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Children in a Post Apartheid South Africa

The South African child, unlike other or most children in the world suffers a plight harsh enough to demand a fundamental transformation of the system. The Apartheid system has systematically denied the South African child the joys of childhood and forced them to engage in adult activities at a very tender age. Hatred and anger have engulfed their feelings and what has emerged is an unimaginable bitterness which must at some stage be addressed.

The Apartheid system within its character has encouraged and fanned brutality through its laws and legislation which have to a great extent sought to undermine and disrupt the family unit. The central care of the child's life - the family setting has been rendered unstable and also divided by the labour laws, in particular the migrant labour laws.

From birth the African child is brutalised, by the environment and the tension experienced by the pregnant mother. Anxiety, frustration, insecurity, poor diet, lack of adequate ante-natal care, the violence around her are passed on to the child in different ways - in short the first shock tremors for the child emanate from the home.

South Africa is one of the few countries in the world that have, through its laws destroyed black family life. The migrant labour system, the influx control laws, forced removals, economic and social deprivation, institutionalised and individual violence are major causes for disintegrating the family. This family has been fatally and grievously injured by

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the system and great effort will have to be applied to retrieve it from the depths of its turmoil and trauma.

The African child has become the victim of a disintegrated brutalized family unit, - love and protection children elsewhere lack because of the devastative practices and effects of Apartheid. Children experience in family situations negligence, poverty, brutality and the institutionalised harassment by the law and its everyday surprise raids by police and security forces.

The African family is presently subjected to abnormal oppressive and repressive conditions of life which make it impossible for the child to cope with its surroundings. The violence and repression meted out by Apartheid in fact causes psychological and mental problems for most children. The wrath and brutality of the system has created unhappy children uncertain of themselves and the future. Children are detained, abducted, shot at and the Harare Conference of the 24-27th September 1987 revealed a dastardly record of the plight of these children. In Harare it was the child talking about its fears and insecurity, sorrow and pain experienced in the hands of the law and its operatives. We see in South Africa a child denied of childhood and a civilised setting. What becomes clear is the recognition of the fact that children in South Africa will never lead a normal life as long as Apartheid exists.

The state of affairs in South Africa call for a consistent serious undertaking of strengthening the most vulnerable of all units in society, the family. The tax system, the migratory labour system, mine and farm labour have contributed greatly in subjecting the family into slave conditions. The system has forcefully split the unwilling inhabitants of the family into separate units. Children are often born and never see their father until much later in their childhood. Wives spent long periods of time awaiting the return of their husbands from mines. Hunger and poverty has driven most children into the streets, the laws of open and informal repression have added to

the creation of street children. We talk of child prisoners, farm hands and orphans of Apartheid.

The absence of adequate educational institutions for children have contributed in the brutalization of the child. The children realize that they need education but are harassed by the repressive measures and rules applied behind school walls, and immediately children lose hope in the entire education and political system. The Bantu education system in terms of its quality and content holds no exiting future for them and the little world that may have been the child's dream crumbles right in from its face. Dr. Alwood, in an address to the National Council of Mental Health had this to say:

"I see the breakdown in family life as fundamental in producing and aggravating mental problems in children."

He further elaborates that the early development of the child needs to be within a safe, consistent, holding, accepting, shaping social structure. If the child is disrupted frequently, if violence, acrimony and abuse are introduced to the child, then one has a recipe for disaster in the development of personality and inter-personal relationships later.

The social structure envisaged by Dr. Alwood lacks for the black child. We have to remember that children live what they learn. From the mothers knees they learn pro-social behaviour then from the wider family network and finally from the community and the society at large. The school, the church, the media, social events have great influence on the child.

Our society, especially the black society has to bring up children in an atmosphere of deprivation, insecurity, violence, poverty. Many try to make homes for their children, but the support system outside works against their efforts.

Apartheid has therefore made children victims of extreme brutalization, children have been robbed of basic human rights, elements that are so significant for their overall development continue to be abused by Apartheid structures. They have been

dehumanised, robbed of their youth and turned into targets by trigger happy police.

Progressive forces within South Africa realised this onslaught against children and they sought to engage people in addressing this issue. Organisations and institutions came up, social and religious groups, welfare organisations and social services became active. These structures can of course only be able to deal with the effects of brutalization and not the causes. In the words of one therapist involved in helping traumatized children are "All I can do", he said, "is to give them better mechanisms to cope under stress, to come to terms with their past traumas and to help them look for alternate ways to deal with their anger. But what alternate ways are there? Inevitably, they still do go back to a situation where there is little space for negotiating over schooling, housing, unemployment etc."

The condition of children in South Africa has been intensified by the Carnage in Natal and other parts of the country. The violent attacks by Inkatha stick wielding impis against the progressive Anti-Apartheid forces of the ANC and MDM alliance has contributed greatly in destabilizing families and children. Young teenagers have seen their parents butchered by Inkatha forces, they have become homeless, have no schools and smelled the stench of blood and seen some corpses eaten by dogs. I am talking here of the 67 year old woman. Apartheid has found a committed partner in Inkatha. A useful pawn indeed. Those who support these forces, especially Inkatha should realise that they are actually financing the death and destruction of young innocent lives caught between an ideological war and not a tribal war as some would like us to believe.

What we then need as a nation is to institute fundamental change which would transform the whole political system and put into its place a system, a democracy which will respect and cater for its citizens. Redressing the situation and according children their basic rights is an issue closely tied to the broader socio-political and economic aspects of our lives. The

health of our children, their education, their social milieu will need immediate attention from the Post-Apartheid government. It has to be priority.

Up till now concern over children has at least engaged people both internally and externally on campaigns that fought for the child to be treated as a human. There has been the Harare Conference of 1987, the 'Free the Children Alliance' which was formed to campaign for the release of imprisoned children. The United Nations Declaration of Children Rights became the yardstick against which the oppression and exploitation of children was measured in South Africa.

What can be done then? What is our ultimate goal?

The children of South Africa need peace above anything else which will open avenues for development and growth. Without peace the development of a reliable social system is not possible, economic expansion cannot take off and family lives returned to normality. All areas of the law directly or indirectly related to the dehumanization of the child should be repealed. Laws and practices associated with the migrant labour system; employment practices must be normalised; wages should be paid out evenly; compounds should be progressively and rapidly phased out and be replaced by family homes. The rural areas ought to be rehabilitated and developed to acceptable levels. Health and educational facilities should be made available to the people. Adequate housing should be provided. People need creches, kindergartens and the right to control their lives, the right to choose, decision and above all the right to allow children to grow as children.

The future of the South African child should be charted out now. We need a generation of healthy reliable people who must be given a basis for future participation in a united, non-racial, democratic, non-sexist South Africa.

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