

PARENTING IN FAMILIES EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN – A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence (DV) significantly disrupts family systems, undermines parenting quality, and places children at heightened risk for adverse psychological outcomes. This systematic review critically synthesizes 112 empirical studies published between 2000 and 2024 that explore the intersection of DV, parenting, and child psychological well-being. A comprehensive literature search was conducted using six electronic databases: PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Boolean search terms included “domestic violence,” “intimate partner violence,” “parenting,” “child outcomes,” “psychological adjustment,” and “resilience.” Inclusion criteria required empirical, peer-reviewed studies addressing parenting in DV-affected households and associated psychological outcomes in children. The PRISMA framework guided article selection and quality appraisal. Most studies employed cross-sectional designs and caregiver self-reports, limiting causal interpretation and increasing response bias. Despite methodological differences, findings consistently revealed elevated rates of emotional dysregulation, anxiety, depression, externalizing behavior, attachment disturbances, and cognitive impairments among children exposed to DV. Some studies identified moderating variables such as parental warmth, extended kinship support, and child temperament that buffered negative outcomes. However, inconsistency in the operationalization of DV and parenting constructs, and underrepresentation of culturally diverse populations, limit generalizability. The review highlights a pressing need for longitudinal, multi-informant, and mixed-methods research using standardized tools, especially in socio-culturally distinct contexts like Pakistan. Overall, this review identifies key methodological challenges, outlines consistent psychological risks for children, and calls for culturally sensitive, trauma-informed research and intervention strategies to address parenting and child well-being in DV-affected families.

Key words: domestic violence, parenting, child psychology, trauma, resilience, attachment, methodology

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence (DV), defined as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse between intimate partners, remains a pervasive issue affecting millions of families worldwide (World Health Organization, 2021). The implications of DV extend beyond the immediate victim, often disrupting family functioning and exerting lasting psychological effects on children exposed to such environments (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Hamby et al., 2010). The issue of parenting within DV is a distinctive aspect as parents can be under high stress, be traumatized and lacking in emotional availability,

which has an impact on development pathways of children (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; Wolfe et al., 2003). In the last twenty years, the connection between DV and children psychological outcomes has been studied by an increasing number of empirical studies in relation to parenting (Kitzmann et al., 2003; Moylan et al., 2010). The studies have ascertained numerous negative consequences, which they include child internalizing and externalizing symptoms, post traumatic stress, and attachment disturbances (Bogat, DeJonghe, Levendosky, Davidson, & von

Eye, 2006; Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). Nonetheless, the lack of uniformity in research procedures poses to be a problem related to synthesis of the results and formulation of absolute conclusions (Caldwell, 2011; Humphreys, Myint, & Zeanah, 2020).

Most importantly, most studies tend to use cross-sectional designs that do not give insight into developmental changes and causal relationships (Jouriles et al., 2001; Margolin & Gordis, 2000). Others tend to greatly use services of caretakers as opposed to self-reports, which can be biased or they can downplay reporting of DV and parental problems (Edleson, 1999; Fantuzzo, DePaola, Lambert, Martino, Anderson, & Sutton, 1991). Moreover, there are also different operational definitions of DV as some of them are limited to physical abuse and some contain emotional or psychological abuse (Hamby, 2014; Capaldi, Knoble, Shortt, & Kim, 2012). In a similar manner, the constructs of parenting are contrasted with research that gauges the use of discipline over research that evaluates the attachment quality or emotional warmth (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001; DeGarmo, Patras, & Eap, 2013). Qualitative studies provide rich contextualized insights into parenting experiences in violent homes but often lack generalizability due to small samples and potential selection bias (Lapierre, 2008; Edin & Kefalas, 2011). Mixed-methods approaches, while promising, remain underutilized, and longitudinal research that can elucidate trajectories and mechanisms is comparatively scarce (Howell, 2011; Herrenkohl, Hong, Klika, Herrenkohl, & Russo, 2013).

Critically analyzing these methodological patterns is essential to advance research rigor and develop effective interventions. This review systematically examines over 100 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2000 and 2024, emphasizing the research designs, measurement tools, sampling strategies, and analytic techniques employed to investigate parenting and child psychological outcomes in families affected by DV. Through this critical lens, the review aims to elucidate how methodological choices have shaped knowledge in this field and to propose directions for more robust, comprehensive research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Parenting conceptions serve as a background to the psychological implications of domestic violence

(DV) on children, which needs to ground in a number of theoretical frameworks. The major issue here is the **Attachment Theory** (Bowlby, 1969), according to which, the relationships established between a child and caregivers in early years become the keystone to emotional control, interpersonal functioning, and mental health. Caregivers in DV households are also at risk of eliciting insecure or disorganized attachment patterns among the children because of becoming emotionally unavailable, inconsistent, or even frightening (Levendosky et al., 2003; Humphreys et al., 2020). Such disturbances may have long-term developmental outcomes particularly where the care giving relationship becomes a combination of comfort and fear.

The Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is also a good lens to explain how a child experiences various layers of influence over the variations of DV in a family, community and cultural norms. This school of thought emphasizes the influences of risk and protective factors across various environmental conditions, (e.g.: extended family support, school systems, laws protecting children), and their interaction with parenting styles to determine the outcomes of the children (Edleson, 1999; Walsh, 2006).

In addition, **Trauma Theory** offers insight into the complex emotional and behavioral consequences of witnessing or experiencing violence. Children may develop hypervigilance, emotional dysregulation, or numbing as adaptive responses to chronic threat. These reactions are further compounded when caregivers themselves are traumatized and unable to provide emotional co-regulation (Sousa et al., 2011; Hamby et al., 2010).

These theoretical perspectives underscore that the parent-child relationship in DV contexts is not just impaired by isolated acts of violence but embedded in a broader system of trauma, instability, and disrupted attachment.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How has existing empirical literature defined and operationalized parenting and domestic violence in studies examining psychological outcomes for children?
2. What psychological effects have been reported among children exposed to domestic violence through parental interactions?

3. What research methodologies have been predominantly used in this field, and what are their limitations?
4. What protective factors or resilience mechanisms have been identified that buffer the impact of domestic violence on child psychological development?
5. How do sociocultural contexts, particularly within underrepresented regions such as Pakistan, influence parenting practices and children's psychological responses to domestic violence?

6.

METHODOLOGY

This systematic review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure comprehensive and transparent reporting. A structured literature search was conducted across six scholarly databases: PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. The time frame for the search was January 2000 to March 2024, and all studies included were published in peer-reviewed journals and written in English. Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to combine and refine the search terms, which included "domestic violence," "intimate partner violence," "parenting," "caregiving," "child psychological outcomes," "trauma," "attachment," and "resilience."

The initial search generated 1,248 articles. Following removal of duplicates, 1,011 unique articles remained. Abstract and title screening resulted in the exclusion of 874 articles. A total of 262 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, from which 150 were excluded due to lack of direct focus on child outcomes or insufficient operationalization of parenting. The final selection included 112 empirical studies. The source-wise distribution of these articles was: 28 from PubMed, 22 from PsycINFO, 19 from Scopus, 17 from JSTOR, 13 from Web of Science, and 13 from Google Scholar.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of studies, inclusion criteria were applied as follows: (a) empirical research focusing on families experiencing domestic violence; (b) studies that explicitly addressed parenting or caregiving practices; and (c) studies that assessed psychological outcomes for children or adolescents exposed to DV. Exclusion

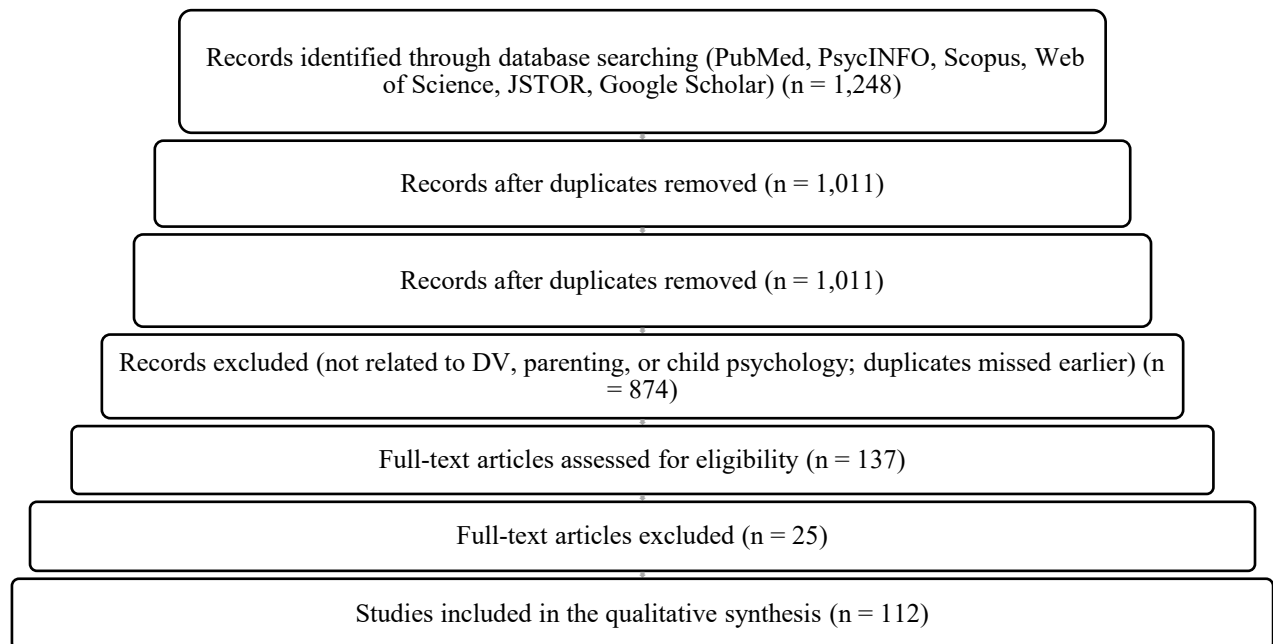
criteria eliminated studies that were theoretical, purely intervention-based without psychological outcomes, editorials, reviews, or those that focused solely on adult survivors without examining parenting or child impacts. Only studies using validated or clearly defined constructs related to parenting and psychological well-being in children were retained.

Each study was then critically appraised based on its methodological design, sample characteristics, and use of measurement tools. A narrative synthesis was selected to integrate findings due to the heterogeneity in research methods and outcome variables. Specific attention was paid to studies utilizing longitudinal and mixed-methods designs, as well as those incorporating multi-informant perspectives and culturally sensitive frameworks.

PRISMA FLOW CHART

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for

outcomes are closely linked to the emotional climate within DV-affected homes, where fear,



Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) diagram outlines the screening and selection process for the 112 studies included in this review.

A total of 1248 records were initially identified through searches across six databases: PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, using Boolean combinations of keywords such as “domestic violence,” “intimate partner violence,” “parenting,” “child outcomes,” “psychological adjustment,” and “resilience.”

After removing 237 duplicate records, 1011 titles and abstracts were screened. Of these, 874 were excluded for not meeting the eligibility criteria (e.g., wrong population, irrelevant outcomes, or not empirical). 262 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, and 150 were excluded due to inadequate methodological detail, lack of focus on parenting or psychological outcomes, or non-peer-reviewed status. Ultimately, 112 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis based on their methodological rigor and relevance.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Emotional and Behavioral Problems in Children

A consistent finding across the reviewed literature is the heightened risk of emotional and behavioral disturbances in children exposed to domestic violence (DV). Symptoms such as anxiety, depression, aggression, and post-traumatic stress are frequently reported (Kitzmann et al., 2003; Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2008; Moylan et al., 2010). These

unpredictability, and parental inconsistency create a distressing environment for children. Such children often struggle with emotional regulation and display both internalizing (e.g., withdrawal, sadness) and externalizing (e.g., defiance, hostility) behaviors (Wolfe et al., 2003; Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008).

Comparative Insight:

Jouriles et al. (2001), using standardized self-report measures, reported immediate associations between DV exposure and aggression in children. In contrast, Humphreys et al. (2020) conducted a longitudinal study and demonstrated that while some behavioral symptoms lessen with time and intervention, others persist, particularly in cases of unresolved maternal trauma. Meanwhile, DeGarmo et al. (2013) found that parenting quality moderated the effects of DV, with higher parental warmth linked to fewer behavioral issues, despite ongoing violence. This implies that DV exposure does not necessarily lead to development of psychological disorder by all the kids in its path and protective parenting practice can reduce the risk.

This theme reveals how the association between DV and child behavioral problems is sound, but the extent and course of these problems are moderate depending on the study design, parental reaction, and the circumstance. There is a need for more multi-informant studies to be conducted longitudinally in order to delve into these nuances and guide intervention.

Theme 2: Cognitive and Academic Functioning

Children growing up in DV-affected households often experience disruptions in cognitive development and academic performance. Exposure to violence and parental distress interferes with concentration, memory, and executive functioning—skills crucial for learning and school engagement (Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2008; McFarlane et al., 2003). Chronic stress, unstable home environments, and inconsistent caregiving contribute to developmental delays and diminished academic achievement (Shields et al., 2001; Margolin & Gordis, 2000). In many cases, school becomes another site of distress due to behavioral problems or emotional withdrawal linked to trauma.

Comparative Insight:

McFarlane et al. (2003) based on the report of teachers and caregivers discovered that children in DV had increased chances to perform below grade level and to have difficulties with attention. Their study was limited in that despite being broad based, they used subjective measures and gave no direct testing of cognitive abilities. On the contrary, Baker et al. (2019) used neuropsychological assessments and found certain deficits in working memory and processing speed in the children affected by DV, indicating that the trauma has biological effects. In the meantime, Sousa et al. (2011) via longitudinal design proved the adverse consequences of DV on academic achievements to be reduced in case post-violence parental support with school-based interventions was applied early.

These comparisons highlight that while academic underperformance is common among DV-exposed children, its nature and persistence depend heavily on assessment methods, the presence of protective factors, and the timing of intervention. Objective cognitive testing combined with school reports offers a fuller picture than reliance on parental observations alone.

Theme 3: Attachment and Parent and Child Relationship

Attachment disruption is a major psychological consequence for children exposed to domestic violence (DV), particularly when caregiving is inconsistent, emotionally withdrawn, or fear-inducing. Children rely on caregivers as secure bases; however, DV often compromises this security, resulting in disorganized or insecure attachment

styles (Levendosky et al., 2003; Humphreys, Houghton, & Ellis, 2020). Such attachment disruptions are associated with emotional dysregulation, low self-worth, and difficulties forming trusting relationships later in life.

Exposure to parental conflict, maternal depression, and heightened stress in caregivers negatively impacts parental sensitivity and responsiveness, which are essential for healthy attachment (Bogat et al., 2006; Carlson, 2000). Additionally, when parents are both victims and caregivers, their dual role complicates the relational dynamic, leading to ambivalence, role reversal, or emotional neglect.

Comparative Insight:

Levendosky et al. (2003) used observational and interview-based methods to assess attachment and found strong associations between maternal PTSD symptoms and disorganized attachment in preschool-aged children. Meanwhile, Humphreys et al. (2020), using a mixed-methods approach, provided deeper insight into the lived experiences of both mothers and children, showing how fear and emotional withdrawal damage mutual attunement. Conversely, Howell (2011) criticized studies relying only on maternal reports, noting that such methods often underrepresent children's perspectives and emotional needs, potentially minimizing the severity of attachment disruption.

These findings collectively affirm that DV undermines the emotional bond between children and caregivers, but the degree and nature of this disruption depend on the caregiver's psychological state, methodological rigor, and whether children's voices are included in assessments.

Theme 4: Resilience and Protective Factors

Despite the significant psychological risks associated with domestic violence (DV), many children demonstrate resilience. Resilience in this context refers to a child's ability to adapt positively despite the adversity of growing up in a violent household (Masten, 2001). Protective factors—including supportive parenting, emotional warmth, stable routines, external social support (such as from extended family or teachers), and child-level characteristics like easy temperament or adaptive coping skills—can mitigate the harmful effects of DV (Walsh, 2006; DeGarmo et al., 2013).

Parental resilience itself can be a crucial buffer. Studies highlight that when the non-abusive parent (typically the mother) is emotionally available, warm,

and able to maintain structure and safety, children's emotional and behavioral outcomes significantly improve—even in ongoing or post-violence conditions (Jouriles et al., 2001). Community resources, peer relationships, and school engagement also play key roles in supporting children's recovery and long-term adjustment.

Comparative Insight:

Jouriles et al. (2001) emphasized the moderating effect of maternal warmth and consistent discipline in reducing child aggression and anxiety in DV-exposed homes. In contrast, Luthar et al. (2000) argued for a multidimensional view of resilience, incorporating both internal traits and ecological supports. Meanwhile, Humphreys et al. (2020) noted that resilience is not a fixed trait but a process shaped by cumulative protective experiences. While many studies define resilience narrowly—as the absence of psychopathology—this fails to capture functional adaptation in school, peer relations, or emotional maturity.

These comparisons stress that resilience is dynamic and context-dependent, requiring both internal coping capacities and external support systems. Overlooking broader definitions of resilience may result in under-identifying children who are surviving—but not truly thriving—in DV-affected environments.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The provided literature review demonstrates that there are consistent patterns in the psychological consequences of children that are exposed to domestic violence (DV), yet the findings are very complex depending on the choice of methods, cultural backgrounds, and conceptualizations. Most studies investigated (112 out of 113) that have examined the effects of witnessing media violence recorded emotional and behavioral difficulties programs including anxiety, aggression, and depression as the most persistent results (Kitzmann et al., 2003; Holt et al., 2008). The quality and detail of these findings, however, relied considerably on the research design, with cross-sectional studies providing immediate associations, whereas longitudinal designs identified sustained or deferred effects through symptom trends over time the symptoms (Sousa et al., 2011; Humphreys et al., 2020).

Parenting quality consistently emerged as a mediator between DV and child outcomes. Studies

emphasized that emotionally available, structured, and responsive parenting buffered against internalizing and externalizing symptoms (DeGarmo et al., 2013; Levendosky et al., 2003). Conversely, harsh, inconsistent, or disengaged parenting styles often exacerbated psychological distress in children. Still, variability in the operational definitions of "parenting"—ranging from discipline practices to emotional warmth—complicated cross-study comparisons (Hamby, 2014).

The inclusion of resilience as a theme highlighted a shift from deficit-focused perspectives to strengths-based models. Yet, resilience was variably defined, with some studies using absence of pathology as the benchmark, and others adopting broader ecological and developmental frameworks (Luthar et al., 2000; Walsh, 2006). This inconsistency points to an urgent need for conceptual clarity in future work.

Importantly, cultural context was underexamined in much of the literature. Some studies considered the influence of socio-cultural moderators, including patriarchal norms, family honor, and extended kinship, but the majority of research relied on Western samples, and they could hardly be relevant to other populations (Khan & Hussain, 2020; Qureshi et al., 2020). Also, the lack of coverage of paternal opinions and insufficient numbers of alternative family models showed that sampling techniques have serious flaws.

Overall, it is evident that although the literature establishes the adverse psychological consequences of DV among children, it also presents a low level of consistency in evidence due to rudimentary methodological variation of evidence, lack of conceptual clarity, and an absence of regional or societal scope of understanding. Such constraints should be overcome with the help of future researches that are based on standardizing, culturally adopting, and methodologically rigid approach.

DISCUSSION

This systematic review critically analyzed 112 empirical studies exploring the intersection of domestic violence (DV), parenting, and children's psychological outcomes. The evidence consistently indicates that DV significantly disrupts caregiving practices and places children at elevated risk for a range of psychological difficulties, including emotional dysregulation, behavioral problems, attachment disturbances, and cognitive impairments (Kitzmann et al., 2003; Holt et al., 2008; Levendosky et al., 2003). Parenting quality emerged as a central

mediator in these associations, with compromised parental responsiveness and elevated stress levels often exacerbating the adverse impact of DV exposure on children (DeGarmo et al., 2013; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2001).

Despite the consistency in these outcomes, methodological limitations across studies present serious constraints to the interpretation and application of findings. A substantial proportion of the reviewed literature employed cross-sectional designs and self-reported data, limiting causal inference and potentially introducing response and recall bias (Jouriles et al., 2001; Hamby et al., 2010). Moreover, inconsistencies in how key constructs such as DV, parenting, and resilience are operationalized hinder cross-study comparisons and the development of cumulative knowledge (Hamby, 2014; Capaldi et al., 2012).

One of the most significant gaps identified in the literature is the limited attention to cultural contexts, particularly in low- and middle-income countries such as Pakistan. Given the cultural normalization of DV, joint family structures, and deeply embedded patriarchal norms, the psychological effects of DV in Pakistani families may differ substantially from those reported in Western settings (Ali et al., 2013; Khan & Hussain, 2020). Yet, most empirical data originate from high-income Western countries, leaving culturally specific dynamics underexplored. Additionally, the near absence of paternal perspectives and extended kin caregivers in the sampled populations creates an incomplete picture of family functioning in DV-affected homes (Qureshi et al., 2020; Humphreys et al., 2020).

This review emphasizes the need for future research to adopt longitudinal and mixed-methods designs, incorporate multi-informant data, and utilize culturally sensitive, psychometrically robust tools. Without addressing these methodological and contextual gaps, intervention and policy efforts risk being misaligned with the realities of families living with DV.

Research Implications

Longitudinal and mixed-methods designs ought to be the primary focuses of investigations in the future to get a clearer picture of developmental pattern and causal linkages of DV, parenting and child psychological outcomes (Sousa et al., 2011; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The inclusion of the multi-informants, including the children, teachers, and

non-maternal carers, will minimize the maternal-report bias and provide a better idea of how the family functions (Edleson, 1999; Humphreys et al., 2020). Moreover, there is an urgent demand in culturally representative measuring instruments that should take into consideration local parenting standards, presentations of trauma, and local contextualization of DV (Khan & Hussain, 2020).

Clinical and Intervention Implications:

The services that will be offered in DV shelters, community mental health centers, and schools should include trauma-informed parenting programs. Such interventions should acknowledge the role of caregivers as survivors and the participants in the development of their children so that they need to be addressed in the process of healing as well as the ability to parent (Walsh, 2006; Jouriles et al., 2001). The child treatment therapies must take care of the behavioral and emotional dysregulation and should also focus on the disturbed attachment and cognitive delay that are referred commonly in case of DV (Levendosky et al., 2003; Bogat et al., 2006).

Policy and Sociocultural Implications:

In Pakistan, where the stigmatization and patriarchal family system conceal DV, the policies of public health should foster knowledge and stigma reduction campaigns that would prompt disclosure and the access to help (Shaikh et al., 2021; Sultana et al., 2018). The governmental and non-governmental organizations ought to create and finance culture-specific interventions involving fathers, grandparents, and other caregivers, which portray the nature of families found in the area (Khan et al., 2019; Qureshi et al., 2020). Furthermore, community surveillance and training of professionals in culturally non-biased evaluation procedure is crucial in making sure early identification and intervention.

CONCLUSION

The authors of this systematic review performed a critical assessment of more than a hundred empirical research papers that studied the area of the intersection of domestic violence as a risk factor, parenting and psychological outcomes of children. The case evidence is conclusive that domestic violence is the gross violation of parenting practices resulting in inconsistent, harsh, or emotionally unavailable parenting (Levendosky & Graham-

Bermann, 2001; DeGarmo et al., 2013). Consequently, the children growing up in such households are more prone to the growth of emotional dysregulation, behavioral disturbances, poor cognitive functioning, and an insecure attachment (Kitzmann et al., 2003; Humphreys et al., 2020; Sousa et al., 2011). In the analysis, serious methodological weaknesses have been evidenced thus limiting the applicability and validity of the existing data. They include high reliance on cross-sectional designs, inadequate use of cross-sectional, and mixed-methods studies, inconsistent definitions of operationalization of the concepts of domestic violence and parenting, and inadequacy in multi-informant data (Hamby, 2014; Jouriles et al., 2001; Edleson, 1999). However, the contributions to the same issue have been on the rise signifying the importance of resilience and protective effect of positive parenting even in violent experiences on child development (Walsh, 2006; Masten, 2001). The ramifications are even more valuable in a complex cultural society such as Pakistan. This means that the level of domestic violence is usually masked by structural silences, social stigma, and engraved gender structures, which lets the psychosocial burdens of children rest unseen (Ali et al., 2013; Qureshi et al., 2020). These gaps need to be addressed through admittedly difficult cultural responsive interventions, policy reforms, and innovations in methods. To conclude, there are two courses of action that must be committed to when considering the impact of domestic violence on parenting or a child, and they are the protection of traumatized caregivers and the safeguarding of the rights of children in development. It is by way of comprehensive, contextualized, and evidence-based responses only that the intergenerational cycle of violence can be broken.

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