



COMMENT



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Rise in dumped babies

JUST before lockdown started, the gardener called us outside. He had 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 newborn girl wrapped in a bed throw, blanket and towel. She was breathing. We called the police, who arrived within minutes. The policewoman called an ambulance. Paramedics cut the umbilical cord, wrapped her in a small space blanket and rushed off.

The case is not an isolated incident. In South Africa, an estimated 3 500 babies are abandoned every year.

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.

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. Many babies born from unintended pregnancies are abandoned.

The lockdown has led to 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 because of uncertainties and added emotional, social and economic stress. 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?

The hours that followed finding the baby were filled with questions. Who was the mom? Why did she abandon the baby? Was she in pain? Was she afraid? Was she alone? 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?

I felt angry that someone could abandon a perfect little creature. I felt sad that someone could be so desperate. I felt relieved we found her alive. I felt worried about the baby's survival. I felt anxious about the mom's physical and emotional state.

The baby was someone, she existed – she was Baby Ivy. Later the following week, I found her. At the hospital, I went to the incubator and put my hand through the opening to touch her. 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.

Not all babies are as fortunate. South Africa has abortion services, baby chutes where mothers can leave the babies, and several other options. Yet the number of abandonments remains high.

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 they have identities. They need services which can help in preventing abandonment.

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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