

# The Thinker

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A PAN - AFRICAN QUARTERLY FOR THOUGHT LEADERS

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**SPECIAL ISSUE ON**

**VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN**

Guest edited by Lilly Nortjé-Meyer and Nina Müller Van Velden

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# AFRICA

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Prof Ronit Frenkel

The University of Johannesburg acquired *The Thinker* in April 2019 from Dr Essop Pahad. Over the last decade, *The Thinker* has gained a reputation as a journal that explores Pan-African issues across fields and times. Ronit Frenkel, as the incoming editor, plans on maintaining the pan-African scope of the journal while increasing its coverage into fields such as books, art, literature and popular cultures. *The Thinker* is a 'hybrid' journal, publishing both journalistic pieces with more academic articles and contributors can now opt to have their submissions peer reviewed. We welcome Africa-centred articles from diverse perspectives, in order to enrich both knowledge of the continent and of issues impacting the continent.



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# FOREWORD



By Kammila Naidoo, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg

I was delighted to open the conference on 'Violence Against Children' organized by the Department of Religion Studies, at the University of Johannesburg, in partnership with the New Testament Society of Southern Africa (NTSSA). I am extremely pleased that a special issue on the topic has been produced so briskly. Although there is currently much work being done on violence, there is insufficient interdisciplinary and collaborative work on how violence configures the lives of children in Southern African countries. One does not hear of conferences on children or children's rights as often as one might hear about initiatives on other compelling topics. This coming together of scholars to reflect on the experiences and lived realities of children – and, on the theme of children and violence – is exciting and timely.

Currently, there are more than 2 billion children in the world, with the highest proportion living in sub-Saharan Africa. By the middle of this century, more than 40 percent of children younger than 5 years will

be resident here. It is often pointed out that a child's life chances are shaped by the place of birth, year of birth, and privileges of the natal familial context – in this regard, class, race, nationality, regionality, and gender are some of the key predictors of a child's future. Many countries face entrenched inequalities and disparities, thus economic, socio-political, cultural, religious, and communal factors often have considerable and defining impacts on a child's future well-being and success. Interventions to create equality of opportunities and mitigate inherited disadvantages have been considerable. Despite government and civil society efforts, the situation of children today remains dire. This is distressing to note for all who work in this field and who acknowledge that a country's future stability, growth, and development, are inextricably linked to the ways in which this youngest cohort is treated, catered for, inspired, and afforded economic, social, and educational opportunities.

Some years ago, I guest-edited a special journal issue on the topic of 'Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs of Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Research, Policy, and Practice'. One of the strongest and unanticipated themes emerging out of the collection of articles was that of young women's and girls' engagement with violence, which marked their lifestories but also built-up specific resistances and defensive responses from them. The theme of violence became much more urgent in the COVID-19 era when lockdowns and stringent security regulations came into effect inhibiting activities and freedom of movement, and consequently increasing encounters with violence. While the focus has been on women enduring violence in households under lockdown, there is no doubt that children too bore the brunt of immense physical and emotional abuse during that time. In 2021, many young girls in South Africa did not return to schools when they re-opened; many below the age of 16 did not return due to pregnancy. The COVID-19 pandemic offers an instrument to consider the extent to which children's lives have been set back and in what ways possibilities exist for reimagining transformed futures.

One of the central questions of the conference, and indeed this special issue, is about how violence against children is understood, experienced, and challenged. If parents in South Africa were to be interviewed and asked about corporal punishment, I doubt whether all would agree that spanking a child is an act of violence. When a child is punished and told, 'I am doing this because I love you', it becomes one of the first lessons showing the association between love and violence. We should be interrogating how socialized practices and things deemed normative become implicated and entangled in persistent forms of abuse. Apart from sharing insights on meanings and understandings of what constitutes violence, I anticipate that this special issue will probe mediations and interventions that have been evident, and or successful, in different societal contexts.' In Johan Galtung's frameworks of violence, three forms are predominant: direct or personal violence, structural or institutional violence, and cultural violence. Direct violence is recognized as overt attacks including verbal and psychological torment. Structural violence draws attention to systems and institutions that are exploitative and discriminatory resulting in the long-term suffering of disadvantaged groups. Cultural violence highlights ideologies, value

systems, and socialized practices that are learned and perpetuated, and that would be experienced as abusive by those on the receiving end. Like the case of spanking, it is important to focus critically on cultural practices and belief systems and expose the harm that they can create by negatively affecting the day-to-day lives of children. As cultural violence, the hidden realities of sexual coercion, bullying, and emotional abuse are often tolerated within schools and families, and the strands of this intersect to negatively shape the lives of young people across the world. The culture of silence especially about sexual violence committed within the home, is very common in Africa and certainly South Africa.

The violence that children endure growing up, inevitably shapes how they live out their roles as socially adjusted and healthy adults. Many children carry with them mental health disorders, confidence and trust issues, and have problems keeping a job after living with violence. Children, like adults, may face crisis points in their lives. How can they be guided when they face a teacher attempting to solicit sex in order to award them a higher grade, or bullying, verbal abuse, and sexual coercion? Evidence does reveal that violence survivors commonly succumb to higher risk behaviours and accept these as 'normal'. Unplanned pregnancies, suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, and lack of academic success would be prevalent if there were no concerted attempts at redress and intervention. Children can be empowered to fight back, put perpetrators behind bars, and move ahead with confidence and determination. Our scholarship should therefore be high-quality, substantive, and activist-orientated. Doing research on this sensitive and complex topic can be daunting and challenging. There are ethical issues relating to how violence data can be obtained from young people, especially younger adolescents and children. Getting children to open up and talk freely and share their experiences might in some contexts prove difficult.

Against this background, it was great to note that the 'Violence Against Children' conference created space for critical views on conceptual, methodological, and ethical challenges experienced by researchers. The special issue reflects on them and brings together fresh insights and original work on addressing violence against children. Thank you to Prof Lilly Nortje-Meyer for this initiative, and to all the authors for sharing their research on this very important topic.