

The other side of domestic violence: the children who are left.

Serenella Spitale, Psychologist and criminologist

Introduction

This contribution wants to be a push for reflection, to highlight a delicate aspect related to the domestic violence between spouses: **the children who are victims of a witnessed violence.**

There are many cases where mothers are abused by their husbands. Some cases come to the light, others do not. We find some cases on the front pages of the newspapers near the word FEMINICIDE, others are consumed behind the close doors for a lifetime. What about those children who witness? How does an environment of aggression, whether verbal or physical, sneaky or explicit, influence the life and the future of those children? What happens to the orphans of a feminicide? Are they adequately protected and supported?

Risk of clinical consequences

When we think about domestic violence, the first person you think is the direct victim of violence, one against whom the aggressor acts. But the children who become witnesses of this violence, physically or verbally, are also victims.

Several studies show that children who witness domestic violence are at greater risk of suffering from **health problems, behavioral disorders** and **emotional trauma**, as well as being more likely to **develop mental health problems in their adulthood.**



They can get to **feel responsible for the abuse** that one of the parents has on the other, suffering from **sleep disorders, depression, anxiety, panic attacks**, having **problems at school, eating disorders** and **developing an aggressive character, with little capacity for empathy**; often they develop a **post-traumatic stress disorder.**

There is a high risk of **falling into further dysfunctional relationship dynamics**, from where they can be **batterers or victims of abuse themselves.**

In very young children exposed to chronic domestic abuse, it denotes a **lack of trust, a damaged affection**, and often even the **neuro-cognitive development is compromised.**

During the teenage hood, the situation may even get worse. The teenager who has experienced this situation could develop **self-relieving problems**, shelter himself in the **alcohol or drugs**, being engaged in **inappropriate sexual relationships** with the aim of getting affection, suffering from **depression, low self-esteem**, or other mental health problems.

Orphans of feminicide

Another side of the coin of the domestic violence are the orphans of femicide, the ones that Justice calls "collateral victims".

Those children (so far more than 1600) whose mothers have been killed by their companions, or former partners, can become murderers who kill themselves or end up in prison. Those are children who find themselves alone, entrusted to relatives, given up for adoption, migrants between institutions, communities, family homes, who, in addition to the psychological repercussions we have mentioned above, rarely receive the necessary help to address a situation that has been compared, due to the psychological implications that entails, to the child victims of violence themselves.

Help that consists of an adequate network of psychological, economic and social assistance that welcomes those children, protect them and comes in handy to overcome the trauma.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the society, the judiciary and the legislative bodies and the bodies who are responsible for the protection will work in synergy with both the issue of sensitization and towards a more quickly direction and implementation of the protection and support measures.

The minors who witnessed violence, are the adults of tomorrow. Ensuring a dignified and optimal present for these children, as well as an inalienable right, also means taking care of the future of our society.