



The Voiceless Victims: Domestic Violence and Children's Rights

Panel by Felicia Browne

Presented during the Public Launch of the DECIDES CARIBBEAN project *Cultural Rights to foster behavioural changes and women's empowerment against Domestic Violence in Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean* held in Bridgetown, Barbados, on 21 November 2016.

Preliminary considerations

In many Caribbean societies, there is an aim to primarily focus on their victims and the nature of their deaths, rather than the deep and fundamental causes of these inhumane acts against human life. Many of these victims are women and children, some of whom were known to be victims of continual abuse or violence within their respective homes and communities. In such human tragedies, it is very alarming that in many of these cases, children are involved — whether directly or indirectly. As we continue to implement effective legislation to try to protect the human and civil rights of these victims, many advocates are fully convinced that these legal and social procedures require the collective efforts of every citizen. Recently, in Barbados, three women were violently murdered by their spouses, while in Trinidad two children have suffered hideous death at the hands of their parents. In addition there have been brutal murders of women, including a female teenager, in Jamaica. In all these instances, the perpetrators are males.

Domestic violence has been defined as physical, emotional and psychological abuse by spouses; yet, hardly do we ever consider the devastating effects that children endure within these abusive environments. The nature and content of domestic violence must be critically assessed from all angles within our society. We must continue to engage young people and children on its effects and ability to create further harm within their homes, communities, schools and society. Given the high levels of domestic violence, it is almost inevitable that many children are either witnesses or victims of these violent abuses.

Children and youths murdered or seriously injured due to domestic disputes should

send a strong warning sign to our Caribbean societies that child abuse and domestic violence are deeply connected. In many cases, these abuses are direct causes of domestic violence in which the child becomes the immediate victim of physical harm, and even death. Domestic violence should no longer be seen only as a violation of an adult person, but a violation of children's right to live in a peaceful and secure environment.

Situational analysis

A study conducted by Cadres in 2009, reports that the total number of murders reported in Barbados demonstrates that between 2000 and 2007, on average 21% of murders in Barbados arise from incidents of domestic violence which is one in every five murders. It is noteworthy that all of these persons who were killed in this time period were women. Due to effects on children, the respondents were asked to identify the ways in which domestic violence perpetrated between adults has been known to have a negative impact on children. Aside from the instances in which a child may fall victim to some of the physical abuse suffered by a parent, violence perpetrated between adults in a household has been known to have indirect effects on the child living there. The atmosphere of violence may develop a level of fear in a child, which in turn may engender behavioural problems at school, and affect the nature of the child's academic performance and relationships with other students. Such children may become socially withdrawn, or grow to be ultraviolent in their behaviour towards other students, and the violence in the household may also affect how the child goes on to relate to males or females in adult life. Children are often unable to sleep or, as a result, concentrate on schoolwork since the unrest caused by domestic violence makes



WOMEN AGAINST BATTER



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them fearful of sleeping at night. There are also instances in which mothers use the presence of a child for protection. One aspect of financial abuse is that of physically abusive fathers in some cases preferring to forfeit child support responsibilities, deny their children and be incarcerated, rather than support their children financially.

The first study to estimate the numbers of children who are exposed to domestic violence globally was derived from the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children (forthcoming, 2006), which reviewed existing studies that measure violence in the home in various countries. The numbers estimated by the research were staggering. As many as 275 million children worldwide are exposed to violence in the home. In actuality, millions more children may be affected by violence in the home. It is known that growing up with violence in the home is a devastating experience.

According to a UNICEF report (2015), many researchers have concluded that some children who witness or are victims of domestic violence experience a profound and lasting impact on their lives and hopes for the future. "A child's developing brain can mistakenly encode the violence," says Children of Domestic Violence, adding that kids can grow up believing that violence is normal and that they are to blame for it. The statistics and studies below reinforce that belief, and that stopping domestic violence long-term and "breaking the cycle of violence" heavily relies on raising children in environments free of violence. The report further notes that 30% to 60% of perpetrators of intimate partner violence also abuse children in the household.

The single best predictor of children becoming either perpetrators or victims of domestic violence later in life is whether or not they grow up in a home where there is domestic violence. Studies from various countries support the findings that rates of abuse are higher among women whose husbands were abused as children or who saw their mothers being abused. Boys who witness domestic violence are twice as likely to abuse their own partners and children when they become adults. Males exposed to domestic violence as children

are more likely to engage in domestic violence as adults, and females are more likely to be victims as adults.

Further to the report notes that children who were exposed to violence in the home are 15 times more likely to be physically and/or sexually assaulted than the national average. Compared with children in other households, children who have been exposed to domestic violence often suffer from insomnia and have trouble with bed-wetting. They also are more likely to experience difficulties in school and to score lower on assessments of verbal, motor, and cognitive skills, and are more likely to exhibit aggressive and antisocial behavior, to be depressed and anxious, and to have slower cognitive development.

Court statistics show that children are present during domestic or intimate partner violence incidents in 36% of cases; of those children who were present, 60% directly witnessed the violence. Despite the high rates of violence against women and the recent attention to the physical and emotional consequences of this abuse, until recently relatively little attention had been given to the unseen victims—the children. More than half the female victims of domestic violence live in a household with children under the age of 12. In fact, it is estimated that between 2.3 and 10 million children witness domestic violence each year in the United States (Rossman, Hughes, & Rosenberg, 2000). Because children exposed to domestic violence may not necessarily be direct victims of abuse, they may be overlooked by helping professionals and, therefore, their potential problems related to witnessing the abuse go unnoticed. Ignoring the consequences of exposure to violence on children can negatively impact their cognitive development as well as their emotional and physical health (Edleson, 1999). Complicating these risks and negative impacts is the fact that these children are at higher risk for child maltreatment, with estimates indicating that as many as 70% of children exposed to domestic violence are also victims of child maltreatment (Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999).



Principal conclusions

Though gender justice assumes that all human beings, including children, have equal human rights, many children are left to suffer under the hands of their relatives or parents. We must continue to also engage our males in resolving these gender-based concerns given that the majority of perpetrators are young males. These types of gender-based crimes should be warning signs that there are troubling inequalities and ideological distortions that continue to exist within our region.

We cannot eradicate violence against women and children without engaging our males. We can, however, begin the dialogue and create alternative solutions for them. Our norms have to change, our culture has to change, and our socio-political outlook has to change when dealing with gender-based violence and its associated concerns. The very way we

nurture and socialise our males must begin to reflect our demand for social change.

As advocates of change, we should ensure that we demonstrate to our children a responsibility in the way that we deal with issues in the home. We can show that intelligent and calm discussion will resolve an issue or concern with much better effect, than any act of violence. Or else how can we expect our children to know better? We cannot expect to violate our young males and expect that our sons will behave differently when dealing with their children, wives or spouses. The onus is on us to change the shape of our homes and most importantly our attitudes towards our children — in particular our youth. Children's rights are human rights. Domestic violence is a direct violation of their rights. We must begin to re-evaluate the nature of domestic violence and its detrimental role of child development, safety and societal peace.