
Family Violence and the Girl Child

By Irene Fereti

Family violence is a subject which needs no special introduction to a feminist audience, since, as we know, it is the Women's Movement itself which has made this problem visible and has gradually turned it into a priority issue, through the many and varied efforts: to help the victims, to provide a coherent theoretical understanding of their predicament, and, to work towards the elimination of the occurrence of the phenomenon. It should be noted that the decisive role of the Women's Movement is increasingly recognised and acknowledged in the writings of most of the disciplines and the various perspectives involved in the field of family violence.

During the past twentyfive years a large body of knowledge, based on numerous empirical studies, has been produced across the world. What the major conclusions of these research studies are clearly telling us is that: the vast majority of victims of family violence are women and children. Increasingly, attention is also drawn to other forms of intra-family violence and categories of victims, as for example, abuse against the elderly and violence among siblings. Although the general patterns have not changed, these relatively recent concerns have helped to shed light to further interrelated aspects of the universal phenomenon of violence in the home.

The abuse to which victims are subjected can be physical, sexual and/or psychological with the latter been always present along with the former two categories, whilst it can also occur alone.

The common factor underlying all forms of violence in the family is the abuse of power and authority. The victims are robbed of their most fundamental human rights in the privacy of their own home by people whom they trust and love. As it has been repeatedly emphasised during this congress, what is really at issue here is a series of severe violations of human rights.

Looking more specifically into child abuse, we must note that the recent Convention on the Rights of the Child states for the first time explicitly, in Article 19, that children should be protected against their parents' or guardians' maltreatment.

Data shows that girls become victims of intra-family sexual abuse at significantly higher rates than boys. Some re-

cent data from Greece, based on: "A Retrospective Study of Sexual Abuse Experiences among Greek University and College Students", during their childhood years, has shown that (in a sample of 743 respondents (524 girls and 219 boys) 1 in 6 girls has been sexually victimised, whereas the rate for boys is 1 in 16. Ninety eight percent of the perpetrators in this study were men¹.

Another study of incest based on a given time period of six consecutive months, obtained 14 cases of girl victims of incest and only 1 case concerning a boy. Here all the perpetrators were men².

Finally, a collection and analysis of child abuse cases reported in the Greek press between 1988-1991 has revealed that in the case of sexual abuse, out of the 226 children involved, 70% were girls and 30% boys. In physical abuse, the respective numbers are 35% girls and 65% boys in a total of 86 cases, that is, there were reported significantly more cases of boys who were physically abused than cases of girls, whereas for sexual abuse the situation was reversed, with over twice as many girls as boys reported to be sexually abused. As far as neglect is concerned, we have an even distribution of 50% girls and 50% boys in a total of 74 reported cases³.

There is not sufficient and reliable data for emotional or psychological abuse since it is extremely difficult to be detected and measured, although it may often represent a very severe form of violence without visible scars but with lifelong devastating effects.

A very important outcome is that living in an unhappy home and suffering such violations within their family, can drive girls, as well as boys, to run away from home and in their vulnerability they can become easy prey to other forms of exploitation and deviant activities.

It is also important for us in the Women's Movement to recognise that women can be violent too, mothers do also physically abuse, they do displace their anger and frustration on their children, who are less powerful and dependent on them. It is often the case that the cumulative stress of being victimised herself may diminish a woman's coping skills and undermine her confidence as a parent. It should also be noted that although family violence surveys carried out in the United States in 1975,

found significantly higher rates of physical punishment and maltreatment by mothers in comparison to fathers, ten years later, similar surveys concluded that this disparity was no longer significant. This outcome has been interpreted as a reflection of the changes in the traditional roles in the family, in women's increased participation in the labour force, in the greater availability and use of day care facilities for preschool children and, in the increased involvement of fathers in child rearing.

It is estimated that as many as eighty percent of the children of abused women witness the abuse of their mother, and, in most cases, the girls are those who internalise the experience and become passive and withdrawn with feelings of helplessness, despair and low self esteem, whereas the boys are those who tend to become aggressive imitating their father's cruel and belittling behaviour towards their mother. These general findings of international research are in accordance with our own experience from running a counselling service for supporting women victims of violence and their children.

These close interconnections in wife and child abuse, create a need — and this is a point I wish to emphasise — for the Women's Movement and for Child Protection Services to work closely together and bridge their differences in order to incorporate in intervention practices and prevention efforts the fundamental issue of gender inequality.

It is not — as it is often claimed within the antifeminist approach of individual pathology — that women are 'bad' and incapable mothers, failed in their role, regardless of the absent, careless or violent father. It is the suffering, the humiliation and the loss of self respect due to the violence which disempower women even further.

And what these women and mothers really need is effective support, protection, a job, and very importantly, to get out of their isolation. They need to feel that they are not alone.

We have heard during the proceedings of this congress about the feminisation of poverty and unemployment. These factors exacerbate women's dependence and subordination and keep them and their children trapped into violent relationships.

Within the frame of any serious analysis of the phenomenon of family violence, we can see how the violence in the home reflects the patterns of violence and inequality in the structures and institutions of wider society. I think that by now, we have sufficient knowledge to be aware of the trauma, the fear, the consequences and the destruction of lives involved.

What is needed is to elevate our ef-

forts, to press further existing strategies and to devise new context specific ones, which can be realised in both preventing and addressing a universal problem which cuts across class-boundaries, cultures and countries.

The violent homes contain a "silence" that is "deafening". It is our goal and commitment to get it across, loud and

clear, to all bodies of decision and policy making, who still pretend that they do not hear it.

Notes

Irene Fereti has organised and is in charge of a free counselling program, established in 1990 within our League, for the social and psychological support of women victims of violence. This service operates weekly and in

close cooperation with the long established free legal counselling.

1,2,3: Research projects and reports of the Department of Family Relations, Institute of Child Health, Athens.

*** Irene Fereti is Sociologist at the Department of Family Relations, Centre for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, Institute of Child Health, Athens, Board member, Greek League for Women's Rights.**