



By Laura

She's only 28. And she's already borne nine children - the last one just six months ago. While I believe that children are gifts, I also believe that gifts come with responsibility. I feel that to leave the conception and bearing of children to chance or fate when you can intervene, to a degree of course, is inexcusable and this when they can ill afford to have another baby. As it is, they have to depend on charity.

I ask her if she's taken steps to stop further pregnancies and she says no. My feelings are mixed. I want to cry because she doesn't know better. I want to cry because she's so poor, legacy of an oppressive system and a vicious cycle of learned helplessness. At the same time, I am also angry because I feel she *should* know better. From my position, I feel that every woman should know instinctively to give the best protection, education, care and love to their offspring, and that if they can't, they should seriously not consider bringing another kid into the world. Surely she can see what her many children are lacking. The filthy squalor they live in alone is reason enough not to have more children and I haven't even started on education which is every child's right.

Her toddlers lie on the cold, sticky and slimy floor of the bare flat - half naked, sharing a dirty bottle which contains what looks more like "kopi susu" than "susu". The older ones sit with dirty faces and hair staring vacantly, flashing their white teeth in wide grins when I smile at them. I feel pity for them. And her. But I also feel a little angry that she brought them into the world, to a life of abject poverty - without their permission. They did not ask to be born and to be subjected to such a life.

Because I've spoken to her before on a few occasions, I know that she is quite intelligent and so I find it even more unacceptable that she did not take the necessary birth-control measures. When I asked her to go and "ikat" and she replied with the "mahal lah" answer, I'm thinking "bullshit" because to my knowledge, it doesn't cost that much. Besides, based on my prior observation of her children, she had chosen to spend money on clothes, accessories and even gold-plated necklaces for them instead. When I asked her about the wisdom of these purchases, her smiling reply of "Hari besar mah. Bagi budak happy" infuriated me even more.

I'm aware of feeling exasperated by her misplaced priorities and careless spending. I find myself gesticulating wildly and reasoning with her in a lecturing tone, practically expounding on the possibilities where money and education is concerned. I asked her if she wants to see her children repeat the life she herself has lived and the kind of example she wants to set for them - especially her daughters. When I suggested helping her with regards to tubal ligation, she responded by saying that she can just take some "ubat cina – murah saja... banyak bagus punya". I questioned the efficacy and safety of it but she insisted that it's safe. I feel utterly frustrated that what is so obvious to me is not so to her.

At one point, she said that she "sudah takut....tak mau lagi ...saya cakap dengan suami saya, jangan dekat ah...". She said that she told him if he wanted sex, she'll give him the RM5 to go pay a prostitute for it.

My shoulders are slumped. I feel quite exhausted. I must have been shouting because my throat feels tired too and my mouth feels dry. I think to myself, "Why do I even bother?" I give up. But for just a while only. And then, I'm back at her again.

I ask her how old she is. "28," she replies. I ask her, "You tak mau, kah?" in reference to sex. She coyly smiles and says, "Mau...". I said, "Habis, macam mana? Nanti dapat sakit macam mana? You muda lagi, subur lagi. Nanti, sekali saja dekat, bunting lagi, macam mana?"

She just smiles, shakes her head and says, "Ok punya lah." I'm aware of wanting to grab her and shake some sense into her. Instead, I place my hand lightly on her shoulder, laugh like a loser and say, "Saya ta-boleh cakap lagi lah." I feel so ineffective. I heave a heavy sigh.

As I look at her face, I feel so sorry for her. I feel so sad, especially when I see her dirty children with their large eyes and flashing white teeth. I give her a hug and say, "Tengok macam mana lah nanti." I devise a sketchy plan in my mind to be executed another day.

I sense a quiet desperation within her that she tries to mask with her seemingly nonchalant smile. I feel bad that I did not sense this sooner. I feel bad that I did not afford her her dignity, little though it may seem to me. She must have wanted to hold on to whatever control she has of her body. Maybe, I have failed to understand that maybe that was what it was all about. Control over her body. Whatever control she still has. Maybe it's not merely about being callous and irresponsible. And maybe also, there are fears of how a tubal ligation may affect the complete woman in her as she understands it. Or maybe, she is afraid that her husband will desire her less after that.

So many maybes that I'd failed to see in my rush to so-called educate, enlighten and help her. I'll have to come back another time to talk with her and understand better what her underlying concerns are. While I may mean well and genuinely care, my way of going about it may not have been right. Or even if it is, perhaps I should exercise greater gentleness. Or perhaps, the timing isn't right. And yet, I feel the urgency of the matter. I am afraid that she might just conceive again in another moment of heightened arousal. I keep thinking that she can't risk that.

As I walk wearily back to my car, I am amazed at her resilience through all that she faces.

Seen in one light, she seems so weak and lacks a fighting spirit. But seen in another light, she is strong and a fighter in a way that I don't think I can be, standing where I am standing at this point in time.

It's so easy for me to look at her from the outside and judge her motives, her attitude, her actions. From my higher ground of better education, relative wealth and resolve, how can I possibly understand her circumstances and emotions fully, no matter how much I care? I am conscious of the idealist in me – for good or for bad. I recognize that while I mean well for her, it is nevertheless not a good thing to force my intended good on her. That is to take away her dignity. Besides, I cannot make my choice her choice. I realize that while I can try, I cannot control the outcome.

The line from a song that I've heard my son sing before, rings in my mind, "...good intentions never save a man...". How true. I am acutely aware of my impatience to "right wrongs" and see immediate results and realize that it's self-defeating and energy-sucking. I was only with her for about an hour but I feel so drained. As I become aware of this tiredness, I realize that it is not mere physical tiredness but rather an emotional one that had somehow crept into my body. I realize for the umpteenth time how deeply people's problems affect me, and in a most unhelpful way.

On the plus side though, it reminds me that there is so much work to be done and that I am fortunate I have the resources to contribute to the work instead of just being wrapped up in "I, me and mine". I recall a quote by A.C. Grayling that goes "...that happiness is gained by outward-looking in work and relationships, and lost by being wrapped up in oneself, dwelling on anxieties and fears".

I learn that life is so much about perspectives.

I can do this.

I can help.

And along the way, I will learn about myself and become a better person. And a less judgmental one.