

CHILDREN'S RIGHTSINSERT BTHE RIGHT TO A FUTURE

Hailed as heroic young lions by many; and denounced as precocious tyrants by others, the children of our country have undoubtedly borne the brunt of the anti-apartheid conflict. Excessively street-wise and prison-wise and combat-wise, they now have the right to emerge from their trauma and claim the future for which they have struggled so hard.

Once the slogan was: liberation now, education later. Today it has to be education now, liberation now. Tens and hundreds of thousands of specialists will have to emerge from the ranks of the oppressed if the country is ever to know true equality.

The present generation of young people have the right not to be fossilised as premature veterans, not to be converted into eternal victims of a ~~cruel~~ ^{vicious} society, not to be everlasting exhibits to the cruelty of apartheid. They have the most fundamental of rights, the right to have rights, and also the most fundamental of responsibilities, the responsibility to be responsible.

We of their parents' generation have our rights and responsibilities too. We cannot use the notion of living for the future as a pretext for evading our responsibility for the present. We fight for a free and democratic South Africa because that is what we want for ourselves. It is less selfish to acknowledge that fact and live our lives in an open and spirited way, than to appropriate the future in a pre-designed scheme and then complain later of our children's ingratitude for not accepting what we did for them. Our sacrifices have been for ourselves, not for future generations. Our major contribution is to create conditions to enable our children to have their own future. Their right to have rights implies that they are not victims of history; their responsibility to have responsibilities requires them to assume their potential as full human beings, now, sensitive to whom they are and caring about what they do.

The children of our country should accordingly not be our adjuncts to be mobilised for this or that action and then told to shut up and wait for the future we are organising for them. Nor should they be regarded as free-floating bands roaming the streets in constant tension with the community. They have the right to be free citizens of a just society and not angry victims of an unjust one.

The greatest of legal rights they can have is to grow up under a new constitution that recognises the worth, dignity, capacity and yearnings of all. If we are the mothers and fathers of that new constitution, they are its daughters and sons, and we are all its authors.

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When children report on fatalities - 'our side' versus 'their side'- as if giving a football score, we all bear the shock.

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In particular, the adoption by the United Nations of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, provides a secure foundation for legislation in all countries.