

# Bridging the Divide

Unpacking the intersections of violence against women and violence against children in two communities in Western Cape, South Africa

## Research Brief

### Background

Violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC) is endemic in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> The South African Demographic Health Survey showed that more than a quarter (26%) of women aged 18 years or older had experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime.<sup>2</sup> The Birth to Twenty Plus study in Soweto-Johannesburg revealed that over 90% of the cohort were exposed to several forms of violence, including physical and sexual abuse, at some point in their lives.<sup>3,4</sup>

### How are violence against women and violence against children linked?

VAW and VAC are closely linked, often co-occurring in the same household settings and sharing similar risk factors, such as gender inequality, male dominance in households, marital conflict, misuse of substances and weak institutions that do not offer protection against violence.<sup>5,6</sup> Both are prevalent in communities with social norms that condone the use of physical punishment of women and children, promote notions of masculinity based on violence and control, prioritise family reputation and blame victims, and are characterised by gender inequitable relationships.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, experience of violence as a child can increase the risk of victimization and perpetration in adulthood. For example, a South African study showed an association between sexual assault in childhood and increased risk of physical or sexual intimate partner violence in adulthood.<sup>7</sup> In another study, witnessing violence in the home was found to be associated with increased risk for perpetration of intimate partner violence.<sup>8</sup> A life-course perspective is critical in understanding the intersections between violence against women and children as it highlights the prevalence of different forms of violence at different stages of life and how these types of violence intersect and reinforce one another across the lifespan. This perspective allows for a better understanding of the pathways to victimisation and perpetration of violence – and how violence can be prevented.

### Addressing these intersections in practice

Despite these insights, the fields of VAW and VAC have developed separately, without considering the relationship between them. But there is an emerging evidence base on the intersections between male perpetrated violence against women, and caregiver (male and female) perpetrated violence against children. The evidence is clear that they are inextricably linked, and interventions that focus on these challenges in isolation may overlook the common drivers and consequences within families and across the lifespan.<sup>9</sup> Developing an understanding of these intersections is particularly important in South Africa due to the high levels of violence.

This research brief describes a qualitative study aimed at contributing to the evidence on intersections in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). It explored how women, men and children living in two communities – Paarl and Mitchell's Plain – in the Western Cape perceive violence against women and against children in the home, with a particular focus on the social norms that underpin violence in these areas. The study took place in 2021 and consisted of interviews with stakeholders and focus groups with men, women and young people living in each of the communities. The findings are intended to inform the development of a joint prevention intervention that will be tested for feasibility and integrated into existing services within the targeted communities.



#### About the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town

The Children's Institute is a leader in child policy research and advocacy in South Africa. The Institute is based at the University of Cape Town. The CI aims to contribute to policies, laws and interventions that promote equality and improve the conditions of all children in South Africa, through research, advocacy, education and technical support.

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## What did we find?

### Shared risk factors

Participants recognised the shared risk factors driving VAC and VAW in their communities and noted that there is no single factor driving violence in these two communities. Instead, violence in the home is driven by an interplay of factors, with individual-level factors such as the harmful use of drugs and alcohol and unaddressed trauma or ‘inner damage’, as well as community-level factors such as overcrowding and a lack of privacy, featuring strongly in their narratives. These drivers have not been well-documented in previous research. Such factors intertwine with the household stressors of poverty, unemployment, and job insecurity, exacerbated by the historical and political context of these communities and the persistent gang violence. Social and cultural norms on gender roles and the ways in which families function, together with a tacit acceptance of violence as an expected part of life, were also recognised as risk factors. All these factors combine to contribute to an escalation of stresses and tensions in the home and increase the risk of violence being used by men against their partners and by parents towards children.

### Harmful social norms driving violence in the home

#### Violence is ‘normalised’

An overwhelming finding of the study was that violence is a part of the daily experiences of men, women, and children in these communities. While many participants described the negative effects of violence in the community, their accounts were also

interlaced with descriptions of the ‘normalisation’ of violence. For most participants, violence was so common it became almost invisible or becomes viewed as socially acceptable or even socially encouraged behaviour.<sup>10</sup> This was evidenced in numerous ways, from the apathy shown in the face of the violence they or other community members are exposed to, through to participants observing that violence is a ‘part of life’ and expected, including in intimate relationships, and the acceptance or justification of the use of physical punishment in the home, among others.

*“I see it every day now. So now I see it as normal because nobody is rising up...nobody is saying something...[that] it is not normal.”* [Young male, FGD]

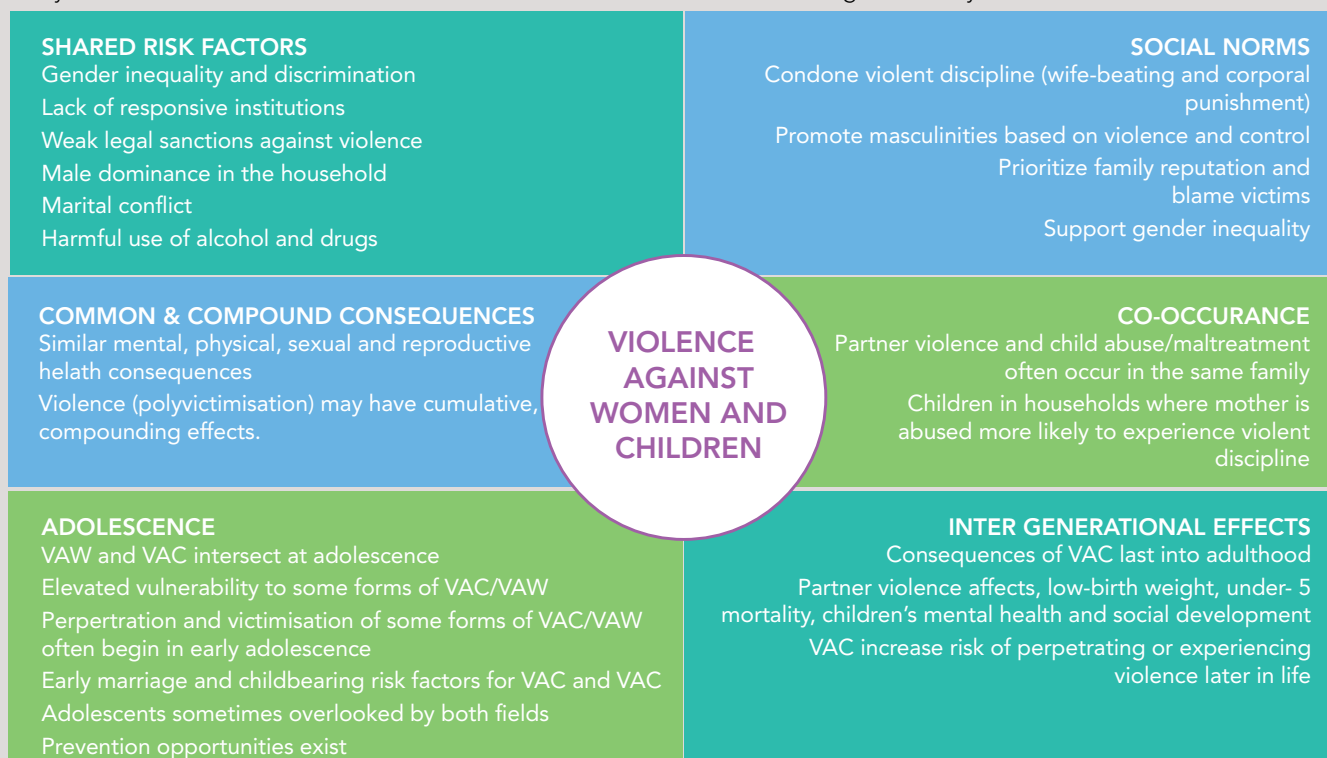
#### Women and children are silenced and blamed

This normalisation means that often women and children do not get support from family and friends when they disclose experiences of violence. Our findings suggest that violence in the home is still viewed by many as a private matter for the family to resolve. There is a reluctance to ‘interfere’, especially when “tomorrow she is back with the same man again” or when the perpetrator is the breadwinner. Several spoke of families silencing – and even blaming – adult and child victims, out of shame and fear of ruining individual or family reputations, among other reasons.

*“...because I was blamed as a seven-year-old for being a promiscuous four-year-old [when the sexual abuse started]. Which four-year-old is promiscuous?”* [Adult female, FGD]

## Mapping the intersections between VAW and VAC

Guedes and colleagues conducted a global review that mapped the intersections of between violence against women and violence against children, and developed a framework outlining six pathways through which they intersect (see below).<sup>6</sup> This study drew on this framework to structure the interconnections identified through this study.



Participants also spoke to the role of power dynamics in the home, which deter women and children from disclosing experiences of violence because they fear they will not be believed – or their disclosure will not be acted upon.

### **Social norms informing the expected roles of men and women**

Men's violence towards women in South Africa is largely tolerated.<sup>11</sup> Some participants spoke of how men would become 'justifiably' violent when women did not behave in an 'appropriate' way.

*"[My mother] would go and drink and entertain friends with the money that she had...she would come home late at night drunk, there is no food and what is the result? [My father] is going to beat her. So, I don't put the blame completely on men, but there is blame for both sides."* [Adult female stakeholder]

Other examples given included women provoking men through persistent criticism, using household money for her own pleasure, or suspected infidelity (jealousy).

The role of provider was described by both male and female participants as being central to perceptions of 'being a man', and how men would become 'frustrated' when they do not have the resources to support their families, forming a key driver for conflict experienced in the home.

*"So, he doesn't have work...they need stuff in the household also, but he can't provide. So, they [are] putting tension between him and his wife, and he beats her up so badly..."* [Adult male, FGD]

A thread running through many of the accounts was the notion that intimate relationships are predicated on power men have over women, and the patriarchal structure of families was commonly described. Violence and control are viewed as a means to achieve the characteristics that are associated with being 'the man of the house'.<sup>12</sup> This need to maintain power and control in their intimate relationship appears to be related to their relatively powerless position in other domains of their lives,<sup>13</sup> which is likely to have been exacerbated by the lack of opportunities and job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic (when the interviews were conducted).

Participants also spoke to cultural and religious norms that are sometimes used to reinforce or justify gender inequalities. Others referred to the role of socialisation in perpetuating gender norms, and how girls are 'taught' to be non-violent while boys' use of violence – and the suppression of emotion and any sign of 'weakness' – is promoted.

*"The cultural thing is when men feel they have more power, the women need to submit, the woman need to do whatever men ask them to do and they have been robbed of their identity."* [Adult stakeholder]

### **Norms regarding families**

The private nature of domestic violence and sexual abuse perpetrated by family members or persons known to the family provides the perfect environment for hiding the violence that takes place in the confines of the home and is unseen by those outside.

Similarly, participants noted that sexual abuse in the home

environment, especially abuse perpetrated against children or by children against other children, often remains hidden. Reasons include that the abuse is not recognised, the individual experiencing the abuse does not disclose it, or the family reputation is prioritised over the needs of the survivor. The shared social norm of protecting family honour often sustains the use of violence and abuse in the home by prioritising reputation over the safety and wellbeing of women and children in the family.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, sex and sexual abuse are not topics of conversation that are encouraged in the home in these communities. Limited communication about sex and reproductive health, especially with children, contributes to a narrative that sex is shameful and leaves children ill-prepared, despite many children being exposed to sexual activity in their home from an early age. This silence makes it difficult to disclose sexual violence to families or community members who prioritise propriety over the voices of children and discourages both children and adults from seeking help if they do experience sexual abuse or intimate partner violence.<sup>15</sup>

### **Harsh parenting and the positioning of children in families**

Harsh and punitive parenting patterns are highly prevalent in South Africa and influence the way children are disciplined, with parents less likely to be affectionate with the child and more likely to use corporal punishment as a form of discipline (Ward et al., 2015).<sup>16</sup> Such practices were evident in participants' accounts. These inconsistent parenting practices influence the child's risk for externalising disorders (behavioural problems) and internalising disorders (anxiety, depression), influencing the child's ability to succeed at school and later employability.<sup>16</sup>

The use of physical punishment of children remains widespread in the home and in schools, with several participants arguing that corporal punishment could be justified under certain conditions.

*"I am a parent and I don't believe in corporal punishment but it can be effective, you know. When you do it the right way, of course...there isn't a right way but, I mean, you hit a child on the bum and that should be, you know...not beating you up and you ending up with broken ribs or broken bones or hand marks or whatever the case may be. That is not right."* [Adult stakeholder]

Feminist understandings of childhoods suggest that power, control and oppression not only shape the gendered relationships of men and women but also the relationships between parents and children.<sup>17</sup> This gives rise to a hierarchy of power within households that allows men to dominate and be in control of both women and children – and children remain voiceless in the gendered social order that is driven by patriarchy within families. This patriarchal structure therefore normalises the use of violence against children and silences children, making invisible their experiences such as sexual abuse in the home.

### **Co-occurrence of VAC and VAW**

Study participants recognised that VAC and VAW tend to occur within households. The literature highlights how this co-occurrence is shaped by the presence of common risk factors

and underlying social norms in homes and in the community.<sup>9</sup> Studies show that a history of partner conflict in families associated with a greater risk of child abuse.<sup>18, 19</sup> Examples given by participants of the co-occurrence of VAC and VAW included men as perpetrators of violence against women and children, as well as women who were harsh or used corporal punishment with their children.

*“How could I give them a hiding just because they are crying? Because he is giving me a hiding. So, they are big now and they say, mommy, [he] used to hit you a lot, but why did you hit us?” [Adult female, FGD]*

### Common and compounding effects

Participants also acknowledged the similar emotional, psychological, and physical effects of violence in the home on women and children, and the negative impacts on their ability to function in daily life. They recognised that the social norms that fuel violence in the home impact in similar – and compounding – ways on women and children. There was also awareness of the gendered effects on children, with talk of boys showing aggression and bullying (externalising behaviours).

Participants also clearly recognised the longer-term effects of exposure to violence in childhood on mental health, particularly when there are limited opportunities to process or resolve the impacts.

*“Some kids would be depressed, and they would end up being alone. Like [they/he] wouldn’t want to be in a relationship because they [are] scared they might beat their girlfriend or their wife, like he saw in his childhood with his stepfather.” [Young female, FGD]*

Participants were also aware that violence and the trauma it inflicts is often not a once-off experience in these communities, with accounts of poly-victimisation in which women and children are exposed to multiple forms of violence within the home, or in multiple settings, such as at home and at school. This has compounding effects which many in these communities do not have an opportunity to process or address, leading to negative coping strategies to survive.

### Intergenerational effects

Participants also demonstrated an understanding of the intergenerational effects of VAC and VAW, reflecting on how a child’s exposure to violence in the home can shape their relationships as adults.

*“Maybe the father’s father used to beat his father and now the father in the house is also beating and now the generation[al] curse, that is just passing on... [Adult female, FGD]*

A multi-country study found that both boys and girls who experience or witness violence are more likely to become neglectful or abusive parents, and to use harsh parenting with their own children, creating a vicious intergenerational cycle.<sup>19</sup> Violence experienced in the home therefore provides a potential mechanism for the transmission of violence between generations, as children model the behaviours they see and may carry this into adulthood.<sup>8, 20</sup>

*“It will become a pattern because they will think my father hit my mother, so, it’s fine that if my husband hit me, it’s fine.” [Young female FGD]*

### Recommendations

Understanding the dynamic interplay between VAC and VAW is important to inform the development of interventions that can shift the pattern of these forms of violence in LMIC contexts. Several lessons can be learnt from the insights that emerge from this study:

1. There is an urgent need to address the normalisation of VAW and VAC in communities through participatory engagement processes that tackle the patriarchal social norms that drive violence.
2. Unresolved trauma as a driver of violence is highlighted and requires services to recognise the need to address both the trauma of victims of violence as well as the broader need to tackle trauma on a wider scale to reduce the effects.
3. Structural factors such as poverty and unemployment increase the risk of conflict in the home. There is a need for universal economic empowerment and poverty alleviation programmes that integrate a gender transformative element to reduce violence in the home.
4. Parenting programmes that integrate a gender transformative component and promote positive parenting are crucial to reducing harmful forms of parenting and fostering responsive parenting practices.
5. Gender transformative programmes with men and boys – but that also include women and girls – need to be prioritised to shift gendered practices to reduce violence in the home.

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