

FORGOTTEN GIRLS

Stories of Hope and Courage



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PART 1



PHYSICAL LIFE



*I*n a mountain village in southern China, a six-year-old bitten by a snake on the way to school waited three days for the car that transports people to the closest medical facility, two hours away. Just before the car arrived, the child died.

Illness and accidents take on a whole new face for those who live in the hardest places of the world. When medical care is scarce, every problem—even a treatable one—can quickly become a disaster.

Where people lack access to clean drinking water or basic sanitation, the situation is particularly dire. Diseases such as malaria and cholera easily reach epidemic proportions. And something as commonplace as a bout of diarrhea can be a death sentence.

Girls are at an even greater risk than boys because, from babyhood, girls consistently get the short end of the nutritional stick. Frequently girls are the last in the family to eat, so they get whatever is left, which means they often have little protein in their diets. The result is that many exist in a state of precarious health, which translates into a higher mortality rate for girls. And many families who will do what-

ever it takes to get medical help for their sick or injured boys, leave their girls to struggle along with home remedies. The value of a girl to the family simply is not as great as the value of a boy.

Many children in these areas of concern also suffer due to the AIDS epidemic. In China, in India, in country after country across

According to some reports, close to one quarter of the girls in India die before they ever reach the ripe old age of sixteen.



Africa, children are afflicted. Others, left orphaned by the disease, struggle to survive any way they can. In sub-Saharan Africa, where in the fifteen-to-twenty-four age group two girls are infected for every infected boy, half the girls believe the myth that a healthy-looking person cannot carry the virus. In the most-affected areas, five or six adolescent girls are infected for every infected boy.

Yet the lack of physical welfare goes beyond malnutrition and the well-documented plagues in poverty-afflicted areas. Most frightful of all is the physical harm purposely and systematically inflicted on girls. In places least-reached with the gospel, it is a daunting challenge to many little ones simply to be allowed to come into the world alive—especially in China and India, home to more than a third of the world's six billion people.

According to UNICEF, gender-based infanticide, abortion, malnutrition and neglect are believed to be behind sixty to one hundred million women “missing” from the world's population.

In this section we will explore some of the lesser-known physical needs of girls and what is being done to help them.

Stand Up to the Witch

Indonesia



The first time Michele saw the preschooler with the choppy haircut, she bent down to give the child a warm, face-to-face greeting. Michele couldn't tell if she was talking to a boy or a girl. With her Indonesian friend Mirah translating, Michele smiled and stroked the child's hair.

"Look closely," Mirah said as she brushed the child's hair aside. Long scars crisscrossed the little head. Mirah continued, "The one who brought this child in exclaimed, 'Just look! Someone cut her head with scissors.'" Then Mirah pulled up the child's sleeve to reveal burn and slash scars. "Every part of her body except her face and hands is covered with scars."

Michele could not hide her horror. After the child had slipped away, she demanded, "Who did this to her?"

Mirah told us Beti's story.

Beti was not quite four years old when her mother left her with a neighbor. She was going to find Beti's father and bring him home, and

she promised to be back in two weeks to get her child. When several months passed and Beti's mother did not return, the neighbor began asking people in the village if someone would take the child into their home.

Immediately a woman eagerly agreed—Borang, the local witch doctor. Her own daughter had given birth to a son, she said, and with so many people in their house, they needed a babysitter and housekeeper. Beti could work in exchange for room and board.

But the child was far too young for such duties. Everyone in the village knew that. Even so, and although they feared for Beti, no one would argue with the fearsome witch. Her abilities to call on dark forces to intervene in peoples' lives were infamous. Anyone who crossed her paid a heavy price.

Borang lived in a wooden house with two rooms. The front room was for eating and for meeting with customers. It was dark and smoky, with a low ceiling and dirt floor. Against the walls stood rough, filthy tables piled high with pots, jars and boxes containing ingredients for her "magic." Drying herbs hung from the ceiling alongside rodent carcasses.

In the back room, the family slept on two mattresses. When little Beti was "good," she was allowed to sleep inside the house on the dirt floor in the front room. Most nights, however, she was tied to a tree in the backyard.

One day, the witch yelled out from the house, "Beti, you miserable dog!" The little girl knew from painful experience to run in and quietly receive yet another punishment for yet another offense she didn't understand.

The witch was waiting just inside the door. She slapped Beti so hard her ear rang, then she scolded, "This plate is still dirty!"

The witch grabbed Beti's arm and shook her, then hurried her toward the back room, where the cruelest punishments were exacted. First came the cigarette burns, then the cuttings on her arms, legs and bottom. Beti tried not to cry loudly. Drawing attention to the house only brought more punishments. Sometimes she

accidentally wet herself, and then she was beaten again for making a mess.

The witch even cut Beti under her hair, where she thought no one would see the wounds. But the blood ran down the little girl's face and neck, and since she was never bathed, her hair matted with blood and dirt, and her skin developed a crusty layer of mud and oozing sores.

The neighbor next door saw the child's suffering, and it disgusted her. When she could no longer stand to hear Beti crying for her mother, she pleaded with Borang to let the little girl go. The neighbor even plucked up her courage and threatened to call the police. Borang ignored her. One day, fearing the witch would kill Beti, the neighbor actually did call the police. But to Borang's delight, they had no interest in a worthless girl. They never even came by.

As time went on and Beti stayed with the witch, she grew to act like a wild animal. She never spoke. When anyone came near her, she would only whimper.

More than once, the neighbors raised concerns about the child to the village leaders. But no one knew what to do. They could not move Beti to another house in the village, because the witch would certainly retaliate. Then someone suggested they send the child to the new preschool at the Christian seminary. Perhaps the leader—Mirah—would have an idea of someone in her area who would want Beti.

So the next-door neighbor was sent to Mirah with an urgent message about an abused girl badly in need of help. Mirah came immediately and went with a few neighbors to the witch's backyard. As she examined the little girl's wounds and scars, she seethed with anger.

"How did this happen?" she demanded.

Beti said little, for she trusted no one. But the people of the village gave Mirah more than enough to let her know she must take action.

"Let's have a talk with this witch," Mirah said. Without hesitation, she led the neighbors to the woman's house.

"We would like to help Beti become like other little girls," Mirah told the witch.

Borang spit an unintelligible reply at them and roughly grabbed the little girl's arm in an attempt to pull her inside. But Mirah's hand moved quickly, resting firmly on top of the witch's hand.

"If you cannot take better care of Beti, we can find someone who will," Mirah said. "I will be watching to see if the child improves. If not, I will be back to talk with you."

The door slammed in their faces, and they could hear the witch's angry voice fading toward the back room.

A week later, Beti was found wandering in a daze down the dirt road that bisects the village. Never before had anyone seen her off the witch's property. But here the child was, stumbling along with what appeared to be a rag on top of her head, seemingly blind to the world. As they looked more closely, they could see that the child's head had been laid open by large gashes. Her filthy clothes were covered with fresh blood.

That was it. The neighbors rushed Beti to the village leaders. They worked on bandaging Beti's head while the next-door neighbor hurried back to Mirah with a message.

When the neighbor arrived at the seminary and explained Beti's condition, Mirah's face flooded with angry tears. She sat down and wrote a contract naming Beti the ward of the seminary; the child would never return to the witch. Then Mirah went to meet with the villagers. She took the seminary's cook along and placed Beti in her loving care while she and the leaders went to see the witch.

"Half the village went to the witch's house with me," Mirah said. So she had plenty of support when she told Borang that her days of hurting Beti were over. "My hand was shaking as I shoved the contract toward her. I told her to sign the paper and to never again see the child."

"She is a lazy dog! Never could do any work!" the witch sneered. "I am glad to be rid of her. Give me the papers, and I'll sign."

The neighbors blinked at each other. They could not believe the witch would relinquish Beti so easily.



The first time we saw Beti, she had just been rescued. Now, after four years, we were eager to see her again. No longer a wild, frightened creature with chopped hair, she is now a gregarious young girl no one would mistake for a boy. She is the little sister of all the seminary students because she has been adopted by the cook who watched her that day four years ago. At every gathering, Beti begs to sing. She has a few favorites in her repertoire, and she eagerly performs them all, joyfully and courageously.

As we prepared to say goodbye, Beti busily puffed out a plastic bag, which she attached to a string.

“What are you making?” Michele asked her.

Beti offered to demonstrate. She skipped down the seminary driveway, then giggled triumphantly as her homemade parachute soared into the air.