

Children and Domestic Violence: The Perspective of Abused Women in Malaysia

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Abstract

Domestic violence has been regarded as a significant social and public health problem in many countries. Notably, the impact of such victimization experiences may have adverse consequences not only for the victims, but their children, families, friends as well as the whole of society. The purpose of this study is to explore the abused women's experiences regarding how domestic violence affects the well-being of their children. The approach to empirical research adopted for this study is one of a qualitative, semi-structured interview methodology. The primary source was drawn from face to face interview with 25 women who identify themselves as experiencing domestic violence at some point in their marital relationships. All of the participants were aged between 19 and 65 years.

Via the thematic analysis, five important themes were revealed to be the impact of domestic violence on children, as described by the participants. The themes include negative feelings towards abusive father, dangerous complication during pregnancy (to unborn child), neglected children, protective behaviours as well as juvenile delinquency. Fragments of excerpts and quotations acquired from the participants were used to represent the research findings as the themes emerged. In brief, the results conclude that domestic violence not only affects the women who are abused, but also imposes negative effects on the growing children.

Keywords: Domestic violence, spousal abuse, family violence, child abuse

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Introduction

Domestic violence is often described as a family-centred problem and generally understood as patterns of abusive and coercive behaviour which may cause physical injuries, psychological and emotional disturbances, sexual intimidation as well as financial oppression of the victim. In fact, it is portrayed as the act of maltreatment of one's partner by the other in the context of an intimate relationship. A similar definition, described by Healey, Smith and O'Sullivan (1998), is that acts of violence and abusive behaviours are used by adults to control and dominate their intimate partners, and is thus classified as domestic violence.

There are many definitions for domestic violence, which may differ from one another depending upon the perspective of the definer(s). Straus and Gelles (1990) argued that proper definitions of domestic violence are essential, since without accurate description the problems related to the occurrence of violent domestic incidents seem to get more severe. The World Health Organizations (WHO) defines violence in the following way:

“Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation” (WHO, 2009).

The Women's Aid Organisation of Malaysia (WAO) states: “Domestic violence is an abuse of power. It is when one partner, usually a boyfriend or husband, attempts to control and dominate the other, usually a girlfriend or wife through violence, threat of violence, or by controlling the couple's finances and social life” (WAO, 2009). Meanwhile, the All Women's Action Society Malaysia (AWAM) defines it as: “The incident when a partner, former partner or family member attempts to control and dominate a person through violence, the threat of violence or other means of control such as deprivation” (AWAM, 2009).

In contrast, both of the above definitions by WAO (Malaysia) and AWAM considered the violence acts which occurs within non-marital couples, although in Malaysia, domestic violence is only regarded as the violence occurring among intimate partners who are either spouses or ex-spouse of a legal relationship as stated in the Domestic Violence Act 521 (1994) [DVA]. The definition of domestic violence in the Act means the commission of any of the following acts (Domestic Violence Act 521, 1994: 6):

- a) willfully or knowingly placing, or attempting to place, the victim in fear of physical injury;
- b) causing physical injury to the victim by such act which is known or, ought to have been known would result in physical injury;
- c) compelling the victim by force or threat to engage in any conduct or act, sexual or otherwise, from which the victim has a right to abstain;
- d) confining or detaining the victim against the victim's will; or
- e) causing mischief or destruction or damage to property with intent to cause, or knowing that it is likely to cause distress or annoyance to the victim, by a person against
 - i. his or her spouse;
 - ii. his or her former spouse;

- iii. a child
- iv. an incapacitated adult; or
- v. any other member of the family

Section 2 under Laws of Malaysia: Domestic Violence Act 1994, Act (521), (1996) refers to the term *spouse* as a person who has gone through a form of ceremony which is recognized as a marriage ceremony according to the religion or custom of the parties concerned, notwithstanding that such a ceremony is not registered.

Section 1 under Laws of Malaysia: Domestic Violence Act 1994, Act (521), (1996) defines *child* as a person below the age of eighteen years who is living as a member of the offender's family or of the family of the offender's spouse or former spouse, as the case may be.

Incapacitated adult means a person who is wholly or partially incapacitated or infirm, by reason of physical or mental disability or ill-health or old age, who is living as a member of the offender's family. [Section 2, Laws of Malaysia: Domestic Violence Act 1994, Act (521)], (1996).

At present, the Domestic Violence Act 521 (1994) is officially applicable to all Malaysians regardless of their religion. However, in the matter of divorce petition related to partner violence, Muslims are bound to file the case via the Islamic Religious Affairs Department (for *Sharia* Law) whereas non-Muslims need to seek advice from the National Registration Department (for Family Law).

Review of the Literature

A number of studies have found that children who are involved in abusive relationships may also directly be abused (Holt, Buckley & Whelan, 2008; Jarvis, Gordon & Novaco, 2005) and exhibit behavioural problems in their lives, such as in the social and emotional aspects of their functioning (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001). According to the National Report of Health and Violence (Malaysia) 2006, children who are exposed to an abusive relationship are more likely to be aggressive and show higher risks of psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, as well as low self-esteem.

Cummings, Pepler and Moore (1999) examined the patterns of family aggression and behaviour problems in children exposed to domestic violence. Primarily, the study was focusing on gender differences in children who were exposed to family violence. The study involved 242 mothers and 378 children recruited from shelters for battered women from a few cities in Canada. Participants were compared between a violent family and a non-violent family. For the latter group, there were three sub-categories involved, namely a homeless group, a single-mother group and a two-parent group. As hypothesized, the study confirmed that children from the shelter category were rated as having higher levels of behaviour problems than other comparison groups. It was clear from the findings that girls from a violent family had shown greater maladjustment problems and required more clinical interventions rather than the boys from the same group. This result was rated by the mothers within the shelter families in which parenting practices may also be affected due to the battering situation.

In line with the above review, previous studies have reported that families with domestic violence are prone to have problems in parenting (Holden, 2003; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001). Evidently, the work of Flach, Leese, Heron, Evans, Feder, Sharp and Howard (2011) concludes that women who had violence experiences during pregnancy were more likely to have children with behavioural issues. Their subjects were 13,617 women in the United Kingdom. Taken together, this study placed significance on the effect of domestic violence on child behaviour. What is surprising is that the study found that behavioural problems among children can be evident as young as 42 months old of age.

Closely linked to this issue, it is believed that parent-child bonding may be impaired owing to the frequent arguments, disputes as well as conflicts occurring within the family. Abused mothers often find it difficult and challenging to provide supports and a sense of security to their children in the event of violence. Jarvis, Gordon and Novaco (2005) point out that the relationship between the mother and their children was significantly associated with maternal depression. Children, on the other hand, may intervene and take responsibility to protect their victimized parent (Jones, 2008). In the article titled 'Parenting in battered women: The effects of domestic violence on women and their children', Levendosky and Graham-Bermann conclude:

“Perhaps even if the mother is able to maintain adequate parenting, the changes in her affect and mood could have deleterious effects on her children’s emotional well-being. For example, the child may worry more about the mother.” (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001: 184)

Methods

The present study is exploratory and descriptive in nature. In Malaysia, many issues regarding domestic violence are still under-researched; including the experiences of abused women. It was decided that the best method to adopt for this investigation was to employ qualitative methodology. This method was used in order to obtain new insights into Malaysian women’s experiences of living in abusive relationships. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), by using qualitative research as an approach a better understanding can be acquired about the phenomenon studied.

Owing to the sensitivity of the issue, the context of the research, as well as a number of practical constraints that lay in the study, non-probability sampling method with a purposive sample type has been employed. Purposive sampling was chosen as the sampling framework in the study because this strategy is often used on interviews with specific groups of people in applied social research. In addition, purposive sampling provides the researcher with more opportunity to fully understand the participants (Polit & Beck, 2004).

Real names or other identities were not used in any documentation in order to maintain confidentiality. In the result’s section, identification of the participants in the interview transcripts would occur by use of pseudonyms. Data analysis was performed by software called NVIVO version 8.0. Furthermore, the researcher also compared volumes of ‘observational data’ sourced from the interview notes with the actual interview transcriptions during the coding process. Observational data includes participants’ non-verbal signs, researcher’s reflections as well as observations at the time of the interviews. This type of information is useful to generate in-depth descriptions and thorough analysis of the research data.

Research Findings

The experience of domestic violence is believed to negatively affect the children. As a matter of fact, children involved in the violent relationships may also be directly and indirectly abused. Therefore, incidents of child abuse among families with domestic violence are a common subject and many behavioural problems have been evident among the children who are exposed to the abusive relationship. The women in the study too had explained the reactions of their children towards the abusive father. The women said:

“I pity my children. They lack of their father’s love. They have been staying with someone outside the family. Of course things are not the same. My eldest child is grown up but simply refuses his father, whereas the second child never knew the father”. (Aton)

“My children neither bothered to ask about their father nor grumbled about wanting to see him. They don’t have that feeling of love towards their father although I’ve never talked bad about him. Anyway, they are all grown up now and they know how to judge him for themselves”. (Raihana)

“My children still remember until today of how my husband used to beat me. He told me not to retaliate or else I’ll get a swollen face and bleeding lips. It makes no difference to my children whether he is around or not”. (Junaidah)

“Both of my daughters hated their father because of the abuse. They refuse to go to their father’s house although he came to fetch them. I guess that’s the effect”. (Patimah)

The bonding between the father and the children should have been established at the point of the pregnancy itself. However, in most domestic violence relationship, this would not be the case. In fact, for some women the violence escalates over the period of the pregnancy trimesters. Arni and Rita argue that the husbands were insensitive towards the hormonal changes and seemed like not bother at all about their current situation. The beatings continue as they said below:

“Two months after my pregnancy was confirmed, I suffered nausea and vomiting quite badly. He didn’t try to understand my condition and still wanted me to do normal house chores and to please him as usual. He easily got irritated when I was pregnant. He would just beat me for even small mistakes”. (Arni)

“When I was pregnant with my second child, he often came back home with a bad temper. Our financial status was very critical at that time. We had to think about the child we already had and the unborn child, at that time. He always beats me. There was one time when we had a fight and he choked me until I couldn’t breathe. I was very scared at that time if anything should happen to my unborn child”. (Rita)

As for Nor, her husband's drug habit had made her expecting period awful:

"He was addicted back to drugs. We were penniless. He had no job. I think that was the main reason. He always come back home 'high' and started to talk nonsense and behave aggressively. He still beat me up although I was 8 months pregnant. I felt horrible during my pregnancy period". (Nor)

Ikin recalled her tragic story:

"I had two miscarriages in my early years of marriage because of the beatings from my husband. My family-in-law knew what happened but they tried to pacify me. They said it's probably not our turn yet to have a child. During my third pregnancy, I was more careful and spent most of my time with my mother-in-law. Even though, the same thing happened again. As a result, my child was born premature but I am happy the child is safe". (Ikin)

As the women struggle to deal with the situation at home, the children on the other hand may worry and feel responsible to protect their mother. Yusnah and Tina revealed:

"My children remember about the abuse until today. My eldest child who was eight years old at that time told me not to go against my husband or else my face will get swollen again. He said that my husband will beat me even harder if I retaliate. He was afraid that I might die. My face was always swollen at that time because of the beatings". (Yusnah)

"Even though my child is still small, he understands what's happening around him. There was one time when my husband was beating me, my child bit his leg and told him to let go of me. I was so touched. Thereafter, whenever my husband wanted to let go of his anger, he would break all the things in the house. He seldom beats me anymore nowadays". (Tina)

In fact, parenting issues are likely to take place in families with domestic violence. The quality time that the family is supposed to spend is often limited by disputes, arguments as well as quarrels. Joyah regretted her negligence:

"Nowadays, I give priority to my children because I had often neglected them due to my marital problems. If I had not neglected them in the past, they too can become successful like others. I regretted what happened". (Joyah)

As well, Rosy felt the same way:

"I have not found peace inside me due to many fights I had with my husband. I admit that I have neglected my children's education. I cannot control my daughter's behaviour anymore. She is wild and has ill feelings towards men. My children follow their own path". (Rosy)

Yuna, on the other hand felt some kind of relief as she has no children with the abusive husband. She uttered:

"When I was in Penang, I took him to see a psychiatrist. I think that's the effect of the accident. I try my best to look after him. He was on epilepsy medication. Unfortunately, he didn't want to continue to take his medicine. Then he started to lose control of himself. He beats me up every day. Luckily I had no children with him. I can't imagine having kids in this sort of unhealthy relationship". (Yuna)

Domestic violence may cause the retaliation by the children. Many abused women in the study perceived there is a strong linkage between the children and negative behaviours such as physical aggression, delinquency and verbal abuse. Furthermore, the children also reported being involved in school truancy and cigarette smoking at a very young age. The following quotations are used as evidence to describe the circumstances:

“Angah is my second child. He watches his father doing the beatings. He follows suit and does it to his youngest sibling, my fourth child. He kicks and beats his siblings. He is just like his father. I always scold him because I don’t want him to follow his father’s footsteps. He is a hot-tempered man”. (Siti)

“When we opted for the divorce, we had to go to court several times. I didn’t know that my child was often absent from school. There was once when she was absent for almost two weeks... and the teacher called home. I was so angry when I found out the truth. She said that she was so tensed up and that was why she didn’t go to school”. (Raihana)

“A teacher came and complained to me that my child likes to talk rudely to his friends. That’s the problem, because his father does the same at home when we get into a fight. All sorts of bad words will come out of his mouth. I often advise my children to mind their words when talking. Not to start cursing their siblings. It’s a sinful thing. I don’t know what happens when I’m not watching”. (Ain)

“My eldest and my fifth child are very stubborn. I don’t have any problem with the rest because they listen to what I say. My eldest child likes to get into a fight in school. When his teacher reported this to us, my husband got angry at me. The same goes with my fifth child. He was caught smoking in the school’s toilet. At that time he was only in Form one (13 years old). Now, he is in Tunas Bakti School (juvenile rehabilitation centre). I hope he changes when he is released later on”. (Halimah)

Discussions and Conclusion

In relation to the outcomes of domestic violence on children, it was believed that the abusers used violence to control their female partners at every point in their marital relationships. There were no exceptions for the women, not even with the presence of the children in the households. Unfortunately, the children may also be at risk of harm since in the mother’s womb. In this study, the abused women felt themselves to be powerless in protecting their unborn child.

Subsequently, the women’s sense of powerlessness continually hampers the attempts to safeguard the children from the abuser. As the children grow up with the exposure to violence at home, many of those children have reflected their dissatisfaction, retaliation as well as self-rebelliousness in terms of emotional and behavioural difficulties. Therefore, young children living with domestic violence should benefit from the professionals and informal supports in the community so as to help families and children deal with these negative situations. In this particular study, several participants highlighted the negative effects of domestic violence on their children, predominantly the young children. The mothers claimed to suffer a sense of

powerlessness and feelings of being overwhelmed which had contributed to their inability to respond appropriately to their children's needs.

Theme 1: Negative feelings towards abusive father

The results of this study indicate that domestic violence affects paternal-child bonding. During the interviews, a number of negative reactions regarding the child-father relationships were described. Firstly, the children did not bother to ask about their father's whereabouts although the father was not around for quite some time. Secondly, the children just refused to have contact with the father. And thirdly, the relationships were lacking in feelings of love as a result of the children's hatred and anger. However, these results have not previously been described. In Guille's (2004) paper, a comprehensive review of the literature found that there has been a lack of attention to the issue of father-child relationships in domestically violent families.

Similarly, the researcher also found no research discussing this negative bonding issue directly from the (abusive) father-child perspective. The closest related issue concerned the significance of the father (perpetrator) in the children's lives (Peled, 2000; Bunston & Crean, 1999), the quality of parenting (Mullender, Hague, Iman, Kelly, Malos & Regan, 2002; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001) and parenting by abusers (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). It was demonstrated in a quite revealing finding from Mullender *et al.* (2002) which demonstrated that paternal-child interaction experiences were described by the children as being characterised by feelings of fear, confusion, sadness as well as disappointment.

Theme 2: Dangerous complication during pregnancy

In relation to unborn children, the prevalence of domestic violence during pregnancy was further recorded in the study. The correlation between domestic violence and pregnancy is interesting because for some women participants the abuse was in fact initiated, and further escalated, over the period of their pregnancy. Almost half of those who were interviewed reported that they had been exposed to various kinds of violence including physical abuse during pregnancy. This finding supports previous research into this area which links domestic violence and pregnant women. (Flach *et al.*, 2011; Kratochvil, 2010; Sricamsuk, 2006; Gazmararian, 1996). Although a Malaysian study found the prevalence of domestic violence among pregnant women was low in percentage (Jahanfar, Kamarudin, Sarpin, Zakaria, Abdul Rahman & Samsuddin, 2007), other studies showed that this vulnerable 'mother-to-be' group somehow face violence with higher risks in comparison to the general female population (Awusi, Okeleke & Ayanwu, 2009; Sricamsuk, 2006). Failure to report the incidents of domestic violence hampers data collection on the number of pregnant intimate partner violence victims (Rodriguez, Bauer, McLoughlin & Grumbach, 1999).

Jasinski (2004) in the article entitled 'Pregnancy and domestic violence: A review of the literature' discusses the interdisciplinary empirical research on pregnancy-related violence. The review of the studies indicated that prevalence rates of pregnancy-related violent victimization vary due to variables such as research designs, the violence measurements used and differences in the populations sampled. Further results demonstrated that the association between direct effects of violence on the health and well-being of both mother and the unborn child were negatively correlated. The result of this current study may be explained by a number of different factors.

These include the possibility of the abuser's increased stress over the impending birth of the unborn child due to financial difficulties, or the hormonal and physical changes of the women being unfavourable to men, and the decreased capacity to self-defence due to the physical discomfort of carrying a child, which makes the women become vulnerable to such abuse perpetrated by their male partners.

Theme 3: Neglected children

A few women in the study commented on how much they regretted their 'negligence' regarding these young children. The women admitted to not paying attention to the emotional needs of the children as well as losing their authority and control over them. This may become another potential issue within the parenting context in domestic violence families that is worth investigating. In this study, a household plagued by domestic violence was found to foster negligence towards the children. The mothers reported that the marital conflicts had affected their parenting capability since they failed to utilise any quality time together with the children, as well as the distraction caused by the fights.

In particular, the women acknowledged the importance of their children's education where they thought this should be their main concern for the youngsters' future. It is encouraging to compare this finding with that by Holden (2003) who found that maternal stress and depression among mothers may severely compromise their emotional energy and the time they had available for their children. Other studies highlighted that abused women may be unable to encourage their children's normal developmental transitions, and their sense of basic trust and security in contrast to non-abused mothers due to the 'nature' of the violent relationships they live in (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001).

Theme 4: Protective behaviours

One unanticipated finding was that some of the children had expressed their sense of insecurity by protecting the mother as an alternative. A few women participants recalled some 'touching moments' regarding how their children act in response to the father's violent behaviour. This result may be explained by the fact that some children may feel very worried and frightened of what may happen to their mother if the violence is continually repeated. This often means that the children's sense of safety and security is undermined. The consequences of mediation, however, probably led to the experience of child abuse and maltreatment. It is believed that children intervening between the parents reflected a strategy of the children attempting to safeguard their mother's safety.

Edleson, Mbilinyi, Beeman and Hagemester (2003) research found that the frequency of children intervening in the conflict was between 10 and 30 per cent. Meanwhile the Jarvis *et al.* (2005) study showed that 70 per cent of abused mothers reported child intervention in violent incidents. Indeed, there is a similarity between the attitudes expressed by the children who grew up in abusive homes in this study and those described by Goldblatt (2003). Goldblatt (2003) proposed that children and young people describe different ambivalent thoughts towards their father and their mother respectively. As opposed to the fearfulness notion for their male parent, a sense of obligation to protect was established for the mother. Furthermore, the views regarding children interfering in regards to protecting the abused mothers in this study is similar

to the previous literature, which suggests that children intervening to defend their mother may often result in child battering (Hilberman & Munson, 1978).

Theme 5: Juvenile delinquency

A strong relationship between the impact on children's attitudes and domestic violence has been reported in the literature. Much empirical evidence suggests that growing up in an abusive home environment can contribute to behavioural and social problems among the children (Bauer, Herrenkohl, Lozano, Rivara, Hill & Hawkins, 2006; Lundy & Grossman, 2005; Cunningham & Baker, 2004; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt & Kenny, 2003; Laing, 2000; Edleson, 1999). Comparable findings were reported by most of the women participants in this study wherein the association involving domestic violence and children's negative behaviours was noticeably linked. The current study found that the negative behaviours in children as described by the mothers included physical aggression, delinquency, verbal assault, smoking and habitual truancy. Concerns over the domestic violence effects on the children's behavioural and emotional problems has also been expressed in other research on young children by Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt and Kenny (2003), Jarvis *et al.*, (2005) as well as in Lundy and Grossman (2005).

The findings of the Kitzmann *et al.*'s study in 2003 found that children who are affected by domestic violence experiences are likely to demonstrate negative attitude problems, academic impairment as well as problems with temperament. Jarvis *et al.* (2005) on the other hand concluded that children's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms were found to be associated with the frequency of physical violence incidents whilst the behavioural problems were related to maternal psychological functioning factors (i.e. depression, anxiety and anger). This also accords with the earlier observations, which showed that almost 20 per cent of the sample of the US children who were exposed to domestic violence was identified as 'troubled' children. At school for example they were reported as not complying with the rules of the school, being delinquent, frequently acting in an aggressive manner, as well as displaying emotional dysfunction such as sadness and symptoms of depression (Lundy & Grossman, 2005).

Possibly, the exposure to an abusive environment at home may also internalize the children's violent behaviour as acceptable techniques for them to use in interaction and socialization with others. However, it is believed that every child will respond differently to inter-adult physical aggression and the responses may vary according to numerous factors such as age, sex, ethnic group, religion as well as the family dynamics. The findings obtained in the study may be served as suggestive but not definite explanations because further inquiry is warranted for this particular issue of behavioural adjustment among children from violent families in the context of Malaysia.

As a conclusion, the damage wrought by domestic violence problem extends far beyond the women themselves. Perhaps the most affected individuals, besides the women themselves, are the children who grow up in abusive homes. The exposure of children to domestic violence, stated by some authors as the 'witnessing' of the assaults, involves seeing physical injuries, broken furniture as well as overhearing arguments (Cunningham & Baker, 2004; Mullender, Hague, Iman, Kelly, Malos & Regan, 2002). Thus, based on the evidence revealed, it can be concluded that violence

in relationships frequently contribute to several forms of adverse outcomes in the women victim's life with no exception on her children.

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