

Dealing With Violence against Neglected Children through Community-Based Support Systems in East Java, Indonesia

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This study aims to examine the various forms of violence experienced by neglected children in the community, and the role of the surrounding social environments in providing the protection and handling of neglected children. The research was conducted in four locations in Indonesian. The results of the study showed that most of the neglected children who became respondents experienced violence, especially physical and psychological violence. The study also found that the existence of socio-religious institutions, besides being able to help neglected children and relieve the burden of the family, could also prevent the occurrence of violence and the neglect of children. Nonetheless, there were still some obstacles, since violence against children is considered an internal family affair and not a community matter. Efforts to prevent child violence should not only be based on the threat of punishment but should be more emphasised on the involvement of secondary groups, CBOs, and community groups at the local level.

Keywords: *Child violence, Neglected children, Socio-religious institutions.*

Introduction

Neglected children are part of a larger demographic that needs special protection, since they are often the recipients of various acts of violence. According to a study by Sutinah and Aminah (2018) regarding children in orphanages, 47.8 per cent of the respondents had been the victims of violence, with approximately 1.2 per cent stating that they were frequently abused. In addition, those who committed the most acts of violence were the victims' friends (46.8 per cent), older children (31 per cent), and caretakers (21 per cent) at their respective orphanages. Furthermore, 29.5 per cent of the children stated that they often received

physical violence (e.g. being beaten, kicked or having their ears pinched), while 38.4 per cent admitted that they occasionally received such treatment. As for psychological violence, 13.8 per cent stated that they often received it, while 16.52 per cent occasionally received such treatment. Finally, approximately 17 per cent of the respondents were abused when they were forced to work or perform some activity that they disliked, while 2.5 per cent claimed that they had experienced some type of social violence, such as discrimination.

Based on these findings, the violence experienced by the children could still be categorised as 'mild'. However, any act of violence against neglected children cannot be accepted because it not only violates their rights, but it also negatively affects their growth and development (Appleyard et al., 2007). In reality, the neglected children who are prone to violence (physical, verbal, and/or psychological) are not only those living in orphanages but are also those among the most vulnerable groups in society.

Previous studies have indicated that child neglect has a relatively higher prevalence, compared to other types of child abuse, such as physical or sexual abuse (Sedlak et al., 2010; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015; Stoltenborgh et al., 2013). Child neglect also has similar negative effects on children's health and development with other types of child abuse (Norman et al., 2012), not to mention, the social and medical costs associated with such neglect (Florence et al., 2013; Gilbert et al., 2009). Paradoxically, child neglect has received the least public and scientific attention, compared with other types of child abuse (Gilbert et al., 2009). Other studies have shown that violence against children can be reduced by increasing effective social cohesion in their respective neighbourhoods (McLeigh et al., 2018). In this regard, parents can play an important role in reducing the number of neglected children in society, as a whole (Mulder et al., 2018).

Based on such research, the present study investigates the role of the surrounding social environment (i.e. the community) in dealing with neglected children who become the victims of violence. It also reveals the obstacles faced by the community-based, social-religious groups in preventing violence against such children. The results of this study not only add to the literature on child violence, but also highlight the necessary factors for preventing violence towards neglected children in the future.

Methods

Besides identifying the forms of violence experienced by neglected children, this study examines the roles of community-based, social-religious groups in dealing with such children. For these purposes, this study focussed on a total of 400 neglected children (chosen through purposive sampling) from four regencies or cities in East Java, including Surabaya, Malang, Nganjuk, and Probolinggo.

Structured interviews, based on a set of questions, were conducted with the neglected children to obtain primary data and an accurate or valid picture of the various forms of violence inflicted upon them. The researcher also conducted in-depth interviews with several informants to collect additional information that could not be obtained through the structured interviews.

Besides the primary data, the researcher gathered secondary data on neglected children and orphanages in East Java from the Central Bureau of Statistics, the Office of Social Affairs and Women Empowerment, the East Java Child Protection Agency, local surveys, several universities, and other research institutes. Finally, all of the data (both primary and secondary) was processed, analysed and presented in the form of frequency tables, after which the results were interpreted according to certain themes. As for the data from the in-depth interviews, it was classified to clarify the quantitative analysis.

Results and Discussion

Profiles of the Neglected Children

According to the interviews with the 400 neglected children from the aforementioned regencies or cities, 53 per cent were boys and 47 per cent were girls, ranging from ten to 18 years of age. At the time of the interviews, the majority of the children (99.2 per cent) were still attending school, whereas 0.8 per cent had either graduated or were working full- or part-time. As for their education, the majority were at the junior high school level (63.2 per cent), 26.8 per cent were still in elementary school, and ten per cent were at the high school level. Such findings imply that neglected children tend to have their education either delayed or obstructed altogether.

Regarding their families, the majority had lost at least one of their biological parents (78.7 per cent), with 45.9 per cent who had lost their fathers, 32.8 per cent who had lost their mothers, and 21.3 per cent who had lost both parents. Among the children, 70.5 per cent lived with the remaining parent, 14.2 per cent lived with their relatives, 13.3 per cent lived with their grandparents, 1.2 per cent lived with their siblings (especially older siblings), and 0.8 per cent lived with other people, such as foster parents.

Among the Indonesian people, especially the Javanese, there is still a strong tradition of considering relatives or siblings as ‘safety nets’ when family members experience some type of tragedy or trauma. For a family that has lost its breadwinner, the relatives are obligated to help raise the children. However, due to various reasons, some children are placed in orphanages (Ginting, 2015).

Forms of Child Neglect

It is undeniable that there are still some parts of society that do not favour children. In fact, a number of studies have shown that there are still many cultural practices that harm children, both physically and emotionally. Despite the laws placed in some areas, certain societies still tolerate physical punishment (e.g. whipping, punching, and slapping) and verbal abuse (e.g. swearing, threatening, and scolding), under the guise of ‘parenting and educating’. According to Mustain (1999), acts of violence in Surabaya were generally performed on women and children, with most of the acts directed towards the latter. It is interesting to note that, when witnessing such acts of violence, the neighbours had no meaningful reactions. Horan and Widom (2015) found that such conditions are more apparent among economically disadvantaged families.

Neglected children are often the most vulnerable to mistreatment and violence (Colman et al., 2004), especially after losing a parent or both parents. Table 1 includes the changes in the living conditions of the neglected children in the present study.

Table 1: Conditions of the neglected children after the death of a parent or parents

Conditions	Better	Worse	No Change
Economically	1.3%	90.5%	8.2%
Psychologically	0.6%	92.8%	6.8%
Continuity of Education	0.5%	81%	18.5%
Treatment by the existing parent or foster parent	0.5%	72.2%	27.2%

According to this table, the children left behind by a parent or both parents tend to face various problems, both economically and psychologically. As stated by 90.5 per cent of the respondents, their lives had become economically worse since the loss of their parent or parents. Psychologically, 92.8 per cent of the respondents believed that their lives had become worse after losing their parent or parents. Moreover, 72.2 per cent of the respondents stated that the attitudes of the remaining parent or foster parents had worsened. As for those who believed that their lives had become psychologically worse, they were often overwhelmed by the burdens placed upon them, due to their lack of independence (O’Reilly et al., 2010).

As for the continuity of their education, 81 per cent of the respondents stated that it had become threatened, whereas only 0.5 per cent of the respondents claimed that their education was secure. Ginting (2015) found that when the continuity of education is threatened, social support from community-based organisations is crucial, especially for neglected children who have lost a parent or both parents.

Regarding their nutritional needs, most of the respondents (86.4 per cent) were able to eat meals three times a day. Conversely, 13.6 per cent of the respondents stated that their eating frequency was roughly once or twice a day. Overall, the majority of the children claimed to enjoy the food provided by their respective families. Although the side dishes were somewhat restricted, they realised that, as an economically vulnerable family, the ability to provide additional food was limited. According to a study conducted in California, the ability to obtain food and other services by low-income families was somewhat difficult, resulting in additional stress on the family members (Gershoff et al., 2007). In addition to staple food, the neglected children in the present study stated that they occasionally received food from their neighbours and other families. Other types of assistance included school supplies (29 per cent), allowances (29.5 per cent), transportation money (29.5 per cent), desks (30 per cent) and books (30 per cent). However, approximately one-third of the children did not receive such assistance. Finally, 19 per cent of the respondents stated that their parents had asked them to discontinue their schooling, since they lacked the financial means to pay for their education (Maguire-Jack et al., 2017).

Forms of Violence against the Neglected Children

Theoretically, child abuse can be defined as physical, mental or sexual acts that threaten the health and welfare of children (James et al., 1993; Iwaniec et al., 2007; McSherry, 2007). In the present study, all of the neglected children stated that they had experienced violence at home, with 9.5 per cent often experiencing violence and 90.5 per cent occasionally experiencing some form of violence. In general, such acts experienced by the children were carried out by the parents (fathers at 17 per cent; mothers at 18.2 per cent) or the siblings (37 per cent).

In Indonesian society, it is well-known that some vulnerable children are mistreated and abused. Meanwhile, there is a lack of understanding among parents regarding the rights of their children, often resulting in acts of violence (child abuse). According to Mustain (1999), in rural communities, the act of beating children with, for example, a wooden item or broomstick, is often considered a method of instilling discipline.

Experts have classified the types of violence against children into four categories. First, there is physical violence. This type is the most easily recognised since its effects can be visibly seen on the body of the victim. Examples include bruises, bleeding, and fractures, all of which are due to physical actions such as slapping, kicking, punching, strangling, pushing, etc. Second, there is psychological violence. This type is more difficult to recognise since it is usually inflicted through, for example, verbal abuse and public humiliation, which does not leave visible marks. However, its deep-rooted effects can cause long-term emotional issues, such as insecurity and worthlessness. Third, there is sexual violence. This form of violence

includes the sexual abuse of unwilling victims, such as children, family members, strangers, etc. Finally, there is economic violence. This type often occurs when parents force their children to work and contribute to the family's income. For example, many underage children, especially in urban areas, become newspaper sellers, street entertainers, beggars, etc., to support their respective families.

In this study, 29.6 per cent of the respondents frequently experienced some type of physical violence (e.g. beaten, kicked, and pinched on the ear), while 43.3 per cent occasionally experienced such acts. Moreover, 22.3 per cent of the respondents often experienced psychological violence (e.g. threatened, bullied, and locked in a room), while 47.2 per cent occasionally experienced such acts. Although they occurred far less than physical and psychological violence, sexual violence was occasionally experienced by 0.5 per cent of the respondents, while economic violence was often experienced by 4.2 per cent of the respondents (Table 2).

Table 2: Forms of violence experienced by the neglected children

Forms of Violence	Often	Sometimes	Never
Physical Violence (beaten, kicked, ear pinched)	29.6%	43.3%	27.37%
Psychological Violence (scolded, threatened, bullied)	22.8%	47.2%	30%
Sexual Violence	0.0%	0.5%	99.5%
Economic Violence (forced to work)	4.2%	1.5%	94.3%

At first glance, the neglected children, as the victims of violence by their parents or families, do not appear to have any problems. However, such victims are actually at risk of developing counterproductive behaviours, ranging from a lack of motivation and self-esteem to severe mental stress (Suyanto, 2012). They will also show symptoms of depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, and phobias. In many cases, they will become persecutors who continue the cycle of violence and oppression.

Social Support

In general, neglected children who lose their parents require some type of social support to go on with their lives. Thus, it is important for social-religious groups and community leaders to provide such support. As stated earlier, some of the neglected children were mistreated by their remaining parent or foster parents, which increases their risk of continuing the cycle of violence into adulthood. However, some of the neglected children have developed ways to avoid or mitigate the violence directed towards them (see Table 3).

Table 3: Efforts by the neglected children to avoid or mitigate violence

Efforts Developed by the Neglected Children	Often	Sometimes	Never
Giving up	23.2%	67.8%	9%
Staying silent or not fighting back	19%	64%	16.8%
Trying not to break the rules	15.5%	52%	32.5%
Avoiding the abuser altogether	4.5%	48.8%	56.8%
Pretending to be good children	4.5%	36.2%	59.2%
Running away from home	6.5%	29.2%	64.2%

According to this table, the most common action for avoiding or mitigating violence was giving up or not doing anything, as stated by 91 per cent of the respondents. The second most common approach was staying silent or not fighting back, which was used by approximately 83 per cent of the respondents. Moreover, 67.5 per cent stated that they avoided violence by trying not to break the rules, while roughly 53.3 per cent avoided the abuser altogether. Finally, the children pretended to be good or they simply ran away from home, which was stated by 40.7 per cent and 35.7 per cent of the respondents, respectively. In regard to the most common tactic, one of the children stated the following:

“I was once kicked, which was very painful, but I didn’t dare retaliate. If I cried, then the act would be repeated. So, I kept silent and endured the pain. If you are silent, then the act will not be repeated. Even if you are kicked or hit, just be silent and don’t fight. My friends too...if they fight, then they will be hit even harder”.

As shown in Table 4, in addition to the efforts of avoiding or mitigating the acts of violence, the neglected children complained to certain parties for protection.

Table 4: Parties that the neglected children complained to about the violence

Parties	Schoolmate/Playmate	7%
	Older siblings	9%
	Relatives	3.5%
	Grandfather/Grandmother	7.5%
	Teacher	1%
	Local community leader	27%
	Head of RT/RW	29%
	Child NGO/Child Protection Agency	16%
Social-Religious	Groups/Neighbourhood group (RT)	3.5%
	Community group (RW)	0.8%
	Family Welfare Program (PKK)	0.2%
	Subdistrict	5.2%
	NGO	4.5%
	Orphanage	83%
	Islamic boarding school	1.2%
	Islamic recitation group	0.7%

According to this table, 29 per cent of the neglected children complained to the head of the neighbourhood group (RT) or the community group (RW), followed by local community leaders (27 per cent), and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (16 per cent). Meanwhile, 7.5 per cent complained to their grandparents, followed by their school or playmates (7 per cent), relatives (3.5 per cent) and teachers (1 per cent). Regarding this relative drop in percentage, some studies found that children who are victims of violence are not quick to report such acts to adults (Pitzer & Fingerman, 2010; Sperry et al., 2013).

In regard to social support, O'Reilly et al. (2010) stated that it is intended to reduce stress and prevent families (parents) from inflicting harm (physical and/or psychological) on their children. Such support is particularly aimed at families in crisis, who are at serious risk of abusing and neglecting their children (Chaffin et al., 2001; McCowskey et al., 1998). In the present study, the social-religious groups played an important role in providing the necessary support for the children (Table 5).

Table 5: Support by the social-religious groups

Support by the social-religious groups	Often	Never	Unaware
Scholarships	80%	3%	17%
Clothing	87.2%	0.8%	12%
Food	87.5%	0.5%	12%
School supplies	71.5%	1.2%	27.2%
School tutoring	67%	2.8%	30.2%
Religious guidance or activities	67%	2.8%	30.2%

According to this table, the majority of the respondents were aware of the support provided by the social-religious groups. For example, 80 per cent were aware that the groups provided scholarships, while 87.2 per cent, 87.5 per cent and 71.5 per cent were aware of the groups' assistance with clothing, food and school supplies, respectively. Moreover, the majority of the children were aware of school tutoring (67 per cent), and the religious activities (67 per cent). The children also felt that such support was beneficial for their lives, especially those who were economically vulnerable.

Overall, the findings indicate that the social support provided by the community-based, social-religious groups helped fulfil the physical, educational and spiritual needs of the neglected children. Previous studies have shown that such support for neglected children and victims of abuse has a positive impact on their physical and mental well-being (Kaul et al., 2003; Taylor, 2011). Moreover, social-religious groups have proven to be effective mediators between neglected children and their parents or families. This is particularly important because neglected children and victims of violence tend to have difficulty maintaining social relations with the adults in their families (Pitzer et al., 2010; Sperry et al., 2013). This is understandable since the adults in their respective environments are often the perpetrators of the violent acts in question.

Obstacles

As mentioned earlier, the social-religious groups serve as 'safety nets' that help ease the burdens of neglected children and their families. This is not surprising, considering that there is usually a sense of 'togetherness' in a close-knit community. In the present study, the majority of the parents and families of the neglected children did not question the role of the social-religious groups in their communities. As shown in Table 6, 98.5 per cent of the parents stated they did not mind that such groups provided scholarships for their children's education. Moreover, assistance in the form of clothing, food, school supplies, school tutoring, and religious activities had the same level of the support.

Table 6: Parents' attitudes towards the social-religious groups

Parents' attitudes towards the social-religious groups	No Problem	Forbid it	Unaware
Scholarships	98.5%	0	1.5%
Clothing	90.5%	0	9.5%
Food	91%	0	9%
School supplies	91%	0	9%
School tutoring	91%	0	9%
Religious guidance or activities	91%	0	9%

Regarding such assistance, one of the respondents stated the following:

“I am very happy if there is assistance, from any place and any support, because it can alleviate the needs of my family. My mother will not mind if there are others that help ease the burden on my family, especially since I still have younger siblings and need money. Besides, after my father died, my mother has been the only one working”.

As stated earlier, the parents or families of the respondents did not have a problem when other people or social-religious groups offered assistance, meaning that there were no obstacles in regard to such support. However, there were some parents (foster parents) who did not know where the help came from.

It is widely known that orphanages or the Child Social Welfare Institution includes standard facilities such as bedrooms or self-contained rooms of a certain size. In addition to these facilities, orphanages provide food, clothing, and education, in accordance with the needs of the children under their care. As shown in Table 7, 80.2 per cent of the children preferred an orphanage over their home, since the living conditions were better in the former. According to one of the respondents:

“If I am asked to choose, then I would go to an orphanage, because I know that I will be fed, dressed and disciplined by the counsellors. I will also be allowed to learn, recite the Quran, study and sleep in a nice room. If I am at home, then I will be told to stop going to school because there is no money”.

Table 7: The preferred residences of the neglected children

Preferred residence	Percentage
Orphanage	80.2%
Home	19.5%
No preference	0.2%
Total	100%

As for the 19.5 per cent of the neglected children who preferred to stay at home, the main reason was that they could be closer to their remaining parent, even though the conditions were somewhat limited. For example, one respondent stated the following:

“I feel sorry for my mother, who is taking care of my little brother on her own. She has to work to buy food and pay for school fees, so I help around at home. Sometimes we don’t have enough money to buy food and other necessities. However, there are those who give rice, oil, sugar, clothes or snacks”.

These findings indicate the conflicting situations of the children. On the one hand, some preferred to remain at an orphanage to reduce the burdens on their remaining parent, while on the other hand, some chose to stay at home to help their remaining parent. Such findings also show that the children were able to think about their futures and families, despite their difficult situations.

In regard to the importance of the social-religious groups in the children’s lives, there are several obstacles that the groups face when providing such assistance. One of the obstacles is dealing with the sheer number of neglected children in society. More specifically, such groups face difficulties in obtaining the necessary funds to support all of their projects. Another obstacle is the culture in which violence inflicted by parents on their children is considered a private, family affair. In such cases, the parents perform violent acts to ‘educate’ their disobedient children (Mustain, 1999), while the social-religious groups only get involved if such acts are of a criminal nature.

Finally, as the study by Maguire-Jack and Font (2017) showed, there is a connection between poor areas and family involvement in the reporting of violence and neglect of children, both by the neighbours and the social-religious groups. Poor families, in general, do not want to report any violence committed on their children, even though the social support from neighbours (or other informal social groups) is one of the most important protective factors against child abuse and neglect (Stith et al., 2009; Molnar et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This study examined the role of the surrounding social environment (i.e. the community) in dealing with neglected children who become the victims of violence. It also revealed the obstacles faced by community-based, social-religious groups in preventing violence against such children. The results indicate that the everyday lives of the children generally worsened after one or both of their parents had died. More specifically, the forms of violence experienced by these children were physical (e.g. being beaten, kicked or pinched on the ear),



psychological (e.g. being bullied, threatened or scolded), sexual (e.g. harassment and abuse) and economic (e.g. discontinuing their education to work and support the family).

This study also found that the children had different ways of dealing with such violence. For instance, some chose to be silent and non-resistant, whereas others simply avoided the abuser altogether. When the neglected children experienced acts of violence, they usually complained to the head of the RT or the RW, followed by local community leaders, and NGOs. Meanwhile, other children complained to their school or playmates, older siblings, grandparents, relatives, and teachers.

Overall, the social-religious groups were extremely important to the children and the disadvantaged families, since they provided assistance in the form of scholarships, clothing, food, school supplies, tutoring, and religious activities. Moreover, the parents or foster parents did not mind such assistance since it lessened their burdens as a whole. An interesting finding was that the majority of the children preferred living in an orphanage, instead of at home with their remaining parent or relatives. Despite the actions of the social-religious groups, some families still believed that violence towards children should be a private matter. The implication of the findings is that the prevention of child violence should be the mutual obligation of all parties within their respective roles and responsibilities.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks go to the non-governmental organisations and the Child Protection Institution at East Java, for providing information to this research. We acknowledge review board approval to conduct our study by the East Java Government Province, Indonesia. Special thanks go to people who agreed to participate in the study.

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