

# Intimate Partner Violence: Attitudes and Beliefs

Authored by  
**mohammed looti**

November 21, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammed looti (2025). *Intimate Partner Violence: Attitudes and Beliefs*. Psychepedia.  
Retrieved from <https://psychepedia.arabpsychology.com/?p=25308>

## Introduction and Definition of Attitudes toward Intimate Partner Violence

Attitudes toward Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) represent the complex spectrum of beliefs, judgments, and emotional reactions individuals and societies hold regarding the acceptability, justification, or condemnation of violence occurring between people in an intimate relationship. These attitudes are crucial determinants of how frequently IPV occurs, whether victims seek help, and how effectively legal and social institutions respond to these incidents. A permissive or ambivalent attitude can normalize abusive behaviors, often disguising patterns of control and coercion as mere relational conflict, thereby creating a dangerous environment where violence is tolerated or minimized. Conversely, strongly condemnatory attitudes serve as protective factors, encouraging accountability and supporting victims. It is vital to recognize that IPV encompasses a wide range of behaviors, including physical aggression, sexual assault, psychological abuse, and coercive control, and attitudes often vary depending on the specific form of violence examined.

The study of attitudes toward IPV is inherently challenging because these beliefs are deeply intertwined with established cultural norms, gender roles, and power dynamics within relationships. An individual's expressed attitude is not always their underlying conviction, particularly due to the pervasive influence of social desirability bias, where respondents feel compelled to report socially acceptable, non-violent stances, even if their private beliefs are more permissive. Therefore, researchers must employ sophisticated measurement techniques to uncover the true prevalence of attitudes that justify violence, often finding higher rates of acceptance when violence is framed contextually, such as in situations involving perceived infidelity or loss of control, rather than when framed abstractly. Understanding the nuances of these attitudes is the first step toward effective prevention, demanding a thorough examination of the social structures that reinforce them.

Furthermore, attitudes toward IPV are not monolithic; they are shaped by perceptions of the victim and the perpetrator, often leading to skewed judgments based on demographics such as socioeconomic status, race, or sexual orientation. For instance, violence in same-sex relationships has historically received less institutional attention, partially due to societal attitudes that fail to recognize the complexity of power dynamics outside of heteronormative frameworks, or attitudes that dismiss emotional abuse as less harmful than physical injury. The core issue remains that attitudes function as cognitive filters, determining whether an act of violence is labeled as a crime, a regrettable mistake, or a justifiable reaction. A comprehensive understanding requires moving beyond simple acceptance versus rejection to examine the underlying schemas that rationalize aggression and minimize the perpetrator's culpability while maximizing the victim's assumed responsibility.

## Theoretical Foundations of Attitude Formation

The formation of attitudes toward IPV is deeply rooted in several interconnected theoretical

frameworks, most notably the influence of patriarchal ideology and Social Learning Theory. Patriarchal structures inherently promote gender inequality, positioning men in roles of dominance and control, and often tacitly or overtly sanctioning the use of force to maintain this hierarchy within the family unit. Attitudes that justify IPV frequently draw upon these traditional gender norms, suggesting that a man is entitled to discipline or control his partner, or that a woman's primary role is to avoid provoking her partner's anger. These deeply ingrained cultural scripts provide a ready-made cognitive framework for minimizing the severity of violence, framing it not as a criminal act, but as a failure to adhere to prescribed relational roles. Such attitudes become self-reinforcing within conservative social contexts, where deviations from traditional family structures are seen as threats, justifying aggressive measures to restore perceived order.

Social Learning Theory posits that attitudes and behaviors related to violence are acquired through observation, imitation, and direct reinforcement. Individuals, particularly during childhood and adolescence, learn about relationship dynamics by observing their parents, peers, and media representations. If a child grows up witnessing violence being used successfully as a means of conflict resolution or control, or observes attitudes among adults that minimize the harm of abuse, they are significantly more likely to develop permissive attitudes toward IPV later in life. Reinforcement plays a critical role; if violence or controlling behavior is tolerated by the social circle, or if the perpetrator faces no significant negative consequences, the attitude that violence is an acceptable relational tool is strengthened. This generational transmission of attitudes underscores the public health challenge presented by IPV, requiring interventions that break the cycle of learned acceptance.

Furthermore, attitudes are often maintained through cognitive mechanisms such as the Just-World Hypothesis and cognitive dissonance reduction. The **Just-World Hypothesis** suggests that people have a psychological need to believe that the world is fair and that people get what they deserve. When confronted with evidence of victim suffering, rather than facing the uncomfortable realization that random, unjust cruelty exists, observers may shift their attitude to one of victim blaming, thereby restoring their belief in a predictable, controllable world. This attitude shields the observer from personal vulnerability but severely harms the victim. Similarly, individuals who engage in or are close to those who engage in violence may experience **cognitive dissonance**. To resolve the conflict between their self-perception as a good person and the reality of their harmful actions or associations, they may adjust their attitudes to justify the violence, perhaps minimizing the injury, maximizing the provocation, or characterizing the victim as deserving of the abuse.

## Measurement Scales and Methodologies

Accurately measuring attitudes toward IPV is essential for both research and effective intervention design, yet it remains methodologically complex due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Researchers rely heavily on standardized psychometric scales, such as the widely used Attitudes

Toward Violence Against Women (ATVAW) scale or adapted versions of the Acceptance of Violence scale. These instruments typically employ Likert-style responses to statements that gauge levels of acceptance, justification, or minimization of various forms of violence, often presenting hypothetical scenarios to elicit genuine responses. A critical challenge in this area is the pervasive issue of **social desirability bias**, where respondents consciously or unconsciously alter their answers to align with perceived social norms against violence, leading to an underestimation of permissive attitudes in general population surveys.

To mitigate the effects of social desirability, researchers often employ indirect or implicit measurement techniques. Implicit association tests (IATs), for example, measure the strength of automatic associations between concepts (e.g., "violence" and "justified") and are less susceptible to conscious manipulation than explicit self-report measures. Additionally, researchers utilize vignette methodology, presenting detailed, context-rich scenarios that vary key variables--such as the gender of the perpetrator, the severity of the violence, or the perceived provocation--and then asking respondents to assign responsibility or suggest appropriate legal consequences. This contextual framing often reveals more permissive attitudes than abstract questioning, particularly when the violence is framed as a reaction to perceived threats to honor or authority, demonstrating that attitudes are highly contextualized rather than absolute.

Further methodological considerations involve ensuring cultural validity and reliability across diverse populations. Scales developed in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) contexts may not accurately capture the nuances of attitudes in different cultural settings where definitions of marriage, conflict resolution, and gender roles vary significantly. Therefore, effective measurement requires rigorous translation, adaptation, and validation processes to ensure that the constructs being measured--such as "justification" or "coercion"--hold equivalent meaning across diverse groups. Without culturally sensitive measurement, research risks generating misleading data that fails to inform localized prevention efforts, potentially overlooking specific cultural rationales that sustain permissive attitudes toward violence.

## Sociocultural and Demographic Influences

Attitudes toward IPV are profoundly shaped by sociocultural context, with cross-cultural research highlighting significant variability in the acceptance of violence, often correlating directly with the degree of gender inequality present in a society. In cultures characterized by strong patriarchal norms and rigid gender segregation, attitudes that justify male control and dominance, even through physical means, tend to be more prevalent. These attitudes are often institutionalized through legal codes and religious interpretations that grant husbands authority over their wives, leading to a societal normalization of certain coercive behaviors. However, it is a simplification to view this solely as a difference between "developed" and "developing" nations; within any large society, significant variations exist based on factors such as urbanization, adherence to traditional

or conservative religious doctrine, and exposure to globalized human rights discourse.

Demographic variables such as age, education, and socioeconomic status also play a critical role in shaping attitudes. Generally, higher levels of education correlate with less permissive attitudes toward violence, likely due to increased exposure to critical thinking, human rights education, and greater economic independence. Conversely, lower socioeconomic status can sometimes correlate with higher stress levels and reduced access to protective resources, which may, in turn, contribute to environments where violence is more common and thus, attitudes justifying it are more frequently encountered and internalized. Age often shows a curvilinear relationship; while older generations may hold more traditional, permissive views, younger generations sometimes show concerning levels of acceptance, particularly regarding digital forms of abuse or coercive control, reflecting new challenges in defining acceptable relationship boundaries in the digital age.

Gender is perhaps the most critical demographic variable, though the relationship is complex. While men, on average, tend to hold more permissive attitudes toward IPV than women, this is not universally true, and significant within-gender variation exists. Crucially, women can also internalize patriarchal attitudes, leading to beliefs that rationalize their partner's violence or assign fault to themselves for the abuse they suffer. This internalized sexism is a powerful psychological barrier to seeking help and challenging the status quo. Furthermore, research increasingly examines attitudes related to intersectional identities, finding that experiences of marginalization based on race, sexual orientation, or disability status can complicate attitudes toward violence, sometimes fostering skepticism toward institutional help or leading to the normalization of violence within marginalized communities due to systemic neglect or historical trauma.

## The Phenomenon of Victim Blaming

Victim blaming is a central and detrimental manifestation of permissive attitudes toward IPV, functioning as a psychological defense mechanism that shifts accountability away from the perpetrator and onto the person who suffered harm. This phenomenon is often fueled by the **Just-World Hypothesis**, where observers attribute negative outcomes to the victim's actions, beliefs, or character flaws (e.g., "She must have provoked him," or "Why didn't she just leave?"). This attribution provides the observer with a comforting illusion of control, suggesting that if they behave "correctly," they will avoid similar victimization. When the violence is sexual in nature, victim blaming often intensifies, focusing on the victim's clothing, sobriety, or past sexual history, effectively demanding an impossible standard of behavior to prevent harm.

The consequences of victim blaming attitudes are severe and far-reaching. For the victim, encountering these attitudes from family, friends, or institutional representatives (such as police officers or judges) can lead to profound secondary victimization, exacerbating trauma, shame, and isolation. This societal response severely inhibits help-seeking behavior; if victims anticipate being

judged, disbelieved, or held responsible for the violence, they are significantly less likely to report the abuse or utilize critical resources like shelters or counseling services. This silence, in turn, reinforces the perpetrator's sense of impunity and allows the cycle of violence to continue unchecked, demonstrating how seemingly benign judgmental attitudes contribute directly to public safety failure.

Victim blaming attitudes are often subtly reinforced through cultural narratives and media representation. Media coverage of IPV often focuses disproportionately on the victim's background or past behavior rather than the perpetrator's history of violence or coercive tactics. Language used in reporting frequently employs passive voice when describing the violence ("She was assaulted") versus active voice when describing the victim's actions ("She chose to stay"), subtly minimizing the perpetrator's agency and responsibility. Challenging victim-blaming requires targeted educational interventions that focus on empathy training, critical media literacy, and a firm commitment to the principle that violence is always the choice and responsibility of the aggressor, regardless of the victim's behavior or circumstances.

### Attitudes within Institutional Contexts

Institutional attitudes toward IPV--held by police, judiciary, healthcare providers, and social workers--are critical gatekeepers to justice and recovery. If these professional groups hold permissive or dismissive attitudes, the institutional response to IPV becomes ineffective, essentially legalizing or medicalizing the violence. For example, law enforcement officers who hold attitudes that minimize domestic disputes as private matters, or who stereotype victims as unreliable witnesses, may fail to adequately investigate claims, make arrests, or properly document evidence. This failure of the criminal justice system is often exacerbated when officers display **gender-biased attitudes**, assuming the victim must have provoked the incident or treating male victims of female aggression with skepticism.

Within the judicial system, judges and prosecutors' personal attitudes toward gender roles, the severity of emotional abuse, and the credibility of victims profoundly influence case outcomes, sentencing, and child custody decisions. If a judge holds the attitude that a woman's primary role is motherhood, they might penalize a victim for leaving an abusive relationship by restricting custody, viewing the departure as parental alienation rather than a survival tactic. Conversely, if judges fail to recognize coercive control as a form of violence, they may impose inadequate protective orders or sentences, sending a clear institutional message that certain forms of abuse are tolerable or minor inconveniences rather than serious crimes. This institutional tolerance undermines legal protections and discourages victims from pursuing justice.

Healthcare settings also reflect critical attitudes. Medical professionals who lack proper training on IPV may fail to screen patients for abuse, or worse, adopt attitudes that dismiss physical injuries as

accidental or attribute psychological symptoms to pre-existing mental health conditions, ignoring the underlying trauma. A healthcare provider's attitude of genuine concern and non-judgmental support, however, can be a pivotal moment for a victim, offering a safe path toward disclosure and referral to specialized services. Therefore, system-wide interventions must focus on mandatory, continuous professional training across all institutional sectors to challenge deeply held biases and ensure that all professionals adopt attitudes rooted in trauma-informed care and zero tolerance for violence.

## Strategies for Attitude Change and Prevention

Effective prevention of IPV requires comprehensive strategies aimed at shifting societal and individual attitudes from permissive acceptance to unequivocal condemnation. Primary prevention strategies focus on educational interventions targeting young people, emphasizing the development of healthy relationship skills, emotional literacy, and critical analysis of traditional gender stereotypes that justify control or violence. Programs promoting **bystander intervention** are particularly effective, as they aim to shift the attitude of the passive observer, empowering individuals to recognize abusive behavior not as a private issue but as a community responsibility requiring intervention. By challenging the normalization of violence in peer groups, these strategies aim to foster a culture where permissive attitudes are socially unacceptable.

Mass media campaigns and public service announcements also play a crucial role in attitude change by challenging dominant cultural narratives and promoting positive role models for relationships. These campaigns must utilize messaging that avoids sensationalizing violence and instead focuses on the spectrum of abuse, including subtle coercive control, and explicitly counters victim-blaming narratives. Successful media interventions leverage respected community leaders and influencers to disseminate messages of accountability and respect, thereby influencing the social norms that dictate acceptable behavior. Changing deeply rooted attitudes requires sustained exposure to consistent messaging that unequivocally defines violence as unacceptable behavior, regardless of context or perceived provocation.

Finally, legislative and policy reforms serve as powerful mechanisms for attitude change by establishing clear, non-negotiable societal boundaries. When laws are strengthened to classify coercive control as a crime, or when judicial systems adopt specialized domestic violence courts, it sends a powerful institutional message that the state holds a zero-tolerance attitude toward IPV. These legal shifts not only provide tools for accountability but also shape public discourse, slowly eroding the cultural rationales that once justified minimization of the violence. Ultimately, shifting attitudes requires a multi-level approach--challenging individual biases, fostering community responsibility, and reinforcing these changes through strong institutional commitment and legal frameworks.