



Original article

Linkages Between Gender Equity and Intimate Partner Violence Among Urban Brazilian Youth

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Gender inequity is a risk factor for intimate partner violence (IPV), although there is little research on this relationship that focuses on youth or males. Using survey data collected from 240 male and 198 female youth aged 15–24 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, we explore the association between individual-level support for gender equity and IPV experiences in the past 6 months and describe responses to and motivations for IPV.

Methods: Factor analysis was used to construct gender equity scales for males and females. Logistic and multinomial logistic regression models were used to examine the relationship between gender equity and IPV.

Results: About half of female youth reported some form of recent IPV, including any victimization (32%), any perpetration (40%), and both victimization and perpetration (22%). A total of 18% of male youth reported recently perpetrating IPV. In logistic regression models, support for gender equity had a protective effect against any female IPV victimization and any male IPV perpetration and was not associated with female IPV perpetration. Female victims reported leaving the abusive partner, but later returning to him as the most frequent response to IPV. Male perpetrators said the most common response of their victims was to retaliate with violence. Jealousy was the most frequently reported motivation of females perpetrating IPV.

Conclusion: Gender equity is an important predictor of IPV among youth. Examining the gendered context of IPV will be useful in the development of targeted interventions to promote gender equity and healthy relationships and to help reduce IPV among youth.

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Few studies from low-income countries investigate intimate partner violence (IPV), defined as psychological, physical, or sexual abuse occurring between two individuals in a close relationship, among youth aged 15–24 [1–3]. Understanding the causes of IPV among youth is particularly important because early experiences with violence in relationships may increase the likelihood of future IPV and sexual risk behavior [4–6].

Growing evidence indicates that gender inequity is a risk factor for IPV [7–10]. Support for norms reflecting gender inequity, such as acceptability of men having multiple sexual partners and male dominance in sexual decision-making, may put young women at risk of adverse health outcomes [11–13]. Promoting gender equity may be a fruitful avenue for combating IPV, as interventions that address the context of youth's lives may be more effective in promoting risk reduction [14–16]. Indeed, several interventions for men focused on gender equity have been successful at reducing levels of IPV perpetration [17–19].

IPV has been conceptualized traditionally as a gendered issue, with women as victims and men as perpetrators. In addition to fatal and nonfatal injuries, women who experience IPV are at higher risk of adverse reproductive health outcomes, poor mental health, and a greater number of lifetime sexual partners [4,20–24]. Notably, both men and women report IPV perpetration

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tion and victimization [8,25–27]. In numerous population-based studies, primarily from high-income countries but also from Latin America, South Africa, and the Philippines, higher proportions of females report perpetrating IPV against their partners as compared with males, though studies rarely report the frequency, severity, or context of violence [3,25,27–31]. Nevertheless, it is clear that when studying IPV among youth, males and females should be examined as both victims and perpetrators to better understand the context in which violence occurs.

Most research examining gender equity and IPV has focused on married women, neglecting young women, who may be at a greater risk of disempowerment within relationships, as well as young men, who often reinforce gender inequity because of social and cultural norms but may be responsive to more equitable ideas about gender [9,32–34]. Moreover, little research has been conducted on the relationship between gender equity and female perpetration of IPV. Although male IPV perpetration is often theorized to occur because of power imbalances in relationships caused by inequitable gender norms, female IPV perpetration and male IPV victimization may be related to gender inequity as well. Inequitable gender norms may support infidelity and poor communication in relationships [35]. Coupled with other contextual factors, such as community-level violence, gender inequity may provide some explanation for why IPV occurs, regardless of the sex of the perpetrator or victim.

Methods

This analysis uses a population-based survey of male and female youth aged 15–24 from an urban slum in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The data were collected by the Brazilian nongovernmental organization Promundo in 2006 as baseline data for an evaluation of a youth peer education program focused on gender equity. The survey used a sampling frame based on the 2000 Brazilian Census, with random sampling and proportional allocation size for each census tract. Youth were interviewed in their households by trained interviewers of the same sex. Because interviewers followed up with individuals who were initially unable to participate, there was no nonresponse in the study (M. Segundo, personal communication, March 8, 2010). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, as well as consent from a parent or guardian for respondents younger than 18 years. A total of 254 female and 247 male youth aged 15–24 were surveyed. The analytical sample included 240 male youth and 198 female youth who were asked questions about IPV in a relationship in the past six months and were not missing data on key demographic variables. A total of 50 female and two male youth who did not report any relationships in the past six months were excluded from the analysis. The 50 excluded female youth were not significantly different from the analysis sample in terms of educational attainment, employment status, race, and religion, but were younger and had a lower level of sexual experience (results not shown, $p < .01$).

Measurement and instrumentation

Outcome variable. The outcome of interest was experience of IPV in the past six months. Three outcome variables were examined for females: any IPV victimization, any IPV perpetration, and a summary IPV variable with four mutually exclusive categories (reported no IPV, only victimization, only perpetration, or both victimization and perpetration). Only one outcome (any IPV per-

Table 1
Violence items

Category of IPV	Type of abusive behavior
Psychological	Humiliating Threatening Controlling whether partner leaves house ^a
Physical	Pushing Punching Pulling of hair Throwing things Trying to strangle Trying to burn Slapping Kicking Threatening with firearm ^a
Sexual	Physically forcing sex Forcing sex in a humiliating way

^a Not asked to females in IPV perpetration questions.

petration) was examined for males, as comparable data on victimization were not collected. For the IPV victimization variable, females were asked, “In the last six months, did one of your partners commit one of these acts against you?” For the IPV perpetration variable, both male and female youth were asked if they committed each of the types of IPV against one of their partners. The abusive behaviors are listed in Table 1. After each item asked in the context of male IPV perpetration and female IPV victimization, respondents were asked what happened after the last time each type of violence occurred. In addition, after females were asked if they perpetrated each type of violence, they were asked for their motivation the last time it occurred. Both responses to and motivations for violence were close-ended survey items in which respondents could choose from a list of option or provide another response. Female perpetrators were not asked the response of their victims to the abusive behaviors.

Key independent variable. The key independent variable was a continuous variable reflecting support for equitable gender norms. Both males and females were made to read more than 50 statements about various dimensions of gender norms, including household roles, child care, sexuality, reproductive health, pregnancy, violence against women, homosexuality, and relationships with other men [36]. For each item, respondents were asked whether they completely agreed, partially agreed, or did not agree at all. Questions that assessed support for inequitable norms were reverse coded so that higher values for all items reflected greater support for gender equity. For each item, “don’t know” responses were replaced with the mean value of the item.

Factor analyses were performed separately for the entire sample of males and females to create gender-specific gender equity indices. For males, the 24 items comprising the Gender Equitable Men (GEM) scale were used. The GEM scale was developed to measure men’s support for norms around gender equity and was previously validated in Rio de Janeiro [36]. For the males in this study, the GEM scale had an unstandardized Cronbach’s alpha value of .82. For the female gender equity index, 50 survey items related to gender norms were initially examined. Items with factor loadings less than .35 were eliminated, leaving 16 items. The resulting female gender equity index had an unstandardized Cronbach’s alpha value of .81. Seven items were present in both the female and male gender equity indices. For both males and females, individual scores on the respective indices

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