



Violence in and against children

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Abstract

Children are the most valuable elements of a society. If well preserved and properly trained, the developmental opportunity provided by Demographic Window can be utilized to garner maximum Demographic Dividend. History suggests that whether it was the rise of USA after 1870s, the economic boom of Asian Tigers in 1970s or the coming of age of Ireland in 1990s; all could be attributed to this Demographic Gift. However, along with this, they also are the most vulnerable sections of the society. Their tender age coupled with the fear of raising voice against their oppressors make them an easy target for their exploitation. Another concern today for the civil society and the policy makers alike is the growing tendency of violence within children themselves. Whether it is the effect of violent video games or action packed films, freely available to children of all ages; the effect has been very damaging. Children introduced to such aspects of life at a very early age tend to have a very warped idea of humanity. The current paper analyses such impacts of violence against and violence by children.

Keywords: children, demographic window, demographic dividend, violence

Introduction

The Committee on the Rights of Child (CRC) defines violence against children as “all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse.”

The CRC even determines the scope of its definition as “every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”

World Report on Violence and Health (2002) gave a broader definition of what constitutes violence against children as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a child, by an individual or group, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity.”

Studies by myriads of world bodies provide us with a very grim statistics. According to these studies:

1. Only 2.4% of children around the world are protected from forms of corporal punishment.
2. ILO estimates that 218 million children were involved in child labour in 2004
3. More than 150 million girls and 73 million boys have experienced sexual abuse
4. WHO estimates that the rate of homicide in children in 2002 in low income group countries was twice as high as the rate in high income group countries. (UN Secretary General Study).
5. In at least 28 countries, 30% of the girls are married before they reach 18 years of age. (UNICEF)

Even though the reports may appear grim, a greater concern is that this represents only a minuscule proportion of the total violence perpetrated against children. These are the cases that are reported and thus constitute the tip of the iceberg. A major

proportion of violence goes unreported especially in developing countries.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is the most prevalent and pervasive form of violence against children. Most commonly, it includes corporal punishment but may also include sexual abuse as well. Almost 15% of girls and 5% of boys have been sexually abused and out of these in 30% of the cases the victims were acquainted with the offender.

In 2000, Pinki Virani published a chilling account of violence being meted out to children in her book *Bitter Chocolate*. In the book Virani audaciously accuses the lax implementation of laws that are framed to protect children as the main cause of continuing violence. She says that majority of people do abuse children because they know they can get away with it.

The use of any kind of force against children is illegal in 24 countries but passively accepted in the rest of the world.

Neglect

A problem which has so far been less studied but has overarching significance to the proper and healthy development of a child is that of neglect. At the surface, neglect seems to be much less severe form of violence than physical abuse. However, in effect it has equal, if not greater repercussions on mental development of children as physical violence. In simple terms Child Neglect is “the failure of a person responsible for a child’s care and upbringing to safeguard the child’s emotional and physical health and general well-being”.

The failure to protect child’s emotional health can lead to lack of proper education, mental deformation etc. On the other hand, the failure to safeguard child’s physical health leads to unhealthy body. Neglects may actually expose a child to an

increased risk physical violence too. WHO estimates that 40 million children suffer neglect and require immediate social and health care.

It is not that the phenomenon of violence against children is a new one. This problem has always been present in societies, but the danger today is its prevalence and all pervasiveness.

Violence in Children

Children around the world now have round the clock access to television and computer games. The content of these media are more often than not aggressive to say the least. A regular exposure to such harmful programmes and entertainment medium has left an indelible imprint on the tender minds of the children of the present generation.

According to a study some video games have 20 violent scenes an hour on an average. Even some movies and television shows with more than 5 to 10 violent scenes an hour are easily accessible to children of all age groups.

Such programmes and video games glorify violence. For example a way to end the game Mortal Kombat is to rip open your opponent after which blood flows profusely from the dead body. The effect of such a ghastly form of entertainment can be nothing but a much distorted understanding of good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable acts.

Studies carried out by George Gerbner of University of Pennsylvania shows that children who have watched violent cartoons and programmes are more likely to disobey authority, strike out their companions and less willing to wait for things as compared to their peers who have watched normal non violent programmes.

The effect of such a plethora of factors has resulted in a lack of respect for human life in the child's mind. Indeed the news of children carrying out brazen attacks on their schoolmates and going on rampage with guns in both hands has become dangerously common in developed countries in general and United States in particular. This is because violent contents are more freely available to the children in developed countries than in the developing countries. However, with the pace at which action video games are becoming popular in India, the day is not far when a similar event occurs in Indian soil.

Violence vis-à-vis Corruption

In a poor country like India, corruption eats away into a large chunk of money that would otherwise have been utilized for public services. Money that should ideally have been utilized for granting health services and education to children is being stashed away into the accounts of politicians and bureaucrats. This means that children are being denied their basic right to education and proper upbringing. Hence, the window of demographic opportunity is being compromised in India. Corruption is a crime not just because it is eating into India's developmental needs but also more importantly because it is transferring the fund which should be used for child welfare into illegal accounts. This is nothing short of violence and should be dealt with accordingly.

Conclusion

Children in all societies today are being subjected to varying degrees of abuse. Whether physical or emotional both lead to

a situation in which an indelible imprint is left on the child's mind for rest of his or her life. It would be best to end the discussion with the words of a 13 year old South Asian girl which was incorporated in the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Child (CRC);

"I hate being a child, I hate being hit and I hate being taken for granted".

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