

Behind Closed Doors

The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children

The children in this picture are supporting our campaign, and are not victims of domestic violence.



STOP VIOLENCE IN THE HOME

unicef 



Contents

Introduction 3

Some of the biggest victims of domestic violence are the smallest 3

An unspoken problem, with no easy answers 5

Understanding the extent of the problem 5

Key findings 7

What children need 9

Moving forward: what policyholders must do 11

Annex 1 Map of Countries by Regional Grouping 12

Annex 2 Estimated number of children exposed to domestic violence 13

Endnotes 14

Introduction

What do children need? We know the answer from our own childhoods. First and foremost, children need a safe and secure home, free of violence, and parents that love and protect them. They need to have a sense of routine and stability, so that when things go wrong in the outside world, home is a place of comfort, help and support.

For too many children, home is far from a safe haven. Every year, hundreds of millions of children are exposed to domestic violence at home, and this has a powerful and profound impact on their lives and hopes for the future.¹ These children not only watch one parent violently assaulting another, they often hear the distressing sounds of violence, or may be aware of it from many telltale signs.

"Me and my sister are scared," says one nine-year-old girl who lives in a violent home in the United Kingdom. "Our parents fight a lot and we fear they might split up. They fight when we're upstairs. They don't think we know what's going on, but we do."²

Violence in the home is one of the most pervasive human rights challenges of our time. It remains a largely hidden problem that few countries, communities or families openly confront. Violence in the home is not limited by geography, ethnicity, or status: it is a global phenomenon.

Some of the biggest victims of domestic violence are the smallest

The devastating effects of domestic violence on women are well documented. Far less is known about the impact on children who witness a parent or caregiver being subjected to violence. These children – the forgotten victims of violence in the home – are the focus of this report.

The findings show that children who are exposed to violence in the home may suffer a range of severe and lasting effects. Children who grow up in a violent home are more likely to be victims of child abuse. Those who are not direct victims have some of the same behavioural and psychological problems as children who are themselves physically abused.³

Children who are exposed to violence in the home may have difficulty learning and limited social skills, exhibit violent, risky or delinquent behaviour, or suffer from depression or severe anxiety. Children in the earliest years of life are particularly vulnerable: studies show that domestic violence is more prevalent in homes with younger children than those with older children.⁴

Several studies also reveal that children who witness domestic violence are more likely to be affected by violence as adults – either as victims or perpetrators.⁵

Children who are exposed to violence in the home are denied their right to a safe and stable home environment. Many are suffering silently, and with little support. Children who are exposed to violence in the home need trusted adults to turn to for help and comfort, and services that will help them to cope with their experiences. Far more must be done to protect these children and to prevent domestic violence from happening in the first place.

This report, developed jointly by UNICEF, The Body Shop International and the Secretariat for the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children, examines some of the underlying causes of domestic violence and the impact on children of being exposed to violence in the home.

Defining 'Violence in the Home'

Domestic violence or intimate partner violence is a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviours including physical, sexual and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion used by adults or adolescents against their current or former intimate partners.

Examples of physical abuse include slapping, shaking, beating with fist or object, strangulation, burning, kicking and threats with a knife. Sexual abuse includes coerced sex through threats or intimidation or through physical force, forcing unwanted sexual acts, forcing sex in front of others and forcing sex with others.

Psychological abuse involves isolation from others, excessive jealousy, control of his or her activities, verbal aggression, intimidation through destruction of property, harassment or stalking, threats of violence and constant belittling and humiliation.⁶



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An unspoken problem, with no easy answers

Domestic violence is a global problem of enormous proportions. Although men are sometimes victims, the vast majority are women. At least one in every three women globally has been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in some other way – most often by someone she knows, including by her husband or another male family member. One woman in four has been abused during her pregnancy.⁷

Domestic violence can happen anywhere but certain factors seem to increase its likelihood. These include the age of the mother (the younger the mother, the more likely she will become a victim), poverty and unemployment, and alcohol and substance abuse.⁸ One study in Canada found that women who lived with heavy drinkers were five times more likely to be assaulted by their partners than those who lived with non-drinkers.⁹

Understanding the extent of the problem

This is the first study to estimate the numbers of children who are exposed to domestic violence globally. The data is from the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children (forthcoming, 2006), which reviewed existing studies that measure violence in the home in various countries.

Collecting reliable data on this hidden issue poses several challenges. In almost every country there is limited data available on the prevalence of domestic violence, and even less information on the numbers of children who may be exposed to such violence. **Some countries have no data at all.** The studies themselves often acknowledge that their findings are limited by underreporting of domestic violence, both by the abused parent and by children who live in the home.

Despite these limitations, the research provides what we believe is a first, critical step toward a fuller picture of how many children are exposed to violence in the home.

The numbers estimated by the research are staggering. **As many as 275 million children worldwide are exposed to violence in the home.** This range is a conservative estimate based on the limitations of the available data. In actuality, millions more children may be affected by violence in the home.

Global, regional and national estimates of the number of children who are exposed to domestic violence as estimated by data in the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children, are presented in Annex 2.

Creating The Report: The Body Shop International and UNICEF Partnership

Through the Stop Violence in the Home campaign, The Body Shop International is working with charitable and government partners all over the world, encouraging millions of people to speak out and take action against violence in the home. In 2005, the campaign was launched in 35 countries throughout the Americas, Asia, Africa, Australasia, Europe and the Middle East.

In 2006, Stop Violence in the Home turns its attention to children, the forgotten victims of violence in the home. The campaign is raising funds and awareness to help ensure that all victims of domestic violence are better protected and supported, including children.

Little is known about the full extent of the problem

Anecdotal it is known that growing up with violence in the home is a devastating experience for many children across the world. Yet, little is known about the full extent of the problem. Answers are difficult to find on even the most basic aspects of the problem, such as:

- What are the effects of violence in the home on children?
- How many children are affected around the world?
- What can be done to make a difference?

In an effort to find definitive information on the impact of domestic violence on children, a new partnership was formed between The Body Shop International, UNICEF and the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children. The Secretary-General's study is the first global effort to document the nature and extent of various forms of violence against children, and will be presented to the United Nations General Assembly in 2006.

This is the first global report to document the impact of domestic violence on children. It concludes with key actions that must be taken to better support and protect the forgotten victims of violence in the home.

This exciting partnership provides an opportunity to highlight a hidden issue and to make a call for action on behalf of children, creating momentum for the Stop Violence in the Home campaign and UNICEF's work to protect children from all forms of violence.



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Key findings

Children who live with and are aware of violence in the home face many challenges and risks that can last throughout their lives.

There is increased risk of children becoming victims of abuse themselves.

There is a common link between domestic violence and child abuse. Among victims of child abuse, 40 per cent report domestic violence in the home.¹⁰ One study in North America found that children who were exposed to violence in the home were 15 times more likely to be physically and/or sexually assaulted than the national average.¹¹ This link has been confirmed around the world, with supporting studies from a range of countries including China, South Africa, Colombia, India, Egypt, the Philippines, and Mexico.¹²

There is significant risk of ever-increasing harm to the child's physical, emotional and social development.

Infants and small children who are exposed to violence in the home experience so much added emotional stress that it can harm the development of their brains and impair cognitive and sensory growth.¹³ Behaviour changes can include excessive irritability, sleep problems, emotional distress, fear of being alone, immature behaviour, and problems with toilet training and language development.¹⁴ At an early age, a child's brain is becoming 'hard-wired' for later physical and emotional functioning. Exposure to domestic violence threatens that development.

As they grow, children who are exposed to violence may continue to show signs of problems. Primary-school-age children may have more trouble with school work, and show poor concentration and focus. They tend not to do as well in school. In one study, forty per cent had lower reading abilities than children from non-violent homes.¹⁵

Personality and behavioural problems among children exposed to violence in the home can take the forms of psychosomatic illnesses, depression, suicidal tendencies, and bed-wetting.¹⁶ Later in life, these children are at greater risk for substance abuse, juvenile pregnancy and criminal behaviour than those raised in homes without violence.¹⁷

Some studies suggest social development is also damaged. Some children lose the ability to feel empathy for others. Others feel socially isolated, unable to make friends as easily due to social discomfort or confusion over what is acceptable. Many studies have noted that children from violent homes exhibit signs of more aggressive behaviour, such as bullying, and are up to three times more likely to be involved in fighting.¹⁸ One Australian study showed that up to 40 per cent of chronically violent teenagers have been exposed to extreme domestic violence.¹⁹

There is a strong likelihood that this will become a continuing cycle of violence for the next generation.

The single best predictor of children becoming either perpetrators or victims of domestic violence later in life is whether or not they grow up in a home where there is domestic violence. Studies from various countries support the findings that rates of abuse are higher among women whose husbands were abused as children or who saw their mothers being abused.²⁰

Children who grow up with violence in the home learn early and powerful lessons about the use of violence in interpersonal relationships to dominate others, and might even be encouraged in doing so.²¹

Not all children fall into the trap of becoming victims or abusers. Many adults who grew up with violence in the home are actively opposed to violence of all kinds. There is reason to believe that children know that domestic violence is wrong and actively want it to stop. Many children who are present during acts of domestic violence try to help. One study showed that in 15 per cent of the cases when children were present, they tried to prevent the violence, and 6 per cent tried to get outside help. Another 10 per cent actively tried to protect the victim or make the violence stop.²²



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What children need

Children can be better protected from the effects of domestic violence and better supported in healing following exposure to this violence.

Children need a safe and secure home environment.

Every child has the right to grow up safe from harm and should feel that those they love are also protected. Violence in the home shatters a child's basic right to feel safe and secure in the world. Children need the violence to stop.

Children need to know that there are adults who will listen to them, believe them and shelter them.

Adults who work with children, including teachers, social workers, relatives, and parents themselves, need the awareness and skills to recognise and meet the needs of children exposed to violence in the home and to refer children to appropriate services. Close, dependable relationships can also help children reduce the stress of living in a violent home. Children who have an adult who gives them love, warmth and attentive care cope better than those who do not.²³ Children who are exposed to violence in the home need to know that they are not alone and that the violence is not their fault.

Children need a sense of routine and normalcy.

Violence in the home can turn a child's world upside down. Routines such as going to school and participating in recreational activities are vital for children's development and well-being and should be maintained.

Children need support services to meet their needs.

Responses to children exposed to domestic violence should be comprehensive and holistic, taking into account the range of effects and needs of different children. Children must have places to go that are safe and supportive, whether it be with extended family or at a domestic violence shelter. Studies suggest that providing interventions to abused mothers can also have benefits to children,²⁴ especially where these efforts take into account the specific needs of children.

Children need to learn that domestic violence is wrong and learn non-violent methods of resolving conflicts.

Children must hear it re-affirmed that domestic violence is wrong. They have to see alternative role models in order to grow up with a positive idea of the future. Several countries have instituted programmes that teach young people how to avoid violence in personal relationships. Schools are key in the strategy. School-based programmes can reduce aggression and violence by helping children to develop positive attitudes and values, and a broader range of skills to avoid violent behaviour.²⁵ Other successful programmes emphasise conflict resolution, cooperative play and positive role models.

Children need adults to speak out and break the silence.

Children who are exposed to violence in the home need to know that things can change and that violence in the home can end. Children need hope for the future. Public education and awareness-raising campaigns on domestic violence should focus more on the impact on children and specific ways to address this hidden problem. Governments and other public institutions should speak out about the impact of violence in the home on children.



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Moving forward: What policymakers must do

Children have the right to a home environment that is safe and secure, and free of violence. Governments carry a primary responsibility for ensuring that children and women are safe and secure in their homes, and can take several key steps to ensure this.

Raise awareness of the impact of domestic violence on children.

Much can be changed by bringing this problem into the open. The message to all must be that domestic violence is damaging to everyone, including children who are exposed to it, and that it can be stopped. Customs that validate domestic violence and dismiss its impact on children must be challenged.

Public education works. One public information campaign in the United States succeeded in challenging common beliefs and in changing attitudes towards domestic violence.²⁶ Protective policies put in place by governments must be matched by efforts to change attitudes and traditions which condone abuse. As long as violence in the home is shrouded in silence, the violence will continue.

Create public policies and laws that protect children.

Legislation and policies must reinforce the message that domestic violence is a crime, that perpetrators will be punished and victims protected. These policies must focus on the protection of children and address the impact of violence in the home on children. Criminalising domestic violence sends a clear message that violence is not a private matter and is unacceptable. It is essential that protective laws are enforced and offenders held accountable. Courts and government departments must have specialised policies in place to address the safety of adult victims of domestic violence and their children, including in connection with custody and visitation rights.²⁷ The particular impact of domestic violence on children must be taken into account by all government agencies responding to violence in the home.

Enhance social services that address the impact of violence in the home on children.

Governments must specifically allocate resources to support children who are exposed to violence in the home, within the overall context of prevention and support for adult victims of domestic violence.

Interventions that support children who are exposed to domestic violence are crucial in minimising the long-term harm. Some innovative programmes exist to address the needs of these children, for example through training staff who work with children to detect early warning signs and to provide appropriate responses and support.²⁸ Early detection programmes that train health care workers to ask women about domestic violence can also help to break the silence and encourage women to seek help.²⁹

Providing services and support to adult victims of domestic violence can benefit children, especially when the specific needs of children are considered. Support for locating safe housing, income assistance, access to health care and referrals for psychosocial support services should be considered as means to assist all victims of domestic violence.

Violence has no place in a child's life. With a clear vision and concrete action, we can and must give children a brighter and more peaceful future.

Private Sector Engagement

Corporate social responsibility is a growing priority for the private sector. Increasingly, companies are recognising their responsibility to address issues that impact their customers, employees, the environment and the communities in which they work.

Corporations have a critical role to play in addressing the impact of domestic violence on children. UNICEF and The Body Shop International encourage businesses to ensure that time and resources are committed to protecting and supporting children who are exposed to violence in the home.

The private sector can:

- Finance or otherwise support initiatives that seek to prevent domestic violence and services that support all victims of domestic violence, including children.
- Actively engage in partnerships with NGOs to develop public awareness and communication campaigns and fundraising initiatives.
- Increase awareness of the issue through innovative employee education and training programmes.
- Take action to persuade governments to take the issue of domestic violence and its impact on children seriously.

Annex 1

Regional Estimates of the Number of Children Exposed to Domestic Violence by MDG (Millennium Development Goals) Region

These are the official regions as defined by the United Nations Millennium Project, <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org>



This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF or The Body Shop International on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.

MDG (Millennium Development Goals) region	Estimated Number of Children Exposed to Domestic Violence - Range
Global Estimate	133 to 275 million
Developed countries	4.6 to 11.3 million
Commonwealth of Independent States	900,000 to 3.6 million
Northern Africa	No Estimate
Sub-Saharan Africa	34.9 to 38.2 million
Latin America & Caribbean	11.3 to 25.5 million
Eastern Asia	19.8 to 61.4 million
Southern Asia	40.7 to 88.0 million
South-eastern Asia	No Estimate
Western Asia	7.2 to 15.9 million
Oceania	548,000 to 657,000

Annex 2

National Estimates of the Number of Children Exposed to Domestic Violence for The Body Shop International Countries – where available

Source: United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children (forthcoming, 2006).

The Body Shop International Region	The Body Shop International Country	Estimated Number of Children Exposed to Domestic Violence - Range
UK & ROI	UK	240,000 to 963,000
	Rep of Ireland	8,000 to 42,000
Americas	Canada	85,000 to 362,000
	Mexico	1.6 to 8.5 million
	USA	339,000 to 2.7 million
Europe, Middle East & Africa	Austria	82,000
	Belgium	26,000 to 170,000
	Denmark	22,000
	Finland	61,000
	France	240,000 to 802,000
	Germany	1 million
	Greece	45,000
	Holland	237,000 to 431,000
	Iceland	2,000
	Italy	385,000 to 1.1 million
	Kuwait	28,000
	Norway	38,000 to 68,000
	Portugal	44,000 to 168,000
	Romania	300,000
	Saudi Arabia	1 million
	South Africa	500,000 to 1.3 million
	Spain	188,000
	Sweden	46,000
	Switzerland	8,000 to 76,000
	Turkey	2 to 6.2 million
Asia Pacific	Australia	75,000 to 640,000
	Hong Kong	75,000 to 82,000
	Japan	427,000-875,000
	Korea	1.2 million
	Malaysia	951,000
	New Zealand	18,000 to 35,000
	Philippines	1.8 to 3.2 million
	Thailand	903,000 to 2.6 million
	India	27.1 to 69 million
	Pakistan	6.1 million

Endnotes

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For more information on the global Stop Violence in the Home Campaign
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