

# Why is Violence against Children Acceptable?

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*Rehana looked as if she was eight years old but in fact, she was twelve. She lived in a small house with her father, stepmother and four other siblings in a suburb of Kampala. Her house shared an open courtyard with three other households. At least ten adults saw her hollow eyes and her thin face on a regular basis. Even more people saw her struggling with physical work that was well beyond the capacity of her tiny body. Some even saw her being threatened, bullied, beaten and starved. None spoke up. Rehana died because of violence against her. She died because no one in her immediate community raised their voice to protect her, to speak up for her or help her speak up for herself.*

Sadly, this is not an unusual occurrence. Although it happened in Uganda, it could have, and does happen in many countries that have, like Uganda, ratified United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 19 of the CRC clearly defines the protection that Rehana should have received. The State should "take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s), or any other person who has the care of the child."

Why is it then that violence against children continues unchallenged and appears to occur with impunity? At Raising Voices, we have been working with partners in East Africa to develop programmatic approaches to mobilize communities to prevent domestic violence. During the course of this work it has become clear that there are complex factors that contribute to prevalence of domestic violence. Obviously, until there is a political will, government agencies such as Family Protection Units and social welfare services are likely to remain under-funded, demoralized and ineffective. However, it is also true that a lack of political will and financial constraints are only a part of the problem. Other factors such as a community's notions about children's status within the family also play a key role. Informal consultations with a community in a suburb of Kampala revealed some of these underlying constructs:

- In the hierarchy of power distribution within the family, children occupy the lowest rung of the ladder, and as a result, are most vulnerable to violence. Children often become scapegoats for the frustrations of adults around them by mere virtue of their position in this hierarchy.
- At the most powerful end of the hierarchy are adult males who are socialized to assert their superiority as heads of families. Inevitably, this is often confused with infallibility and a lack of need for accountability.
- Due to an absence of alternative models, many adults within and outside of the family conduct their relationships with children by claiming absolute jurisdiction over their every decision. As a consequence, the tone and the substance of the relationship become limited by this power imbalance.
- Many adults have learned from their own family experiences to either petrify or patronize children in order to bend them to their will. The adult-child relationship is particularly susceptible to this type of corruption and a lack of a more equitable model has led to its normalization in the popular culture.
- Due to the enormous socio-economic stresses that many families are operating under, many adults have come to see a child as a 'possession' or a 'property' of the family and not as a distinct individual with rights.
- When resources are scarce, children are often seen as a drain on the family's resources. Their basic needs such as sufficient food, school fees or medical costs are seen as added demands on the family's already stretched budget.

- Violence against children is often discounted as 'discipline', 'guidance' or even a parent's prerogative.
- In some instances, children are seen as semi individuals and therefore the full moral force of conscience is discounted when adults, particularly family members, treat children badly.

It must be emphasized that this consultation was an informal one whose key objective was to identify constructs that perpetuate violence within the family. While the findings discussed above are reasonable conclusions to draw from the information shared by the community members, it is not meant to suggest that this is a complete picture of the family dynamics. Therefore caution should be exercised in generalizing about the wider culture from these findings.

With that caveat in place, it is our contention that at the *root of the domestic violence against children is the community's constructs about the value of children. This determines the types of relationships that adults construct with children around them.* While all relationships are developed within the context of the prevailing social norms and economic stresses, if the social structures of the community continue to devalue and objectify children, this will inevitably be mirrored in the adult-child relationships. Children's lower status within the social domain will continue to determine the level of violence against them. If the central operational model continues to be that the adult male may assert his will over all that are arbitrarily ascribed a subordinate status to him, the family unit will continue to be an unsafe place for many children.

Thus the work of preventing domestic violence becomes to challenge this status quo with clarity, creativity and pragmatism. It involves:

- a) Challenging the unjust power distribution within the family, a shared antecedent of a myriad of human rights abuses.
- b) Promoting equity in family relationships.
- c) Reconceptualizing the adult-child and gender based power dynamics.
- d) Inspiring the communal will and practical mechanisms that support and sustain this new vision.

### **Envisioning a broader approach to preventing domestic violence**

In Uganda, like many other countries, although several civil society organizations work to help children, none of them address the violence perpetrated against children systematically, especially within the family unit. Obviously it is not due to a lack of concern for children, but more due to the complexity of the problem. Addressing the dynamics of human relationships is a long-term process that cannot be done within the bounds of narrowly defined projects.

Yet there is an urgent need for a meaningful response. It can cogently be argued that all gains in promoting children's rights are fundamentally undermined if large numbers of children continue to live with violence within their homes. Every aspect of children's lives is affected. From their physical health to the possibilities they are able to imagine for themselves; all are limited by the experiences of domestic violence. Clearly, there is a need for comprehensive, longer-term work that is conceptualized within a broader framework. The following are some ideas for broadening the approach to preventing domestic violence:

*a) Reconceptualize violence not only as a degrading physical interaction but also as the context within which children have to negotiate their daily lives.* This is a bold revision of approach that broadens the scope of the work. It entails going beyond immediate acts of physical violence and addressing the politics of experience. It requires articulation of a new way of relating within the family and underlines the need for comprehensive interventions that address power dynamics of adult-child and gender based relationships. It avoids fragmented solutions that respond to immediate needs only and have minimal long-term impact.

*b) Recognize the very real link between domestic violence against women and that against children.* When coercion becomes an acceptable mode of asserting one's will over other members of the family, the demarcation between women and children as victims becomes blurred. Each incidence of domestic violence affects children profoundly, regardless of whether it

is directly against them or not. As witnesses to violence against their mothers or other women, children's sense of safety and understanding of justice is severely eroded. As scapegoats of frustrations and at the receiving end of the chain of violence emanating from men and passing through abused women, children learn that safety is deeply linked to abusive power.

*c) Constructing the work as promotion of family harmony opens the door to non-defensive dialogue.* This approach (as opposed to 'preventing violence against children') has many advantages and allows linkages with many existing organizations focusing on promoting women's rights. Many professionals and community leaders have found it easier to grapple with promoting family harmony and the ideas can be couched more effectively within the appeal to the best traditions of the community. When adults feel their power base is not threatened, the resultant goodwill bypasses many barriers to dialogue and it allows the discussion to focus around validity of violence as a behavioral response, instead of defensive posturing. Initial indications from community mobilizers have confirmed the value of this approach. The fulcrum of the discussions does not seem to be around whether the violence is legitimate but around the difficulty of reforming from this unacceptable behavior. Distracting discussions around the standard justification of corporal punishment as the authority figure's 'responsibility to discipline and guide children' have been avoided.

It is important that this broader approach is further variegated to address specific concerns of children and women. It must disaggregate and analyze in depth, the different reactions to violence and therefore response needs, that children and women have. Furthermore, it must address the violence experienced by children at the hands of women beyond the broader discussion of the futility of violence as a behavioral option.

*d) Work to elevate the status of children and women, not merely by assertions, but by a myriad of workable mechanisms.* Engage a broad cross section of the community to reevaluate the status of children and women within the family structure. Devise practical mechanisms such as collaborating with various community-based institutions to review operational policies, calling town meetings or developing Community Charters, that introduce the rhetoric of violence prevention into children's and women daily lives.

*e) Develop supportive community infrastructure that reinforces messages of equity and justice in relationships.* Injection of ideas without developing capacity within the community to understand, and honor those ideas is counterproductive. By persuading and inspiring the community leaders to uphold and promote a new way of relating through their day-to-day work increases acceptance. Role models from within persuade more effectively than external unfamiliar messages. Community decision-making mechanisms that demonstrate these values (police protocols, fair local courts, hospital procedures, local governance procedures) legitimize and even enhance the collective will to change the status quo.

*f) Recognize the need for linking the work of preventing domestic violence and violence against children within schools and the community.* While it may be too much for one agency to address adequately the deeper causes of violence in all spheres, drawing a demarcating line too rigidly may lead to fragmented solutions and loss of synergy. A concerted effort by several aligned agencies to prevent violence within the home (domestic violence), violence within schools (e.g. corporal punishment, hierarchical teaching methodologies), as well as violence within the community (e.g. children in situations of conflict, brutality towards street children) is likely to lead to a more sustainable change. Success in any of these domains requires acceptance of a different ethic of relating with children, and thus, has clear implications across the board on how we relate with children.

*g) Recognize that changing violent behavior at an individual and the community level is a process that goes through distinct stages.* These stages have been well defined (denial, recognition of problem, commitment to change, taking action and maintaining the change). Programmatic activities should recognize this process and phase the intervention accordingly. Simply asserting

that 'violence should be stopped' is likely to elicit skepticism or even a backlash. A phased approach, which begins with a non-prescriptive dialogue and relationship building, followed by raising awareness and building supportive networks and subsequently engaging the community over a period of time to maintain the momentum of preventing violence may be more effective.

### **Conclusion**

At Raising Voices ([www.raisingvoices.org](http://www.raisingvoices.org)), we have focused our efforts on developing programmatic approaches that address the nature of relationships between individuals. In a simple formulation, the work of preventing domestic violence is about inspiring more imaginative, respectful and mutual relationships; the types of relationships that don't lapse into formulaic, familiar roles of power imbalance. This work becomes particularly challenging when the relationship in question is the one between adults and children. However, as a community we can no longer continue operating with impunity or fail to raise our voices when other children, just like Rehana, are suffering and even dying on a regular basis.

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