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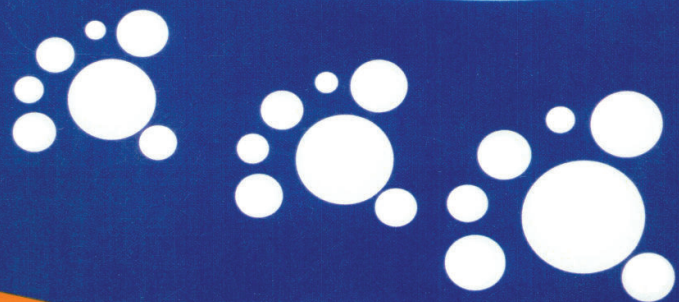
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Intra-Parental violence: Impact of exposure on children

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ABSTRACT

Extensive research has already been undertaken to understand the effects of Intimate Partner Violence on women and men. What is limitedly understood and particularly so in Indian context is the impact of Intimate-Partner or Intra-Parental Violence on children. The cultural paradigms act as an inhibitor in children being able to share the manner in which Intra-Parental Violence touches their tender lives. It is probably an extension of the same that it is difficult to locate services which cater to these forgotten victims of violence.

The focus of the current paper is to understand the effects of exposure to Intra-Parental Violence on children's well being, relationships, behavior and adult life. The gender differential in respect of impact is also explored. Additionally its contribution to the continuance of the vicious cycle of violence is also examined.

Qualitative approach was adopted for the present study and adult survivors of parental violence were interviewed in retrospect. The data was analyzed thematically by using grounded techniques of analysis. Findings have been substantiated with the narratives from respondents.

The paper holds value in the light of the fact that while Intimate-Partner Violence is witnessing an incremental trajectory limited attention is being paid to children who are rightly referred to as the forgotten victims of violence.

Keywords: Intra-Parental Violence, Exposure, Witness, Impact, Retrospective, Children

INTRODUCTION

Intimate-Partner Violence typically involves a pattern of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and intimidation which escalates in frequency and severity over time. It can be understood as the misuse of power and exercise of control (Pence & Paymar,1996) by one partner over the other in an intimate relationship, usually by a man over a woman, occasionally by a woman over a man (though without the same pattern of societal collusion) and also occurring amongst same sex couples. It has profound consequences in the lives of individual, families and communities (Mullender & Humphreys, 1998).

According to available statistics from around the globe, one out of every three women has experienced violence in an intimate relationship at some point in her life. This is an average based on available national surveys across industrialized and developing countries (World Health Organization, 1997).

As per NFHS-4 report 28.8 percent women experience spousal violence whereas according to NFHS-3 data, nearly two in five (37 percent) married women in India have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence by their husband. It was also found that only one in four abused women have ever sought help to try to end the violence they have experienced, two out of three women have not only never sought help, but have also never told anyone about the violence. Another revealing finding of the

study was that, more than half of women (54 percent) and men (51 percent) agree that it is justifiable for a husband to beat his wife under some circumstances (IIPS, 2007).

133 to 275 million children are estimated to be exposed to parental violence globally and they need services to be able to cope with their experiences (UNICEF, 2006). Ironically no estimates for India exist as on date for child witnesses of parental abuse.

The consequences of Intimate-Partner Violence on the partners (or affected spouse) are known to be many but the focus of this paper is to understand the immediate and long term consequences on children who witness the same. In order to discuss the same, the author draws on the researches undertaken worldwide on the subject. Additionally inferences are also drawn from the author's empirical work which aimed to study the psycho-social dimensions of the exposure to parental violence on children. The study was retrospective in nature and was carried in Delhi/NCR, India.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach was found appropriate keeping the sensitive nature of the study in view. Additionally due to ethical concerns of working with children on such a sensitive issue and to protect children exposed to parental violence retrospective approach was adopted and adult (above 18 years of age) survivors of parental conflicts were selected as respondents and enquired about their experiences of witnessing parental abuse.

Self-selecting sampling was the technique adopted to select the sample. The study involved five participants' i.e. adult survivors of parental conflicts owing to self selection criterion and the views expressed by these respondents formed the basis of this study. The study was conducted as a pilot to a larger research study with greater number of participants.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed in accordance with the objective of research and in-depth interviews were conducted with the respondents. The dimensions that were explored included the psychological, sociological and developmental hindrances or effects faced by the children due to exposure to parental violence.

The process for data analysis was as follows - The interviews were audio recorded (with consent of the respondents), transcribed and coded manually, analysed qualitatively and segregated in themes.

The themes were drawn in accordance with the objective of the study and set in a logical form of initial encounters with Intra-Parental Violence, followed by effects posed of them and summed up by the coping mechanisms adopted by them as well as and the mitigating factors. Grounded techniques of analysis were adopted and the results have been discussed with support of narratives from the respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Children – The Forgotten Victims of Intra-Parental Violence

Children witness violence in the home in a number of different ways. They may see or hear the abusive episode, be used or even involved in the violence, will experience the aftermath, and sense the tension in the

build-up to the abuse. Even when the parents believe the children were unaware of what was happening, the children can often give detailed accounts of the events. Not only physical violence is often found in abusive relationships, the children also observe emotional abuse of the parent frequently. 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.).

The present research is an attempt to explore how children perceive and understand the violence in home. On enquiring about their **experiences of exposure to parental violence**, respondents of the study described their initial encounters as horrible and scary. An adult male respondent reported-

“Once my mother was taken into the store room of the house and beaten by my father with leather belt. I could just hear voices . . . I was in 2nd standard (6- years old) at that point of time. . .”

When the respondents were asked to explain **their reactions to the incidents of violence** between their parents they explained such incidents as scary, a female respondent said-

“. . . I was very scared when (I was 5-6 years old) I saw my mother lying on bed unconsciously. It was as if the world is no more for me and my life is over. I could never imagine my life without my mother.”

It confirms that children do sense and observe the violent acts between their parents even in early years while it has been found that parents have a perception that children cannot sense the same. Not only they sense it, it becomes a permanent memory and affects their lives to a great extent.

Additionally exposure to violence also 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).

Effects of Intra-Parental Violence on Children

The development of child can be expected to be appropriate within a secure and nurturing environment. Where the environment is infected by violence and fear, all the normal tasks of growing up are likely to be adversely affected.

It is also believed that effects of being exposed to parental violence could be immediate. They may be accidentally injured because they become caught in the violence which is usually directed at their mothers; they may be the subject of separate incidents of physical abuse by the same man who is also abusive of their

mothers; or they may also suffer greater levels of physical punishment or abuse from their over stressed mothers (Mullender & Humphreys, 2000).

This exposure to Intra-Parental Violence can have negative effects in long run too. For an instance, it can have effect on children's adjustment in adult life (Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999). Children exposed to Domestic Violence are at a higher risk for self-esteem difficulties (Hughes, 1988), lower IQ scores (Koenen, Moffitt, Caspi, Taylor, & Purcell, 2003), problematic peer relations (McCloskey & Stuewig, 2001), and increased internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Jouriles, Norwood, Mc Donald & Peters, 2001) than their non exposed peers.

When it was endeavoured to investigate the **effects of being exposed to Intra-Parental Violence on academic performance of the children**, it was found that lack of concentration due to non conducive environment at home affected their academic performance to a great extent. As narrated by respondents-

“ . . . My academic performance turned down because of lack of concentration...” explained a female respondent.

Said another female respondent, *“Even after investing concentrated hours on studies there wasn't any significant change or improvement in my grades.”*

There are apparent and acute negative effects of exposure to parental violence on children's academic life which may include lack of attentiveness in classroom, decreased attendance, declining scores or marks, low concentration etc. (Naaz & Sukhramani, 2013).

It was also found that exposure to Intra-Parental Violence in early childhood can **affect one's confidence** up to a great extent which hampers a child's development in many ways. As reported and explained by a female respondent that the exposure to Intra-Parental Violence affected her confidence up to a great extent.

“ . . . I used to have low confidence and cold feet very often.”

- Reported a female respondent.

Another dimension explored through the present research was the children's **decisions about life i.e. major decisions of life** which could be impacted through exposure to Intra-Parental Violence.

As narrated by a female respondent, *“When I was a teenager, I used to think that I won't marry ever.”*

It can be understood that by virtue of witnessing violence and disrespect among parents the respondent had developed negative perception of marriage and spousal relation hence she was scared of getting married.

It has also been found that children who witness parental abuse tend to **learn violent behaviors** and replicate the same in their relationships (intimate relationships) during childhood and even after growing adults.

A male respondent explained, *“I slap her (wife)... when she does not listen to me which is fine also. Sometimes it is needed to keep her on track, even my father used to do the same.”*

A female respondent explained how she learnt to bear violence in her own intimate relationship by narrating, *“I became very submission over the period of time and a belief that I developed is that I cannot stand violence. I get scared and helpless.”*

Past researches had similar findings which suggest that girls who witness maternal abuse may tolerate abuse as adults more than girls who do not. Those boys who witness abuse of their mother by their father are more likely to inflict severe violence as adults (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986).

Previous researches have documented the long-term effects including poor self-esteem, feelings of isolation and stigma, difficulty in trusting others, and marital and relationship problems (Finkelhor & Brown, 1988).

Findings of the present research explained that majority of the respondents had **negative and unhappy feelings**; it was established that they have feelings like insecurity, sadness, unhappiness, loneliness, etc. As narrated by a female respondent in the research study-

“I used to think that I don't belong to anyone, the only place I belonged was my books and libraries that don't involve living beings.”

Violence in families particularly between intimate partners is a distressing phenomenon not only for those involved in the conflict but other family members as well. Moreover the experiences of getting exposed to Intra Parental Violence are clearly stressful for the children as they are dependent on the adults/parents for fulfilling their needs and provide support. When the caregiver is not available to support the child, the children are more prone to stress, health issues that leads to development delays also. Researchers have found that exposure to Intra-Parental Violence not only have short term consequences on the children's wellbeing (physical, psychological, social, cognitive, and emotional) but long term also.

It can be summed up that there is an increasing evidence that children who witness Intra-Parental Violence are at risk for a range of psychosocial problems (Osofsky, 1995). Indeed, problems seen in child witnesses to Intra-Parental Violence are quite similar to those seen in children who are the direct victims of physical abuse (Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt & Kenny, 2003). Because witnessing Domestic Violence can terrorize children and significantly disrupt child socialization, some experts have begun to consider exposure to Domestic Violence a form of psychological maltreatment (McGee & Wolfe, 1991; Peled & Davis, 1995). Children react to the difficult situations in different manner depending upon their coping skills and kind of support system available.

Factors Determining Impact of Intra-Parental Violence on Children

There are various factors that play role of catalyst in the phenomenon of witnessing conflicts between the parents. Not only direct abuse creates hurdles in positive growth and development of a child but witnessing abuse of the caregiver or a parent can also leave long lasting unpleasant marks on child's mind, that the child carries till adulthood and even longer. Likewise, not all marital conflict has equal impact on children's adjustment. Conflict that is more frequent, intense and of longer duration tends to be associated with more negative child outcomes. None of these factors act in isolation, however, and significant interdependence is the norm rather than the exception. How each dimension might impact child's development is likely to be related to other dimensions of the family context in which marital conflict is embedded. Let us discuss few factors that determine the effect of witnessing Intra-Parental Violence on children-

- **Frequency and intensity-** Numerous studies have shown a positive association between the frequency of parental arguments and level of maladjustment in children. Frequency has been linked to conduct problems, anger and insecurity, and academic difficulties (Cummings & Davies 1994). Similarly, intensity of arguments has been shown to be linked to more anger, sadness, concern, and helplessness in children as well as to higher levels of behavior problems (Grych & Fincham, 1993).
- **Content-** The content or topic of parental disputes is another important domain of marital conflict. Conflict that is child-related has been associated with children's report of higher levels of shame, self-blame for the conflict, and fear of being drawn in to the parental conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1993). Parental arguments or disagreements about childrearing policies and strategies have been shown to better predict child difficulties than other dimensions of marital dysfunction, including global marital distress and/ or non child-related fights.
- **Resolution-** In addition to how parents express their anger, the extent to which disagreements are resolved also matters. Resolution is probably best described as residing along a continuum, from no resolution to complete resolution (Cummings & Davies, 1994). Higher degrees of resolution have been shown to be associated with reduced levels of distress in children. In fact, even partially resolved disputes are associated with reductions in children's anger as compared to unresolved fights.

Mitigating the Impact of Exposure

Amidst the factors that affected the children negatively exists the dynamics that have a propensity to protect and have cushioning effects. These protective factors were identified as the mitigating factors which included support, sharing and coping.

Support

When researcher tried to explore the support systems available to the children-witnesses of Intra-Parental Violence, it was found that the only support system that was available to the respondents of the study were relatives who knew about the situation and in one case it was teacher who after observing the behaviour

could figure out that something is wrong with the person and provided support. Only two respondents reported to have received support from their grandparents (maternal or/and paternal).

One of the male respondents narrated, *“In absence of care from my parents (during and after the episodes of violence) my grandparents and uncles was there to support me and show affection. I used to sleep with my extended family members when the atmosphere in house was not conducive.”*

While another female respondent female said, *“The only support system that was available was my nana and nani [maternal grandparents] who used to support my mother....they ultimately helped me by helping my mother.”*

With the increasing trend of nuclear families in urban areas, the support systems (informal) are shrinking and the children are left with fewer options to seek support from. Even the neighbourhoods are no more able to play role of support system for society and especially to children.

One of the respondents shared that her teacher extended her support on getting to know about the violence she had been seeing at home between parents. It is worth pointing out that professionals working with children especially in schools need to be sensitive and trained to be able to deal with such concerns of children

“.....The only support I received was from my teacher, she [teacher] supported me when I approached her but nobody came forward otherwise to me for support.” As narrated by one of the female respondents.

It is evident that negative effects of witnessing Intra-Parental Violence may be diminished if the child benefits from intervention by the law and Domestic Violence programs (Giles, 1985). In addition to intervention by law, there is another factor that decides the level of influence which is the support available to the children during and after the violent episodes. Good formal as well as informal support system can be very effective in preventing and protecting the children from the ill effects of witnessing Intra-Parental Violence.

Sharing

When the respondents for the research were asked if they had shared their experiences with anyone, it emerged that they rarely did so. The reasons for not sharing their experiences were lack of courage and confidence to do so, lack of faith in other people, fear of rejection and that people will make fun of them and their family.

“.....I never had the courage to share my experiences of Intra Parental Violence with anyone.” explained a female respondent who had been exposed to parental abuse during childhood.

Narrated a male respondent that, “.....*I have never been comfortable to share this (experiences of Intra-Parental Violence) as it cannot be changed now even if I share with someone.....*”

Sharing has been well recognized as therapeutic since it provides opportunity for catharsis. However it has been found in the present research that children seldom share their experiences and concerns with anyone to receive support due to the stigma and fear of rejection. Hence it is required to encourage the children to talk and share their concerns with trustworthy adults.

Coping

Coping is persistently altering cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage precise external and/or internal demands that exceed the resources of a person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping is thus expending conscious effort to solve personal and interpersonal problems, and seeking to master, minimize or tolerate stress or conflict. Psychological coping mechanisms are usually termed as coping strategies or coping skills (Zeidner & Endler, 1996).

An adequate understanding of the effects of Intra-Parental Violence on children requires attention to the moderating effects of child characteristics, one of which is coping strategies adopted by the children (Cummings, 1998). It is also found that children of different genders react differently to conflict (Cummings, Iannotti, & Zahn-Waxler, 1985), children’s reactions to conflict do change with age also (Cummings, 2000), but no clear pattern of gender or age differences has yet emerged in research on the outcomes of child witnesses to Intra-Parental Violence.

Every child is unique with her/his unique needs and capabilities/capacities and their ways of dealing with different situations (coping strategies). Traumatic stress is produced by exposure to events that are so extreme or severe and threatening, that they demand extraordinary coping efforts. Such events are often unpredicted and uncontrollable.

When researcher investigated the respondents about the **coping strategies** they used to adopt in order to deal with stress, it was found that when away from home, they try to portray a positive image of their family by cooking up stories and sharing funny instances/things about the family which are untrue. As narrated by a female respondent-

“I used to cook up stories about my family and used to portray as if things are really nice. I used to share the stories with friends.”

The above respondent depicted a fake happy and loving picture of her family to gain acceptance among peer. She did not want the harsh reality of violent episodes of her family to get public.

During the discussion with respondents it came out that in order to cope with the difficult situations many of the children tried to keep themselves busy. During younger age they used to keep themselves busy in

painting, writing, reading stories or course books or taking up volunteering opportunities away from home however use to make efforts to keep themselves away from home when they grew up.

Shared one of the female respondents, “.....*I used to take up volunteering opportunities that could help me to stay away from home, even away from the city*”

Another unique way to cope with the situations that children adopt is to pray to God and become spiritual. Same was adopted by a respondent when he was young.

Narrated one of the male respondents, “.....*Whenever I was in trouble, I used to remember God and pray to make everything fine.*”

Inability of expressing self and sharing and in absence of any support the above respondent found strengthen in prayer and held belief in God.

If children are not able to cope well and deal with situations effectively themselves, it is required to provide them some support to enable them to be competent to deal with the stressful situations. Thus, it is need of the hour to address the concern and make provisions to meet the needs of the children. Before that it is required to be able to identify such children and have some provision to identify the vulnerable children and then providing appropriate support would help them to cope with the situations in a better manner. It can also reduce the short as well as long term effects of being exposed to Intra-Parental Violence. It is worth looking at the significance of medical practitioners, counsellors and social workers working in various settings including school, counselling centres, medical or hospitals and communities who could play an active role to support such children (Naaz, 2014).

Conclusion

The findings of research suggest that the experience of witnessing abuse among parents is clearly distressing and traumatic. It is also evident that witnessing violence among parents has long term consequences and can hamper a child’s development in many ways. A wide range of effects, reactions and coping strategies were manifested. The present research has opened up this area of human experience. This can guide both future research and intervention. Nonetheless further research in this area is clearly mandated.

Through the analysis of empirical data collected through the present study and the literature reviewed, it was found that there is no set pattern of signs or symptoms. Some children come through relatively unscathed, for example if they have good ways of coping, or people to turn to for support. However, children are likely to be affected by the fear, disruption and distress in their lives. Children show distress in their own ways, depending on their age, gender and developmental stage. They may have physical, emotional, learning, behavioural or developmental problems, and their educational performance and achievement may also be affected. These symptoms can easily be wrongly assessed as illness, permanent learning difficulties or naughtiness (Humphreys & Mullender, 2000).

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