

Domestic Violence against Women in the Conditions of War and Economic Crisis

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The main aim of this paper is to analyse the characteristics of domestic violence against women in Yugoslavia where the war in Bosnia and Croatia and economic crises have an influence. I report on the qualitative analyses of thirty-three cases of domestic violence against women.

War and Economic Crises^{3/4} the Specific Influence on Domestic Violence Against Women

As the base for analyses of specific influence of war and economic crises on domestic violence against women, I used 25 cases reported to the SOS telephone, four cases from Shelter for battered women and four cases reported to me in interviews which I did with women refugees from Bosnia and Croatia.

The general characteristic of all these cases is that the beginning or aggravation of violence is related to: the return of soldiers, nationalism, aggravation of social position and financial situation resulting from refugee status or from economic dependence of either husband or wife as a consequence of economic crises and refugee status. Twenty molesters were husbands and eleven were sons. In addition, one boyfriend molested his girlfriend and one refugee molested his landlady. The majority of women were Serbs, one was Moslem and two were Croats. Six women lived with husbands of different

nationalities—one with a Moslem, one with a Croat, one with an Albanian and the rest with Serbs.

All sons who molested mothers and eight husbands who molested their wives came back from warfare and brought weapons with them. Some of these men also molested their sisters as well as other relatives who lived with them and destroyed household furniture. All of them regularly used weapons (pistols, bombs) for threatening their victims. Some of them became more violent under influence of their war experience. Some started to consume alcohol and beat their mothers and wives for the first time when they returned home from warfare. Some women described their husbands as ‘persons who had become crazy after their war experience’. Even when they were not beaten, wives of such husbands called the SOS telephone and asked what they could do with them.

At the very beginning of the war some women reported so-called ‘post-television news violence’. This means that their husbands became very aggressive after watching television news on Channel 1, which was the main channel for broadcasting war propaganda. Some of these women were beaten for the first time in their lives by their husbands: sometimes violence was abrupt, unexpected, or more drastic, and women learned to stay away from their partners at that time.

Belonging to different ethnic groups or differences in political opinions of spouses are also the source of conflict and violence in marriages. In some cases violence became more drastic because of the wife’s belonging to an ethnic group different to her husband’s but in some cases nationalism provoked the violent behaviour of her husband. Nationalism did not dominate only in politics and the media. Its reflection is obvious in all, even personal, relationships. As Smith pointed out ‘everything that happens in global society is reflected in the family’ (Smith 1989). The abstract hatred against other nationalities was smoothly transformed into hatred against very close persons such as wives, children, relatives. They are seen as concrete symbols of enemies. But wives are also seen as parts of their husbands’ property which became bad and worthless because of their nationalities as well as the source of husbands’ shame and problems in contacts with other people.

One Croatian woman reported that in the last two years she had ‘been suffering awful violence from her husband because of her nationality’. He molested her earlier, too, but with the beginning of war and nationalism he became completely insupportable. He turned the child against her too. One other woman, also a Croat, is divorced but because of the bad financial situation had to continue to live in the same apartment with her Serbian husband. Her husband’s entire family blamed her for the war and the political situation. Her former husband became violent with the beginning of nationalism and beat her several times so that she had serious injuries and had to stay in hospital. A very similar situation was reported by a Serbian woman who lived with a Croat. She suffered death threats from her husband and his family, and she was beaten. One Muslim woman whose husband was Serb has been beaten regularly since the beginning of war. Earlier she was happy with her husband but when the war started the friends began to accuse her husband saying: ‘Why did you choose to marry one Moslem among so many Serbian women’. They found her guilty for everything

that was done against Serbs by Moslems. And he started to beat her every night after having drink with his friends. She had serious injuries and tried to escape but he refused to allow her to bring their child with her saying: 'It is a Serbian child and must stay here'.

Domestic violence against women may also be related to frustrations produced by refugee status. Sometimes the conflicts in refugee families result from a changed social status or a lack of financial security. When a husband does not work and his family has serious financial problems, he is frustrated since he is not able to support his family as it is traditionally expected from him. When a woman who was earlier economically independent from her husband is not able to find a job, she may be regarded as worthless and abused, usually psychologically, because of that. In some cases husbands spent some time at warfare as soldiers and have the weapons with them. In these cases, the violence is most dangerous and victim is most helpless. One woman refugee from Bosnia lived with her husband and child in a rented apartment. Both parents were unemployed. When the husband came back from warfare he started to consume alcohol, to rape, beat and threaten her with a knife. She would like to leave him but did not have anywhere to go.

A special problem existed in families which accepted refugees. Women who have both refugees and violent husbands in their homes report that their husbands became more violent. The imbalance in the family created by newcomers is used by men as a reason for violence against women. In such situations men are violent regardless of the nationality of their wives. Also, there were some cases of male refugees who took advantage of the hospitality of women (who accepted them for some time) and molested them.

Sometimes aggravation of the financial situation of the family and incapability of husbands to support their family as well as to satisfy their own elementary needs were sufficient reason alone for the husband's violent behaviour. One woman reported that her husband was violent for years but in recent times the violence became more drastic and dangerous. Her husband became nervous and more violent when their financial situation got worse. Earlier, he consumed alcohol regularly but now he has not the money even for cigarettes. He broke off the contacts with friends and relatives and spent all his time watching television.

Sometimes, the tension arising from different nationalities of spouses is added to an aggravated economic situation. This is especially serious in the cases when the nationality of the husband is seen as the cause of the loss of job or aggravation of the financial situation. One Serb woman said that her Moslem husband start to consume alcohol, to beat her and their child and to threaten to kill her after being fired from his job.

The majority of women called police and asked for help, but police either did not intervene or their intervention was not effective. Police did not take away the weapons from molesters. Sometimes they supported molesters who participated as volunteer soldiers in the war in Bosnia and Croatia and justified their violent behaviour as the consequence of their war traumas. Also, police officers often made mocking comments in response to the reports of battered women. They

made comments such as ‘what do you expect me to do, I was not the witness at your wedding’, ‘he is obviously in love with you’ and so on.

Conclusion

War and economic crises promote the criminalisation of society and are the source of frustrations and stresses of individual men which make domestic violence against women more widespread and dangerous than usual. Although sexist organisation of society, that is, imbalance of power in relations between women and men, is still the main cause of domestic violence, war and economic crises lead it to the dramatic point. Cultural norms, such as the male-dominated ideology regarding relationships between the sexes, influence acceptance of domestic violence in such a way that there is inappropriate reaction, or even absence of reaction by police and other institutions within the patriarchal social system. In the conditions of war this is intensified by the high rate of violent behaviour in general and widespread tolerance toward violence as a way of conflict resolution.

Reference

Smith, L. 1989, *Domestic Violence: An Overview of the Literature*, Home Office Research and Planning Unit, London.