

Fact Sheet on Child Abandonment Research in South Africa

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Research study: Child abandonment and adoption in the context of African ancestral beliefs in contemporary urban South Africa

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Context

A new qualitative research study on child abandonment and adoption in the context of African ancestral beliefs in contemporary urban South Africa has been released by the National Adoption Coalition South Africa (NACSA) ahead of Child Protection Week 2014.

The research undertaken by Dee Blackie, a consultant to the National Adoption Coalition of SA, is the result of an intensive, 1-year long research project that will provide NACSA with the understanding and insights needed to address the growing social crisis of child abandonment and declining adoption rates in South Africa.

Blackie's fieldwork, conducted from March 2013 to February 2014, involved in-depth interviews and participant observation with young women experiencing unplanned pregnancy, women who had been apprehended for abandoning their children, community members, police officers, nurses and social workers, baby home managers and caregivers, adoption social workers, foster care and adoptive parents, psychologists and psychiatrists, legal experts, traditional healers and abandoned children (predominantly in Alexandra, Soweto and Tembisa).

The following facts and findings were uncovered in the study.

Statistics on child abandonment in South Africa:

- Child Welfare SA estimated that more than 3500 babies were abandoned in SA in 2010.
- There are no current statistics detailing the number of children who are abandoned in South Africa on an annual basis, but most child protection organizations believe that the numbers have increased significantly over the past decade.

Statistics on children in South Africa:

- There are 18.5 million children in South Africa.
- Of these children, 4.5 million live with neither of their parents.
- Orphans have increased by 30% over the decade to approximately 5.2 million children.
- Over this same period, foster care grants have increased by over 70% whilst adoption has decreased by more than 50%.
- An estimated 150 000 children live in child headed households, over 13 000 live in residential care facilities and an estimated 10 000 live on the streets of South Africa.
- In 2013, over 11 million children were registered for child support grants and over half a million children for foster care grants.

Statistics on adoption:

Based on a review of the Registry of Adoptable Children & Parents (RACAP) as at November 2013

- There are 297 unmatched parents registered
 - o 14 black, 190 white and 43 Indian, the remainder are unspecified.
 - o Most are seeking a child of their own race.
 - o Girls are preferred to boys where gender was specified.
 - o 50 applicants would consider a child with special needs (HIV or with physical or mental disabilities).
- There are 428 children unmatched children available for adoption
 - o 398 black, 3 white, 9 termed 'mixed race', the remainder are unspecified)
 - o 60% were abandoned, less than 40% formally consented for adoption by parents/family.
 - o 38 are HIV positive, 22 born premature, 53 have other special needs challenges.
- In summary, there are only 29 possible parents for around 429 children registered on RACAP.
- Only 1699 adoptions took place in 2013, from 2840 in 2004.

The challenge:

- High levels of child abandonment and low levels of adoption, coupled with conflicting cultural perceptions of these practices in South Africa, indicates a need for more understanding of the social context that created this situation.

Child abandonment and the law:

- Abandonment and adoption are governed by Children's Act 38 of 2005, one of the largest pieces of legislation to be created under our new constitution in SA.
- Although considered a good piece of legislation, implementation has caused a number of challenges, with regard to child abandonment these include:
 - o Illegal immigrants are unable to legally place their children in the formal child protection system in South Africa, and face deportation should they try.
 - o Relinquishing one's parental rights so that a child can be adopted, can only be done without a legal guardian's consent from the age of 18 years, making this option inaccessible to teenage mothers, however, a child of any age can request an abortion in South Africa sending mixed messages about the option of adoption.
 - o Anonymous child abandonment has been criminalised, with mothers facing a range of charges such as concealment of birth and attempted murder.
 - o Baby safes are considered illegal in terms of the Children's Act, however, these are being opened up more frequently given the increase in abandonment.
- Child protection experts voiced concerns that the Act is being used as a tool to prevent adoption rather than to facilitate it by both the Courts and the Department of Social Development.
- Many abandoned children are believed to not even make it into the formal child protection system, as they are absorbed into communities through 'informal adoption', raising concerns around issues such as child trafficking.

Child abandonment globally:

- Mass child abandonment has been reported around the world and across generations from as early as the 17th Century, usually associated with mass urbanization and the related social issues of broken extended family support systems, the vulnerability of young single women in these environments, and the devastating impact of poverty.
- 17th & 18th Century Europe saw a staggering increase in child abandonment and the creation of the first foundling homes and 'foundling wheels' managed predominantly by spiritual institutions such as the Catholic Church.
- 19th Century America saw a similar increase due to industrialization and migrant labour, however, they lacked the social support systems of Europe with devastating consequences for the children.
- More recently, the late 1980's saw a significant increase in child abandonment in China, coinciding with that governments implementing of the strict one child policy per family/couple.
- Anthropologists have conducted work throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s in countries such as Brazil, Jamaica and Peru where a combination of poverty, war, gender inequality and social suffering have led women to consider what they perceive as a 'survival strategy'.
- In these examples we see how 'child circulation' through informal fostering and adoption becomes a means of managing abandoned children, similar to South Africa.

Child abandonment and adoption in South Africa:

- Contemporary urban South Africa has all of the challenges identified as causes of child abandonment in global studies on the subject:
 - o Restrictive legislation
 - o Poverty
 - o Mass urbanization
 - o High levels of violence (gender based violence and specifically rape is a major concern)
 - o Extreme gender inequality
 - o High levels of HIV/AIDS (Which has also been gendered as a disease)
 - o Diminishing family support
- Our institutional and foster care systems are under pressure due to over-use.
- Despite its proven success globally, government appear hesitant to openly support adoption as a means to alleviate the current child protection crisis, this is particularly evident through its perceived over-regulation of the process by child protection experts.
- A review of African ancestral beliefs indicates that the 'Western' practice of adoption, where unrelated children are incorporated into families in a form of 'created kinship' is viewed as problematic in this social environment.

"It would take years before there was a flexibility of mind about adoption among most South Africans. We would have to have a big indaba [meeting] before it could be accepted. Ancestral spirits look after their relatives and no-one else. In our religion, in our culture, this thing is ring-fenced" (Jabulani Mphalal, KZN Commissioner for Traditional Leadership Disputes and Crimes, IOL 21/02/2014)

Research methodology and fieldwork:

- Dee Blackie has worked with the child protection community over the past 4 years in the facilitation of the National Adoption Coalition of SA, started in 2011.
- The fieldwork for this study involved qualitative research conducted over the period of a year from March 2013 to February 2014, following the people and the conflicts around the issue of child abandonment.
- 37 in-depth interviews and 12 workshops involving 134 participants were conducted, as well as numerous hours of 'participant observation' in the communities of Alexandra, Tembisa and Soweto, a range of baby homes and child/youth care facilities, NACSA meetings and conferences and at the Johannesburg Children's Court.
- Research respondents included young women experiencing unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, women who had been caught for abandoning their children, police officers, nurses, state social workers, baby home managers and carers, adoption social workers, child psychologists and psychiatrists, legal experts and abandoned children.
- A detailed discourse analysis was also conducted of an archive of newspapers from the past 4 years (2010 to 2013) relating to teenage pregnancy, abortion, child abandonment, temporary care solutions such as foster care and children's homes, and adoption.
 - o A total of 539 articles were analysed to identify messages, communication techniques and the sources of information that were amplified via the media, which given the absence of research on the subject, plays an important role in constructing the dominant point of view on how we talk about this complex social behaviour.

Overview of research:

- The study explored four perspectives on child abandonment, these include:
 1. The media's portrayal of child abandonment and related subjects as the dominant commentator on this social predicament.
 2. The management of child abandonment by child protection officers, including police officers, state social workers, health care practitioners and adoption social workers.
 3. The personal experience of child abandonment from the perspective of both the abandoning mother and the abandoned child.
 4. The 'treatment' of the abandoning mother and child by western psychologists and psychiatrists versus that of traditional healers and Sangomas.

1. Research findings – The media's portrayal of child abandonment:

The sad, bad and mad mothers

- In South Africa young pregnant girls are increasingly being individualised and demonised:
 - o Language used includes: Shocking; skyrocketing; crisis, out of control; epidemic (medical term implying the widespread occurrence of an infectious disease).
 - o The girls are said to be getting younger and younger, and by implication more innocent.
- Parents and particularly mothers are chastised for abdicating their parental responsibilities.
- Intergenerational sex is cited as the primary cause of teenage pregnancy:
 - o 20% of teen pregnancies a result of rape and 60% of pregnant teens claim to being coerced into having sex by older men (Mail & Guardian 03/02/2012).

- Older Men + Young Girls = Teenage Pregnancy & Aids – Sugar daddies destroy lives (Outdoor billboard, KZN Department of Health 2012).
- Sugar daddies, as a cause of teenage pregnancy, is followed by poverty, rape, drug and alcohol abuse, proving one's fertility, grant dependency and peer pressure (descending order of mention).
- The perspective of the young teenage girl is usually absent in the discourse.
- A distinct graphic style of photography is used to portray teenage pregnancy, specifically a faceless, disembodied pregnant belly in school uniform.
- This portrayal is supported by the dominant political leadership in SA currently, with President Zuma referring to teenage mothers as 'indulged', 'irresponsible', and 'having no self-respect'.
- Abstinence and traditional 'virginity testing' is growing in popularity in communities across SA.
- Abortion remains a contentious issue, with girls who chose this option being labelled primarily as immoral versus that of making informed and responsible choices.
- Illegal, backstreet, unsafe and botched abortions are reported on frequently, often resulting in the death of the young mother and her unborn child.
- Abandoning mothers are portrayed as immoral criminals and murderers or suffering from severe mental disorders.
- Child abandonment is increasingly being associated with postpartum depression and post-traumatic stress, positioning abandoning mothers as criminally insane and in need of care.

The disposable, disconnected children

- Abandoned children are portrayed as innocent victims in contrast to their guilty mothers.
- No statistics exist, but a review of reported abandonments indicates that:
 - 65% are new born.
 - 90% are younger than a year.
 - 70% of abandonment sites cited are unsafe.
 - The number one mentioned site of abandonment is toilets, drains, sewers and gutters.
 - This is followed in descending order of mentions:
 1. Toilets, drains, sewers and gutters
 2. Rubbish sites, dustbins and landfills
 3. Parks and the open veld
 4. Baby safes
 5. Hospitals
 6. On the street
 7. In a township
 8. On a doorstep
 9. On or near train tracks
 10. In a taxi-rank
 11. At a school
 12. At a crèche
 - Only one article (of 151) referred to a child being abandoned in the 'suburbs', however, many referred to the fact that mothers travel to informal township environments to abandon their babies to ensure their anonymity.
- Verbal and visual imagery of disposability is a standard feature of articles on child abandonment.
 - Language used includes: Born to be dumped; Sewer baby; Weggooi kinders.
 - Images are often shocking, showing small bodies being rescued from rubbish dumps.

- Abandoned children are portrayed as vulnerable and sick, with many believed to be exposed to infection and HIV.
- The majority of abandoned children are thought to die, however, again no formal statistics exist:
 - *“These babies in dustbins, gutters, dumps... who are aborted or miscarried new-borns being disposed of... are becoming a large part of ...undetermined deaths [of young children] in Gauteng”,* and abortions are *“the leading external cause of death in 2009 for children aged zero to four”* (Professor Jeanine Vellema, Gauteng Forensic Pathology Service, Pretoria News 05/11/2010).
 - Of the 200 abandoned babies found in Johannesburg and Soweto monthly, only 60 are found alive (The Star 02/05/2012).

Adoption:

- There is much coverage of the declining rates of adoption in South Africa, sometimes associated with the implementation of the new Children’s act, but most frequently with ‘cultural barriers’.
- Cross race adoption is also stated as being a contentious issue, with many adoptive parents sharing experiences of judgement and discrimination from social workers, the Department of Social Development and from society at large.
- International adoption is treated with a great deal of mistrust, with most concerns stemming from a belief that the adopted child will experience a “loss of cultural roots” and that their welfare will not be a priority in the receiving country (Pretoria News 09/12/2011).
- The notion of Ubuntu is conflicted in its reference to adoption in the media, Government and NACSA both refer to it as a means to deal with the rising crisis of orphaned and abandoned children, however, it is also stated as a reason for black parents rejecting adoption as an option, due to the child being from a different and unknown blood-line:
 - *“Adoption is not an option as it is believed that the child is born spiritually linked to rituals peculiar to that ancestry, and a cross-pollination of rituals will anger the child’s ancestors and cause all sorts of misfortunes for the child, including sickness and disease”* (The Times 20/01/2012).

Statistics and research:

- There are countless references to statistics on teenage pregnancy and abortion (51 across 152 articles), whilst practically none exist around child abandonment (2 across 151).
- Government often cites the need for research on child abandonment, but to date none has been commissioned:
 - When asked for comment on the phenomenon [of child abandonment], Sello Mokoena, spokesman for Gauteng’s department of social development, said he did not know the extent of the problem. More research, he said, was needed. *“Given current media reports, it would seem the problem is increasing. “One cannot emphatically say it is. The issue needs to be researched”* (The Times 29/05/2012).

2. Research findings – The management of child abandonment by child protection organisations

- Child protection officers identify a number of different ‘kinds of abandoning mothers’, these include:
 - Women living in extreme poverty, and just surviving from one day to the next.
 - Illegal immigrants with no support structures.

- Women with no family or support structures
- Women who have moved from one relationship to another and their new boyfriend does not want to take care of the child from a previous relationship.
- Women who have HIV/AIDS.
- Women who have been raped by a family member (incest is often mentioned), someone in their community or a stranger (multiple perpetrator rape in SA is the highest in world).
- Women who have been abandoned by their boyfriends.
- Young teenagers who are still at school.
- Prostitutes.
- Alcoholics and drug addicts (usually living on the streets).
- Women living in rural areas in extreme poverty who travel to the city to abandon.
- Most social workers believe that the profile of a mother who places her child up for adoption and a mother who abandons her child is often very similar, poverty is usually the common factor to all.
- Baby safes were not viewed as a motivator for child abandonment, but rather as a means to ensure the safety of one's child whilst remaining anonymous (especially relevant to teenagers and illegal immigrants given the new Children's Act).
- There is a distinct difference between how the police, state social workers and nurses treat and manage abandoning mothers, to that of adoption social workers:
 - The adoption social workers portrayed the abandoning mother as a victim of social and structural suffering, and were supportive of adoption as a solution to their predicament. Many cited instances where poverty had stripped the mother of her ability to love her child, and that many mothers disconnect themselves from their babies as a 'survival strategy', to protect themselves from the trauma of losing a child.
 - The hospital social workers and nurses were very against adoption, and conversely portrayed the abandoning mother as irresponsible and immoral young women - Further exploration revealed that many feared that if they assisted a young woman in placing a child up for adoption, they may also suffer some form of punishment from their ancestors.
- The adoption social workers advised that many abandoning mothers do not see abandonment as permanent, and believe that they can always return one day for their children.
- All of the social workers were very concerned about the impact of long term institutional care for these children, as they believed that it could lead to 'attachment disorders' such as behavioural and learning challenges later on in life.

3. Research findings – The experience of child abandonment from the perspective of the abandoning mother and the abandoned child

The abandoning mother:

- Women who choose to abandon their children often find themselves in desperate situations, many have been abandoned themselves by the father of their child and by their families (on discovery of their pregnancy).
- Pregnancy brings a rapid shift in their social status in their family and their community - they move from someone who is loved and cherished, to someone who is isolated and shunned.
- Many of the young women spoke of their frustration at being labelled as the sole perpetrators of their predicament by their community, their family and their boyfriends/partners.

- Most of the women were completely unprepared for pregnancy, no one had told them about sex, conception, birth control or pregnancy.
- Understanding of how conception takes place was often incorrect with many believing that 'one has to have sex a number of times to make a baby'.
- Some mothers and community members believed that, in the eyes of their ancestors, to abandon a child was in fact better than formally relinquishing their rights to it, so that it can be adopted:
 - Formally relinquishing one's rights to a child is seen as a conscious act and in the eyes of their ancestors, this would amount to rejecting a gift that they have given to them.
 - They believed that the punishment for doing this could be extreme suffering and bad luck and in some cases a woman may even be rendered infertile - a major blow when you consider how important fertility is in determining a women's value at marriage through the process of lebola or the paying of bride price, which is still a common practice in SA.
 - If a woman abandon's a child, however, she can always say that she was not herself at the time, that she was suffering from high levels of stress, possibly due to how the child was conceived (ie through rape) or that she had been abandoned herself by the father of the child and or her parents (which is often the case).
 - In this instance, the mother can then sacrifice something to call her ancestors, and then when they appear, to apologise to them at which point they could chose to forgive her.
- Abortion and adoption were both viewed with a great deal of mistrust, and both amounted to rejecting a gift that God or your ancestors have given you.
- Foster care was seen as a far better solution as it allowed a mother to leave her children with someone until she felt ready to take care of them.
- The abandoning mothers, in this study, had all been subjected to many years of poverty and abuse, most of them had been raped at some point in their lives.
- None could tell me why they had abandoned their children, but all appeared extremely disconnected from their child at the time of the abandonment, and believed themselves and their children to be at the mercy of fate.
- None saw themselves as perpetrators of child abandonment, but rather as victims of their particular situation, making them feel disempowered, angry and depressed.

The abandoned child:

- The physical act of abandonment is a traumatic and alienating experience for a child – they go from the warmth and familiarity of their mother to a strange environment with strange people, from breast milk to a bottle, and they are given a range of medical tests to assess their health.
- Most research respondents believed that an abandoned child, who grows up in an African family who believes in ancestor, will live a difficult life.
- Beyond their sense of loss and rejection at being abandoned, they will be unable to connect with their ancestors, as they have no knowledge of their father's name and family ancestors.
- Not knowing who their ancestors are also prevents them from fulfilling many of their traditional roles and rituals effectively, these include paying damages for a child, paying lebola, celebrating big milestones such as matriculating, graduating or getting a new job and so on. Ancestors are also important for guidance and support, for understanding where illness may come from, and assisting a person in making important life decisions.

- The abandoned and adopted young adults who took part in this research had only recently discovered their adoption and abandonment, due to the death of an adoptive parent or because they had just reached adulthood.
- It appears that many black adoptive parents do not tell their children that they are adopted for fear of the stigma and possible alienation by their extended family or community. When these children then try to track down their mother, it is almost impossible.
- Even as adults, the discovery of their abandonment had a devastating impact on the individuals concerned, they felt that they did not know where they belonged and were struggling with defining their new identity.

4. Research findings – The treatment of child abandonment from a western biomedical and traditional ancestral perspective

- The research findings indicated that child abandonment is increasingly being associated with illness for both the abandoning mother and the abandoned child:
 - o The abandoned mother is often thought to be suffering from postpartum depression and possibly post-traumatic stress.
 - o The abandoned child is often thought to suffer from attachment disorder, which can lead to behavioural and learning challenges later on in life. The process of attachment is associated with the development of empathy in an individual, and many psychologists and psychiatrists attributed the high levels of crime in SA to the number of children who are abandoned by their parents in this country.
- The treatment of these individuals depends on their beliefs:
 - o They could seek help from a biomedical doctor who would treat them for depression and trauma through medication and counselling, or,
 - o They could see help from a Sangoma who would treat them by cleansing them of any perceived wrong doing, and then attempting to connect them with their ancestors to make amends before moving forward.
 - o Sometimes both forms of treatment were sought out by the individuals or families concerned.
- Although not believed to be ideal, the adoption social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists felt that that the individual mother and child could be helped individually to deal with their trauma.
- The Sangomas, however, believed that the only way to solve the problem was to deal with it at a family level, e.g. either with the abandoning abandoning mother's family or with the adoptive family of the abandoned child, as one Sangoma advised, "we can't try to sort out the branches when the roots are a mess".
- The Sangomas advised that abortion and child abandonment are greatly frowned on by indigenous African ancestors, and the choice to engage in either can cause ancestors to punish the mother, even rendering her infertile.
- All of the Sangomas believed that ancestors would engage with and assist both the abandoning mother and the abandoned child, as long as they are consulted on the issue openly and honestly.
- They advised that they could assist a child who has been abandoned to connect with their ancestors through the ancestors of their adoptive parents – this is done through the process called ubigile, or announcing of a child to the ancestors.
- Children who have not been introduced to the ancestors, however, will live troubled lives, especially if they are young men who are required in adulthood to 'build their father's home'.

- The Sangomas, as with the psychiatrists, associate these children with the high levels of crime in South Africa.
- None of the Sangomas stated their opposition to adoption, however, they did believe that a more culturally relevant solution should be sought where the ancestors of all the individuals and families involved are consulted.

Note to media:

For more information on the research or for media interviews with NACSA and Dee Blackie, please contact Nadine at Teresa Settas Communications, NACSA's PR agency on (011) 894 2767 or nadine@tscommunications.co.za to arrange.

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