



Some Challenges Facing Families

"The family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community."

Preamble to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

1. Introduction

Families come in all shapes, sizes, generations and degrees of vulnerability.¹ While all families are different they are the basic social structure into which we are all born. They play a fundamental role in the socialization of children, and the quality of nurture experienced in families has profound impact on the life of each child. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes "that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding".² Similarly, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child asserts that "the child occupies a unique and privileged position in African society [and that] for the full and harmonious development of his personality the child should grow up in a family environment in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding".³ However, the statistics on child abuse indicate that wilful and/or neglectful harm frequently occurs within the context of the family.

2. The South African Family

The results of the 2011-2012 census indicate that although the average South African house is headed by a man the number of female breadwinners is on the increase, as is the number of female-headed households, which now account for 14% of the total. According to the census

report, "of the 15 million households counted, about a third were 'traditional' families with both married parents living together with their children."⁴

Historically the 1913 Land Act, the system of migrant labour, and apartheid legislation such as the Group Areas Act and its companion, the Pass Laws, had a devastating affect on black South African families. An urban/rural divide was created where children and the elderly resided in the 'homelands' while their fathers worked in the mines and their mothers worked as domestic servants in urban areas. Some black families had so-called section 10(a) rights which allowed them to live in townships in urban areas – frequently some distance from their place of employment. The presence of black people in urban areas was predominately determined by the demand for their labour; their responsibilities as parents were not taken into account at all. Parents sent money back to their children in the rural areas and looked forward to seeing them once a year; but such 'long-distance parenting' is not easy.

The opportunity for a better family life for the post-apartheid black African family was dealt a devastating blow by the emergence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, whereby hundreds of thousands of children were orphaned, losing one or both parents. This has resulted in grandparent-headed households (usually grandmother-headed). It has also created a new form of family configuration – the tragic child-headed household, where a child under the age of

18 assumes responsibility for the running of the household and the care of younger siblings. Large-scale orphanhood has become part of our social fabric.⁵

Today, despite the repeal of apartheid laws and attempts to create a more people-centred economy, migration continues to be a determining factor in the absence or presence of fathers in families. The mining industry and seasonal labour still rely on migrant labour and facilities for family living continue to be lacking.⁶

3. Domestic Violence

Research indicates that there are “three factors likely to increase the risk that someone would end up in an abusive relationship as an adult: conduct disorder (a group of behavioural and emotional problems in children); exposure to parental violence; and power assertive parenting (which involves controlling, forceful tactics, including physical punishment)”.⁷ Poverty also engenders choices that may be detrimental to healthy family life, such as the tolerance of domestic violence when the abusive partner is responsible for the economic security of the family.

4. Parenting and Life Skills

The quality of nurture is the determining factor in the up-bringing of healthy adults. For example, although some people may find it counter-intuitive, it is important to cuddle boy children as much as girls. There is an urgent need for parenting and life skills programmes to help parents effectively nurture and discipline their children. The churches and other faith-based communities are particularly well placed to assist by running parenting courses, as well as by providing ongoing support to families in need. Pope John Paul II said in his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* that the Church would provide support for whichever kind of family needed her. He stated: “The Church wishes to speak and offer her help to those who are already aware of the value of marriage and the family and seek to live it faithfully, to those who are uncertain and anxious and searching for the truth, and to those who are unjustly impeded from living freely their family lives”.⁸

5. Housing

Another important point raised at the Roundtable was the inadequacy of many of the housing developments that have been, or are being, established by the Department of Human Settlements. These developments do not take into account the extended family in terms of both the spatial accommodation and the role/support provided by the extended family in the care and socialization of children. Overcrowding and the stresses and lack of privacy associated with cramped living conditions are thus perpetuated.⁹ The uniformity and small size of much public housing fails to reflect the diversity of families in our communities.

6. Teenage Sexuality

Children are becoming sexually active at an increasingly young age. A recent study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) indicates that many South African children are having sex for the first time between the ages of 14 and 15.¹⁰ Girls as young as 11 and 12 may fall pregnant but most are physically not ready to deliver a baby.¹¹ 50 000 teenage girls fall pregnant each year, frequently as a result of rape or ongoing sexual abuse. Peer pressure and an increasingly ‘sexualised’ youth culture are other important factors. There are high levels of rape and sexual abuse of adolescent girls in their homes, by teachers at school and by male learners at school or on their way home.

Teenage pregnancy is a complex issue. Some suggest that teenage girls fall pregnant to access the child support grant, thus giving them a small income for luxuries. However, there is not much concrete research to support this view. There is also the ‘sugar-daddy’ phenomenon whereby young girls may be persuaded to exchange sexual favours with older men in return for money or other material goods such as cellphones and clothing.

There is clearly a desperate need for proper sex education both at home and at school. As Childline’s Joan van Niekerk pointed out at the Roundtable, boys need to learn to ‘manage’ their sexuality and to act responsibly. Risky sexual behaviour has consequences. There is a shortage of positive male role models and a need for

alternative models of masculinity which respects the corporal integrity of girls and women. Girls, too, who may be tempted to go along with the inducements offered by a sugar daddy need to be helped to value their own sexuality, and to be more aware of the likely consequences of such a relationship.

There have been some ill-advised attempts to address the problem of teenage pregnancy and sexual abuse. Grade 6 girl learners at a primary school in Zwide, Port Elizabeth were visited by the Dora Nginza Hospital's family planning unit and given injections which, they were told, would prevent pregnancy should they happen to be raped. This unwanted medical intervention in the lives of such children was condemned by medical practitioners as unethical. Furthermore, it was illegal as children below the age of 12 require parental consent to reproductive health treatment.¹² The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) has suggested that the Department of Basic Education amend the curriculum to include "accurate and comprehensive information" on sexual matters and urged parents to talk to their children about sexuality.¹³

7. Funding Crisis

The present funding crisis is placing a heavy toll on NGOs working with families and children, resulting in an increasing loss of capacity to provide support services to families in need. In many instances this includes food aid. Many fathers and mothers of young children have little prospect of finding employment, and unemployment places immense strain on the family and erodes the coping mechanisms of parents; this, in turn, can lead to increased rates of domestic violence, sexual abuse and other family pathologies. South Africa has a wealth of

highly-experienced, well-trained NGO workers in the field of family welfare, and it is tragic that most of them ultimately have to rely on funding from outside the state sector in order to do their work. A relatively small shift of public funds into the NGO sector would make all the difference.

8. Conclusion

The Department of Social Development has recently published the long awaited White Paper on the Family, the purpose of which is to promote and strengthen families in South Africa. It sets out three key strategies to achieve this end, namely the promotion of healthy family life; family strengthening; and family preservation. Future CPLD briefing papers will deal with this White Paper in more detail, but for now it is at least encouraging that government has reached the point of establishing a clear policy on the family.

In a recent address to Interpol, the international policing organization, Vatican spokesperson Archbishop Dominique Mamberti said that "the most important place in which human beings are formed is the family. There, children experience the value of their own transcendent dignity, as they are accepted gratuitously in the stable and reciprocal love of their parents. It is in the family that people experience justice and forgiveness, which cements family relationships and acts as a foundation into social life".¹⁴

For the good, then, of our shared 'social life' in South Africa, it is our shared responsibility to ensure that our children grow up in an 'atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding', which is the birthright of every child.

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¹ The SACBC Parliamentary Liaison Office, the SACBC Family Life Desk and the Goedgeacht Forum for Social Reflection recently held a Roundtable Discussion in Pretoria on 'Challenges Facing Families'. The Presenters at the Roundtable were Joan van Niekerk from Childline, and Toni Rowland from the SACBC Family Life Desk. This Briefing Paper owes much to their presentations and to the discussion which flowed from these presentations.

² Preamble to the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. This Convention was the first international agreement signed by the new post-apartheid Government.

³ African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1999

⁴ City Press 4th April 2012

⁵ As yet we do not fully understand the psycho-social consequences of this form of 'family'.

⁶ One of the miners killed at Marikana near Rustenberg supported 18 people in his home village.

⁷ Health 24 12th March 2004

⁸ Apostolic Exhortation '*Familiaris Consortio*,' Pope John Paul II, 1981

⁹ Since the advent of the original RDP houses there has been a tendency to count the number of dwellings to be replaced, rather than the number of people inhabiting each dwelling, in planning and construction. For all their disadvantages, 'shacks' are far more flexible and physically adaptable to the changing size and make-up of families than are brick and mortar RDP houses.

¹⁰ The Star 26th November 2011

¹¹ Pregnancy at such a young age can compromise the survival of both the 'child-mother', and the baby.

¹² News 24 13th September 2011

¹³ News 24 26th September 2011

¹⁴ The Southern Cross 14th-20th November 2012

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