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programme, an 83.7% school participation rate of children of the age group 5-14 years and the elimination of child labour in the formal sector of employment), yet some deep rooted forms of child abuse still persist (eg. child domestic labour and exploitation of chil-

CHILD ABUSE – SOME SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS

By Wimala de Silva PhD. D.Litt.

dren as a family resource) and new forms of child abuse have proliferated with social change, the development of a consumer economy, aspirations for a better quality of life among all strata of society and international influences.

What specifically is indicated by the term "Child Abuse"?

There is no internationally accepted definition of child abuse. But going by the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child of November 1989, it may be inferred that violation of these rights is Child Abuse. Nevertheless for purpose of this paper and to obtain deeper insights into the numerous facets of child abuse in the local setting, it is necessary to understand the characteristic features of childhood and to deduce from this perspective that whatever goes counter to the fulfilment of the needs of childhood constitute child abuse.

More specifically, childhood is a period of dependence. Hence it is an extremely vulnerable period requiring special care and protection. Childhood is also a period of growth – physically, mentally, socially and emotionally and therefore requires special nurturing and an environment favourable for development. Childhood is further a period of intense learning activity to come to understand the world in which the child lives and to prepare for adult life. Hence childhood requires opportunities for observing, questioning, learning accepted behavioural patterns and acquiring knowledge and skills. From this conceptualization of childhood it follows that if any action on the part of a care-giver (parent, guardian, teacher or other) or of a person in a superordinate position harms or retards any aspect of a child's development, then such an action constitutes child abuse.

Viewed from this perspective child abuse covers a wide spectrum ranging

Dr. Wimala de Silva currently chancellor of the University of Sri Jayawardanapura got her PhD from London and D.Litt. from the University of Sri Jayawardanapura. She has been interested in the study of Child Abuse for several years. She participated in the Third International congress on Child Abuse and Neglect held in Amsterdam in 1987. She had written several articles on Child Abuse including "Some Cultural and Economic factors leading to Neglect, Abuse and Violence in respect of children within the family in Sri Lanka" published in the International Journal of Child Abuse and Neglect Vol. 5, No. 4 1988. Dr. de Silva served as a honorary member of the International Journal of Child Abuse and Neglect from 1983-84. She's currently a member of the Governing Board of the Centre for Womens Research (CENWOR).

A Background

Priya – Come on Vajira! Don't run away!
Vajira – Why do you want to take my picture?

Priya – I want to include it in the story I am writing of you.

Vajira – Why are you writing about me?

Priya – To tell people about your difficulties.

Vajira – What can they do about it?

Priya – You know Vajira, there are important people who can do things. We want to bring to their notice your story and stories to other children like you.

Vajira – Why do you have to write about us and bring it to their notice? We are everywhere.

This conversation with 13 year old Vajira, a child in years but an adult in cynicism and perception, was reported by a young researcher into the street child.

"We are everywhere" – the school drop out selling lottery tickets, the scraggy child walking from one railway compartment to another begging for coins with a pathetic song, the boy hanging around places of tourist interest and pleading for pens, chewing gum and other imported goodies, the child used by his father to cut stones at the expense of his studies, the little girl in the market weighed down by the basket she carries and trailing behind a buxom mistress, the adolescent female

domestic servant raped or seduced and then turned out to the streets when she becomes pregnant - and so the list goes on and on.

The poignant cry "Don't they see us?" hits hard, a cry of condemnation of the prevalence of exploitation and deprivation in a country where great value is laid on the child. Yet, Vajira did not know the full story. Since the early decades of the twentieth century there has been legislative concern for the child. Enactments have been made for their care and maintenance (1), their education (2), to prevent their exploitation as labour (3), to safeguard them from being used in illegal activities (4), and from harmful publications (5). The law also makes provision for the care of the unwanted child (6), and for the rehabilitation of the delinquent (7). Societal concern for the well being of the child in all its aspects is embodied in the constitutional safeguard provided in the 1978 Constitution – that the state "shall promote with special care the interest of children and youth so as to ensure their full development physical, mental, moral, religious and to protect them from exploitation and discrimination."

Nevertheless, the country is faced with the unhappy dilemma that while much has been achieved for the well-being of the child (the drop in child mortality to twenty per thousand live births, the success of the immunization

for infanticide, abandonment and battering to early removal from school or an unhealthy pressurization for achievement.



To understand the complexity and multidimensional nature of child abuse it should be noted that it is interlocked with a number of disciplines such as sociology, economics, politics, law, physiology, psychology, education and criminology, and has also numerous dimensions including the cultural and attitudinal. Because of the complexity of the subject this paper will confine itself to the analysis of four cases of child abuse from the socio-cultural perspective within the conceptual framework of child abuse detailed above.

All names are fictitious and details have been altered to conceal identity.

B – Cases of Child Abuse

I – Sajeeva

Story

Ransina was a twenty two year old woman working in the Fernando household. The husband and wife were both in government service and their three children were school going. Therefore, Ransina was by herself the greater part of the day. She was a good and honest worker and trusted by all members of the household. One day Mrs Fernando felt unwell while at work and returned home unexpectedly, to find Ransina entertaining a man from a neighbouring dairy who used to deliver milk at the door. When Mr Fernando returned home the evening they drove Ransina back to her home and told the story to her mother. It was clear, though unnoticed by the Fernandos, that Ransina was pregnant. She hoped to marry the milkman who had passed off as a bachelor. But inquiries revealed he was in fact married. Enraged Ransina's brother thrashed her mercilessly. How could they face the village? In the early hours of the following morning Ransina took her few belongings and went to the home of a dhoby family with whom she had struck up a friendship while in service. This family lived in a small hut with plank walls and thatched roof. They said that Ransina could live with them

until the baby was born. But it was impossible to keep a mother and child in that hovel which could barely accommodate their own family. Prior to her confinement Ransina worked on a casual basis in affluent homes near by. But after the baby was born – a son whom she named Sajeeva – she could find no work and a place to live. She then took to the life of a beggar, sleeping on pavements and under trees. With the child she had no chance of obtaining work. Once she was on the point of throttling the infant. But fear of consequences restrained her. On another occasion she tried to pass the infant to an unsuspecting female at a bus stop. But she was detected. One day she met one of the ladies for whom she had worked. She promised to get Ransina a job in the Middle East as she knew Ransina was a capable cook and housemaid. But who would look after Sajeeva? By now Sajeeva was about 1 1/2 years old – an emaciated infant, dull looking and retarded in his development. Once he had a bout of diarrhoea. Ransina took him to a clinic. After treatment Ransina was asked to bring the child regularly for vitamins, nutrients, immunization and medical checks. But Ransina turned up months later when Sajeeva was running a high fever. A social worker who remembered Sajeeva's pathetic figure turned angrily to Ransina "Why didn't you bring this child earlier, as you were asked to? Are you trying to kill him?" "Yes" answered Ransina. She wanted to go to the Middle East!

Analysis

The story of Sajeeva illustrates the web of circumstances driving a mother to infanticide and abandonment of her child – the social ostracism of a woman who has an illegitimate child, the rejection by her own family, her poverty, the inability to find for herself and her infant without support, lack of knowledge of support systems, the opening of employment in the oil rich countries of the Middle East and the visions of a life of comfort in this Eldorado being shat-

tered because she is shackled by her infant. The child would have been allowed to die of neglect were it not for the timely intervention of a social worker.

2. Seelawathie

Seelawathie's father was a coconut plucker. When Seelawathie was six he fell from a tree and died. He left behind a family of five children. Seelawathie was the one but the youngest. The mother was a casual agricultural labourer and had no other means of support. Sunk in despair she gladly seized an offer made by the village mudalali to give to his cousin Mr Perera; a headmaster in a small town, the child Seelawathie for adoption, Mr. Perera too had children, all of school going age and Seelawathie had only to be a companion to them when they were at home. Mr Perera would undoubtedly send Seelawathie to the village school though not to the convent his daughters attended. So persuaded, Seelawathie's mother removed her from the village primary school and took her to Mr Perera's household. It was however, not adoption, but slave labour. There was no talk of schooling for Seelawathie. She was the first to be woken up to help Mrs Perera with the cooking and the last to go to bed. She was at every one's beck and call and was given a knock or slap when she did not respond fast enough. When the other children left for school, Seelawathie would watch them wistfully and then return to the soot and smoke of the kitchen.

Seelawathie was comparatively well fed on rice and curry. But delicacies were only for the children of the family. Whenever the mother visited Seelawathie Mrs Perera never left them alone. She was sent back home with Seelawathie's "salary" and some cast off clothes for the older children. The mother would go away happy tucking inside her jacket the daughter's meagre earnings and an additional Rs 100.

One day after a child's birthday party, Seelawathie took a tempting piece of cake which Mrs Perera had stored away. One of the daughters caught Seelawathie in the act of "stealing" and dragged her to the mother. Mrs Perera

tied her to a pillar and rubbed chillie powder on her tongue. The next morning Seelawathie took Rs 10/- from the mistress's purse and ran away. She was seen by a teacher living nearby and taken to her home. When Mr Perera was informed he went to the teacher's house with a cane and drove Seelawathie back thrashing her all the way. Not a soul protested. A few months later, Seelawathie ran away again and was able to find her way to the village. But the mother fearing reprisals from the Mudalali took Seelawathie back. Again Seelawathie ran away. Mr Perera informed the Police. But she had not been heard of since.



uncle. Unwilling to incur the wrath of his brother-in-law the uncle handed Somapala to the care of the Chief Bhikku of the village temple. He hoped the boy would be ordained in due course.

Analysis

This case brings out the strains and stress affecting the families of migrant women workers leading to child abuse. The father, weak or alcoholic is unable to handle the new situation. And in the absence of his wife he works out his frustrations and aggression on the two older children. In terms of our culture removing a child from school for the maintenance of the family and physical chastisement directed towards the disciplining of a boy may be considered as child abuse only marginally. But the sexual abuse of young daughter left in a father's care would be condemned by any standard of morality as child abuse of the darkest hue. It is further brought out that even the corporal punishment meted out to Somapala in its severity was really a mean by which the father worked out his frustrations and was not directed towards the well being of the son.

And so Rani would return to a broken home even though laden with good things for the children.

One interesting fact emerges from this story. There is one escape route for the abused boy, not available to the sister, namely to take refuge in a temple.

4. Shanta

Story

Shanta's story is in a completely different setting to the other three. Both his parents are teachers. Both are from families of good standing. But they have little wealth except undivided shares in ancestral property. Shanta is the only boy in a family of four children. So the hope of the parents were centred on him to acquire wealth and reach the upper rungs of society.

Shanta was admitted to one of the best schools in the Island, and was

hand. Though the father was a shiftless chap to fond of the bottle and irresponsible, everyone expected he would change once the wife was away. Besides his own mother lived only a few doors away and she could keep an eye on the household. It seemed a wonderful opportunity for the family. With Rani's earnings they would build a new house to replace their mud hut, buy jewellery for Kusuma and set up Somapala in business when he was old enough. Moreover Rani, would be spared for a couple of years the batterings from her husband. So Rani left with a light heart, confident she had made adequate arrangements for the family.

In the morning Kusuma would cook the mid day meal take Samira to their grandmother and then go to school. One day the grandmother was asked to see Kusuma's teacher. There was a rumour going round the school that Kusuma had confided in a friend, "My father does with me what he used to do with mother". The grandmother would not believe this story. But persistent questioning and probing revealed that in his drunken spells the father had sexually handled the girl, yet he had not gone so far as to rape her. The grandmother promptly took Kusuma and Samira to her own home. But she had to withdraw the girl from that particular school because of the scandal that had been raised.

Enraged, Jinasena took it out of Somapala. He took the boy out of school to do the household chores and help him in his work as a vendor. One day instead of working in the home garden as ordered by his father, Somapala took some money from his father's purse and went to see a film with his friends. When he returned the father tied him to a tree full of red ants and thrashed him. In spite of his cries no one came to Somapala's help. After all, the father was only exercising his parental right to discipline a wayward son. When the father left, Somapala managed to free himself and run away to his maternal

Analysis

Seelawathie's story is almost a worked example of the exploitation of children as cheap domestic labour. Poverty provides the excuse and the opportunity for such exploitation. The Perera family appears as the worst offender—the crime against the child being compounded by the fact that he is in a profession committed to the care and well being of children. Nevertheless, with the conceptual framework of child abuse, the mother becomes the primary offender. Though she gives the child for "adoption" in all good faith yet she uses the little girl's earnings for the benefit of the family without any consideration for the child's own future. Further, the mother did not have the courage to stand up for the child she fled to her for protection. Nor can the neighbourhood be absolved of responsibility. By its silence it gave support to the use of a child almost as slave labour and condoned the brutal treatment of a child.

3. Karuna and Somapala

Story

When Rani decided to go to the Middle East as a house maid, like so many of her relatives, no one objected — not even her husband, Jinasena. She was leaving behind three young children. But Kusuma a girl of thirteen, would be able to do the cooking and look after her four year old brother Samira. The eleven year old Somapala was big enough to give his sister a helping

urged to follow every possible extra curricular activity. He was sent for cricket practices and classes in swimming, elocution and art – though he was not particularly keen on any of them. Academically he was only little more than average. So to ensure admission to a Medical faculty (the parents had set their heart on seeing their son a doctor) he was given tuition in every subject from the age of seven. So from the early years he was pushed hard and made to feel that the future well being of the family depended on him. The parents drove Shanta hard. But they drove themselves hard too-engaging in several businesses other than to earn the money needed to pay for classes to which they sent their children.

Shanta sat for the Genral Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (G.C.E O/L) when he was fifteen. Just before the results were out he was a nervous wreck. He couldn't eat or sleep and had bouts of diarrhoea. When the results were out the house was like a house of mourning. Shanta had failed to qualify for admission to the G. C.E. Advanced Level Science stream – the only path leading to a carrer in medicine.

Shanta's uncle came to find out the results. But Shanta was nowhere to be seen. He heard a noise in a garden shed and ran towards it. He was just in time to strike a bottle of insecticide from Shanta's hands.

Analysis

This case illustrates the other side of the coin where parents with high ambition drive their children too hard and too early for high achievement regardless of their abilities. While the declared reason for such pressure is concern for the child's future, there is also the covert reason of wanting to realise, through the boy, their own aspirations and use him as a vehicle for upward social mobility.

C. Issues

These cases cover only some areas of child abuse. Nevertheless they spotlight several important issues.

1. Many forms of child ranging from child battering to exploitation as family



labour take place in a domestic setting. Hence what is visible may be only the tip of the iceberg. Statistics, therefore, may not provide a true picture of the nature and prevalence of child abuse in this country.

2. There is legal concern to safeguard and protect the child from exploitation. Nevertheless except in relation to the use of child labour in the formal sector of employment, laws have not been effectively enforced. Participant observation reveals the presence of child domestic servants in urban homes. Nevertheless during the period 10.3.86 to 10.8.89 only twelve such cases had been reported to the Department of Labour. During the period of eleven years only one court case had been filed against an employer. Similarly the Education Ordinance making education compulsory upto the age of fourteen (a law, which if enforced, would serve as a deterrent to the use of child labour in the informal sector) is not now enforced. It is therefore vital that for the containment of child abuse not only should there be legal enactments but effective law enforcement machinery.

3. Equally important is the development of a social conscience regarding child abuse. While there are sporadic efforts to raise public awareness and develop a sense of public responsibility nevertheless there is no orchestrated and sustained attempt to do so. The media is used on occasions, such as International Children's Day, to bring to the notice of the public the problems of child abuse. Once that day passes there are long silences, even on the part of government department and NGO's concerned with child abuse, until the next occasion comes round.

4. It is brought out that poverty provides the ideal breeding ground for most forms of child abuse. Hence alleviation of poverty becomes an important requirement for the eradication of the most common forms of child abuse. Nevertheless, such programmes alone

are inadequate without the necessary laws, an effective law enforcement machinery, a developed social conscience and above all a strong political commitment to the eradication of this evil.

5. Child abuse stemming from cultural values and attitudes was also observed. In Sri Lanka infanticide was never used as a method of resolving social problems such as the control of population growth. But that it is prevalent today is seen from newspaper reports, the main reason for this being social ostracism of the unmarried mother and illegitimate child.

In Sinhala society, before the coming of the western colonial powers, the attitude towards the illegitimate child was much more liberal. He was accepted as the off-spring of an "irregular marriage" and had property rights from both parents (9). But with the enactment of the General Marriages Ordinance (10) and the spread of a strongly puritan sexual morality, social attitudes have become harshly condemnatory of the mother and illegitimate child. Hence with a child outside a valid marriage may be forced to the streets without any support driven to infanticide or to the abandonment of the child.

Since today the opportunities for sexual relationships outside marriage are increasing it is desirable that the social attitude towards the illegitimate child should change that services and infrastructural supports should be established and their availability publicised.

6. With the national and international commitment towards the involvement of women in development new situations have arisen in which child neglect and abuse can take place. Therefore providing adequate care for the children of mothers who are away from the family for long periods has become an urgent need. What generally gets highlighted is the plight of children of low income families whose mothers have migrated for employment. But child care needs of working mothers of all social classes require study. With the recent phenomenon of large numbers

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of women going out to work and traditional sources of support drying up new support structures have to be established to prevent fresh opportunities for child abuse.

7. Using children as a family resource at the expense of their own development is not generally seen as child abuse. This may stem from the fact that under ancient Sinhala law children could be treated as parental property to be gifted, pawned or sold, to meet families liabilities (11). Therefore the public has to be educated regarding the concept that childhood is a period of development with special needs and that a child is an individual with rights of its own including the rights to its childhood. This is important for while the law can enforce school attendance it is difficult to exercise controls on the exploitation of children as family labour. Educational programmes are urgently required for this purpose, since studies reveal that with more manufacturing companies "putting out" work to be done at home and with the expansion of opportunities for home based employment, children are used as family labour to work long hours after school at the expense of their education and leisure (12).

D - Conclusion

It may be queried whether the conceptualization of Child Abuse in this paper is relevant to an underdeveloped country steeped in poverty and trapped in a political situation where funds for security takes a large proportion of the national budget. Nevertheless international agencies such as UNICEF, WHO and UNESCO have developed standards of child care which this country cannot afford to ignore. Therefore, child abuse needs to be identified and attacked within this broad international framework though the priorities for action must necessarily be determined in terms of the local situation. ■

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