

Silent Scars: Substance Abuse, Psychological Abuse, and the Social Well-Being of Children in Low-Income Urban Settlements in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Substance abuse within households remains a growing social and public health concern with significant implications for the psychological and social well-being of children, particularly in low-income urban communities. Children living in environments characterized by parental or caregiver substance misuse are often exposed to emotional neglect, domestic instability, violence, and psychological abuse, all of which negatively affect their development and social functioning. Despite increasing scholarly and policy attention toward substance abuse in Uganda, limited research has specifically examined its relationship with psychological abuse and the lived experiences of children in low-income urban settlements.

This study employed a qualitative narrative literature review design to examine the relationship between substance abuse, psychological abuse, and the social well-being of children in low-income urban settlements in Uganda. Relevant literature was obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, and policy publications focusing on substance abuse, child welfare, psychological abuse, and urban vulnerability.

The findings indicate that substance abuse within households contributes significantly to emotional neglect, family instability, domestic violence, and poor social outcomes among children. The study further reveals that poverty, weak parental supervision, and social stigma intensify children's vulnerability to psychological abuse and social exclusion. Additionally, inadequate community support systems and policy implementation gaps continue to limit effective interventions for affected children.

The study concludes that substance abuse is not only a public health issue but also a major child protection and social welfare concern with long-term implications for children's emotional and social well-being. The paper highlights the need for integrated interventions involving families, schools, communities, and policy institutions to strengthen psychosocial support and child protection systems in vulnerable urban communities.

Keywords: Substance abuse; psychological abuse; child well-being; urban poverty; child protection; informal settlements; Uganda.

INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse remains a growing global public health and social concern with significant consequences for children's psychological, emotional, and social well-being. Recent evidence suggests that children living in households affected by substance misuse are more likely to experience emotional neglect, domestic instability, violence, and psychological abuse, all of which negatively affect their development and social functioning (World Health Organization, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). Globally, millions of children are exposed to harmful household environments characterized by substance misuse and mental health challenges, increasing their vulnerability to abuse, stigma, and long-term psychosocial difficulties.

Psychological abuse, including emotional neglect, intimidation, humiliation, verbal aggression, and exposure to chronic household conflict, has increasingly been recognized as a major form of child maltreatment with long-term developmental consequences. Children exposed to psychologically abusive environments often experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, social withdrawal, poor academic engagement, and difficulties in social integration (UNICEF, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). Evidence further indicates that emotional abuse and domestic instability significantly undermine children's sense of safety, identity, and emotional stability.

In many low-income urban communities, the effects of substance abuse are intensified by poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, weak social protection systems, and limited access to psychosocial support services. These conditions contribute to household stress, family instability, and increased exposure of children to neglect and emotional abuse. In Uganda, urban informal settlements continue to experience increasing levels of alcohol and illicit drug use, particularly among economically vulnerable populations (Kalungi et al., 2024). Recent studies conducted within urban poor communities in Kampala indicate increasing prevalence of high-risk alcohol consumption and substance misuse among adolescents and vulnerable households.

Despite growing scholarly attention toward substance abuse and child welfare globally, limited research in Uganda has specifically examined the relationship between household substance abuse, psychological abuse, and the social well-being of children living in low-income urban settlements. Existing studies have largely focused on substance use prevalence, adolescent behaviour, or public health implications, with limited analytical attention given to children's lived experiences within affected households.

Furthermore, although legal and policy frameworks exist to protect children from abuse and neglect, implementation challenges, limited community awareness, weak institutional coordination, and inadequate psychosocial support services continue to hinder effective child protection interventions within urban poor communities. This creates a significant gap in understanding how substance abuse within households shapes children's emotional experiences, social relationships, and overall well-being in Uganda's informal urban settlements.

Therefore, this study examines the relationship between substance abuse, psychological abuse, and the social well-being of children in low-income urban settlements in Uganda. The paper seeks to contribute to existing literature by providing a deeper understanding of how household substance misuse interacts with poverty, family instability, and social vulnerability to affect children's psychosocial well-being and social development.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative narrative literature review design to examine the relationship between substance abuse, psychological abuse, and the social well-being of children in low-income urban settlements in Uganda. A literature review approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to critically analyse, synthesize, and interpret existing scholarly literature, policy reports, and institutional publications related to child welfare, substance abuse, psychological abuse, and urban vulnerability.

The narrative review design was particularly suitable for this study because the subject under investigation involves complex social and psychological dynamics that require interpretive and contextual analysis rather than statistical measurement alone. The approach further enabled the integration of global, regional, and Uganda-specific perspectives regarding substance abuse and child well-being.

Literature Search and Selection Criteria

Relevant literature for this study was obtained from academic databases and institutional repositories including Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, ResearchGate, and reports published by organizations such as World Health Organization, UNICEF, and UNODC.

The review focused primarily on literature published between 2020 and 2025 in order to capture recent debates, emerging trends, and current evidence concerning substance abuse, psychological abuse, child well-being, and urban vulnerability. However, a few earlier foundational studies and theoretical perspectives were included where necessary to provide conceptual grounding for the study.

The study included peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and scholarly publications relevant to child welfare, substance abuse, and psychosocial well-being within low-income urban settings. Sources lacking academic credibility, methodological clarity, or thematic relevance to the study were excluded from the review. Key search terms included “substance abuse and child well-being,” “psychological abuse among children,” “household substance misuse,” and “urban poverty and child vulnerability.” Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to refine the search process and improve the relevance of retrieved literature.

Data Analysis

The collected literature was analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The researcher systematically reviewed and categorized findings into major themes relevant to the study objectives.

The major thematic areas included:

- substance abuse and household instability,
- psychological abuse and emotional neglect,
- poverty and urban vulnerability,
- social stigma and child well-being,
- and child protection and policy challenges.

The thematic analysis enabled the identification of patterns, relationships, and recurring issues across the reviewed studies, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of how household substance misuse affects the social and psychological well-being of children in low-income urban settlements.

Ethical Considerations

Since the study relied entirely on secondary sources of data, no direct interaction with human participants was involved. Nevertheless, ethical principles of academic research were observed through proper citation and acknowledgment of all sources used in the study. The researcher also ensured objectivity in the interpretation and presentation of findings.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that explains the relationship between household substance abuse, psychological abuse, and the social well-being of children in low-income urban settlements in Uganda. The framework positions household substance abuse as a central contributing factor that creates emotionally unstable and psychologically harmful home environments for children.

The framework illustrates that substance abuse within households contributes to multiple forms of psychological abuse, including emotional neglect, intimidation, verbal aggression, fear, humiliation, and exposure to domestic conflict. These experiences negatively affect children’s emotional stability, social relationships, behavioural development, and overall well-being.

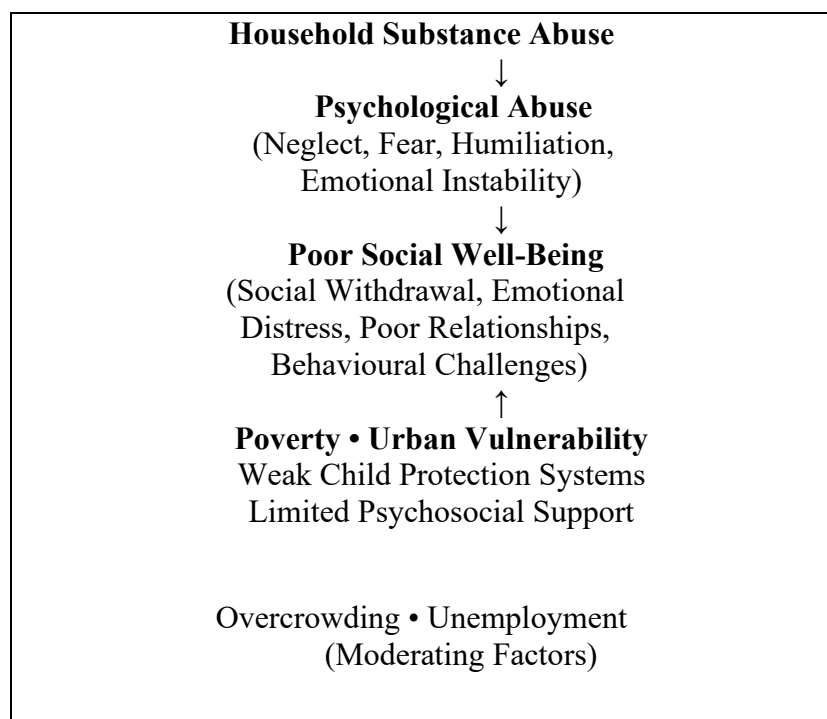
The framework further recognizes that the effects of substance abuse and psychological abuse are intensified by broader socio-economic and environmental conditions such as poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, weak child protection systems, and limited psychosocial support services commonly found in low-income urban settlements.

These factors collectively increase children’s vulnerability to emotional distress, social exclusion, poor academic engagement, and long-term psychosocial challenges.

The conceptual framework therefore provides an analytical lens through which the reviewed literature is interpreted, enabling a deeper understanding of how household substance misuse interacts with structural vulnerabilities to shape children’s social and psychological well-being.

The framework is further informed by Social Learning Theory proposed by Albert Bandura (1977), which explains how children may internalize behaviours, emotional responses, and social experiences from their surrounding environments.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Source: Researcher’s Conceptualization based on reviewed literature (2026).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Household Substance Abuse and Child Well-Being

Substance abuse within households continues to pose significant risks to children’s emotional, psychological, and social well-being across both developed and developing societies. Recent studies indicate that children raised in households characterized by alcohol and drug misuse are more likely to experience emotional neglect, domestic instability, poor parental attachment, and exposure to violence (World Health Organization, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). These experiences often undermine children’s sense of safety, emotional stability, and social development.

Research further suggests that substance misuse among caregivers negatively affects parenting practices, family relationships, and household functioning. Children living in such environments frequently experience inconsistent supervision, emotional rejection, and family conflict, which contribute to anxiety, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal (Nabunya et al., 2023). In many low-income urban communities, the effects of household substance

abuse are worsened by poverty, unemployment, and overcrowded living conditions that increase emotional stress within families.

In Uganda, studies conducted within informal urban settlements indicate increasing prevalence of alcohol and drug use among economically vulnerable populations, particularly among youth and low-income households (Kalungi et al., 2024). These conditions expose children to unstable family environments that negatively affect their emotional and social well-being.

Psychological Abuse and Emotional Development of Children

Psychological abuse is increasingly recognized as one of the most harmful yet least visible forms of child maltreatment. Unlike physical abuse, psychological abuse often occurs through emotional neglect, humiliation, intimidation, verbal aggression, rejection, and exposure to chronic domestic conflict. Recent evidence shows that children exposed to psychologically abusive environments are at increased risk of depression, anxiety, emotional insecurity, behavioural disorders, and poor social adjustment (UNICEF, 2024; World Health Organization, 2022).

Studies further indicate that persistent emotional abuse negatively affects children's cognitive and social development by weakening self-confidence, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships (Miller & Sheridan, 2021). Children raised in emotionally unstable households may struggle to establish trust, communicate effectively, and participate confidently in social environments.

Within households affected by substance misuse, psychological abuse often occurs indirectly through emotional neglect, exposure to parental conflict, fear, and unpredictable caregiver behaviour. These conditions create emotionally insecure environments that negatively influence children's psychosocial development and long-term well-being.

Poverty, Urban Vulnerability, and Social Exclusion

Poverty remains a major structural factor that intensifies children's vulnerability to substance-related household abuse and poor social well-being. In many low-income urban settlements, families face unemployment, food insecurity, inadequate housing, and limited access to social services, conditions which contribute to emotional stress and increased substance misuse within households (World Bank, 2023).

Urban informal settlements are often characterized by overcrowding, social inequality, weak child protection systems, and limited access to mental health and psychosocial support services. These conditions expose children to neglect, violence, social stigma, and emotional insecurity. Research conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa suggests that children living in urban poverty environments are more likely to experience emotional distress, social isolation, and reduced opportunities for healthy social development (UNESCO, 2023).

In Uganda, urban poor communities continue to face significant socio-economic challenges that limit effective child protection and family support mechanisms. The interaction between poverty and substance abuse often creates cycles of family instability and child vulnerability, particularly within informal settlements where institutional support systems remain weak.

Social Stigma and Child Socialization

Children from households affected by substance abuse frequently experience social stigma, discrimination, and exclusion within schools and communities. Social stigma may arise from negative community perceptions associated with addiction, family instability, or poor living conditions. Such experiences often affect children's confidence, peer relationships, and participation in social activities (UNICEF, 2024).

Research suggests that children exposed to family substance abuse are more likely to experience bullying, social isolation, and feelings of shame, which negatively affect their social identity and emotional well-being (UNODC, 2023). Persistent stigma may further discourage affected children from seeking emotional support or participating fully in educational and community environments.

In low-income urban settlements, social exclusion is often reinforced by poverty and limited access to social support services. Consequently, children affected by household substance misuse may develop coping behaviours characterized by emotional withdrawal, aggression, mistrust, and social insecurity.

Child Protection Systems and Policy Challenges

Child protection systems play a critical role in safeguarding vulnerable children from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. However, recent reports indicate that many low-income urban communities continue to experience weak implementation of child protection policies and limited access to psychosocial support services (UNICEF, 2024).

In Uganda, although legal and policy frameworks exist to protect children from abuse and neglect, implementation challenges, limited funding, weak institutional coordination, and inadequate community awareness continue to hinder effective child protection interventions. Studies further show that many vulnerable children living in urban informal settlements remain underserved due to shortages in mental health services, social workers, and community-based support systems (Nabunya et al., 2023).

Furthermore, stigma surrounding substance abuse and mental health challenges often limits reporting and intervention efforts within affected households. This creates barriers to early identification and psychosocial support for children experiencing emotional and psychological distress.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from the reviewed literature demonstrate that household substance abuse is not only a public health concern but also a major driver of psychological and social vulnerability among children living in low-income urban settlements. The study reveals that children exposed to household substance misuse frequently experience emotionally unstable family environments characterized by neglect, fear, verbal aggression, family conflict, and inconsistent parental care. These experiences significantly undermine children's emotional security, social relationships, and overall well-being (World Health Organization, 2023; UNICEF, 2024).

One of the major insights emerging from this study is the strong relationship between household substance abuse and psychological abuse. While previous studies have often focused on the physical and behavioural consequences of substance misuse, the reviewed literature indicates that emotional neglect and psychological harm are equally significant yet frequently overlooked outcomes. Children raised in households affected by substance abuse often experience chronic emotional stress, humiliation, intimidation, and exposure to domestic instability, conditions that negatively affect their confidence, emotional regulation, and social development.

The findings further suggest that psychological abuse within substance-affected households is often normalized or hidden within everyday family interactions, making it difficult to identify and address. In many low-income urban communities, emotional neglect and verbal aggression may be perceived as ordinary disciplinary practices rather than forms of abuse. This contributes to the invisibility of psychological abuse despite its long-term effects on children's mental health and social functioning.

Another important finding is the role of poverty and urban vulnerability in intensifying household instability and child vulnerability. The reviewed studies indicate that overcrowding, unemployment, food insecurity, and poor housing conditions create stressful household environments that may increase the likelihood of substance misuse

and family conflict (World Bank, 2023). Within such contexts, children are exposed not only to economic hardship but also to emotionally insecure and socially unstable family environments.

The discussion also highlights the relationship between social stigma and children's social well-being. Children from households affected by substance abuse frequently experience discrimination, shame, social isolation, and reduced participation in school and community activities. These experiences may weaken children's sense of belonging and contribute to emotional withdrawal and poor interpersonal relationships. In urban informal settlements, stigma associated with addiction, poverty, and family dysfunction often reinforces children's social exclusion and psychological distress.

Furthermore, the findings reveal important gaps in child protection and psychosocial support systems within low-income urban communities. Although Uganda has policies and legal frameworks aimed at protecting vulnerable children, implementation challenges, limited funding, weak institutional coordination, and inadequate mental health services continue to undermine effective intervention efforts. The lack of accessible psychosocial support services within informal settlements leaves many children exposed to prolonged emotional distress without adequate professional or community support.

The study therefore demonstrates that the relationship between substance abuse and children's social well-being is multidimensional and deeply interconnected with broader structural inequalities. Household substance abuse should not be viewed solely as an individual behavioural problem but rather as a complex social issue shaped by poverty, urban vulnerability, weak social protection systems, and limited psychosocial interventions.

Overall, this study contributes to existing literature by emphasizing the often-overlooked psychological and social consequences of household substance abuse on children in low-income urban settlements. It further highlights the need for integrated and multi-sectoral approaches involving families, schools, communities, health systems, and child protection institutions to effectively support vulnerable children living in substance-affected environments.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the relationship between household substance abuse, psychological abuse, and the social well-being of children living in low-income urban settlements in Uganda through a qualitative narrative review of existing literature. The findings demonstrate that substance abuse within households creates emotionally unstable environments that expose children to psychological abuse, emotional neglect, social stigma, and long-term psychosocial vulnerability.

The study further reveals that psychological abuse is often an overlooked consequence of household substance misuse despite its significant effects on children's emotional stability, social development, and interpersonal relationships. Children exposed to substance-affected households frequently experience fear, humiliation, emotional insecurity, family instability, and social exclusion, conditions that negatively affect their overall well-being and social functioning (World Health Organization, 2023; UNICEF, 2024).

The findings also indicate that the effects of household substance abuse are intensified by broader structural conditions such as poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, weak child protection systems, and limited access to psychosocial support services. In low-income urban settlements, these vulnerabilities interact to create cycles of family instability and emotional distress that disproportionately affect children.

This study contributes to existing literature by highlighting the interconnected nature of substance abuse, psychological abuse, and child social well-being within urban poor communities in Uganda. Unlike many previous studies that primarily focus on substance use prevalence or behavioural outcomes, this paper emphasizes

the emotional and social experiences of children living in substance-affected households and the structural conditions that reinforce their vulnerability.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study carry important implications for child protection policy, mental health interventions, and community-based support systems. First, there is a need to strengthen child protection mechanisms within low-income urban communities through improved identification, reporting, and response systems for children experiencing psychological abuse and emotional neglect.

Second, psychosocial support services for vulnerable children and families affected by substance abuse should be expanded, particularly within informal urban settlements where access to mental health and social welfare services remains limited. Schools, community organizations, and health institutions can play a critical role in identifying emotionally vulnerable children and providing supportive interventions.

Third, interventions addressing substance abuse should adopt a multi-sectoral approach that integrates public health, social protection, education, and community development strategies. Addressing household substance abuse requires not only behavioural interventions but also broader efforts aimed at reducing poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion within vulnerable urban communities.

Finally, future research should explore children's lived experiences through empirical field-based studies in order to generate deeper contextual understanding of psychological abuse and child well-being within substance-affected households in Uganda and similar low-income urban settings.

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