Gender Differences in Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence in Nigeria

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Abstract

Children's exposure to domestic violence (DV) remains an understudied problem in African society at present, particularly in Nigeria. This study examined gender differences in children's exposure to domestic violence based on identified gaps in the literature. Through a cross-sectional research design, data were gathered from 280 Nigerian children with a mean age of 14.14 ± 2.36 . Data were collected using a standardized questionnaire. The independent sample t-test was utilized for hypothesis testing, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$. Although female participants scored a slightly higher mean score, there was no significant gender difference in children's exposure to domestic violence [$t(278) = .67$; $p > .05$]. The authors conclude that there was no statistically significant gender difference in children's exposure to domestic violence; however, this research informs further exploration into other variables that may affect children's exposure to domestic violence.

Keywords Gender · Children · Domestic violence

Introduction

The vulnerability of children continues to rise and calls for timely research studies. The current coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and resulting lockdown measures may be increasing the rate of children's exposure to violence (Abramson, 2020). The violence that children are exposed to that requires research attention is domestic violence (DV). This form of violence includes the violence perpetrated by intimate partners and other family members, and this could be manifested through: physical abuse such as kicking, slapping, beating, stabbing, choking, threats with an object, and this may lead to murder (United Nations International Children's Education Fund, UNICEF, 2000).

The exposure of children to domestic violence is associated with their gender (Evans et al., 2008; Hillis et al., 2016; Idemudia & Makhubela, 2011; Jung et al., 2019). The World Health Organization supported this by reporting that up to 1 billion children (mostly females) aged 2–17 years were exposed to physical, sexual, or emotional violence in the past year (WHO, 2020). In the same submission,

the WHO stated that children's exposure to domestic violence could be tackled through recommendations from research studies by individuals and international agencies. Other related studies (e.g., Evans et al., 2008; Idemudia & Makhubela, 2011) have similarly echoed the need for further research that examined gender differences in children's exposure to domestic violence. Children exposed to domestic violence often have negative outcomes such as substance use and an increased likelihood of experiencing violence in adulthood (Fagan & Wright, 2011); therefore, understanding the gender differences in children's exposure to domestic violence contributes to informing targeted interventions that could mediate negative outcomes.

Consequently, the current study examined gender differences in children's exposure to domestic violence in Nigeria. Children's exposure to domestic violence as defined in our study implied children witnessing violence perpetrated by intimate partners and other family members (United Nations International Children's Education Fund, UNICEF, 2000).

Literature Review

Studies have documented mixed findings on the influence of gender on children's exposure to domestic violence. For instance, Fagan and Wright (2011) found no significant

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gender influence on children's exposure to domestic violence. A researcher in the United Kingdom (UK) argued that females may be more exposed to domestic violence than males (Lloyd, 2018). A meta-analysis of studies conducted in North America reported that gender had no significant impact on exposure to domestic violence among children (Sternberg et al., 2006). In Italy, Baldry (2003) reported a significant gender difference in children's exposure to domestic violence, with female children having greater exposure than male children. These findings reflect the importance of extending these studies to other cultures to identify and protect children who are vulnerable to domestic violence exposure. Based on data from a national survey in the United States (US), Hamby et al. (2011) reported that male children were more likely to perpetuate the domestic violence they witnessed from their fathers; consequently, male children may have been more exposed to domestic violence than female children.

In Nigeria, Bakare et al. (2010) found that female adults were at greater risk of being exposed to domestic violence compared with male adults. These researchers, therefore, invited scholars to extend their research to Nigerian children. Further, Benebo et al. (2018) found that one in four Nigerian females aged 14–64 years was exposed to domestic violence; however, the findings were inconclusive to Nigerian children. Additionally, the researchers argued that identifying the factors contributing to exposure to domestic violence among children may inform early interventions. In the same study, the researchers found that social norms justified violence against females by males and increased the occurrence of females' exposure to domestic violence. This supports previous findings (Hillis et al., 2016) that indicate that exposure to domestic violence may have an association with gender. Thus, we argue that further investigation is required into the association of gender and exposure to domestic violence among children in Nigeria.

Based on the literature, this study asked and hypothesized:

Will female children have greater exposure to domestic violence than male children?

H₁ Female children will score significantly higher than male children in exposure to domestic violence.

Method

Participants

This cross-sectional study was carried out with 280 secondary school pupils in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. A total of 300 participants were randomly recruited, 280 of whom completed the questionnaires. Participants were recruited from Abadina College and Abadina Grammar school, in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. These schools have among the

highest number of pupils in Oyo State, as they are public schools, which are more affordable. The sample comprised 131 males and 149 females. Their mean age was 14.14 ± 2.36 years. Their class ranged from junior secondary school (JSS) to senior secondary school (SSS). Participants were included in our study if their parents consented to their participation, if they were pupils in the study setting, and if they could communicate (written and verbal) using the English language.

Instruments

The Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence scale (CEDV) by Edleson et al. (2008) was used in this study. The CEDV scale has been used in a recent Nigerian study (Ujunwa et al., 2020). It is a 42-item scale that measures the extent to which children have been exposed to domestic violence. Illustrative items on the scale are: "How often has your dad broken or destroyed something on purpose?", "When your dad hurts your mum, how often have you called someone else for help, like calling someone on the phone or going next door?", "Has your mum's partner ever hurt your mum's feelings by calling her names, swearing, yelling, threatening her, screaming at her, or things like that?", or "How often have you seen someone being hurt or killed on television, or in a movie?".

Before conducting our study, the research instrument was piloted with 30 pupils in other schools not designated for this study. The 30 pupils demonstrated competence in completing the English version of the research instrument. On average, it took 10 min for participants to complete the questionnaire. A reliability coefficient of 0.82 was obtained in this study using Cronbach's alpha. The instrument also gathered demographic information about the participants, viz. gender, age, name of the school, and class.

Data Collection Procedure and Process of Data Analysis

Approval was sought from the University of Ibadan research ethics committee. Approval was also sought from the school principal of each research setting, and the principals sought verbal and written consents from the parents/caregivers of the children to enable them to enroll in this study. Only parents/caregivers who consented had their child or children enrolled in the study. Parents/caregivers who did not consent attributed their decision to their personal choice.

Following approval, the researchers briefed participants about the study, obtained verbal and written consents, and administered the questionnaires. Participants were assured of their confidentiality, and they were informed that they had the right to withdraw participation at any time with no consequence if they did so. The researchers collected data

in a 2-week timeframe. Following data collection, the third author (a clinical psychologist) sought permission to conduct a free group counseling session with participants. The group counseling session focused on resilience building and social support to mitigate the adverse impact of exposure to domestic violence. Following data collection, all participants and school principals were thanked for their cooperation.

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 23). Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize the participants' demographics. Lastly, an independent sample t-test was employed for hypothesis testing, and statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Given that our hypothesis testing found no significant result, we conducted an item-by-item analysis of the CEDV scale by gender, and we found that both males and females scored almost the same score on each item in the CEDV scale. Therefore, we have not presented the results of the item-level analysis in this paper (Walliman, 2015).

Results

It was hypothesized that female children will score significantly higher than male children on exposure to domestic violence.

A visual inspection of Table 1 shows that female participants ($\bar{X} = 16.69$; $SD = 4.67$) reported a slightly higher mean score on children's exposure to domestic violence than male participants ($\bar{X} = 16.18$; $SD = 4.76$). However, it was observed that the mean difference was not significant [$t(278) = 0.67$; $p > 0.05$]. The stated hypothesis of this study is, therefore, rejected.

Discussion

This cross-sectional study examined gender differences in children's exposure to domestic violence. We stated an alternate hypothesis that females will score significantly higher than males in children's exposure to domestic violence. Although females had a slightly higher mean score on children's exposure to domestic violence, the statistical analysis showed that there was no significant gender difference in children's exposure to domestic violence. These findings agree with Fagan and Wright (2011), who reported

no significant gender difference in children's exposure to domestic violence. The findings also support other related studies (e.g., Sternberg et al., 2006).

On the other hand, our findings contradict the literature where significant gender differences were reported (e.g., Baldry, 2003; Hamby et al., 2011). These disagreements with the literature may be attributed to cultural differences between the current study and the contradicted literature. Additionally, there is an argument in the literature that African culture can influence the impact of gender on exposure to domestic violence among children and adolescents (Idemudia & Makhubela, 2011).

The Nigerian literature on this topic (e.g., Bakare et al., 2010; Benebo et al., 2018) found that females are more exposed to domestic violence than males, which lends support for our finding that female participants had a slightly higher mean score than male participants on children's exposure to domestic violence. Thus, although our finding was not statistically significant, the combination of study findings may imply that female children in Nigeria may be at greater risk of being exposed to domestic violence than male children. This highlights the need for longitudinal studies to confirm this hypothesis which we intend to embark on in the future.

Given our finding that both male and female children are exposed to domestic violence, we recommend that both male and female children need gender protection programs against exposure to domestic violence. Our recommendation will contribute to a reduction in the prevalence of children's exposure to domestic violence and contribute to an increase in children's wellbeing. Further studies can expand our study by examining possible ways to support specific gender protection programs for male and female children.

Finally, our study is not without strengths and limitations. Although our sample size was quite large, it was not representative of Nigerian children. Our study relied on self-report methods, which could have led to self-report bias. Another limitation of our study is that our recruitment process did not screen out children who were not exposed to domestic violence. However, because we explained the research purpose to participants before the data collection, children who were not exposed to domestic violence might have opted not to participate in our study. Nevertheless, future studies should ensure that children without exposure to domestic violence are screened out.

Table 1 Summary table showing the independent sample t-test result of gender differences in children's exposure to domestic violence

	Gender	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	Df	t	p
Children's exposure to domestic violence	Male	131	16.18	4.76	278	0.67	> 0.05
	Female	149	16.69	4.67			

Domestic violence can be perceived differently by children, and we did not explore gender differences in the dimensions of the CEDV scale. Nevertheless, our study contributes a broad perspective for understanding the influence of gender on children's exposure to domestic violence. Also, our study could inform future studies that add further knowledge/evidence about other factors (e.g., children's wellbeing, children's attitudes towards gender-based violence, their degree of violent behaviors, normalizing violence in intimate partnerships, etc.) that may affect the long-term effect of children's exposure to domestic violence.

Conclusion

We concluded that there was no statistically significant gender difference in children's exposure to domestic violence in our study. Our conclusion should inform practical solutions for tackling children's exposure to domestic violence with special consideration given to both male and female children in society. Future studies can benefit from longitudinal designs that explore the long-term impacts of being exposed to domestic violence among children. Finally, our study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the COVID-19 pandemic may affect children's exposure to domestic violence (Abramson, 2020). Therefore, future studies may benefit from exploring the impact of sheltering-in-place on children's exposure to domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Authors' Contribution All authors contributed substantially to merit the authorship of this paper.

Data Availability Statement The data that support this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest None was declared.

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