A Framework for the Psychosocial Rehabilitation of Adolescent Victims of Domestic Violence

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ABSTRACT: During the Covid-19 pandemic, domestic violence (DV) in India rose exponentially. Therefore, the poor urban households in Kerala with the highest vulnerability call for urgent investigations and remedial actions. In this context, this study explored the problems of adolescents living with DOMESTIC VIOLENCE in deprived families, their risk factors, and protective factors. Based on the information gathered and the suggestions of social work experts, it further developed a framework for a school-based psychosocial rehabilitation (PSR), endorsing the role of school social workers. This study was conducted in a government-aided high school in the suburbs of Kochi. It gathered data from adolescent victims (n=12) of DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, their mothers (n=12), teachers (n=7), peers (n=30), and school counselor (n=1), subscribing to a generic qualitative inquiry. A theoretical thematic analysis was adopted for analyzing and drawing conclusions from the data. The study recommends the PSR framework developed in the light of social support theory for testing and refining.

Keywords: domestic violence, psychosocial rehabilitation, adolescents, poor urban households, school social worker

Although domestic violence (DV) deserves to be termed everyday terrorism because of its horror and severity, it is often excluded from mainstream debates by being described as mundane and private (Pain, 2014). However, scholars perceive the gender-power dynamics of a patriarchal system at the core of domestic violence that the South Asian countries with a patrifocal family system and asymmetrical gender expectations have an extensive prevalence of domestic violence (Maji et al., 2021). India bears a disproportionately large percentage of the worldwide burden of domestic violence (Krishnakumar & Verma, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence cases hiked at an alarming rate in India (Krishnakumar & Verma, 2021, Maji et al., 2021, Mittal & Singh, 2020, Nair & Banerjee, 2021). Undoubtedly, women and children are the victims of this terrible gendered ailment of our society.

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Either victim or witness, the exposure to domestic violence is stressful and traumatizing for children (An et al., 2017; Smith & Moore, 2013). A child who is a victim of domestic violence is somewhat a victim of child abuse, as the link between domestic violence and child abuse is irrefutable (Buckley et al., 2007; Merrick & Latzman, 2014). Apart from witnessing violence, physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, and neglect are constructs of the adversity package experienced by children (Calvete & Orue, 2013). This adversity package begets stress and trauma that manifest in multiple ways (Rossman, 2001). Children exposed to domestic violence may internalize or externalize its repercussions to develop psychological, psychosomatic, and behavioral problems accordingly (Calvete & Orue, 2013). Moreover, domestic violence disrupts children's schooling and harms the quality of their educational experience and outcome (Lloyd, 2018).

During adolescence, external factors such as immediate family environment, school, peers, and community significantly influence how children respond to life (UNICEF, 2018). Their positive life experiences make them strong individuals, whereas traumatic experiences lead to undesirable outcomes. Adolescents who live with domestic violence may view violence as an integral part of interpersonal relationships, which reflects in their behaviour (Sims et al., 2008; Willis et al., 2010). Thus, domestic violence jeopardizes adolescents' future as its cumulative effect traps them in the 'cycle of violence (Buckley et al., 2007; Øverlien, 2010). Nevertheless, adolescence provides a 'window of opportunity (Dahl et al., 2018; Joseph & Karalam, 2021; Knoll et al., 2016) for staging interventions among individuals to bring about desirable changes in their developmental trajectories.

The existence of multiple stressors such as poverty, parental drug abuse, unemployment, ailments, and homelessness alongside domestic violence aggravates damage to the well-being of adolescents (Holt et al., 2008). Although a substantial body of literature affirming the adverse effects of domestic violence on adolescents is available, studies explaining mitigation strategies are rare (Lee et al., 2012). In addition, a predominance of the quantitative genre in the repertoire calls for qualitative inquiries that voice the views of sufferers and experts, in which policies and programs must be grounded. Moreover, evidence of domestic violence research in the context of education remains relatively under-investigated (Lloyd, 2018).

The policy research working paper published by the World Bank in 2017 revealed that domestic violence is higher in urban than rural households in Kerala. According to the study, domestic violence is more common in poorer households than in better-off households, although

under-reported (Joseph et al., 2017).

This paper discusses the problems of adolescents living with domestic violence in poor households in the suburbs of Kochi, their risk and protective factors (RPFs), and a paradigm for their psychosocial rehabilitation (PSR).

Methods and materials

This social work research adopted a generic qualitative inquiry method to identify the problems of high school students living with domestic violence, explore their risk and protective factors, and develop a framework for their psychosocial rehabilitation. The study constructed prescriptive and prospective knowledge subscribing to a pragmatist stance (Goldkuhl, 2012).

Research setting

This study was conducted in a government-aided school in the suburbs of Kochi. The school was selected using the purposive sampling technique, post a discussion with the part-time counsellor in the school on the registered cases of high school students living with domestic violence.

Participant selection

As this study aimed to develop a framework for the psychological and social rehabilitation of adolescents living with domestic violence by exploring their problems, reducing their risk factors, and promoting protective factors, we recruited participants from all groups related to students who are victims of domestic violence. We identified 12 students from classes 8, 9, and 10 by reviewing case records on domestic violence maintained by the school counselor and selected them and their mothers for the study. Three ten-membered focus groups of classmates and a seven-membered group of teachers of the selected students were recruited. Another participant in this study was the school counselor. We further formed a panel of five social work experts for refining the framework for PSR based on the results of data analysis.

Tools for data collection

This study explored data from the selected students who face domestic violence at home through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide that framed questions on their socio-demographic profile, life experiences with domestic violence, schooling experience, and aspirations. IDIs were conducted with their mothers using another interview guide that inquired about the domestic violence's effect on their children and their RPFs. All IDIs were prescheduled considering the convenient time and place for the participants, and each IDI lasted for nearly 90

minutes. The researchers interviewed students on the school premises and mothers at their homes. This study interviewed the school counselor at three-time points, during the selection of research setting, participant selection, and the development of rehabilitation framework.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) with the selected group of peers and teachers were carried out using a predesigned performa. Due to ethical concerns, FGDs with peers explored ways to help the students identified with domestic violence minimize their behaviour problems and improve academic performance without revealing that the particular students are facing domestic violence. FGDs with teachers inquired about the problems of their students due to domestic violence and mitigation strategies.

Data were collected after obtaining informed consent signed from all participants for their voluntary participation in the study, data recording, and publication of results. After analyzing data, we conducted panel discussions for developing a framework for PSR based on the conclusions drawn from the data.

Data analysis

The audio-recorded data were transcribed verbatim and translated into English from Malayalam (local language). A bilingual expert ensured the accuracy of translation using the back-translation technique. Coding and grouping codes were done using the Delve software for qualitative analysis. This study adopted a theme-based analysis. A theoretical thematic analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) developed themes and interpreted the problems of adolescents living with domestic violence, their risk factors, and protective factors. It further developed a framework for their PSR leveraging the protective factors identified.

Theoretical framework

This study analyzed the problems of students living with domestic violence from poor urban households and attending a government-aided school, referring to a set of theories. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) postulates that, based on the experiences with living-environment, significant persons, and self, individuals develop internal working models (IWMs) for relationships. In addition, an ecological perspective of domestic violence explains how children or adolescents learn to apply violence in their relationships (Osofsky, 2003) through developing IWMs that lack a secure attachment. These IWMs trigger aggression as instinctive behavior with their relationships, trapping them in the cycle of violence (Widom, 1989) and learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) to continue in that cycle. Moreover, the family stress model (Conger et al.,

2010) links economic troubles to parents' behavioral problems and interparental conflicts resulting in harsh and uninvolved parenting that affect adolescents' competencies and generates emotional and behavioral issues. Adolescents from disadvantaged households are likely to face stigmatization and exclusion from mainstream peer groups, encouraging them to build peer relations that support anti-social behavior, including aggressiveness and addiction (Eamon, 2002). In addition, adolescent educational aspirations are linked to the family's material well-being and their psychosocial competencies to parents' education (Dercon &Krishnan, 2009). This study elaborates on the PSR of students living with domestic violence, seeking implications of social support theory (Kort-Butler, 2017) that stresses the role of supportive relationships and supportive societies in preventing delinquency and promoting adolescent well-being providing instrumental, informational, and emotional support. Figure 2 shows the theoretical framework of this study
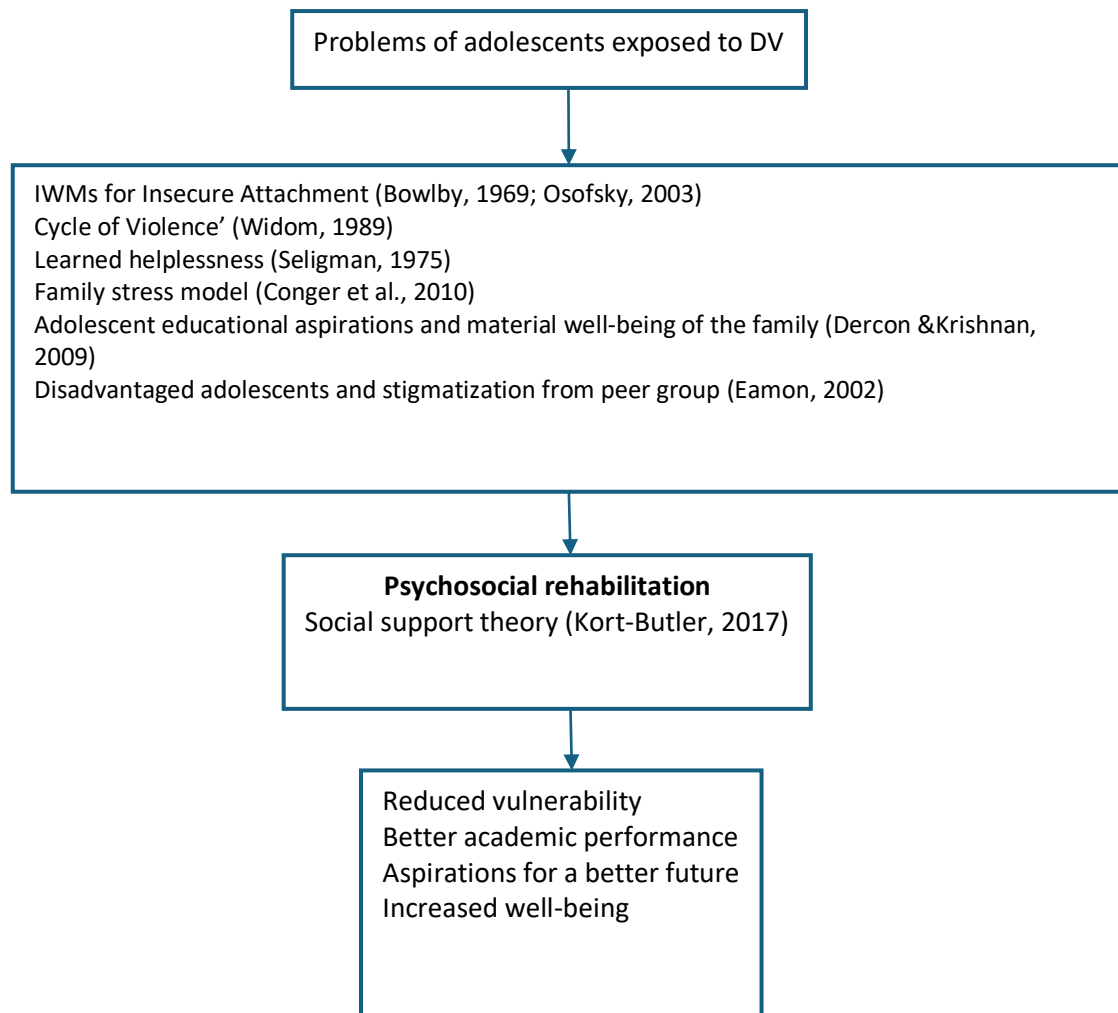
Problems of adolescents exposed to DV

IWMs for Insecure Attachment (Bowlby, 1969; Osofsky, 2003)
Cycle of Violence' (Widom, 1989)
Learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975)
Family stress model (Conger et al., 2010)
Adolescent educational aspirations and material well-being of the family (Dercon &Krishnan, 2009)
Disadvantaged adolescents and stigmatization from peer group (Eamon, 2002)

Psychosocial rehabilitation
Social support theory (Kort-Butler, 2017)

Reduced vulnerability
Better academic performance
Aspirations for a better future
Increased well-being

Figure 2: Theoretical framework

Validation strategies

The quality of this research is judged against the four tests framework recommended by

Yin (2018). In maintaining construct validity, appropriate informants were selected and data collected from multiple sources, using IDIs and FGDs for converging evidence or triangulation. Data analysis was performed by the researcher and research assistant under the guidance of the research guide, which ensured investigator triangulation. Consistent with internal validity, we adopted pattern-matching among units of data about each adolescent selected and addressed rival explanations in developing mitigation strategies for their problems. For explanation building and analytic generalizations, checked conformity with different theory frameworks, ensuring external validity. PSR was developed based on the suggestions from the panel discussion and the draft reviewed by the research guide in strengthening construct validity further. The study protocol developed in the commencing phase of the research enabled methodological congruence, and the line of inquiry was maintained with reflexivity. In addition, the study database created by the research assistant helped maintain a chain of evidence with sensitivity, which furthered reliability.

Study limitations

The researcher's positionality as an 'outsider' slowed down the rapport-building process. It took several visits to the school to establish a connectedness with participants for extracting their lived experiences accurately. A few sessions with participants had been rescheduled considering their absence from school, which extended the duration of fieldwork to six months. Moreover, Covid-19 protocols made the process of data collection hard.

Results and discussions

The students who participated in this study were aged between 13 and 16. There were seven boys and five girls among the students living with domestic violence. They all were from low-income households, and their mothers' highest educational qualifications were pre-degree. Three of the students lived with their stepfathers, and none were with their grandparents. Five of them lived in rented houses, and others were in their own houses, although in poor condition. The problems and RPFs identified from the data are shown in Table 1

Parent-Child relationship

The theme parent-child relationship is an aggregation of sub-themes such as time-together, communication, concern, trust, and respect. Memories of participants on time-together were woefully deficient, other than 'abusive' time. Hence, there exists an association between domestic violence and lower adolescent-parent attachment (Sternberg et al., 2005).

My father is a drunkard. He comes late at night and starts beating my mother. He abuses

me physically and sexually if I try calming down the situation. My mother is always busy with my mentally disabled sister. She neglects me and sometimes beats me. She always complains that 'you are good for nothing' (Participant [P]1).

I hate my father because he made our life miserable. He committed suicide. My mother got married again since she found it is hard to provide for her two children. I was against her decision, but she went ahead with that. Moreover, now we are suffering more than before. My stepfather is an alcoholic. He beats me for no reason. I know that my mother can do nothing with it (P4).

I hate talking to my father. I do not respond if he asks something, then he beats me. If my mother defends me, he hits her too. I hate talking to my mother either (P 6).

Corroborating with findings of Bancroft & Silverman (2002), a study that unfurled the experiences of children with a 'male batterer' as a parent, this theme confirms father as the "perpetrator of abuse" (Sternberg et al., 2005:862) in the families of adolescents with domestic violence we studied. Although mothers want to protect their children, they seem helpless and avoid provoking the aggressor (Margolin et al., 2003). Further, it substantiates the view that adolescent victims of domestic violence possess an insecure attachment style (Levendosky et al., 2002), and they are less attached to parents and receive less parental support (Sousa et al., 2011).

On the contrary, one of the cases proved the power of emotional support by a mother amidst the chaos, that her daughter is ambitious and fares well in studies and co-curricular activities.

She is bright and good at writing poetry also. Sometimes, she misses her classes due to problems at home, but she catches up. Her mother encourages her well. So, she is confident, and she wants to become an engineer. I am sure she will achieve that (Class teacher [CT] 5).

Social relationships

Victims of domestic violence constitute another marginalized group in societies (Sokoloff, 2005), even though the world is much aware that stigmatization is not an answer to the problems of the suffering. Adolescents exposed to domestic violence stay away from committed relationships since they are ashamed of their family environment (Buckley et al., 2007).

Teachers and other students tease me because I sleep in the class. I do not sleep well at night because my stepfather may abuse me. However, I do not disclose it. I do not talk to

anyone in the class now. Let them tease me, but I do not want anyone to know about my family (P 6).

Many in the school know the plight of my family. So, they do not talk to my siblings and me. Maybe they are scared that I may go violent. Now, I lose control and abuse them if they come near me. They do not understand my problems because they have good families (P 3).

Peer relationships become equally or more important than family relationships in adolescence, but adolescents living with domestic violence find difficulty forming healthy peer relationships due to the insecure attachment they possess (Levendosky et al., 2002). Nevertheless, peer group is a protective factor, and those who have positive peer support can withstand the effects of domestic violence to a certain extent (Tajima et al., 2011).

I have three friends, and one of them is my best friend (P 2).

She is a brilliant student. She won first prize in the district-level quiz competition last year. She will reach high if someone is there to sponsor or support her (CT 2).

Peer relationships become sources of caring, companionship, and intimacy; even if domestic violence predicted abuse in dating relationships (Levendosky et al., 2002), this study identified positive dating relationships as a protective factor.

I have a boyfriend, and we meet during class intervals. I share my worries and aspirations with him (P 2).

Emotional stress

The participants' anxiety, stress, and hopelessness demonstrated that they internalize the impact of domestic violence (Calvete & Orue, 2013; Smith & Moore, 2013). In addition, Armsden & Greenberg (1987) proved an association of insecure attachments to parents with adolescent anxiety, depression, and hopelessness.

Participants were barely keeping eye contact in the interview. I could hardly see any of them smiling (Researcher reflection [RR]).

He is very skinny, and I think he might be starving. However, he will not disclose anything and look at me (CT 3).

At home, no one loves me. I have no friends in the class, and they make fun of me. I thought of committing suicide many times (P11).

Once I made a suicide attempt, that was a failure. Now I am scared to make another

attempt (P6).

Discussions with the school counselor on strategies for relieving emotional stress unveiled ideas of stress-reducing activities such as sports, games, reading, dancing, and swimming.

> *We must ensure the participation of these students in arts and sports activities of their choice. We can provide them opportunities that help them to release their stress (School Counselor [SC]).*

Behavioral problems

Several studies scientifically link children's domestic violence exposure to later aggression, violence, delinquency, substance abuse, and alcohol dependence (Øverlien,2010; Sousa et al., 2011; Sternberg et al., 2006; Willis et al., 2010); among them, aggression is found to be the most cited problem of externalizing the impacts of domestic violence (Calvete & Orue, 2013; Jouriles et al., 2012).

Consistent with the results of this study, it is stated in a meta-analysis by Evans et al. (2008) that externalizing symptoms are stronger in boys than those are in girls, and adolescents living with domestic violence react violently in peer conflicts (Ballif-Spanvill et al., 2004) since their behavior is based on the IWMs of relationship they developed with their experiences with their primary caregivers (Bowlby,1969).

> *He was good at studies, but now he changed a lot. He is irregular to school, does not even open his books, and is sometimes arrogant (CT 3).*
>
> *He sits alone in a corner when he comes to school, and he uses abusive language if we ask him anything (Peer Group [PG] 3).*
>
> *He regularly smokes and uses 'pan parag' (PG1).*
>
> *He is arrogant and uses bad words, and he consumes 'pan parag' (PG 4).*
>
> *I have friends in my colony; they all consume alcohol and use other substances. I steal money from my mother's savings to chip in with them (P 4).*

Adolescents exposed to domestic violence express their anger towards their mother for "perceived failure to protect" (Holt et al., 2008:803) or their inability to leave the abuser. Moreover, Eliot & Cornell (2009) proved an association between insecure attachments and aggressive attitudes.

> *I am furious with my mother; she does not even utter a word when I tell her my fear of abuse by my stepfather. I yell at her sometimes (P 2).*
>
> *I beat him because I wanted him to study well, but now he attempts to hit me back*

(Mother [M]1).

She rarely talks with me, but sadly she uses abusive words now (M6).

These shreds of evidence are supportive of "Cycle of Violence Theory, or Intergenerational Transmission of Violence Theory" (Øverlien, 2010:84), which posits the possibility of manifesting violence in adolescent victims of domestic violence (Gelles and Cavanaugh, 2005).

In contrast, adolescents may become providers for their mothers and siblings. Since over-parentification results in a lost childhood and emotional stress (Goldblatt, 2003), care-taking roles that adolescence adopt have to be empowered with a sense of control (Holt et al., 2008).

My father is an alcoholic, and my mother is mentally ill. I earn a little from newspaper distribution and buy food for my mother and siblings. Usually, I go on an empty stomach because my income is insufficient to get enough food for a five-member family. Sometimes, I feel stressed and use cigarettes or 'pan parag' (P3).

Aspirations

For adolescents, aspiration is the primary predictor of their success in life. Adolescents with domestic violence have low or no aspirations because parental support is significantly associated with the aspirations of adolescents (Frostick et al., 2016).

I have no dreams; there is no point in studying; no, I have no ambition (P 1).

Happiness, hope, tomorrow; these are not part of our lives. I have nothing to dream of (P3).

I will not get anything from this life; I do not have any ambition (P4).

I cannot concentrate on my studies, not able to do my homework. I do not have any dreams (P6).

Adolescents fail to set an ambition due to 'learned helplessness' (Seligman, 1975) that they hold as an effect of prolonged exposure to domestic violence. On the contrary, one with mother's emotional support and another with peer support concentrate on their studies to follow their dreams amidst violence at home.

I want to become an engineer. I put all my efforts into studying well (P 5).

I do not know how far my mother can afford my studies; still, I want to study and get a good job to live (P 2).

Both of these girls articulated their educational and employment aspirations. Refuting the view that girls with domestic violence possibly make non-productive coping strategies (Lepistö, 2010),

this study illuminates trajectories out of the cycle of violence.

Financial hardships

Literature proves that not all children are equally affected with domestic violence, but some are resilient (Martinez-Torteya et al., 2009). Their responses to domestic violence vary with their development status and environment structure (Osofsky, 2003). However, this study evidenced that adolescents from poor households are less resilient to domestic violence.

> *There is no one to help us financially. I have to work and provide for my family. So, I do not expect any miracles in my life. It will continue as miserable as it is (P3).*
>
> *I do not have many options. I have to work as a daily wager or a driver to survive (P1).*
>
> *We do not have our own house to reside in. I am not dreaming of any change in life (P10).*

A resource mapping done with the panel of social work experts explored different resources such as child sponsoring agencies, government schemes, NGOs, religious organizations, and residents' associations, which can be leveraged to support the participants financially.

Unsafe homes

The safety of participants at home is a significant concern that they are exposed to all kinds of violence. Besides, violent men use sleep deprivation strategies against family members (Humphreys et al., 2009), making the life of school-going children hard.

> *Sometimes extreme violence occurs at home, but I have no place to go. It is dreadful, and the nights are sleepless (P 6).*
>
> *I feel unsafe at home when my stepfather is around. He made many attempts to abuse me. I know my mother will not stop him; she will not protect me; she is scared (P 12).*
>
> *Every moment at home is terrible. I know my mother is helpless, but my efforts to support her stir the violence up (P5).*

Panel discussions drew measures to ensure the safety of participants, such as coordinating the services of police and child welfare departments in providing helpline numbers and emergency shelters in case of extreme violence at home.

Academic performance

While poverty and poor academic performance stay as predictors of violence, resilience theory recommends academic achievement for children living with domestic violence as a protective factor (Holt et al., 2008). Since this study correlates exposure to domestic violence to low academic performance, mitigation strategies for improving the participants' academic

performance were discussed with peer groups, teachers, and the school counselor.

> *She misses classes occasionally. If someone could arrange additional classes or catch-up sessions, she would score better (CT 2).*

> *We are ready to help him in his studies (PG1).*

Catch-up sessions by teachers and peer learning sessions by the peer groups were identified as two methods to help participants improve their performance. Moreover, the panel discussion suggested providing career guidance sessions and mentoring services through networking with police officers, social workers, academicians, and healthcare professionals.

Framework for PSR

As an end product of this study, we contoured a framework for PSR of students from poor urban households with domestic violence to lead them out of the 'circle of violence' by instilling aspirations for a better future and leveraging resources to achieve them. It is consistently cited in the literature that a secure attachment with a significant caregiver or a non-violent parent is a vital protective factor (Holt et al., 2008), and our study results extended this literature proving the effectiveness of mother's emotional support in imparting confidence and aspirations to adolescents exposed to domestic violence. Therefore, in the aftermath of domestic violence, providing active support to the 'mother-child relationship' is paramount (Humphreys et al., 2011).

Resilience is associated with positive peer relationships and friendships that buffer repercussions of domestic violence (Holt et al., 2008). This study confirmed this association, so that it is verified that a competent PSR necessitates peer support promotion. Furthermore, the inclusion of activities such as art, camping, dancing, drawing, martial arts, meditation, and music in school programs is also recommended by Willis et al. (2010) for reducing stress.

Informational supports that the PSR provides are catch-up sessions by teachers and class group studies to assist those with difficulty in learning. Another aspect is career guidance for helping them to set educational goals and choosing role models in setting employment goals. Professional networking is another part of the service, to keep contact and relationship with professionals for availing their services when needed.

Instrumental support for students living with domestic violence encompasses financial support and safety and security measures that PSR needs to arrange financial aid for food, education, and health care, through government agencies, NGOs, or community groups. For prevention and intervention (Osofsky,2003), PSR has to seek help from welfare agencies, police, and community leaders as well, that PSR must initiate joint working of key professionals or

agencies such as schools, police, health centers, and community-based organizations (Buckley et al., 2007). Though we stress changing the home environment to make it safer for children, shelter homes for short stays in worse situations are also recommended. The proposed PSR is meant to be managed by a full-time school social worker for coordinating the program.

Figure 3 is a diagrammatic representation of a school-based PSR framework developed for adolescents exposed to domestic violence and with low socioeconomic status.
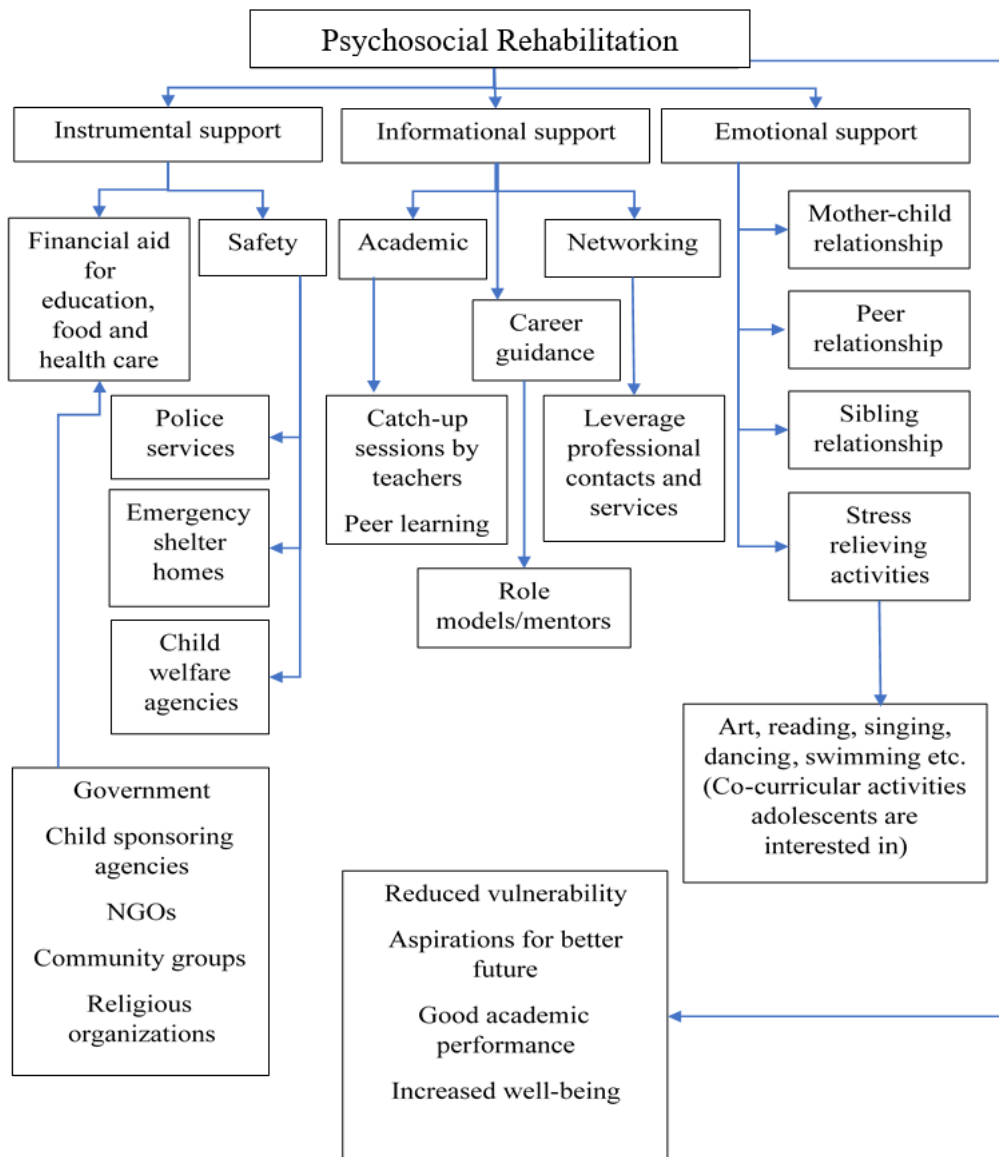

Figure 3: Framework psychosocial rehabilitation of adolescent victims of domestic violence in poor households

Conclusion

The engagement of schools in a coordinated multi-agency response is essential in addressing the needs of students affected by domestic violence. In the cultural context of Kerala—where incidents of domestic violence and their underreporting have risen markedly, particularly

during the COVID-19 pandemic—inter-agency collaboration forms a critical component of school social work practice. The psychosocial rehabilitation of students exposed to domestic violence necessitates urgent and sustained attention from both governmental institutions and professional stakeholders. There is a pressing need to develop and implement research-informed policies and intervention programs tailored to the needs of student victims, particularly those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Accordingly, this paper recommends further empirical testing and refinement of the proposed framework for psychosocial rehabilitation to ensure its contextual relevance and effectiveness.

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Competing interests

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