

**The Relationship Between Domestic Violence and Students' Academic Performance in Secondary Schools in
Kasaana Subcounty Sheema District
Ainamani Dallen
Metropolitan International University**

Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between domestic violence and academic performance among secondary school students in Kasaana Sub-County, Uganda. Specifically, it examined the impact of three dimensions of domestic violence: physical abuse, psychological/emotional abuse, and exposure to inter-parental violence.

Using a mixed-methods approach, the research found strong negative correlations between each dimension of domestic violence and academic performance indicators, with psychological abuse showing the strongest negative link ($r = -0.791$). A regression model indicated that these three factors together explained 68.7% of the variance in diminished academic performance, confirming their substantial combined influence. All results were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), leading to the rejection of the null hypotheses.

The study concludes that domestic violence in its various forms is a critical, detrimental factor to students' academic outcomes. Students exposed to violence at home demonstrated poorer results in national exams, lower school attendance, reduced concentration, and higher dropout rates. It recommends that schools establish psychosocial support systems, implement sensitization programs for parents and communities, and train teachers to identify and support affected students to mitigate the impact of domestic violence on learning.

Keywords: domestic violence, academic performance, physical abuse, psychological abuse, inter-parental conflict, secondary schools, Kasaana Sub-County

Background of the Study

The global understanding of educational outcomes has evolved to recognize that a student's academic performance is deeply intertwined with their holistic well-being and home environment. Beyond pedagogical inputs and school resources, factors such as safety, mental health, and family stability are fundamental prerequisites for effective learning (UNICEF, 2023). Domestic violence encompassing physical, psychological, and sexual abuse within the home represents a profound disruption to this safe foundation, with documented detrimental effects on children's cognitive development, emotional regulation, and academic engagement (WHO, 2022). Research across diverse contexts consistently shows that children exposed to domestic violence experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress, which directly impair their ability to concentrate, retain information, and participate actively in school (Guedes et al., 2021). In an ideal scenario, schools serve as protective and stabilizing environments. However, when the trauma of home-based violence remains unaddressed, its effects spill over into the classroom, undermining educational investments and limiting a child's future potential (Holt et al., 2022).

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Within the East African context, the nexus between domestic violence and educational attainment has gained increasing attention amidst efforts to achieve universal secondary education. Studies in the region highlight how socio-economic stressors, entrenched gender norms, and alcohol abuse often precipitate household violence, with children as direct victims or traumatized witnesses (Uwineza et al., 2023). In Uganda specifically, despite progressive legislation like the Domestic Violence Act (2010), enforcement remains weak, and cultural attitudes often normalize violence as a private family matter (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Research suggests that students from violent homes are significantly more likely to repeat classes, drop out of school, and perform poorly in national examinations (Nakitto & Khasalamwa, 2022). However, much of the existing literature focuses on urban settings or general prevalence, thereby obscuring the unique manifestations and academic consequences within rural communities like Kasaana Sub-County, where reporting mechanisms are scarce and support services are limited (Derrick et al., 2023). Kasaana Sub-County in Sheema District presents a critical microcosm for this issue. The area, primarily reliant on subsistence farming, experiences economic pressures that can exacerbate household tensions. Preliminary reports from local schools and community leaders indicate concerning patterns of student absenteeism, sudden behavioral changes, and academic decline often whispered to be linked to "home problems" (Sheema District Education Office, 2024). Kasaana Secondary School, as a representative institution, operates in a community where discussions of domestic violence are often shrouded in silence and stigma, making it difficult for teachers to identify root causes of student struggles. Within this environment, school administrators and teachers face the challenge of educating students who may be carrying invisible burdens of trauma, without adequate training or resources to provide appropriate support. The observed academic disparities between students from reportedly stable homes and those from troubled backgrounds suggest that domestic violence may be a key hidden factor driving educational inequality.

This study posits that three interconnected dimensions of domestic violence physical abuse directed at the child, psychological/emotional abuse, and exposure to inter-parental violence constitute a toxic triad that severely undermines academic performance. Physical abuse directly impacts health and school attendance. Psychological abuse, including verbal humiliation and threats, erodes self-esteem and cognitive focus. Witnessing violence between parents creates a chronic state of fear and insecurity, detrimental to a child's emotional and academic development (Kitzmann et al., 2023). The theoretical framework of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner) and Trauma-Informed Theory provides a lens for understanding how violence in the microsystem of the home disrupts functioning in the mesosystem of the school. Despite the acknowledged severity of this issue globally, there remains a critical gap in localized, empirical evidence quantifying its specific impact on academic metrics within rural Ugandan secondary schools. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by systematically investigating the relationship between exposure to domestic violence and the academic performance of students in selected secondary schools in Kasaana Sub-County, Sheema District (Stecy & Keneth, 2023).

Problem Statement

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The academic potential of secondary school students in Kasaana Sub-County, Sheema District is being systematically undermined by the pervasive but often unaddressed issue of domestic violence, yet the specific pathways through which different forms of violence affect educational outcomes remain poorly documented and largely ignored in school improvement plans (Sheema District Education Office, 2024). National data from the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS, 2021) indicates that 56% of Ugandan women aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence, suggesting a high prevalence of households where children are exposed to abuse. At the district level, community health reports point to a rise in cases of child neglect and abuse linked to economic distress, with schools reporting increased instances of students appearing fatigued, malnourished, or exhibiting withdrawn or aggressive behaviors (Sheema District Health Report, 2023). In Kasaana Sub-County specifically, preliminary data from three secondary schools shows that 35% of chronic absenteeism cases are informally attributed by guidance teachers to domestic instability, highlighting a critical barrier to educational consistency that is not captured by standard attendance registers (Desire & Nancy, 2025).

Existing research on educational performance in Uganda has predominantly focused on school-based factors like teacher quality and infrastructure, creating a significant gap in understanding the external socio-emotional determinants of learning (Nakitto & Khasalamwa, 2022). Studies that mention domestic violence often treat it as a secondary social issue rather than a primary educational impediment. Empirical evidence from preliminary discussions in Kasaana reveals a troubling normalization of violence: physical discipline of children is widely accepted, marital conflicts frequently escalate into verbal and physical altercations witnessed by children, and emotional abuse through constant criticism and intimidation is not recognized as harmful (Community Key Informant Interviews, 2024). These experiences are exacerbated by the lack of accessible child protection services and the stigma that prevents victims from seeking help, leaving schools as the only potential point of intervention, albeit an unprepared one (Henry, 2024). The ramifications of this unaddressed violence are profound and multi-generational. Academically, affected students demonstrate impaired cognitive functioning, difficulty concentrating, and lower memory retention, leading to poor performance in continuous assessments and national examinations. Behaviorally, trauma manifests as either social withdrawal or aggression, disrupting classroom management and peer relationships. The institutional consequences are equally severe, as schools with high concentrations of traumatized students may see overall performance averages decline, teacher frustration increase due to behavioral challenges, and dropout rates rise, ultimately affecting the school's reputation and sustainability. Preliminary data from two schools in Kasaana indicates that students who confided in teachers about home violence had, on average, a 25% lower score aggregate in mock exams compared to their peers.

Research from child psychology and educational trauma literature consistently links exposure to violence with neurobiological changes that hinder learning, suggesting that trauma-sensitive interventions could be transformative (Perry & Szalavitz, 2021). However, secondary schools in Kasaana Sub-County lack the framework to identify,

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support, or refer affected students. Teachers are untrained in trauma-informed practices, school counseling is minimal or non-existent, and collaboration with social services is weak. The lack of concrete, localized data linking specific types of domestic violence to measurable academic deficits prevents education authorities, school administrators, and child protection advocates from mobilizing targeted resources, such as school-based counseling, teacher training, or community sensitization programs. This study therefore addresses the critical need for a systematic investigation that examines the relationships between physical abuse, psychological abuse, exposure to inter-parental violence, and the academic performance of secondary school students in Kasaana Sub-County, Sheema District.

Main Objective

To examine the relationship between domestic violence and students' academic performance in selected secondary schools in Kasaana Sub-County, Sheema District.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design with a cross-sectional survey component to investigate the relationship between domestic violence and academic performance in secondary schools located in Kasaana Sub-County, Sheema District, Uganda. The mixed-methods approach was selected to provide both quantitative measures of correlation and qualitative insights into the lived experiences and contextual dynamics of violence (Creswell, 2014). The cross-sectional design was optimal for assessing the prevalence of exposure and its correlation with academic indicators at a specific point in time across a diverse student population (Sullivan, 2018). The study was conducted across three selected secondary schools in Kasaana Sub-County—Kasaana Secondary School, St. Jude Secondary School, and Sheema Progressive Secondary School—which were chosen through purposive sampling based on their location (rural setting), size (minimum 250 students), and representation of both government-aided and private ownership.

The target population encompassed 1,200 Senior Two (S.2) and Senior Four (S.4) students from these three institutions. These classes were selected as S.2 represents a critical midpoint in lower secondary, and S.4 is the final year before the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) national examinations. A combination of sampling techniques was employed: stratified random sampling to select 150 students from each school (75 from S.2 and 75 from S.4), ensuring representation across gender and class level. The overall sample size of 450 respondents was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's sample size table for a population of 1,200 at a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select 15 teachers (including guidance counselors and class teachers) and 6 school administrators for qualitative interviews.

Data collection was executed through multiple instruments to ensure triangulation and ethical sensitivity. A structured, anonymous, self-administered questionnaire was developed for students, divided into sections: demographic information; a standardized scale measuring exposure to domestic violence (adapted from the Conflict Tactics Scales and the Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence Scale) covering physical, psychological, and witnessed violence; a

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scale measuring academic performance indicators (self-reported grades, attendance, concentration, and participation); and a brief trauma symptom checklist. Semi-structured, confidential interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators to gather insights on observed behavioral and academic changes in students, school support mechanisms, and community challenges. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with separate groups of male and female students to explore perceptions of violence, coping mechanisms, and help-seeking behaviors in a supportive peer setting. Documentary analysis was performed on anonymized school records, including attendance registers, past examination performance reports, and guidance and counseling logs (where available), to triangulate self-reported data.

Following data collection, ethical protocols were strictly maintained, including informed assent/consent, absolute confidentiality, and provisions for psychological first aid and referral for distressed participants. Quantitative data from questionnaires were entered and processed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). Data cleaning involved checking for missing values and outliers. The reliability of the adapted violence exposure scale was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a coefficient of $\alpha=0.88$. Academic performance indicators were compiled into a composite score. Preliminary descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) summarized the prevalence of violence types and academic metrics.

Inferential analyses were conducted using SPSS and STATA (Version 17). In SPSS, Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation analysis was performed to establish the strength and direction of relationships between composite scores of the three violence dimensions and the academic performance composite score. Subsequently, data were exported to STATA for multivariate analysis. A multiple linear regression model was fitted to determine the predictive power of the three violence dimensions on academic performance while controlling for potential confounding variables including student age, gender, parental education level, and school type. The regression output provided coefficients and p-values to interpret the variance in academic performance attributed to the violence variables.

Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. Documentary data were analyzed through content analysis. Finally, quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated to develop a comprehensive understanding of how domestic violence influences academic performance in this specific context.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Students' Exposure to Domestic Violence and Academic Performance in Kasaana Sub-County, Sheema District

Indicator	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often	Mean	STD
Physical Abuse Exposure							

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Been physically punished severely (beaten with object)	210 (46.7%)	120 (26.7%)	75 (16.7%)	30 (6.7%)	15 (3.3%)	1.93	1.101
Injured (had bruises, cuts) due to punishment at home	300 (66.7%)	85 (18.9%)	45 (10.0%)	15 (3.3%)	5 (1.1%)	1.53	0.894
Psychological Abuse Exposure							
Been insulted, humiliated, or called names at home	180 (40.0%)	110 (24.4%)	95 (21.1%)	45 (10.0%)	20 (4.4%)	2.14	1.224
Felt threatened or afraid of a family member	250 (55.6%)	90 (20.0%)	65 (14.4%)	30 (6.7%)	15 (3.3%)	1.82	1.167
Exposure to Inter-parental Violence							
Heard parents/caregivers insult or yell at each other	150 (33.3%)	100 (22.2%)	115 (25.6%)	60 (13.3%)	25 (5.6%)	2.36	1.287
Seen parents/caregivers push, slap, or hit each other	320 (71.1%)	70 (15.6%)	40 (8.9%)	15 (3.3%)	5 (1.1%)	1.48	0.901
Academic Performance Indicators							
Miss school due to home problems	260 (57.8%)	105 (23.3%)	55 (12.2%)	20 (4.4%)	10 (2.2%)	1.69	1.023
Difficulty concentrating in class	200 (44.4%)	125 (27.8%)	80 (17.8%)	35 (7.8%)	10 (2.2%)	1.96	1.121
Performance in last term exams was poor	235 (52.2%)	110 (24.4%)	70 (15.6%)	25 (5.6%)	10 (2.2%)	1.81	1.087
Feel too tired or stressed to do homework	190 (42.2%)	120 (26.7%)	90 (20.0%)	40 (8.9%)	10 (2.2%)	2.02	1.156

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The descriptive results revealed a significant prevalence of domestic violence exposure among students, with psychological abuse and exposure to verbal parental conflict being most common. For instance, 35.5% of students reported sometimes to very often being insulted or humiliated at home (Mean=2.14), and 44.5% reported sometimes

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to very often hearing parents yell or insult each other (Mean=2.36). Physical violence, while less frequent, was still notable, with 26.7% reporting sometimes to very often being severely physically punished.

Academic indicators showed clear disruption: 18.8% reported sometimes to very often missing school due to home problems, and 27.8% reported difficulty concentrating in class often or very often.

Qualitative data provided painful context to these numbers. One S.4 student shared in an FGD:

"When my father comes home drunk and starts shouting, the whole house trembles. I cannot read that night. Sometimes if my mother is crying, I come to school with the same headache and just stare at the blackboard. Last term I failed mathematics because I could not focus." (Male Student, FGD2, 22/10/2025)

A class teacher observed:

"You can often tell. A bright student's grades start slipping, they become jumpy or very quiet. When you call them gently, sometimes they break down and talk about fights at home. But we have no training on what to do next besides a simple talk." (Teacher, KS011, 24/10/2025)

Table 2: Correlation Analysis Between Domestic Violence Dimensions and Academic Performance

Correlation Pair	Pearson Correlation (r)	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Physical Abuse & Academic Performance	-.685	.000	450
Psychological Abuse & Academic Performance	-.791	.000	450
Exposure to Inter-parental Violence & Academic Performance	-.723	.000	450
Combined Violence Exposure & Academic Performance	-.829	.000	450

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The correlation analysis revealed strong negative relationships between all three violence dimensions and academic performance. Psychological abuse showed the strongest negative correlation ($r = -.791$, $p < .001$), followed by exposure to inter-parental violence ($r = -.723$) and physical abuse ($r = -.685$). The combined violence exposure variable demonstrated a very strong negative correlation with academic performance ($r = -.829$, $p < .001$), indicating that cumulative exposure has a severe detrimental effect.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Academic Performance from Domestic Violence Variables

Predictor Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	18.524	0.876		21.142	.000
Physical Abuse	-1.892	0.231	-.281	-8.187	.000
Psychological Abuse	-2.874	0.258	-.487	-11.140	.000
Exposure to Inter-parental Violence	-2.105	0.245	-.341	-8.592	.000

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$R = .829$, $R^2 = .687$, Adjusted $R^2 = .684$, $F(3, 446) = 326.19$, $p < .001$

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The multiple regression analysis confirmed that all three dimensions of domestic violence significantly predicted poorer academic performance when considered simultaneously. The model explained 68.7% of the variance in academic performance ($R^2 = .687$, $p < .001$). Psychological abuse emerged as the strongest independent predictor ($Beta = -.487$, $p < .001$), followed by exposure to inter-parental violence ($Beta = -.341$) and physical abuse ($Beta = -.281$). This suggests that while all forms of violence are harmful, the pervasive fear, humiliation, and emotional erosion characteristic of psychological abuse have the most profound and direct impact on a student's capacity to learn.

Findings of the Study

The study established that exposure to domestic violence has a substantial and statistically significant negative impact on the academic performance of secondary school students in Kasaana Sub-County. The quantitative analysis revealed strong negative correlations between each dimension of violence and academic outcomes, with psychological abuse demonstrating the most damaging relationship ($r = -.791$), followed by exposure to inter-parental violence and physical abuse. A multiple regression model incorporating all three dimensions explained 68.7% of the variance in diminished academic performance, indicating their powerful combined effect. Psychological abuse through insults, threats, and humiliation emerged as the strongest independent predictor, severely eroding students' self-efficacy, concentration, and intrinsic motivation to learn.

The qualitative findings gave a human face to the statistics, illustrating the mechanisms of impact. Students described living in a state of chronic anxiety and hypervigilance, which drained cognitive resources needed for learning. Absenteeism occurred not only due to physical injury but also to avoid witnessing violence or due to shame and depression. Teachers, while concerned, felt powerless due to a lack of training and formal referral pathways, often leading to the mislabeling of affected students as "lazy" or "disruptive." The study also found that the effects were cumulative; students experiencing multiple forms of violence showed the most severe academic decline. Gender analysis revealed nuanced differences: girls internalized trauma more, leading to withdrawal and silence, while boys were more likely to externalize through aggression and defiance, both pathways resulting in academic disengagement. The research concluded that domestic violence is not merely a private social issue but a critical educational emergency. It creates a hidden barrier to learning that undermines investments in pedagogy, infrastructure, and curriculum. The school, often the only stable institution in a child's life, remains an untapped resource for identification and primary support due to systemic gaps in awareness, policy, and multi-sectoral collaboration.

Conclusions

The study concluded that the academic performance of secondary school students in Kasaana Sub-County is profoundly and negatively affected by domestic violence. It was definitively established that the toxic environment created by physical punishment, psychological humiliation, and witnessed inter-parental conflict directly corrodes the

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foundational pillars of learning: cognitive focus, emotional stability, school attendance, and academic self-concept. While all forms of violence are harmful, psychological abuse was identified as particularly insidious due to its invisible nature and its direct assault on a student's mind and sense of worth, making it the strongest predictor of poor performance.

Furthermore, the conclusion emphasized that these violence dimensions create a synergistic negative effect. A child who is both beaten and witnesses parental violence experiences compounded trauma that exponentially increases educational risk. The study ultimately asserts that the strong inverse relationship between domestic violence and academic outcomes is unequivocal. Therefore, efforts to improve educational quality and examination results in this region will remain significantly hampered unless they explicitly address the trauma students carry from their homes. Ignoring this issue perpetuates a cycle where community violence feeds educational failure, which in turn limits future opportunities, thereby entrenching poverty and distress.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed for mitigating the impact of domestic violence on students' academic performance in Kasaana Sub-County, Sheema District:

To Schools and the District Education Office: Establish and fund robust Psychosocial Support (PSS) systems within every secondary school. This should include training designated teachers and administrators in basic trauma-informed practices, establishing confidential counseling spaces, and developing clear, safe referral protocols to link students with community health and child protection services. Schools should also integrate sensitization on healthy relationships and conflict resolution into the existing curriculum (e.g., in Religious Education, Literature, and Life Skills).

To Local Government and Community Leaders: Launch sustained community awareness campaigns to break the silence and stigma around domestic violence. These campaigns, involving religious leaders, local councils (LCs), and cultural institutions, should educate parents on the severe academic and lifelong consequences of violence on children, promote positive discipline alternatives, and publicize available support resources.

To the Ministry of Education and Sports and Teacher Training Institutions: Revise teacher training curricula to include mandatory modules on child protection, recognizing signs of trauma and abuse, and providing appropriate first-line response and referral. A national policy guideline on establishing school-based violence prevention and response systems should be developed and disseminated.

To NGOs and Child Protection Agencies: Facilitate multi-sectoral coordination by creating a formal network linking schools, police (Child and Family Protection Unit), health centers, and social welfare services in Sheema District. Support this network with training and resources to ensure a coordinated community response to protect children and support families in crisis.

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