

The Impact of Witnessing Spousal Sexual Violence on Children and Juvenile Sexual Delinquency

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Abstract – Over 40 million children under the age of 18 live in India. According to a WHO report, one in three women have been the victim of sexual or physical abuse at some point in their lives. Domestic violence is an unavoidable reality. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 2019–2021, 3.1 percent of pregnant Indian women between the ages of 18 and 49 experienced physical violence during their pregnancy, and 29.3 percent of married Indian women between the ages of 18 and 49 have experienced domestic or sexual violence. The world is aware of these reported lodged figures. The irony is that the majority of these cases in our nation go unreported. The future of this country, or "the children," is the answer to the question of who is most impacted by these acts. When children see their parents acting violently, it has a profound effect on their mental health. This essay looks at the effects of seeing such behavior at home and how it relates to sexual and juvenile delinquency.

Key Words: Juvenile Delinquency, Sexual Delinquency, Domestic Violence, Children, Spousal Violence

1. INTRODUCTION

The Toll on Kids: Mind, Behavior, and Growth

Witnessing violence among parents, particularly when it's sexual, is not only something children see; it's a profound trauma that derails their development. It can cause a whole range of issues with their thoughts, feelings, behavior, and development as a whole. Children in these circumstances are not mere spectators; they are victims attempting to deal with fear, disorder, and the belief that their own home is not a safe place. There is much research that indicates just how harmful this is, reporting a clear trend of negative impacts that can persist long into adulthood.

Mentally and emotionally, kids who see intimate partner violence (IPV) are far more likely to struggle with internalizing problems – things turned inward. Study after study connects seeing domestic violence to higher chances of anxiety, depression, and feeling bad about themselves, compared to kids from peaceful homes (Kolbo et al.). Imagine living with constant tension, fear, and never knowing what

might happen next; it creates this ongoing feeling of being unsafe and always on edge. Researchers like Osofsky, Wewers, Hann, & Fick (in New Orleans) and Richters & Martinez (in Washington D.C.) found clear links between witnessing domestic violence and anxiety symptoms, like being scared to leave the house or feeling emotionally numb – similar to what's seen in PTSD. This trauma can show up as scary thoughts that won't go away, nightmares, and trouble focusing, making it hard to feel okay or function day-to-day. On top of that, the damage to the bond with parents, which often happens when there's IPV, can cause long-term trouble with managing emotions, trusting others, and building healthy relationships later on, just as attachment theories predict (Roberts et al.).

Behaviorally, witnessing spousal violence tends to result in externalizing issues – things acted out. Children may become more violent, act out, or struggle with impulse control (Moylan et al.; Bell & Jenkins). Social cognitive theories describe how children can learn aggressive ways of acting and unhealthy methods of problem-solving simply from observing the violence in the home (Roberts et al.). They may begin to believe violence is a normal, or even acceptable, means to resolve conflicts or achieve what they desire, adopting unhealthy ideas about how people should be treated. Roberts et al. noted that boys who witness IPV are more likely than other boys to believe violence is acceptable, that it makes them appear stronger, and to excuse their own violence. Acceptance of violence is a very significant factor in understanding the transmission of violence from one generation to another. Also, witnessing domestic violence is associated with an increased risk of drug or alcohol use as adolescents or young adults, perhaps as a means of coping with the trauma (Carliner et al.; Sternberg et al.).

Developmentally, children who witness parents beating each other are likely to be hampered in their education and intelligence. Research shows that children exposed to IPV can have lower IQs and intellectual delays compared to children who do not experience violence (Roberts et al.; Forke et al.). Ongoing stress of living in a violent home actually harms brain development, with the regions needed for such essential skills as holding attention, remembering things, and solving

problems. This mental strain, combined with the behavioral and emotional problems, has a propensity to transfer to school difficulties, including failing in school and not being very interested (Forke et al.). This trauma can potentially alter the course of a child's life, with vulnerabilities that manifest in many areas of their functioning.

So, putting it all together, the research clearly shows that seeing spousal violence causes serious, wide-ranging harm. Kids going through this face big risks for emotional pain (like anxiety, depression, PTSD), behavioral issues (like aggression and substance use), and developmental problems (like trouble thinking and learning). This really drives home why we need to see witnessing violence as a form of child abuse itself and why it's so important to step in, help these kids, and work to stop the cycle of violence.

2. MAKING THE CONNECTION: WITNESSING VIOLENCE AND JUVENILE SEXUAL DELINQUENCY

When kids see violence between their parents, especially sexual violence, it messes them up in ways we've already discussed – more aggression, trouble handling emotions, warped ideas about relationships, and trauma symptoms. All this creates a worrying path towards problems later on, including juvenile delinquency. We know pretty well that seeing domestic violence in general is linked to kids getting into trouble overall (both violent and non-violent stuff). But figuring out the specific connection to sexual delinquency is trickier. We need to look closely at the theories and the evidence, keeping in mind that the research picture is complex and sometimes gives mixed signals.

How can exposure to such violence lead to sexual offending? Several theories offer some explanations of this phenomenon. According to the social learning theory, as presented by Roberts et al., youngsters who are exposed to violence—possibly involving sexual coercion or hostility between their parents—may come to view such acts as normative or even acceptable strategies for gaining power, control, or closeness. By observational learning, they are able to internalize skewed beliefs about sex and relationships, thus predisposing them to rationalize or downplay cases of sexual aggression.

When this is coupled with inadequate education about healthy sexual behaviors, the risk of developing unhealthy attitudes and behaviors about sex might be enhanced. Additionally, exposure to violence can lead to emotional dysregulation and impulsivity in youth (Roberts et al.; Moylan et al.). For some other adolescents, sex might be employed as an unhealthy means of coping with strong feelings, getting a thrill, or regaining mastery over a life that feels out of control. Another way to consider this is through attachment theory: the effects

of exposure to IPV can interfere with the attachment to caregivers so that children struggle to develop healthy relationships throughout their lives, which might place them at higher risk for having coercive or exploitative sexual experiences (Roberts et al.).

But when researchers try to find hard proof directly linking witnessing domestic violence to sexual offending specifically, the results are a bit muddy. Some studies find connections, but others don't, or the findings get tangled up with other issues like whether the child was also abused directly (which often happens alongside IPV) or other stresses in their life. Shaw's dissertation, for example, didn't find strong statistical proof that witnessing DV directly led to sexual reoffending in her specific group (partly because not many reoffended). However, she did point out the strong theoretical reasons to expect a link and noted that about 70% of the young sexual offenders she studied had been exposed to DV (Shaw). Her study also found links between witnessing DV and emotional neglect, and a hint of a connection (a statistical trend) between witnessing DV and reoffending, suggesting it might be an indirect link or one that needs bigger studies to show up clearly (Shaw v). Other research looks at the bigger picture of "adverse childhood experiences" (ACEs), which includes seeing domestic violence. ACEs are known risk factors for many kinds of delinquency, including sexual offending. Studies looking into why young people commit sexual offenses often point to things like chaotic family life, high stress, and being exposed to violence or abuse (Worling & Curwen; Carpentier & Proulx). Even if these studies don't single out witnessing DV as the only cause, they show it's part of a mix of risk factors that mess with development and can lead to offending.

It's really important to remember that seeing domestic violence often happens alongside being directly abused (physically, sexually, or emotionally neglected). Moylan et al. looked at these combined effects and found they have a big impact on kids' behavior, both internalizing (like anxiety) and externalizing (like aggression). Trying to separate the impact of just witnessing violence from the impact of being abused directly is tough for researchers, but it matters. Seeing violence, even if you're not the one being hit, creates a poisonous atmosphere that makes a child feel unsafe and confused, and that alone could push them towards delinquency. When a child both sees violence and is abused themselves, that's likely the worst-case scenario, causing deep trauma that affects their development in many ways.

So, while we can't draw a perfectly straight line from seeing spousal sexual violence to becoming a juvenile sexual offender based on current research – because it's complicated by other factors and research challenges – the theories make

sense, and the evidence linking witnessing DV to known risk factors (like aggression, poor emotional control, twisted thinking, trauma) is strong. It seems clear that witnessing this violence is a major contributing factor. It's tangled up with other family and environmental problems, often including direct abuse, and it makes kids more vulnerable to developing harmful behaviors, including sexual ones.

3. What the Numbers Tell Us (NCRB and Government Data)

Examining the larger picture of crime impacting vulnerable individuals helps to truly understand how witnessing spousal violence may relate to juvenile delinquency in India. We can infer some helpful, albeit general, information about the frequency of crimes against women, crimes against children, and juvenile delinquency from data analyzed by India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). It aids in illustrating the world in which these issues coexist. Although the NCRB statistics don't specifically track cases where a young person committed an offence after witnessing spousal sexual violence, the statistics on related crimes provide crucial context.

The various categories of offences are broken down in the NCRB's 2022 "Crime in India" report. Figures for crimes against women, such as cruelty committed by a husband or his family members (under Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code), are included in Chapter 3A. Even though it's not always sexual violence, domestic violence frequently falls under this category. The sheer volume of these cases that have been reported nationwide demonstrates how prevalent domestic violence and abuse are in households with children present, where they are probably witnessing or hearing things (National Crime Records Bureau, Crime in India 2022, Chapter 3A). The high numbers indicate that many children are living in homes that are troubled by conflict and potential violence, even though the data does not account for the number of children who witness these acts.

Some extremely concerning statistics on child victimization are presented in Chapter 4A, which focusses on crimes against children. Child sexual abuse is regrettably common, as evidenced by the large number of cases covered by the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act (National Crime Records Bureau, Crime in India 2022, Chapter 4A). Table 4A.10 frequently shows that the child knew the perpetrator of the abuse under POCSO, such as a neighbor or family member. This intimacy draws attention to the betrayal and violation occurring within or adjacent to the child's own safe areas, which is similar to what occurs when children witness domestic abuse.

A society where children are frequently unsafe is depicted by the high rates of various forms of child abuse documented by NCRB, which may exacerbate the situation for kids who are already coping with witnessing violence in their homes.

Chapter 5A provides information on juveniles in conflict with the law. Young people's ages, histories, and offences are described in this section (National Crime Records Bureau, Crime in India 2022, Chapter 5A). The types of offences (under the IPC or Special & Local Laws, or SLL) that result in young people being arrested are among the patterns in juvenile crime that may be seen in this data. Once more, the data illustrates the extent of young people's involvement with the legal system, but it does not explicitly connect these offences to witnessing domestic abuse. Young people's involvement in violent crimes or crimes against others may be a trend that reflects bad coping mechanisms or behaviors that they have learnt from witnessing violence.

Statistics indicating that young people are arrested for assault, injury, or even sexual offences, for instance, provide us with a gauge of the delinquency issue that theories attempt to explain by pointing to variables like exposure to violence.

When examining these figures, we must exercise caution. Correlation is not causation, therefore just because two events occur at the same time does not entail that one caused the other. Also, only recorded offences are included in NCRB statistics. The true figures are probably far higher because many problems—particularly child abuse and marital violence—frequently go undetected. However, the NCRB data does demonstrate that juvenile delinquency, crimes against women (including domestic violence), and crimes against children (including sexual abuse) are all significant, intertwined issues in India.

Examining the relationships between them is much more crucial in light of this statistical context. The statistics on child abuse and delinquency demonstrate the types of detrimental outcomes that researchers are attempting to connect to factors like witnessing violence at home, while the prevalence of domestic violence indicates that many children are at danger of exposure.

4. Tying It All Together (Discussion)

What does all of this evidence indicate, then? It presents a rather clear picture: children are severely harmed when they see parental abuse, particularly sexual assault. It disrupts their growth and may lead them to engage in juvenile crime, including sexual offences. The mixture of hypotheses, data regarding the overall impacts of watching violence, and crime statistics definitely suggests a serious connection, even though we cannot draw a perfect straight line saying "seeing this

causes that" because life is complex and science has its limitations. Seeing violence in the family is more than just poor luck; it can cause severe trauma that alters a child's thoughts, feelings, and behavior throughout their lives.

According to the studies we reviewed, children who witness domestic violence are more likely to have anxiety, sadness, aggression, and learning challenges (Kolbo et al.; Moylan et al.; Roberts et al.). These issues frequently accompany or serve as stepping stones to delinquent behavior. It makes sense that children are more likely to get into problems when they witness violence normalized, learn to be aggressive, struggle with emotional regulation, or turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with trauma. Although further research is necessary to determine the precise relationship, the sexual aspect of the violence adds another unsettling layer. It may distort their perception of sex, consent, and relationships, increasing their susceptibility to sexual delinquency (Shaw; Roberts et al.).

Putting this in an Indian perspective is made easier by the NCRB data. These difficulties are pervasive and overlap, as seen by the high reported rates of crimes against women (typically associated with domestic problems) and crimes against children (including sexual abuse under POCSO) (National Crime Records Bureau). The worry is increased by the fact that juvenile delinquency is a serious problem as well. The NCRB statistics demonstrate that both the risk factor (observing domestic violence) and the negative result (juvenile delinquency) are prevalent in the same culture, even though they cannot demonstrate that children who see violence are also the ones who commit crimes. This provides compelling evidence for the necessity for programs that address this possible link.

How do we respond to it? A few important points stick out. First, even if the child isn't experiencing direct physical or sexual abuse, we must acknowledge that witnessing domestic violence is a type of child abuse that requires care and support. To identify children exposed to domestic violence and comprehend the long-term hazards, such as delinquency, those who work with children—in child protection, schools, and hospitals—need training. Second, we must employ trauma-informed approaches when engaging with juvenile offenders, particularly those who have committed sexual offences. This entails looking for and addressing past reports of witnessing domestic violence in addition to actual assault.

Treatment that ignores the underlying trauma and learnt habits in favor of concentrating only on the problematic behavior is unlikely to be as effective. Third, we must address the underlying cause, which is domestic violence. In addition to being beneficial for adults, preventing violence between

spouses, helping victims, and ensuring that abusers are held accountable are crucial for shielding children from the terrible consequences of exposure.

Naturally, we must acknowledge the limitations in this situation. Instead of demonstrating cause and effect, a large portion of the research depends on identifying links. It's also very difficult to distinguish the effects of seeing violence from other negative experiences that children may have, such as experiencing abuse themselves. Research on these delicate subjects with vulnerable populations can be challenging, as evidenced by studies like Shaw's. Clear statistical findings may be difficult to obtain due to small study sizes or low rates of things like reoffending. Furthermore, we are only seeing the beginning of the problem of child abuse and domestic violence when we rely on official crime data like the NCRB's.

What is required next? More long-term research that tracks children across time, with larger and more varied groups, employing ingenious techniques to separate all the variables. This might make it clearer to us how seeing domestic abuse causes sexual delinquency in young people. It would also be fantastic to research what helps children recover, such as strong family or friend support or good school experiences, as these could shield them from the harshest consequences.

Ultimately, the data clearly indicates that witnessing domestic violence is a significant risk factor that increases children's susceptibility to negative consequences, such as juvenile delinquency and maybe sexual offences. This calls for a multifaceted strategy, including avoiding domestic abuse in the first place, identifying and assisting children who are exposed at a young age, and assisting juvenile offenders through trauma-aware techniques.

5. Conclusion

Children who witness sexual violence between their parents suffer severe, frequently invisible trauma that has a significant impact on both their development and society at large. In order to examine the complex relationship between witnessing this type of violence and a young person's likelihood of engaging in sexual delinquency, this study synthesized the findings from psychological research and crime statistics. Our research regularly demonstrates that children who witness domestic violence, including sexual violence, are far more likely to experience emotional, behavioral, and cognitive issues.

These problems—such as increased aggression, difficulty controlling emotions, indications of trauma, and distorted beliefs about violence and relationships—create a precarious

basis that facilitates the emergence of negative behaviors, including delinquency.

The hypotheses and the facts strongly suggest that witnessing this violence is a key contributing factor to sexual delinquency, even though it is difficult to establish that it causes sexual delinquency directly because research is difficult and other negative things frequently happen to these youngsters as well (such as being abused themselves). It makes children more vulnerable by acting as a potent stressor and imparting negative messages, particularly when paired with other issues in their life. This is put into perspective by looking at the NCRB statistics for India, which demonstrates that crimes against children, juvenile delinquency, and domestic violence all occur regularly and frequently overlap. This further supports the need for solutions that address these relationships.

So, what are the key takeaways? We must make it abundantly evident that witnessing violence is a type of child abuse and increase screening and trauma-informed assistance in the areas of child protection, education, healthcare, and the legal system. Additionally, we must address domestic violence directly through prevention. More long-term studies that track children over time are needed for future study in order to sort through all the variables and determine what keeps children resilient in the face of these terrible events. In the end, keeping children safe entails putting an end to domestic violence, ending these destructive patterns, and establishing communities where everyone may live in safety, respect, and healthy development.

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