

Women and Children victimised in their own households

1. Introduction

August is a very important month in South Africa's calendar. It's Woman's month. It is also children's safety month. So in this edition, I'd like to spend a few minutes celebrating women in my life and highlight some critical safety issues affecting some of the poorest women and children in our society.

2. Women

I love the women in my life. At home, I am surrounded by two cute women, my wonderful wife, Nomonde and my beautiful daughter Lelihle. They both anchor me in deeper ways to solid values and meaningful living. My mother and mother-in-law are also very important in my life. At work, there are about 11 women who are strong, intelligent, professional and hardworking. They add a tremendous amount of value to my professional life. At church, there are some outstanding women who encourage me in my spiritual life. I appreciate them all.

Perhaps the best reason why I am involved in the kind of work that I do, is because of the poor women in the informal settlements where our organisation, the Paraffin Safety Association works. These are the very women who toil hard daily to eke out a living under extremely difficult conditions. When they come home, they stand behind wobbly and unstable tables, cooking with faulty and ready to explode paraffin appliances in squalid conditions where their whole houses are combustible.

Research shows that the majority of victims and survivors of household energy-related fires are women. According to a report by the Human Sciences Council, domestic chores such as cooking, feeding and cleaning are mainly the responsibility of women in the home. As such, they bear most of the negative effects of household energy use. It is women who take their badly burnt children to hospital. In the video that we've just produced, there is a picture of a woman who has brought her badly burnt child to hospital. As she wipes her sweaty brow, supporting her face with a tired hand, you can feel a sense of desperation, a sense of not knowing what to do.

This was born out recently at our National Summit which we held in Johannesburg on 27-28 June 2007. The summit was primarily about giving a platform for the victims and survivors of paraffin appliances and fuel-related incidents to speak about their personal experiences. The overwhelming majority of those who spoke, were women.

Two stories stand out for me and I will never forget them. One woman from Khayelitsha who was pregnant at the time, was cooking in her informal settlement. Her flame stove exploded and she caught fire and burned a large area of her body. She nearly lost her child due to smoke inhalation and falling. And she lost everything that she ever owned in the fire. The second lady from East London, was asleep in her house. She said she had taken her ARVs. Her boyfriend came home in the middle of the night and started warming his food with a flame stove. It also burst into flames. Before they knew it, the

whole house was engulfed in fire. Dazed by the medication and the smoke, she somehow stumbled outside. Her boyfriend together with everything they owned, including things like identity document perished. Now she is destitute and depends on others for assistance. Her and other's situation demands for a compensation grant from government.

Our President is known for his commitment towards the betterment of the lives of women and he has done much in this regard. The time has come for the focus to shift towards improving the energy safety of women in their households. A safe system of energy provision is critical to the complete emancipation of women.

3. Children

August doubles up as a Child Safety Month as well. Yesterday, I read a newsletter from Child Accident Prevention Foundation of SA with important tips about how to improve the safety of children. Research also shows that the most dangerous place for some children, especially the poor children, is their homes. The HSRC report referred to above, states that infants are particularly at risk as they spend most of their time in the kitchen in the care of their mothers. A critical contributor to this dangerous situation is the presence of paraffin in unlabelled and unpackaged containers as well the presence of substandard and unsafe stoves. In June I said 'The Child Awareness Week and International Children's Day activities might be a waste of time and precious resources if a critical aspect of children, which is their safety in the homes, is not realised. Everyday, thousands of children live with a real possibility of death and injury in their own homes because of fires caused by the explosion of faulty and illegal paraffin appliances and drinking of paraffin.'

At our summit we heard from a burns unit doctor at Chris Hani Baragwanath about the majority of children who present there. The worst illustration of the abuse of children related to unsafe energy is a story that was told at the summit, by a child from Mabopane in Pretoria. He told the gathering about the night that he was at a neighbour's house to watch TV because they did not have one in his house. He said whilst they were watching, a quarrel erupted and developed into a fight between the husband and his wife of the house. The man threw a paraffin heater which was on, on the wife. The wife, who was holding the boy, used the child as a shield. As a result the boy was badly burnt on his face and body.

4. Conclusion

So clearly, there is so much work that needs to be done. The Paraffin Safety Association adds its voice to the call for the safety of our children. Apart from action that needs to be taken by parents to improve their children's safety, there needs to be a proper policy framework on the household energy safety.

These issues are serious enough to warrant a concerted effort and action by our government and other relevant stakeholders.