POLICY BRIEF

How violence against women and children is represented in research

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This policy brief presents findings from an analysis of how violence against women and children in South Africa was represented in 57 research papers. The analysis complements the work of the Violence Prevention Forum and considers the implications of that framing for policy and practice. Recommendations are made for the research community and funders of research including the need for terminology that enables inclusion.

Key findings

How the problem is framed:

▶ Researchers studying violence in South Africa, and how to prevent it, use many terms to describe violence (e.g. intimate partner violence, domestic violence, gender-based violence, violence against women). These terms are often used interchangeably and without adequate explanation of their meanings and differences.

The proliferation of terms and the rapid rate at which they emerge in literature can alienate politicians, practitioners and policy actors and frustrate efforts to reach a common understanding of the problem and solutions.

▶ The papers reviewed focused on physical forms of violence. They did not adequately address the intersections between structural violence, trauma, racism and physical violence.

The consequences of this framing:

▶ The interventions covered in the papers and reports reviewed addressed risk factors at individual and relational levels. There is limited research on how to tackle societal risk factors or the structural drivers of violence.

▶ Most research has been done in poor black communities in townships and rural areas. This could create a perception that these communities are the 'problem', or are more violent than others, thereby reinforcing racial and class prejudice.

▶ Although black communities are the focus of most of the violence-related research, there is poor representation of black researchers or those from previously disadvantaged institutions (such as the Universities of Fort Hare, Venda and Limpopo) in research teams, especially as principal investigators.

Recommendations

▶ The Violence Prevention Forum, working with other partners, should consider developing a position paper that argues for violence prevention to be prioritised, even as South Africa grapples with the impact of COVID-19. It should provide suggestions as to the different combinations of interventions needed to address multiple vulnerabilities that are likely to be made worse by the pandemic.

▶ Donors and research funding agencies should consider incentivising research collaborations among South African universities, particularly between historically disadvantaged institutions and formerly white institutions. The sector would be enriched by a diversity of views and research approaches.

▶ Donors and government research funding institutions should incentivise asset-based research in communities. Women and children (and men) can be active agents in designing research questions and thinking about solutions (programme design). Enabling women and children to play this role is likely to require facilitation or access to networks and resources that they lack.[1] Programme designers also need to explore ways to work with local institutions that already have established relationships in the community.

Introduction

Research undertaken by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in 2020, with funding from Australia Aid, explored how South African researchers and evaluators frame and define the problem of violence against women and children (VAWC) and the implications of this framing for policy and practice.

The study applied a feminist 'What is the Problem Represented to Be?' (WPR) approach. It provides researchers and policy makers with a bird's eye view of how VAWC in South Africa is defined, researched, and acted upon. The study identified challenges and opportunities to further the work to prevent violence.

The ISS research was based on an analysis of 57 research papers represented in an evidence map[2] on interventions to prevent VAWC. The map was developed in 2019 by the ISS, the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results at the University of the Witwatersrand and the Africa Centre for Evidence at the University of Johannesburg on behalf of the Violence Prevention Forum (VPF).

Why study how the problem is represented?

Researchers and programme designers shape the way society understands social problems. The choice of what to study, how and where to study it, and what to report contributes to how society comes to understand itself. Given this reality, it is important to critically analyse the process by which researchers define, conceptualise and recommend remedial interventions to government or non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Since 2015, participants in the VPF[3] from government departments, international NGOs, community-based organisations, development partners, research institutions and the private sector have grappled with what it will take for South Africa to prevent/reduce violence.[4] How the participants of the VPF speak about the problem and advocate for its resolution impacts the way that society perceives women and children, and how government and donors will respond in policy and resource allocation.

This problem analysis research was intended to inform current debates within the VPF. It was also intended to generate insights to encourage critical engagement with the existing evidence base on interventions to prevent violence as South Africans.

How we did the research

The ISS research applied the WPR approach, a feminist policy analysis method, to the 57 papers and reports referenced in the evidence map.[5]

The WPR approach suggests that problems are not self-evident, nor do they exist objectively. Rather, social issues are framed as problems in a specific location and in a context of existing power relations. This context and framing impacts research and policy, as every policy proposal contains within it an implicit representation of what the problem is purported to be.[6]

The WPR approach is a methodology of flexible questioning in order to interrogate the way social issues are constructed so as to gain insight on how to solve them.

Each of the 57 papers was read in full and analysed using the following WPR interrogative questions:[7]

- What's the 'problem' represented to be?

- What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'?

- How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?

- What is left unproblematic in the problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' have been thought about/articulated differently?

- What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?

- How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted, and replaced?

Qualitative data were extracted using the six questions and analysed thematically. Descriptive data about each paper, including authors, methods used, and funders (amongst others) were extracted from each article. In addition, a review of South African and international literature was undertaken to contextualise violence experienced by women and children in South Africa; how

the government has responded to it, and the challenges encountered.

How is the problem represented?

Terminology can be confusing

The study identified 12 terms used to describe violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC). This includes terms such as VAC, VAW, violence against women and girls (VAWG) and gender-based violence (GBV). Within these broad categories, other terms are used to distinguish the forms that violence takes, i.e. physical violence, emotional violence, rape, sexual violence, sexual harassment, spanking, etc. Lastly, there are terms that indicate the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim such as intimate partner violence (IPV), stranger rape, etc. These terms were often used interchangeably without adequate explanation of their meanings and differences.

The proliferation of terms affects the way the public and policy audience understand the issue

The proliferation of terms is understandable and perhaps inevitable as researchers grapple with the problem and attempt to understand it better. However, the multiplicity of terms and the rate at which new terms emerge create practical challenges. In reference to IPV, Rachel Jewkes, Professor at the South African Medical Research Council has noted how applying different definitions of IPV affects how the phenomenon is measured.[8]

The proliferation of terms not only affects how and what researchers measure, but also the ability of the public and policy audience to understand and speak about the issue. Confusion and uncertainty about which term to use can also alienate politicians and policy makers and implementers, the very actors that researchers aim to influence and inform.

VAWC is not adequately contextualised

Research on VAW and VAC has not sufficiently positioned the problem within the context of, nor in relation to, other forms of violence, and shared risk factors are not acknowledged. VAWC takes place within a context of

high levels of intergenerational trauma, male-to-male violence, spatial inequality and a history of ongoing racial oppression where there remain insufficient opportunities for poor black South Africans to build meaningful and fulfilling lives or escape from inter-generational poverty.[9]

The context in which violence in South Africa takes place is also characterised by institutional failures, broken inter-sectoral relationships and racial tensions, amongst other things. Representation of the problem in the 57 research papers reviewed tend to focus on addressing risk factors within relationships, families and schools. Though this focus is pragmatic, the question remains whether levels of violence can be reduced without shifts in some of the structural drivers of violence.

A question for researchers and those testing interventions is how knowledge about structural drivers of violence should shape the way violence is framed and researched, and the interventions implemented in communities. Particularly, how to grapple with the interface of capitalism, racial subjugation, unemployment and underdevelopment and individuals' behaviour when intervening.

What influences the framing of the problem?

Global frameworks and limited participation of beneficiaries

In 20 of the 57 papers that were reviewed, violence was defined as a public health issue. There was extensive reference to the work emanating from international bodies like the World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNICEF. We observed that researchers rarely critically engaged with frameworks developed by the WHO, such as INSPIRE.[10] They seemed to be adopted as definitive.

The questions are: can one assume these frameworks are always sufficient to address the contextual realities of communities in South Africa and how does community voice come to shape what is researched and tested?

Papers that present the findings of programme evaluations, did not indicate the extent to which women and children participated in the design and conceptualisation of solutions to be implemented.

While public policy is subjected to public debate and comments, it is unclear if the same should apply to

programmes designed by researchers. Research papers also did not always describe how much existing institutions in those communities where the programmes were tested were engaged in the delivery of programmes. This seems to confirm concerns raised by researchers Makama et al,[11] that framing the problem in a way that sees women and children as having no agency can lead to interventions designed without the active engagement of those for whom the interventions are intended.

Skewed focus on poor black communities

Although most research reports and publications in the sample of 57 were prefaced with statements about how violence against women occurs across socio-economic status, race, age and religion, most research on the topic took place in poor black communities (African and 'Coloured'). Poverty is most often mentioned as a predictor of violence and therefore provides the motivation for studying these communities. However, there is a notable absence of other poor communities in the literature, i.e. Asian poor communities and white poor communities.

Authors unevenly represented

Even though most communities that were the objects of study were black, most of the authors were not. In addition, while 59% of the authors of these studies were affiliated with South African-based institutions, they were mostly affiliated with the Universities of Cape Town, the Witwatersrand, and KwaZulu-Natal, and the Medical Research Council.

Figure 1: Distribution of authors by country
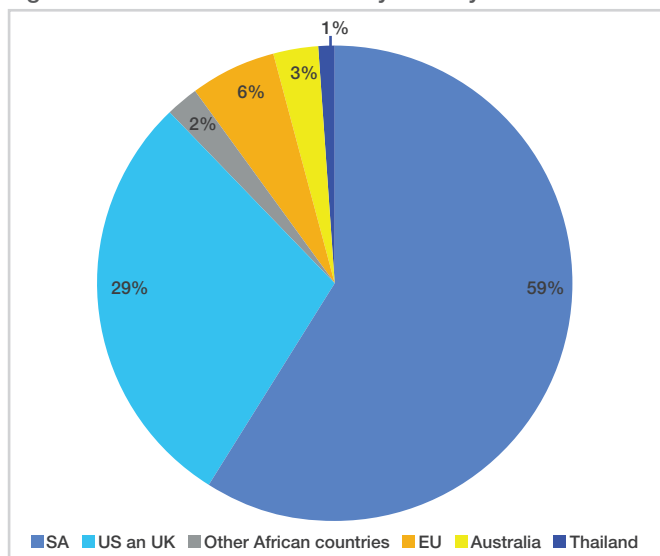
Legend: SA, US an UK, Other African countries, EU, Australia, Thailand

There was no representation of previously disadvantaged universities in the research teams, though most programmes were tested in communities that are geographically close to these universities. We found more collaboration between South African researchers and those based in the United Kingdom and the United States than between South African universities and those in other developing countries.

There was no representation of previously disadvantaged universities in the research teams

The pattern of collaboration seems to be influenced by funding. Much of the research represented in the 57 papers was funded by multiple donors. Of the 55 funders mentioned in the papers, 37 were US- or UK-based. Fifty-two percent of the papers were published in international journals – mostly based in the US and the UK – while 48% were published in South Africa.

What are the consequences?

Interventions focused on individual and inter-personal risk factors

Papers reviewed reported findings from interventions focused on individual and relationship-level factors, such as in Sinovuyo, Expressive Art therapy, 'Let us protect our future', Prepare, and Skhokho supporting success, etc.

These interventions tended to focus on empowering individual women to make different decisions regarding violent relationships, improving conflict resolution in relationships, improving parent/caregiver-child relationships, improving self-confidence in young boys, and so on. This could be because most of the papers reported on programmes that were designed by researchers and tested in communities rather than on programmes seeking to measure the effect of existing interventions implemented by government or NGOs.

Even those interventions that aimed to address economic conditions were limited to cash transfers or micro-finance for women and were not interventions to address structural drivers of poverty. We found two papers that assessed the effectiveness of environmental interventions; two that assessed the impact of gun control legislation,

only one study reported findings of informal mechanisms for dealing with domestic violence, and no studies assessed work-based interventions.

Violence is racialised

As mentioned above, black people are more likely to be the subjects of research than people from other race groups. Ignoring the influence of structural forms of violence (inequality, racism, poverty, etc.) on individual behaviour and focusing on norms, beliefs and values has the unintended consequence of explaining violence in terms of characteristics inherently found in black communities.[12] This risks racialising our understanding of violence as a society. Violence comes to be seen as a problem of black people, particularly black men.[13]

This feeds into existing stereotypes and the othering of black men. As such, society treats violence by non-black males as exceptional and violence in black communities as the norm. This entrenches the archetype of a violent black male. In so doing, it shapes how private security officers or members of neighbourhood watches and community social media groups profile black men in 'privatised' public spaces, and justifies police use of violence in black neighbourhoods.[14]

> Private companies may be oblivious to the way they contribute to violence or how they can solve it

'Invisible' forms of violence are minimised

Representing the problem by focusing on physical forms of violence and poor black communities risks enabling a disassociation from violence and minimisation of other forms of violence.

Firstly, it enables men who are not physically violent yet hold sexist or misogynistic views to see themselves as outside the problem of VAW. Secondly, members of society who benefit from exploitative capitalism that keeps poor black people earning menial salaries that trap them in poverty, travelling long distances to work, unable to be present at home and lacking the means to protect their children do not see how the system they benefit from is part of the problem of high levels of violence.

As a result of the way the problem is represented, many private companies may be oblivious to the way they contribute to violence or how they can be part of the solution, or how their success might also be tied to the country's ability to build a more just and fair society.

Areas that require further exploration

From our analysis there are issues about the way the problem is understood, conceptualised and represented that need further exploration. The intersection of VAW and VAC is increasingly gaining attention. The inclusion of children in the National Strategic Plan on GBV and Femicide is an important start to address this, but many questions and practical hurdles remain.

There are also other intersections that remain unexplored in research. For example, what are the intersections of VAWC and male homicide? How does interpersonal violence interface with structural violence, particularly extractive and racialised capitalism? We found no research on interventions to prevent trafficking for purpose of sexual exploitation, child pornography, child trafficking, paedophilia, etc.

There was also no research that focused on interventions to reduce sexual harassment in the workplace. There are questions such as: are there connections between these forms of violence and what happens within intimate relationships and in poor communities? And why interventions to address these forms of violence have not been assessed for effectiveness.

A major unresolved contestation remains what to do with men and masculinity. Researcher Peralta found high levels of spillover violence outside of intimate partner relationships: men who reported perpetrating violence against their partner also reported perpetrating violence against acquaintances and strangers.[15] However, it remains contested as to whether this should lead to more programmes that focus on men and boys, or whether the solution lies in focusing on empowering women and reducing gender inequality.

Conclusions

This brief set out to present findings from an analysis of the way the problem of VAWC has been conceptualised and represented in research and the consequences of this.

We found that VAWC has attracted a significant amount of intervention research that has contributed to what is known about the problem in South Africa. Researchers use a wide variety of approaches to conceptualise the problem and study it. They have tested programmes for their effect on a range of risk factors for interpersonal violence. Several of these have shown promise. However, gaps and challenges remain.

Firstly, a number of terms are used to describe violence experienced by women and children. An important area of growing ambiguity is in relation to the binary gendered nature of terms. Another area of contestation is around victimhood of children. That is, are boys and girls equally vulnerable to victimisation? Should they be treated the same?

We know little about the combination and intensity of interventions needed to address violence

Secondly, although there is some knowledge about which programmes work to address certain risk factors, we know little about the combinations of interventions or the intensity of those interventions needed to address the multiple risk factors that households tend to experience.

Thirdly, there is inadequate knowledge about the intersections between different forms of violence. Historical trauma linked to racial and gender oppression and the continuing oppression of poor black communities within a capitalist economy have not been given adequate attention in the way the problem of VAWC is represented and responded to.

Therefore, the question of how individual factors interface with historical, structural and systemic factors to reproduce violence remains inadequately answered. Interventions tend to focus on familial and individual risk factors. However, this is not sufficient.

Lastly, race was not given sufficient attention in the papers analysed. This is the case both in relation to why certain communities experience disproportionately high levels of violence and are the subject of study, and in who undertakes research or is acknowledged as contributing to the research. This raises questions about whether the

absence of black women voices shapes the discourse around violence and why their voices are inadequately represented in research.

Notes

1   Violence Prevention Forum, *Evidence-led violence prevention: principles and guidelines for practice*, Pretoria, ISS, 2020, https://www.violence-prevention.org/docrepo/Policy%20brief%201.pdf

2   MM Amisi, N Tshabalala, M Cooke, M Molebatsi, M Mulondo, D Mufamadi, C Gould and L Langer, *Mapping the Evidence: South African Interventions to Prevent Violence against Women and Children*, 2019, https://issafrica.org/crimehub/analysis/research/evidence-map-south-african-interventions-to-prevent-violence-against-women-and-children.

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5   C Bacchi, Why Study Problematizations? Making Politics Visible, *Open Journal of Political Science*, 02, 2012, https://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2012.21001.

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9   I Edelstein, Lifting Young People out of Poverty: Factors That Influence the Transition, *HSRC Review*, 2018, www.hsrc.ac.za/en/review/hsrc-review-dec-2018/lifting-young-out-of-poverty.

10 World Health Organisation, Inspire: *Seven Strategies for Ending Violence against Children*, New York, World Health Organisation, 2016, www.who.int/publications/i/item/inspire-seven-strategies-for-ending-violence-against-children.

11 R Makama, R Helman, N Titi and S Day, The Danger of a Single Feminist Narrative: African-Centred Decolonial Feminism for Black Men, *Agenda* 33, 11/04/ 2019, https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2019.1667736.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 K Ratele, Watch your man: Young black males at risk of homicidal violence, *South African Crime Quarterly* no 33, 2010, https://journals.assaf.org.za/sacq/article/view/881.

15 RL Peralta, LA Tuttle and JL Steele, At the Intersection of Interpersonal Violence, Masculinity, and Alcohol Use: The Experiences of Heterosexual Male Perpetrators of Intimate Partner Violence, *Violence Against Women* 16, no 4, 2010/04/01, https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1077801210363539.

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