Relative Resources and Community Norms: Contextualizing Intimate Partner Violence in West Africa

Introduction

Violence against women, which the United Nations (UN) defines as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life", is a pervasive human rights violation.

This issue is particularly pronounced in developing countries, posing significant challenges to both public health and economic and social development (World Health Organization (WHO), 2021).

Globally, 1 in 3 women (30%) has experienced either sexual intimate partner violence or nonpartner sexual violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2021). In sub-Saharan Africa, the lifetime prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) among women is 37%, surpassing the global average of 30% (WHO, 2021).

While research on the scope and determinants of IPV in Africa is increasing (McCloskey et. Al 2016; Tenkorang 2019, Seid, Meles, Alemu, 2016), less is known about the impact of women's empowerment and gender equality both at the individual and community-level on IPV, particularly in Western Africa.

Empowerment of women, often conceptualized as the transformative process whereby women previously constrained from making strategic life decisions gain agency and autonomy (Kabeer, 1999), has garnered renewed scrutiny within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs) due to its significant implications for women's sexual and reproductive health outcomes. However, the literature is mixed on how women's access to resources (education, employment, and household wealth), especially relative to male partner's impact the risk IPV in the African context.

This gap in research is especially palpable in West Africa which is characterized by diverse range of contexts and cultures, including Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone countries. Additionally, socio-economic, and demographic pressures in the region such as high fertility rates, armed conflict, rising unemployment and agrarian or resource-dependent economies which create unique challenges for both women's economic empowerment (Buvinic, O'Donnell and Bourgault, 2020) and their vulnerability to IPV.

Yet, despite these challenges and the devastating effects of IPV including various mental and reproductive health concerns, the region lacks comprehensive demographic and populationbased policies to address IPV which hinders the Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs), specifically goal 5 which aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination, violence, and harmful practices against women and girls, including gender-based violence by the year 2030. In this paper, we investigate the associations and pathways between women's empowerment as indicated by education, employment, and autonomy (relative to male partner), and the odds of intimate partner violence at the both the individual and community-level. We interpret our results in the context of SGD 5.2 and policies to reduce gender-based violence in Africa.

Background and Literature Review

Prior studies have demonstrated that Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by diverse factors across all tiers of the social ecology (Stockl et al., 2021; McCloskey et al., 2016). At the individual level, risk factors for IPV include but are not limited to excessive alcohol consumption, exposure to violence during childhood, unemployment, the educational attainment of the husband, and substance abuse. Household dynamics, such as wealth or assets and autonomy in decision-making, have also been identified as correlates of IPV. Furthermore, at the community level, entrenched patriarchal traditions, cultural beliefs, and gender disparities contribute significantly to shaping women's vulnerability to IPV.

Research on women's empowerment and interventions aimed at reducing intimate partner violence (IPV) through empowerment initiatives has yielded mixed results (Gibbs, Jacobson, and Wilson 2017). For example, in an intervention to prevent both IPV and HIV in South Africa, direct program participants experienced a 55% reduction in IPV, though the program did not influence rates of unprotected sexual intercourse or HIV incidence (Pronyk et al. 2006). In contrast, in more conservative areas of Bangladesh, higher levels of individual women's autonomy and participation in savings and credit groups were associated with an increased risk of IPV, while community-level factors had no significant effect (Koenig, Ahmed, and Mozumdar 2003). On the other hand, in Tanzania, women who participated in a microfinance program faced a lower risk of experiencing physical or sexual IPV, or both (Kapiga et al. 2019).

Furthermore, limited research exists on how relative resources, such as differences in education, employment status, or income between partners, impact IPV, particularly in West African countries. The available literature offers mixed findings regarding the relationship between women's employment or income and their likelihood of experiencing IPV. For example, in a randomized control trial in northwestern Tanzania, women's income was found to be protective against IPV, but women who contributed more financially than their partners were at greater risk of IPV (Abramsky et al. 2019). Similarly, in an analysis of couples' data from 25 DHS surveys across 15 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, higher levels of education for both men and women and increased household wealth were associated with a decrease in IPV. However, women's employment—particularly when only the woman worked—was linked to an increased risk of IPV, especially if the woman earned more than her partner (Stockl et al. 2021).

Many studies in South Asia similarly report mixed findings, with some showing a negative association between women's empowerment and IPV (Panda and Agarwal 2005), while others reveal a positive association (Acharya et al. 2012; Santhya et al. 2007). In some cases,

empowered women may be more vulnerable to IPV than less empowered women. For example, in Bangladesh, older cohorts of more empowered women were more likely to experience physical violence than less empowered younger women. Additionally, childless women with lower empowerment levels were at greater risk of IPV compared to more empowered women with male children (Sanawar et al. 2018), highlighting the importance of other variables like age, parity and raising questions about others such as rural-urban differences. In India, women with higher educational resources than their partners had increased odds of experiencing physical and sexual violence compared to women less educated than their partners (Pathak 2022).

Relative resources theory, as posited by Goode (1971), suggests that disparities in education, employment, and income between partners can influence the likelihood of intimate partner violence (IPV). According to this theory, men who lack resources to assert dominance and power in a relationship may resort to violence. When traditional gender norms are challenged, particularly in situations where a woman has greater economic resources than her male partner, the risk of IPV increases. Male partners dominant by violence as an alternative resource if education, income and employment status cannot guarantee masculinity or if their role as breadwinner is threatened (Macmillan and Gartner 1999; Atkinson and Greenstein 2005).

However, relative resource theory assumes that all men adhere to traditional gender roles or aspire to be the primary breadwinners in their relationships. A more nuanced approach, known as gendered resource theory, argues that the effect of relative resources on the likelihood of intimate partner violence is moderated by the husband's gender ideologies (Atkinson & Greenstein, 2005). This theory considers the husband's beliefs about appropriate masculinity and femininity, suggesting that these gender ideologies influence the relationship between resource disparities and the likelihood of wife abuse (Atkinson & Greenstein, 2005).

To account for the broader macro-level context and integrate theories that explain individuallevel risk of intimate partner violence (IPV), we adopt a community-level approach. This perspective captures the influence of socio-economic conditions and patriarchal structures on women's risk of IPV. Women residing in socio-economically disadvantaged communities, where patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched and violence against women is culturally tolerated or normalized, face a heightened risk of IPV. Community-level factors such as poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education can exacerbate power imbalances between men and women, reinforcing traditional gender roles that justify male dominance and control. These socio-economic conditions often weaken social support networks and limit women's ability to seek help, thereby increasing their vulnerability to abuse. Furthermore, communities with high levels of inequality and rigid gender norms may foster environments where violence is not only more likely to occur but also less likely to be condemned, perpetuating cycles of abuse. By examining IPV through a community lens, we can better understand how broader social and economic forces shape individual behavior and the risks women face in their relationships.

Data and Methods

Data for this study comes from the latest surveys from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) for eight countries (Burkina-Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, and Togo) in West Africa with that contain information on experiences with IPV. The DHS surveys use a two-stage sample design. In the first stage, stratified sampling techniques are used to select clusters as the primary sampling unit (PSU). The second stage involves a systematic sampling of households within each PSU from which individual women between ages 15-49 are interviewed. Information on IPV has been collected since 2000 and the DHS has developed a standard questionnaire and methodology for the collection of data on domestic violence. For countries that implemented the IPV module, only one randomly selected woman per household is selected for the individual questionnaire for this module. Thus, the number of women who have information for domestic violence will always be less than the number of women selected for the complete DHS individual interview. Previously, a large part of the domestic violence module was implemented only for ever-married women and had questions about violence perpetrated by the current husband/partner for women who are currently divorced, separated, or widowed.

However, starting with surveys implemented in 2021 using the DHS-8 domestic violence module, the module now includes never-married women who, through two new screening questions, say that they currently have or have had an intimate partner. Note that ever-married women are women who self-report as being married, divorced, separated, or widowed, or living with or having ever lived with a man as if married. Never-married women self-define who is an intimate partner. Nonetheless, interviewers are trained to be careful to not include casual relationships without longer-term intimacy when asking never-married women if they have or had an intimate partner. The inclusion of never-married women in the intimate partner related violence indicators imply that these indicators can no longer be called spousal violence indicators but are more accurately called intimate partner violence indicators (Hindin, Kishor and Ansara 2008).

Measures

The dependent outcomes include- marital control behaviors, Physical Violence and Emotional Violence as defined in the domestic violence module of the DHS.

The key independent outcomes are Community Variables

We use three variables to capture aggregate levels of education, employment and poverty in the community. The first is the percentage of educated women in the community. This variable was constructed by aggregating (finding the average scores) of the individual educational attainment variable by the primary sampling unit (PSU). The mean scores where then recoded into low, medium, and high to represent the aggregate level of educational attainment in each PSU (community).

The second aggregate level variable is the percentage of working women in the community. The third is aggregate levels of poverty in the community. These three community variables have been demonstrated to be associated with women's reproductive outcomes (Kravdal, 2002; Adedini et al., 2014). We use individual educational attainment (No education, primary education and secondary or higher) as a key independent variable to examine the impact of community variables on the dependent outcomes.

Results (Preliminary results are for Ghana)

Table 1: Partner displays any marital control behaviors.

When women live in communities with a high level of women's labor force participation the odds of marital control behaviors are 1.6 times that of women who live in communities is a lower labor force participation. These results are significant at p<0.001.

. svy: logit dv_prtnr_any_cont com_educ com_poor com_work educ wealth agegrp2 residence hus_working rel_occ relative_ed
> ucation_status, or
(running logit on estimation sample)

(running logit on estimation samp

Survey: Logistic regression

Number	of	strata	=	32
Number	of	PSUs	=	618

Number of obs	=	3,728
Population size	=	3,231.0283
Design df	=	586
F(10, 577)	=	5.91
Prob > F	=	0.0000

Odds ratio	Linearized std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf.	interval]
.9505373	.093687	-0.51	0.607	.783248	1.153557
1.156924	.1390732	1.21	0.226	.9136304	1.465005
1.304367	.0776685	4.46	0.000	1.160406	1.466187
1.1802	.169408	1.15	0.249	.890266	1.564558
1.048757	.1845409	0.27	0.787	.7423112	1.481711
.6945775	.0487736	-5.19	0.000	.6050973	.7972897
.8095368	.1014855	-1.69	0.092	.6328591	1.035538
.5698018	.1965623	-1.63	0.104	.289388	1.121934
1.015313	.1345012	0.11	0.909	.7827189	1.317026
1.071513	.080208	0.92	0.357	.9250152	1.241212
2.569456	1.362012	1.78	0.076	.9072025	7.27743
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Note: _cons estimates baseline odds.

Table 2: Partner Displays Any Physical Violence in the last 12 months.

Like Table 1, women who live in communities with high labor force participation are at higher risk of IPV. The odds of physical violence by a partner in such communities is 1.1 times that of that of women who live in communities with a lower labor force participation. These results are significant at p<0.001.

Similarly, when the husband has more education that women the risk of physical violence is nearly twice (1.97). Whereas when both partners have a similar level of education the odds of

physical abuse are 0.65 less than when the woman has more education. These results are significant at p<0.05 level.

. svy: logit dv_prtnr_phy com_educ com_poor com_work educ wealth agegrp2 residence hus_working rel_occ rel_educ_eq rel_ > educ_hm, or

(running **logit** on estimation sample)

Survey: Logistic regression

Number of stra	Number	r of obs	; =	3,728			
Number of PSUs	Popula	ation si	ze = 1	3,231.0283			
				Design	n df	=	586
				F(11,	576)	=	5.82
				Prob :	> F	=	0.0000
·		Linearized					
dv_prtnr_phy	Odds ratio	std. err.	t	P> t	[95%	conf.	interval]
com_educ	.9166223	.1017455	-0.78	0.433	.7370	739	1.139908
com_poor	1.062162	.143131	0.45	0.655	.8151	.736	1.383985
com_work	1.270702	.1020363	2.98	0.003	1.085	305	1.487771
educ	1.087292	.1821085	0.50	0.617	.7825	015	1.510802
wealth	1.354998	.332476	1.24	0.216	.8368	8487	2.193968
agegrp2	.9794481	.1028982	-0.20	0.843	.7968	8405	1.203903
residence	1.035736	.1754311	0.21	0.836	.7426	359	1.444517
hus_working	.7874718	.4373988	-0.43	0.667	.2645	204	2.344287
rel_occ	.9655748	.1857265	-0.18	0.856	.6617	897	1.408808
rel_educ_eq	.6530574	.133974	-2.08	0.038	.4364	826	.9770928
rel_educ_hm	1.978769	.3779924	3.57	0.000	1.359	749	2.879596
_cons	.11359	.0714479	-3.46	0.001	.0330	239	.3907082

Note: _cons estimates baseline odds.

Table 3: Current Partner Experienced Emotional Violence in the last 12 months.

On this Table no community variable is statistically significant. However, if the woman is educated her odds of emotional abuse are 1.41 times higher than a woman who is not educated (P<0.05). This is reinforced by the husband having more education that the wife. If a husband has more education than his wife the odds of emotional abuse are twice (1.99) compared when the wife has more education.

. svy: logit dv_prtnr_emot com_educ com_poor com_work educ wealth agegrp2 residence hus_working rel_occ rel_educ_eq rel
> _educ_hm, or
(running logit on estimation sample)

Survey: Logistic regression

Number of	strata	=	32	Number of obs	=	3,728
Number of	PSUs	=	618	Population size	=	3,231.0283
				Design df	=	586
				F(11, 576)	=	3.14
				Prob > F	=	0.0004

		Linearized				
dv_prtnr_emot	Odds ratio	std. err.	t	P> t	[95% conf.	interval]
com_educ	.94386	.1324015	-0.41	0.681	.7165669	1.24325
com_poor	.8535111	.1263685	-1.07	0.285	.6381485	1.141554
com_work	1.109042	.0707482	1.62	0.105	.9784433	1.257073
educ	1.407518	.2311634	2.08	0.038	1.019455	1.943302
wealth	.8784234	.1686079	-0.68	0.500	.6025359	1.280634
agegrp2	1.009912	.0830759	0.12	0.905	.859248	1.186995
residence	1.074748	.1600686	0.48	0.629	.8021761	1.439937
hus_working	.508796	.168884	-2.04	0.042	.2651067	.9764876
rel_occ	1.218513	.166496	1.45	0.149	.931714	1.593595
rel_educ_eq	1.010147	.1458362	0.07	0.944	.7607483	1.341306
rel_educ_hm	1.998416	.3370786	4.10	0.000	1.434876	2.783285
_cons	.3393897	.222507	-1.65	0.100	.0936458	1.230012

Note: _cons estimates baseline odds.

Discussion and conclusion

The preliminary results displayed here show the significance of the community context in understanding IPV. It also shows that analysis of IPV must account for the relative education and employment of the spouse. This is important for designing policies and programs to eradicate IPV and to achieve SGD 5.2 in Africa.

In further work, similar models for Burkina-Faso, Burkina-Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, and Togo are being analyzed. Measures of economic empowerment in terms of household decision making will also be included.

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