

Across the Border

Europe, women, and poverty

by *Christina Duhoux-Rueb*

“No poor people in my congregation,” reads the bold headline of the interview with a pastor in a local newspaper. It sounds like the Promised Land: that is how it should be, but is he right? Alice thinks long and hard and finally decides to write a letter to the editor. She signs with her full name—which is nothing less than a coming out because in this little town everybody knows everybody—maybe not as well as they should, but still....

When you think about the Netherlands, poverty won't be the first thing that springs to mind. And how poor is poor exactly? Through a good social and national health system nobody needs to go hungry since food may be obtained from a food-bank, everybody has a shot at medical care, a chance at the appropriate education or vocational training, and other

relief when needed. The roads have no potholes, streetlights shine brightly, drinkable hot and cold water are available in every house, and toilets are working well. There is a widely spread system of public transportation. So, technically, on a worldwide scale, there is no poverty in this pastor's congregation, but the problem is: who defines what is poor, what is needed and when it is needed?

Alice isn't a member of this pastor's flock so the statement still holds. And she doesn't consider herself poor. She certainly doesn't want to complain, because she has much to be thankful for, but how can she make people understand what it is like to live from day to day, and the careful decisions that she has to make every time she needs to spend money, to worry about the washer that is about to break down and to worry about the winter without a proper coat. She wants to explain how much it hurts that she can't



An Amsterdam woman living in poverty.

Photo by Associated Press


Across the Ocean

buy her granddaughter that little toy—it doesn't cost much, but it still means she has to give up something else, like food. Do people know how it feels to come up with "something else to do" when someone invites her, because she can't invite people back. She never eats in a restaurant, but she can cook miracles and when she shops at the end of the day there is usually a bargain just before closing time.

Maybe she could write about the much-needed dress that was on sale? It was a bargain, but she decided against it, because she couldn't afford to buy matching shoes. Maybe a man wouldn't understand a thing like that. Or should she explain about her free public transport pass so she can visit her daughter and the little ones once in a while? Since the accident she can't drive anymore, besides, she doesn't have money for a car—but she can't use public transportation either. She simply can't reach the bus stop, which is a good ten minutes walking from her house. She has to change buses too and the trip takes just too long for her limited energy. People who handled her application suggested that her husband would drive her, but since she doesn't have one any more, that is hardly a solution. She now needs a medical test by a different doctor to see if she can apply for an inexpensive cab ticket. She quickly notices that he lives two villages away. So how will she get there? She can ask a neighbor—but does this pastor know how difficult it is to always ask?

Poverty and women—Alice doesn't complain. She can handle her own affairs, but her world is getting smaller and smaller. What she finds hardest is the spoken and unspoken judgment. She realizes that she brings it on herself, since she told nobody about her financial situation, but why would people judge anyway? Why do they comment on her hair that needs a haircut? She is not going to explain that she doesn't have the money right now....

The letter is well received and well read. Alice is embarrassed by the response. She gets invitations to speak on poverty and explains that she isn't poor, there are just things—many things—she can't afford to do or buy and that has consequences.

Alice had the courage to tell, and I am so proud of her. She has opened people's eyes and invited them not to judge, but to observe and—maybe—to share. 

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