

Monday 26 November 2007

Let's build a safe SA out of love, not from fear

As we approach the annual 16 Days of Activism Against Women and Child Abuse, more and more people are calling for more punitive measures against violent criminals. This response is predictable as it stems from legitimate feelings of fear and distrust.

But if we are to build a safe South Africa, we must challenge ourselves to address these feelings without being driven blindly by them.

We must find a response based on good science and knowledge; one based on hope and opportunity.

We need to start by contemplating what South Africa looks like when it's safe – if our aim is to live in a society where our children are safe to play in the park while women walk safely through our neighbourhood and city streets, we need to take pragmatic steps towards that dream.

We must contemplate that what we don't have enough of is love and compassion, rather than harsh punishment.

This is not to say that the criminal justice system doesn't have a vital role to play – of course, we should expect that criminal behaviour must have serious consequences for the offender.

But no matter how many offenders we lock away, it will not stop the stream of ready perpetrators.

We need to build families and communities; we need to build self-esteem and compassion, create a common investment in our future, one that will constrain behaviour so that our women and children are, indeed, safe.

As we focus for the next few weeks on the dangers facing our women and children, it is easy to fall into despair about the size and scope of the problem – and we might be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed.

But the useful response is to mobilise for a time when we will be able

Violent times do not call for violent measures but for pragmatic ones. We are in need of more compassion, not hate

to hold our heads high and claim a victory for safety and decency.

We should start at the beginning; let us intervene on behalf of teenage pregnant girls. We cannot build a safe society out of accidental motherhood. Let us start a programme that aims to empower pregnant girls and women to be good mothers; providing them with simple information about nutrition, alcohol, smoking, domestic violence and bonding, helping them understand the vital role they play in forming our society.

If we intervene today, then in 15 years' time, their daughters need not be pregnant and we need not fear that their sons will be criminals.

Let us invest in keeping our children busy. We need to provide them with activities and options – every child needs to find something that he or she is good at, something that makes them feel good about themselves. And they need to be supervised and protected as they grow and flourish.

Let us give them all something that makes them look forward to tomorrow.

Let us be creative in the way we deal with our young people, particularly our young men. We need to give them a purpose.

Having no function, being needed by no one is a terrible fate. We have abandoned our young people and they are going nowhere.



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25 November - 10 December

It's our failure, not theirs, and we should take collective responsibility to fix it.

We must make everyone in our society useful in one way or another, starting from the perspective that everyone has a talent rather than a problem.

We need to build inclusive communities instead of aspiring to exclusion zones and spending more and more on securing ourselves in homes that resemble fortresses.

We need to invest in the offenders already in our correctional centres.

Currently less than 20% are involved in correctional programmes. We can't afford for them to return to society unchanged.

To be pragmatic, we should prioritise those who are there for serious crimes, for periods of between 10 and 15

years; it's long enough to make a difference and serious enough to warrant our investment.

We must do this because if we don't, these offenders will come back out in 10 or 15 years and quickly destroy whatever safety we have achieved.

We need them to become constructive members of our society.

We must intervene for victims of crime; untreated trauma perpetuates the cycle of crime and violence in which we find ourselves.

Not all victims of violence will go on to offend, but the overwhelming majority of violent offenders first experience violence as victims or as witnesses.

So many times, we choose to ignore the trauma of the victim and then expect the police to intervene at the point of offence.

If we want our women and children to be safe, we must intervene, especially for young men when they are victims of crime. It is they who go on to threaten and harm the weak and vulnerable in our society; women and children cannot be safe unless men are healthy too.

We need to talk less about crime and more about safety. As long as we talk about crime, we expect the police to fix it. When we talk about safety, we open up the arena to a whole other range of role players.

The safety of women and children is not an issue only for 16 days of activism; it is an issue that must be addressed by all sectors in our society – through poverty alleviation, building a new sense of family, through job creation, sports, arts and cultural activity, inclusion and social justice.

It must be addressed with compassion, empathy, respect and esteem. Safety for women and children is safety for all by all. That is what we need: for everyone to play their part.

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