

Domestic violence against children

Every year, as many as 275 million children worldwide become caught in the crossfire of domestic violence and suffer the full consequences of a turbulent home life. Violence against children involves physical and psychological abuse and injury, neglect or negligent treatment, exploitation and sexual abuse. The perpetrators may include parents and other close family members.

Children who survive abuse often suffer long-term physical and psychological damage that impairs their ability to learn and socialize, and makes it difficult for them to perform well in school and develop close and positive friendships. Children who grow up in a violent home are more likely to suffer abuse compared to children who have a peaceful home life. Studies from some of the largest countries in the developing world, including China, Colombia, Egypt, India, Mexico, the Philippines and South Africa, indicate a strong correlation between violence against women and violence against children.

The behavioural and psychological consequences of growing up in a violent home can be just as devastating for children who are not directly abused themselves. Children who are exposed to violence often suffer symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as bed-wetting or nightmares, and are at greater risk than their peers of suffering from allergies, asthma, gastrointestinal problems, depression and anxiety. Primary-school-age children who are exposed to domestic violence may have more trouble with schoolwork and show poor concentration and focus. They are also more likely to attempt suicide and abuse drugs and alcohol.

The incidence of sexual violence in domestic settings is well known. Recent studies indicate high levels of sexual violence in childhood – up to 21 per cent according to a multi-country study conducted by the World Health Organization – with girls far more likely to be abused than boys. Sexual and gender-based violence is prevalent in schools and colleges, with much of the violence directed towards girls.

Working in someone’s home can also entail the risk of violence. Child domestic workers – often girls under 16 – have indicated severe abuse at the hands of their employers, including physical punishment, sexual harassment and humiliation. Unlike other forms of domestic violence, much of the humiliation and physical punishment is perpetrated by women, although girls in particular are also vulnerable to sexual violence from men living in the household.

The consequences of domestic violence can span generations. The effects of violent behaviour tend to stay with children long after they leave the childhood home. Boys who are exposed to their parents’ domestic violence are twice as likely to become abusive men as are the sons of non-violent parents. Furthermore, girls who witness their mothers being abused are more likely to accept violence in a marriage than girls who come from non-violent homes.

Although they often lack the means to protect themselves, abused women

often provide protection for children who are exposed to domestic violence. But without the legal or economic resources to prosecute abusive spouses, countless women and children remain trapped in harmful situations. Government-led efforts to create protective policies for victims of domestic violence require a parallel effort to change social attitudes that condone such violence.

Shattering the silence that surrounds domestic violence is key to ending violent behaviour in the home. The Report of the Independent Expert for the United Nations Study on Violence against Children represents a crucial step towards unmasking the issue of violence against children, including abuses perpetrated in the household. The report’s six guiding principles – quoted at right – are clear, none more so than the first: **No violence against children is justifiable**. Its recommendations are comprehensive, with overarching precepts complemented by specific measures to combat violence against children in the home and family, in schools and other educational settings, in care and justice systems,

in the workplace and community. These measures also include advising governments to establish an ombudsperson or commission for children’s rights in accordance with the ‘Paris Principles’. The report advocates for the establishment of a Special Representative to the Secretary-General on Violence against Children to advocate at the interna-

tional level, in conjunction with UNICEF, the World Health Organization and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the creation of a UN inter-agency group on violence against children, with representation from NGOs and children themselves.

See References, page 88.

The guiding principles of the Report of the Independent Expert for the United Nations Study on Violence against Children

- No violence against children is justifiable. Children should never receive less protection than adults.
- All violence against children is preventable. States must invest in evidence-based policies and programmes to address factors that give rise to violence against children.
- States have the primary responsibility to uphold children’s rights to protection and access to services, and to support families’ capacity to provide children with care in a safe environment.
- States have the obligation to ensure accountability in every case of violence.
- The vulnerability of children to violence is linked to their age and evolving capacity. Some children, because of gender, race, ethnic origin, disability or social status, are particularly vulnerable.
- Children have the right to express their views, and to have these views taken into account in the implementation of policies and programmes.