

In Children's Eyes. "To see mother suffering is the hardest trauma for a child"

November 12, 2015 at 18:17

Text by Darya Tsaryk, photo by Alexandr Vasiukovich/ TUT.BY

- *My daughter has problems with growth. She is thirteen. The psychotherapist says she does not grow because she does not want to become adult, to become a woman, because it is inevitably connected to acquisition of sexuality. Yes, there are problems.*

A society unable to protect its women and children is doomed to degeneration. According to the expertise, Belarus somewhat confirms the pan-European statistics - every fourth female suicide is a consequence of physical, psychological or sexual violence in the family. In some aspects, the statistics even surpass the European ones: every third Belarusian was subject to physical violence in the family, and not more than 30% of the victims' total number sought help.

Aiming to tell about the domestic violence in Belarus by available means as well as to dissolve a dozen other common stereotypes and labels, TUT.BY journalists investigated the issue within the project "Home and Violence" together with the victims and assisting specialists such as lawyers, police, psychologists, volunteers, business people etc.

Names of domestic violence victims are fictional. Journalists know their real names.

Domestic violence is not only about partner violence. It is as much about violence against a child, who is always a victim. Today we will discuss child abuse prevention with Andrei Makhanko, chairperson of NGO "Understanding", member of the Commission on Juvenile Affairs at the Council of Ministers, international consultant on education and protection of children's rights.

Domestic violence and child abuse

"It is all based on the human factor. There is no system, and if there is one, then it's fake. It may say one thing and actually mean a different one", says Andrei Makhanko, chairman of NGO "Understanding", member of the Commission on Juvenile Affairs at the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, international consultant on education and protection of children's rights (UNICEF, 2006); member of the international expert group ISPCAN (2013-PT); member of the Scientific Committee of the European Conference of ISPCAN (2013, 2015) and the International Congress ISPCAN (2016) in the office of the organization.

Andrei Makhanko emphasizes that the work of "Understanding" has little to do with the fight against domestic violence in Belarus. The NGO's activities do not imply or encourage the localization of the physical, psychological or emotional child abuse in the place of "action": a house, a street, a pharmacy, and so on. However, there are points of intersection. We first heard about "Understanding" from Anna D., client of public association "Radislava", who was later redirected to Andrei Makhanko:

- My daughter has problems with growth. She is thirteen. The psychotherapist says she does not grow because she does not want to become adult, to become a woman, because it is inevitably connected to acquisition of sexuality. Yes, there are problems.

Alia's mother takes out a thick folder with copies of the case files and asks to look through while she is away in the rest room: - Well, so that you imagine what it is about. She was asked about it in "Understanding".

Five minutes for reading. "Fingers", "vagina", "anus" - now the idea is clear, and the conversation continues when Anna comes back.

- I asked her one day: "Why did not you tell me before?" She said: "I thought it should be like that. I did not know it was bad". Therefore, it is necessary to teach children basic concepts from an early age, so they know what is out there and they cannot be touched, it is not the norm.

We meet Andrei Mikhailovich in room 404 at number 8 Leshchynski street. The modest room 2,5 by 2,5 meters used to be the first friendly room in Belarus to interview abused children started by the organization in 2009. Alia was also interviewed in such a room, just in a different district of Minsk:

- The conversation with my daughter revealed more than I knew. Alia said that her father shoved her head under the blanket and poked her with his sexual organ. I heard such details that I started vomiting and managed to escape to the bathroom. After the questioning he was charged.

Cases of child sexual abuse are based on children's testimony, and if the interrogation is conducted correctly, the Belarusian investigators get a reliable witness with true and accurate testimony that no one doubts about: neither lawyers, nor judges. Moreover, as Andrei says, in 99% of cases brought to court child rapists are sent to prison.

- Look, there was a camera in this hole and in this one there is still a microphone, so if anyone suspicious comes, I turn on the button, press and record to hedge myself (laughs). But if I stick to the point, the topic of domestic violence is an important one, but we have little to do with it.

- How come?

- "Understanding" is part of the international movement, which works to protect children from violence. Child abuse is a problem different from domestic violence. They have a point of intersection when children are suffering from severe forms of abuse caused by domestic violence. That is when children are beaten if one of the parents switches on to the child. Besides, most children are victims of emotional abuse, because to see mother suffering is a severe trauma for the child. These children account for approximately 5% of the total number of girls and boys, who we believe are victims of violence. But in general, child abuse is a different thing.

A home boxer, power-hungry, necessary to be short-circuited is about the manifestation of power and control. Child abuse is about the underdeveloped parental skills, about the lack of competence in positive parenting, or about pedophilia in pure form or libertine sexual behavior combined with alcohol or drug abuse and so on.

- Why are you so fundamentally separating «domestic violence»?

- Because the phenomena have a different nature, and respectively the solution of problems is different.

- Does this solution have any practical implementation in Belarus?

- Yes. We have a great experience since 2003, and in 2009 we issued a policy document called "A strategy to prevent violence and to assist child victims in the Republic of Belarus." Belarus as a sovereign state is free to adopt this strategy or not. By now, we have been able to lobby for the three most important measures to protect children in the "National plan to improve the situation of children and protect their rights for 2015-2016." First is the creation of a national children's call line. Second is the

creation of favorable conditions for juvenile witnesses participating in a criminal trial, i.e. our friendly interview rooms (CAC/Barnahus-programs). Third is a partnership of the state and the civil society in the protection of children's rights. In the National Plan, the third point is formulated in a bureaucratic language and sounds like "to attract public organizations to implementation of this plan." We insisted on this point, in fact, and I think the next time we will push through "participation of public organizations paid from the state social order." We also actively participate in the work of the expert group under the leadership of Vadim Devyatovskiy, deputy of the House of Representatives together with representatives of the Ministry of Interior, the Investigation Committee, and the State Committee of legal expertise and law department of Belarusian State University. Some of our work results have already become part of the law, some are being discussed by parliamentarians, and another part is being prepared for submission to specialized commissions.

Sexual acts against minors: how the law works

On the computer screen we can see children friendly interview room. The computer is in a separate room from which the investigator can see the interrogation.

- Does article 167 of the Criminal Code "Sexual assault" work in practice, and in particular its third paragraph ("Actions envisaged in the first or second paragraph of this article, committed knowingly against a minor (juvenile) or on imprudence entailed death of the victim, or the infliction of serious bodily injury, or infection with HIV, or other grave consequences ")?

- It can be different. Usually the practice is that the case against a villain, intimidating or abusing a child, with a minimum of evidence (in our cases it is very often that there is very little evidence). Then investigations are started by article 168 ("Sexual intercourse and other sexual acts with a person under sixteen"). And in the course of the investigation evidence of more serious offenses generally appears, as well as articles of more serious charge appear, e.g. article 166 ("Rape") with a maximum penalty of 15 years imprisonment, for example. There may be episodes that qualify for several articles, such as, for the 167th or "softer" 169th ("Sexual Abuse") as well as 170th ("Coercion to perform sexual acts"). It could lead to a much longer period of punishment for the villain. In our memory there is a 17-year sentence for one of the "gang of bikers." In addition to the established practice to initiate proceedings on the 168th article, investigators see problems with the evidence in 167th. Are you talking about the case against Davidovich?

- Yes.

- The case was started in the right way according to article 168 ... and even, according to the head of Administration of the Investigation Committee in Minsk, there was evidence in the case. And this is usually enough to be put into jail. The termination of the case raised many questions from investigators and journalists, as well as us, social activists.

I still think that Davidovich and especially those who protected him will not be so easily abandoned by our judicial system. I am perhaps the last romantic and I still believe in justice, so yeah ... today it is a slow process of investigation, and tomorrow it can be a high-profile case, which allows seriously reconsider approaches to personnel policy, as well as to "clean" the society and in the first place its so-called "elite", "untouchable" part. I believe because ...

- **It is destined to be like that?**
- Yes, it must have already started...
- **How do judges work in your situations when it comes to child abuse?**
- There is a very positive thing about our judges. Most members of the judiciary in Belarus are women. I want to thank them. Almost none of them call children to court. They evaluate the records of interrogations, which gives them a sufficient result. The presence of a child in court is

a trauma for him or her. And if we are told that a child is called to court, then we can say with confidence that the judge is a man. It is usually like this ... Although in recent years most judges, both women and men, are faced with innovations such as interview records, and the judiciary appreciates the quality and reliability of children's testimony which are weighty convictions for villains.

About abused children, experts and criminals

A web camera is used to transfer images from the interview room. In mid-June 2015 the House of Representatives of the Republic of Belarus adopted the amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code, governing the use of video conferencing systems in criminal proceedings, including child-friendly interrogation rooms.

- Do 100% of abused children pass through the interrogation room of youth social organization "Understanding"?

- Unfortunately not. There is no common practice yet. Friendly interview rooms are only 18 in our country, one in each regional center city and several in other towns. For comparison, in Poland there are over 50. Poland is four times as big as our country. If we multiply our eighteen by four it is seventy-two. That is, in relation to the proportion of the population we are ahead of Poland today, with its 25 years of experience in real democracy, and the development of local philanthropy and benevolence on the part of the international donation agencies. The number is good, now we have to improve the quality, to standard them, etc. However, there are a lot of things to learn from our Polish neighbors. Not only the infrastructure components may work, but also the law framework, and above all the process of humanization of all society spheres concerning children, including abused ones. Infrastructure is important too, i.e. a strong children's ombudsman independent from government branches, and almost completely reformed system of care for orphans, as well as very humane conditions for children in conflict with the law ...

- How many children have passed through these rooms over the 6 years?

- 1 807 children were victims of crimes against sexual inviolability and sexual freedom in the past six years. We estimate that over the years 20% to 80% of these children have been interviewed in the friendly rooms. The answer is about a thousand children.

- Are children followed up by a psychologist after the interviews? Is there rehabilitation or something like that?

- Yes, but unfortunately not all parents of "our children" understand that you must work with traumas. We always say: "It is necessary to heal the child." Stress that the child lives under for a long time after the situation of violence has toxic and damaging effects on the psyche - it constantly brings back memories to that situation. What is stress? It is the release of the cortisol hormone into the blood. Hydrocortisone is a toxin which affects the central nerve system, cardiovascular system and the like. The result is poisoning. Hence, a child who had been beaten, raped or traumatized by any other influence, runs a double risk of strokes, heart attacks, diabetes, a five times bigger risk of underperformance at school (unemployment as a consequence), promiscuity, drug and alcohol abuse, and one point seven times increased risk of cancer. Again, the mere memory of traumatizing experience causes chemical changes in the blood over and over again.

One more thing: we almost do not have experts specializing in such cases. In Belarus there are only twenty-three children psychotherapists who work with the full range of child psychiatry and psychotherapy, i.e. they handle traumas, mental illnesses and special needs. They are two in each region

apart from Minsk, the rest working in the capital. Can you imagine what it is for the country - 23 specialists against 10 million people?

- And you say the villains who did it to "your" children mostly are in jail?

- Yes. Almost all men, even though I would not dare to call them "men", are in prison. And this is very good. In Belarus, the level of detection of such crimes grew by 73% from 2008 to 2014 (totally 412 of such crimes were revealed last year - TUT.BY). But we do not idealize the picture. It is far from the ideal. In Sweden, which has approximately the same population, detection of crimes against sexual inviolability and sexual freedom of children is five times higher. It is necessary to state that in Belarus this issue has been given much more attention since 2009, it is true, and hence there are results. But we also have another national trait that slows down the whole process: until some of the high officials personally attend to this or that problem, the solutions will not be found.

There is one more peculiarity - the so called sexual misconduct. These are all offenses under articles 166-170, which cannot be imputed to a person under the age of 14. Our police moans and cries about this and asks for help. They cannot do anything with these guys. In the US, such a child of 12 can get into the registry of sex offenders and will stay there for at least 5 years. You can be registered for 5 to 25 years, or for life, depending on the crime. So the guy who offensively touched a girl at a private part of the body would go to the therapy every day and to school, too, without truancy and mischief. For if he would not, he would go to in jail for a long time, and then the Belarusian maximum of 10 years set for "youngsters" would seem one day compared to US terms of imprisonment for this crime category.

- Violence against children is not the subject, on the extent of which we have a complete picture. What is the estimated percentage of children who really need help, do you work with?

- Not only we but the whole system in general - both the state and NGOs - work with about 20% of the target group of children subjected to sexual, emotional and physical abuse. And this is a very optimistic estimate.

- How often do children who are beaten by parents call at the National children's line call?

- Yes. I would like to clarify that before the nationwide children's line belonged to us. Today it is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health (with our development partner's role kept), and if things go on like this, we will have to take it back. We are observing and trying to encourage the Ministry of Health until January of the next year, we give them a chance to improve the situation.

How to help a child?

The layout of the future National Centre for Child Protection. Andrei Makhanko periodically buys lottery tickets, saying: "Well, it's not for me. I do it for the children, maybe I will be lucky."

Hello Dasha,

I read your article about women abuse in their families. I got shocked. But still I could not fully believe that such things might happen. Today, when I passed by the neighbors' apartment, I hear someone crying. I first thought that it is TV on a high level of sound. Then I listened more and it turned out that it was mother beating her daughter. The slaps on the skin were very loud, I could not tell where, probably, on the face. The girl is about 10 to 12 years old. She was crying loudly, that she did not want this and that it hurt. You know how a crow cries. This was such an awful cry. Meanwhile, the mother told her in a calm voice that it also hurt her and it was also unpleasant when she was summoned and that if the girl complained once again it would be even worse. The father served in Afghanistan. He is also crazy and

aggressive. He often shouts at his wife... Dasha, what should I do in such a situation? The girl will not complain again. The father beats mother and the mother beats the daughter... Everything is so mixed up...

- One day I received a message: as a practitioner, please answer, what kind of actions a child in a similar situation should do?

- A child needs to talk about his or her situation with a significant adult, and it is desirable that the adult is a member of the school (a teacher or a social worker); a person who may, on the official duties, take steps to protect the child.

- What comes next?

- And then there is an instruction "On the procedure on identification of minors in need of state protection" attached to Decree Law № 18 "On additional measures for the protection of children in dysfunctional families", which clearly states what is necessary to do and how when the fact is confirmed. One should protect a child's legitimate interests, protect his or her life and health, in the end, the child can be placed in a shelter until the parents are somehow rehabilitated. If parents are not rehabilitated within six months, the children can be placed with another family. If the child is small, he/she may be adopted: we have a huge waiting list for adoption. I am not for the fact that a child is taken away from the family, but there are situations when a baby is hospitalized with fractures several times a year. Wait a minute, the baby cannot break itself. If it falls, let's say, from the crib a meter high, it can never be hurt. It is only with the acceleration against the floor or the wall when such cases happen. In this case, it is necessary to take measures to save the child's life. Here one cannot speak about any undermining of family and spiritual foundations.

- Decree Law number 18, yes or no?

- Yes. Decree Law number 18 is the same juvenile justice, about which is shouted so loud about in every way, from the hard-nosed "against" to the categorical "for". With the existing shortcomings, the decree law saves children who die from beatings, starvation, who may be ill and no one will help them, who spend the night in November with dogs in a box, crammed into a shed and asking the neighbors for food. Now they are fewer, but once again it is now that the economic crisis is coming to a full height.

Lost in translation and the cynical mathematics

It's a children friendly interview room in one of the socio-pedagogical centers in Minsk. 1807 children were victims of crimes against sexual inviolability and sexual freedom in the past six years. About a thousand children went through such rooms. Eighteen rooms are open throughout Belarus in each regional center cities and several in other towns.

International NGO "Understanding" is a non-governmental, non-profit organization. I heard many times from employees and other public associations about various difficulties encountered when dealing with government agencies. I ask Makhanko from his experience. As it turned out, Andrei fears actions of completely different structures. For example, UNICEF and IOM, which, according to him, thoughtlessly come into the field which they do not know. According Makhanko it is wrong, unethical and fraught when managers and linguists, not experts in the field of child abuse invade this area with multimillion-dollar budgets, paying no attention to the opinion of the professional community or the recognized players of the national civil society, with the aim to master budget. With this approach one cannot establishment strong and self-sufficient national players. Andrei uses the expression "wasting money" and refers to the experience of UN project activities termination in other countries as positive, primarily for the development of national civil society.

- Recently, I have really enriched myself with the experience of a small area - American Samoa. The local civil society is strong there (still only 23 organizations while we have around 2500 in Belarus). It forced the local office of the United Nations (including the IOM, and UNICEF) to fully formally abandon this approach in cooperation with the local stakeholders and spend their entire project budget only on the support of civil society organizations and only as civil society actors themselves determine - the priorities, the amount and the timing. That is where the office of the United Nations has taken its true place as a source of technical assistance and a developer of high standards. It returned to its original mission as defined in the UN Charter, i.e. cooperation with the country in its interests, rather than the narrow specific office and personal ones.

- When was your work easier? Was it when you started or is it easier now?

- First there were problems of non-recognition. I saw officials and professors blowing up their cheeks and turn away. Then we made friends with a very good man, a real scientist, first-rate psychologist Vladimir Alexandrovich Yanchuk, and then became recognized in the scientific community. Now we are dealing with dozens of stars of the first magnitude in the world of our professional field, and certainly Vladimir is one of such stars, a man who played a very important role in the movement to protect children from violence in our country.

In the opening period there were problems with our government. When you work with normal people work you get a good result but if you deal with a retrograde or a casual and uninterested person then it's a dead end.

And now we have no one to take decisions. I was just going to make an appointment with Natalia Ivanovna Kochanova (deputy prime minister. – Note by TUT.BY). We had known each other for from Novopolotsk. It was with her blessing that we set up the friendly interview room there. But why should I go to her? Because a decision will not be taken until you go to the senior management. [...] I've always remembered Anatoly Afanasievich Tozik said about it. He did a lot for the hospice. He laid the first stone together with the Health Minister Zharko by arranging the decision to transfer all of the republican "Saturday working day" mission in 2014 to the hospice. He took two decisions regarding our nationwide children's call line. How can we say about the decision process when the deputy prime minister should take the decision to listen to the public organization and to do what we said?! And it all started with the fact that prior to the meeting he called the national children's line, but he did not get an answer. Yes, there are global statistics that up to a third part of calls are usually ignored, but everyone understood everything. We proposed certain measures, and they were being implemented into managerial decisions, which, alas, have not yet been fulfilled.

- Why?

- No money, they say ... Officials of the Ministry of Finance are actually quite pragmatic people, mathematicians, and if so, let them calculate how much the state loses when a child dies. The state loses about 300 thousand dollars, and the direct losses are 30 thousand US dollars.

- What is this amount about?

- 30 thousand is the amount of income tax over the working life of an average Belarusian, and if we include the added value produced by an average Belarusian with an average salary of 500 USD, that is all of 300 thousand USD. This is cynical mathematics. And it is understood in the Finance Ministry. And that is without taking into account the costs incurred by the state to free education, health care, child allowances, and so on. We counted only direct losses. And if that child was the second Einstein? Or Mozart? How to measure that?

How many children are killed per year? How many will not be able to realize their full human potential because of the experienced violence, pain, fear and the toxic stress? Multiply. And get hundreds of millions of dollars. So you select the money now, not even all hundredth part of it! It is going to be a loss anyway. Spend it on the Nationwide Children's call line. And we will add to development. The same is about the building of the National Centre for Child Protection. Do not plan it for 2,200 m², as our gray cube (pointing to the 3D-layout of the building, hanging on the wall), just at least a minimum area of 400 m².

About the National Center for Child Protection

- How is the implementation of your project going on? When and why did you decide to build an Education and medical center to protect children?

- The decision to build the center we adopted back in 2011, when we first came to the National Center for Protection of children from violence in the United States. Since then, we have worked not only to just to adapt the "Western" model to local conditions. We explored a number of models employed in the world. Once we have made a technological chain assistance in the conditions and resources of a poor country, which yet has much underrated HDI = 54 ... And the fact that our HDI (Human Development Index. - Comm. TUT.BY) is still strongly undervalued is confirmed not only by handing the Nobel Prize to the Belarusian writer Svetlana Aleksievich, but also by our hempen practice. We have created single model (includes all the mechanisms - from prevention, intervention and investigation to services for the treatment and rehabilitation, i.e. child protection in one system at the Centre. - Comm. TUT.BY) for the protection of children from violence, which has been considered a great success in most accepted he developed world. It got two prestigious international awards so far. Regarding the services' concentration approach, we are followed by the flagship countries - the United States, Iceland, Norway, Poland, and the actively developing region of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Russia. Along with the development of this process a new confirmation of our correctness comes. Just one thing ... We have left it on paper - in the design and 3D-layout ... Yes, in two beautiful charters on the wall, received from the hands of a Japanese princess. And they have it in "iron" - everything is built and operates. We have no money.

- Does it have anything to do with your status of NGO? Is it a political reason?

- No. And the fact that we are going to build the center for, between other, the US or other Western money does not bother anyone, because we have no need to demonstrate the professional competence and patriotism. The problem is that international donors see everything through the eyes of UNICEF, and it says " It is a dead-end country", "it is impossible to work in it," "it does not have the structures of civil society", "the government has other priorities, different from international obligations " ... Will a serious donor come here? Those who know us personally, if only. But there are not many. These are goal-oriented means. There is nothing about politics. We need the budget, the structure of which is going to be discussed only with a serious and proven donor (so that it does not work out as last time when the report was done, the diploma was hanged on the wall, the dinner eaten at hotel "Beijing" and "goodbye"). We need 17 million USD. And when we find the money, then this thing is going to work forever. It is going to be a perpetual motion, with a little fed from our passionarity (smiles). By the way, I constantly observe Anya Gorchakova (director of the Belarusian Children's Hospice. - Comm. TUT.BY).

She is worth making a gold bust of the hero only her fundraising campaign, the second bust can be made for the construction. Everything will come. It's a matter of time.

Contact telephone number for victims of domestic violence - a nationwide hot line - 8 801 100-88-01

Contact phone number to be placed in shelters for women victims of domestic violence - 8 029 610-83-55

The national children's line - 8 801 100-16-11

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