Linkages between Gender Equity and Intimate Partner Violence among Urban Brazilian Youth

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Abstract

**Purpose:** Gender inequity is a risk factor for intimate partner violence (IPV), though little research on this relationship focuses on youth or males. Using survey data collected from 240 male and 198 female youth (ages 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 utilized 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%). 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.

**Conclusions:** 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.

**Keywords:** Intimate partner violence; gender; youth; Brazil; urban
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Few studies from low-income countries investigate youth (ages 15-24) intimate partner violence (IPV), defined as psychological, physical or sexual abuse that occurs between two people in a close relationship[1-3]. Understanding the causes of IPV among youth is particularly important, as 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; 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 non-fatal 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 and victimization [8, 25-27]. In numerous population-based studies, primarily from high-income countries but also Latin America, South Africa and the Philippines, higher proportions of females report perpetrating IPV against their partners than 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.

The majority of research examining gender equity and IPV has focused on married
women, neglecting young women, who may be at greater risk of disempowerment within
relationships, as well as young men, who often reinforce gender inequity due to social and
cultural norms but may be responsive to more equitable ideas about gender [9, 32-34]. Moreover,
little research has considered the relationship between gender equity and female perpetration of
IPV. While male IPV perpetration is often theorized to occur due to 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 and victim.

Methods

This analysis utilizes a population-based survey of male and female youth (ages 15-24)
from an urban slum in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The data were collected by the Brazilian non-
governmental organization Promundo in 2006 as baseline data for an evaluation of a youth peer
education program focused on gender equity. The survey utilized 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 participants who were initially unable to participate in the
study, there was no non-response in the study (M. Segundo, personal communication, March 8,
Detailed information regarding consent, sample, and methodology is provided, followed by the measurement and instrumentation section. This section outlines the outcome variable of interest, which is experience of IPV in the previous 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 reported). Only one outcome (any IPV perpetration) 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 where 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 read more than 50 statements about various dimensions of gender norms, including household roles, childcare, 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 full sample of males and females to create gender-specific gender equity indices. For males, the 24 items comprising the Gender Equitable Men’s (GEM) scale were utilized. 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 0.82. For the female gender equity index, 50 survey items related to gender norms were initially examined. Items with factor loadings less than 0.35 were eliminated, leaving 16 items. The resulting female gender equity index had an unstandardized Cronbach’s alpha value of 0.81.
Seven items were present in both the female and male gender equity indices. For both males and females, individual scores on the respective indices were entered into regression models, with increasing values indicating greater support for norms reflecting gender equity.

**Covariates**

Inclusion of sociodemographic characteristics in multivariate regression models was informed by the ecological framework for understanding violence against women, which incorporates individual, situational and sociocultural factors [15]. Personal history factors included current age, race and whether the participant was sexually experienced (having ever had vaginal or anal sex). Microsystem factors, which address the immediate context of violence, included religion, educational attainment, relationship status, weekly alcohol use over the last six months and employment status. (See Table 2 for details of coding of variables). Since all respondents lived in the same community, we were unable to consider factors at the level of exosystem (the social structures that influence individual behaviors) or macrosystem (the broad cultural ideals that influence the other levels of factors, such as gender roles, male dominance and patriarchy).

**Analytic approach**

Analyses were conducted using Stata (version 9.2). One-way ANOVA tests were used to examine differences in mean gender equity scores by sociodemographic characteristics and IPV experiences. Logistic regression models were utilized to examine the relationship between the gender equity score and the likelihood of any IPV. For the four-category summary outcome for females, multinomial logistic regression models were employed to investigate the association
between gender equity and IPV. This secondary data analysis was reviewed by the Public-Health Nursing Institutional Review Board and considered to be exempt from review.

Results

Descriptive characteristics

The mean age of male youth was 19.2 years (Table 2). About half reported having more than primary education and were unemployed. Fifty-eight percent of males did not have a steady partner at the time of the survey, and 81% were sexually experienced. For females, the mean age was 18.9 years. Forty-six percent had more than primary education. Most female youth were unemployed (65%), had a steady partner (79%) and were sexually experienced (83%).

IPV experiences

Eighteen percent of males perpetrated IPV against a partner in the past six months (Table 2). By type, physical violence was reported at the most frequently (15%), followed by psychological (13%) and sexual (1%) violence. Among female youth, 32% reported IPV victimization, while 40% perpetrated IPV in the past six months. Twenty-two percent reported both IPV victimization and perpetration, while half of female youth did not report either form of IPV. For females, physical (22%) and psychological (19%) IPV victimization were more common than sexual IPV (1%). As perpetrators of IPV, females reported physical violence most frequently (31%), followed by psychological (17%) and sexual (4%) IPV. For each type of violence, except hair pulling, higher proportions of females reported perpetration than males (results not shown). When considering the types of violent acts asked to both genders, male
perpetrators reported a mean of 3.3 types of violence, higher than female perpetrators (2.4 types) and victims (2.1 types) (results not shown).

Support for gender equity

Means for the gender equity score were examined within each sex. For males, the mean gender equity score was 0.0 (range -3.1 to 1.5; results not shown), indicating that males who had positive scores had higher than average support for gender equity and those with negative scores had less than average support. Mean gender equity scores were compared by sociodemographic characteristics. Notably, males with more than primary education had higher gender equity scores compared to less educated males (p≤0.001, results not shown). Similarly, males who were sexually experienced (p≤0.001), were employed (p≤0.05) and did not consume alcohol on a weekly basis over the last six months (p≤0.01) had significantly higher gender equity scores than their respective male counterparts (results not shown). For females, the mean gender equity score was 0.2 (range -2.7 – 0.9; results not shown). A difference in means was found only for educational attainment, where females with more than primary education had higher gender equity scores than those with primary education or less (p ≤0.01; results not shown).

Gender equity and IPV

The mean gender equity score was examined by IPV experience. Female victims (p≤0.001) and male perpetrators (p≤0.001) had significantly lower scores for gender equity than their respective counterparts; there was no statistical difference in means for female perpetrators (results not shown). Controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, sexual experience and alcohol use, the relationship between the gender equity score and IPV was examined in logistic
regression models. Table 3 shows that for male IPV perpetration and female IPV victimization, the gender equity score was negatively and significantly associated with IPV, indicating that as an individual’s support for gender equity increases, she or he was less likely to be a victim or perpetrator of IPV, respectively. Gender equity was not associated with any female IPV perpetration. Considering personal history factors, only sexual experience was associated with an outcome; females who were not sexually experienced were less likely to report IPV victimization (AOR 0.2). Among microsystem factors, females who were Catholic were less likely to report any IPV perpetration (AOR 0.4), as well as any IPV victimization (AOR 0.4), compared to those who reported another religion or not being religious. Weekly alcohol use over the past 6 months was positively associated with IPV perpetration for males (AOR 3.4). Not currently being in a relationship was protective against IPV perpetration for both males (AOR 0.2) and females (AOR 0.4) at a statistically significant level. Women who were unemployed had a higher likelihood of perpetrating IPV (AOR 3.0).

In the multinomial logistic regression model for female IPV experiences (Table 4), support for gender equity was negatively associated with two outcomes (only victimization, and both victimization and perpetration) as compared to no IPV reported. In particular, women who had higher gender equity scores were less likely to report only victimization compared to no IPV (RRR 0.3); similarly they were less likely to report both victimization and perpetration compared to no IPV (RRR 0.4). In this model, there was not a statistically significant relationship between gender equity and only reporting IPV perpetration compared to no IPV. Among the microsystem factors, being Catholic was protective against IPV victimization (RRR 0.3). Additionally, weekly alcohol use was positively associated with female IPV perpetration (RRR 2.5). Being
unemployed was associated with increased risk for IPV perpetration (RRR 2.8) and both IPV victimization and perpetration (RRR 2.6).

*Responses to and motivations for intimate partner violence*

When female youth who reported IPV victimization were asked what happened after the last time they experienced each type of abuse, they reported a variety of responses (Table 5). The most frequent response was using violence against their partners (32%). A quarter of female IPV victims said they left their partner but eventually went back to them, while 10% left their partners and ended the relationship. Male IPV perpetrators reported that 41% of their partners left them but came back after the last occurrence of each abusive act, while only 5% of their partners terminated the relationship. Seventeen percent of perpetrators said their victims retaliated with violence.

Female perpetrators of IPV indicated that jealousy (60%) was the main impetus for the violence the last time they perpetrated each violent act (Table 5). Twenty two percent of female IPV perpetrators reported retaliation for their partner’s aggression as their motivation.

**Discussion**

This analysis underscores the importance of examining gender equity in relation to IPV for female and male youth. This is one of the first studies using data from a Latin American country to examine female IPV perpetration, as well as both IPV perpetration and victimization for females, and to consider these issues among a representative sample of female and male youth in an urban, low-income setting. The few previous studies that have examined gender equity and female IPV victimization have similarly found that greater support for gender equity
is associated with reduced risk for IPV [9, 30, 32]. Furthermore, we provide contextual information about IPV, including responses to and motivations for violence, measures that are not frequently reported in quantitative studies and have important programmatic implications.

This study faces a number of limitations, including a small sample size, which may have limited our ability to detect statistically significant differences in multivariate models; cross-sectional, retrospective data; and a lack of data on male IPV victimization and several important contextual factors, including child abuse, witnessing parental violence and community context. While the GEM scale used for males is comprehensive and validated [36], the items included in the female measure, though statistically reliable and reflective of a number of important domains, were fewer and based on the development of the GEM scale for males. The female measure includes items that were not part of the male GEM scale and that are possibly more relevant to females’ experiences; for example, items included in the female measure and not the male measure reflect whether female respondents think a woman can do anything to help a friend in a violent relationship or whether respondents could ever be friends with a lesbian. Reverse causality may also be an important issue, as being a victim of IPV may influence a woman’s gender norms.

Additionally, females who perpetrated IPV were asked to describe one motivation for IPV for each type of abuse, potentially oversimplifying the context of abuse, and were not asked their victim’s response to the IPV; similarly, male perpetrators were not asked their motivation for IPV. The data also lacked a measure of household wealth or income. Finally, while this study provides more information on context than is usually presented in similar research, it would have been useful to have measures on injuries caused by IPV; community, parental and peer
influences; partner characteristics; and relationship factors, such as communication, quality and satisfaction, to aid in the understanding of the relationship between gender equity and IPV.

In this study, the reported levels of female IPV victimization and perpetration were higher than male IPV perpetration, though the mean number of types of abusive acts was highest for male IPV perpetrators. This finding is consistent with the few other studies that have examined both IPV victimization and perpetration by women in low-income countries [3, 25, 27-31] and may partially be due to overall underreporting of male IPV perpetration. Males may be more likely to underreport violence perpetration in surveys due to the unacceptability of the behavior and victimization due to embarrassment or not conceptualizing acts as violent. Moreover, not all acts of abuse are equal, though questionnaire items may weigh them as such. For example, researchers argue that commonly used items from the Conflicts and Tactic Scale, such as throwing objects at or hitting or trying to hit a partner, may equate throwing a pillow with a lamp, and attempted hitting with actual hitting [37].

This study highlights the need to examine the context in which IPV occurs, including the perspectives of males and females as IPV victims and perpetrators and explorations of responses to and motivations for violence. Our broad, individual-level measure of gender equity was not related to female IPV perpetration; one possible reason is that community-level norms around infidelity may be a more important factor for this outcome. Notably, because only one factor is shared between male and female IPV perpetration (relationship status), it is possible that different mechanisms may underlie perpetration by gender. Further contextual information on gender and how it influences relationship norms, especially around infidelity, will be useful in the development of interventions focused on promoting gender equity. Moreover, gender inequity may underlie other relationships noted in this analysis, such as the positive relationship
between unemployment and female IPV perpetration. Females who are unemployed may be more socially isolated and thus less exposed to ideas about gender other than what prevails in their community; additionally, unemployment may indicate financial dependence on a partner, which has been shown to be associated with power imbalances in relationships [38].

The majority of female IPV perpetration was motivated by jealousy. Our own qualitative research with young couples in the same community in Rio de Janeiro reveals that a common cause of conflicts in relationships is female jealousy, often driven by suspicions or fears that their partner is being unfaithful [39]. Most couples described dealing with conflicts in their relationship in an antagonistic way, indicating that psychologically abusive behavior is normative in their relationships and physical violence is common in their community. Both the present analysis and our qualitative work indicate the need to promote healthy relationship behaviors for this population, particularly approaches that provide youth with the skills to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner.

Research examining female IPV victimization has generally been contextualized within the gender-based violence framework, which purports that power differentials precipitate relationship violence [40]. While this framework is relevant in this study, the examination of IPV perpetration and dual IPV experiences presents the need for an expanded framework for understanding this relationship. Given the results regarding women’s motivations for perpetration of IPV and our ongoing qualitative research, it is apparent that inequitable gender norms that endorse acceptable behavior in relationships are related to IPV. In particular, jealousy and infidelity as causes of IPV relate to the larger issue of unhealthy relationship norms, which can have myriad implications for health.
These findings suggest the need for better information about the circumstances of violent encounters to develop programs to prevent IPV. IPV prevention interventions for youth are crucially important and have the potential to improve the lives of men and women throughout the life course by setting into play positive relationship behaviors. Understanding the dynamics that precipitate IPV will aid in the development of interventions that consider relationship context. School-based programs incorporating skills-based approaches to conflict resolution may be one way to reach more youth early in their lives. Community-based behavioral interventions, such as Program H, Stepping Stones and the Men As Partners project, have already shown success in reducing male IPV perpetration by promoting gender equity and healthy relationship norms [17-19]. Scaling up these programs to reach youth in schools may be worthwhile in Brazil and globally. Future research in this area will inform interventions to address the complex interplay of factors that underlies gender inequity and increase young women and men’s risk of IPV in diverse global settings.

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