Reviewer's report

Title: Perpetration of physical and sexual abuse and subsequent fathering of pregnancies among a cohort of young South African men: a longitudinal study

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Reviewer: Suzanne Maman

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Minor Essential Revisions:

This is an important and interesting study that explores the association between IPV and pregnancy incidence. The authors have used data from the Stepping Stones trial in South Africa to examine whether and what type of violence is associated with the incidence of fathering an unintended pregnancy. The paper is well organized and written. I have very few suggestions for improvement. These are just a few overall comments that the authors may want to consider:

1) In the Background, one of the arguments the authors make for the significance of this research is that men often control the reproductive decisions within relationships (including contraceptive use). The citation that the authors include for this is not from South Africa. The data I have seen from South Africa suggests that South African women have more agency in contraceptive decision making than women in other sub-Saharan African settings. It would be helpful for the authors to engage with some of the literature from South Africa on contraceptive decision making. Despite the agency that women may have in South Africa, there is still very high rates of “unintended” pregnancy. This is puzzling. A more nuanced review/discussion of this literature would strengthen the paper.

2) The direction of the association between pregnancy and violence is assumed to be that IPV leads to unintended pregnancies. Given that the period of recall for the IPV covers the period during which the partner became pregnant, is it not possible that the direction of association is such that an unintended pregnancy led to increased violence within the relationship? There is a large body of research on violence during pregnancy, and some research on violence during the postpartum period. This is a time of tremendous change for a couple (pregnancy and postpartum) that does lead to stress and sometimes violence. The authors need to comment on whether some of the violence that occurred could have resulted from learning about the unintended pregnancy within the relationship.

3) The measure of pregnancy incidence is weak, and they authors acknowledge this. It is weak for a number of reasons. As acknowledged by the authors the measure depends on the men’s knowledge of the pregnancy, which is contingent upon whether the men have been told by their female partners. It is also weak because how one defines “unwanted” or “unintended” pregnancy is challenging. This is not discussed by the authors. There is literature available on the
challenges of defining and measuring “unintended” and “unwanted” pregnancy. Furthermore, the sample of men that they include in the analysis includes the men who participated in the intervention. Given that the intervention was focused on transforming gender norms, I think there could be some differential bias in the reporting of unintended pregnancies by men in the different arms of the study. While it is unlikely that the authors have any other measures of pregnancy incidence to use from this study, it would be helpful for the authors to engage more with the literature on the challenges of reporting “unwanted” or “unintended” pregnancy.

4) I think the authors need to say more about the implications of these findings for programs. They make a few brief points about this in the conclusion, but I think they could be more specific about how these findings could inform programs to both prevent pregnancy and prevent violence. They make the point in the Background, that men have been excluded from reproductive health programs. So I would assume they would want to argue for programs that engage men in these programs. They do not comment on that in the conclusion.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.