



Understanding Domestic Violence Victimization: Insights from Literature on Normalization and Intergenerational Transmission

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence is a deeply impacting social issue and a product of a patriarchal system that affects individuals, and families, and can be passed through multiple generations. Through the intergenerational transmission of violence, children who grew up in violent households may become victims, perpetrators, or both. This can further be transmitted to the next generations as well. People who live in a society where domestic violence is normalized can internalize the same and the children who grow up with such parents can adapt the same as it is the only model they have seen in an intimate relationship. There is a lot of shame and stigma surrounding domestic violence that people are incentivized to normalize. Victims often have to ignore their victimization due to the fear of humiliation, divorce, and isolation from their family and society (McCleary-Sills et al., 2016). This results in denial of victimhood, not seeking help, and accepting violence as a part of “normal married life”. Therefore, normalizing domestic violence not only makes the victim silent but also creates generations of perpetrators and victims through their silence. This study focuses on how the normalisation of domestic violence in society can cause the intergenerational transmission of violence and its consequences through a review of various relevant literature.

Introduction

Domestic violence is a serious global problem and is considered the major type of violence faced by women among others. Globally 27% of women between the age of 15 to 49 years have been a victim of intimate partner violence either in the form of physical and/or sexual violence (World Health Organization, 2021). Various risk factors are associated with domestic violence such as a history of exposure to violence, dissatisfaction in marriage, communication issues between partners, and controlling behaviour towards partners (World Health Organization, 2021) . Its consequences are often overlooked and violence existing in intimate relationships is often accepted as a part of the relationship. This gives an outlook on how we as a society let violence be a part of our life in various ways.

Violence in the family especially among intimate partners has severe impacts on the partners as well as the people witnessing it. The impacts can be physical, economic, or psychological. The scars that are created psychologically are not going to go away one day like the physical impacts. The severity can even extend up to losing a life as homicide and suicide are also widely observed in intimate partner violence. The impact on children growing up in such an environment is far worse as they are seeing the violence from a very young age when they are not even able to understand things.

The acknowledgment of domestic violence as a serious problem in society is very less but its impact is deeper and generational. Thus, it needs to be addressed and prevented. In the following sections, how domestic violence is normalized is explained along with various factors that contribute to it. Also, how the normalization of domestic violence leads to the intergenerational transmission of violence is mentioned. Further, it is also explained why it is necessary to prevent the transmission of violence and how it can be done.

Normalization of Domestic Violence

Family violence is often normalized when children grow up witnessing violence between their parents. It is accepted and legitimized on an individual as well as on a societal level (Fleming et al., 2015; Hynes et al., 2016; Lennon et al., 2021). Here acceptance and legitimization mean that violence happens often and questioning the violence or stopping it is minimal. This gives the idea that violence is the normal response to conflict and there is nothing wrong with the concept of violence itself. It is bizarre to see violence being normalized in the family while we generally do not accept the same violence in any other situation.

Normalization of domestic violence is often taught by the parents during the upbringing of their children (Lennon et al., 2021). They are taught the idea of hegemonic masculinity and women being in an inferior position. This contributes to the acceptance of violence as they are taught that men are supposed to be violent and women in such positions are supposed to be in an abused role. The role of social norms (Fleming et al., 2015) in normalizing violence is very significant. People who grew up in a society where men being violent is a norm often perceive violence as permissible and also expects pressure from peer and society to perpetrate violence in a relationship. These norms lead to attitude formation (Eriksson & Mazerolle, 2015; Fulu et al., 2013; Sanchez-Prada et al., 2021) such as attitude towards women, domestic violence, and violence as a whole. Therefore, an individual learns from their family that domestic violence is a normal incident and it is normal to be violent in an intimate relationship, through witnessing violence and through an upbringing that normalizes violence. They also learn it from the society that approves violence in intimate relationships and makes it a social norm. And it is not just men who justify violence but very often women also do (Black et al., 2019) as they are also taught the same norms which create similar attitudes towards domestic violence.

Often the victims of domestic violence felt more fear of breaking up their families than the fear they felt of violence (Wirtz et al., 2014). They also face multiple sociocultural and interpersonal barriers (Hynes et al., 2016; McCleary-Sills et al., 2016) in help-seeking. Barriers such as financial dependency, lack of support system, victim blaming, and social isolation often force the victim to conform to the social norms even when they know that they are being abused. These barriers act as a hindrance to reporting or seeking help and therefore stop the victim support system and the policies to intervene and stop the violence and also to keep domestic violence an under-reported crime. The lack of intervention can also enforce the normalization of domestic violence. In a society where help-seeking is considered abnormal, people often get incentivized for tolerating and ignoring violence. Leaving an abusive relationship or seeking help is dealt with by shaming and blaming the victim and is done by even the family of the victim while the ones who tolerate the violence are glorified for their 'sacrifice and character'. In this way, individuals are rewarded in society for normalizing domestic violence.

In a study (Moulding et al., 2015) it was observed that mothers who undergo abuse stay silent or take the blame as an act of protecting their children. They believe that tolerating the violence or taking responsibility will keep the family from breaking up and children can be with both parents together. Also, they do this to inhibit the violence that may extend to the children. But on the contrary, often this may affect the parenting, and the parent-child relationship and give men reasons to justify their abuse.

According to Moulding et al. (2015), children may develop a mother-blame attitude in these situations. When mothers stay silent towards domestic violence, children may blame the mother for the situation by questioning their inefficiency to leave the relationship and find it as a reason to normalize violence.

Variables such as the response of police and other stakeholders towards domestic violence (Pollak, 2004) and the victim's perception of the criminal justice system and the support system also play a vital role in increasing the probability of violence and normalization of violence. If the response of police and other stakeholders in handling complaints of domestic violence is not in adherence to assisting the victims, then there is a higher probability that victims might not seek help or report the incident to them. Similarly, if the image of the criminal justice system in society is not victim friendly or if there is existence of victim blaming and shaming among them, the victim might perceive that tolerating violence is better than reporting it. It is necessary to provide proper victim assistance to the victims of domestic violence and also to build trust among victims in the existing criminal justice system. In the absence of that, the same system that should prevent violence will act collaterally to normalize domestic violence.

Intergenerational Transmission of Violence

Experiencing neglect or abuse in childhood increases the risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence in adulthood (Fulu et al., 2017; Wilson, 2016). Women experiencing trauma in childhood have a higher probability of victimization whereas men with childhood trauma develop a higher risk of violence perpetration especially in intimate relationships. Similarly witnessing parental violence in childhood also increases the same risk. A study conducted by (Wilson, 2016) among indigenous children found that growing up in a violent household increases their risk of being a victim, perpetrator, or both. This transmission of violence through various generations in a household was initially elaborated by Kalmuss (1984) where it is explained that family aggression is transmitted through children and it is mostly affected by parental hitting than parent-child hitting. Children witnessing family violence tend to normalize violence and they are also often brought up in an environment or community where violence is used as an acceptable way to interact.

It is evident from various studies (Ehrensaft & Cohen, 2012; Eriksson & Mazerolle, 2015; Franklin & Kercher, 2012; Pollak, 2004; Wirtz et al., 2014) that being in a household where violence is routine among the parents, increases the risk of transmitting the same violence to the children through multiple generations. Children growing up witnessing violence often internalize the pattern followed by their parents as a model in their own life. They consider aggression and violence as the normal and right way

to interact with individuals, especially in times of conflict (Lennon et al., 2021). Children learn that violence is permissible in an intimate relationship to sustain ‘goodness’ if other methods fail to achieve the goal (Kalmuss, 1984). They often don’t question the beliefs and cultural norms that are taught to them. In adulthood, they turn to violence as they don’t know any alternate method. Sometimes the abused and abuser know that they are abusing or being abused. But that doesn’t stop them from the violent interaction as they haven’t witnessed or learned a positive way of interacting during a conflict (Wilson, 2016).

Another pattern of seeking partners with higher probabilities of perpetration or victimization (Wirtz et al., 2014) is also observed among adults who witnessed violence in their childhood. Since women often identify themselves with the role of ‘victim’ and men with the ‘aggressor’ (Lennon et al., 2021), they mostly end up with partners that have the potential to be either the victim or the aggressor. Both adults expect a partner who accepts and normalizes the violence. This enables them to enact the model they have internalized.

Adults who grew up in violent atmospheres mostly end up together as partners and they inculcate violence in their family similar to their parents. The children of these adults who will also grow up in a violent atmosphere like their parents possess a higher risk of normalizing and internalizing violence. The violence is similarly transmitted through multiple generations. This transmission often looks like a cycle of violence (Simons & Johnson, 1998). Parents who learned violence as a model for interaction would also use the same violence towards their children (Wilson, 2016) as they are unaware of any positive parenting. Although being abused in childhood alone will not contribute to the violence transmission, the existence of child abuse and witnessing domestic violence increases the risk of transmission (Franklin & Kercher, 2012). This also contributes to poor parenting (Casanueva et al., 2008; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001), strained parent-child relationship and parents being not able to fulfil the emotional and developmental needs of their children. All these impacts eventually transform into trauma and are transmitted as violence.

As mentioned before, the normalization of domestic violence in society often aids in forming an attitude that accepts domestic violence. Even if children witness violence among parents while growing up, unless it is normalized in society, children have less probability of modelling this behaviour. If society is condemning domestic violence and penalize the perpetrator, the tendency of developing a favourable attitude towards domestic violence (Eriksson & Mazerolle, 2015; Fulu et al., 2013; Kim, 2012) would be

less and therefore reduce the risk of modelling and transmission of violence. Even though witnessing domestic violence increases the probability of perpetration and transmission of violence, it is not a guarantor of violence (Pollak, 2004). The transmission of violence can be prevented in various ways. It can be hindered by penalizing violence in intimate relationships, prohibiting the normalization and rewarding the tolerance of domestic violence, and building a society that acknowledges the consequences of domestic violence. Intervention programs provide a holistic approach to all these solutions.

The Necessity of Intervention in Domestic Violence

Intervention programs are vital to prevent the normalization of domestic violence as well as for the intergenerational transmission of violence. Interventions usually happen formally and informally. In informal interventions, people who model violence in their relationships meet people who incorporate positive way conflict resolution and interaction or an incident occurred in their life that forced them to question their attitude and beliefs towards normalized violence (Wilson & Webber, 2014, as cited in Wilson, 2016). But this is not always possible and happening as it is not easy to change a person's attitude through an incident and also people with different models of interaction and violence don't usually come together. In this scenario, formal intervention is required and done through various programs created according to the problems in a structured manner and planning.

According to Fulu et al. (2017), interventions should encourage positive parenting, address the inequality in the relationship, transform the power dynamics among men, women, and children, and come to grips with the normalization of violence. Pollak (2004) suggests policy analysis is essential. Through policy analysis and amendment, it is possible to address issues such as victim blaming, gender inequality, and violence normalizing culture. It can also work as a facilitator for creating interventional programs in association with the social welfare department and also to allocate more funds for the same.

Conventionally the interventions happen medically when there is physical abuse and it is more obvious than other forms of abuse. It is necessary to have interventional programs focusing on psychological abuse (Rada, 2014), especially for children. In some studies, (Rada, 2014; Weingarten, 2004), the significance of clinical interventions in preventing the intergenerational transmission of violence is highlighted. Along with that, the relevance of professionals being aware of the violence witnessed by the children and the potential of intergenerational transmission of violence needs to be considered while dealing with children.

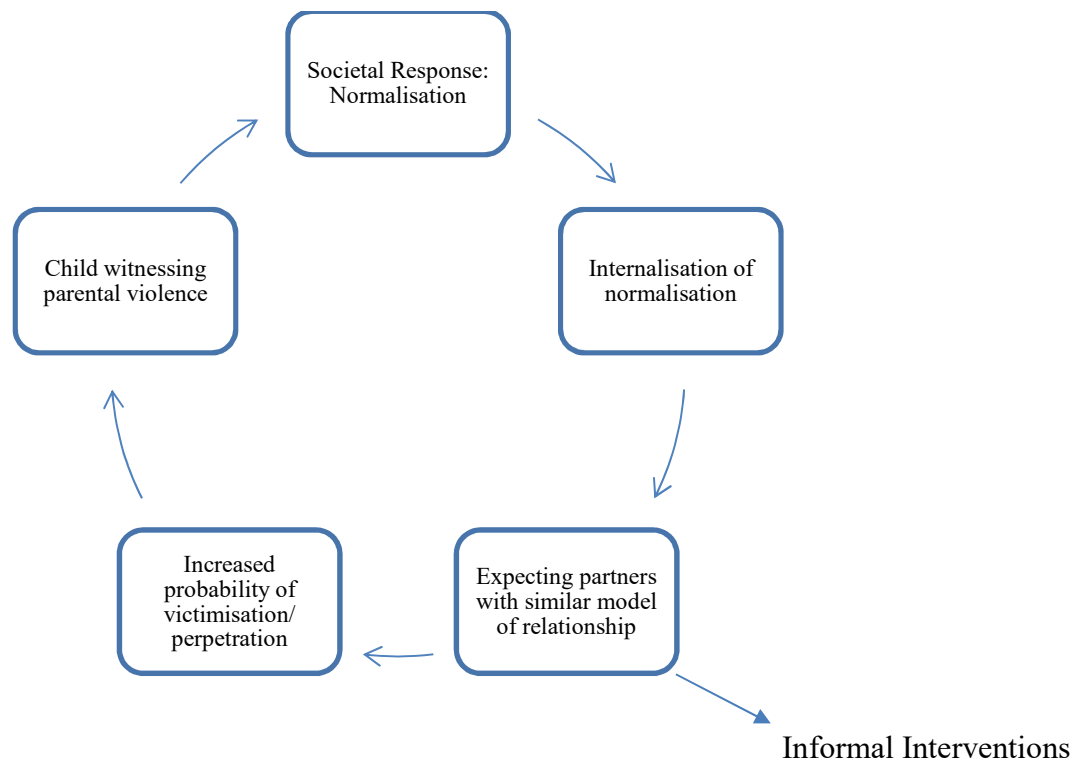


Figure 1: Intergenerational Transmission of Violence Cycle (adapted from Wilson (2016))

Factors that informally intervene in the cycle of violence exist only in a certain stage of the cycle (Figure 1) and it is not present always in every cycle. The effectiveness of such intervention is also questionable. Whereas well-curated intervention programs are comparatively more efficient in dealing with the cycle of violence. Targeted interventions on children (Widom & Wilson, 2015) focusing on various stages in the cycle can work as a preventive measure. Before the child is born, families experiencing violence can be focused and programs to improve partner relationships and positive parenting skills can be imparted to them. Children already living in violent atmospheres can be identified and included in intervention programs so they don't normalize violence. They can also be taught with alternate ways of interaction other than that of violence. Young adults should be made aware of what constitutes domestic violence and through various programs, knowledge should be given to them on legal rights and victim support systems and that it is not acceptable to use violence in a relationship. This might help them in identifying the pattern and breaking it. Therefore, we cannot ignore or overlook the role of intervention in curbing the intergenerational transmission of violence.

Implications

Domestic violence exists globally and it is a serious menace to society. It is often accepted and normalized on an individual level as well as in the form of social norms. It is not just men but both men and women are taught the same and are conditioned through incentivizing the normalization of domestic violence. The same people teach the same concept to their children and/or the children socialize the normalization while growing up in such a society. People who are not adhering to this are punished through shaming, isolating, and blaming them. The gender norms existing in society also play a vital role in creating such an attitude towards domestic violence. It is also important to acknowledge the contribution of the criminal justice system to it. All of them act as a barrier that prevents them from seeking help and also forces the women to stay in abusive relationships. Children growing up in such households model violence as the normal way of interaction and they further pass on this same model to the next generation and create intergenerational transmission of violence. Intervention is one of the most effective ways to break this cycle. A need-based intervention program along with awareness campaigns to the public and sensitizing the criminal justice system can improve their attitude towards domestic violence and make them understand the consequences of it.

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