

---

**Prof. Assoc. Dr. Edlira Haxhiymeri**  
University of Tirana  
edlira1960@yahoo.com

**“Factors Associated with Child Maltreatment”  
(Case of Tirana Shelter for Victims of  
Domestic Violence)**

**Abstract**

*This paper is focused on the factors that cause violence on children at home environment. The author based her research work mainly on observations of children's behavior and their interactions with mothers while staying at a 'Shelter for Battered Women and Girls'. Children's artwork, writing pieces, memories, playing mood were subject to interpretation. A group of twenty-two children were studied. Although the terms child abuse and neglect are frequently used together, actually they refer to two different types of problems, each taking different forms. A more appropriate comprehensive term is **child maltreatment** which can be divided into two major types: child abuse and child neglect (Faller, Bowden, Jones and Hildebrandt, 1981). The author believes that the results of this research will serve as a professional tool for social workers, psychologists, teachers and other professionals who work closely with children to help identify factors related to child abuse, prevention of abuse and treatment of physically, emotionally and sexually abused children.*

**Key words:** child abuse, child neglect, child maltreatment, children's artwork,

## 1-Introduction

Domestic violence continues to remain a serious problem in the Albanian society. According to Albanian Helsinki Committee, 24 women lost their lives during 2013, compared to 22 victims of domestic violence during 2012. Hundreds and thousands of women suffer from domestic violence in silence. A recent survey (Albania Equality Factsheet) found that 59.4% of women have experienced some form of domestic violence in their lifetime, with 53% currently leaving in a violent relationship.

Violence towards women remains a deeply worrying phenomenon which is commonly viewed and treated as a family issue within a broader patriarchal socio-cultural context and is extended across the country, affecting all strata and ages of the society (Vatra, 2010).

A recent international study of UNICEF on violence towards children included young boys and girls up to the age of 19. Its findings for Albania show concerning high occurrences of violent education methods used at home for children (with 77% of children being violated for disciplining purposes). Findings from the 2007 survey revealed that ... the majority of children in urban and rural areas reported being physically battered by a family member, children living in rural areas (**67.5%**) ...and children living in urban areas (**51.2%**) ( INSTAT, 2007 ).

BECAN Research (2013) found that more than **67%** of children, age 11, 13 and 16 admitted that they have experienced some form of abuse in their life. This does not only has un-repairable consequences in developing their socialising skills (52% are bullied and 48% having physical fights with peers) but also has immediate effects in sustaining their physical wellbeing (2% are victims of homicide). What counts is that they are raised as violent adults and from an early

age they accept violence as a normality of family and social life. Thus there are 37% of male youth and 24% of female youth at the age of 15 to 19 years who think that a husband/partner is justified in hitting or beating his wife or partner for at least one of the specified reasons, i.e, if his wife burns the food, argues with him, goes out without telling him, neglects the children or refuses sexual relations. Findings become especially worrying when compared to findings of other neighbouring countries. In all indicators Albania scores much higher than Serbia, Macedonia, BiH and Montenegro.

The Shelter for Battered Women and Girls, established under the National Network against Gender Based Violence and Human Trafficking, has provided safe housing, psychosocial support, and basic living services to battered women and their children since 1998. Women, girls and children are illegible for these specific services if they are in imminent physical danger and have no access to other resources. The beneficiaries of the Shelter service have few, if any, emotional support and come to the Shelter as their only alternative. According to the rules of the center they are entitled to remain in the residence for a maximum of 6 months.

Initially, the shelter staff focused on the psychosocial support for battered women. Over a period of time, staff came to realize that the children who had witnessed domestic violence also presented their own emotional and developmental problems. Among children's symptoms were depression, excessive separation anxiety, psychosomatic concerns, low self esteem and feelings of powerlessness.

Based on the experience of dealing with children coming from violent environments, Shelter established a special program for providing services directly and specifically to the youngsters.

## 2- Methodology

This paper aims at bringing to the attention of the professional readers some of the main factors that cause child maltreatment at different ages based on **a qualitative method**. The researcher decided to use a set of tools to answer to the research questions. The techniques used for these reasons were:

- Interpretation of children's drawings to identify maltreatment,
- Observation,
- Assessment of development,
- Assessment of behaviour,
- Interviewing

The paper will be focused on the following research questions:

- How serious is the problem of child maltreatment in Albania?
- How can we identify cases of child maltreatment
- What causes child maltreatment?
- How can we deal with it?

To illustrate the research findings, the author is going to use some of the children's artworks. The interpretations which will be presented are not intended to represent the only possible analyses of these drawings, nor will they be all-inclusive. Rather, they will highlight specific areas of each drawing that we feel will help the reader to better understand and appreciate the artwork on the aspect of child maltreatment.

Children of both sexes and of age from 3 to 13 were put un-

---

der observation while being supported to overcome their emotional and developmental problems. The observation lasted for a period of two years. A group of twenty-two children were studied. The sample allows the researchers to draw some conclusions and make generalizations that can serve to a broader professional community and public, as well.

While the author collected a substantial representation from preschoolers, she felt it would be extremely difficult for the average untrained person to adequately understand the significance of the scribbles and symbols. The work of older children was not included because the sample was not large enough to be significant. The selection from elementary-school-age children, however, included a variety of artwork by youngsters of various economic backgrounds; it is particularly important because it can serve as a guide to professionals who have daily contact with children from five to twelve years old.

Out of twenty two children that were put under observation, only few artworks will be presented in this paper. The reason is that some of the mothers did not give consent to use the artwork of their children for scientific research. The illustrations, though, are sufficient to draw conclusions.

Clinical observations at the Shelter suggest a strong correlation between factors that fuel child maltreatment and the disturbances in the development of the children's emotional and intellectual functioning.

By identifying both factors and consequences through the youngsters' artwork, we hope to continue to sensitize main actors and professionals to the profound effect of domestic violence on the child. In this way, the value of early intervention can be more adequately perceived and, hopefully, the cyclical effects of family violence

can be broken. The observation and interpretation was supported by the professional literature.

## 2- Children's drawings - theoretical reflection

The author of this paper was aware that children's drawing skills, as in any other skill or ability, follow a developmental sequence. Since 1963 Harris (1963) has identified specific stages of children's ability to draw. At approximately age four the child produces lines. In this stage one can easily draw single parts of a person. At around age five to six, the child climbs the next stage of drawing: *descriptive symbolism*, where body parts of a person become distinguishable.

The next age group (seven to nine or ten) draws a more true to life figure and adds more detail, such as clothing and decoration. From age ten to eleven, children develop *visual realism*, which is characterized by improvement of technical skills. Although each child's perception and representation are distinctly unique, a great deal of research in the field of art therapy, psychology and social work has resulted in the development of specific methods for interpreting this artwork.

**Projective drawings** are useful in gathering information about an individual's cognitive and developmental levels, degree of flexibility, and overall personality integration. The quality of the child's interaction with the environment is graphically presented (Buck, 1981).

Hammer (Hammer 1980) pointed out that the manner a youngster approaches a drawing can be extremely revealing terms of personality dynamics. The child may be happy or sullen, talkative or quiet, anxious or relaxed, self-confident or self-doubtful, dependent or independent.

When analyzing children's artworks one should bear in mind that most children are not particularly artistically inclined or talented. Nevertheless, their drawings are sufficient enough detailed to allow for interpretation.

When interpreting the drawings of children been treated in the Shelter for Battered Women and Girls, a full package of drawings that include Person, House and Family, is used. Upon completion of the drawing phase, a planned interview is initiated. In this case, a set of standardized questions is been used to provide insights into various aspects of the drawings by having the children describe, clarify, and interpret the objects. It allows the child to free associate and provides the counselor with knowledge on the youngster.

Hammer (1980) has provided some important and fundamental aspects in analyzing the content of the artwork. *The size of the image* on the paper is highly significant and provides a measure of the subject's self-esteem (Buck, 1981; Di Leo, 1973; Hammer, 1980; Jolles, 1971; Ogdon, 1981). In a normal drawing, the human figure occupies no more than half of the A4 page. If a drawing is larger, this may indicate personality features such as aggression, grandiosity, and compensatory defenses. Conversely, if we are presented with a tinny drawing, this may infer inadequacy, inferiority, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and a weak ego (Hammer 1980).

*Detailing is another aspect* that is examined in drawing interpretation. This feature mirrors an individual's awareness and interest in the outside world. Hammer (1980) believes that inadequate detail suggests an inner emptiness, a low energy level, depression, and an introversive type of personality. On the other side, the excessive use of detail represents an abnormally strong need to structure the total environment. A further analyses of the details represented, may help in better understanding of the conflict.

*Erasures* in the production must be considered in the analyses of the drawing. When the erasures are used in moderation and followed by improvements in the drawing, this indicates flexibility and an ability to be critical of one's own work. Excessive erasures are interpreted as general dissatisfaction.

*Placement of the figure* or object is also an important factor for consideration. A central placement of the drawn object is normal and suggests that the person is reasonably secure. Hammer (1980) adds that this indicates that the individual is self directed and self-centered.

An image placed above the middle line suggests that the person is struggling to meet the objectives. An image placed below the midline represents feeling of insecurity, depression.

*The side of the page* that is utilized is significant, as it also projects attitudes in regard to self. Placement of the right side, according to Ogdon (1981), suggests a degree of intellectualizing, control, and behavior that is largely governed by the 'reality principle'. The child may also reveal the fact that he/she is preoccupied with the future. Objects on the left side of the page have been thought to reflect a more impulsive individual who is focused on the past.

*The pressure exerted* by the pencil may also be revealing. When it is fairly consistent throughout the drawn work, this implies that the child is 'normal' or 'stable'. Heavy strokes suggest inner tension, forcefulness, and a tendency to act aggressively (Hammer 1980), while light penciling project a personality that is colored by hesitation, fearfulness and indecisiveness.

*Coloring*, the use of different colors allows us to understand feelings and experiences that children are going through. Bright colors are usually interpreting as representing positive feelings of chil-

dren and dark colors as presenting fear, unsafetiness, anger, pain, hurt etc.

Other aspects that are essential to be interpreted in children's artwork are also symmetric, omissions, distortions, proportions, shadings and weather. The authors of this paper will refer to them while interpreting children's artwork.

### **3- Discussion and results**

#### **a- *The human figure drawing***

Of all the types of drawings created by children, the human figure is the subject and is also closest to being the child's inner self portrait. According to Hammer (1980) and many others researchers in this field ( Di Leo-1983, Jolles-1971 and others) drawing a person can elicit a child's feelings about the self, the ideal self, and perceptions of significant individuals in his or her life, such as a mother, father, sister, or brother. In addition, a child/s personality traits, attitudes, concerns, and interpersonal skills are represented through this vehicle.

When using this tool to identify problems that the child is experiencing, the therapist leads the child towards an interpretable drawing. The result of the child's drawing must serve as a communication between the child and the therapist. The specialist can, in this case, study carefully the size, placement, line quality and pressure, spontaneity and rigidity, and emotions. Inclusion or omission of specifics, such as the head, the body, body parts, limbs, hands, fingers, clothing and the presence of other details such as clouds, sun, or other persons.

Koppitz (1968) has identified 30 indicators of possible emo-

tional disturbances in children. Among them we can mention: (1) quality of drawing: poor integration of parts of the figure, shading of the face, shading of the body, shading of the limbs, asymmetry of body parts, tiny figures or very large figures; (2) items or features like: eyes, teeth, arms too short, arms too long, big hands, arms without hands, legs pressed together, genitals, and the presence of rain or snow; (3) omissions: head missing, arm missing, trunk missing, etc.

These elements are always considered in relation to the developmental characteristics of age group. The illustrations that we will present in the coming pages are administered as projective tests. The interpretation will offer some generalized themes that may be applicable to children's spontaneous drawing as well. At this stage, we would underline, that the interpretation of only one figure, is not and cannot be considered as the only source to decide about child's world. In order to reach to professional conclusions, a series of drawings and techniques have to be used.

### **Case 1 – Artan**

What struck in this case is the extreme lack of details in a drawing of a child six to seven years old. There are no arms, no fingers, no legs, no trunk. It looks as if the child is trying to control his emotions or impulses. There are some details that are atypical for human drawings. One can easily read confusion and emotional concern on the drawing. Watching at the bowing of the body, one can think that the child is trying to transmit pain, sufferings on his part.



b- ***The family drawing***

The family as a system is more powerful than the total of the individual members. The family is a dynamic interacting force which influences the growth and development of the child. The child's self-concept is built while he/she gradually matures in the family environment. The role of parents and other siblings in the family remains of great importance to contribute to the self-concept and the inner world of the child. If the interactions with parental figures are positive the child experiences and develops healthy and positive self-concepts. If these feelings and values are negative, the child may develop negative self-concepts.

In the case of the family drawing, each person represented is individually evaluated. It is important to note how each person is using his or her body: are they using them to show off, to hide or be seductive? Do they seem proud or ashamed? The communication in the family is much described by the position on the paper and in relationship to each other. The alliances, coalitions and family disharmonies are clearly presented in children's family drawing. It is im-

portant to realize that in a child's family drawing one can depict the sense of individualization existing in the family or not. Cases when family members are presented in the same clothes, sizes and are put in the same position illustrate lack of individualization in a family environment.

Minuchin (1981), in his theory of structural family therapy, addresses the issue of boundaries between the parents and the children. The parents should be a separate entity with explicit roles of power and dominance. When the family system has broken down, a child may assume the responsibility or role of a parent. This is clearly depicted by the size of the child in relation to the parent and the child's role in the family activity portrayed. Other factors to consider in analyzing a family drawing are omission of family members or erasures, which most often point to some type of conflict. Some researchers allude to the importance of the drawing style and suggest some questions: how is family organized in the picture? Are they on different sides on the paper? Are barriers erected between family members? Who is taller or shorter? How is this with the real height? Who is placed in the foreground and who in the background?

The collection of data on all the above mentioned issues and their interpretation can give information on the child's family. Most of this information cannot be accessible otherwise.

## **Case 2 - Alonso's family**

The drawing of the family of eight year old boy clearly presents the alliance in the family: the three children are put on the same side with their mother, whereas the father is drawn separately. Mother is

higher and colored blue. Sisters are red and brown and the other side of their mother. The boy is not colored, positioned on the other hand of the mother, facing the abusive father.

The lack of a positive tonality for him is evident. Children of his age, normally, draw themselves and use bright colors. The boy makes an attempt to stay together, to hold each other in a difficult moment of their life.



### c- ***The house drawing***

It is within the house that the basic needs of the family life, affection and security are sought (Di Leo, 1983). Symbolically, the house serves as a self-portrait, reflecting the child's body image, maturity, adjustment, accessibility to others, contact with reality, and

general emotional stability. Experts in the field of projective drawings believe that the house also represents the child's perception of the parental home. This includes the youngster's view of his or her home life, the quality of his relationship with his family, his sense of how he is experienced by his family, and the child's attitudes concerning both his parents and siblings.

Interestingly, the house is the child's second favorite subject to draw after the human figure. Children, in general, do not resist drawing their house, when asked to do so. On the other side, this is a very method to elicit valuable information. While analyzing a child's house drawing, the first step is to interpret the feelings it communicates: is it a pleasant drawing, scary, cheerful etc?

The next step is looking at specific factors such as size, placement, line quality and pressure, bizarre details etc. Expected details in a house drawn by persons over six years of age include at least one door, one window, one wall, a roof, and a chimney (Buck, 1981), all of which have individual symbolic meaning. Other aspects important for consideration in the interpretation of a house are: the rooms which are included or excluded; the presence of the pathways; the use of the entrance details leading up to the house; and the inclusion of a ground line.

The door is representative of the child's accessibility to interpersonal contact. As an example, an open door suggests a strong need for emotional warmth; the absence of a door reflects a tendency to withdraw from the environment (Jolles, 1971). Just as eyes are our windows to the world, the windows in a house provide an eye to the environment.

Windows, adequate in number and size, indicate normal personal accessibility (Hammer, 1980). The absence of the windows is a

child's way of saying: "I will make it impossible for you to see in". At the same time, the child pays the price of not being able to see out. In understanding the symbolism communicated by the door and the windows, it is important to look at the location, number, style, size, proportions, emphasis and details.

Walls generally show ego strength, wide walls represent strong ego and thin walls a fragile ego. Overemphasized walls are attributed to the child's strong and conscious need to maintain ego control.

The chimney is a symbol for the male genitals or a symbol of warmth in the child's close relationships. The particular treatment given to this part of the house, such as its emphasis, reinforcement, absence, size, transparency, and the number of chimneys, are all significant. The characteristics of chimney smoke, shape, and intensity, must also be considered.

Buck (1981) states that there is sound empirical evidence for the assumption that the roof symbolizes thinking and fantasy when the house is viewed as a psychological self-portrait. The relative size of the roof, in proportion to the rest of the house, tends to indicate the amount of time and energy the child devotes to fantasy. The overemphasized roof is interpreted as a fear from people of losing control over their fantasy life. The omission of the roof reflects an inability to fantasize. All of the above information, when combined, offers a rich source on child's inner world.

Following we will be presenting few examples of house drawing by children of different ages, all been supported by Shelter program.

### Case 3- House of Ani

Ani is a seven year old girl that belongs to a family of five persons. Her parents are going through the divorce after a long history of abuse.

Ani and her brother are being taken care from their grandmother from father's side. This drawing represents Ani's emotional situation after six months treatment in the Shelter.

One can see hope in it. There is Sun and light.

The door is closed and black.

Ani drew two windows, one closed and black, the other red.

There is chaos in the family. Instability in the family environment is clear. The child is being exposed towards several traumatic experiences in the family. There is hope outside the house.



Whereas the interpretation of the children's art work has helped child social workers to identify the maltreatment, observation of children interactions and behavior and the interviews helped to identify factors that fuel child maltreatment at home.

There are some **major factors** that fuel all forms of abuse. **Different factors** are identified as related to different forms of abuse. Three categories of factors are identified for each of the types of child maltreatment:

- **Individual related factors,**
- **Family related factors,**
- **Social and cultural related factors.**

Main factors that cause each form of child maltreatment, as identified through work with children, are presented in the following paragraph. The interpretation of these factors will be the focus of another paper.

### 1- **Factors Associated with Child Neglect**

**Individual related factors:** these factors result to be related to the mothers' personality characteristics. Mothers dislike children, are impulsive, unable to take responsibilities, exhibiting ego deficits.

**Family related factors:** absence of father in the family, dysfunctional parent child relationships, disengagement of family members.

**Social and cultural related factors:** poverty and social isolation.

## 2- Factors Associated with Physical Abuse

**Individual related factors:** parental abuse as a child, inappropriate expectations, inadequate parenting skills, role reversal, lack of empathy to children's needs.

**Family related factors:** interaction of parents and children, family composition.

**Social and cultural related factors:** poverty, social isolation, cultural and religious values.

## 3- Factors Associated with Psychological Maltreatment

**Individual related factors:** personality characteristics of mothers.

**Family related factors:** parental scapegoating, parental child communication pattern, inappropriate expectations.

**Social and cultural related factors:** stress, sex role stereotyping.

## 4- Factors Associated with Child Sexual Abuse

Context in which sexual abuse occurs

Disbelief of reports of sexual abuse

Psychopathology of perpetrators

---

## 4-Conclusions and recommendations

- The number of non-accidental injuries against children in Albania shows that violence threatens seriously the wellbeing of children and their right to life.
- Albania does not have a mandatory reporting system on violence against children. Given that, there are no national guidelines concerning standard data collection on child maltreatment and because of this it is impossible to have a real picture of the phenomenon.
- Maltreatment has a considerable influence on the behavioral problems of children.
- Parents' history, their education, the relations in the couple as well as poverty, housing inadequacy and financial problems are contributing factors towards violence against children in Albania.
- Although violence against children constitutes a criminal offence, very few legal actions are taken by agencies to report the perpetrators.
- Children continue to live in the same family premises even when extreme forms of abuse are reported to have been exercised by a member of the family.
- Prevention of CAN (child abuse and neglect) in Albania is neither streamlined among the system of child protection nor to the child related services.

***What to do in order to prevent child abuse at home?***

This paper aims at giving some recommendations for the professional community such as social workers, psychologists, therapists, educators as well as recommendations for the wider public, parents being an important actor in broader sense.

First, the emotional disorders reflected in the artwork of children in the Shelter can serve as a point to begin with early treatment of children in order to prevent behavioral disorders such as delinquency, stealing, lying, and in sometimes inability to establish meaningful friendships or to develop trust in others.

Secondly, the artwork can serve as a professional tool to collect information that is hard to be collected otherwise on factors related to child maltreatment.

Third, this technique can also help to lead the professionals to family counseling and training of parents in parenting skills.

Fourth, group work with children in the Shelter can help improve the self image, clearly represented in their drawings and build positive social skills.

Fifth, in order to prevent child abuse and neglect, it is important that actors put in motion the systems by which the early detection of domestic violence can be made, the appropriate interventions instituted, and the cyclical effects of violence eradicated.

---

## References

- Albanian Helsinki Committee, Annual Report 2013, Tirana, Albania
- BECAN Research - Balkan Epidemiological Study on Child abuse and neglect, Tirana, 2013
- Buck, J. *The House-Tree-Person technique*. Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services, 1981.
- Di Leo, J. H. *Children's drawings as diagnostic aids*. New York: Bruner/Mazel, 1973.
- Faller, K., Bowden, M., Jones, C., & Hildebrandt, H. (1981). *Types of child abuse and neglect*. In Social work with abused and neglected children (pp. 13-31). New York. Free Press.
- Hammer, E. *The clinical application of projective drawings*. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 1980.
- Harris, D. *Children's drawing as measures of intellectual maturity*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963.
- Jolles, I. *The catalogue for the qualitative interpretation of the House-Tree-Person*. Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services, 1971
- Koppitz, E. *Psychological evaluation of children's drawing*. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1968.
- Minuchin, S. *Family therapy techniques*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Ogdon, D. P. *Psychodiagnostics and personality assessment: A handbook*. Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services, 1981.
- Vatra Psychological Centre, Annual Report, 2010.
- <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/census/census-2011/census-2011-pre-ferences.aspx>
- <file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/NewFolder/albaniaequalityfactsheet.pdf>