CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter presents the concluding part of this research study on child abuse in Kuala Lumpur based on the cases reported to the Social Welfare Department during 1995. The chapter will provide a brief overview of the study, a summary of the findings, some implications of these findings, and some recommendations on alternative strategies to deal with the problem.

5.1 AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This research study was carried out to determine the factors that contributed to abuse by examining the confirmed cases of physical abuse by parents registered with the Department of Social Welfare, Kuala Lumpur. The purpose of the study was to identify the characteristics associated with the abused child, the abusing parent, the family and environment in which the abuse takes place, which are crucial to the recognition and screening of maltreated children and in targeting populations in need of preventative intervention before the abuse takes place. The significance of the study is apparent in light of the amount of public opinion and debate that serious cases of abuse generate. Gil (1987) has argued that child abuse is a symptom of fundamental inequalities such as poverty, social disadvantage and discrimination.

The data for the study was collected through a structured questionnaire to obtain information on the abused child, the abuser, and the family environment in which the abuse took place. Apart from this, interviews with the social workers were conducted to meet other information needs. The sample of the study consisted of
thirty-three cases of children who had been physically abused by their parent(s). These thirty-three cases comprised the total number of confirmed and "active" cases in 1995. This study of child physical abuse in Kuala Lumpur, based on the cases reported to the Social Welfare Department during 1995 reveals that there are interacting sets of variables that contribute to abuse. Analysis of the data indicates that there are general factors that arise from within and outside the family, which converge to create a situation in which the abuse takes place. The integrative approach adopted in this study focuses on the interaction of both individual (abused child and abuser) characteristics and environmental (family and culture) characteristics, found in the reported cases, to understand why abuse takes place. The ecological perspective within which the factors/causes of abuse are sought to be placed, reveals several levels of dysfunction that can be targeted for remedial intervention or prevention.

5.2 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The study found that certain characteristics in the child predisposes them to abuse, namely sex, age, race, birth order in the family, a child who is difficult to care for. These conclusions are based on the findings which reveal that in this study, two-thirds of the abused children were boys. While in terms of the age factor, about one-fourth of the children were found to be of pre-school age, the racial composition of the study sample shows that more than half of the abused children were Malay. Likewise, more than half the abused children were the eldest or the only child in the family. Over a quarter were considered difficult by their parents and 15 per cent had been separated from the parents prior to the abuse.
The findings associated with the characteristics of the abusers show that though male and female abusers were equally implicated in abuse, in almost half the cases the abuser was the biological father of the child.

While more than half the abusers were Malay, within this category almost two-third of these were female. Insofar as the age factor of the abuser is concerned, more than half the abusers were in their 30’s at the time of abuse. More than three-quarters of abusers had school level education with about 30 per cent of abusers being employed as labourers and about a quarter of the abusers being unemployed. About a quarter of parents were single (divorced or separated); one-fourth of parents were suffering from emotional problems and one-third were facing marital problems. Only a small percentage were drug abusers.

Findings related to the family and environment in which the abuse took place reveal that financial problems were being faced by a fourth of the families in the sample. While about three-fourths of the families to which the abused child belonged, were nuclear, two-thirds of them were also found to have no relatives to give assistance or support. Likewise, half the families in which the abuse took place, had little or no contact with neighbours. One-third of the sample found that the abused child came from families which had between four to six children. In terms of the type of accommodation, it was found that two-thirds of the families lived in low-cost houses or flats.

When the source of the report of abuse was studied it was found that, together almost half the reports were made by neighbours or a member of the public. A significant number of reports were also made by the non-abusing parent and by doctors.
5.3 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The data collected from the Social Welfare Department relating to the characteristics of the abused child, the abusing parent, and the family in which the abuse took place, as well as the information collected through interviews with the social workers and officers, involved in the case work has implications in terms of offering an alternative to strategies that treat abuse through individual counseling approaches.

It was noted that workload for case workers handling these cases was very heavy. For instance, one officer was handling 115 cases at one time. The number of reports of child abuse received by the Social Welfare Department is high and they all have to be investigated by the few officers. Therefore, those cases which the investigating case worker finds are not serious, the abusers are warned about the legal provisions and what action can be taken against them. The case is not supervised until further reports of abuse are received since owing to the heavy workload, the case worker moves on to the next, more severe case. Therefore the decision to categorise the case as one of abuse which needs supervision or some other form of intervention or indeed needs any action to be taken at all, is highly subjective. Witness the fact that in the present study out of the total number of 125 cases of physical abuse by parents registered by the Department in 1995, only 33 cases were found to be serious and were therefore “active”. Only a fraction of cases reported are actually processed through the Child Protection System; the majority seem to be below the threshold for official response.

Similarly in the year 1991 out of the total number of 348 cases registered for investigation in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, only 72 were confirmed to be
child abuse and neglect cases (Social Welfare Department Report, 1993). These cases included physical, sexual and emotional abuse, abandonment and neglect. Overburdened case workers filter out the less severe cases and even if we take into account the fact that a large number of reported cases turn out to be false reports, the fact remains that a large number of abused children do not get the benefit of services or the protection of the legal provisions designed to rescue them from the abusive environment. Case workers are forced to rely on their judgement on whether to categorise a case as one of abuse based on what they see as well as what is related to them by the parents. There is no standardised instrument for assessing the situation objectively. In the absence of such clear procedural guidelines, a large number of abusers escape the net and the children remain trapped in the abusive environment. Moreover, in the absence of any obvious signs of maltreatment or abuse there is also a tendency to believe the parents rather than the child. The case workers are also constrained by the system which seeks to maintain the family unit intact.

However, within all these constraints, it should be possible to evolve a standard instrument for screening suspected child abuse cases. A number of checklists, surveys and test instruments have been developed to screen for parenting problems and child maltreatment risk by researchers in the United States of America. Knowledge and use of such instruments as also an awareness of their limitations would help the State Protective Services workers to carry out their mandate to investigate and render timely and accurate decisions regarding the occurrence of child abuse.

In those cases which are “active”, depending upon the severity of the case home visits are carried out by the case workers about once in two months. Some
cases are reported to the Police, and the legal process takes it's course. Regular monitoring of cases is constrained by the lack of adequate staff. The Child Protection Act of 1991 does not make counseling for the abuser mandatory during the jail term if the abuser is convicted therefore, just serving the jail term without undergoing any effective rehabilitation does not help the abuser, or the child, or the family, since often abuse recurs after the offender is released.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

An understanding of child abuse, as well as, the treatment and prevention of the social problem require an integrative approach with a broad range of strategies aimed at treatment and prevention. By identifying the social and cultural factors in child abuse, apart from the individual characteristics of abuser and abused child, strategies can be proposed for intervening at the individual as well as the societal level. This has implications for changes in public policy since it recognises that child abuse is a problem of society and not merely a concern of the mental health professionals.

Since child abuse is a complex problem it is necessary to tackle it simultaneously on various fronts. Although the immediate context of abuse requires treatment for the abused child either by placing the child with “fit” persons, or by placing the child in a childrens home or by removing the abuser, there is also a need to address the specific perceived stress factors that are operating in a given case. For instance, if unemployment is seen as a major stress factor in a particular case then this source of stress must be addressed by providing job related knowledge and skills.

It is necessary to involve the abusers and the abused child in counseling. It has been reported that abused children who are placed in institutions or foster care tend to
be forgotten because case workers get involved with other new cases that constantly demand their attention (Social Welfare Department Report 1993). Rehabilitation should be a major element in a strategy that is reactive i.e. one that comes into effect after the abuse has taken place. Priorities should be placed on getting the family back together after effective counseling. Follow up on such families to prevent recidivism should form a part of the effort.

Regular home visits by social workers which allows closer supervision as well as personal rapport with the family, has proven to be an effective means of dealing with the problem. Cross-cultural research also provides examples of innovative practices which could be useful when applied in the Malaysian context. According to Steinberg (1993), in Israel for instance, because of the ideological preference for family preservation and the limited capacity of traditional foster care, a number of innovative programmes have been implemented to help the abused child and their families. These programmes provide the requisite support, supervision and surveillance necessary, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the family. Parents benefit through child guidance programmes, parenting classes, organised outings, and subsidised day care, while the abused child is aided through home work assistance programmes, counseling services and after school programmes. The more severe cases, which require closer monitoring, have separate programmes under which the child spends after school hours at an ‘afternoon club’ which provides structured activities, free play time, assistance with homework and free meals. This fosters the child’s development while at the same time reducing stress on the parents by reducing the time children spend at home. It helps monitor the child’s well being and if necessary activate more serious means of intervention. The programme is offered as
an after school enrichment programme, which avoids evoking an authoritarian and coercive approach that might alienate parents from social services. The manner in which such programmes, aimed at helping the abused child and his family, are offered is therefore crucial.

Home visits by case workers or Protective Services workers should be augmented by community efforts such as neighbourhood volunteers. In fact the success of any program depends a lot upon the extent of community involvement. Campaigns to draw in and motivate members of the community to join in the child protection system or to form informal support groups in the neighbourhood should pay dividends. People are affected by the plight of abused children and often what is needed is some concrete grouping or organisation which they can join. The “Rukun Tetangga” scheme for instance, could also be used to foster neighbourhood support to assist those in need of emotional or material support. Such informal support groups in the neighbourhood are also more likely to encourage those who really need help to come forward for assistance. In case of the mandated services, help or “treatment” is forthcoming only after the detection and labeling of the “offender”. If neighbourhood support groups can be activated, help would be available before the abuse takes place. Such an option holds appeal and has a fair chance of success in a “caring society”.

The media is another extremely powerful agent of change with a direct reach into people’s lives. The Social Welfare Department has launched media campaigns through both the print and electronic media to highlight the plight of the abused child. These have to a large extent succeeded in mobilising public opinion on the issue. However, more could be done in terms of generating a debate on strategies aimed at prevention, strategies that are proactive and that deal with the more fundamental
underlying problems such as providing improved quality of living or free day care facilities for working parents etc. The media can help by educating the general public to create a change in current attitudes, values and beliefs about the use of violence as an acceptable method of child rearing as well as heightening societal awareness on the devastating impact of rejection and verbal abuse.

These are programs which do not require the massive mobilisation of funds which Governments are unwilling to spend. It does, however, require a concerted long term effort to educate parents on alternatives to corporal punishment. Alternatives must be offered in order to establish positive socialization practices, which will reduce the need for parents to power assertive methods to control their children. In the recent past the media has informed us about the options available to child abuse victims and the punishment awaiting the abusers. It needs now to highlight those aspects of the issue that would help change social attitudes and behaviour.

Of all the primary prevention strategies, parenting education for pre-parent populations is often singled out as the strategy most likely to prevent the initial injury to the child, since children learn abusive parenting practices from observing their parents and experiencing abuse during the process of growing up. Parenting education should be incorporated into the secondary school curriculum, incorporating aspects on child development as well as the role and responsibilities of parenthood. Likewise, religious platforms could be used to disseminate information on the issue and encourage pro social behaviour. Religion has a pervading influence on peoples lives, and therefore through the mechanisms of social control and sanctioning, religion can reduce the risk of child abuse.
Mandated social intervention with abused children is recognised as the oldest and most universal response to this problem (Wolfe, 1993). However, this form of intervention has certain drawbacks in terms of the risks to the child's on-going development and family relationships. Often the impact of the placement of the child, whether in an institution or a foster home, is evaluated only in terms of the child’s personal safety rather than with reference to the social, emotional, and intellectual development. And as previously stated, the child tends to be forgotten once the decision regarding placement is made.

Finally, primary prevention programmes could also focus on geographical areas that contain a number of high risk indicators. For instance in Kuala Lumpur, congested areas such as Cheras, Setapak, Sentul, and Keramat record a large number of cases. These programmes should hold an appeal across the board for a wide range of clientele and encourage the high risk populations to come forward and avail of the services being offered. The stigma attached to receiving the mandated services should be removed by making the services available before any violation forces intervention. The involvement of the community in such programmes as well as their continuation over several years, should be taken into consideration as also the fact that flexibility and sensitivity to the cultural and social diversity of families will allow such a strategy to have a wider appeal and therefore a better chance of success.

Prevention evaluation studies should also be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the present programs for dealing with child abuse. The Social Welfare Department Report (1993) states that there were many children who were still abused or neglected after the intervention of the authorities. It is possible that the type of treatment given to the abuser and the abused child was inadequate, given the
constraints of the system. It is therefore imperative to undertake an evaluation of the present strategies and treatment designs, so that necessary changes could be effected or alternatives developed.

Researchers have found that child abuse can lead to many other social problems e.g. juvenile delinquency, and criminal behaviour, other forms of family violence, runaways, prostitution, teenage pregnancies, drug abuse, mental illnesses, etc. Child abuse prevention therefore is the most important way to prevent many other social problems.

5.5 SUMMARY
This chapter concludes the report with a brief overview of the study and provides a summary of the findings. The implications of the findings as well as some recommendations as to alternative strategies to deal with the problem are also detailed in an attempt to provoke a re-thinking among concerned individuals on how to improve the existing system.