# *Michele Landsberg*

## West Must Confront Anonymous Misery of the World's Children

*Michele Landsberg is one of the nation's most liked and trusted journalists, a voice of compassion and common sense. Her career could be summed up in the words* Women & Children First, *the title of her 1982 book. In it she collected some of her best earlier newspaper columns on abuses such as rape and domestic violence, but also on the joys of family life such as birth, holiday rituals, graduation and marriage. This split focus illustrates Landsberg's position as feminist: though she fights inequalities suffered by women, she strongly believes in marriage and family life. Her attempts to reconcile these sometimes opposing values lend an often dramatic power to her essays. Landsberg was born in 1939 in Toronto, and studied at the University of Toronto. Since then she has written for* The Globe and Mail, Chatelaine *and* The Toronto Star, *winning National Newspaper Awards for both her columns and feature articles. In 1986 her family interests led to* Michele Landsberg's Guide to Children's Books. *Then living in New York City as wife of Canada's ambassador to the United Nations, Stephen Lewis, Landsberg produced a series of columns for* The Globe and Mail *about New York and about international issues at the UN, which has its headquarters there. One of these articles is our selection, from November 7, 1987. (Its point was in fact realized when in September 1990, 20 countries ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.) To round off her American experiences, two years later Landsberg published* This is New York, Honey! A Homage to Manhattan With Love & Rage.

1 International Declarations come in for a lot of derision. Any hostile observer at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, for example, might well snicker as delegates lengthily debate each parenthesis, comma, word, in the draft Convention on the Rights of the Child.

2 The process has gone on for years, and will not come to fruition for several more. Can the verbiage really make that much difference to the millions of the world's children who suffer and die in anonymous misery?

3 Yes. Ten years ago, the mere phrase "children's rights" was, to most people, a joke, a ludicrous extension of the "rights" frenzy of the '70s. Today it has entered our consciousness as a legitimate and forceful claim. The Declaration process itself (now pressing forward more rapidly under the leadership of Poland and Canada), involving hundreds of volunteer organizations and government officials, has turned many governments' attention, some for the first time, to the agony of their children.

4 An essential part of social change is the forcing of this attention. What newspaper, a decade ago, wrote about child labor in the Third World? Now, in recent weeks and months, well-researched documents — from the Christian Science Monitor, the Cox Newspaper Service, the International Defence and Aid Fund, the United Nations sub-commission on the prevention of discrimination against minorities — have heaped up on my desk.

5 They catalogue a horror that has been invisible to most of us.

6 They tell of Gypsy children who are kidnapped or sold from Yugoslavia to criminal gangs in Italy, where they are beaten into performing as thieves and beggars.

7 Thirteen- and 14-year-old girls work 17-hour days at their sewing machines in Manila sweatshops. The pay: 13 cents an hour.

8 That's better than the one cent a day earned by 5-year-olds who weed the tea plantations in Sri Lanka.

9 In the Ashanti Goldfields (jointly owned by the Government of Ghana and a company called Lonrho International), 11-year-old boys labor naked in pools of cyanide to extract gold from rock.

10 Girls as young as 4 are virtual slaves in Moroccan carpet factories, crouched on their benches for 12-hour days, sleeping on the floor next to their looms at night, breathing air thick with fluff and fibre.

11 They compete with Indian carpet-makers for the North American market. In New York department stores like Bloomingdale's, the luscious glowing colors of the carpets fetch prices in the thousands. But the small Indian and Moroccan weavers themselves earn a pittance of pennies an hour.

12 World Health Organization officials are researching the trauma of children as young as 7, in countries like Kenya, who drudge through 15-hour days as household servants. They weep at night, refuse to speak, wet their beds. They mind the babies, scrub dishes, floors and laundry, live like little household animals.

13 Brazil has 30 million street children; many more are actually sold for forced labor. On rice plantations, children of 6 or 7 are primed with alcohol in the pre-dawn to get ready for work. Their beds are the bare ground, their wages a plate of rice; little girls are used as prostitutes by

their overseers. On Brazil's tea plantations, 10,000 children ages 5 to 13 wade through pesticide muck. They get 15 cents for every 52-pound sack of tea they pick and carry.

You'll switch to cocoa? Thousands of Nigerian children are kidnapped 14
— some as young as 5 or 6 — to slave in cocoa plantations.

In Mozambique and Angola, 375 of every 1,000 infants die — the 15
highest infant mortality rate in the world — because of devastation caused by South African armed aggression.

Thailand has at least 30,000 child prostitutes. In one Bangkok house, 16
owned by a prominent man active in charity, the little girls crawl through a hole in the wall at the sound of the madame's whistle, and sit on benches wearing numbered shirts, to be picked by customers. Their faces, in Cox News photographs, are ravishingly lovely, shatteringly sad.

In most of these countries, governments are struggling to overcome 17
the kind of poverty that makes child labor a condition of life. Much of the poverty is caused by debt. Third World countries are economically strangled by the high interest rates on the money they owe to us First Worlders.

In some countries, however, it is the government that orchestrates 18
the horror. South African news censorship means that we no longer see the sudden, irrational descent of gun-wielding police from their armored cars to shoot at random as black children scatter, terrified, in the dusty township streets. But volunteer organizations doggedly collect the evidence. They tell us that last year, 59,000 children were detained by South African police.

Children as young as 7 and 8 are cross-questioned for hours in court, 19
denied lawyers or visits from parents. They are so small that all we can see of them over the edge of the dock are their troubled, panicky eyes.

Fathers tell of finding their broken, tortured children lying on con- 20
crete floors of police stations, trembling and speechless and sometimes dying. Children in jail are routinely beaten and whipped; many have been tear-gassed, scarred with boiling water, hosed, electric-shocked, raped, beaten into permanent brain damage or death.

Can a United Nations Convention on children's rights make a differ- 21
ence? The people at work in the field say yes. When enough people absorb the idea that all children have fundamental rights, we lucky ones in the West will begin to accept responsibility. We buy the carpets, the cocoa, the rice, the cheap shirts, the pornography, the South African gold. One day we'll buy the idea that we can, through our foreign policy, help the children.