

Pathways between childhood trauma, intimate partner violence, and harsh parenting: findings from the UN Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific



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Summary

Background Although childhood trauma and violence against women are global public health issues, few population-based data from low-income and middle-income countries exist about the links between them. We present data from the UN Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific, exploring the pathways between different forms of childhood trauma and violence against women.

Methods In this multicountry study, we interviewed multistage representative samples of men and women, aged 18–49 years, in Asia and the Pacific, using standardised population-based household surveys. Men were interviewed in six countries, and women in four. Respondents were asked questions about their perpetration or experience of intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence, childhood trauma, and harsh parenting (smacking their children as a form of discipline). We used maximum likelihood multivariate logit models to explore associations between childhood trauma and violence against women, and fitted path models to explore associations between experience and perpetration of child maltreatment.

Findings Between Jan 1, 2011, and Dec 1, 2012, 10 178 men and 3106 women completed interviews in this study, with between 815 and 1812 men per site and 477 and 1103 women per site. The proportion of men who experienced any childhood trauma varied between 59% (n=478, 95% CI 54·0–63·3; Indonesia rural site) and 92% (n=791, 89·4–93·8; Bougainville, Papua New Guinea). For women, the results ranged from 44% (n=272, 37·7–50·8; Sri Lanka) to 84% (n=725, 80·7–86·8; Bougainville, Papua New Guinea). For men, all forms of childhood trauma were associated with all forms of intimate partner violence perpetration. For women, all forms of childhood trauma were associated with physical intimate partner violence, and both physical and sexual intimate partner violence. There were significant, often gendered, pathways between men's and women's perpetration and experiences of childhood trauma, physical intimate partner violence, harsh parenting, and other factors.

Interpretation The data point to both a co-occurrence and a cycle of abuse, with childhood trauma leading to violence against women and further child maltreatment, which in turn increases the risk of experience or perpetration of violence during adulthood. Efforts to prevent both forms of violence would benefit from a meaningful integrated approach. Interventions should promote positive parenting, address inequality and the normalisation of violence across the life course, and transform men's power over women and children.

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Introduction

Child maltreatment and violence against women are global public health issues.^{1,2} In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals established international development targets for all member states of the UN. These targets include one on the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls (target 5.2), and another on ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against, and torture of, children (target 16.2). Governments and multilateral agencies

need scientific evidence that can guide programmes and policies to achieve these ambitious targets.

In Asia and the Pacific, violence against women and child maltreatment are pervasive,^{3–5} although there are scant population-based statistics on child maltreatment across the region.⁶ Violence against children and violence against women have generally been addressed separately. More recently, researchers in the region have focused on violence against women as a consequence of child maltreatment, with evidence showing that the association

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Research in context

Evidence before this study

We searched PubMed and Google for references using the following search terms: “intimate partner violence”, “marital rape”, “sexual coercion”, “perpetration”, “etiology”, “aetiology”, “risk factors”, “child abuse”, “child sexual abuse”, “child maltreatment”, “harsh parenting”, “physical discipline”, and “intergenerational violence”. We sought published papers or reports with empirical research from 1990 onwards, from any country, published in English, and drew on previous systematic reviews. This literature review found that childhood trauma, intimate partner violence, low socioeconomic status, harsh or inconsistent parenting skills, attitudes condoning violence, and inequitable gender attitudes are key risk factors that link different forms of childhood trauma with violence against women. However, our literature review found few population-based statistics on child maltreatment in the Asia–Pacific region, and limited evidence on the pathways between child maltreatment and intimate partner violence.

Added value of this study

The results from this large multicountry study show that, to varying degrees, childhood trauma is highly prevalent among women and men in the general population, across the Asia–Pacific region. Our findings indicate that there are strong

links between childhood experiences of maltreatment and the perpetration or experience of violence against women in adulthood, and that the cycle of violence is facilitated and fuelled by gender inequality. Importantly, the findings show the pathways through which experiences of childhood trauma contribute to violence against women and further child maltreatment. Additionally, they also stress the need for these two issues to be addressed.

Implications of all the available evidence

The 2015 Sustainable Development Goals include specific targets about the elimination of violence both against women and against children, and governments and multilateral agencies are eager for scientific evidence that can guide programmes and policies to achieve these ambitious targets. These findings are particularly pertinent because they provide a major advance in our understanding of violence against women and children, and have important implications for violence prevention strategies. The data from this population-based study suggest that gender inequitable social norms and attitudes, and the normalisation of violence, must be overcome to properly address the cycle of abuse in families. Interventions should promote positive parenting, address inequality and the normalisation of violence across the life course, and transform men’s power over women and children.

is complex and varied.⁷ A narrative review of evidence on intersections between violence against children and violence against women, with an emphasis on low-income and middle-income countries, identified a number of important intersections between these two types of violence. These include co-occurrence within the same household, shared risk factors, and common and compounding consequences across the lifespan.⁸

Research about childhood trauma and its interface with violence against women is concentrated in high-income countries.⁹ Child sexual abuse is the most researched and consistent predictor of adult sexual revictimisation¹⁰ and of risky sexual behaviours, which might act as mediating factors in women’s trajectories towards adult experiences of sexual violence.⁷ Child sexual abuse has also been associated with women’s experiences of intimate partner violence in high-income¹¹ and low-income and middle-income settings.¹² There is some evidence of the associations between physical child abuse and adult experiences of violence from studies with women in Latin America.¹³ Children who witness abuse between their parents are more likely to experience or perpetrate violence as adults,^{4,11–14} although this is not consistent across settings.^{4,15} Men who experience childhood emotional abuse and neglect,¹⁶ and childhood sexual abuse,¹⁷ are also at increased risk of perpetration of rape, intimate partner violence, and sexual assault.^{4,15}

The pathways from childhood trauma to adulthood experiences and perpetration of violence are complex and multifaceted.¹⁸ There is some evidence that women who experience intimate partner violence are more likely to physically abuse their children than women who do not experience abuse.¹⁸ Furthermore, children who grow up witnessing abuse are at increased risk of being physically and sexually abused themselves.¹⁹ The evidence about the overlaps between experiences of witnessing violence, child maltreatment, and violence against women does not adequately capture or explain the relationship between these different types of violence.

In this Article, we present comparable population prevalence data from men and women who report different types of childhood trauma, including emotional abuse and neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and witnessing abuse of their mother, and their reports of using physical discipline against their own children. Using structural equation modelling, we show the pathways through which one’s childhood experiences of violence can lead to violence against women and child maltreatment during adulthood. The aim of this study was to move beyond simply looking at linear associations between violence against children and violence against women, and to disentangle the complex and intersecting pathways and risk factors that connect these experiences of violence.

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