



Violence against children in **Timor-Leste**
and Consequences on Adult Health and
Exposure to Adversity

Evidence Brief: Areas for further research
April 2022

Background

The *Violence against children in Timor-Leste and Consequences on Adult Health and Exposure to Adversity* study ('the Timor-Leste study') recommended a number of areas for further research to extend understanding of the impact of violence in childhood on experiences of violence in adulthood in Timor-Leste.

This evidence brief examines **two of these research areas**, providing guidance on possible next steps and learnings from other contexts.

Research Area 1: Patterns of susceptibility

The Timor-Leste study identified the need for further research to expand understanding of patterns of susceptibility and resilience. That is, to explore why some people who experience trauma in childhood do not go on to experience or perpetrate violence in adulthood.

Potential research questions:

- What promotes resilience among children who have experienced abuse, but do not go on to perpetrate or experience violence during adulthood?
- What individual or contextual characteristics encourage or interrupt the association between child sexual abuse and the perpetration and experience of violence later in life?
- How can we use this information to interrupt cycles of abuse through early intervention strategies?
- How can this information improve the design of violence prevention interventions for children and adolescents?

There is limited research focussed on understanding resilience among children who have experienced abuse and an identified need for further research in this area.¹ Longitudinal studies have been undertaken in the United States, drawing on public records and national surveys. For example, one study employed a prospective longitudinal design to follow children for 16 years.² A recent study in Uganda used a mixed methods approach to conduct a long-term follow up of participants in the *Good Schools Study* to understand pathways for Ugandan adolescents. Between 2014 and 2022, the study conducted three waves of quantitative survey data collection; qualitative data from five time points; and a series of workshops to facilitate use of emerging findings.³

Longitudinal studies require significant investment of time and resources. An alternative approach in the Timor-Leste context could be to undertake a qualitative life-history study in partnership with a local civil society organisation or service provider. This study could interview adults about their experiences in childhood and compare the histories of those who have gone on to perpetrate or experience violence in adulthood with those who have not. It would be important to ensure that the sample extends beyond those currently accessing support services. However, given the research limitations (see box below) pursuing another research area may better support the aims of the *Nabilan* program.

Research limitations

Research investigating the effects of child abuse and neglect in adulthood is extensive. However, it is difficult to establish causal links, and therefore to understand resilience and susceptibility for several reasons:

- Research studies with adult survivors based on retrospective reporting of events are reliant on participants’ recollection of events over long periods of time.
- It is difficult to control for other environmental and social factors, such as socio-economic disadvantage, disability, and social isolation, and therefore to understand the impact of these influences.
- Prospective longitudinal studies are not completely representative of the population, as a high proportion of child abuse goes unreported and those experiencing abuse are less likely to participate in, or remain in, a longitudinal study.⁴
- Studies often focussed solely on one type of abuse (particularly sexual abuse) which overlooks the effects of children experiencing chronic and multiple types of abuse and neglect.⁵

Research Area 2: Risk factors for child sexual abuse

Understanding the risk factors for child sexual abuse, and how these vary by age group and gender, was another area identified for further research in the Timor-Leste study. Research aimed at identifying risk factors for childhood sexual abuse is crucial for the development of preventative strategies.

Potential research questions:

- What are the risk factors for child sexual abuse in Timor-Leste?
- How do these risk factors vary by gender, age, and setting?
- What are the specific risk factors for adolescents in Timor-Leste and what does this mean for strategies for preventing sexual violence?
- What are the specific risk factors for child sexual abuse in schools in Timor-Leste?

Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS)

A key mechanism for identifying risk factors in a specific country are the *Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS)*, led by the U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as part of the Together for Girls partnership. These are nationally representative household surveys of males and females ages 13 to 24, implemented by the national government, with CDC providing technical support. These surveys have been conducted in more than 20 countries, including Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in the Asian region.⁶ Details of the process, questionnaire and existing country-specific VACS are available online.⁷ Notably, these studies are time-consuming and require investment and careful planning.

Given time and resource implications, rather than conduct a VACS in Timor-Leste, Nabilan and other actors could consider a research study which assesses common risk factors, by age and gender, as identified in existing VACS, and then complement these findings with qualitative research specific to the Timor-Leste context.

Research focus by age: Adolescence

Adolescence is a crucial life stage to influence attitudes and behaviours related to gender equality and violence. Research is needed to support a better understanding of the risk factors for adolescents in Timor-Leste and strategies for preventing sexual violence. This research could:

- Explore the emerging findings of the *Global Early Adolescent* study (GEAS) and adapt the GEAS questionnaire and/or GEAS qualitative methods for use in Timor-Leste.⁸
- Map innovative interventions with adolescents in other country contexts which could be adapted and piloted in Timor-Leste. For example, *Aahung*'s work on comprehensive sexuality education in Pakistan or the *Safe Dates* program.

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Understanding risk factors in different settings is also an area requiring further attention. The *Nabilan* study is focussed primarily on child abuse in the home, whereas evidence demonstrates that a high proportion of child abuse is perpetrated by peers or outside the household. Research could therefore focus on child sexual abuse in other settings, such as in schools (see below).

Understanding specific risk factors for child abuse in the school setting

1 Collect data on school-related gender-based violence (GBV) situation in Timor-Leste

The *Global Guidance on addressing school-related gender-based violence* contains guidance on conducting research on the school-related GBV situation in a country. For example, a national study was conducted in Lebanon using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to investigate and understand the nature, extent and causes of GBV in schools and its effect on all school-age students.

2 Implement and assess impact of the Good School Toolkit:

The Good School Toolkit is a methodology created to help educators and students explore what makes a healthy, vibrant, and positive school and guide them through a process to create their vision.

3 Engage with the Spotlight Initiative

To identify any research gaps emerging from their work on gender equality and violence prevention in schools in Timor-Leste.

References

¹ Fulu E, Miedema S, Roselli T, McCook S, Chan KL, Haardörfer R, Jewkes R; (2017). UN Multi-country Study on Men and Violence study team. Pathways between childhood trauma, intimate partner violence, and harsh parenting: findings from the UN Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific. *Lancet Glob Health*. 2017 May; 5(5): p 512-522.

² Millett LS, Kohl PL, Jonson-Reid M, Drake B, Petra M. (2013). Child Maltreatment Victimization and Subsequent Perpetration of Young Adult Intimate Partner Violence: An Exploration of Mediating Factors. *Child Maltreatment*. 2013;18(2):71-84. See also Fang, X. & Corso, P.S. (2008). Gender Differences in the Connections Between Violence Experienced as a Child and Perpetration of Intimate Partner Violence in Young Adulthood. *J Fam Viol* 23, 303–313.

³ Devries K, Parkes J, Knight L, Allen E, Namy S, Datzberger S, Nalukenge W, Atuhaire L, Kyegombe N, Walakira E, Seeley J, Weiss HA, & Naker D. (2020). Context of Violence in Adolescence Cohort (CoVAC) study: protocol for a mixed methods longitudinal study in Uganda. *BMC Public Health*. 2020 Jan 13;20(1):43.

⁴ Kendall-Tackett, K., & Becker-Blease, K. (2004). The importance of retrospective findings in child maltreatment research. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 28, 723-727.

⁵ Bromfield, L. M., Gillingham, P., & Higgins, D. J. (2007). Cumulative harm and chronic child maltreatment. *Developing Practice*, 19, 34-42.

⁶ See <https://www.togetherforgirls.org/where-we-work/> for details of countries

⁷ See: www.togetherforgirls.org/about-the-vacs/

⁸ Global Early Adolescent Study, Qualitative Methods, available at: <https://www.geastudy.org/training-suite-qual-meths>

⁹ UNESCO & UN Women. (2016). Global Guidance on addressing school-related gender-based violence, available at: <https://www.unicef.org/media/66506/file/Global-Guidance-SRGBV.pdf>, p103.

