

Condemning violence without rejecting sexism? Exploring how young men understand intimate partner violence in Ecuador

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Background: This study aims to explore young men's understanding of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Ecuador, examining similarities and differences between how ordinary and activist young men conceptualize IPV against women.

Methods: We conducted individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with 35 young men – five FGDs and five interviews with ordinary young men, and 11 interviews with activists – and analysed the data generated using qualitative content analysis.

Results: Among the ordinary young men the theme 'too much gender equality leads to IPV' emerged, while among the activists the theme 'gender inequality is the root of IPV'. Although both groups in our study rejected IPV, their positions differed, and we claim that this is relevant. While activists considered IPV as rooted in gender inequality, ordinary young men understood it as a response to the conflicts generated by increasing gender equality and women's attempts to gain autonomy.

Keywords: *intimate partner violence; qualitative content analysis; gender; masculinities; gender equality; machismo; Ecuador*

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Intimate partner violence (IPV), defined by the World Health Organization as 'behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behavior' (1), is the most prevalent form of violence against women, with devastating effects on their health and well-being (1–3). Although we acknowledge that IPV can occur against men and within same-sex intimate relationships, here we focus on men's intimate partner violence against women, and the acronym used – IPV – refers to that. Despite the fact that IPV remains commonplace, progress towards its eradication has been notoriously difficult; however, IPV is today less accepted and has become the subject of public policies, laws and interventions in many countries (1, 4).

From a feminist perspective, IPV is one extreme consequence of gender-power structures that force

women into a subordinate position (5). Consequently, dismantling sexism is the key to eradicating IPV. However, the connections between sexism and patriarchal dominance and intimate partner violence are not as straightforward as it might appear to be. On the one hand research shows that men who commit IPV have more sexist attitudes, and IPV is more prevalent in settings with higher gender inequality (6, 7). On the other hand, progressive changes towards gender equality may also trigger IPV as a reaction against increased women's autonomy (7–9). Ambivalent sexism theory states that the pervasiveness of sexism is based on its ambivalent construction. According to this theory, sexism has two faces: hostile sexism, constituted by all the extreme features that may arise, less acceptance and sanction; and benevolent sexism, constituted by features that sustain gender inequality and women subordination but that are categorized as prosocial and may even

be honored (9–12). In the Latin American context Torres has applied this theory to explore the complexities of machismo, and other authors have also discussed its ambivalent features (13, 14). Machismo can be considered a regional form of sexism that is hegemonic in Latin America – and elsewhere (15–19). Marianismo, constructed as machismo’s complement, stresses the construction of women as submissive, chaste and self-sacrificing – a concept similar to Connell’s emphasized femininity (20–22). Similar to what ambivalent sexism theory states, several Latin American authors (13, 14, 16) have proposed that machismo can be considered as including both positive and negative characteristics. Torres, for example, identifies five different types of machismo, which differed in issues such as authoritarianism, control over women and openness to change (13).

While for many years the fight against IPV focused on women’s empowerment and targeting men only as potential perpetrators (5, 23, 24), more recently the need to involve men has been highlighted (25, 26). Evidence shows that young men are the most likely to engage in IPV (26), that men’s attitudes to and perceptions of gender relations and IPV are strongly linked with exercising violence against their partners (27), and that programmes that promote gender equality among young men show promising results (6, 27–31). Despite such evidence, research on IPV has paid only limited attention to exploring how young men understand IPV – especially in low-income settings (26, 27) – and even less to whether these understandings may change among young men who participate in programmes promoting gender equality.

In Ecuador, where this study was conducted, IPV remains prevalent and severe: the last DHS (Demographic Health Survey) conducted in 2004 showed that 46% of Ecuadorian women had experienced violence during their lifetime, with 95% of cases occurring at home (32). This is despite that the country is making notable progress putting IPV on the public agenda (33). The Law Against Violence Against Women and the Family (Law 103) was passed in 1995, one year after the first Women’s Police Stations were set up. Law 103, together with initiatives in the health and education sectors, represented a considerable advance, not least because it contributed to visibilizing an issue that was previously portrayed as private (34, 35). Twelve years later, in 2007, a presidential decree was passed declaring the ‘eradication of IPV as state policy’. A commission was also established at the highest level, launching the ‘National Plan for the Eradication of Gender-Based Violence’ (36). Unlike Law 103, the decree and plan explicitly state that IPV is rooted in gender inequality and machismo. The decree and plan also address the state’s responsibility to support shelters and centres to provide adequate care for victims, and include amongst the five main strategies one aimed at

transforming sociocultural patterns, such as machismo, that generate IPV. Since 2009, the Women’s Police Stations have been transformed into specialized courts on violence against women and the family, and integrated into the judicial system. Currently the penal code is under revision, with a proposal to classify violence against women as a crime rather than a minor offence (37). Despite these notable advances at policy level, published research on IPV in Ecuador is scarce, and formative unpublished research focuses on experiences of women surviving IPV and their perceptions of available services (35, 38–40).

This study aims to explore how young men in Ecuador understand men’s intimate partner violence against women (IPV), and whether young men participating in programmes promoting sexual and reproductive rights and gender equality conceptualize IPV differently from young men who do not. Gaining insight on how young men reason regarding IPV, and how this reasoning might be challenged by activism, may provide relevant input to ongoing policies and programmes aiming to transform the sociocultural patterns that sustain IPV.

Methodology

Study area

This study was conducted in the province of Orellana, located in the Amazon Basin of Ecuador. Orellana is a large but sparsely populated province, with an ethnically diverse and young population. The majority live in rural communities, with the main sources of income being subsistence farming, work in the oil extraction sector or in the civil service (41).

A qualitative study conducted in the region in 2000 showed that physical IPV was perceived as a main problem by women, closely linked to men’s alcohol abuse and psychological violence. Unwanted pregnancies and single motherhood were also mentioned as problematic (42). The results of this study were used to develop an intervention aiming to improve young people’s knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and their access to services, with a human rights and gender approach. The intervention was funded by UNFPA, and implemented through the local organization FUSA in collaboration with other public and private organizations and grass roots groups. It began in 2001, with some activities still ongoing. With young people, the intervention worked through the implementation of sex education in schools and through workshops with youth groups and organizations. In these workshops several issues – including sexuality, gender as socially constructed, violence, sexual diversity and reproductive rights – were discussed in an open and informal way each week throughout the year. In addition to the activities directed towards young people, the intervention implemented activities with health and

educational providers and grass roots organizations, and supported the implementation of an integral centre for women's health that included health, legal and social services for women experiencing or survivors of IPV and sexual violence (43).

Despite the many implemented activities and the advances made in terms of local policies and investment in the prevention and management of IPV, more recent research has shown that gendered structures still strongly constrain young women's agency and sexual and reproductive freedom, and place them at increased risk of control, abuse and violence (44). However, some signs of change and resistance are also emerging, i.e. some providers criticize the moralist approach to girls' sexuality, and young girls are aiming for financial autonomy as a way of gaining power and independence (15, 44). Our previous research exploring how activist young men construct masculinities and sexual relations shows that change towards more 'gender-equal' masculinities might be taking place (unpublished observation Goicolea & Öhman (45)).

Participants and data collection

For this study, we conducted individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with two different groups of participants. The first resulted in data set 1, consisting of five individual interviews and five FGDs with 19 ordinary young men who had not participated in groups or organizations receiving training/education on gender issues. Ages ranged from 17 to 25 (mean age 21). The second resulted in data set 2, consisting of 11 individual interviews with activist young men who had participated in groups or organizations receiving training/education on gender issues and were also engaged in training/educating other young people. Ages ranged from 20 to 25 (mean age 21.5). Each group was considered a separate data set and analysed accordingly. All but one young man in each data set was single and none stated a particular sexual orientation except for one in the second data set who identified himself as gay. Educational levels and job status were similar in both groups.

The first author (IG) conducted all the individual interviews and moderated the focus group discussions. IG lived and worked in the area for more than 10 years, which facilitated access to participants. Data collection took place from December 2009 to March 2010 within a larger research project on young men's masculinities, gender relations and health.

Both the individual interviews and FGD guides followed an open format, and several aspects were explored, such as sexuality, reproduction, fatherhood, masculinities, marriage, contraceptive use, gender relations and violence in general. Across the interviews, participants used diverse terms to refer to men's violence

against women in intimate relationships, including mistreatment, wife abuse, domestic violence, intrafamily violence and partner violence. Direct translation of these terms will be maintained in the quotations, but elsewhere we will use the term IPV when referring to men's violence against women in intimate relationships.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish, which was the mother tongue of the interviewer and all of the respondents. Transcriptions in Spanish were entered into Open Code 3.4 for managing the analysing process (46). Two data sets were created, one for each group.

Data analysis

For this study, all the original transcriptions in Spanish were analysed using qualitative content analysis, focusing on aspects related to IPV (47). After reading the interview transcriptions several times, meaning units that referred to IPV were identified. From the meaning units – short summarized versions of the sentences – codes were developed. For each data set, codes were grouped together to build categories. Categories reflected the manifest content, i.e. what the interview transcripts overtly expressed about IPV. Finally, from each data set one theme emerged that cut across the categories identified within each data set and reflected the latent content. All the authors were involved in the data analysis, and categories, themes and comparisons between the two data sets were negotiated and refined through discussion between them.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the Universidad Central de Ecuador. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants. Names were erased to ensure confidentiality. During the FGDs, the moderator stressed the importance of respecting others' opinions and maintaining the privacy of what was said within the group. Participants were encouraged to talk about their perceptions and opinions, and not necessarily about their personal experiences. However, during the interviews and group discussions some participants openly described personal experiences.

Results

The two data sets were analyzed separately, and consequently themes and categories emerged specifically for each data set. The two emerging themes referred to how both groups established connections between gender equality/inequality and IPV. On the one hand, within the data set of the ordinary young men one theme was identified: too much gender equality leads to IPV. This theme represented how ordinary young men generally rejected IPV but justified it as men's response to increased women's power and autonomy. On the other hand, within

the data set of the activist young men, a different theme was identified: gender inequality is the root of IPV. This theme represented how activist young men categorically rejected violence and linked the existence of IPV with gender inequality and machismo.

The themes were cut across categories that referred to young men’s level of consciousness regarding IPV, how they positioned themselves in relation to IPV, and their views and actions concerning the fight against IPV. Within data set 1 – ordinary young men – the theme ‘too much gender equality leads to IPV’ cut across three categories: acknowledging the existence of IPV, fluctuating positions on IPV and ambivalent positions on actions against IPV.

Within data set 2 – activists – the theme ‘gender inequality is the root of IPV’ cut across four categories: understanding IPV pervasiveness, connecting IPV with machismo, acknowledging (limited) social changes, and becoming personally involved and rejecting violence. Table 1 presents the themes and categories and the main differences between the two data sets.

Ordinary young men – too much gender equality leads to IPV

Acknowledging the existence of IPV

Ordinary young men did not deny the existence of IPV in Orellana: they acknowledged that IPV was very common; they did not minimize its harmful effects, and they commented on personal experience of witnessing IPV or hearing about cases of IPV from other people. They stated the strong role of the family in reproducing IPV: boys and young men learn to exercise IPV because they witness their fathers or other male relatives exercising violence against their intimate female partners. IPV was described as an escalating process, where insults led to arguments, and ended up in physical violence. In this process jealousy was considered a strong trigger of IPV.

These things happen when he starts reproaching her, then he insults her, then it leads to fighting, and then comes the slap. That happens because there is an argument, a fight, because she cheated on him, or he saw her kissing another boy ... (Interview 1)

Table 1. Themes and categories emerging from each data set and the main similarities and differences between them

| Comparisons between the two groups | Data set 1 general young men | Data set 2 activist young men |
|--|--|--|
| <i>Connections between gender equality/inequality and IPV</i> While general young men in the main rejected IPV but justified it as men’s response to increased gender equality, activists categorically rejected violence and linked the existence of IPV with gender inequality. | Theme: Too much gender equality leads to IPV | Theme: Gender inequality is the root of IPV |
| <i>Young men’s level of consciousness regarding IPV</i> Both groups recognized the existence and harmful effects of IPV on women. However, the activists showed a deeper understanding of the complexities of IPV and the difficulties that women suffering from IPV face when they seek help or want to end an abusive relationship. | Category: Acknowledging the existence of IPV | Category: Understanding the pervasiveness of IPV |
| <i>Young men’s position regarding IPV</i> General young men in the main rejected IPV, but they also considered it inherent in men and understandable under certain circumstances; they did not consider controlling behaviour as IPV. Activist young men firmly rejected IPV. They considered controlling behaviour as a form of IPV and understood machismo as generating IPV. | Category: Fluctuating positions on IPV | Category: Connecting IPV with machismo |
| <i>Young men’s views and actions concerning the fight against IPV</i> Although general young men agreed with institutional measures against IPV, they feared that these could give too much power to women. Activist young men were knowledgeable about the institutional responses against IPV and the social changes towards lower tolerance of IPV (pushed for by the women’s movement); however, they criticized their poor implementation. Activist men felt a personal conflict between maintaining a pacifist position and avoiding responding with violence against IPV aggressors. | Category: Ambivalent positions on actions against IPV | Categories: Acknowledging (limited) social changes Becoming personally involved and rejecting violence |

Participants identified IPV as occurring within stable (adult) couple relationships, even if some references were made to violence between young people in boyfriend–girlfriend relationships. IPV was associated with ignorance, with some participants remarking that IPV was more common among poor uneducated people, and that it was less tolerated nowadays than in the past:

Mistreatment is related to poverty. Since they are little boys from poor families, they are raised wrongly ... education makes you understand that you shouldn't do that, that there are ways to solve it. And it also depends on the person's education. In the family, with the parents, how they educate their children. I mean, if the father was a *machista* and beat his wife, then the son will learn to do those bad things, too. (FGD 1)

Fluctuating positions on IPV

Across the interviews there were remarks against violence in general, and a call to solve conflicts through dialogue, never resorting to violence of any kind. Men who committed physical violence against women were labelled '*machistas*' and criticized. Violence was not considered a solution and was never justified, even in cases of flagrant infidelity. Separation and divorce were considered much better options than violence; separation was also felt to be best for the children. IPV was perceived as negatively affecting all members of the family equally, rather than solely women:

It is better to divorce than letting the beatings continue [...] It seems that if children see how the couple mistreat each other, they suffer more, then it is better to separate, and the children will decide who they'll follow, either the father or the mother. (Interview 2)

There were also remarks against IPV not based on an overall rejection of violence, but on the view that women were a vulnerable group who needed men's protection. It was acceptable for a man to fight another man – since they were at the same level – but not to fight people who were viewed as weaker, such as women or children. That was a gentleman's position, implying that real men would never hit a woman, but would always be willing to fight another man to protect her.

I like to defend women [...] If a man is beating his wife, and he is not my friend, I will beat him, I will give him some of the same to make him understand that a man should never hit a woman, and that he should fight a man if he wants to fight. (Interview 3)

Finally, even if IPV was generally rejected, it was also constructed as understandable, inherent in men's impulsive nature. Even if they criticized it, participants declared reasons that could justify IPV, such as infidelity. Participants also referred to how women could tease and

rile men until they were beaten; in that sense they felt that physical IPV could be a way of 'calming down' women.

I was there and they were having an argument [...] and he told her that he was going to beat her, that he was going to slap her ... and she teased him 'Go on, beat me, beat me. You're not man enough to beat me', she told him. Then he raised his hand and 'Bam', he slapped her in the face, and the woman just shut up and calmed down. There are women like that who like to goad men. (FGD 3)

Controlling behaviour was not considered IPV and the connections between the two were not established by the participants. Even if there were expressions criticizing men who considered themselves the owner of their female partners, men's controlling behaviour was strongly taken for granted. They distinguished between being abusive, prepotent and violent, being what they called '*machista*', which was generally considered bad, and being controlling and holding the reins, which was accepted and promoted.

I am not a *machista*, because it's one thing to be a *machista* but a very different one to be authoritarian! I'm authoritarian, because I have authority over my partner. (FGD 1)

To minimize the risk of IPV, women should be accountable to men, behave in a respectable way, avoid raising suspicion and be able to 'manage' men's impulsive behaviours:

The woman is acting wrong. If there's a problem, they have to try and solve it together. They are both wrong, the man because he beats her, but the woman, too: she is even worse, because instead of reasoning ... She should try to foresee what might happen and behave accordingly. (FGD 1)

Ambivalence and contradictions were present not just between participants but also in the accounts of individual participants, fluctuating from justifying IPV, to rejecting violence out of hand, to adopting the gentleman's position, as seen in the quote below from one participant in a FGD:

Violence against women is the worst thing possible ..., it's the worst thing a man can do ..., I would hang those motherfuckers ... I mean, a woman can't defend herself. It's deplorable, any mistreatment of a woman by a man ... Although sometimes I think there are some women who ... I don't know ..., they go beyond what a man can tolerate. There are women that keep on and on, and then you feel you need to grab hold of her and punch her. (FGD 3)

Ambivalent positions on actions against IPV

Participants' positions regarding actions against IPV were also ambivalent and contradictory. On getting

personally involved in cases of IPV, participants expressed how they felt it deeply and reacted with rage. They described how they could get in between the couple to stop the fight, or even beat the aggressor. However, they also stated that they were reluctant to get involved in an issue that would likely bring them trouble. As one participant pointed out, ‘He [the aggressor] can ask you: “What’s it got to do with you? Are you her lover or something?”’ (FGD 4)

Between these two positions, there were also vague allusions to trying to reason with the aggressor, to talk with him, appeal to him and question him regarding his reasons for engaging in IPV.

Participant A: [when faced with a case of a man beating his girlfriend in the street] I would go to help, I would ask him ‘What’s going on?’ and shout at him if he was going to beat her.

Participant B: I would talk to him, try to make him see sense, talk with him, have a dialogue. (FGD 4)

Participants were aware of the state’s legal responses to punish IPV, and preferred to resort to those means rather than getting physically involved when faced with cases of IPV. References to the Women’s Police Station were constantly made, and here again ambivalence and contradiction emerged. On the one hand, participants acknowledged the need for a legal response to protect women exposed to IPV. They recognized IPV as a problem where police and law enforcement structures should intervene, and they acknowledged that the Women’s Police Station had been beneficial for women. The legal measures that a woman exposed to IPV could make use of were considered to give power to women. On the other hand, participants expressed caution regarding the law enforcement measures against IPV. They claimed that women were taking advantage of these measures, or even ‘abusing’ them to oppress men. The Women’s Police Station was considered to be biased in favour of women, and was portrayed more as a way of exacting revenge than justice.

[The Women’s Police Station] is very good, it’s a way of enforcing women’s rights, backing women ... Even if I have to say that nowadays women resort too much to that, and sometimes they abuse it. [...] there are cases when the man is calm, but he just touches his wife and she runs for a restraining order and he ends up in jail. That’s bad, because there are women who abuse that authority. (Interview 1)

The existence of these legal measures also led participants to consider that women now had no excuses for not reacting against IPV. Some comments blaming women who did not ‘take action’ against violent partners were made.

Young activist men – gender inequality is the root of IPV

Understanding the pervasiveness of IPV

The participants described IPV against women as widespread, and references to personal experiences in their own families were common. Their understanding of IPV went beyond physical abuse to include psychological, sexual and economic violence:

I knew a case from a friend. She was thrown out of the house by her husband, and they were married, and after seven years he threw her out. And she didn’t have any rights to the house or anything, because she was ‘not working’ [quotation marks made by participant] during the seven years ... , but I mean, she had contributed as well during those years ... There is a lot of violence, and discrimination. Violence doesn’t just come in the form of beating, but also in psychological and economic mistreatment. Women are economically tied because their husbands never share a cent, and they are reminded that they are ‘not working’ [quotation marks made by participant]. (Interview 1)

Even if IPV was mainly portrayed as occurring between formal cohabiting partners, they also referred to violence within boyfriend–girlfriend relationships, especially sexual violence.

Participants did not express any blame towards women who stayed in violent relationships. On the contrary, the barriers and difficulties that those women could face were recognized. The judicial system, police and other institutions were criticized for their lack of sensitivity in dealing with these issues, and were considered a reason for the persistence of IPV:

[Regarding IPV] the legal and other authorities are not well prepared to carry out that role, that’s the way I see it. You go there to report a case of intrafamily violence, and they tell you that it is the woman who should come, she has to report it ... , I mean the husband can be about to kill her and they want her to come and inform them ... We still don’t have authorities who are really sensitive to the issue. (Interview 2)

Criticisms referred not only to the poor implementation of protection measures and the unsympathetic attitudes of those dealing with IPV in public institutions, but also to the way the system itself was structured. Participants stated that the judicial system was structured in a way that favoured men economically in cases of separation or divorce, and which lessened men’s financial (and other) responsibilities towards their children if they did not cohabit with the mother.

Connecting IPV with machismo

The participants connected IPV with women's subordination to men and machismo. They strongly criticized and rejected machismo, referring to it as 'Man's immaturity that makes him feel above everybody else . . . , believing he is superior to everybody else, superior to women, and consequently marginalizes and discriminates against women' (Interview 4). Participants distanced themselves from '*machista*' men, criticizing them as resorting to violence as a way of being dominant, of 'showing who is in charge' and always 'getting away with it'. Participants portrayed '*machista*' men as narrow-minded, stubborn and unreasonable in their attitudes and actions. Machismo was considered a form of violence in itself, as well as the root of IPV and other forms of gender-based and even social violence. Connections between machismo, women's subordination, controlling behaviour, and IPV were made across the interviews:

I think it's wrong if a man beats his wife. That's because he is too *machista*, he thinks that he is the one that rules, that he is the owner of the family, the boss, the one in charge . . . , that's the root of violence, because it means, like, women are useless [. . .] Those are the men that abuse women, who say that men are the ones that rule, because they are the ones who are earning . . . , that women are not able to work, that women shouldn't have a job but rather stay at home and do this and do that . . . , and he can come home drunk and turn up the music loud and so on . . . (Interview 3)

Acknowledging (limited) social changes

Participants acknowledged that progress had been made on IPV in the country. They were familiar with policies, programmes, campaigns and institutions dealing with IPV and felt that they had helped to reduce the number of cases and severity of IPV. They considered that this change has taken place mainly as a result of pressure by women, who had become less tolerant of IPV. Supported by emerging progressive policies and spaces to exercise their right to denounce, women were becoming more aware of their right to live free from violence and were increasingly demanding this right:

In the past women may have said, 'If he beats me, if he kills me, he's still my husband' . . . and they put up with it. But now women are much more aware . . . , and they don't put up with violent behaviour, they leave. (Interview 1)

Participants felt that men in general had been forced to change and reduce their exercise of IPV. The activist young men considered that this change had occurred because men in Ecuador generally were afraid of the consequences, namely being reported to the police followed by prison. There was also an increased social rejection of men who were violent towards their partners:

Change has happened. Compared to old times, how our fathers behaved . . . , young men are not like that. Because there have been a lot of campaigns and this has increased the fear among young men. I think that awareness raising among young men is working, regarding not engaging in violent behaviour But I think that the majority of young men react more because of fear, fear of going to prison, fear of being reported to the police. I don't think it's because they truly assume the change, that they have become more responsible and aware of women's rights. (Interview 5)

Becoming personally involved and rejecting violence

Participants recounted several occasions when they had witnessed and got involved in stopping IPV. Their knowledge was not theoretical but based on actual experience, and one that raised strong emotions. They described IPV as something that enraged them, or something that made them feel impotent, and definitely something that moved them to act. Acting could mean becoming personally involved themselves, calling the police or other law enforcement agencies, or advising women they knew about services and procedures available.

I always get involved, because it enrages me. And even if you advise the woman to report it I mean, I have advised my relatives like that, 'Go, report him, it shouldn't be like this' . . . , but sometimes it's much more complex, because they may answer that he is supporting her [financially], or that she loves him . . . , and I always argue that that can't be called love, nobody who loves you hits you. I can't understand why that happens. And it really makes me angry. The other day I earned myself a punch in the street, because there was a man hitting a young woman and I faced up to him and said: 'Why are you hitting her?' And he punched me and told me it was none of my business. (Interview 1)

Participants' rejection of IPV was based on a general rejection of violence as a means to resolve conflicts. Participants took a pacifist stance, repeatedly stating that violence was never justified, that nothing is solved by fighting, that nobody has the right to beat others and that it does not mean that you are not a man if you do not retaliate:

Boys learn that a man's attitude is that if somebody shouts at him, if somebody strikes him, then he should respond like a man, hitting back . . . I mean, as if beating someone up was a 'man's attitude'. But I think that I'm still a man even if I decide not to retaliate. I mean, what's the point? If somebody is going to hit me, what is the point of squaring up to him? I will solve nothing by getting into a fight. (Interview 5)

The participants rejected not only IPV, but also violence against other men, or punishment of children as a way of ‘teaching them a lesson’. In this sense, they described a process of ‘learning to control their own violent behaviour’, and how participation in groups and organizations had changed their approach to problems, frustrations and disappointments. This meant taking an analytical stance and not resorting to violence:

I have changed a lot from participating in these workshops. Especially regarding the issue of violence, especially on that. I mean, before I was so violent, very violent, half a word and I would react badly. But since I started this, because we talked about the types of violence, machismo and all that, I have changed quite a lot, a hundred percent. (Interview 6)

However, maintaining a pacifist position was difficult when confronted with cases of IPV – when they were in two minds about whether to fight the aggressor, or stay calm and appeal to him, or report it to the authorities, knowing that the authorities might not be sympathetic and helpful in such cases.

Discussion

Young men in this study – both ordinary young men and activists – recognized the existence and harmful effects of IPV, rejected it and distanced themselves from men who committed IPV. This contrasts with previous research by Segura (35) conducted with indigenous communities in the neighbouring province of Sucumbíos. In Segura’s study, adult men naturalized IPV and trivialized its pervasiveness and harmful effects. This divergence could be due to the fact that our participants were younger, better educated and living in a semi-urban area where access to information and services – including those dealing with IPV – was easier. It may also be a sign that existing policies and regulations – especially Law 103 and the Women’s Police Stations – have influenced how people conceptualize IPV. In fact, several studies have shown that changes towards less tolerance of IPV among men are also taking place in other Latin America settings (48–50).

Although both groups in our study rejected IPV, their positions differed, and we hypothesize that this is significant. Ordinary young men had an ambivalent view of IPV, justifying it under certain circumstances, while activist men were categorical in their rejection of it. Gender relations were strongly present in the accounts of both ordinary young men and activists. However, the way they were constructed differed radically: activists considered gender inequality to be the cause of IPV and aimed to challenge sexism, while ordinary young men justified IPV when gender inequality and men’s dominance were threatened. For ordinary young men, IPV could be a way of placating women’s attempts to gain

power. In that sense, IPV was viewed as a last resort when men could not maintain their supremacy by other means. IPV was rejected because real men should not need to use it in order to maintain their hegemony, and good women should know how to behave in order to avoid threatening the status quo. This is in line with Connell’s gender-power theory, which portrays violence as not only part of the system of patriarchal domination, but also as a measure of its deficiency (21, 51). Other authors have also pointed out that IPV can be triggered as a reaction against increased female autonomy (7–9).

The accounts of ordinary young men in our study support ambivalent sexism theory (10–12): these young men support benevolent sexism, but may resort to hostile sexism and violence if the former is threatened. Their rejection of IPV is conditional on the maintenance and naturalization of men’s power over women. McCarry, exploring young people’s understandings of IPV in Scotland, also found a similar pattern: young men rejected IPV but at the same time justified it because they considered that men were naturally violent and socially entitled to it (26).

Parallelisms with how Connell and other authors describe the complex process through which hegemonic masculinity adapts and incorporates features of other masculinities – without challenging the sexist structure that is produced and reproduced through the hegemony schema – in order to sustain its ascendancy can be noticed (21, 22). In that sense, the ordinary young men’s rejection of IPV could be more a sign of the ability of hegemonic masculinity to adapt to social changes, maintaining its preeminent and normative position. The ascendancy of benevolent sexism over hostile sexism does not contribute to the eradication of IPV; instead it constructs gender equality as a threat to stability and a justification for the exercise of IPV.

Research shows that men who show greater support of gender equality are less likely to engage in IPV (6, 7, 27). Several studies have pointed out that interventions aimed at primary prevention of IPV by young men are much more effective than interventions attempting to change the behaviours of batterer men (30, 52, 53). An increasing number of academic and formative research studies show that among certain groups of men, real change towards increased gender equality and non-violent intimate relationships could be possible (6, 25, 27–29, 31). The activist men in our study firmly rejected machismo, supported gender equality, and considered that IPV was never justified. For them, IPV was rooted in machismo, and machismo was understood as men’s dominance over women. We argue that this is a more substantial change in the direction of eradicating IPV. Even if we were not ascertaining actual behaviour, we can assume that activist young men were less likely to engage in IPV compared to ordinary young men. Challenging machismo and taking a

stance in favour of gender equality and against IPV was not a matter of chance, but the effect of engagement in programmes or groups that encouraged men to critically reflect on traditional masculinities and unequal gender relations. Similar to the process in Orellana, interventions underway in different countries show promising results (6, 25, 28–31). We do not claim that the intervention was the ‘sole’ and direct cause of this change – activist young men may have been different from ordinary young men before the intervention – indeed, that difference may have led to their participation. What we claim is that there is a difference in the way the two groups understand IPV, and that raising gender-consciousness seems to be connected with a deeper understanding and with being aware of the connections between gender inequality and IPV.

Diminished social tolerance and increased rejection of IPV may not be sufficient in themselves. Rejecting IPV without challenging the gender-power relations that support it is possible. In fact, proponents of gender symmetry on domestic violence criticize the feminist argument that IPV is gendered and disproportionately affects women (54). Such an approach to IPV might be less contentious to implement. However, we agree with other authors that it would also be less effective in eradicating IPV (51).

Degendering IPV means addressing all cases of IPV as if they are ‘common couple violence’ and negating the existence of cases of ‘intimate terrorism’. Intimate terrorism – defined by Johnson as ‘a terroristic control of wives by their husbands that involves the systematic use of not only violence but economic subordination, threats, isolation and other control tactics’ – is rooted on patriarchy (55) (p. 284). Intimate terrorism has more devastating and long-lasting effects on direct victims (the majority of them women) – and children and adolescents who witness the violence – than common couple violence (55, 56). At least in this setting, IPV is constructed as strongly gendered and as a means for maintaining patriarchy and sexism in times of significant changes in gender relations. Ignoring that fact that challenging gender relations is at the root of challenging IPV does not seem useful. In fact, the latest national plan and 2007 presidential decree constitute strong efforts to engender IPV in that they refer explicitly to ‘gender violence against women’ and to ‘machista violence’. They focus not only on punitive measures but aim to challenge social norms that sustain women’s discrimination and violence within intimate relationships (36, 57).

An additional finding from this study is that IPV was still generally understood as physical abuse happening to adult women in cohabiting relationships. Even if some allegations of women’s violence against men were made, the gender asymmetry of IPV was acknowledged, contrary to findings from other settings that claim that young people are more critical of the feminist position

that IPV disproportionately affects women (26). Violence among young people in informal relationships, date rape and other forms of IPV that may be more frequent among young people were cited but not strongly perceived as part of IPV. This may reflect how policies, programmes and campaigns against IPV have failed to consider the specificities of IPV among young people and target this audience (26, 27).

Methodological considerations

This study was based in a specific setting – the Amazon of Ecuador – with a significant proportion of the population living in poverty, and where subsistence agriculture coexists with major foreign industries with minimum local investment. It is also a setting where national and local policies and programmes against IPV have flourished and women’s access to education and the workforce has increased, but where machismo and *marianismo* remain strongly influential in the way gender relations are constructed and IPV is far from being eradicated. We claim that many settings in Latin America and (arguably) in other low income contexts share these characteristics, and thus our results may be transferable to them.

Triangulation of researchers – bringing different perspectives by having different backgrounds and degrees of familiarity with the setting – and prolonged engagement (two authors lived in the area for several years) enhanced the study’s credibility (58). In addition, we carried out peer debriefing by discussing preliminary results in workshops held with young people, providers and stakeholders both in Orellana and Quito.

As we have described before, this research was part of a larger study in which exploring IPV was not the main focus; thus, we may have failed to inquire in greater depth on relevant issues. A further limitation may arise from the use of the term IPV, which may not have encompassed the diversity of concepts and wordings that the participants used to refer to, what we interpreted as, men’s violence against women within an intimate relationship.

However, the central role of IPV in the construction of masculinities and gender relations, and the qualitative differences in how activist and ordinary young men constructed IPV, emerged from the data, and this was what motivated this study. We argue that following an emergent design adds to the study’s dependability, which contributes to research trustworthiness (58).

During the interviews and focus group discussions, the interviewer (IG) tried to create a conducive environment and the participants said that they enjoyed the discussions. However, the fact that the interviewer was a woman, and was identified with activist work on sexual and reproductive rights by some of the participants, may have led to more socially desirable responses. Further, the

fact that we used mainly FGDs with the ordinary young men and individual interviews with the activists may also have influenced the results. However, we did this because we assumed that the activists might be more familiar with interviews and more at ease with the questions and topics, while the ordinary young men might feel less threatened in a group situation.

Within FGDs, the group dynamic can influence the answers of some members, and participants with a leadership position might have more influence than others. However, during all the FGDs that were conducted, young men participated actively and different opinions and contradictions emerged, as shown in the results. The fact that the number of participants was larger in the first data set than in the second is an additional limitation of the study. However, if we consider each FGD as a unit of analysis, then the difference in sample size is minimal. It is also important to notice that activist young men are still a small group within the general young men's population and consequently it does not exist an ample population of activist young men from whom to choose a large number of potential participants.

Conclusions

The young men in this study generally recognized the existence and harmful effects of men's intimate partner violence against women. They rejected it and criticized male aggressors. Despite these commonalities, the differences between the two groups of men were remarkable. IPV rejection was categorical among the activists but milder among ordinary young men, allowing the latter to justify IPV under certain circumstances. The way the groups understood IPV was also very different. While activist men considered IPV to be rooted in gender inequality, ordinary young men considered IPV as a way of solving conflicts generated by women's attempts to gain greater independence and power.

This study shows on the one hand, that policies and programmes against IPV might reduce social tolerance of IPV. However, if they fail to engender IPV they may not succeed in addressing the unequal gender structures that sustain it. On the other hand, programmes and interventions generating gender-consciousness among young men might lead to more profound changes by challenging gender inequalities and sexism as the roots of IPV. Scaling up such interventions may have a stronger impact.

An additional recommendation for strengthening programmes aimed at preventing IPV might be to increase awareness of all forms of violence – not only physical abuse. Finally, these programmes might benefit from highlighting that IPV can also happen among young people and in casual relationships, and to target this audience accordingly.

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