

January 2015

He just wants to go to school - - -

You know how it is: step out of your car, or walk out of a supermarket in the early evening... and there appears beside you a boy child asking if you will buy some banana bread, or custard slice, or roti, or a *sasa* broom – so he can get money for something.

And so it was on the first day of school this year, 20th January, midday, near ‘Dolphins’ in Suva. That it was that day flashed through my mind; yet the thought that lingered more was how this kind of thing annoys me so much. This latter thought led to the usual round of questions: why aren’t you at school; what school do you go to; how old are you; what do your parents do ... the boy shuffled, and was exasperated; perhaps ‘here we go again’ flashed through his mind to complement mine.

When confronted thus in earlier weeks, I inclined to scold the child asking me to buy something ... which really was most unfair: is it his or her fault that he or she is walking the streets asking *vulagis* or people supposedly with money to buy banana bread? For those of us who have had to beg or seek favours from absolute strangers it is not only embarrassing and humiliating, but it hurts – because we’d rather be 100 miles away rather than do this. Yet necessity – and may be hunger – overrides the motivation to flee and throw the box of bread into the bushes ... Added to that is the insult of strangers throwing questions at you that highlight your poverty.

This is Fiji, the way the world should be

So to Epeli – which is his name – I handed out \$2 and left the bread for him to sell to someone else for another \$2, and went into ‘Dolphins’ to buy lunch, for me. Yet as I ate, the encounter with Epeli ran and re-ran through my head where it was analysed. Mentally kicking myself, I departed ‘Dolphins’ and headed to the place where I’d been accosted – and to my great surprise, there he was. Still. And with the same quantity of bread to sell.

What is your name? Epeli

Where do you live? Cunningham stage 4

How old are you? 14

Where are you from? shrugs and eyes cast about; Kadavu.

Who looks after you; who do you live with? My grandma; my parents sent me to Suva to go to school.

Is it just you? Yes

Why aren’t you at school? I need to sell the bread to buy my school uniform and shoes so that I can go to school.

But today is the first day of school – why didn’t your grandma bake bread several days ago to sell? my grandma is old (65) and she is not well – her chest; she wasn’t well enough to bake until today.

Didn’t your grandma know that the Government has said that schools can’t turn children away (just) because they have no uniform? no answer; foot shuffle; eyes downcast. [I realise afterwards that at age 14, boys need to conform to be ‘part of the pack’; and anyway, if he’d appeared at school in non-conformity and wearing slippers/thongs, his peers would identify him as being ‘less’ than they – not a good image for a young man.]

Does this happen every year? yes – I usually miss the first three or four days.

Ma’am, I want to go to school: I’ll be in Form Three this year; RS school in Nabua.

How much is a school uniform? \$25 – which I give to him, with a ‘now you can go to school’. But ma’am, I need to buy some school sandals first. How much are they? \$30 ma’am, at MH. But you can get cheaper shoes than that – there are shops in Nina Street ... Yes ma’am, but the MH ones last longer- five months. Give me back the \$25; here is \$50 for the shoes and uniform.

So what are you going to do now? I'm going to buy my uniform and shoes ma'am, and go home, so that I can go to school this afternoon.

Yes, but you also must sell the banana bread for your grandma: it cost her money (butter, flour) to make it; the money you make from selling the bread can be used for food for a few days. Yes ma'am (but placatory, unconvinced – 'another hurdle').

This is Fiji, the way the world should be

Should it?

Epeli's parents and /or his grandma could be arrested for (1) human trafficking, (2) contravening the Employment Relations Promulgation 2007, and the (3) Child Welfare Decree 2010.

(1) **human trafficking** (see Crimes Decree 2009). A child is someone younger than 18 years. Domestic trafficking carries a maximum penalty of between 12 and 25 years' imprisonment if a person organises or facilitates the transportation of another person who is younger than 18 years, from one place in Fiji to another place in Fiji and in so doing, is 'reckless' about whether the other person will be exploited ('used'), either by the first person or another, after that transportation [S 113 & 117].

But in this case, Epeli was not forced to sell the bread, and maybe he departed Kadavu willingly so that he could attend secondary school. Otherwise, grandma could be charged with debt bondage (S118) — particularly of a person younger than 18 years — but the court would consider the economic relationship between her and Epeli and maybe his parents, their personal circumstances and dependence on each other. The maximum penalty here lies between two and 12 years' imprisonment.

(2) **Employment Relations Promulgation 2007**

Part 10, S92-93, 97 states that children younger than 15 years may not be employed (work) except when they are working with family or members of communal or religious groups and are not working during school hours, and that they must be given 30 minutes paid rest for every continuous four hours' worked. Epeli's grandma therefore, is liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding \$10,000 or to a term of imprisonment not exceeding two years, or both (Part 21, S256).

(3) **Child Welfare Decree 2010**

If Epeli was being 'harmed' by not attending school, a 'professional' (medical officer, police officer, welfare officer, or lawyer) person is mandated to report him?, his grandma? to 'proper authorities'.

Didn't anyone tell her? She could have accessed these rules on the government website, or she could have read about them in the newspapers - Does she have money to buy newspapers?; can she read?

If she'd known about the non-necessity of wearing school uniforms, Epeli could have started today along with his mates – Why didn't she find out and insist he go, un-uniformed?

Are there not enough secondary schools in Kadavu, and teachers?

What is his parents' situation?

What will happen to Epeli if his grandma dies this year; or next; or before he finishes school? Grandma's health concerns Epeli – I can see that he loves her, yet maybe also fearing that she will not 'last' long enough to see him through school ... Going To School is – to him - what it's all about.

I forgot to ask Epeli about buying school stationery ... will selling banana bread make enough?

This is Fiji, the way the world should be