



# The status of child abuse in Cyprus: Evidence or global implications<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

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Child abuse permeates every walk of life and is shaped and perpetuated by the cultural context in which it is embedded. To help sketch out a profile for child abuse in Cyprus, the following areas are reviewed: (a) evidence on the impact of Greek culture on child abuse (b) social services available to child victims in Cyprus; and (c) international and local child protection policies. Subsequently, attention is placed on the three empirical studies performed to date on child abuse in Cyprus. It is concluded that the third study (Georgiades, 2008) is more in agreement with the second study (ACPTFV, 2004) in regards to severity and gender trends and less consistent with findings of the first study (UNCRD, 2000) by all accounts. There is no apparent reason detected for the evidentiary discrepancies. Moreover, the Cyprus social welfare department is found to vastly under-investigate the child abuse problem. Pertinent international policy, research, and practice implications are highlighted.

**Key Words:** Child Abuse, Greek Culture, Cyprus, International Implications

Child abuse is a problem with no ethno-cultural, social strata, family structure, or gender boundaries (e.g., Amodeo et al., 2006; Arai, 2004; Chavez, 2007; Chen et al., 2006; Duran et al., 2004; Georgiades, 2008; Lalor, 2004; Malley-Morrison, 2004). The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 40 million children under the age of fifteen are maltreated (European Network of National Observations on Childhood [ENNOC], 2007). Moreover, nearly 53,000 children are murdered each year, and about seven percent of boys and fourteen percent of girls are sexually violated (WHO, 2007).

In South Africa, child sexual abuse is even considered a cure for HIV/AIDS (United Nations, 2002). In 2002, over 67,000 child sexual abuse cases were reported in South Africa. However, it is estimated that the number of unreported incidents could be ten times higher (Flanagan, 2001). Underreporting (de Souza Eremita, 2007; ENNOC, 2007; May-Chahal & Herczog, 2003; Kim et al., 2007; Mathews & Kenny, 2008; Oz & Balshan, 2007) and the sexual exploitation of children via the internet (Cooper et al. 2005) are international concerns of growing proportions

## The Consequences of Child Maltreatment

Child abuse impacts biological, emotional, psychological, and social spheres of individual functioning. Some of the outcomes of child abuse include brain injury, depression, anxiety disorder

ders, low self-esteem, learning disabilities, eating disorders, smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, aggression and violence towards others, risky sexual behaviors, arrhythmia, specific gynaecological and gastroenterological disorders, endocrine and immune problems, and post traumatic stress disorders (Dallam, 2001; Kendall-Tackett, 2002; Mental Disability Rights International, 2006; Morrison et al., 1999; Silverman et al., 1996; Teicher, 2000; WHO, 2007).

While child maltreatment often occurs within the family, its impact goes further. Society as a whole pays a price for it both directly and indirectly. Direct consequences include costs associated with maintaining a child welfare system to investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect, as well as expenditures by the judicial, law enforcement, health, and mental health systems to respond to and treat abused children and their families. In the United States for example, a 2001 report by *Prevent Child Abuse* estimates these costs at \$24 billion per year. Some of the indirect consequences include future expenditures associated with juvenile and adult criminal activity, mental illness, substance abuse, and domestic violence. They can also include loss of productivity due to unemployment and underemployment, the cost of special education services, and increased use of the health care system. In the U.S. alone, the Prevent Child Abuse Organization (2001) estimated these costs to be more than \$69 billion per year.

## Child Abuse Services in Cyprus

In Cyprus, social welfare policy was introduced for the first time in 1946, when legislation was enacted to regulate the supervision of juvenile offenders, the aftercare of reform school boys, and the protection of deprived children. After Cyprus gained its independence from British colonization in 1960, social welfare became the responsibility of the Department of Social Welfare Services under the Ministry of Labor and Social Insurance. In the late 1980s, the state provided five main categories of services: delinquency and social defense; child and family welfare; community work and youth services; social services to other departments; and public assistance.

Under the child and family welfare umbrella, child protective services' aim is to provide protection and care on a short- or a long-term basis to children whose physical and psychological integrity is in danger due to inadequate family care and/or other factors. In cases where a family cannot cope with the protection and care of a child, the Director of Social Welfare Services has jurisdiction to take the child into his/her care and to assume parental rights. The child may then be removed from the biological family and be placed in a foster family or a group foster home. Residential placements (in a children's home, a boys' hostel or a girls' hostel) are used as a last resort, in cases of children with serious behavioral problems and other difficulties. At the same time, counseling and social work services are provided to the child's family in order to facilitate a timely reunification with the child (Cyprus Ministry of Labor and Social Insurance, 2003).

Child abuse and neglect cases are handled by family counselors who: (a) receive complaints and carry out investigations; (b) mediate any problems in the family that are likely to lead to, or have led to, the use of violence; (c) make arrangements for an immediate medical examination of the complainant; and (d) take all necessary steps for the commencement of criminal proceedings against the perpetrator. In order to encourage reporting of cases, family counselors accept anonymous referrals and they are obliged to investigate them within twenty-four hours. Family counselors may seek the protection of police and the assistance of any Governmental officer in carrying out their duties. In executing investigations, family counselors have the same powers as investigating police officers (Koni, 2007, Cyprus Social Welfare Department, Personal Communication, March 14, 2007).

The social welfare department defines child physical abuse as those acts used by a parent or caregiver that cause actual physical harm or have the potential for harm, such as hair pulling, pinching, spanking, hitting, twisting the child's ear, slapping the child's face or head, punching,

shaking, kicking, beating, and burning. Child sexual abuse is defined as any of the following acts between an adult and a minor: sexual touching, masturbation, vaginal or anal intercourse, oral/genital contact or sex, indecent exposure, use of children in pornographic filming or photographs, showing children pornographic filming or photographs, encouraging or forcing children to prostitute themselves, and encouraging or forcing children to witness sexual acts. Child psychological abuse is defined as any act that has an adverse effect on the emotional health and development of a child, including: rejection, confinement, threatening or intimidation, terrorizing, belittling, using derogatory terms to describe the child, blaming, discrimination, and restricting the child's movement (Koni, 2007, Cyprus Social Welfare Department, Personal Communication, March 14, 2007).

The coordination among the Governmental authorities responsible for addressing violence against children (Ministry of Labor and Social Insurance, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Central administrations of Police and the Legal Office) is ensured through a manual of interdepartmental procedures. Its implementation is approved by the council of Ministers and unofficially by the Advisory Committee for the prevention and combating of family violence which is set up according to the law.

There are also an Ombudsman who examines complaints for merely administrative decisions and a national Commission for Human Rights, which accepts complaints regarding violence against children. The cases of child abuse reported to the social welfare services identify six categories of perpetrators: father, step-father, mother, step-mother, other relatives, and strangers (ENNOC, 2007).

In 2003, there were reports that the Ministry of Labor's Welfare Department was understaffed, and therefore unable to deal effectively with the child abuse problem. As of today, Cyprus continues to lack a National system of registrations and statistics on child abuse (ENNOC, 2007). There is also significant public agitation with the insensitivity of police towards women and children in domestic violence investigations (e.g., Charalambous, 1998; Georgiades, 2003).

## International and Cyprus Law

One hundred forty nations (including Cyprus) are signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Articles 34 and 35 of this international treaty require that member nations protect their children from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. This includes outlawing the coercion of a child to perform sexual activity, the prostitution of children, and the exploitation of children in creating pornography (United Nations, 1989).

In 1979, Sweden became the first country in the world to ban all corporal punishment of children. The Swedish government bolstered the law by supporting a massive education campaign and availing diversified support services to reduce family stress and conflict (Durrant, 2003). As of April 15, fourteen other European nations introduced legislation vetoing corporal punishment: Finland (1983), Norway (1987), Austria (1989), Cyprus (1994), Denmark (1997), Latvia (1998), Croatia (1999), Bulgaria (2000), Germany (2000), Iceland (2003), Romania (2004), Ukraine (2004), and Hungary (2005). In the United States, as of April 15, 2003, twenty-eight states had proscribed corporal punishment in schools (Robinson, 2005). "Reasonable" corporal punishment of children by parents or guardians is legal in every state except Minnesota (Bitensky, 1998; Neddermeyer, 2007). Prohibition of corporal punishment in family day care, group homes/institutions, child care centers, and family foster care varies according to state laws (EPOCH-USA, 1999b).

In Cyprus, the Prevention of Violence in the Family and Protection of Victims Act (1994) stipulates that regardless of the child's behavior or reactions, it is the responsibility of the adult not to engage in sexual acts with children. Sexual abuse of a child is defined as any sexual act between an adult and a child. This includes: (a) fondling: touching or kissing a child's

genitals; or making a child fondle an adult's genitals; (b) violations of bodily privacy: forcing the child to undress, spying on a child in the bathroom or bedroom; (c) child pornography: using a child in the production of pornography, such as a film or magazine; (d) exposing children to pornography (movies, magazines, or websites) or enticing children to pornographic sites on the internet; (e) luring a child for sexual liaisons, through the internet or by any other means; (f) exposing children to adult sexuality in any form (showing sex organs to a child, forced observation of sexual acts, telling "dirty" stories, group sex); (g) child prostitution or sexual exploitation (using a child to perform sex with others); (h) sexual acts with a child: penetration, intercourse, incest, rape, oral sex, sodomy.

The age of consent for sexual activity is seventeen years of age. The child in age pornography legislation is eighteen years. A person committing incest with or without the consent of the other person is liable to imprisonment for seven years. Any person engaging in a sexual act of any kind (as defined above) with a person under thirteen years of age, is guilty of a felony and liable to imprisonment for fourteen years (Criminal Code Chapter 154, Article 154).

The law also defines mandated reporters to be any persons working with children in a professional capacity (e.g., teachers, day care providers, medical personnel, mental health professionals, social workers, etc). In 2000, the Ministry of Justice amended evidentiary laws to permit the use of video-taped testimony in family violence cases, including instances of alleged child abuse. During the year, one child abuse case was prosecuted using taped testimony.

## **Greek Culture and child abuse**

The use of physical force against children can be traced in Greek mythology, history and literature (Agathonos-Georgopoulou, 1997) and has repeatedly been reported as an acceptable child discipline technique in Greek families (Potamianou & Safilios-Rothschild, 1972; Stathopoulou, 2004; Vasiliou & Vasiliou, 1979; Zarnari, 1979). Greek boys are much more likely to be physically abused than girls (Georgiades, 2008; Nakou et al., 1982). This may be because expectations for tangible success are much higher for boys than for girls (Nakou et al., 1982). Another explanation could be that abuse in boys is used as a vehicle to teach them toughness and endurance that will allow them to prosper as adults, in a male-dominated culture. Moreover, unrealistic expectations of a male offspring may not be realized, and this perceived failure on the part of the son may not be tolerated by the parent and as such responded to with abuse. Another explanation could be that some marriages in Greece are still arranged by the families, and the young mother expects her son to provide her with the emotional fulfillment and affection lacking in the marriage bond. When sons, fail to do so, they may subject themselves to the risk of maternal abuse (Nakou et al., 1982). Fathers may feel antagonized by their sons due to the extra attention they receive from their mothers, and/or may be physical with their sons to prepare them for their future military service, which is compulsory in Greece, and known to involve a great deal of toughness (and occasionally violence) in its training.

The feeding of children is an emotionally charged activity in Greek culture. The family runs the risk of being seen as neglectful when a child lacks in size or weight. As such, feeding problems sometimes result in child abuse (Nakou et al., 1982). Similar to other contexts, other risk factors for child abuse in Greek families are social isolation, living in a rural area, poverty, unwanted pregnancy, lack of maturity, early health problems or handicaps, a lower maternal IQ, unrealistic expectations, being a single parent, emotional deprivation, role reversal, and various maternal personality traits, such as shyness, withdrawal, threat sensitivity, lack of self-discipline, and self-conflicting tendency (Agathonos et al., 1982; Diareme, 1995; Kokkevi & Agathonos, 1987; Konstantareas & Papageorgiou, 2006; Nakou et al., 1982; Zarnari, 1979).

Some of the characteristics of abusive fathers include being very disciplined and compulsive (Kokkevi & Agathonos, 1987). Overall, mothers are found at greater risk of abusing their chil-

dren (Kokkevi & Agathonos, 1987; Maroulis, 1979). Sociological changes associated with industrialization, the introduction of women in the labor force and its added stress on women in having to simultaneously juggle traditional 'female' roles within the family, and loss of important support systems due to resettlement in big cities and associated alienation, are some of the reasons used to explain this phenomenon (Kokkevi & Agathonos, 1987). Child-related risk factors for child abuse in Greek families include three main types of children's behavior: opposition to parental authority, school failure, and inappropriate social behavior (Potamianou & Safilos-Rothchild, 1972).

Child victims are often reluctant to report abuse because of the cultural emphasis on sacredness of familial bonds and the insufficient protection of the victims by law enforcement and legal authorities (Stathopoulou, 2004). Moreover, there is denial about the existence of child abuse among medical professionals (Agathonos et al., 1982). What's more, children who are sexually abused are often stigmatized by society (Chatzifotiou, 2003), and therefore families keep the problem *behind closed doors*. In addition, teachers are not sufficiently trained to identify the abuse (Saoulli, 2006)

## Research Evidence on child abuse in Cyprus

Research on child abuse in Cyprus has been so limited that it is difficult to determine the extent of its prevalence, frequency, etiology, and nature. The first national study on child abuse in Cyprus (University of Nicosia Center for Research and Development [UNCRD], 2000) used a stratified sample of one thousand individuals (age 16 and older), and a combination of personal interview and written questionnaire and concluded that about forty-seven per cent of men and fifty-three per cent of women had been abused as children. Of these abuses, thirty-four per cent were physical and psychological, twenty-eight per cent psychological, twenty-six per cent physical, and about five per cent sexual.

Moreover, in this study about one seventh of the respondents did not categorize pushing, shaking, pinching, or ear pulling as child abuse. What's more, only about one ninth of respondents thought that exposure to domestic violence, rejection, humiliation, use of derogatory language to address the child, and isolation of the child from his/her friends could classify as child abuse. Lastly, about forty per cent of respondents thought that fathers are frequently abusive to their children and twenty-two per cent that mothers are so; fifteen per cent thought that children can be controlled by being yelled at; nineteen per cent suggested that parents hit their children because they want to better them; thirty-four per cent stated that there are occasions (i.e., the child being disrespectful, the child associating with the wrong crowd, or the child using drugs) where hitting a child is appropriate; and lastly about fifteen per cent thought that child abuse should be kept *behind closed doors* without any outside interference.

A subsequent national study using a stratified sample and a questionnaire with nine hundred thirteen students, ages twelve to eighteen, found that at least twenty per cent of the sample had suffered abuse (Advisory Committee for the Prevention and Treatment of Family Violence (ACPTFV), 2004). In this study, boys were more likely to suffer physical and emotional abuse and equally as girls to suffer child sexual abuse, albeit girls suffered more severe forms. All in all, about ten per cent of students reported child sexual abuse. Moreover, about forty per cent saw pinching as non-abusive behavior; about thirty-six per cent saw pushing as such; about twenty-five per cent saw shaking as such; about twenty per cent saw ear pulling as normal; and about eleven per cent saw hair pulling as normal. Clearly, these findings suggest that there is high tolerance of abuse among Greek-Cypriot children.

The third study on child abuse in Cyprus (Georgiades, 2008) involved a retrospective telephone survey with a random sample of adult Greek-Cypriots living in Nicosia (N = 120; 81% response rate). Three-quarters of the sample were women, the average age of respondents was

about 48 years, and had on average about 13 years of formal education. In this study, about one-fifth of respondents admitted to having experienced some type of abuse in their childhood. Moreover, about one-fifth of respondents claimed that they had experienced physical abuse (such as severe spanking, kicking, punching, hair-pulling and ear-pulling), one-fifth felt they had been emotionally and/or verbally abused, three per cent claimed sexual abuse, and none admitted neglect. On average, respondents were familiar with four cases of child abuse outside their family and knew twelve parents who were emotionally abusive to their children. Furthermore, almost three-quarters of them thought that there was a large or very large lack of public education about child abuse in Cyprus and only one-tenth thought that the problem of child abuse was worse in Cyprus than other parts of the world. Finally, men were more likely to report physical and emotional abuse, and equally likely to report child sexual abuse as women.

There is no apparent explanation as to why the first study (UNCRD, 2000) is so inconsistent with the two subsequent studies (ACPTFV, 2004; Georgiades, 2008) in regards to prevalence and gender trends. What's more, the child abuse estimates provided by ENNOC (2007) for Cyprus in 2002 differ vastly from those concluded by all three empirical studies. In particular, ENNOC noted that only 64 children out of 10,000 were reported as having been abused (.64%), of whom 43 (.43%) physically, 12 (.12%) sexually, and 9 (.09%) emotionally. This is evidence of under-reporting of the problem and perhaps ineffective community outreach on the part of the Cyprus Social Welfare Department in the identification of cases. It may also reflect lack of public and professional awareness on the issue and perhaps ineffectiveness of mandatory reporting legislation.

## Future Research in Cyprus

Future research using larger samples needs to reassess the prevalence, frequency, etiology, and consequences of child abuse on victims, families, and communities in Cyprus. The knowledge base of mandated reporters and the general public about child abuse issues should also be evaluated so that contextually informed prevention interventions can be crafted. Other areas of potential exploration include: (a) child abuse investigators' ability to work effectively with *abusive* parents and collaborate with other professionals in reaching placement decisions and planning prevention of re-abuse; (b) cultural sensitivity towards immigrant groups which may be unfamiliar with local child protection laws; (c) the effects of financial and employment stress on family relationships; (d) characteristics of perpetrators, passive abusers, and victims, and so on. These research questions only begin to scratch the surface of what needs to be pursued empirically to allow for a deeper scrutiny of the child abuse problem in Cyprus.

## International Implications

Research in Cyprus (ACPTFV, 2004; ENNOC, 2007; Georgiades, 2008; UNCRD, 2000) and other geographical contexts suggests that social service authorities reach out to only a very small fraction of abused children around the world (de Souza Eremita, 2007; ENNOC, 2007; May-Chahal & Herczog, 2003; Kim et al., 2007; Mathews & Kenny, 2008; Oz & Balshan, 2007). Cultural complexities, lack of service coordination, and the absence of stringent child protection legislation tend to compound the under-reporting and under-investigation of cases (e.g., de Souza Eremita, 2007; Hahm & Guterman, 2001; Slonim-Nevo & Mukula, 2007; United Nations, 2002). At the heart of the problem is limited public and professional awareness about the problem (Hahm & Guterman, 2001; Hanson et al., 2004; Kenny, 2004; Nakajima, 2005; Wang & Ho, 2007).

Mandatory reporting laws must be strengthened globally so that professionals are more motivated to detect physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms of child abuse (e.g., Chen et al., 2007; Mathews & Kenny, 2008; Van Dam, 2001). Evidence-based child abuse education interventions should target both professionals and the general public so that essential consciousness-raising levels can be attained (e.g., Baruch et al., 2007; Graham-Bermann et al., 2007; Rusk & Rusk, 2007; Sexton et al., 2005; Turner & Sanders, 2006; Weist et al., 2005). Teachers need to be trained to identify abuse at its early stages before it becomes seriously harmful (e.g., Chen et al., 2007; Hanson et al., 2004; Nakajima, 2005; Saoulli, 2006; Van Dam, 2001). Children need to be empowered with knowledge about abuse at school to ensure that they do not blame themselves for the abuse if it occurs, are able to recognize the seductive manipulations of potential child molesters, and to know how to report their abuse and protect themselves (Chen et al., 2007; Saoulli, 2006; Van Dam, 2001). In this regard, the sexual abuse of boys should not be undermined as it is of serious magnitude (e.g., Collings et al., 2005; Georgiades, 2008; Hall, 2007; Lillywhite, & Skidmore, 2006; Purcell et al., 2004; Whealin et al., 2007) and more under-reported due to the higher stigma it produces in homophobic contexts (e.g., Hall, 2007; Lillywhite, & Skidmore, 2006; Whealin et al., 2007). Finally, technological means must be developed to put an end to the increasing phenomenon of the sexual exploitation of children via the web and international child protective agencies must build strong partnerships for the effective investigation and prosecution of child molesters in every part of the world (Cooper et al., 2005). This offered list of recommendations is certainly not exhaustive and provides only a beginning ground towards the global fight against child abuse.

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## Note

1. This article replaces the article by the same author which, due to a mistake by the editor, has been published in *International Journal of Child & Family Welfare*, 10, 110-124.

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