



Book Reviews

Stolen Childhood: In Search of the Rights of the Child by Anuradha Vittachi
Polity Press in association with Basil Blackwell, Cambridge 1989. 150pp. \$19.95 (pb)

Stolen Childhood is a glossy, well-presented book, on the rights of the child aimed at the general population – not at professionals working in this field. This is to be expected when viewed as the book to accompany a TV series – presented by Richard Attenborough.

The aim of the book and the TV series is to raise awareness of the child rights related issues and to stimulate action to address these issues around the world. The central concept is children's rights and adult obligations as defined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child.

Stolen Childhood attempts to graphically portray a range of children whose rights have been abused, neglected or endangered. It takes the reader through many countries, highlighting different levels and categories of indifference, neglect and abuse. From poor or third world countries where children are deprived of the right to actual survival, to the 'runaway', or 'throwaway' children in affluent societies.

The issues covered in this book can be quickly gauged from the chapter headings:

- "A stitch too late" stressing health issues and that the world could afford a full immunisation program for all children.
- "The devil makes work". Work becomes exploitative labour when it hinders a child's development. Physically damaging child labour is sanctioned by many governments around the world.
- A chance to go to school.
- Child prostitution
- Rich world runaways, concentrating on the complex issues concerning familial abuse and rejection including homeless children running from 'dangerous nests'. The book does not look at answers but attempts to show what exists in affluent societies.

- Reliance on the power of the family.

- A tendency to blame the victim as nuisances or criminals.

- A need for more public awareness of the existence of and damage caused by physical and sexual abuse.

- A unique human being. This highlights a world wide intolerance of imperfection and a tendency to view children as possessions or objects. It is refreshing to see a segment on the mentally or physically disabled which does not stress sentimentality but the rather the issues of social acceptability versus isolation and the vulnerability of being imperfect.

After some thirty years, the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child is being given legal force by means of a Convention. This convention embodies a specific set of standards to which all signatory countries will be expected to adhere. The UN Convention gives legal weight to the acknowledgment that children universally have specific human rights. The thirty-five Articles of the Convention include civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Stolen Childhood looks at a number of violations of children's rights using the conceptual framework of the UN Convention. It commences with a clear summary of the Convention and refers back to its Articles and philosophy throughout the book. The UN Convention could become just an act of symbolic politics, unless each signatory country makes and acts upon laws accordingly.

This book and especially the TV series aims at increasing awareness of inequalities and child abuse around the world. It argues that by poverty, illness, disability, ignorance, abuse and exploitation, childhood is stolen by families, communities, and government actions or inactions in every country around the world. There is an

attempt to identify children's rights issues everywhere, not just in under-developed countries, but with an emphasis still on poverty.

Hopefully the message portrayed by the TV series will be that charity and sentimentality should no longer be necessary, adequate or even tolerable when focusing on child rights.

Stolen Childhood offers little to enrich informed debate for professionals working with children – its aim unashamedly is to publicise issues for the general public. The message is that a new consensus needs to be built in all countries, as inequalities and abuse of children exist because enough adults and therefore Governments consider them acceptable. A dilemma for presentations such as this TV series and book is that an over-emphasis on third world poverty and deprivations can result in the scale of the problems appearing overwhelming and viewers can become desensitised for other issues concerning child abuse. There are many areas which need addressing in our own community, including sexual abuse.

A survey of community attitudes about child sexual abuse recently undertaken by Community Services Victoria highlighted a community attitude that familial sexual abuse of children is widespread, but there was an expressed reluctance to take action to protect children.

There is a need for books and TV series such as *Stolen Childhood* and the book could be valuable as an educational support at secondary school level.

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