



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

Anita Ghimire and Fiona Samuels

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

IPV is not widely recognised as a problem and remains deeply entrenched: even programmes that work directly with men struggle to change their attitudes towards such violence.

Action to respond to the complex and interlinked factors that shape IPV in Nepal includes an expansion of the debate on IPV, and measures to tackle the norms that underpin its long-standing and emerging forms.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a public health and human rights issue in Nepal, with the social and economic impacts felt by women and adolescent girl survivors, and by their wider communities. Recent Demographic and Health Survey data show that 33% of women aged 15-49 who have ever been married have experienced IPV, while 17% have experienced it in the past 12 months.

Our 2016 study draws on secondary analysis and primary qualitative research in two districts: Rupandehi and Kapilvastu, and confirmed the **severe consequences of IPV for 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 multi-level influences that shape male attitudes to, and perpetration of, IPV in Nepal, generating evidence-based recommendations for national and local governments, donors, NGOs, civil society and academia.

We focused on two programmes that include training for men on gender-based violence (GBV) and IPV: The Government of Nepal's programme Training on Promotion of Male Co-workers in Gender-based Violence Alleviation, and CARE Nepal's Tipping Point programme. One key finding is that we did not observe any significant changes in the behaviours towards IPV among male beneficiaries of these programmes – a sign that men continue to face pressure to adhere to social norms around masculinity and that IPV remains deeply entrenched and widely accepted. There are also concerns about increases in some forms of IPV among younger generations, including emotional violence within marriage. Emerging forms of IPV, particularly among adolescents in dating relationships, include rigid controls over female mobility and social interaction, as well as sexual coercion and cyber bullying.

'They usually say [to their girlfriends], "If you truly love me, you need to have physical relation with me..."'

and girls are forced into that to prove their love. In most of the cases, girls don't know that they are forced into it and it is violent.' (In-depth interview with adolescent boy, Rupandehi)

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 as well as drivers of IPV at individual, household and community levels.

Our primary research found that men's consumption of alcohol and their levels of awareness of women's rights were **individual risk factors**, as was witnessing or being exposed to IPV during childhood. Another potential driver of IPV was the negative attitude of boys towards girls, who were often criticised for being 'spoilt', disobeying their parents and keeping secrets. Unlike many studies on IPV that have overlooked unmarried adolescents in dating relationships, this study found that unmarried adolescent girls were vulnerable to IPV in such relationships and unlikely to seek (or receive) help because of the stigma of having a partner before marriage. The abandonment of young girls who become pregnant outside marriage was thought to be fuelling a rise in suicides among some groups in parts of Rupandehi.

At the **household level**, polygamy, arranged and early marriage, lack of women's economic independence and poor relationships with in-laws are the main risk factors. Our study suggests that fathers having multiple wives could be a trigger for the IPV perpetrated by men. Boys whose fathers had another wife appeared more protective of their mothers and a strong desire to make their mother happy was incompatible with having a girlfriend who might divide their attention. While such attitudes might not matter when boys are not in relationships, they might matter a great deal when they are. Early marriage can be a risk factor as boys who have married young tend to continue their education and become exposed to a wider

world and modern attitudes, while their wives leave school and remain largely secluded in the household. This can exacerbate tensions and incompatibility, leading to IPV.

At **community level**, social norms around masculinity, femininity, male guardianship of women and polygamy have a strong influence on behaviour and choices in Nepal, and a strong bearing on IPV, as do other specific cultural practices such as the Gauna system (a form of early marriage). Men are accorded a superior social status and the inferior status of women goes largely unquestioned. Domestic violence is also generally accepted as a way to control women and/or correct the behaviour of a wife or girlfriend. Such deeply entrenched gender norms make it difficult for people to conceptualise IPV as a problem (or a problem that men need to address) and to discuss it openly. Men and boys who had participated in programmes and spoke in favour of equality in marriage faced a backlash from others in their community and were labelled ‘meheru’ (‘the servant of the wife’).

Current responses to IPV in Nepal

While relevant laws are in place in Nepal, our key informants noted that these laws often provide cursory remedies, contain loopholes or, most importantly, fail to address the underlying social norms and values that drive GBV and IPV.

Formal protection services fall under the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare (MoWCSW) and its gender violence control section, with implementation carried out at district and village levels. The section has shelters for women in all 75 of Nepal’s districts, and funding mechanisms to help victims access legal and medical services. MoWCSW has established local groups, such as the ‘Gender-based violence monitoring group’ to and make it easier for women to report cases. The justice sector provides free legal services for women and is increasing the number of female staff members, while police desks known as ‘female cells’ are staffed by female police officers to help women file cases of IPV.

Despite these mechanisms, **under-reporting of IPV** is typical across our study sites, with women only accessing protection services when IPV becomes severe. Social stigma is a major barrier to reporting, alongside lessons learned in childhood about the need to prioritise the family over the individual. Under-reporting is also linked to inaccessible legal and bureaucratic systems, lack of coordination across the different bodies tackling IPV, lack of interest among (mostly male) bureaucrats and politicians, and a lack of resources for measures to tackle IPV, which is seen as a ‘women’s issue’.

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 in Nepal. This requires an expansion of the debate on IPV, as well as measures to tackle the social norms that underpin its long-standing and emerging forms. Specific recommendations have emerged for government, donors and NGOs, and for local civil society groups.

- **Government** should improve coordination between gender focal points, establishing formal and regular communication channels between these focal points and with the police and courts to ensure that the impact of strategies developed at the central level is felt at village level. Greater government support is also needed to monitor successes and challenges in the implementation of existing strategies before the development of new strategies. The retention of qualified staff needs to be prioritised, as well as the sharing of institutional learning on what has worked, and what has not. The design and targeting of economic empowerment programmes should be improved. It is also critical to ensure that sufficient resources are provided to address and prevent IPV.
- **Donors and NGOs (national and international)** need to take a broader view, weaving a gender perspective into all programmes – beyond those that aim to address IPV specifically – and working with all stakeholders and service providers, as well as with men of all ages, with men and women as couples and with in-laws. Men should be engaged as ‘champions’ to combat IPV. Donors and NGOs should also address coordination issues by avoiding duplication of effort and the creation of parallel structures, and ensure effective exit strategies that promote sustainability.
- **Local civil society groups and organisations** should ensure that women know how to report IPV and are aware of the support services available to them. Male and female beneficiaries should be encouraged to take part in activities and discussions together, rather than being divided into same-sex groups, and ways should be found to engage men meaningfully in issues that affect women. Unmarried young people should be targeted by initiatives, as well as married couples.

