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Physical and Mental Violence on Children and Domestic Abuse: A Visible but Unsaid Problem

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ABSTRACT

Physical and mental violence on children and domestic abuse is rarely noticed in India. Violence against children is widespread and remains a harsh reality for millions of children from all socio-economic groups in India. Many children who witness domestic violence are at higher risk of physical abuse as well. The quality of the environment where children and adolescents grow up shapes their well-being and development. Early negative experiences in homes, schools, or digital spaces, such as exposure to violence, the mental illness of a parent or other caregiver, bullying and poverty, increase the risk of mental illness. Which leads to long and short term mental and physical health problems.

KEYWORDS

Child abuse, Mental and Physical health, Domestic abuse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to understand the impact of domestic and child abuse on mental and physical health through a mixed-methods approach. It integrating both quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore the effects of domestic and child abuse on mental and physical health. Goal is to shed light on these critical issues and inform compassionate interventions that can truly support affected children and families.

INTRODUCTION

Any instance of violence, abuse, or controlling, coercive, or threatening behavior between individuals in a domestic context, such as marriage or cohabitation is considered domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is violation of human rights that happens in

homes or aftercare facilities where women and children are mostly victims. Basically it is an issue with people's attitudes toward one another which can cause various consequences for individual victims. Abuse behaviours indicate a person's attempt to assert control and power over the victim, not that they are upset. Domestic violence is possible in any type of relationship regardless of gender or sexuality. It can even take place anywhere inside and outside of the house. In most of the cases it happens between partners or even between family members. Domestic abuse can be done in varied forms like, physical, emotional, sexual, financial and even psychological. For example, hitting, digital abuse, harassment, stalking, rape etc. All this results in death, serious injuries, mental health issues for victims, their children and others.

CHILD ABUSE

Mostly people talk about domestic abuse on women and men but the child who witness or goes through such abuse, his/her mental health is rarely noticed. Child abuse occurs when a child is mistreated. It arises when a child is harmed or neglected. The abuser is frequently someone the child knows. It could be a parent, relative, caretaker, or close friend. As a result children majorly suffer from fear, guilt, shame, sadness, depression and anger issues. It is believed that children raised in an abusive home learn that violence is an effective way to solve conflict and problems. They use the violence they witnessed as a child in their teen and adult life. Most of the time the child is also the victim of domestic abuse. Due to continuous violence and abuse the mental state of parents is being disturbed, there is always a feeling of irritation and anger due to it. As a result the anger and irritation are being released on the child through physical, emotional violence. Most of the time children are exposed to sexual abuse too which is a worldwide phenomenon, and India is not an exception. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) as “the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society...”. Every year, countless children around the world, regardless of their gender, endure unimaginable suffering due to exploitation and sexual abuse. According to UNICEF (2022), about 1 in 10 girls under the age of 20 have been coerced into sexual acts, a heartbreaking reality that strips away their innocence and robs them of their childhood. Each of these girls has a story, a family, and a future that should be filled with joy and opportunity, not fear and trauma. It's a reminder of the urgent need for compassion, awareness, and action to protect the

most vulnerable among us. In India, we celebrate “Children’s Day” on November 14th, honouring the birthday of Jawaharlal Nehru, our first Prime Minister, who envisioned a nation where children could thrive in a safe and nurturing environment—a true “Children’s paradise.” Yet, the reality often tells a different story, one filled with heartache and tragedy. Just days after this celebration on 17th November 2020, a horrific incident shook the nation: a 6-year-old girl was brutally raped and murdered in Kanpur, her life extinguished in a senseless act tied to dark beliefs in black magic. In the same year, a 17-year-old girl was found dead near her home in Lakhimpur Kheri, her life cut short, leaving behind unanswered questions and a community in mourning. And before these tragedies, a 13-year-old Dalit girl, a victim of sexual violence that went largely unnoticed, overshadowed by societal biases that often silence the voices of the marginalized. These stories are not just statistics; they are the painful realities of countless children in India. Child sexual abuse remains an understated crisis, with only a few cases making headlines while many others fade into the shadows, unreported and unresolved. Each incident represents a child’s lost potential, a family’s grief, and a society that must confront its failures. It is a call to action for all of us to ensure that every child can grow up in safety, free from fear and harm, and to advocate for justice for those who have suffered

EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN

Children who witness domestic abuse are at the higher risk to suffer depression, trauma and anxiety issue. By witnessing such violence in house the child occasionally starts being sad and feeling hopeless. Due to it there is vast change in the behaviour of that child. At a certain age the children even start feeling disconnect from the parents, there is a feeling of loneliness, discomfort, irritation. Such children often become isolated, fearful and vulnerable. Such fearful situation makes the children feel insignificant and defenceless. Childhood experiences of sexual exploitation can leave deep emotional and psychological scars. Survivors often struggle with anxiety, depression, and trust issues, leading to feelings of isolation and low self-esteem. Physically, the trauma can manifest in chronic health problems and self-destructive behaviours, such as substance abuse. Socio-economically, these experiences can hinder educational and employment opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and instability. Ultimately, the lasting impact of such trauma can severely diminish a person's overall quality of life, making it challenging to find joy and fulfilment in everyday experiences. Understanding these effects is essential for providing compassionate support to survivors on their healing journey.

Violence effect on different age group of children

Infant / Toddlers	Child	Teenager
<p>1. Development Delays: A baby's physical and cognitive development may be impacted by abuse and stress exposure throughout pregnancy and the first few months of life. Stress hormones released in response to trauma can affect brain development and functioning. There is an increased chance of miscarriage, an early birth, and low birth weight.</p> <p>2. Attachment Problems: For babies to develop stable attachments, they require constant, affectionate care. This process is disturbed in an abusive relation, which frequently results in insecure attachment styles. As they get older, these babies could have trouble in developing good relationships and trust.</p> <p>3. Short-term effects: (increased sensitivity and crying, difficulty in sleeping, separation anxiety)</p>	<p>1. Emotional Distress: Children raised in abusive homes frequently experience fear, anxiety, and depression. Their general emotional well-being may be impacted by living in continual terror.</p> <p>2. Behavioural Problems: At school and in social situations, these kids may act aggressively, withdraw, or exhibit other behavioural problems. They could have trouble relating to peers and dealing with authority individuals.</p> <p>3. Health Problems: Chronic exposure to stress can cause physical health issues like immune system weakness, headaches, and stomach-aches. These kids might also have trouble sleeping and wet the bed.</p> <p>4. Short-term effects: (A loss of drive to participate in activities, feeling guilty for everything that happens)</p>	<p>1. Risky Behaviours: As coping strategies, young people may abuse drugs, injure themselves, or act violently. These behaviours are frequently signs of underlying trauma and pleas for help.</p> <p>2. Relationship Problems: Unhealthy relationship dynamics can become the norm when abuse is witnessed or experienced. These teenagers are more likely to join abusive relationships themselves, which would continue the violence cycle.</p> <p>3. Mental Health Issues: Adolescents from abusive homes are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. Additionally, they can have identity and self-worth issues, which could hinder their academic performance and other stages of their lives.</p> <p>4. Short-term effects: (acting out in negative ways, low self-esteem)</p>

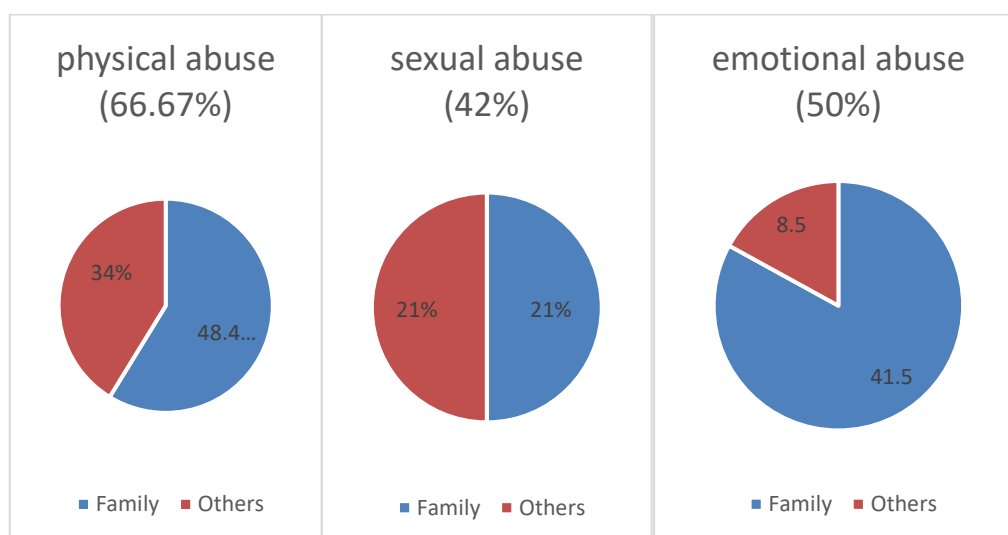
VAN DER KOLK'S VIEW ON TRAUMA

Bessel Van Der Kolk is the father of trauma therapy and a psychiatrist. He states that early trauma creates an 'assault' on

the child's development over time. Shore supports this by explaining how stress, abuse, and neglect harm an infant's quickly developing brain by preventing the natural growth of neural networks. According to Van der Kolk, trauma puts our lives in risk and sets off our nonverbal reactions, which instantly activate the body's regulatory systems and increasing their sensitivity to perceived danger. Children who have experienced trauma are frequently "developmentally stuck" in the brain stem, which controls the fight-flight-freeze response. Since they are merely attempting to survive in a world that they perceive to be harmful, they find it more difficult to develop stable relationships, control their emotions, think, learn, or reflect when trapped in the brain stem.

STATISTICS ON CHILD ABUSE

According to a report by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in India, around two thirds (66.67%) of children and young people in the general population experienced physical abuse in one or more situations by family members (48.47%) and others (34%). Sexual abuse in some form was reported by (42%), with (50%) of the abusers being family or family friends. Emotional abuse was reported for about (50%), with parents being the abusers in most cases (83%).



There was non-significant or marginal gender difference in physical, sexual or emotional abuse, but the majority of girls (70.57%) reported girl child neglect (i.e. girls receiving less care and fewer resources than boys of the same family). A more recent study in India involving school-going adolescents also showed physical abuse to be the most common form of childhood

maltreatment (42.6%), followed by emotional neglect (40.1%) and emotional abuse (37.9%). Many types of abuse and neglect were reported for nearly all street children in North-Western India, suggesting that children from socioeconomically disadvantaged sectors may be at an extremely high risk of maltreatment.

India has a wide range of laws to protect children and child protection is increasingly accepted as a core component of social development. The challenge is in implementing the laws due to inadequate human resource capacity on the ground and quality prevention and rehabilitation services. As a result, millions of children are prone to violence, abuse and exploitation. One of them is “Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO)” Act, 2012 (Ministry of Women and Child Development), a specified law, to ensure children’s protection from maltreatment. “ The Act has come into force with effect from 14th November 2012 along with the rules framed there under. The POCSO Act, 2012 is a comprehensive law to provide for the protection of children from the offences of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and pornography while safeguarding the interests of the child at every stage of the judicial process by incorporating child-friendly mechanisms for reporting, recording of evidence, investigation and speedy trial of offences through designated Special Courts” (Ministry of Women and Child Development)

CONCLUSION

Moreover, addressing the effects of trauma and domestic abuse on children, requires a multifaceted strategy that involves knowledge of developmental trauma, professional support, safe environment creation, education and support for both parents and children. The society needs to know that as an adult’s mental health is important same way the children around us also suffer through depression, trauma, stress, anxiety issues. Getting blind for such issues will just not destroy the future of children but also the country. It’s a high time to build a society that prioritize the mental and physical health of children.

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