

Domestic violence is widely accepted in most developing countries, new study reveals

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Societal acceptance of domestic violence against women is widespread in developing countries, with 36 per cent of people believing it is justified in certain situations.

Using Demographic and Health Surveys conducted between 2005-2017, researchers at the University of Bristol analysed data from 1.17 million men and [women](#) in 49 low- and middle-income [countries](#).

These findings, published in the journal *PLOS ONE* today and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Future Research Leaders award, will help shape national and international strategies to prevent [domestic violence](#).

Surveys measured whether people thought a husband or partner was justified in beating his wife or partner if she goes out without telling him, argues with him, neglects the children, suspects her of being unfaithful, refuses to have sex, or burns the food.

On average, 36 per cent of people thought it was justified in at least one of these situations. Attitudes towards domestic violence varied significantly across the 49 countries with only three per cent of people justifying it in the Dominican Republic, in the Caribbean, compared to 83 per cent in Timor-Leste, South East Asia.

Overall, the societal acceptance of domestic violence was higher in South Asia with nearly half the population (47 per cent) justifying it and in Sub-Saharan Africa (38 per cent), compared with Latin America and the Caribbean (12 per cent), Europe and Central Asia (29 per cent).

In 36 of the 49 countries, mainly in South East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, women were more likely to justify the behaviour than men.

Country-level factors, especially the political environment, played an important role in the acceptance of domestic violence. For example, this attitude of acceptance was more prevalent in countries which have experienced frequent and severe political conflict within the past five years.

Furthermore, the [societal acceptance](#) of domestic violence among men was lower in countries with more democratic regimes.

People in countries where women had more economic rights were less likely to justify domestic violence. These findings suggest that expanding women's economic rights can serve to challenge existing social norms around gender roles and the expectations of women and men.

Dr. LynnMarie Sardinha, an ESRC Research Fellow in Domestic Violence and Health at the University of Bristol, led the research. She said: "This is the first study of its kind and the insights it gives us into people's attitudes towards domestic violence in the Global South and the influence of country-level factors and environment are invaluable if we're to tackle this global problem.

"The widespread justification of domestic violence by women in highly patriarchal societies suggests women have internalised the idea that a husband who physically punishes his wife or verbally reprimands her has exercised a right that serves her interest. They perceive this behaviour as legitimate disciplining, rather than an act of violence.

"Our findings highlight the need for tailored, geographically-differentiated and gender specific interventions targeting acceptance of domestic violence. There is need for much greater focus on addressing the acceptance of domestic violence through targeted initiatives in societies affected by political conflict. Although domestic violence is exacerbated during and after armed conflict it's prevention in these societies has received little attention.

"Interestingly, our findings suggest that the commonly-used measures of countries' gender quality scores, for example, women's labour force participation, and number of seats held by women in national parliament

did not significantly influence society's acceptance of domestic violence. This highlights the need for international domestic violence prevention policies to consider that a sole focus on narrowly defined economic or political 'empowerment' alone are not sufficient in challenging existing discriminatory gender norms.

"Given that, as estimated by the World Health Organisation, 30 per cent of women globally have experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime, the prevention of domestic violence is both urgent and vital.

"Domestic violence has serious consequences for women's physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health, negatively impacts on the well-being of children and families and has implications for wider society's economic and social development."

This project resulted in the construction of a first-of-its-kind global meta-database on societal attitudes to domestic violence, and a comprehensive range of diverse high quality internationally comparable socio-economic, political and legislative metadata from UN sources and other topic-specific databases.

Researchers hope the findings will inform the development of effective prevention programmes, targeting the factors which lead to domestic violence being accepted by different societies.

Several multilateral organisations, including the World Health Organisation and the United Nations, have already expressed an interest in using the data to help monitor its goal of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (goal five of the UN Sustainable Goals Agenda to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all) that includes the elimination of all forms of [violence](#) against women and girls.

Provided by University of Bristol

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