Background

What is the current problem?

Domestic Violence is a serious societal problem that impedes the growth and development of children. The United Nations in its definition acknowledges that anyone can be a victim of domestic violence regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, faith or class. Victims of domestic abuse may also include a child or other relative, or any other household member. The Unicef report of 2017 estimated that nearly 3 in 4 children or 300 million children aged 2 - 4 years regularly suffered from some form of violence by parents and caregivers. The same study indicated that 1 in 4 children under 5 years lived with a mother who is a victims of intimate partner violence. [A familiar face: violence in the lives of children and adolescents, United Nations Children's Fund, 2017]. Domestic violence is the most common factor for children to be considered “in need” of support from local children’s social care agencies. [Not Just Collateral Damage: the hidden impact of domestic abuse on children, Barnardo’s, 2020]

Evidence has shown that exposure to intimate partner violence and/or child abuse within the home has a multitude of adverse impacts on children both in their childhood and throughout their lives [Adverse Childhood Experience, CDC Index]. In addition to the immediate risk of injury and trauma, longer term impacts include psychological, cognitive and emotional health, and increased risk of adopting high risk health behaviours; developmental problems such as depression and low self esteem affecting learning goals and achievement, and an increased risk of becoming victim or perpetrator of violence, thus contributing to the intergenerational cycle of violence [Impact of Childhood Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence and Other Adversities, Journal of the Korean Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2017].

Findings from the report on digital stories by children in Colombia, Guatemala, Indonesia, Rwanda and Zimbabwe [Losing the care of your parents is equal to losing our life, Family for Every Child, 2018] indicate that domestic violence is one of the key drivers of children being separated from their parents and extended families. The report indicated that domestic violence could be accompanied by several other related causes of the child’s separation including migration or detention of parents or caregivers, parental abuse of alcohol. The overall impact is often a breakdown in the stabilities of family care, such as through absence of parents, parental separation and divorce or multiple care moves. Separation from parents is often traumatic experience for children with multiple negative impacts on children.

“I endured that bad life and went on staying with my stepmother because I had no other alternative. I lost concentration, became addicted to drug abuse and vagrant, simply because my mum was not

Intergenerational violence refers to a model of domestic violence in which behavioral strategies or scripts are transmitted from parent to child and from sibling to sibling as examined by Robert A. Pollak, 2004 - https://www.jstor.org/stable/20007910
there to care for me. The separation of my dad and my mum spoiled my life. [...] I continued struggling in that difficult life, but I managed to survive. Losing the affection of your parents is equal to losing your life." Boy, aged 17, Rwanda

In the same report many children related their positive experience of growing up in supported and loved families and how that impacted their growth and development.

“My family would get together at weekends to play five-a-side football. We could feel togetherness, love and happiness. Those days were fantastic. I felt so lucky and grateful for having such a family.”
Girl, aged 15, Colombia

Studies show that significant number of children in institutional care are those who have run away or have been removed from their parents and families by the authorities because of violent and abusive homes. Studies also evidence from many countries that children in institutional care are often subjected to violence from staff and officials responsible for their well-being and safety. [United Nations World report on Violence against Children, 2006]

Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the risk of children to the face of domestic violence. Imposition of lockdowns, quarantines, loss of income, over crowding in homes resulted in increased stress, anxiety in parents, caregivers and children leading to heightened prevalence of domestic violence either through intimate partner violence or directly inflicted on children. Families and children have been cut off from their usual source of support and this has impacted the most vulnerable communities across the globe. The UN study on violence against children 2020 reported rise in child abuse and of children witnessing violence between their parents and caregivers [Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children 2020]. The UN described as the “shadow pandemic” of domestic violence [The Shadow Pandemic, Violence against Women during Covid-19]. The World Vision Study of 2020 “Covid-19 Aftershocks” estimated 20 - 30% increase in experiences of violence against children including violence at homes. This could mean that 85 million more girls and boys could have been exposed to physical, sexual and/or emotional violence following the first 3 months of the Covid-19 lockdowns.

The intersection with violence against women

Violence against children and violence against women are innately interlinked with common risk factors and adverse consequences. It has a direct link to the cycle of intergenerational transmission of violence [Harmful Connections, Unicef and UNFPA, 2015]. While the impact of domestic violence against women and children is well documented, there are not many evidence of interventions that support children and parents or caregivers to address factors leading to risks of domestic violence, particularly targetting gender and social norms and power dynamics in relationships at homes.

A significant body of work exists around tackling domestic violence but often these are designed from a gender lens and for tackling women’s issues [Not Just Collateral Damage,Barnardo’s Report, 2020]. There is inevitable opportunity and need for the women’s rights and child rights sector to work in an integrated manner towards strengthening interventions that tackle the problem not only from a gender lens but broadening it to a child protection and development approach. Children need to be acknowledged as direct victims of domestic violence and that their growth and development
into adolescents and adulthood are seriously impacted. Domestic violence should be also viewed from the lens of child protection where the family is supported with greater emphasis on gender norms and children development to reduce violence and making families safer.

**International framework**

**Article 19 of the UNCRC** makes it clear that children and young people have the basic human right to dignity. This means they have the right to be protected from any form of violence including by parents, legal guardians or any care giver. The General Comment No.13 of Article 19 of the UNCRC vests responsibility and obligation of the State to support parents and caregivers to enable their children to grow in a violence free environment.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child further recognises that references to “family” (or to “parents”) must be understood within the local context and may mean not only the “nuclear” family, but also the extended family or even broader communal definitions including grandparents, siblings, other relatives, guardians or care providers, neighbours, etc as outlined in the recommendations from the 2001 Day of General Discussion focussing on violence against children in family and school. This implies that all prevention and response to domestic violence against children needs to take into account the above context of “family”.

According to the World Health Organization, violence against children by family members is one of the least visible forms of child abuse, but it is widely prevalent in all societies. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) defines ending violence against children as one of their priorities, considered fundamental for global development. In SDG Target 16.2 it explicts states: “end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children”.

**Our recommendations**

Many Family for Every Child member CSOs from different parts of the globe reported an increase in domestic violence cases, against children, either directly or indirectly affected by increased violence within families. Accordingly our members strengthened and adapted their approach and practices to tackle domestic violence, including focusing on children, in the changed circumstances of the pandemic. In January 2022, we published a Toolkit on Prevention of Domestic Violence against Children in Covid-19 which is a practice guidance capturing specific resources on prevention and responses to encourage cross learning and exchange and to generate new learning across the alliance and beyond. The Toolkit attempts to cover certain practices and approaches for strengthening social norms that drive domestic violence affecting children.

Family for Every Child is committed to and supports all actions towards making families and communities, empowered, safer and caring. It will do this by creating a global community of child rights, women's rights and other rights based groups to analyse the impact of COVID-19, climate crisis and inequality among particular communities and groups of children, exchange examples of good practice, and campaign for improved policy and practice for vulnerable women, girls and boys.
Family for Every Child calls upon to local CSOs, donor partners, policy makers and fellow practitioners to:

**Include the narrative of children and how they are impacted within the scope of Domestic Violence by:**

- **Acknowledging** that domestic violence is an issue of violence against children and that it seriously and directly impacts the lives of children by impairing their growth, development and learning.

- Including **information** about how children are impacted by either witnessing or experiencing abuse within family situations and how this is interlinked with domestic violence against women.

- Increasing the **evidence** base around how domestic violence is a direct cause of children being deprived of care and protection within families and how this poses children at heightened risk of being separated from their families and often being placed in state care systems, with heightened risks of further abuse in the absence of high quality care.

- **Collaborating** between the women rights groups and child rights sector to realise the interlinkages between domestic violence against women and children and coordinate resources towards a common goal of protecting lives of children and families.

**Strengthen practice based evidence and research in the area of domestic violence to:**

- To **provide services to children in various contexts** including those who have been separated from their families due to domestic violence so that they are either able to be reintegrated or integrated into a family environment suitable to their care and protection.

- To be able to support families and children with necessary **support in preventing and responding** to domestic violence by addressing situations of gender inequality, family conflicts, alcohol and substance abuse, lockdown stress, stress related to pressure of livelihood,

- To provide **specialised care and protection services** for children experiencing stigma and discrimination due to special inequalities related to gender, sexuality, caste, indigenous community, or disability and others by recognising that such groups of children are at heightened risks of domestic violence.

**Voices of lived experience**

Losing the care of your parents is equal to losing your life DST stories report: [https://changemakersforchildren.community/topic/losing-care-parent](https://changemakersforchildren.community/topic/losing-care-parent)
“I grew up with my parents [...] who filled our home with joy, happiness that vanished when my father arrived drunk screaming at my mother and insulting her.”

Boy, aged 16, Guatemala

“And then my father hit her in the face and I was very scared.”

Girl, aged 15, Colombia, describing domestic violence between her parents

“He hit my back with his belt with lots of rage. At the age of 12, I had a terrible grudge in my heart and many times I wanted to follow the example of my father and consume alcohol, but I decided to try the marijuana that for me became an outlet.”

Boy, aged 16, Guatemala

“The only way I could rid myself of such sadness was by crying because the person I told my things to, with whom I felt secure, was gone. [...] After everything that happened, my life had a drastic change. I separated myself from many things, it was no longer the same communication. [...] Several years have passed since this happened and it still affects me.”

Young man, aged 18, Guatemala

“During my stay with my aunt, there were days that I would go to school hungry yet there was food in the house. On some days I was told to do house chores first before going to school.”

Girl, aged 15, Zimbabwe

“Because we were poor, my mother and my father went to the city of Kigali to earn a living [...] Though my grandmother let me stay with her, she assigned me heavy work.”

Young man, aged 19, Rwanda