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Mary John Children's rights and power: charging up for a new century. Jessica Kingsley ISBN 1 85302659 X £? (pbk) pp.304

Mary John is widely respected for her advocacy of children's rights. She founded the programme of work arising from the 1992 conference that she convened on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This book is the ninth in the 'children in charge' series that she edits. Mary begins with the powerful memory of herself as a child in hospital over 50 years ago, deprived of basic rights, and she writes from the perspective of 'as if', not from cynicism but from hopeful imagining. To the familiar UNCRC's '3 Ps' of provision, protection and participation rights, Mary introduces the vital fourth 'big P' – power, and how children around the world experience power, being powerful, and transforming power relationships. The book asks why children are in a powerless minority group. Why are they so rarely included in debates on social accountability, freedom and autonomy? And why is their personhood often misunderstood and denigrated, so that they are not seen as real people?

By the 1970s and 1980s, a few psychologists, such as Judy Dunn, were recognising very young children as persons. They followed the earlier work, for example, of the Polish paediatrician Korczak, who inspired the UNCRC, and the French obstetrician Leboyer, who recognised new born babies as sensitive aware people. Yet the multiple representations of the child still tend to be negative, dominated by such media images as the Bulger murder and other witch-hunt visions of childhood, in contrast to respecting every child regardless of age or circumstances.

Beyond protection and provision, power concerns realising children's own self-defined aspirations in ways, for example, that Judith Ennew has proposed for street children, and Rhys Griffiths for school students: children as citizens now. Different concepts of power are reviewed - power as domination, or power as peaceful transforming energy – with the potential for children as one of the most excluded and oppressed groups to contribute to social change.

If the major axes of rights are personhood and power, respect for children's rights entails honouring children's personhood and lived experiences. To do so, involves critically rethinking mainstream child psychology that has fallen into depoliticised 'objective' indifference. This rethinking is similar to the way feminism reformed adult psychology, and enabled the voices of the silent women to be heard through radical new research theories, methods and ethics. In research with children and young people, these new approaches cross, but also explicitly analyse, power relationships between children and adults.

The chapters on children and the economy examine the commercial corporate construction of childhood, and also review how children tend to be invisible in statistics. If children do appear, the statistics may be misleading and fragmented. Children are sited on the edges of adults' concerns. We need statisticians, journalists and economists who will render children visible, and start from children's perspectives to change public attitudes and policies, for example, towards Afghanistan, Iraq and Africa. I found that this section of the book filled in yawning gaps left by admirable but adult-centred writers such as Will Hutton and George Monbiot.

The 'enduring and surviving' section reviews how the seemingly remote political issues are integral to immediate personal ones. Cases such as Victoria Climbié's short life illuminate structures in contemporary British society, the state services, and the family. The section considers indomitable children who endure and survive, are resilient and resourceful, cope and collude, despite the constraining myths that adults weave around them.

Many families across the world survive through the support of their working children. This book challenges unrealistic Western opposition to all child labour, in the light of working children's own views and Declarations, showing how, instead of researching young people, it is often more salient to research adults' misrepresentations of them and 'intolerable' offences against them (p 154). 'Warriors and workers' begins with the relentless war waged against childhood, and especially against child workers and child soldiers, by adults' violent values and policies.

In the section on eloquent active 'children in charge', their political agency and participation, Mary John sustains her radical critical scrutiny, such as of children's attempts to take part as equals with adults at UN conferences and global summits. The depressing state of many schools' disrespect for children and young people, from the West to South Africa to Japan is reviewed. There's a fascinating account of the modern versions of Geisha girls with their liberating mobile phones.

The 'young citizens in action' section ranges from the Devon Youth Council to the Children's Parliament, which since 1993 has run night schools in Rajasthan, one of the poorest regions in the world. The children there work from around dawn to dusk, and then attend night school. Unusually, the night schools emphasise skills over abstract learning, rural and working class language over urban middle class approaches, small local schools rather than larger distant ones, and skills over exams. Everyone learns and teaches (a model for every school). The young teachers are former students of their school. Sustainable education helps everyone to understand and enrich their self-reliant local community (practical nurturing power) instead of to hanker after the dream of personal success in a distant city. By 2001, there were 150 night school with nearly 3000 children, two thirds of them were girls. Whereas the new UK Children's Parliament is mainly for role play, the Rajasthan Children's Parliament has real power. The children aged 6-14 years elect their MPs aged 11 – 14 years. The Parliament monitors the schools and can fire slack teachers. The 11 year old Speaker, Devkaran Guijar, in 1996 organised installing a water pump for his village, showing how the children have responsibility and power to achieve change. A travelling puppet show warns people against money lenders and promotes women's and children's rights and the value of good teachers. So the children teach the adults about citizens' power, even in this very traditional community, where a series of the Parliament's Prime Ministers had to resign when they became wives aged about 15 years. This global book moves on to Albany Free School, questioning why, since there are pockets of respect for children and their rights in all part of the world, these pockets are so small and rare.

There are many vivid analyses: 'Adolescence, an artificially-created, cold waiting-room to life, appears now to have to endure more waiting' (page 258). And young people tend to be blamed for their impatience, whereas we need instead to research how and why adults enforce the wait through escalating intergenerational and international inequalities. Children and young people are 40% of the world's population, allocated nowhere near 40% of the world's resources. If reports from the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, G8, EU, and international corporations all

had to include an impact on children statement, would we all become informed and horrified enough to insist that policies change?

This book offers hope that the world can become one of risk, excitement, imagination and creativity (page 267) by listening to children. The book ends with the memory of Mary John as a child in hospital and Proust's belief that: 'We do not receive wisdom. We must discover it for ourselves from experiences...' I found the book's beginning and end especially interesting now because of Margaret Stacey, who died recently and was a founder of medical sociology, which has important links with children's rights and power. First, Margaret (and I) started from our sons' time in hospital being treated for malformed feet, and we followed in our sons' footsteps to learn to research with children. In a sense, so do all sociologists of health and healing who follow Margaret's lead. And second, in the ultra risk-managing, child-protecting contemporary UK society, children in hospital with severe disease or disability are among the few groups of children in Britain who still experience the kinds of danger and suffering that children in many parts of the world face everyday. Adults have much to learn from their courage and insight, and Mary John's book, grown from her own suffering in childhood, profoundly illustrates this point.

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