



Response

June 2nd, 2017

National Child Protection Week: 28th May – 4th June

National Child Protection Week is held annually to raise awareness about, and promote, the rights of children. This year it is being commemorated under the theme: “Child Protection is Everyone’s Business”. This emphasises that the care and protection of children demands a collaborative approach across all sectors of our society. Section 28(d) of the Bill of Rights specifically states that every child has the right to be protected “from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation.”¹ The appalling tragedies of the recent past are illustrative of our failure to do so. The little white coffin containing the mutilated remains of little Courtney Pieters, and the charred wreck of the taxi transporting learners from Verena in Mpumalanga to school in Gauteng, bear testament to this.² They are victims of psycho-social and socio-economic neglect.

The society into which our children are born is one of extreme violence, from which the domestic sphere is in no way exempt. They are born into a society characterized by gross socio-economic inequality. Children are frequently the witnesses or victims of violence at home, at school and in the community. Numerous children are victims of those they know: home is a very dangerous place for some children. It is estimated that one in five children has been sexually molested, while many experience bullying at school or in the areas where they live. Corporal punishment at school remains common. There are disturbing reports of rapes of both girl and boy children by other children. There is a lack of respect for, and little sense of, the corporal integrity of others.

Many children grow up in harsh socio-economic circumstances which amount to degradation. Service delivery is poor and, in spite of the child support grant, food security is by no means assured. This results in stunting and is predictive of future learning difficulties. Early Childhood Development Centres which should provide for a basket of services to young children and their parents are not adequately resourced.³ Children travel to and from schools in taxis and buses which are often overcrowded and unsafe. They live in informal settlements that lack adequate sanitation and refuse disposal, and which are poorly lit.

The closing down of the Child Protection Unit of the SA Police Service was ill advised, while the failure of the police to act in terms of the Domestic Violence Act and to enforce protection orders has been a matter of ongoing concern. Women and children have paid a high price for this lack of diligence by the law enforcement authorities.

At the conclusion of its recent National Executive Committee meeting, the ANC expressed grave concern at the recent spate of brutal killings of women and children. The NEC’s statement asserted that, “Government for its part must strengthen the justice system to better deal with cases of gender based violence. Programmes of the ANC-led government must target both victims and perpetrators. Amongst others we must ensure the establishment of a special unit in each police station specially

trained for this type of work. This will ensure that we reduce barriers to reporting sexual offences and domestic violence.”⁴ The government must be held to account to ensure that this commitment is realized. In addition, it is essential that communities hold the police to account. Contact should be established with ward councillors and MPs as it is their duty to act on behalf of their constituents. This calls for an active citizenship.

The promotion and protection of the rights of women and children demands a proactive response on behalf of everyone. Nelson Mandela set the bar high when he said at the launch of his Children’s Fund: “Our actions and policies, and the institutions we create, should be eloquent with care, respect and love.”⁵ These must be afforded to all children, all the time; and that is all of our business!

Lois Law
Researcher

¹ The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996

² <https://mg.co.za/article/2017-04-24-bronkhorstspuit-crash-these-children-were-too-young-to-have-died-the-way-they-did> and ewn.co.za/2017/05/20/Courtney-Pieters-to-be-laid-to-rest-today

³ The Children’s Act 38 of 2005

⁴ Statement by the NEC of the ANC, 29th May 2017

⁵ www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1998/980925_canadanmcf.htm