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REVIEW ARTICLE

EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Children deserve safe and stable violent free parents, who will love, protect and see them grow in a violent free homes or environments. Therefore, for a child to grow normally without major developmental or psychological challenges, it is important to shine a light on domestic violence also known as family violence and its effects on children in all aspects of development, such as cognitive impairment, suicide attempt, damage to social, physical or emotional development and the way forward in order to address this predicament.

**Key words:**

Domestic, Violence,  
Effect, Children.

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INTRODUCTION

Children deserve a safe, violence free parents who will love, and protect them. They also need stability in that when things go wrong outside the home, then their homes become a place of safety, comfort, love, help and support. According to United Nations International Emergency Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2008) yearly hundreds of millions of children are exposed to domestic violence and this leaves a profound negative impact in their lives and that of their future, Furthermore these children to not only witness violent acts but also hear the sounds and may be aware of the signs; it is a global fact. For the benefit of a clear understanding of this paper, it is most important to understand the definition of family/domestic violence, effect, and what a child means. Domestic violence also known as Family violence is a pattern of behavior which involves abuse by one partner against the other in an intimate relationship or within the family such as physical aggression, biting, kicking, slapping, throwing objects or threats (Child Welfare, 2013). The word "Effect" simply means the result or change. A child is a human being below puberty (Oxford Dictionary, 2014) The paper therefore focuses on the effects of family violence on children globally, (in the west, in Africa); and its major effects on children and possible recommendations based on valid studies that have been carried out to support the topic.

**Domestic Violence Globally**

Domestic or family violence is a serious problem around the world. Physical or sexual violence is a public health problem that affects more than one third of women globally (World Health Organization, 2013). Furthermore, World Health Organization found out some interesting statistics in 2013 on several effects of domestic violence on both women and their children, For instance death and injury rates globally was at 42% women who experienced physical violence at the hands of their partners. Also women who experienced partner violence had a 16% greater chance of having a low birth weight baby. These are negative effects of family violence that could have contributed negatively to the development of the children.

**Domestic Violence in the West**

Childhood is regarded as a phase of unique protection and rights in western culture, Children's development is anticipated to unfold within a safe and nurturing environment. Over one million Australian children were affected by domestic violence in 2005 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Where the environment is infected by violence and fright, all the usual tasks of growing up are likely to be unfavorably affected. For instance, exposure to violence can result in 'regressive' symptoms such as bedwetting. This can become more frequent, language development is then delayed and anxiety develops due to separation from parents (Osofky,1995, cited in Margolin and Gordis, 2002). These factors may have effects on children's ability to learn, get along with other children or to focus in school. Most data

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gotten in the past on the effect of violence on children were studies done on children in refugee camps and so these children are dealing with the aftermaths of struggling with homelessness, dropping out of school and so on. Therefore it may be different compared to children who are just experiencing domestic violence without been displaced from their homes. It is very important to check on how early in life children experience domestic violence as they develop.

According to (Medibank 2014), children who live with family violence, experience trauma which could be ongoing and long lasting experience; it can also prevent a child's brain from developing normally. The effects are progressive and could be permanent in an individual's life time. Medibank, went on to elaborate more on the effects of domestic violence on children's behaviors as they tend to act out what they have been experiencing or become aggressive and defiant and to these children the behaviors are normal. Talking about children's development could be impaired as well as they may be acting younger than their age. It can also be due to damage in the brains of a child. Looking at relationships, such children become withdrawn and try to push people away from them which could be dangerous as they try to develop alternative safe base if their homes becomes insecure. In a handbook by the Bureau of Indian affairs (2005) did mention, some remarkable statistics on domestic violence in the West such as a survey of over 6,000 American families, 50% of the men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently abused their children. Children who witness violence at home display emotional and behavioral disturbances as diverse as feeling alone, lack of confidence, nightmares, self-blame and hostility against peers, and family members. Finally, Over 3 million children are at risk of exposure to parental violence each year (Bureau of Indian affairs 2005)

### **Domestic Violence in Africa**

A study was carried out in West Africa in a country called Nigeria, on the topic "The effects of domestic violence on pre-school children in Nigeria"; The author stated that early childhood victimization either through neglect or witnessing parental domestic violence has been shown to bring long term effects like adult violence or antisocial behaviors (Gladys, 2013). The reason why this study was carried out in Nigeria was to find out possible solutions to end the generating cycle of domestic violence which keeps following the trend from childhood to adolescence and finally adulthood. Therefore the study came up with results that could have brought about violence in families. Gladys (2013) went on to state that, mothers sometimes transfer aggression to their children or anger when there were underlying issues with their spouses and this becomes a big problem to the children making them develop behavioral problems such as nightmare, anxiety or even become violent towards their peers at school or siblings. Therefore, domestic violence has many effects on the cognitive aspect of the children's development such as the generating attachment issues been one of the aspect of a child's development. According to the report by United Nation International Children's Emergency Fund (2008), on violence against children in Nigeria, physical and psychological violence against children are both experienced at homes and

schools. Very few violent incidences in Nigeria are been reported as most of the acts are regarded as normal within family cycles or on the verge of family privacy. Having said that it is a culture in Nigeria that children remain submissive to their elders and therefore anything short of that is regarded punishable or not accepted. It may be right to then say that Nigerian culture to some extent permit domestic violence on the bases of its normalcy. The brain of a growing child tend to develop properly due to early experiences, therefore the home and the environment provides the raw materials for the growth of the child's brain, but where domestic violence keep occurring, then there may be a tremendous effect on the brains of the child. According to (Helander 2008), to measure the effects of childhood violence is based on the observations of ten categories of adverse childhood experiences which are; recurrent and severe physical abuse, recurrent social abuse, sexual abuse, growing up with an alcoholic, a family member been imprisoned, a family member mentally ill, mother treated violently, both biological parents not present, emotional neglect and physical neglect. All these are measurable effects of domestic violence against children.

### **Extents to the Problem of Domestic Violence on Children**

#### **Cognitive Impairment**

Physical neglect has the most intense effects on the cognitive functioning of a child and academic performance. Helander, (2008) quoted Friedrich (1998), in his book and stated that family variables such as quality of the relationship between mother and daughter, the capacity of problem solving in families, substance abuse, single parent family and so on are usually combined with both physical and psychological abuse, domestic violence and neglect. Therefore the adverse effect of domestic violence on the cognitive ability of a child is low which can be detectable on measures of verbal ability, memory, speed and concentration even as far as in midlife.

#### **Suicide Attempts**

A child experiencing domestic violence has a higher chance of attempting suicide later in life (Ystgaard, 2004). The impact of domestic violence may continue through adolescence and into adulthood. Children who have grown up in violent homes are at risk of recreating violent Relationships and are more likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, tend to run away from home, take on teenage prostitution, other youth criminal behaviors, and engage in sexual assault crimes (Boshier *et al.*, 2013).

#### **Meaninglessness**

According to McIntosh (2000), the thread that runs through the research literature is the impact on the child called meaninglessness of the violence they witness or experience. People do not talk about what is happening and then an abused mother's sense of helplessness leads her to 'dissociate' from the violence so that when it is not happening, she may act as everything is alright. The child's thoughts and feelings about the experience become confusing and they are unable to make sense out of anything. This obviously, is what happens in the

African contest where people tend to pretend about their problems so the society does not criticize them and prefer to keep it a secret as part of preserving the family name and prestige, but then the children suffer the consequences of the family problems. Children begin to view the world in a different dimension which could affect their expectations to life and what it means.

### Damage to social development

Social development is one area that gets disrupted as the child grows witnessing violence in the family. The inability to show empathy to others or becoming withdrawn and incapable to socialize properly with people or make friends are some of the social damages that could occur. Many children from violent homes display signs of more aggressive behaviors, such as bullying, verbal abuse and are up to three times more likely to be involved in fighting (United Nation International Children's Emergency Fund, 2008). Abused children are significantly having higher levels of depression, lack of self esteem, anxiety, fearful behavior and despair, therefore exposure to these issues during childhood leads to elevated rates of violent offending, substance abuse, suicide attempt, being a victim of violence and mental health problems (Einar, 2008, p. p.22)

### Psychological Problems

A study carried out by (Stanley *et al.*, 2012) on the topic perspective of parents and children on domestic violence, did mentioned that Parents described their children as Nervy, depressed and anxious, and reported sleeping problems associated with exposure to domestic violence. Some of the findings in this study stated that survivors and young people particularly highlighted angry feelings and aggressive behavior in children as a consequence of experiencing domestic violence. Such feelings and behaviors were often perceived to be learnt through imitation and they too were described as persisting beyond the point of separation. Children could also suffer from stress disorders like post traumatic stress having experienced violence the effect was not dealt with by letting the children know what is going on around them and not providing a safe environment.

### Physical/Emotional Development

Children, who were exposed to witnessing indirect domestic violence, were at risk of experiencing other types of violence. For example, a child who was physically assaulted in the past year would be five times as likely to also have been sexually victimized and more than four times as likely also to have been maltreated during that period. Similarly a child who was physically assaulted during his or her lifetime would be more than six times as likely to have been sexually victimized and more than five times as likely to have been maltreated during his or her lifetime (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2014).

### Protective Factors

- Good parenting especially mothering is one aspect that could help mothers still be emotionally available to their children, teaching them the art of surviving and modeling,

been assertive and non-violent responses to violence. Mothers who have gone through violence might be finding some relief by modeling their children in the best way to handle family violence.

- Having some form of support from the extended family might also be of great help to the children in case of domestic violence especially when there is a sense of danger. In order words the nuclear family needs emergency support for safety of the children.
- Training on the understanding or general knowledge of domestic violence to the public will go a long way to enlighten the public on the rights of victims involved in domestic violence and better ways to prevent violence and if it happens how do infected persons get help.

### Conclusion

Domestic violence has become a big problem not only to the partners involved, but also affects innocent children as well as extended families and neighbors living close. In conclusion this paper has looked at the effects of domestic or family violence, reviewing literatures that have been written by different authors to support the raising problem in the world today. The effects of domestic violence or family violence on children is a global issue that keeps growing every day. Finally were few recommendations looking at the way forward suggested.

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