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### COPING MECHANISMS AMONG CHILDREN EXPOSED TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON THEIR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN KUKIRANGO WARD, MARA REGION, TANZANIA

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**Abstract:** Research indicates that the exposure of children to domestic violence is a worldwide phenomenon, prevalent in both developed and developing countries. In fact, it is one of the major constraints to children's academic performance. This is due to the lack of appropriate coping mechanisms for the same. However, it seems that the coping strategies used by the children exposed to domestic violence vary and have a positive or negative influence on their academic performance. This paper explored the influence of coping mechanisms among children exposed to domestic violence on their academic performance in Kukirango ward, Mara Region, Tanzania. An exploratory technique with multiple research methods was used to facilitate the study. The study's target population was all children and adolescents aged between 9 and 18 years who were exposed to domestic violence in Kukirango Ward. In total, 272 children participated. Survey interviews were conducted on 234 participants, participatory exercises engaged 30 participants (six groups of five children), and semi-structured interviews involved 8 participants. The theoretical and practical influences of coping mechanisms among children exposed to domestic violence in Tanzania were discussed.

**Key terms:** Coping mechanisms, domestic violence, academic performances, children.

### 1.1 Background of the Study

According to Osofsky (1997) millions of children and adolescents all over the world are exposed to violence in their homes, schools, neighborhoods, and through the media. Globally, the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children (2006), reviewed existing studies on violence in the home in various countries and estimated that as many as 275 million children worldwide are exposed to violence in the home (UNICEF, 2006). Children may cope with the fear and loss associated with violence by restricting their activities and pretending not to care about anything, which sometimes affects their studies. Each year an estimated 3.3 million to 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence and use different coping mechanisms to deal with domestic violence in their homes in Sub-Saharan Africa (Edleson, 2001). For example McCholskey *et al.*, (2005) points out that virtually half (48%) of Zambian's children are exposed to domestic violence and they use different strategies, which influence their academic performance, to cope with the situation.

In 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO) ranked Tanzania 4<sup>th</sup> in terms of children exposure to domestic violence prevalence. This meant that it had one of the highest incidences of the same. Although these children in Tanzania have no typical reaction that is the permanent coping mechanism when exposed to domestic violence, researchers have found that they are at risk of developing maladaptive behaviour, emotional, social and cognitive malfunctioning which have effects on their academic performances as their ways of coping with the episode (Holt & Devaney, 2015; Kitzman *et al.*, 2003; Wolfe *et al.*, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2008).

Kukirango ward is one of the areas in Mara region with a large number of domestic violence cases. The extent and magnitude of children exposure to domestic violence and their coping mechanisms to the episode cannot be precisely measured because most of the cases go unreported. This makes the vice an interpersonal and family secret. A variety of coping strategies are employed by the children exposed to domestic violence in Kukirango ward in their day to day lives. Though these children may wish to improve their welfare and education, they have limited choices with respect to alternative coping strategies.

### 1.2 Statement of the Problem

There is a growing awareness of the impact of domestic violence on the academic performance of children, and an increased recognition of the need to understand children's experiences and their coping strategies first hand. However, research on the coping mechanisms among children exposed to this vice and the effects of the same on their academic performance in Tanzania has been relatively limited. Most of the children exposed to domestic violence in Kukirango ward, Tanzania, perform poorly at school as a result of the ineffective coping mechanisms they employ. These children result to different coping strategies which impact their performance at school. Examples of such strategies include; missing some classes, not attending school at all, avoiding other students and teachers, and being outright arrogant. A number of studies have been done on the nature, causes and effects of exposing children to domestic violence. However, no studies have been conducted on the coping mechanisms children use in this episode and their effects on academic performance in Kukirango ward. This has negatively affected both the education and future lives of most children in Kukirango ward. As a result, there is a need to provide detailed information on the impact of these coping mechanisms on the academic performance of children exposed to domestic violence.

### 1.3 Objectives and Study Questions

The main objective of this study was to investigate the impact of the various coping mechanisms employed by children exposed to domestic violence on their academic performance in Kukirango ward, Mara region, Tanzania. To achieve this broad objective, this study employed the following specific objectives:

- (i) To find out the extent to which time spent seeking support affects the academic performance of children exposed to domestic violence in Kukirango ward, Mara region, Tanzania.
- (ii) To establish the influence of social distraction among children exposed to domestic violence on their academic performance in Kukirango ward, Mara region, Tanzania.

### 1.4 Justification

The level of awareness on the coping mechanisms that children exposed to domestic violence in Kukirango ward result to is minimal. A limited number of studies have analyzed children's strategies for coping with domestic violence and the impact of the same on their academic performance. It is therefore necessary to unearth these coping strategies with a view to improving their academic performance and overall growth.

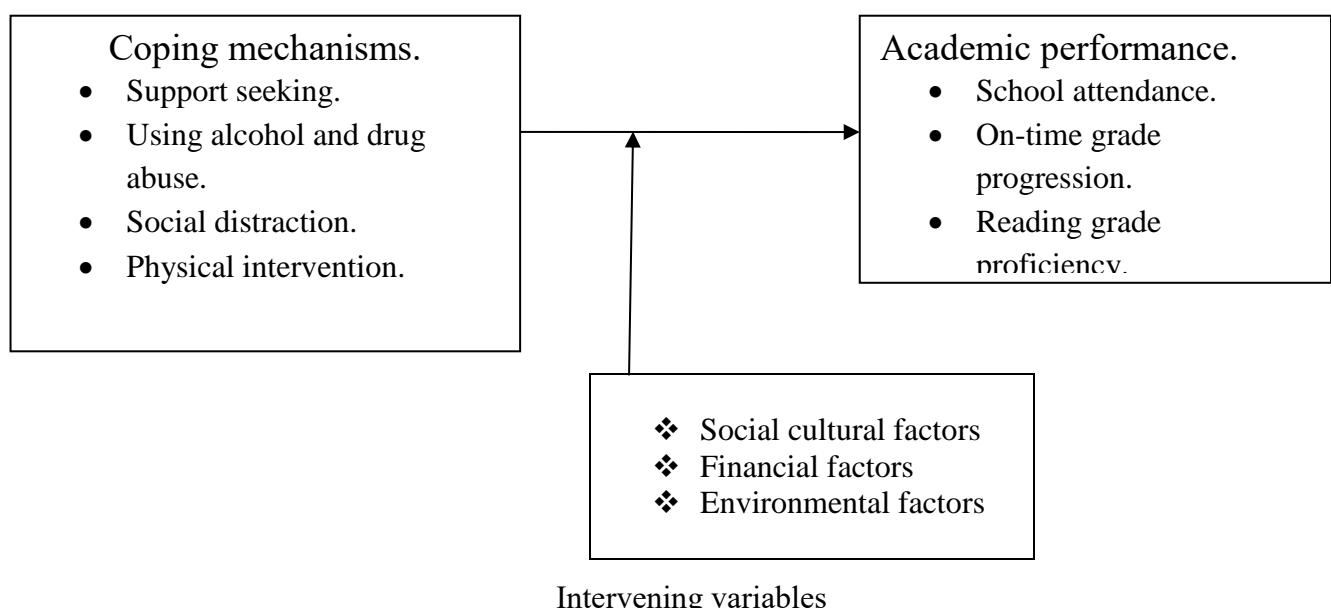
### 1.5 Conceptual Framework

The coping mechanism, which is the independent variable, refers to the actions children result to when exposed to domestic violence. It includes; support seeking, alcohol and drug abuse, social distraction and physical involvement. All these are directly linked to their academic performance, which is the dependent variable. The major indicators of academic performance include; school attendance by children, on-time grade progression, reading grade proficiency and credit accumulation. This relationship between the independent and dependent variables is supported by the intervening variables which include the socio-cultural factors in the society. This can be illustrated in the diagram below:

**Figure 1: Conceptual framework**

Independent variables

Dependent variable



**Source: own conceptualization, 2018****1.6 Review of the Empirical Studies.*****Extent to which time utilized in support seeking affects academic performance.***

Social support encompasses the perception and actuality that one is cared for, the assistance available from other people, and being part of a supportive social network. These supportive resources can be emotional (e.g. nurturance), tangible (e.g. financial assistance), informational (e.g. advice), companionship (e.g. sense of belonging) or intangible (e.g. personal advice) (Wills, 1991). Globally, all forms of social support from the school, family members, close friends and mentors have a major impact on the student's achievement and performance. As is the case in other parts of the world, children and adolescents exposed to domestic violence in Sub-Saharan Africa view Social support as the instruments and/or expressive provisions, real or perceived, which are given by the community, social networks, and intimate relationships in dealing with stressors of domestic violence (Lin et al., 1986).

In East and Central African countries specifically, a contextual perspective of analysis on social support focuses on the environmental and social conditions in which the transactions take place, like the source of support. The main sources of this support for children and adolescents exposed to domestic violence in urban areas are family, peers, culture, sports, social organizations and groups, and online social networks (Stice *et al.*, 2004). On the other hand children and adolescents feel freer to talk about their problems with peers than parents (Barker. 2007).

In Tanzania- especially in the Lake zone regions like Mwanza, Shinyanga, Mara, and Kagera-support and help seeking assessed in 12 studies, were found to be the most commonly used strategies among adolescents and children exposed to domestic violence across all ages in relation to their academic performance (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006). Many children exposed to domestic violence can resolve their feelings and concerns with the help of their mother, other family members and community. However, there are instances when professional help is needed (Futures without Violence, 2016). According to Lawuo *et al.*, (2015), most children (76%) exposed to domestic violence in Tanga, Tanzania, sought support from friends, relatives and strangers without regard to the protective or vulnerability factors within their environments. This affected their academic performance because of the time spent.

***Social Distraction and academic performances***

Social distraction refers to a classification of coping strategies that are employed to divert attention away from a stressor and toward other thoughts or behaviors that are unrelated to the stressor (Traeger, 2012). Worldwide, in both adult and child populations, social distraction (for example, focusing on an external object or imagining a peaceful place.) may be used to deal with the pain or stress resulting from the exposure to domestic violence. Other examples of social distraction include daydreaming or engaging in substitute activities to keep one's mind from ongoing stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In Sub-Saharan countries, parents, teachers, and adults mostly divert their attention to the development of motor skills, language skills, and leaning in children. In most African countries like Zambia, Malawi and Ethiopia, the social and emotional growth of the child is often neglected. Socially withdrawn children frequently refrain from social activities in the presence of their peers. The lack of social interaction during childhood may result from a variety of causes,

including social fear and anxiety or a preference for solitude (Kenneth, 2013). A study done in Namibia in 2006, found that from early childhood through to adolescence, socially withdrawn children are concurrently and predictively at risk of developing a wide range of negative adjustments and outcomes. These included; social emotional difficulties (e.g., anxiety, low self-esteem, depression symptoms, and internalization of any problems faced.), peer difficulties (e.g., rejection, victimization and poor friendship quality), and school difficulties (e.g., poor quality of teacher-child relationships, academic difficulties and school avoidance) (Kenneth, 2013). The study of children's and adolescents' solitary and withdrawn behavior has been associated with such constructs as shyness, behavioral inhibition, isolation and rejection, social reticence, passivity, and peer neglect which affect their academic performance (Rubin & Coplan, 2004). According to research in South Africa, there is preliminary evidence linking social withdrawal to lack of displayed academic competence both in early and later childhood. Student participation and social interaction are viewed as important contributors to the attainment of learning objectives (Coplan et al., 2001).

In the Tanzanian context, like in most Sub-Saharan countries, social withdrawal is one of the maladaptive coping strategies that seem to be particularly detrimental to children's and adolescents' adjustments after being exposed to domestic violence (Spirito *et al.*, 1996; Stallard *et al.*, 2001). Research shows that some children who are exposed to domestic violence run away from home to either live with other relatives or on the streets. This is mostly used by children and adolescents from well-off families especially in cities like Dar es Salaam, Mwanza and Arusha. Those in urban areas prefer watching videos, movies and music as a way of coping with domestic violence (Edger & Skinner, 2003). This also affects children's academic performance because they spend a lot of time on social media, in theaters watching movies or attending shows and dancing instead of studying (Lawuo *et al.*, 2015).

Those students who use the various forms of social media such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, and Instagram are unable to fully pay attention in the classroom. For teens in this generation, social networking has become a form of "addiction" (Lawuo *et al.*, 2015). BOHA (2015) conducted both a research and a survey in Tanga, Tanzania, to test whether social networking could be a hindrance to a good performance at school. The survey confirmed that indeed some children and adolescents were willing to spend more time on social network platforms than to spend time in studying and catching up on school work. Time wasting is a major issue in this regard. The conclusion is that if students spend too much time on Social networking sites, there is a definite negative effect on their academic performance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical perspective used to further explain this study is the Attachment Theory which was formulated by John Bowlby (Cassidy, 1999). This theory states that, within close relationships, young children develop mental representations or working models of their own worthiness based upon other people's availability and their willingness to provide care and protection (Howe, 2011). If an adult's ability to provide care to a child is compromised, or is less than optimal, then a child's attachment can suffer. Domestic violence undermines this developmental need for security and stability, through the main care giver's lack of availability and the child's exposure to a hostile atmosphere. This can result in the child developing attachments of poor quality (Shemmings & Shemmings, 2011).

The presence of security in an attachment has a major influence on exposure to domestic violence which, in turn, affects academic performance. It is basic to the quality of attachment that the child builds with his/her parents. This security can also be defined as having reliable and trusted relationships that can serve as a secure basis against unforeseen events. Exposure to domestic violence leads to insecurity and does not allow the child to have an attachment figure. This then forces the children exposed to domestic violence to use different coping mechanisms which may include; alcohol and drug abuse, running away from home, social distraction, support seeking etcetera. All these affect the academic performance of both children and adolescents. In other words, the attachment impulse is a secondary libidinal auto-conservative impulse which aims to meet the need for protection, comfort, and support.

### **1.7 Study Findings**

#### ***Support-seeking and academic performance***

The first objective of this study was to find out the extent to which time utilized in support-seeking affects the academic performance of children exposed to domestic violence in Kukirango Ward. Under this objective, the study intended to explore the various forms of support children sought and their impact on academic performance, the places where they seek support, and how time utilized on this exercise affects their academic performance. From the information gathered on the forms of support which children seek as coping mechanisms, social support had the highest percentage with boys yielding 47.1% and 45.7% for girls. The lowest percentage was for financial support with 2.1% and 1.1% being the results for boys and girls respectively. This is summarized in table 3 below. The study found that the most preferable form of support seeking is the social support. However, all the different forms of support require the children to spend time, which could otherwise be spent on studies, trying to get them.

**Table 1**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Male (N=140)</b>		<b>Female (N=94)</b>	
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Kind of support seeking</b>				
Social support	66	47.1	43	45.7
Emotional support	5	3.6	6	6.4
Running away from home	24	17.1	12	12.8
Financial support	3	2.1	1	1.1
Advice and counseling	4	2.9	5	5.3
Prayers (Church/Mosques)	38	27.1	27	28.7

*Source: Field data, 2018*

The finding also confirmed that children also prefer to use prayers- praying and depending on God for help or going to churches and mosques- as coping mechanism when exposed to domestic violence (boys 38% and girls 28.7%). Time is utilized when meeting servants of God or attending prayers. Sometimes they concentrate more on prayers and less on their studies. This eventually affects their academic performance. Therefore, the above kinds of support seeking as coping mechanisms, among children exposed to domestic violence in Kukirango ward as discovered in the study, are consistent with the existing literature on their relationship with academic performances (Alen *et al.*, 2003).

Moreover, the results on the places where children seek support show that many children would rather seek support from relatives (46% boys and 48% girls) and friends (42% boys and 41% girls) than from government leaders (2.2% and 1.2% for boys and girls respectively). This indicates that children have a lot of trust in their relatives and friends in solving their problems. This conforms to two theories used in this study i.e. Attachment theory and Social Learning theory. This is consistent with the observation made by Lawuo *et al.*, (2015) that most of the children exposed to domestic violence in Tanga, Tanzania, sought support from friends, relatives and strange persons without regard to the protective or vulnerability factors in their environments. When the researcher asked the reason for not seeking assistance from the government leaders or judicial institutions like police and courts, the response was that these institutions and leaders do not care nor pay attention to children's problems especially the effects of their exposure to domestic violence.

Furthermore, with respect to when they most likely seek support, the findings show that both boys and girls have no specific time of seeking support- be it during holidays or school time. The information gathered showed that 50% sought support during holidays and 50% for during school time. This was the same for both boys and girls. These statistics show that, whenever children are exposed to domestic violence they seek support from different places, regardless of whether studies are ongoing or not. This eventually affects their academic performance. Also, most of the children, 70% and 79% for boys and girls respectively, do not belong to any academic club where they can share experiences and reduce the tensions resulting from exposure to domestic violence.

Generally, support seeking has been revealed as a key method of coping with the impact of stress in children and adolescents exposed to domestic violence in Kukirango ward. Due to the different contexts, there are mixed findings in regard to the children's sources of stress and support. Despite the fact that seeking support has been demonstrated as a functional strategy to cope with stress caused by the exposure to domestic violence, children in Kukirango do not always use it. This is attributed to the time needed to explore this option. This, in turn, hinders the development of efficient help-seeking and social support interventions that would improve the academic performance of children and adolescents.

### ***Social Distraction and academic performance***

The results from the study showed that majority (54.3%) of boys and (51.1%) girls watch movies and listen to music or dance as a coping mechanism. This, they believe, helps them free their minds from the effects of exposure to domestic violence. Whereas 25% and 12.8% of boys and girls respectively opt to run away from home, 18% of boys and 21.3% of girls often decide to remain silent. However, 2.8% of boys and 14.8% of girls prefer to stay alone in secluded places to escape from the exposure to domestic violence (Table 2 summarizes the findings). From the findings it is evident that majority of children prefer to watch movies, listening to music and dance as coping mechanisms when exposed to domestic violence. This is consistent with BOHA (2015) who conducted a research and a survey. They found that that most of children and adolescents (59%) give too much time to social networking sites. As a result there is a resultant decrease in their academic performance.

**Table 2**

Variable	Male (N=140)		Female (N=94)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
<b>How do children withdrawal from violence</b>				
Watching movies and music	76	54.3	48	51.1
Running away from home	35	25	12	12.8
Keeping silence	25	17.9	20	21.3
Staying alone lonely	4	2.8	14	14.8

*Source: Field data, 2018*

Furthermore, the study found that social distraction affected the children's academic performances more negatively (53%) than positively (47%). This is consistent with Edger's and Skinner's (2003) literature review. They conducted a research to explore the relationship between social networking sites and academic performance. They found that those students who use the various social media platforms such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter and Instagram have shorter spans of attention in classrooms. This negatively affects their academic performance. They also concluded that studies are most effective in conducive environments i.e. silence. Unfortunately, their study discovered that some children exposed to domestic violence still try to study in such noisy places. In order to avoid hearing the conflicts at home, they result to turning up the volume of their music. This negatively impacts their ability to concentrate on their studies.

Moreover, the study intended to find out the way children who are exposed to domestic violence interacted with their friends and teachers in relation to their studies. The study found that 16% of children did not want to interact with their friends and teachers, they wished to stay alone. This is consistent with the attachment theory which has been used in this study. Therefore, the academic performance of these children is affected because of inadequate co-operation with other students and their reluctance to seek assistance from their teachers. Again, this is consistence with the study done by Lawuo et al., (2015) in Tanga, Tanzania, which found that, majority (72%) of children on the street use social distraction as a strategy. This eventually results in poor academic performance due to reduced interaction with other children, pupils, teachers and relatives, who can greatly assist them with their studies.

### **1.8 Conclusions and recommendations**

Effective training on suitable methods of coping with domestic violence should be offered to both parents and children. Emphasis, however, should be made on the children because they are the most vulnerable group and have little control over the same. Parents should not focus solely on the physical needs of their children but also bear in mind the negative emotional effects that their marital conflicts have on their children. They should also take the gender of the children into account while at it.

From the study findings, the relationship between the coping strategies used by children exposed to domestic violence and their academic performances was significant. Time utilized in seeking support among the children exposed to domestic violence negatively affects their academic performances. The results also showed the existence of a statistically significant relationship between social distraction or social withdrawal among children exposed to domestic violence and their academic performances. There was no significant difference in the influence of the

coping mechanisms between boys and girls exposed to domestic violence on their academic performances.

The findings of the study formed the basis for the recommendations for action, policy change and further research. There is a need for the provision of family and parent education by specialists such as social welfare societies, counselors and community development workers at the family level. This should be done in all communities where marital problems are common using various methods such as mass mobile cinemas and seminar targeting village elders, hamlets, teachers and other stakeholders directly involved in family and children's affair. This family education may produce researched strategies that may hopefully provide healthier problem-solving skills for both couples and children. A family court or chambers with specific jurisdiction- and dealing solely with family, marital and children matters- is another possible solution.

The Tanzania's Child Development Policy should identify children exposed to domestic violence and classify them as a special target group. Participatory strategies should then be devised to reduce their vulnerability and eventually improve their poor academic performance. Currently, the policy does not recognize children exposed to domestic violence as a target population requiring special attention. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs should ensure that children are protected from family conflicts. It should also set up education campaigns on human rights and the effects of domestic violence in the country, specifically on children.

With regards to recommendations for further research, more in-depth knowledge and understanding of the factors influencing the choice of the coping mechanisms by children exposed to domestic violence is necessary. This will help to inform appropriate policies, programmes and educational services for this highly vulnerable population. Since the current study covered only one ward, Kukirango, a larger study encompassing different urban areas in Tanzania needs to be carried out. Such research would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the academic performance and coping strategies used by children exposed to domestic violence in a more diverse or broad urban context in Tanzania.

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