



## Response effects to attitudinal questions about domestic violence against women: A comparative perspective

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### ABSTRACT

According to the national Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), between 10% and 90% of women in poorer countries agree that domestic violence against women is justified. Such wide variation in women's responses raises concerns about the comparability of the underlying attitudinal question, and the validity of comparative research that assumes comparability. Using 67 DHS conducted in 48 countries between 1995 and 2007, we explored whether cross-national variation in women's affirmative responses to this question were explained by cross-national variation in survey design, socioeconomic conditions, or both. Variation in survey design had considerable predictive power and accounted for a non-trivial amount of the variance in women's affirmative responses. Including the survey-design variables also modestly altered associations of the outcome with structural variables of interest in comparative studies. These findings offer insights about future analyses and data collections on women's attitudes about domestic violence against women.

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### 1. Introduction

*Domestic violence* refers to “assaultive and coercive behaviors that adults use against their intimate partners” (Holden, 2003, p. 155). In (often purposive) samples in North America and Europe, men and women have self-reported equally often committing physical and psychological domestic violence (Straus, 2004; Swan et al., 2008); yet, men's physical violence has been more injurious, and men more often have stalked, sexually assaulted, and used coercive tactics of control (Swan et al., 2008). In Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, between 12% and 71% of women have reported a prior experience of physical domestic violence (Douki et al., 2003; Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006; Hindin et al., 2008; Watts and Zimmerman, 2002), and according to reports by women and men, women less often have initiated such violence (ICF Macro, 2010). Thus, population-based studies of domestic violence suggest a disproportionate burden on women.

Despite the global burden of domestic violence against women, beliefs about such violence are understudied outside the US. (Exceptions include Hindin (2003), Lawoko (2006, 2008), Yount (2005), Yount and Li (2009), and Yount and Carrera (2006).) Yet, gender norms, especially regarding the treatment of wives, are important determinants of domestic violence against women (e.g., Archer, 2006; Boyle et al., 2009; Fincham et al., 2008; Gage, 2005). In the US, diverse samples from the 1950s to the 1980s have shown a stable pattern of more frequent approval by men than women of interpersonal and other violence (Smith, 1984). Later surveys – often of university students – have shown that domestic violence typically is not condoned (e.g., Smith et al., 2005), but that men tend to blame the victim more often than do women (e.g., Bryant and Spencer, 2003; Locke and Richman, 1999; Saunders et al., 1987). Findings from university students in Spain have been consistent (Pérez et al., 2006),

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but a cross-national study of university students in four countries – India, Japan, Kuwait, and the US – showed (1) a greater propensity in the non-US samples to blame the wife for physical domestic violence and (2) some variation in the gender gap in wife blaming, although men more often blamed the wife in all samples (Nayak et al., 2003).

Between 1995 and 2007, 69 Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) in 50 lower-income countries have collected national data from women regarding their views about domestic violence against women. In these surveys, women's tendency to *justify wife beating* has varied from less than 10% to more than 90% (Kishor and Johnson, 2004). In 17 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa in which (some form of) this question has appeared in the DHS, 29–75% of women have reported that wife *hitting or beating is justified*, and the odds for women relative to men of reporting such views have varied widely, from less than one (0.91, 95% CI 0.83–0.99 in Lesotho) to more than five (5.51, 5.07–5.98 in Benin) (Uthman et al., 2010).

Such wide variation in women's responses in poor settings suggests that their justification of such violence is not inevitable. The structural conditions of poverty, rural residence, and gender inequality have predicted such views at multiple levels. First, poor, rural women have *justified wife beating* more often than their wealthier, urban counterparts (Hindin, 2003; Oyediran and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005; Uthman et al., 2009a,b; World Health Organization [WHO], 2005; Yount, 2005; Yount and Li, 2009). Second, larger spousal gaps favoring husbands in schooling (Yount, 2005; Yount and Li, 2009) and household decision-making (Hindin, 2003; Lawoko, 2006, 2008; Uthman et al., 2009a) have predicted this response. Third, across 17 Sub-Saharan African countries, a higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita and greater gender equality as measured by the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) have predicted smaller gender gaps in *justifying* such violence (Uthman et al., 2010). The GDP per capita in purchasing power parity (PPP) dollars measures standards of living across countries at equivalent price levels. The GDI captures achievements in adult literacy, gross schooling enrollment, life expectancy, and GDP per capita, but imposes a penalty for inequality between women and men (UNDP, 2007). The analysis by Uthman and colleagues (2010) did not adjust concurrently for these indicators and found that the gender gap in attitudes also varied by region and survey year. Finally, ethnicity, religion, and exposure to the media have been associated, in variable ways, with women's attitudes about such violence (Flood and Pease, 2009; Hindin, 2003; Lawoko, 2006; Oyediran and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005; Uthman et al., 2009a; Yount, 2005; Yount and Li, 2009; Yount and Carrera, 2006).

Such wide variation in women's responses in poor settings also raises concerns about the comparability of the question, as well as the practice of assuming cross-national comparability and of drawing inferences about its macro-structural determinants (e.g., Uthman et al., 2010). In wealthier settings, a large body of experimental research has shown that variations in the (1) wording, (2) response options, and (3) ordering especially of nearby, conceptually related attitudinal questions can alter the distribution of responses to them (e.g., Holleman, 1999; Rugg, 1941; Schuman and Presser, 1977, 1996; Tourangeau et al., 2003). Moreover, qualitative research in poorer settings has exposed the complexity of women's responses to attitudinal questions on sensitive issues, such as domestic violence against women. Discussions with 14 groups of wives in rural Bangladesh, for example, showed that some resign themselves to violence without condoning it, and many suggest extreme punishments for the male perpetrators (Schuler and Islam, 2008). This qualitative study was not designed to validate survey questions on attitudes about domestic violence; yet, such conflicting responses among poor women in rural Bangladesh raise questions about comparing such attitudes across heterogeneous groups.

Despite experimental research in wealthier settings and provocative qualitative findings in poorer settings, response effects to variations in attitudinal questions, especially on sensitive issues like domestic violence against women, are understudied in poorer settings. This paper explored to what extent cross-national variation in women's attitudes about domestic violence against women is explained by cross-national variation in survey design, socioeconomic conditions, or both. We, thus, test current trends in comparative violence research by allowing variation in these reported attitudes to be an artifact of variations in survey design as much as a real outcome of the structural conditions identified in recent research. The above-mentioned study by Uthman et al. (2009a), for instance, compared attitudes about domestic violence against women using pooled data collected between 2003 and 2007 from 165,983 women and 68,501 men in 7465 communities from 17 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Likewise, the study by Lawoko (2008) compared attitudes about domestic violence against women across Zambian and Kenyan men. Finally, the study by Uthman and colleagues (2010) entailed a meta-regression of women's versus men's odds of justifying domestic violence against women across 17 Sub-Saharan Africa countries using the DHS and country-level predictors. The present analysis is based on all available DHS ( $N = 67$ ) conducted between 1995 and 2007 in which women 15–49 years answered a multi-item attitudinal question about domestic violence against women. The DHS are known for their cross-national comparability, but potentially important variations in this attitudinal question have occurred since its first administration in 1995. These 67 DHS provide an opportunity to quantify the sensitivity of women's responses to variations in this question. Our findings shed light on the cross-national comparability of this question and its potential for improvement in the DHS and similar surveys.

## 2. Sample and data

The main data for this analysis come from the DHS. The DHS are cross-sectional, nationally representative surveys of all or ever-married women 15–49 years who live in low- or middle-income countries. ICF Macro undertakes these surveys in collaboration with local institutions. In face-to-face interviews with local field staff, participating women provide information on their fertility, contraceptive history, health and nutrition, as well as the health and nutrition of their children less than 6 years. In the last two decades, the DHS has included optional questions and modules on women's empowerment and gender relations (Kishor and Johnson, 2004). In 69 surveys across 50 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (35 surveys), North Africa

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