

Violence against mothers linked to 1.8 million female infant and child deaths in India

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The deaths of 1.8 million female infants and children in India over the past 20 years are related to domestic violence against their mothers, according to a new study led by researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH). In their examination of over 158,000 births occurring between 1985 and 2005, the researchers found that husbands' violence against wives increased the risk of death among female children, but not male children, in both the first year and the first five years of life.

"Being born a girl into a family in India in which your mother is abused makes it significantly less likely that you will survive early childhood. Shockingly, this violence does not pose a threat to your life if you are lucky enough to be born a boy," said lead author Jay Silverman, associate professor of society, human development, and health at HSPH.

The authors attribute this disparity to lower investment in girl [children](#) in such areas as nutrition, immunization and care for major causes of infant and child death (e.g., diarrhea and respiratory infections). This neglect of girl infants and children is likely to be most pronounced in families in which the status of women is the lowest, that is, in those families in which women are physically abused by their husbands. Based on the study findings, they urge that violence against women be considered a critical priority within programs and policies to improve child survival, particularly those working to increase the survival of girls.

The article appeared online January 4, 2011 in the journal [Archives of](#)

[Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine](#), and will appear in the January print edition.

Currently, 2.1 million children die in India each year, and the nation is not on-track to meet the United Nations Millennium Development Goal of a two-thirds reduction in [child mortality](#) from 1990 levels by 2015. The authors assert that violence against mothers and the associated gender-based mistreatment of female infants and children may represent major barriers preventing India from reaching this goal. "Family violence against women in India must be vigorously challenged, given that even a very small reduction in this abuse may lead to the saving of tens of thousands of lives of girl infants and children," said Silverman.

More information: "Gender-Based Disparities in Infant and Child Mortality Based on Maternal Exposure to Spousal Violence," Jay G. Silverman, Michele R. Decker, Debbie M. Cheng, Kathleen Wirth, Niranjana Saggurti, Heather L. McCauley, Kathryn L. Falb, Balaiah Donta, Anita Raj, *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*, vol. 165, no. 1, online Jan. 4, 2011.

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