



The tragic case of Baby Ivy

We can't condemn those who abandon newborn babies, and focus solely on the crime

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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. Their ages vary from newborn to one year.

Why do mothers abandon their babies? Where are the mothers' families? Where is the biological father? 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



RESEARCH shows that 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. | SIBONELO NGCOBO African News Agency (ANA)

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.

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. 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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