

Committee on the Rights of the Child

Day of General Discussion

Friday, 28 September 2001 – OHCHR (Palais Wilson, Geneva)

Violence Against Children within the Family and in Schools

Submission by International Federation of Social Workers

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on

**VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN
WITHIN THE FAMILY AND IN SCHOOLS**

**Comments respectfully submitted by the
International Federation of Social Workers
seated in Berne, Switzerland**

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is at present composed of 76 national associations or coordinating bodies of professional social workers in a like number of countries representing close to half a million social work professionals. Initially founded in 1928, the Federation was recreated in 1956 after a disruption caused by the second world war.

Social work counters violence against children

IFSW has chosen to limit its comments to violence against children within the family.

Together with other child care professionals, social workers have first-hand experience in the difficult field of violence against children, and receive special training

- 1) to detect signs and symptoms pointing to possible acts of physical, sexual and emotional violence ;
- 2) to intervene with families to prevent all forms of violence against their children ;
- 3) to take all possible measures to stop violence against children.

Considerable contemporary literature and empirical evidence suggest that the ability of social workers to establish long-term relationships with families and children at risk is increasingly compromised by heavy workloads, deprofessionalisation, loss of morale and high staff turnover. This is particularly so in highly industrialised countries. Nevertheless social workers continue to strive to balance the difficult and sometimes seemingly conflicting roles of supporting families and individual change while at the same time monitoring and acting to protect children when required.

Social work allies in the fight against violence

1) A generalised understanding of child rights

IFSW believes that society at large, families and parents as well as social workers could counter some of the violence against children by a better understanding of the rights of the child. To this end, IFSW has for some years worked on a manual on social work and the rights of the child to be adopted by its Executive Committee in July 2001.

In order to be truly effective, child rights have to become deeply embedded in the human conscious and subconscious mind. While many parents no longer view their children as their property, some still do, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child can help them understand that rather than owners of their children, they are their prime carers. In short, a matter of 'stewardship without property rights'.

With social workers more knowledgeable on the subject and better able to impart their knowledge to parents and the family, the fight against violence can be brought onto a less emotional level, enabling parents to understand certain kinds of abuses as a violation of their children's rights rather than an accusation levelled against themselves.

2) Community and self-help work

With motivation a prime mover for behavioural change, social workers have long encouraged, or even started, family self-help groups and parenting groups. Both have been successful in various countries.

Furthermore, children's and parents' helplines are useful vehicles for children's spontaneous cries for help and parents' (in fact mostly mothers') search for support, either against the temptation of violence in themselves or for the denunciation of their partners' acts of violence.

3) Local authorities

Close links with local authorities are vital for social workers' action to prevent violence against children or to have swift measures taken to halt it. Good working relations involving regular consultation structures, including with the police, are valuable bulwarks against child abuse.

4) Allied professions

Social workers' teamwork with allied professionals : teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers among others, forms another protective network for children. This must be nurtured on the basis of mutual trust and respect.

5) **Child Rights Coalitions and child-focused NGOs**

This partnership is more useful for joint action on a more general level rather than in acute individual cases.

Final observations

The extraordinarily important issue of violence against children within the family is generally seen as one of the main origins of other forms of abuse such as commercial and other sexual exploitation of children and juvenile or adult delinquency. Although generally known, this should be explained to adolescents and future parents, in schools, sports facilities and other appropriate locations where young people congregate.

Corporal punishment is still usual in many cultures, and it may take time to phase it out. The same goes for child marriages which are likewise a form of violence against children. Open discussion of all these matters must be encouraged and, where possible, organised by nationals within their respective countries. As has been done in the case of harmful traditional practices, it may be expedient to approach such debates from a health angle.

Last but not least, the close relationship between violence against children and POWER (*of the stronger over the weaker*) needs to be clearly understood and publicly stated.