**Forum:** Human Rights Council

**Issue:** Protecting children from domestic abuse

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Introduction

The issue of domestic abuse against our youth has been ongoing in modern society today and in the past centuries. The United Nations defines domestic abuse as “a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power”. In the case of our youth, this type of relationship is often found between them and any form of adult present in their life. This comprised parents/guardians, family members and any authoritative figure. Furthermore, it is important to note that domestic abuse spans all races, religions and cultures. This means it impacts children globally and all countries are affected. According to the World Health Organization, in the year 2020, an estimated 1 billion children face physical, emotional and sexual violence in that year alone.

As a result of domestic abuse, children face the hardships and effects that stem from such abusive encounters in their life, whether in the present or along the line into adulthood. Youth that experience abuse on a frequent basis tends to be left with irreversible psychological harm and sometimes even physical harm. They find themselves having a lack of control over their social abilities and have increased difficulty integrating into society when they are older, shaping the people they become.

Currently, UN bodies such as the Human Rights Committee and World Health Organization are continually analyzing, researching, collecting and publishing data regarding the rates and importance of this issue. However, despite previous efforts to mitigate this issue, they have been seen as ineffective and minors continue to be left suffering.

Definition of Key Terms

Domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is the pattern of violence behavior of a person that include a whole variety of forms that are used to control someone. These forms include, verbal/degrading language, physical harm, sexual violence and controlling behavior.

**Mental disorders**

Mental disorders are clinically diagnosed when it is noticed that there are significant disturbances and differences in an individual's cognitive and emotional behaviour and show in different ways. Examples of these include anxiety, depression, bipolar, etc.

**Adverse childhood experience (ACE)**

ACE’s are traumatic experiences, such as violence, neglect, abuse, that youth (people under 18) face that impact individuals in the short and long term. They can show up as physical and mental disorders.

**Intergenerational cycle of abuse**

It describes the cycle of children carrying their own childhood trauma such as physical or emotional abuse, into their adulthood. As people pick up on the habits and behaviour they witness or go through as they are growing up, these will then reflect in the relationships they have during adulthood, in particular the way they treat their kids may be similar to how their parents treat them. If this treatment is abusive the child will then proceed to pick up the habits, leading to an unbreakable violent cycle.

**Corporal punishment**

Corporal punishment is a form of physical violence inflicted on a minor, with the intent to cause harm. This is often use as a form of punishment in home or school environments.

Background

History

Though it is rather hard to pinpoint the exact moment in time when domestic abuse against children was beginning to be put into practice, some records date it back to early as 200 BCE. However, in a more modern context, the domestic abuse of our youth became increasingly prominent in the 19th century. It was a common practice of that time, appearing more frequently in both homes and schools. Within the school environment, the incentive to work hard and listen to the teacher was encouraged by the environment of fear of getting beaten by their teachers. Home life didn’t often differ from this, parents also encouraged and implemented physical discipline and harsh verbal abuse into parenting. During this time, little concern was raised about these methods, and it was the norm. For this reason, corporal punishment is embedded into our culture and the way we treat our children, increasing the difficulty of stripping it from our habits. Researchers have the cycle of abuse we have caught ourselves in the “intergenerational cycle” which describes the cycle of violence that is formed by raising our generations with such abusive habits, where they will raise their younger generations the same way.

Forms of Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse can take forms in various forms. One of the more common ones is physical violence. This is when an authoritative figure inflicts physical harm on a minor, through ways such as slapping, beating, shoving, etc. There is often a debate on whether physical discipline is a form of domestic abuse, due to different beliefs and ethics of cultures and nationalities. However, physical discipline being an act of physically harming a child, is classified as a form of domestic abuse falling under physical violence. Another form of domestic abuse is psychological. This is when the creation of fear is instilled into a child in order to gain control over them. Examples of these include blackmailing, intimidation and threatening acts. In addition, there is emotional abuse, which is when one attacks the victim's self-esteem and self-worth in order to create doubt in order to gain control of the victim and the situation, this is often done through overly harsh criticism and belittling. Last of all is sexual abuse, which is when a sexual act is done without consent and forced.

Causes

It is rather difficult to determine the causes of domestic abuse. Domestic abuse causes are truly a case-by-case basis, however, there are some common factors. To start off, culture is a major influencing factor. As aforementioned, certain cultures have permitted the abuse of children in order to gain respect and obedience. These cultures often used to view the children as more of something adults had ownership of. This has caused people to hold a mindset in which they think abusing their children is normal and the sole way of discipline. Now, as the world has grown more modern, this whole idea of ownership of children has somewhat died down, but the method of discipline has been passed down that it is still the main form of discipline for many.

Now, this habit of abuse that is passed down from generation to generation is the environmental factor that adds to the causes of domestic abuse. Which again, relates to the previous point of the intergenerational cycle. Those who are raised in a way where domestic abuse is a reoccurring factor in their life, tend to raise their kids in the same way.

Society itself has also created an unhealthy space where victims of abuse are hesitant to step out. A contributing factor to this is the media, which often frames victims as the enemy and the ones to blame. Due to this reason, victims of domestic abuse are fearful of stepping out and having to deal with the possible backlash that may come from it. Furthermore, people are shamed for “exposing” their family members, in particular, their parents to this as it is viewed as disloyal and disrespectful.

Research shows that a household's economic status has an influence on the likelihood of domestic abuse happening within it. Factors such as unemployment, financial instability and lack of education can result in shaping an individual to carry out violence against one's children. A lack of education means that they aren’t exposed to as much understanding of social standards and norms. This forms a lack of understanding of what is acceptable in terms of how someone should treat others. Because of this parents that are less educated, are stuck with an old mindset of harsh abuse as discipline as they weren’t educated or exposed to know otherwise. Unemployment and financial instability also often takes a toll on an individual's mental health and high stress. This may lead to mental disorders and issues which may turn into substance abuse or mental instability. Which in result to individuals losing control and often lashing out at their family members, particularly, their kids at home. However, it is important to remember that all of this is circumstantial and doesn’t have a complete direct correlation to domestic abuse. Children from the middle and upper classes are still highly vulnerable to domestic abuse.

Effects

As domestic abuse includes physical, sexual and verbal abuse, the reflection of this on youth runs deep, causing damages on a cognitive, emotional and physical scale. It is no doubt that children are the product of the environment they grow up in, which is key to understanding the extent an abusive household can affect a child. The violence encountered during childhood is considered an Adverse Childhood Experience, also referred to as ACE’s. ACE’s are traumas faced in youth that have a lasting impact. These will show in a plethora of forms depending on the child.

In terms of behavioural effects, in a general sense, there tend to be two outcomes. One is the externalizing of the abuse faced. This means that victims of domestic abuse quite often direct their anger and trauma towards other people in forms of aggression and acting out against rules/laws. Which shows a display of a lack of emotional intelligence and antisocial behaviour. The second outcome is the internalizing of the received abuse, which is directly related to a child facing mental disorders. Such disorders include depression, anxiety, PTSD and increased moodiness. In 2015, researchers in Norway conducted an experiment that attempted to uncover a link between the mental health of a child and how it relates to their probability of facing mental disorders. They used several different participants that faced different kinds of violence in the home, whether it be sexual, physical or verbal and saw the correlation it presented in terms of reported levels of anxiety and depression. Unsurprisingly, those who faced a higher amount of domestic abuse had shown a higher amount of mental distress. However, keep in mind that we cannot assume this applies to everybody and how individuals react to domestic abuse varies,

After experiencing acts of violence growing up, children's cognitive abilities and physical development have been proven to be stunted or damaged by it. Due to the mental disorders that come from domestic abuse, it then becomes the cause of impairments in cognitive functions. The disorders show themselves as a lack of motivation and poor academic engagement and performance as a whole. One thing that commonly derives from ACE's is something called “toxic stress”. Toxic stress occurs when someone's body goes through prolonged amounts of stress and the body never has the time to recover. This toxic stress goes further than affecting mental health but also the human body physically. This toxic stress is simply high levels of stress in the body, it weakens immune systems and causes problems in the cardiovascular and central nervous system.

Major Parties Involved

China

China is a country that has high rates of domestic abuse. A survey in the province of Guangzhou reported that over 27% of the children between the ages of 11 to 17 years old have faced physical abuse and a separate one done in Changsu, Hunan has a total of 62.4% of children also encountering domestic abuse. Alongside this, there has been high percentages of domestic abuse against China’s youth. This problem in China has been overlooked for decades as it links back to the causes of domestic abuse previously mentioned. China has deep-rooted culture, one aspect of it is the way they choose to discipline their children. What’s more, is a strong sense of age hierarchy within Chinese households. In China, the oldest should be given the most respect. Including not talking back and never questioning your elders, if a child does, they may face physical punishment. After the issue of domestic abuse being overlooked for many years, China has taken the appropriate steps to try to counter the issue. In 1984, they banned the use of physical punishment in schools and recently in 2016, their first Anti Domestic Violence Law was put into effect. This required the mandatory reporting of domestic abuse and offered sheltering and other forms of support. However, there is still room for progress in this area.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is another country holding one of the highest amounts of domestic abuse activity against children. UNICEF reports a high number of ¾ of children between the ages of 2 to 11 facing domestic abuse on a regular basis. Girls face the issue of being forced into child marriage at an early age, with 50% getting married to adults before the age of 18. Due to the high rates of spouse abuse, these children in marriages are frequently exposed to the abuse of their husbands. In Afghanistan, over 90 per cent of women feel as if it's justified to face domestic abuse from their spouse, leaving this as another example of the intergenerational cycle. Girls from a young age are uneducated and brought up in a culture where they see domestic abuse occurring between their parents and within their household. This teaches them to accept it and normalize it, therefore bringing it to their family. With lack of protection through laws for young children going through forced marriage and domestic abuse at home, rates of domestic abuse continue to maintain at a high.

World Health Organization (WHO)

The World Health Organization, WHO are an organization that was created by the UN to achieve the goal of promoting health and safety for all individuals, globally. They have been working towards ending domestic abuse in all countries. WHO has launched several initiatives such as the Global Plan Of Action and the Violence Prevention Alliance, that aim to monitor, counter and overall respond to domestic abuse of children, especially those in vulnerable positions.

United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF is another UN body, whose goal is to fund humanitarian and developmental aid to help improve the lives of children globally. To counter domestic abuse, UNICEF has worked with many governments and various organizations to help increase media attention, strengthen laws and help respond to victims of domestic abuse. Aside from that, they have and continue to fund initiatives of organizations, for example the #Endviolence campaign, that also played a role in reducing domestic abuse against children.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

End Violence against Children Partnership

The End Violence against Children partnership was launched by the UN secretary-general in June 2016. It is a coalition that composes of over 700 individual organizations that include research organizations, UN agencies, foundations, NGOs and other various groups. The goal of this coalition was to end all domestic abuse and neglect against children. Since the start, the partnership has taken large steps toward making global progress. For one, they have managed to partner with 37 countries which they have named “pathfinding countries” who have pledged and committed to changing laws and policies that are involved in better protecting children that face domestic violence. These countries include Canada, Finland, Brazil and many others. In December of 2020, they set in motion a campaign named #Endviolence. This global campaign has been used to make a statement and form policies that have been endorsed by over 50 political leaders to encourage the funding to protect more children against domestic abuse as well as other safety measures needed to be taken to make the world a safer environment. They have also hosted a multitude of events surrounding this campaign with up to 77 events to date. These events are used to spark policy debate, showcase possible solutions and overall build momentum in hopes of further government investment and involvement.

WHO Global Plan of Action

In May 2016 a World Health Assembly resolution endorsed the first WHO Global Plan of Action that sought to strengthen the role and response of the global health system to better address interpersonal violence against women, girls and children. The plan stated that they would partner with different countries and commit to several different ways that they could begin to take steps forward. Their main aim was to increase the amount of research and published data, as well as reduce domestic violence. This included developing electronic information systems that summarized scientific data on the consequences and risk factors of violence towards children. Furthermore, they strived to publish global status on new laws, action plans, prevention programmes, etc. that also addressed the issue. Finally, they wanted to collaborate with different organizations and agencies to work towards eliminating violence against children globally, one of the examples of an initiative they came from this is the End Violence against Children partnership.

Possible Solutions

* Adults are the sole contributors to the domestic abuse that children face on a daily basis. If we are to look back on the causes of a domestic abuser as a whole we are able to identify several reasons why adults carry it out. To begin with is the culture that such adults have grown up with. The intergenerational cycle calls for education and understanding. There are a few different possibilities to educate our adults on the issue of using domestic violence against kids. For one, the training of teachers needs to be thorough. Teachers should be trained to one, know discipline methods for children that are effective and do not harm the child in any way, but most importantly, create a safe space.
* As previously mentioned, victims of domestic abuse are often too afraid to speak up, schools should accommodate and create spaces where these issues can be raised without fear. In lower years, it is vital that children are taught from a young age what boundaries are. They should learn to understand the full seriousness of the issue and know that such behavior is never acceptable. This once again puts an end to the intergenerational cycle where habits are broken. By doing this, we are creating new generations that understand the importance of stopping domestic abuse. In the upper years when children now fully understand what they are experiencing, schools should have a system where it is safe and private to speak up if a child were to be facing such abuse in or out of school. Additionally, there should be regulations and standardized steps in place to address these issues. This could include a multistep process where everything is fully understood to know the extent of the abuse, from there how the school should respond.
* The government also should play the main role in ending domestic abuse. This starts with tightening laws for “early help” which is to prevent this issue from ever even occurring in the first place. This early help could also include showing a strong government stance and opinion on this issue and giving media attention and raising awareness of it. For those who are already victims, there should be aid provided that helps families resolve possible domestic abuse issues. For example, hosting family relations courses, and subsidizing family counselling and therapy for victims. Furthermore, there should be assistance provided for those who want to be able to leave that situation. Governments can provide a substantial amount of aid for victims which includes youth shelters as well as funding for their basic necessities.

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