

Family Group Conference and domestic violence

Domestic Violence

In cases of domestic violence there is often an element of secrecy: nobody can know anything about it. And nobody says anything about it or dares to ask any questions; there's a taboo against it.

There is often isolation: the family in which the domestic violence occurs has little contact with other people. Sometimes, one member of the family will seek contact with an aid agency to solve the situation; sometimes the neighbours report domestic violence to the aid agency. These agencies can usually only offer something temporary: that is why contact is needed with at least one person. Ultimately, people have to do it themselves.

Approach in the Netherlands

In recent years, women's aid agencies in the Netherlands have primarily catered for a woman's safety, her protection from the man, offering her shelter and helping her to organise her life herself, independently, far from the man, far from acquaintances who would be able to tell the man where she was living. She can then build up a new life in a place far away, with or without children. However, what we notice in the Netherlands is that this is only a fraction of the solution: it is very hard to start a new life somewhere a long way away. If there are children, the route to the man is never sealed off, because if the man does not go looking for the children, the children will look for their father some time between now and becoming adult, even if no contact has been agreed. Many women also seek contact with their ex-partner after some time; for them it was not so much the relationship as the violence within it that had to stop. That is why new forms of aid have been developed in which more support can remain (or be sought) for the woman and in which her safety is guaranteed.

In Amsterdam, for example, in addition to refuges there are also support offices in each district of the city where women who are abused and still live at home can build up a plan of action (to stay, to mobilise aid or to flee). Women, who after shelter choose to return home, can make use of counselling on their return. That is how contact with Family Group Conferencing (FGC) came into being. Since 2001 Family Group Conferencing (a decision-making model) has been successfully applied to Youth Welfare Work in the Netherlands. In Canada and America there had been earlier successes in stopping violence by projects on domestic violence and Family Group Conferencing. In the Netherlands, a start was made in 2002 in providing Conferences for domestic violence.

Family Group Conferencing in brief

An FGC is a possibility for people to remain responsible for both the problem and the solution. Questions such as: problems in upbringing, catering for the safety of children, but also: parents who are separating, is a plan needed for the future of the children, and: if there is domestic violence, how can it be stopped?

At a meeting with people they select themselves (family members, friends) they draw up a plan. An independent co-ordinator (someone who speaks the same language as the family, who understands their culture) sets up the meeting. The family is in charge: the conference is in their language, at a time of their choosing, with their habits, rituals and with their food.

The actual conference

The meeting itself has *three parts*:

1. exchange of information (at which professionals may also be invited)
2. private part, plan is drawn up by the family
3. making agreements about the plan

In questions of domestic violence

In the case of domestic violence the basis of the conference may be different:

- the violence must stop, but I want to continue with the relationship
- the violence must stop, I want to end the relationship
- I want to end the relationship but I know that he is still the father of my children. So how can we arrange parenting without my being afraid for my safety? Who can help?

Strengths-Restorative Approach

By revealing the secret, by involving more people in the problem and the solution, a conference often has more success in these matters in the long term. At a conference family members and acquaintances of both the woman and the man take part; they draw up a plan together and make agreements on how to carry it out. Where professional help is needed, more people will be able to make sure that it is going to work. At a domestic violence conference the *information part* is important. Nearly always, information provided there is about the spiral of violence, so that others can also understand how the violence originated, why it is so difficult to break away from it. "I love him, but not the violence."

In addition, information is needed about the possibilities of aid related directly or indirectly to the violence: strengths-restorative training, aggression regulation, housing, debts, unemployment and illness. By sharing the information with people who are going to find a solution together, everyone is aware of precisely what is happening and what is possible. More people work together from the family and from the aid agency in order to reach a conclusion.

What about safety?

The participants want to work towards a solution. Possible obstacles to attendance are discussed. For both the man and the woman (and for the children) there is a support person at the conference, someone from their own network who can help them to say what they want to say, who can help them to remain focussed on a solution and who can help them to remain calm.

Sometimes people will choose not to attend: they are not capable of working towards a solution, they cannot vouch for their aggression or they just do not wish to be present. Then they can be represented by someone else, or can contribute by a letter, a video message or a taped message. In this way, their opinion is still represented and it can be involved in the deliberations.

An example

A woman makes a report of domestic violence, her husband is arrested and the police discuss an FGC with both of them and give them each a folder. They like the idea of a conference because they want to continue their relationship. A co-ordinator makes an appointment with both of them and then with each of them separately in order to map out what their network is like, who is aware of the situation and who could help. Slowly but surely, people are named who could be involved, for example, his parents, his cousins a friend of the family. For her, it is more difficult: she has little contact with her family, they don't want to have anything to do with it. When the co-ordinator rings her father he is not very responsive. After a talk he wants time to consider whether or not he will come. He would actually prefer to stay out of it, but finally makes the decision to come. A woman friend of the woman is prepared to come.

The problems are not restricted to violence: there are big debts, he has no work, neither does she. They cannot discuss it with each other, the children are upset by their quarrels; sometimes they are hit as well. All this has been going on for two years.

The police are present at the conference. They give information about what the police can do when a report is made, how often they have been involved with this family. The intention is to draw up a good plan together. Information is also given about domestic violence and possibilities of help. For example, help with aggression regulation, help in the relationship, but there is also information about debt relief and the possibilities of help in finding work.

In the private session, the participants draw up a plan, in which use is made of aggression regulation, but there is also a practical look at who can support them in organising debt relief (the man's mother) and looking for work (the man's cousin is going with him to look for work, the cousin's wife will help his wife to see if she can find temporary work so that there is some money coming in. If necessary the children can be looked after during the day by their grandmother for the time being).

FGC, where else is in Europe?

There are projects in Great Britain, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Poland and Russia. A European Forum for Family Group Conferencing has just been set up this year.

FGC has recently been introduced via the foundation "Op Kleine Schaal" (the initiator of FGC in the Netherlands) into Poland and Russia; Rob van Pagée (the director of the foundation) has given training courses there in PRIDE, a foster care education programme and also introduced FGC; the training courses in these countries was also organised by him.. This exchange of expertise has been taking place for some time now in Eastern Europe and in my opinion is very successful. There has been contact with a children's home in Bulgaria (via SaC-Amsterdam, a youth care organisation in Amsterdam) in the field of promoting expertise. Here too, FGC has been discussed and there are ideas about training courses in Bulgaria. I think that Eastern European countries could derive much benefit from a development such as FGC, particularly as the provision of aid can be further developed from it. Setting up its own network is in any case possible and produces support. In the Netherlands we see that family members take over 80% of the agreements themselves and in only 20% of the 17 agreements on average is help requested from the aid agencies.

Lineke Joanknecht

joanknecht@eigen-kracht.nl

Lineke Joanknecht works as a regional manager for the district of Amsterdam for FGC. In the Netherlands, FGC has been set up under the name: Eigen-Kracht conferentie: "your own strength conference".

