



“Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty,  
human rights are violated.  
To come together to ensure that these rights be respected  
is our solemn duty.”

*Joseph Wresinski (1917-1988) Founder of ATD Fourth World.*

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### What is poverty in Great Britain today?

Poverty is a very emotive word. In the UK, in the minds of many people it evokes images of starving children, of the dead and dying after war or drought and of those enslaved by their desperation to survive. Almost always, those images are of people suffering in other countries, on other continents; beyond our help, whose fate seems to be someone else's responsibility. This allows people in our country a comfort zone, but it is an illusion; a buffer from reality.

Poverty to the point of death is not the only form of poverty that exists; it is the most extreme form that exists. It is rare in the UK and usually only happens amongst the homeless who live on the streets, the poorest pensioners (especially in winter), and those who are unable to access services or are not entitled to them e.g. illegal

immigrants. Poverty however, is present here in the UK and it is our responsibility. In the UK we have a welfare system that is supposed to protect the poor and vulnerable from the effects of poverty and, for the majority who use it, it does just that. For the minority though, the very poorest and most vulnerable, it often does not work. In fact, the poorer and more powerless they are, the more likely it is that the very systems that are meant to protect them become a burden and oppression on them. The higher the standard of living in the general population, the higher the expectation on parents but this does not take into account the growing divide between the wealthy and the poor.

Because the current priority for ATDFW UK is working with families, I will speak mainly in terms of families; parents and children who are in touch with, and at the heart of, the work of ATDFW. The majority of the

families live in London and the South East of England, their origins are varied but all suffer long-term poverty. Most have experienced social work intervention in their family life and many of the families are headed by a parent who themselves were separated from their parents as children and placed into children's homes or foster-care.

Poverty, to these families, is daily struggle, choosing between having heating, food or adequate clothing. It is lack of money; education; health; safe work; decent housing; choice and dignity. Poverty is being disrespected and excluded at almost every point where they should be able to turn for help or to access services. It is never having your opinion sought or taken into consideration, being disbelieved and suspected. It is living in fear that the negative views of others will result in children being taken away and put into local authority care or - even worse - adopted against the parent's wishes, severing all familial ties. In one of the world's richest economies, as in the poorest, poverty is a denial of basic human rights to both adults and children alike.

### To be treated as less than human

In a society that boasts free education; health care; social support in times of crisis and assisted access to the justice system, it is still very hard for the poorest families to feel they have the right to access these services

without negative repercussions, based in fact on previous experience. Families often speak about how they are regarded as a nuisance when asking for what they have a right to, and how they are usually offered a very poor service on the assumption that it is "good enough for the likes of them" and that they will not know that they have a right to better. As one person recently said, "They offered me and my son a room you would be charged with cruelty for housing a dog in. Doesn't my 3 year old son deserve better than a dog."

Several ATDFW parents took part in a project with professionals (see Getting the right trainers, published by ATDFW) which resulted in them being enabled to go into universities to train social workers on the links between poverty and children taken into care. One of these people defined the blindness of professionals to the effects of poverty as "Povertyism." It is clear that a lot of people cannot identify the difference between lack of effort and the effects of poverty and so they treat people living in poverty with disdain and a total disregard for their feelings.

### The right to live as a family in Jeopardy

It is hard enough to endure this disregard in other respects, but unendurable to parents when trying to access legal support when going through the family law courts to prevent the removal of (non-

abused) children. Because living in poverty carries such a stigma, social care professionals can believe that removing a child from a situation of poverty will ensure better life-chances and a future free of poverty. This Government's own poverty statistics disprove this by showing care-leavers in the lowest 2.5% income group in the population with high representation in statistics on poor educational achievement; homelessness; teenage pregnancy; imprisonment; unemployment; addictions; prostitution and mental illness.

The issue of children in care is such a priority amongst the families as it is a situation that increases as the families get poorer and where poverty is from generation to generation. One of the most extreme examples of infringement of a person's human right to family life occurs when an assessment is made of a parent's parenting ability – before the child is born. It is called Pre-Birth Assessment and involves professionals deciding before birth whether or not to allow the expected child to be raised by the parents or not. Another is the process of residential assessment of families, especially parents with new-born children, which can be greatly humiliating and intrusive. The following is a quote from a speech given in Brussels on October 17<sup>th</sup> 2006 by a parent who had experienced this.

“When you arrive at the Assessment Centre you are treated like a criminal. You feel the stigma

on you, as if you have failed already. There you are not worth anything, you are not worth the support you need, it is as if you don't deserve it.

"You are judged because of your social background, they read all your reports before you arrive. They judge you because of all the things that you don't have, all the things you cannot do, but nothing is ever said about the good things... soon your self-esteem is down to the floor. In the Assessment Centre you have no human rights. You arrive in a place where you are observed 24/7, sometimes with cameras inside your room! You are not allowed out without being escorted, often not allowed to see your friends and family, you have no privacy, not even privacy to cry! If you are a first time parent it even worse you don't know what to do, the pressure of being watched makes you feel as if you are making mistakes all the time. The assessment centre does not offer you any support or advice on the things that you could improve, just supervision all the time. They just tell you off all the time, they punish you like a child. From the start, you are treated as a failure“.

In the case of unmarried couples, sometimes only the mother and child are assessed. The child's father is not allowed to be in the assessment centre, so the mother is deprived at this vulnerable time of the person with whom she would raise her child. This is a system that sets parents up to fail. A human rights approach would

mean that no child would be removed unless there was evidential proof of abuse or intentional criminal neglect. Poor parenting and life skills would be seen as a reason to provide supportive services, not to remove the children.

In a society where the state or local authority provides for the poor, a human rights approach to service provision would ensure that people living in poverty were treated with respect and were not given a poor quality service based on their lack of money or status. It would mean that training would reflect this respect agenda and, by removing humiliation from the process, there would be less anger and confrontation. We hear often that a person must meet their social obligations before they are entitled to have their rights met – this is wrong. A right is just that – a right. Being able to access their rights is an important means to reaching a point from which people can then meet their obligations and better contribute to society. Understanding exactly what each human being is entitled to in respect of their humanity helps to build a society based on commonality rather than difference and this enables us to build a just and peaceful society. Being prepared to overcome our prejudices in order to respect another person's human rights makes each of us a better person and gives us a legacy of hope to pass to our children.

### People living in poverty defending Human Rights for all

People who live in poverty do not expect the non-poor to eradicate poverty for them, but with them. Often it is the poorest who make the first move to offer help to those in similar or worse situations. It is the person who is in poverty and excluded who finds it easiest to recognise another who suffers in the same way. One member of the families of ATD in the UK was John, a man in his fifties who had suffered poverty all of his life. Although he had moved to the north of England and ATDFW is based in the south, he was still very active in ATDFW and tried to develop a north/south ATDFW link through a local church in spite of having little education and limited resources.

John met a Polish man and his son who lived in the same area as John and he befriended them. He discovered that the man, Tomack, was a Roma – a gypsy – whose wife had died in Poland. He had come to England to try to escape the persecution and violence suffered by Roma people in Poland and had claimed asylum, but not on the day of arrival, and so was considered an illegal immigrant. He lived in fear of being sent home and was exploited by employers who gave him jobs but paid him very low wages because of his immigration status.

John realised that all Tomack wanted was to be a legal resident

and work at his trade as a mechanic in order to support himself and his son, and so he began to muster support for Tomack and his son to be able to stay. He asked for help from ATDFW, who helped him put together a petition, which was then circulated through our network, and by his church. Some of the people who lived in the area were annoyed that John was giving support to a person who was described to him as, "Not just illegal scum but a thieving gypsy too." This opposition made John feel that Tomack was the victim of discrimination and he made greater efforts to explain the validity of Tomack's fear of returning to Poland and that he was a victim of prejudice. All of that made it even harder for John to be accepted in his community and affected his wife and children too. Sadly, Tomack lost his fight to stay and he and his son ran away. They just disappeared from the area.

In spite of this disappointment, John continued to offer support to people he met who were struggling and excluded. On his return to London he increased his activity with ATDFW and became a champion of poor families and of the long-term unemployed and those in low paid work. Only weeks before his recent death at the early age of 55, he spoke at a Trades Union conference on the right to work and the barriers faced by people in poverty who always get the low paid, low status, poor quality work that no-one else wants to do.

John was not alone in his efforts. There are many others who take the risk to speak publicly about their own struggle with poverty and exclusion and some who suffer within their community as a result. One young mother, Anne, agreed to appear on a televised debate that brought people in poverty face to face with policy makers. She wanted to raise awareness of how poor families suffer. Anne spoke about the appalling housing she was forced to live in, the crime and deprivation of the area and her fears for her children. She talked about the difficulties of raising children with an inadequate income and of the barriers she encountered when trying to access work or training, of the stigma attached to her address. She held herself with dignity, even when challenged by a politician who asked her why she had children if she had no money. Anne replied that, "If people did not have children our society would have no future and I have the right to have children, I love my children and I want them to be something when they grow up".

Back home on the housing estate where she lived, people started shouting at her in the street and being abusive about the fact that she had described her area as deprived and her home as being, "on a sink estate". Even her children suffered as they were bullied in school and were told that their mother should shut up and not "dis" (disrespect) the place they live. The reality is that she lives on a notorious estate in an area designated by the Government

as one of severe deprivation, but others who live there felt labelled and were angered by her public statements. For months she was afraid to go out.

### Conclusions - Uniting to eradicate poverty

Defenders of human rights come from many backgrounds, wealthy and poor, and often take chances in order to raise the issue of poverty and human rights in their social circle and more publicly. On a daily basis, the poorest fight poverty by surviving it and helping others to survive it too. The neighbour who looks after a young mother's child to give the woman who cannot afford a babysitter time to rest, rather than reporting the crying child to social services is a defender of human rights. The man who invites other unemployed people to his home to help them fill in forms for jobs, training or benefits is a defender of human rights. The mother who teaches her

children that they need to befriend the child who has the least and suffers the most is a defender of human rights. The child who helps another to learn to read and write so that they don't get bullied in school is also a defender of human rights. Being forced to live in poverty is a violation of human rights and those who suffer from poverty most are often working hardest to fight it – but no-one sees their efforts or recognises their fight so they are not included in debates on policy.

It is time for all of us to move out of our comfort zone and accept that there is poverty in our country and in every country and that eradicating it worldwide is all our responsibility. In whichever country or community we fight poverty, it will never be eradicated unless those who live in poverty are the principal partners because they have the knowledge and experience required to make policies effective.

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