



Intimate partner violence in Pakistan: not just a women's issue

Rozina Karmaliani, Nargis Asad, Kausar S. Khan, Sohail Bawani, Tazeen Saeed Ali, Nicola Jones, Taveeshi Gupta, Anita Allana, Hussain Maqbool, Yasmeen Somani and David Walker

Intimate partner violence (IPV) in Pakistan affects more than one-third of the population, with heavy costs not only for women and adolescent girls, but also for the wider community.

The multi-level drivers of IPV require approaches that engage with men and boys, as well as survivors, complemented by efforts to tackle norms that justify such violence as 'acceptable'.

Action is needed to address fragmented and limited policies and practices on IPV and to strengthen responses that recognise diverse norms and behaviours related to IPV across Pakistan.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a public health and human rights issue in Pakistan, with the social and economic impacts felt by women and adolescent girl survivors, and by their wider communities. Recent Demographic and Health Survey data reveal that almost 40% of women aged 15-49 who have ever married have experienced IPV, and one third have experienced it in the past 12 months. As well as concerns about the scale of IPV, there are concerns about its increased severity.

'And now the killing is not just part of honour killing, it's part of the usual violence as well. Women can be killed because of very petty issues' (Key informant).

Our 2016 study, drawing on secondary analysis and primary qualitative research in three sites in and around Karachi, confirmed the severe consequences of IPV on its victims. While there is a wealth of evidence on its impact on women, less is known about what drives men and boys to perpetrate IPV and, therefore, the policy and programme responses most likely to succeed. Our study aims to help fill this knowledge gap by exploring the multi-level influences that shape male attitudes to, and perpetration of, IPV in Pakistan, generating evidence-based recommendations for national and local governments, donors, NGOs, civil society and academia.

Multi-level influences that shape IPV norms and behaviours

The study highlighted the complex, multi-level nature of the drivers of IPV-related norms and behaviours, using an ecological model to review risk factors at individual, family and community levels. Our primary research found that lack of education was a key individual risk factor. Respondents spoke of lack of 'intelligence (aqal), manners (tameez), and awareness (shaoor)' as root causes, while unemployment (and thus, poverty) was seen as a risk factor, given the 'stresses' that accompany 'economic problems at home.' Substance abuse emerged as a risk factor, with respondents noting its increase in the study

sites. Witnessing violence in the family or neighbourhood was also seen as a key factor, particularly if it normalised IPV.

At household level, risks centred on conflicts between spouses, often exacerbated by tensions with in-laws. Triggers identified by male respondents included: wives not taking care of the house, children or in-laws, wearing inappropriate clothes, not having food ready, talking back, going out without permission, being suspected of talking to other men, refusing sex and tensions over polygamy.

At community level, deep-rooted patriarchal norms and expectations about appropriate behaviour were seen as key drivers. Notions of femininity remain traditional, while notions of masculinity reflect a mix of traditional norms (e.g. men meeting the needs of the family) and modern constructions of manhood (e.g. opposing violence against women). Restricted mobility for women and early/forced marriages are stringent norms that put girls and women at risk of IPV. Our research also found that conservative disapproval of boyfriend/girlfriend relationships ensures that IPV in such relationships is well hidden.

Many male and female respondents justified IPV, seeing it as necessary to correct women – a view often reinforced by conservative interpretations of Islamic scriptures that legitimise male perpetration of IPV. Social media was also seen to put women at risk, with new technologies giving boys easy access to pornography, leading them to inflict IPV on their girlfriends, including unreasonable sexual demands.

Current responses to IPV in Pakistan

Our findings suggested that current legislation provides cursory remedies at best, and suffers from gaps in design and implementation. Legislative and policy frameworks pay inadequate attention to social norms that drive IPV, and fail to mainstream and coordinate actions to tackle IPV across sectors (e.g. education, health, justice, transport). There is also a lack of accountability for enforcement, compounded by staffing and capacity issues within relevant central government agencies.

Informal protection for women may include their natal family members and neighbours, although our findings suggested that reactions of natal families can be mixed. Justice system responses include informal arbitration at village level (jamat), but informal courts may not be a viable option for a woman, as she is often under pressure to remain with an abusive husband to protect his family's status and honour. Formal protection services, including police, courts, and helplines, are not widely accessed. Our findings suggested significant under-reporting of IPV to such services – the result of entrenched beliefs that IPV is a 'private' matter. The consensus was that such services are not accessed until women's lives are in danger. As well as strong norms and stigma, respondents cited women's limited awareness of services, their poor treatment at police stations and financial barriers as deterrents to seeking formal justice. Key informants stressed a lack of accountability and transparency within formal response systems, as well as rampant corruption. Efforts are underway to improve local police capacity through sensitivity trainings, but change is *'not fast enough to keep up with the demand.'*

Given limited government capacity, most prevention services provided by NGOs and academia aim to raise awareness by fostering dialogue at household and community levels. Our study identified promising approaches, including father, brother, mother, and youth advocacy groups, awareness-raising through mass media channels, support for female income generation initiatives, and raising the profile of women's issues in university curricula and on campuses. Beneficiaries of such programmes felt a *'significant impactful change'* in their attitudes towards violence against women.

One married man who had participated in a youth group reported that it *'has affected me immensely'*. He stops men who are speaking disrespectfully to women, explaining *'I am an active citizen here and this woman is like my sister.'*

Recommendations for policy and practice

Our main recommendation is that programmes be strengthened to better respond to the cultural patterning and multi-level influencers of IPV. At national level, a first step is to support a national coordinating agency or inter-agency working group to design an inter-sectoral, multi-level strategy for change. This should focus not

only on specific programming on IPV, but also on mainstreaming IPV through programming related to women's health, livelihoods/economic empowerment, food security, infrastructure and transport. It is also essential to mobilise communities, especially local and religious leaders, activists, schools, scholars and women's networks, to change the discourse around VAWG and to harness the power of the media. Specific recommendations include the following.

- **Promote culturally-resonant definitions of IPV** by building on standardised measurements for IPV and identifying culturally resonant indicators (e.g. dowry violence), agreed with academics, educationalists, and regional bodies. One challenge is to ensure that the definition captures the variations within Pakistan on IPV attitudes and behaviours.
- **Engage with men – especially younger adolescent boys – to better tailor programmes** by identifying entry-points where they are likely to be receptive to messaging, including religious institutions (e.g. mosques), schools, youth groups, cafes and sports centres.
- **Identify entry-points to reach young adolescents within their families**, given that social norms become more rigidly enforced and embedded during adolescence. This can be done by working with educational establishments (e.g. curricula development), youth clubs and progressive male role models, including celebrities or religious leaders. It is also vital to embed robust monitoring and evaluation to strengthen programmes, many of which are small scale and short-term.
- **Map and engage strategically with key institutions** by investing in information and the capacities of service providers to prevent, identify and respond to (IPV (including referral) across the justice, legal, protection, health and education sectors. Efforts at systems level should institutionalise gender-budget monitoring and enhance the transparency and accountability of service providers across sectors.
- **Advocate for legal reforms and implementation of legislation in line with international conventions against gender-based violence**, including legal reforms to criminalise IPV behaviours such as marital rape and dowry related violence, and stronger provisions for the prosecution and sentencing of perpetrators.