



PO Box 1560, Parklands, 2121 • Tel +2711 788 1278 • Fax +2711 788 1289
info@mma.org.za • <http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org>
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Media Coverage of Child Protection Week: Still room for improvement

A few weeks ago, South Africa observed Child Protection Week. The campaign, which ran from the 1st to the 6th of June initially began in 1997 and is commemorated annually to raise awareness on the rights of children and mobilise society to end violence against them. Through monitoring over 200 stories printed about children across 14 newspapers¹ during Child Protection Week, it is clear that although children's rights are protected under the South African Constitution and championed by numerous child- rights NGOs and governmental bodies alike, children are at great risk in South Africa. The papers were full of stories about abuse, neglect, rape and murder of children while the number of unreported incidents is even higher. Each story is more gruesome than the next as the stories often focus on the perpetrator's actions, trial and punishment or on the injuries of the child while little attention is paid to the reasons behind the crime or the future of the child.

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) believes that the media plays a crucial role in explaining why and how South Africa needs to protect its children and why the rates of violence against children are so high in the country. In general the media problematises child abuse without explaining why it happens. We believe that Child Protection Week was an opportunity for the media to provide extensive coverage exploring the deeper questions surrounding violence against children, raise awareness of the plights of children and mobilise society to help. Through exploring the underlying factors of abuse and raising

¹ *The Citizen, Saturday Citizen, The Times, Sunday Times, Daily Sun, Sunday Sun, The New Age, Sowetan, The Star, Saturday Star, City Press, Business Day, Sunday Independent, Sunday World*

awareness, the media could help people learn how to recognise the signs of abuse and take action against it through both preventative and retroactive measures.

What was reported?

Children² constitute 37% of the population in South Africa and it is clear that the South African people care about the future of children and want to protect them. During Child Protection Week, the media published a number of letters written by readers calling for an end to abuse and action to be taken by communities and the government to protect their children. This shows the public's awareness to the dangers facing children and their desire to use the media to achieve change. Along with individuals, organisations and government institutions such as the Gauteng Provincial Government wrote about helping children and called for action to be taken against perpetrators of child abuse. The media reported on the creation of parenting skills programmes, early childhood development counselling buses, and events which seek to increase the safety and the cautiousness of children. Other articles identified services available for the abused, provided contact information to report abuses to, and stressed the importance of harsh legal punishments for those found guilty as a deterrent for future perpetrators. A majority of the articles on the subject focused on post-incident aid as a means of helping child victims, which, although important, does little to eradicate abuse in society. In addition, while children should be aware of the dangers in their lives, the media and society should not solely focus on altering the behaviour of potential victims, but on understanding and shifting the thinking and behaviour of future perpetrators. Abuse can only be eradicated through preventative measures which deter abuse rather than just mitigating its effects after it has happened.

How was it reported?

In order to help prevent violence against children, it is essential to identify the reasons adults abuse children and then disseminate the information to the public so that they can know what to look out for and how to intervene. In an article by *The New Age* titled "Premier calls for rapist profiling, (04/06/2014, p. 8), Premier Senzo Mchunu declared that public representatives need to take a stand against rape and "need to profile all rapist and visit their families so that we can all understand their upbringing... we cannot hope to solve this problem if we do not understand what goes into the mind of a rapist and what influences such a person to do such a barbaric thing"). Unfortunately, even during Child Protection Week, the media printed few articles that gave reasons for the actions of the perpetrators

² Under the South African Constitution a child is defined as any person who is under the age of 18

and accessed few sources who were qualified to unpack the underlying issues behind child abuse. For example, *Saturday Star* in its article “Chained boy was mentally ill, says mom,” (07/06/2014, p. 9) reported that the Springs man accused of abusing his wife and five children and holding them hostage for eight years did so because, according to his wife, the son “always wanted to run away and would beat up his father, so my husband chained him up for his and our safety” and “we only kept the children close to us because we were told someone would come and take them” .

Several other papers cited the parents’ concern for the children’s’ safety in a dangerous world as the main reason they didn’t allow them outside or to school.³ None of the few papers that gave reasons for the actions of the parents claimed that they were evil or ill intentioned, only that “the parents were out of touch with reality as they truly believed they were doing the best for their children” (*The Star*, Sibling sex a point of mental health, 04/06/2014 p.5). Mental illness or deranged thinking, like that exhibited by the parents mentioned above, is cited by the media as a cause of child abuse and neglect. While we commend the media mentioned above for asking probing questions and delving more into the causes of the abuse, we are worried that the media tends to present child abuse as isolated cases and not as a societal ill. While there are psychopaths and sociopaths who abuse children because of their illness, it is clear from the vast amount of abuse stories monitored during Child Protection Week that the problem goes beyond mentally ill individuals and is a result of societal pressures. A school teacher who pleaded guilty of abusing two boys 20 years ago explained that he “had been ‘very mixed up’ at the time and unable to live openly as a gay person” (*The Star*, “Schoolteacher pleads guilty to sexual abuse charges”, 06/06/2014, p. 2); he was/is not mentally ill, but was driven to abuse by societal norms and judgments. While his reasoning does not justify his actions, it does provide insight into the thoughts of a perpetrator and the societal elements that can lead to violence against children.

During Child Protection Week the media explored some of the societal ills that lead to child abuse. *The New Age* featured three stories on June 4th that explored the various causes of violence against children and called upon parents who were planning on hurting their children to seek help rather than harm their child. Revenge, depression, unwanted pregnancy, and spousal conflict were stated as some common causes of violence against children as parents displace their frustrations onto their child through violence. Poverty was cited as one of the main factors that is connected with child

³ Some of these papers included *The Times*’ “Free after a life in bondage” (03/06/2014 p.2); *The New Age*’s “Man accused of locking his kids up in court,” (03/06/2014 p. 6).

abuse as “unemployment and economic difficulties faced by families heightens tensions and increases aggression in families” (*The New Age*, “Child abuse soars as recession bites”, 04/06/2014, p. 21). A mother who was convicted of killing her baby, said she did so because “she did not get a R300 monthly child support grant” and “had no one to support her and the baby” (*Citizen*, “Young mom tells why she killed her baby”, 05/06/2014, p.5). It is clear that societal pressures, be they cultural, religious, economic or social are driving factors of the child abuse epidemic in South Africa.

With the recent reports of parents abusing or killing their own children, increased responsibility is being put on entire communities by the media to protect children from their own families if necessary. Children are symptoms of society and reflect the values and ills of their communities; therefore it is not only the duty of the parents but also of the community to help protect the children. According to the late Nelson Mandela “there can be no keener revelation to a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children”, it is therefore not surprising that during Child Protection Week the media focused on the “it takes a village” approach to protecting and helping children. According to various articles, the government does not do enough to protect children and NGOs struggle to fill the gaps because of their lack of funding, thus it is up to the communities to look out for their children and report any abuse they suspect.

So what’s the problem?

While there are multiple examples of good in-depth and prolific reporting on violence against children during Child Protection Week in the media, these examples constitute only a tiny fraction of stories reported about children during the week and an even smaller portion of all the articles published in the media. Most of the articles published about violence against children still focus on the shock value and gory details of the crime; these stories, while helping to sell newspapers, do little to help the plight of children in society. Even the articles that shed light on the reasons behind rape, abuse and neglect still relied on gruesome information to supplement the story. According to an article in the *Legal Times* (an insert in *The Times*) “South Africa suffers from an emotional detachment from the situation, because every day media are flooded with reports of horrendous crimes committed against children, as a society, we cannot allow ourselves to become numb and apathetic – we have to stand up and take action” (*The Times*, “Be aware of children’s rights – stand up and take action,” (06/06/2014, p. 3)). Society shapes its children and their future, and the media has the ability to shape society, thus it is important for the media to report on children in a way that will promote progress.

It appears that the media tends to focus on reporting events and does little to address the widespread underlying issues. Issues, such as child abuse, are only addressed when horrific events happen or when campaigns such as Child Protection Week are launched; it is only when an issue gets loud enough to not be ignored that it gets reported on. But how loud is loud enough for the media to pay attention? The broad, commonplace issue of child abuse is not reported on and the sensationalism of abuse in the media highlights specific cases and belittles the issue by making the perpetrators seem like exceptions from society. More so, event-based reporting disassociates perpetrators from society and makes it easy for the public to dismiss the everyday presence of violence against children. The brutality reported on by the media is not representative of vast majority of child abuse, thus by focusing on the most extreme cases, the media numbs society to the mundane and lesser (but equally worrisome) forms of child abuse.

The Way Forward

Through comprehensive and sensitive reporting on violence against children and the ills of society that prompt violence, the media could initiate societal change and reduce the child abuse epidemic in South Africa. There is noticeable effort being made to protect children in South Africa by society and the media alike, but unfortunately the media still relies too heavily on sensationalising violence against children to sell newspapers. In addition to increased sensitivity and in-depth background reporting on violence against children, the media should go beyond fleeting campaigns such as Child Protection Week as regular, nuanced coverage of child abuse needs to be continuous throughout the year. By making issue-based reporting a staple in the media and not waiting until a child is horribly abused or killed to talk about abuse, the media will be able to help South Africa protect its children. Through media depictions of the circumstances and reasons behind violence, society will learn to recognise, prevent and take ownership of abuse and will be able to take action against the circumstances that lead to violence against children. Unfortunately, child abuse is a symptom of our society and should be understood as an everyday occurrence; until the media and society acknowledge that all abuse is worth our attention, and not just the extreme cases, there can be no progress.

By Noemi Ventilla