

***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY***

# ***ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE***

**in Brazil and Honduras**

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Founded in Brazil in 1997, Promundo works to promote gender equality and create a world free from violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls. Promundo is a global consortium with members in the United States, Brazil, Portugal, and Democratic Republic of the Congo that collaborate to achieve this mission by conducting cutting-edge research that builds the knowledge base on masculinities and gender equality; developing, evaluating, and scaling up high-impact gender-transformative interventions and programs; and carrying out national and international campaigns and advocacy initiatives to prevent violence and promote gender justice.

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# Adolescent Relationship Violence in Brazil and Honduras: Executive Summary



## 1. OVERVIEW

There is strong evidence to show that adolescent relationship violence (during non-cohabitating relationships of *namoro* in Portuguese, *noviazgo* in Spanish) can lead to adult intimate partner violence (IPV). However, research and interventions addressing violence among adolescents are limited compared to those focused on adult IPV, and they are especially scarce in Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries. As a result, policies and programs in the region miss out on significant opportunities to promote nonviolent relationships throughout life.

In order to advance research in the region and improve potential strategies toward addressing the problem, Promundo and the Inter-American Development Bank led a qualitative study in 2015. The study focused on risk and protective factors surrounding adolescent IPV. In **Brazil**, fieldwork was conducted in an urban site (Rio de Janeiro) and a rural site (Codó, in the northeastern state of Maranhão). In **Honduras**, partners carried out research in urban (Tegucigalpa) and rural sites (in the department of Intibucá).<sup>1</sup> The teams conducted focus groups and a total of **147 in-depth interviews** with girls/young women and boys/young men aged 14 to 24 years. The age range captured younger adolescents' recent dating experiences and young adults' reflections on past relationships.

1. The research received funding and technical assistance from the Inter-American Development Bank. Researchers affiliated with UC Berkeley and ESA Consultores coordinated the Honduras data collection, and Plan International Brazil coordinated the Brazilian rural site data collection. Instituto Promundo (Brazil) collected data in Rio de Janeiro.



## 2. KEY FINDINGS

Adolescents engaged in diverse intimate relationships, ranging from casual “dating” and sexual experiences to formal relationships and formal or informal unions. Adolescents described aspirations of being in relationships with nonviolent characteristics, such as respect, love, and trust. They generally recognized physical violence as such, but often did not identify nor problematize an array of violent behaviors among partners. Controlling behaviors that appeared throughout nearly every interview of this research are gravely overlooked in policies and interventions. Common examples found in this research in Brazil and Honduras include monitoring a partner’s phone or social media pages with or without permission, restricting a partner’s clothing choices or ability to leave the house, and requiring a partner’s permission to socialize with friends.

These types of violence were especially tolerated in relationships with more commitment compared to the most informal relationships. The following **risk factors**, among others, were identified (with the inverse of these factors serving as **protective factors**):

- **Community level:** Inequitable gender norms, i.e., those that promote risky sexual practices among both sexes; minimizing or normalizing IPV; lack of spaces for courtship due to norms about premarital relationships, leading to couple isolation; limited access to support services and sexual and reproductive health services; recurrent IPV and community violence, in multiple spheres, that is not recognized as violence or considered problematic.
- **Relationship level:** High degree of unequal power in the relationship, often characterized by jealousy and fear of infidelity; age gap in the relationship, typically an older male with a younger female partner; cohabitation in which inequitable gender roles are reinforced and the couple becomes more socially isolated; unwanted sex and unequal decision-making around sex.
- **Individual level:** Sociodemographic factors; misuse of alcohol or drugs; individual and partners’ personality traits and related behaviors, e.g., aggressiveness, victim-blaming, minimizing violence (with the ability to critically reflect upon and assert one’s preference about relationships as a key protective factor); low educational attainment; peers or friendships that support or use IPV; lack of friendships and meaningful connections; lack of a supportive family member or other caregiver to turn to for help; lack of a positive relationship role model; history of inter-family violence.

### **Additional findings offer implications for addressing adolescent IPV:**

**Rigid gender norms and dynamics encourage adolescent IPV.** For example, adolescent girls are expected to “show respect” by not going out and not dressing provocatively. If they do, male partners are expected to have a role in “making them behave,” as young men who don’t keep their partners in line risk looking weak in front of others. Young men and young women alike justify the use of violence when they perceive women to be “provoking men” by stepping out of their assigned gender roles.

**Gender norms around sexuality can also enable sexual violence.** Adolescent boys are consistently expected to want and insist on sex to demonstrate their manhood, while girls are expected to resist and give in at the “right” time. Girls experience IPV on multiple occasions, engage in unwanted sexual acts, and stay in relationships they dislike out of fear. Questioning gender norms also exacerbates the risk of IPV.

**Reciprocal violence**, i.e., the use of IPV by both members of a couple, was especially common among adolescents in the urban site in Brazil, although girls were still more likely to be victims of physical and sexual IPV. Adolescents struggle to negotiate relational boundaries during this pivotal developmental period, and often do so through joking and testing each other.

**Controlling behaviors were reported in nearly all interviews.** Reasons to control could include jealousy, infidelity, and fear of infidelity. For example, boys and girls often prohibited their partner from having friendships. The resulting social isolation escalates IPV risk, diminishing adolescents’ access to potential sources of support and wider networks beyond their partner. Restricting access to cell phones and social media and monitoring online and in-person social activity are key means by which one partner may exercise control over another. Adolescents may conform to their partners’ controlling behaviors in order to “keep the peace.”

**Bystanders are discouraged from intervening when they witness conflict and IPV**, and young couples may not seek help; often, they do not recognize their relationship as problematic, or they are afraid. When they do seek help, adolescents are likely to seek it from family members or friends rather than from services.



### 3. PROGRAM STRATEGIES

Adolescent relationships and IPV are often inadequately reflected in policies and programs meant to serve young people. The findings point to the need to **intervene early**, as relationships are forming, and to offer spaces to openly discuss and critically reflect on them. Programs and policies that incorporate adolescent risk and protective factors should be prioritized, along with approaches that promote nonviolence in relationships throughout the LAC region, including those that:

1. Adapt existing gender-transformative programs aimed at preventing violence among adolescents to include a more explicit focus on healthy relationships (including through comprehensive sexuality education);
2. Support young men's and women's healing from violence and abuse they experienced in their families and communities;
3. Adapt to local sociocultural contexts and evaluate school-based adolescent IPV prevention programs in LAC;
4. Encourage communication, conflict resolution, and mediation skills among all adolescents;
5. Develop and promote healthy spaces for teens to interact with their peers;
6. Support interventions with fathers, mothers, and other family members that promote caregiving and modeling of nonviolent, equitable relationships;
7. Encourage community norm-change programming;
8. Develop adolescent-centered advocacy to prevent IPV;
9. Leverage technology and online platforms as tools for campaigns and messaging to promote equitable, nonviolent relationships (rather than as tools of control);
10. Train providers to offer services that are accessible, meaningful, and supportive to adolescents.

# Authorship and Acknowledgements

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- **Alice Taylor** (Instituto Promundo): *Co-principal investigator and overall research coordination for Brazil*
- **Clara Alemann and Monserrat Bustelo** (Inter-American Development Bank, IDB): *Funding support, technical advice on research design, development of research instruments, and review of report*

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