

Violence behind the Closed Door: Depression, Suicidal Ideation and Future Concerns Among its Spectators

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To determine the depression, suicidal ideation, and future concerns among domestic violence spectators.

Study Design: Exploratory study design.

Place and Duration of Study: Shelter Homes and Community Centres, in Rawalpindi/Islamabad Pakistan, from Aug to Nov 2022.

Methodology: In-depth interviews with 30 participants aged 12 to 17 years were conducted to assess the future apprehensions and worries of domestic violence spectators. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Transcribed data were critically reviewed, and themes were identified. Inter-rater reliability was calculated with the help of Cohen Kappa and was found to be in substantial agreement.

Results: The study findings identified major themes related to psychological issues and future apprehensions among participants who witnessed domestic violence. Maladaptive relationships with parents and intensification of social problems such as isolation, self-harm, social withdrawal, suicidal ideation, difficulty in making friends, and apprehensions about the future relationship with a partner were also perceived as serious future concerns among domestic violence spectators.

Conclusion: Domestic violence takes a toll on the mental and physical well-being of not only its victims but also its spectators. Early detection and prevention of violent exposure are essential to mitigate its long-term psychological impact.

Keywords: Domestic violence, Depression, Suicidal ideation, Wellbeing.

How to Cite This Article: Khurshid S, Toor HK, Pervaiz F. Violence behind the Closed Door: Depression, Suicidal Ideation and Future Concerns among its Spectators. *Pak Armed Forces Med J* 2023; 73(6): 1683-1686. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51253/pafmj.v73i6.9633>

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INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence term implies the physical and psychological damage to the adult victim.¹ This is true, intimidating behaviour or abusive actions not only harm the victim but also drastically affect the emotional and physical well-being of its observer, such as children. The most recent Pakistan statistics explained that almost 90 per cent of women are victims of domestic violence, and in every three women in Punjab have suffered domestic abuse and violence.² Sometimes, the hidden psychological and emotional effects in these children get worse with time and can have a long-term traumatic impact throughout adulthood.^{3,4} A recent study has highlighted that the unending emotional and psychological damage can be traced back even before the birth of the child due to the mother's distress or depressive experiences.⁵ Then, how worse can this situation traumatize the child who is witnessing the same violent behaviour in front of his eyes? It has been proclaimed that young children who are exposed to violence are consistently more prone to

low self-esteem, depression and self-harm as compared to non-exposed children.^{6,7}

A very recent study concerning Pakistan has observed alarming psychological issues among youngsters due to inter-parental conflict. They found 22% suicidal tendencies in individuals, around 9% have attempted suicide, 4.6% have attempted suicide twice, and 11% have strong suicidal ideation.⁸ Minors who witness domestic abuse or violence have tendencies to become perpetrators in their adulthood.⁹ By taking the theoretical perspective into account, the long-term consequences related to the future can be easily traced. Social learning theory depicts the future outcomes related to violence and abuse. Albert Bandura (1973) explains that when a male child observes how his father behaves aggressively toward his mother or even hits her brutally, it seems an acceptable way of interacting with him and dealing with his future partner. On the other hand, for a girl, being a submissive partner is the only choice to cope with the torture in the future.¹⁰

Parents often think arguments or disputes behind closed doors cannot affect their children in the long run. The cluster that has to bear great mutilation to his

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Received: 05 Dec 2022; revision received: 20 May 2023; accepted: 23 May 2023

or her personality is the children who are going through this violent behaviour. Therefore, the current study aims to identify the possible psychological impact of domestic violence on children and how these behaviours change their future perspectives. The result of the current study will be a great addition to existing literature and will have future implications for policymakers and mental health departments.

METHODOLOGY

The exploratory study was conducted at Women's Shelter Homes and Community Centres in Rawalpindi and Islamabad Pakistan, from August to November 2022. Formal approval from the University Ethical Review Board was obtained to conduct this study (Ref: FUSST/IRB/053). After approval from Institutional Review Board, shelter homes and community centres were contacted for permission to collect data.

Inclusion Criteria: Children who were, directly and indirectly witnessed a history of domestic violence within the last six months were included.

Exclusion Criteria: Children who were mentally disabled and victims of child or sexual abuse were excluded.

A total of 30 children aged between 12-17 years were selected by purposive sampling technique. Informed consent from participants and their guardians was attained after briefing the context and process of this study. Confidentiality and anonymity about their given information were ensured by coding.

For a detailed exploration, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 respondents. The interview

guide was developed with the help of literature and subject matter experts. Questions related to possible psychological issues and future relationships, thoughts, and concerns were added to the interview guide. Interviews focused on children's apprehensions and worries about their future, such as how they perceive it. How will these traumatic experiences impact their behaviour in the future? How do they define their future relationship when they grow up? Interviews were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Each interview took 30-40 minutes to complete.

After completing the interviews, the gathered data was transcribed and critically reviewed to identify themes, as the process is described in Table-I. To assess the inter-rater reliability of themes, Cohen Kappa was calculated by four trained inter-independent raters for interviews and was found to be in substantial agreement (0.80).

Table-I: Overview of Steps involved in the Analysis Process

Steps	Description
Step 1: Organization of recorded data and familiarization with data	Organization of recorded data and copies of all records help to get back to the original record when needed.
Step 2: Condensation of gathered data	Transcription of data and re-read to become familiar with the material helps to get an overall picture of the information.
Step 3: Coding & Classification	An analysis is based on the coding of participants' verbatim.
Step 4: Analysis and Interpretation	Analysis of transcribed data depends on inter-rater reliability.

Table-II: Themes representing future concerns among domestic violence spectators

Themes	Subthemes	Condensation
Maladaptive relationship with parents	Distress in the Parent-child relationship The communication gap between children and parents	We are fearful that we cannot build a good and cohesive relationship with our parents in the future. There will be an immense communication gap between us that cannot be filled easily.
Escalation in Abusive and self-harm behavior	Aggression and anger issues Abusive behavior Internalized aggression	More aggressive behavior patterns can be expected shortly if we are continuously exposed to an abusive environment at home. Self-harm behavior can also be increased.
Self-selected Isolation and social problems	Difficulty to make new friends Self-selective isolation Social isolation Poor self-esteem Depression	We cannot make new friends anymore because we cannot share our feelings and difficulties with them. We feel depressed and stress out. We feel that we'll like to remain isolated and will not want to have any kind of social activity further.
Fearful about future intimate relationships with partners	A maladaptive and abusive relationship with the spouse Don't want to get married or want to build a future intimate relationship	Our main fear is related to our behavior with future partners. Will we have the same abusive relationship as our parents do? We might be using the same abusive pattern to solve issues between us. We think it's better if we don't get married or if we should avoid an intimate future relationship.

RESULTS

A qualitative approach was applied to explore future concerns among domestic violence spectators in-depth. Based on the qualitative data analysis, major themes related to future concerns among witnesses of domestic violence are presented in Table-II. Maladaptive relationships with parents and an increase in the tendency of self-harming behaviour stood out as the major future concerns of respondents. Additionally, an increase in social problems such as isolation, social withdrawal, aggressiveness, difficulty in making new friends, and apprehensions about the future relationship with partners are also perceived as serious future concerns among domestic violence spectators.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study highlighted a robust connection between exposure to domestic violence and its long-lasting impact on the psychological well-being of its spectators. The study findings contributed to an extended previous research on domestic violence and its possible effects on children. The current study results addressed the important gap in the literature by focusing on the effects of these traumatic experiences on children's behaviour and an upsurge in future apprehensions. The findings revealed that young children who witnessed domestic violence and abuse suffered from depression, low self-esteem, self-harm and suicidal ideation. The findings of the current study were found to be consistent with the previous studies.^{11,12} Young children who are raised in violent and abusive environments tend to display mental health issues, and thus, these unresolved psychological conflicts lead them to suicidal ideation.^{13,14}

Additionally, the study also highlighted the major future concerns of children who experience domestic violence. The main future apprehensions were related to maladaptive relationships with parents and peers, social withdrawal, an increase in aggression, and worries about the relationship with future partners. The current study outcomes showed that Children who experienced a lack of warmth, love, and a cohesive home environment tend to create negative reactions and relationships with their parents. Furthermore, they also will experience the same abusive behaviour with their own families in the future. These findings corroborated past literature.^{15,16}

Moreover, other major future concerns among domestic violence spectators related to increases in aggressive behaviour, maladaptive relationships with

peers, and low self-esteem were found to be consistent with findings reported in the longitudinal study carried out by Huang *et al.* (2015). They highlighted the increase in violent behaviour, difficulties in peer relationships, and social withdrawal increase with time in children.¹⁷ As Dube *et al.* (2001) communicated, children who witness domestic violence are considered silent victims. They directly or indirectly experience domestic violence, and this situation exposes them to a higher risk of developing short and long-term physical and mental health problems.¹⁸ This traumatic experience leaves them with the thought of when the next violent event will occur and how they will survive when they grow up. Despite the numerous strengths of the current study, there are a few limitations. First, this study focused only on the psychological impact of domestic violence on children who witness this directly or indirectly. Future studies need to explore the impact of witnessing domestic violence on children's emotional health and adjustability, along with their decision-making abilities. The current findings would expand our understanding of how much these traumatizing experiences contribute to poor psychological well-being.

LIMITATION OF STUDY

Therefore, future studies must examine the impact on children's intellectual and physical functioning and psychological well-being. Secondly, the present study explored children's perception of their future; it did not include parents' perception of the possible effects of witnessing domestic abuse or violence on their children's well-being and future.

CONCLUSION

Domestic violence takes a toll on the mental and physical well-being of not only its victims but also its spectators. Early detection and prevention of violent exposure are essential to mitigate its long-term psychological impact.

Conflict of Interest: None.

Authors' Contribution

Following authors have made substantial contributions to the manuscript as under:

SK & HKT: Study design, data interpretation, drafting the manuscript critical review, approval of the final version to be published.

FP: Data acquisition, data analysis, drafting the manuscript, critical review, approval of the final version to be published.

Authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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