

ABUSE AND FAMILY VIOLENCE: A GLOBAL AFFLICTION

Twenty-five years of scientific data regarding the incidence of abuse and family violence undergird the reality that abuse and family violence represent a significant threat to the well-being of individuals and societies worldwide. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is not immune.

Abuse and family violence are blind to age, social status, color, culture and creed. There is no typical victim of abuse and no typical perpetrator, except insofar as the victim is, overwhelmingly, female and the perpetrator male.

Toward Some Definitions

Abuse and violence may be physical, sexual, and/or psychological. In the case of children, it may also take the form of severe neglect. The terms abuse and violence should not be used to describe minor incidents or isolated events that are without serious consequences. However, consensus among professionals is emerging that the following kinds of behavior are abusive and constitute unacceptable conduct in all relationships.

Physical abuse involves aggressive behavior towards the victim's body. It includes behaviors like pushing, pinching, spitting, kicking, biting, pulling hair, slapping, hitting, punching, choking, burning, clubbing, stabbing, limb twisting, and confining. It also includes throwing acid, boiling water, or objects; throwing the victim down, against a wall, or down stairs; mutilating with knives, scissors or other dangerous objects, and the use of guns. The practices of selective amniocentesis and the killing of female newborns, bride burning, and female genital mutilation constitute violent physical abuse.

Psychological or emotional abuse includes behaviors like consistent and harsh criticism, degrading, and disparaging name-calling. It can also include verbal threats, episodes of rage, depreciation of character and person, and unrealistic demands for perfection. The regular use of menacing, violent, and obscene language directed at another person are also included. In addition, excessive possessiveness, isolation, and deprivation of physical and economic resources are psychologically abusive. Such abuse may also involve denial of sexual contact or activity resulting in sexual frustration, self-doubt and guilt about sexual attractiveness. Violent activity which is destructive of property belonging to the victim such as clothing, furniture or pets is also emotionally abusive.

Sexual abuse can include inappropriate fondling, touching and verbal remarks. Included in this category are actions such as incest, molestation, rape and forced prostitution, oral/genital contact, or fondling of genitals or breasts. Even if it is not forced, it is nonetheless abusive when perpetrated against an underage victim, or by a pastor, teacher, or any adult in a position of trust who takes advantage of the vulnerability of the victim or of the trust relationship to meet his own needs or desires.

What the Statistics Show

Statistical evidence indicating the epidemic proportions and global extent of abuse and family violence is growing. The United Kingdom, Papua New Guinea, and the United States have conducted large scale surveys. Many developing countries are to be commended for their beginning efforts to gather information systematically, with Nigeria, Colombia, Bangladesh, and Chile among the first to collect such data. It's clear that one cannot conclude that the problem is not present in a particular region just because statistics are lacking.

Abuse and Violence Ending in Murder/Suicide. Criminal statistics in 1982 in **England and Wales** indicated one in four murder victims were women murdered by their husbands. In a study

conducted between 1983 and 1985 in **Bangladesh**, 50% of women murdered were victims of domestic violence. The New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research in **Australia** indicated that of the homicides solved by police between 1968-1981, 42.5 percent occurred within family relationships. Research suggests that in situations where wives are murdered, there is usually a long history of physical abuse. Studies in **Bangladesh** and **India** indicate that victims of abuse within the family frequently find a solution to their problems in suicide.

Battering. An estimated 3 to 4 million women in the **United States** are battered each year by their husbands or partners. One out of every ten women in **Canada** is a battered woman. A

British study noted husband against wife violence in as many as one in three marriages. Comprehensive studies conducted in **Papua New Guinea** in 1986 indicated that among the representative samples of a number of tribal groups in both rural and urban parts of the country, as many as 67% of wives suffered marital violence. Significant levels of family violence have also been noted in research from **Austria, Kuwait, Kenya, Thailand, Nigeria** and **Uganda**. By 1989, case studies from 24 **United Nations countries** indicated violence in the home. And all respondents to a 1984 survey in **Commonwealth** countries indicated that domestic violence was a problem in the country.

Assault. A comprehensive analysis of recorded incidents of assault on women in two **Scottish** cities in 1974 revealed that wife assault was the second most common form of violent crime. Similar statistics exist for **Poland** and **Vanuatu**. An analysis of cases of bodily injury in hospitals in Bogota, **Columbia** revealed that 20% of the cases were due to conjugal violence, with women being the victims of the assault in 94% of cases (a percentage rate that holds consistently across international data). An analysis of emergency room cases in Santiago, **Chile** yielded similar results. A study conducted by the University of British Columbia in **Canada** noted that 40% of wife assaults began during the time of the wife's first pregnancy. In one hospital emergency department, 21% of pregnant women seeking treatment had been battered.

Violence as Grounds for Divorce. In a trend noted from data gathered in the **United Kingdom, Canada, Egypt, Greece,** and the **United States**, violence is frequently offered as a ground for divorce. In **Jamaica** in 1980, 16% of divorces were granted on the grounds of cruelty and 25% of women who sought counseling through the court in 1982 complained of violent husbands.

Rape. It is estimated that 30% of all rape victims are also battered women. A woman is more likely to be assaulted, injured, raped, or killed by a male companion than by any other type of assailant.

Child Abuse. The Statistical Abstract of the **United States** reports that in 1993 there were 838,232 cases of neglect, 204,404 cases of physical abuse, 129,404 cases of sexual abuse, and 49,123 cases of emotional abuse. Reports indicate that one out of three girls and one out of eleven boys are sexually abused before they reach the age of 18. At least half of the sexual abuse of children is incestuous abuse. Studies in **Jamaica** and **Samoa** show significant levels of sexual abuse of young women within the family circle. There is vast documentation of the "battered child syndrome" from most countries and cultures.

Elder Abuse. A 1985 study conducted by the New South Wales Government in **Australia** represents one example of documentation available that elderly women are particularly vulnerable to assault by their grown children.

Abuse and Family Violence among Seventh-day Adventists

Significant levels of physical, emotional and sexual abuse were reported by the nearly 8,000 randomly selected respondents to the Adventist Family Survey initiated in 1994 by the General

Conference Family Ministries office, now completed in parts of seven world divisions. A range of 8-18% of female respondents reported being sexually abused. (The range indicates the lowest and highest percentages reported in the world divisions for which data is currently available.) Reports of physical (15-43%) and emotional abuse (27-69%) among women were considerably higher than for sexual abuse. On average women reported higher levels of abuse than men. A range of 4-12% of males reported sexual abuse. As is the case with women, more males report emotional (6-37%) and physical (16-55%) abuse than report sexual abuse.

The *Adventist Review* (August 1994) reported on a study conducted by the Southeastern California Conference Family Ministries Committee in which over 500 randomly selected church members responded. Forty percent answered affirmatively to the question "Were you ever the victim of physical abuse in your home up to age 18?" Fifty-six percent of the respondents said that physical abuse had been directed toward them or their siblings in the homes in which they were reared. Females were three times more likely to suffer physical abuse than males. Verbal and emotional abuse was reported by 43% of respondents.

Clearly the Seventh-day Adventist faith community is not immune to the problems of abuse and family violence. These responses suggest that a significant amount of energy is being consumed by individuals seeking to survive violent family experiences, thus inhibiting their ability to fully enjoy a meaningful life in relationships among family members and friends and in service to their fellows and their Church.

Certainly these wounded individuals and families deserve a compassionate response from the Church. To remain indifferent and unresponsive is to condone, perpetuate, and potentially extend such behavior. To respond with acceptance, understanding, comfort and practical help is our moral responsibility and tangible evidence of the presence of Christ in our midst.

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Global statistics reported in Violence Against Women in the Family (United Nations, 1989). Used by permission.