

Wednesday, 17 June 2020

## OPINION PIECE

### **Abandoned babies: Early intervention and care can help prevent abandonment, UP expert says**

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On a sunny day just before lockdown started, the gardener called us outside. He'd found a zipped, black sports bag tucked halfway under the ivy plants on the pavement where he was gathering fallen leaves. When we unzipped the bag, we found a new-born baby girl wrapped in a bed throw, blanket, and towel. She was breathing, lying on her side with the umbilical cord still attached. We called the police who arrived within a few minutes. The policewoman called an ambulance. When the ambulance arrived, they cut the umbilical cord, wrapped her in a small space blanket and rushed off.

The case is real, and unfortunately, not an isolated incident. In South Africa, an estimated 3 500 babies are abandoned every year. The ages of the babies vary from new-born to one year.

Why do mothers abandon their babies? Where are the mothers' families? Where is the biological father of the baby? A family should provide security and care, nurturance, and protection. The family should maintain and augment the physical, social, emotional, and psychological well-being of its members. If this is the role and function of the family, why do we find so many abandoned babies?

Unintended pregnancies are not country specific. Research says 38% of pregnancies worldwide are unintended, with an estimated 16 million births globally occurring in girls younger than 15 years and up to 19 years of age. Reasons for unintended pregnancies may include insufficient reproductive health care, gender-based violence and rape, abuse, unsafe sex practices, sexual exploitation, and poverty with lack of access to and control over resources. Unfortunately, many babies born from unintended pregnancies are abandoned.

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown has led to even more challenges. Media reports mention an increase in abandoned babies and fetuses found in dustbins, dumps, and ditches. Organisations anticipate an increase in abandoned babies during the lockdown period because of uncertainties and added emotional, social, and economic stress. Several NGOs have already received babies. With the lockdown regulations and people forced to live together in small spaces, reports of gender-based violence and rape are increasing. Will the number of unintended pregnancies also rise because of the COVID-19 lockdown?

The reasons behind the decision are not clear, as it is nearly impossible to find the mothers after they have left the babies. Poverty, unwanted pregnancy, teenage pregnancy, shame, and lack of support are some of the possible reasons for such a decision. Child abandonment is a criminal offence and a person who abandons or deserts a child, can be charged, and tried in a court of law.

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But how do we view the act of abandonment? The hours that followed finding the tiny baby were filled with hundreds of questions: Who was the Mom? Why did she abandon the baby? Was she in pain? Had she no other choice? Was she afraid? Was she alone? Did someone assist her? Was she forced to leave the baby? Why did she wrap the baby in the towel, then the blanket, then in the throw and then placed her in the sports bag and zipped it close? Did she intend the baby to die, or did she hope that someone would find the baby in time? Did she watch from a distance? Did she know us? Emotions jumped from one continuum to another. I felt angry that someone could abandon such a perfect little creature. I felt immensely sad that someone could be so desperate to do this. I felt so relieved that we found her while she was still alive. I felt worried about the baby's chances for survival. I felt anxious about the mom's physical and emotional state.

The baby was found by the ivy plants. She was someone, she existed – she was Baby Ivy. Later the following week, after several phone calls and assistance from people familiar with the hospitals nearby, I found her. At the hospital, I went to the incubator and put my hand through the opening to touch her. She was real. Even with the hospital identity band indicating 'Unknown', she had an identity.

A social worker placed the baby with a family with the aim of adoption. She is thriving. She is a beautiful and content baby. Not all babies are as fortunate to be found alive. South Africa has abortion services, baby chutes where mothers can leave the babies, and several other options. Yet the number of abandonments remains high. Thousands of young girls and women have unplanned and unwanted pregnancies. Baby homes and places of safety are filled to the brim and depend on donations and the services of volunteers to assist with the care of these babies.

We cannot just condemn the person who abandons a baby and focus on the fact that it is a criminal offence. We cannot ignore the issue of abandoned babies and unwanted pregnancies. Society must acknowledge that the mothers and their abandoned babies exist, and that they have identities. They need services which can help in preventing abandonment with early intervention and care.

The Department of Social Development, NGOs, civil society, citizens, tertiary institutions, and each of us as individuals have the responsibility to respond to the act as one of possible despair.

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### **ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA**

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences,

clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In June 2019, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa's research-intensive universities, UP launched the *Future Africa Campus* in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition, UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In 2020 UP will launch Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of 'science for transformation'.

For more information, go to [www.up.ac.za](http://www.up.ac.za)