

Effects of Domestic Violence on Child

—A Case Study of Chinhoyi

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Abstract

Background: This article discusses the effects of domestic violence on children and how it compares to forms of child abuse. **Aim:** The purpose of this article is to explore if domestic violence in households where there are children should be classified as a form of child abuse and be dealt with in the same way as other types of child abuse. **Methods:** For this study, primary data from a qualitative research methodology was carried out in Chinhoyi, Mashonaland West. Community members were interviewed and focus groups were used to collect data on child abuse and domestic violence. Secondary data was also used to explore what is known about child abuse and domestic violence. **Conclusion:** To effectively fight against child abuse, it is very important that all types of child maltreatment such as Domestic Violence are identified.

Keywords

Domestic Violence, Child Abuse, Domestic Violence Households, Child Maltreatment

1. Introduction

Past studies have given varying meanings of child abuse. With the passing of time, more types of child abuse have been revealed although very limited studies have been carried out to highlight the new types and signs of child abuse. Whilst multiple studies have defined child abuse as an action that harms the child mentally, emotionally, physically or sexually (NSPCC, 2016; Radford et al., 2011). NSPCC (2016) adds that child abuse is when a child is intentionally harmed by an adult or another adult constantly or as a one-off. It is important to appreciate that child abuse is social context depended. That suggests that a practice can be described as child abuse differently in different cultural settings and over time. For example, what a British culture shuns as a physical form of child abuse (Radford et al., 2011), the Native American culture may regard it as quite a normal

way of disciplining a child (Bigfoot & Schmidt, 2010). One such cultural happening within a household is domestic violence. This article seeks to explore whether domestic violence becomes child abuse when it happens as a one-off or persistently in families where there are children.

Domestic Violence

This section discusses what is domestic violence and its effects on the family. Domestic violence is defined as violence or fighting that takes place in domestic settings such as marriages, cohabitation or intimate relationships. However, there is a knowledge gap on how domestic violence is interpreted when it happens in families where there are children and how the children are affected in such households. Due to limited studies to confirm the effects domestic violence on children when this happens, this article will highlight the extent of its effects on children and how it can be dealt with. Very often, when domestic violence happens, the focus is on the adults involved and not the children (Tsirigotis & Luczak, 2018).

With innovations and developments in technology and media information distribution, the definition of child abuse and maltreatment has expanded. For instance, cyber bullying a form of child abuse by online tools, computer or Facebook and the use of text messages has very little written about. In addition, cross-cultural, racial, religion and beliefs have also added multiple facets of what is now perceived as child abuse and child maltreatment. There is also very little known about how domestic violence affects children. Hence, it is necessary to explore the impact of domestic violence on children and if it is a form of child abuse.

Although different cultures and religions may define child abuse depending on what is cultural, religious, and socially acceptable, there is a need to compare what is known about effects of child abuse and domestic violence on children. For the purpose of this study, child abuse refers to an act of constant failure to act that results in physical injury, emotional harm, sexual abuse, exploitation or death of a child.

Traditional literature identifies five types of child abuse namely, physical, sexual, emotional, neglect and bullying (Chauhan, 2022). However, over the years, other types of abuse have been distinguished due to developmental changes such as advances in online technology. Cultural changes and awareness have also brought to light other types of abuse that may have been deemed acceptable and culturally correct in the past. This study explores the connection between signs of well-known types of child abuse and signs of domestic violence on children. The different cultural beliefs may have hindered the need to analyse the effects of domestic violence on children. The latter statement suggests that there is a knowledge gap on the direct effects of domestic violence on children that needs to be investigated and seek accurate classification based on the impact it has on minors. With recent studies highlighting four other types of abuse namely, sexual exploitation, grooming, child trafficking and radicalization (Chan et al.,

2013), this article seeks to highlight if domestic violence is a form of Child abuse.

Multiple studies agree that in domestic violence, a child can be hurt emotionally or physically when they witness domestic violence and when adults they live with have an altercation or fight in their presence. A child may be hurt physically when they try to stop a fight by standing between the adults, trying to break off the fight. Reviewed literature shows that a large number of children worldwide witness domestic violence. According to studies carried out by UNICEF, (Ajayi & Soyinka-Airewele, 2018) approximately 133 - 275 million children globally are exposed to domestic violence. While UK has 240,000 to 963,000, USA, 339,000 to 2.7 million, Canada has 85,000 to 362,000 children exposed to domestic violence. Sub-Saharan Africa also has 34.9 to 38.2 million children who witnessed domestic violence. Currently, there are very limited studies that highlight how children are exposed to domestic violence in Zimbabwe. However, based on UNICEF studies, an estimate of 500,000 to 1.3 million children are exposed to domestic child violence in Africa (Ajayi & Soyinka-Airewele, 2018).

2. Effects of Domestic Violence on Children

Domestic violence can be described as controlling, bullying, violence, altercation, or threatening behaviour towards another spouse. The difference between domestic violence where children are in the family and where there are no children is that children who witness domestic violence are likely to be affected in one way or another. For instance, by witnessing domestic violence, the children suffer the knock-on effects as a result. That is why the repercussions of domestic violence on children should be explored and redefined in cases where the fighting couples live with children. Past studies suggest that domestic violence has psychological effects on children who witness it (Chauhan, 2022). Traditionally, domestic abuse violence was not frowned upon in most countries and by various cultural beliefs (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2019). However, multiple studies are in agreement that Domestic Violence is controlling, threatening behavior to the victim (M'jid, 2020). Because of its nature, domestic violence was viewed as an issue between adults and should be resolved within the families. However, when children witness domestic violence between parents, family members or other siblings, the effects it has on children are not sufficiently researched in Zimbabwe. Past studies that explore how domestic violence affects children in Zimbabwe are also very limited (Foya, 2010).

Recent studies have since highlighted how children can suffer emotionally or be subject to mental abuse through witnessing domestic violence between parents, guardians, or other siblings. The direct signs of domestic violence can be the same as physical, emotional, bullying and cyberbullying forms of child abuse. Reviewed literature claims that one of the indirect effects that happens when a child witnesses domestic violence is that, the child may display antisocial behavior towards other children (Muthukui, 2020).

This section explores similarities between signs of child abuse such as physical, emotional abuse, and bullying and the effects of domestic violence on children.

3. Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is the deliberate physical injury to a child, or the willful or neglectful failure to prevent physical injury or suffering. It also includes assault, hitting, slapping, punching, kicking, hair-pulling, biting, pushing, inappropriate or unlawful use of restraint or unauthorized restraint, restricting movement such as tying someone to a chair. Studies show that children who witness domestic violence can also be affected in the same way as those exposed to physical child abuse (Frylig et al., 2011).

Signs of Physical Abuse

The signs that may indicate that a child is a victim of physical abuse include unexplained injuries such as bruises, cuts, welts or marks on the body or differing explanations of how the child got the injuries or scars (Chikwiri & Lemmer, 2014). A child may also have injuries that do not tally with their lifestyles. For instance, a child who plays rugby may have bruises when they have been practicing. Whereas if a child who does not play any sport has bruises often, this may be a cause for concern, as it could indicate physical abuse (Frylig et al., 2011). A physically abused child may also have eating disorders or might not want to go to changing rooms for activities such as ball games or physical education in fear of peers or teachers seeing the injuries. The child may be aggressive towards other children, and have regular shape bruising marks such as bite marks, handprints or cigarette burnt marks. In addition, parents or guardian not having an explanation for injuries or clumps of hair loss may also indicate physical abuse. The child may also be withdrawn or may not want to join in play activities (Tsirigotis & Łuczak, 2018).

4. Emotional or Mental Child Abuse

Emotional abuse is the persistent emotional ill-treatment of a child causing severe and persistent adverse effects on the child's emotional development. It is also when an adult or another child persistently hurt a child's feelings affecting the child's ability to thrive (Frank, 2019). This may include telling a child that they are bad, useless, stupid, dull, name calling, exploiting or making the child perform duties that are beyond their ability or isolating them.

The child who is emotionally abused may have low self-esteem; persistently have a negative self-image. For example, they may call themselves stupid, ignorant, or useless or thick. They may be unusually timid, fearful, and tearful without any apparent explanation. They may emotionally abuse other children, show regressive development, aggressive or self-harm themselves, and be sleep deprived or extremely anxious (Radford et al., 2011).

Signs of Emotional Abuse

A child who is emotionally abused may:

- Have low self-esteem;
- Persistently have a negative view of themselves. For example, they may call

- themselves stupid, ignorant, or useless or thick;
- Unusually timid, fearful, and tearful without an apparent explanation.

5. Signs Shown in Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

This section discusses signs of domestic violence on children and compares them with signs of physical, emotional and bullying types of abuse. Multiple studies have shown that children who are affected by domestic violence are more likely to suffer domestic violence as adults (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2019). Although domestic violence can have long-term effects such as struggling to make meaningful or long-term relationships, long-term trust issues and becoming abusive partners or parents when they become adults (Tugume, 2019), exposure to domestic violence in children can be demonstrated by specific signs as an outcome of witnessing domestic abuse. Children could get physically hurt during the parental altercation or be physiologically affected and display signs similar to those displayed by children exposed to physical abuse, emotional abuse and bullying (Frylig et al., 2011). The characteristics of domestic violence include some or all the following described below.

A child may demonstrate aggressive behavior towards peers or family members because they are coping with what they witness in the domestic violent household (Chan et al., 2013). The child may show sadness most of the times including crying. They may also be depressed, withdrawn or make suicidal attempts or thoughts. The child may be argumentative and difficult to reason with and suffer from poor performance in school. Children who are victims of domestic violence may have low self-esteem, negative self-image, stressfulness, and low self-confidence. Some children may also develop eating disorders as a sign of being exposed to domestic violence (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2019).

6. Physical Abuse, Neglect and Domestic Violence

This part lists the signs of physical and emotional child abuse in comparison to effects of domestic Violence on children (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparisons of signs of child abuse and domestic violence.

Type of abuse	Signs of abuse	Domestic Violence
Physical abuse and bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unexplained injuries such as bruises, cuts, welts or marks on the body • Differing explanations of how the child got the injuries or scars • Injuries that do not tally with their lifestyles. For instance, a child who plays rugby may have bruises from playing • Eating disorders • Not wanting to use changing rooms for activities like ball games or exercising • Aggressive towards other children • Have regular shaped bruising marks such as bite marks, handprint or cigarettes burns • Clumps of hair loss • Withdrawn or may not want to join in play activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unexplained injuries such as bruises, cuts, welts or marks on the body • Eating disorders • Not wanting to use changing rooms for activities like ball games or exercising • Aggressive towards other children • Withdrawn or may not want to join in play activities

Continued

Emotional Abuse and bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have low self-esteem ● persistently have a negative view of themselves. For example, they may call themselves stupid, ignorant, or useless or thick ● Unusually timid, fearful, and tearful without an apparent explanation ● Emotionally abuse other children ● Show regressive development ● Aggressive or self-harm ● Always tired or extremely anxious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have low self-esteem or negative view of themselves ● Lack self confidence ● Emotionally abuse other children ● Aggressive or self-harm
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7. Methodology

Primary data from a qualitative research methodology was carried out in Chin-hoyi, Mashonaland West where 40 adults were interviewed. Secondary data was also used to analyse characteristics of domestic violence to decide if domestic violence can be classified as a form of child abuse or not.

7.1. Findings

Below are findings of primary data on signs of domestic violence.

Source: Primary data Findings on Signs of child abuse

This section of results shows the participant’s description of, types, and signs of child abuse when children are exposed to domestic violence. This section will have word clouds and word trees to highlight the participant’s responses. A total of 25 respondents addressed this question through focus group discussions and interviews conducted in Zimbabwe. The respondents’ verbatim responses were coded under the following 7 emerging themes: abuse; academics; bad example; family disintegration; health; recklessness and social (Figure 1).

Based on the primary data analysed in this study on signs of Child abuse in Zimbabwe in comparison to past studies, the analysed data in the experiment provided sufficient evidence to confirm Child Neglect, Physical abuse, Emotional abuse, Sexual abuse, and Domestic violence exist in Zimbabwe (Foya, 2010). The primary data findings below are in sync with past study in Zimbabwe that says the mostly known types of child abuse are Child Neglect. Primary data also agrees that children are affected by domestic violence in the same way as forms of child abuse in Zimbabwe.

Under the worrisome behavior caused by domestic violence theme, the following was said by participants in Zimbabwe. They made lengthy explanations of the worrisome behavior or domestic violence of people who take alcohol.

The responses below highlight how one can tell if the children are affected by their parents’ fighting or arguments.

ZWIR1:

“Mostly children change behaviour and most of the times they decrease in their academic education, even intellectually. That is when you see that there is something that is disturbing the children, and if you check you find out that it is because of the violence affecting the family due to the fights of their parents.”

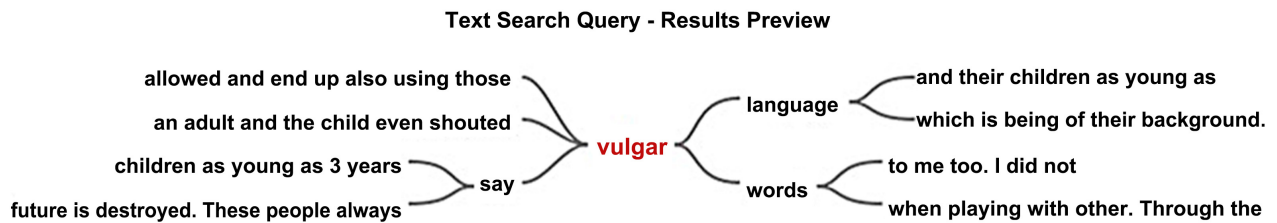


Figure 1. Emerging themes from the respondents' verbatim responses to how children are affected by child abuse in Zimbabwe.

ZWIR2:

"The children will not be happy it can be at church or the places they go, they will not be happy among other children. The way they dress also shows that they are being abused."

Use of Vulgar or offensive language was also highlighted in the results (Figure 2) as a sign of child abuse. Also illustrated in the results is that children who are exposed to a toxic home environment leads to a belief that family infighting could be where children adopt bad language (Figure 2). Primary results suggest that children copy parents' behaviour. This implies that the use of bad language and fighting in children is a sign of child abuse. This is in agreement with past studies such as Albert Bandura who theorized that children copy behaviours they see being portrayed by adults in his study on learnt behaviours.

7.2. Primary Data Findings Discussion

This section discusses the primary findings in relation to the reviewed literature in this study.

Emotional abuse is the persistent emotional ill-treatment of a child causing severe and persistent adverse effects on the child's emotional development. A child is emotionally abused when an adult or another child persistently hurt a child's feelings affecting the child's emotional development and ability to thrive (Franke, 2014; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2019).

Although domestic violence is not well known as a form of child abuse, analysed data points to cues that can lead to believe domestic violence within the family affects children emotionally. Multiple literature in this studies and the primary data results from the analysed data are consistent that children who are exposed to domestic violence are also subjected child abuse (Field et al., 2010).

Based on the primary data analysed in this study on signs of Child abuse in Zimbabwe in comparison to literature review, the analysed data in the experiment has now provided sufficient evidence to confirms that signs of Child Neglect, Physical abuse, Emotional abuse, Sexual abuse are similar to those of children in households where there is domestic violence. The primary data and reviewed literature in this article suggest that domestic violence has common effects as those of children who are victims of child abuse such as physical abuse, emotional abuse and child neglect on children.



Figure 2. Word cloud. Primary data interviews findings highlighted that domestic Violence affect children. Source: Primary data.

8. Dealing with Child Abuse in Zimbabwe

Although there are specific measures for preventing and reporting suspected child abuse in Zimbabwe. However, there are no studies that shows how children exposed to domestic violence are protected from this form of domestic child abuse or effects of it because it is not viewed as a form of child abuse despite it having similar signs and effects as those of physical, bullying and physiological aka emotional types of child abuse (Shangwa & Mathende, 2019). Studies carried out by the researcher on how parental substance misuse causes parents to demonstrate violent behavior in the home highlighted that children who witness violent behaviours suggests that children’s well-being and ability to thrive and achieve educational goals is affected as well (Figure 3).

How domestic creates a toxic environment



Figure 3. Word cloud of verbatim responses coded under the “toxic family environment” theme.

9. Conclusion

The primary data in this study highlighted that domestic violence and child abuse affect children in the same way. This is strong and sufficient evidence to suggest that domestic violence in households with children is indeed a form of child abuse. This concludes that domestic violence in such households should be prevented, disclosed, reported and dealt with in the same way as other forms of child abuse. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that children living in households where there is domestic violence should be closely monitored for signs of child abuse and supported in the same ways as children who are victims of physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and bullying because this study has confirmed that children exposed to domestic violence are also victims of child abuse.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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