

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Problem of Domestic Violence

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Domestic violence is one of the most real and actively discussed problems in Ukrainian society. In 2001, Ukraine adopted a law on the 'prevention of domestic violence', which gave the legal foundation to address the problem. Prevention and work with victims of domestic violence is carried out by state institutions and NGOs.¹

Despite this, the problem of domestic violence remains widespread throughout the whole of society. According to the Ukrainian Department of Public Safety, from the numbers given by preventive law enforcement agencies, there were 85,085 persons who committed domestic violence in 2009. Physical and psychological violence are the most common types of violence, accounting for 95% of cases.²

The available statistical information, however, does not reflect the whole problem completely. According to specialists and experts, as well as sociological research, people who suffer domestic violence are not inclined to seek protection from authorities or do not know where they can get help.³

In such circumstances, involvement of the Church as a social institution to solve the problem of domestic violence seems necessary. Also, the phenomenon of domestic violence in religious families exists. So problem-solving inside the community is very important to the Church. According to American researchers, the religiosity of families may influence the phenomenon of violence.⁴

In Kiev, from September 2009 to June 2010, the all-Ukrainian Charity Fund, 'Faith. Hope. Love.', conducted research on the 'attitude to the problem of domestic violence in representatives of religious communities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) Moscow Patriarchate'. It was supported by the Synod Department for Charity and Social Ministry of the UOC, which insured the participation of priests and parishioners from Kiev Orthodox churches.

This research confirmed that the problem of domestic violence exists in Orthodox families, likewise in non-Orthodox families. Women and children suffer from violence more, but men and elderly people might also be victims of family abuse. Most community members identify physical and psychological violence, but do not consider the economic manifestations of domestic violence as violence at all. Representatives of poor communities identify sexual

1 Amnesty International, 'Ukraine: Domestic violence – blaming the victim', Amnesty USA, 2007, <<http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?id=ENGEUR500052006&lang=e>>.

2 O Boyko, 'Domestic Violence: A sociological analysis of the phenomenon', Social Science, 22.00.03, National University of Internal Affairs, 2003, p.10.

3 N Romanova, T Semigina, and V Levchenko, 'The study of national practice providing services to victims of domestic violence', *Social Work in Ukraine: Theory and practice*, no. 4, 2008, pp. 70-84.

4 DC Dollahite, LD Marks, and MA Goodman, 'Social scientific study of the religiosity-family linkage', [Electronic resource], <www.sagereferenceonline.com>.

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abuse, if carried out in the form of coercion. Similar features can also be found in society as a whole.

However, the phenomenon of domestic violence in families of Orthodox parishioners has its own special features.

In this community, there are prejudices against modern methods and directions of social work that lead to distrust of social services and police. In situations of domestic violence, most parishioners go only to the pastor for help. At the same time, priests do not always understand the psychological aspects of domestic violence. This situation requires cooperation between priests and social services. The work of priests in shelters for victims of domestic violence is an example of such cooperation.

On the other hand, representatives of religious communities feel prejudice against them in society (including the existence of the stereotype that the Church supports gender inequality). Manifestations of gender discrimination really exist in the traditions of the Orthodox Church (e.g. in the tradition to wear a scarf in church), but are not secured in its dogma and are unlikely to lead to increasing violence. According to survey results, in families in which the members of the couple have different religious views, Orthodox men more rarely play the role of aggressor against their unbelieving partner.

In addition, the aggressors who have religious beliefs (often mothers who carry out violence against children) often consider violence committed by them as a spiritual problem, feel guilt, and seek advice from priests on how to change aggressive behaviour. This phenomenon opens up great opportunities for working with aggressors and problematic families.

According to the results of the research, victims of domestic violence with religious beliefs often perceive the situation of violence as inevitable. They believe that the patience they show to an aggressor could change him or her for the better. Even priests sometimes advise victims to be patient in situations of violence. This can lead to repeated victimisation, when a victim after rehabilitation goes back to the situation of violence.⁵

These findings suggest that priests working with cases of domestic abuse require certain knowledge and training on the psychological aspects of domestic violence. The priest who works with the family as a spiritual director has a great impact on all family members and can work on violence prevention issues, as well as provide services to victims or aggressors.

Thus, it is worth noting that in Orthodox families there is also the problem of violence and it requires an individual approach to solve. Internal community resources to address the

5 O Savchuk, 'Strategies to work with women who experience violence in the family', *Practical Psychology and Social Work*, no. 4, 2003, pp. 51-60.

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problem of violence are great enough, but the priests and parishioners do not have enough knowledge about the problem.

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