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PREVENTION

Urgent action needed to fight violence against children

BRIDGET MACHAKA

ON WORLD Children's Day (November 20), we must remember that for many children in South Africa, childhood is interrupted by fear, violence and silence. Too many face sexual exploitation, domestic abuse and gender-based violence in the places meant to nurture them: homes, schools, and neighbourhoods. To honour children's rights, we cannot wait. We must act.

Crisis

The scale of violence against children in South Africa is staggering. Writing for IOL, journalist Yasmine Jacobs reported recently that an estimated 1 656 children were killed in the 2023–2024 period. Reporting for *The Star*, journalist Xolile Mtembu noted that between January and March 2025 alone, 314 children were murdered.

Meanwhile, psychologist Dr Guru Kistnasamy warns that "one in three children" experience physical or sexual violence before the age of 18. Yet even these grim figures may understate the crisis. The statistics themselves are incomplete and contested.

Children depend on adults for protection and often cannot speak out. Perpetrators are frequently people they know: family members, neighbours, and school staff. A recent government statement flagged a troubling trend of parents commercially exploiting their children. The home is not always a safe haven. Children's physical, emotional, cognitive development makes the consequences of violence even greater: trauma, dropping out of school, early pregnancy, preventable diseases, lost opportunities and lifelong scars.

Laws and policies

South Africa has relatively advanced laws and policies on paper. For example, the Children's Act 38 of 2005 sets out comprehensive child-protection rights, while the Constitution, our supreme law, entrenches children's rights to safety and protection in Section 28. The National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide outlines a multisectoral response, with dedicated funding, victim-support services and care centres aimed at addressing violence against women and children. Beyond our borders, South Africa is also a state party to key international instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 19 and 34) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Article 16), both of which require strong measures to prevent



SOUTH Africa has relatively advanced child protection laws and policies, but the implementation of these remains uneven, says the writer. | Independent Newspapers Archive

and respond to abuse. Yet gaps persist. Implementation remains uneven, resources are stretched, and co-ordination across critical sectors – the police, social development, education and health – is weak.

Programmes

There are several programmes working to protect children and respond to violence. These include:

- ◆ The Childline South Africa "Isibindi" model that offers training to community-based child and youth care workers to support vulnerable children in therapeutic, local settings.
- ◆ The Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children that provides hotlines, shelter and psycho-social support for children affected by GBV.
- ◆ The national 24-hour GBV Command Centre, which offers immediate counselling and referral for victims of GBV and children.
- ◆ The Generation Gender South Africa coalition that is launching an app for GBV case-monitoring, aiming to improve victims' access to justice.

These efforts matter but prevention must happen before violence occurs in homes and schools, and restorative support must be sustained.

So, what can we do to prevent vio-

lence against children? First, we must strengthen data and accountability. Reliable statistics on children's victimisation are essential to measure progress and hold institutions accountable.

Second, we need to make every institution a protective environment for children. Schools must have reporting protocols, trained staff, safe-space mechanisms and digital-safety training. Families and caregivers must have access to parenting programmes, early-intervention services and psycho-social support, especially in high-risk communities. The justice system must expedite cases involving children, ensure child-friendly court processes and guarantee rehabilitation of perpetrators only when victims and communities are safe.

Third, we should move from rhetoric to community-based prevention. Grassroots action is key: Community dialogues, consent education, mentorship, and safe avenues for children to speak up. Prevention is always cheaper, less traumatic and more effective than responding after harm.

Fourth, we need to assess whether our current penalties are enough. South Africa abolished the death penalty in 1995, a decision rooted in constitutional values of dignity and the right to life. Yet today, faced with the unrelenting brutality of violence against

children, we must ask question: does our justice system still reflect the gravity of these crimes? When children are raped, tortured and murdered, the consequences are permanent. Families live with life sentences of their own, while perpetrators, even of the most heinous crimes, may one day return to communities.

It is time to start a national conversation, honest and evidence-based, on whether the current sentencing framework is sufficient to deter and punish extreme forms of violence against children. For some, this includes reconsidering the death penalty for the most egregious child-related crimes. Importantly, a child's life must carry the highest possible value under the law. South Africa cannot allow impunity or leniency where children are concerned.

On this World Children's Day, let's remember the children whose lives are interrupted, the girls who are too afraid to walk home, and the boys who are abused. Childhoods are stolen, and futures dimmed. This reflection must fuel our shared vow: to protect children's rights and ensure no child suffers violence.

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