

Children a test for abused women Transition To Single Parenthood Gets Even More Difficult

By Swati Desai

Hyderabad Chitra hoped having children would make her marriage stronger. Since her arrival in the US, Chitra was subject to her husband's violent behaviour and peculiar sexual demands. But she never thought of leaving him. Her parents had always advised her to adjust with her husband and not to be so 'headstrong'. So she even tolerated his sexual wanderings and accusations of prudishness.

However, she was unaware of the established observation by counsellors of domestic abused victims that violence increases during pregnancy. The child in her life gave Chitra a sense of importance, but her marriage only grew worse. She tolerated her husband's occasional overnight absenteeism because he was a good provider. They lived in a comfortable middle class neighbourhood. Their fights were loud and involved pushing and shoving. The children, now 8 and 5, lived in this world. Finally, after one such violent argument, a neighbour called the police leading to the involvement of a local child protective agency.

In California and some other states in the US, when children witness violence between parents, it is viewed as child abuse. Allegations of child abuse generates an investigation by the local child protective agency. This can lead to a simple warning, mandatory attendance to parenting classes or mandatory counselling.

Only in extreme cases are children placed in foster homes until the situation between parents improve. In Chitra's case, her husband was asked to vacate the house. Chitra was allowed to have custody of the children only if she agreed to severe contact with him until the completion of the mandated counselling.

Mothers who are victims of such marriages are faced usually with additional challenges: 1) financial security of the children in case she leaves the husband, 2) the social stigma of a broken marriage in the Indian community and the impact on the children, 3) children attached to the father makes the transition to single parenthood trickier, 4) the difficulties itself in single parenthood such as lack of family support in a foreign country, expensive professional child care, and the possibility of children straying in the absence of male supervision.

Also, research shows that children who witness parental arguments and violence regularly are more prone to mental trauma and violence.

The choices in such cases are never easy.

Some important points: 1) Seeking the advice of psychologists and counsellors to deal with the situation. Get as much information on possible outcomes of child abuse investigation in your case and what your options are. (Remember that the counsellor may be required to report suspected child abuse to the child protective agency.) 2) There is no need to panic as this does not mean the child will be taken away. 3) Garner support from family and friends for child care and court appearances. 4) Build a rapport with social workers.

(The author, a psychotherapist in private practice in Los Angeles and a mental health consultant to South Asian agencies, is on a visit to ISB, Hyderabad)