

Physical Child Abuse and Implications for Household Social Wellbeing in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Physical child abuse remains a significant yet under-theorized dimension of gender-based violence within household environments, particularly in low- and middle-income contexts. This paper presents a qualitative thematic synthesis of interdisciplinary literature to examine how violent caregiving practices intersect with gender relations, cultural disciplinary norms, and socioeconomic constraints in shaping children's social wellbeing in Uganda. Drawing on Social Learning Theory and Feminist Theory, the analysis demonstrates that physical child abuse is sustained through intergenerational transmission of coercive norms, gendered household authority structures, and structural inequalities that constrain positive parenting environments (Bandura, 1977; Heise, 2011). The review highlights the developmental consequences of violent discipline for psychological wellbeing, educational participation, and social integration, with implications for long-term socioeconomic trajectories (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Meinck et al., 2015). The paper argues for reconceptualizing physical child abuse as an embedded component of gender-based violence frameworks and emphasizes the need for integrated policy responses addressing normative change, gender inequality, and social protection.

Keywords; Gender-based violence; Physical child abuse; Social wellbeing; Household power relations; Uganda; Feminist theory; Social learning theory

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) constitutes a persistent global challenge with profound implications for individual wellbeing, family stability, and social development (Jewkes, 2002; WHO, 2020). Although research has extensively addressed intimate partner and sexual violence, physical child abuse has received comparatively limited attention as a gendered phenomenon embedded within household systems of authority and socialization (Lansford et al., 2017). In many socio-cultural contexts, including Uganda, disciplinary practices involving physical force remain normalized as legitimate behavioural regulation strategies (Naker, 2005). Such practices are shaped by gendered power relations that structure caregiving roles and social constructions of authority (Connell, 2012).

This paper examines physical child abuse within the continuum of gender-based violence and explores its implications for social wellbeing, conceptualized as encompassing psychological health, educational engagement, and long-term socioeconomic participation (Boyden & Dercon, 2012).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis integrates Social Learning Theory and Feminist Theory to examine the reproduction of violent caregiving practices. Social Learning Theory posits that behaviours are acquired through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within social contexts (Bandura, 1977). Exposure to coercive disciplinary practices may therefore normalize violence as an acceptable strategy for conflict resolution and behavioural control, contributing to intergenerational transmission of abusive norms (Straus & Paschall, 2009).

Feminist Theory provides a structural lens for understanding how gendered power relations legitimize coercive authority within households (Heise, 2011). Violence is conceptualized as embedded within broader systems of inequality that shape caregiving expectations and disciplinary norms (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Methodological Approach

This study employs a qualitative thematic review to synthesize interdisciplinary scholarship on physical child abuse and social wellbeing (Patton, 2015). Thematic synthesis facilitates the identification of recurring patterns, theoretical linkages, and conceptual gaps across diverse sources. Literature selection prioritized peer-reviewed research, global policy reports, and foundational theoretical works addressing gender-based violence, child maltreatment, and developmental outcomes in low- and middle-income contexts (Pereznieto & Taylor, 2014).

Thematic Synthesis

Cultural and Structural Drivers of Violent Discipline

Violent disciplinary practices are frequently sustained by cultural norms that legitimize corporal punishment as a necessary component of moral socialization (UNICEF, 2017). Such norms are reinforced through social institutions that shape collective expectations regarding child-rearing. Structural constraints, including poverty and limited access to supportive services, further contribute to environments in which coercive parenting strategies are normalized (Merrick et al., 2019). Addressing these drivers requires recognition of the socio-cultural contexts that shape caregiving practices.

Gendered Household Power Relations

Physical child abuse is closely linked to gendered configurations of authority within households. Patriarchal norms often position men as primary decision-makers while assigning disciplinary responsibilities to women (Connell, 2012). Gendered expectations also influence children's experiences of punishment, reflecting broader societal constructions of masculinity, femininity, and behavioural propriety (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Socioeconomic Deprivation and Cycles of Violence

Economic stressors may exacerbate household tensions and increase reliance on coercive discipline. (World Bank, 2018). These conditions contribute to intergenerational cycles of violence, as children exposed to abuse internalize such practices as normative (Meinck et al., 2015). Urbanization and changing family structures further complicate these processes by weakening traditional support systems.

Developmental Consequences for Social Wellbeing

Physical child abuse is associated with psychological distress, reduced educational attainment, and social exclusion (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016). Educational disruption represents a critical pathway through which abuse undermines social mobility and reinforces inequality. (Walker et al., 2011). These developmental consequences extend beyond individual households, influencing broader patterns of social wellbeing and development

Conceptual Implications

The synthesis underscores the need to reconceptualize physical child abuse as an embedded dimension of gender-based violence rather than a discrete child protection issue (Yount et al., 2017). Integrating Social Learning and Feminist perspectives highlights the interplay between cultural norms, gendered authority, and structural inequalities in shaping caregiving practices (Heise & Kotsadam, 2015). This framework advances theoretical debates by emphasizing the relational contexts through which violence is reproduced and normalized. Bridging disciplinary divides between child protection and gender-based violence scholarship is essential for developing integrated approaches to prevention and intervention.

CONCLUSION

Reframing physical child abuse within gendered violence systems offers critical insights for theoretical advancement and policy development. Effective prevention requires addressing normative beliefs, household power dynamics, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities that sustain coercive caregiving practices (WHO, 2020). Integrated strategies promoting positive parenting, gender equality, and social support are essential for enhancing children's social wellbeing and fostering sustainable development outcomes (United Nations, 2023). Future research should build on this conceptual foundation through empirical investigations examining the complex interactions between gendered violence, socialization processes, and developmental trajectories in diverse contexts.

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