

Violence across generations: what are the underlying mechanisms and how can we prevent continuation?

Dr Christina Thurston



BANAKEKELI
YOUNG CARERS



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH



UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
JOHANNESBURG



European Research Council
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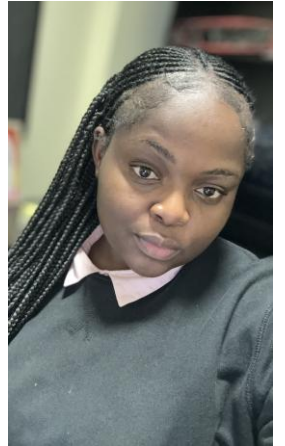
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Theories or mechanisms for the intergenerational continuity of violence

Social learning theory – children normalise violence through witnessing and/ or experiencing violence (Assink et al., 2018; Perkins et al., 2024)

Childhood abuse affects **mental health** with a greater likelihood of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder – linked to IPV and poorer parenting (Whiting et al., 2009; Taccini et al., 2024)

Childhood abuse affects **parenting**: inconsistent disciplining, difficulties responding to children's needs, an overreliance on children to meet their emotional needs (as adults), parental overinvolvement and authoritarian or permissive parenting (Greene et al., 2020)

Pathways or mechanisms underlying intergenerational cycling of violence

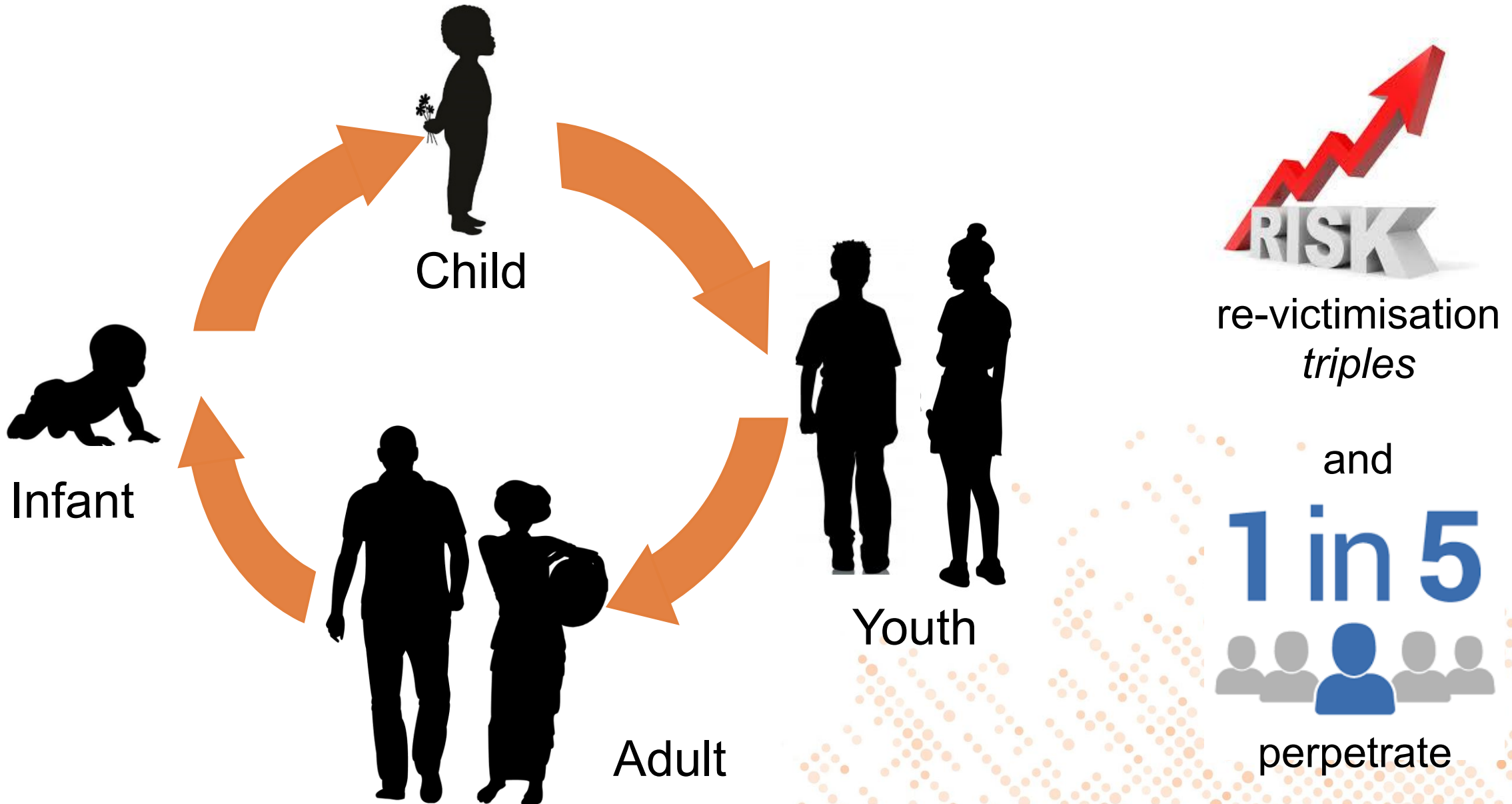
Unequal **gender power relations** between women and men as well as inequitable gender roles and norms play a critical part in the use of violence against women and children (Guedes et al., 2016)

Social inequality and poverty and intergenerational trauma (Lau et al., 2010)

Evidence of the intergenerational transmission of violence is substantiated in a vast scope of research (Adjei et al., 2024; Chiang et al., 2018; Madigan et al., 2019; Su et al., 2022; Wadji et al., 2022; Whiting et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2024), but results are mixed for some studies on account of methodological limitations (Kimber et al., 2018).



Intergenerational violence cycling



INTERRUPT_VIOLENCE

Young Carers 1

Young Carers 2

2022/2024

2010

2011

Quantitative



N=1664

Age 10-17



N=1648

Age 11-18



N=1304

Age 22-30

+



N=602

+



Age 6+

Qualitative:
30 young adults
20 caregivers
23 children

Round 2
7 complete
families

LONGITUDINAL

Pilot study

2021

N=200

Meinck et al. (2023) BMC Public Health



Study sites

Poverty

Food
insecurity

Unemployment

Poor
mental
health

Poor services
(justice, health,
education, child
protection)

Poor
understanding
child &
adolescent
development



Peri-urban



Rural





Aim

Understand the mechanisms and risks that drive intergenerational transmission of violence across multiple generations in South Africa and identify potential points for intervention.



Methodology

- » Tracing and verification of original participants
- » Consent procedures
- » Interview the young adults
 - » (our original Young Carer's participants)
- » Consent to contact former primary caregiver
- » Consent to interview oldest child (6+) they care for like a parent
- » Consent and assent of caregiver and child
- » Interview of caregiver & child
- » Ethical approval : University of Edinburgh, University of the Witwatersrand, North-West University, Mpumalanga Department of Health





Questionnaires

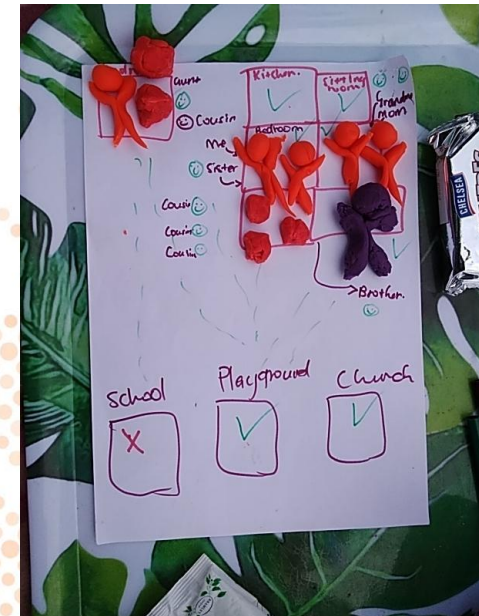
Young Adults & Caregivers:

- » Violence
- » Health Outcomes
- » Risk/Protective Factors
- » Social Protection



Children:

- » Violence
- » Health Outcomes
- » Risk/Protective Factors





Addressing participant need

1358 referrals in total

765 referrals attended by
study social workers

Approx. 1 in 5 had multiple
visits

- Suicidality/mental health
- Child protection issues
- Sexual violence
- Bullying
- Domestic abuse
- Food insecurity/ unemployment
- Identity documents
- Substance use disorders
- Disability
- HIV
- Bereavement
- Other health issues



Participant characteristics – Young Adults



25 years old
average age
for men and
women



More than **1 in 3**
men and women
experienced food
insecurity



1.5 in 10 have a
disability, for the
majority, this means
some difficulty rather
than not being able
to do something



Participant characteristics – Young Adults



2 in 3

men and women had completed matric



Less than **1 in 2** is at tertiary, where the majority receive a bursary to attend.

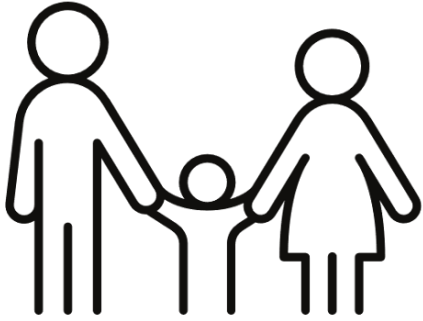


1 in 3

Young men or women had a job, with women and those with disabilities much less likely to be employed



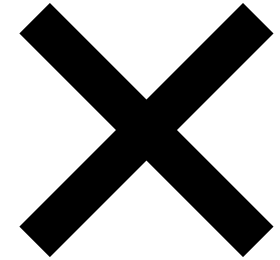
Young adult participant caregiving



7 in 10 women
4 in 10 men were
caregiving for a child like a
parent



4 in 10
pregnancies were in women
before age 20



1 in 3 men
Did not accept paternity for a
child they were told was
theirs





Young adult experiences with violence



7 in 10 experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse or neglect in childhood



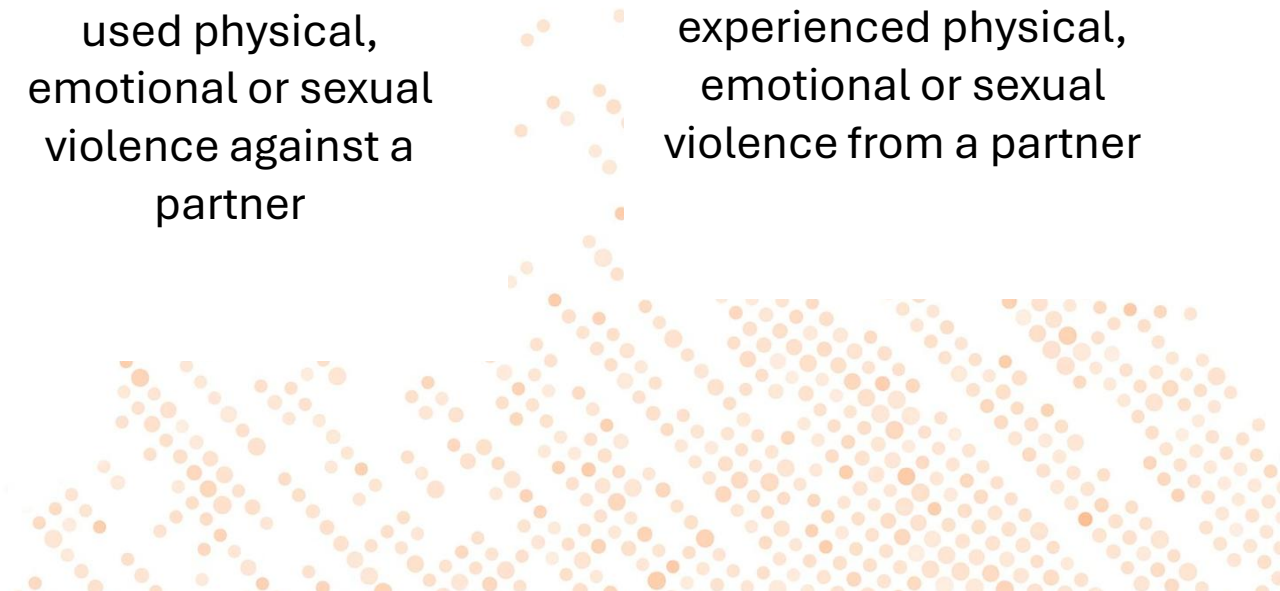
3 in 10 saw violence between adults in their family of origin in childhood



1 in 2 young men used physical, emotional or sexual violence against a partner



1 in 3 young women experienced physical, emotional or sexual violence from a partner





Child data: Quantitative findings

Child data from questionnaires

280 children (*Young (age 6–9); Middle (age 10–12); Teen (age 13–17)*)

- 55% girls; 45% boys
- Ages 6–17
 - Mean age: 8.8 years
 - 6–9 years: 68%





Prevalence of VAC experienced

Physical abuse: 55%

Hit with object: 83%

Severe—Left with injury or mark: 19%

Emotional abuse: 56%

Deprivational abuse: 8%

Any caregiver violence: 75%



Repeated sibling violence: 21%

Violence between household
adults: 39%

Any household violence: 84%



Repeated peer violence: 53%

Sexual abuse: 6%



Community violence: 27%

Attacked: 17%

Witnessed: 15%

Any violence: 91%



Considerations

- Focus of analysis is sex assigned at birth, rather than gender identity
- Lack of men who are caring for children in South Africa
 - No blaming of women intended for parenting behaviours
 - Majority of analyses focus on women and their parenting, often in difficult circumstances
- Many multi-generational households – there might be more than one primary caregiver across generations e.g., biological mother and grandparent
- Voices of young children not typically prioritised, we have attempted to prioritise these through recruiting children aged 6+

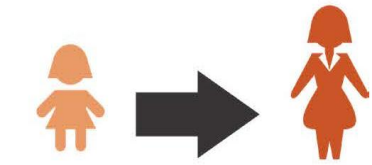


The Intergenerational continuity of violence: An exploration of patterns and mechanisms between experiences of child abuse, intimate partner violence and the use of violence against children in the home among young women and men

- To examine the patterns and mechanisms underlying intergenerational continuity of violence from childhood into adulthood, and to identify how these pathways differ for women and men.

Christofides et al, submitted to EJTP

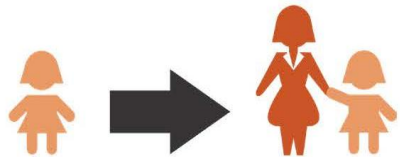
Types of intergenerational violence continuity



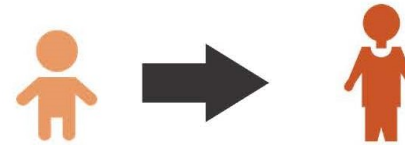
25% (178/720)
child abuse – intimate
partner violence



24% (129/547)
intimate partner violence –
child abuse



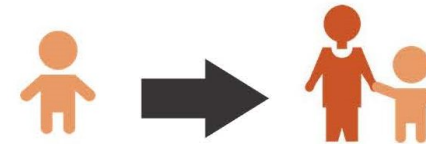
39% (213/547)
child abuse – child
abuse



34% (186/551)
child abuse – IPV
perpetration



12% (27/228)
IPV perpetration –
child abuse



13% (30/232)
child abuse – child
abuse

Model for women

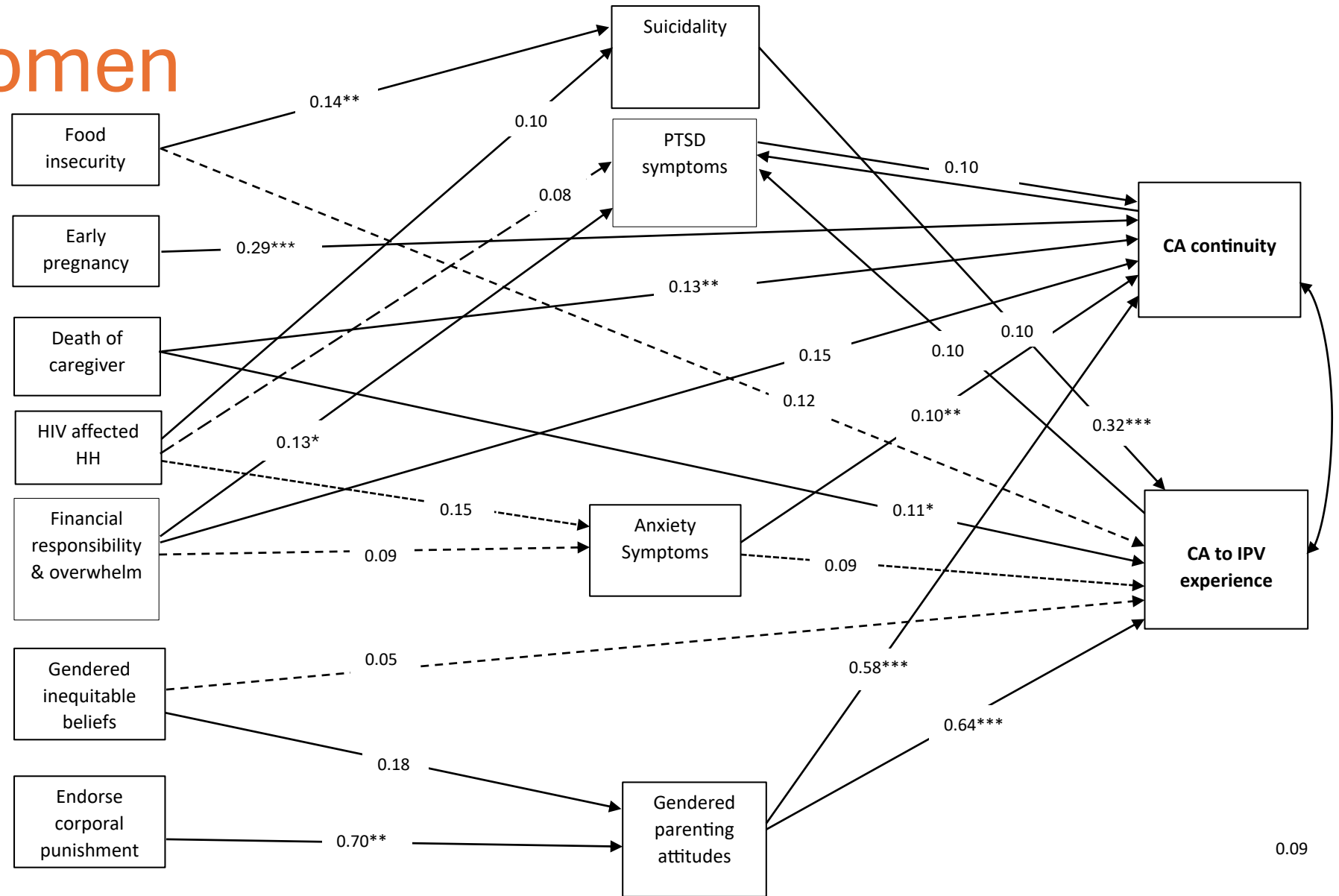
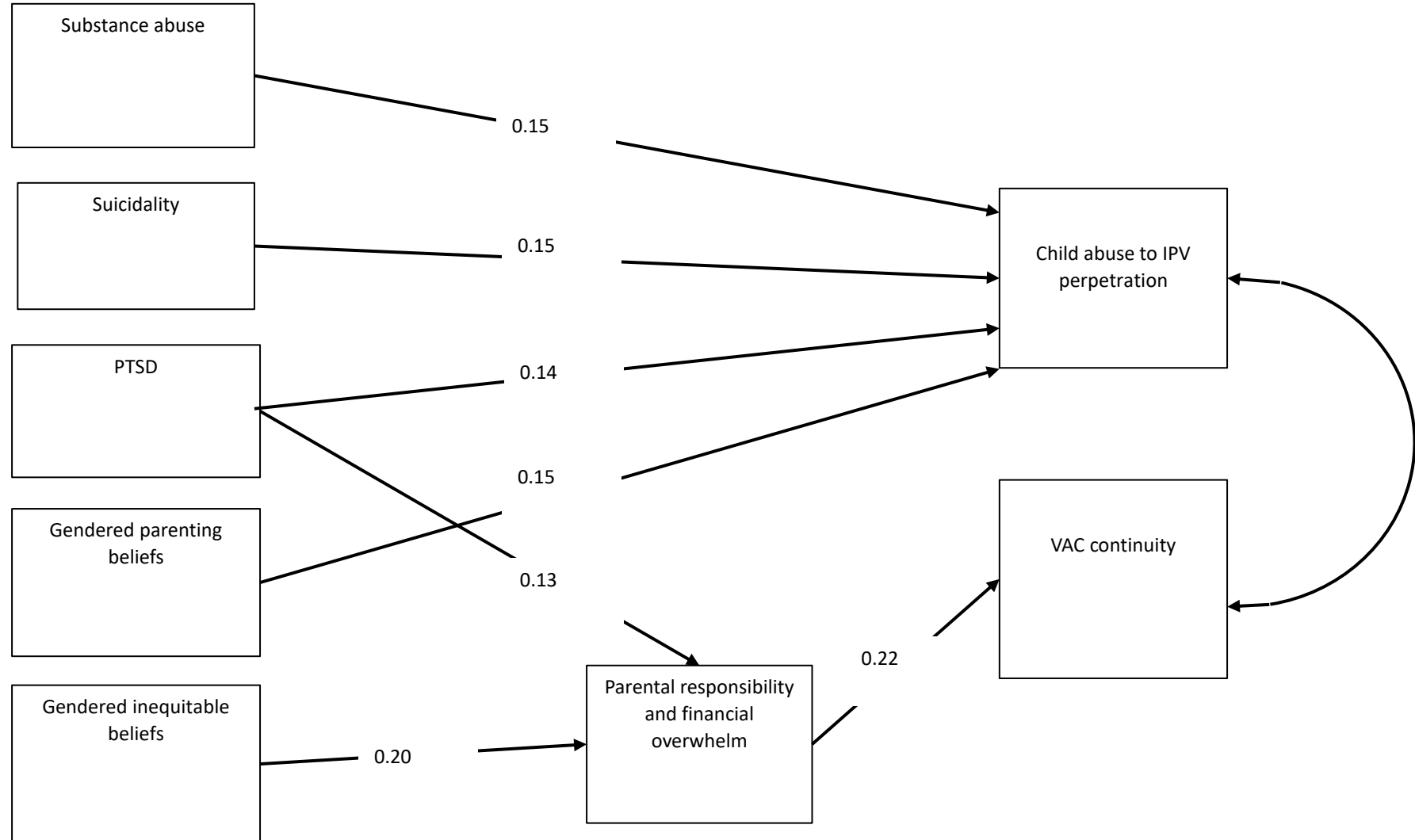


Figure 5: Path model of intergenerational violence trajectories for women (* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$,

*** $p < 0.001$)

Model for men

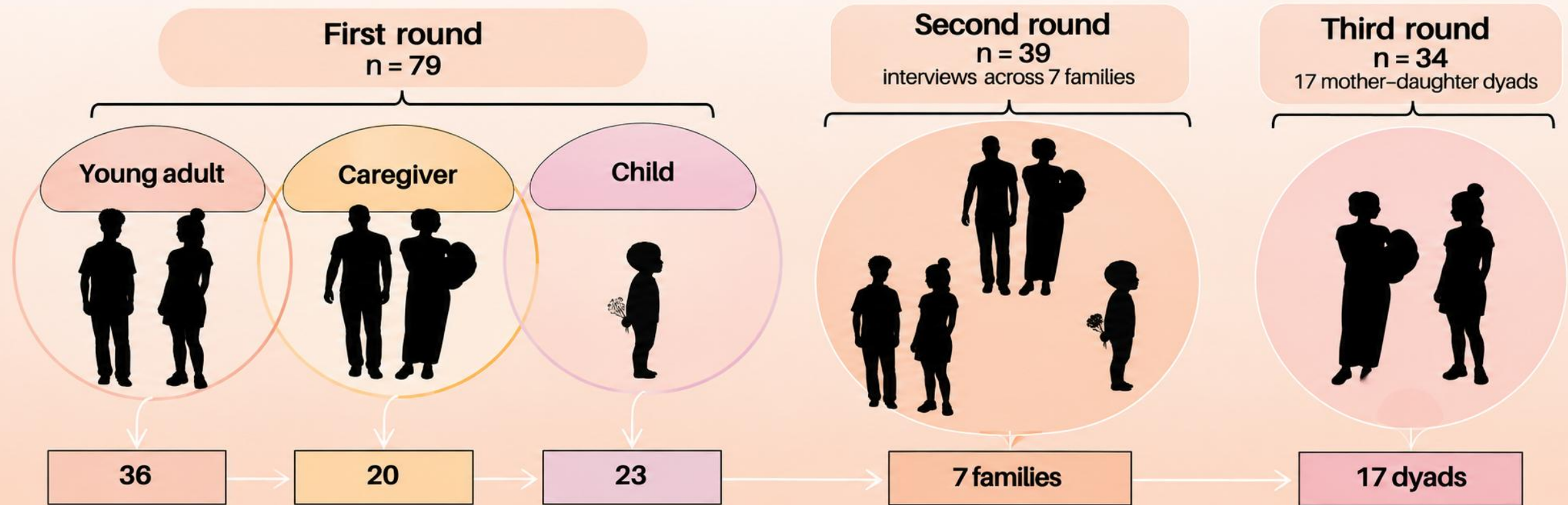


Qualitative findings on the intergenerational continuity of violence

Participants reporting experiences of violence were invited to in-depth qualitative interviews (n = 79).

Seven families were subsequently selected for follow-up interviews across three generations (n = 39 interviews). A complementary dyadic analysis explored the experiences and perspectives of 17 mother–daughter pairs (n = 34), examining how violence, parenting and protection were understood within the same family relationships.

Qualitative Completed Interviews



Poverty

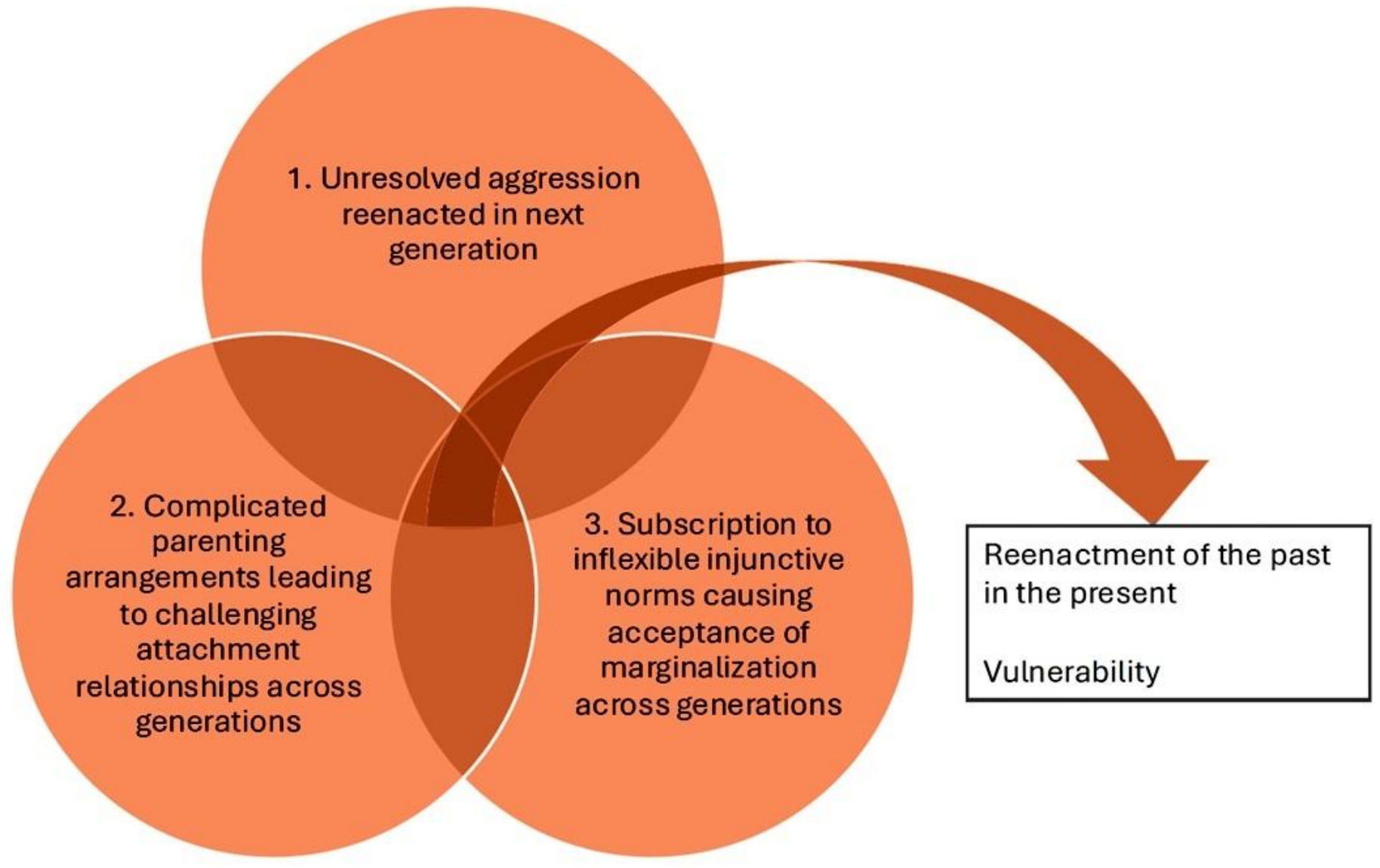
Food insecurity

Unemployment

Poor mental
health

Poor services
(justice, health,
education, child
protection)

Poor
understanding
child &
adolescent
development



A young woman, 26yrs, who experienced IPV in adulthood and physical abuse in childhood, shared insights around her own **unresolved and displaced anger** that was highlighted in her reflection on her parenting:

“It was very difficult, I won’t lie. I was angry, I was an angry mother, very angry. I would get pissed off by people on the streets and take it out on the closest person to me. And, usually, it was my daughter. She would do a small thing, like spill water, and I would overreact. Like, I realised that the way I was hitting her was not normal.”



Fig. 1. Displaced aggression (courtesy of Kweykway Consulting, Canada).

**Theme 1: Unresolved aggression
reenacted across generations**

Physical abuse appeared the only kind of discipline to consider and was handed down across generations.

A young woman, 27yrs, who beats her own children shares: *“But you know, now in our older age when we speak about it we tell her [caregiver] that by beating us she actually helped us from doing bad things, because if it wasn’t for her beatings we would be in the street smoking nyaope [drug]. She really helped us by beating us and putting us in the right path.”*

Children seemed to **understand** the accepted order. For one boy participant, aged 7yrs, when asked what adults should do when children are naughty, he responded: *“They must hit them...They must hit us when we are naughty.”*



Theme 2: Complicated parenting arrangements leading to challenging attachment relationships across generations

Living in **multigenerational multifamily homes** seemed to perpetuate an authoritarian parenting style, especially where young women, 29yrs, and caregivers, 52yrs, are both young: *“I listen to the elders and as I am also still under their roof, I am also a child. I don’t do as I please because this is not my house. If they don’t want something, I listen to them and also warn my children to discipline them because in the end we need to all get along and if we don’t that will just affect the children.”*

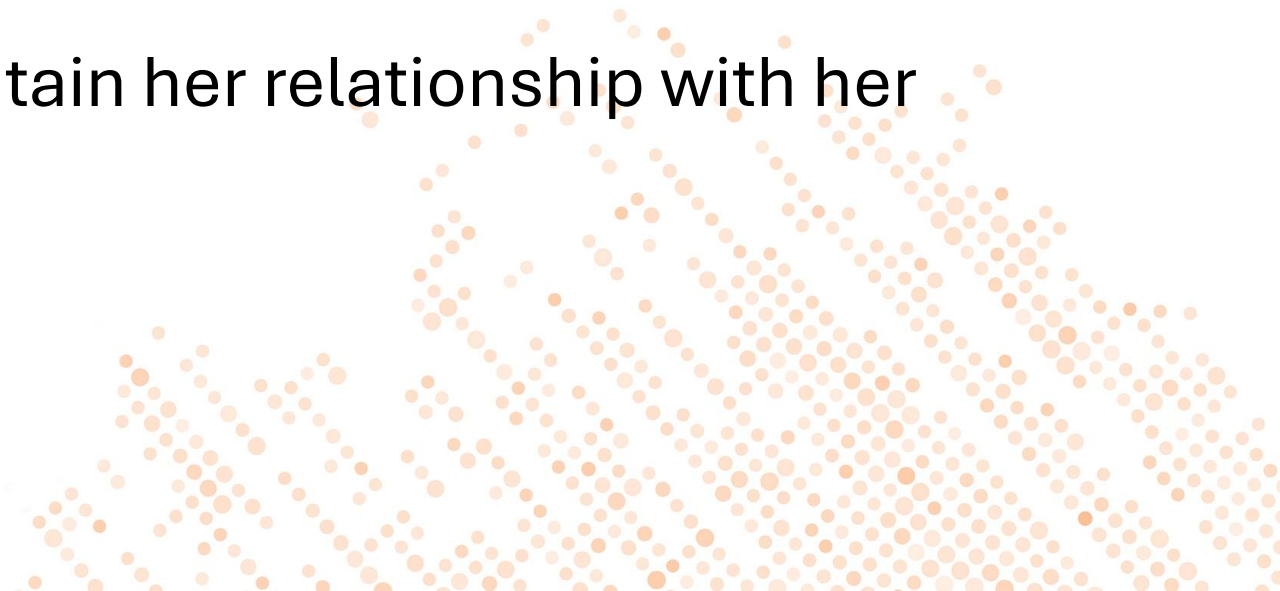
Strained relationships between one generation and the next had serious implications when living in multigenerational homes: *“For instance, now that they have cooked, even if they do not dish up for me [woman, 31yrs] they should at least dish up for my children. I have no problem them not dishing up for me, I can be able to survive even when I go to my neighbours, they can give me food, but I can’t take my children along they won’t be able to dish up for all of us. When I did something wrong, my children have to also suffer because of my actions, and that doesn’t sit well with me. Isn’t it I am the one who did wrong, the children did nothing wrong.”*



Insecure attachment bonds between mothers and daughters (dyadic analysis)

Across these accounts, some mother–daughter relationships were characterised by profound feelings of rejection, abandonment or not being loved.

This participant works hard to maintain her relationship with her mother:



I: And then tell me about the time you felt like you were hurt. Hurt by someone you know, maybe your friend, your family, or your man.

P: Well, someone that I usually hold in my heart whenever they hurt me is my mom.

I: What does she do?

*P: She... ah, **I just don't feel her. I don't feel her as my own mother.** Okay, she is there in my life, but sometimes I have this that...maybe she does not wish me well or what. I don't know; maybe it's my mind, but I see her that way.*

I: But then, have you tried speaking with your mom?

*P: She is difficult; my mom is hardheaded, but you can speak with her just like in other things; whenever you want to reason with her, she wants to be high and mighty; then I am not able, then I keep quiet. **I love my mom, it's just that. But I have so much love for her in a way that if they can say I have to kill a person for her, I will do it.** - Young daughter, dyad 15*



Mothers' inability to protect and support daughters (dyadic analysis)

Suicidality seemed present for adolescent women and particularly when they became pregnant (a common occurrence in both generations), experiencing significant stigma and lack of support from their mothers and grandmothers (who had ironically been through very similar experiences in their own adolescence).

Termination was also strongly discouraged:



I: And then, in all the challenges that you've been through, have you ever thought of hurting yourself?

P: Yes, and I did not only think, I did it, but unfortunately nothing happened.

I: What did you do?

P: I drank pills [laughing].

I: You are laughing, you know?

P: What makes me laugh is that nothing happened; instead, I vomited all the pills, I did not die, and the child also did not die...I wished with all my heart to abort them. It's just that I did not have the power to abort them, but I wished in a way that if I had the opportunity, I would have aborted them. - Young daughter, dyad 15

This participant goes on to explain her disappointment with her mother as she did not stand up for her when her grandmother, who was caring for her at the time, threw her out the house without kindness or protection during pregnancy.

Theme 3: **Subscription** to inflexible injunctive norms causing marginalization across generations

There was little opportunity to leave homesteads, **limiting freedom** on multiple levels (freedom of choice, of mind, of opportunity) with continuous interpersonal violence characterized by **patriarchy**, affecting multiple generations all living together. **Women** in particular were expected to look after their mothers in their older age. A young woman shares, 24yrs:

“I feel bad because when I look at the situation at home...even the neighbours start gossiping about us because they know that my brother is always running after us and hitting us. He just does anything and everything, they laugh at us because of this. Sometimes I even feel like I could just pack my things and go. My sister tells me that no one is going to leave this house and we all live there together. No one is leaving, our father left us here at home and this is where we will also die. Where will we go? Will we leave our mother?”





Intergenerational changes in attitudes and responses to IPV and marriage (dyadic analysis)

Interestingly, there were notable behaviour and attitude changes in the younger generation, around typically stigmatizing experiences like IPV. The older generation seemed to be more accepting of this form of violence in their relationships, whereas the younger generation seemed less so, and were outspoken and agentic regarding their rights and resources. This participant explains that she is unwilling to conform to norms that place women at risk of violence in their relationships:

You see, sometimes if you love a person, you become like, eish, maybe it's a mistake or maybe it's my fault. But at the same time, even if it's my fault or someone else's, now I'm hurt. What if he beat me and killed me? What was I going to say? Whose fault was it going to be? Because he just cannot continue to beat me, whereas he sees that I'm hurt and bleeding. You know how old people are; 'ah, you should have sat down and talked'. Then I said, 'I did not want that to be the first, I wanted that to be the last'. Besides, I did not want to sit down with them because they said I was the one who was wrong. 'Why did I go to the police station? I should have gone to his home', whereas he beat me at his home and his mother was there. – Young daughter, dyad 13



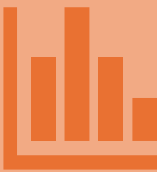
Interrupting the intergenerational cycle of violence

Thurston et al., *in preparation*

Aim and how we did it



To identify protective factors, actionable intervention points, or “interrupters” of intergenerational violence outcomes



First, we tested candidate interrupters' individual associations with 7 violence continuity outcomes.



Next, we tested: **Does protection become stronger when protective conditions are layered?**

Layering education and economic protection

Continuous schooling for Generation 1 and sustained household government grants for Generation 2 were associated with a substantially lower probability of childhood violence continuity between generations.

An intergenerational pathway

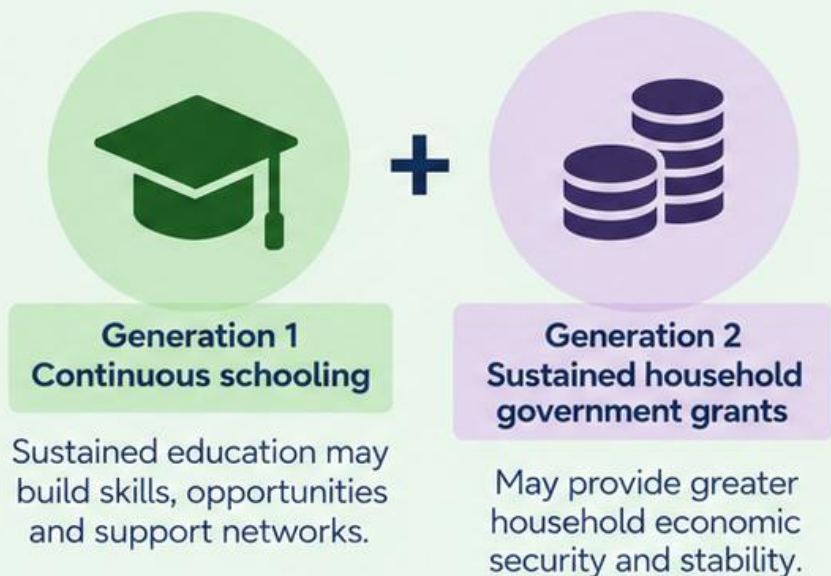
We examined continuity of childhood violence from Generation 1 to Generation 2.



Childhood violence can show continuity between generations — but this continuity is not inevitable.

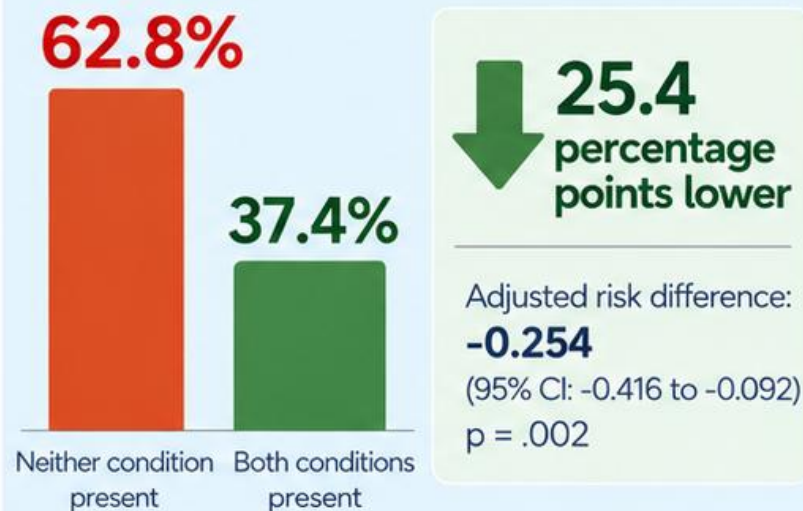
Two protective conditions together

Lower adjusted probability when both protective conditions were present.



Substantially lower adjusted probability of next-generation childhood violence

Adjusted predicted probability of Generation 2 childhood violence.



Layering protection across different domains

Food sufficiency and gender-equitable norms together were associated with a substantially lower probability of adult intimate partner violence following childhood violence.

Life-course pathway within Generation 2

We examined continuity from childhood violence to adult intimate partner violence within Generation 2.



Following the same generation from childhood into young adulthood.

Two protective conditions together

Lower adjusted probability when both protective conditions were present.



**Generation 2
Food sufficiency**

Enough food in the household.

+



**Generation 2
Gender-equitable norms**

More equitable views about gender roles and relationships.

Substantially lower adjusted probability of adult intimate partner violence

Adjusted predicted probability of Generation 2 adult intimate partner violence

55.6%



Neither condition present

19.4%



Both conditions present

**36.2
percentage
points lower**

Adjusted risk difference:
-0.362
(95% CI: -0.545 to -0.178)
 $p < .001$

Protection can start a generation earlier

Continuous schooling for Generation 1 and an HIV-free household for Generation 2 were associated with a substantially lower probability of childhood violence continuity across three generations.

A three-generation pathway

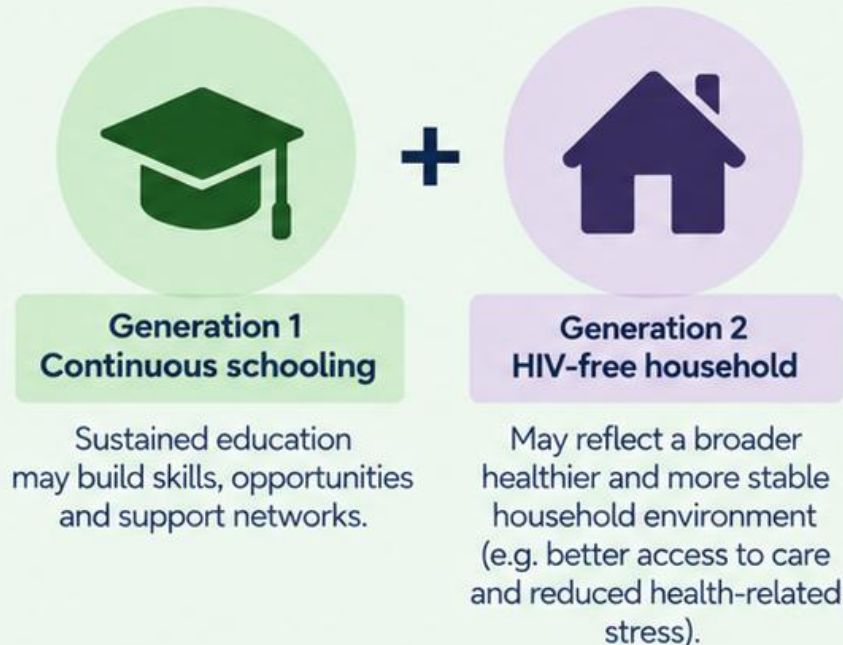
We examined continuity of childhood violence across three linked generations.



Violence can continue across generations, but this is not inevitable.

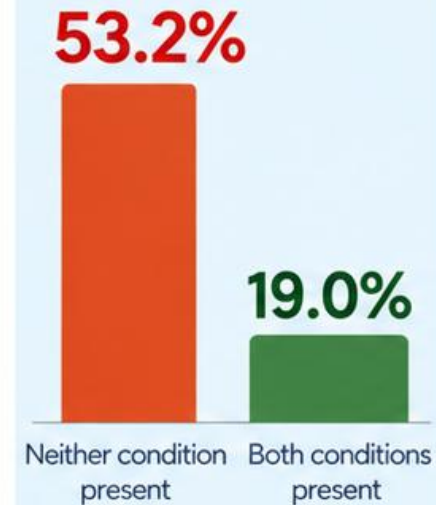
Two protective conditions together

Lower adjusted probability when both protective conditions were present.



Substantially lower adjusted probability of three-generation childhood violence continuity

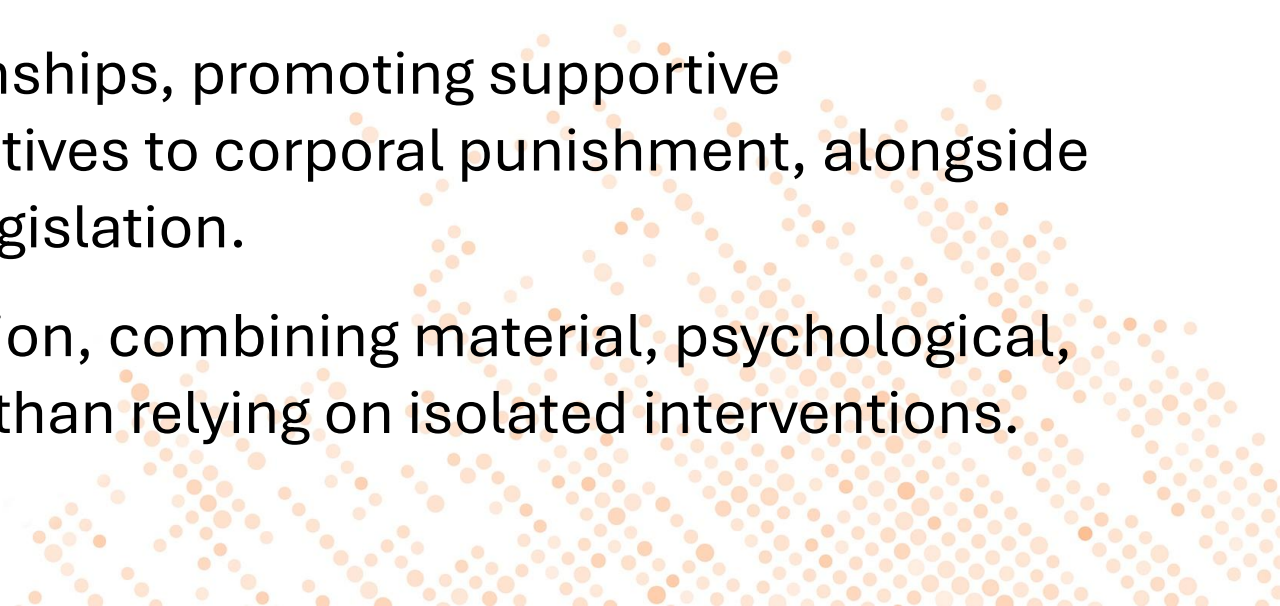
Adjusted predicted probability of three-generation childhood violence continuity.



34.2
percentage
points lower

Adjusted risk difference:
-0.342
(95% CI: -0.552 to -0.132)
p = .001

Overall Recommendations

- Address structural adversity, including poverty, inequality and the conditions that place families at risk.
 - Challenge harmful gender norms and attitudes towards violence through coordinated action across individual, family, community and societal levels.
 - Invest in accessible mental-health support, recognising the cumulative effects of violence and traumatic stress across the life course.
 - Strengthen parenting and family relationships, promoting supportive communication and non-violent alternatives to corporal punishment, alongside implementation of existing protective legislation.
 - Prioritise holistic, multisectoral prevention, combining material, psychological, relational and structural support rather than relying on isolated interventions.
- 

Thank You! 😊

Meinck et al. *BMC Public Health* (2023) 23:395
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-15168-y>

BMC Public Health

STUDY PROTOCOL

Open Access

Interrupting the intergenerational cycle of violence: protocol for a three-generational longitudinal mixed-methods study in South Africa (INTERRUPT_VIOLENCE)



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