



### Overview and Objectives

Although exposure to violence is recognized as a critical factor in determining mental health outcomes, there has been little opportunity for investigators in mental health and addictions, child maltreatment and intimate partner violence (IPV) to collaborate to develop and test approaches to reduce violence and associated impairment. As a result, there is a paucity of research evidence about effective interventions for family violence. Our international team of over 50 collaborating investigators and policy partners has been funded for 5 years by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) to establish the **PreVAiL Research Network**, a Centre for Research Development in Gender, Mental Health and Violence Across the Lifespan.

PreVAiL has three main objectives:

1. to increase understanding and knowledge about the links between mental health impairment, gender and exposure to child maltreatment and IPV, both in Canada and internationally;
2. to develop interventions to prevent or reduce child maltreatment, IPV and subsequent mental health problems; and
3. to develop and promote an integrated research and knowledge translation and exchange (KTE) agenda among a network of established, new and emerging researchers and key stakeholders.

### Team

The co-principal investigators are Harriet MacMillan, Professor of Psychiatry & Behavioral Neurosciences, and of Pediatrics at McMaster University; Donna Stewart, University Professor and Chair of Women's Health at University Health Network and University of Toronto, and Nadine Wathen, Associate Professor of Information and Media Studies, The University of Western Ontario. International co-principal investigators are Jeffrey Coben, Professor of Emergency Medicine and of Community Medicine, West Virginia University and Helen Herrman, Professor of Psychiatry, University of Melbourne.

The team includes a broad range of collaborating academic investigators at the national and international level, and partnerships with Canadian organizations and international organizations such as Centers for Disease Control, the World Federation for Mental Health, the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect and the World Health Organization.

### Research Themes

**Theme 1 - Gender/Mental Health/Violence Network:** A multidisciplinary Canadian research and KTE network with links to international researchers, decision makers and funders will meet twice yearly to review the research evidence for approaches to promoting mental health through the prevention of child maltreatment and IPV and ameliorating the impairment in mental health associated with these exposures, and to develop research strategies for enhancing existing interventions and developing new ones. This network will:

- 1) identify, evaluate and synthesize the best scientific knowledge to reduce poor mental health and other problems associated with child maltreatment and IPV;
- 2) identify existing promising interventions with a focus on those that address both child maltreatment and IPV and design the evaluations needed to determine their effectiveness;
- 3) map out with practitioners, researchers and policy makers the theoretical components important to consider in developing new interventions;
- 4) establish key scientific principles to be applied to the evaluation of interventions;
- 5) determine the best approaches for knowledge translation both within Canada and internationally and
- 6) develop approaches to recruit new and emerging investigators to the field, providing opportunities through the network for collaboration and mentorship.



**Theme 2 - Understanding and Fostering Resilient Mental Health Outcomes in the Context of Violence across the Lifespan:** One of the strongest predictors of mental health conditions in both sexes worldwide, especially depression and substance abuse, is violence in its many forms. What is less well understood is resilience; a key question is: *what enables some men and women to withstand violence, not develop impairment, and at times to even thrive?* Resilience is an interactive, dynamic construct that considers protective factors and positive adaptation in adversity, including violent interpersonal relationships; it promotes mental health and prevents mental disorders across the lifespan. Although resilience is usually thought to reside within the individual, research increasingly demonstrates that characteristics of social contexts and policies may be better predictors of resilience. More transdisciplinary research is urgently needed across genders in the context of violence to learn more about the individual, family, community and systemic resources, policies and interventions that promote or impede resilience and improve mental health outcomes. We will explore resiliency across the lifespan in males and females in Canadian, Australian, Danish and Indian violent contexts by quantitative analyses of databases, qualitative methods and extensive reviews of the published and gray literature.

**Theme 3 - Innovations in Knowledge Translation & Exchange Strategies and Research Methods Specific to Mental Health, Gender and Violence across the Lifespan:** Knowledge translation and exchange (KTE) involves *"...collaborative problem-solving between researchers and decision makers that happens through linkage and exchange... result[ing] in mutual learning through the process of planning, producing, disseminating, and applying existing or new research in decision-making"*. A particular challenge is measuring and evaluating the uptake and impact of new knowledge at multiple levels, including public policy and systems, organizations, communities and individuals. Equally important is ensuring that the messages are appropriately contextualized; this is particularly true in the field of family violence. We are bringing together leading researchers in the content areas (Themes 1 and 2) with experts in KTE to develop 'evidence-based meta-narratives' that synthesize findings across studies and contexts to begin providing integrated messages about violence and its impact on mental health for men and women. To reach this goal, new methods are required. We are exploring techniques, such as qualitative meta-synthesis, to create integrative meta-narratives across different types and "levels" of results; we are also examining new ways to prepare and communicate messages; and techniques to create communities of practice, including using new technologies. More importantly, we require advances in metrics and tools for capturing the impact of KTE activities in mental health and violence.

**For more information:**

Harriet MacMillan, MD, MSc, FRCPC  
Offord Centre for Child Studies  
McMaster University,  
1200 Main Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario L8N 3Z5  
[macmilnh@mcmaster.ca](mailto:macmilnh@mcmaster.ca)

Donna E. Stewart, MD, FRCPC  
Women's Health Program  
University Health Network  
University of Toronto  
200 Elizabeth St., EN7-229,  
Toronto, Ontario M5G 2C4  
[donna.stewart@uhn.on.ca](mailto:donna.stewart@uhn.on.ca)

Nadine Wathen, PhD  
Faculty of Information & Media Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
North Campus Building, Rm 254  
London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5B7  
[nwathen@uwo.ca](mailto:nwathen@uwo.ca)

