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What do we know about violence against women and girls and what more do we need to know to prevent it?

A Summary of the Evidence



WhatWorks
TO PREVENT VIOLENCE

A Summary of the Evidence

About this brief

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is preventable. However, to address it effectively we need to understand it in all its complexity. To develop and implement effective prevention interventions globally researchers and practitioners need to understand: the scale, scope and nature of the problem; variations across and within countries; women's experiences and men's perpetration of different forms of violence; and the underlying drivers, risk and protective factors that influence the occurrence of VAWG.

It outlines our current knowledge base regarding VAWG and identifies where our understanding needs to be expanded in order to deliver the most sophisticated interventions and impact on the prevalence of VAWG globally. This brief is designed to provide an overview of what we know about intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence and child abuse, based on the literature. It can be used by programmers, policymakers and researchers to inform theories of change for violence prevention interventions. This is not a systematic review, but designed to inform the research agenda for the What Works to Prevent VAWG Global Programme.

Table 1: What do we know about intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence and child abuse?

	Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)	Non-partner sexual violence	Child abuse
Prevalence and patterns	IPV is a significant social problem worldwide, with estimates that 30% of women over the age of 15 have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime (1). However, the level of violence varies greatly between countries and even within countries. For example, data on men's perpetration from the Asia-Pacific region shows a dramatic range between 26% (Indonesia rural site) and 80% (Bougainville, PNG) of ever-partnered men aged 18-49 reported perpetrating physical and/or sexual violence against an intimate partner in their lifetime (2).	Sexual violence is a global problem - the global estimate for the proportion of women who have experienced non-partner sexual violence is 7.2% - but levels of violence vary significantly across and within countries (3). The WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence found that reported levels of sexual violence by non-partners from the age of 15 years varied from under 1% in Ethiopia and Bangladesh (where a majority of women are married by age 15 years) to 10-12% in Peru, Samoa and urban Tanzania (4).	In high-income countries (HICs), the annual prevalence of physical abuse ranges from 4% to 16%. A recent meta-analysis estimates that 18% of women and 7.6% of men worldwide have experienced sexual abuse in childhood (3). In most settings girls typically report rates 2 to 3 times higher than boys in HICs (4), but in some settings boys report of sexual abuse are higher than girls(2).
Perpetrators	In low and middle-income countries (LMICs), the majority of partner violence is perpetrated by men against women. In higher income countries, a greater proportion of violence appears to be mutual, although the health and social consequences of men's violence remain more severe for women.	The majority of sexual offences are committed by men known to the victim, with approximately half being serial offenders. Perpetration of non-partner sexual violence usually starts in adolescence. Data suggests that between 50-75% of rapists do so for the first time as teenagers (2, 5).	The majority of child abuse takes place in the home and in schools, perpetrated primarily by someone known to the victim. Physical abuse and maltreatment is perpetrated most commonly by parents or caregivers.
Overlap with other forms of violence	Universally, types of violence (sexual, physical, emotional, economic) overlap in relationships, although the patterning of violence varies among countries. In most countries sexual violence usually occurs with physical violence, however in a number of countries in South East Asia sexual violence occurs on its own (2, 4).	There is a strong overlap between the perpetration of non-partner sexual violence and intimate partner sexual violence. There is also a strong overlap between men's perpetration of rape against women and against other men (2).	Types of violence against children and adversity in families frequently overlap. This means that researchers must understand family environments that put children at risk rather than studying one type of violence at a time.
Causes and risk factors	No single factor causes partner violence, nor is there a single pathway to perpetration. Rather, violence emerges from the interplay of multiple interacting factors at different levels of the social 'ecology'. Some factors appear consistently potent in their power to elevate risk of partner violence in LMICs. These include: exposure to violence in childhood; presence of community norms that support wife abuse; binge drinking; and harmful notions of masculinity and rigid gender roles. Some factors, such as education and women's employment, appear to have a complex relationship to partner violence that varies by level achieved, social context, and other country-level factors. The factors that determine the prevalence of partner violence at a population-level may be different than those that drive risk at an individual-level.	The perpetration of non-partner sexual violence is motivated primarily by sexual entitlement (2). Some factors appear consistently potent in their power to increase risk of non-partner sexual violence in LMICs - adverse childhood experiences, personality disorders, peer influences, delinquency, inequitable ideals of masculinity that emphasise heterosexual performance, and control of women.	Different types of violence against children have different constellations of risk and protective factors. However, common risks factors include poverty, approval of corporal punishment, mental health problems, low educational achievement, alcohol and drug misuse, having been maltreated oneself as a child, and violence between other family members.

Gaps and limitations in the body of evidence

The field of violence against women and girls has advanced considerably over the past two decades. We have much more information on the prevalence of violence in low and middle income countries as well as an expanding body of knowledge on risk and protective factors. The evidence outlined above positions us well to develop and implement strong primary prevention interventions with a rigorous theory of change. However, there are still key gaps that need to be addressed in order to move towards more sophisticated models of intervention.

Table 2: What are the knowledge gaps regarding VAWG?

There is a gap in data on sexual violence as compared to physical violence against women	Child sexual abuse, especially against boys and perpetrated by women	There is a gap in men's perpetration of VAWG as compared to women's victimization	There is a large geographical gap in the literature on VAWG in the Middle East and Central Asia
There is limited data on VAWG in fragile states	We need more information on what helps buffer and protect individuals from risk. For example, what promotes resilience among children who have experienced abuse?	The current evidence base is highly skewed toward individual level predictors of abuse. More evidence is needed on relationship and community-level risk and protective factors	Macro-level factors influence the geographic distribution of different types of violence and how global, economic and political processes feed into and affect the dynamic of VAWG
There is a substantial data base on risk factors for VAWG, but if it's unclear which are merely 'markers' for other variables and which are causally related to the outcome	Interaction between factors across and within levels of the ecological model. e.g. protective effect of education is dampened when violence is highly acceptable in the community	Little is known about whether risk factors vary by age group	It is well established that adverse childhood experiences increase the risk of VAWG, however, we need to better understand how the experience of child abuse relates to other adverse childhood environments
The timing of risk factors and what is cause and effect	We must explore the extent of overlap between pathways to perpetration for different types of violence	More evidence is needed on the impact of mental health/PTSD/antisocial behaviour on the perpetration of and experiences of violence	There has been limited research into the role that environment X gene interactions (epigenetics) play in the aetiology of different types of abuse

¹ Devries, K. M., et al. 2013. The global prevalence of intimate partner violence against women. *Science* 340(6140): 1527-1528.

² Fulu, E., et al. 2013. Prevalence and risk factors for male perpetration of intimate partner violence: findings from the UN Multi-country Cross-sectional Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific. *Lancet Global Health*.

³ Abrahams, N., et al. 2014. Worldwide prevalence of non-partner sexual violence: a systematic review. *Lancet*.

⁴ Garcia-Moreno, C., et al. 2005. WHO Multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women: Initial results on prevalence, health outcomes and women's responses. Geneva, WHO.

⁵ Gilbert, R., Widom, C.S., et al. 2009. Burden and consequences of child maltreatment in high-income countries. *Lancet*, 373(9657): 68-81.

⁶ Stoltenborgh, M., et al. 2011. A global perspective on child sexual abuse: Meta-analysis of prevalence around the world. *Child Maltreatment* 16(2): 79-101.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the findings of this review, it is proposed that the research agenda prioritises the following areas:

- **Broaden the base of knowledge:** There is a need for research on VAWG, particularly sexual violence, and men's perpetration, from a much wider range of countries particularly low and middle income countries, the Middle East and Central Asia
- **Deepen our understanding of causality, pathways and interplay between risk factors:** There is a need for longitudinal research to understand the timing of all risk factors and what is cause and effect. Structural equation modelling of existing data could be used to better understand the pathways between various risk factors and violence outcomes. In particular research is needed on the interaction of different risk factors across and within levels and mediating impact of factors on each other.
- **Research men's perpetration:** We need to better understand if there are differences in men who perpetrate different types of violence. We need to look at different pathways to perpetration and also explore whether there are different pathways/sets of risk factors for different age groups.
- **Deepen understanding of patterns of susceptibility:** Research is needed to understand why some men/women who have particular risk factors become perpetrators/victims and others do not.
- **Investigate macro-level factors that drive abuse and how global, economic and political processes affect the dynamics of VAWG:** We need to know more about what is driving violence against women and girls at a population level and how that interacts with individual level risk. This could include ecological and multi-level studies as well as long-term qualitative and ethnographic research.
- **Further explore the role of epigenetics:** We need to know more about the biological drivers of different types of VAWG and their interaction with the environment/epigenetics.
- **Pursue multi-disciplinary research:** New generations of research are needed that combine perspectives from multiple disciplines, including developmental psychology, gender studies, epidemiology, economics, psychopathology, genetics and neuro-imaging.