Original Research

Male and female physical intimate partner violence and socio-economic position: a cross-sectional international multicentre study in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This work explores the association between socio-economic position (SEP) and intimate partner violence (IPV) considering the perspectives of men and women as victims, perpetrators and as both (bidirectional).

Study design: Cross-sectional international multicentre study.

Methods: A sample of 3496 men and women, (aged 18–64 years), randomly selected from the general population of residents from six European cities was assessed: Athens; Budapest; London; Östersund; Porto; and Stuttgart. Their education (primary, secondary and university), occupation (upper white collar, lower white collar and blue collar) and unemployment duration (never, ≤12 months and >12 months) were considered as SEP indicators and physical IPV was measured with the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales.

Results: Past year physical IPV was declared by 17.7% of women (3.5% victims, 4.2% perpetrators and 10.0% bidirectional) and 19.8% of men (4.1% victims, 3.8% perpetrators and 11.9% bidirectional). Low educational level (primary vs university) was associated with female victimisation (adjusted odds ratio, 95% confidence interval: 3.2; 1.3–8.0) and with female bidirectional IPV (4.1, 2.4–7.1). Blue collar occupation (vs upper white) was associated with female victimisation (2.1, 1.1–4.0), female perpetration (3.0, 1.3–6.8) and female bidirectional IPV (4.0, 2.3–7.0). Unemployment duration was associated with male

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perpetration (>12 months of unemployment vs never unemployed: 3.8; 1.7–8.7) and with bidirectional IPV in both sex (women: 1.8, 1.2–2.7; men: 1.7, 1.0–2.8).

Conclusions: In these European centres, physical IPV was associated with a disadvantaged SEP. A consistent socio-economic gradient was observed in female bidirectional involvement, but victims or perpetrators-only presented gender specificities according to levels of education, occupation differentiation and unemployment duration potentially useful for designing interventions.

Introduction

Exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) is greater in more unequal societies.[1] Similarly, from an individual perspective, the more disadvantaged is the socio-economic position (SEP) the more frequently women and men are victims of violence.[2] However, the nature and magnitude of the association between social determinants and violence depends on the type of indicator used.[3,4] Also, it is particularly important to know if similar determinants and pathways operate when considering separately the involved gender and the directionality of violence, taking victims, perpetrators and those that are both victims and perpetrators as different outcomes.

The relation between socio-economic indicators and IPV has been essentially studied considering female victims.[5–8] The World Studies of Abuse in the Family Environment consortium addressed communities from Chile, Egypt, India and the Philippines and showed that a higher educational level protected women from physical assault.[9] In the World Health Organization multicountry study on women's health and domestic violence a protective effect was consistently observed across settings when both the woman and her partner had completed secondary education.[10] A Spanish telephone survey of 2136 women living in the Madrid region showed that unemployment increased physical violence victimisation.[5] Furthermore, secondary analysis of the 2008 British Crime Survey data demonstrated that individual and area social deprivation were associated with being a victim of any IPV among women but not generally among men.[8] Similarly, a systematic review addressing the relationship between violent male partner behaviour and low SEP concluded that more information and better quality data are required to establish conclusive results on the causal role of the socio-economic status of men who batter their intimate partners.[6]

Although bidirectional violence, which means to be both a victim and a perpetrator, is recognised as a common situation in IPV,[11,12] no study has addressed the role of socio-economic indicators in its occurrence. Bidirectional IPV (having been both a victim and perpetrator of at least one act of violence), compared to unidirectional IPV (having been only a victim or only a perpetrator), has been linked with worse health outcomes,[13,14] but rarely measured in samples of adult men and women from the general population. To identify groups that are particularly vulnerable (as those socioeconomically disadvantaged) is of extreme importance for the design of public health interventions.

Thus, the DOVE project (doveproject.eu), a study on IPV in the general population of diverse European cities, provided the opportunity to measure the association between SEP and past year prevalence of physical assault taking into consideration gender and the perspectives of victims, perpetrators and of those involved in violence as both.

Methods

Study population

The analysis presented in this article is based on data obtained as part of the DOVE project.[15–17] In brief, DOVE consisted of a cross-sectional multicenter study designed to measure the prevalence, determinants and consequences of IPV using samples of working age adult men and women, 18–64 years, drawn from the general population. For an expected IPV prevalence of 15% and 3.0% of relative precision, the sample size was calculated as 544 (272 women) per centre, and proportionally stratified to follow the age and sex distribution of the resident population (2008 national data). For the purpose of the present investigation, we evaluated participants from Athens–Greece, Budapest–Hungary, Porto–Portugal, Östersund–Sweden, Stuttgart–Germany and London–United Kingdom. Registry-based sampling was used in Stuttgart (city municipality registries, total number of records $n = 3077$), Östersund (state person address registry, number of records $n = 1996$), Porto and London (electoral registry, number of records $n = 1990$ in Porto and $n = 4720$ in London) and random-route was performed in Athens and Budapest. In Greece, random route sampling was based on stratification of four major regions of the Greater Municipality Area of Athens according to geographical proximity of municipalities and similar socio-economic structure. At each selected sampling point (building block), households were selected via k-step sampling. At each household, the member who had last his/her birthday was selected. In Hungary, streets were selected from localities in Budapest. A starting address was randomly selected and, taking alternate left- and right-hand turns at road junctions, every nth address was selected. An adapted Leslie Kish Key was used for participant selection at each household. As complementary sampling strategies, random-digit dialling was used in Porto (number of calls $n = 10623$) and via a public approach in London (potential participants were approached in public settings and invited to