

# Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

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## **Parliamentary task team on sexual abuse hears from the children**

Last month a parliamentary task team sat to hear submissions from children's rights activists, child care practitioners and researchers, legal and policing professionals on the overwhelming issues of sexual abuse and exploitation that South African children are facing. **Janet Prest Talbot** was chaperone to two Durban children who addressed the team.

Two children from each province, along with their adult chaperone, were selected to take part in the hearings in respect of the Children's Rights Charter. Facilitator Bengi Francis of Africa Cultural Trust helped to make this happen and secured funding from Unicef literally days before the event. As a result it was a rush to select the children and to get them more or less oriented to what they would be doing in Cape Town.

At the Durban YMCA we were approached by the Children's Rights Centre and asked to find two participants. Fortunately the youth that we work with have been involved in debating and have become aware of the issues of children's rights over the past two years. Siyabonga Makhaye, Sno Buthelezi and myself left for Cape Town on March 12 to begin the process of getting ready for the submissions.

This was to be no holiday from school for the children. It involved close to 12 hours of workshopping, heart searching, reaching out in compassion to those who had stories of their own abuse and getting together thoughts on what they would like to share with the task team. The adult participants worked separately from the young people and activities included an art workshop, some ice breaker games and a lot of talking and listening. The day was demanding to say the least and unfortunately the facility and surroundings did not have space for some physical activity to break the intensity of the proceedings. Despite this there was much co-operation and focus on the task from all concerned.

The following day was spent in the parliamentary buildings. It included a tour of the complex and four hours of hearings. These were originally scheduled for 11am but were delayed until 2pm. The members of parliament who listened to the heart cry of the children were deeply moved and responsive to the extent that early on in the proceedings the members walked out and held discussions outside because they were sensitive to the often intimate information that some participants chose to share. They felt that it was not appropriate to share such information amongst strangers in such a public environment and that this could be damaging and traumatising for the participants. This was a wise consideration, but the young people were indignant and adamant that what they had prepared was what they wanted to share as an indication of what

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was happening to children in South Africa.

When the parliamentary members returned each of them spent time relating one on one to the young people and asked that the adult supporters sit closer to, if not alongside, each child as they told their story. There was much warmth and support from the listeners. One wonders how else the 'child' participants could share if it was not to be their stories and observations of what is going on about themselves. They are not, after all, professionals with research evidence and analysis of the situation at hand. What they have to share is what they experience and see in real life about themselves.

Our children in South Africa are under siege. Participant after participant told of harrowing stories to the point that many listeners were in tears. Quite a number of the children represented were from children's homes and places of safety and they had real reasons to be in there.

Amongst issues addressed was the big factor that poverty had in furthering child abuse; that care givers, teachers and religious leaders often abused their positions and violated children; the disabled are often victims of abuse because of their weak position to defend themselves (there were two blind or partially sighted participants who spoke about this); that rape was a profoundly life shattering experience; that sexual abuse more often than not occurred in silence within the family for years on end and that children often felt abandoned and utterly helpless to change the situation.

For many, sharing their stories was a path to healing and those who were fortunate to be protected from such horrors also learnt to speak as advocates for their suffering peers. While there was plenty of support at the hearings, I felt the weight of the experience on returning home and would imagine that for many of the children this would be the same. As there was an adult supporter for every two children from their home context, one hopes that they would be sympathetically available to debrief and work through some of the feelings that might have arisen through this experience.

Every member of parliament present at the hearing responded with warmth, compassion and encouragement. One blind woman member of parliament empathised with similar experiences that other blind members of our group told of and encouraged them to forge beyond their obstacles. A concluding thought from one person reminded us of how, in 1976, the children were the catalyst for the death throes of apartheid. One wonders if in the decade 2000, the children of South Africa can rise up with a strong, determined will to combat this spiralling violence and oppression of sexual abuse against themselves. Could their voice and the seeking of a new quality of life bring about change?

In many respects this experience has helped me feel proud to be a South African: a sense that the government is listening; that those who listened represented a cross-section of South Africans; that children were brought into the debate; that a truly human and compassionate face was shown by the listening task team. One hopes that the voices for children will be loud and clear and recommendations will be taken seriously.

Through this experience the children who attended the hearings grew at least another 20cm in inner strength, resolve and understanding of how our country works. The awesomeness of the occasion alone gave them maturity beyond their years. They instantly grew in their ability to be advocates for their peers.

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