

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A GLOBAL THREAT TO HUMAN DIGNITY

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Abstract

This work stems from the basic self-motivation to disabuse many minds of systemic tendency of spousal abuse which commonly is the brain-child of gender injustice. The objective is to expose the menace of domestic violence. It will also propose a way forward, with regard to Buber's relational approach, to facilitate a web for coexistence and habitation among spouses. Most violence is within the confines of the home, and sometimes devoid of any physical contact, making it difficult for any third party to discern. This social problem has now come to be conceptualized with the term 'domestic violence'. Domestic violence has been perpetrated in various forms all over the world and has assumed a global concern. It is a violent confrontation among family or household members, involving emotional or verbal abuse, denial of access to resources or money, restraint of normal activities or freedom, including isolation from friends and family, sexual coercion or assault, threats to kill or to harm, and physical intimidation or attacks. Although men are sometimes abused by their female partners, but there is no doubt that women are mostly victims. The nature of domestic violence has been a tragic element in the evolution of human dignity and is entirely subjective and lacking in mutuality. In many cultures, domestic violence has been an accepted fact of life because one may think it

is difficult to solve. In recent years, it has been viewed as a criminal problem. This research work discusses the forms, implications, causes, and the devastating effects of domestic violence on its victims and on human dignity. Preventive and remedial solution is proffered as a way forward in abolishing this ugly phenomenon. The works reveals that victims of domestic violence experience both short-term and long-lasting effects. Physical injuries can range from bruises, cuts and bums to broken bones, stab wounds, miscarriages and death.

Introduction

Among the major concerns of many nations today is how to eradicate the problem of relationship inequality which eventually has metamorphosed into domestic violence. This social problem that has now come to be conceptualized with the term “domestic violence” or “violence in intimacy” first received international attention and definition at the Second World Women’s Conference held in Copenhagen in 1980. The Conference, under resolution 5 on “Battered Women and Violence in the Family”, resolved that the abuse of family members must be internationally recognized as a problem of serious social consequence that is often perpetrated from one generation to another.

Domestic violence is the physical or mental assault of one member of the family by another member i.e. where the victim and the perpetrator have some form of personal relationship or where they have had such a relationship in the past.¹ The term “domestic violence” encompasses violence against women, child abuse, be it physical, psychological or sexual, violence between siblings, abuse or neglect of the elderly, and abuse of parents by children. It consists of acts committed in the context of an adult intimate relationship mainly in marriage, which has incidentally become a monster in the society. It is taken to be one of the most under-reported social injustices which consequently have dragged the dignity of the human person to the

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margin. Research has shown the widespread nature of it (domestic violence) across all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, while women are revealed to be more susceptible to becoming the likely victims than men. Evidently, this situation is eminent in Nigeria, as the 2001 survey by *Project Alert on Violence Against Women* disclosed the worst number (49%) of domestic violence. In the light of the Amnesty International, the federal and state governments of Nigeria were partly blamed for such a shocking and embarrassing number due to lack of awareness and sensitization programmes. This means that abuse has taken seat-tight position in most of our cultures and has consented to spousal violence as a disciplinary measure.

Recently, more than ever before in Nigeria, there were cases of spousal rape and physical assaults which resulted in facial disfigurement, loss of sight, and some other life-threatening injuries. All had both men women as the potential victims. Following the reports of the US Department of State's Country Reports on Human Right Practices for 2013, one in four married women experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence.²

Discussing on the *Domestic Violence in Nigeria*, the *National Crime Victimization Survey* of 2013 showed that the Nigerian government has taken legal proceedings to prosecute men who abuse their women in several states. And currently, there is a push in Nigeria for federal laws concerning domestic violence.³ Although men are sometimes abused by their female partners, there is no doubt that domestic violence is most often directed towards women. Whichever way it goes, it is of great worth to assert that domestic violence has become a corporal punishment in many households. This defies Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue that advocates for mutual recognition of the other. Central to his thought is the idea of community as the framework in which potential intersubjectivity relationship is realized. His contribution is his basic insight that real, genuine being is being in relation.⁴

In this paper, however, the terms ‘domestic violence’ and ‘gender violence’ will be used interchangeably. This work stems from the basic self-motivation to disabuse many minds of systemic tendency of spousal abuse which commonly is the brain-child of gender inequality. The objective is to expose the menace of domestic violence. It will also propose a way forward with regard to Buber’s relational approach to facilitate a web for coexistence and habitation among spouses.

Explication of the Concept ‘Domestic Violence’

Domestic violence or spouse abuse refers to physically or emotionally harmful acts between husbands and wives, those who have a biological or legal parent- child relationship or between other individuals in intimate relationships. Domestic violence is sometimes referred to as intimate violence. It includes violence that occurs in dating and courtship relationships, between former spouses, and between gay and lesbian partners. It is a violent confrontation between family or household members, involving emotional or verbal abuse, denial of access to resources or money, restraint from normal activities or freedom, including isolation from friends and family, sexual coercion or assault, threats to kill or to harm, and physical intimidation or attacks. In extreme cases, domestic violence may result in the death of a partner. Many experts and lay people use the terms “domestic violence” and “spouse abuse” interchangeably. Some scholars and activists consider the term “spouse abuse” inappropriate. They assert that because the term is gender-neutral; that is, it can refer to abuse of either husband or wife, it gives the impression that men are as likely as women to be victims of abuse. Because police and hospital records indicate that the majority of victims of domestic violence are women, some experts use the term “violence toward women” to refer to domestic violence. These experts tend to view violence in intimate relationships as a problem of coercive control of women by their partners.

Experts agree that domestic violence is a widespread problem. Its actual extent is difficult to measure. Researchers as well believe that the extent of violence between intimate partners is higher than reports indicate. Data based on official documents, such as police or hospital records, tend to underestimate the extent of violence because many instances of abuse are never reported. Surveys of individuals generally produce higher estimates of violence than official records, but they are also assumed to underestimate the actual extent of domestic violence. For a variety of reasons, respondents may fail to report violence that occurs with an intimate partner.

According to a study published in 1998 by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), women in the United States experienced about 840,000 nonlethal incidents of violence committed by an intimate partner in 1996. These incidents consisted of physical assault, robbery (theft that is accomplished by a threat of violence or actual violence), and rape or other sexual assault. The DOJ report indicated that intimate violence occurs almost equally among women of all races and is slightly more likely to occur among women with low incomes. The report showed that the most common victims of intimate violence are younger women, between the ages of 16 and 24.

Experts widely disagree over the extent of male victimization. According to the Department of Justice, men in the United States were victims in about 150,000 incidents of intimate violence in 1996. The department's data indicate that women are about six times as likely as men to experience victimization by an intimate partner. However, in a privately funded survey conducted in 1993, American men and women reported experiencing similar rates of intimate violence.

In some cases, domestic violence results in homicide. According to the *Federal Bureau of Investigation* (FBI), more than 500 men were killed by their wives and girlfriends in 1996, representing about 5

percent of all male homicide victims in the United States. That same year, more than 1,300 women in the United States were killed by their husbands or boyfriends—approximately 30 percent of all female homicide victims. Murder by intimates accounts for about 9 percent of all homicides in the United States each year. Two surveys of married couples in the United States conducted in the 1970s and 1980s found that some kind of violence between spouses had occurred during the previous year in 16 percent of the homes surveyed. In addition, 28 percent of couples surveyed reported marital violence at some point in their marriages. Researchers have found comparable rates of domestic violence in numerous other nations, including Canada and New Zealand.

Causes of Domestic Violence

No single factor explains why men and women assault and abuse their partners. The factors most closely related to spouse abuse are youth of both the offender and the victim (between 18 and 30 years old), low income, growing up in a violent family, alcohol or substance abuse, unemployment, sexual difficulties, and low job satisfaction. While no single personality factor causes domestic violence, offenders committing the most serious abuse tend to have antisocial personality disorders. People with such disorders have an impaired ability to feel guilt, remorse or anxiety.

The family structure in Nigeria gives men the power over women. As a result of this, it reinforces the subordinate position of a wife which can then increase her chances of being the target of abuse. Violence against women is a portrayal of power relationship existing between men and women. Power seems to be the overriding influence in wife battering. If a woman proves to be disobedient, she is beaten in order to demonstrate the control and power a man has.

Social and cultural influences also contribute to spouse abuse. There is no doubt that the social context of violence in Nigeria is based largely on its patriarchal society, because most victims of intimate

violence are women. Researchers who analyze social factors contributing to spouse abuse often focus on the role of women in society. In most societies, economic and social processes operate directly and indirectly to support a patriarchal (male-dominated) social order and family structure.

Patriarchy is associated with the subordination (restriction to inferior status) and oppression of women. In this condition, violence against a wife is seen as a tool that a husband uses to chastise his wife and to improve her.⁵ The common loss of women's right upon marriage in Nigeria and its implicit obedience and deference towards men are socially encouraged within the society. This is why the Yoruba women refer to their husbands as "Olowo Ori mi" which means he who owns me.⁶ In effect, marriage gives up a woman's right to herself. In practices where the bride price is paid, it is common for the husband to believe that by paying the bride price, he now owns the wife. The act of marriage is seen to give the husband full ownership of the woman. She gives up her right to her body to him, as well as her agency.⁷

Another cause of domestic violence is infertility. Reports from the fertility clinic have revealed the reaction of some infertile women who reported some form of domestic violence. There were also trends showing that women from the Yoruba tribe were more likely to experience violence in this case.⁸ This is why some analysts believe that patriarchy accounts for the historical pattern of violence directed against women in intimate relationships. The violence is often institutionalized, or formalized in societal structures, especially in traditional laws and customs that permit husbands to physically punish their wives. Also, analysts have equally opined that patriarchy contributes to lower economic status for women, which may make women dependent on men. This dependence may increase a woman's likelihood of becoming involved in an abusive relationship or may limit a victim's ability to leave such a relationship.

Domestic Violence and Womanhood in Nigeria

Domestic violence is a problem in Nigeria, as in many parts of Africa.⁹ It was widespread and often considered acceptable. This has gained much prominence within the Nigerian societies, following the deep cultural and clannish belief (mentality) of beating a woman as a corrective measure. Women are often the victims and men the victimizers.

Domestic violence against women takes different forms such as physical violence. In a survey released on November 23, 2009, 28 percent of women reported experiencing violence after the age of 15, the majority of which was inflicted by a husband or partner. Police did not intervene in domestic dispute. In rural areas, the courts and police were reluctant to intervene to protect women who formally accused their husbands of abuse, if the level of alleged abuse did not exceed customary norms in the areas.¹⁰ According to the 2003 *Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey* (NDHS), 64.5 percent of women and 61.3 percent of agreed that a husband was justified in hitting or beating his wife for at least one of six specified reasons, including burning food and not cooking on time.¹¹

This syndrome was also highlighted in the report of *Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey* of 2013, which states that nearly three in ten Nigerian women have experienced physical violence since the age of fifteen.¹² In the view of the same source, one in four married women in Nigeria has experienced physical abuse by their husbands or partners.

Stephane Mikala, a staff of the Amnesty International, was outraged over the level of violence against women in Nigeria. According to her, on daily basis, Nigerian women are beaten, raped and even murdered by members of their family for supposed transgressions, which can range from not having meals ready on time to visiting family members without their husband's permission.¹³

Tragically, husbands and partners are responsible for most of the violence against women. Most often in Nigeria, women are exposed to the warning signs of physical violence such as hair pulling, biting, slapping, punching, confinement, not allowing them to freely use the cars, etc. Furthermore, in some cases, women were victims of vicious acid attacks which eventually left them with horrific disfigurement and mutilation. And some incidentally embraced untimely death as a result of these attacks. We can have as a good reference point in the case of the beauty pageant winner that rejected her boyfriend's attempts to rekindle their relationship. In retaliation, he threw acid in her face with words "let me see how any man will love you now".¹⁴

The second is sexual violence against women. This is rampant because the abuser believes that abuse is acceptable, justified, or unlikely to be reported. It largely goes unreported due to insufficient proof and evidence that are necessary for conviction. This, in effect, can create a cycle of abuse during which tensions rise and act of violence is committed, followed by a period of reconciliation and calm. The major reason behind the under-reporting is that it is seen as a taboo to involve the police in family matters.¹⁵ A study looking at domestic violence in southwest Nigeria found that there are only 18.6% reported cases of domestic violence. This statistic shows that there may be a tendency for under-reporting, which can occur for various reasons.

The third is economic violence. This is defined as making or attempting to make an individual financially dependent. Most women are prevented from getting or keeping a job, while some are denied or deprived of the privilege of having access to family fund. Most men claim or clamor for exclusive control over household finances and consequently prevent the involvement of their female partners in important financial decisions. This entails that women without resources or living below the poverty line are at greater risk of domestic violence.

The fourth is psychological abuse which has exposed women to coercion and threats. Other elements of psychological abuse include: causing fear by intimidation; threatening physical harm to self, partner, children or partner's family or friends; destruction of pets or property; and forced isolation from family, friends, or school and work. This can also take the form of undermining an individual's sense of worth or self-esteem using such means as criticism, diminishing one's abilities, name-calling, or damaging one's relationship with his or her children.

Effects of Domestic Violence on Victims

Victims of domestic violence experience both short-term and long-lasting effects. Physical injuries can range from bruises, cuts and burns to broken bones, stab wounds, miscarriages and death. Partner abuse of women has been associated with preterm deliveries of low-weight babies. Victims experience depression and other psychological distress, eating disorders, and alcohol and substance abuse problems, and they are more likely than other people to contemplate or attempt suicide. Children who witness domestic violence experience depression and psychological distress and are more likely than other children to be physically violent. Spouse abuse often involves repeated episodes of violence. In the past, people sometimes blamed victims for failing to leave abusive relationships or marriages.

Domestic violence also has a major public consequence. Research reveals that 25%-50% of homeless families have lost their homes as a result of intimate partner abuse. Such victimization is also associated with high health-care cost and low work productivity.

However, considerable research indicates that most victims are not passive in response to abuse. Victims call the police; they go to social workers or mental health agencies; they flee to the homes of friends or parents; and they fight back physically. Studies find that many factors—economic, interpersonal, cultural, and social—prevent victims from leaving violent relationships. Victims who seek help from

community services often find that agencies are overwhelmed and limited in their resources. People who are dependent on their partners emotionally and economically learn to endure abuse and remain in unhealthy relationships, a process that has been labeled “learned hopefulness.” Learned hopefulness refers to an abuse victim’s belief that the abusive partner will change his or her behaviour or personality.

Most experts agree that economic and cultural factors play an especially powerful role in contributing to and perpetuating repeated abuse of women. Because women, as a group, tend to have less power in society, they are more likely to be victims and are less able to end abuse once it begins. Traditional beliefs, customs and laws restrict the roles women may play and limit their economic opportunities, contributing to their dependence on men. Some scholars assert that the process of socialization teaches boys and girls a belief system that devalues women—especially unmarried women—and creates a sense of female responsibility for the maintenance of the family. Women who believe that the end of a relationship or marriage represents a personal failure are less likely to leave abusive relationships.

Domestic Violence and Human Dignity in Nigeria

In reflection with Aquinas, human dignity entails an exposition of those intrinsic qualities that all together shape the greatness of man, such as eminence, nobility, excellence,¹⁶ etc. with Immanuel Kant, human dignity is used to indicate that persons should always be treated as ends in themselves and never merely as means, and it also makes a person irreplaceable.¹⁷ The notions of human person and human dignity transcend ideological, cultural and political differences. Regardless of colour, religion, creed and belief, we all should enjoy equal dignity. This fundamentally gave rise to human rights.

The human person is endowed with an inherent dignity that demands respect. Martin Buber believes that relationship between humans should be characterized by a respectful reciprocity. For him, man is a being whose existence is validated by the affirmation of the other. He contends that the human person must be valued in his uniqueness and otherness. By this, he discourages the prevailing forms of thingfication, objectification and depersonification common in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, violence in all its forms gravely offends that dignity and is, at the same time, against the human person. This is particularly true of the violence that takes place within the home. Abuse, whether physical, mental, verbal or sexual, that takes place among family members is known as domestic violence, which is a tragic reflection of the violent society of our day. The educated elite in Nigeria today have raised their opinions in denouncing the menace of domestic violence that erodes the dignity of the human person.

One cannot ignore the violence that is destroying our families and scarring our common humanity and respect. Hence, domestic violence is a violation of human dignity and marital love. Cases of violence against women abound. The media is awash daily, with stories of women, seeking for dissolution of their marriages over acts of violence and disrespect against them.

There is an unbroken spectrum of violence that women face at the hands of people who exert control over them. In some societies, women are often looked upon as representatives of the honour of the family. When women are suspected of extra-marital sexual relation, even if in the case of rape, they can be subjected to the crudest form of indignity and violence, often by their own fathers or brothers. Women who are raped and are unable to provide explicit evidence are sometimes accused of unlawful sexual relations, the punishment for which is often death by stoning. Such laws serve as a great obstacle to their dignity. This sometimes involves female genital mutilation as a cruel form of disciplinary measure.

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This violence against women is deeply rooted in the culture of discrimination which denies women in their homes and marriages the equal right with men. This, in essence, legitimizes the appropriation of women's bodies for individual gratification, and thus defies their dignity. There is no doubt that this condition stands in stark contradiction to the dignity of the human person. It has reduced human interaction, especially among married partners, to a subject-object relationship in which existential beings are regarded as valuable objects. It is manifested in various forms: degrading comments, manipulation of financial resources to intimidate the abused partner, use of physical strength to bully and, ultimately, to injure or kill. This is why Buber's theory of existence is too critical of partnership inequality. In his view, domestic violence defies the development and nurturance of genuine dialogical relationship and in this manner affects the dignity of the human person. Domestic violence exchanges the natural bond of love and nurturing for the unnatural relationships of aggressors trampling mercilessly on the dignity, right and aspiration of the abused.

The nature of domestic violence has been a tragic element in the evolution of the human person and his life. It is entirely subjective and lacking in mutuality. In this situation, one relates with the other in a pure utilitarian manner. Domestic violence is like the I-It relationship – the relationship that does not recognize the dignity and inviolability of the other. It is world of manipulation where the other is weighed, measured, categorized and controlled to serve one's purpose¹⁸ which poses the danger of the subject deliberately placing a distance between the object being observed and himself and in effect drags the dignity of the other to the margin. It crosses all socio-economic, religious and ethnic boundaries.

Economically, domestic violence situates the abused in a social structure in which he/she cannot escape being subjected to the inhuman yoke of exploitation. Buber will see in this the seed-bed of

man's destruction where the abused is thingfied to the realm of disrespect. Due to male gender dominance, the abused (mainly the woman) is relegated to the background, as she is seen only in relation to economic value. Many people in our society have experienced and continue to experience the terror of living in danger of being attacked by another family member. For generations, violence and disregard for human dignity and respect in the home have been common and go virtually unchallenged. It takes courageous women and men to bring the ugly reality of domestic violence into public forum.

Solution – A Call to Action

A variety of programmes and services, both for victims and offenders, exist to treat and prevent domestic violence. Since 1964, more than 1,800 shelters or refuges for battered women have been established in the United States. Initially designed to provide simply a safe place for victims (and often victims' children), shelters now provide a wide range of programmes. At shelters, victims of abuse receive legal assistance, counseling for themselves and their children, referral to other treatment programmes (such as substance abuse rehabilitation), and additional treatment and advocacy services.

Project Alert on Violence Against Women, a local NGO, continued various outreach efforts to combat domestic violence, including training to sensitizethe police to domestic violence, support groups and programmes for male abusers, and provide assistance to faith-based counseling victims of domestic abuse.¹⁹ Project Alert also operated a shelter, Sophia's Place, for victims of domestic violence, which offered services such as counseling, legal aid and skills acquisition. The Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternatives also served as a leading voice in the campaign about violence against women and continuously advocated passage of legislation to protect women's right.²⁰

An increasingly common response to domestic violence has been the establishment of treatment programmes for offenders. Courts often

require offenders who are found guilty of physically or sexually assaulting their partners to attend these programmes as a condition of their sentences. The length of programmes varies, but many are short term—lasting from 6 to 32 weeks. Although programmes for offenders vary in form and in underlying theory, most involve group therapy. Many are educational and offer a feminist perspective on domestic violence. Such programmes seek to educate male offenders about the role of patriarchy and to demonstrate that men’s attitudes and behaviour about control and power lead to abuse of women. The programmes also encourage men to examine their attitudes about what it means to be a man. Many treatment programmes also emphasize anger management for offenders. Counselors teach participants to recognize cues of anger and then use a technique, such as waiting a period of time to calm down before reacting, to control the anger and avoid violent behaviour.

The laws of all 50 U.S. states provide that domestic violence is a crime. These laws have made it easier for victims to obtain protective or restraining court orders that prohibit offenders from having contact with them. Also, laws in most states allow police officers to arrest people suspected of committing domestic violence, without the victim filing charges. Before the 1980s, arrests were uncommon, in part because many victims were unwilling to press charges and also because many law enforcement officials were reluctant to make arrests. Instead, officers typically attempted to calm the violent parties down or restore order. In response to criticisms by feminist activists and as a result of research indicating that arrests seemed to reduce subsequent violence, many cities changed their intervention policies.

In 1994 the U. S. Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act, which authorized more than \$800 million in federal funds for state and local programmes to combat domestic violence. This law makes it a federal crime for a person to travel from one state to another in

order to violate a restraining order. It also prohibits an individual, who is subject to a restraining order, from possessing firearms. Although the title of the law refers to women victims, both male and female offenders are subject to its provisions.

The vast majority of programmes that deal with intimate violence—such as shelters, police intervention programmes and treatment groups—are implemented after a severely abusive incident. A few programmes and policies attempt to prevent intimate violence before it occurs. The most widespread prevention programmes have been community and national public awareness campaigns that identify intimate violence as an important social problem.

Effective solutions for preventing intimate partner abuse include, providing economic opportunity, mentors and role models who are survivors of domestic violence, organizing community programmes for youth and families and a school environment that promotes prevention of abusiveness in any relationship. Also, adult family members can help prevent domestic violence in any relationship by nurturing and providing consistent, structured supervision. Raising the awareness about intimate partner violence in society at large, which takes place during Domestic Violence Awareness Month each October, can be invaluable in educating people about this issue.

Furthermore, everyone can help find ways to stop domestic violence, either by donating money or time to a domestic-violence organization, learning more about the problem, teaching children about healthy and abusive relationships, listening in a nonjudgmental way to a domestic violence victim when he or she shares what they are going through, and giving victims information about where to get help.

Supporters of intimate partner abuse victims can discourage sexist jokes and remarks, boycott movies that gratuitously depict intimate partner violence and violence against women, and write legislators to support laws that protect and support intimate violence victims and

sufferers. In the workplace, those who want to help stop domestic abuse can organize a drive or fund-raising to assist a domestic-violence organization. Solution to the issues of domestic violence can also include continuing to improve the effectiveness of treatment and to strengthen legal protection for victims, as well as accountability and treatment for abusers. This will help to manage the unique issues faced by individuals who are in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender relationships.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that disagreements develop from time to time in relationships. But it is at the same time of great importance to note that domestic violence is far more hurtful and vicious than disagreement. It is rather a whole pattern of behaviours used by one partner to establish and maintain power and control over the other. These behaviours can take the forms of hair pulling, biting, shaking, pushing, pinching, choking, kicking, confinement, slapping, hitting, punching, forced intercourse, etc.

Domestic violence is also not only physical and sexual violence but also psychological. This means intense and repetitive degradation, creating isolation, and controlling the actions or behaviours of the abused partner through intimidation or manipulation, to the detriment of the individual. This can also degenerate to a more degrading and dehumanizing stage of making light of the dignity of the abused. Consequently, these have the tendency of becoming frequent and intense over time. This is capable of destroying the home. Therefore, no one deserves to be abused.

Domestic violence can happen to anyone, regardless of race, age, sexual orientation, religion or gender. So, it might be a misconception to view women as the only victims of domestic violence. There have been cases of domestic violence against men. It is important to observe that domestic violence does not only affect those who are

abused, but it does also have substantial effects on family members, friends, co-workers, other witnesses, and the community at large. Children, who grow up witnessing domestic violence, are among those seriously affected by this crime. This implies that frequent exposure to violence in the home predisposes children to social and physical problems, and also exposes them to violence as a normal way of life, thereby increasing their risk of becoming the next generation of victims and abusers in the society.

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