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Child abuse on rise in J'lem's Arab quarters, experts say

Lack of awareness, high poverty seen as main causes

• By RUTH EGLASH

Arab children living in east Jerusalem suffer more from abuse than their Jewish counterparts in the western part of the city, experts working in the sector said on Thursday.

They spoke on the last day of a week-long conference organized by the Haruv Institute, a Jerusalem-based research and training center, for professionals on preventing child abuse.

According to data presented by Ra'anya Harish, director of the East Jerusalem Social Services Office in the municipality, there were 1,022 new cases of abuse against children in 2010, with more than half (526) involving physical abuse and most of the cases of violence happening within the family structure.

"Unlike in more developed areas of the country, children in east Jerusalem still have no rights and the subject is not really talked about at all," Harish said at the conference, which included senior professionals from the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs, as well as local and international academic experts in the field of child abuse.

"Punishing children in a very physical way is still very much accepted," she said.

Harish's figures showed that among the abuse cases uncovered by social services in that part of Jerusalem, 79 involved sexual abuse and 417 were neglect-related.

Extreme poverty, low awareness and lack of resources were the main reason for the growing abuse recorded last year, she said.

"Up until pre-school age, when the state pays for education, the children simply sit at home and do nothing, and that is because of the poverty experienced by most families in east Jerusalem," said Harish, who estimated that 90 percent of children under five were not enrolled in an education framework.

As many as 84% of east Jerusalem children lived below the poverty line and more than half of the teenagers in the city dropped out of school at one point or another, she said.

Harish also told the conference: "There is a serious gap between the needs of the population in east Jerusalem and the available resources. There is no center for children suffering from different disorders, either behavioral or learning disabilities, and when we encounter such children, we send them to institutions in other parts of the city, such as children suffering from hyperactivity."

Another explanation for the rapidly growing child abuse within the capital's Arab sector, according to Harish, is the young age of girls getting married and giving birth. The marrying age is now as young as 14, she said.

"As far as we know, this is one of the main reasons there has been an increase in abuse against children under one," she said. "The young mothers do not know how to take care of the babies and in many cases they themselves are still children. This affects the entire family structure, and the poverty they endure does not help the situation either."

According to official figures, there are roughly 270,000 Arabic-speakers living in east Jerusalem and roughly a third live below the poverty line. Around half the residents have a child under the age of 14.

"One of the main characteristics of the Arab population in east Jerusalem is a low use of services," said Harish, adding that mixed couples, where one spouse is an Israeli citizen and the other a permanent resident or with a temporary status, often are not entitled to municipal services.

"In addition, many of them do not believe in state institu-

tions, chose not to obey local laws or simply do not understand their rights," she added.

Prof. Hillel Schmidt, director of the Haruv Institute, said the low level of services in the Arab sector is a well-known phenomenon and that for cultural reasons many cases go unreported.

"Those in the Arab sector, like in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, do not rush to inform the authorities in cases of violence," Schmidt said.

Research undertaken by the institute a year ago found that ultra-Orthodox Jewish and Arabic-speaking communities

are less likely to report child abuse or view it with the same severity as those from more secular segments of the population, either for cultural reasons or due to fear of outside interference.

Based on interviews with 812 Israelis – 688 Jews and 124 Arabs, the study highlighted that secular people viewed child abuse as a very serious problem in society while those from the ultra-Orthodox sector were less informed and saw it more as a secular phenomenon.

The study also found that while 61% of Jewish citizens

viewed child abuse as a very serious problem in their community, only 39% of Arabs felt it was a big issue among their people.

The Haruv Institute was founded just over three years ago by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation with the goal of becoming a world center for advanced research in the field of child abuse within the family in Israel. The institute works closely with the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services and in training all professionals who work with children.