Making the Links between Economic Inequality and Intimate Partner Violence

Dr Jude Towers


This study by Dr Jude Towers investigates the connection between economic inequality and intimate partner violence against women. It shows that access to economic resources is an important risk factor and argues that by understanding economic resources better, economic policy development could create better outcomes for women and their children.

Background

There is a substantial body of research on the relationship between economic inequality and intimate partner violence against women. This literature covers a broad range of different relationships between economics and intimate partner violence but arguably the most extensive considers whether women with fewer economic resources are more likely to experience intimate partner violence compared to women with comparatively greater economic resources. The two key resources most explored in this literature are women’s employment and women’s income.

The findings from many of these studies demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between these economic resources and intimate partner violence against women. Nevertheless they provide strong evidence to suggest that women with fewer economic resources are more likely to experience intimate partner violence compared to women with comparatively greater economic resources.1,2,3.

The research reported here is also concerned with the relationship between economic inequality and intimate partner violence against women. Economic inequality can be conceived of as the disparity in economic resources across a population. Thus economic inequality is operationalised via economic resources such as employment status, or earned income.

This research builds on previous studies in four ways: the findings for the first two are reported here; the findings for the third and fourth (outlined below) will be published in due course. The first is an analysis of the relationship between intimate partner violence against women and a number of individual, but also household and neighbourhood, economic resources.

The second analyses whether certain economic resources (such as employment or income) are more ‘important’ in relation to intimate partner violence against women.

The third analyses whether economic resources at a certain level (individual; household; or neighbourhood) are more important in relation to intimate partner violence against women. The fourth analyses whether the relationship between recent intimate partner violence and economic resources differs depending on whether women are still in or have exited the violent relationship.
Method

The research is based on an analysis of the British Crime Survey (BCS) *Intimate Violence Module* 2008/9. This BCS (now renamed the Crime Survey for England and Wales) module asks respondents (women and men aged 16-59 years) about their experiences of being a victim of intimate partner violence in the past 12 months (recent IPV). The BCS main questionnaire contains key economic data about the respondent, their household and their neighbourhood which can be linked to intimate partner victimisation. The survey is also structured in such a way as to enable additional economic variables to be constructed, added to the dataset and linked to intimate partner victimisation. Nine economic resource variables were identified or constructed for analysis in relation to women’s intimate partner violence victimisation: employment status; socio-economic class; earned income; household income; housing tenure status; household poverty status; neighbourhood income and neighbourhood employment deprivation; and violence against women service provision.

To create an analysis sample women aged 16-59 years who had been in one or more intimate partnerships in their lifetime were identified. This created an analysis sample of 12,920 female respondents.

An inclusive definition of recent IPV was used; this included non-physical abuse (prevented from having fair share of household money; stopped from seeing friends and family; repeatedly belittled and made to feel worthless), stalking behaviours and threats of physical or sexual violence, as well as physical and sexual violence. ‘Partner’ included current or ex-intimate partners and dating partners.

A prevalence measure (victim once or more during the past 12 months) was used for the analysis. This identifies two groups of women for comparative purposes: those reporting one or more incidents of recent IPV and those reporting zero incidents of recent IPV. From the sample of 12,920 female respondents 763 reported one or more incidents of recent IPV. This equates to an estimated 5.3% of the female population (aged 16-59 years) of England and Wales.

Table 1: Prevalence of recent IPV against Working-age Women in England and Wales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>No. in sample</th>
<th>Estimated % of female working-age population</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recent IPV</td>
<td>763</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>(0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No recent IPV</td>
<td>12,157</td>
<td>94.8</td>
<td>(0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12,920</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: BCS *Intimate Violence Module* 2008/09

Analysis of the relationship between recent IPV victimisation and economic resources used binary logistic regression modelling. This method enables the identification of statistically significant relationships between recent IPV and individual economic resources. An odds ratio is derived which gives an indication of how much greater or lesser the odds are of recent IPV for women with a certain level of economic resource compared to women with a different level of the same economic resource, for example the odds of recent IPV for unemployed women compared to employed women. When multiple economic resources are analysed in the same model, this method enables the identification of economic resources which retain a statistically significant relationship with
recent IPV even after the effects of the other economic resources have been accounted for. This indicates economic resources which may be of particular importance in relation to recent IPV.

Table 2: Economic Resources and the categories of analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Resource</th>
<th>Categories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-economic class</td>
<td>Never worked &amp; long-term unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earned income</td>
<td>Economically inactive (£0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income</td>
<td>Low (less than £10,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing tenure</td>
<td>Social rented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household poverty status</td>
<td>At or below poverty threshold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood income deprivation</td>
<td>10% most deprived Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood employment deprivation</td>
<td>10% most deprived LSOAs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence against women service provision</td>
<td>One or more services in Local Authority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

When each of the nine economic resources was analysed individually in relation to recent IPV all except one were found to have a statistically significant relationship. The exception was violence against women service provision.

Women’s employment: the odds of recent IPV for women who were unemployed were 2.3 times higher than those of employed women (p<.001); and the odds of recent IPV for economically inactive women were 1.4 times higher than those of employed women (p<.001).

The odds of recent IPV for women in the three lowest socio-economic classes (never worked / long term unemployed; semi-routine and routine occupations; and lower supervisory and technical occupations) were 2.3 times; 1.5 times; and 1.7 times higher respectively than those of women in higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations (p=.005; p=.002; p=.010). However,
the odds of recent IPV for women classified as small employers / own account workers and those
classified as having intermediate occupations were not found to be significantly different to those of
higher managerial, administrative and professional women (p=.996 and p=.543 respectively).

The odds of recent IPV for women whose individual earned income was £0 because they were
unemployed were 2.4 times higher than those of women earning an above average £20,000 or more
per annum (p<.001) and the odds of recent IPV for women whose earned income was £0 because
they were economically inactive were 1.5 times higher than women earning £20,000 or more per
annum (p=.006). However, the odds of recent IPV for women with a low (less than £10,000p.a.) or
average (£10,000-£19,999p.a.) earned income were not found to be significantly different to those
of women earning an above average income of £20,000 or more per annum (p=.191 and p=.551
respectively).

Women whose household income was low (less than £10,000p.a.) had 3.5 times higher odds of
recent IPV compared to women whose household income was an above average £30,000 or more
per annum (p<.001). Women whose household income was an average £10,000-£29,999 per annum
also had significantly higher odds (1.9 times higher) of recent IPV compared to women whose
household income was £30,000 or more per annum (p=.001).

For housing tenure status, the odds of recent IPV for women in social rented housing were 2.7 times
higher than those of women in owner/occupier housing (p<.001) and were double for women in
private rented housing compared to women in owner/occupier housing (p<.001).

The odds of recent IPV for women whose households were at or below the household poverty
threshold were 2.6 times higher than those of women whose households were above the poverty
threshold (p<.001).

The odds of recent IPV for women living in the most deprived 10% of Lower Super Output Areas
(LSOAs) for both neighbourhood income deprivation and neighbourhood employment deprivation
were significantly higher than those for women living in the other 90% of LSOAs (1.6 times higher
(p<.001) and 1.3 times higher (p=.048) respectively).

The second part of the research was designed to investigate whether any of the nine economic
resources were more ‘important’ in relation to recent IPV victimisation. This was assessed as those
economic resources found to have a statistically significant relationship to recent IPV even after the
effects of the other economic resources had been accounted for. When all nine economic resource
variables were analysed together, only two were found to still have a statistically significant
relationship to recent IPV after the effects of the other economic resources were accounted for:
household income and housing tenure status.

The odds of recent IPV for women whose household income was average (£10,000-£29,999 per
annum) were 1.5 times higher than those of women whose household income was £30,000 or more
per annum (p=.019). However, the odds of recent IPV for women with low household incomes were
now not found to be significantly different to those of women with above average household
incomes (p=.090).
The odds of recent IPV for women with social and private rented **housing tenure** compared to owner/occupier housing remained significantly higher: 1.7 times higher for women in social rented housing \((p=.013)\) and 1.9 times higher for women in private rented housing \((p<.001)\).

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The finding that service provision was not a significant factor in relation to intimate partner violence warrants further investigation. It is likely that the data in this research was unable to accurately capture the complexities of service access for women. In a time of cuts to, but growing demand for, services, understanding the role of specialist service provision in preventing re-victimisation is of considerable importance.

The key finding from the two parts of the research reported here is that working-age women in England and Wales with fewer economic resources are more likely to experience recent IPV compared to women with comparatively greater economic resources. This finding strengthens the evidence-base which suggests women’s economic inequality (i.e. access to economic resources) is an important factor in relation to intimate partner violence.

The findings from this research challenge the current focus on individual economic resources (employment and income). Whilst significant relationships were found for employment and earned income with recent IPV, significant relationships were also found between recent IPV and household and neighbourhood economic resources. The relationship between earned income and recent IPV was also particularly complex. The lack of earned income through unemployment or economic inactivity increased women’s odds of recent IPV, but the odds of recent IPV for women with low and average levels of earned income were found to be no different to those of women with an above average earned income. Thus could the reduced risk be linked to *earning* an income rather than how much income women earn?

Perhaps more importantly, when the comparative importance of all nine economic resources was analysed, it was only two household resources (household income and housing tenure status) which retained a statistically significant relationship with recent IPV after the effects of the other economic resources had been accounted for. Relatively little analysis has been conducted which compares the significance of different economic resources in this way. Analysing a wider variety of economic resources, but importantly, comparing the significance of these to each other may reveal important economic resources in relation to intimate partner violence against women which have not yet been fully interrogated.

Thus women’s access to economic resources can be argued to be a significant factor in reducing the odds of intimate partner violence. Gendered changes in the economy are therefore an important factor in considering the prevention of violence against women. In addition understanding which economic resources are most significant in reducing the odds of intimate partner violence could enable the development of both economic and violence prevention policies which are more effective in combating violence against women.

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Notes


4 It is likely that the number of adults in a household will be correlated with household income. The number of adults in the household (single adult; two or more adults) was taken into account in the analysis.

Acknowledgements

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