

Intimate Partner Violence: Challenging Harmful Acceptance

The acceptability of intimate partner violence (IPV) against women encompasses the societal and individual justification of abusive behaviors

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Defining the Concept and Scope of Acceptability

The acceptability of intimate partner violence (IPV) against women refers to the societal, cultural, or individual endorsement, justification, or tolerance of physically, psychologically, or sexually harmful acts committed by a current or former male partner. This concept moves beyond merely documenting the prevalence of violence to understanding the underlying attitudes that permit such abuse to persist and remain hidden within communities. It is crucial to distinguish between the experience of IPV and the acceptance of it; while the former measures victimization, the latter measures the normative environment that either condemns or condones the violence. High levels of acceptability often correlate with low reporting rates, reduced willingness of bystanders to intervene, and significant institutional inertia when responding to cases of abuse. Understanding acceptability requires a deep dive into the complex interplay between traditional gender roles, economic dependency, and systemic failure to protect vulnerable populations.

Globally, the rates at which men and women justify IPV vary dramatically, but even in contexts where violence is legally prohibited, a significant portion of the population may still rationalize certain acts of abuse under specific circumstances. Common justifications often center around perceived failures of the woman to fulfill domestic duties, such as neglecting children, burning food, or refusing sexual relations. These specific triggers illustrate how acceptability is often deeply embedded in expectations regarding female subordination and adherence to rigid patriarchal norms. When violence is viewed as a legitimate tool for maintaining household order or enforcing compliance, it ceases to be perceived solely as a crime and instead becomes a contested mechanism of social control. Therefore, mapping the scope of acceptability is essential for identifying the specific cultural levers that must be addressed to foster sustainable change.

Furthermore, the scope of acceptability extends beyond simple justification; it includes the internalization of blame by victims themselves, a phenomenon often referred to as secondary victimization or self-blame. When women are repeatedly exposed to narratives that frame violence as a consequence of their own actions or failures, they may internalize these beliefs, which severely limits their ability to seek external assistance or leave abusive situations. This internalization is particularly dangerous because it transforms structural violence into a psychological barrier, reinforcing the cycle of abuse from within the victim's own mental framework. Analyzing the acceptability of IPV, therefore, provides a necessary framework for understanding the profound structural roots that allow violence to be normalized across diverse socio-economic settings, impacting policy design and preventative measures.

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Acceptance

Several theoretical models attempt to explain why IPV is accepted or justified within populations, with the primary frameworks often drawing from sociology, psychology, and feminist theory. The

Social Learning Theory posits that individuals learn acceptable behaviors, including aggressive responses, by observing models in their environment--such as parents, peers, or media--and being reinforced for those behaviors. If violence is frequently observed within the family unit or community without significant negative repercussions, it is often internalized as a viable, albeit undesirable, conflict resolution strategy. This framework suggests that acceptability is not inherent but is a learned response, meaning it can be unlearned through targeted educational interventions and the promotion of non-violent role models.

In contrast, **Feminist Theories** view the acceptability of IPV as a direct consequence of systemic patriarchy, where violence serves as a primary mechanism for enforcing male dominance and maintaining gender inequality. From this perspective, acceptance is structural; it is built into the legal, economic, and social institutions that grant men greater power and control over women's lives and bodies. Justifications of violence (e.g., "she deserved it") are seen as ideological tools that mask the underlying power imbalance. The theoretical implication here is that reducing acceptability requires fundamental structural shifts, including economic empowerment of women and dismantling legal frameworks that privilege male authority in domestic spheres. This framework highlights that acceptability is not merely an attitude but a reflection of entrenched power dynamics.

A third important framework involves the concept of **Techniques of Neutralization**, originally developed in criminology. This theory suggests that perpetrators and community members rationalize deviant behavior by employing cognitive strategies that temporarily suspend moral inhibitions. In the context of IPV, these techniques include denying responsibility ("I was provoked"), denying injury ("It wasn't serious"), or appealing to higher loyalties ("I was defending the honor of my family"). These neutralization strategies are critical because they allow individuals to maintain a positive self-image while simultaneously condoning or committing violence, thereby facilitating the widespread normalization of abuse within social groups. The acceptability of violence, therefore, relies heavily on the shared availability and invocation of these neutralizing narratives within a community.

Socio-Cultural Determinants of Acceptance

The acceptability of IPV is rarely uniform and is profoundly shaped by specific socio-cultural determinants, including economic status, education level, and geographic location. Research consistently shows that lower levels of female education and economic dependence often correlate strongly with higher acceptability of violence. When women lack access to independent financial resources or educational attainment, their ability to negotiate power within a relationship or exit an abusive situation is severely constrained, making them more likely to rationalize the violence they face as an inevitable aspect of their subordinate position. Conversely, higher levels of community education and opportunities for women tend to be associated with stronger condemnation of IPV,

suggesting that economic and educational empowerment acts as a protective factor against the normalization of violence.

Geographic location also plays a significant role, often reflecting the intensity of traditional norms. Studies frequently find that acceptability rates are higher in rural or peri-urban settings compared to major metropolitan areas. This disparity can be attributed to several factors: limited access to external support services, weaker penetration of legal reforms, and the dominance of tightly knit, conservative community structures where social cohesion often overrides individual rights. In these settings, community elders or traditional leaders may hold greater sway than formal legal institutions, and adherence to established social hierarchies becomes paramount. Consequently, violence that enforces those hierarchies is more easily tolerated or even encouraged as a means of preserving social order, illustrating the powerful influence of localized community norms on individual attitudes toward violence.

Furthermore, religious beliefs and interpretations can heavily influence the cultural determinants of acceptability. While most major religions promote peace and compassion, specific interpretations or fundamentalist readings of religious texts are sometimes invoked to justify male headship, female submission, and, in extreme cases, the use of physical discipline within marriage. When religious authorities or interpretations lend credence to patriarchal control, it provides a powerful, morally sanctioned basis for the acceptance of violence, making interventions particularly challenging. Addressing these determinants requires engaging with community and religious leaders to promote interpretations that emphasize equality and human dignity, challenging the misuse of spiritual authority to perpetuate harmful norms.

The Role of Gender Norms and Patriarchy

Patriarchy, defined as a social system where men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property, is the foundational structure upon which the acceptability of IPV rests. Within patriarchal systems, rigid and often exaggerated gender norms dictate appropriate behavior for men and women. For men, this often involves the expectation of **machismo**--a concept encompassing aggressive masculinity, dominance, and emotional stoicism--which can normalize the use of force to assert authority or resolve conflict. When a man fails to meet these masculine ideals, or perceives his authority being challenged, violence can become a mechanism to restore his perceived status and control, and this mechanism is frequently tolerated by the wider community.

Conversely, traditional gender norms impose restrictive expectations on women, emphasizing domesticity, obedience, and self-sacrifice. The acceptability of violence often hinges on the perception that the victim has failed to adhere to these prescribed roles. Phrases such as "she provoked him" or "she neglected her duties" function as powerful rhetorical tools for **victim-**

blaming, shifting the focus away from the perpetrator's criminal act onto the victim's supposed moral or domestic failure. This systematic justification ensures that societal scrutiny falls upon the woman's behavior rather than the man's violence, thereby maintaining the structural integrity of the patriarchal system and reinforcing the idea that violence is a justifiable consequence of female transgression.

The normalization of violence is further cemented by the societal expectation that women should endure hardship for the sake of the family unit, particularly the children. This concept often intertwines with honor culture, where a family's reputation is closely tied to the perceived purity and obedience of its female members. If a woman reports abuse or attempts to leave, she may face severe social ostracism, as her actions are framed not as seeking safety, but as destroying the family structure or bringing shame upon her relatives. This high social cost associated with seeking help significantly contributes to the high acceptability of violence, as it forces victims into silence and perpetuates the cycle by signaling to perpetrators that the community will not hold them accountable.

Psychological Consequences of Normalized Violence

The widespread acceptability of IPV has profound psychological consequences for victims, often leading to the internalization of blame and the development of coping mechanisms that further entrench their victimization. When societal narratives consistently justify violence based on the victim's behavior, the victim may develop **learned helplessness**, a psychological state where individuals feel they have no control over their situation, even when opportunities for escape exist. This helplessness is reinforced by the lack of external validation or support, leading victims to believe that abuse is an inevitable component of their life or marriage.

Furthermore, the normalization process can lead to significant barriers in seeking professional help. If a woman has internalized the belief that her abuse is justifiable or merely a private family matter, she is less likely to recognize the abuse as a violation of her rights or seek assistance from legal, medical, or psychological services. This psychological barrier is compounded by the fear of judgment or disbelief from service providers who may also operate within the same cultural context where violence is tolerated. Consequently, victims often suffer from chronic mental health issues, including severe depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation, all exacerbated by the societal message that their suffering is deserved or unavoidable.

The normalization effect also impacts children exposed to IPV, shaping their attitudes toward violence and acceptability in future generations. Children who witness violence in the home, especially if it is justified by the non-violent parent or community members, are more likely to internalize the belief that violence is an acceptable means of resolving conflict or asserting dominance. This intergenerational transmission of acceptance creates a self-perpetuating cycle,

where the psychological acceptance of violence in childhood paves the way for both victimization and perpetration in adulthood. Breaking this cycle requires not only intervening with adult attitudes but also providing comprehensive psychological support and alternative behavioral models for youth exposed to violence.

Measurement and Methodological Challenges

Measuring the acceptability of IPV presents substantial methodological challenges, primarily due to issues of social desirability bias, definitional variability, and the difficulty of conducting cross-cultural comparisons. Surveys designed to assess attitudes often rely on direct questioning, such as "Is it acceptable for a husband to beat his wife if she burns the food?" However, respondents may provide answers that align with perceived social norms or legal expectations rather than their true personal beliefs, leading to significant **social desirability bias** and potentially underreporting the true level of acceptance. To mitigate this, researchers often employ indirect questioning techniques or vignette-based scenarios, which allow respondents to project their attitudes onto fictional situations.

A second challenge lies in the conceptual definition of "justification" versus "acceptance." Acceptance implies a general tolerance, while justification implies a specific condition under which violence is deemed appropriate. Many studies focus on measuring justification based on a fixed set of scenarios (e.g., infidelity, neglecting children). However, these standardized scenarios may not capture the nuances of local cultural contexts where other specific triggers might be highly acceptable. Furthermore, the degree of violence considered acceptable may vary widely; some communities may tolerate a slap but not a severe beating, requiring instruments to capture the continuum of acceptable violent acts rather than a simple binary measure of acceptance or rejection.

Cross-cultural comparability is another major hurdle. Instruments developed in Western contexts may fail to capture the local idioms of distress or the specific cultural justifications for violence prevalent in non-Western societies. Translating survey questions requires careful adaptation to ensure that the concept of "violence" and "acceptability" carries the same moral weight and meaning across different languages and cultural frameworks. Without rigorous methodological adaptation, comparative studies risk drawing inaccurate conclusions about the relative levels of IPV acceptance globally, thereby hindering the development of targeted, context-specific interventions.

Legal and Policy Implications

High levels of IPV acceptability within a population directly undermine the efficacy of legal frameworks designed to criminalize abuse. Even where strong laws against domestic violence

exist, societal tolerance can translate into minimal enforcement by police, lenient sentencing by judges, and a reluctance of community members to report incidents or serve as witnesses. This gap between law and practice--often termed **implementation failure**--is a critical policy implication of normalized violence. Policies must therefore move beyond mere legislation to focus heavily on judicial and law enforcement training that actively challenges ingrained biases and cultural acceptance of violence among legal actors.

Furthermore, the acceptability of violence necessitates policy interventions that address systemic inequalities contributing to vulnerability. Policies focusing solely on crisis response (e.g., shelters) are insufficient if they do not simultaneously tackle the economic dependency that prevents victims from leaving. Effective policy must integrate legal protections with economic empowerment programs, including microfinance initiatives, guaranteed access to education, and vocational training, thereby reducing the structural leverage that perpetrators and accepting communities hold over victims. These policies serve to increase a woman's bargaining power within the relationship and reduce the perceived necessity of tolerating abuse for economic survival.

International conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), mandate states to take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct that perpetuate gender stereotyping and violence. This implies that legal and policy responses must include mandatory, sustained public education campaigns that explicitly challenge the cultural justifications for IPV. Such campaigns should target not only potential victims and perpetrators but also bystanders and institutional gatekeepers (teachers, doctors, religious leaders) to foster a collective sense of responsibility and shift the normative environment from tolerance to zero tolerance for all forms of intimate partner violence.

Strategies for Intervention and Prevention

Effective intervention and prevention strategies must operate at multiple ecological levels--individual, relational, community, and societal--to successfully counter the deep-seated acceptability of IPV. At the community level, interventions focused on **community mobilization** have proven highly effective. These strategies involve engaging local leaders, media, and grassroots organizations to publicly condemn violence, promote gender equality, and establish community-led monitoring systems. When the entire community collectively agrees to reject violence, the social cost of perpetration increases, and the social acceptance of violence decreases significantly, making it harder for individuals to neutralize their behavior.

A crucial strategy involves engaging men and boys as allies in prevention efforts, rather than simply viewing them as potential perpetrators. Programs focused on shifting traditional masculine norms--often termed "positive masculinity" interventions--teach men alternative, non-violent methods of conflict resolution and emotional expression. By challenging the harmful aspects of

machismo and demonstrating that caring, respectful behavior is compatible with strength and leadership, these programs directly attack the gender norms that underpin the justification of violence. This approach is essential because men are the primary agents of change required to dismantle patriarchal attitudes of entitlement and control.

Finally, prevention requires long-term investment in educational reform. Curricula, starting from primary school, must incorporate comprehensive sexuality education and gender sensitivity training that explicitly addresses power dynamics, consent, and respectful relationships. By instilling egalitarian values early in life, educational systems can systematically erode the foundations of IPV acceptability across generations. These structural strategies, combined with robust legal enforcement and economic empowerment, offer the most promising pathway toward permanently shifting societal norms away from the tolerance and justification of intimate partner violence against women.

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