

University Students' Perceptions of the Effects of Domestic Violence on the Mental Health of Children: Evidence from Lahore, Pakistan

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Abstract

Children who experience domestic violence may suffer from depression, anxiety, emotional distress, behavioral and social adjustment problems, and other negative effects. The present study was conducted to explore the University students' perception of these mental health effects in Lahore, Pakistan. A quantitative survey was carried out on 384 students chosen from three universities. The results indicated that the majority of the respondents were very strongly in agreement that children's emotional health, psychological development and their sense of safety are negatively impacted by domestic violence. There was also a strong correlation between domestic violence and children's mental disorders as found through statistical analysis. The findings show that educated young adults know that domestic violence is a major problem for children's mental health. The study highlights the importance of public awareness, child protection measures, and trauma-informed counseling services. It also recommends that all families, education providers and policy-makers should collaborate to help prevent violence and to jointly provide prevention, intervention and rehabilitation services across communities for children who have been abused and/or impacted by domestic violence.

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1. Introduction

Domestic violence has become one of the most significant social, criminological and public health issues faced by people everywhere. Domestic violence is largely a problem between partners or family members, but the effects run much deeper than the immediate victims and have a significant impact on children who see violence in their homes. It is now well established that childhood exposure to domestic violence is an important adverse childhood experience (ACE) that has a negative impact on children's emotional, cognitive, behavioral and psychological development. Children who grow up in violent homes are often afraid, feeling insecure, anxious, depressed and dysfunctional in their interpersonal relationships and these negative feelings can last through adolescence and into adulthood (Doroudchi et al., 2023).

It is expected that the family will give children protection, emotional security, opportunities to develop healthily. But, if violence is a regular occurrence in the home, it can change from a secure environment into one of fear and uncertainty. Children exposed to repeated verbal, emotional, psychological or physical violence

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may have difficulties with emotional regulation, trust, and positive social relationships. These experiences have the potential to affect academic performance, lower self-esteem, negatively impact decision making and increase the risk of mental health issues later in life (Spencer et al., 2023).

International studies show that domestic violence is one of the most common types of childhood trauma experienced by millions of children annually. The emotional impact of exposure to violence can be just as devastating as physical abuse, though it may not be apparent. Ongoing domestic violence can cause emotional distress that can contribute to chronic stress, depression, behavioral issues, sleeping disorders and emotional control. Domestic violence is now seen as a multi-disciplinary problem that needs multi-disciplinary responses from Healthcare workers, Educators, Psychologists, Criminologists, Social workers and Policymakers (Capper et al., 2022).

Domestic violence is a serious issue in developing nations, particularly in Pakistan, where cultural attitudes, gender disparities, the economic burden, social taboos, and the lack of reporting make it difficult to address. While legislative changes and awareness campaigns have helped to raise awareness about domestic violence, there are still many cases of domestic violence that go unreported within the family. Children who grow up in these surroundings often suffer from secondary victimization as a result of being continually exposed to conflicts and abuse. Negative aspects of these experiences can have a detrimental impact on their emotional development, their educational performance, and their relationships with others into adulthood (Shaikh, 2024).

University students are a vital part of society as they are the future educators, psychologists, criminologists, lawyers, health workers and policy makers. They can have a significant impact on future public policy and intervention and prevention programmes, because of their understanding of domestic violence and its consequences. Therefore, assessing students' perceptions of children's mental health is important for understanding the extent of awareness of the educated young adults and the areas that need additional educational intervention.

Evidence from past research has shown that childhood victims of domestic violence have negative psychological consequences. (Doroudchi et al. 2023) found that children who are victims of domestic violence are at a much greater risk of developing anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation and behavioral disorders than children who are not victims of domestic violence. Likewise, Spencer et al. (2023) highlighted that exposure to domestic violence is a significant public health problem due to its broad lifelong psychological impact. In the context of Pakistan, (Seher and Manzoor, 2024) found that exposure to abuse and neglect has a negative impact on the emotional and psychological health of youth, whereas (Shaikh, 2024) indicated that domestic violence is a prevalent issue in Pakistan and has detrimental effects on its members.

Though not much empirical research has been done in Pakistan, this study investigated the perception of the impact of domestic violence on children's mental health in Lahore among university students. It is centered on three universities and will not fill the literature gap until now in terms of providing evidence to support the effective and appropriate support of vulnerable children and trauma-informed interventions by educators, policy makers and child protection practitioners.

Research Objective

To determine university students' perception of the impact of domestic violence on children's mental health.

Research Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis (H₀): The relationship between the university students' perception of domestic violence and the mental health of children is significant at 0.05 level.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁): University students have a statistically significant association between their perceptions of domestic violence and the mental health of children.

2. Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on the concept of Social Learning Theory (SLL) proposed by Bandura (1977), stating that people learn behaviors, attitudes, and emotions from other people in their environment. This theory suggests that children are exposed to violence in the home over and over and learn from the adults and adopt aggression as a way of dealing with conflict. In addition to the effects of behavioral imitation, prolonged exposure to violence also has a negative impact on children's emotional and psychological development, making them susceptible to fear, anxiety, depression, aggression and low self-esteem. Hence, the theory of Social Learning is considered as the suitable theory in understanding the relationship between domestic violence and children's mental health.

The study is also grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Systems Theory that calls attention to factors that affect children's development as they occur in several environmental systems. The family is the child's main developmental environment (microsystem) and violence in this environment hampers healthy emotional development and psychological adaption. These disruptions can have additional impacts on child's learning outcomes, relationships with peers, social interaction, and relationships with others.

These theories together help to account for the impact of domestic violence on children's psychological health and give much justification to the conceptual basis of the current study.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study shows how the independent and dependent variables are related. Domestic violence is the independent variable while the

dependent variable is mental state of children. The study assumes that exposure to domestic violence has a negative psychological impact on children, including an increased risk for depression, emotional instability, anxiety, fear, and psychological distress. A structured questionnaire was used to assess students' perception about this relationship and to evaluate the extent of awareness about the psychological impacts of domestic violence among the students of the university.

4. Research Methodology

Research Design

The current study used a quantitative research design as it allows respondents' opinions to be measured objectively and relationships examined with statistics. When standardized questionnaires are used to examine perceptions, attitudes and behavioral relationships, quantitative methods are especially appropriate.

Study Area

The study was carried out on three higher education institutes located in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan namely Minhaj University Lahore, University of Lahore, and Lahore Garrison University. The choice of these universities was not random, but was based on their offering a range of academic disciplines and access for students with a variety of educational backgrounds.

Target Population

The population of the study was undergraduate and post graduate students in the selected Universities. Future professionals, in the form of University students, were identified as appropriate respondents as they are members of a generation that will have a future impact on practices in education, law, health, psychology and criminality, relating to domestic violence and child protection.

Sample Size

The population sampled was 384 which was determined by Yamane (1967) formula. The sample size was deemed to be sufficient for attaining reliable quantitative results and representativeness of the selected universities.

Sampling Technique

Multistage sampling method was used in data collection. The universities were selected purposively and then respondents were selected using appropriate sampling procedures to get different academic departments and levels of education. This method resulted in greater participant diversity and increased representativeness of the sample.

Research Instrument

A structured self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data, which was designed after extensive literature review on the intersection of domestic violence and children's mental health. This questionnaire had two main sections. The first section gathered demographic data, and the second section had statements

reflecting the respondents' perceptions of the psychological impact of domestic violence on children. A 5-point Likert scale was used to record the responses ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

Data Collection Procedure

Appropriate university authorities were approached prior to the beginning of data collection to obtain permission for the study. The purpose of the research was explained to the respondents and that they would be free to participate at their own will. The questionnaires were personally handed out and filled out anonymously. Completed questionnaires were retrieved at the same time they were completed to ensure high return, and to reduce missing data.

Data Analysis

The questionnaires collected were screened, coded and analyzed statistically using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Data were presented in descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage to describe the opinions of the respondents about domestic violence and children's mental health. The Pearson chi-square test was used to analyze the relationship between the study variables. The 0.05 probability level was used to determine statistical significance.

Ethical Considerations

All of the ethical procedures were followed during the study. There was no pressure for participants to take part, and informed consent was sought prior to the administration of the questionnaires. Safety to participants was ensured regarding their anonymity, and that of the provided data, which is only used for academic purposes. The participants were also advised that they may opt out of the study at any time without any repercussions. Participants' rights were respected and the integrity and credibility of the research were maintained by these ethical measures.

5. Results

The results of this article are based on the perception of university students about the impact of domestic violence on the mental health of children. The topics related to the first research question, specifically, were selected from the overall data, as 4 questionnaire items directly relate to that research question. Data is analyzed descriptively using frequency, percentage, median, mode and standard deviation, and inferential analysis by Pearson Chi-square Test.

Table 1

Attitude of the respondents towards the negative impact of domestic violence on children's emotional health

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Disagree	34	8.9

Neutral	48	12.5
Agree	302	78.6
Total	384	100.0

Interpretation

This table shows that most respondents recognized the negative impacts of domestic violence on children's emotions. Almost four-fifths (78.6%) believed that children who are exposed to domestic violence have emotional difficulties, while a small percentage disagreed (8.9%). 12.5% of the rest of the respondents were neutral. From the results, it can be concluded that children's emotional stability and psychological growth are influenced by domestic violence which is generally recognized by university students.

Table 2

The attitude of the respondents towards the effect of domestic violence on children's depression

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Disagree	27	7.0
Neutral	58	15.1
Agree	299	77.9
Total	384	100.0

Interpretation

As reflected in Table 2, the majority of the respondents (77.9%) agreed that domestic violence is a cause of depression in children. 15.1% were neutral and 7.0% disagreed. These results suggest that respondents believe that domestic violence is a major psychological stress, and can cause depressive symptoms in children. The findings also indicate that university students realize that children who have been exposed to violence in their homes repeatedly are exposed to a long-lasting emotional toll.

Table 3

Attitudes about psychological problems in children exposed to domestic violence (DV)

Response	Frequency	Percentage
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Disagree	22	5.7
Neutral	55	14.3
Agree	307	80.0
Total	384	100.0

Interpretation

Table 3 shows that 80.0% of the respondents thought that children who are exposed to domestic violence are psychologically distressed. Only 5.7% disagreed, 14.3% were neutral. The high degree of consensus reveals that there is a clear understanding among respondents of the importance of psychological trauma as a significant impact of home violence. Children exposed to repeated family conflict could develop a long-standing fear, instability, stress and a sense of helplessness which would ultimately impact their psychological health and well-being.

Table 4

There is mixed opinion about whether children are more anxious when their parents are abusive.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Disagree	27	7.0
Neutral	63	16.4
Agree	294	77.6
Total	384	100.0

Interpretation

From the results in Table 4, it can be seen that 76.6% of the respondents think that domestic violence is associated with anxiety in children. About 16.4% agreed while 7.0% disagreed. The results are consistent with what is already known about the perception of university students about anxiety as one of the most frequent psychological consequences of the exposure to domestic violence. An ongoing sense of fear, uncertainty and emotional insecurity that develops as a result of family violence can have a profound impact on children's anxiety levels and general psychological resilience.

6. Hypothesis Testing

In terms of mental health of children, Pearson Chi-square test was applied using SPSS to test whether there was a significant association between the university students' perception of the domestic violence issue and mental health of children.

Research Hypotheses

H₁: University students' perception of domestic violence and children's mental health are not statistically significantly associated.

H₁: University students perception of domestic violence is statistically significantly associated with children mental health.

Table 5

Test	Value	Df	Sig.(2sid ed)
Pearson Chi- Square Test	8.157	1	0.004

Interpretation

The results of the Pearson Chi-square analysis yielded a chi-square value of 0.004 which is below the accepted chi-square significance level of 0.05. We can then reject the null hypothesis (H₀) and accept the alternative hypothesis (H₁). The results are statistically significant and support a relationship between a university student's perception of domestic violence and children's mental health. This finding suggests that the respondents strongly felt that domestic violence has significant psychological effects on children, and thus provided support to the first research aim.

7. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the perception of the university students about the impacts of domestic violence on the mental health of children. The descriptive findings consistently showed that most respondents perceived that the negative effects of domestic violence had a negative impact on children's emotional health, an increase in depression, increased anxiety and psychological distress. The chi-square analysis also corroborated that there is a statistically significant relationship between mental health and domestic violence among children, supporting the alternative hypothesis.

The findings of this study indicate that university students have a good awareness of the psychological effects of family violence. This is especially relevant as the university students are future professionals who could be involved in child protection, counseling, education, psychology, criminality and the health and law sectors. Their knowledge of childhood trauma may affect future policies and interventions for the protection of vulnerable children.

The results agree with (Doroudchi et al. 2023) who found that children of domestic violence often suffer from anxiety and depression and have emotional and behavioral issues. They highlighted the importance of systematic exposure to

violence leading to long-term psychological issues, which can persist into adolescence and adulthood. The findings of the present study confirmed the above as the majority of respondents were aware of the emotional and psychological damage suffered by children in violent homes.

Likewise, (Spencer et al. 2023) believed that domestic violence should be seen as a significant public health issue, due to its impact on children's mental and emotional health. The present results support this view, as the overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they felt that exposure to violence had a strong impact on children's mental health even if they were not directly exposed to physical violence.

The results also support (Seher and Manzoor 2024) that abuse and neglect are harmful for the emotional and psychological health of youth in Pakistan. Similarly, (Shaikh 2024) noted that domestic violence is still a common problem in Pakistani society, and it is negatively impacting the mental well-being of family members, especially women and children. The consistency of the present findings with the past national research enhances the validity of the present investigation, and suggests that educated youth are becoming more aware of the psychological impact of domestic violence.

The findings can be explained with the Social Learning Theory which states that children learn behaviors and emotional responses from the significant people in their environment. Parental aggression can be a normalization of violence, and can also lead to fear, anxiety, and insecurity. Likewise, Bronfenbrenner's theory of Bio-Ecological Systems suggests that violence in the family environment can lead to impaired psychological development since the family is the child's first socializing environment. The results of the present study support both views and give evidence of the respondents' awareness of the negative effect of domestic violence on children's psychological health.

8. Conclusion

Domestic violence is a significant social and public health issue, impacting not only those directly affected by it, but also children who are witnesses to domestic violence. The present study revealed that university students have a high sense of its negative psychological consequences including anxiety, depression, emotional instability, trauma, and distress. Results of the descriptive analysis revealed a high level of agreement for all the variables and the Chi-square analysis revealed a significant association between domestic violence and children's mental health. These findings are in line with the results of previous studies and support Social Learning Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Systems Theory, which both highlight the role of violent family environments in the emotional development and behavior of children. The results of the study indicate in general, that public awareness, family support, counseling and early psychological intervention are needed to address domestic violence. Protecting children from exposure to violence is essential for promoting their emotional security, healthy

development, and long-term well-being. This can be a way to minimize trauma and build resilience in vulnerable families now.

9. Practical Implications

The results of this study have a number of practical implications for educational institutions, educational policy makers, mental health professionals, and child protection agencies.

Do incorporate child psychology, domestic violence, trauma informed care and child protection issues into appropriate academic programs at the university or school level. These learning programs can enhance the knowledge of students about childhood trauma and equip future practitioners with the skills to respond appropriately to family violence cases. Schools ought to arrange awareness seminars, workshops and community outreach programmes in education encouraging healthy family relationships and enhancing awareness of the psychological impacts suffered by children of violent homes. There is a need for mental health workers to further boost counseling services for children who have been exposed to domestic violence and to create intervention programmes that will help children to recover from their emotions and psychological traumas.

Policies and measures respectively to prevent domestic violence, protect vulnerable children and increase access to psychological support services should be designed in a manner based on evidence, involving government institutions and non-governmental organizations.

10. Recommendations

The recommendations that can be made based on the results of this study are:

- Awareness programmes involving Universities on domestic violence and mental health of children should be introduced.
- Government authorities need to improve implementation of the laws and policies addressing domestic violence and child protection.
- There is a need to establish Counseling Centers in Schools/ Universities with qualified Psychologists to help individuals affected by domestic violence.
- Parents need to be educated about positive parenting styles and conflict resolution using non-violence.
- Public awareness campaigns by community organizations should be carried out to raise awareness of the psychological impact of domestic violence on children.
- There should be an increase in the collaboration between educational institutions, healthcare providers, psychologists and social welfare departments to help early identify and intervene in domestic violence situations at the earliest opportunity.

11. The limitations of the study

The results of the present study contribute to the knowledge, but some limitations have to be taken into account. The study was conducted with students of only three universities at Lahore, restricting the generalizability of the study results to other parts of Pakistan. A cross sectional quantitative design was used in this study in

which perceptions were assessed at a specific point, and causality relationships were not made. Moreover, results are based on people's perceptions and not on children's actual psychological assessments of whether they have been subjected to domestic violence.

12. Future Research

The researchers are invited to replicate the study with bigger and varied samples from universities from various provinces of Pakistan. A comparative study between teachers, parents, psychologists, social workers and health professionals may offer a wider-ranging picture of the perceptions of the public on domestic violence and children's mental health. The researchers can also use mixed method or longitudinal research design to study the psychological impacts of domestic violence on the children in the long term and the effectiveness of intervention programs.

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Conflict of Interest

The author states there is no conflict of interest with the publication of this research.

Ethical Approval

Before the data were collected, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant departmental authorities. It was conducted voluntarily, informed consent was obtained from all respondents and confidentiality of data collected was carefully respected throughout the study.

Data Availability Statement

All data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon request. The data cannot be made publicly available as they are only collected for academic research.

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