

Article

## The Impact of Spousal Violence on Children: An Empirical Study

Page | 252

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**Abstract:** Domestic violence is a severe social problem which does not only impact on the spouses but also on children who are exposed to the conflict between the parents in the family setup. The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of spousal violence on children to determine how it manifests itself and the psychological and behavioural effects of spousal violence on children. There was the use of a descriptive analytical research design. A sample of 300 parents in Tunis selected by a stratified random sampling technique were used in order to collect data by use of a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to measure two key dimensions, which included manifestations of spousal violence and the negative effects on children. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and independent samples t-test were used to analyse the data. The results showed that the incidences of spousal violence were relatively good especially in verbal aggression through the use of shouting and insults. The findings also indicated that the adverse impacts on children were moderate, such as, psychological distress, less emotional security and inability to socialise. In addition, the researchers concluded that there was a statistically significant positive correlation between spousal violence and adverse child outcomes. There were however no statistically significant differences according to gender. This paper comes up with the conclusion that exposure to spousal violence is an important risk factor in the psychological and behavioural development of children. It brings out the necessity of preventive measures, parental awareness campaigns and intervention measures to curb domestic violence and help families lead healthier lives.

**Keywords:** *Spousal violence, intimate partner violence, child exposure to domestic violence, psychological outcomes, behavioural problems, family environment, social learning theory, child development*

## **Introduction**

The family is generally known to be the most important social institution that influences the psychological and social growth of children. In this context, children learn the basic values, behavioural standards, and emotional self-control by interacting with their parents. Healthy development can only be promoted in a stable and supportive family environment, and the exposure to conflict and violence can cause serious developmental risks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Huesmann et al., 2023; Schulte & Karakuş, 2025; Kivelä, 2020; Papas et al., 2023).

Domestic violence, especially spousal violence is a significant social and public health issue in the world. Even when children are not the immediate victims of interparental violence, they are more likely to develop emotional, behavioural, and cognitive problems (Kitzmann et al., 2003; Evans et al., 2008). Theoretically, social learning theory posits that children acquire behaviours by observing and imitating important other people, particularly their parents (Bandura, 1977; Yunitasari et al., 2022; Firmansyah & Saepuloh, 2022; Khadka). Children who are exposed to violent interactions in the family can thus internalise and repeat the same behaviours in their social interactions.

In addition, the ecological systems theory focuses on the fact that the family is the nearest environment that affects the development of a child. The conflicts and violence in this microsystem may have adverse impacts on the emotional stability and developmental performance of children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Empirical studies have always shown that children who are exposed to domestic violence tend to develop anxiety, depression, aggression, and social maladjustment (Holt et al., 2008; Vu et al., 2016; Doroudchi et al., 2023; Rosser-Limiñana et al., 2020)). These effects can be carried into adulthood affecting future interpersonal relationships and psychological well-being.

Since domestic violence is widespread and it has significant consequences on children, it is necessary to explore its consequences in certain cultural settings. Thus, the proposed study will explore the effects of spousal violence on children and discuss its psychological and social consequences.

## **Literature Review**

There is a considerable amount of literature that has investigated the impact of domestic violence on children, and it has always shown that it has adverse outcomes in the psychological, behavioural, and social development of children.

Kitzmann et al. (2003) carried out a meta-analysis and discovered that children who had witnessed interparental violence had much higher levels of internalising problems, including anxiety and depression, and externalising behaviours, including aggression. These results indicate that child development is affected by exposure to violence even as a witness.

On the same note, Evans et al. (2008) conducted a review of the empirical literature and concluded that domestic violence exposure is closely linked to emotional distress, behavioural problems, and academic malfunctioning. The authors stressed the fact that indirect exposure to violence may be as detrimental as direct victimisation.

Holt et al. (2008) also established that children brought up in violent families are more prone to long-term psychological problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and emotional dysregulation. The paper has indicated that these adverse effects are compounded by long exposure to violence.

Moreover, Fantuzzo and Mohr (1999) discovered that children who are exposed to domestic violence tend to develop social maladjustment, such as problems in peer relations and withdrawal or aggressive behaviour. Such social challenges may make children incapable of effectively integrating in educational and community environments.

A more recent study by Vu et al. (2016) investigated the burden of child exposure to intimate partner violence in the world and established a strong relationship with adverse mental health outcomes and developmental problems in a wide range of cultural settings. This paper highlights the universality of the issue.

Moreover, Cater et al. (2015) claimed that the experience of parental violence interferes with the sense of safety and attachment of children, which causes emotional and relational problems in the long term. The authors have highlighted the need to intervene early in order to reduce such effects.

All in all, it is evident that the literature shows that spousal violence is a serious risk factor that influences various aspects of child development. Nevertheless, more empirical research in particular regional settings is still required to gain a clearer insight into the nature and magnitude of these effects.

### **Problem**

Although domestic violence has increasingly become a significant social problem, little has been done regarding its indirect impact on children especially when it comes to exposure to spousal violence in

the family. Although there is a lot of research on direct child abuse, little has been done to highlight the psychological and behavioural effects of children who observe violence between parents.

Spousal violence also leads to a dysfunctional family environment which can have adverse impacts on the emotional security of children, their behavioural adaptation, and social development. The children raised in such conditions can develop anxiety, fear, aggression, or social withdrawal due to constant exposure to conflict.

Despite the fact that past studies have established the adverse effects of domestic violence on children, there is still need to conduct empirical research that can help to understand the effects of domestic violence in certain cultural and social settings, and how the effects differ depending on demographic factors like gender.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following central problem:

**What is the impact of spousal violence on children's psychological and behavioural outcomes?**

### **Objectives**

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the manifestations of spousal violence within the family environment
2. To examine the negative psychological and behavioural effects of spousal violence on children
3. To assess whether there are statistically significant differences in these effects based on gender

### **Questions**

**The study is guided by the following research questions:**

1. What are the main manifestations of spousal violence within the family?
2. What are the negative effects of spousal violence on children?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The two key theoretical approaches that form the basis of this study include social learning theory and ecological systems theory, which can be used to explain the impact of spousal violence on children in a comprehensive manner.

The social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) explains that children learn behaviours by observing and imitating the important people in their lives, especially the parents. Children who witness violent interactions between parents can adopt the behaviours and replicate them in their interactions, resulting in escalation of aggression and behavioural issues.

Moreover, the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) also focuses on the fact that the family is the most important microsystem that affects the development of a child. The conflicts and violence in this system may disrupt the feeling of safety and emotional stability in children, which leads to adverse psychological and social consequences.

According to these views, spousal violence is theorised as one of the most important environmental stressors that have a direct impact on the psychological well-being and behavioural development of children.

### **Hypotheses**

**H1:** There is a statistically significant relationship between spousal violence and negative effects on children.

**H2:** There are no statistically significant differences in the impact of spousal violence on children attributable to gender.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The analytical design used in this study was descriptive because it is suitable when the researcher is interested in studying a social phenomenon and determining patterns and relationships among variables. The design was deemed appropriate to research on the manifestations of spousal violence and how it affects children in the family set up.

### **Study Population and Sample**

The population of the study was parents living in Tunis between July and September 2024. The target population was chosen to be parents since they are the main people who interact with the family, raise the children and control the relationship within the household. Their views were regarded as critical towards the realization of the expressions of spousal violence and its impacts on children in the family environment. The study also narrowed down to parents, which enabled the research to collect data of parents who are directly involved in the marital relationship and involved in the day-to-day social and emotional growth of children.

The study used a stratified random sampling method to get a representative sample. The reason this approach was chosen is that it will assist in ensuring that the various sections of the population are well represented and this will enhance the reliability and generalisability of the results in the study environment. The sampling was done in the first stage by dividing the city into eight geographical areas,

which represented the major residential areas of the city. This division was supposed to embrace the difference in family settings and social life situations throughout the city.

The second stage involved the selection of three geographical areas randomly.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Characteristics of the Sample*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Gender	Male	150	50.0%
	Female	150	50.0%
<b>Total</b>		300	100%
Age	Less than 20	50	16.7%
	20–30	70	23.3%
	31–40	80	26.7%
	41–50	55	18.3%
	Above 50	45	15.0%
<b>Total</b>		300	100%
Marital Status	Married	280	93.3%
	Divorced	15	5.0%
	Widowed	5	1.7%
<b>Total</b>		300	100%
Family Size	Less than 4	30	10.0%
	5–8	170	56.7%
	9–12	60	20.0%
	More than 12	40	13.3%
<b>Total</b>		300	100%

As indicated in Table (1), the number of male and female participants was equal (50:50). Most of the participants were aged 31 to 40 years (26.7%), with the majority of them being married (93.3%). The highest percentage (56.7) was recorded in the number of family members of between 5-8.

### **Research Instrument**

The structured questionnaire, which was created by the researcher based on the existing literature on the topic of domestic violence and child well-being, was used to collect data.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts:

Section One: Demographic data, such as gender, age, marital status, and family size.

Section Two: Study items, which are 10 statements and are divided into two dimensions:

Spousal violence manifestations (5 items)

Children (5 items) Negative consequences of spousal violence.

The scale of measurement of responses was a five-point Likert scale, which ranged as:

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

### ***Validity***

In order to determine the content validity, the questionnaire as it was, was sent to a group of experts in the field of social sciences and other areas. Their remarks and recommendations were considered in the revision of the wording, clarity and relevance of the items. Their feedback was taken into consideration and the final version of the questionnaire was prepared.

### ***Reliability***

Cronbach alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the instrument and measure its reliability. The questionnaire had a total reliability coefficient of 0.82, which means that the reliability is acceptable to be used in this study.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The study period was used to administer the questionnaire to the sampled participants. The participants were told about the aim of the study and were requested to answer all the items as correctly as possible. The questionnaires were then filled and ready to be analysed statistically.

### **Data Analysis**

The data obtained were analysed by means of proper statistical tools. The sample characteristics and the answers to the first and second research questions were described using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentages, means, and standard deviations).

To verify the hypothesis on the variation in the effect of spousal violence on children based on gender, an independent samples t-test was used. The level of statistical significance was set at 0.05.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The research was conducted using the accepted ethical standards in social science research. The participation was voluntary and informed consent was taken before data collection among all the participants. The participants were given an assurance that their answers would be confidential and anonymous and the information would only be used in academic research.

## Results

### Results Related to Research Question 1: What are the manifestations of spousal violence?

To answer this question, means and standard deviations were calculated for the items measuring manifestations of spousal violence, as shown in Table (2).

**Table 2**

#### *Manifestations of Spousal Violence*

Rank	Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level
1	Parents exchange insults in front of children	4.20	0.83	High
2	Parents shout loudly at home	4.19	0.91	High
3	Parents deliberately ignore each other	3.63	1.41	Moderate
4	Parents mock each other in front of children	3.47	1.32	Moderate
5	Parents undermine each other's status	3.34	1.11	Moderate
<b>Overall Mean</b>		<b>3.68</b>	0.94	High

Table 2 suggests that the general degree of manifestations of spousal violence was high ( $M = 3.68$ ). Verbal insults and loud shouting were predominant and other behaviours including ignoring and mocking were practiced moderately.

### Results Related to Research Question 2: What are the negative effects of spousal violence on children?

Means and standard deviations were calculated for the items measuring negative effects on children, as shown in Table (3).

Rank	Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level
1	Poor child upbringing and socialization	4.32	0.86	High
2	Psychological problems due to family conflict	4.23	1.16	High
3	Loss of self-confidence	3.43	1.25	Moderate
4	Lack of emotional security	3.12	1.14	Moderate
5	Reduced sense of dignity	3.30	1.20	Moderate

Rank	Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level
<b>Overall Mean</b>		<b>3.60</b>	0.97	Moderate

Table (3) reveals that the general degree of adverse effects of spousal violence on children was in the middle (M = 3.60). The greatest impacts concerned bad upbringing and psychological sufferings.

**Testing H1**

There is a statistically significant relationship between spousal violence and negative effects on children.

To test this hypothesis, Pearson’s correlation coefficient was calculated, as shown in Table (4).

**Table 4**

*Pearson Correlation between Spousal Violence and Negative Effects*

Variable	Spousal Violence	Negative Effects
Spousal Violence	1	0.72**
Negative Effects	0.72**	1

There is a significant positive correlation between spousal violence and negative child effect (Table (4),  $r = 0.72$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This implies that the more there is spousal violence, the more psychological and behavioural ills are manifested among children. Therefore, H1 is supported.

**Testing H2**

There are no statistically significant differences in the impact of spousal violence on children attributable to gender

**An independent samples t-test was conducted, as shown in Table (5).**

**Table 5**

*Independent Samples t-test by Gender*

Gender	Mean	Std. Dev.	t-value	Sig.
Male	4.04	0.82	0.852	0.361
Female	4.23	0.23		

Table (5) shows that gender does not statistically differ with regard to the effects that spousal violence has on children ( $p = 0.361 > 0.05$ ). Therefore, H2 is accepted.

**Discussions**

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the effect of spousal violence on children by determining its manifestation, its adverse effects, and testing the connection between these two variables.

The results showed that the occurrence of spousal violence manifestations is quite common in the family circle, and it is mostly manifested through verbal form of violence, including shouting and (or) exchanging insults in the presence of children. The findings suggest that non-physical violence is widespread and can potentially have an important effect on the family setting.

This observation can be explained by the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) which states that children learn behaviours by observing and imitating those they consider important. When children are exposed to such aggressive communication patterns repeatedly, they might develop internalisation of these patterns and become more likely to develop behavioural problems. This reinforces earlier studies that have pointed to the view that exposure to parental violence may affect development of behaviour in children (Kitzmann et al., 2003; Evans et al., 2008).

Additionally, the findings indicated that the moderate and significant role of spousal violence on the psychological and behavioural well-being of children existed. Specifically, the results show that experiencing parental conflict correlates with bad upbringing, psychological distress, and lower emotional security. The results remain in line with the previous research, which reported that children that have seen domestic violence tend to develop anxiety, emotional instability, and behavioural problems (Holt et al., 2008; Vu et al., 2016).

More to the point, the correlation study showed significant positive association between spousal violence and the impacts on children. The result confirms the assumption that higher exposure to parental violence is linked to worse psychological and behavioural implications on a case-by-case basis. It also reinforces the theoretical rationale offered by the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) where the primary role of the family environment is placed as the determinant of child development. The instability that exists in this environment, like constant warfare, can destroy the feeling of security and stability in the children.

Also, the findings revealed that the effects of spousal violence on children are not statistically different according to gender. This can imply that both male and female children experience the negative effects of family violence in a similar manner. These results can be consistent with other articles, which highlight that exposure to domestic violence is a universal problem of development, and it is not a gender matter (Vu et al., 2016).

In general, this research demonstrates that marital conflict is not the only issue of spousal violence that has impact on the development of children both psychologically and socially. The family environment

when marked by conflict and aggression, turns out to be a risk factor, which can have long-term effects on children.

### Conclusion

This paper has also discussed the effects of spousal violence on children and given empirical data regarding the forms and effects of this behaviour on the family.

The results show that it is relatively common and most of the spousal violence occurs verbally and emotionally, including yelling and insults. Although these types of violence are sometimes ignored, they can have serious consequences to children.

The paper has also shown that exposure to violence between the spouses correlates with adverse psychological and behavioural effects on children, such as emotional distress, inadequate feelings of security, and poor socialisation effects. It was also found that there was a statistically significant relationship between spousal violence and its adverse consequences in children.

Furthermore, there is no gender difference, therefore indicating that the effects of the spousal violence are similar in all children irrespective of their gender. This contributes to the realization that family violence has an impact on children everywhere.

Finally, the research highlights the need to tackle the problem of spousal violence as a key social problem that affects the development of children beyond the couple. Preventive measures and effective intervention strategies are needed to foster healthier family settings and to guard children against the negative effects of domestic violence.

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