

## Is intimate partner violence declining in low-income and middle-income countries?



Global estimates of intimate partner violence suggest that 27% of ever-partnered women aged 15–49 years have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime, and 13% report intimate partner violence over the past year.<sup>1</sup> These experiences disproportionately affect women in low-income and middle-income countries compared with high-income countries, with past-year intimate partner violence prevalence at 32% in central Africa and 24% in eastern sub-Saharan Africa, at 19% in South Asia, and at 4–6% in Europe and North America.<sup>1</sup> However, Li and colleagues<sup>2</sup> new research emphasises that intimate partner violence reductions are occurring in low-income and middle-income countries and that women's empowerment efforts could be a means through which these reductions are being achieved.<sup>2</sup>

Using data from nationally representative Demographic and Health Surveys conducted across 53 low-income and middle-income countries and collected at multiple time points in each country over the period of 2000–21, Li and colleagues offer new insight into change in prevalence of intimate partner violence over time and, secondarily, whether women's empowerment indicators are associated with observed intimate partner violence prevalence.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, these analyses highlight a decline in both physical and sexual intimate partner violence over the past two decades overall, although with some heterogeneity across the countries of study. This is a deeply important finding for the researchers and advocates who fought to include these measures of intimate partner violence in national surveys such as the Demographic and Health Survey, as well as those policy stakeholders that utilised these data to advocate for intimate partner violence prevention at scale. Demographic and Health Survey data on intimate partner violence has only been available since the 1990s and is now the basis of how nations and multilateral organisations track changes in intimate partner violence, highlighting the importance of these national surveys and data for policy and impact.

These encouraging findings are somewhat dampened by findings that some countries have seen an increase in intimate partner violence prevalence in this same

period, including Sierra Leone and Timor Leste; the authors suggest that conflict in these countries might have resulted in intimate partner violence elevations. This interpretation is supported by evidence that conflict and disaster, including climate and economic disasters, can lead to increases in intimate partner violence.<sup>3,4</sup> Escalating climate concerns, conflict and forced migration, and pandemic outbreaks<sup>5–7</sup> will require us to keep a close watch on rates of intimate partner violence and ensure that this observed progress does not stagnate or decline. Li and colleagues' findings regarding the strong and consistent associations between women's empowerment indicators at both the national and individual levels suggest that improvements in gender equity norms, women's choice and agency in both the public and private spheres, and attitudes related to unacceptability of violence are all contributing to observed declines in intimate partner violence. Hence, continued focus on these issues via national gender budgeting, gender equity supportive policies and practices, and political and community mobilisation of women's voices in legislative and judicial decision making remain important.

A concern identified in this Article is the rise in psychological intimate partner violence, even as physical and sexual intimate partner violence decline. The authors note the value of their work in terms of including psychological intimate partner violence in their assessment of trends, but they inadequately discuss why some researchers exclude these data from their analyses. Most recent Demographic and Health Survey data show half of assessed nations (26 of 58 nations with data in Demographic and Health Surveys statcompiler) reveal a higher prevalence of physical than of psychological intimate partner violence, which is inconsistent with more comprehensive research and theory on this topic.<sup>8</sup> We would expect higher rates of psychological rather than physical intimate partner violence against women, as such violence is typically rooted in male entitlement to control women, and thus physical intimate partner violence would be less necessary if psychological control is working.<sup>8</sup> Hence, this variable and the observed increases presented in this study should be interpreted cautiously. Psychological intimate partner violence

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might be increasing as physical intimate partner violence becomes less tolerated by society, or perhaps women today are more likely to recognise their experiences of psychological intimate partner violence due to increased awareness of these issues. The quality of this measure of intimate partner violence needs further exploration.

However, this Article does suggest good news regarding global reductions of physical and sexual intimate partner violence in low-income and middle-income countries over the past 20 years, and the value of investments in measuring, tracking, and preventing this violence via women's empowerment efforts. We must strive to continue this progression, because these prevalence rates are still far from our goal to eliminate intimate partner violence by 2030.

I declare no competing interests.

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