

Child Abuse in Southern Africa

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Available information on child abuse in Botswana, Lesotho and South Africa is reviewed.

Introduction

The 1990s began with a commitment to children through the adoption, by the United Nations General Assembly, of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This Convention set the minimum standards of protection for children's survival, health and education; protection against exploitation at work; protection against the degradations of war; and protection against physical and sexual abuse. By 20th July, 1994, 163 countries had ratified the Convention and 11 other countries had signed but not yet ratified the convention (World Health Organization, 1994: 1).

This was followed by the first World Summit for Children that was held at the United Nations on 30th September, 1990. The Summit was attended by approximately half of the world's Presidents and Prime Ministers who pledged to improve the life circumstances of children by fighting hunger, poverty, disease, exploitation, neglect, and illiteracy that afflict children in both the developing and industrialized countries. This pledge requires a detailed knowledge of the magnitude of the problems children face in each country. This research communication reports on the recent situation in several countries of Southern Africa.

Southern Africa generally

The Twenty-first century is nearly upon us, yet child abuse and violence in society continue to increase. Violent political activities, dramatic increases in car-hijackings, armed robberies, burglaries, rape, domestic violence and child abuse

have been a feature of the past decade in Southern Africa (e.g. Morris and Hindson, 1992). Violence against children has come from the domestic front and from the political arena. As a result of violence in the political arena, children in South Africa have been in the news. Children in other African countries have also been in the news largely as victims of armed conflicts (Bwibo, 1993; Okeahialam, 1984).

Children have been victims of armed conflicts in as many as 50 countries of the world (UNICEF, 1987:6), and a disturbingly high number of deaths have been caused by starvation and disease as well as bullets and beatings. By 1987, in Southern Africa, out of 70 million people in Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, some 750,000 children died before the age of five (UNICEF, 1987: 10). A significant number of these deaths were due to conditions of poverty and associated lack of medical facilities, including unsanitary conditions, malnutrition and diarrhea, untreated diseases and lack of immunizations, lack of access to clean water and to child-care clinics, and to the additional impact of war and violence which has been witnessed especially in Angola and Mozambique where child mortality rates have been as high as 375 per 1,000. Poverty, lack of economic support, marital breakdown and the proliferation of female-headed households have tended to go hand in hand with child abuse, neglect and abandonment.

Child Abuse in Botswana

According to Tswana custom, and under the law, children are the responsibility of their parents, rather than being under society's protection. This means that children who are abused or whose rights are denied by their parents (or guardians) are not themselves entitled to seek redress and protection in the modern courts or the traditional kgotla (court) and usually have nowhere to go for help (UNICEF and Government of Botswana, 1993). While it is widely accepted that children should be protected against abuses, very little has been done to amend the legislation for this purpose. As a result, many abused children will go unheard, unhelped and unprotected. The Children's Act of 1981 attempts to provide care, custody and rehabilitation for children. This remains inadequate due to the lack of support structures, guidelines and provisions for dealing with children and juvenile offenders.

As in other societies, children in Botswana face exploitation through work, sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, unlawful detention, capital punishment, unjustified removal from the family and other threats to their rights and welfare. Of the 17 percent of children who do not attend school, many may have been prevented or discouraged by their parents. The rights of the girl child are the most threatened of all, particularly as a result of sexual exploitation (UNICEF and Government of Botswana, 1993: 61). Since it began operation on 22 July, 1992 up to September, 1994, Childline Botswana, a telephone referral help line for abused children and families, has dealt with not less than 210 new cases. Of these, 25 percent were sexual abuse cases, 25 percent physical abuse, 30 percent emotional abuse and 20 percent were classified as truancy (Selelo sa Bana, 1994).

Child Abuse in Lesotho

According to the Ministry of Planning, Economic and Manpower Development (1991:13 1) the law in Lesotho does not adequately protect children from injuries that may be the result of child abuse. The Children's Protection Act of 1980 does not define such forms of abuse as child battery. Thus, Lesotho has few or no mech-

anisms whereby alleged abuse is brought to the notice of the authorities and investigated, nor are there sufficient places of safety for abused children who cannot remain with relatives. What is more, neither the police nor the medical profession are given sufficient training in recognizing child abuse.

Although there are no statistics available, it appears from anecdotal evidence that sexual abuse within the family is as common in Lesotho as anywhere else. According to the Police, Courts of law and the hospitals, there are cases of child victims of rape, assault or abduction that have come to their notice for referral for treatment in hospitals. In a study of the Thibella area of Maseru, it was found that incest, child rape and sodomy existed in the community. It was also found that some miners who had grown accustomed to homosexual relationships in the mine compounds, sometimes used rent boys on their return to Lesotho. There was also evidence that the sexual abuse of young girls was supported by the customary belief that sexual intercourse with a virgin girl would cure syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases (Ministry of Planning, Economic and Manpower Development, 1991:132).

Only 13 percent of the children in Lesotho's social welfare institutions were there for reasons of cruelty and neglect (Ministry of Planning, Economic and Manpower Development, 1991:132). Physical and emotional neglect of children is more prevalent among teenage mothers who became pregnant out of ignorance or by accident, and are not mature enough to accept the maternal responsibilities. The children are often regarded as illegitimate and their fathers often do not support the family. Migrant labour often results in legitimate fathers also leaving and neglecting their families for long periods of time. Mothers are increasingly forced to seek economic opportunities in towns and often leave their children with old and poor grandmothers. Some of the children attempt to follow their parents in towns and very often fail to find them and end-up as some of the most miserable neglected street children.

According to the Ministry of Planning, Economic and Manpower Development (1991:133), The number of abandoned children in Lesotho is small. In the period 1987-1989, the Social Welfare Department dealt with 14 abandoned girls and seven (7) abandoned boys. The Catholic Relief Health and Social Welfare Section had five (5) abandoned babies referred to them. Many of the abandoned children have teenage mothers who abandoned them in hospitals after birth, left them in dongas or among clusters of shrubs, in public toilets, with friends or strangers, or in drinking places such as *shebeens*. Older children have been abandoned at crowded bus-stops. Some of these children have been adopted by expatriate doctors who ultimately left the country with the children.

Child Abuse in South Africa

According to UNICEF and the National Children's Rights Committee (1993:76) there were 15,333 cases of child abuse reported to the Child Protection Unit of the South African Police in 1992. Of this number, 3571 cases involved physical abuse, 3,639 involved rape, and 4,135 involved sexual abuse (sodomy, incest or other sexual assault). The South African Police believe that the real incidence of child abuse is ten times higher than the reported figure. A total of 7,012 cases of child abuse and neglect were encountered by child welfare societies nationally. Child neglect accounted for 81.3 percent of cases treated. In 1991, 892 new cases of physical abuse and 1,139 cases of sexual abuse were reported to child welfare societies. Emotional abuse to children is not recorded due to the difficulty of proving such cases. Figures from other forms of abuse, however, should serve to indicate the extent of emotional abuse.

As a result of child abuse and neglect between 1991 and 1993, some 13,603 children in South Africa were institutionalized, and a further 28,988 children were placed in foster care in terms of the Child Care Amendment Act of 1991. The majority of the children who benefited from child protective services (55 percent) were those classified as Coloured, followed by those classified as white children, who formed 33 percent of

the total. Black children had the least access to child protection services.

Although no statistics on abandoned children were readily available, UNICEF (1993:77) reported that:

- between June, 1991 and May, 1992 118 babies or toddlers were abandoned in the Vaal triangle;
- in Johannesburg, between 1 January 1992 and 30 June 1992, 25 babies were abandoned, of whom 21 were abandoned at the Baragwanath Hospital, three at the Coronation Hospital and one at the Johannesburg Hospital;
- in KwaZulu, during the period 1 January 1986 to 1 May 1991, 56 neonates were abandoned. Further, in 1991, around 300 children were abandoned in Natal KwaZulu hospitals; in Cape Town, during the period 1 January 1992 to 30 June 1992, 167 children were abandoned, 76 being coloured, and 19 being African. One third of the children were under three years of age.

In addition to the above, there were approximately 30,873 children affected by divorce and separation, of whom 65 percent were white, 27 percent coloured and 7 percent Indians. These figures are underestimates in the light of the fact that they do not reflect divorce and separations among Hindus and Muslims, whose marriages and divorces are concluded by religious rites, which are not considered to be legal in South African law. Similarly, many African marriages are concluded by customary law for which there is no national register. As a result, the number of African children affected by divorce is not known. There are also large numbers of children living apart from their parents. In 1992, 1.8 million children whose mothers were live-in domestic workers, with no accommodation for their children at their places of employment, were permanently separated from their mothers (UNICEF and the National Children's Rights Committee, 1993:77).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Through a periodic analysis of the situation of children and women, several countries, with the

help of UNICEF, have documented some of the problems facing children. However, these analyses have not always articulated the problem of child abuse, neglect and abandonment in many countries. Reliable information on child abuse is scarce in most countries. Even in the industrialized countries only a few have reasonably good data on child maltreatment. The need to provide reliable information that could guide government policy and social action in the area of child abuse cannot be overemphasized. Future baseline research is required to document the nature and extent of the problem. In addition, future census data should capture key indicators of child abuse, neglect and abandonment nationally.

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