

Sins of the mother

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We have heard the story before. The names change, the province changes, the particulars of the custody case change, the age of the dead child changes, but some things stay the same when a mother kills her own children: Any objective observer can see the tragedy coming a mile away, the children are not removed from her toxic embrace before it happens, and the mother is not only insufficiently punished (if at all) for the crime, but receives public sympathy on the assumption she was driven to it by forces beyond her control.

Last week, Frances Elaine Campione, 31, locked in a year-long custody battle with her estranged husband Leonardo, was charged with the murder of their two baby daughters, one-year-old Sophia, and three-year-old Serena. Whatever the truth turns out to be in this case, warning signs had abounded: The Children's Aid Society of Simcoe County, Ont. had kept an open file on this family for some time; former neighbours portrayed the mother as unstable and possibly suicidal; some described bizarre and frightening public behaviour; she had been hospitalized for treatment on several occasions.

In the past five years, there have been several comparable tragedies. In 2003, 13-month-old Zachary Turner was drugged and drowned in Newfoundland by his mother, Shirley, while she was out on bail for the third time on charges of murdering Zachary's father. Then there was Toronto baby Jordan Heikamp, who in 2001 starved to death in his mother's care under the eyes of the Catholic Children's Aid Society (no jail time), and Toronto baby Sara Cao, abused to death in 2001 by her mother Elizabeth (again no jail time -- has any murdering mom ever done jail time in Canada?). According to Christie Blatchford, who followed the case, Sara's mother was "treated by the system, and in the main by the media, as a pitiful [woman], worthy of sympathy."

When fathers kill, society holds them completely responsible. In a way, this is a backhanded compliment. They are assumed to be full-fledged moral agents acting from a willed choice. In the default absolution of women from responsibility for violence, however, we see the soft bigotry of low expectations, and a kind of infantilization process, which presents in the form of familiar excuses. Friends and relatives, women's groups and sympathetic media all declare the tragedy a result of post-partum depression, the ravages of a custody battle or other uncontrollable factors.

Thus, even though, ironically, the ravages and iniquities of custody battles are disproportionately borne by men, there is no question that in any single one of these and all other such cases, if the father were the killer, the outcomes would have been very different. Indeed, these deaths would likely have been prevented, for the same aberrant behaviour in a man over a period of months would render him unfit to parent in the eyes of all concerned. A murdering father, it goes without saying, would have been sent to jail, and for a long time.

As a rule, then, when fathers kill their children, it is usually in spite of the system's efforts to protect children, for both alleged and real warning signs by men are taken seriously. But when mothers kill, it is usually because the system willfully ignored obvious warning signs -- or even, as may be the case in the Campione affair -- actively colluded with a disturbed mother in isolating the children from a stable and engaged father.

So these tragedies don't happen because caseloads are too heavy, as CAS workers often plead, or because they are stupid. The culprit, in short, is cultural bias. They happen because frontline social service people have been marinating in an ideology that willfully shifts the blame for domestic violence from women to men or "society," whichever is handiest to the case. They are trained to see women as victims, who need comfort and validation, and not -- in spite of a cornucopia of evidence to the contrary, as Lorne Gunter pointed out in his column yesterday -- as perpetrators of violence.

Not all deaths at the hands of disturbed parents can be prevented, but some can -- I think those Campione babies could have been saved -- if only those who stand between at-risk children and their fate jettison the persisting myths around domestic violence, and take a gender-neutral position when distinguishing children's natural protectors from their enemies.

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