

Young women who commit intimate partner violence

Summary

Background. Only limited research has been undertaken on women who commit intimate partner violence (IPV). In this study I investigate how the abusive behaviour of young women towards their partners is correlated with characteristics of the relationship and with aggressiveness more generally. Furthermore, I investigate the assumption that the violence is mostly motivated by self-defence.

Materials and methods. The analyses are based on a nationwide longitudinal study of the normal population. Data on IPV were collected when the women were 20–25 years old.

Results. Of the 1 250 women who had been in a relationship during the last six months, a total of 114 (9 per cent) had slapped their partner during the same period, while 70 (6 per cent) had hit, kicked or bitten. Altogether 77 (6 per cent) reported that they (and not their partner) had acted violently in this manner, whereas 68 (5 per cent) responded that the attacks had been reciprocal. Perpetration of IPV correlated with other forms of destructive interaction with the partner. Nevertheless, a majority of those women who had acted violently were satisfied with the relationship. Aggression-related personality traits and acting-out behaviour during the teens were both related to perpetration of IPV.

Interpretation. Young women who act violently towards their partners tend to be more aggressive than women in general, and are in many cases the only physically aggressive partner in the relationship. The study does not corroborate the assumption that self-defence is the main motivation for women's perpetration of IPV. The results should be seen in light of the reservation that surveys of the normal population only to a limited extent capture really serious violence in intimate relationships.

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The gravest forms of intimate partner violence (IPV) mostly concern male perpetrators and female victims (1, 2). However, the more widespread and less serious forms of IPV are just as often perpetrated by women (1, 3–5). Women's perpetration of such violence has been subject to less research than the prevalence of this phenomenon would indicate. In the following, I will present findings from a Norwegian study of this topic. Previous analyses of the data set have shown that violence in relationships does not strike blindly, and that individuals who are prone to acting-out behaviour are more exposed to violence than others (6).

The purpose of this article is to investigate how perpetration of IPV among young women is correlated to characteristics of the relationship and to aggressiveness more generally. Furthermore, I will elucidate the assumption that this violence to a large extent is used in self-defence against physical abuse by the partner.

Materials and methods

The data are collected from the study *Young in Norway*, which was launched in 1992 on the basis of a nationwide representative sample of adolescents in schools (response rate: 97 per cent). The next round of data collection took place in 1994 (response rate: 92 per cent). Respondents who still were in school in 1994 and who had assented to continued follow-up (91 per cent) received a questionnaire in 1999. Of these, 84 per cent responded (cumulative response rate: 68 per cent). Detailed information on the design of the study, data collection and permissions can be found elsewhere (7).

Most of the analyses are based on the 1999 study and are restricted to women who had been in a relationship during the previous six months ($n = 1\ 250$). In addition, the 1994 data are used for longitudinal analyses. In the following, I will refer to the measurement points as t2 and t1 respectively. At t2, the respondents were 20–25 years old.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) was assessed at t2 using two paired questions about the respondent's and the partner's physical

assaults (slaps in the face, kicking, biting and/or blows with a fist). The questions were derived from a modified short version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (8). In most analyses, two dichotomous variables have been used. The first concerns whether the women had perpetrated the described forms of violence at least once. The second distinguishes between non-reciprocal and reciprocal IPV.

Independent variables. Other items based on the Conflict Tactics Scale concerned verbal aggressiveness (verbal abuse, insults) and statements or actions undertaken with a malicious intent. Avoidance in conflict situations (sulking, refusal to speak) was also assessed. The variables were dichotomised with the cut-off point placed at six or more incidents during the last six months, which implied that the top 10–15 per cent of the distribution was singled out.

Whether the partner was perceived as supportive was operationalised as having ticked «partner» for the following items: Who can make you feel better when you're really down and out? (item 1), whom would you've asked for advice or help if you had a personal problem? (item 2), or if you had been arrested by the police for illegal activities? (item 3). A total of 13 response categories were provided, and multiple answers were possible. Perceived acceptance by the partner was identified in a similar manner, although with the aid of only one item: Who accepts you fully and totally, your good as

Main message

- A total of 11 per cent of all young women in relationships had assaulted their partner during the previous six months.
- Non-reciprocal assaults perpetrated by women occurred slightly more frequently than reciprocal violence between the partners.
- The majority of the women who had committed violence towards their partner reported that the relationship was well-functioning.
- Women who had acted violently towards their partners tended to be more aggressive than women in general.

well as bad sides? Since these measurements referred to ongoing relationships, they were only used in analyses of women who actually were in an intimate relationship at the time. The same applied to analyses of the women's perceptions of the quality of their sex life and the relationship as a whole. Here, responses were given on a five-point scale, and a positive assessment was defined as having ticked either «very good» or couldn't have been better».

Aggression-related personality traits were assessed at t2 with the aid of six items from the State Trait Anger Expression Inventory (9). The respondents reported how well various statements described themselves by crossing off on a scale ranging from 1 («applies very poorly») to 4 («applies very well»). Three items measured angry temperament (e.g., «I'm short-tempered») (Chronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$), and another three concerned anger suppression (e.g., «I often harbour grudges against others») (Chronbach's $\alpha = 0.61$). Two sum scores were constructed and subsequently dichotomised with the cut-off point placed at an average score of 3.0 or above. Self-assessed aggressiveness was assessed at both t1 and t2 using an item from Bem's Sex Role Inventory (10). The variable was dichotomised, so that respondents who answered that it was «completely» or «fairly» correct that they had this characteristic were singled out.

Eight dichotomous variables from t1 concerned involvement in problem behaviour during the last year. For low-prevalence behaviour (fistfights, vandalism, bullying, shoplifting/petty theft) the cut-off point was placed at no versus 1+ incidents. For more prevalent norm violations, the cut-off point was placed between 0–1 and 2+ (fare dodging in public transport, telling lies), or between ≤ 5 and 6+ incidents (unwarranted absence from school). A measure for verbal aggression, which was constructed on the basis of two items pertaining to acting-out behaviour towards teachers (ferocious arguing, profanities and/or verbal abuse) was also used (≤ 3 vs. 4+ incidents).

Results

At t2, altogether 1 272 of the women (78 per cent) in the sample had been in an intimate relationship during the last six months. The results in Figure 1 show the prevalence of IPV for this group. A total of 114 (9 per cent) reported that they had slapped their partner at least once during the last six months, whereas 69 (5 per cent) had suffered the same themselves. The corresponding figures for blows with a fist, bites and/or kicks were 70 (6 per cent) and 46 (4 per cent) respectively.

Altogether 77 women (6 per cent) reported that they alone, and not their partner, had perpetrated any of the abovementioned forms of violence, whereas 68 women (5 per cent) stated that the violence was reciprocal. A total of 22 women (2 per cent) had been

exposed to IPV without having been physically abusive themselves. These women were excluded from the further analyses. The remaining group thereby comprised 1 250 women. The average age of these women was 22.4 years at t2 and 16.7 years at t1 (SD = 2.0). Furthermore, a total of 971 women (78 per cent) were in a current relationship, and 561 (45 per cent) were either married or co-habiting. Altogether 132 of them (10 per cent) had children. None of these background variables correlated with perpetration of IPV. Among those who had received social security payments or social assistance, altogether 22 (19 per cent) had acted violently; the same applied to 123 (11 per cent) of those who had not received any such benefits ($p = 0.005$).

As shown in Table 1, the occurrence of IPV was significantly related to other forms of destructive interaction within the relationship. The conflict level was especially high in relationships where both partners had been physically aggressive. These results applied to all women who had been in a relationship during the previous six months ($n = 1\,250$), but analyses that included only women in current relationships yielded nearly totally equivalent results.

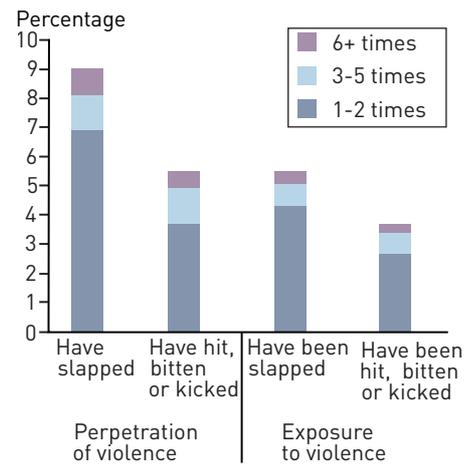


Figure 1 The women's perpetration of and exposure to various forms of violence between them and their partners during the previous six months. Cumulative percentage ($n = 1\,272$).

Table 2 shows that the majority of the women who were in a current relationship reported having a positive relation to their partner. This applied even to those who had perpetrated IPV. However, women who had not acted violently were more inclined to portray their relationship favourably. One

Table 1 Destructive conflict management by both partners by occurrence of violent acts and by differences between women who reported non-reciprocal and reciprocal violence respectively. Absolute figures, percentages in brackets.

	Has acted violently			Type of pattern of the violence						
	No 1 074		Yes 139		Non-reciprocal 73		Reciprocal 66			
	Num-ber	[%]	Num-ber	[%]	P value	Num-ber	[%]	Num-ber	[%]	P value
Frequent verbal abuse/acts with a malicious intent										
Self	160	(14.7)	80	(56.3)	< 0.001	36	(47.4)	44	(66.7)	0.021
Partner	145	(13.5)	68	(48.2)	< 0.001	27	(36.7)	41	(61.2)	< 0.003
Both	96	(8.9)	58	(41.7)	< 0.001	19	(26.0)	39	(59.1)	< 0.001
Frequent avoidance behaviour										
Self	142	(12.9)	47	(32.6)	< 0.001	20	(26.0)	27	(40.3)	0.067
Partner	103	(9.5)	40	(28.0)	< 0.001	12	(16.0)	28	(41.2)	< 0.001
Both	56	(5.2)	23	(16.2)	< 0.001	7	(9.3)	16	(23.9)	0.019

Table 2 Assessments of the partner, the quality of own sex life and of the relationship in general by occurrence of violent acts between the partners. Analyses of women in current relationships. Absolute figures, percentages in brackets.

	Has acted violently towards a partner				
	No 862		Yes 110		P value
	Number	[%]	Number	[%]	
Perceived support from partner	652	(74.9)	69	(62.7)	< 0.007
Perceived acceptance by partner	739	(84.8)	80	(72.7)	< 0.001
Both support and acceptance	600	(68.9)	58	(52.7)	< 0.001
Has a satisfactory sex life	532	(61.7)	58	(52.7)	0.069
Generally positive assessment of the relationship	679	(78.3)	65	(59.1)	< 0.001

Table 3 Aggression-related personality traits, self-assessed aggressiveness and various types of problem behaviour during the teens, by occurrence of violent acts between the partners. Absolute figures, percentages in brackets. Time of measurement in italics.

Lowest N	Has acted violently in the relationship				P value
	No 1 026		Yes 127		
	Number	[%]	Number	[%]	
Tends to repress anger, <i>t2</i>	98	[8.9]	33	[22.8]	< 0.001
Irascible temper, <i>t2</i>	262	[23.9]	61	[42.4]	< 0.001
Perceives herself as aggressive, <i>t2</i>	145	[14.1]	45	[35.4]	< 0.001
Perceived herself as aggressive, <i>t1</i>	364	[33.3]	67		< 0.001
Aggressive problem behaviour, <i>t1</i>					
Has been in fistfight	106	[9.8]	32	[22.1]	< 0.001
Has committed acts of vandalism	52	[4.8]	24	[16.6]	< 0.001
Has bullied/harassed others	206	[25.3]	57	[39.3]	< 0.001
Frequent verbal aggression	194	[18.2]	45	[31.0]	< 0.001
Other kinds of problem behaviour, <i>t1</i>					
Shoplifting/petty theft	256	[23.6]	45	[31.0]	0.050
Frequent fare dodging on public transport	267	[24.6]	41	[28.3]	0.342
Frequent lying	206	[19.3]	47	[32.4]	< 0.001
Frequent unwarranted absence from school	243	[22.4]	145	[29.0]	0.079

exception, however, applied to the quality of their sex lives, for which the difference between the groups was not statistically significant. Further analyses revealed no clear differences between women who reported non-reciprocally and reciprocally violent behaviour respectively, and these results have therefore been excluded from the table.

Women who had acted violently towards their partner were more inclined than women in general to suppress their anger and to have an angry temperament (Table 3). They were also more inclined to perceive themselves as aggressive, and to have perceived themselves in this manner when they were teenagers (*t1*). Furthermore, the occurrence of various forms of aggressive behaviour at *t1* was markedly higher among these women. The analyses of other forms of problem behaviour at *t1* showed the same tendency, but neither fare dodging on public transport, nor unwarranted absence from school produced statistically significant outcomes. Women who reported non-reciprocal and reciprocal IPV respectively were also compared, but only one statistically significant difference was found. More precisely, vandalism was reported by eight women (10 per cent) in the former group and by 16 women (24 per cent) in the latter ($p = 0.034$).

Discussion

In concurrence with previous research on IPV among young adults (8, 11), reciprocal violence was nearly as prevalent as non-reciprocal assaults committed by women. The violence was related to various forms of destructive interaction with the partner, and the conflict level was especially high in rela-

tionships in which both partners had been physically aggressive.

IPV and perceived quality of the relationship

A recent meta-analysis revealed that the correlation between violent behaviour towards a partner and the perception that the relationship was functioning poorly on the whole was relatively weak – particularly for women (12). The current study also revealed negative correlations between the women's use of violence and their perception of the quality of the relationship. At the same time, the results for those women who had assaulted their partners were interesting in their own right. Altogether 58 (53 per cent) of these women stated that their partner gave them support and accepted them fully – their good as well as their bad sides. Furthermore, 65 of these women (59 per cent) reported that their relationship on the whole was either «very good» or that it «couldn't have been better» (Table 2). Other findings indicated that women who were in relationships involving reciprocal IPV were somewhat less satisfied than those who were the only partner to act violently, but these differences were not statistically significant.

Even though the subjective assessments of these women do not provide an indication of how the relationship is perceived by the other partner, the findings above may nevertheless indicate that physical abuse occurs in relationships that are otherwise reasonably well-functioning. This must be seen in light of the fact that the violence identified in the study is unlikely to have been very serious. The most frequently reported incidents involved occasional slapping, while extremely

few women had bitten, kicked or hit their partner frequently, or had been exposed to the same treatment themselves.

This study helps emphasise that violence between partners is a heterogeneous phenomenon, and that studies of the normal population to a little extent are able to capture abuse in the true sense of the word (13, 14). In addition, Archer's (1) comprehensive meta-analysis has revealed that the prevalence of serious forms of IPV is higher among older adults than among young people who are in the early stages of establishment – who are the subject of analysis in this study.

Aggressiveness and acting-out behaviour

Even though IPV was low-frequent and in all likelihood not very serious, the perpetrators stood out in terms of various measures of aggressiveness. To a far larger extent than other women, these women had strong feelings of suppressed anger, an angry temperament and a high level of self-assessed aggressiveness. Furthermore, in correspondence with previous longitudinal studies (15–17), aggressive behaviour in the teens (*t1*) was prospectively related to violent behaviour towards a partner in early adulthood (*t2*). Fistfights, vandalism, bullying and verbal aggressiveness at *t1* all produced statistically significant results, and the correlations were on the whole relatively strong. Corresponding analyses of non-aggressive problematic behaviour revealed a less consistent pattern, but the results nevertheless gave equivalent indications.

Previous research has shown that *both* men and women who act violently towards a partner tend to be generally more aggressive and prone to engage in acting-out behaviour than those who do not perpetrate IPV (15–18). Several other common characteristics and risk factors have also been revealed. It has therefore been claimed that violence between partners is likely to have a common aetiology across the genders, and that many of the causal factors are likely to be the same as for other forms of violence and acting-out behaviour. Accordingly, efforts to prevent behavioural problems and destructive forms of aggression can be expected to reduce the risk of becoming a perpetrator of IPV – for men as well as for women.

Self-defence

Findings from large population surveys and numerous studies of other non-clinical samples indicate that the perpetration of «mild» and moderately serious forms of IPV is approximately equally prevalent among men and women (1, 3–5). Some have argued, however, that such findings are deceptive, because the context and meaning of the violence are gender-specific (19–21). For instance, self-defence has been emphasised as a key explanation of why women,

and not only men, act violently in intimate relationships.

In the present study, non-reciprocal assaults made by women constituted the most widespread pattern of violence. A lot of this violence is therefore unlikely to concern protection from physical assaults by a partner. In relationships where the assaults went both ways, however, it is conceivable that the women's violent behaviour may be motivated by self-defence. On the other hand, their violent acts – including those made in relationships characterised by reciprocal violence – were closely correlated to aggressiveness and acting-out behaviour more generally. Thus, it lies close at hand to assume that as a rule, other motives than self-defence incite young women to assault their partners.

Furthermore, international research does not provide any clear support for the assumption that perpetration of IPV by women mainly is intended as defence against physical attacks by a partner (21–23). A broad range of emotions and motivations appear to lie at the base of women's violent behaviour in intimate relationships, including anger, frustration and jealousy, as well as a need for control and attention. Harassment and other forms of psychological violence on the part of the partner also appear to be important triggers. In a sense, self-defence could therefore nevertheless constitute a key motive – not to deflect a physical threat, but as a barrier against torments that challenge their self-esteem.

Reservations

This study must be interpreted with some reservations, not least because the women in the sample were quite young. More than half were not married or co-habiting, and violence taking place in long-term, committed relationships appears to have another significance than violence in less established relationships. It should also be emphasised that studies of relationships involving systematic abuse capture different patterns of violence with other characteristics and another gender profile (13, 14) than those described here.

The study included only two paired questions on IPV. If a broader range of aggressive behaviours could have been assessed, the

number of false negatives would have been lower and the prevalence of violence correspondingly higher. Another weakness is related to statistical power. The two groups of perpetrators consisted of relatively few individuals, which increases the risk of Type 2 errors. The fact that the differences between women who reported reciprocal and non-reciprocal violence only in exceptional cases were statistically significant must be seen in light of this restriction.

In addition, the data material is not of very recent origin. Even though the prevalence and characteristics of violence between partners are unlikely to have changed significantly since 1999, this possibility cannot be completely excluded. On the other hand, the study had several strengths, including a relatively high response rate, a longitudinal design and a wealth of relevant data.

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