Why Some Mothers Kill Their Children

By Kelly Sons

Rachel Summers, a Murfreesboro Tennessee woman is accused of poisoning her own son to death. A 19 year old Cuban native, Mariafelix Morales is accused of killing the son she secretly gave birth to in her Shelbyville Tennessee home. Even in rural areas like these you'll find these headlines. Although it seems unnatural for a woman to kill her own children it is not uncommon. More than 200 women kill their children in the US every year, according to a recent study by the American Anthropological Association.

Homicide is the leading cause of death in children under four. Not crib death as many believe and not by a maniacal stranger but by a parent. Deliberate killing of ones own infant has never been observed in wild primates. There is a direct correlation between the act and the human society. Women, for the most part, do not make the best criminals. FBI crime statistics show that women commit only two crimes as frequently as men. Shoplifting and the murder of their own children. Although women commit less than 13% of all violent crimes they are also responsible for about 50% of all parental murders.

Many of these instances are contributed to postpartum depression or Baby blues - triggered by the births themselves says Nancy Scheper- Hughes, a medical anthropologist specializing in motherhood, violence and mental illness. There are three types of Postpartum depression that mothers may experience after childbirth. The least threatening is baby blues, consisting of mild mood swings and bouts of tearfulness. This can usually be taken care of without medication or treatment, often by just attending a support group.

The next is Postpartum depression, occurring anywhere from a few days to a few months after having any child in the family. Felling very strong feelings of sadness, despair and tragedy that affect a woman's ability to function. It can get worse if untreated. It can be treated with therapy and sometimes may need medication.

Postpartum psychosis is the most serious. It is a mental disorder that sets on quickly within the first three months of child birth. The mother will loose touch with reality and have hallucinations an delusions. It almost always requires medication and an extended hospitalization. The most highly publicized of these cases is the Texas mom Adrea Yates who drowned her 5 children in the bath tub. The birth of each of her children was followed by an hospitalization for deep depression.

A high percentage of these cases are also blamed on impulses as discussed in an article by Mike Rusyigan, a criminologist and Professor at San Fransisco University. Impulses like rage and frustration will often end in shaken baby syndrome or suffocation from covering a crying child's mouth. About 30% are premeditated murder, named Medea killings after an ancient Greek myth, a mother kills to punish someone like a cheating or abusive husband.

Yet another type is the narcissistic idea that the child is stymieing the mothers freedom, happiness or chance at a better life. The most famous such case is that if Susan Smith, the South Carolina mom who drowned her two boys by strapping them in a sinking car.

The reasons women kill their children are complex but more often than not there are signs of trouble before the act. Frequent bouts with depression are the most telling and most often used in court as a defense. England has instated an Infanticide Act which codifies a ready made postpartum defense. Severe poverty also lends itself to infanticide. Women often kill their children in poor societies.

Historically, the families survival is pivotal to the sacrifice of weaker children or female children. Infanticide has always soared in counties riddled with famine or during political unrest. African women on board slave ships killed their children. The amount of these cases will continue to grow each year until societal norms maintain that this is not rare behavior. Mother love is not universal. All women are not natural loving mothers. Nor does motherhood trump all illnesses and psychosis.

More than half of the 45 women on death row are there for killing their husbands and/or children and almost all reported that no one believed them when they cried out for help saying "I cannot be trusted with my children." The public must take an active role in recognizing actual child abuse and how to intervene supportively before anything Else can be done.

Takeaways
- More than 200 women kill their children in the US every year.
- Women commit less than 13% of all violent crime.
- The reasons women kill their children are complex but often seen beforehand.

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