

# Silenced Voices: Effects of Gender-Based Violence on the Physical Health and Well-Being of Sons and Daughters

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## Abstract

In recent years, it has been observed that gender-based violence within the family context affects all members, especially children. Minors are often in two main situations: either they are victims of violence alongside their mother, or they witness it in some other way. Numerous studies (Aravena, et al., 2023; Román-Gálvez, et al., 2021; Maciel, et. al., 2019; Carlson, et al., 2020; Tenkorang, 2023) have documented the high prevalence of violence against women and children.

Astorga 2022, points out that these experiences have effects on the individual, family, and societal level, emphasizing the need to focus on psychotherapeutic and psychosocial attention not only on mothers but also on children, recognizing the multi-generational dimension of this phenomenon.

This study aims to review the current state of research on the physical and psychosocial repercussions on minors who have witnessed parental conflicts and reflect on new implications for research and intervention in this field.

**Keywords:** Family violence, cultural diversity, minors, victims, health.

## Introduction

In The World Health Organization's (WHO, 2002) first report on violence as a health issue, published in 2002, highlighted a concerning issue: gender-based violence in intimate partner relationships. This problem affects women from all cultural backgrounds and societal classes worldwide. Gender-based violence manifests in multiple forms, including physical assaults, psychological abuse, and sexual coercion.

From January 2003 to September 2023, Spain has recorded 1,232 deaths due to gender-based violence, leaving 412 children under the age of 18 orphaned as a result of this violence, according to data provided by the National

Institute of Statistics (2023). These numbers reflect a reality consistent with global statistics from the WHO, indicating that approximately one in three women worldwide, or 30 percent, experience physical and/or sexual violence, usually within the context of intimate partner relationships (see Figure 1).

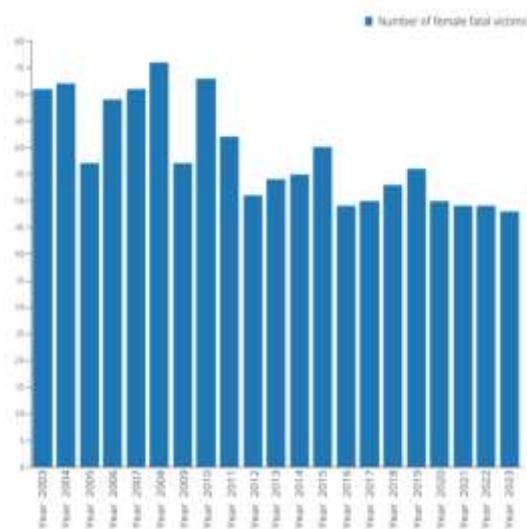


Figure 1. Number of women victims of fatal gender-based violence in Spain

Note: Figure 1 shows the number of women who have died in Spain due to gender-based violence from the year 2003 to September 19, 2023, based on data provided by the Government Delegation against Gender-Based Violence of the Ministry of Equality.

Although this issue has a global reach, a higher level of incidence is observed in specific regions such as Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Southeast Asia, especially in terms of fatalities. In this regard, Southeast Asia leads the list, followed by Africa and the Americas (Tenkorang, 2023). Despite efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically the targets of Goal 5 related to gender equality and women's empowerment, significant challenges persist, and progress has been too slow in Africa on the path towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This fact is confirmed in the most recent United Nations report, "The Gender Snapshot" (Progress on the sustainable development goals, 2023), which estimates that if current trends continue, over 340 million women and girls, approximately 8 percent of the global female population, will live in conditions of extreme poverty by the year 2030. Additionally, the gender gap in leadership roles and power remains significant, and women of the next generation will continue to spend an

average of 2.3 hours more per day than men on unpaid domestic and care-giving work.

Likewise, when we refer to minor children who are exposed to gender-based violence, a series of needs that cut across their sociocultural circumstances are revealed, as pointed out in previous research (Frías, & Gaxiola, 2008; Limiñana, et al. 2018; Estadísticas sobre violencia de género, 2023). In reality, three risk contexts can be identified that highlight the unique vulnerability of minors to violence within the family environment. It is important to note that a child is in a situation of risk when the circumstances, deficiencies, or family conflicts they face threaten their personal, family, educational, or social development. These contexts encompass child abuse, exposure to partner violence, and, in a more complex scenario, experiencing both forms of violence. In the first case, the child may become a direct target of violence and abuse that occur within the partner relationship. Minors in this situation tend to exhibit maladaptive and antagonistic behaviors in the social sphere, jeopardizing the quality of their social relationships and degree of integration [Carracedo, et al. 2013; Carracedo, et al. 2013].

In this line of research, multiple studies (Atenciano, 2019; Izaguirre, & Calvete, 2015; MacMillan, & Wathen, 2014) have confirmed the high frequency of violence directed towards both women and children, showing their coexistence and bringing with it a predisposition to child abuse.

At the national level, the Spanish Constitution establishes a clear responsibility for public authorities in protecting the rights of minors, in line with international commitments in this area (Article 39). In response to this constitutional obligation, Spain has enacted two key laws that have led to significant changes in the child and adolescent protection system: Organic Law 8/2015, of July 22, and Law 26/2015, of July 28 (2015). These laws have significantly modified the legal framework that underpins this protection.

However, today, family maltreatment is manifesting as a problem of structural nature,

as pointed out by Arcajo (2021). Other researchers (Garcia, et al. 2020) extend this perspective to include abuse that occurs during the prenatal stage, as well as exposure to situations such as shouting or noises, observing the consequences on the victim or in the environment, direct participation in violence, and the experience of consequences, among other aspects. In this sense, the repercussions resulting from any of these situations can be comparable to the effects of child sexual abuse (Astorga, 2023; Olmos-Gómez et al., 2019).

That is why since 2011, the exposure of minors to gender-based violence has been recognized as a form of psychological abuse and/or neglect, as established by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. In more severe situations, children can suffer even more significant consequences, which have been termed the

"double blow." This means that children are victims both directly and indirectly of family violence, as noted by Hughes, et al. (1989).

Regarding the exposure of children to violent behavior, it is important to high-light how frequently children have knowledge (direct or indirect) of these family circumstances. The 2019 Macro-survey on gender-based violence conducted in Spain by the Ministry of Health, Social Services, and Equality indicates that 60.6% of women with minor children when the episodes of violence occurred claim that their children witnessed or heard some of the violent situations. Of these children, 92.5% were underage when the events took place, a figure nearly identical to the 2015 Macro-survey (2019). Furthermore, 51.7% of women state that their children suffered violence at the hands of the abusive partner (See Table 1).

Table 1. Children of the woman have suffered violence directly from her current partner (N = sample frequency, % = percentage)

	CURRENT PARTNER		PAST PARTNERS		ANY PARTNER		ANY PARTNER	
	N	Percentage of women who have experienced IPV by their current partner and had children when the episodes of violence occurred	N	Percentage of women who have experienced IPV from past partners and had children when the episodes of violence occurred	N	Percentage of women who have experienced IPV from any partner and had children when the episodes of violence occurred."	N	Percentage of women who have experienced IPV from any partner, had children when the episodes of violence occurred, report that their children witnessed/heard violence against the mother and were minors.
Yes	79	16,8	342	32,2	419	28,4	371	51,7
No	384	81,7	705	66,3	1036	70,1	342	47,7
Ns	4	0,9	10	1,0	15	1,0	3	0,4
Nc	3	0,6	5	0,5	8	0,5	1	0,1
Total	470	100,0	1062	100,0	1479	100,0	716	100,0

M1P14 Have any of your children suffered or have they suffered directly from the behaviors of your current partner?

M2P14 Have any of your children suffered directly from the behaviors of your past partner(s)?

Note: The information comes from the 2019 Macro-survey on violence against women by the Ministry of Equality.

Given the significant prevalence of this issue, we will focus on a theoretical re-view aimed at understanding the impact that gender-based violence can have on the physical and

emotional health of minors. We will address the various personal, family, and community variables that can influence these effects, similar to how they do in their mothers. Additionally, we will explore the need to continue researching the consequences for children who have witnessed violent situations at home and their importance in the development of future psychoeducational interventions.

### **The Impact on the Physical and Mental Health of Minors Witnessing Gender-Based Violence**

As we have previously analyzed, the exposure of children to gender-based violence in intimate partner relationships is not only considered a risk factor for their well-being and overall development but is also a complex phenomenon with multiple causes (Banyard, et al., 2017; Morales, 2004; Cánovas, et al., 2019). Consequently, it is not surprising that this situation has a direct impact on the daily life and general health of the children. In this context, Tenkorang (2023) emphasizes that this traumatic experience affects both the physical and psychosocial aspects of minors, constituting a global health issue.

Based on research and updated data, we can highlight that the exposure of children to gender-based violence within the context of intimate partner relationships continues to be a cause for deep concern. Recent studies, such as those conducted by the American Academy of Psychology (2023), support the idea that children are highly sensitive to adverse environments, and ongoing exposure to gender-based violence can have a significant impact on their well-being.

Data provided by organizations like UNICEF (2023) indicate that millions of children worldwide continue to witness gender-based violence in their homes. This exposure can manifest in various ways, from physical assaults to psychological abuse and sexual coercion. The effects on children can be profound and encompass both physical and emotional aspects.

According to research (Imaz & Martínez, 2023; Trocmé, 2005; Horno, 2006; Fariña, 2011) children exposed to gender-based violence may experience a range of physical and psychological health problems. These include somatic disorders such as headaches and gastrointestinal problems, as well as difficulties in growth and development. Furthermore, it has been observed that these children may experience sleep disturbances, changes in eating patterns, and exhibit regressive behaviors.

Regarding the long-term impact, recent studies have highlighted the correlation between early exposure to gender-based violence and health problems in adulthood (Kolbe & Büttner, 2020; Bensley et al., 2003). For example, research conducted by the American Pediatric Association (2023) suggests that children exposed to violence in the home during their childhood may have a higher risk of developing diseases such as stroke, cancer, and heart diseases in adulthood. Additionally, it has been demonstrated that these traumatic experiences can influence cellular aging and DNA, which can have a long-term impact on health. These current findings underscore the need to comprehensively address gender-based violence and its effects on children, both in research and in intervention and prevention. It is essential to consider these findings when designing strategies and policies aimed at protecting children and promoting a safe and healthy environment for their development.

Often, these physical manifestations result from complex alterations at the psychological, emotional, and cognitive levels, crucial areas for development during childhood and adolescence (Imaz, & Martínez, 2023). In the context of exposure to violent behaviors in the intimate partner relationship, it has been documented that children may experience symptoms associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, as this situation is considered distressing (Lutgendorf, 2019). Additionally, these events can overwhelm children's capacity, leading to significant emotional (Potter, et al. 2021). This dysregulation manifests as difficulties in expressing and understanding both their own emotions and those of others, especially when it comes to family members (García & Matud, 2015). As a result, feelings of confusion, anger, sadness, fear, but also shame, guilt, and frustration emerge (Fariña, et al. 2011; Trocmé, 2005). Furthermore, this experience can undermine self-esteem, increase distress and anxiety, and lead to depressive symptoms, especially in the case of girls exposed to intense conflicts (Alcántara, et al. 2013; Manchego, et al. 2022). From a cognitive perspective, children in this situation tend to perceive it as a threat, undoubtedly

contributing to the aforementioned emotional instability (Morris, et al., 2022).

The exposure of children to gender-based violence within the family environment can create an imbalance in both their physical and emotional well-being, which significantly impacts areas related to their development, such as their behavior in social situations and academic performance. As a result of prior emotional distress, it is common for children to face difficulties in controlling their behavior (Sancho, et al. 2022). Specifically, Alcántara, et al. (213) have identified eight predominant empirical syndromes in these children, highlighting a range of serious behavioral and emotional problems. These limited behaviors can be linked to various factors, including underdeveloped social skills, difficulties in interpreting non-verbal cues, and a general attitude of distrust that affects their social relationships overall (Rico & Cantón, 2017;Gámez & Calvete, 2012)

Clearly, this situation also has a strong impact on the academic life of minors. In the curricular context, difficulties related to concentration, attention, and memory capacity are common, a topic documented in various research studies (Carracedo et al. 2013; Alcántara, et al. 2013; Haroz, et al. 2013).

### **Factors Influencing Risk or Protection: An Analysis of Personal, Family, Social, and Internet Variables**

While it is true that the presence of children during violent episodes at home can increase the likelihood of experiencing some of the mentioned disruptions, it is important to consider that there are several factors that can exacerbate or, conversely, mitigate this risk situation. Ultimately, these variables play an intermediary role between exposure to domestic violence and the effects it has on each child, as suggested by the study conducted by Martínez-Torteya et al. (2009).

In the analysis of this situation, it is essential to recognize that it does not occur in isolation; rather, it is framed by a series of internal and

external factors that influence how children cope with and experience suffering. To fully understand this dynamic, it is crucial to highlight the specific characteristics of this group and their ability to identify protective and risk factors.

In this context, the family environment, the educational environment, the cultural, social, and environmental system shaping human development and learning have been carefully considered. In this regard, the ecological model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) has gained significant importance. According to this theory, human development is forged through the interaction of the individual with their surrounding environment, which consists of four interdependent structures that interact through social networks: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (León, 2020).

Firstly, the "microsystem" refers to the child's closest relationships and environments, such as the family, school, and friends. These direct interactions can have a significant impact on the child's experience in situations of gender-based violence, and it is crucial to consider how these elements can influence their well-being.

The "mesosystem" considers how elements of the microsystem interact with each other. This is relevant for understanding how problems at home, for example, can affect academic performance and vice versa. It is important to highlight how different areas of a child's life can be interconnected.

The "exosystem" extends the perspective to include external factors that influence the child's life, such as parental work circumstances or support services in the community. In today's society, this also needs to consider how technology and online social networks can influence the lives of minors. Currently, minors navigate a world deeply influenced by technology and social networks. These elements have become integral components of their microsystems, influencing their personal relationships and experiences. Social media platforms like Facebook,

Instagram, Twitter, and others are part of their immediate environment and can play both positive and negative roles in their lives.

On one hand, social networks can be an important resource for minors who have experienced gender-based violence. They provide opportunities to connect with friends and support communities in real-time, which can be especially valuable when they feel they cannot talk about their situation in the real world. These online environments can offer a safe platform to share experiences and seek advice. However, there is also a negative side to social media and the internet. Minors may be exposed to harmful content, such as the normalization of gender-based violence or cyberbullying. Additionally, the pressure to maintain an online presence can lead to increased vulnerability, as minors may feel the need to hide or downplay their gender-based violence situation due to fear of stigma or online scrutiny.

Ecological theory by Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) also extends to the "exosystem," considering external factors that affect minors. In today's society, this includes how technology and social media can impact the lives of minors. Parents, educators, and professionals must understand how these digital platforms influence the experiences of minors and how they can provide support and education to navigate the online environment safely. In summary, social media and the internet are key components of minors' environments in today's society and should be considered within the context of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. These elements can act as both protective factors, offering online support and resources, and as risks, exposing minors to harmful content. A comprehensive understanding of how these digital influences impact the well-being and development of minors who have experienced gender-based violence is essential.

The "macrosystem" examines broader cultural, social, and political influences on children's lives, such as gender norms and government policies related to gender-based violence. Here, it is important to consider how digital culture and online trends can affect minors' perceptions

and attitudes. Finally, the "chronosystem" refers to how these systems change over time and how children can adapt as they grow. In an era of constantly evolving technology, it is crucial to consider how changes in society and technology can affect minors affected by gender-based violence.

In summary, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory provides a comprehensive understanding of how minors affected by gender-based violence are immersed in a complex network of contextual influences that affect their well-being and development. This provides a solid foundation for understanding and addressing their situation in the current context, where online interactions, technology, and social media also play a significant role in their lives (See Figure 2)

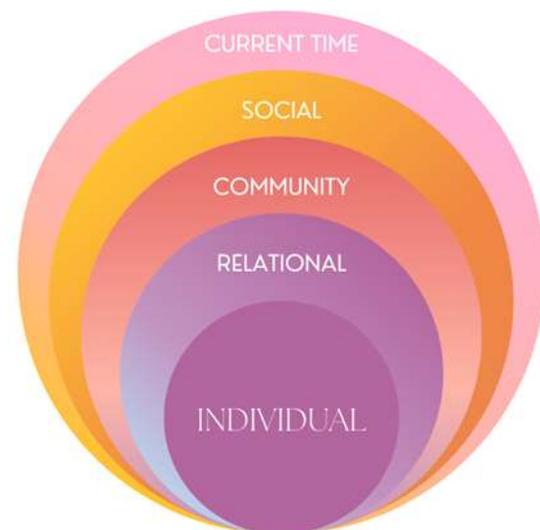


Figure 2. Ecological Model for Understanding Violence. Source: Own.

## Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored in detail the issue of gender-based violence in intimate relationships and its impact on minors who witness these situations. From the first report by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2002 to the date of September 2023), alarming statistics have been analyzed both globally and in the Spanish context. Gender-based violence remains a serious problem affecting women of all cultural backgrounds and social classes worldwide.

In Spain, the numbers of deaths related to gender-based violence and the number of minors orphaned due to this violence are concerning. Globally, regions like Southeast Asia lead the list in terms of the incidence of this issue. Despite efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to gender equality, progress has been insufficient in some parts of the world, posing significant challenges on the path to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The devastating impact of this violence on minors who witness it has been highlighted. From somatic disorders and developmental issues to severe psychological consequences such as post-traumatic stress syndrome, affected minors face a wide range of challenges affecting their physical and mental health in both the short and long term.

Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model has been adopted to analyze how different levels of influence, from the microsystem of the family and school to the macrosystem of cultural and policy norms, interact and affect minors. The importance of considering the digital environment and online social networks as an integral part of minors' lives has also been emphasized, acting as both protective and risky factors.

In conclusion, this article emphasizes the need to address gender-based violence comprehensively and multidisciplinary. Effective prevention and intervention require an approach that considers all these contextual factors and provides support to both female victims and minor witnesses. Only through continued commitment to research, education, and awareness can we aspire to a world where minors are protected and have the opportunity to grow up in a safe and healthy environment. Eradicating gender-based violence is a fundamental goal in building a fairer and more equitable society, and we all have a role to play in this effort.

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