

# Young mothers with children by multiple partners more likely to experience abuse, study finds

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Younger mothers with children by multiple fathers are more likely to experience psychological or physical harassment, economic abuse and sexual violence than younger mothers who have children with only one partner, a new Rutgers study finds.

The findings, published in the journal *Family Relations*, indicate a strong link between [intimate partner violence](#) (IPV) and multiple partner fertility (MPF). Reasons include complex family dynamics, fractured kinship models and family structure ambiguity. It is believed to be the first study to examine how MPF is associated with the risk of experiencing IPV.

"We know that social and financial support are key for mothers' well-being, and that a social-support system can mitigate intimate partner violence," said Iris Cardenas, a doctoral candidate at Rutgers' School of Social Work and lead author of the study. Less is understood about how family change, which can lead to complexity in living arrangements, affects IPV risk. "We saw signals suggesting a link, but there was nothing in the literature looking at it."

Previous research has shown the likelihood of victimization is higher in less affluent contexts: approximately one in three women in the Global South (lower-income countries in Africa, Asia, Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean) experiences IPV in their lifetime. Risks are even greater in Colombia, a country with a high prevalence of MPF and IPV.

Using data from Colombia collected during the 2015 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), a standardized survey administered by USAID, Cardenas and co-author Laura Cuesta, an assistant professor at the School of Social Work, conducted a series of analyses to determine if having children with multiple partners increased a woman's odds of suffering violence. The survey included questions specific to IPV, and nearly 39,000 Colombian women were interviewed.

The researchers partially confirmed their hypothesis: MPF is associated with an increased risk of IPV, but only for younger mothers (ages 25-29).

Compared to women with no education, women with less [high school education](#) and those with more had 36 percent and 35 percent higher odds, respectively, of experiencing violence from their partner.

"For young mothers in certain contexts, going from no education to having some level of education can be seen as disrupting [gender roles](#) in the home, which may lead to conflicts," Cardenas said. She added that it's imperative that educational initiatives for young mothers in the Global South be coupled with programs that encourage social acceptance of gender equality.

Taken together, Cardenas said, these results call attention to the need for targeted intervention for young mothers and their children. Given that rates of MPF tend to be higher among mothers in developing countries, programs in the Global South need to account for the added detrimental impact of IPV risk on well-being, she said.

**More information:** Iris Cardenas et al, The association between intimate partner violence and multiple partner fertility among Colombian women, *Family Relations* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/fare.12656](https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12656)

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