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14 April 2008

Children who witness domestic violence

Motion for a resolution¹

tabled by Ms Carina OHLSSON and other members of the Assembly

This motion has not been discussed in the Assembly and commits only those who have signed it

The Parliamentary Assembly is currently taking an active part in the Council of Europe campaign to prevent violence against women.

Most violence against women takes place within the family and the perpetrator is often a person well-known and close to the victim. These forms of violence are usually, if not also directly experienced by children, witnessed by children. In Sweden, the number of children witnessing violence has been estimated at 200 000.

Children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence, including in the family. Violence in all its forms, including witnessing violent acts, is detrimental to the development of the child. Still, violence in the family and the effects it has on children's lives is a largely hidden phenomenon.

Studies indicate that violent patterns are often established by experiences during childhood. These patterns are deeply gendered – boys who experience and witness violence are more likely to themselves commit violent acts and girls are more likely to find themselves in violent relationships. Urgent preventive measures, with a clear focus on gender roles, need to be undertaken to break these patterns.

In some countries, such as Sweden, the adult who is convicted for marital violence has to pay damages to the child for psychological damage by exposing him/her to violence in his/her own home; and in certain countries the need to defend children's interests is used as a justification for separating children from their parents to ensure that they do not have to witness such violence or suffer from its consequences. However, some people dispute the need for such a measure on the grounds that it may be even more harmful to the child.

In all cases of domestic violence when children are involved, the best interest of the child should prevail. This means to acknowledge the child's own rights and needs at every stage of domestic violence intervention. Their views can and often do vary from those of other victims in the family and need to be given due weight, in accordance with age and maturity, in every decision concerning them.

This issue is a major social problem but its importance is underestimated. Council of Europe member states must be invited to discuss this issue so as to alert the public, make parents and social welfare services aware of the problem and identify the steps that can be taken to help children who witness violence.

Signed (see overleaf)

1. Referred to the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, for report, and to the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, for opinion: Reference No. 3444 (Standing Committee, 29 May 2008).



Signed²:

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2. ALDE: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
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SOC: Socialist Group
UEL: Group of the Unified European Left