

Violence against young children: What does gender have to do with it?

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Despite a clear connection between violence against children and violence against women, the two issues are rarely considered together. In this article, Gary Barker and Marcos Nascimento discuss results from their recent research in Brazil and from global survey data.

There are clear connections between children's experience of violence, as victims or witnesses, and violence against women – often referred to as gender-based violence – and, indeed, gender equality in general. For example, global UN estimates suggest that 30% of the world's women will experience violence from a male partner over their lifetimes. We know that young children are frequently present when this violence happens or live in households where it takes place.

Both programme experience and research suggest that violence against women and violence against children are intricately intertwined, and can and should be discussed and addressed together. Yet research, programme interventions and advocacy efforts on the two issues often operate in parallel, seldom-overlapping worlds.

In this article we use gender as a lens through which to view the issue of violence against young children and possible interventions. It is important to affirm from the start that the concept of gender is not only about women and girls. It should be understood as referring to the social factors that shape both masculinities *and* femininities, women *and* men, girls *and* boys, the power relations between them, and the structural

contexts that create and reinforce these power relations.

The global data shows that, in interaction with the individual characteristics and life experiences of caregivers and children, there are three overlapping factors which underpin violence against children:

1. poverty and structural inequalities that shape care settings and frequently affect whether parents, families and other caregivers have the means to adequately care for their children in non-violent and non-stressed ways;
2. cultural and social norms related to child-rearing practices and the acceptability of corporal punishment and other forms of violence against children (and women, and between men and boys); and
3. gender norms and dynamics, specifically views that boys need be raised to be physically 'tough' and emotionally stoic while girls are seen as fragile, inferior and/or subordinate to boys and men.

Nearly universally, gender-related trends are apparent in terms of violence against children. Worldwide, boys are more likely to experience bullying, fights and physical violence, while girls in most of the world are

more likely to experience sexual violence, psychological violence and specific forms of discrimination and exclusion. As the UN's World Report on Violence Against Children states, in recommendation 10:

“Girls and boys are at different risk for different forms of violence across different settings. All research into violence against children and into strategies to prevent and respond to it should be designed to take gender into account. In particular, the study has found a need for men and boys to play active roles and exercise leadership in efforts to overcome violence.”

Taking this recommendation as our starting point, we ask: what are these gendered patterns in terms of violence against children? And what does a gender lens imply in terms of implications for action to tackle violence against children?

The situation in Brazil

Household surveys carried out by Instituto Promundo, a Brazilian NGO working to promote gender equality and end violence against children, provide examples of these gendered trends. While they are specific to Rio de Janeiro, they are similar to those seen in some other parts of the world. A representative sample survey carried out with parents in 2005 in three low income neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro showed that:

- *Physical violence against children was a common experience: 35% of parents had used some form of physical violence in the past 3 months (36% against boys and 33.8% against girls).*
- *Psychological violence was more common against girls: 39.3% of parents reported using psychological violence against a daughter or girl in the past three months compared to 32.6% against sons or boys.*
- *Severe physical violence was more common among boys: 16.8% of parents reported using physical violence against sons or boys compared to 12.9% against daughters.*
- *Violence was most frequent in the case of younger children: the highest rates of violence reported by parents were against children ages 6-11, but violence was also used against children ages 3-5.*

Building on this household survey research, and informed by evaluation data from parenting intervention programmes globally, Promundo developed an intervention that combined parent education with community campaigns enjoining parents to “educate, not beat” their children. The parent education workshops emphasized alternative, non-violent childrearing techniques, children’s rights and basic tenets of child development.

An impact evaluation of the experience, with two intervention

communities and a delayed intervention community that served as a control group, provides useful lessons on both the challenges of reducing violence against children in low income settings and the role of gender. The communities where the study was carried out are low income, but with high degrees of social support between residents, and with a high prevalence of community violence – both gang-related and police reaction to gangs.

There is also a high prevalence of women-headed households. In the three communities, between 43-49% of the participants (who are broadly representative of the communities as a whole) were single mothers or women-headed households, meaning the woman's income was the major income and women supported the household. Even when men are living in the households, their participation was reported to be limited in terms of their participation in the care of children.

National data from Brazil shows that these patterns are not limited just to these communities. National household data in Brazil show that women spend on average of 21.8 hours a week on domestic chores, including child care activities, compared to 9.1 hours for men – and that women with children under age 14 who live *with* a man present spend two hours *more* per week on average than households where a man is not present. In other words, national data in Brazil show that having a man present in the household creates more work for women than less.²

Brazilian women's experiences of childcare and violence

In this setting, what is possible in terms of reducing violence against children? The results of the impact evaluation of the “educate, not beat” intervention found that participants showed a statistically significant increase in awareness of Brazil's national law on children's rights (the Statute on Children and Adolescents), and slight increase in understanding of mechanisms for child protection, compared to no change in the control group.

There was also a slight change in one community in terms of attitudes that support the use of violence against children – in effect, an increased understanding of and support for children's rights.

The vast majority of participants – around 80% in all three communities – believed that parents have the right to use violence when a child does not show them respect. Between 19-32% of participants in the three communities reported having carried out physical violence against a child in the past three months, prior to participation in the parenting groups. After the intervention, there was a small but statistically significant decrease in parents' reported use of violence against children in one of the communities – the one that combined both parent education and a community campaign.

At the same time, however, psychological violence increased in

all three communities, suggesting that parents may have been substituting psychological violence for physical violence, or that the ways they talk to their children – as an alternative to using corporal punishment, or not – were still violent.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the study, however, is the qualitative findings. Almost no fathers, nor men as caregivers of children, participated in the workshops – because they were not interested, reported not having time, or were not present in the home or involved in caregiving on a regular basis. During the course of the parent education workshops and afterwards, the mothers who participated expressed frustration with the situation. They were virtually alone, though sometimes supported by other women, in terms of child care, and also generally worked long hours outside the home.

They also complained of feeling powerless in general in their communities and workplaces, and in their relationships with male parents. And many had experienced violence from a male partner, either current or previous.

For most mothers corporal punishment and psychological violence, such as humiliation and shouting, were viewed as “necessary evils” – something they knew they should not do, but frequently did when they lost control or were stressed. Tellingly, some women said that all they needed was someone to look after

Some public policies have been analyzed to examine how existing social welfare and gender equality policies can encourage greater involvement by men in caregiving, health and child development issues

Photo: Pedro Silva



their children for a few minutes at the end of the day so they could have a short break between their work outside the home and starting their “second shift” when they arrived at home and were the principal caregivers.

Mothers who participated in workshops were clearly appreciative of the information they received, but seemed equally or even more appreciative of the opportunity to talk with other parents about their lives and their daily frustrations.

Global links between childhood and gender-based violence

These findings lend additional support to the case for providing support for low-income and stressed families, as has also been demonstrated in numerous studies on the efficacy of home visitation programmes in various parts of the world. Indeed, what this research suggests is that while parents appreciate and need information on child development and on alternative, non-violent child-rearing, what they most often need are changes in the household gender dynamics and

caregiving patterns – and additional support from the often-absent men.

To probe these issues further, Promundo and the International Center for Research on Women, with partner organisations in South Africa (the Medical Research Council), India (ICRW-Asia Regional Office), Mexico (Colegio de Mexico), Croatia (CEST) and Chile (CulturaSalud) recently carried out a representative household survey with women and men called the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES). The study will be expanded in collaboration with additional partners in 2010, both in Africa and in Asia (in collaboration with Partners for Prevention, the Joint UN Program for Engaging Men and Boys to Prevent Violence Against Women in Asia and the Pacific).

While results are still being finalized, and will be published later in 2010 and in 2011, preliminary analyses on men's use of violence against women is being confirmed by the high rates of men's reports of sexual violence against women and girls (both stranger rape and marital rape) and high rates of physical violence against female partners, in numbers similar to those found in the WHO's multi-country study on violence against women, which interviewed only women.

Initial analyses from three of the countries where IMAGES³ has been carried out (South Africa, Croatia, and India) found that four factors were associated with men's self-reports of

sexual and physical violence against women:

- A belief in inequitable norms related to gender, in other words believing that men have more rights than women;
- Childhood experience of violence – in and outside the home, namely being victims of bullying in the school or community or a victim of physical violence in the home;
- Men's economic disempowerment, that is reporting feeling stressed, ashamed or depressed as a result of not having enough work or income; and
- Alcohol use.

While it is still being analyzed, the IMAGES data so far suggests a cluster of behaviors on the part of men, including risky sexual behavior (especially low use of condoms), alcohol use, and use of violence against women, exacerbated by economic disempowerment.

Insights for action

Along with the IMAGES survey data, the partner organisations (working together as the Men and Gender Equality Policy Project) have also analyzed public policies in their countries to examine how existing social welfare and gender equality policies can encourage greater involvement by men in caregiving, health and child development issues (men's own health and the health of their partners, and the health and development of their children).

A qualitative study – called the “Men who Care” study – is also underway, and involves carrying out life history interviews with men in the same settings who show more involved participation in caregiving in the home or are involved in caregiving professions.

Taken together, the studies discussed in this article provide a number of insights for action. They suggest that reducing violence against women and against children should be part of integrated interventions and policies including:

- Family support and home visitation programmes, building on those which have shown evidence or promise of effectiveness. This includes building on women's economic empowerment programmes that have shown effectiveness in reducing violence against women, and that could be adapted to engage men and also include efforts to reduce violence against children;
- Campaigns and legal reform to promote changes in the social norms that sustain men's violence against women, violence between men, and parents' use of violence against children;
- Promoting paternity leave and work-life policies that seek to engage men to a greater extent in caregiving (these have shown impact in some upper income countries);
- Teacher training and school-based and daycare-based interventions that

have shown evidence or promise of promoting gender equality, engaging men in caregiving positions and changing cultures of violence and gender stereotypical views; and

- Social support for boys, girls, women and men who have experienced violence in the home or community, recognizing how early experiences of violence are often associated with later use of such violence.

Family support policies and child support policies also need to move beyond a view that gender refers only to women and girls, and acknowledge the significance of relationships between men and women and boys and girls, and between social norms related to masculinities and femininities.

There are numerous concrete examples of what such gender “relational” programming can look like, both at the policy and the programme level, and the potential benefits of such an approach. Norway – the world’s richest country per capita – invested 20 years in promoting equal pay for women, together with incentives to engage men as fathers and caregivers. The result: in a recent national survey 70% of men and 80% of women say they are happy with the equality achieved and family violence has been dramatically reduced. In a household survey that sought to evaluate the impact of such policies, the authors conclude that, among other benefits of an integrated children’s rights and children’s rights policy approach: “

...the father’s role as the performer of physical punishment/violence is disappearing from the average Norwegian home.”⁴

At the level of programme interventions, in recent interviews with beneficiaries of a combined community micro-finance and gender-based violence programme that engages men and women, we heard this report from a man who participates in the intervention:

“...men in my community thought I was controlled by my wife because I let her go out by herself and participate in the village savings and loan association... then I joined too... we pooled our money and we bought animals. We invest together and we make more money... my wife seems to me more beautiful than she used to be, and our children are happier. I stopped using violence [against his wife and his children]”

To be sure, changing both the social norms and the community and economic conditions that underpin both violence against children and women, and between men and boys, is a long-term process. But these examples suggest both that the issues must be considered together and that individual and societal change are possible.

Notes

- 1 The authors wish to thank several colleagues for input on this article: at ICRW, Juan Manuel Contreras, Ajay Singh and Ravi Verma; at Promundo, special thanks to Marcio Segundo, Isadora Garcia, Gabriela Aguiar, Rafael Machado. Thanks also to Rachel Jewkes for assistance in data analysis.
- 2 Cited in “What Men Have to do with it: Public Policies to Promote Gender Equality,” International Center for Research and Women and Instituto Promundo (2010). Available at: <http://www.icrw.org/docs/2010/What-Men-Have-to-Do-With-It.pdf>
- 3 The South Africa data are from the study “Understanding Men’s Health and Use of Violence: Interface of Rape and HIV in South Africa,” 2010, Jewkes R, Silkweyiya Y, Morrell R and Dunkle K, South African Medical Research Council. The same questions were used as part of the IMAGES research in the other countries. Special thanks to Rachel Jewkes for analysis of the initial data.
- 4 Holter O, Svare H and Egeland C (2009). *Gender Equality and Quality of Life: A Norwegian Perspective*. Oslo: The Nordic Gender Institute (NIKK).