

The Silent Victims: Child Witnesses to Domestic Violence

by Akhter Jahan Rahman

There is an urgent need for the government to demonstrate concern for the problem of domestic violence, to publicly denounce it and to declare it an offence; and to promote equality between men and women.

I had been in bed waiting for my mum to come and read me a story. She was doing her teeth in the bathroom. My dad went in there. He was saying something in a very, very angry voice. The door was closed. I heard mum's weak voice saying something, then the sound of a whack, and my mum's scream. I got really frightened. I jumped up and hid under the bed. My dad was still yelling at mum, and I could also hear him hitting her some more. I was really, really scared. It felt like I had nobody in the world: as if the people in the bathroom were not my mum and dad, but some strange scary people. I felt all alone and scared that a monster would just come and kill me, and I would have nobody to help me."

This is the kind of stories children who witness domestic violence recount. Domestic violence is the worst form of violence within the family of which there are four types: physical, verbal, economic and social. In the developing countries, the wife/female partner is generally the victim of economic and social disadvantages. In many cases she also suffers persistent and serious verbal and physical abuse in the hands of her partner, and sustains severe and debilitating emotional and psychological harm. It is typically the husband or the male partner of a marriage who dominates and controls the family, and meets his needs through violence or threat of it, especially on his wife/female partner, and, in many cases, on his children as well.

Domestic violence is not a new phenomenon. But it has been ignored, tacitly accepted, and kept a secret in most countries until recently. An editorial in an 1878 Perth (Western Australia) Gazette called for legislation to protect wives from their husbands' brutality. Extensive research in the past two decades in the civilized countries has highlighted the plight of abused women, as well as documented some understanding of why men abuse their wives/female partners. Today in most civilized countries, domestic violence is a crime, and the battered women are considered victims of crime. It is now a public health issue in these countries, and is a major social problem, affecting almost a third of the married population (Strauss, 1980).

Violence is directed in the main to be the direct result of perpetuation by societies of a power imbalance between men and women. Violence by men is unofficially sanctioned by social and family traditions of male superiority. The needs and rights of men are paramount in such societies, and those of women and children are denied: they are there to meet the needs of the men.

Violent families are typically characterized by a number of factors, such as: rigid sex roles; the use of violence to control others; poor communication patterns; isolation, both within and outside the family; inability/refusal to accept responsibility for one's own actions, especially by men. Most of these also characterise the society these families belong to.

Silent Observers

Society has continued to perpetuate the view that children are untouched by the chaos happening around them in their family home. Such beliefs are now considered myths. In the last 15 years the impact of family violence on children has increasingly been receiving due attention in Western Societies. A study by Jaffe et al (1990) found that almost all of the children interviewed by them were able to remember detailed accounts of violence that their mothers or fathers never realized the children had witnessed. "It was part of life. You had it since you were born", said one child witness to domestic violence.

Accounts of the children from violent families described periodic episodes of violence in their homes, in which their mothers were hit, slapped, pushed or threatened when their fathers were apparently in a rage. The incidents occurred from as much as twice a week to once a month or four or five times a year. For the majority of children these 'normal' incidents were punctuated by particularly violent episodes that stood out in their minds. For example, one child described how her mother was so severely beaten that she had to be taken to hospital in ambulance and revived, and in another situation the father drove the car recklessly threatening to kill all the members of the family. Each of the children witnessing these kinds of incidents said they feared for their mother's life.

Defining a child witness to domestic violence extends beyond establishing the child's direct observation of their father (or other intimate partner of their mother) threatening or hitting their mother. Children may hear this behaviour from another part of the house without actually seeing violence. They may also be exposed to the results of this violence without witnessing its instigation. For example, children may see the

bruises or other injuries clearly visible on their mother; or they may note the emotional consequences of fear, hurt, intimidation or anger in her.

How they Respond to Parental Violence

Children's responses to domestic violence vary according to many factors. Some of these factors are, age, sex, stage of development, role in the family, frequency of the violence, and the amount of support given to them by other adults. Younger children, with limited cognitive, verbal, and emotional coping abilities, are likely to respond with somatic complaints and to regress to earlier levels of functioning. School-aged children tend to react with gender stereotyped ways: boys with aggressive behaviour, and girls with more passive, clingy and anxious behaviour. A common response of adolescent boys is to run away, whilst adolescent girls may develop extreme distrust of men. Other factors such as social class, ethnic origin and the special needs of a child independent of the violence are also key determinants. In addition, the differential power dynamics within the family, including the differential treatments of male and female children within the family, also influence the children's responses. Accordingly, some children play an active role in trying to deter the violence, and often get hit in the process, whilst others are immobilized and silenced by terror, confusion and shame. The following are examples of some of the thoughts and reactions children can have living in violence:

"I'd like to kill him."
 "If mum wont deal with him, then I will. I have to stay strong to hold things together."
 "Dad behaves like a mad dog."
 "I feel ashamed of him — I can't tell anyone because then they will know I haven't got a proper dad."
 "I hate my dad and I want to leave home."
 "I sit in my room and cry."
 "I want some peace for myself."
 "I remember fantasizing that my parents would die — then I felt guilty — because I wasn't allowed to express my feelings. I didn't realize that it was OK to have had thoughts."
 "When you can't express how unhappy you are, you learn not to bother — you feel rejected and bitter — it flattens you, it stops you trying."
 "I wasn't aware of having any rights."
 "I used to smile so that people wouldn't know."
 "I used to fantasize about being a normal child."

These comments demonstrate that children can speak directly about how they feel when given the chance, and can articulate the intensity of their responses to the violence they witness.

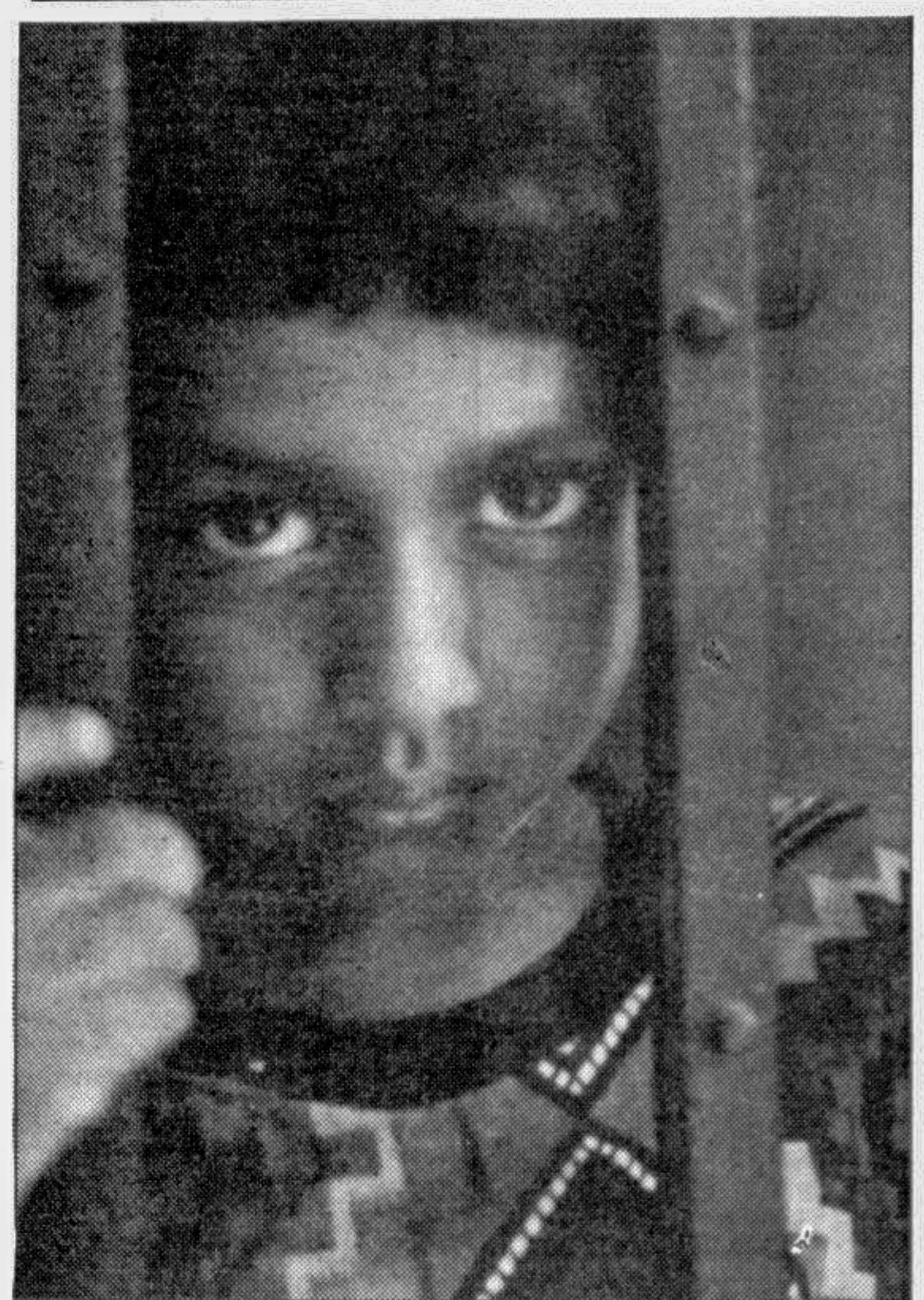
Emotional Reactions to Domestic Violence

Children can have a whole range of feelings about the violence. They talk of feeling scared, confused, upset, angry, distraught, sad, suicidal, powerless, bitter, guilty, betrayed, and rejected.

Many children at some time in their lives will face a crisis or danger that evokes some of these feelings of stress. For most the crisis is external to their immediate family, and is a specific event that passes. The child is then able to recover and to use those closest to her/him for help in the process of healing. But when the danger is within the home, when it is repeated over time, and when those closest to her/him are the source of the danger, the child has no recourse for recovery. Some of the children interviewed by researchers and phone-in counselors have said that they do not approach their violent father for comfort because of the negative feelings they have towards him, and they do not turn to their mother due to their concern and desire to protect her.

Child witnesses to domestic violence often feel as if they ought to be able to diffuse their father's anger, and feel guilty because they cannot do so. Some children try to stop the violence when it is occurring, and put themselves at risk of getting hurt. Some of them have said, "I'd rather he hit me than my mum." It is as if they are saying that it is easier to bear the physical pain of being hurt than the emotional pain of observing someone they love being hurt and themselves being unable to prevent it.

Children also tend to feel responsible for the violence, as though, in some ways, they caused the ambivalent feelings their parents have towards each other, the arguments they have, and the anger behind their father's violence. They may feel that their very presence is an added burden on their demands are excessive. These feelings are reinforced as the mother turns to the child for sympathy and the mother-child relationship becomes intense and important. This is perceived by the child as provoking



Children in violent families, even when they are not themselves physically abused, are highly vulnerable to being neglected at the least, and in the worst case scenario, emotionally and/or physically and sexually abused. Battered women are likely to suffer from both physical and emotional disorders, to be exposed to other life stresses, and to be limited by a number of socioeconomic disadvantages. Such disorders and disadvantages usually limit their psychological availability to their children, to a lesser or greater extent, and impair their ability to meet the developmental and emotional needs of the children. Parental psychological unavailability can account for the children being easy preys to adults who are sexually abusive. It has been suggested that some abused mothers may themselves employ harsher punishment on their children, as a result of their own victimization.

further violence from the father. This feeling of being responsible for the violence is unwittingly confirmed by the parents when they argue within the child's earshot about discipline, child care and education. Such a sense of guilt is one of the factors behind the development of a low self-esteem which limits cognitive development, academic achievements and interpersonal relationships.

Children from violent families often have ambivalent feelings towards their mothers. They have feelings of anger at her for her inability to protect herself, as well as for "causing" the violence. At the same time, they still feel love and concern for the mothers. Children describe making suggestions to their mothers, encouraging

believe or understand them. In reality they may not have had the opportunity to develop the social skills and relationships which teach them how to communicate effectively, and how to be heard. Not only may there be nobody to tell, but the children also do not know how to tell.

Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

Another myth was that parental violence did not have any major effect on children. It is now accepted that the children from violent families are the indirect victims of crime; that exposure to domestic violence and child health are closely linked; and that such exposure can also have adverse effects on these children's future violence from the father. This feeling of being responsible for the violence is unwittingly confirmed by the parents when they argue within the child's earshot about discipline, child care and education. Such a sense of guilt is one of the factors behind the development of a low self-esteem which limits cognitive development, academic achievements and interpersonal relationships.

Children from violent families grow up with many painful memories and conflicting emotions, some of which do not recede with time: "I wished I was big enough to hit dad back"; "If I saw it (father hitting mother) now I'd just take a knife and stab him";

maladjusted life, and in the extreme, emotional breakdown, especially at times of normal developmental crises.

Not all children are necessarily seriously affected. The impact of violence can sometimes be mediated by several factors. These include, firstly, a child's inherent characteristics, e.g., temperamental and cognitive endowments, coping abilities and the capacity to adjust; secondly, a positive relationship with the mother where she overcomes the possible limitations of being battered, and attends to the child's needs and moral training; thirdly, positive relationships with people from the extended family and outside, e.g., school, etc. Many children also develop some adaptive techniques, which can develop into strengths, e.g., becoming super achievers by trying extra hard at academics and other activities and keeping the mind thereby engaged in positive, esteem building occupations; caring for their younger siblings; becoming self-sufficient; developing a sense of humour; being creative in crises, and so on. However, in the main, growing up in an environment of continuous domestic violence has the potential to leave long-term scars.

International "Transmission" of Violence?

According to social learning theory, violence against women is a learned behaviour. Consequently there is a belief in the intergenerational transmission of violence. It not only means that the man learns to be violent because of modeling of violence by a violent father, but that a woman also learns from her childhood to tolerate violence, to "provoke" it, or "to grow to need it", because of her mother's tolerance of violence. This theory of "cycle of violence" is attractive largely because it can account for the higher rates of violence often encountered amongst children from violent families (Jaffe et al, 1990). This theory also developed from work which had sought to explain male violence by women's behaviour, and tried to find explanations for why women stay in violent relationships.

Thus both partners in an intimate relationship can have inappropriate approaches to meeting their normal needs and behave in more appropriate and rational ways. But because of the early childhood brain development, people without adequate inner resources tend to have difficulty putting new learning into practice when under stress.

There is a need for professional intervention directly with children who have witnessed domestic violence. It appears that children can recover from the impact of marital violence or conflict provided that the violence is stopped and adequate supports and opportunities are provided. They need to be relieved of the burden of secrecy, and helped to work through the effect of the trauma they suffered.

grissiveness and impulsivity, tantrums, anxiety, depression, and self-harm.

Male child witnesses to domestic violence appear to be susceptible to conduct disorders or behaviour problems, and female child witnesses tend to be prone to sadness, social withdrawal and depression, more than their counterparts in non-violent homes with comparable demographic backgrounds.

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Conclusions

Thus children are the innocent and silent victims of the violent crimes committed within the family home. They are not allowed to protest, because they are seen as having no right to question their parents. They are not allowed to talk about it in the name of privacy. In cases of domestic homicide, the reactions and needs of children who watch helplessly as their mothers get killed, are not taken into consideration if/when the fathers are brought to trial. Very seldom do the adults around them consider the long-term damage the children can suffer as a result of witnessing violence between the parents they depend on.

Children are helpless beings brought into the world by their parents. Their paramount need is to be nurtured, to be protected from danger, and to be stimulated, so that they can explore and master the world, realize and extend their potential, and develop skills to survive as emotionally secure and independent, happy, compassionate and valuable members of society as adults. If parents are unable to provide an environment to the children where they feel safe, most children cannot develop normally, and cannot realize their potential, leave alone extend it, and are likely to live a life of unhappiness. It is both the parents who are responsible for this: the father for his monstrous behaviour, and the mother for accepting responsibility for her partner's brutality, and for continuing to stay in the violent relationship. The grandparents, and the extended family are also responsible for colluding with the secrecy pact, for not providing consequences to the offender,

where empathy, impulse control, positive communication, creative problem solving, ownership of responsibility for one's behaviour, etc., are not modeled, nor reinforced, the possibility of carrying on the cycle of violence is strong for males. All children are capable of "violence": it is one of the basic survival responses one is born with: fight, flight or freeze. It is not so much through mechanical emulation, but

However, as some studies have shown, not all men from 'violent' homes turn out to be abusive. Children may learn to accept, emulate, or expect such behaviour, but they may also be repulsed by its use. It would be naive in the extreme to assume that a child is such a simple creature that he or she learns only one thing from what he or she observes, and that is to emulate the observed behaviour in a robot fashion."

Thus violence is not inevitably transmitted through generations. The cycle of violence can be interrupted by similar resiliency factors to those which mediate damaging effects. However, for children without such ameliorating factors, growing up in a family where empathy, impulse control, positive communication, creative problem solving, ownership of responsibility for one's behaviour, etc., are not modeled, nor reinforced, the possibility of carrying on the cycle of violence is strong for males. All children are capable of "violence": it is one of the basic survival responses one is born with: fight, flight or freeze. It is not so much through mechanical emulation, but

through lack of consistent training in impulse control (consistency being, "Do as I say and do", and not "Do as I say, not as I do"), lack of exposure to appropriate alternative models, and through lack of opportunities to develop a positive self-esteem, that violence can be passed on through generations. The possibility of repeatedly getting into violent relationships is also high for women who grow up in violent families without much resources within themselves and outside.

The foundations for interpersonal skills are laid down in childhood in the way the parents relate to each other and to the children. Inappropriate patterns of relating to people (insecure, unresponsive) and of conflict resolution repulse those who use appropriate, sensitive and responsive interpersonal and problem solving methods. As a result adults with inappropriate skills usually pair up with other adults who complement their skills. This is also how indirectly the cycle of violence can continue.

Without ameliorating factors, male children with violent family backgrounds can grow up to be needy, because their childhood needs for security and nurture were usually not met in such families; and they can also be demanding, because this is how they get some of their needs met when parents are not psychologically available to them. As they grow, these children are likely to try out adding physical force (violence) to their verbal demands. If such behaviour is reinforced, especially by the mother, because of her sense of powerlessness in the face of violence, and because of the deference she pays to males (taught by society), these children can come to use violence as a method of getting their needs met when in the presence of individuals whom they consider to be weaker than themselves. It is these male children who might come to use violence in their intimate relationships as adults. It is not that they want to necessarily emulate their fathers, but that they have not been exposed to, and reinforced for more appropriate methods. It is then that they justify violence, even if they think it is wrong, because of the fact that in most cases violence in families is perpetrated behind closed doors. The female children from violent families also tend to grow up needy, but coy and manipulative (adaptive survival techniques in childhood).

Thus both partners in an intimate relationship can have inappropriate approaches to meeting their normal needs and behave in more appropriate and rational ways. But because of the early childhood brain development, people without adequate inner resources tend to have difficulty putting new learning into practice when under stress.

There is also a need for parenting programmes tailored to the special needs of battered mothers. These programmes need to strongly focus on the mothers' potential for change, communication skills, and responding to children in non-violent, developmentally appropriate manner.

There is also clearly a need for professional intervention directly with children who have witnessed domestic violence. It appears that children can recover from the impact of marital violence or conflict provided that the violence is stopped and adequate supports and opportunities are provided. They need to be relieved of the burden of secrecy, and helped to work through the effect of the trauma they suffered. Children involved in research studies and counseling services were found to benefit from the opportunity to talk freely about their experiences.

It is hoped that the enlightened women and men of the country will be motivated to mobilize awareness-raising campaigns, to loudly denounce any form of abuse and power imbalance between men and women, and to demand the criminalization of domestic violence and the implementation of severe and public punishment for it. It is also hoped that these enlightened people will insist on making education compulsory so that women have options of economic security. The enlightened people must also lobby with the Government to make it a number one priority, to protect children, the future of the country, from all forms of violence.

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