

Child Abuse in the West Bank: Lessons Learnt from a Qualitative Study

In preparation for a survey using two international child abuse screening tools (ICAST-P for parents and ICAST-R for young people), a qualitative study explored the use of discipline and the understanding of child abuse, including sexual abuse, in Palestinian West Bank society, and investigated the appropriateness, in relation to clarity, acceptability and relevance, of the instruments. Qualitative research teams conducted 30 in-depth interviews with mothers (10), young men (10) and young women (10). Our findings indicate that in a society where sexual abuse is not openly discussed and follow-up services may be inadequate or inaccessible, inclusion of sexual abuse questions in a survey may be inappropriate and even harmful. However, by asking respondents about sexual abuse questions, rather than asking specifically about an individual's experiences, this study initiated discussion, which acknowledged the occurrence of sexual abuse of both boys and girls in the West Bank population. The findings warrant serious attention by educational, psychological, social and legal services in Palestine. Additionally, the findings caution against administering internationally designed survey instruments in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) before the potential implications related to cultural, social and political contexts have been carefully examined. © 2020 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGES:

- Before administering an international child abuse screening tool, qualitative research must be conducted in order to understand the cultural context.
- Sexual abuse research must include questions on both male and female exposure to abuse.
- Conducting surveys on sensitive issues, such as sexual abuse, could have unforeseen negative consequences for both respondents and researchers.
- Qualitative research on sensitive topics may be sufficient in demonstrating the need for social interventions.

KEY WORDS: Child abuse; Corporal punishment/Physical punishment; Sexual abuse; Child protection; Palestine

Introduction

Recognising that most research on child abuse and neglect had been conducted in affluent Western societies, and that systems generating

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'Before administering an international child abuse screening tool, qualitative research must be conducted in order to understand the cultural context'

‘ISPCAN developed three child abuse screening tools for use internationally with parents (ICAST-P), children aged 12–17 (ICAST-C) and young people aged 18–24 reporting retrospectively (ICAST-R)’

‘The literature on child abuse and neglect in Palestine is limited’

reliable data on child abuse and neglect may not be in place in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN - <https://www.ispcan.org>) developed three child abuse screening tools for use internationally with parents (ICAST-P), children aged 12–17 (ICAST-C) and young people aged 18–24 reporting retrospectively (ICAST-R). The intention was to facilitate the measurement of child maltreatment and to contribute to the prevention of child abuse and neglect globally (Runyan *et al.*, 2009a). These instruments evolved following an elaborate process of workshops and Delphi consultations involving more than 60 international experts (Dunne *et al.*, 2009). The ICAST instruments have been used in a number of non-Western countries, such as South Korea (Lee and Kim, 2011), Saudi Arabia (Al-Eissa *et al.*, 2015), Taiwan (Feng *et al.*, 2015), Cyprus (Karayianni *et al.*, 2017), Turkey (Simsek *et al.*, 2017), South Africa (Meinck *et al.*, 2018) and Sri Lanka (Chandraratne *et al.*, 2018). The ICAST-P manual suggests using focus groups to ensure that the instrument is sound and understandable in the local context. Runyan *et al.* (2009b) recommend that ‘further work’ be done to demonstrate the utility of the instrument for describing parenting around the world. In this paper, we reflect on the findings from a qualitative study undertaken in the Palestinian West Bank in preparation for a comparative survey on child discipline in Qatar and Palestine in which the ICAST-P and ICAST-R were used (Eldeeb *et al.*, 2016; Kamal *et al.*, 2018).

The literature on child abuse and neglect in Palestine is limited. Haj-Yahia and Tamish (2001) reported that rates of children experiencing forms of family violence were high and confirmed that sexual abuse occurs in Palestinian society. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 2006, p. 6) also included the issue of child abuse and neglect in its first-of-a-kind study on domestic violence, stating that about half of the interviewed mothers reported that one of their children (aged 5–17) had been exposed to violence in 2005. A later Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) by PCBS (2015, p. 21) reported that 93 per cent of children aged 2–14 years had experienced violent disciplining at home in the previous month, and 23 per cent of children experienced severe physical punishment. Neither the domestic violence nor the MICS surveys included questions on sexual abuse.

Research Questions

As preparation for the survey we conducted qualitative interviews with mothers, young women and young men, seeking the following: (1) general ideas and opinions on child discipline and child abuse in Palestinian West Bank society; and (2) the relevance and appropriateness of the ICAST-P and ICAST-R instruments for use with Palestinian West Bank respondents. Both the ICAST questionnaires include basic demographic questions. The parents (ICAST-P) questionnaire includes questions about the use of verbal and physical discipline. The physical acts are classified as moderate or severe. The ICAST-P questionnaire also includes a small number of questions designed to obtain information on neglect (three questions) and sexual abuse (two questions). The ICAST-R for use with young adults includes 15 primary questions about potentially abusive verbal and physical types of discipline and six questions about potential sexual abuse, with follow-up questions about

perpetrator characteristics, frequency of acts and periods in childhood when the recalled abuse occurred. (ICAST tools used for this study can be found in supplementary online files – see online Supporting Information).

Methodology and Ethical Considerations

Research Team

The qualitative research team consisted of a leader and three pairs of research assistants. The European team leader has lived and worked in Palestine for more than 30 years. She is fluent in local Palestinian Arabic. The six research assistants are urban young female Palestinians working at the Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University on the West Bank and are members of the University capacity-building programme. A Palestinian translator translated original ICAST questionnaires from English into local Palestinian Arabic. This translation was then adjusted following back-translation to English by a bilingual translator and approved by the research team.

Sampling

The samples of ten mothers, ten young men and ten young women were purposively selected with support from trusted Birzeit University contacts to include participants from the north, central and south areas of the West Bank, and from urban, rural and refugee camp populations. Palestinian refugee camps are an important separate category of population residency type in the West Bank. They were established by the United Nations in 1948 after Palestinian refugees were not allowed to return to their homes in what had then become Israel. Over time the original tent camps have come to resemble urban slums with different characteristics compared to villages or other urban areas. Following the first five interviews, we used more detailed purposive selection of candidates for the second five interviews in order to ensure diversity in

‘A Palestinian translator translated original ICAST questionnaires from English into local Palestinian Arabic’

Table 1. Interviewee characteristics

	Mothers	Young men	Young women
Age	31–50	18–24	18–24
Type of residency			
Urban	4	2	3
Rural	5	6	6
Refugee camp	1	2	1
West Bank area			
North	3	3	3
Centre	4	6	5
South	3	1	2
Education			
Less than secondary	4	4	4
Secondary	2	1	1
College/University	4	5	5
Occupation			
Housewife	6		
Other	4	4	2
Student		4	
Unemployed		2	8

socioeconomic status and educational level (see Table 1 for interviewees' characteristics).

Data Collection

Interviews took place in March–June 2013. Two research assistants conducted each interview; one asking the questions while the other took notes. Twenty-five of the 30 interviewees granted permission to audiotape the interview. We conducted the interviews in locations chosen by the interviewees: at their home, the university or a quiet public space.

Interview Structure

The interviews included: personal introductions; explaining the purpose of the study; obtaining participants' verbal consent and assurance of confidentiality; and an explanation that there were no right or wrong answers. Some general questions about child discipline were asked in order to gently introduce the topics covered by the ICAST questionnaire and to gain some insight into local views. The interviewers then read the questions in the ICAST instrument one by one and initiated a conversation on whether the interviewees found the question clear, relevant for Palestinian society and acceptable to ask. When interviewees found questions unacceptable, we asked them to explain why. Finally, participants were asked what questions might be important to add to this or future surveys.

Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis using elements of grounded theory, including a continuous comparative analysis of emerging themes using an iterative approach, whereby learning from initial interviews is used to solicit input in subsequent interviews (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). After the analysis of the first five interviews for each of the interview populations, we adjusted the interview guidelines and sampling strategy to gain more information on the emerging themes. For example, when participants raised the issue of potential psychological harm for survey respondents as a result of being reminded of a traumatic experience, to gain more feedback we would add questions about available support in such cases. The three research assistant teams conducted the initial analyses. They shared and compared their findings with the entire team and discrepancies in interpretation were discussed until we reached a consensus. We did not use computer software.

Ethical Considerations

This qualitative investigation was executed in line with the World Health Organization (WHO) ethical and safety recommendations for researching, documenting and monitoring sexual violence in emergencies (WHO, 2007), which lays down a range of ethical and safety issues that need to be addressed prior to the commencement of any such inquiry. The study proposal was accepted by the Birzeit University Ethical Review Board, and, in line with their guidelines, verbal, as opposed to written, informed consent was obtained. In the local context, asking respondents to sign consent forms brings suspicion,

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especially as this is seen as revealing the person's details and thereby invalidating confidentiality. A list with contact information about services, which could help respondents or others in need of psychosocial support, was given to each participant at the end of the interview.

Findings

Early in the study, it became clear that the sexual abuse questions were soliciting the greatest disquiet among interviewees. The presentation of our findings therefore seeks to reflect and explore those concerns. We first present the respondents' views on discipline and abuse and their opinions on all the ICAST questions except those on sexual abuse. We then focus on the respondents' thoughts about sexual abuse and their reactions to the ICAST sexual abuse questions.

Interviewees' Feedback Regarding Discipline Methods Included in the ICAST Survey Questionnaires (Excluding the Sexual Abuse Questions)

'Acceptable' and Alternative Types of Child Discipline

Interviews confirmed that the ICAST questions on child discipline, deprivation of privileges, humiliation and physical punishment were clear, relevant and acceptable. Regarding the disciplinary methods, mothers often commented spontaneously that they use such methods or know others who do. They reported that hitting children lightly (with the hand) is common, acceptable and not considered abusive when children persist with wrong behaviour or do something that harms others. However, they considered hitting a method of last resort and deemed its success questionable. They suggested that the authoritarian ways in which they were raised are less effective in dealing with today's children. They said that beating or using any other violent means against the child *with lasting physical effect* would be physical abuse and unacceptable. They pointed out that physical abuse may result in long-term psychological harm. One mother (interview 3) regretted that she had often hit her children. She explained that the frustration of living with her in-laws, who complained about the children fighting with their cousins, had contributed to her using this method.

Mothers suggested that girls are less exposed to physical punishment than boys, because controlling boys is more difficult than controlling girls. Most mothers thought that depriving children from something they like is a better form of discipline than physical discipline but were wary of carrying out the threat if the deprivation would cause the child to lose face in front of peers. Mothers warned that humiliating a child in front of other children or strangers may cause negative psychological effects and should be avoided. The young men and women emphasised that a child's upbringing does not exclusively depend on the parents' method of raising them. Young men spoke much about the influence of the external environment, including *'bad friends'*, while young women tended to warn about the influence of the internet, *'face' [book] and chat*.

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Psychological Abuse

Young people confirmed the use of hitting and spanking in their upbringing but added that physical discipline is often accompanied by psychological abuse – for example, by addressing the child with derogatory names (*'animal'*, *'stupid'*) – which may affect the child even more than the hitting. However, they clarified that calling names is not always psychological abuse. It depends on the context and what it means to the child. If it negatively affects his or her psychological wellbeing, then it should be considered psychological abuse.

Parental Discrimination

An issue not referred to in the ICAST questionnaires, but featuring in several of our interviews with young people, is the discrimination children may experience within the family, when parents favour one child over another:

'Discrimination, if a family gives more attention to one kid. Even if the parents don't do that on purpose. [...] the second kid will be destroyed. The son would become withdrawn and lonely. He will hate his family. He'll think why do you discriminate, is he better than me? And the parents have no idea the child is thinking like this.

Interviewer: Is that for girls as well?

Yes, of course. If I see that, I would even hate my sister, are you better or prettier than I am? Many think that way.' (Female respondent aged 22, interview 1)

Interviewees' Feedback in relation to the Sexual Abuse Questions

The Occurrence of Sexual Abuse (both Boys and Girls)

The interviewees' opinions on sexual abuse in Palestinian society were diverse and sometimes influenced by how comfortable the interviewees felt with asking about this sensitive topic. While there was no clear indication of what respondents considered to be sexual abuse, it appeared that they were referring to contact abuse rather than verbal sexual harassment. Some interviewees, especially those from refugee camps (including mothers, young men and young women), thought that sexual abuse did not happen in their camp, but might happen elsewhere. The interviewees from non-camp populations thought that sexual abuse happens in both urban and rural settings. Respondents noted that sexual abuse of females happens indoors and often involves nuclear or extended family perpetrators:

'I heard that sexual abuse happened, to a pretty girl ... but she has a disability ... we understood that she had not let them touch her. She got married and divorced ... "Why did she divorce?"; I asked ... Then she told me that the husband found out that she wasn't 'a girl [virgin]' ... She doesn't have prospects [for marriage] now ...' (Female respondent aged 23, interview 8)

Young males, especially in villages, are also at risk of sexual abuse, but this is more likely to happen outdoors and often involves older males as perpetrators:

'I hear about boys being sexually abused more than women; perhaps because women stay inside more, whereas men have the opportunity to be outside ...' (Male respondent aged 19, interview 2)

'It happens in our village, mostly between men and younger boys. A child playing with someone much older than him should ring a bell ...' (Female respondent aged 22, interview 1)

'Opinions on sexual abuse in Palestinian society were diverse'

The Appropriateness of Asking about Sexual Abuse in a Survey

Whereas generally the ICAST questions on physical and psychological discipline were found 'acceptable' (not causing offense or potentially subjecting the interviewees to negative consequences as a result of participating in the survey), there was much less consensus about the sexual abuse questions. The question – 'Was there a time in the last year that your child had sexual intercourse with an adult?' – was considered inappropriate to ask in Palestinian society by all three groups. They explained that intercourse before marriage is considered unacceptable. If it happened, parents would either not know, or not answer the question. There was variation between the mothers', young men's and young women's opinions on the acceptability of asking the sexual abuse questions of the ICAST-R. The most outspoken on the subject were the young women. Even those who thought that the questions might be acceptable to some and unacceptable to others still thought that being asked about abuse might cause psychological harm to young women who had experienced sexual abuse. The research team collecting the data from young women also voiced their concerns about 're-opening wounds, and then you do not offer anything to help.'

Potential Consequences to Survey Respondents. Those who said that the questions were unacceptable further clarified that if 'people' (i.e. parents, brothers, husbands) found out that young female family members had answered such questions (regardless of how they answered), they might be punished. They pointed out that even if a girl has experienced sexual abuse, she would not find it easy to disclose such information:

'Some people, especially here, say "the girl is to blame." And so when you want to disclose something, you are discouraged, because you know that disclosing it will put many people against you.' (Female respondent aged 23, interview 2)

It was suggested that just answering the questions might cause problems:

'If my brother knew that I answered such questions, perhaps he would never let me go to [the city of] Ramallah again.' (Female respondent aged 23, interview 7)

Several young female respondents described graphically that if the community finds out about the sexual abuse questions in the survey, the field workers administering the survey also risk being harmed. Because of the volatile atmosphere of Israeli military occupation, Palestinians tend to be vigilant of what happens in their community and it is highly likely that the topic of any survey would quickly become public knowledge. The major concern seemed to be that the community would find out that the survey included sexual questions rather than any fear of a breach of confidentiality relating to the data:

'They will cut you [the researchers] to pieces ...' (Female respondent aged 23, interview 8) 'Even if young people might respond to them, if their parents knew it might lead to many problems, even killing ...'(Female respondent aged 23, interview 7) 'Asking these questions will be taken very serious by parents and some community members, causing problems and could even lead to killing!' (Female respondent aged 19, interview 3)

Some mothers had a more nuanced response, mentioning that the survey would add to awareness around the issue. But most, especially in the

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'If the community finds out about the sexual abuse questions in the survey, the field workers... risk being harmed'

villages, found the questions unacceptable. Young men had least problems with the acceptability of the sexual abuse questions and unlike the girls they did not seem concerned with possible repercussions, although one admitted that:

‘If it comes out that a girl has been sexually abused, it will affect her life in the future, even with her husband if she does get married ...’(Male respondent aged 20, interview 1)

The young men also had a positive comment, recognising that for people exposed to sexual abuse, answering the questions might give them the feeling that they were doing something about the issue. But it was not clear whether they were referring to both boys and girls. A final illustration of reservations about asking the sexual abuse questions came from our team conducting the interviews with young women aged 18–24 (the targeted age group for the ICAST-R survey). Although these questions are meant to be retrospective, looking back on childhood, when the team interviewed an 18-year-old girl, they realised that not only did she seem shocked by the first sexual abuse question, she also did not understand it and seemed so confused that the team skipped the other sexual abuse questions and moved to the next interview section. According to the data collection team interviewing the females aged 18–24 (interview 5):

‘It was also clear from this particular case that understandings of sexual assault and abuse were unclear, and for us to implant specific ideas into the interviewee’s mind and potentially causing a distressing experience would be morally unacceptable.’

Doubts about Truthful Responses to Survey Questions

Many doubted whether respondents would answer all questions truthfully, particularly the sexual abuse questions. They thought that parents might admit to behaviour that they personally find acceptable (for example, spanking a child on the bottom with a bare hand), but not to behaviour that they knew to be unacceptable and that might be considered as child abuse (for example, choking a child or squeezing his or her neck with hands):

‘They will pretend to be better than they are ...’(A mother, interview 1) ‘I think with the third section (who did it) there will be a problem and people will not answer, or would be dishonest.’(Female respondent, interview 2) ‘The one who is hit will not answer this. He may lie ...’(Male respondent, interview 8)

Some young people added that respondents who experienced issues referred to in the sexual abuse questions might answer negatively out of shame or fear that even anonymously admitting to having had this experience might result in a risk of people finding out, with the potential of serious consequences for both females and males:

‘People will not answer because the cost is too high. If this information comes out into the community, one may not be able to get married. For example, a guy asks a girl’s hand, and the father [of the girl] asks around, and they tell him “this and this happened to the guy” and the father would refuse.’(Male respondent aged 23, interview 8)

‘Many doubted whether respondents would answer all questions truthfully’

Discussion

The ICAST-P and ICAST-R are presented as instruments that can be used across cultures to measure parental behaviours directed at children (Runyan *et al.*, 2009a) and as survey tools for the retrospective measurement of violence against children (Dunne *et al.*, 2009). Our finding that the ICAST questions, except those about sexual abuse, are acceptable, understandable and appropriate in a Palestinian population supports the universal applicability claimed by the two original pilot studies testing the instruments (Dunne *et al.*, 2009; Runyan *et al.*, 2009b). However, our interviewees' concerns about the truthfulness of responses to sensitive questions challenges the conclusion that the instruments 'generally performed well.' Tourangeau and Yan (2007) found that even when privacy is provided, survey respondents tend to misreport when answering sensitive questions. The interviewees' concerns about long-term psychological harm of discipline measures causing humiliation or loss of face was striking. Indeed, it is well-accepted among researchers and practitioners that childhood abuse and neglect can impact emotion processing even in middle-adulthood (Young and Widom, 2014). Our young adult respondents pointed out that the ICAST instruments omit parental favouritism as a form of child abuse. Finzy-Dottan and Cohen (2011) warn that parental favouritism can lead to conflict between siblings, and Moharib (2013) adds depression and aggression as potential consequences. Another important point young people made was that it is not necessarily the act or words of parents' discipline that cause harm to the child, but rather the context and the meaning ascribed to it by the child (see Houlberg *et al.*, 2012).

Concerns about the sexual abuse questions expressed by all respondent groups, but particularly by the mothers and young women, led the researchers to omit the sexual abuse questions from the questionnaires used in the main quantitative study in Palestine (Eldeeb *et al.*, 2016; Kamal *et al.*, 2018). This decision complies with the WHO ethical guidelines, which caution:

'Simply participating in sexual violence inquiries can have serious, even life-threatening implications, not only for the participants themselves, but for the community and those involved in collecting information.' (WHO, 2007, p. 1).

Haj-Yahia and Tamish (2001) did ask sexual abuse questions in a survey with Palestinian university students, but had to limit their survey to a convenience sample in two universities instead of the initially planned systematic random sample of all university students. While some data on psychological abuse and physical abuse can be extracted from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys used in 28 countries (where Syria, Yemen and Iraq were the only Middle Eastern countries), these surveys do not include questions related to sexual abuse (Akhmatov, 2011). The two Arab countries included in an early ICAST pilot study, Egypt and Lebanon, notably recorded no responses to the sexual abuse questions (Runyan *et al.*, 2009b). A Saudi Arabia study using the ICAST-C questionnaire retrospectively excluded the 12–15-year-old respondents from their sample of 12–18-year-olds because parental consent for the younger group was frequently refused and non-response rates were high (Al-Eissa *et al.*, 2015). This poses the question whether, in a society where any premarital sexual activity is taboo, a random sample survey is the best approach for gaining information on the extent and nature of child sexual abuse

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(see Murray *et al.*, 2016). The important information yielded from our qualitative interviews about sexual abuse in Palestinian society is unlikely to be obtained from the ICAST questionnaire. It confirms the findings of the earlier study by Haj-Yahia and Tamish (2001). The young people's opinion that sexual abuse happens to young males perhaps even more than to females requires addressing and is in line with a number of studies in the region (Al-Eissa *et al.*, 2015; Simsek *et al.*, 2017), including a recent study in Israel in which Israeli Palestinian-Arab boys reported significantly higher rates of sexual abuse than girls (Lev-Wiesel *et al.*, 2018).

Although the consequences of sexual abuse for female victims may be more serious (especially when the hymen is ruptured and the girl is no longer a virgin), our finding that disclosure may also have social consequences for male victims confirms the finding of Haj-Yahia and Tamish (2001) that male sexual abuse tarnishes the family reputation. Al-Rafai (2007, p. 20) conducted interviews with and about Palestinian victims of sexual abuse and honour killings and explains that:

‘Victims of rape and sexual abuse in particular and/or their families do not want to talk about the event because of all the negative emotions it conjures in them including: tremendous pain, shame, guilt, sorrow, bitterness, prejudice and partiality.’

In an assessment of child abuse and neglect services in Palestine, three quarters of respondents working at institutions dealing with child abuse and neglect said that sexual abuse was rarely dealt with (Halileh and Abdallah, 2009), corroborating our respondents' concerns that when interviews open old wounds, support may not be available. The lack of adequate referral services in resource-poor contexts and the ethical challenges this poses to research teams has also been highlighted by Devries *et al.* (2015) for Uganda. A literature review on adult disclosure of childhood sexual abuse warns that, although disclosure may be beneficial when responses are positive (Easton, 2019), it can also be harmful when responses are negative (Tener and Murphy, 2015). This warning must be taken seriously given our interviewees' suggestion that replying to sexual abuse questions, let alone disclosing abuse, can have potentially negative consequences. In Western society too, it required a context of increasing public awareness and the criminal prosecution of perpetrators of child abuse within the Roman Catholic Church before victims finally felt able to come forward after keeping the abuse secret throughout childhood and adulthood (Dale and Alpert, 2007). For our respondents, disclosure, even by anonymous participation in surveys, raises concern about potential psychological and/or social consequences for victims and their families. This concern was also highlighted in a study using the ICAST-R with Turkish medical students (Simsek *et al.*, 2017). However, we discovered that speaking about the questions in general, especially with the young men and women, yielded important information. Although neither children nor families seem to have an interest in public disclosure or anonymous reporting of sexual abuse, the problem is acknowledged as existing, and affects both boys and girls. Research into factors that help children to disclose has found that providing an indirect opportunity to talk and building trust can be of major importance (Jensen *et al.*, 2005; McElvaney *et al.*, 2014). Parental support in both adolescence and adulthood, and support

‘Replying to sexual abuse questions, let alone disclosing abuse, can have potentially negative consequences’

of friends, were found to protect against depression in adults exposed to child sexual abuse, except when the perpetrator was a parent or caregiver (Musliner and Singer, 2014). Trusted family members, teachers or school counsellors may be best placed to notice when a child seems upset and to provide that opportunity to talk about what has happened to the child.

Conclusion

The qualitative interviews indicated that most ICAST questions were applicable, but reservations about the sexual abuse questions were such that the study recommended omitting the questions from the quantitative survey questionnaires to prevent jeopardising the safety of interviewees and interviewers. However, the findings of our qualitative interviews demonstrate that, even without quantitative data about incidence and prevalence, the presence of child sexual abuse in a population can be acknowledged. Our interviewees confirmed that sexual abuse occurs in Palestinian society and affects both female and male children. They confirmed that disclosure of a history of sexual abuse may have grave consequences for female but also male children, not only psychologically, but also socially, in particular, jeopardising the chances for marriage. These findings demonstrate the need for awareness-raising among parents, other caregivers, professionals and researchers. Strategies could include alerting teachers and school counsellors to changes in children's behaviour as possible indicators of (sexual) abuse and educating them on how best to respond and support these children. These are important first steps, which combined with advocacy for improved legal, health and social welfare services, should lead to better support of children exposed to sexual abuse and their families.

Our study draws attention to a range of potential adverse consequences for survey respondents in a population where sex before marriage is unacceptable and where psychosocial support and legal services are underdeveloped. We advise researchers to seriously consider potential consequences to survey respondents and fieldworkers before embarking on surveys dealing with socially sensitive topics in vulnerable populations. While this study focused on the Palestinian population in the occupied West Bank, the results could apply to other vulnerable groups, for example, refugee camp populations in the Middle East, Europe and other parts of the world. Lastly, following the concern of some of our respondents, parental favouritism, as a form of child abuse or neglect, should be considered for inclusion in new ICAST versions.

A potential limitation existed in our exclusively female team of interviewers. We would have employed male interviewers if male interviewees had seemed inhibited and disengaged with the questions. But this was not the case. An additional limitation is that we were unable to include fathers, unavailable during our daytime interviews, in our sample. We mitigated this limitation somewhat by asking the mothers about the fathers' role in child discipline but recommend including fathers in future studies. A particular strength of this study is that the methodology did not limit the communication with the participants to the questions of the instruments but encouraged general exploration of the topics related to child discipline and abuse, revealing information that is not easily obtained in

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survey research. Finally, we want to highlight the contribution of this study to the field of global research on child maltreatment in its advocacy for culturally grounded research on the potential consequences on participants and researchers. Before administering any internationally designed survey instrument in LMICs, special attention must be given to the cultural, social and political contexts of these countries.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.