

Strategies for Safeguarding Children from Abuse and Maltreatment in Dysfunctional Families. An Analysis Study of Traditional Authority Chimwala, Mangochi District.

Kassan Kaselema, Abester Ngozo

DMI-St. John the Baptist University, Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses strategies to safeguard children from abuse and maltreatment in dysfunctional homes, with a focus on identifying key risk factors, assessing the effectiveness of various interventions, and examining the role of legal and policy frameworks. Through quantitative approach, the study reveals that children in dysfunctional families are at significant risk due to unstable environments, parental mismanagement of anger, and inconsistent care. Specifically, children experience frequent changes in living situations, leading to insecurity and anxiety. In 55% of cases, parental anger is misdirected at children, resulting in fear and behavioural issues. Psychological abuse, including constant criticism and emotional manipulation, severely impacts children's mental health, while inconsistent care due to financial difficulties, mental health issues, and single parenting affects 30% of children. Additionally, frequent arguments or aggression in 25% of these homes create a tense atmosphere detrimental to children's emotional development. Furthermore, 35% of parents exhibit abusive behaviors under extreme stress, causing profound psychological trauma. The study assesses the effectiveness of various intervention programs. The top 30% of programs achieve the highest effectiveness, significantly reducing abuse rates through well-funded, rigorously evaluated approaches. Legal and policy frameworks play a crucial role in protecting children, prioritizing their best interests through appropriate custody arrangements and mandatory reporting of abuse. Continuous oversight and collaboration between legal and social services are essential. The study concludes with recommendations to enhance program design, strengthen legal frameworks, address parental stress, and promote public awareness. Further research is suggested to explore long-term impacts and effectiveness of interventions in various contexts.

Keywords: Child Abuse, Dysfunctional families, Risk Factors, Interventions, Legal Frameworks

INTRODUCTION

A child is a young person especially between infancy and puberty (university, n.d.). Children growing up in dysfunctional families, characterized by divorce, separation, or other forms of familial disruption, are particularly vulnerable to various forms of abuse and maltreatment. This vulnerability emphasises the critical importance of exploring strategies aimed at safeguarding children from such adversity. Abuse and maltreatment encompass a wide range of issues, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect. Studies have shown that children in these environments are more likely to experience hostile outcomes, such as behavioural problems, lower academic achievement, and long-term psychological distress (Amato, 2001; Fergusson, Lynskey, & Horwood, 1996). Addressing this issue requires a multi-faceted

approach that combines research, policy development, and community involvement.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) explicitly affirms the right of every child to grow up in a safe and nurturing environment, and it calls upon nations to ensure that children's best interests are a primary consideration in all actions and decisions affecting them (United Nations, 1989). This global framework emphasises the international commitment to protect children from harm, irrespective of their family circumstances. It is essential to conduct a thorough examination of the strategies that can mitigate the risks children face in dysfunctional families. Through a critical analysis of existing literature and an exploration of policy initiatives, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities involved in safeguarding children in a complex family dynamic.

Background of the study

Child abuse and maltreatment in dysfunctional families in Traditional Authority Chimwala and similar regions have far-reaching consequences. Children in such environments are vulnerable to various forms of abuse, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect. These adversities can result in a range of long-term issues, from compromised educational attainment to psychological trauma. Efforts to address these challenges require context-specific strategies that take into account the unique socio-economic and cultural factors at play. In the context of Traditional Authority Chimwala, there is a need to understand and assess the effectiveness of various safeguarding strategies in place. Such strategies may include community-based interventions, social services, legal protections, and educational programs aimed at preventing and responding to child abuse and maltreatment. As the global community recognizes the importance of safeguarding children's rights and well-being, the case of Traditional Authority Chimwala, Mangochi, provides a valuable opportunity to explore the practical implications of implementing strategies for protecting children in dysfunctional families. This research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how local, national, and international efforts can be tailored to address the specific challenges faced by children in this region, ultimately fostering a safer and more nurturing environment for their growth and development.

Protecting vulnerable children

The report *Protecting Vulnerable Children* (Australian Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2005) addressed concerns about children in out-of-home care such as foster care, other residential-type organisations like juvenile justice and detention centres and children with disabilities in care. It also addressed the role of organisations within mainstream communities with whom vulnerable children potentially interact. The report found that in spite of regular State-commissioned inquiries into problems with the care and protection of children in out-of-home care, a system that was responsive, accountable and achieved outcomes in the best interest of children (Australian Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2005, p. 22) had yet to be achieved. The Committee recommended, for example, that awareness of child protection issues and the long-term effects of being in care be included as components of tertiary teacher education courses. This and other recommendations highlight the need for awareness about child abuse and neglect in all child-focussed organisations, not just those in which children have been found to be vulnerable to maltreatment.

Previous maltreatment

Children who have experienced maltreatment in the past (for example, children already in the child protection system) have an increased vulnerability to further abuse (Finkelhor & Dzuiba Leatherman, 1994). In addition, most children who have been maltreated experience multiple types of abuse and neglect (Bromfield & Higgins, 2005; Higgins, 2004). Children previously maltreated by a family member are vulnerable to further maltreatment by an extra-familial perpetrator (Bromfield & Higgins, 2005). Generally

there are potentially a number of reasons why children who have already experienced maltreatment have a higher risk of being maltreated again, including the impact on the child's psychological development from the previous maltreatment, the child being starved for attention, or—in cases of child neglect—inadequate supervision and attention leaving the child vulnerable to predatory perpetrators of child sexual abuse (Bromfield & Higgins, 2005).

Policies and procedures

An essential component of effective risk management strategies must be reliable, workable and easily implemented policy and procedures for responding effectively to allegations or disclosures of maltreatment. The first step must be an assessment of existing facilitators and barriers to disclosure of both past and current maltreatment. Examples of poor organisational practices in responding to disclosures that have been highlighted in the literature include: staff ignoring signs of abuse or dismissing/ failing to act upon disclosures (Sullivan & Beech, 2002); managers attempting to protect reputations of institutions by not reporting abuse; and reluctance by staff to co-operate with investigations (Nunno, 1999, cited in Gallagher, 1999). Other negative responses to disclosure in the experience of some institutions have included whistle-blowers being ridiculed, sacked, ostracised, disadvantaged on rosters and leave schedules, and reprimanded (Davidson & McNamara, 1999). Policies and procedures for responding to disclosures of maltreatment should include a structure for responding to allegations of child abuse (both past and present) perpetrated by members of the organisation; and a framework for responding to and supporting children and their families affected by child abuse within the organisation. In addition, regular and updated training on child maltreatment matters ensures the topic is discussed regularly and that staff members have the most current information available. It also encourages regular open discussion of any staff concerns and can contribute to an environment that supports early disclosure of abuse (Higgins, 2001).

Problem statement

Child abuse and maltreatment in dysfunctional families particularly in Traditional Authority Chimwala, Mangochi, are far-reaching (Pritchard, 2014) in such a way that Children in Traditional Authority Chimwala, Mangochi children are exposed to physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and in educational which proves that children in Mangochi Traditional Authority Chimwala are facing child abuse and maltreatment in their homes. Due to the results of the child abuse and maltreatment children are at risk of compromised educational attainment, psychological trauma, and long-term issues that hinder their overall development (Metcalf, 2016). Moreover, these challenges pose a significant obstacle to the realization of children's rights and well-being, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 2020).

Given the critical need to address this issue comprehensively, there is a gap in understanding the effectiveness of existing safeguarding strategies and interventions and the role of parents (Metcalf, 2016). It is essential to analyse or address the strategies of child abuse and maltreatment because even though there are strategies for safeguarding child abuse and maltreatment, children still face different forms of child abuse and maltreatment in their homes. It is also important to address child abuse and maltreatment in dysfunctional families with the aim of identifying areas where improvement is necessary to ensure the protection and well-being of children in dysfunctional families in Traditional Authority Chimwala (Pritchard, 2014).

This problem underscores the urgency of exploring evidence-based strategies and policies that can mitigate the risks these children face and contribute to the creation of a safer and more nurturing environment for their growth and development (Smallbone & Milne, 2019).

Objectives of the study

Main objective

The study was premised to analyse strategies for safeguarding children from abuse and maltreatment in dysfunctional families.

Specific objective

1. To identify the key risk factors associated with child abuse and maltreatment in dysfunctional families
2. To assess the effectiveness of different strategies and interventions in preventing and addressing child abuse and maltreatment.
3. To analyse the role of legal and policy frameworks in protecting children in cases of dysfunctional families.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Research on child abuse in dysfunctional families indicates a correlation between family structure and the prevalence of abuse. Numerous studies such as the new direction in child abuse and neglect by the committee of child maltreatment research (Felt, 2014) recommends an action framework to guide and support future child abuse and neglect research. It calls for a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to child abuse and neglect it also examines the factors related to child abuse which are physical, mental and behaviour health domain. Not only but also studies of child maltreatment by Dante Cicchetti (Cicchetti, 2013) elaborates the causes and consequences of child maltreatment from a developmental perspective it also gives the history and definition context of child neglect.

In addition to that we have the Child Protection in the Philippines that also conducted a study in child abuse and maltreatment, it focused on child protection in terms of maltreatment whereby it elaborated the current child protection system which is described as ‘top-down’, with clear legislation and national policy that is poorly implemented to the point that its ‘systemic’ characteristics are questioned (Roche et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2016). Child protection coverage varies significantly in resources and approaches, while social welfare infrastructure lacks capacity and technical expertise. The Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act also provided a legal basis to protect children from abuse including ‘neglect, cruelty, exploitation and discrimination and other conditions, prejudicial to their development’. The Act also states that it is the ‘policy of the State to provide special protection to children from all forms of abuse’ and to ‘carry out a program for prevention and deterrence of and crisis intervention in situations of child abuse, exploitation and discrimination’, detailing a legislative and programmatic commitment to protecting children.

Child protection in the Global South

UNICEF understands child protection as preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse (UNICEF, 2008), an approach largely utilised within system-based frameworks in Global South policy contexts (Connolly et al., 2014). Child protection systems aim to provide a coherent structure, including a combination of policy, programs and efforts, to prevent, respond and resolve child maltreatment (Pells, 2012; Wessells et al., 2012). As such, they seek to integrate fragmented programs and actors across community, national and international levels (Wulczyn et al., 2010). Community-based child protection has emerged in circumstances of ineffective or absent child protection systems and diverse populations, often comprising local level groups, actors or processes that prevent or respond to child maltreatment in the absence of effective formal structures to protect children (Connolly et al., 2014; Wessells, 2015; Wessells et

al., 2012). These approaches utilise community strengths and actors, may incorporate community-government collaborations (Wessells, 2015), and require trust across micro- and macro-levels with numerous and diverse actors and groups (O’Leary et al., 2015). The primary advantage of such approaches is that child protection actors are closer to the lives of children and their families and the contexts in which maltreatment occurs.

Child protection in the Philippines

The Philippines’ current child protection system is described as ‘top-down’, with clear legislation and national policy that is poorly implemented to the point that its ‘systemic’ characteristics are questioned (Roche et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2016). Child protection coverage varies significantly in resources and approaches, while social welfare infrastructure lacks capacity and technical expertise (Kim & Yoo, 2015; Ramesh, 2014; UNICEF, 2016). The Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act (Republic Act 7610) provides a legal basis to protect children from abuse including ‘neglect, cruelty, exploitation and discrimination and other conditions, prejudicial to their development’. The Act also states that it is the ‘policy of the State to provide special protection to children from all forms of abuse’ and to ‘carry out a program for prevention and deterrence of and crisis intervention in situations of child abuse, exploitation and discrimination’, detailing a legislative and programmatic commitment to protecting children.

Child protection, and broader welfare approaches, reflect wider governance structures in the Philippines. The state provides minimal social assistance, with the family unit taking onus for its own welfare, under the ‘productivist’ conditions of the Philippine welfare state, whereby economic growth is prioritised over social policies (Choi, 2012; Yu, 2013). National policy highlights the role of local government as a central component of welfare interventions for children (CWC, 2010), while emphasising parents’ and families’ own responsibilities for protecting children (Roche, 2019). LGUs struggle to provide services and can leave communities without basic services and facilities (Yilmaz & Venugopal, 2013). Further, weak national institutions struggle to hold local governments to account (Yilmaz & Venugopal, 2013), creating situations whereby child protection efforts have become discretionary, impacting welfare services for children and families. Emerging from these governance conditions are an array of non-government welfare organisations, including residential care settings. The Philippines’ Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) lists over 900 private social welfare agencies with residential care programs (DSWD, 2021a, 2021b); however, there are generally thought to be many more (Graff, 2018), due to limited regulation and the international commodification of children’s welfare and demand for engagement with orphans (Cheney & Ucembe, 2019). How these factors contribute to local child protection arrangements, child protection actors and their roles and functions, including the role of residential care, is the focus of this study.

Preventing child abuse: Changes to family support in the 21st century

The impact on families

Given the complex nature of families, and their sensitivity to economic and social change in their wider environment, it is perhaps not surprising that families themselves have experienced significant changes to their structure (McGurk 1997; Weston & Stanton 2002). The ‘changing patterns of family structure and formation – [such as] the formation of marriage-like relationships, changes in childbearing and fertility patterns, revisited gender roles, the intrusion of work into family life and family breakdown’ (McGurk 1997: v), have been interpreted as evidence of both the decline of the family ‘as we know it’ and alternatively, as evidence of the ability of families to adapt to changing circumstances. With regard to the latter, it is the family’s ‘durability and adaptability’ that are seen as evidence that families (albeit different sorts of families) will continue to remain as the basic social unit of society (McGurk 1997).

The Changing Nature of Family Support

The increasing expansion and identification of social ills or issues (such as child abuse and parenting problems, youth suicide, bullying, domestic violence, substance abuse, relationship breakdown etc.), combined with a greater focus on the quality of family life and the health and wellbeing of family members (Tomison & Wise 1999), have produced significant demand for assistance as families and communities seek external support to assist Preventing child abuse: Changes to family support in the 21st century Adam M. Tomison them in achieving and maintaining a ‘reasonable’ standard of living, health and wellbeing. This has occurred as traditional forms of support provided by extended family and/or friends and neighbours appear to be decreasing (Bittman & Pixley 2000). As a consequence, families have turned to governments and a range of family support services to assist them in dealing with the changing nature of society and the specific issues they may face. These ‘family support services’ can be broadly defined as seeking ‘to benefit families by improving their capacity to care for children and/or strengthening family relationships’ (AIHW 2001:xi). Typically, such services have focused on the provision of parent support, knowledge and skills development, and have been provided via centre-based group programs and/or as home visitation services (e.g. Tomison & Poole 2000). [For an overview of parent education, see Tomison 1998; for recent analyses of the effectiveness of such programs, see Chalk & King 1998, and Shonkoff & Phillips 2000.] In the last decade there has been a substantial reinvestment in a rapidly changing family support sector (Tomison 2001), and growing recognition of the need to work strategically to ensure the best response for families and improved societal health and wellbeing. In this paper, the intention is to explore a number of central themes in the development and provision of family support services, particularly as it applies to the prevention of child abuse and other family violence in the twenty first century.

The child protection ‘pendulum’

Since the 1800s, the provision of alternative care has oscillated between the housing of children in institutional settings or in some form of family-based care, such as foster care. This trend provides one of the earliest examples of what has become a continuing issue in child protection and child welfare – the regular oscillation between (and revisiting of) child protection and child abuse prevention service models or approaches (Dale 1998), often as a response to public outcry at perceived failures in protecting children from harm (and child deaths in particular) (Scott 1995; Goddard 1996; Parton 1997). Fuelled by evidence of the further abuse and neglect of children in institutions, the alternative care ‘pendulum’ has continued to swing between institutional and family-based care to this day. Australian State and Territory governments are still reflecting on the degree to which institutional care should be used under a system that has favoured family-based care for much of the past 40 years.

Family support in the 20th century

most Australian states had established a Children’s Court and legislation to protect children from the more obvious forms of child maltreatment. A number of voluntary ‘child rescue’ organisations were also formed at this time: for example, the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (1894), later to be known as the Children’s Protection Society (Liddell 1993). The development of such agencies strengthened the role of the non-government sector in carrying out early forms of child protection work. The end of the nineteenth century saw child protection as largely invisible, subsumed within the ‘emerging and amorphous field of child welfare’ (Myers 2002:563). The period also saw the development of early family support services, such as forms of parental respite, and set the foundation for the child welfare/family support sector of the 1990s (Liddell 1993).

The modern discovery of child abuse

The first half of the twentieth century was not notable for changes to child welfare practice, but it did see the

state taking greater responsibility for looking after children's welfare, and the increased use of legislation to enforce appropriate standards of care (Liddell 1993). It is generally agreed that modern professional (and subsequently public) interest in child maltreatment, sometimes known as the 'second wave of the child rescue movement' (Scott 1995), was prompted by the publication in 1962 of Kempe and colleagues' seminal work on 'battered child syndrome' (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemuller & Silver 1962). Subsequent public concern for the welfare of children and the need for expertise in the assessment and treatment of cases of child abuse and neglect led most communities to develop some form of distinct, professionally staffed, child protection service, located within social service agencies or government departments (Jenkins, Salus & Schultze 1979). According to some sources (for example, American Humane Association 1992), the development of child protection services as part of larger welfare departments was part of a commitment to maintaining families, rather than treating child abuse as a crime.

The role of family support services

In addition to a continued role in providing alternative care for children removed from their families, the church agencies, 'child rescue' societies and other non-government agencies that constitute the family support service sector, have spent much of the last 40 years maintaining and expanding their role in supporting children and families at risk of harm. Although it was not always explicitly acknowledged as such, the work of supporting 'at risk' families, maltreating families who sought assistance voluntarily, and statutory child protection client families, has been vital in not only avoiding the recurrence of maltreatment, but in reducing the risk or preventing maltreatment and enhancing child and family wellbeing (Tomison 1999; 2011). Throughout the 1980s, a range of family support services provided a variety of therapeutic supports to families in need. These services included nurse-based home visiting services, where there was some recognition by governments and practitioners that infant welfare nurses could play a greater role in identifying and supporting 'at risk' families. At this time, adequate resourcing and lower service demand meant that many services were able to counsel, treat or support not only statutory child protection clients, but many voluntary client families where identified child maltreatment concerns were deemed suitable for a community case plan (Tomison 2011). In addition, many families who voluntarily sought assistance for more general family dysfunctions or issues, and/or who were 'at risk' of maltreating their children (that is, secondary prevention cases), were also able to be provided with supports, although these were often of a short-term nature (Tomison 2011).

Reframing child protection service provision

In the 1990s, statutory child protection services in the Australian States and Territories, like those in other Western countries, struggled to cope with ever-increasing numbers of reports of suspected child maltreatment and fewer resources (Tomison 1996c). These pressures, some caused or exacerbated by an over-emphasis on cost-effectiveness and bureaucratic structures at the expense of professional practice, led governments and child protection services to seek alternative approaches for managing child abuse and neglect. It became apparent that a substantial proportion of the child maltreatment allegations referred to child protection services did not involve concerns deemed by the statutory services as requiring their involvement (Audit Commission 1994; Dartington Social Research Unit 1995; Tomison 1996c). Many of the reports involved families who had not maltreated their child but who had more generic problems, such as financial or housing difficulties, an incapacitated caregiver, or serious stress problems. Although such 'at risk' families may require assistance, it has been argued (Tomison 1996c) that they do not require child protection intervention.

Further, their labelling as cases of child abuse or neglect was placing an additional burden on what were generally limited child protection resources (Tomison 1996c). Despite the fact that legal action was not

taken for the majority of families with whom child protection services were involved, it was argued that the style of intervention for all families had become ‘forensically driven’ (Tomison 1996c; Armitage, Boffa & Armitage 1998). This adoption of a ‘forensic’ or legalistic approach produced a number of negative consequences. First, it led to the shifting of scarce child protection resources away from the provision of support to families where there was confirmed or ‘substantiated’ child maltreatment (tertiary prevention) to enable the conduct of investigations. Similar problems were identified in the United Kingdom (Audit Commission 1994; Dartington Social Research Unit 1995) and the United States. The US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (1993) concluded that the adoption of a forensic approach meant there was no realistic hope of meaningful treatment or family support to prevent a recurrence of child abuse and neglect, or to ameliorate its effects. As Kaufman and Zigler noted: ‘currently, investigation is the only “service” provided in response to many child abuse and neglect reports’ (1996:235).

Second, an under-resourced family support system was swamped by referrals from child protection services, effectively ending the bulk of the secondary prevention work that had been done with ‘at risk’ families and creating substantial waiting lists for all but the most severe child abuse cases (Tomison 1996c; 1999). In effect, the focus on child protection investigations at the expense of prevention and treatment services was ‘the same as having a health system in which ambulances and casualty departments are increased while immunisation programs and surgical wards are closed’ (Scott 1995:85). Third, there was an emphasis on child protection services as the ‘expert’, and an alienation of essential non-government family support agencies and professionals from a partnership approach with statutory services with regard to the prevention, support and protection of children (Armitage, Boffa & Armitage 1998). Finally, the shift to forensic investigation also raised general questions in relation both to child protection services’ screening or ‘gatekeeping practices and the nature and availability of broader child welfare and family support services in the community.

Valuing family support

As Scott noted; child protection services are merely one component in a complex web of child and family services at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of prevention. The child protection service is heavily dependent on this broader infrastructure of statutory and non-statutory service. One of the primary aims of the ‘family support’ approaches described above was to re-balance the respective roles of statutory child protection services and family support services. Taken to its logical conclusion, the aim was to ensure that statutory intervention would no longer drive the child protection system, rather that it would be integrated as one important facet in an overall welfare or ‘needs’ assessment of the family (Dartington Social Research Unit 1995; Parton 1997). Thus, good practice and adequate child protection would emerge from adopting a wider perspective on child protection such that the underlying problems in a family that may put a child ‘at risk’, or have a detrimental effect on the child’s long-term welfare, would be addressed. That is, it was recognised that merely conducting an investigation and applying the label ‘child abuse’ to a family would not do much to reduce the risk of further harm to children. The priority would be on supporting children and parents to reduce any risks to the child, and to keep ‘policing, surveillance and coercive interventions to a minimum’ (Parton 1997:3). Clearly there has been a renewed focus on addressing family ills holistically, and to resource services to support children and families in order to prevent the development or recurrence of child abuse and neglect. With regard to statutory child protection services, child protection workers have been provided with a greater range of options to select from when responding to a report. These differentiated responses provide workers with more scope to tailor the assessment process to the perceived family needs and the level of risk to the child (Tomson 2002). Thus, a case that appears to be mainly about a need for general family.

Theoretical framework

Ecological Systems Theory (Urie Bronfenbrenner, 1979): Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Urie

Bronfenbrenner, emphasizes the importance of understanding the multiple systems and contexts in which a child develops. It consists of several interconnected levels:

1. **Microsystem:** This is the immediate environment in which the child interacts, including the family and home. In the context of dysfunctional families, the microsystem can include the abusive or neglectful family members and their impact on the child.
2. **Mesosystem:** This level involves the connections and interactions between various microsystems, such as between the child's family, school, and community support systems. In the case of safeguarding children in dysfunctional families, the effectiveness of interventions may depend on how these systems collaborate to protect the child, (E Ebersohn and AC Bouwer, 2015).
3. **Exosystemic:** The ecosystem comprises settings that indirectly influence the child, like the workplace of the parents, extended family, or social services. Understanding how these factors can either exacerbate or mitigate the risks faced by children in dysfunctional families is essential.
4. **Macrosystem:** This level encompasses the broader cultural and societal values, laws, and norms that shape the child's experiences. Laws and policies addressing child protection and family support are a critical part of the Macrosystem.
5. **Chronosystem:** The chronosystem considers the changes and transitions that occur in a child's life over time. It is essential to recognize how a child's experience in a broken home may evolve and how interventions must adapt accordingly.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby): Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby, focuses on the emotional bonds between children and their caregivers, often parents. Children rely on their caregivers for safety, comfort, and support. In dysfunctional families, these attachments can be disrupted or compromised due to factors such as parental separation, neglect, or abuse, (SC Flaherty, 2011).

Attachment theory can help us understand how the quality of these early attachments influences a child's emotional well-being and behavior. Insecure or disrupted attachments can contribute to emotional and psychological problems in children. Safeguarding strategies in dysfunctional families should consider the following aspects:

1. **Secure Attachment:** Encouraging secure attachments with caregivers, even in the context of a broken home, can provide children with a source of emotional support and resilience.
2. **Interventions:** Interventions should aim to support and strengthen the caregiver-child attachment, promote healthy parent-child relationships, and provide therapeutic interventions when necessary.
3. **Impact on Future Relationships:** Understanding attachment theory can also help professionals anticipate how these early relationships may influence a child's future relationships and mental health, guiding long-term protective strategies.

The Ecological Systems Theory and Attachment Theory provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing child abuse and maltreatment in dysfunctional families. These theories highlight the importance of considering the multiple systems and relationships that shape a child's development and well-being, as well as the critical role of secure attachments in safeguarding children from the adverse effects of dysfunctional families.

Conceptual framework

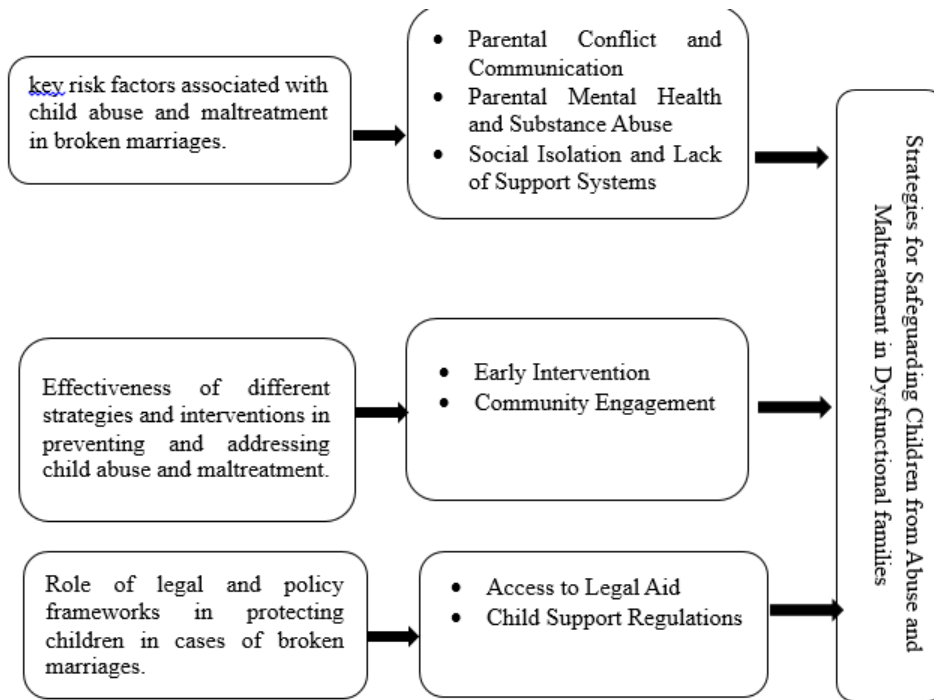


Figure 1: conceptual framework on the child maltreatment and protection

The identification of key risk factors serves as the foundational layer, exploring the elements such as parental stress, communication breakdown, and economic strain. Building upon this foundation, the framework extends to the assessment of the effectiveness of diverse preventive and intervention strategies, forming a crucial bridge between understanding risk factors and implementing targeted measures. The analysis of legal and policy frameworks comprises the main structure, emphasizing their key role in safeguarding children amidst broken marital contexts. This conceptual seeks to synthesize psychological, social, and legal dimensions, creating a holistic understanding that not only identifies the roots of vulnerability but also informs strategies and policies aimed at nurturing a protective environment for children in the aftermath of broken marriages.

Research Design

A research design is an arrangement of conditions for collection and analysis of data in a manner that aims at combining relevance of the research purpose with economy in procedure (Kothari, 2004). This research used quantitative research methods for collection and analysing data. Quantitative research design is defined as a research method that focuses on obtaining data through open-ended and conversational communication. Quantitative research also deals with numerical data to understand how independent variables affect the dependent variable. There are different types of quantitative research design namely; descriptive, correlation, experimental and casual experimental design. This project used quantitative research design. Descriptive design involves outlining and describing the status of the identified variables to provide systematic information on a phenomenon in this case community development, (Nassaji, 2015).

Study Area

This research was conducted in Mangochi district in Chiwaula village, Traditional Authority Chimwala. This area is located in the southern region of Malawi covering an area of 6,273 km² and has a population of 610,239.

Study Population

According to (Mungenda, 2003), Population is defined as a complete set of individual cases or object with some common observable characteristics. This study targeted 30 respondents and every male and female from 18 years and above.

Sampling

According to (Krause, 2011) sampling means the design task of deciding which elements in a population will be chosen and how those elements will be chosen. A sample refers to people who are participating in the study. There are two types of sampling; Probability and Non-probability sampling, this study probability sampling was used.

Probability sampling is a sampling method that involves randomly selecting a part of population that needed to study. Under probability sampling, simple random technique was used. Simple random, is a technique where every item in the population has a chance of being selected. The reason of choosing this technique was to made generalization about a population and because of its simplicity and lack of bias. This means that everyone in Chimwala village participated in this research (Bryman, 2004).

Table 1: number of respondents

S.No	Entity name	Respondents
1	Chiefs	2
2	Parents/caregivers	14
3	Children	14
	Total	30

Data Collection and Instruments

Data collection methods are instrument which are used to collect data beyond the physical research of the observer (Adler, 2008). In this research, both primary and secondary data were used, primary data obtained from the participants of the community. While secondary data was collected from reviewing other scholar's books, journals and article. In order to collect primary data, questionnaires and interviews were used to get answers from both girls and boys in Chimwala village.

Questionnaire

Questionnaire refers to a sheet of paper containing questions relating to a specific aspect regarding which the researcher collects data (Engel, 2009). The questionnaire contains both open and closed questions. This study administered a total of 30 questionnaires. The researcher used this type of tool because it helped to gather a lot of information in short period of time from different people. Also, this type of method is free from bias because answers generated are in respondents' own perception. Despite the importance the questionnaire tried to limit the respondent the extent to which they may respond to the questions.

Interview Guide

An interview is a data collection technique that involves oral questioning of respondents either individually or as a group (Bryman, 2004). This research used interview guide as a data collection tool. The approach targeted those that participated in filling the questionnaires by giving them opportunity to explain further their opinion on study topic inline to the objectives. As such, 45 respondents participated in the interview

data collection. The interview guide contained a list of questions that help the researcher to gather information as required by the objectives of the study. Interview guide was selected because of its nature of flexibility which allows the respondents to extend their responses.

Data validity and reliability

Ensuring data validity and reliability is critical for trustworthy research outcomes. Data validity ensures that measurements accurately represent the intended concepts, whether through content, construct, or criterion-related validity. On the other hand, data reliability assesses the consistency of measurements over time or across different conditions, employing methods like test-retest or internal consistency reliability. Researchers enhance validity by using robust measurement tools and validation methods, while reliability is strengthened through standardized data collection and rigorous testing procedures. These measures collectively contribute to the accuracy and consistency of the data, forming the foundation for meaningful and credible research findings.

Data Analysis plan

Data analysis is the process of interpreting the survey data (Rick, 2004). The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft excel. Simple descriptive statistics such as percentage, tables and graphic illustrations were used to present the findings of the study.

Ethical consideration

American psychological Association (2017), argues that it is very important for researchers to highlight ethical considerations for research. First and foremost, permission to conduct the research was obtained from DMI University. Secondly, the researcher got consent from respondents and notify them that their participation is voluntary. Thirdly, participants were informed about the research objectives before participating. Lastly, the study observed confidentiality, and use of proper language.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Factors associated with child abuse and maltreatment in broke homes

- **Unstable environment for children, parental stress and parental inability to provide consistency care and support**

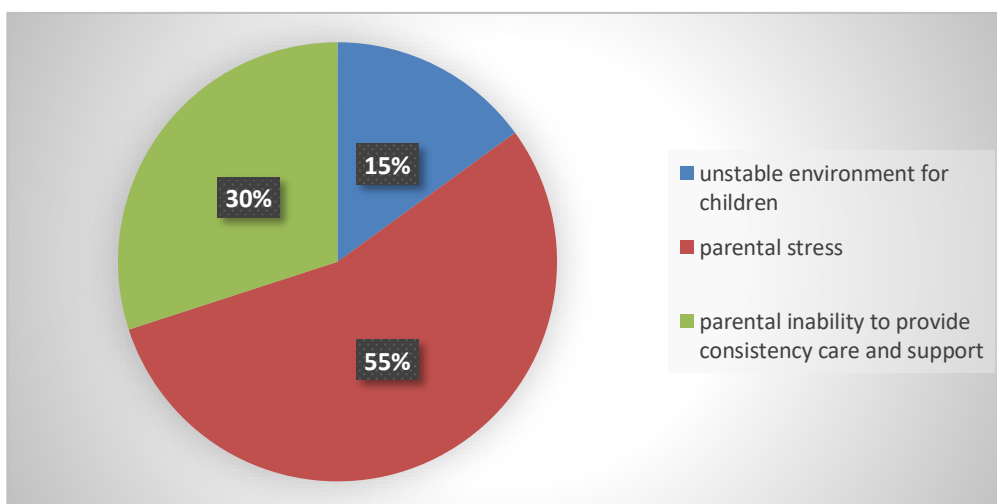


Figure 1: contributing factors to child abuse and maltreatment

An unstable environment, affecting 15% of children, involves frequent changes in living situations and inconsistent routines, which can make children feel insecure and anxious. This instability hampers their ability to form secure attachments and perform well academically and socially. 55% of the cases involve parental stress in such a way that parents misdirect their anger towards their children. And also, parents might unintentionally vent their frustrations on their children, leading to confusion, fear, and damaged self-esteem in the children, potentially resulting in behavioural issues.

Parenting stress as a factor also include psychological abuse due to increased tension and the decreased ability of parents to provide consistent and supportive care. Psychological abuse includes constant criticism, humiliation, and emotional manipulation, which can severely affect children’s mental health, leading to issues such as depression, anxiety, and low self-worth. This abuse has long-lasting effects, impairing their ability to form healthy relationships in the future. Similarly, high levels of stress and conflict can prevent parents from offering consistent and nurturing care, leading to developmental delays and emotional insecurities in children. These children may feel neglected and unsupported, which can hinder their overall growth, affecting their academic performance and social interactions. These findings emphasise the importance of addressing parental stress and conflict to ensure a stable and nurturing environment for children’s healthy development.

About 30% of children problems involves parents’ inability to provide consistent care and support. This means that in nearly one third of these situations. This means that children suffered because their parents couldn’t offer a stable and reliable environment. Reasons for this included financial difficulties, mental health issues, substance abuse and the challenges of single parenting. Addressing these problems through support systems, community programs and better policies can help reduce child abuse and maltreatment in dysfunctional families.

- **Economic factors and financial stress contributing to the risk of child abuse and maltreatment**

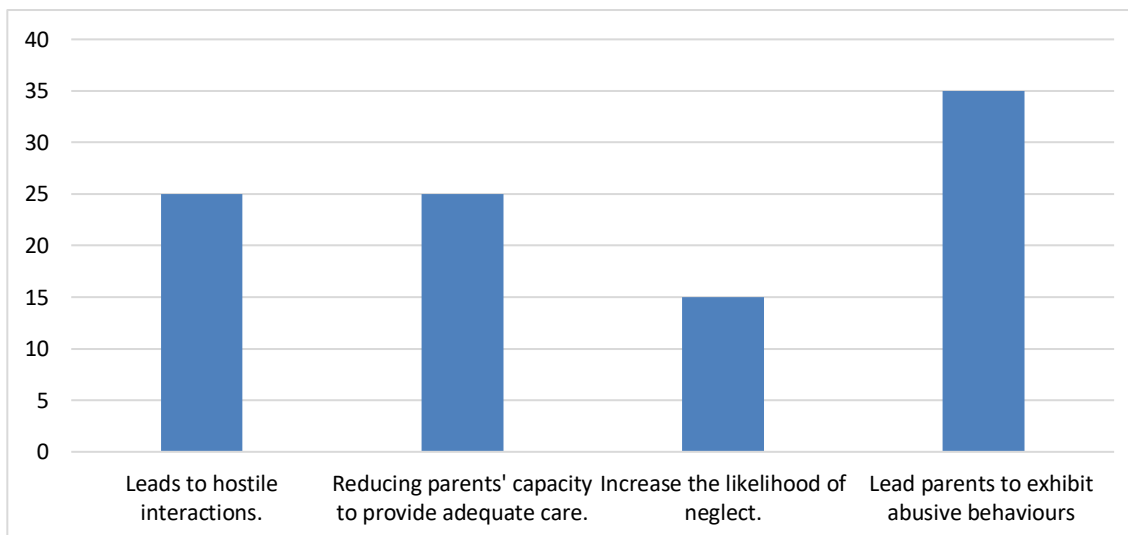


Figure 2: Economic factors and financial stress contributing to the risk of child abuse and maltreatment

Hostile interactions, 25%, are a significant consequence. In such environments, parents may engage in frequent arguments or show aggression, creating a tense atmosphere that can make children feel unsafe and anxious. This hostility can damage the parent-child relationship and negatively impact the child’s emotional and social development. Almost 25% of the cases involve a reduction in parents’ capacity to provide adequate care. When parents are overwhelmed by stress or conflict, their ability to meet their children’s physical, emotional, and developmental needs diminish. This inadequacy can lead to children feeling

neglected and unsupported, affecting their overall well-being and development.

The likelihood of neglect increases in 15% of these situations. Neglect occurs when parents fail to provide necessary care, supervision, or support due to being preoccupied with their stressors. Neglect can have severe and long-lasting effects on children, including developmental delays, emotional issues, and problems with forming healthy relationships. The most severe consequence, observed in 35% of the cases, is that parents may exhibit abusive behaviors. Under extreme stress, parents might resort to physical, emotional, or verbal abuse towards their children. This abuse can lead to profound psychological trauma, resulting in mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. The impact of such abuse can be enduring, affecting the child’s ability to lead a healthy and productive life.

• **The absence of a supportive social network impacting the risk of child abuse and maltreatment within broken marriages**

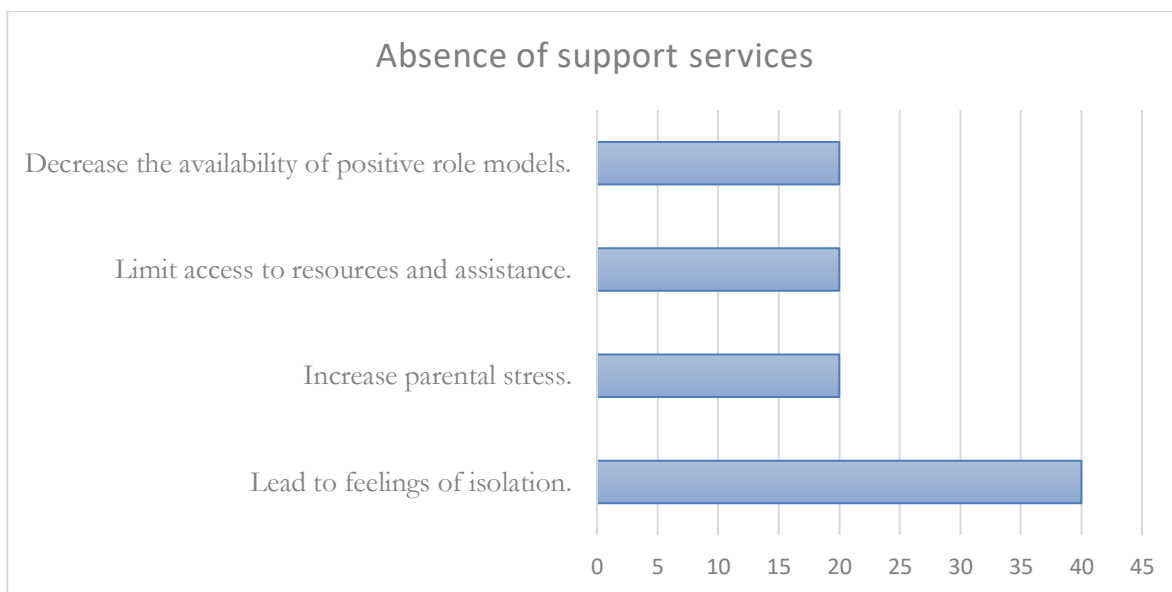


Figure 3: The absence of a supportive social network impacting the risk of child abuse and maltreatment within dysfunctional marriages.

The most prevalent impact, at 40%, is that these conditions lead to feelings of isolation. Children in such environments may feel disconnected from their peers and community, which can hinder their social development and emotional well-being. Isolation can lead to loneliness, depression, and a sense of alienation, making it difficult for children to form healthy relationships and support networks. Secondly, 20% of the cases show an increase in parental stress. High levels of stress in parents can further exacerbate the difficulties they face in providing adequate care and support for their children. This increased stress can lead to a vicious cycle where the parents’ ability to cope diminishes, potentially resulting in negative behaviors and poor parenting practices.

Another 20% of cases involve limited access to resources and assistance. Families dealing with adverse conditions often struggle to obtain necessary resources such as healthcare, educational support, and financial aid. This limitation can severely affect children’s development, as they might not receive the help they need to thrive academically, physically, or emotionally. Access to community resources and support systems is crucial for mitigating these adverse effects. Lastly, 20% of the situations involve a decrease in the availability of positive role models. Positive role models are essential for children’s development, as they provide guidance, inspiration, and a framework for healthy behaviors and attitudes. When children lack access to such role models, they may struggle to develop a positive self-image and effective coping

strategies, leading to potential behavioural and emotional challenges. Overall, these impacts highlight the importance of providing support to families in adverse conditions. Interventions such as community support programs, mental health services, and access to educational and financial resources can play a crucial role in mitigating these negative effects and fostering a healthier environment for children and their families.

Effectiveness of different strategies and interventions in preventing and addressing child abuse and maltreatment.

- **Education programs**

Educational programs designed to prevent child abuse and promote positive parenting practices have shown varying levels of effectiveness

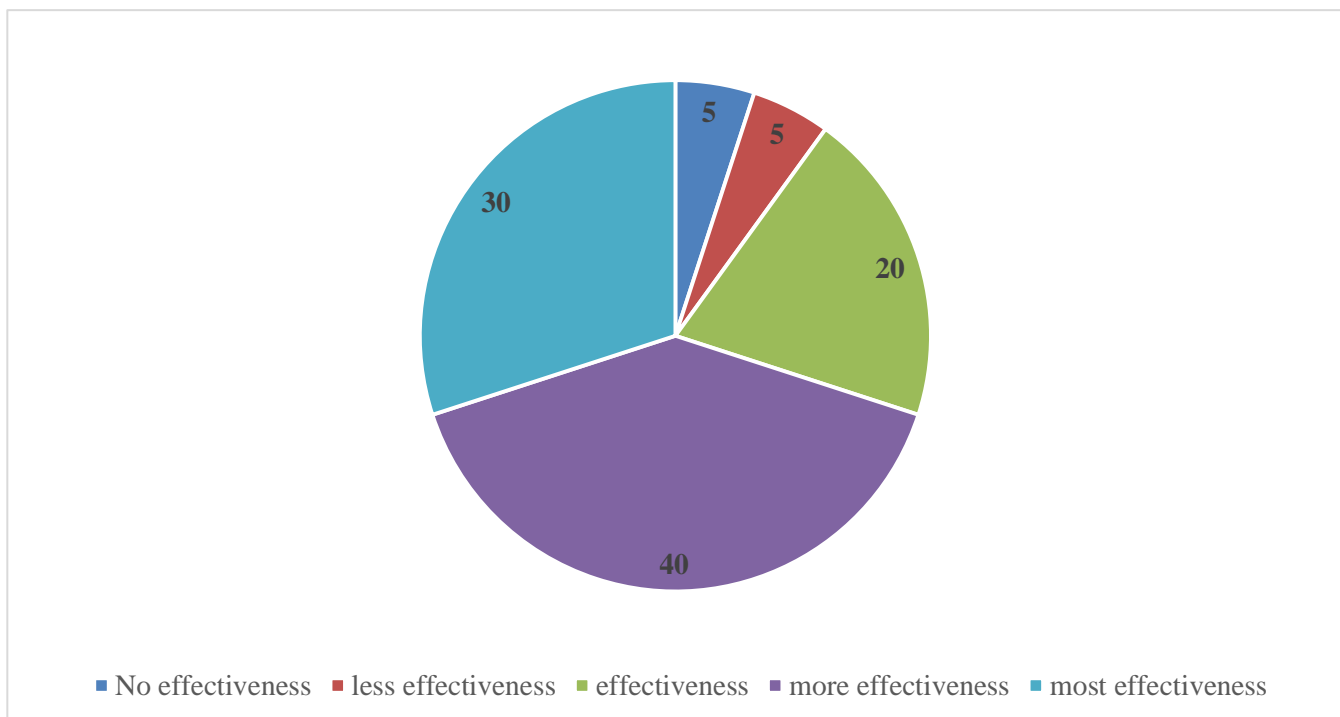


Figure 4: Evidence existing regarding the effectiveness of educational programs in preventing child abuse and promoting positive parenting practice

Approximately 5% of these programs demonstrate no significant impact, often due to factors such as poor design, inadequate implementation, or lack of participant engagement. Another 5% exhibit minimal effectiveness, leading to slight improvements that are not substantial or long-lasting. However, around 20% of programs show clear effectiveness, with noticeable improvements in parenting skills, increased awareness of child development, and reductions in abusive behaviors. More substantial positive outcomes are observed in 40% of programs, which typically include comprehensive curricula, multiple sessions, and follow-up support. These programs effectively reduce instances of child abuse, enhance parent-child interactions, and promote healthy development. The top 30% of programs achieve the highest levels of effectiveness, significantly reducing child abuse rates and improving positive parenting practices. These programs are well-funded, rigorously evaluated, and continuously improved based on feedback and research, often integrating multidisciplinary approaches involving social services, healthcare providers, and educational institutions. Evidence supporting the effectiveness of these programs includes successful models like Home Visitation Programs, Parenting Education Programs, and Community-Based Programs, as well as findings from meta-analyses and systematic reviews, which consistently highlight the success of well-designed interventions in improving parenting practices and reducing the risk of child maltreatment.

● **Community-based interventions and factors influencing their success**

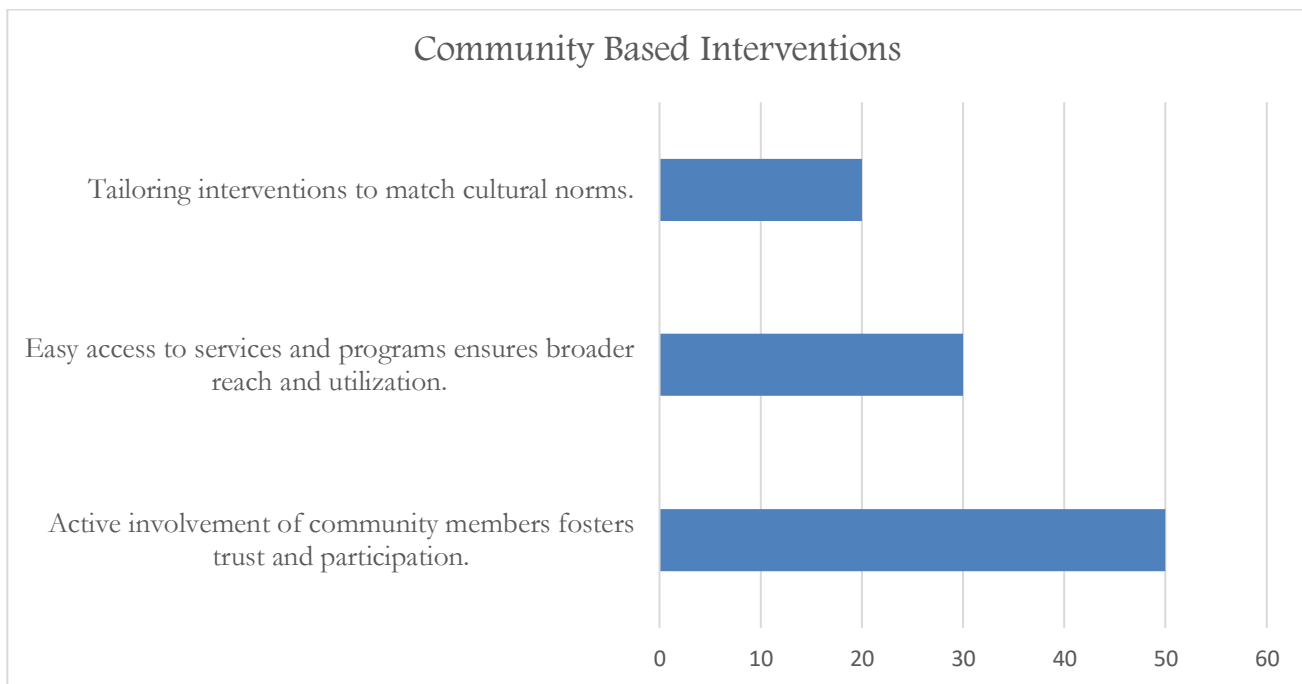


Figure 6: Community-based interventions contributing to reducing the incidence of child abuse and maltreatment, and factors influencing their success

The effectiveness of interventions aimed at preventing child abuse and promoting positive parenting practices is significantly enhanced by several key factors. Firstly, the active involvement of community members, accounting for 50%, fosters trust and participation. When community members are engaged, they help create a supportive environment that encourages parents to participate in programs and adhere to positive parenting practices. This involvement also builds a sense of collective responsibility and trust, which is crucial for the success of any intervention.

Easy access to services and programs ensures broader reach and utilization, making up 30% of the effectiveness. When services are readily available and easily accessible, more families are likely to take advantage of them. This accessibility can be achieved by offering programs in convenient locations, at various times, and through multiple channels (such as online platforms and in-person sessions), thereby removing barriers to participation and ensuring that more parents can benefit from the support offered.

Tailoring interventions to match cultural norms accounts for 20% of the effectiveness. Programs that respect and incorporate the cultural values and practices of the target population are more likely to be accepted and effective. Tailoring interventions in this way helps ensure that the strategies and messages resonate with participants, making them more relevant and impactful. By considering cultural norms, programs can address specific needs and challenges within the community, enhancing their overall effectiveness and sustainability.

The role of legal and policy frameworks in protecting children in cases of broken marriages

existing legal frameworks addressing the rights and well-being of children

Existing legal frameworks prioritize the best interests of the child by ensuring that children’s rights and well-being are protected during and after the dissolution of a marriage. This includes provisions for child

custody, visitation rights, and financial support. Laws typically mandate that decisions regarding children must focus on their safety, stability, and emotional and physical health, ensuring that both parents remain involved in their lives in a way that serves the child's best interests.

The extent of family court procedures and custody arrangements contributing to ensuring the safety and welfare of children in cases of broken marriages

Family court procedures and custody arrangements play a critical role in safeguarding children by determining the most appropriate living and visitation arrangements. Courts evaluate various factors such as parental competence, the child's preferences, and any history of abuse or neglect. Custody arrangements are designed to provide a stable and nurturing environment, and courts can modify arrangements if the child's welfare is at risk, ensuring continuous oversight and intervention if necessary.

Child protection policies integrated into divorce

Child protection policies are integrated into divorce and separation proceedings through mandatory reporting of any suspected abuse or neglect, thorough evaluations of each parent's suitability, and court-ordered interventions such as parenting classes or supervised visitation. Mechanisms for enforcement include regular court reviews, involvement of child protective services, and legal penalties for non-compliance with court orders. These measures ensure that children's safety remains a top priority throughout the legal process.

Role of collaboration between legal and social services play in safeguarding children during and after the dissolution of marriages

Collaboration between legal and social services is essential for providing comprehensive support to children and families. Legal professionals rely on social services for assessments and recommendations regarding child welfare, while social services depend on the legal system to enforce protective measures. Improving this collaboration can involve better communication channels, integrated case management systems, and joint training programs to ensure both sectors work seamlessly together to address the complex needs of children in broken marriages.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The study focused on analysing strategies for safeguarding children from abuse and maltreatment in dysfunctional families. The Study Key findings are summarized below:

Risk factors associated with child abuse and maltreatment

In dysfunctional families, 15% of children experience frequent changes in living situations and inconsistent routines, leading to insecurity, anxiety, and difficulties in forming secure attachments and performing academically and socially. In 55% of cases, parents misdirect their anger towards their children, causing confusion, fear, and damaged self-esteem, potentially resulting in behavioral issues. Psychological abuse due to parenting stress includes constant criticism, humiliation, and emotional manipulation, severely affecting children's mental health and development. Additionally, 30% of children suffer from inconsistent care due to their parents' financial difficulties, mental health issues, substance abuse, and the challenges of single parenting. Frequent arguments or aggression are present in 25% of these environments, creating a tense atmosphere that negatively impacts children's emotional and social development. There is also an increased likelihood of neglect in 15% of situations, leading to severe developmental and emotional issues. Furthermore, in 35% of cases, parents exhibit abusive behaviors under extreme stress, causing profound psychological trauma in children.

Effectiveness of different strategies and interventions in preventing and addressing child abuse and maltreatment.

Five percent of programs show no significant impact due to poor design, inadequate implementation, or lack of participant engagement. Another 5% exhibit minimal effectiveness, leading to only slight improvements. However, 20% of programs show clear effectiveness, with noticeable improvements in parenting skills, increased awareness of child development, and reductions in abusive behaviors. Forty percent of programs show substantial positive outcomes, effectively reducing instances of child abuse and enhancing parent-child interactions. The top 30% of programs achieve the highest levels of effectiveness, significantly reducing child abuse rates and improving positive parenting practices through well-funded, rigorously evaluated, and continuously improved approaches.

The role of legal and policy frameworks in protecting children in cases of dysfunctional families

Legal frameworks prioritize children's best interests by ensuring their safety, stability, and emotional and physical health during and after the dissolution of a marriage. Courts determine appropriate custody and visitation arrangements based on parental competence, the child's preferences, and any history of abuse or neglect, with continuous oversight and intervention if necessary. Child protection policies, integrated into divorce proceedings, include mandatory reporting of suspected abuse, thorough evaluations of each parent's suitability, and court-ordered interventions such as parenting classes or supervised visitation. Collaboration between legal and social services is essential for comprehensive support and can be improved through better communication, integrated case management, and joint training programs.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that children in dysfunctional families face significant risks of abuse and maltreatment due to unstable environments, parental mismanagement of anger, and inconsistent care. Effective strategies and interventions are crucial in mitigating these risks, with well-designed and funded programs showing the best outcomes. Legal and policy frameworks play a vital role in safeguarding children, emphasizing the need for continuous oversight and collaboration between legal and social services to ensure children's well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Enhance Program Design and Implementation: Develop comprehensive, multi-session programs with follow-up support to ensure sustained effectiveness. Secure adequate funding and conduct rigorous evaluations to continuously improve program outcomes.

Strengthen Legal and Policy Frameworks: Ensure that legal decisions prioritize children's best interests, focusing on their safety, stability, and emotional health. Integrate robust child protection policies into all divorce proceedings, with mandatory reporting and thorough evaluations.

Address Parental Stress and Conflict: Provide support for parents dealing with financial difficulties, mental health issues, and substance abuse. Offer parenting classes and resources to help parents manage stress and improve their ability to provide consistent and nurturing care.

Promote Public Awareness and Education: Raise awareness about the risks of child abuse and maltreatment in dysfunctional families. Educate parents, caregivers, and the community on recognizing and addressing these issues to ensure children's safety and well-being.

AREA OF FURTHER STUDY

Further study in the area of children in dysfunctional families facing risks of abuse and maltreatment can focus on several aspects to deepen understanding and improve interventions and also to examine the long-term effects of growing up in a broken home on children's mental health, educational attainment, and social relationships.

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