

Nordic countries: Highest in gender equality and intimate partner violence against women

June 7 2016

The Nordic countries are the most gender equal nations in the world, but at the same time, they also have a disproportionately high rate of intimate partner violence (IPV) against women. This is perplexing because logically violence against women would be expected to drop as women gained equal status in a society. A new study published in *Social Science & Medicine* explores this contradictory situation, which has been labeled the "Nordic paradox." Researchers believe that gaining understanding of its underlying causes may offer important tools to help curb the worldwide public health epidemic of violence against women.

With a global prevalence of 30%, IPV is the most common form of [violence](#) suffered by women. It also contributes to female mortality, with 38.6% of murdered women killed by their partners. In many instances, gender inequality is thought to be a major contributing factor to violence against women, which is why interventions that attempt to boost gender equality are often implemented in an attempt to prevent or lessen IPV against women.

"High prevalence IPV against women and high levels of gender equality would appear contradictory, but these apparently opposite statements appear to be true in Nordic countries, producing what could be called the 'Nordic paradox'," stated co-investigator Enrique Gracia, PhD, Professor, Department of Social Psychology, University of Valencia, Valencia, Spain. "Despite this paradox being one of the most puzzling issues in the field, interestingly, this is a research question rarely asked and one that remains unanswered."

While gender equality is a fundamental value in Nordic nations, the rates of violence against women are much higher than in other parts of Europe. The average rate of lifetime prevalence of violence against women perpetrated by partners in the European Union is 22%, but Denmark's average is 32%, Finland 30%, and Sweden 28%. The rates are also high in Nordic countries for violence against women by non-partners. Meanwhile, EU members Portugal, Italy, and Greece, which all trail far behind the Nordic nations in gender equality, have much lower rates of IPV against women.

This report calls for a closer look at the paradox in hopes that investigation will help shed new light on how to prevent IPV against women by illustrating how gender equality influences violence. "The Nordic paradox posits a challenging research question that should not be ignored," emphasized co-investigator Juan Merlo, MD, PhD, Professor, Unit for Social Epidemiology, University of Lund, Malmö, Sweden. "After excluding the possibility of confounding and information bias, this paradox needs to be urgently understood. By doing so we will advance our knowledge base on the determinants of individual IPV risk within and between countries and, thereby, provide better-targeted prevention initiatives."

Professor Gracia and Professor Merlo offer a number of potential explanations and propose methodological approaches to understanding the contradictory phenomenon. One theory is that Nordic countries may be suffering from a backlash effect as traditional definitions of both manhood and womanhood begin to be challenged in a meaningful way. However, the investigators caution that multiple layers of influences might be at play, therefore it is important to evaluate all factors surrounding IPV including neighborhoods, places of employment, social networks, and other associations in a multilevel analysis.

The authors also address possible sources of information bias. For

example, some have argued that women in Nordic countries may feel more free to talk about IPV because of their equal status. "Data would reflect not an actual higher prevalence but higher levels of disclosure than in less equalitarian countries," explained Professor Gracia.

"However, the same EU Agency for Fundamental Rights survey provides data suggesting lower levels of disclosure of IPV to the police by women in Nordic countries as compared to other EU countries."

As the issue of IPV against [women](#) continues to be a target for public health interventions, the information provided by exploring the Nordic paradox may reveal new connections and shatter old expectations. "The Nordic paradox may provide an avenue to guide new research on IPV in order to appropriately respond to this social and [public health](#) problem in a more effective way," concluded Professor Merlo.

More information: Enrique Gracia et al, Intimate partner violence against women and the Nordic paradox, *Social Science & Medicine* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.03.040](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.03.040)

Provided by Elsevier

Citation: Nordic countries: Highest in gender equality and intimate partner violence against women (2016, June 7) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-06-nordic-countries-highest-gender-equality.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--