



## Research article

# Children who are exposed to intimate partner violence: Interviewing mothers to understand its impact on children<sup>☆</sup>

Ainhoa Izaguirre, Esther Calvete<sup>\*</sup>

University of Deusto, Spain

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## ABSTRACT

Children's victimization related to intimate partner violence (IPV) has damaging effects on their well-being and development. The purpose of this research was to assess the impact of IPV on children's emotional and behavioral problems through their mothers' narratives. A total of 30 Spanish mothers (mean age = 41.57 years,  $SD=8.54$  years) were individually interviewed. The results showed that many of the children directly suffered from aggression, and most of them witnessed IPV. As a result of their exposure to violence, children often develop psychological, social, and school problems. Their learning of aggressive behaviors is especially remarkable, and these behaviors are sometimes directed towards their mothers. Thus, women can suffer a twofold victimization: by their partner and by their children. These additional problems contribute to hindering the recovery process of victims. Fortunately, not all children develop problems as a result of exposure to IPV; some of them are capable of mature responses.

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## Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is defined as threatened, attempted, or completed physical, sexual, or emotional abuse between partners (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2002). Surveys from around the world indicate that approximately 10–69% of women are physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some point during their lives (World Health Organization, 2005). However, in IPV situations, women are not the only victims; their children can also become victims. The general aim of this research was to assess the impact of IPV on children's emotional and behavioral problems through their mothers' narratives.

It is estimated that, worldwide, between 133 and 275 million children are exposed to this type of violence each year (General Secretariat of the United Nations, 2006). Specifically, children may be the object of a twofold victimization: direct victimization, when they receive blows and humiliation, and indirect victimization, when they witness violence against their mothers (Calvete & Orue, 2011; Edleson, 1999).

Direct victimization of children can adopt many modalities, such as physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse (Arata, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Bowers, & O'Brien, 2007). Diverse studies show that the children of female victims of IPV are also frequently victims of psychological, physical, and sexual aggression (Haight, Shim, Linn, & Swinford, 2007; Matud, 2007; Mbilinyi, Edleson, Hagemester, & Beeman, 2007). In general, these studies suggest that between 20% and 70% of children may be direct victims of aggression by perpetrators (Lundy & Grossman, 2005; McGuigan & Pratt, 2001).

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<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author.

The second form of victimization, indirect victimization, relates to children witnessing violence against their mothers. Research has shown that children are eyewitnesses of approximately 85–90% of IPV that occurs in the home (Fusco & Fantuzzo, 2009; Graham-Bermann, Gruber, Howell, & Girz, 2009). Indirect victimization can occur in numerous ways. For example, the children may overhear episodes of IPV (Øverlien & Hydén, 2009), they may be used as part of the violent incidents, they may experience the aftermath of violence, and a few of them intervene to protect the abused parent, often at the risk of being abused themselves (DeBoard-Lucas & Grych, 2011). According to the statistics, children's indirect victimization reaches dramatic numbers (McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & Green, 2006).

Witnessing IPV often occurs at early ages (Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2011), and early victimization places children at risk for developing behavioral and emotional problems (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008; Levendosky, Bogat, & Martinez-Torteya, 2013; Øverlien, 2010). Younger children may experience somatization problems and sleep disorders, such as nightmares, bedwetting, and difficulties with falling asleep (Stanley, Miller, & Richardson, 2012). Furthermore, many studies have shown that victimized children and adolescents are at risk of developing disorders such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (Chemtob & Carlson, 2004; Kearny, 2010).

Among the problems caused by being a victim of IPV, the learning of aggressive behavior is gaining a wide recognition as, in some cases, as it implies a twofold victimization of the mothers. For example, mothers who were victims of IPV reported the presence of angry feelings and aggressive behavior against peers and mothers as a consequence of children witnessing IPV (Stanley et al., 2012). With regard to aggression against mothers, recent studies with adolescents have suggested that exposure to violence at home and witnessing IPV, in particular, act as risk factors for the development of child-to-parent violence (Calvete et al., 2014; Calvete, Orue, & Gámez-Guadix, 2013; Calvete, Orue, Gámez-Guadix, & Bushman, *in press*; Ireland & Smith, 2009). However, until now, no study has examined the association between witnessing IPV and aggression towards mothers by children, based on the perceptions of mothers who have experienced IPV. This approach would contribute to understanding the link between exposure to family violence and the development of aggressive behavior against mothers.

Furthermore, not all children who witness IPV experience negative consequences (Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003). Kitzmann et al. (2003) found that over one-third of children who witnessed IPV did not experience any consequences. The results obtained in the study by Herrentohl, Herrentohl, and Egolf (1994) indicated that between 50% and 60% of child victims do not present short-term sequelae of violence, and they also do not reproduce their parents' violent behavior. In fact, a few children show resilient reactions. For example, Stanley et al. (2012) found that IPV forced children to adopt adult roles and responsibilities to survive.

### *The Present Study*

The above review shows that IPV can have important consequences for children. Nevertheless, most previous studies were based on quantitative methodologies, whereas research that is based on qualitative methodology using the mothers' narrations is relatively scarce (for exceptions, see Chemtob & Carlson, 2004; Haight et al., 2007; Mbilinyi et al., 2007; McDonald, Jouriles, Rosenfield, & Leahy, 2012; Stanley et al., 2012). Qualitative research produces context-based knowledge of IPV and can shed light on the variety of understandings of this phenomenon. In addition, a context-based understanding of IPV creates the possibility of understanding IPV as a societal problem (Øverlien, 2010).

Moreover, the majority of previous studies have examined the impact of IPV on emotional and behavioral problems in children; however, no studies have examined the link between witnessing IPV and the development of child-to-mother aggression in samples of victims of IPV. Finally, a large part of the available studies are based on samples that were obtained in North-American countries. In Spain, studies on the impact of IPV in children have only recently been reported (e.g., Bayarri, Ezpeleta, & Granero, 2011; Fernández, Ezpeleta, Granero, de la Osa, & Doménech, 2011; Matud, 2007; Olaya, Ezpeleta, de la Osa, Granero, & Doménech, 2010; Polo, Olivares, López, Rodríguez, & Fernández, 2003; de la Vega, de la Osa, Ezpeleta & Granero, 2011; de la Vega, de la Osa, Ezpeleta & Granero, 2013). To the authors' knowledge, the present study is the first in Spain based on a qualitative methodology that attempts to understand the mothers' perceptions of their children's reactions. National awareness campaigns against IPV in Spain have focused on women as main and only victims of violence. But recently, campaigns have started highlighting the impact of such violence on children. It is of vital importance to understand the direct and indirect victimization that children may experience and also the consequences of such victimization in order to design efficient interventions. Namely, the primary aims of our analyses were as follows: (1) to assess the perspective of the female victims of IPV regarding the direct and indirect victimization of their children; (2) to determine the children's reactions to violent episodes; (3) to determine whether or not IPV produces psychological, social and academic consequences in children; (4) to examine the link between witnessing IPV and child-to-mother aggression; and (5) to understand the actions that are undertaken by mothers towards their children in the face of violent episodes.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

The participants for this study were 30 women who were recruited from 6 different agencies for victims of violence, such as shelters, social services, charities, and support groups for women who had experienced IPV in Bilbao and San Sebastian

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