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Growing Up With Intra-Parental Violence

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In the last decade, a lot of research has been undertaken on the issue of domestic or intimate partner violence in India but limited research has been undertaken on the issue from a child's perspective, that is, intra-parental violence. The children – silent witnesses of intra-parental violence (IPV) are neglected not only by the parents but also by researchers and the state. Thus, there remain very few opportunities to bring the children to the notice of the society. Often the society and the legal systems designed to help victims of domestic violence fail to address the needs of the children due to lack of sensitivity towards their vulnerability. Ample of laws do exist in India that deals with the issue of domestic violence, still we have to go a long way to understand plight children being exposed to IPV as silent witnesses and give it recognition as a social problem that requires legal intervention.

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Introduction

Intra-Parental Violence (IPV) often interchangeably termed as intimate-partner violence or domestic violence is a well known phenomenon in India and worldwide. It is also known that it causes serious implications to the millions of women as well as men. It affects both the victim and the perpetrator in a way or another, yet too little attention has been paid to the harm suffered by the children who witness parental abuse.

Looking at the violence between intimate partners from their child's perspective is the focus of the term Intra-Parental Violence. Intra-Parental Violence is described as an escalating pattern of abuse where one parent in an intimate relationship controls the other through force, intimidation, or threat of violence (Merrell, 2001). These forms of violence may include one or more of the following; physical, sexual, emotional or psychological, verbal, spiritual and financial abuse (Merrell, 2001). Intra-Parental Violence occurs in all racial, socioeconomic, educational, occupational and age groups, without distinction, and

can also impact on a child witness's development.

In order to survive, children who are raised in the environment of conflict and abuse develop complex defense mechanisms. Unfortunately, these mechanisms have a devastating effect on emotional, cognitive and physical health of the children i.e. survivors of intra-parental violence.

Regular exposure to IPV and a child's inability to process it provokes the development of anti-social behaviors. A child's ability to thrive in society is limited by her tendencies towards impulsive actions, resistance to authority, violent communication and other damaging behaviors. This leads directly towards higher incidences of depression, high-anxiety, drug addiction and alcoholism that only exacerbate her social exclusion. (Growing up with violence, n.d)

Recent researches show that a young child's emotional experiences are vital part of her/his development. The emotional experiences that children have in this segment are permanently engraved into the brain. Constant negative stress (family abuse, anarchy and abandonment) is a detrimental factor that prevents the appropriate connection of the child's mind and actions. Other negative experiences such as poor nutrition, a lack of stimulation, the absence of positive social relationships also cause negative alterations in the child. Often the result is a person who is not capable of coping and adjusting well in the social systems. However, this harm or loss can be reversed with the appropriate intervention.

Child's Exposure to IPV

Children witness violence in the home in a number of different ways. They may see or hear the abusive episode, been a part or even involved in the violence (e.g. the child may be in his mother's arms when she is hit), will experience the aftermath, and sense the tension in the build-up to the abuse. Not only physical violence is often found in abusive relationships, the children also observe emotional abuse, in the form of name-calling, accusations and threats made by the abuser in their presence. Where the parent is being abused, the children are also likely to be abused themselves. Here the child's own self-esteem is battered by being shouted at, being blamed or not understanding, or given mixed messages by being favored one moment and put-down the next. Quite apart from possible physical involvement or direct abuse, these emotionally damaging actions have a detrimental and often long-lasting effect on the children. (Effects on Children Witnessing Domestic Violence, n.d.)

It has been observed that the younger the child, the more he/she gets exposed to the conflicts due to their dependence on parents and adults. Infants and the younger children are often directly involved in violent episodes. They are held as a shield by the mother, hit by thrown objects, or intentionally threatened or hurt to terrify the mother. Even when they are apparently lying passively in their cots, infants are exquisitely sensitive to their surroundings and especially to the emotional signals given out by their caregivers, including the caregiver's depressed, anxious, fearful or angry mood. (Domestic violence and its impact on children's development, 2002)

Children hear their parents, the adults they love and depend on, screaming in

anger, pleading in fear and sobbing in pain. They hear fists hitting bodies, objects thrown and shattered, people thrown against walls and knocked to floors. They may see blood, bruises and weapons. Some children witness domestic rapes.’ (Wolak and Finkelhor, 1998)

Impact of the Exposure on Children

A child is always affected by their parent’s violence, the impact can be determined by many factors like frequency and intensity of violence the child is exposed to, support systems available, individual coping strategies and so on and so forth. Their reactions may become immediately apparent, or surface days, sometimes even weeks later. Just how a child expresses their fear, upset, anger and confusion can vary according to their age.

Research suggests that the children exposed to IPV are, on average, at greater risk for school, social and behavioral problems (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990). Exposure is defined as children’s seeing, hearing, or perceiving the effects of physical aggression between their parenting figures, and perhaps should also include the psychological abuse and verbal hostility that often accompany it. Greater frequency and duration of exposure and whether children have also been personally abused are associated with greater child problems. In addition, children’s perceptions of the properties of the conflict and associated attributions appear to play a role in their reactions (Cummings & Davies, 1996). Conflicts that are unresolved, involve threats to leave or of physical aggression, are about the child, seem more severe and frequent, and elicit more self-blame are linked to greater distress.

The effects of witnessing intra-parental violence vary with the age of the child. Children of different age groups have different kind of impact due to exposure to IPV. Impact during different stages of childhood and that of adolescent differ, which is explained below by reviewing relevant literature.

Childhood

The exposure to IPV means that the young child may not develop a sense of trust or security. So by three years, it has been found that children exposed to Intra-Parental Violence may respond to adult anger with greater distress and increases in aggression directed at peers. One research found boys were more aggressive and girls more distressed. While others have not found gender differences (Margolin, 1998). But there is a consistent thread running through the research findings of higher levels of aggression, greater likelihood of seeing the intentions of others as hostile, psychosomatic disorders, difficulties with school work, poor academic performance, school phobia and difficulties in concentration and attention (Cumming & Davies, 1994).

Adolescence

The impact may be different for adolescents who have been part of an abusive

system from their earliest years compared with those who experience it for the first time in adolescence. Violence against mothers in childhood is found to be highly associated with ongoing depression in adolescent girls (Spaccarelli, Sandler & Roosa, 1994). The stresses associated with violence in the home may make usual adolescent risk-taking and escape behaviors worse and they may begin to participate in family violence themselves (Howard, 1995). It can also affect their relationships and other domains of their lives like academic performance and career choices.

Lack of meaning

Another thread that runs through the research literature is the impact on the child of the meaninglessness of the violence they witness or experience. No one talks about what is happening and the mother's sense of helplessness leads her to 'dissociate' from the violence so that when it is not happening, she may act as if there's nothing wrong. So the child's thoughts and feelings about the experience become fragmented, disorganized and they are unable to make sense of it (McIntosh, 2000). To sum up, 'violence affects children's view of the world and of themselves, their ideas about the meaning and purpose of life, their expectations for future happiness and their moral development. This disrupts children's progression through age-appropriate developmental tasks' (Margolin & Gordis 2000).

Potential Role of Social Work Profession

Children who grow up in violent homes can be helped through Intervention, prevention, and support programs. But there is much more to be done to keep them safe. The Children are forgotten victims. By creating awareness and educating the public, we can promote community and social responsibility – we can stop violence and help the children exposed to IPV.

Social workers can work at different levels and with different groups of clients. They can work with individuals (such as the children victims and witnesses of violence), with the families which are facing discord issues, communities where the violence prevails to generate awareness and mould the attitudes toward the issues and with governments to make and design policies for the children's security and protection.

Social Workers can play a vital role to safeguard the children and bring about a positive change in the attitude of the society towards domestic or intra-parental violence; they can turn the focus of the society on the children who are victims as well as witnesses of the violence of their parents. Social workers can educate the public, advocate for stringent laws for protection of the child witnesses and victims of violence, and stronger punishments for the offenders.

Social Workers or therapists can work with individuals as well as groups (children and families) who are especially trained and experienced at helping children and their families who are affected by intra-parental violence. The

sooner professional intervention is introduced —either through individual therapy for the child or parent(s) or with the family — the sooner serious emotional, psychological and physical damage can be put to a stop for everyone concerned (The Youngest Victims of Domestic Violence, n.d.).

Social workers in school can play great role by identifying the children by using the protocols and the hints to identify the children in schools. They can also carryout counseling sessions and interventions with the children. They can also involve the family in the process of helping the children. Social workers in schools can be very effective if they are well trained to identify and deal with the children.

Social workers working with family counseling centres or police and dealing with domestic violence cases can also play an active role by enquiring about the children and identifying the child victims and witnesses of intra-parental violence. In addition to provide support to the parents, they can then assess the children, counsel them and refer them to specialized services like child psychiatrist, psychologist or specialized social workers. They can also make the parents aware of the impact that their conflicts have on their children which can have great impact on their behaviors.

Social Workers working with communities can work to create a culture of safety in serving organization which can aim to carry out sensitization drives in the community. But organizations must also establish policies and procedures that address boundaries, supervision and responding to concerns - and provide the training to support these. And anyone with concerns about a child's safety must be encouraged and empowered to speak up - and have the confidence that their concerns will be dealt with responsibly.

Social activists can work with masses and advocate about the effects of witnessing violence on the children. They can do advocacy and involve the society and various stake holders to make laws that can protect the children. They can generate awareness about the ill effects of witnessing IPV on children in the society. Social Workers can be especially trained at helping children and their families who are affected by domestic violence.

Policy Implications

In India, when we talk about domestic violence the focus is on intimate partners, that is, the emphasis is on the partners involved in the violence. But the children as witnesses and victims of parental violence are often ignored. Thus, the phenomenon of intra-parental violence has to bring to the notice of society. Then protecting the children needs to be taken seriously by the Government and adequate provisions need to be made to do so.

The child witnesses of IPV are unseen and unnoticed as the law does not put much focus on them. We have no such policy or programme in India that deals with the child witnesses of IPV. Though we focus much on family and couple counseling but unfortunately the child is not considered important while counseling

the family. The child is kept out of the ambit of family while the intervention or services are provided to the couple and hence, they remain unnoticed and their needs remain unaddressed.

State should adopt legislation that broadens the definition of child neglect and abuse to include children who witness domestic or intra-parental violence. Expanding the legal definition of child maltreatment, however, may not always be the most effective method to address the needs of these children. Communities can better serve families by allocating resources that build partnerships between service providers, child protective services, and the array of informal and formal systems that offer a continuum of services based upon the level of risk present.

The requirement for special measures should be considered as part of the charging advice. Child witnesses under the age of 18 should automatically be eligible for special measures.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes the need for adults and organizations, when making decisions that affect children, to consider their best interests and their views. Article 3.1 states:

In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration.

Based upon this, a law to protect the children is need of the hour and right of the children.

Conclusion

The children are forgotten victims of adult's violence i.e. parental violence and it is the high time to intervene in the situation before it is too late. As the children are future of the country, if they are maltreated or ignored they might not grow up in the true sense and their functioning can be hampered too. Thus it is needed to intervene at the earliest stages of exposure during childhood.

Social workers can play crucial role in bringing about a positive change which is required/needed to make the country a safe and better place to live for the children. They can work at different levels and with different client groups such as with individuals, groups, families, communities and with the government to address the issue of intra-parental violence.

Institutional and societal changes can only begin when an expansive network of service providers integrate their expertise, resources, and services to eliminate domestic/Intra-Parental violence in their communities. Thus, child welfare and domestic violence service providers can collaborate to achieve a shared goal of not just freeing victims but also witnesses from violence and working to prevent future violence and the children getting exposed to the same.

In India, we do not have such laws and legislations that address the children - forgotten victims of intra-parental violence appropriately. Thus, it is needed to bring the issue in notice of the society, sensitize the society about the issue and act to make stringent laws for protection of such children who need protection and care in their own homes.

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