

Global Families Project

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6/14/23

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Project Summary



Gender inequality perpetuates harmful norms that justify violence against women and children and is associated with higher rates of family violence.

Worldwide, parental physical abuse is a common form of family violence that children are exposed to at alarming rates. Parental engagement in physical abuse is linked to negative child outcomes including depression, anxiety, and aggression that may persist into adulthood. Globally, these continuing mental health and aggression problems may have high financial costs, with effects both on social service systems and developing economies.

Despite the substantial scholarship on parent- and family-level predictors of parent-to-child physical violence, important questions remain about societal-level predictors of parental physical abuse and its associations with young children's development in developing and transitional countries.

A further gap in prior literature is the lack of studies that have examined potential moderators such as child age and household economic status in the associations between gender inequality and parental violence against children.

Using data from over 520,000 families in 57 low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), the current project seeks to address these research gaps by examining the associations of country-level gender inequality and violent social contexts with caregivers' use of physically abusive behavior and child social-emotional development. We will employ multilevel models using data on parental physical violence against children, family socio-economic characteristics, and children's social-emotional development from the UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and data on country-level gender inequality and violent social contexts from the United Nations Development Programme on Human Development and the World Health Organization Global Health Observatory.

The specific aims are to 1) examine the associations of gender inequality with parental child physical abuse in LMICs, and the moderating roles of child age and household economic status in these associations, 2) examine the associations of violent social norms and crimes with parental physical abuse in LMICs, and 3) examine the associations of parental physical abuse with child social-emotional development in the context of gender inequality and violent norms

and crimes in LMICs, and whether country-level normativeness of physical abuse moderates these associations.

The proposed studies will advance the understanding of macro-level social and economic indicators that perpetuate caregivers' physical violence against children in international contexts. Study findings will inform cross-cultural programs and policies that reduce gender disparities and prevent parental physical abuse to promote child social-emotional development across the globe.

In addition, these studies will provide rigorous research engagement opportunities to undergraduate students and graduate students and strengthen the research environment at the University of Michigan-Flint.

1 Research Team

Julie Ma, Principal Investigator

Associate Professor of Social Work, UM-Flint

Professor Ma's research interests center around the effects of neighborhood disadvantage and negative parenting on the well-being of children. Her research builds on her experience in parent education programs that serve families in marginalized communities in Michigan. Much of her current research focuses on the risks of negative contextual and family influences such as neighborhood poverty and disorganization, and parental corporal punishment on behavior problems and maltreatment in early childhood.

Andy Grogan-Kaylor, Co-Investigator

Sandra K. Danziger Collegiate Professor, Professor of Social Work

Professor Grogan-Kaylor's research focuses on knowledge development and intervention research on children and families with the aim of reducing violence against children and improving family and child wellbeing. Grogan-Kaylor's current research projects examine parenting behaviors such as physical punishment and parental expressions of emotional warmth and support, and their effects on children's aggression, antisocial behavior, anxiety, and depression.

Shawna Lee, Co-Investigator

Professor of Social Work

Professor Lee is a professor at the University of Michigan School of Social Work. She is the director of the Parenting in Context Research Lab and the director of the Program Evaluation Group at the School. Lee has published on topics related to child maltreatment, fathers' parenting, father-child relationships, parenting stress and family functioning, and parental discipline. Her recent research focuses on parenting and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic.