

## POVERTY AND EXPLOITATION AFFECTING CHILDREN

Australia is the lucky country.

That statement is so true, especially when we consider that we as Australians are entitled to all the basic rights; such as food, water, health care, freedom for all religions and races, and equality, regardless of our social or economic status, country of origin, political opinion or gender.

These basic entitlements are clearly outlined by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, written in 1948.

I live in Australia, a place that is separated from the rest of the world. In this sheltered environment I was largely oblivious to the reality of poverty and injustice that are so prevalent in the developing world. I was so concerned with my own selfish desires for material possessions, that when I viewed in the media the poverty and exploitation of children just like me in other countries, I saw these people as merely characters and statistics in events taking place in other parts of the world, far removed from me and my conscience. I was indifferent to the fact that they were real people who were really suffering on a daily basis because of their race, nationality, and circumstances often beyond their control, such as poverty, war and political crises.

My attitude of indifference and blissful ignorance was dramatically changed when I learned about the plight of a tribal group in northern Thailand called the Akha people. In their hill tribe villages, poverty is endemic and the children are the ones who suffer most. The children are poorly clothed, malnourished (they eat an average of one bowl of rice every two to three days), and they are uneducated.

I discovered that as a result of their desperate poverty, the Akha children are vulnerable to exploitation in the form of child prostitution and slavery.

When the children seek employment to support their poor parents, they travel to the cities. Alone, defenceless and naïve, they are captured and taken into sex slavery or forced to work as slaves. The children are also stolen from their villages by gangs of corrupt police and child traffickers. These people take children by force or trick them into slavery with false promises of employment in the cities.

The Akha children are part of an unrecognised people group in Thailand and because of this they are ineligible for citizenship and can be treated like animals.

Consequently, with no home, no rights as human beings, no medical assistance, no education and no one to turn to for help, the hopeless Akha children are destined to face a terrible future of slavery, child prostitution, AIDS and a long and painful death, after years of physical, emotional and sexual abuse and torture.

I was infuriated, depressed and deeply saddened when I heard a heart rending story about a young girl named Ador. Allow me to share her story with you because it truly epitomises the injustices of poverty and exploitation that thousands upon thousands of children around the world suffer through no fault of their own.

When Ador was just twelve years old, she left her village in northern Thailand and travelled to a city to find work to support her poor parents. She was uneducated, naïve, vulnerable and alone, and she soon fell prey to child sex slave traders who lured her into prostitution with false promises of work, money and freedom. Ador was raped repeatedly by ten to twenty men (sadly, many of them Westerners), every day. She was beaten and threatened with death if she did not cooperate. Then, after years of humiliation, mental torment, physical and sexual abuse, Ador contacted AIDS. She became another child sentenced to a long and excruciatingly painful death from the affects of AIDS, being constantly tormented by nightmares and unbearable pain, dying alone, neglected and unloved.

After such a shocking awakening to the reality of the evils that are in our world, I felt very guilty because I realised how careless my attitude towards underprivileged people had been and how self-centred my entire outlook on life had become. I was moved to change the situation and so my family and I became actively involved in fundraising to help start a refuge and training centre for the Akha children, which aimed to rescue them from child sex slavery and poverty and give them a future and a hope.

The Akha refuge and training centre is now established in the Golden Triangle of Thailand and our friends David and Asa, who my parents and I helped to found the refuge, are now providing the basic rights of food and clean water, clothing, health care, bedding, education, love and protection to over five hundred children.

When my parents and I travelled to Thailand, I saw first hand the transformation of the Akha children, who had been scared, hopeless and oppressed by extreme poverty, and were now transformed into confident and joyful people, who had a positive attitude towards life because they had been given a hope for their future. I was astounded by these children's work ethic and their willingness to seize every opportunity that was presented to them. We helped them build plant nurseries and seed beds, showed them irrigation and spraying techniques and bought plants and seeds for them to grow and become self-sufficient. Spending time interacting with these children was a fulfilling and rewarding experience, which is etched forever in my heart and mind, and has had a profound and positive influence on my attitudes, goals and the future direction of my life.

I learned that children, who are rescued from adverse circumstances, and in particular, poverty, become a testimony to the resilience of the human spirit. Underprivileged people only need to be given the opportunity to thrive and they will change their own world.

Perhaps you have wanted to impact the world for the benefit of others or stop an injustice that you have seen happening around you, but you may have thought: I am only one person, what difference can I make?

You can make a great difference in other peoples lives because by donating your finances, time and energy to providing opportunities to people who are less fortunate and cannot facilitate change for themselves, you are acting as their point of contact with the developed world, which can change their circumstances by releasing them from poverty and injustices.

Through education and training, people can change their social and economic status and through this they can turn their lives around in many other areas as well.

I firmly believe that all poverty-stricken and underprivileged people need to affect change in their lives is opportunity.

However, without the help of people who care enough to highlight problems, promote solutions and implement changes, by utilising their resources, opportunities will not be presented to the people in need, and human rights will remain an idea but not a reality in their lives.

In conclusion, I would call upon all Australians to take action and use our influence and resources, such as finance, time and energy, to affect the lives of underprivileged people all over the world. Together we can endeavour to change the world for the better by providing opportunities to people who are restricted by poverty and exploited through corruption. All children are entitled to equality and basic human rights, and it is our responsibility and privilege to aid those less fortunate than ourselves and to give them a future and a hope.

One person can change one life. Many people can change many lives. I can make a difference. You can make a difference. Together we can change the world!