

## Exploring the Influence of Domestic Violence Exposure on Pupils' Behavior in Kenyan Public Primary Schools

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### ABSTRACT

Families are perceived as protective, nurturing and provide a safe environment for growth and wellbeing of their members, especially children. However, children of all ages are exposed to domestic violence between parents. Living in an environment that has conflict can be challenging especially for children who are exposed. Children can be exposed as witnesses, victims or both witness and victim. The current study seeks to explore the influence of the type of exposure to domestic violence on pupils' behaviour in public primary schools in Nairobi County, Kenya. A descriptive survey was utilised. Purposive sampling was used to select public primary schools that drew pupils from informal settlements and pupils from a two-parent family. During the data collection phase, formulae by Krejcie & Morgan (1970) were used to sample 380 pupils. An adapted Violence Exposure Scale for Children-Revised (CEDV) and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) were self-administered to measure exposure to domestic violence and internalizing and externalizing behaviours. Reliability of the questionnaires was tested by computing Cronbach alpha coefficient. CEDV had an alpha coefficient of  $\alpha = 0.785$  while SDQ had an alpha coefficient of  $\alpha = 0.77$  which was considered reliable. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse qualitative data collected. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) aided data analysis. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation ( $r$ ) was used to test hypothesis. The hypothesis failed to show a significant relationship on influence of type of exposure to domestic violence on pupils' behaviour  $n=380$ ,  $r=0.043$ ,  $p=.408 > 0.05$ . Major recommendations of the study are provision of sensitization programmes for parents to reduce child exposure to domestic violence. Further research includes conducting research to explore resilient factors in pupils from informal settlements exposed to domestic violence. Major beneficiaries of this study are pupils, parents, teachers and policy makers in education sector.

**Keywords:** Domestic Violence, Academic Performance, Pupils, Primary Schools, Informal Settlements

### I. INTRODUCTION

Exposure of children to domestic violence has an influence on their behaviour (Khemthong & Chutiphongdech, 2021; Drinkard et al. 2018; Vu et al. 2016). They are at risk of developing behaviours that make them inhibited such as social withdrawal, anxiety and fearfulness (Clauss & Blackford, 2012) or have difficulty with interpersonal relationships, conduct problems and aggression (Kewalramani & Singh, 2017). These behaviours, known as internalizing and externalizing behaviour tend to be severe with multiple encounters such as experiencing other tribulations like abuse and neglect (Al-Eissa et al., 2020; Bourassa, 2007; Devries et al., 2017). According to Lloyd (2018), there is a strong correlation between domestic abuse and child abuse, with approximately half of all domestic violence situations involving direct child abuse.

Though exposure to domestic violence adversely affects children of all ages, there have been inconsistencies in research findings on its effects on boys and girls. For example, in some studies, girls are more susceptible to experiencing internalizing and externalizing behavioral issues compared to boys ( Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2023); report more fears than boys (Lacinová et al., 2013); witness more violence against both their mother and father (Hietamäki et al., 2021a).

Other studies found that some girls were more affected by internalizing mental health problems than males, especially for female perpetuated IPV (Pinchevsky et al., 2013). Similarly, studies have explored whether it is the age at first exposure or cumulative exposure that has a greater influence on behaviour (Graham-Bermann & Perkins,

2010). According to Babicka-Wirkus et al. (2023) there are significant differences in internalizing and externalizing behaviours among Polish adolescents attending primary schools, with girls showing higher scores on most scales. Young children exposed to domestic violence may not manifest behavioural problems initially but they tend to exhibit them later in life (Holmes, 2013), usually during the school age. Preadolescence is a crucial period in development where early identification of behaviour problems can be mitigated to prevent escalation into adolescence and adulthood. For example, experiencing domestic violence during childhood has been linked to a higher probability of engaging in risky behaviours during adolescence and adulthood (Maurya & Maurya, 2023).

Exposure to domestic violence has also been associated with an increased likelihood of bullying behaviours and peer victimization among youth (Voisin & Hong, 2012). Severe exposure as an adolescent was also found to increase the probability of alcohol consumption in early adulthood, particularly among young women (Smith et al., 2010). Men who witnessed domestic violence as children were found to commit domestic violence more than those who were not witnesses (Murrell et al., 2007). Timely and effective intervention can help mitigate the negative long-term impacts of IPV and improve the overall well-being of the child.

Pingley (2017) avers that domestic violence generates a multitude of responses and needs in children. Although some children experiencing domestic violence will exhibit difficulties others will not be adversely affected: ‘some children living with domestic abuse achieve highly in school; throwing themselves into school life and work can provide an escape’ (Poole & Sterne, 2010). It is therefore essential to take into account the range of exposure to domestic violence among children. Exploring whether they are exposed as witness, victim or both can give a clear understanding on magnitude of exposure to domestic violence.

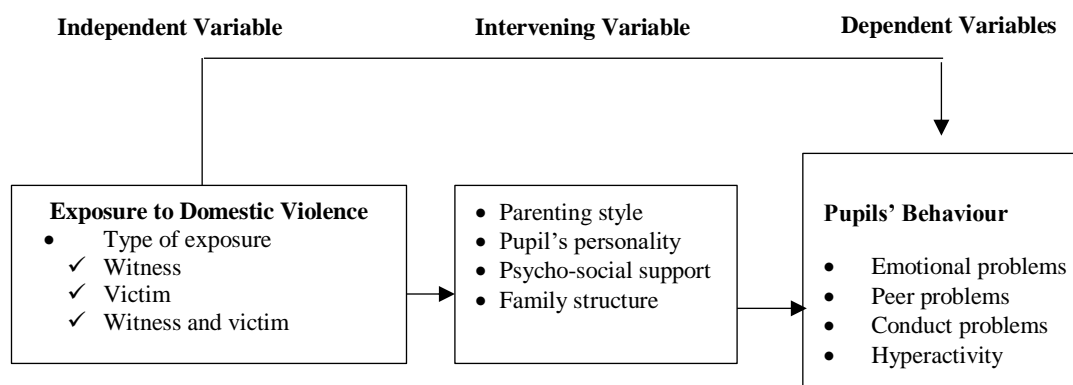
## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Family Stress Theory, a social theory developed by Reuben Hill in 1949, which provides a valuable framework for understanding how families adapt to and are affected by various stressors. This theoretical foundation offers a lens through which we can examine the different ways in which children are exposed to domestic violence and how it influences pupils’ behavior in public primary schools, Kenya, particularly in the context of disadvantaged neighborhoods like informal settlements in Nairobi. By applying the Family Stress Theory, we aim to shed light on the complex interplay between stressors, family resources, and the perceptions of families, and how these factors collectively shape the experiences of pupils who are exposed as witness, victim or both witness and victim to domestic violence. Through this exploration, we seek to inform policy and interventions aimed at mitigating the impact of domestic violence on pupils’ well-being and educational outcomes.

### 2.2 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 forms the foundation upon which this research assessed the impact of various dimensions of exposure to domestic violence on pupils’ behavior in Kenyan public primary schools.



**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework Showing the Relationship between the Variables of the Study*

### 2.3 Empirical Review

Children have often been referred to as 'silent victims' of domestic violence (Bair-Merritt et al., 2006) yet children are subjected to aggression at home in many ways that are not limited to seeing or hearing the violence. Holden (2003) identified ten discreet categories on forms of exposure to domestic violence. Some of these included: victim, where the child is physically assaulted intentionally during an incident; witness, where the child is present and directly observes the assault; victim and witness and where the child is both a victim and witness to the assault.

One of the seminal studies on effects of child witness to domestic violence was by Edleson (1999). In his research, the author reviewed 31 research articles with the primary focus of understanding how domestic violence is defined and how it affects children. According to the researcher, witnessing domestic violence can be construed to be an eyewitness account of the violent events. Children also witness violence by hearing the violent event or as victims where they are used as part of the violence.

According to Edleson (1999), children were exposed to high rates of assault incidences most of which took place in their presence. However, the reviewed studies pointed out to discrepancies on prevalence of child exposure. This was because of an overreliance on parents' reports as the main source of information and yet parents' reports underestimated the child exposure occurrences. A similar analysis by Tsavoussis et al. (2014) discussed the negative impact that witnessing domestic violence poses on children. The researchers indicated that an encounter with domestic hostility can lead to changes in a child's brain development and functioning, leading to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which affects their mental health and academic achievement.

Separately, Pingley (2017) assessed how children as witnesses of IPV at home are affected by exposure to violence. Using a systematic review, the author synthesized and analysed existing literature on experiences of children who witness IPV and its effects on their behaviour. It was found that being a witness of IPV is a precursor of emotional, cognitive and psychological challenges. Additionally, the challenges affected children across all developmental stages.

Hietamäki et al. (2021) conducted a study to investigate the frequency of intimate partner violence (IPV) witnessed by children and gender variations with regards to victims, perpetrators, and witnesses. The data was analysed using cross-tabulations and chi-square results. It was established that familial aggression was committed against female spouses than male ones, as reported by the minors who witnessed it. Moreover, girls reported witnessing more aggression against both parents (7.0% vs. 5.1%) than boys (2.7% vs. 1.8%). Therefore, most girls came from families with twice as much as the level exhibited in most boys' homes. They suggested that these gender differences could be attributed to the differences in the recognition and interpretation of violent incidents. Overall, the authors emphasise the necessity of interventions and support services that address the specific needs of children who witness IPV.

Idemudia and Makhubela (2011) explored gender differences and identity development in adolescence exposed to domestic violence. The researchers randomly sampled 109 adolescents aged between 15-20 from the University of Limpopo Province in South Africa. For the study, a cross-sectional design was employed. The participants were divided into two groups: Those subjected to domestic violence, as well as the non-victims. By utilizing this scale, the researchers were able to compare the responses and experiences of these two groups and investigate any potential differences that may exist between them. Results showed that the differences between genders in regards to exposure to domestic violence were insignificant.

A similar study conducted by Asagba et al. (2022) in Nigeria among adolescents exposed to domestic violence. Data was analysed and hypothesis tested using independent t-test with a statistically significance set at  $p < .05$ . It was ascertained that on average, female participants had a slightly higher mean score. However, no statistically significant gender differences concerning the level of exposure to domestic violence were found. In other words, although female participants scored higher, there was no clear indication that they were more exposed to domestic violence than male participants.

Another study that focused on children as witnesses was by Meltzer et al. (2009). The researchers established that witnessing severe domestic violence almost tripled the likelihood of having conduct disorder. The study also established that being in an older age group, mixed ethnicity, physical disability, having several children in family, divorced parents, living in rented premises and poor neighbourhoods were some of the factors independently associated with greater likelihood of a child witnessing domestic violence. The researchers sampled children aged 5-16 throughout England, Wales and Scotland and used face-to-face interviews with children and parents and mailed questionnaires to teachers to collect data. The current study extends the field of study by sampling children from informal settlements in a low-income country.

In Uganda, Devries et al.(2017) sought to provide evidence from a low-income country on child exposure to IPV and maltreatment. The researchers focused on primary school pupils in non-boarding primary school. The study subjects included children within the puberty stage of development. The researchers used 2 binary response items to measure witnessing IPV. Exposure to maltreatment was measured using the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect Child Screening Tool. The researchers gathered information through one-on-one interviews with the participants. As per the results, about one quarter of the participants had witnessing IPV. A negligible proportion of the victims said they did not experience familial aggression. Further, both boys and girls who had witnessed IPV in the home also experienced violence and had between 1.66 (95% CI 0.96 to 2.87) and 4.50 (95% CI 1.78 to 11.33) times the odds of reporting mental health challenges. Findings from the current study will add to field of study from East African Region.

Increased risk of behaviour problems associated with dual exposure to IPV was also reported by Moylan et al. (2010). In their study, they sought to examine the effects of child abuse and domestic violence in childhood on adolescent internalizing and externalizing behaviour. Data was from the Lehigh longitudinal study which classified violence exposure groups as non-witness, abuse only, domestic violence only and dual exposure. Findings showed that children exposed as victim, witness or both had higher levels of externalizing and internalizing behaviour than those not exposed, with dual exposure at more risk of negative outcomes.

Overlap between witnessing physical domestic violence and being a victim of violence can be attributed to harsh parenting. According to Grasso et al.(2016) mothers who reported greater occurrence of IPV in form of physical assault often engaged in mild to more severe forms of physical punishment with potential harm to the child, which in turn correlated with child disruptive behaviour. Children with disruptive behaviour in school need to be assessed for exposure to domestic violence to ensure intervention measures address both parent and child.

Other researchers used a qualitative study to reveal the experiences of educated youths with dual exposure as witness and victim to IPV and its impact on them from childhood to growing up. For example, Mas'udah et al.(2022) used in-depth interviews where informants were university students aged between 19-22 years of age. Findings showed that the victims felt afraid, exhausted and tired of dealing with bad situations at home all the time. The home felt unpleasant to stay in when parents fought. Further, domestic violence perpetrated and experienced by parents extended to even children who were frequently exploited as scapegoats for issues that develop for problems giving rise to harsh parenting and affects them psychologically.

The simultaneous occurrence of IPV and the child maltreatment is a broad area with many strands of the literature in existence. These include, for example, the attributes of the parents who mistreat each other or their kids (Dixon et al., 2007), and coinciding exposure and experience of marital aggression against a spouse and mistreatment of a child, as well as, other forms of maltreatment (Hamby et al., 2010) intergenerational effects of childhood maltreatment (Greene et al., 2020). Much of the reviewed information on type of subjection to aggression focused on adolescents, youth and young children and studies done in developed countries. There is a gap in literature especially in low-income countries that focus on middle school children. The existing gaps in knowledge, literature, and practice are addressed and filled by this study.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted for this study was a descriptive research design, chosen for its suitability in collecting comprehensive data about various aspects of domestic violence's impact on pupils (Orodho, 2008). The study was conducted within the informal settlements (slums) of Nairobi County, Kenya, a region known for hosting some of Africa's largest urban slums.

The target population comprised 61,034 pupils in classes 4, 5, and 6 attending public primary schools located in sub-counties with informal settlements in Nairobi County. A sample size of 390 participants was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's formula (Bukhari, 2021). The sampling procedure involved a combination of random and non-random techniques. Purposive sampling was used to select sub-counties with informal settlements and schools catering to students from these areas. Moreover, it identified students who lived with both parents, as the study's focus centered on children exposed to domestic violence between their parents. Simple random sampling was then employed to select students in each class.

Data collection instruments consisted of an adapted the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) child and teacher version to collect data on behaviour. To ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments, a pilot study involving 42 pupils was conducted, assessing clarity, completion time, and addressing issues during debriefing. Face validity was employed to evaluate the questionnaire's appearance and relevance, while the reliability coefficient,

calculated using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha, indicated an acceptable level of reliability ( $\alpha=0.785$ ) for the Exposure to Domestic Violence Scale. Data collected was subsequently coded, entered, and cleaned, preparing it for analysis through IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. Demographic data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as percentages and frequencies, while inferential statistics, including Pearson's correlation, were used to explore the relationships between independent and dependent variables.

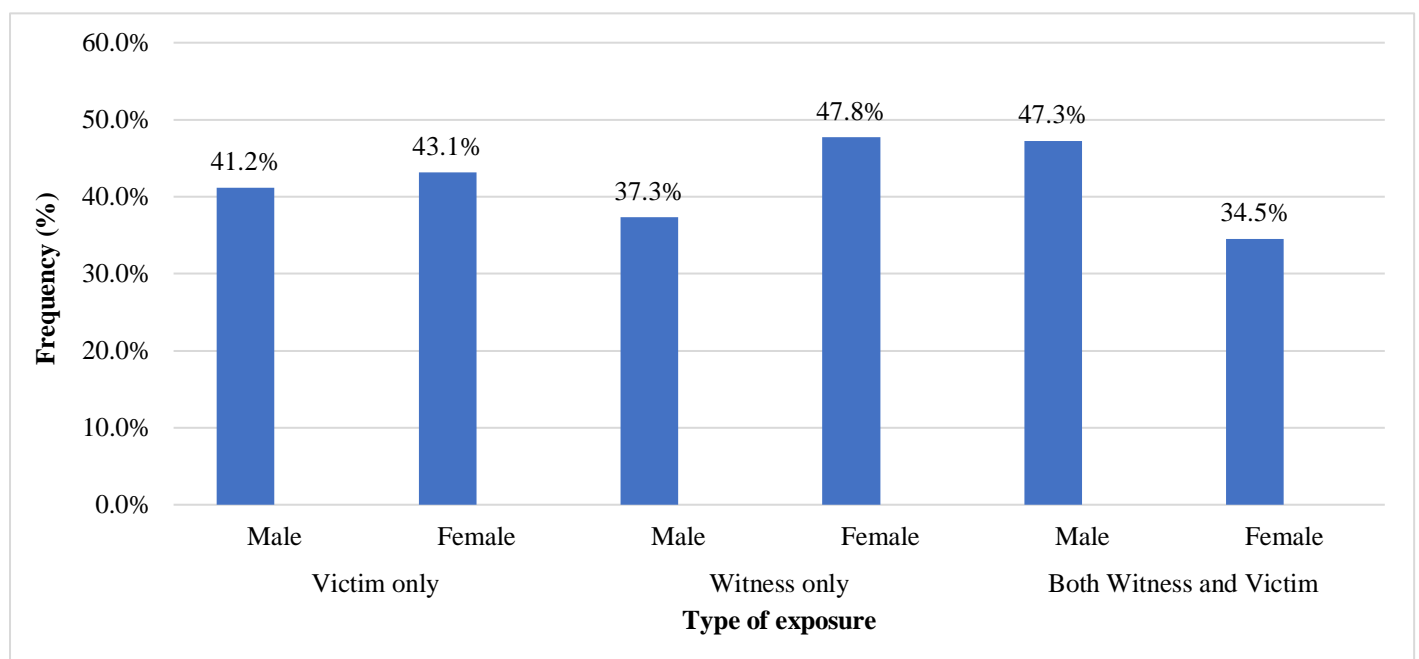
#### IV. FINDINGS

##### 4.1 Influence on the type of exposure to domestic violence on pupils' behaviour

The objective of the study sought to establish the influence of the type of exposure to domestic violence on pupils' behaviour among pupils in public primary schools, Nairobi, Kenya. Respondents were required to indicate from 25 items on domestic violence, which they had witnessed or were a victim. Those who selected both indicated that they were both a witness and a victim. Therefore, being a witness, victim or both victim and witness are the types of domestic violence that pupils were exposed to.

##### 4.1.1. Distribution on the type of exposure to domestic violence

Analysis was done to establish the distribution of types of exposure to domestic violence and gender. Findings are reported in Figure 2.



**Figure 2**  
*Distribution on Types of Exposure to Domestic Violence across Gender*

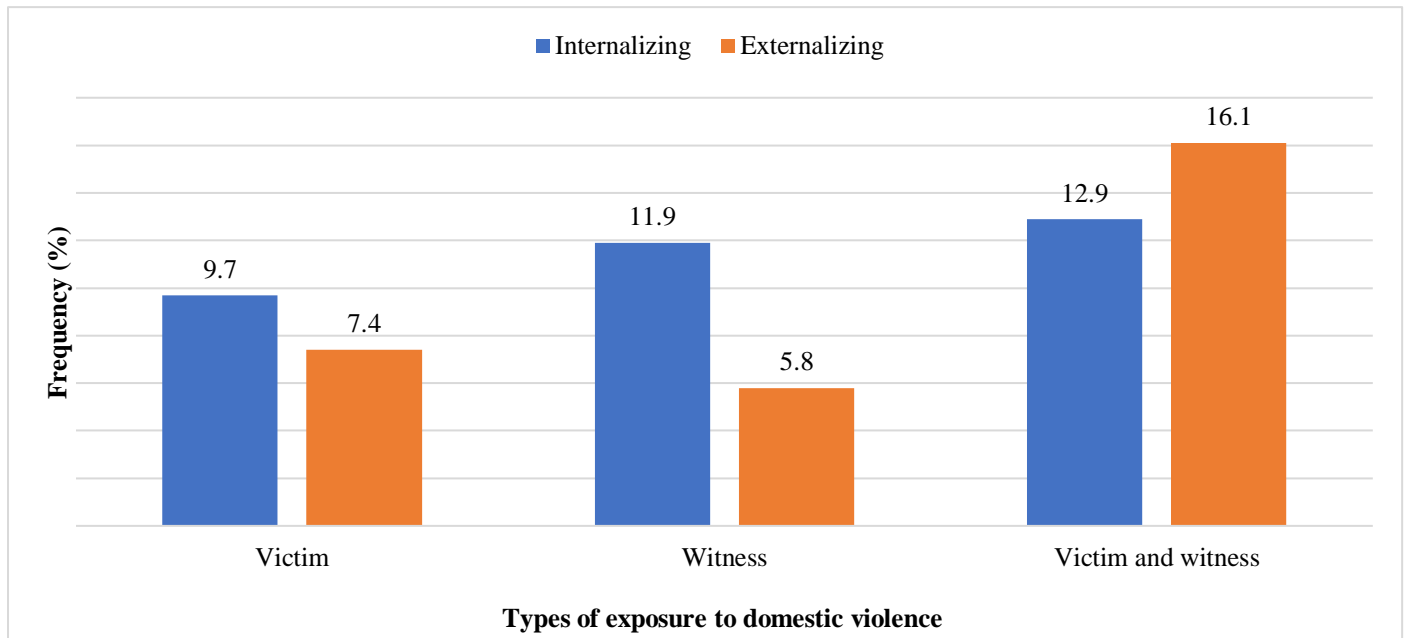
It is observed from Figure 2, an almost an equal number of males (41.2%) and females (43.1%) were exposed as victims only. However, there more females (47.8%) compared to males (37.3%) who were exposed as witness only. Further, more males (47.3%) were exposed as both witness and victim compared to females (34.5%). This finding can be explained by the fact that male are more likely than female to intervene and help their mothers' during a domestic violence incident and hence get caught up in the physical violence as victims.

This is supported by Lyod (2018) who established that more males than females reported having intervened during a domestic violence incident. Further, more female than male indicated that they tried to escape by leaving the house, hiding or locking themselves in their rooms during a domestic violence incident. Generally, there were more pupils exposed as victims (male and female) compared to those exposed as witness or both victims and witnesses. These findings indicate that during domestic violence episodes between their parents, they not only witnessed but were victims of physical violence by their parents.

Domestic violence is a stressful event, especially in absence of social support that affects mental health and parenting skills. It is probable that after a domestic violence episode, parents are not able to handle their emotions and their children’s behavioural problems. They project on their children physically. Use of physical aggression towards a child is culturally accepted as a normal way of disciplining children. It is important to have programmes that target the mental wellness of children and equip parents with parenting skills so that they are not physically violent towards their children.

**4.1.2 Distribution of behaviour on types of exposure to domestic violence**

Analysis was done to establish distribution of behaviour across the types of domestic violence. Findings are shown if Figure 3.



**Figure 2**  
*Distribution of Behaviour on Types of Exposure to Domestic Violence*

From Figure 3, the highest prevalence of internalizing (16.1%) and externalizing (12.9%) behaviours were among pupils who were exposed as witnesses and victims. The prevalence was higher than for any other type of exposure. Those who were witnesses only or victims only had more internalizing behaviour than externalizing behaviour (11.9% vs. 9.7%). These findings indicate that those with dual exposure are at a higher risk of mental health issues.

**4.1.3 Influence of Type of Exposure to Domestic Violence on Pupils’ Behaviour**

H<sub>01</sub>: There is no statistically significant influence of the type of exposure to domestic violence on behaviour among pupils in public primary schools in informal settlements, Nairobi County, Kenya. To test the hypothesis Pearson correlation was used to test the influence of prevalence of exposure to domestic violence on school related behaviour and academic performance.

**Table 1**  
*Pearson product correlation on types of exposure to domestic violence, pupils’ behaviour*

		Pupils’ Behaviours Scores
Nature of Exposure	Pearson Correlation	0.043
	R <sup>2</sup>	0.002
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.408
	N	380

The findings in the Table 1 present the relationship between the type of exposure to domestic violence on pupils' behaviour. The results show that there is a weak positive relationship between the type of exposure to domestic violence and the pupils' behaviour in the public primary schools, ( $r=0.043$ ,  $n=380$ ,  $p=0.408$ ) at 0.05 level of significance. However, the correlation was not statistically significant therefore we retain the null hypothesis. The conclusion is that there is no statistically significant correlation between the type of exposure to domestic violence and pupils' behaviour.

The study's results are consistent with earlier research showing a link between conduct and exposure to domestic violence, even though this relationship was very marginal and not statistically significant in this instance. There are a number of possible causes for the weak and non-significant connections that were found. First off, unlike other studies like Pingley (2017) that just looked at witnessing, this one included a wider range of experiences, such as victimization, witnessing, or both. Furthermore, the study's methodology—a descriptive survey that focused on preadolescents—differs from research and systematic reviews that focused exclusively on teenagers (e.g., van Berkel et al., 2018; Moylan et al., 2010). Furthermore, adolescents could be grappling with emotional and behavioural issues occasioned by adolescence which further compounds their behaviour.

## CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Conclusions

This study explored the influence of domestic violence exposure and its ramifications on pupils' behaviors in Nairobi County's informal settlements. The research findings elucidate a disturbing but essential truth that children within these disadvantaged neighborhoods bear a substantial burden, as they are more likely to witness or experience domestic violence within their families. Domestic violence exposure, characterized by the intensity, types, and age at exposure, significantly influences pupils' behaviors. Internalizing behaviors, such as peer problems and emotional issues, along with externalizing behaviors like conduct problems and hyperactivity, are exacerbated in the presence of domestic violence. The detrimental impact of such exposure is unequivocal, as children exposed to severe domestic violence are more prone to exhibiting adverse behaviors.

### 4.2 Recommendations

The gravity of the issue necessitates concerted efforts from various stakeholders to address domestic violence exposure's effects on pupils in informal settlements. Community leaders, schools, and local authorities should initiate and support awareness and sensitization programs on domestic violence's adverse effects. Parents and caregivers should be educated about the psychological toll it takes on children and the long-term consequences.

Schools should provide counseling services for pupils who have been exposed to domestic violence. These services should help pupils develop coping mechanisms, deal with their emotions, and enhance their resilience. Additionally, families should be connected to available support services, both within the community and through government initiatives.

Teachers must be equipped to recognize and address behavioral issues linked to domestic violence exposure. Training programs should provide educators with the knowledge and tools to support affected pupils effectively and create a safe and nurturing classroom environment.

Schools should implement early intervention measures to identify pupils exposed to domestic violence and provide timely support. Early identification and assistance can mitigate the behavioral challenges faced by these children, ultimately improving their academic performance and overall well-being.

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