

A New Perspective

By Viki Rife

The child had spent most of her life lying on the floor. Her atrophied muscles caused her to curl up into a fetal position. Her mother or grandmother would often place sacks of flour on her limbs to try to straighten them out.

The girl had been developing normally until an epidemic went through her village when she was a toddler. Because her culture believes that being cold is the greatest danger in an illness, parents tried to keep their children warm as they fought the chills. As a result, many children ages 6-8 in the village now have brain damage from spiked fevers.



In her country, children with disabilities are considered a curse. Their family becomes a social outcast, and many times the father will kick the mother out of the house for having failed in her responsibility to produce offspring that will support him in his old age. She ends up returning to her mother's home, where mother and grandmother struggle to support themselves and care for the disabled child. The society places no value on the life of a disabled child.

For this particular child, however, a new stage of life was about to begin. She had been brought to the village clinic, where a team of American therapists was available to work with disabled children. The Americans had a strange contraption made of three pieces of wood. They chose her to be the first one to demonstrate how it could help. Using scarves, they formed a five-point harness and lifted her onto the homemade chair.

Suddenly a huge grin crossed her face. She was seeing other people at an eye-to-eye level for the first time! People clapped. Her grandmother was in tears. The hospital doctors and nurses came to watch because they heard something amazing was happening.

Soon moms and grandmothers were gathered around the chair, taking pictures with their phones and talking about how they could build one themselves. An atmosphere of hope began to spread through the room as the therapists shared how the chair could be used to strengthen the child's central core and explained the importance of strengthening their muscles.

"We talked to them about personal dignity," says Amanda Swain, team leader. "We encouraged them to engage with their child's face and see their emotions. We explained the importance of interactions, such as letting the child watch from the chair while they did their daily chores, such as baking bread."

The Women of Grace USA team had come specifically to help children in a culture where there is little to no help available for children who have special needs. One of the things the team members enjoyed most was being able to tell these children and their families that God loves and values them. That's not something they've experienced in their culture.

At another village, the team was expecting about 10-30 kids and ended up with over 100. Mandy shares, "One lady carried her 14-year-old son down the stairs and through the creepiest hallway I have ever seen to meet with Debbie, a speech therapist. The mom waited for two hours with the boy on her lap.

When it came time to leave because the room was scheduled for something else, Debbie said, ‘She’s been waiting so patiently for two hours. Can I talk with her?’ She sat on the floor with the mother and son and loved on the boy. She looked into his eyes, talked with him, and helped him play ball. She gave the mom suggestions on ways to improve his quality of life and help him eat and communicate with her. She told her how precious her son was, how he is a blessing from God, and how God loves them both.”

Amanda shares, “Before we went, we couldn’t envision how vast the need was. It felt overwhelming, especially when much of what we had planned on fell through. We almost hit a wall of depression, but we turned it into a prayer time. God reminded me that we were not there to take care of all their needs, but to show the light of Christ.”

One of the team members commented that as a result of what she had seen, she had a new perspective on being able to trust God in the big and small things.

Mandy agrees. She adds, “So many things we had planned fell apart. When that happens, you let God do what He wants.”