

Hard and Heart Data

A Counselor-Mother's Perspective on Family Violence Prevention

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*T*he Women's Crisis Center (WCC) is the first crisis center in the Philippines to offer a holistic range of services to women and children who are victims-survivors of violence against women. At the core of its services is the Crisis Intervention Program, which includes feminist counseling, both hotline and face-to face, medical and legal assistance, and a temporary shelter where women are assured of security and safety. Accompaniment is also provided to women who need support in accessing help from other service providers, until the survivors gain the confidence to stand up for themselves. Survivors who have undergone counseling are encouraged to join the Survivors' Support Group where women share problems and experiences and support each in the healing process. The assistance of donor agencies enables WCC to provide all these services for free. In tandem with the Intervention Program is the Prevention Program that promotes strategies and advocates for the prevention of family violence. Its resource and training institute has been renamed Raquel Edralin-Tiglaio Institute for Family Violence Prevention (RETIFVP) in honor of its former executive director who steered WCC into what it is today. RETIFVP houses the Education and Training, and the Research, Documentation and Advocacy Programs. A special project, the National Family Violence Prevention Program, with seventeen partner-organizations, is a nationwide campaign that mobilizes communities to address family violence prevention through concerted efforts to raise public awareness, organizing, social mobilization, and policy advocacy and planning.

As a feminist alternative organization working for women's empowerment, every staff member is expected to do crisis intervention work when necessary. Multi-tasking is the rule rather than the exception. Services and responses to the needs of abused women and girls are guided by what the victims-survivors define as woman-centered, sensitive, helpful and empowering to them. The experience I will share is informed by heart data as a mother and hard data as a crisis worker.

Mothers and Family Responsibilities

As a society we need to recognize and be sensitive to multiple dimensions of family diversity. Children are not disadvantaged by living in non-traditional family structures; rather they are victimized by cultural intolerance and a reluctance to accept and celebrate family diversity.

Mothers nowadays have added responsibilities unlike a century ago. Economic difficulties have forced mothers to join the work force outside the home. However, most family responsibilities are still considered as part of women's work. Socialization and traditional gender roles placed a heavy burden on mothers. They are the nurturers and caregivers not only of their husbands and children, but aging parents as well.

There are circumstances when mothers find themselves unable to give what they think is best because of certain social and family structures. Among these are the structures that condone and perpetuate intimate or family violence. While nobody wants to live in fear and in a hurting environment, the social and political contexts in which we live shape the choices we make in mothering. How do mothers in abusive situations cope with the dilemmas and challenges they face as they try to live up to the paradigm of good mothering?

Mothers and Family Violence

Since WCC is a crisis center based in a tertiary government hospital, most of the women who come to us are from the urban poor communities. But we also have clients who come from posh villages seeking safety and security at the shelter. Housewives, doctors, lawyers, along with sidewalk vendors come to ask our help especially during crisis triggered by violence. In the same manner, there is no definite profile of batterers. They include men who occupy respectable positions in the community and who are considered as good providers. Contours of family violence can be gleaned from the stories women tell us.

He beat me because I refused sex... failed to cook his favorite food... I asked him for marketing money... I got pregnant... I failed to arrive on time... for no particular reason... He poured boiling water on me because he was jealous of another man... he pimped me to pay for his

vices... he gets my salary... he's violent with the children... he raped our only daughter... I'm losing my eyesight because he would always hit my eyes... he did not take me to the hospital when I had a miscarriage because of his beatings... He only stopped the beatings when he got tired... He is violent with his parents... he hit my mother when she refused to give him her money... He has another family ...

My children abandoned me because I'm a burden to them ... my brother sexually assaulted me... my grandfather raped me and I'm carrying his child... my siblings beat me whenever I come home late... My parents sold me to our relatives...

We have witnessed women and children leaving their homes in the middle of the night during violent episodes fearing for their lives while their abusers enjoy the comfort of the conjugal dwelling. We have sheltered elderly women abandoned by their children and siblings. We have sheltered young girls, pregnant because their fathers and brothers raped them. What's happening to our families? Certainly love and violence do not co-exist.

It is difficult to recognize and acknowledge family violence because it is inflicted by family members. We were led to believe that this is a part of family life. When we hear family violence, we express disbelief. Child abuse is justified by discipline. Sibling violence is a part of growing up but some siblings never outgrow their aggression. Wife abuse that starts as cruel teasing, progresses to verbal abuse, mental and emotional torture and escalates into physical and sexual abuse that sometimes lead to death.

We downplay the visibility of family violence and wish it out of existence. We have yet to find a Filipino term for incest. The denial stems from our pain in recounting the violence and embarrassment that we have failed in our homes. Society has tasked us mothers to be the guiding light and binding force of families. We turned a blind eye to the abuser/perpetrator's violence because society assigned him as head of the household and its guardian. Tradition and culture have led us to believe that a woman needs a man for protection and is expected to submit to the power of someone, usually a male throughout her life.

Before, I thought violence was only physical and sexual. Emotional, mental and economic abuses do not count. But I learned that emotional scars remain long after the physical scars have healed and cleared. It pains me to see that people who are supposed to protect, love and guard their family are the ones who are inflicting harm and suffering to the vulnerable members who are the women, children and elderly.

We have popular myths and practices that condone and perpetuate family violence. As mothers, we are guilty of believing in some of these myths. We worry when our children are not yet home and it's late in the evening, because we think that today's streets hold the greatest risk for women and children. Records at the WCC show that people, especially women and children, are more likely to experience violence and abuse inside the home and in the hands of other family members than anywhere else.

We believe that to build character in our children we are licensed to use violence in the name of discipline. Spanking a child is normal, necessary and good. We went through it when we were young. The intent is to cause some slight harm so that the child will get the message. Spare the rod and spoil the child. We use discipline to justify the physical and emotional harm we inflict on our children not knowing that this may have long-term effects that may last a lifetime. Street children come to us fearful that their parents would punish them if they fail to give some money at the end of the day. Some turn to the streets afraid that they will be beaten or sexually abused at home.

Another hidden family violence is violence towards parents. We always think of children as submissive to the authority of parents. Like elderly abuse, parents are reluctant to report or admit that their children had physically assaulted them. As mothers, our children often hurt us emotionally, but our love for them far exceeds our desire to report the abuse or let others know the hurt.

Why do mothers stay in violent relationships?

We always expect women who experience abuse and violence at the hands of their intimate partners to either end the abuse or leave the relationship. Women are judged and criticized harshly if they remain with a violent husband or partner, but are accused of breaking the marriage,

and depriving the children of a father if they leave. Social expectations put a heavy burden on women with abusive partners but it is socialization and male-female stereotyping that greatly influence why women remain in abusive relationships.

There are countless reasons why a mother cannot leave. Women's vulnerability comes from being exposed as a bad wife and mother as well as from the fact that there is no place for her to turn to. We are guilty of blaming and asking why battered women stay; yet we remain indifferent to their plight. Lack of alternatives prevents them from leaving. Most women do not have economic resources. Some have sacrificed their own careers to be the supportive wife and nurturing mother. The law and our courts do not have much to offer either. We don't have a law to protect women from domestic violence. Abusing a loved one is a lesser crime than behaving aggressively towards a stranger. We do not have enough shelters for women who need them. Abused women have shared with us how they were revictimized when they approached the barangay, police and health service providers for help. Most often they were asked insensitive questions trivializing their experience and blaming them for the abuse. Our Barangay Lupon Tagapamayapa always works for the reconciliation of husband and wife and preserving the family even at the cost of the woman's life. Mothers who agree to uncontested separation or annulment of their marriages often find themselves charged as unfit mothers and deprived of child custody.

The nature of violence in intimate relationships is crucial to understanding why women find it difficult to get away from her abusive situation. The type and severity of abuse may vary but the abuse is always intended to control and invoke fear in the victim. Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence Theory further explains why women stay in violent relationships. The cycle of violence starts with the first phase where there is tension and "minor" incidents of violence such as threats, verbal abuse, and indirect acts of violence that serve as warnings. There is fear and anxiety as to what will follow. This escalates to the second phase when the acute physical battering occurs. After the violent episode, the abuser shows contrition and remorse. When the woman threatens to leave, the abuser soon realizes that so much is at stake. He will lose his wife who did everything for him. Who will now clean the house, wash his clothes and cook for him? He begs the woman to stay, behaves in a loving manner and swears that it was not his intention to hurt her. He was again the man she fell in love with. This gives her hope that he will change. She remembers that abuse is not the only

significant aspect of her relationship and she realizes that she still loves him. The third phase is the honeymoon phase where the woman is led to believe that the abuse is about to end until the next build up phase creeps in again.

It is the honeymoon phase that explains why many women stay with the abuser. This phase provides hope that the abuser will change and violence will end. Families, friends, media, literature, religion all encourage women to hope and believe that they can change their male partners. All they need is perseverance and patience to see the results of their labor of love. But conflict always arises when the abuser's sense of control is threatened and this sets in motion the next cycle of violence.

Fear is another reason why women stay. Women are often stalked and followed by their batterers. Friends and family who try to help them are harassed. To end a relationship is to face the possibility that the man will carry out his threat to harm or kill her and her children. We have clients who were followed by their abusers and have to make the lethal choice of getting killed or be killed. For preserving their lives and their children's lives, these mothers are serving life sentences at the Correctional Institute for Women.

Religion plays an important role. Some women choose to honor their commitments to their marriage vows. Others chose to stay especially if the time and emotional investment is high and the alternatives are few. To leave is to abandon her commitment but to stay is to be beaten. She wants to move into safety but does not want to lose her relationship. It is for the same valued traits of women in society that make women endure the abuse and yet we blame them when they stay.

Mothers of Incest Survivors

For a mother whose children are sexually abused by family members, the stay-or-leave dilemma is a tremendous burden. Society holds mothers, rather than fathers as primary nurturers and responsible for the safety and well being of their children. Our maternal biases against mothers of incest victims accuse them of colluding with the abuser or allowing the abuse to happen. Again there are various reasons why it is not easy for a mother to disclose or report incest. Reporting would mean prosecution of a family member and exposing one's family to shame and stigma. There is also the fear of death penalty for the abuser who could be her

husband, son or relative. Her relationship with the perpetrator causes her ambivalence on whom to protect: her daughter or the perpetrator who is also a family member. She might be economically dependent on the abuser and sacrificing her daughter would mean saving her other children. The mother could also be facing her own victimization. Studies conducted by WCC on incest survivors found that six out of ten survivors reported that their mothers were also abused by their fathers. Such a situation makes her powerless to protect herself and her daughter. The lack of personal resources, support and insensitivity of the people and institutions they approach for justice make some mothers resign to another victimization in their lives. Fear, shame, our insensitivity and indifference have silenced these women. It is the political, cultural and social factors that contribute to their powerlessness and the silent support for the abuser to continue the abuse that make it difficult, if not impossible, to seek justice.

Consequences of family violence

It is not difficult to understand how being trapped in violent relationships, repeatedly subjected to abuse, and receiving no social or legal support extract a heavy toll on the victims-survivors. The research study undertaken by WCC found that consequences on physical health include injuries, body pains, fractures, disfigurement, partial and even permanent disabilities like loss of hearing and eyesight. Reproductive tract infections and contraction of sexually transmitted diseases are common. We wonder and blame battered women on why they have many children. In an abusive situation, family planning has never been an option for these mothers. Using contraceptives gives reason to be beaten. It is alarming to know that violence during pregnancy is common and affects mother and child. It is even used to effect abortion.

Family violence has strong implications not only on physical but mental health as well. Fears, anxiety, depression, anger, and hostility are just a few of the effects. Some became suicidal. While others resort to alcohol or drugs. Others turn to spirituality for inner strength. The mind may deny the abuse but these traumatic experiences are stored as body memories that may manifest in other ways later in life.

Such consequences can also be found in child and elderly abuse and other types of family violence. Children from violent homes also become victims. They are often neglected and abused, suffer severe stress and develop dysfunctional behaviors. Sometimes they get hurt when they

intervene during violent outbursts. Just witnessing violence and seeing their loved ones getting hurt will have profound effects on their physical, emotional and social development. Children develop their own strategies for survival in growing up in abusive homes, including being a "perfect child", acting out in destructive ways through alcohol or drug abuse, delinquent behavior, school related problems, criminal behavior, depression or suicide. They also learn to use violence to control others, bully their friends, siblings or mothers. They learn that violence is an effective means of gaining control over others.

The economic costs of family violence include interrupted schooling, home displacement, frequent transfer of residence in search of safety, lack of financial support, medical costs due to physical injuries and mental health therapies, loss of job due to absenteeism, inefficiency and incapability days. There are also legal costs for judiciary procedures like custody of children, separation and annulment and expenditures for arrests and prosecution. But beyond these economic, health and social costs is the cost in human suffering.

Family violence is a traumatic event that overwhelms the ordinary human being. Judith L. Herman has found that victims- survivors of rape and domestic violence and the Vietnam War veterans have one thing in common – they all suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The common denominator is intense fear, helplessness, loss of control and annihilation. Remember that soldiers were trained for combat while women and children unexpectedly found themselves in a home turned battleground.

We blame women for their helplessness. In an attempt to create some sense of safety and control over their fears, they restrict their lives. For fear that the batterer will strike her anytime, victims-survivors stop doing anything because any action on her part might result to more violence. Learned helplessness, self-isolation, denial and rationalization of the abuse are just some of women's ways of coping to ensure her and her children's survival. Never underestimate the strength and determination to survive of a battered woman.

Interventions for family violence prevention

While every citizen has a role to play in eliminating the worldwide plague of family violence and abuse, the role and power of mothers in this

area cannot be overstated. Interventions are necessary not only to protect the victims and survivors from further abuse but also to help them cope with the effects of force, abuse of trust and power within the family.

Nowadays we have child welfare agencies operated by both government and non-government organizations. There are women's drop-in crisis centers that provide information and services to women coming from violent homes. There are shelters for battered women, abused children and for the elderly where they can temporarily stay away from a violent environment and are given support to take control of their lives. In some countries, treatment for abusers and programs for men including counseling for behavioral change are also available.

There are legal measures that aim to ensure the safety of family members. We have the Child Protection, Anti Rape (including marital rape), and Anti-Sexual Harassment Laws. Unfortunately we don't have a law against abuse in intimate relationships in the Philippines. The problem with these laws lies in the level of protection they can provide. The death penalty for incest rape in the Philippines is a major reason why some daughters do not want to pursue legal cases against their father-abusers lest they be blamed for their father's death and family shame.

In our intervention work at the Women's Crisis Center Manila, we believe that the ultimate goal of crisis intervention is the empowerment of victims-survivors. Women are given counseling that aims to provide them information to make informed decisions. Whatever decision a woman may arrive at will always be respected for only she knows how to live her life. We celebrate and measure success not by winning cases in court but by the small steps women take towards self-empowerment. Our role is to be there when she needs us because we believe in her capacity to regain control over her life, which has been shaken.

We hold the abusers accountable for their behavior. While we know that they must be viewed with compassion and as victims themselves who need support, we fear this approach will let the abuser get away with his accountability by placing the blame on his past experience. Any intervention should make the abuser fully responsible for his actions. We believe there is a need to use aggressive intervention to punish the violent behavior. But we also fear for interventions that might increase the risks for the victims-survivors since the abuser might retaliate and take violent actions against his wife or children.

Intervention programs are necessary to protect the lives and welfare of victims and potential victims of intimate violence. But even the best programs will not break the cycle of cultural norms and values that contribute to the violent nature of the family and intimate relationships. There will always be the risk that certain relationships will be abusive and violent. There is no easy solution as to what is the best intervention approach, but the best would involve appropriate measures of legal control and human support.

What can mothers do to help in the prevention of family violence?

The central goal of programs and policies aimed at intimate violence is to prevent and eventually eliminate violence. Some fundamental changes in values and beliefs have to occur before we see a decrease in the level of family violence. Stopping the cycle of violence should start at home. Parents who are considered as the children's first teachers are in the best position to sow the seeds of eliminating family violence. Violence is a learned behavior and therefore it can be unlearned. Before I became a crisis intervention worker, I've always believed that the family must be preserved at all cost. Having been exposed to the painful and destructive effects of violence, I have come to realize that while the ideal goal is to preserve the family, the reality is that there are families that cannot be preserved and others that should not be preserved. I have seen in my work how husbands justify their violence by blaming the wives for not being the obedient and dutiful wives that they want. I have also seen children who had cigarette burns, with swollen faces and feet, suffering from sexually transmitted diseases because of physical and sexual abuse. Most women, especially mothers, just want the violence to stop while keeping and preserving the family. We cannot afford to risk lives for future abuse and violence because in the end, we will pay a very high cost.

As mothers and members of our communities, we have a responsibility to actively pursue the prevention of family violence and we are in a position to do so. There are ways to make our contribution count.

- ***Start with a personal commitment to end family violence. Be informed.***

One can start by reading and looking for information on family violence. As we think and learn about it, we may be shocked or troubled

to discover that we can identify with some aspects of abusive relationships. Thinking about family violence may bring back memories of difficult times in our own lives. Maybe we can now identify comments we would not have noticed before as reflections of attitudes that foster family violence. Let us take a stand and share this information to others and help other people recognize and care about the problem.

As mothers, we become fearful for our children especially our daughters. I was scared that what is happening to others can also happen to my family. Having a "feel" for what abusive relationships are about will make one a more empathetic and effective helper and help us be realistic about how to approach the problem.

- ***Examine our parenting practices. Eliminate myths and practices that perpetuate and glorify violence in our families and society.***

Family violence prevention should start with our parenting and child rearing practices. Eliminate spanking and corporal punishment in schools as child-rearing techniques. Fairytales, folklore and nursery rhymes are full of violence. Hansel and Gretel had been abandoned by their parents in the forest because of financial difficulties. Stepmothers are usually portrayed as wicked and evil towards their stepdaughters. Cinderella was a victim of the cruelty of her stepmother and stepsisters. Remember the old woman who lived in a shoe who beats her children before sending them to bed. Do we tell stories that convey the message that violence is all right?

Do we socialize our children into roles that foster violence with toys like guns, swords, and war games that are associated with violence? Monitor what our children are watching on TV and what computer games they are playing. Even cartoons intended for children nowadays portray violence and abuse in families. Eliminate media violence that glorifies and legitimizes violence.

In school, do we encourage our children to use aggressiveness and force in settling disputes with their friends? Fraternities and school gangs that engage in violence in their rivalry for supremacy should be banned. Are we guilty of encouraging and cultivating a culture of violence?

- ***Help in changing the sexist characteristic of our society by starting with our children.***

Sexual inequality makes violence possible in homes. Eliminate the sexual division of labor by teaching our children that there should be no men's and women's work. Men can be good housekeepers and women can be good carpenters and engineers. Let us eliminate prescribed gender roles – sons can be nurturers and daughters can be breadwinners. Boys, like girls, can cry and should get in touch with their feelings. A man's prowess is not measured by the number of women he can "conquer"; rather, it is measured by how he cares, loves and respects his family. Eliminate macho posturing and strive for equality of individuals. Take a stand against commercial advertisements and pornography that depicts women and children as objects. As consumers, we should be vigilant about what is forced on us. Let our voices be heard on what we want for our children's well being.

- ***Break the cycle of violence in the family and at home.***

Violence cannot be prevented if we show that it is okay to hit the people we love. Unfortunately, children learn what they experience at home. They know about violence in their home, despite attempts by the parents to hide what is going on. Boys and girls who grow up in violent homes are more likely to carry these behaviors into their own relationships.

Violence is not an acceptable method of dealing with difficulties. Conflict resolution should not be done through force and abuse. There are peaceful ways of settling differences. Parents should be sensitive to their children's needs in the same way that children should know when their actions are hurting their parents. Let us start breaking the cycle of violence by teaching our children that violence is unacceptable in our homes.

- ***Meet the spiritual and nurturing needs of our children and practice what we preach.***

As parents, we are privileged to be in a position to teach our children the total life concept. It means much more than teaching and imparting to them knowledge and wisdom accumulated through the years. It is also imparting to them our spiritual beliefs and practices.

The expectation is that through words and personal example, parents will nurture their children and teach them how to live peaceful lives. Our biggest investment is in our children. Each child is precious and is worth whatever it takes to care for him/her properly. The returns could be a violence-free world.

Let us teach them values that will guide them in life, develop positive behavior and lasting relationships. Children look up to us parents as their model. Let us train our children in the way they should go but let us be sure we go that way ourselves.

- ***Avoid family isolation by developing involved relationships with support network of kin and community***

The changing patterns of family and community life have isolated families and children from parents and other extended family members. The family, neighborhood and community dynamics that once socialized young people into norms of society are often extinct especially in big cities where one hardly knows one's neighbor. Children need to know through example or indirect methods, moral codes and patterns of living that build strong family relationships. They will help our children resist the negative influences in life. Supportive ties from relatives, friends and the community are necessary.

- ***Support public awareness campaigns that promote attitudes and values that foster nurturing relationships and prevent family violence.***

Participate actively in community campaigns and public education that promote the welfare of families. Advocate and support laws and ordinances that forbid and penalize violence and abuse. Join multi-agency groups and other community-wide efforts to prevent family violence. During the early days of our National Family Violence Prevention Program, parents and children actively participated in its family violence awareness activities like poster making and slogan contests, speak outs and parades.

- ***Volunteer in shelters and centers that provide services and programs for victims and survivors of family violence and abuse.***

Help in supporting victims and survivors of family violence by sharing your resources and skills. Shelters and crisis centers need your services and support. Healing and recovery come easier when survivors receive the community's support and collective care. Violence threatens not only families but also the existence of our communities.

Let me share with you the recommendations of women who come to us at the Women's Crisis Center. These are mothers whose parenting skills were compromised by violence at home. They were unwilling victims but have survived. With their children, they have taught me that there is hope amidst despair. Let us listen to what they have to say.

- Conduct awareness campaigns on family violence prevention in all levels of society.
- Media should help in these campaigns.
- Eliminate the sexual division of labor at home and in the workplace.
- Include children's rights and family violence in the school curriculum so that the young will know and understand.
- Make family violence a community concern and communities have the right to intervene.
- Pass laws on family violence prevention and impose stiff penalties for offenders.
- Create support groups among women to strengthen each one.
- Men and women should undergo seminars and counseling on family violence before getting married.
- Conduct gender sensitivity training for the legal and medical service providers.
- Involve the active participation of men in campaigns against family violence.

In our desire to protect the family, too often we close our eyes to the violence within the family. Too often we act on the behavioral manifestations of hopelessness, helplessness, anger and hostility that we find offensive, dangerous and threatening. We punish our loved ones without asking, listening nor understanding what precipitated these desperate responses. If there is violence inside the home, let us recognize the need to disclose the violence lest we help in protecting a perpetrator by hiding his deeds with our silence. When any family member discloses to us, let us

not blame them. She does not want violence and is usually helpless to fight it alone.

The seeds we have planted won't yield immediate results. But we should recognize that our actions make a difference. We should feel confident that the cumulative and collective effect of our efforts would bear fruit and help to create a healthier, violence-free and more peaceful environment for us all. Let us remember that world peace starts in our hearts and in our homes.

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