



Briefing paper 508

September 2020

## The Cost of Staying at Home

### The psycho-social consequences of the lockdown for families

*"The rights of the person, even though they are expressed as rights of the individual, have a fundamental social dimension which finds an innate and vital expression in the family."<sup>1</sup>*

Vatican Charter on the Rights of the Family

#### 1. Introduction

While the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown imposed to prevent its spread have exposed the fault lines of inequality in our society, there has been less focus on the psycho-social consequences of the lockdown for families required to stay at home. While for some this has been an opportunity to spend quality time with family, this has not been the case for others.<sup>2</sup> The lockdown initiated here was one of the strictest globally. Everyone, except those performing essential services, was required to remain behind closed doors. Staying at home was perceived as safe. Given the high level of inter-personal violence which characterises our society, this assumption was gravely misplaced – because home is the most dangerous place to be for so many women and children.

It soon became apparent that there was another pandemic prevailing – that of domestic violence.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it was clear that this trend was as undiscerning as the virus itself and occurred irrespective of social class, race or religion. The family was under threat and institutions such as the Church, schools, and health and social services, which are usually the first line in protection, could not be accessed easily. Professor Nicolette Roman

stresses that "the nexus of COVID-19 created a state of disequilibrium and instability amongst families, especially families in resource-constrained settings. In a pandemic, such as COVID-19, with every single person struggling to deal with the unknown, families in South Africa are struggling in various ways to come to terms with the new normal."<sup>4</sup>

Any abuse violates the security of the family as it takes place within the context of an intimate relationship and at home, where women, children and older persons should be safe. The perpetrator is someone who is supposed to love and care for the family. While it might not be directed against children, it frequently takes place in front of children. Such violence impacts profoundly on the socialization of children, and those who are exposed to violence at home will grow to see it as 'normal'.

#### 2. The Role of the Family

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 proclaims that the "Family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled

to protection by society and state.”<sup>5</sup> The Sanya Declaration, the ‘World Declaration for a Comprehensive Family Policy’, asserts that families “perform essential functions and serve as sources of stability, continuity and development. Being as different as alike, and the cradle of the generations to come, families are essential to the world’s future and their strength and weaknesses reflect the fabric of the larger society.”<sup>6</sup> This has been made very clear during the lockdown.

While South Africa does not have a single particular piece of legislation which addresses family life, a number of laws address different aspects of marriage and family. As the National Family Policy issued by Department of Social Development (DSD) in 2008 points out, despite all the gains that have been made in the social, economic and political spheres, the reality of family ‘disintegration’ prevails. Furthermore, “the family is not explicitly addressed in many of the country’s policies, but rather, it is usually inferred. In this way, the family is implied and not focused upon as the point of intervention. As a consequence, socio-economic benefits indirectly filter down to the family because they do not originate from its deliberate targeting.”<sup>7</sup>

There is no typical South African family; rather, there much diversity in terms of size, race, age, gender and socio-economic circumstances. However, as Professor Roman of the Child and Family Studies Unit at the University of the Western Cape observes, “family functioning and care consist of often complex activities and are varied depending on culture, family size and family structure; but socialisation, provision, protection, holistic care and support are often common activities cutting across all families.”<sup>8</sup>

The Children’s Act of 2005 seeks to “promote the preservation and strengthening of families and [to] give effect to the constitutional rights of children enshrined in the Bill of Rights.” Welcoming this legislation, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said that “This Children’s Act emphasizes the state’s role in strengthening the capacity of families and communities to care for and protect children. It therefore dramatically departs from conventional child protection legislation, where the state intervenes only after a child has experienced abuse, neglect or exploitation.”<sup>9</sup> However, the successful implementation of the Children’s Act has encountered numerous difficulties, not least of all the ‘intersectoral’ nature of the Act which is

dependent on the successful participation of a wide range of government departments and institutions.

### **3. The White Paper on the Family**

The White Paper on the Family was presented to cabinet and approval was granted on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2013. It remains the single most comprehensive government policy statement on the family.<sup>10</sup> Family policy is seen as “any policy that has any direct or indirect influence on the well-being of the Family.” This emphasises the ‘intersectoral nature’ of such policy, which embraces better living conditions, access to primary health care, proper sanitation and better employment opportunities. Proper access to all these services would benefit the family and enhance its capacity to perform its role successfully. This family strengthening is defined as “the deliberate process of giving families the necessary opportunities, relationships, networks, and support to become functional and self-reliant. The strengthening of families is driven by certain core areas, namely: family economic success, family support systems, and thriving and nurturing communities.”<sup>11</sup> It is very difficult to carry out this mandate during COVID-19 and the lockdown, when the control of children is absolute and it is very difficult of them to reach out for help.

### **4. Children and the Lockdown**

Children’s rights consultant Dr Joan van Niekerk points out that the lockdown was announced on 23<sup>rd</sup> March and implemented on 28<sup>th</sup> March with very little time for families and schools to prepare.<sup>12</sup> The initial expectation was that the lockdown would be for 21 days, with incremental lowering of restrictions and the gradual reopening of schools. This turned out not to be the case. While violence against children was high before the lockdown came into force, the situation of children during the prolonged lockdown and the months-long closure of schools deteriorated seriously.

Children bear a disproportionate cost of the lockdown. It is an unprecedented, unpredictable and confusing time for them – they may be afraid of getting sick themselves, and fear that their givers might become ill and be unable to care for them. Children might feel isolated and lonely as

they are unable to attend school or play with friends. They can suffer emotional stress due to isolation, increasing poverty, and anxiety about how long the present situation will last. While some children have been able to access some learning using the internet, this is not possible for most children. The prolonged lockdown and the continued closure of Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centres and schools means that children of essential workers, and those who were able to return to work under level three, were without proper supervision and vulnerable to predatory adults, involvement in gang activity, bullying and home accidents.

Moreover, the lack of contact with their friends is very difficult for adolescents, as the peer group is an important reference group at this age and socialising with peers is particularly important as they begin to negotiate independence. The continued closure of schools has limited the development of social skills and interaction, and consequently teenagers might have become lonely and depressed.

Dr van Niekerk emphasises that parents and caregivers are under considerable stress, and that this stress has increased with the prolonging of the lockdown. They are anxious about their own health<sup>13</sup> and the health of children; unable in many instances to provide for their families as they have lost their jobs or taken wage cuts; and as schools closed, they found themselves having to assume the role of teachers to prevent children falling behind at school. Furthermore, they are required to confine their children in small spaces where it is difficult for them to play games and exercise. Caregivers are expected to obey strict hygiene practices in places such as informal settlements, where access to clean water and sanitation is compromised and social distancing is difficult. Overcrowding, real hunger, and lack of access to support are all ongoing realities.

While it is important to get our children back into the classroom to learn and to be with their friends, the return to school might result in separation anxiety for children who have been confined to home with caregivers for such an extended period.

## **5. Challenges Facing Child Protection Services**

At the beginning of the lockdown child protection services were – shockingly – not regarded as

essential services. Dr van Niekerk explains that this grave omission “brought NGO child protection services together to lobby for their inclusion in essential services to children during the lockdown.”<sup>14</sup> The lobby then worked with government to motivate for services and to assist with crisis policies, such as developing standard operating procedures for managing child abuse.<sup>15</sup> Partnerships developed between government and some NGOs. However, many offices providing services to children remain closed at a time when they are most needed.

The continued closure of ECD Centres and Partial Care Centres leaves children of all ages vulnerable, and many are unable to access protection. This isolates children from support-persons who can make meaningful interventions in a crisis and support the child. Similarly, caregivers are isolated from their support systems at work, and from religious groups and communities. Visiting friends and family was prohibited before the introduction of lockdown level 2. Households are under significant psycho-social and economic stress, with little support and dwindling hope. This impacts profoundly on the well-being of children. While the increase in the child care grant is welcome, it is time limited and palliative rather than transformative. COVID-19 has laid bare the fault lines in our care of children and in the systemic neglect they face.

Dr van Niekerk recounts that, during Child Protection Week this year, Childline consulted with children through the Helpline, Online Counselling and Therapeutic Services to hear from them how they felt and thought about the current situation in the country.<sup>16</sup> Children requested more support in the form of home visits to check on them, free counselling and emotional support, and someone to talk to and to report abuse to. This emphasises the need to break the isolation of children during the lockdown via services such as Childline’s toll-free crisis and counselling line, and web/chatroom-based counselling services. WhatsApp groups can play a role as well.

However, in spite of the introduction of level 2 lockdown it remains difficult for children at risk to access help. While the President’s speeches to the nation have focused much on Gender Based Violence (GBV) there have been few policy directives in this regard, and SAPS are largely occupied with the enforcement of the lockdown, rather than with the investigation of violence against women and children.

It is cold comfort indeed to know that SA is not alone in this, but the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically compounded domestic violence against women and children the world over. Research in the United Kingdom reveals that “two-thirds of women in abusive relationships have suffered more violence from their partners during the pandemic. Three-quarters of victims also say the lockdown has made it harder for them to escape their abusers.”<sup>17</sup> The head of the National Prosecuting Authority, Advocate Shamila Batohi, argues that “what we need to do as a society is to look at ways to prevent the violence on women. Religious institutions and the values that families instil in their children play a key role in changing gender-based violence.”<sup>18</sup>

## 6. Illness and Death

Many families live in multi-generational homes with older persons, many with co-morbidities. COVID-19 has confronted us all with our own mortality and that of those we love. Illness, death and grief are a daily reality. Older persons are particularly vulnerable to infection and have been encouraged to stay at home as much as possible. Many have required hospitalisation, and no visiting has been allowed at any inpatient facility, regardless of the reason for hospitalization. This means that many patients died without the comfort of family or friends. Separation, loneliness and loss have been a constituent part of the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore the recent announcement that hospitals will allow visitors is to be welcomed, as it will bring much comfort to both patients and their families.

Furthermore, the usual practices of funerals and other traditional rituals which provide comfort to those left behind have been curtailed in terms of the lockdown regulations and this retards the grieving process. These regulations remain in place.

Moreover, clinics and hospitals have seen a decline in attendance of those suffering from other diseases and conditions, who are consequently not receiving the treatment they need. This is particularly concerning for oncology patients and those with TB and HIV. Likewise, fewer children are presenting at clinics for routine vaccinations, which is troubling as this renders them vulnerable to measles and other illnesses. It is to be hoped

that the downgrade to level 2 lockdown will see greater accessing of medical facilities.

## 7. Building Family Resilience

Imelda Diouf of the Sekwele Family Centre emphasizes that the voices of citizens have been diminished as the COVID-19 pandemic has presented the family with overwhelming issues which have been discussed above. Furthermore, “families themselves are being further weakened because government and other stakeholders who have weak implementation of family policy now have to rethink operations that suit the new normal.”<sup>19</sup> She stresses that

“Our current scenario of lockdown might not be the last time that we are instructed to ‘go back’ to our homes. Putting on the family lens provides an opportunity to already see beyond COVID-19. South Africa must pay attention to fostering a social compact that empowers families and places them at the centre of development. Admit to our mistakes of silo mentality. Go back to the basics. Improve the conditions of the households, but also the people, the families that reside in those four walls. Strengthened families do have an ability to support the critical actions of implementing the National Development Plan 2030. A family focus is the catalyst for change.”<sup>20</sup>

The Vatican Charter on the Rights of the Family reminds us that “the family constitutes, much more than a mere juridical, social and economic unit, a community of love and solidarity, which is uniquely suited to teach and transmit cultural, ethical, social, spiritual and religious values, essential for the development and well-being of its own members and of society.”<sup>21</sup> Family strengthening is vital to societal resilience and, in South Africa, this means that proper implementation of the White Paper on the Family is vital.

## 8. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown are leaving an indelible mark on all South Africans. The economic and social devastation experienced by so many might not have been anticipated, but

there can no longer be any papering over the cracks. While some have been more badly affected than others, no one has been exempt. Food prices have escalated so that, while there is plenty of food available, many are unable to afford it. Domestic violence is endemic; home for so many women and children is the most dangerous place to be. It is clear that patriarchy remains the dominant narrative. Families are in trouble and in desperate need of economic and social support.

There has been some discussion regarding the introduction of a Basic Income Grant (BIG), but such an extension of state funds will be extremely challenging. Countless South Africans have had to endure the pandemic in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. Children are returning to schools where social distancing and sanitising will be enormously challenging. Not all teachers will be

given Personal Protective Equipment (PPC), and distance teaching by those teachers with co-morbidities will be very difficult in communities with poor internet access.

We would do well to be reminded of the founding provisions of our Constitution as we face the challenges and uncertainties which lie ahead. "The Republic of South Africa is one, sovereign, democratic state founded on the following values: Human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms; non-racialism and non-sexism; supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law.... to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness."<sup>22</sup> Only if we live up to those values will we successfully address the pandemics of COVID-19; gender based violence; corruption; poverty; and inequality.

---

## Lois Law

### Project Co-ordinator

---

<sup>2</sup> On Wednesday, 15th July, the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office hosted a Webinar on 'The Cost of Staying at Home: The psycho-social consequences of the lockdown for families'. This Briefing Paper owes much to the presentations given at the Webinar and the discussion which followed.

<sup>3</sup> The lifting of the lockdown to level 3 saw a surge in Gender Based Violence in places outside of the home as well.

<sup>4</sup> 'Family in the eye of the COVID storm', Professor Nicolette Roman, July 2020

<sup>5</sup> General Assembly Resolution 217a(III) 10<sup>th</sup> December 1948

<sup>6</sup> Sanya Declaration: World Declaration for a Comprehensive Family Policy "Achieving the Millennium Declaration With and For the Family", 8<sup>th</sup> December 2004

<sup>7</sup> National Family Policy, Department of Social Development, October 2008

<sup>8</sup> 'Family in the eye of the COVID storm' Professor Roman, July 2020

<sup>9</sup> 'Cape Times', 10<sup>th</sup> April 2008

<sup>10</sup> It is usual for White Papers to be developed into Bills which are introduced to Parliament which, after public comment, subsequently become Acts. It is not clear why this process has not been followed with this White Paper.

<sup>11</sup> White Paper on the Family, September 2012

<sup>12</sup> Presentation by Dr Joan van Niekerk at the CPLO Webinar on 'The Cost of Staying at Home: The psycho-social consequences of the lockdown for families', 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020

<sup>13</sup> This is particularly the case in households with older persons who are regarded as especially vulnerable to COVID-19 infection

<sup>14</sup> Presentation by Dr Joan van Niekerk at the CPLO Webinar on 'The Cost of Staying at Home: The psycho-social consequences of the lockdown for families', 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020

<sup>15</sup> UNICEF played an active role in keeping lines of communication open.

<sup>16</sup> Presentation by Dr Joan van Niekerk at the CPLO Webinar on 'The Cost of Staying at Home: The psycho-social consequences of the lockdown for families', 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/aug/17/domestic-abuse-surged-in-lockdown-panorama-investigation-fin>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-08-11-church-and-families-must-step-in-to-help-halt-scary-gbv-stats-says-shamila-batohi/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=First%20Thing%20Tuesday%2011%20August%202020%20Marriott&utm\\_content=First%20Thing%20Tuesday%2011%20August%202020%20Marriott+CID\\_822a2aea8a2ccca636d23756c93b95a&utm\\_source=TouchBasePro&utm\\_term=Church%20and%20families%20must%20step%20in%20to%20help%20halt%20scary%20GBV%20stats%20says%20Shamila%20Batohi](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-08-11-church-and-families-must-step-in-to-help-halt-scary-gbv-stats-says-shamila-batohi/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=First%20Thing%20Tuesday%2011%20August%202020%20Marriott&utm_content=First%20Thing%20Tuesday%2011%20August%202020%20Marriott+CID_822a2aea8a2ccca636d23756c93b95a&utm_source=TouchBasePro&utm_term=Church%20and%20families%20must%20step%20in%20to%20help%20halt%20scary%20GBV%20stats%20says%20Shamila%20Batohi)

<sup>19</sup> 'Implementing the National Development Plan 2030 through a Family Lens', Imelda Diouf, July

<sup>20</sup> 'Implementing the National Development Plan 2030 through a Family Lens', Imelda Diouf, July 2020

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/family/documents/rc\\_pc\\_family\\_doc\\_19831022\\_family-rights\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_19831022_family-rights_en.html)

---

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/images/a108-96.pdf>