

SOCIAL VISIBILITY AND TOLERANCE TO FAMILY VIOLENCE

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This paper analyzes a phenomenon common to all types of family violence (child abuse, abuse of women, or abuse of the elderly in the family context), but which has received little attention. The phenomenon in question is given the metaphorical label "iceberg", in reference to the notion that only a small portion of all cases of family violence become known, the vast majority being socially and institutionally invisible. This paper questions the supposed invisibility of family violence, and stresses the need to consider, in order to understand this phenomenon, the still high levels of social tolerance to some types of violence in the family, a tolerance which is closely related to social and institutional attitudes.

Este trabajo reflexiona sobre un fenómeno común a todos los tipos de violencia familiar (menores, mujeres o personas mayores maltratadas en el entorno familiar), aunque escasamente analizado. Un fenómeno que se expresa metafóricamente como el "iceberg" de la violencia familiar y que se refiere al hecho de que tan sólo una pequeña parte de todos los casos de violencia llegan a ser conocidos, siendo la mayor parte de esos casos invisibles social e institucionalmente y, quedando, metafóricamente, por debajo de la línea de flotación de ese "iceberg". En este artículo se cuestiona esa supuesta "invisibilidad" de la violencia familiar y se subraya la necesidad de considerar, para comprender este fenómeno, los niveles todavía excesivamente elevados de tolerancia social ante determinados tipos de violencia, tolerancia que a su vez está íntimamente relacionada con actitudes sociales e institucionales.

There is no doubt that the social visibility of family violence in its different forms (child abuse, abuse of women, abuse of the elderly) has increased progressively in recent decades, perhaps because social tolerance towards these problems has seen a parallel decrease. Nevertheless, we should not allow ourselves to be carried away by optimism. While it is true that there is greater social visibility and less tolerance towards family violence, there is, unfortunately, still a great deal of progress to be made. One of the major problems to be overcome relates to a characteristic shared by all types of family violence, a characteristic commonly known as the "iceberg phenomenon".

Through this metaphorical label it is attempted to reflect the considerable differences between the number of recorded cases and estimated true incidence. As the "iceberg" image suggests, recorded or official cases represent only a minimal portion of the problem of family violence in society. The majority of cases of vio-

lence fall "below the water line", invisible both socially and institutionally. That is, despite the increased social acknowledgement and concern with regard to family violence, it is still a largely hidden problem. In other words, this recognition, this concern and this greater social sensitivity does not prevent a situation whereby large numbers of children, women and elderly people that suffer violence fail to form part of the statistics that are supposed to give us an approximate idea of the "true" dimensions of the problem. Hence the well-worn phrase, "the figures available do not represent the true scale of the problem of family violence," or "the available data show only the tip of the iceberg."

In order to illustrate this situation, let us consider some data. In the document on family violence drawn up in 1998 by a working party of experts from regional governments and the Spanish Ministries of Education, Interior, and Labour and Social Affairs, it is stressed that the data on known child abuse account for only 10 to 20% of the true figure – a chilling and official confirmation of the iceberg metaphor (*Dirección General de Acción Social, del Menor y de la Familia, MTAS, 1998*).

With regard to violence against women, it is estimated that only between 5 and 10 percent of cases are reported. The document on family violence drawn up by the wor-

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king party of experts from the regions and ministries, referring to these data, states that “with respect to these statistics, the available data refers to the number of reports received by the police, which represents nothing more than the tip of the iceberg of family violence.” The iceberg metaphor in the case of violence against women is perfectly illustrated by the data from a macro-survey carried out recently by Spain’s Institute for Women (*Instituto de la Mujer*, 2000). According to the results of this survey, 4.2% of Spanish women over 18 claimed to have been victims of abuse over the previous year, at the hands of those living in their home, or of their partners that live elsewhere. This percentage accounts for a total of 640,000 women (of the 15,028,000 adult females in Spain). Moreover, in the same study, 12.4% of women over 18 were considered as “technically” abused, representing a total of approximately 1,865,000. However, and to give an idea of how apt the iceberg metaphor really is, over the last year only 20,000 cases of abuse were reported – a figure that would represent just 1.1% of women considered technically as victims of abuse.

Finally, as regards abuse of the elderly, the working party report stated having found “no studies or figures referring to the importance of this phenomenon.” Nevertheless, the same document recognizes that such abuse is “an invisible and underestimated reality.” Indeed, and if we are to judge by one of the few studies available, such as that of Pillemer and Finkelhor (1988) showing that only 1 in 14 cases were reported to the authorities, the all-too-familiar image of the iceberg emerges once again.

VISIBILITY, TOLERANCE OR SOCIAL ATTITUDES TO FAMILY VIOLENCE?

If we consider this image common to all types of family violence, whereby only a small fraction of this violence comes to light, we cannot fail to conclude that the social visibility of the phenomenon is still extraordinarily low (a conclusion that would be equally valid if, instead of knowing about 10 to 20% of cases, we knew about 40 to 50%, because this would still represent an intolerable number of people whose suffering is invisible to society and to those who are supposed to be doing something to avoid such pain). But neither can we avoid asking ourselves why so many situations of violence remain in the

darkness, below the surface – and this leads to the suspicion that levels of social tolerance of violence are still too high in our society.

For, is this lack of visibility really so overwhelming? Is the submerged part of the family violence iceberg really invisible? Is it, therefore, inevitable that such large numbers of abused children, women and elderly people receive no help, support or protection? Which types of abuse are easily visible, and come to constitute the “official” or reported cases of abuse, that is, the visible part of the iceberg? Which cases, or which types of victims, go undetected, and remain under the surface, which is the same as saying that they do not exist insofar as their potential for prevention and protection are concerned? Is this division between visible and invisible cases really a problem of visibility, or is it a problem of social tolerance to certain forms of abuse? And finally, why is the acknowledged fact that 70 or 80 percent of family violence cases are invisible not considered to be a social problem of the first order? These questions are not easy to answer, but we do have elements at our disposal that help us to reflect upon them.

First of all, the set of “official” or known cases, the tip of the iceberg of family violence, the part that appears in the statistics, tends to represent the most serious, chronic and often aberrant extreme of the spectrum of family violence (Gracia, 1995). These are cases in which the abuse cannot be concealed (e.g., because of the severity of the injuries or because of death), or in which other factors (such as marginalization) drew the attention of the social services. Moreover, it is well known that those from the most economically disadvantaged social groups and ethnic minorities have more probability of being labelled and reported in connection with abuse (Gelles, 1975, 1980; O’Toole, Turbett & Nalepka, 1983; Hampton & Newberger, 1985). They are cases that undoubtedly belong to the visible part of the iceberg. But what happens with the invisible cases – that is, the majority of cases of family violence?

Let us consider the case of child abuse. Here there are studies providing us with frankly revealing results with respect to the submerged part of the iceberg and its supposed invisibility (see Gracia, 1995). Such is the case of the national abuse incidence study carried out by the US government (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services,

1981). According to this study, one of the reasons adduced for filing away reported cases of abuse (and if they were reported it was because they had been seen) was that they were "not serious enough." This argument was used to file away the not inconsiderable figure of 39% of reported cases (Giovannoni, 1989). However, and as Giovannoni noted, what was truly remarkable was that "all of these cases were considered as valid cases of abuse, and the disagreement concerned the relative seriousness of abuse as a criterion for intervention" (in other words, 39% of abuse cases ceased to be official cases, even though they were indeed real cases).

The results of this study also mentioned the existence of a large number of cases where there was suspicion of abuse by different institutions (hospitals, schools, etc.), but no report. These cases, once they have been filed or it has been decided not to report them, become part of the submerged portion of the iceberg, but it should once more be stressed that this is not because of their lack of visibility.

Another interesting set of results is that contributed by studies attempting to identify the factors associated with the reporting of abuse cases or with the non-reporting of known cases. Among these factors are that of the minor's age (while 60% of abuse involving children under 6 was reported, 78% of cases involving 12-17-year-olds was not reported) and the type of abuse involved (less than 25% of cases defined as abuse and negligence were reported) (Giovannoni, 1989). Whether abuse is reported or not also depends on the seriousness of the suspected abuse. For example, it has been found that the cases reported by schools tend to be those in which the child him/herself calls attention to the abuse, in which a series of injuries or bruises is observed over time, or in which the result is so severe or shocking as to provoke an immediate report (Tite, 1993). Furthermore, Besharov (1993) observed that among the different categories of professionals studied, almost 50% of the moderate cases of physical abuse and around 75% of cases of physical negligence went unreported. Finally, if research shows that abuse cases fall into the category of "low priority," even more revealing is the finding that just 16% of abused children known to the authorities were investigated by the child protection services (Finkelhor, 1993).

All such cases help to swell the ranks of the socially invisible or submerged cases. The iceberg metaphor is no longer valid, because if they are cases that lie beneath the waterline, it is because they are deliberately held there, and if they are invisible it is because a curtain has been drawn to hide them. Here, as we can see, the problem is not invisibility (these cases are known about and have been seen), but rather tolerance towards certain forms of abuse.

With regard to violence suffered by women, it has indeed often been stated that we do not know of more cases due to the fact that there are so few reports and the long delay in reporting the cases that are brought to the attention of the authorities (i.e., women "put up with" violent situations for long periods before revealing them to others, either by reporting them or ending the relationship). Thus, what is really important is to understand the various reasons for this delay in seeking help and the small number of reports (Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 1997). In some cases, what the woman wants is not to leave the relationship but for the abuse to end. Moreover, the decision to end the relationship often substantially increases the risk of suffering more severe aggression, so that fear of reprisals must also be taken into account. Other reasons for not leaving a violent relationship are financial dependence, fear that the children will also become victims of the situation, fear of being alone, lack of social support, or psychological factors, such as minimization of the problem, shame, fear in general, feelings of helplessness, refusal to accept the failure of the relationship, or adaptation to the violence; nor should we forget the reactions from the social context, which often lead to situations in which the victim is blamed (Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 1997; Echeburúa & del Corral, 1998).

In any case, despite active attempts to prevent future victims of abuse, all too frequently obstacles are encountered that in most cases are the result not of the psychological limitations of the victim herself, but rather of the constraints imposed by the institutions of social control and social attitudes (Gelles, 1999). Thus, in many cases, the question of why women wait so long before asking for help or reporting situations of violence should be substituted by another question: why was help not offered sooner? Let us bear in mind an aspect that is fre-

quently ignored, which is the often chronic nature of violence: as indicated by the study carried out by the Institute for Women (*Instituto de la Mujer*, 2000), violence suffered by women takes place in the majority of cases (more than 70%) during the five years prior to anything being done about it. Is it really possible for five years of abuse to go totally unnoticed by a family's social environment? Among the possible reasons for this passivity of the social context, ignorance of the facts, at least, would not appear to be one of them. Let us refer in this regard to a study carried out by the CIS with a representative sample of the Spanish population (Study No. 1.867, *La condición social de la mujer*, April 1990), in which to the question "Do you know of any cases of abuse against women?" 29% of interviewees replied "yes" (to which must be added 17% that knew of child abuse cases and 16% that knew of abuse of the elderly). If 12% of women are abused and 29% of the population knows of a case of abuse against women, it does not appear that these cases go unnoticed within the social context of these women.

Finally, in the case of violence against the elderly, it is notable that the factors related to the lack of awareness and quantification of this problem (that is, to its invisibility) are similar to those that are used or have been used to explain the lack of visibility of other types of violence in the family, such as abuse against children or women. These factors, summarized by the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs working party on family violence, are as follows:

- The Spanish family tends to be "private territory": problems that occur within it are not exteriorized, and victims' families can conceal abuse and violence.
- The age of elderly people that report abuse makes their testimony less credible (curiously, the same was said previously about the testimony of children).
- Elderly people, especially those with a high degree of dependence and disability, no longer have a social life (though even though they may not be in contact with institutions, we might ask whether the institutions should be in contact with them), and are frequently socially isolated, a fact that obviously increases their social invisibility.
- The elderly themselves tend to hide such situations,

either due to shame or because they are trying in some way to protect the family members that are responsible for them.

As this working party concludes, abuse of the elderly is a reality insufficiently reflected in the statistics (nor socially recognized), due to factors such as its concealed nature, fear, or the shame of reporting one's own family.

There are undoubtedly still certain social attitudes that contribute little to helping any of this submerged part of the family violence "iceberg" to emerge. There is still a social stigma attached to abuse and violence of all kinds, which almost certainly leads, in many cases, to reluctance to seek or even to accept help (Kingston & Penhale, 1995). We still live in a society that resists believing that family violence is widespread, or at least much more widespread than might be expected judging only from isolated cases involving unbalanced people (for the visible part of the "iceberg" represents family violence almost always portrayed as something aberrant perpetrated by unhinged people or psychopaths). We are reluctant to admit that families have the same potential for violence as individuals and other social groups; while it is commonly accepted that outside the family context aggression and violence are likely to occur anywhere, there is a general refusal to accept such likelihood in the case of families – this constituting a curiously differential form of applying standards of human behaviour. It may well be that underlying this situation is the myth of "happy families," which has a strong influence in conferring something of a taboo on family violence (Kingston & Penhale, 1995).

It is taboos, myths, fear and social attitudes that help to explain the supposed invisibility of much of the violence that takes place in households, and that also help to explain the still high degree of social tolerance towards the problem. This image or metaphor of the iceberg, whereby only a small portion of family violence is known, reveals that the visibility of abuse in families (of whatever type) is still extremely low; it reveals that social tolerance is too high; but most of all it reveals society's failure to fulfil what is supposed to be one of its primary functions: offering opportunities for growth, development and improvement of the quality of life, as well as providing the resources necessary for the protection of its members (Wiehe, 1998).

All situations of abuse in the family are potentially visible. Children are examined by paediatricians, attend nurseries and schools, have relatives, do sports and other non-academic activities supervised by adults, and play in the streets and parks of their neighbourhoods. Women have relatives, friends, neighbours, interact with the local people, belong to associations, and have jobs. Elderly people abused by their own families have other relatives, have telephones, neighbours, visit or are visited by doctors, and attend (if they can) social centres... Truly, does nobody know anything? Does nobody hear anything? Does nobody see anything? Does nobody notice anything? Or is it that the deafness, the blindness, the insensitivity, the indifference or the fear of becoming involved in the lives of others only disappear when it is too late, or when dramatic or shocking injuries occur – of the type that are spectacular enough to attract the attention of the media?

THE PREVENTION OF FAMILY VIOLENCE: SOCIAL ATTITUDES AND SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

Let us compare for a moment, as Xavier Caño (1995) has done, the social reactions to two different social problems: terrorist killings and the murder of women by their partners. Between 1983 and 1993, terrorism caused 360 victims; in this same period, 609 women died at the hands of their husbands, cohabiting partners or boy-friends (a figure that omits deaths occurring as a consequence of the aggressive act, but two weeks or one month later). As we well know, the murder of women by their partners has not mobilized society or its institutions to anywhere near the same extent as the terrorist issue.

It is, therefore, fundamental that the attitudes of institutions and the general public change, that there is progress towards greater social sensitivity to family violence. If society, through its different institutions, were capable of transmitting the message that all types of abuse or cruelty are totally and absolutely intolerable, perhaps we would recover our sight, hearing and sensitivity.

It is not surprising, then, that all proposals for the prevention of family violence insist on the importance of promoting greater social sensitivity, aimed at reducing the level of social tolerance of family violence to zero. What is needed is social commitment to the idea that

violence in the family should not be tolerated in a civilized society. Proof that these ideas are practicable is provided by a public education programme carried out in Edinburgh called, precisely, “Zero Tolerance.” With the cooperation of public institutions, local organizations, community groups and associations and representatives of the academic community, and through lectures, public debates and publicity campaigns, this programme attempted to transmit a basic idea: the right of women and children to live their lives free of violence or of the threat of violence (Lloyd, 1995).

There is no doubt that greater public and institutional sensitivity would result in more investment of resources such as intervention programmes, information and direct attention services, training of professionals, promotion of research, specialized professional groups, support groups, specialist attention services, shelters, or financial aid, as well as the promotion of legal and penal initiatives and norms. Such resources and initiatives are fundamental to the prevention of family violence. However, some additional considerations are necessary with respect to such prevention.

There are two approaches to the prevention of violence in the family. The first assumes that it is possible to deal with the problem in isolation from the socio-economic, cultural and political context. The other approach considers wider social reform as a prerequisite (and a vehicle) for significant progress in the prevention of family violence (Garbarino, 1986).

As regards the first approach, research has indeed demonstrated that prevention “in isolation” is possible to a certain extent (see Hampton, Jenkins & Gullotta, 1996; Gracia, 1997; Wiehe, 1998; Hampton, 1999). Although there are still considerable gaps in our scientific knowledge on human aggression in general and, in particular, on family violence, we nevertheless know a great deal about processes, mechanisms of transmission, risk factors and protective or compensatory factors in relation to this phenomenon, allowing the design of intervention programmes such as those aimed at risk populations, which have demonstrated their effectiveness (see Gracia & Musitu, 1993, 1999). Even so, from this perspective, programmes frequently represent a crisis model in social intervention, in accordance with which social institutions only mobilize (and find money) once disaster has occurred.

In contrast, the hypothesis underlying the second approach is that sustained and generalized prevention can take place in association with social, economic and cultural reforms. Significant progress in the prevention of family violence as a social and cultural phenomenon requires progressive change in attitudes, values and beliefs towards children and the family, towards the meaning of parenthood, and towards the bases on which relationships are built, as well as new cultural models promoting alternative, non-violent forms of education, of interaction and of the solution of problems (Gracia & Musitu, 1999, 2000).

The family does not exist as a unit independent of other organizations in society. The family is a social system immersed in a given community and culture. From this point of view, domestic violence should also be understood in the context of certain values, attitudes and beliefs with respect to the family and to the relationships between members of the family. For example, the deep-rooted idea about the privacy of the family leads to a considerable reduction in the sense of community responsibility for the care and protection of the most vulnerable members of families, and this, in turn, helps to increase their isolation. The problems of a particular family thus become a private matter, beyond collective responsibility and commitment. But the daily suffering of, for example, an abused woman is not an exclusively personal or family issue. The passivity of the social environment of that woman and that family also reflects the (lack of) will of a community to assume responsibility for the welfare of its members (especially the most vulnerable). As long as there is silence and passivity from society towards everyday situations of abuse and violence, there will continue to be many victims of family violence that have to wait for a brutal attack before their suffering starts to become known outside of their immediate social context, or before they merit a news item in the communications media (which involves a high probability that they will not be alive to recount their experience).

And in this regard, what can be done? We might consider, in line with this second approach, the proposals of Recommendation No. R(85)-4 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to the member states on violence in the family. The Council makes, among others, the following proposals:

1. To inform and sensitize public opinion with regard to the extent, the seriousness and the specific features of violence in the family, in order to guarantee its adherence to the measures aimed at combating this phenomenon.
2. To promote the diffusion among families of knowledge and information on social and family relationships, on early detection of situations that may lead to conflict, and on the resolution of interpersonal and family problems.

We might also consider the steps proposed by Richard Gelles (1999), one of the pioneers in the study of family violence, for its prevention:

- To eliminate the norms that legitimate and glorify violence in society and in the family.
- To reduce the social stressors that may provoke violence (poverty, unemployment, poor housing, education and health services).
- To reduce the social isolation of families.
- To change the sexist nature of society.
- To break the cycle of violence (we cannot prevent violence if we teach that it is appropriate to hit the people we love, or if we consider that corporal punishment of children is an effective way of teaching violence).

The curious thing is that both Gelles' suggestions and the Council of Europe recommendations date from 1985, and both continue to be of prime relevance. The fact that Richard Gelles repeats his proposals 14 years later is because practically nothing has been done about them. Is it because of lack of sensitivity, lack of political will or lack of resources? Probably none of these. If we consider what family violence signifies in human and social costs, I believe we must look elsewhere for the reason. Societies do not benefit from family violence (it is detrimental to their own health and welfare). And even more detrimental is the situation in which the majority of that violence is invisible. The most intelligent thing for a society is to devote all its efforts to prevention, to sensitization, to education and to the prioritization of all kinds of preventive initiatives. In short, to maximize social visibility and minimize social tolerance with regard to family violence. And this is where societies have traditionally failed: there has been a lack of intelligence. But an intelligence that is neither numerical or verbal: a social intelligence. And in this regard we

might consider, finally, the remarks of Norman Birnbaum (Law Center, University of Georgetown), for whom “the response to the supposed blackness of the human heart is a renewed clarity of the social intelligence of human beings.”

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