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Associations between adolescent experiences of violence in Malawi and gender-based attitudes, internalizing, and externalizing behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about adolescent exposure to and factors associated with violence in Malawi. The aim of this research was to describe the prevalence of exposure to violence among adolescents in Malawi, and test the hypotheses that such exposures are associated with gender-based violent attitudes, and with internalizing and externalizing problems. In 2014, 561 primary school pupils were interviewed (50% girls), and logistic regression analysis was performed on gender-stratified data, adjusting for sociodemographic differences. Both girls and boys had witnessed domestic violence (28.5% & 29.6%), experienced emotional abuse at home (23.1% & 22.9%), physical abuse at home (28.1% & 30.4%), physical abuse at school (42.4% & 36.4%), and been bullied (33.8% & 39.6%). Among girls, internalized violent attitudes towards women were associated with emotional abuse at home (OR 2.1) and physical abuse at school (OR 1.7). Condoning rape was associated with physical abuse at school (OR 1.9). Bullying perpetration was associated with emotional abuse at home (OR 4.5). Depression was associated with emotional abuse at home (OR 3.8) and physical abuse at school (OR 2.4). Among boys, violent attitudes towards women and condoning rape were not associated with violence exposure. Bullying perpetration was associated with having been a victim of bullying (OR 2.9) and physical abuse at school (OR 2.7). Depression was associated with emotional abuse at home (OR 2.9), domestic violence (OR 2.4) and physical abuse at school (OR 2.5). These findings can inform programs designed to reduce violence victimization among Malawian girls, both in homes and schools.

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1. Introduction

Annually, more than 1 billion children – half of all the children in the world – are victims of violence (Hillis, Mercy, Amobi, & Kress, 2016). In Africa, prevalence of victimization is predominantly high (CDC, 2015) – yet, research on the consequences
of childhood and adolescent experiences of violence is substantially lacking. In order to prevent and eliminate violence it is important to understand its prevalence, nature, and implications in a country-specific and culturally-relevant manner.

Emerging evidence from the Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS), a recent joint effort by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and UNICEF, systematically measures physical, emotional, and sexual violence, and has so far been released in 8 countries around the world (CDC, 2015). The highest rates of physical and emotional violence were reported among boys in Zimbabwe, where the lifetime exposure to physical abuse and emotional abuse, prior to turning 18 years of age, was 76% and 38% respectively. Moreover 38% of girls in Zimbabwe had experienced sexual abuse, which was also the highest prevalence seen among the studied countries (CDC, 2015). The most recent data was released in Malawi, where physical violence was experienced by 42% of girls and 65% of boys, sexual violence by 22% of girls and 15% of boys, and emotional violence by 20% of girls and 29% of boys (UNICEF & CDC, 2014).

Other studies have reported that children in sub-Saharan Africa suffer from predominantly high rates of exposure to violence (Akmatov, 2011; Stoltenborgh, van IJzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). This is partially due to the fact that physical punishment as a form of discipline in the homes is ubiquitous (Naker, 2005; Slonim-Nevo & Mukuka, 2007), and schools are another predominant setting for physical and sexual abuse (Jewkes, Levin, Mbananga, & Bradshaw, 2002; Meineck, Cluver, Boyes, & Loening-voysey, 2016). In Swaziland, nearly 1 in 5 females has experienced childhood physical violence in her lifespan – 1 in 20 requiring medical attention due to the severity of the experience (Breiding, Mercy, Gulaid, Reza, & Hleta-Nkambule, 2013).

There is considerable literature documenting the long-lasting and harmful impacts of life-time exposure to physical and emotional violence on children (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2013; Perry, 2001; Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009). Research in high-income countries has repeatedly demonstrated that children who have been exposed to emotional and physical violence are at greater risk of depression, suicidality, post-traumatic stress disorder, unwanted pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (Felitti et al., 1998; Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006). These children often develop a wide range of long-lasting externalizing and internalizing disorders, which are shown to be linked to experiences of violence in the household and community (Bensley, Van Eenwyk, & Simmons, 2003; Danese et al., 2013; Sachs-Ericsson et al., 2010). However, research has also shown that experiences of violence and factors associated with these exposures are contextual and as such, country specific data are needed.

In South Africa, there is evidence that the experience of emotional abuse of girls and women is associated with depression, suicidality, alcohol abuse, and HIV and HSV2 infections, and of men with depression and drug abuse (Cluver, Orkin, Boyes, & Sherr, 2016; Jewkes, Dunkle, Nduna, Jama, & Puren, 2010; Meineck et al., 2017). Gender-based violence in sub-Saharan countries is also linked to sexual risky behavior and HIV infection (Andersson, Cockcroft, & Shea, 2008). Other studies in South Africa suggest exposure to violence during adolescence is linked to anti-social and violent behavior, including rape perpetration (Jewkes, Nduna, Jama Shai, & Dunkle, 2012). However, evidence on the nature and implications of experiences of violence, during the formative teenage years, is still very limited in many sub-Saharan countries – especially in Malawi. Furthermore, most of the published research on the experience of abuse in sub-Saharan Africa is from one country, South Africa, limiting our ability to understand how this phenomenon is expressed elsewhere on the continent. Therefore, it is particularly valuable to shed light on new data from Malawi.

In order to better prevent and control the damaging impacts of violence through effective measures and evidence-based interventions, it is essential to consider the regional risk factors and outcomes associated with different forms of violence and abuse experienced by adolescents (Jewkes, 2014). Furthermore, it is important to study the prevalence and nature of attitudes towards gender-based violence as they are highly diversified across communities and cultures (Meineck, Cluver, Boyes, & Mhlongo, 2015). In 1992, the UN Convention Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted General Recommendation No 19 which clarifies that gender-based violence (GBV) is a form of discrimination and defined as “violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately [. . . it includes] acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty (United Nations, 1992).” Since then the definition of GBV has been broadened to the “general term used to capture violence that occurs as a result of the normative role expectations associated with each gender, along with the unequal power relationships between the two genders, within the context of a specific society.” (Bloom, 2008). Thus, country and society specific research on the health and behavioral conditions associated with different forms of exposure to violence in adolescence, and its relationship with prevalence of gender-based violence is critical for programming and policy-making.

Malawi’s society subscribes to a conservative cultural value system, where gender inequalities manifest in discrimination within families and institutions, as well as social and cultural norms that perpetuate practices that are detrimental to women (Prah, 2013). Thus, the most essential step in achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment is overcoming socially accepted cultural beliefs and ideologies that emphasize male dominance (Prah, 2013). To further this, the government of Malawi has made a national commitment to ameliorating gender based inequality and violence in the country. The first priority of this national commitment is prevention of GBV by addressing the root causes and promoting transformation of harmful social norms. The strategy also aims to provide a strong framework for sustainable interventions to prevent and effectively respond to GBV (Malawi, 2014). To that effect, the country has also agreed to host the Violence Against Children (VAC) studies that were conducted across the globe (CDC, 2015). Programs and policies can promote important and positive change in men’s gender-related attitudes and practices, including in reducing men’s use of violence against women. Since the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, national governments from around the world and
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