

Tzelem: Child Poverty

Here is the thing about child poverty: you can't see it. It's hidden from the sight of most of us who are fortunate enough to have houses to live in and enough to eat. It's hidden behind the pride of a mother who goes without a meal in order to feed her children; it's concealed inside the mouth of a one year old whose teeth haven't come through yet because he's not getting enough to eat and is on the lowest centile of growth for a child of his age; it is out of sight within the four walls of a hostel where two parents and four children live together, all in one room serving as bedroom, living room and kitchen, the bathroom down the corridor.

Perhaps it is hard to believe that child poverty exists in Britain today. But the fact is that one in four children in Britain do not receive adequate nutrition; they may be homeless, living in inappropriate private rented accommodation, or in hostels because their parents lack enough points for social housing.

Through my own community's connection with a project for homeless families, I met Iona, in her mid-thirties and from Northern Ireland. An intelligent and educated woman, who went to university, she worked in the City before her two children were born. She is one of those who live in one room in the hostel to which the project is attached. Her eight year old son, a lovely, caring boy, is two years behind in his educational attainments. Iona cannot see what the future will look like. She does not have enough points to be eligible for social housing (because as she said wryly to me, 'I'm not the victim of domestic abuse'), and it seems as though the journey to release this vital and intelligent woman and her two children from poverty, is going to be a long and almost impossible one.

Emma, thin and pale looked as though she had been going through a very tough time. Her fifteen month old son, once a happy and outgoing child, she said, had become clingy and sensitive to his mother's depression and fear as a result of domestic abuse. The day I met Emma, her former partner had discovered where she was staying and there was another episode of abuse in front of the child. She was going to have to leave the hostel at the weekend to try and remove herself from her former partner. The burden of having to find private rented accommodation, even one room in London, in a borough that is distant from her own family, the challenge of caring for a baby on her own, having enough to feed him and feed herself, was frightening for Emma, but she is determined to find work and to make herself independent.

These are just two individuals whose children are growing up in poverty. And I highlight their circumstances in order to help us understand the shameful and disgraceful facts and figures of child poverty.

3.5 million children are living in poverty today, 27%, more than 1 child in every four children.

Let me take just one parliamentary constituency – Westminster North, where I happen to work and which is not far from where we are standing. After housing costs, 43% of children in Westminster North are living in poverty. The borough of Westminster as a whole has the fifth highest level of children living in poverty in the UK. (Figures for 2013).

[Westminster Parliamentary Constituency: Westminster North
Number of children in In-work poverty 2013: 5,517

Number of children in Out of work poverty 2013: 1,447
% of children in low income families, 2013: 42.56%]

Talking about this subject, means dispelling the myths that surround the issue of child poverty:

- Child poverty is not inevitably the result of having parents who are out of work or who are 'unwilling' to work, who are dependent on drugs or alcohol or where family breakdown or poor parenting has occurred.
- The truth is that work does not provide a guaranteed route out of poverty in the UK. 66% of children growing up in poverty live in families where at least one parent works.
- Poverty can cause complicated health histories over the course of a lifetime, Child poverty imposes costs on broader society – estimated to be at least £29 billion a year.

Provision of nutritious food, vitamins and protein, growing up in a space that is not grossly overcrowded, where a child can do their homework without noise or distraction, having access to green spaces, the seaside and fresh air, being raised in an atmosphere that is free from abnormal levels of stress and distress – these, surely, are children's rights and that any child is deprived of these basic rights today, is a tragedy and a national disgrace.

Children growing up in poverty are hidden from our view. I am reminded of a verse from the Book of Job who envisages the injustice of his own time: "They chase the needy off the roads; all the poor of the land are forced into hiding" (24:4). But I have an image of that one year old, still to cut his teeth – alert and smiling, but very small. He lives in one room with his parents and twin brothers, one of whom is often in hospital with respiratory problems because the house in which the family lives is damp. To help that little boy and his twin brothers escape poverty is a matter of justice and fairness. Freedom from poverty is a human right which we must all combat so that children can grow up in dignity and in turn contribute to the well-being of our society.