

ETIOLOGY AND PHENOMENOLOGY OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN¹

ABSTRACT: The attitude of the society towards children is conditioned by its cultural, social, economic, and political aspects. However, violence against children is a historical phenomenon present in every society, regardless of its level of development. The responsibility lies with the state and society to enable and ensure the equality of children's rights with other members of the community and to protect children from violence, considering the fact that children cannot do this by themselves. Destructiveness of the consequences of violence against children indicates the necessity of a systematic fight against this phenomenon. The subject of this paper is to present the etiology of violence against children, i.e., the causes influencing the influx of violence against children, as well as the phenomenological aspect of this occurrence. In this context, this paper aims to indicate the causes, characteristics, and manifestations of violence against children through the presentation of empirical knowledge. The forms of violence against children overlap, but it is necessary to distinguish them in order to create more effective measures of their prevention and suppression.

Keywords: *children, violence, causes, phenomenology.*

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1. Introduction

Violence against children is a historical phenomenon that has taken on different forms and has been treated differently as society has developed. Today, violence against children is completely criminalized, but the development of technology, techniques, and society, in general, opens up the possibility for new forms of violence.

Due to their age, the physical and psychological state of children makes them particularly vulnerable to victimization by different forms of violence. Studies on the prevalence of violence against children, which included 96 countries, indicate that one billion children worldwide between the ages of 2 and 17 have experienced some form of violence (Hillis, Mercy, Amobi & Kress, 2016). Children are the most vulnerable and sensitive members of society, and violence has extremely destructive effects on their health, psychology, and social well-being. However, violence against children often remains unreported, concealed, and marginalized.

The level of concealment of this phenomenon is indicated by the prevalence estimate of violence against children based on a meta-analysis of global data, which shows that the number of sexually abused children is 30 times higher than the number of reports of this form of violence and that the number of physically abused children is 75 times higher than estimates in various reports by authorities (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn & Alink, 2013, p. 82).

Understanding and analyzing empirical knowledge about the prevalence, causes, characteristics, and manifestations of violence against children is a prerequisite for creating effective measures to combat and prevent it.

2. Causes of Violence Against Children

Factors that contribute to the occurrence of violence against children are numerous and very complex. It is often a combination of several factors that lead to this phenomenon, and their complexity and prevalence make it difficult to combat and prevent.

Criminological literature often emphasizes the presence of victimizing factors that contribute to someone becoming a victim. In this sense, the most commonly cited factors are personal characteristics, such as personality traits, belonging to a certain social group, or circumstances that continuously expose a person to the risk of becoming a victim of a crime. The psychophysical

and emotional state of a child and their dependence on adults represent predispositions for the existence of this risk.

Determinants and factors that influence violence against children occur at different levels of society. At the macro level, these factors manifest as broader socio-economic, cultural, or institutional determinants that contribute to an increased risk of violence. These factors include economic underdevelopment or instability of the state and society, poverty, social conflicts, non-existent or inadequate legal regulation, lack of rule of law, etc. At the micro level, they manifest as socio-economic, cultural, or institutional factors specific to a particular local community or region, or factors related to a particular protection system such as the network of social welfare centers, primary healthcare institutions, educational systems, etc. When it comes to the micro level, factors related to the family appear, i.e., the socio-economic position of the family, dysfunctional relationships, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, etc., or factors related to certain institutions that create a specific environment in which factors that increase the risk of violence are present. In addition to these factors, certain individual factors increase the risk of exposure to violence, such as gender, age, nationality, disability, or certain psychological personality traits (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2017, p. 11).

These factors can be viewed as risk factors at the individual level, at the level of close relationships, at the level of the community, and at the level of society. Risk factors at the individual level relate to biological and personal aspects of history such as gender, age, education, psychological development and disorders, presence of socio-pathological phenomena, and a history of abuse. Risk factors at the level of close relationships involve factors related to family and society, in terms of emotional disconnection from parents and their inadequate parenting, dysfunctional families, witnessing violence against another family member, and association with delinquent peers. At the community level, risk factors involve certain specificities of the environment in which a child spends a certain amount of time, such as school and neighborhood. In this context, poverty, high crime rates, high population density, low social cohesion, transitional processes, and the like can be classified as these factors. Risk factors at the level of society involve legal and social norms that justify, encourage, promote, and approve violence. These factors include policies of economic, social, gender, and other inequalities, ineffective social protection, social conflicts, natural disasters, war, absence of rule of law, and malfunction of state administration (World Health Organization, 2016, p. 16).

The most common causes of violence against children are related to individual and family factors, which interact with each other. At the

individual level, the causes can be grouped into demographic (social, biological, cognitive), affective, and behavioral characteristics. As for family factors, the causes that increase the risk of violence against children include economic resources, inappropriate living environment, the presence of social pathologies, frequent verbal and physical conflicts in the family, social isolation, and lack of family cohesion, as well as various forms of family dysfunctionality (Bjelajac & Merdović, 2019, p. 198).

Various studies have shown that growing up in a violent environment creates a predisposition for violent behavior in the future. Therefore, exposure to violence in childhood can be seen as a precursor of future violent behavior, both in relation to society and within the family and towards children (Stevković, 2007, p. 14).

An inadequate attitude of society towards violence against children, as well as violence in general, represents a particularly significant risk factor. Marginalizing violence against children, seeing this phenomenon as a private matter of the family and as an instrument of upbringing, as well as insufficient awareness of the consequences, create a basis for the expansion of violence against children, which has a destructive impact not only on the victim but also on society as a whole.

3. Types of Violence Against Children

When it comes to types of violence against children, various classifications can be found in the literature, but physical, sexual, psychological, emotional violence, neglect, and negligent treatment are mostly mentioned. Child exploitation is a specific type of violence, but it almost always involves some form of physical or psychological violence, depending on how it manifests.

Physical violence as a form of violence against children can be defined as the use of physical force against a child that involves injuring their health, bodily integrity, cohesion, and even their life. This form of violence is the easiest to detect because it has visible consequences such as bruises, scratches, cuts, fractures, etc., and it usually arises from the need to demonstrate power and control. The injuries sustained can cause permanent physical deformities and disabilities in the child, and research shows that continuous physical violence can lead to long-term consequences for the victim, such as mental retardation, blindness, and cerebral palsy, as well as various neurological disorders such as tics, stuttering, depression, sleep disorders, a tendency towards self-harm, etc. (Račić, 2016, p. 276).

Sexual violence, as well as sexual harassment, involve sexual intercourse with a child, forcing a child to engage in sexual intercourse under duress,

using force or threatening to abuse the position, trust, or authority the perpetrator has, pimping and mediating child prostitution, forcing a child to witness sexual acts, using a child to produce images, audio-visual and other materials of pornographic content, and sexual harassment, i.e. any verbal, nonverbal or physical behavior that violates the child's dignity in the sphere of sexual life. In this context, sexual violence also includes forcing a child to watch or touch other people's genitals, to show or touch their own genitals, to watch pornographic material together with the perpetrator, and sending the child messages, images, and audio-visual material with sexual content, and more. Sexual violence can be non-contact, non-penetrative, and penetrative. Victims of sexual violence often have visible injuries as physical indicators of the violence they have suffered, but emotional and social indicators are also noticeable, such as anger, fear of going to bed, depression, confusion, withdrawal, insomnia, very controlled behavior or hyperactivity, etc. (National Platform for the Prevention of Violence Involving Children, n.d.)

Psychological violence generally refers to behavior that endangers, underestimates, insults, or verbally attacks a child, or behavior that expresses negative emotions and deprives the child of emotional support. In this context, when it comes to the family environment, psychological violence manifests itself through emotional coldness, denial of love and attention, use of derogatory names and curses, belittling, prohibition of outings and socializing with peers, and the like (Mihić, 2002, p. 54).

Emotional abuse is the most difficult form of abuse to identify and prove compared to other forms of abuse, but it is the most widespread and usually occurs together with other forms of abuse. Emotional abuse is particularly difficult to identify because children develop emotional intelligence by learning from models and are not able to recognize emotional and psychological abuse, and society's attitude towards this form of violence is often such that it is not recognized or condemned (Milašinović & Andrić, 2021, p. 63).

The exploitation of children involves using a child for labor or other purposes and has a destructive effect on the child physically and mentally. Child exploitation includes the misuse of a child in child trafficking, prostitution, and pornography, using a child for begging, child labor, child trafficking for adoption, the misuse of a child for medical or scientific purposes, social exploitation of the child (misuse of the child in the media), and early, forced child marriage.

Neglect is a form of violence that involves neglecting a child's basic physical and psychological needs, which can lead to serious consequences for the child's health and development. Neglecting a child's basic needs arises from the failure of parents or caregivers to provide adequate living conditions,

such as food, shelter, and clothing, failure to protect the child from physical harm or danger, as well as failure to provide necessary medical care. Neglect also includes abandoning a child (Republic Institute for Social Protection, 2017, p. 23).

All forms of violence against children usually intertwine with each other, and besides differing in terms of manifestation, they can also differ depending on the environment in which they occur.

4. Types of Violence Against Children Depending on the Environment

4.1. Violence Against Children in the Family

The family has the most significant role in almost all aspects of a child's life. It directly affects the child's development, upbringing, and understanding of social circumstances and human relationships, and influences their actions in the future (Subotin & Odalović, 2016, p. 43). The family should be a zone of safety for children, however, in certain cases, the family represents the opposite. For many children, the family is the source of their most intense vulnerability. Considering the helplessness of the child and the relationship of dependence, trust, and emotional connection between children and parents, children are exposed to the risk of victimization by violence within the family environment. Research has shown that parents are the abusers of children in 95% of cases. In addition, studies show that in about 80-90% of cases, abusers are mature and responsible individuals, although it is a common belief that abuse is mainly carried out by mentally disturbed individuals (Milosavljević-Đukić & Tankosić, 2018, p. 67).

Violence in the family, especially violence against children, is reported far less than its actual occurrence. The reason for this situation lies in patriarchal understandings of family relationships, fear of retaliation from the perpetrator or other family members, fear of condemnation by society or friends and their lack of understanding, lack of trust in authorities, and more (Matijašević-Obradović & Stefanović, 2017, p.15).

Violence against children in the family can manifest itself directly or indirectly. If physical, sexual, or psychological violence or neglect of a child is being carried out, it is direct violence. Indirect violence against a child will occur if the child observes violence being carried out against another family member.

Regardless of whether they are witnesses or victims of violence, children are always victimized. Children become indirect victims of violence by being present during the violence, observing violence, or even listening to the

violence happening in the neighboring room. The consequences of indirect violence can be just as lasting and destructive as the consequences of direct violence and can manifest in adopting such behavior patterns or in aversion to family life (Milenković, 2015, p. 349).

Social stigmatization, fear of retaliation from the perpetrator for reporting, inefficiency, and unavailability of competent services, all contribute to the fact that the number of detected cases of violence against children in the family is significantly lower than the actual number. In this context, cases of sexual violence are particularly difficult to detect due to the sense of guilt and shame that the victim usually experiences. Therefore, it is of particular importance to raise awareness about recognizing signs of all forms of violence against children in the family and the importance of reporting it.

4.2. Violence Against Children Outside of the Family

Violence against children can occur not only within the family but also in any place where the child spends time. Although the majority of cases of violence against children occur within the family, it is noticeable that other forms of violence, such as peer violence and digital violence, are becoming increasingly common.

Violence in the community encompasses various forms of direct violence towards children by unknown or known individuals, as well as structural forms of violence manifested through social exclusion and discrimination. This type of violence includes all forms of violence that occur outside the family, i.e., outside the home, educational institutions, and other institutions, such as violence on the streets, sports fields, and other places where children spend time (Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children from Violence for the period from 2020 to 2023).

Institutions of social protection such as homes for children without parental care, institutions for children and youth with disabilities, as well as correctional institutions for juvenile delinquents, can also be environments where there is a risk of violence against children due to the specific nature of their work. This is why competent authorities need to have control and continuous screening in order to detect any signs of violence.

Violence in educational institutions includes any violence that occurs in preschool institutions, primary or secondary schools, student dormitories, or during the organization of various activities by these institutions. The causes that contribute to the occurrence of violence by educators and other employees in educational institutions can be different, and personal dissatisfaction with

the system, personal family traumas, experienced violence, economic-social factors, etc. are often singled out (Račić, 2021, p. 273).

In schools, physical and psychological violence usually occurs, and often together. Violence perpetrated by teachers or other school employees can be sexual and gender-based violence and harassment. In addition, peer violence is very present in schools, which can also include physical and psychological, as well as sexual and gender-based violence and harassment, fights in the schoolyard, gang violence, etc. The development of technology has created a new form of violence that involves bullying through the use of the internet and mobile phones, i.e. digital violence, for which the term “cyberbullying” is used (Sérgio Pinheiro, 2006, p. 116).

There are numerous definitions of peer violence, but there is a general consensus that it involves any physical and psychological violence directed at children by their peers, with the goal of causing harm and typically repeated. Peer violence can vary in scope, severity, intensity, and duration, but it is distinct from peer abuse. Peer abuse represents a more serious form of peer violence that is repeated and lasts longer, and involves an imbalance of power. Physical violence, offensive words, offensive gestures, and malicious acts are classified as peer abuse if they are repeated and there is an imbalance of power. It is not considered peer violence if two children of approximately equal strength engage in a fight or teasing (Batic, 2013, p. 82).

Peer violence has strong consequences on the child who experiences violence, but also on the child who perpetrates it. Violent children tend to exhibit delinquent behavior as they grow up, while victims of violence face various psychosocial consequences such as depression and social anxiety.

Digital violence, or violence through the internet, involves sending messages, video content, photos, or invitations whose aim is to harm, disturb, or in any other way cause damage to a child, adolescent, or adult. This form of violence usually includes harassment, privacy attacks, stalking, insults, posting offensive comments, sending threatening messages, misuse of others' email addresses, social media profiles, etc. Recently, there has been an increasing number of videos of physical violence, primarily videos of peer violence, appearing on the internet, which are accompanied by numerous inappropriate comments that secondary victimize the victim of the violence (Sumonja & Skakavac, 2013, p. 238).

Considering that information and communication technologies have become an integral part of life, both for adults and children, the digital world has opened the door to numerous dangers and new forms of violence. Due to the specific characteristics of the environment in which it occurs, protecting children from this form of violence poses a special challenge.

5. Conclusion

Combating violence against children must be a priority for every state and society. The complexity of this phenomenon, its different manifestations, the difficulty of detecting it, and the seriousness of its consequences, all indicate that effective preventive action is necessary to prevent violence against children.

Due to all of the above and the scientifically proven connection between domestic violence and child abuse, scientific research is directed towards discovering risk factors and predicting child abuse and preventing domestic violence. The dependence, sensitivity and helplessness of children in relation to adults, their need for care and love, give space to the closest family members to abuse those needs and inflict consequences on children that will follow them throughout their lives and which, unfortunately, can never be completely eliminated (Merdović & Bjelajac, 2021). Physical violence is more visible compared to other forms of violence, but sometimes even it is not obvious. Given that in the majority of cases, the abusers of children are family members, it is necessary to raise the level of formal and informal education on recognizing signs of abuse so that competent authorities, as well as every individual, can adequately, efficiently, and timely react. However, special attention must also be paid to raising awareness of digital violence against children, considering the rapid development of technology, the time that children spend in the digital space, and the increasing occurrence of this form of violence.

Marginalizing violence against children carries extremely destructive consequences and leads to further complicating and escalating violence. The primary task is to protect children from every form of violence through decisive, timely, efficient, and coordinated action by relevant authorities. However, preventing further violence and partially eliminating its consequences will not be sufficient to combat this problem. It is necessary to pay special attention to preventive measures that should be created based on all etiological factors.

Therefore, violence against children is a complex social phenomenon, which is not just a single act of an individual towards a child, but a phenomenon that is conditioned by various socio-economic, cultural, or institutional factors, and its suppression can only be effectively addressed through a multi-sectoral approach of all relevant services and raising public awareness of its destructiveness.

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ETIOLOGIJA I FENOMENOLOGIJA NASILJA NAD DECOM

REZIME: Odnos društva prema deci uslovljen je njegovim kulturološkim, socijalnim, ekonomskim i političkim aspektom. Međutim, nasilje nad decom predstavlja istorijsku pojavu koja je prisutna u svakom društvu, bez obzira na njegov stepen razvijenosti. Odgovornost je na državi i društvu da omogući i osigura jednakost prava deteta sa ostalim članovima zajednice i da zaštiti decu od nasilja, imajući u vidu da sama deca ne mogu to da učine. Destruktivnost posledica nasilja nad decom ukazuje na neophodnost sistemske borbe protiv ove pojave. Predmet rada jeste prikaz etiologije nasilja nad decom, odnosno uzroka koji utiču na pojavu nasilja nad decom, kao i fenomenološkog aspekta ove pojave. U tom kontekstu, cilj rada jeste da se kroz prikaz empirijskih saznanja ukaže na uzroke, karakteristike i pojavne oblike nasilja nad decom. Pojavni oblici nasilja nad decom se međusobno prepliću, ali ih je neophodno razlikovati kako bi se kreirale efikasnije mere prevencije i suzbijanja.

Ključne reči: deca, nasilje, uzroci, fenomenologija.

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