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# **Safety in Childhood: A Prevalence Study of Childhood Abuse Experiences in Malta**

A Quantitative Research Study

by

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# Executive Summary

The primary aim of this research was to obtain a prevalence rate of children witnessing domestic violence and other forms of abuse through recruiting a representative sample (through quota sampling) of 18- to 24-year-old participants and asking them about their retrospective childhood experiences of witnessing domestic violence, of suffering child maltreatment, neglect, peer and sibling victimisation and sexual victimisation. The rates of abuse obtained are lifetime prevalence rates, based on their childhood abuse experiences, from 0 to 17 years of age. The research also obtained the rate of polyvictimisation amongst these young people. The data was collected through computer-assisted web interviews, that is online, based on questions that were adapted from the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire Revision – 2 (JVQ- R2; Finkelhor, D., Hamby, S., Turner, H., & Ormrod, R (2011). The sample consisted of 433 respondents, out of which 49.2% (n=213) were males and 50.8% (n=220) were females. The young people were mainly recruited through social media and through the dissemination of the online link by various educational institutions and entities working with young people.

The findings indicated that a total of 52.0 % of respondents have witnessed domestic violence and indirect victimisation while a total of 54.3% of respondents witnessed family violence. A slightly smaller percentage (46%) of respondents witnessed their parents' intimate partner violence during their childhood, that is physical abuse or psychological abuse or physical damage on property. Important gender differences were also found regarding this form of victimisation. Females reported significantly more frequent witnessing family violence than males. The most frequent type of witnessing domestic abuse and indirect victimisation was witnessing physical violence on objects belonging to parent/guardian, punching the wall, or throwing something (42.5%) or witnessing violence by parent/guardian on sibling (30.5%). Half of the respondents (50.7%) claimed that their biological or adoptive father was the main perpetrator for physical violence, whereas 9.3% identified their biological or adoptive mother and 5.8% their stepfather or live-in boyfriend. Almost one third of the sample refused to identify the main perpetrator.

In terms of severity of impact, the data showed that 42.5% of the respondents who had witnessed their parents/ guardians threaten to hurt the other parent were more likely to miss days of school or more likely to be unable to complete their homework when compared to those who had not witnessed their parents/ guardians threaten each other. This same pattern applied to 41.7% of the sample who witnessed physical violence between their parents/guardians. Slightly more than half

(56.4%) of the respondents who have witnessed violence at home yelled at their parents/ guardians to stop during an argument, and 36.0% of the respondents intervened physically to try and stop their parents. Most of the respondents who witnessed an episode of domestic violence (79.1%) did not call for help. Respondents whose parents/caregivers were perceived to be suffering from mental health illness and perceived to be suffering from drug addiction respectively, were somewhat more likely to witness physical violence between parents/ caregiver.

As for experiencing child maltreatment: a total of 61.4% of participants reported suffering experiences of child maltreatment during childhood. Females reported significantly more frequent child maltreatment than males. The most frequent types of maltreatment were psychological/emotional abuse (45.0%) and physical abuse by a caregiver (43.0%). Again, the main perpetrator of physical abuse on the respondents was identified by 45.7% respondents as being the biological or adoptive father. A total of 64.7% of the respondents claimed that their biological or adoptive father also happened to be the same perpetrator of physical abuse on the other parent, whereas 28% of the respondents who have been physically abused have identified their biological or adoptive mother as the perpetrator. The less frequent cases of maltreatment were neglect (13.2%) or custodial interference / family abduction (8.3%). Child maltreatment was also significantly related with witnessing family violence.

A total of 22.4% of participants reported neglect during childhood. The most common type of neglect was neglect from parental absence (10.4%) and neglect from parental incapacities (9.7%). Child maltreatment was also significantly related with witnessing family violence. Neglect was significantly related with witnessing family violence and child maltreatment.

Regarding peer and sibling victimisation: a total of 75.3% of the participants reported experiencing at least one type of victimisation by their peers or siblings. The most frequent types of victimisation were relational aggression by peers (57.7%), peer or sibling assault (46.4%) and physical intimidation by peers (37.4%). Overall, no gender differences were found with the exception for non-sexual genital assault, where males were more at risk. Peer and sibling victimisation were significantly related with witnessing intimate partner violence, witnessing family violence, child maltreatment and neglect.

Finally, a total of 43.0% of the participants reported sexual victimisation during childhood. Important gender differences were found regarding sexual victimisation and assault. These were significantly more frequently reported by females than males. The most frequent types of sexual

assault were verbal sexual harassment (21.5%), statutory rape/sexual misconduct (18.5%) and flashing/sexual exposure (17.1%). Sexual victimisation was significantly related with child maltreatment, neglect and witnessing family violence.

In terms of polyvictimisation, 89.6% (n=388) of the respondents suffered from at least one abuse, whereas only 10.4% (n=45) of the respondents did not suffer from any abuse. Significant differences were found between males and females after analysing the polyvictimisation variable. The results indicated that, on average, females experienced a greater number of victimisations during childhood (up to the age of 17). This same trend was observed with regards to all victimizations with the exception for peer and sibling victimisation where males were more likely to experience a greater number of victimisations even though the result was not significant. In all the groups of victimisation and polyvictimisation, the most frequent types of victimisation were child maltreatment, peer and sibling victimisation, and indirect victimisation, whereas neglect and sexual victimisation were the least frequent.

Findings from this study give a strong message that children witnessing domestic violence deserve more visibility and to be given priority across different sectors, across different Ministries, and different departments in policymaking, service development and service delivery and research. Focus needs to be on collaboration across all sectors in order to prioritise early intervention in all forms of child abuse especially in the cases of children witnessing domestic abuse, child maltreatment and peer and sibling victimisation. Attention needs to be given to females who have shown up to be at risk for almost all forms of child abuse. Finally, a violence prevention strategic plan also needs to be high on the agenda.