

Domestic Violence and Poverty

Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) | December 2019

OVERVIEW

1. Poverty perpetuates domestic violence by creating aggravating circumstances for violence and presenting barriers to escaping the abuse.
2. Domestic violence (DV) perpetuates poverty by hindering women's financial independence and creating new cycles of poverty for children.
3. Domestic violence shelters and related services play a critical role in breaking the cycle of domestic violence and the cycle of poverty.

1. Poverty perpetuates domestic violence by creating aggravating circumstances for violence and presenting barriers to escaping the abuse.

While poverty does not directly cause DV, economic stresses and other factors associated with poverty can be aggravators.ⁱ Poverty also makes it harder to escape DV, and thereby perpetuates the cycle of abuse.ⁱⁱ When a woman is completely financially dependent on her abuser and has no other source of income, leaving her abuser may not be an option at all if she can't provide a basic livelihood for herself and her children.ⁱⁱⁱ In some cases, the root cause of the poverty may be unrelated to the DV, while in other cases, the poverty might itself be a result of the DV,^{iv} and subsequently may exacerbate and perpetuate the DV.

WAO Case Study – Siti: Siti is a 40-year old woman with three children, aged 15, 6, and 4. Siti recalls living in poverty since the day she was born. She never had the opportunity to get even a basic education and has been working odd jobs since she was young. Siti's first husband passed away from an asthma attack when their first child was only one month old. She married her second husband in the hopes that he could help build and support a family. However, after marrying him, Siti found out that he abused drugs and alcohol and robbed to earn a living. In the rural area where Siti was from, poverty is a norm, as is drug abuse.

Siti's husband also began to abuse her, and told her that this is the only way of life he knows. As a result of both poverty and DV, Siti's oldest daughter dropped out of school when she was 14. After Siti and her children came to WAO, her daughter resumed schooling. However, Siti's daughter only aims to get vocational skills training and has given up hope that she can perform academically well, while Siti herself is struggling to get a job that can pay her enough to support herself and her children. Siti is fearful that her only hope that her daughter can bring them out of poverty may also be shattered.

2. DV perpetuates poverty by hindering women's financial independence and creating new cycles of poverty for children.

DV, especially financial and social abuse, perpetuates poverty by preventing women from becoming financially independent. DV can also perpetuate or create a new cycle of poverty for child survivors of DV. This may be caused by children being out of school for long periods of time as a result of the DV, or from their mental health needs going unaddressed, resulting in their withdrawal and lack of focus in school. In the long term, this can impact their income-earning potential and keep or force them into poverty.

WAO Case Study – Kate: Amelia (14), Melissa (13), Kevin (10), and Michelle (9) are three sisters and one brother who were physically abused by their father. Their mother, Kate, was also subjected to the violence. She was married to the children's father for 15 years and had experienced domestic violence since the start of their marriage. It was difficult for Kate and the children to permanently escape the abusive situation as Kate's support network was small, and she was both financially and

emotionally dependent on her husband, since he did not allow her to work. Kate also received little to no support from other family members, and she feared for the future of her children if she left her husband, worrying that by leaving home she would 'put her children on the street.'

Two of the children exhibited a lot of built-up anger and aggression towards their siblings and even towards their mother and adopted certain aggressive behaviours such as pulling hair and kicking. The other two children became more withdrawn and quiet. The oldest child, who used to excel as a student, began suddenly and drastically underperforming in school. The other children's grades lowered gradually as well.^v

3. Domestic violence shelters and related services play a critical role in breaking the cycle of domestic violence and the cycle of poverty.

There is a close relation between DV and poverty; in some cases, DV may be the actual cause of poverty, while in other cases DV may perpetuate it. Similarly, poverty perpetuates DV by hindering the survivor from being able to leave the abusive situation. In either case, interventions to DV may be critical in breaking both the cycle of DV and the cycle of poverty.

Each of the case studies included above highlights the role that shelters and other DV-related support services can play in breaking the cycles of DV and poverty.

- **WAO Case Study – Yasmin:** After 12 years of abuse by her husband, Yasmin had lost all financial and social support from her family and friends. When she decided to leave her husband she could not even afford to buy food. The shelter, protection, and support she received from WAO allowed her to search for a job to support herself and her children and to eventually become independent.
- **WAO Case Study – Sofia** had no valid spousal visa and no means of supporting herself. She left her abusive husband on multiple occasions to seek shelter, and ultimately stayed at WAO while looking for jobs. Ultimately, Sofia secured a job and now lives independently and supports herself and her children.^{vi}
- **WAO Case Study – May** was entirely dependent on her abusive husband until she finally left and sought help from WAO. After four years of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse, May returned to her home country with the help of WAO and her embassy.^{vii}
- **WAO Case Study – Kate:** After Kate and her children came to WAO, the children attended play therapy, counselling, and psychological assessments, which helped them recover and release their suppressed feelings. Kate and the children now live on their own, and the children—after learning how to work through the trauma of abuse—are doing well. They have been excelling academically and are involved in co-curricular school activities; two became prefects in their new school and secured a place in the top-performing class.

Conclusion

Based on WAO's cases, there are clear links between DV and poverty, and each can serve to exacerbate and perpetuate the other. At the same time, WAO's own clients' experiences demonstrate that providing shelter and other DV-related services can help break both the cycle of DV and the cycle of poverty, such as by supporting women survivors to become economically independent. Additionally, providing critical interventions for child survivors, such as counselling and play therapy, can help children overcome their trauma and ensure that their opportunities for education, and eventually income generation, are not lost, thus potentially preventing the perpetuation of DV and the creation or perpetuation of the cycle of poverty.

Appendix 1 – Additional Case Studies

Case Study – Geeta

Geeta is a 38-year-old survivor of violence and has a 9-year-old son. Geeta is of Indian ethnicity and belongs to the B40 community in Malaysia. Hers is a typical story of an Indian family from rural Malaysia, whose primary source of income depends on harvests from plantations.

In her hometown, Geeta lived under the same roof as her extended family, and their land was sufficient to generate income to meet their basic needs. However, Geeta's husband developed mental health issues and, due to a lack of awareness in their community, he did not seek early treatment and instead resorted to drugs and alcohol. This became the primary aggravator for Geeta's DV, as her husband lost his mental stability and became abusive. Geeta eventually left the abusive home and came to Klang Valley. Due to a lack of language proficiency and education, Geeta is struggling to get a job that can pay her enough to bear the high living costs in Klang Valley without external support.

Case Study – Gayatri

Gayatri is a mother of three children, aged 14, 13, and 11. Gayatri has been caught in the cycles of poverty and DV for most of her life. Gayatri lost all of her primary care givers by the age of 12, and her sister and brother assumed the role of earning income for the family. Gayatri's brother used to sexually assault her when she was a teenager and on one occasion raped her. Following the incident of rape, Gayatri sought help from family who subsequently abused her themselves. Her only hope to break away from the violence was marriage.

However, after marriage Gayatri's husband did not assume any responsibility to provide financially, which became the cause of their arguments and resulted in Gayatri's husband physically abusing her. After enduring the abuse for 15 years, Gayatri left her husband in 2018 with her children and since then been working hard to provide for her family, with some external support.

Gayatri's husband also came from a very poor family. While his siblings worked hard to build their lives, her husband, although given a chance to obtain secondary education, never worked hard. Gayatri is determined to break the cycle of poverty for her children.

ⁱ Borgen Magazine. "The Connection Between Poverty and Domestic Violence." 5 November 2013. Available at: <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/connection-poverty-domestic-violence/>

ⁱⁱ Action Aid. "5 links between poverty and violence against women." 7 March 2018. Available at: <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/blog/policy-and-research/2018/03/07/5-links-between-poverty-and-violence-against-women>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Joseph Rowntree Foundation and University of Bristol. "Evidence and policy review: Domestic violence and poverty." Available at: https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/128551400/JRF_DV_POVERTY_REPORT_FINAL_COPY_.pdf

^v Adapted from Case Study 1. Women's Aid Organisation. "Where's the Child? The Rights of Child Domestic Violence Survivors." 2010. Available at: https://wao.org.my/publications/wheres_the_child/

^{vi} Adapted from Case Study 8. Women's Aid Organisation. "Perspectives on Domestic Violence."

^{vii} Adapted from Case Study 11. Women's Aid Organisation. "Perspectives on Domestic Violence."