

FORGOTTEN GIRLS

Stories of Hope and Courage



Kay Marshall Strom and Michele Rickett


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Introduction

Have you ever noticed how seldom something “life changing” really changes your life? The term gets tossed around a lot—to describe watching the sun set in a gorgeous blaze of color, for instance, or to rave about an exciting adventure. Consider the number of books with the phrase splashed across the front cover. Good things, all. Inspiring and helpful and memorable. But *life changing*?

Yet truly life-changing events do occur. Events that forever mark a divide between the *then* and *now* of life. Between despair and hope. Between ignorance and understanding. Between death and life.

Consider Parimala. She barely had time to draw her first breath before she experienced a life-changing event. As her mother staggered in from the fields, the baby was already entering the world. But no one rejoiced in her birth. When her father saw that the baby was a girl, he grabbed her up and carried her outside. He dug a hole in the hard ground beside their thatch-roofed hut and dropped her in. Then he covered her with dirt.

Done, and done.

But the baby’s grandfather saw it all. And he knew that every night for the rest of his life that baby’s accusing wail would echo up from the ground to torment him and haunt his sleep. So while his son sat at the table eating his dinner and as his daughter-in-law wept in the corner, the old man crept outside and dug the baby out of the hole. He carried her choking and gasping to a nearby medical clinic, where he laid her down by the door. Then he headed back home, confident that he would sleep in peace.

Inside the clinic, the nurse stopped sorting papers and cocked her head to listen. The sound was faint, but . . . yes, it was definitely a choking gasp, and it was just outside the door. When she poked her head out to investigate, she saw the infant lying on the rocky ground, struggling to breathe, her nose and mouth clogged with dirt. Already the tiny, gasping face showed a blue tinge. The nurse sighed and shook her head. Then she went back inside, picked up the telephone receiver and called a couple who ran an orphanage for boys.

“It’s a girl,” she stated matter-of-factly. “She will not last long. If you want her, come quickly.” Then she hung up and went back to sorting papers.

That’s how little Parimala entered the world.

Welcome, sweet baby. You have plenty of company, for little girls are tossed away every day. Many who manage to survive are exploited, abused, neglected and oppressed—so many little ones who will never know they are God’s precious treasures.

Unless, that is, life-changing events intersect their lives.

On that first day of Parimala’s life, the couple who ran the orphanage hurried over to the clinic in response to the nurse’s call. They plucked the newborn off the ground and quickly cleared the dirt from her nose and mouth. Then they wrapped her in a cloth and carried her home with them, telling her all the way what a precious treasure she was. That day they stepped into the gap on her behalf and changed her life.

Just as it has always been everywhere around the world, today the defenseless and powerless suffer most. And who is more defenseless than a child? Who more powerless than a girl, written off as worthless and expendable?

Unwanted.

A burden.

A curse.

Such is the heritage of multitudes born into the belt of nations that extends from West Africa all the way to Asia—home to the least educated, to those with the least access to health care, to the poorest

members of the poorest countries on earth. Look closely at the world's most oppressed, and you will find them to be overwhelmingly female. Indeed, women and children make up

- 80 percent of the world's refugees.
- 70 percent of the poorest of the poor.
- two-thirds of the world's illiterate.
- four million annual victims of human traffickers.
- 80 percent of those who have never heard of Jesus Christ.

FOCUSING ON GIRLS

Around the world, women suffer from myriad problems that keep them oppressed and locked in poverty. But more and more we are finding that many of these adult problems actually develop in childhood. So if we are to have the greatest possible impact on women in the generations to come, it is imperative that we double our efforts toward today's young ones. They are the nurturers of the future. They are the heart of tomorrow's homes.

Girls born into a life of abandonment and abuse, resented and oppressed from birth, grow up acting out their oppression and abandonment. They believe they truly *are* inferior and deserving of abuse. Unless a life-changing event interrupts this pattern, abused and oppressed girls grow up to be abused and oppressed women.

When we met Parimala, she was an apple-cheeked two-year-old with dancing brown eyes and a bubbly personality. Kay gave her a Hershey's Kiss, the first chocolate she had ever tasted. Parimala rolled the tasty treat around on her tongue, and her eyes sparkled. As the Kiss began to melt, a chocolaty smile spread across her face. Parimala jumped for joy and hugged our knees—but only so long as her auntie and uncle were in sight.

Auntie and Uncle changed Parimala's life by bringing her into their house, where they accepted and loved her as their own. Curious neighbors peered over the fence to see this couple who actually *chose*

a girl. They watched as Auntie cared for her and sang as she fed the child from her own plate. They watched as Uncle tenderly rocked her and carried her with him when he went out to check the cows.

In time, the bolder among them came right out and asked, “A *girl*? Why would you waste time and money on a girl?” That was a question they loved to answer, for it gave them a chance to affirm the value of every girl and every girl’s right to live. Again and again the couple repeated that girls are made in God’s image too, and are also precious in his sight.

The neighbors didn’t have too much to say, but evidently they listened. No baby girl is known to have been buried alive in that village since Parimala.

Rescue. Restoration. Prevention. These are the steps to real change.

If a newborn buried alive by her father in India can have a future, why not a tossed-away girl in Tibet or Mali or China? Why not a forgotten child in Japan or a girl trafficked and sold in Nepal? Why not a little one languishing in Sudan or Iran or Iraq? We are convinced that every unwanted girl has the potential of a different ending to her story.



On the way out of India, we passed the time in the Bangalore airport, thumbing through an Indian newspaper. A short article ended with these sobering sentences: “Look into a child’s eyes, and where we should see innocence and hope, we see hunger, fear, suspicion. We need to take a look at the society we have created.”

Too often we judge our progress as a society by what we have accumulated. Material goods, money, homes—all the things we think mark us as successful. If we really want to catch a glimpse of where we are headed, we will do well to look at how we treat the most tender and vulnerable among us—and how we allow others to treat them. This is a far better indicator of our chances of surviving and thriving in the generations to come.

RESIST THE DARKNESS

Altogether, our work in international ministry spans over thirty years and covers dozens of countries, from Latin America across Africa to the Middle East to Asia. Michele lived and worked in East Africa in the 1980s, and every year since has traveled in developing countries to create relationships and to research and evaluate women's projects. Kay, a full-time writer, has worked in fourteen countries in conjunction with writing projects and speaking engagements.

Everywhere we've been in the developing world, we have seen women and girls endure the uneven weight of every imaginable kind of burden. We've seen them shamelessly abused and exploited. And we have seen them endure all kinds of sufferings with amazing dignity.

It is a fact that women and girls around the globe suffer more than men and boys. Sisters In Service (SIS), the Christian not-for-profit organization Michele founded, was formed expressly to garner and share the most current research on the plight of women in developing nations and to provide interventions for those women.

Because empowering women makes them less vulnerable to oppression and exploitation, we began by raising awareness and advocacy and by developing ways to strengthen and restore women's lives. This brought us in contact with courageous women and men already addressing the needs of women and children in the hardest places.

Powerful interventions require linking arms over the long haul and together growing good initiatives into great ones. The best way to do this is to identify local ministries that already work well. Local women have profound insight into the cultural forces in their homeland that lead to oppression and exploitation. They understand how to do things in a way that works in their area, that are cost-effective and that won't draw the backlash that can crush an effort. It is they, after all, who will live with the consequences.

So we began by looking for local ministries with which we shared mutual goals, ministries that have proven leadership, integrity, effectiveness and growth potential. They already have their role. Our role is of a supportive servant: we advocate, consult and provide re-

source and learning opportunities.

Each time either of us traveled, we came home enriched and inspired by the lives of courage, faith and faithfulness of the women we met. And each time we told their stories, people wanted to know more. Our first book, *Daughters of Hope*, tells the stories of women who suffer to serve God in the most difficult circumstances.

As we continued to look for the most effective ways to battle abuse and exploitation, everything pointed toward little girls. For when girls grow up undervalued, underfed, illiterate, physically abused and exploited, the generations that come after them are destined to groan under waves of evil. So if we ever hope to see change in the way women are treated, we absolutely must focus our efforts on stopping the abuse of little girls. That is exactly what we at SIS are doing, particularly in our national initiative “Resist the Darkness” (see page 176).

We know God hears the cries of the weak, and we know he answers them. Job, who knew all about suffering, wrote, “But those who suffer he delivers in their suffering; he speaks to them in their affliction” (Job 36:15). As you read these stories, we hope you will see God’s love reaching into every young life.

Like all children everywhere, these girls have their own “normal.” Because they have not seen any world other than the one in which they live, they have no idea what life is like elsewhere. We talked to girls in Nepal, sold to sex traffickers by their parents, who could not comprehend what it means to be loved. To girls in Sudan who could not fathom life without war. To girls in India who had no understanding of their value. To girls all over who had no concept of being satisfied by a meal or saving money for the future or going outside simply to play, because normal life means hunger and want and endless work.

Yet we also saw within these girls a wonderful potential to bring about change in the families they themselves would be raising in very few years. And if their families change, imagine the effect that will have on their villages. And then the effect their villages will have on the larger communities. And if enough communities are changed,

imagine how that will affect entire countries.

Little girls like Parimala can change the world!



It is both a blessing and a challenge for us to record these stories. People ask us how we are able to get interviews with girls in so many difficult places. In most cases, we have established relationships through our ongoing work with women. Some of our hosts for these interview trips are long-term partners, though not all.

Because most live in hostile places, we must guard their identities. All the accounts in this book are true. The people are real; the stories are factual. We have changed names and identifying details, however; this we must do because of the sensitive nature involved in so many of the situations and locations. Occasionally we have combined several stories to make the narrative easier for readers to follow. But in all cases, each element of the story is factual. Likewise, except for the photo of Yoshi in Japan, the photographs in each chapter were taken by our team or ministry friends to represent girls in the country that each chapter discusses.

On television, we see the faces of hungry children and little ones who wander through war-torn villages. But to really understand the raw ugliness of oppression and poverty, Western Christians need to get to know real individuals. We decided to help you do exactly that: we bring the stories to you, not just to inform you, but so that you can be part of the solution, so that we can work together to obey the words of God as recorded by the prophet Isaiah:

Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)

Come along with us and meet the girls of the world.

Yes, you will encounter suffering. But don't turn away because of the pain. Beyond the abuse and oppression, past the awfulness and

neglect, you will catch glimpses of glorious dignity and staggering resilience, of remarkable potential and untold value. In these girls you will see the sparkle of hope and the promise of the future.

It is our prayer that meeting these girls will be a life-changing event for you. We hope that by the time you finish this book, you will be compelled to seek out the way God would have you be involved in the care of “the least of these,” your sisters.