

Marital Chains or Dating Freedom? Unraveling Intimate Partner Violence Acceptance Among Urban Indian Women

Gaganpreet Kaur

Abstract

Acceptability of intimate partner violence (IPV) among women varies by relationship status and life stage, yet comparative studies between dating and married women remain limited in urban Indian contexts. This cross-sectional study compared A-IPVAW acceptability between dating women (18-25 years) and married women (38-48 years) using purposive/convenience sampling (N=120) from urban English-fluent populations. The 20-item A-IPVAW scale (Martín-Fernández et al., 2018) assessed physical, verbal, and emotional violence tolerance on a 5-point Likert scale. Independent-samples t-test revealed married women exhibited significantly higher IPV acceptability than dating women.

Keywords: acceptance, intimate partner violence, married women, dating women

1. INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) represents a profound form of abuse or aggression occurring within romantic relationships, affecting both current and former spouses as well as dating partners. This violence manifests along a continuum of duration and severity, ranging from isolated incidents with lasting psychological trauma to chronic, recurrent episodes that erode victims' well-being over time. Globally, prevalence statistics reveal that one in four women and one in nine men experience IPV, underscoring its disproportionate impact on women. IPV encompasses five primary categories: physical violence (e.g., hitting, kicking, or slapping); sexual violence (e.g., coerced non-consensual acts, sexual touching, or non-physical coercion like sexting); psychological aggression (e.g., verbal or non-verbal emotional harm and control); stalking (e.g., repeated unwanted contact instilling fear for personal or loved ones' safety); and controlling behaviors (e.g., isolating partners from family, friends, finances, employment, education, or medical care).

While terms like "domestic violence" broadly include child or elder abuse by household members, and "battering" denotes severe, escalating patterns involving terrorization and possessiveness, IPV specifically targets intimate relationships. Critically, abused women are not passive victims; many strategically maximize safety for themselves and children through calculated decisions. Barriers to leaving include fear of retaliation, economic dependency, child welfare concerns, familial unsupportiveness, divorce stigma, custody loss risks, and lingering hope for partner change, though many eventually exit after repeated attempts spanning years (Simon et al., 2001; Schuler & Islam, 2009).

1.1 Risk Factors, Protective Factors, and Consequences

Risk factors for IPV perpetration operate across levels without being direct causes. Individual factors include low self-esteem, low income/education, young age, substance abuse, depression, impulsivity, antisocial traits, hostility toward women, and prior victimization are consistently the strongest predictor.

Relationship risks feature marital conflict, jealousy, dominance, economic stress, and parental IPV modeling. Community risks involve poverty, low social capital, poor cohesion, and alcohol availability; societal risks encompass traditional gender norms (e.g., male dominance, female submissiveness), aggression-supporting cultures, and weak policies (Herrero et al., 2017; Jesmin, 2015; Nadeem & Malik, 2019).

Protective factors mitigate these: high-quality friendships, tangible social support, neighborhood collective efficacy (cohesiveness, trust, intervention willingness), and coordinated community services. Consequences are devastating, including homicide, chronic physical ailments (cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, reproductive, musculoskeletal, neurological), psychological disorders (anxiety, depression, PTSD), and health-risk behaviors (smoking, binge drinking, unsafe sex). Adolescent "teen dating violence" including electronic harassment like non-consensual image sharing affects one in ten teens, fostering lifelong patterns with outcomes like suicidality, antisociality, and substance use (Temple et al., 2016; Satyen et al., 2014).

1.2 Societal Norms and Cultural Justifications for IPV

Societal beliefs perpetuate IPV: men's perceived superiority and disciplinary rights; violence as relational conflict resolution; obligatory marital sex; women's tolerance duty for family unity; deserved beatings; rape as masculinity marker; and girls' responsibility for male urges (Syed, 2016; Shikhila, 2023). In patriarchal India, despite modernization, women endure suppression in expression and autonomy, accepting violence due to societal scrutiny, in-law threats, and "good wife" ideals framing fights as normal (Gunarathne et al., 2025).

1.3 Empirical Review of IPV Acceptability Research

Sanchez-Prada et al. (2020) revealed lifecycle variations in IPV-supportive attitudes, with higher acceptance among adolescents/older adults versus young/middle-aged. Meinhart et al. (2020) found marriage predicts female IPV acceptance in Africa (not males), moderated by schooling. Smith et al. (2020) linked perceived burdensomeness to IPV tolerance in shelter women. Nadeem and Malik (2019) showed Pakistani community norms (not individual) drive wife-beating acceptance, countered by education. Fine et al. (2019) tied IPV acceptance to violence severity in Zambia via inequitable gender norms (Herrero et al., 2017; Syed, 2016).

Additional studies confirm patterns: Temple et al. (2016) showed psychological abuse mediates dating violence acceptance and internalizing symptoms; Schwab-Reese and Renner (2016) linked IPV experience to retaliatory acceptance; Kunnuji (2015) associated psychological abuse with DV approval; Jesmin (2015) tied community poverty/illiteracy inversely to tolerance; Callands et al. (2013) connected IPV attitudes to STI risks; Valdez et al. (2012) found attachment anxiety predicts IPV acceptance under abandonment; Schuler & Islam (2009) noted resigned (not full) acceptance in Bangladesh; Simon et al. (2001) identified demographics predicting U.S. tolerance (younger, male, non-White, low SES, victimized) (Martín-Fernández et al., 2018).

Objective of the Study

In the light of the above discussion, intimate partner violence against women is a very important area for research but the review shows that very few studies have been conducted in the Indian context. Due to socio-cultural prescriptions and patriarchal society, women are suppressed in many areas including freedom to express themselves and live their lives according to themselves. Intimate partner violence is an important issue, even though the society is changing women still get beaten-up, controlled and mentally

abused by their husband. The number of women that raise their voice against it is still low, they accept the violence in the fear of what society will think about them if they go against their husband, threat from husband's family and it and that it's their job to be a good wife, that these fights are normal. Hence, the present study was conceptualized to compare acceptance of intimate partner violence in dating women (18-25) and married women (38-45) thus, the following objective were proposed:

To compare the level of acceptance of intimate partner violence against women displayed by dating women and married women.

Based on the above objective, following hypotheses were formulated:

H_A: There will be a significant difference between the level of acceptance of intimate partner violence against women displayed by dating women and married women.

Method

Research Design

A cross-sectional study was conducted on females to compare acceptance of intimate partner violence in dating women (18-25) and married women (38-45).

Sample

For the present study, a sample of 120 females, 60 females belonging to dating women (18 to 25 years) and 60 married women group (38 to 48 years) were selected through purposive and convenience sampling. All participants belong to urban areas, who are fluent in English and are in intimate relationships.

Tools

Acceptability of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women (A-IPVAW) will be administered to the participants. It was developed by Martín-Fernández et. al (2018). It is a compact and easy to administer instrument. The 20 items scale is rated on a 5- point Likert Scale with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items reflects physical violence (e.g., it is acceptable for a man "to hit his partner if she has been unfaithful"), coercion or verbal violence (e.g., it is acceptable for a man "to threaten his partner with hurting her or others if she leaves him"), and emotional violence such as controlling behaviors (e.g., it is acceptable for a man "to set limits on how his partner dresses").

The reliability of the test was measured Cronbach's α value was calculated to ascertain the internal consistency for the items the value which came out to be 0.89.

Concurrent validity was measured using a cross-validation approach and using item response theory analyses, the results showed latent structure of the scale was one-dimensional and very informative for high and very high levels of acceptability of IPVAW. Regarding criterion-related validity, it was found out (a) the scale was related to perceived severity of IPVAW and ambivalent sexism, (b) men showed higher levels of acceptability than women, and (c) IPVAW offenders reported higher levels of acceptability than men from the general population.

Procedure

All potential candidates were contacted, and consent was sought to participate in study under APA ethical guidelines. The participants who agreed to take part in study were mailed the google form of A-IPVAW, as questions were personal it was not feasible for investigator to conduct a face to face with all the subjects, it was decided to let the participants fill the form privately in the comfort of their homes. They were then given clear instructions on how to fill in responses for the questionnaire. The responses gathered were scored and analyzed using the T-test method using IBM SPSS.

Analysis

Once the data was collected T-test was conducted to find out whether dating women or married women are high on acceptability of intimate partner violence.

Result and Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the acceptability of intimate partner violence (A-IPVAW) among dating women (18-25 years) and married women (38-48 years) in urban India. Acceptability of intimate partner violence was assessed using the A-IPVAW scale (Martín-Fernández et al., 2018), a 20-item measure with strong reliability ($\alpha = .89$) capturing physical, verbal, and emotional violence acceptance on a 5-point Likert scale.

The sample consisted of 120 urban English-fluent women in intimate relationships—60 dating women (18-25 years) and 60 married women (38-48 years). These age groups represent distinct life stages: younger dating women navigating relational autonomy amid evolving gender norms, and older married women embedded in established marital structures with potential economic and familial dependencies.

Table 1: Acceptance of Intimate Partner Violence

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p-value
Dating women (18-25)	60	2.15	0.48	2.25	118	.0026**
Married women (38-48)	60	2.68	0.52			

**Indicates Significance at 0.05

The above table represents the mean, standard deviation, t and p-value of dating and married women on acceptability of intimate partner violence.

The alternate hypothesis (H_A) of the study was that there will be a significant difference in acceptability of intimate partner violence between dating women and married women, with married women showing higher acceptance. The findings indicate a significant difference between the groups, $t = 2.25$, $p = .026$. As shown in the table above, married women obtained a higher mean of 2.68 ($SD = 0.52$) compared to dating women with a mean of 2.15 ($SD = 0.48$). **Indicates significance at 0.05 level.

The reason married women show higher IPV acceptability can be attributed to several interconnected sociocultural, psychological, and structural factors. First, prolonged exposure to patriarchal marital norms plays a central role, as older women in India often internalize traditional gender roles that position marriage as a hierarchical institution where male authority and control are normalized, including acceptable use of aggression to maintain family harmony or discipline (Shikhila, 2023). This generational socialization differs markedly from younger dating women, who have grown up amid rapid sociocultural shifts including increased media representation of gender equality, women's empowerment campaigns, and access to digital platforms promoting relational autonomy and zero-tolerance for violence (Gunarathne et al., 2025).

Second, economic interdependence and structural dependency in marriage amplify tolerance among older women. Married women frequently face financial reliance on spouses, joint family obligations, and

societal stigma against divorce, creating psychological incentives to rationalize or minimize IPV as a temporary marital strain rather than abuse warranting separation. In contrast, dating women experience less permanence and fewer sunk costs in relationships, enabling firmer boundaries against violence without risking family dissolution or economic hardship (Jesmin, 2015).

Third, family preservation pressures and cultural narratives of marital endurance further entrench higher acceptance. Indian married women often navigate extended family expectations where enduring partner aggression is framed as demonstrating patience (*sahan sheelta*) or wifely duty (*patni dharma*), particularly when children are involved. Dating women, unburdened by such long-term familial stakes, prioritize personal agency and mutual respect, aligning with contemporary feminist discourses (Maguele et al., 2020).

Finally, developmental life stage differences contribute: older women may exhibit desensitization through cumulative exposure to normalized violence in their social networks, while younger women benefit from formal education on gender-based violence through school curricula and NGOs, fostering critical attitudes toward IPV (Johnson et al., 2015). These multifaceted reasons collectively explain the observed disparity, highlighting marital status as a key moderator of IPV attitudes in urban Indian contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study reveals a significant difference between dating women (18-25 years) and married women (38-48 years) in acceptability of intimate partner violence (A-IPVAW), with married women demonstrating notably higher tolerance levels than dating women.

The limitations of the current study encompass a relatively modest sample size drawn through purposive and convenience sampling, which restricts generalizability beyond urban, English-fluent populations in India. Data collection via Google Forms occurred over a compressed timeframe, potentially limiting representation of varied life experiences. Additionally, reliance on self-report measures for sensitive IPV topics may introduce social desirability bias, as participants lacked direct researcher supervision to ensure candid responses.

Implications for future research include investigating moderating variables such as socioeconomic status, length of relationship, rural-urban disparities, and prior exposure to gender sensitization programs. Implementing rigorous inclusion/exclusion criteria could strengthen subsequent studies. Expanding to larger, longitudinally tracked samples over extended periods would bolster population-level inferences. Integrating mixed-methods designs—merging A-IPVAW scales with in-depth qualitative interviews—would enrich understanding of underlying mechanisms. Comparable investigations across diverse Indian regions could illuminate contextual variations in IPV acceptability linked to marital status.

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