



Original Contribution

THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE OVER CHILDREN IN BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to present theoretical research into the problem of violence over children. The primary tasks are oriented to the presenting of the forms of violence over children and the consequences of the acts of violence on the child's personality and behaviour.

The main conclusions relates to the following: the violence over children continues to increase not only in Bulgaria, but at a worldwide scale as well; in most cases, the violence is within the family, performed most commonly by parents or close relatives; sexual abuse over children is not reported most often, as it affects the most intimate area of human life; the children – victims of violence, are frequently aggressive to the others; in most cases, children suffering from physical, psychological or sexual abuse, experienced some psychic problems and need support and help.

Key words: sexual, physical, psychological violence, harassment, behavioral patterns, psychological consequences

INTRODUCTION

Child abuse within the family is a very serious social problem and its quick resolution requires full mobilisation on part of the institutions that combat this phenomenon. Violence is a topic with a strong daily presence in the public discourse. It is not a specifically Bulgarian problem, it is one of the most important and discussed problems worldwide.

Therefore it is necessary for violence to be put forth as an issue into the focus of public attention, so that the causes for it can be clearly recognised and accepted as problems of civil society. Denying or hiding it, turning it into a taboo, would only aggravate the problem, from both social and cultural point of view.

Another aspect of the problem is the social care and support for the victims, as overcoming the sustained trauma is often a very difficult and

prolonged process. People, who have been subjected to any type of violence that violated their human dignity and morality, are usually afraid to report the incident, and thus the perpetrator cannot be identified and punished. Examining the facts, the accounts of the victims are very different with regard to the specific circumstances, yet they have much in common from the viewpoint of the victim's right to be protected and to seek punishment for the assailant.

The aim of the present study is to present theoretical research into the problem of violence over children. The primary tasks are oriented towards: a) presenting the forms of violence over children and b) the consequences of the acts of violence on the child's personality and behaviour.

According to a study by UNICEF from 1994, there was no region in the world without the practice of violence over children. "Physical violence" is understood not as episodic punishments, but rather as long-term permanent attitudes of the parents towards the child. This is

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related to the so-called “Balkan syndrome” – in the countries of the Balkans, between 80% and 95% of the interviewed persons supported physical violence over children, regardless of sex, education, age, vocation and nationality. Violence over children in Bulgaria has increased over the last few years. This is according to a report by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, presented by the researcher Elitsa Gerginova. According to her, it is impossible to tell the number of children that become victims of violence, but it is assumed that some of them are abused throughout their entire lives. (1)

In the programme of Bulgaria’s Ministry of Interior, “violence” is defined as follows: “Every action or behaviour aimed at another person or one’s own persona, which causes physical and emotional suffering, is violence. From a social perspective, violence is an anti-humane act. It is a type of crime and violates the dignity and interests of the person.”

In practice, the forms of violence do not occur individually, they almost always are precursors to each other – most commonly sexual violence is accompanied by physical coercion and emotional harassment (2). Violence has the goal of achieving power and control, regardless of the perpetrators, victims and the relations between them.

One of the ways of violating the rights of children and adolescents is violence over them, which could be generally defined as “any action or inaction on the part of the adult, which puts the child’s physical and psychological health at risk” (3). According to the World Health Organisation’s data, one million children perish every year due to their parents’ cruelty and two million are maimed for life. According to the Organisation, “an abused child is a child under 16 years of age, whose parent or another legal guardian inflicts, or allows to be inflicted, serious physical injury, creates, or allows to be created, significant risk of serious injury, commits, or allows to be committed, an act of sexual violence against the child, as defined by legislation”. Child abuse can be conditionally divided into physical, sexual, emotional abuse, and neglect. The term “abuse” generally conceals a field encompassing not only the beaten and molested child. Some authors believe that an abused child is one that is the victim of

physical violence, sexual abuse, as well as psychological harassment. All that leads to severe consequences for the child’s psychological development (2).

The children – victims of violence usually experience conflicting emotions – they are torn between fear and attachment, between security and insecurity, love and hate, despair and the hope that the violence wouldn’t happen again. This experience is the cause for many pathological consequences for the child’s development. In most cases the violence and violent crimes are not directly dependent on the victims’ behaviour. From a technological perspective, crimes can be committed in group, which complicates the process of preparation.

Socially significant factors that create a child abuse-prone environment include:

- Widespread feeling of impunity among the perpetrators;
- Lack of trust in the institutions that are meant to provide security;
- Spread of models of violence as a legitimate means of imposing one’s individual opinion, convictions and decisions.

RESULTS

Physical violence includes various actions (beating, burning, shoving, etc.), which cause physical harm to the child. In many of the cases the injuries are not intentional. They are the consequence of applying too harsh methods of discipline or corporal punishment. Physical violence could result in severe injuries, which can sometimes be fatal (4).

Physical violence is common in the families of alcoholics. According to a study by the National Statistical Institute, the cases of violence over children in the family decreased in 2011, yet the parents kept the highest share of perpetrators – about 68% (in 2010, the share was 70%). The reduction in reports of violence in the family indicates that placing the child in the focus of state policy and care has increased the people’s sensitivity and the assurance that they will receive support and help from the institutions that protect the children. As a whole, the age ratio of the children who were victims of violence was also preserved in 2011, with the largest share belonging to the children between 11 and 14 years of age – 27.8%, followed by the

children aged 15 to 18 – 24.0%, and the children between 4 and 7 years old – 18.7%. Some parents are predisposed to being violent because they were abused as children or witnessed violence in their homes. As a consequence of cruel treatment, children can also become aggressive and cruel. (5)

Psychological, emotional violence can be direct (aimed directly at the child) or indirect (physical or psychological violence directed towards a certain family member. According to (6), the Bulgarian people are highly tolerant towards verbal violence. Psychological harassment includes severe cases of psychological violence, such as humiliation, verbal threats, excessively high requirements related to the child's age. This type of harassment also includes complete lack of care for the child, occurring as deprivation of food or other daily necessities, as well as roughly inadequate parental attitude and behaviour towards the age- and individual-determined affective and cognitive needs of the child.

According to the classification of the Child's Psychological Rights Research Bureau at the University of Indiana, there are several forms of psychological abuse of children (7):

- Belittling, rejection, blaming, diminution and humiliation of the victim, or suggestion that they are psychologically ill. These are cases in which the child is treated as different in a sense negative to them, often in the role of a scapegoat, with lack of acceptance and dislike for the child's need for help and support. Through devaluation the child is presented as much worse and incapable, and is systematically subjected to insults aimed at their individual qualities or overall personality;
- Terrorising, instilling strong fear in the child, threatening with imminent physical assault. Usage of coercion and threats that cause confusion and/or suffering, when they are the style of interpersonal relations;
- Isolation, control or hyper-restriction of the child - locking them in a room for prolonged periods of time, not allowing them to meet other children or any other people in general;
- Presence of the child during scenes of violence, aggression or cruelty towards a loved and significant other person, which they witness. Often, engaged in their

interpersonal conflicts, the parents are prone to give less attention to their children's needs;

- Exploitation – using the child as a “servant” or a replacement parent as a “means” to achieving a certain goal.

Physical, as well as psychological violence, are characterised by brutality, cruelty, daring and cynicism.

Another type of violence that children are often subjected to is **sexual violence**. In cases of sexual coercion the victim is forced to engage in sexual activities against their will. In reality, sexual abuse does not occur as often as society believes, yet the cases are rarely reported. It could go on for years and cause long-term emotional damage. Despite the general lightening up of moral norms, researchers of sexual violence over children claim that for our contemporaries this issue is not sufficiently talked about by the victims, the perpetrators and society as a whole. The very nature of sexual violence distinguishes it sharply from any other crime, as it is aimed towards the most intimate area of human life. Its victim is the person's physical and psychological health, their feelings, freedom and honour. Therefore it exercises great power over the victim, usually regardless of the perpetrator's characteristics. This is exactly what usually causes all participants and witnesses of sexual violence to remain silent. Girls are most commonly subjected to sexual violence. The child-victim's helplessness and inability to defend themselves can be explained with two reasons. The first is related to the dependence and lack of experience of the child, which is treated as property or a mere appendage, on which the adults can experiment with near impunity. The second concerns the physical and physiological immaturity of the child, which makes it easy prey of people with criminal intent. Every childhood age is potentially threatened by sexual violence – from infancy to adolescence. The data point out the relative share of victims from both sexes among babies and toddlers is relatively the same, whereas in the older children 70% - 80% of the victims are girls. Unlike physical violence, which is almost always an expression of a momentary outburst, of the adult's deficient self-control, sexual violence is rarely not premeditated or spontaneous. Sexual offenders have a clear strategy on how to get closer to the child, to earn

their trust and subordinate them. The children who were victims of sexual violence have to deal not only with the chaos of their feelings, but also with their numerous fears. They are afraid that the violence could be repeated if they tell anyone about what happened to them. The data of the social services and the Ministry of Interior indicate that every eighth child has been the victim of sexual violence. On a global scale, the figures are close to the data for Bulgaria. In relation to that, the Bulgarian Telegraphic Agency reports that in 20-40% of the cases of sexual abuse against children at the age of 12-18 years the perpetrator was a close relative – father, brother, grandfather or a friend of the child's mother. More than 85% of the children who are victims of sexual violence had close ties with their assailant. In 74% of the cases, the violence was revealed accidentally, as the children refused to talk about it.

DISCUSSION

The more intensive, prolonged and drastic the violence that children are subjected to in their youth, the more severe the consequences for their psycho-physical development.

Consequences for future behaviour models

Many psychological schools affirm that violence at an early age has a strong effect on the developing personality and in many cases, determines the reproduction of the deformed model of family relationships suffered during the childhood in the family environment of grown children (8). Children, victims of abuse, are also prone to acts of violence. The abuse during childhood years is a risk factor for aggression acts at a mature age. Also, children do not manage to build up a sense of the world as a safe

place, and the confidence in beloved parents is disturbed. Gradually, children adopt the tough and violent relationships, assuming them as tolerable and as a natural response to stress and conflict management. Children, being victims to many types of abuse, become detained much more frequently than those which have not suffered such an abuse, and this relationship is preserved during adulthood as well. Many of these children develop models of aggression, persisting with time. They are also prone to aggression against others, mostly in a school environment (4). The aggression among Bulgarian children is frighteningly increasing, and schools turned out to be areas of violent behaviour – drug sales, fights, robberies. Very often, the teachers are innocent victims of brutality acts. The age of perpetrators is constantly decreasing and during the last years, has decreased from 14 to 10-13 years, thus placing Bulgaria among the "world record holders". In the country, 46% of children feel frustrated at school, and after returning at home, the psychic harassment continues with scandals (in one out of 3 families) or beating (in one out of 8 families). With age, children become less prone to share their feelings in school with their parents (4).

A pilot study conducted by UNICEF in Bulgaria in June 2007, showed that the percentage of girls sharing with parents that they were witnesses of aggressions against other children was higher than that of boys (Figure 1). It was probably due to the effect of social desirability in boys, which assume more frequently the socially negative role of abusers.

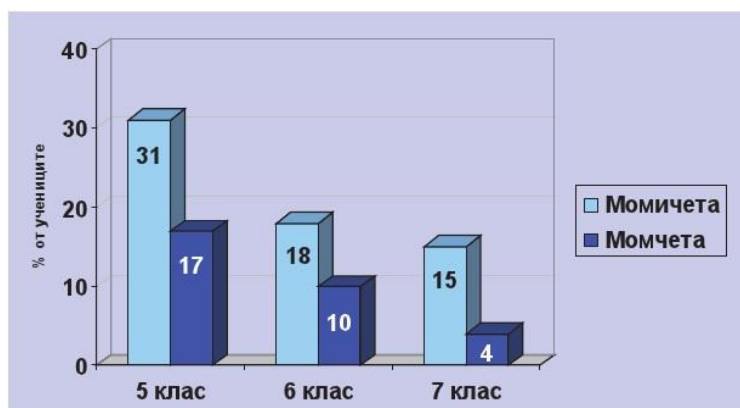


Fig. 1 Percentage of girls and boys confessing to their parents that they have seen aggression against other children (pilot study of UNICEF Bulgaria, June 2007)

Consequences for the personality of the child

Violence has severe and heavy impact on the child's personality. As a manifestation of family dysfunction, the psychological maltreatment of the child in the family becomes a factor, **increasing its vulnerability and decreasing the possible protection mechanisms** against the suffered stress.

A family environment of aggression and tension, fear and lack of confidence, alienation and hostility could raise only hatred (4). Violence provokes cowardice, unwillingness or cruelty, brutality, stubbornness, obstinacy. Children – victims of aggression are with **higher susceptibility**, internal disharmony, easy irritability, cynics, neglecting of public norms.

When the violence is within the family, children exhibit a **lack of natural affection** towards the parents, as they accept them as a threat or danger. The child forms the sense of itself at the background of a cruel and unconcerned attitude from the part of its most beloved people. The requirement for unconditional obedience to the aggressor's will destroy the initiative, tolerates the silence and the passive behaviour. This way, children grow with **impaired self-respect, identity and intimacy potential**. They usually avoid social contacts, make friendships with difficulty, and become reticent, impulsive and aggressive.

In a violence environment, the children suffer serious problems related to **adaptation and development**. The cruel attitude poses a threat for the safety and welfare of the child, affects its faith in other people – the child is forced to trust people who are not trustful, and to thrive for safety in a dangerous environment. It is beyond its possibility to cope with the inadequate reflection of itself and the surrounding world, especially in cases of sexual abuse.

The young victims of cruel violence are with **low self-esteem** and a pessimistic attitude towards the world. The low self-esteem and the limited self-defence potential enhance the vulnerability and provoke violence acts. Children have to cope with the accidental bouts of anger or irritation, with betrayal from the part of parents and other circumstances, limiting their development – violence between parents, the tension in a separating family, the reduced opportunities for learning, the perturbed life.

The victims of physical, emotional and sexual violence, due to the ineffaceable traces of violence

in memory, are at increased risk for emotional distress, depression and suicidal thoughts. If the symptoms of depression and mood disorders are not identified, they would become graver with time and could end with attempts for suicide, self-destructing behaviour, drug and alcohol abuse.

In conclusion, the children need a new type of relationships, including new ways of dialogue. This new type of communication is based upon the mutual respect and communication skills. It requires not to disturb both the child's and parents' self-esteem, to talk with comprehension rather than with advices, instructions or criticism. The tears should be replaced with a smile, the hits – with an embrace.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the present theoretical research, the following **conclusions** could be drawn:

1. The violence on children continues to increase not only in Bulgaria, but at a worldwide scale as well.
2. In most cases, the violence is within the family, performed most commonly by parents or close relatives.
3. Sexual abuse over children is most often not reported, as it affects the most intimate area of human life.
4. The children – victims of violence, are frequently aggressive towards others.
5. In most cases, children suffering from physical, psychological or sexual abuse, experience psychic problems and need support and help.

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