CHILDHOOD VULNERABILITIES

in South Africa

Some Ethical Perspectives

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PREFACE

In Chapter 1, Jan Grobbelaar discusses the plight and vulnerability of children living in South Africa with the goal to enhance critical academic, theological ethical thinking regarding the daily living contexts of South Africa's vulnerable children, and our moral obligations towards them. The chapter starts with a general analysis of the concepts of 'vulnerable' and 'vulnerability' and draws some lines on how these concepts relate to South Africa's children. Attention is also given to a global and a local perspective on the living realities of South Africa's children, as well as the use of statistics in analysing the vulnerabilities of these children. Throughout this discussion some ethical challenges are indicated. The chapter concludes with a few theological ethical perspectives on the calling of the Church regarding South Africa's vulnerable children.

Selina Palm explores violence against children and the positive role of Christian faith communities in contributing towards ending it in Chapter 2. However, this chapter will also highlight ways in which Christian faith continues to perpetuate practices and beliefs that remain harmful to children and that need urgent challenging. It draws on insights from a 2019 interfaith scoping study that explored the relationship between faith and efforts to end violence against children, to suggest that faith leaders can play important roles across many levels of the child protection system. It will apply these insights to the South African context where child abuse, neglect and violence remain endemic. It will emphasise the ethical dilemma that lies beneath the legal and social status of the child: that children can still be seen to be at the bottom of a hierarchy of human value, or be regarded as the property of their parents. This normalisation of a 'less than' social status can mean that children are likely to be subjected to violence by people they know and care about, such as parents and teachers. Reshaping these patterns to prevent violence requires an ethical reorientation of how adult/child relationships are presented. In this core task, faith communities can play an important role only if they

can also critically interrogate harmful theologies within their own traditions and develop a liberating theology for the child.

In Chapter 3, Jan Grobbelaar and Chris Jones focus on the contentious issue of corporal punishment, and how the latter is one of the key drivers of the high levels of violence against children in South Africa. They argue that South Africans, in particular, should concentrate on introducing wide-ranging programmes to support families and teachers in changing attitudes and behaviours that favour and promote harsh and abusive forms of discipline against children. Individual and social norms regarding child discipline should be changed by constantly seeking better ways to discipline children in order to live wisely. In this chapter, the authors focus, among others, on the legal framework and recent developments regarding discipline and corporal punishment in South Africa, the continuing struggle against violence in the lives of children, the role of the Church, and what South Africa, as a pathfinder country, can do in fighting violence against children.

Hanzline Davids reasons in Chapter 4 that The Child Theology Movement (CTM) recently emerged as a global movement with the focus of moving children from the margins to the centre of theological discourse. The focus of CTM is based on the theoretical lenses and methodologies of liberation and feminist theologies. Children are created in the image of the Trinity as full human beings. For this reason, children do theology from their own embodied experiences. Therefore, within a hierarchical system of power, in many cases patriarchy, their theological contribution is often ignored and denied. The embodied theological experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer and other (LGBTQI+) people are also often denied within theological discourses. For this reason, in what way does the movement of children to the centre redefine the hierarchal power discourse in a new way? What theological links exist between the disposition of children and LGBTQI+ parents to reconceive Child Theology? Lastly, does the doctrine of the Trinity provide a theological lens for Child Theology? This chapter will engage these questions

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through employing a Queer Theological Methodology as conceived by Latin-American theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid.

Leana Olivier, Lian-Marie Drostky and Jaco Louw argue in Chapter 5 that community awareness regarding the link between prenatal alcohol use and the children born with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) may lead to the blaming and stigmatisation of biological mothers. The harmful consequences of alcohol exposure in utero can be combated when affected individuals and families seek help as early as possible. Stigma is a major barrier to help-seeking behaviour. The chapter describes the role of self-stigma, structural stigma, stigma by association and public stigma on children living with FASD and their biological mothers. Interviews were conducted with mothers of children with FASD and analysed through the lens of the four manifestations of stigma. Foundation for Alcohol Related Research (FARR) project coordinators also shared their perception of the impact stigma has on intervention programmes. Stigmatisation was closely linked to awareness regarding FASD. Their findings revealed a danger that through confrontational language, policies and even the criminalisation of mothers, public and structural stigma are increasing. Punitive measures to prevent FASD ignore the best practice guidelines on improving health behaviours. Various forms of stigma prevent effective intervention, therefore, they argue that stigmatising language and behaviours must be rejected. Out of a sense of righteous indignation, they may prevent those who need help from seeking it.

In Chapter 6, Chris Jones writes about his interest in male initiation and circumcision, although he is an outsider who did not experience this rite of passage. The chapter starts off with a brief description of how culture and initiation practices are perceived mostly from a South African point of view. It then looks at the current South African situation and how the different challenges regarding male initiation and circumcision can be brought in line with modern times, technology and development. It furthermore focuses on the socialisation of boys and men in African culture, and the importance of rites of passage in different African contexts. It describes what defines being a man in Africa, it looks at different rites of passage, and gives

background information of initiation as a rite of passage specifically in South Africa. Intergenerational tensions especially between boys, young men and older men, as well as sexuality and manhood are also looked at. It also connects initiation with ancestors. In conclusion, it deals with the fear of being ostracised if one is not initiated and circumcised, but on the other hand, it also shows that many boys are not destined to become adult men because circumcision costs them their lives or their genitals are damaged severely by this practice.

Lisa le Roux briefly unpacks the nature, drivers and consequences of child marriage, followed by a focus on South African legislation and cultural practices relevant to child marriage in Chapter 7. This is a prelude to an in-depth discussion of three key dilemmas relating to the phenomenon, namely the inadequacy of a legislative response, the clash between the primacy of human rights versus cultural rights, and the reality of transactional intergenerational sex in relationships other than marriages. Recognition of these dilemmas leads to acknowledgement that current responses to child marriage are not merely woefully inadequate, but also fail to grasp the full scale of the problem.

In Chapter 8, Henry Mbaya commences with defining and highlighting racism as a term and a concept; defining its nature and how it is related to identity formation. Then he gives a very brief historical background of the institutionalisation of racism as apartheid in the South African educational system. He further discusses racial consciousness in children by drawing on the wider global context, specifically analysing very briefly, the significance of the so-called Clark doll experiment in the USA. The chapter proceeds to argue that racism is a social construct determined by contextual factors, pointing out that racial diversity, contrary to racism, is a 'natural.' From this perspective, he then discusses responses to efforts of racial integration in schools in post-1994 South Africa. In this context, he argues that schools constitute critical spaces where racist attitudes and practices are formed and inculcated. He highlights the role of literature and media in informing racist tendencies in children. Finally, the critical role that parents and adults play in the socialisation of children's racial attitudes, is emphasised.

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Krige Siebrits reasons in Chapter 9 that the child support grant (CSG) programme is one of the cornerstones of South Africa's unusually large social assistance system. The chapter shows that large numbers of children in South Africa are severely affected by poverty and poor living conditions. Against this backdrop, it argues that a credible body of evidence confirms the efficacy of the child support grant programme. The programme provides large amounts of cash to poor households with children and avoids extensive leakage to the affluent; furthermore, caregivers generally use the money to the benefit of children and the programme has not given rise to substantial perverse behavioural responses. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of the programme is undermined by the small size of the grant, the limited skills and knowledge of some caregivers, and the often difficult environments within which recipients and caregivers live. In view of this, he argues for a stronger focus on complementary initiatives to further empower caregivers and improve these environments. The chapter further emphasises that measures to strengthen the education system and to accelerate economic growth and job creation are essential to improve the longer-term prospects of South African children.

Louis Fourie focuses on the protection of children in the digital society in Chapter 10. The pervasiveness of digital technology, and in particular social media and mobile devices, have changed the lives of children forever, as well as created new risks for the emotional, sexual and commercial exploitation of children. The risks can mainly be divided into content (children are receivers of mass produced content), contact (children are active participants in an adult-initiated activity) and conduct (children are perpetrators, actors or creators) risks, and include violence and aggression, sexual abuse, the eroding of values, and the commercial exploitation via data tracking and artificial intelligence algorithms. The complex task of ensuring the safety of children online requires a concerted multi-stakeholder collaborative approach between parents, peers, teachers, children, communities, schools, industry, and law enforcement. In South Africa, it is especially the private sector and government that should take greater responsibility for the digital protection of children. The private sector has a corporate responsibility

to promote ethical standards with regard to data, privacy and design. The South African government needs to urgently address the lack of appropriate policy frameworks and national strategies, as well as tend to the limited, fragmented and often-contradictory legislation with regard to the digital rights of children.

With this brief overview of the various chapters in mind, we would like to point out that the focus of this book is not primarily on religion and/or theological ethics in relation to vulnerable children. However, some of the chapters, especially in the first part of the book, contain a definitive reference to the Christian religion and faith communities (1-3), with Chapter 1 setting the scene. This does not mean that it can't be helpful for an audience with a different religious orientation. We consider the discourse in this book valuable enough to inform people from other religious convictions, and even those who do not believe, about the broader social, scientific and ethical lines of thought we deem necessary to support vulnerable children.

These first chapters are followed by a number of chapters (4-7) that focus on certain familial and cultural aspects regarding children, and then in the last part of the book (7-10) the emphasis is directed at larger societal problems that impact children's lives. We, however, decided not to divide these chapters into separate sections with specific section headings, due to the fluent nature of the different themes and approaches.

As already mentioned, this book addresses different challenges that endanger the lives of children (mainly) in the South African context from an ethical perspective. It provides the research of several South African scholars – from different disciplines and backgrounds – systematically and intersectionally, based on scholarly analyses, insights, reasoning and expertise.

The use of multiple data sets in some of the chapters will hopefully position the text as a resource for specialists in ethics and childhood studies, especially those studying the sociocultural contexts of children and families in terms of challenges and opportunities for support. However, not all the chapters rely on statistical data sets, as

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is so typical of a social science approach, because this was not meant to be the research methodology of the book.

The authors were allowed to follow their own research methodology. They mostly did a literature review of academic resources available. In some cases, the academic literature on the relevant themes are limited and the authors had to use some popular sources. In certain chapters, the authors included findings of earlier empirical research in which they were involved. No empirical study was done specifically for this book. Therefore, it was not necessary to get ethical clearance for any of the research done in this study.

The realisation of such a book is a team effort. We would like to extend a word of thanks to all our co-authors, who enthusiastically agreed to become part of this project. Thank you for your willingness, ideas, time, and academic skills to reflect on this highly relevant and urgent debate within the domain of children and ethics.

For any book to be published, a lot of hard work is done behind the scenes. To all the members of the publishing team – for their kind and professional services – as well as the peer-reviewers for their hard work and valuable input, a word of sincere gratitude.

To my co-editor, Chris Jones, a word of sincere appreciation. It was a blessing to work with you on this project. Thank you for your patience and all your support.