Chapter 3
Violence Against Children in Botswana:
Reality, Challenges, and the Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

Violence against children is a profound violation of human rights that has far-reaching consequences for children's well-being. Experiences of violence can lead to lasting physical, mental, and emotional harm, regardless of whether a child is a direct victim or witness. Violence against children cuts across geographic boundaries, culture, race, class, religion, educational and socio-economic backgrounds. Yet, it is under- researched in the context of developing countries such as Botswana. Most research on interpersonal violence in developing countries has been conducted on women. This chapter analyses the complex and multifaceted issue of violence against children (VaC) in Botswana. It discusses the types and contexts of violence that children are exposed to; the effects of violence on children; the risk factors for VaC; and the existing approaches to addressing the issue. The chapter uses documents as source materials. It concludes by charting the way forward for research, practice, and policy.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against children is a disturbing and widespread phenomenon the world over. It is a profound violation of human rights with devastating and long-term consequences for those affected. It is a societal and global concern because it blocks opportunities for growth and development. Experiences of violence can lead to long-lasting physical, mental, and emotional harm, whether a child is a direct victim or a witness. Children who have experienced violence are more likely to suffer attachment problems, anxiety, conduct disorders, cognitive and academic problems, and to display delinquent behaviour.

For decades, violence against children has been of interest to different professionals such as nurses, social workers, paediatricians, and lawyers, and to public officers and the public. Despite widespread interest in the phenomenon across different fields of study in Botswana existing literature is scarce and the dynamics are insufficiently understood and discussed. Furthermore, incidence and prevalence rates throughout the country are unknown. However, the scanty literature and insights from the field demonstrate that the numbers of children who experience violence cannot be ignored. Violence against children spans geographic boundaries, culture, race, class, religion, and educational, and socio-economic background (Khan, Kapoor, & Cooraswamy, 2000). The image that Botswana has created in the local, regional and international arena is that of child-centeredness and this has been realised through the ratification of regional and international protocols. However, this attractive image is contradicted by negative aspects of children's lives which include poverty, HIV and AIDS, malnutrition, exploitation, and violence.

Violence against children is a global epidemic that requires a multifaceted response. What differs within countries are trends and patterns of violence (UNICEF, 2000). In many societies and communities, the family is an institution wherein children are nurtured, and seek love, safety, shelter, and security. While this should be the norm, practice evidence indicates that it is the same institution that children suffer the worst forms of violence (UNICEF, 2000). Given that violence against children frequently occurs in the home, it is frequently tolerated and met with a culture of silence, especially where the perpetrators are other family members. In Botswana, if such violence is brought to the attention of the state and law enforcement agencies, reports may be met with passivity as violence is tolerated within the patriarchal family structure (Mookodi, 2004; Maundeni, 2002). Violence suffered by children in the country is growing at an alarming rate. Despite scanty literature on the subject, media reports and concerns of community leaders, faith-based organisations, and government and nongovernmental organisations have created a public outcry to protect children from violence. For example, in May 2016, #IShallNotForget campaign drew attention to the issue. This movement came about as a result of an area councillor impregnating a 17-year-old student. Activists and the public engaged in awareness raising about sexual abuse and the inconsistencies in policies that are meant to protect children.

Botswana society could be said to be a child centred society when considering the international protocols ratified by the country such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 and the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 1993. Other programs include free childhood immunisation, infant feeding, orphan care, and prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV (PMTCT) (Chopra, & Rollins, 2008). This seemingly child centred approach is contradicted by violence suffered by children in homes, schools, child and health care facilities. Such experiences block their opportunity for growth and development and threaten the realisation of their innate human potential (Caspi, McClay, Moffitt, Mill, Martin, Craig, 2002). In recent decades, there have been concerns among different professionals such as social workers, paediatricians, lawyers, and psychologists as well as the public about violence suffered by children. Yet, despite this and the results of studies conducted worldwide, violence against children is still insufficiently understood. Real incidents and prevalence rates throughout Botswana are not known and relatively little research has been conducted in this regard. However, anecdotal evidence from the field and media reports indicate that children do experience violence in their lives.

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