

## Children living in violent families: implications for social work in Botswana

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*Based on a recognition that men's abuse of women has an impact on children, there is much that social work can do to address the problem of children living with domestic violence. Using findings of a study on children's experiences of parental separation and divorce in Botswana, this paper focuses on children's experiences of violence in the family as well as on perceptions of how the violence affected them. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for social work.*

### Introduction

Domestic violence—defined for the purpose of this article as men's use of physical force on children and women in intimate relationships<sup>1</sup>—is a relatively common problem in Botswana, and most women stay in violent relationships for a long time (Molokomme, 1990; Holm, 1995). However, little work has been done on children's exposure to domestic violence in this country. The paucity of literature on children and family violence is striking, taking into account findings of previous studies that show that violence against women is common—and that in 1991, 43.6% of the Botswana population was between the ages of 0 and 14 (cf. Lesetedi and Ngcongco, 1995). Domestic violence is so widespread that many children will have lived with it.

In this article, I use the findings of a study, that I conducted on children's experiences of parental separation and divorce in some parts of Botswana, to highlight the role that social work can play in the lives of children who live in violent homes. First, I describe the study, and then I discuss the use of physical punishment on women and children and its associated culture. This is followed by findings in relation to children's experiences of violence in the family. Lastly, I highlight implications for social work. Although a wide range of professionals in Botswana can play a role in addressing the problem of children living in violent families, this paper focuses on the role of social workers, because social work has not previously played a significant role in addressing the problem.

My exploratory study of children's experiences of parental separation and divorce began with the assumption that children are active agents in their lives, and that, like adults, they are capable of making sense of their experiences (see also Prout & James 1990). I conducted in-depth individual interviews with a total of 60 people, including 25 custodial mothers, 25 children (one of each of the mothers), and a second child from ten of the 25 families. The sample was drawn from high court and customary court records of separation and divorce. I avoided the option of gaining access to families through professionals such as social workers, psychiatrists, church ministers, family welfare educators, and district commissioners. Such an approach would have provided me with a clinical sample, which would have been biased towards families with difficulties. The sample in this study was therefore a non-clinical one, and as such it is more representative of the children of divorcing parents in Botswana.

Children who participated in the study were between the ages of ten and 21. Mothers rather than fathers were interviewed because most women in Botswana gain custody of their children following divorce, especially where young children are involved or where former husbands were violent (UNICEF & Government of Botswana, 1989; Maundeni, forthcoming). The parents had all separated within four years prior to the period of the study. Most mothers were residents of Gaborone. The rest came from Mochudi, Lobatse, Kopong, Kanye, and Ramotswa.

My interview schedule covered a wide range of themes, including children's experiences of violence in the home, economic changes following separation or divorce, changes in

relationships with family and social network members, the role of social network members, as well as changes in neighbourhoods and schools. All but two of the interviews were audio-taped with respondents' permission. Brief notes were taken during the interviews and later expanded. Interviews were transcribed soon after they were conducted, with ongoing development of categories of analysis. I interviewed the children and mothers separately, which yielded insight into their different, sometimes complementary, and occasionally conflicting perspectives. This paper focuses on the experiences of the first children of the 25 families interviewed, rather than on their siblings, the second children of ten of the families.

### **Use of physical/ corporal punishment and associated culture**

The majority of children who participated in the study witnessed physical violence directed towards their mothers. A few children were victims of violence themselves.

Because violence was a prominent experience for most children, it is important first to consider wider attitudes towards it in Botswana. According to Setswana custom, moderate beating of wives is acceptable (Tabengwa & Fergus, 1998). The husband is regarded as the head of the family and the wife is seen as belonging to him and controlled by him. The husband can therefore chastise his wife as he can his child. This was evidenced in the responses of customary courts to seven of the women in this study, who had sought help from them over their husbands' violent behaviour. Customary court workers told them to go back to their marital homes, and to make sure that they did not do anything more to provoke their husbands.

It should however be noted that not all courts that administer customary law<sup>2</sup> permit the use of physical punishment on women. Courts that administer the general law—i.e. laws received in Botswana during the period when the country was under British protection (Alexander, et al, 1992: 28)—may disapprove of wife-beating. Molokomme (1990:34) quotes a court of appeal judge who presided over a case of wife beating:

...the law does not and will not recognise what is alleged to be an accepted custom in Botswana, that a husband may physically assault his wife...

The use of corporal punishment within Setswana custom is not only acceptable on women, it is acceptable on children as well. According to Mannathoko, 1995, corporal punishment—physical violence as some people call it—is considered a natural part of discipline and upbringing in Botswana. Such punishment is widely used in both the private (family) sphere and the public (government schools and customary courts) sphere to ensure compliance with the wishes and expectations of elders.

Based on her experience as a teacher for several years in Botswana schools, Mannathoko notes that although the Botswana education act of 1967 specifies conditions under which corporal punishment may be used in government schools, schools often do not adhere to the specified regulations.

Mannathoko asserts that more male teachers than female ones use physical violence in schools. Similarly, most children in this study reported that their fathers had beaten them more often than their mothers had. This implies that it is generally more acceptable for men to use physical punishment on children because it is seen as part of their male role.

Because the use of physical punishment is acceptable in Botswana, it is rare for children to report the fact to the police or social welfare organisations when they have been beaten by their parents. It is in this context that we need to understand the children's experiences of violence in the family. Children's experiences of family violence is greatly affected by the (changing) culture in which they grow up. Although corporal punishment is acceptable in Botswana, in this era, it may not still be acceptable ten or so years from now.

## Children's experiences of violence

Nineteen out of 25 children (76%) reported that they witnessed violence towards mothers in the home prior to their parents' separation. The mothers corroborated their children's reports. The high proportion of children in this study who witnessed violence between parents shows the prevalence of domestic violence in many families. This is not surprising, given that parental divorce is usually preceded by conflicts and misunderstandings which commonly lead to violence.

The majority of children in the study described, in detail, the assaults that their mothers were unaware that they had witnessed. Children reported both physical abuse and verbal or psychological abuse of their mothers: they had witnessed their mothers being beaten, shouted at or talked to in an angry manner, humiliated and undermined. The physical violence seen by children being exacted on their mothers by their fathers ranged from being slapped, punched or kicked, through being hit with belts, fists, knives, axes or any other convenient object, their hair being pulled, to attempts to set the house on fire with mother and children inside. In all cases, the fathers were the perpetrators of violence, though some mothers sometimes hit back in self-defence.

(Although children also witnessed their mothers being verbally and psychologically abused, this article focuses on physical violence.)

Seven out of 19 children who witnessed family violence vividly recalled incidents when the physical violence imposed on their mothers was severe and life-threatening. Kamogelo,<sup>2</sup> an 18-year-old boy, described one occasion when his father inflicted extreme violence on his mother.

He used a knife. His intention was to kill my mother. I was with my friends in the neighbourhood, and all of a sudden, I saw my mother running out of the house covered with blood. I could not believe my eyes. My mother was hospitalised in the intensive care unit for two weeks. During that time, I prayed a lot. I had never prayed before in my life. I prayed time and again to God to help my mother to recover. Before the extreme violence he [my father] inflicted on my mother, he used to beat her, but I never thought he could be so much violent to her.

Indeed God answered my prayers. After she spent two weeks in the intensive care unit, she was moved to the general ward, and I knew that she was eventually going to recover.

Although it was mentioned earlier that some moderate beating of women is acceptable in Setswana culture, most children perceived the violence inflicted on their mothers as unjustified. Children reported that such episodes were frequent and severe, but that they did not know or understand their causes. Only two out of 19 children who witnessed violence against their mothers saw their father's violence as justified, because their fathers wanted their mothers to stop extramarital affairs.

Mothers and children agreed that the violence witnessed by children was emotionally disturbing for them. Children were able to provide detailed and vivid accounts of this: how the violence affected them both in the short and long term. They associated family violence with deep feelings of sadness, depression, hostility, fear, and low self-esteem. Some older boys and girls felt they had 'lost' their childhood as a result of witnessing or being victims of violence for so many years.

From their accounts, it is evident that mothers were not fully aware of such long-term consequences of violence on their children. The following words of mothers about their children illustrate this point clearly.

*Mother A:* I think he was affected when he saw his father beating me. But we have never talked about it, so I really don't know exactly how he was affected

You know children forget quickly, they were affected by the violence during the time when it took place. Now it has stopped, they are okay. I mean they no longer think about it and they are not affected anymore...

He used to worry a lot about my safety and whether I will live for many years, now he is okay. That is the only thing I can say about how the violence affected him.

*Mother B:* I don't know how the violence affected her emotions and behaviour, but I think it has affected her somehow. She is the one who can explain better....

Not only did children witness violence between parents, but some five of the 19 were victims of physical abuse themselves. One of the five children said he used to incur injuries when trying to stop his father from beating his mother. In other words, he was caught up in the violence that was directed towards his mother. The other four children reported violence by their fathers directly against them. Kitso, a girl aged 18, had also experienced sexual abuse. Kitso and her mother sadly revealed that the sexual abuse had ended in pregnancy. According to Kitso, the sexual abuse continued for about three years. She did not reveal the abuse to her mother or friends because her father threatened to kill her if she did so. The sexual abuse caused a lot of stress for her, particularly because her father used threats and physical violence to isolate her from contact with her teenage friends—contending that it was her peers who influenced her to do bad things.

Parental violence was a major source of stress, which complicated children's adjustment because it affected them indirectly as well as directly. Firstly, some mothers pointed out that conflict and violence distressed them and adversely affected their parenting skills. Secondly, living in a violent home adversely affected some children's relationships with friends. Children were worried that violence would start when their friends visited them in the home, so they did not want friends to visit and sought to hide their experiences from them.

Thirdly, some mothers and children reported that children's schoolwork suffered as a result of domestic violence. Fourthly, violence sometimes led to injuries that caused women to be admitted to hospital for a period of time. Children stayed without mothers during that time, and thus lacked the social support that they would have received from their mothers under normal circumstances.

Most children in the sample stayed in a violent home for between three and ten years before their parents' legal separation. Six women and their children stayed for more than eleven years. The longest period in a violent relationship was 31 years, by one woman in the study. Some of the reasons that influenced mothers to stay in violent relationships were: previous socialisation and cultural factors accepting violence as normal, lack of alternative places of safety, enforcement of customary laws that make divorce more difficult for women than for men, lack of supportive responses for the victims of violence from both formal and informal social networks, and fear of future social stigma as well as the economic hardships of separation and divorce.

### **Implications of the findings for social work**

The sample size of this study was small, and cannot claim to represent all children of divorced parents who had lived in violent homes in Botswana. The recommendations and implications for social work outlined in this paper are therefore provisional.

Children in the study associated violence in the home with subsequent feelings of sadness, depression, hostility, low self-esteem, and lost childhood. Both children and mothers also reported indirect effects of violence on children such as poor schoolwork and lack of friends. These reported adverse effects of violence in the home on children have significant implications for social work.

A brief overview of social work in Botswana will help readers put the implications into context. Social work is a relatively new profession in Botswana. Formal training of social workers started in 1974 at the Botswana College of Agriculture (BCA) with a certificate in social and community development. In 1985-86, the University of Botswana introduced certificate, diploma and degree courses in social work. Plans are currently underway to

introduce a Master's programme. Certificate graduates work as assistant social workers and they are seen as para-professionals, while the diploma and degree holders are seen as professionals. The certificate course covers methods of social work practice, psychological process of human growth and development, fields of social work practice in Botswana, communication skills, and the cultural context of social work practice. Diploma students study the following: social services in Botswana, human growth and behaviour, interpersonal communication skills, social work with families and individuals, supervision in the social services, social policy and administration, selected issues in social work practice in Botswana, modern social problems, and social work with communities and groups. Courses offered in the Bachelor of Social Work programme include social work practice, interpersonal communication skills, psychology for social workers, modern social problems, management and supervision, research for social workers, social policy and planning for the social service. These are supported by other courses from other disciplines in the social sciences such as law, sociology, psychology, economics, demography, and political and administrative studies (Department of Social Work, 1993). Fieldwork is an important component of all the three programs.

Over the years, 'the character and role of social work practice, have been associated with community development, and in particular with self-help' in Botswana (Osei-Hwedie, 1996:43). Originally conceived as part of community development, social work practice in Botswana focused on 'food for work' provision of basic infrastructure for social development such as roads, schools, clinics, etc, in the context of drought relief programmes.

The current official conception of social work in the country is that of a community-based practice by professionals working with people who are vulnerable and at risk—to reduce the risks and enhance their lives; to prevent social dysfunction and to ameliorate situations which are threatening to people and the social order; to promote healthy development for communities, organisations and individuals; to promote the provision and effective management of progressive services to those in need; and to promote social justice, human rights and mutual responsibility (Department of Social Work, 1993).

The social work profession can play a crucial role—directly or indirectly—in promoting the wellbeing of children living in violent homes. This is for two major reasons: First, the courses that social work students have taken equip them with communication skills, knowledge of human behaviour, and understanding of issues in a wider social context. Social workers are therefore capable of providing practical, informational and emotional support to children living in violent homes. Second, social work has played a minimal role in addressing the problem of 'children living in violent homes'. This is largely so because, as noted earlier in the paper, for many years, the character and role of social work practice in Botswana have been associated with community development.

Children's rights are violated when they are witnesses or victims of parental violence. The mission statement of the Department of social work that is cited earlier in the paper states that social work in Botswana aims to among other things promote human rights. Similarly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (which Botswana signed) states that 'States parties shall take all appropriate... measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent (s)'.

Most social workers are employees of the state, and they can play a vital role in reducing the hurt that children experience as a result of witnessing or being victims of parental violence. Their role in doing this can take several forms: Firstly, they can advocate for the increase in refuges and places of safety for children and their mothers living in abusive homes. This is particularly important because several women in the study associated their long stay in violent relationships with lack of safety places. Currently, only one shelter for battered women exists in the country, therefore many children continue to live in violent families.

Secondly, social workers can educate people about domestic violence, paying particular attention to its effects on children, as well as available services for victims. Various ways can be used to encourage women to use the services. For example, radio talks, and newspapers could be used for women in towns. Because women in rural and remote areas (especially those who are poor and uneducated) may not have access to these forums, one way through which they could be reached is by social workers themselves through traditional court meetings. Social workers could also enlighten other professionals in rural areas who have frequent direct contact with families such as family welfare educators about domestic violence so that they can also play a role in the lives of battered women. This public education programmes should not be one-off events, but should be regular as people's attitudes and beliefs cannot be changed overnight.

Thirdly, in order to enlighten others with conviction, social workers and social work agencies urgently need themselves to learn more about domestic violence. It is important that the social work department of the University of Botswana begins to strengthen its research and teaching in this area. There are a variety of ways in which this information can be transmitted: knowledge about how domestic violence affects children, how children can be helped to cope, the needs of children and women from violent homes, as well as interventions for both victims and perpetrators of violence can be integrated into the regular curricula at the foundation level (i.e. policy and practice courses). Taking into account that a Master's programme is to be introduced in the near future, specialised courses can be offered to students at the advanced level—for example, social work practice with women and children from violent families, social policy and children. In addition the department should continue to promote dialogue with social work practitioners and policy makers. Finally, more fieldwork opportunities should be made available for students to enable them to gain experience and skills in working with children from violent families.

Social workers in Botswana are already aware of the need to improve their knowledge and skills in the area of domestic violence. In 1998, for example, several workshops took place in the country whereby some social workers who work with victims of family violence in South Africa were invited to share their knowledge and skills with a number of human service professionals (e.g. police and social workers) in Botswana. As a participant in such workshops, I found them quite useful, but the focus was largely on interventions with battered women. Little attention was paid to children, as in the early days of thinking about domestic violence in Botswana. Future workshops should focus not only on women, but also on children because children quite often witness parental violence and this has adverse effects on them.

Findings of this study not only have implications for social work practice and social policy, they also have implications for social work research. Social work researchers need to focus their attention on increasing their knowledge base on the area of children and domestic violence. One way through which this could be done is for social work researchers to conduct large scale studies on, for example the prevalence in domestic violence in Botswana families, how violence affects children as well as the number of children affected by violence. This kind of research can facilitate the compilation of figures that are crucial for influencing policy. Social work researchers should also conduct qualitative research that includes more children who live in rural areas as well as ethnic minority children.

### Notes

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1. Domestic violence is a broad concept that includes physical, emotional, sexual and financial abuse of women and children. Physical abuse is usually accompanied by other forms of violence, however this paper focuses only on the use of physical force. This is so because a majority of children in the study perceived the use of physical force on their mothers as a major source of stress.
2. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

3. Customary laws are largely unwritten and based on beliefs and customs of particular tribes. They are formulated by chiefs and other old males (Armstrong, 1995). Molokomme (1987: 129) define customary law as 'traditional law that obtained before the Tswana tribes came into contact with European missionaries, traders, colonialists and other foreigners'.

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