

## Interview with Katharine Hall

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Interview by **Marlize Rabe** for *Gender Questions* based on the publication *South African Child Gauge 2018: Children, Families and the State* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 2018)<sup>1</sup>

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**KATHARINE HALL** is a senior researcher at the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town. She has a PhD in Development Theory and Policy from the University of the Witwatersrand and a master's degree in Sociology from the University of Cape Town. Her work is mainly in the area of child poverty, inequality, migration and related social policy. She coordinates the institute's Children Count project, which monitors the situation of children in South Africa. She is a member of the standing committee of the International Society for Child Indicators and serves on UCT's cross-faculty Poverty and Inequality Initiative.

**MARLIZE RABE:** Thank you for agreeing to discuss the *South African Child Gauge*. Why is this annual report necessary?

**KATHARINE HALL:** We started the South African Child Gauge 13 years ago because we felt that South Africa needed a regular review that tracks progress towards realising children's rights. Children tend to be quite invisible in the general development indicator reports, and of course it is part of our mission at the Children's Institute to bring child rights into focus. We designed the Gauge as a user-friendly publication that would be accessible to a wide audience. From the start we decided to divide it into three sections: Part 1 is written by lawyers and describes in a user-friendly way the recent developments in law and policy that affect children; Part 2 is the main body of the book and is a set of essays on a

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ci.uct.ac.za/ci/child-gauge/introduction>

particular theme, which changes each year; Part 3 presents statistical indicators on children, from our “Children Count” project.

The format has worked well, and the Gauge has become highly regarded and quite influential. It goes to a range of government departments, members of parliament, the judiciary, academic researchers and university libraries, international funders and development organisations, NGOs and civil society groups, and the media. We thought it was necessary to start a publication like this, and now we find that it is necessary to continue because there is a demand for it every year. People find it a useful resource—for policy making, for reporting against international obligations, for teaching, and for advocacy work.

**MR:** What was the focus of the annual report in 2018? Why did you choose this focus?

**KH:** This is our 13th issue and we titled it “Children Families and the State: Collaboration and Contestation.” The topics are always intensely debated, and lots of people send in ideas. Generally, we try to focus on a topic that is a “current” issue in policy. This year government is busy with draft amendments to the Children’s Act, the development of a Child Care and Protection Policy, a review of the Family Policy—and much of this work requires a deeper understanding of what families are and how the state could improve its collaboration with families so that children have a better chance in life.

The Gauge provides empirical evidence on current policy questions, but it is also sending messages. This edition encourages government departments to recognise the central role of the family in contributing to human and national development—that families and the state are development partners. Families are a resource, not a liability, and they need support.

The Gauge also tries to shift deeply entrenched normative assumptions about what a family is or should be, and challenges perspectives that pathologise families or particular groups. We argue for greater flexibility in the design of policies and programmes to accommodate diverse and stretched family forms, changing structure and co-residence arrangements and the different life stages of children. One way to do this is through more responsive, demand-driven programmes.

**MR:** What are the main findings of this report in 2018?

**KH:** Most children in South Africa live in extended family households—nuclear families are a minority, and many children do not live with their parents. In fact, South Africa is a global outlier in this respect. It is related to historical patterns of kinship care as well as a legacy of apartheid policies that deliberately fragmented families. We show that families are not necessarily the same as households—many families span two or more households, family members may move around and childcare arrangements may change as families strategise to provide care while also providing income support. This creates challenges for the state: it would be much easier to target and deliver services if children stayed in neat

families and did not move around. A highly mobile population means that state services need to be well integrated, with good referral and follow-up systems that can be linked across provinces.

We show the gender imbalances: the work of childcare is primarily done by women, but women often bear the dual responsibility of care and income support. Fathers are noticeably absent from children's lives—two thirds of children don't have a co-resident father, and a third don't even have a father on their birth certificate. To some extent the state is complicit in absolving men of their responsibility towards children. It is more difficult to register a father on a child's birth certificate if the parents are not married (and marriage rates have been dropping since the 1960s); gatekeeping makes it difficult for fathers to attend antenatal services with their partners or to be present at the birth of their child; and the maintenance system has simply not been enforced.

The central section of the Gauge has nine chapters—dealing with demography, state law, customary law, care (and caregiving), child protection, income support, early childhood development, education, health and the socialisation of children. These are all areas where families and the state need to collaborate effectively. Families have the primary responsibility to nurture children and provide for their needs, but they cannot do it without good quality social infrastructure and services. When families lack the means to provide for children or fail to protect them, that duty falls to the state.

**MR:** Are there any trends that you have picked up from the reports over the years?

**KH:** Each year has a different theme, and in a sense the themes themselves represent a trend in “current” topics on the policy agenda. Starting in 2005, we've focused on HIV/AIDS, poverty alleviation, social services, meaningful access to education, health services, child participation, inequality, early childhood development, violence, youth, social assistance and the SDGs (survive, thrive, transform).

The back end of the book, Children Count, tracks statistical indicators on children back to 2002. Through the years we have seen the rise of orphaning due to HIV/AIDS, and then from the late 2000s a fairly sharp decline in orphaning due to ARV rollout—a policy success. Even when orphaning rates were at their height, we saw no increase in child-headed households. In fact, most children in child-headed households are not orphans, while orphaned children are invariably cared for by relatives. The assumed link between orphaning and child-headed households is one of the many myths or “moral panics” that we try to counter.

We've seen declining poverty rates as social grants expanded, and improvements in access to services like water, electricity and sanitation. But in all these areas the child population is still worse off than the adult population, because children are concentrated in larger, poorer and more rural households.

**MR:** In media reports we are bombarded with horrific cases of neglect and child abuse—what insight does the Child Gauge offer on this issue?

**KH:** Child abuse happens both inside and outside the home. The Gauge chapter on child protection focuses specifically on family violence—a huge problem in South Africa, where violence has also been normalised in society over many decades. Hitting children is common, and the line between corporal punishment and abuse is blurred. Corporal punishment can start a cycle of violence. Research evidence shows that patterns of violence within families are intergenerational: people who experienced or even witnessed violence in their childhood are more likely to enter into abusive partnerships, and to abuse their own children. There are clear links between violence against women and violence against children in that they tend to co-occur in the same households and share common risk factors. It is important to tackle them together. For example, when a woman reports abuse, this should trigger a coordinated response to protect children too.

**MR:** Are there positive aspects related to care for children in South Africa?

**KH:** Families are remarkably resourceful and resilient despite the massive challenges they face. Caregivers provide care amidst physical and psychological pressures, often on very little money and in poor or hazardous living conditions. It is important to acknowledge and celebrate the extraordinary role of families who, often against all odds, provide for children, keep them fed and clothed, make sure they go to school, care for them when they are sick, and protect them from harm.

At the same time, we need to ensure that caregivers themselves receive support. The multiple challenges of deprivation can affect mental health which can affect a mother's capacity to provide early infant care, giving rise to “toxic stress” that can undermine children's development. There's a small amount of income support from the state (through the child support grant) but practical and psychological support is less readily available. We are at an interesting point when a range of programmes and services are being developed or piloted. These include the new *Road to Health* book which is meant to be used by clinic nurses to ensure more holistic monitoring and support of the mother and child, the introduction of parental leave, the promotion of breastfeeding-friendly workplaces, the development of parenting support programmes and community-based interventions to support families—the Gauge includes some case studies of these. Some important elements that are missing from the plans include routine mental health screening as part of the perinatal support package, and the provision (and funding) of childcare facilities for young children (such as creches and nursery schools).

**MR:** What would you like to see in future research on children in South Africa?

**KH:** There are so many areas that need further research—our next Gauge will be on child health, including a look at the implications of a national health insurance system. Quite apart from research on child-specific matters like health, education and protection, a focus

on children is a useful lens for considering broader development issues. Personally, I intend to focus on what we already know is a global phenomenon: urbanisation. It has huge implications for children, but children tend to be invisible in discourses on migration and urbanisation—they are treated as if they are simply the luggage of adults. How do children negotiate the risks and opportunities offered by cities? How should urban planners cater for children as more families migrate to cities? These are the kinds of questions that I hope will keep me busy for the next while.