



MICRONESIAN SEMINAR
P.O. Box 160
Pohnpei, FM 96941



Micronesian Counselor

March 3, 2003

Issue 46

The Silent Cry for Help



Hitting Hard: Family Violence



Island Topics #36
Running Time: 39:13

When family arguments come to blows, where can women run for protection? This drama about two struggling families explores the options.

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*Spouse Abuse
in Micronesia*

Eugenia Samuel



The night was calm, and the whole neighborhood was deep in sleep except for one family. The wife’s scream could be heard very distinctly, as a strong hand struck her delicate face. Her pained scream forced her brother out of bed and into the darkness of the night. Her second scream drove him to rush toward her house. His wife ran after him in silence. When dogs started to bark, the couple stopped at the porch. They heard a man yelling at his wife to come closer to him. Both of them looked through the louvered window to see two little girls sitting in a mat, their eyes wide with fear while they watched their father beating their mother. Their father was standing with his back against the main door to make sure his wife didn’t try to escape.

She was sitting motionless in front of her husband, moaning with pain. Her husband was holding a handful of her long hair in one hand, clipping hair off carelessly with a pair of scissors. He threw the hair in her face and sat down. She flinched as her hair fell into her lap. She folded her legs with resignation, feeling her hair with her right hand, and wiping her bleeding nose and massaging her injured cheek with the other. Her husband got up and paced the floor, still holding the pair of scissors, but his angry face turned anxiously toward the door when he heard footsteps approaching.

“Maia, Maia, Maia, are you okay?” Then silence.

“Maia, Maia, open the door!”

She answered her brother, “Mario, it’s okay. I am just upset. Nothing serious. I am sorry I woke you up. Please go back to sleep. I’m fine.”

Then her brother asked again, “Are you sure, Maia?”

“Yes, I am sure. Please go back to your house.” Maia sounded scared but firm. Her brother and his wife went back to their home in silence.



Many couples who are just becoming parents now realize the importance of having the parents get involved in their children’s marriage. One lady said that she attributed the strength of her marriage to both her family and her husband’s family. She compared her situation with that of her friends who didn’t involve their families in their marriages. Even though many of these women were abused, their parents were unable to intervene because they never established a good relationship with their daughter and their son-in-law from the beginning of their marriage. They were all strangers to each other. The same lady believes that even if parents don’t necessarily have to arrange the marriage, they should at least approve it and help their children make wise decisions.

Nowadays, many couples want to be left to make their own decision on whom to marry, and they insist on being independent from their families and doing things very much on their own. Because of this, the family—once a source of strong protection for married women—is unable to continue to assume its responsibility for shielding women against domestic violence. At the same time, people are saying that it is “un-Micronesian” to intervene in a family’s affairs if you are not part of the family. So, if we do not call the police to make use of the law enforcement system, who is going to protect the women?

The traditional protection system that the family once offered has broken down, but people are very reluctant to turn to outsiders for help in what they think of as family arguments. This is the dilemma facing women today.



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It is sad to note that most abuse occurs when the couples are living either with the parents of the husband or off by themselves somewhere. In Kosrae, where women usually move in with the husband and his family, there seems to be more wife beating. Being alone, far from her relatives, makes a woman more vulnerable to abuse from her husband.

One lady said when her husband was offered a job to work off-island, she was very worried that her husband might change. She was right. After a year away from home, they began to fight over many things. She said some of their arguments were about financial problems, but there were times that they also fought about women. She knew her husband was not being faithful and honest to her. She tried to talk to him about moving back home, but he got angry and dared her to go ahead and leave without him.

The traditional extended family system that once protected its women is disbanded. Many women today have married independently and have moved away from their parents. Some of them don't see their parents for years. The family protection system that used to be strong is now seriously weakened or entirely absent. Wives no longer have the protection the male relatives in the families used to provide for them. Meanwhile, instead of serving as peace-makers, children have often become victims of spouse abuse.

Conclusion

Domestic violence between husband and wife is considered a serious problem in most parts of Micronesia. Although many people are against wife beating, they claim they cannot intervene because they don't really know what may have caused the problem. Only the couple knows what they are fighting about. That leaves women to deal with their family problems on their own and makes them more susceptible to domestic violence, especially if they are far from their families.



Mario couldn't go back to sleep. He was so frustrated at his sister for defending her husband every time he tried to help her. He and her husband had never really gotten to know one another since the marriage. He knew that they would never be friends. He decided that either he and his family would move away the next day, or he would tell his sister to leave her husband for good.

Maia's husband dropped the pair of scissors on the floor. He picked up his car keys and his can of beer, went outside, got in his car and drove away. Maia crawled over and picked up the pieces of the broken plate, swept the grains of rice together with her hands and put them into a plastic bag. She was wincing from the pain of her broken nose and swollen face. She knew her husband might return and hurt her more. He might still ask for some food if he returned. She prayed he would not return until the next day. Then she crawled to her mat where her two little girls were sitting, staring at their mother fearfully. Neither of the girls said anything.

Maia reached over and folded her arms around her little girls and brought them to her chest. She whispered softly in their ears, "Lie down and go back to sleep. Mama is fine." But, as soon as her kids lay down to sleep again, she turned to the other side and started to sob silently.

Introduction

Maia is not alone in her plight. Wife beating, or what is now called domestic violence, is a problem that is becoming widespread throughout Micronesia. It exists in many different forms, and it affects people's lives in different ways.

A young Pohnpeian woman claims that her husband always beats her up whenever he's drunk. One day he was mad because she didn't serve him food quickly enough, so he picked up a glass of water and threw at her. The glass broke on her head. As she



tried to run to the door, he grabbed her hair, and then threw her against the wall of their kitchen. Before she could escape, he grabbed her hair again and smashed her face down hard on the counter. She suffered a broken forehead, a swollen and bruised face, and a bleeding nose. He continued to kick and punch her until she couldn't stand any longer. He left her lying on the floor of their kitchen, and he drove away to drink some more.

Whenever she asked him to cut down on his drinking, he would get mad and beat her up.

A Kosraean told of his father who terrorized their family whenever he was drunk. He used to spend all of his paycheck on liquor. He expected his meal to be ready as soon as he arrived home. They had such a big family, though, that by the time he got home, all the food was eaten by the children. That always triggered an angry outburst and a beating of his wife. The children were afraid to try to help her because their father would turn to beat them if anyone tried to stop him. His son explained that his mother was scarred all over her body from the whippings.

A Chuukese lady left her kids and took shelter with her parents after her husband kept drinking and beating her repeatedly on pay days when he started to have an affair with his secretary at work. They used to live with the husband's parents on a separate island from her parents. Many people said the fellow was a heavy drinker, drinking away most of his paycheck and spending very little on his family. Yet, he hated to hear any complaints from his wife. Whenever she asked him to cut down on his drinking, he would get mad and beat her up. People said the wife could be seen with bruises and a black eye more often than not.

At times the violence leads to death. In the 1980s one Pohnpeian girl was repeatedly battered by her Chuukese husband while living in Chuuk with the husband and his



arrangement of the marriage, there was nothing they could do to help.

Distance from Protection

Nowadays many young families live far from parents. The extended family is no longer bonded as it used to be. The nuclear family plays a major role in itself, but it does not provide for the protection of women as the extended family once did. This is a real disadvantage to a couple when it runs into trouble, especially when the trouble involves abuse of the wife. There's just no one around to protect her.

There are some families who are forced to move away from their parents because of job opportunities. Many of the wives experience difficulty in adjusting to a life situation where all the chores that used to be shared by their families at home now become hers to do alone. Besides assuming all the responsibilities, she is also left to the mercy of her husband. Many of the wives who leave their families to live with their husbands away from home end up getting abused by them.

The traditional extended family system that once protected its women is disbanded.

Traditionally in Chuuk, a man used to move in with his wife and her extended family. This was a very effective method of protection for the women. Many of my own relatives continue to live with the parents of their wives, and the wives are well-protected from physical abuse. There are times their husbands make mistakes, of course, but immediately afterward they apologize and reconcile with their wives and their families. With all the changes that have taken place, however, many Chuukese women now live with their husbands and their families. Some of them experience domestic violence, as do many women not under the protection of their own families.



from their spouse, but this doesn't help if the woman still wants to live with her husband.

Very few marriages today are still arranged by families. A lot of children are married to people outside their own societies who are total strangers to their families. Some of them don't even bother to get to know the family of their spouses. They ignore the importance of the family's role in their marital relationship.

The problem is when husbands beat their wives, they hide from their relatives and friends to avoid getting embarrassed if the people were to find out that they are not happy with their marriage. Some of them don't want to involve their parents out of guilt. Others, who still love their husband, are afraid their parents might prevent them from going back to them.

One couple met in Guam and, after a few months of dating, they decided to get married. The girl was delighted that she finally met the boy of her dreams: a handsome fellow who was as educated as she was. Even though she knew her parents would not approve of her decision to rush into marriage, she told her friends she was not going to give up the boy of her dreams. Instead of allowing themselves more time to get to know each other better, they went ahead and got married without the consent of their parents. Before the first year of their marriage had ended, the couple began fighting over petty things. The husband started to hit his wife, and sometimes left her to spend the night away from home. When he began drinking and skipping work just to be with his friends, the wife got frustrated but she had no one to turn to for help. Finally, she decided to contact their parents. Unfortunately, their parents didn't know what to do to help her. They claimed that since they were not involved in the



family. The girl got very sick and died from the lacerations inflicted by her husband. Another Pohnpeian girl was beaten to death by her husband, reportedly out of jealousy, within a few years of the first case. Like many families nowadays, the couple lived in their own house by themselves with their three little children. Police officers in Pohnpei claim that five women were beaten to death by their husbands within the last 15 or 20 years.

What's Behind This?

Most people would point to drinking as the culprit. They would claim that most of the cases they know of are alcohol-related. Many of them involve young couples and families whose husbands drink irresponsibly until they are no longer able to control their behavior. Even the men who are considered very quiet, lenient and loving toward their wives can change and become violent once they are drunk. This is a common problem throughout the FSM. Even in Palau and the Marshalls, many people blame most of the domestic violence on alcohol.

But what causes such anger? A lot of people attribute domestic violence to misunderstanding between the husband and wife. Many of them regard domestic violence as the behavior of



an enraged, jealous husband, while others simply say that men beat their wives if they are not happy with the way they serve them. One Kosraean, for example, said that his people believe it is part of their culture for a



husband to beat his wife if she fails to fulfill her responsibilities to take care of him, especially in cooking and serving his food. Still others blame it on the fact that men cannot cope with the demands of their families on them, so they take it out on their wives.

Some men were forced to get married when their girlfriends got pregnant so they always beat them. One woman said her husband never stops reminding her of that; he keeps telling her that she trapped him into marrying her by getting pregnant.

Domestic violence, which has been a big issue in the United States for years, has caught the public's attention even here in Micronesia. People are beginning to talk openly about the problem, its consequences on the family, and what can be done to prevent it. In view of this, Micronesian Seminar decided to conduct our own research on the problem. We conducted interviews with several people, male and female, between the ages of 17 and 70 and from many different walks of life. Among those interviewed were government employees, counselors, teachers, police officers, and clergy. We talked to married and single people, children and grandparents, anyone with something to say about the problem.

We conducted our research in Pohnpei, Chuuk, Kosrae, and among a few citizens of Yap, Palau and the Marshalls who are residing in Pohnpei. We interviewed about 30 individuals from Pohnpei, including a group of women from the Pwihnen Mercedes church group, 25 persons from Chuuk, including a group of men and women from COCA, 20 individuals from Kosrae, three from Yap, two from Palau, and two from the Marshalls.

In the interviews we gathered stories of wife beatings and thoughts on what caused them. We asked about the differences between the frequency of such things in the past and today. Although we did not attempt to compile any statistical data, we



In the past, children also used to play a very important role in the family that was experiencing conflict. Whenever a family had problems they could not confront each other without hurting anyone, they used to send one of their children to make peace. Husbands and wives also used to rely on their children to intervene to make peace. When we were young, my cousins and I used to play the role of peace-makers among our relatives. Some of my uncles used to beat their wives, but as soon as we cried and told them to stop, they immediately did so and walked away.



But Marriage is Different Today

Nowadays, people marry for many different reasons. Often the reasons don't seem like very good ones. Some of the women we interviewed said that when they were young, they wanted to be different from their parents. They were repelled by the thought of having to spend the rest of their lives with husbands chosen by their parents. They felt that since they were educated they would do better to choose their own husbands. Some of them married strangers whose families were unknown to their parents.

Some girls got married after they became pregnant to avoid being scolded by their parents and embarrassed in their communities. It's only when their husbands started beating them after arguing over money or women, or when they begin to get tired of each other, that they realized they made a big mistake. Some of these women said they feel so alone when they encounter problems, but none of them can really share their feelings with their parents since they know that their parents didn't make the decision whom they should marry. Sometimes the parents intervene when they face the choice of separating



by her relatives; she could only be returned if the husband and his family went to them, begged their forgiveness, and promised that she would be treated better in the future. If he was to win his wife back again and regain the trust of her family, the husband would take with him some of the most respected members of his family. In some parts of Micronesia, such as Pohnpei and Chuuk, the man also used to take the oldest child of his oldest sister, a very important figure in his family. Food and other items were presented to the wife's family as an expression of sorrow. In this way, the family of the woman could be convinced to allow the return of their daughter to her husband and family.

A friend of mine told me of her arranged marriage. When her husband's family came to propose formally, the person who spoke on behalf of her own family was her mother's eldest brother, a man very much respected in their village. Her uncle, who had a reputation as one of the strongest and toughest men on the island, told her husband's family to make sure that he would never hear of any abuse. The girl's uncle told the young man that if he ever beat his wife, the uncle would hurt him far more than the young husband hurt his wife.

Sometimes the husband's family also offered strong protection for the girl. An old man we interviewed told us that when he was young, his father and uncle beat him severely when they found out that his wife had left him because he was beating her. They were angry because his father already promised his land to the daughter-in-law if she bore a granddaughter for him, since neither of the husband's parents had any sisters. In protecting their daughter-in-law, then, the husband's parents were trying to protect their land investment.

Generally, women who had arranged marriages had no regrets about the protection they received from their family or the family of their husband. Without this help, their marriages might not have survived.



certainly got a broad view of what was happening in the way of domestic violence and what people thought about the problem.

Why Doesn't Somebody Do Something?

Wife beating is not a new problem in Micronesia. In fact, people told us many cases of domestic violence between husbands and wives from all over Micronesia that happened 30 or 40 years ago. Some of the older people, even those in their 70s, told us of their experiences in their own families when they were young. One of them, a great-grandmother now, reported that her husband used to beat her when they were young because she was always nagging him. Fortunately, they had the help of her uncles and older cousins, who would remind her husband that their marriage was arranged by her parents in the confidence that he would never beat her. This seemed to keep the beatings in check.

Most Micronesians today still consider domestic violence as a family problem—that is, a problem to be resolved by themselves and their family members. Usually, outsiders don't interfere in a problem between a husband and wife since they assume that the couple will eventually reconcile and work out their problems on their own. In the past, parents and relatives used to intervene and put a stop to any domestic violence immediately. There was no need for an outside person to intervene. That same attitude carries over to the present day, so nowadays, even without the intervention of parents and older family members, most people still don't feel they should report cases of domestic violence to the police.

There are other reasons, too, as women who have experience of the problem will tell you. One woman said there are times she really wants to call the police officers to arrest her husband, but she's afraid her husband's friends on the police force might tell him. At the same time, she doesn't want her husband to be put in jail because she needs him to help to take care of their children,



although she would like to have some protection. She's also worried that her family will not support her and her children if her husband leaves them.

One Chuukese couple I know seemed to be happy all the time. I used to wonder whether they ever argued at all because I never saw them get angry at each other. One day, when I went to her house to ask her to sew a dress for me, I noticed that she was trying to cover her arms with a towel. As the towel dropped on the floor, I could see bruises all over her arms. When I asked her what happened, she slumped over and tears filled her eyes. "Did your husband do that?" I asked. She nodded. I told her I never imagined they had problems because I always looked on them as a happy couple. She explained that she had always tried hard not to expose their family problems to other people, for she was worried that her family might find out and force her to leave her husband. Besides, her husband threatened to leave her if people found out anything about their family problems. She did not want to be sent back home like that because it would have been a disgrace to her family. She would rather suffer in silence than inflict on her parents this embarrassment.

One of my girlfriends in high school got married to a young man she met in college. Even though her family told her not to marry the man because they had already arranged for her to marry someone else, she didn't listen to them. She married the fellow and went to live with him and his family. Despite the stories all of us heard about her husband abusing her, she did not want to leave him. No matter how many times her husband beat her and took off with other women, she never gave up. Whenever any of her relatives or close friends went to see her, she would avoid them.



Instead of directly addressing the problem, women sometimes do the very same thing that



their husbands do: take out their anger on an innocent bystander. Most often this is their children. Some mothers take out their frustrations by hitting their children. One wife who was often beaten by her drunken husband used to strike her own children as soon as her husband had left the house. The effects can be damaging. Even if they were never actually beaten, some children grow sullen from being exposed to the hostility between their parents. Some of them refuse to stay with their parents and end up hanging out with the wrong kind of friends.

The Traditional Way of Dealing With the Problem

In the past, people within extended families used to live very close together for survival and protection. It was common for children who got married to continue to live with their parents. Women used to be married subject to consent of their extended families, particularly the older males in their families. In an arranged marriage, the female was matched with a man who seemed suitable by way of status and personal qualities. Since land and other personal property was being passed on through marriage, it was important to insure that the pairing was a good one and that it would last. The older relatives of both the husband and wife made sure they created an effective bridge between the two families for the support of the new couple.

There was usually no mention of romance or love between the young man and woman. The most important part of the relationship was knowing each family very well and having the support from both families. Marriage began with understanding and respect for each other, as one woman put it, and later on, as the couple lived together and became a part of each other's life, love blossomed in their relationship.

Because of the importance they placed on the female in their family, the wife's own male relatives made sure that she was well protected. If her husband was abusive, the woman was taken back