

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON CHILD ABUSE IN PAKISTAN

NISHAT MAQSOOD

Department of Preventive Paediatrics, Fatima Jinnah Medical College, Lahore.

In November 1989, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition to setting standards for children's survival, health and education, the convention seeks to protect the millions of children who are exploited, abandoned or abused, where ever they may be.

We in Pakistan have 56.5 million under sixteen and 22.5 million under five children. They are living in an environment which has the worst demographic indicators. The crude death rate has fallen to 12 per thousand, where as the birth rate is still 46 per thousand, resulting in the alarming growth rate of 3.4% virtually a population explosion. The urbanized population is only 32% but the average annual growth of urban population is 5% which results in unplanned shanty towns and kacchi abadis, the worst thing for children.(1)

The economic situation for these children is equally depressing. The GNP per capita in 1988 was only 350 US dollars. Its annual growth from 1980 to 1989 has only been 3% while the rate of inflation has been 7% People living below poverty level were 32% in urban areas and 29% in rural areas. To add insult to injury only 1% of central government expenditure was allocated to health, 3% to education and 30% on defense(1).

These parameters clearly indicate that the majority of the parents of 56 million children live under severe socioeconomic stress. They produce large families for economic and old age security but end up in more economic problems.

These economic problems are likely to lead to the abuse of child labour and extreme stress can also result in physical abuse. Because it is seen that over 90% of abusing parents are neither psychotic nor criminal personalities. They tend to be lonely, unhappy, angry or under heavy stress(2).

It has been estimated that due to socioeconomic stress more than 100 million children in the world are engaged in employment often hazardous and in

contravention of international conventions which provide for their protection from economic exploitation and from performing work that interferes with their education and is harmful to their health and full development.(1)

In addition to economic parameters culture has a very strong influence on child health and child abuse. Some of the current cultural norms have a protective effect on child abuse. There are other in which incidence of child abuse is likely to be increased.

The beneficial cultural norms are as follows :

Stable Marriage: The majority of marriages in Pakistan are arranged with the belief that "marriages are made in heaven". the sanctity of marriage is still in vogue although the divorce rate is on the increase. children of broken families are more likely to undergo abuse like neglect, abandonment, sexual abuse and other. Education, woman's emancipation, social and scientific progress has had an adverse effect on the sanctity of marriage in the west. This is the price they have paid for progress. If we do not adhere to our culture we can have similar problems. As we look to the west for progress we must continue to value our culture, so that we don't pay the same price for progress.

Extended Family System: We have inherited an extended family system from our fore fathers. It is joint in most circumstances where the parents, children and grand children live in the same house. In other cases the parents and married children live in separate houses near by in the same village or city. In either circumstances there is lot of emotional social, and economic support for the inhabitants, especially those with young children. Unlike the nuclear families in the west the children are in the constant supervision of the elders [grand parents etc.]. Young mothers do not feel the stress of house work and loneliness. It is worth mentioning

again that the majority of parents inflicting physical abuse are those who are under emotional stress and are lonely or who have been abused themselves during childhood.

Extended and joint family systems are likely to have some problems of interaction among family members but the over all effect on child abuse remains to be protective. This tradition should be cherished and every effort should be made to maintain it. At present it is likely to decline due to constant migration from rural to urban areas. Due to neglect and lack of development in our villages people move to towns in search of better life, well paid jobs and education for children. But in reality they move from a traditional society to an urban slum with little or no amenities. Because of cash economy both the parents have to work and the children are left unsupervised.

This is a milieu where maximum damages can occur. The unattended child will go through all stages of neglect and ill health. If he survives he will very soon end up in an early earning hand, 'child labour'. This can only be prevented by consistent development of our rural areas and serious planning for immigration to the towns.

Child Bearing And Rearing Practices have a profound effect on child abuse. In our country most of the deliveries are conducted in the homes by traditional birth attendants. New born are kept in mother's bed [the natural incubator]. Breast feeding is the usual mode of feeding. The sanctity of "chilla" in which mother and baby are isolated is very strictly observed. All these factors facilitates the process of bonding which is best achieved in the house during early days after delivery.

It is well known that bonded mothers are less likely to physically abuse or abandon their children. In the urban areas [where 30% to 35% of our population lives] hospital deliveries are becoming more popular. But due to over load these hospitals can not provide privacy in early hours. Chances of early bonding are missed in the hospital setting. Supervised home deliveries by TBA's should be encouraged and hospital routines should be adjusted to facilitate early bonding.

Negative Influences of Culture on Child Abuse

In spite of all the positive influences of culture quoted above there are a few ingrained negative

influences which should be evaluated and minimized.

Discrimination against the Female Child A female child in Pakistan is born with a disadvantage of being less welcome than a boy, because girls are seen as economic liabilities and a potential threat to family's honour. From the beginning girls are subjected to varying degrees of conscious or unconscious neglect, demonstrated by lower allotment of food within the family, and effort and money spent on their health and education.(3) Boys are considered old age security and likely to do more physical work, so they are fed well forgetting that girls must also be physically fit to bear healthy children for a stronger future generation. They are not trained and educated to become self reliant. Lack of education, professional or vocational skill leaves them unprepared to face later situations in which they may be forced to support themselves or their families. Such females in general find themselves in low paid jobs, vulnerable to all sorts of moral, physical and economic abuse.(4)

Neglect of female education is one of the major reasons of our low literacy level. Although the above has far reaching effects on the socio-economic progress of the nation it is so ingrained and deep rooted that in spite of having ministry for Women's Development or National Commission for Child Welfare and Development, very little research has been done in this field.

Child Labour: The abuse of child labour is common place here, due to repaid urbanization and increase socioeconomic stress there has been a sharp rise in child labour. It has been estimated that about two million children in Pakistan are working in carpet and brick industry. Besides this a large number of children are working in workshops, stores and domestic places. etc. In all around eight million children are subjected to unregulated child labour. Almost all are kept away from school and paid a very poor remuneration. Parents consider themselves very lucky if they can send their child to such a place. Enforcement of very strict labour laws can only save our children from this evil.

Beggary: In some cases where families are living below poverty level the children join their parents in begging or are made to beg alone. Most of the

handicapped children are made to beg instead of being given a vocational training. Beggary is accepted in our culture. We do not discourage a beggar. If some of us have the courage to refuse a beggar we feel guilty for the rest of the day.

Suggestions

In view of the above problems of child abuse the following suggestions are made for its prevention :

1. Various media should be used to increase its awareness among health personnel and public.
2. Research should be done to assess its real status, and on methods to minimize its effects.
3. Strict labour laws should be enforced to regulate child labour. Children living below poverty level need employment for their support, but it is the moral obligation of the employer to provide him adequate food, rest and education for optimum growth and development.
4. More child welfare organizations like schools for handicapped children, SOS village should be developed to curb child beggary.
5. Formation of welfare organizations [like Dast-e-Shafqat] which have legal support to take abused children in their custody and place them in better homes.
6. Serious efforts should be made for increasing literacy education and vocational training for girls.

References

1. United Nations Children Fund. The State of Worlds Children 1991, Oxford University Press for UNICEF, New York pp. 72-86.
2. Schmitt BD, Krugman RD, Abuse & Neglect of Children. In: Behrman RE, Vaughan VC, Nelson WE, eds. Nelson Textbook of Paediatrics, Philadelphia: WB Saunders 1987: 79-84.
3. UNICEF. The Girl Child, 1990, UNICEF Programme Publications, New York. p.9.
4. UNDP, Human Development Report 1990, Oxford University Press for United Nations Development Programme, New York, 1990, p.31