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Ksenia Limanskaya: Child Abuse as a Social Problem in Russia

About the author:

Kseniya Limanskaya has a PhD in Sociology from the Russian State University, Saint-Petersburg, Russia. Currently, she is a Lecturer at Saint-Petersburg University of Culture and Art, Saint-Petersburg, Russia.

Email: lksenia@yandex.ru

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Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen

Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

Klagenfurter Straße 3

28359 Bremen

Germany

e-mail: fsopr@uni-bremen.de

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Abstract

The subject of my research is child abuse in families as a social problem. The concept “child abuse” is defined as the specific behaviour of parents or the trustees, involving moral or physical damage to the child. Such damage is done intentionally or through obvious neglect of the child’s needs.

My work focuses on physical violence. The problem of emotional and sexual domestic violence and neglect is also mentioned in this work, but mainly, in to provide a context for the forms accompanying physical abuse.

I have used contextual construction in my research of a social problem as the basic theoretic methodological approach. The analysis of a problem in my work was carried out from an approach based on the works of such authors as Spector and Kitsuse, which deal with a social problem as a matter of definition. Spector and Kitsuse define a social problem as an “activity of individuals or the groups which are showing discontent and putting forward the statements of exacting character concerning some prospective conditions”.

The methods of receiving the concrete empirical information were: personal leitmotif interviews, the analysis of documents, a content analysis and the analysis of the secondary information.

This method of analysing such data seemed to be the only possible for the research of intrafamily violence, as child abuse occurs in the private sphere closed off to outside observers.

The contextual construction approach in research allows us to define the social problem of child abuse from the point of view of its public definition and to recognize the role of various subjects of public life in defining and solving this problem.

The approach assumes a consideration of the social problem of the cruel treatment of children in families as dynamic, as sequences of certain events. The approach enables one to study a social problem as having an active role in designing a new reality.

The approach allows one to study the opportunities which various public actors have to intervene in a problem.

Introduction

Child abuse comes in various forms. At the same time, the information on violence against children is hidden for many reasons.

Child abuse is the most common kind of abuse in Russian families. According to data from the State Office of the Public Prosecutor of the Russian Federation, in 2002 3,272 children died as a result of child abuse in families, serious harm to health was caused to 3,919 minors, all in all during year the 2002 94,121 children suffered from abuse (Kravchuk, 2003), which amounts to 6 % of all children in Russia. However, this data does not reflect the real situation in full.

On the basis of this and other data, it is possible to say that the rights of the child to have protection against abuse by parents or the persons with custody over them proclaimed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation and the Family Code (1995) Russian Federation are not fully respected.

The subject of my research is child abuse in families as a social problem.

Methodology

The contextual construction approach provides an opportunity to analyse a social problem as defined, designed, considering its objective components.

The dynamics of a social problem is understood as several stages of a social problem: occurrence, legitimisation, mobilisation of action, formation of the official plan of action, realisation of the official plan. Thus, designing a social problem is a process, the beginning and the end of which depend on how the society defines a problem, reacts to it and participates or does not participate in solving the problem.

The problem of child abuse in the family is a rather “young” social problem, which Western countries have faced only in the last three-four decades of the twentieth century, and in Russia over the last fifteen years. Up to now no representative research has been carried out at a national level that reveals the scale and nature of child abuse in families in Russia.

Method

Personal leitmotif interview

The chosen method of personal interviews gives ample opportunities in research and interpretations of child abuse in families. Personal interviews allow one to trace these cases and facts, while also enabling the researcher to estimate the emotional background and value judgments which quite often play a significant role in the reconstruction of the events under investigation.

The location of the empirical research was the social organization *The Child In Danger*, which provides social aid for minors who not received care or have got involved in crime.

Analysis of documents

Two groups of documents were used in the research: documents concerning investigated cases of violence against children, and legislative and statutory acts. The first group includes personal profiles of children, records of conversations with parents, and letters from children. The second group of documents consists of legislative and statutory acts defining the responsibility of parents for child abuse.

The documents are analysed from a position of the proclamations they contain about the obligations of the state in relation to children, especially the protection of their rights. The purpose of this is to reveal the principles and priorities of state policy in the field of the protection the rights of childhood.

Content analysis

In my research I used the content-analysis of sociological journals: *Sociological Researches* from 1993 to 2004, *The Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology* from 1998 to 2004, *Monitoring of Public Opinion*, and *The Journal of Researches in Social Policy* from 2003 to 2004. The semantic analysis of texts was used to reveal materials on the theme of child abuse. In addition, a content analysis of the city newspaper *The St.-Petersburg Vedomosti* from 1993 to 2004 was undertaken. The criteria for choosing the publications analysed were words like “violence against children” and “child abuse” and all their grammatical variations.

Desk research

To describe the dynamics of child abuse as a social problem, I analysed the information on the initiative groups, which have brought the problem into public arenas, i.e. the work of women’s movements, conferences where the subject of child abuse was mentioned, the publication of materials on this topic, and the foundation of care homes for children who have suffered violence.

Results

The essence of the social problem of child abuse

The essence of the social problem of child abuse is the fact that the normal development of children is restrained due to the irresponsibility or negligence of those responsible for the child. As normal development we understand the definition set out in the United Nations' Convention on the right of children. The social problem of child abuse, basically, has a latent character. Situations of child abuse take place in different public groups, in families with a different social standing and level of income. The problem of child abuse in families is widespread in all of the Russian Federation.

The analysis of the local research, the information from telephone hotlines and psychological services shows that after 1991 the number of cases of violence against children in families increased, and that the occurrence of child abuse within families is related to material prosperity and education.

Characteristics of the support system for children who have suffered child abuse in Russia

Child abuse has very a high level of abeyance, as parents (or the people with custody over the child), if they know about abuse against a child, have a vested interest in concealing this information, and other people are unable to find out about the cases of abuse.

Children seldom apply for help for many reasons, including the fear of punishment from parents, the fear of being sent to an orphanage, the fear knowledge about the abuse spreading at school and among friends, and doubts concerning the efficiency of legal aid.

It is necessary to note that according to the Family Law of the Russian Federation, "officials and citizens who know about a threat to the life or health of a child, about an infringement of its rights or legitimate interests, are obliged to inform social services". However, experts note that it is practically impossible to bring the guilty of such events to justice.

Research has shown that although the structures of support for victims of domestic violence organise activity by rendering assistance to children and their families, in most cases it is not effective. Parents might as a result be deprived of parental rights, or the overriding rights of the child may not be upheld (the right to protection (item 56 of the Family Law of the Russian Federation)), or the child will go on living in this "unsuccessful" family. In any case, within the limits of this system the rights of the child can not be defended.

The law on the prevention of violence in the family, the first edition of which was developed in 1995, still has not been passed. The analysis of the existing legislation shows that it is directed mainly at the prevention of adverse consequences for the child when harm is already done, and on establishing the responsibility of those who have already committed a crime.

The system of support consists of: firstly – receiving information on such cases from various sources; secondly – taking the abused child away from family, when its life and health are threatened; thirdly – checking the information received, and gathering materials on the deprivation or restriction of parental rights; fourthly – the referral of the request for the deprivation of parental rights to the judicial bodies for consideration. Lastly, if the request is approved, a placement is found for the child and measures are taken to protect its rights.

In practice, depriving a parent of parental rights because of child abuse is a rather complex procedure. The problem is that it is very difficult to prove the fact of abuse. Thus, it turns out, the majority of cases do not reach the court.

As part of our research, we investigated how those affected by child abuse define cases of child abuse. Parents or guardians tend to consider their violent actions to be normal. Even some social workers and employees of OPPN (the department responsible for crime prevention among minors) consider physical violence to be one of the comprehensible tools of the education of children. When examining a situation social workers tend to “keep the biological family together”; they are convinced that in an orphanage a child’s life would be a lot worse. A social worker has two choices: to take the child away from its family, that is to deprive its parents of their parental rights, or to leave the child in the family. The deprivation of parental rights does not necessarily uphold the rights of the child, in particular its basic right – the right to have a family. According to the experts, children rarely apply for help on their own initiative, despite the fact that they have legal right to do so.

There are the several reasons for this:

- Some children who have suffered violence in their family have no opportunity to turn to help because they are too young;
- Children “pity” their cruel parents;
- They are ignorant of their legal rights and the services to turn to if they are abused;
- Child victims of violence are intimidated by their parents.

These fears are not groundless. Even in cases involving minors, the militia (the police) tries not to institute legal proceedings; it does not guarantee privacy and safety to a victim, and often treats such complains mistrustfully or even with derision.

In addition, the level of artificial abeyance is very high, as crimes known to the police are not always registered. The concealment of crimes by the police is a product of their desire to decrease artificially the crime rate in a region and thus to increase the number of crimes successfully investigated, that is those statistics used by the authorities to evaluate the activity of the police.

As a result, such information comes late and from sources like hospitals, where children are checked in with severe physical, psychological and mental trauma.

At the moment there is no standard approach to making decisions in the field of the protection of children’s rights. As a rule, when making a decision, the employees of various authorities and organisations use the experience from solving similar problems, common sense, intuition and their own personal experience. Thus, the human factor often dominates the process of decision making, leaving a child’s fate dependent on the personal qualities of a specialist.

There is not sufficient preventive work, the bulk of which would be carried out by teachers in kindergartens and schools, doctors in polyclinics, etc. It is the representatives of such services who are supposed to be able to solve problems in families and react quickly and timely. However, they do not have any mechanisms and resources for effective work within families.

There are no efficient mechanisms regulating interaction between these various services working with the same group of families and children; mechanisms that would be able to compensate for the absence of a united board coordinating preventive work.

When a child is taken away from its family, the places to accommodate the child are very limited; besides, the forms approved by the specialists – from the point of view of the interests and development the child – do not dominate. Therefore shelter workers often leave the child in the family, in order to avoid sending the child to an orphanage. However, this option does not change the situation in the family and the child is still in danger.

The algorithm and the mechanism of actions of the corresponding services in case of the arrangements for a child after the request was rejected are dealt with under paragraph 156 of the Criminal Code. Now, if the claim is rejected and the child is returned to its family, no provision is made for his or her future or for work within the family.

Many experts making the decision on the destiny of a child are not familiar with the specifics of childhood; therefore a specific juvenile justice system is a necessity.

Attitude of the representatives of social services to “problem” families - both parents and children, almost never can be described in terms of “cooperation”. Their attitudes toward their “wards” show a great distance and an approach of the authority.

Difference in views, motivations, intentions, and at times absence of precise goals of their own work – these are the reasons that many positive processes in this area move slowly and inefficiently

“Child abuse” as a subject in scientific publications in Russia

We have discovered only seven publications on the theme child abuse in sociological journals. First of them has appeared in 1998. In 1999, 2000 and 2001 one material on a theme of child abuse in families appeared in press, in 2003 in the journal “Sociological Researches” has appeared three publications on this theme.

In these publication questions of a state policy concerning children, experience of research of cruel child abuse in family rose, systems of reaction to violence over children in the western countries were described.

This in itself is rather indicative and testifies, in our opinion, that the Russian social scientists are not ready yet for active discussion of this social problem and its representation on public arena.

“Child abuse” as a subject in Saint Petersburg city newspaper

The analysis of the city newspaper “The St.-Petersburg Vedomosti” from 1993 till 2004 has shown that modern mass-media tends to create stereotypical images of various social groups excluded from full participation in public life, such as single mothers, the unemployed, alcoholics, and other persons ranked as “deviant”, and impose these images in mass consciousness.

The quantity of the revealed publications on cruel treatment of children in families is insignificant; the problem is listed there among other social problems, they sometimes inform about thematic conferences, or about the organizations working with given social group. The empirical research carried out allows the conclusion that journalists of “The St.-Petersburg Vedomosti” are not anxious to present this problem to their readers.

Questions of revealing and social preventive maintenance of violence over children abused in families have not received the necessary legislative decision so far.

The approach assumes consideration of a social problem of cruel treatment of children in families as dynamical, as sequences of the certain events. The approach enables to study a social problem as having an active role in designing a new reality.

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