



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Children cannot wait

Several years ago when I was still reading for my social work qualification at the University of Malta one of my placements was with the Adoption and Fostering Unit at the then *Ċentru Ħidma Soċjali* which provided for most if not all social work services.

It was a very exciting period for this sector in Malta because most specialised services were new and a fresh crop of social workers was starting to sprout. Social work was on the rise.

My first love remains social work which is borne from the fact that I know my roots at Saint Aloysius College where social justice was a pivotal issue in our educational programme. I value whatever I do because of the grounding that this profession gave me, a passion that has never faded away as I moved from one social related job to another.

But what rests as a fundamental issue in all of this discourse is that social workers do not function in isolation. If we really want to see the change we strive for than we need to bring all stakeholders to tow the rope in the same direction. This doesn't seem to be happening in fostering which is passing through a disquieted phase these last years consequently leaving the sector disconcerted.

In terms of fostering, this matter of collegiality seems to be faltering and I wanted to dig deeper into this issue. As a matter of fact I interviewed Paul Gatt the President of the National Foster Care Association Malta. Time after time he expressed his concern that fostering is at a low-ebb.

As a foster carer himself he understands very well the complex dynamics that he and his wife have to manage to make fostering work for the child that is placed in their trust. This is not simply hosting a child or providing for a roof. It is about giving a home, educating and supporting kids who have a history of abuse, sexual or other, whose parents might have rejected them, who have a narrative painted in black. Some or many would have had bad experiences that it would take most of us more than a lifetime to go through. These are children that are damaged at the core, marked with dents that might never be patched up and what we are left with are well-intentioned, trained individuals called foster carers who are ready to accompany these children through their pain.

Let's we forget, the children that are placed with foster carers are the ones that have been pulled out of their homes following a care order, so the situation is to say the least dramatic. These are the same children who would have been previously failed by society; our formal and informal education, our community services and our justice system.

That is why Paul Gatt's appeal that there is no time to waste is so fitting. Waiting and postponing decision-making means that the respective child's situation will deteriorate possibly to unresolved heights. He questions how at times it takes up to five, six years for children to be removed by child protection services from their natural parents' homes even when



the situation is clearly perilous.

Paul Gatt's concern about this situation is confirmed by Sr Magdalene of the Ursuline Sisters who recently wrote in a Facebook posting: "The Children's Act has been a White Paper since the mid-1980's. We talk so much about children's right to live in a family but children do not have votes and so the White Paper remains blank."

It is clear that Sr Magdalene is on the same wavelength with Gatt's Association. In fact Gatt reiterated that even though Minister Michael Farrugia had promised that the amendments to the much-anticipated Children's Law (drafted by former Minister Marie Louise Coleiro Preca) would be submitted by January 2016 nothing has come their way even though we are already in March. The Foster Carers Association has been asking to see these amendments, which they said Minister Farrugia promised would create a more streamlined law that amongst other will cut on the bureaucracy.

A Children's Act that protects the most defenceless in our community is vital.

Gatt also spoke about the need for the Minister to take the bull by the horns and evaluate what is happening in child protection. Even though there are currently circa 200 foster carers and 280 children placed within these families there are more than 400 children who are still in residential care and who would benefit from this model of support as claimed by empirical research citing Dr Olivia Galea Seychell's research and another study commissioned by the Commissioner for Children. Added to this, it is also beneficial because it only costs the government an estimated €10 a day (foster carers allowance) compared to five, six, possibly even more times, if that same child were to be in a children's home. The cost effectiveness of this system would allow for more funds to be directed to this sector. Gatt referred to Romania, a Country that might have a despicable record in childcare, yet has come to terms with the situation and has legislated in favour of children under five years to be placed in foster care as opposed to children's homes. What is keeping us back?

Paul Gatt referred to the lack of recognition and respect directed towards foster carers who struggle

to mind children who come with a baggage of endless challenges and abuse prior to being fostered. Add to this the lack of feedback they get from social workers and SAV staff when it is imperative that information is relayed to the foster carers who are an integral loop in the service chain. Gatt claims that foster carers need to be listened to and positioned as protagonists and close collaborators and not pushed to the side. Even the way children access their natural parents needs re-thinking. The fact that the same biological parents who would have messaged up their children do not subscribe to a statutory programme before getting access to their children are all situations that cause serious difficulties for the system to function.

Paul Gatt also objected to the lack of consultation by the Children's Advisory Board with the foster carers. He claims that this general lack of recognition and lack of respect towards foster carers is particularly reflected in the Children and Young Persons Advisory Board led by Ms Carmen Fearnle. This is further compounded by the fact that the Children and Young Persons Advisory Board lacks human resources and expertise. Gatt also takes to task this board stating that there is no psychologist, no paediatrician and no professionals with the necessary expertise to deal with the complex issues laid out in front of them.

What pains Gatt is that he feels that foster carers are perceived as arduous and exacting, when what they are solely interested in is the wellbeing of the children who are in their care.

Gatt says that it has never been a bed of roses in this sector but the current situation has never been so problematic either.

He cites one example that shows how unconnected the Children and Young Persons Advisory Board are with the reality that surrounds them. For example 'they' expect the foster children to come from Gozo, rain or shine, wind or cold to see their biological parents, at times having the same foster carers to see to this chore rather than the other way round. He also chides that foster carers and children are made to wait for over an hour, sometimes even clocking a two-hour wait when

they attend the routine meeting at the Children and Young Persons Advisory Board.

Gatt claims that in many cases children's voices are not being taken heed of.

On one occasion a top official in the social work services accused foster carers that they are only interested in making life difficult for the natural parents and that their attention was solely to take over the children, a claim that Gatt categorically refuses to agree to. He said that the struggle of the Association is for children to have 'stability, security and permanence', which are fundamental rights that should never be taken away from them and without which these children's future will be as bleak as their past.

Whilst I do appreciate that our social services need to juggle with countless demands, protecting the children who are most defenceless, helpless and in danger should be a priority. This Association has been proactive and submitted recommendations to Alfred Grixti, the CEO of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (23/4/2015) and the Minister for the Family and Social Solidarity Michael Farrugia (19/5/2015) but till now not much is forthcoming according to Gatt.

I feel that fostering is at a crossroads and if we do not pull up our socks and recognise that government, service providers and all other entities involved in this sector need to come together then we are in for an ugly surprise.

Fostering has proved countless times that it leaves a positive impact on children's 'life' whose meaning had almost been lost, children who have been denied the greatest love of all – that of their biological parents.

But it is not all dreary and miserable because in foster carers these children would have found people who are ready to take them on board, lock, stock and barrel and provide them with a good life. There is nothing complicated here – it's a question of choice: Do we truly believe that it is the children who should come first? Do we want to give life back to these children's existence? If we do, then action is promptly called for – children cannot wait anymore.

system is really a mess. Any difficulty not leading those vulnerable children from a person should be started as you once. It is substantially signed then authors can't ignore it. As for the law itself, no other should be changed after all in the meantime vulnerable beings are getting deeply hurt.

Magdalene Caputo: The Children's Act has been a White Paper since the mid 1980's. We talk so much about children's rights to live in a family, but children do not have votes and so the White Paper remains blank.

Like Reply

Magdalene Caputo: I am so pleased that this conversation took place. I fully support.

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

Like Reply

"Għandi xi Nghid"

Is-984 by RADJU MALTA and 9.85m 'li għodda

Dr Andrew Azzopardi
Senior Lecturer, Department of
Youth and Community Studies
Faculty for Social Wellbeing,
University of Malta &
Broadcaster – Għandi xi Nghid
www.andrewazzopardi.org