

This is a summary of the main points of Ann Gilroy's speaking notes from her address to the WATAC Conference 2007.

Why not count the Women and Children? Enough for all in scarce times

Ann Gilroy

The resources of the world are over consumed by western countries and the ones who suffer most from this unequal distribution are the women and children of the world. UNESCO estimates that 30,000 children under five years of age die **every** day in our world from **preventable** causes.¹ This afternoon I am going to focus children in our world and ask what we can learn as women of the Church at this time.

At the beginning of the millennium the United Nations held a special session devoted to the world's children and countries pledged to build a world 'fit for children'. In 2002 the United Nations set out 10 principles for governments in relationship to their children – children were defined as “all human beings under 18 years of age, including adolescents”. This means that for all children – under 18 years, the Human Rights of Children ratified in the 20th century, applied to them. Australia and New Zealand are signatories to the rights of the children as well as to the principles for building a world fit for children. The 10 principles themselves set a new agenda for the world in respect to children: They are:

- Put children first
- Eradicate poverty – invest in children
- Leave no child behind
- Care for every child
- Educate every child
- Protect children from harm and exploitation
- Protect children from war
- Combat HIV/AIDS
- Listen to children and ensure their participation
- Protect the earth for children

The new emphasis on a world fit for children is not before time. By way of an example, let's go back to 1992 when Amartya Sen, an Indian economist, drew the world's attention to his estimation that there were 300,000,000 women and girls missing from the world at that time. He got that number by taking the research on the world's population being done in Europe where the statistics showed that there were more women than men in the world's population. Sen pointed out that the stats were based on the first world's populations numbers, and if he used the western ratio of women to men in Asia, Africa and the non-Western world, the reality was very different -

¹ UNESCO 2005

there were far more boys than girls. He concluded that this was because for a variety of reasons boys were favoured over girls, and as food and medicine was scarce in many of these cultures, boy babies received their share before girl babies and hence there was a higher infant mortality rate for girls than boys. He shocked the two thirds' world and also the governments of the third world at the time with the information – that there were not more women and girls in the world. He showed, in fact, that as many as 300, 000,000 women and girls were missing from the world. Other studies suggest that Sen's number of missing women was a conservative figure!

Sen has kept his eye on this gender discrepancy in the intervening years he has consulted with countries on how they can address it. In 2003, now as the Master of Trinity College in Cambridge University, he looked again to see what gains had been made for girls in the ten years since he first brought the information to the world's attention, and I'll particularly refer to his results in India and Western Asia. In the intervening years since 1991 India in particular had outlawed female infanticide, female foetus abortion and in many respects had worked hard to develop laws and strategies promoting gender equality. At the same time India has made huge economic gains.

However, in 2007 the male to female figures for births in India show that there are still proportionally more boys than girls being born and reaching the age of 1 years, compared to European statistics. Sen's latest paper is instructive – he found that the higher boy/girl ratio is not the same all over India. He said that there is a kind of division of States in India where the poorer eastern and southern states had more equal boy-girl ratios than the richer north-western states. He found that there is a much higher abortion rate of girls in those states despite their booming economies. Why he asked is there such a difference in the low value placed on girls when resources are scarcer in other parts of India where it appears girls are valued more? He could not say positively – but he pointed to two areas that he thought might be indicators and he will monitor them. In the northern richer states there has been a growing alliance between government and religion which interprets women's place as in the home, and as a consequence women tend not to be encouraged to get employment outside the home, so are not exposed to other opinions about women's roles. These women tend to have 'well off' lives, but circumscribed by strong gender roles where boy babies were valued over girls. Even though it was against the law, there was a high abortion rate of girl foetuses. Sen asks do these two factors – the rise of religious right and women caught in the domestic realm - make the difference to girls lives, or is there something else at work?

The southeastern states by and large were poorer yet even so some states had a gender birth rate ratio similar to Europe's. Sen found that these states tended to offer equal education to girls & boys and women worked at jobs outside the home as well as at home! Sen concluded that women's involvement in the mess of everyday life, at home and on the streets and workplaces, meant that they had to think more for themselves and were exposed to diverse opinions and to a large extent were moving from the older cultural values in respect to gender discrimination. However, he also pointed out that these gains are vulnerable – and can be short-lived – as one of the rich northern states' gender balance has decreased over the same time – and with the advent of the religion-

political partnership. So – you can glimpse the complexity and the competing forces for women in building a world fit for children!

‘And whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’

Mark 9:37

With words like Mark’s it becomes clear that we are not just receiving and welcoming a child because of altruism, but it is Godself that we are meeting in a child, the vulnerable God who is present in every fragile creature. It reminds us that incarnation – the divine becoming embodied - happens where we least expect and detect it:

- in the aborigine child, in the Northern Territory confronted by army and medical personnel wanting to invade her privacy – and ‘save her’
- and the youth off his head with the liquor he drank to dull his boredom

Jesus makes the point very strongly – every child is God’s representative and God’s good news to us.

In ‘welcoming a child’ we face the being of God: inconspicuous, vulnerable, and powerful in calling forth our compassion and cooperation. And the child thereby also becomes the representative of other ‘little ones’ in whom we meet God: the poor, disabled, or oppressed, who trust the God Jesus proclaimed. Hurting one of these means denying life itself: as Matthew’s Jesus says - that person might better be drowned with a millstone around their necks! (Matt 18:6; Lk 17:2)

And children know when adults have hurt them:

"I am afraid to cry because I know that I have to work so hard to be a good person, because what they have done to me can turn me into a monster... Today I feel like I am 100 years old, but again, I feel like I am 6 years old."

*- A young Ugandan girl who became a soldier at age 9,
and remained a soldier for almost 11 years*

If we harm children, the millstone passage seems to say, we put ourselves outside the true human community. Becoming like children and welcoming all ‘little ones’ means being in communion with God and all creation.

We want a world fit for children, because a world fit for us is a world fit for everyone. In this world,

We see respect for the rights of the child:
We see an end to exploitation, abuse and violence:
We see an end to war:

We see the provision of health care:
We see the eradication of HIV/AIDS:
We see the protection of the environment:
We see an end to the vicious cycle of poverty:
We see the provision of education:
We see the active participation of children:
You call us the future, but we are also the present.

Message from the children's Forum to the UN 2002

**We cannot afford to not count the children –
after all they show us who God is.**