

Children Affected by Domestic Violence: A Multidisciplinary Approach

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Abstract

This study uses a multidisciplinary approach to assist children affected by domestic violence and to assesses the first-line agents', (service providers) in the community's, awareness of the impact of domestic violence on children, as well as to assess the methods they use to identify and treat problems associated with domestic violence. The integrated efforts of these service providers contribute to the treatment of domestic violence on children. The data was collected through a qualitative method, specifically, focus group discussions. The results confirmed the prevalence of domestic violence and its impact on children. It also found that the service providers were undertrained in their ability to intervene in this area. Therefore, the research trained and coordinated the efforts of the service providers through a multidisciplinary model of intervention. The model identified and then treated the abused children and their families. This intervention resulted in the restoration of children into safe families.

Keywords

domestic violence, children, first-line agents, multidisciplinary approach

Introduction

The family is the most sacred and fundamental social institution of our society. It is the primary force for shaping behaviour and civilising people. The family revolves around its members. Cordial marital relations facilitate the appropriate development of the children. It promotes the right attitudes, values, habits, ideals, hopes, and ambitions of an individual.

Family violence or domestic violence is not only a public health problem but also a mental health issue for children. Some of the biggest victims of domestic violence are the smallest (UNICEF, 2015). Children need a safe and secure home, free from violence, and they need parents that love and protect them. They need to have a sense of routine and stability so that when things go wrong in the outside world, home is a place of comfort, help, and support. For too many children, home is far from being a safe haven. Every year, hundreds of millions of children are exposed to domestic violence at home, and this has a powerful and profound impact on their lives and hopes for the future (UNICEF, 2015). The fact that children have been exposed to trauma in their own homes is not a new issue. However, what is relatively new is the notion of modifying the effect of this trauma through addressing it through the school system.

India is home to almost 19 per cent of the world's children. More than one third of the country's population, around 440 million, is below 18 years (2011, Census). The strength of

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the nation lies in having healthy, protected, educated, and well-developed children who may grow up to be productive citizens of the country. It is estimated that around 170 million or 40 per cent of India's children is vulnerable or experiencing difficult circumstances characterised by their specific social, economic and geo-political situation (GOI, 2016).

On 4th June 2016, *The New Indian Express* reported the shocking increase of child abuse in the state. Research studies have demonstrated that experiencing domestic violence can lead to a range of internalising and externalising behaviour problems in children (Avanci et al., 2012; Rada, 2014). They may have physical, emotional, attitudinal (Coy et al., 2012, WHO, 2013), learning, behavioural or developmental problems, and their educational performance and achievement may also be affected (Coy et al., 2012). Exposure to domestic violence in childhood has been linked to a set of outcomes, including low self-esteem, social withdrawal, depression, and anxiety (Avanci et al., 2012). They are at increased risk of developing personality disorders and mental health problems (Shea et al, 2010). Domestic violence can have a lasting negative impact on children (UNICEF, 2015).

Methodology

The study focussed on the awareness of first-line agents in the community about the issue of domestic violence on children. The first-line agents are the stakeholders who work very closely among children especially at the grassroot levels. This is a baseline study of first-line agents in the community. The study used a qualitative method of focus group discussions (FGDs). It included the different grassroot workers in the community such as *aganawadi* workers, *kudubhasree* members, school teachers, and other service providers. The areas covered were four districts of Kerala, namely Alapuzha, Ernakulam, Kottayam, and Thrissur. Each district had five FGDs from different groups. Out of the 20 FGD sessions conducted, a total of 164 participants took part, these being, 5 Child Welfare Committee (CWC) members, 33 Anganwadi teachers/Asha workers, 71 Ward police/Panchayat members/Kudumbashree (CDS), and 55 school teachers). Each FGD was involved in small groups for maintaining the constructiveness of dialogue.

This study brought out an intervention model to coordinate the efforts of different service providers. The multidisciplinary approach aims at the onset to identify and treat the victims of violence. This model also focuses on the skill development of the different partners. This is implemented in all four districts of Kerala, namely, Alapuzha, Ernakulam, Kottayam, and Thrissur. It included forty schools, a few *aganawadis* and CDS members of the *kudubhasree* mission. The students of Master of Social Work (MSW) specialised in Family and Child Welfare and their faculty supervisors were directly involved in the implementation of the project.

Major Findings

The findings are presented under the major themes of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This is the acknowledgment that every child has basic fundamental rights. These include the right to life, survival and development, protection from violence, abuse or neglect, an education that enables children to fulfill their potential, be raised by, or have a relationship with their parents, express their opinions and be listened to.

Tables 1 and 2 present the summary of the reflections given by the 164 first-line agents. It must be noted that the first-line agents are from different class levels. The summary is not the generalised statements of the entire service providers.

Table 1. Summary of reflections: Survival

Survival	
Sub themes emerged	Descriptions given by the participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affect the life of children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Shelter ○ Nutrition ○ Cloths ○ Medical services ○ Symptoms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants were concerned about the issue of domestic violence. • Most of them shared that they have seen children come with hurts. • Many also responded they found children in hunger. • Some of them rescued pregnant women. • They also opined that many children had sleepless night due to the violence at home. • Almost all were aware of the consequences of domestic violence on children. • Symptoms of violence manifested in children: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wounds • Fearful • Confused • Withdrawn • Aggression <p>Among them many felt that more than the physical impact children suffer from fear, confusion, stress, and lack of social interactions.</p>

Tables 1 and 2 vividly depict the awareness of grassroot workers on the issue of domestic violence. They were able to narrate the impact in respect to the rights of survival. The rate of occurrence of domestic/domestic violence and child abuse in these districts is mentioned as “High”. There is an alarming prevalence of the problem of domestic violence and the victimisation of children in all the four districts of Alapuzha, Ernakulam, Kottayam, and Thrissur respectively. They also stated that the other districts of Kerala are not an exception to the occurrence of domestic violence. Many of them acknowledged the issue in their own locality but most incidents are not reported. They conceded they did not take enough care to intervene in the matter.

Table 2. Summary of reflections: Development

Development	
Sub themes emerged	Descriptions given by the participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Play /leisure/sleep • Emotional development • Religion • Lack of freedom • Violence breeding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All shared and agreed upon the lack of academic performance of these children. • They also described the way in which they interact and play with other children: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often, they use verbal abuse • During play time, some of the children hit other children • Furiously fight over small and silly matters • Some of the girls cannot sleep properly during the afternoons in <i>aganawadi</i>. <p>All the teachers felt it affects the emotional development of the children.</p>

Domestic violence affects the holistic development of the children. It not only influences their academic performance but also their emotional and behavioural development. They also have witnessed violence breeding among the children. Many children imitate physical and verbal abuse during play time. Some children use foul language in their conversations. Some of the teachers shared that the children enacted what they saw at home between their parents, such as sexual harassment. Generally, boys are very aggressive and girls submissive. CWC members also stated that most of the cases of children in conflict with the law reveal the presence of domestic violence in their homes.

Children are innocent and they cannot hide things which disturb them for too long. They demonstrate this in different ways. The following are the different changes the children will exhibit: change in mood and behaviour, lack of concentration, less interest in games and sports, and poor academic performance. There is also a tendency of absenteeism among these children. They also show a dislike in going home and therefore intentionally attend remedial classes or join tuition classes.

“Me and my brother are scared to go back home, as our fathers comes back from office he starts yelling at my mother and even scold us without any cause, he works in bank but he say my mother is sitting at home, without doing any work, and he is only one who is working hard to feed us, he is fed up of this and want to leave us ...” Student, Standard 6.

“I was perplexed and numb for few seconds when I saw one of my boy child in *Anganwadi* was shouting at a girl child and he screamed and tore the frock of the girl and he was about to pull her down ... I called his name out loud ... very horrified I was ...” *Anganwadi* teacher, Ernakulam.

In many of the abuse cases the communication between the parents and children are strange or nil. Children are more prone to physical and emotional abuse. As they see their parents reveal the hidden violence, the children face an assortment of emotions. They lose trust in the parents and their thoughts are disturbed. This will negatively influence the parent-child relationship and attachment.

Table 3. Summary of reflections: Protection

Protection	
Sub themes emerged	Descriptions given by the participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of abuse • Neglect and exploitation • Ensure children are protected from all forms of violence • Impact of violence • Reason for violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All the pre-primary teachers have witnessed physical violence such as beating, pinching, pulling out hair, kicking etc. among their own children. • Some also shared that their children enact the types of violence they have seen at home. • In fact, even when they share they are traumatised. • Many shared that due to the violence and distress children are neglected at home. • They dress shabbily and come late for class. • Due to this condition at home the children are very vulnerable. • All the teachers felt it is their responsibility to ensure protection for all the children. • Often, they have encountered a dilemma in dealing with this issue. • Many of the mothers do not want to take any legal action on this issue. • Mothers firmly believe marriage is sacred, and cannot be broken up. • The broken family is stigmatised. • Teachers even mentioned that the mothers who have violence at home believe “it is their fate”. • All shared that alcoholism is the major reason for violence at home. • The teachers also justify the addict’s behaviour: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to the work-pressure they drink • To get good relaxation • Because of the friends • Sometimes the wives are nagging them at home. • Some of the teachers also mentioned drug use as reason for violence. • Ego clash - also brought out as a reason for violence at home. • All the teachers felt that whatever may be the reason it hampered the holistic development of the children. • When they have seen severe problems in the children, they have informed “Child Line”. • One of them even rescued both “mother and the children” in her home. • All the neglected children were taken care of and provided with extra food for their dinner. • Many shared they have the confidence to intervene in the situation. • But almost all feel marriage and family is sacred. • A human being cannot separate them. • All feel treatment needs to be administered to the alcoholics.

Table 3 shows the different types of violence school teachers have witnessed. Children from violent families have poor socialisation and are more prone to child abuse as they are very reluctant to speak to others out of guilt, fear, and the feeling of being ridiculed. Some of them are hesitant to share even with their teachers.

One of my students in class 9 was seen very upset for some days continuously, as she have shared the issue of domestic violence earlier, she used to tell me that it's that same problem nothing more, but last week she came to me crying, I asked her about the reason and took a promise from me not to share her issue with anyone and should not dislike her, I promised her to help her, then she mentioned that for the past six months she have been sexually abused by her neighbour's uncle. This started when her mother used to run for help when her father beats her mother, she used to run to this uncle's home, uncle's wife is her mother's best friend and she used to consoles her mother. While she consoles her mother, this uncle use to show her porn movies and ask her to play with him or else he will refuse to help her mother, last week there was another uncle and asked her to sleep with him, she ran out from there and that broke her into tears ...I felt really bad for that child ... I was motionless and breathless for some time..." Teacher, Kottayam. (The case was reported to ChildLine).

Domestic violence also displays neglect towards the children. If parents are not happy together they knowingly or unknowingly neglect their children. Sometimes they deprive them of necessities, such as food, clothing, medicine, safety, and education.

Domestic violence is considered a private, not a social problem. Thus, the people who are victims of this violence are reluctant to report it. This lack of reporting is a key issue and needs to be emphasised for people to agree that the presence of violence in the family is unacceptable. When the brutality becomes unstoppable then the media becomes involved. There are many incidences which highlight the vital role played by the media to bring these events to the notice of the public and the concerned authorities. But the integrated development of the child is a distant dream.

Table 4. Summary of reflections: Participation

Participation	
Sub themes emerged	Descriptions given by the participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children's freedom to express opinions, • Forms of Behaviour: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shy, dominated • Aggressive, not participating in any activities • Withdrawn • Over active • Social interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All the teachers shared that the impact of violence has manifested through their participation. • Some are too active and aggressive in their behaviour. • Especially the 'boys'. • Some are very stubborn in their modalities. • Not obedient and disciplined. • Some teachers also shared 'they practise what they see at home'. • Some teachers also mentioned that other children told them parents have told them not be friendly with 'these spoiled children.' <p>Some children also tease them as "drunkard's children."</p>

The school teachers unanimously mentioned that there is a high prevalence of victimisation of children due to domestic violence. The children mostly opened up about the crisis of violence at home but parents, particularly the mothers, seldom agree or admit to the violence. Teachers feel there is a stigma attached to violent families in Kerala. Therefore, the

women/mothers are ambivalent about disclosing marital discord. Table 4 clearly indicates that all stake holders stated that the major reason for domestic violence is alcoholism. The following were the justifications for alcohol use given by the families: a) as a stress buster b) to adjust with family problems c) to adjust with unhappy married life.

“I have children in my school who mention that they saw their father pulling their mother hard and their mother was calling him bad words ... he beats her as well and they are so scared about it ... they don’t feel good at home ... Class teacher, Standard 7.

One of the students says, “it all happens after my father drinks ... I wish he could stop drinking.”

Children intensely describe the tyranny of cruelty to their mothers. Children are shocked and frightened of the situations at home. However, if the *Anganwadi* teachers ask the mother about the issue no one admits to it. All feel these issues are part of family life. The grassroot workers believe alcohol is the common factor for violence at home. They feel alcoholism is an evil which destroys the peace and tranquillity of a family. The problem becomes uncontrollable when alcohol consumption causes domestic violence. The perpetrators do not realise what they are doing after they consume alcohol. The scars, burns, and injuries are what are left behind. There were instances where a normal conversation in the family is turned into an argument and then becomes violent. This results in the children becoming the scapegoats.

I asked him what happened. He replied with immense pain, “My father poured the rice water (*Kanjivellam*) on me and am burnt ... *Anganwadi* teacher, Thrissur. Is the scar of the burn ever goes from his mind?

Table 5 Summarises the important themes which emerged from the Focus Group Discussion.

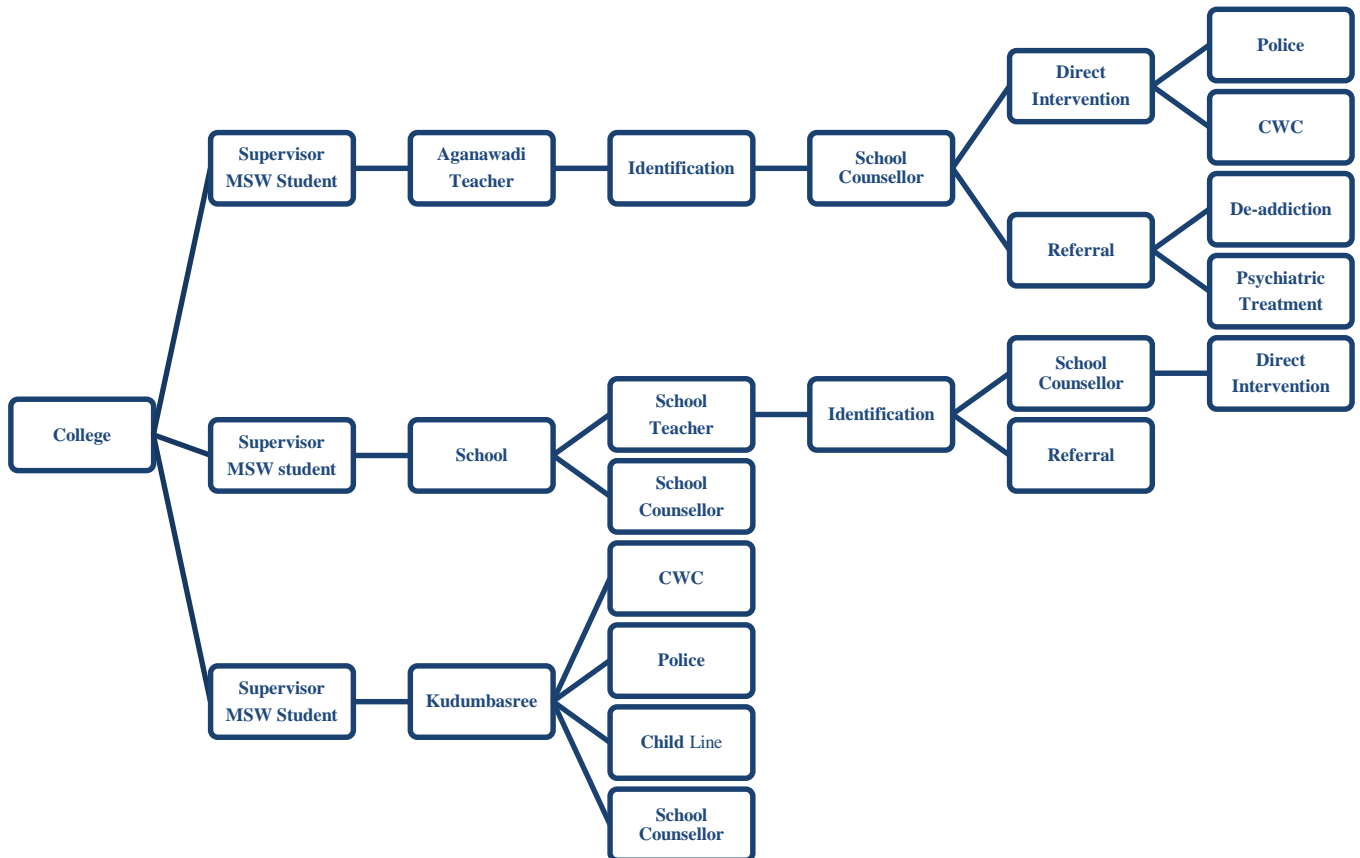
Table 5. Summary of the themes which emerged

Domestic violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic violence is prevalent in Kerala. • All the service providers have knowledge about the issue. • It affects not only women but also children.
Underlying Belief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marriage is sacred and it cannot be broken up. • Family is the core of our society, it must be sustained. • All matters in the family are very private. • Alcohol is the reason for violence at home.
Impact on children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It affects the holistic development of the children. • It has an impact on their survival, development, protection, and participation.
Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government has provided many provisions to deal with domestic violence. • All services work in parallel or duplicate each other. • All are not ready to intervene in the situation. • Coordinated multidisciplinary efforts are required.

**Intervention Model:
Multidisciplinary Approach to Deal with Abused Children**

This model works with the existing service providers in the community. The Department of Social Work, Rajagiri College, coordinated all the activities. Children in Domestic Violence: Multidisciplinary approach, the model of intervention is depicted below.

Figure 1. Children in Domestic Violence: Multidisciplinary Approach



The Process of the Intervention through a Multidisciplinary Approach

Phase I: Preparation of the Manual

The Department of Social Work had the ‘consultation meet’ to prepare the intervention manual. It focussed on children affected by domestic violence through a multidisciplinary approach. The participants of the ‘consultation meet’ were the specialists in the field of children, namely experts in the area of child development, faculty members from the selected social work colleges, child rights’ experts and activists, and people in the field of child counselling. Finally, with their input, guidance, and resources, the manual on the multidisciplinary approach to deal with victims of domestic violence was completed.

Phase II: Training of the Trainers (ToT)

The Rajagiri College of Social Sciences arranged a three-day training for the MSW students from the specialists of family and child welfare. It aimed at training students to handle the training sessions for the service providers such as, teachers, *aganawadi* workers and

kudubhasree members. The ToT was conducted by the different-resources persons. Twenty students were trained according to the manual directives.

Phase III: Selection of Area

Schools are akin to a second home for children. The different stakeholders in schools radically influence the lives of children. Therefore, schools are the major platform to conduct this research these being from four districts of Kerala, Alapuzha, Ernakulam, Kottayam, and Thrissur. Ten schools from each district were randomly selected. The study only included schools that had school counsellors. All the class teachers from these 40 schools were trained. The training occurred at their respective schools.

The *aganawadi* and *kudumbhasree* members were purposefully identified from the vicinity of the above-mentioned schools. Five students of MSW were placed in each district with a faculty supervisor from the college.

Phase IV: Training of Service Providers

The selected school teachers were trained in the identification of victims of domestic violence. The Child Development Project Officer deputed *aganawadi* workers for the training. The Community Development Society (CDS) members from *kudubhasree* were also selected from the same area. The training covered topics such as domestic violence and its impact on children, manifestation of violence on children, primary dealings with the children, the early identification methods and warning signs of violence. It also gave them 'First Aid' for the intervention.

Phase V: Implementation

After training the student social workers were in schools for a 30-day block period. They monitored and supported the service providers in the identification of abused children from their respective places. The number of cases were on the increase. After the primary intervention, they sent the children to school counsellors. As noted, each school was chosen with a professional school counsellor for this purpose. Once a week they also visited *aganawadis*. The counsellors worked upon different levels of interventions to restore the life of the child. To achieve this they counselled the children and trained them in life skills. They reported the necessary cases to the police and CWC. They also consulted with doctors for the physical wellbeing of the children. They also referred certain children for psychiatric treatment. Some of the perpetrators were sent to de-addiction centres. During the project period, the faculty supervisors visited the schools once a week. They supervised the school counsellors and the student social workers. They also had case discussions to improve the interventions. Once the victim had been identified, the *kudumbhasree* members referred the case to any of the following: police, child line, or school counsellors. After a month, the student social workers visited the school on every Saturday for a six-month period.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the multidisciplinary approach proved to be an effective intervention strategy for working with abused children. This strategy coordinated the efforts of different service providers, and efficiently aided the children to return to life with complete vigour. The children not only showed an academic improvement but also one in their behaviour. Some of the perpetrators of violence were also rehabilitated through de-addiction treatments. Therefore, the family once again became the sanctuary of love, peace, joy, and safety.

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