

Unchaining my mind

By Timothy Pope

Human Rights. How many of us could say that we think about this concept often? Not many, I'm sure. I know that I would be lying if I said that not a day went by where I didn't think about it. But when we do consider them, what springs to mind? For me, it evokes thoughts of the United Nations, suited men and women gathered together to promote the best interests of humanity. It reminds me of how lucky I am to be who I am, to be where I am, and to have the rights I do. And it reminds me of those who don't. Those who are oppressed by their leaders, who do not pay heed to even the most basic of their needs.

I sometimes find it hard to imagine that for some people life is a constant and sometimes seemingly hopeless struggle. Neglected or exploited by governments, working and living in squalid conditions, these people are often too easily forgotten. How many people know about slavery today? I was shocked to discover that slavery, far from being an archaic practice, was still active in many places around the world today. As far as I knew, slavery ended in 1949 with the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons. But that was only the Western world's opinion. In many parts of the world, slavery still goes on. The UN estimates that there are about twenty-seven million slaves worldwide today. One country that has a particular problem with slavery is Niger, where it is estimated that around 7% of the population are born into bondage. They are forced to work for their 'owner' and are abandoned when too old or sick to be of use. As children, the slaves are separated from their parents to sever the bond between them and beaten, or if they are female, raped into submission. Slavery is a traditional practice in Niger, as in many countries in the region and the international community has done its best to eradicate it, beginning with the French efforts to illegalise it when Niger was a French colony. Despite these efforts, slavery has still flourished.

When I first saw a television program on slavery in Niger I was appalled that these practices continued. However, it seems that much of the world that lives without fear of the infringement of their human rights is ignorant, and quite happy to remain so, as to the plight of those less fortunate than themselves, not realising that it was merely accident of birth that it is we and not those living in slavery, who have the privileged existence and more rights than we can possibly appreciate. And this relates not only to our freedom but to the myriad of other rights and privileges that we enjoy that others do not such as the rights to an education and healthcare, food and clean water. Even these basic things are often denied them.

This program was a step towards opening my eyes to the abuses of human rights around the world. I soon decided to learn more about human rights and the state of their protection and abuse around the world. I became involved in the Justice and International Mission unit of the Victorian Uniting Church. This has been an experience that is both interesting and horrifying at the same time. I find myself discovering more and more about rights and their abuses globally and also I find that the extent to which this happens is quite astonishingly large. From the imprisonment of people for political and religious reasons such as the Falun Gong in China to the attempts at genocide made against the Kurdish people by Saddam Hussein while president of Iraq. It can often seem as though an individual such as myself can do

relatively little to improve the lot of those who do not have access to their rights. But there is hope, through the actions of governments and organisations significant progress is possible.

The issue of human rights is not one that receives enough airing in our society today. It is often only by chance, as it was for me, that people become involved in human rights. It is not until we unchain our minds from the shackles of ignorance that keep our society living in its all-rights-included insulated cell and see the reality that not everyone is as free as we are, and those people deserve our help to make them so.