

# Attitudes of Men and Women Towards Wife Beating: Findings From Palestinian Refugee Camps in Jordan

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**Abstract** The aim of this study is to investigate the factors associated with the acceptance of wife beating among currently married men and women living in disadvantaged Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan. The study uses data from a cross-sectional survey of 3,100 households from 12 refugee camps, conducted in 1999, with a sub-sample of 395 married women and men selected for this analysis. Associations between acceptance of wife beating and experience of abuse as well as other risk factors are assessed for men and women separately, using  $\chi^2$  tests and odds ratios from binary logistic regression models. The majority of men (60.1%) and women (61.8%) believe that wife beating is justified in at least one of the eight hypothetical marital situations presented to them. Among women, those that had been victims of intimate partner violence are significantly more likely to report acceptance of wife beating. Among men, acceptance of wife beating is also significantly associated with their current age, labor force participation, their view on women's autonomy, and their own history as perpetrators of IPV. The majority of respondents justify wife beating in this context, with essentially no difference between men and women. Acceptance of wife beating by both men and women was strongly associated with previous experiences of wife beating adjusting for other risk factors.

**Keywords** Domestic violence · Intimate Partner Violence · Attitudes · Refugees · Jordan

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a global public health problem that contributes greatly to morbidity and mortality, especially in women, and is associated with injury and negative mental and reproductive health outcomes (Wathen and MacMillan 2003; World Health Organization (WHO) 2002). IPV victimization of pregnant women increases perinatal and neonatal mortality (Ahmed et al. 2006) and is associated to poor mother and child outcomes even among women victimized a year prior to pregnancy (Silverman et al. 2006). IPV against mothers also places children at higher risk of under-5 mortality (Asling-Monemi et al. 2003). Similarly, research suggests that witnessing domestic violence is associated with developmental, academic, and health problems in children (McFarlane et al. 2003; Kernic et al. 2003; Saltzman et al. 2000). IPV is therefore a public health problem harming more than just the individual victim.

IPV, however, is often viewed as a private matter concerning couples rather than the community as a whole. Accordingly, research on IPV has mostly focused on the individual perpetrators or victims of violence to understand the risk factors that contribute to this phenomenon. Individual level risk factors that have been associated with being a victim of intimate partner violence include young age (Vest et al. 2002), low or no education (Maziak and Asfar 2003), financial dependence on a partner or unemployment (Gage 2005; Bates et al. 2004), alcohol use (Jewkes et al. 2002), and immigration/refugee status due to the social isolation and precarious legal status often related with migration and the ensuing dependence on one's partner (Raj and Silverman 2003). Some individual level risk factors that have been associated with perpetration of IPV include alcohol consumption (Parish et al. 2004) and unemployment or unstable employment status (Hampton and Gelles 1994; Kyriacou et al. 1999).

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Prevalence of IPV has been studied in a variety of settings in developed and developing countries. In the United States, over a lifetime, around 25% of women will experience IPV (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). In Rakai, Uganda, 30% of women reported having ever been physically abused by their partner, and 20% were physically abused in the last year (Koenig et al. 2003). In Nicaragua, a study of married women reported lifetime IPV prevalence of 52%, and yearly prevalence of 27% (Ellsberg et al. 1999). In Albania, 37% of married women reported victimization (Burazeri et al. 2005), and among married Palestinian refugees living in Jordan and Lebanon, 42.5 and 22%, respectively, reported having ever been beaten by their husbands (Khawaja and Barazi 2005; Khawaja and Twetel-Salem 2004).

According to WHO, “violence is the result of the complex interplay of individual, relationship, social, cultural and environmental factors” (WHO 2002). The environment and social norms that may condone or help perpetuate violence, however, are examined infrequently. Rates of acceptance of wife-beating range from 70% of men and 90% of women in rural Uganda (Koenig et al. 2003), to 53% of women in Zimbabwe (Hindin 2003), 56% of women in India (Koenig et al. 2006), 66.4% of women in Nigeria (Oyediran and Isiugo-Abanihe 2005), and 60% of Palestinian men and 61% of Palestinian women living in Jordan (Khawaja 2004). In a recent study in North India, Koenig et al. (2006) report that community-level norms concerning wife beating are significantly associated to the actual occurrence of physical violence, yet only a few studies have looked at the risk factors for acceptance of wife beating. In a study of men and women in Uganda, younger age was associated with the acceptance of wife-beating, and in all situations, women were more likely than men to justify beating (Koenig et al. 2003). Another study examined women’s attitudes towards wife-beating in Zimbabwe and noted that younger age, residency in rural areas, lower household wealth, lower job status and less than secondary education were all associated with justifying wife-beating (Hindin 2003). Similarly, associations between acceptance of IPV and a number of demographic, social, and empowerment factors were examined among women in Zambia, and among other things, a history of IPV was found to be significantly associated to acceptance of this violence (Lawoko 2006).

This paper examines acceptance of wife beating among married Palestinian men and women living in Jordanian refugee camps, to offer insight into the social environment and norms surrounding domestic violence and to specifically identify factors associated with the justification and acceptance of wife beating. Beliefs surrounding wife beating in the Arab world have been explained in relation to the specific socio-cultural context and family dynamics

characterizing the region (Haj-Yahia 2000). In two recent studies, Haj-Yahia found that both among women in Jordan (2002) and Arab men in Israel (2003), beliefs justifying wife-beating are related to the patriarchal ideology and broader attitudes towards women and their role within the family.

One critical question this paper tries to answer, raised previously by Koenig et al. (2003), is whether the legitimization of domestic violence is related to its occurrence. Specifically this paper will examine the hypothesis made by Hindin (2003) that: “women’s attitudes (i.e., believing that wife beating is justified) are less likely to be directly linked to their own experience of wife beating compared with men’s attitudes”. By looking at the disposition of married men and women separately, this is the first paper to our knowledge that examines gender differences and similarities in the legitimization of wife beating in the same Middle Eastern context. Building on the findings of Haj-Yahia, this paper also examines whether beliefs surrounding wife-abuse are associated with beliefs around women’s autonomy. It is therefore hypothesized that persons supportive of women’s autonomy are less likely to be supportive of wife beating. Findings from this study may shed light on the normative beliefs at the community level and offer suggestions for practical interventions targeting different gender and age groups.

## Method

### Participants

The data used are from the living conditions survey of Jordan’s refugee camps. This is a cross-sectional survey of about 3,100 households selected randomly from 12 refugee camps. Households were selected from a sampling frame provided by Jordan’s Department of Statistics, and updated using detailed maps from the Department of Palestinian Affairs. A total of 2,590 households were successfully interviewed, with an overall response rate of 95%.

The original sample was reduced because of eligibility criteria used for answering domestic violence questions: currently married, living with spouse, and privacy during the interview. Of the total sample of 801 married respondents, 395 (262 women and 133 men) were included in the study. There was remarkable similarity between our sample and the original one in terms of socio-demographic characteristics. However, the selected sample was slightly younger (mean age=37.5) than the original (mean age=40), and included slightly better educated respondents (mean years of schooling: 8.6 versus 7.9). See Table 1 for a summary of the main characteristics of the sample.

**Table 1** Sample characteristics of the currently married Palestinian refugees, Jordan's Camps

Covariates	Men		Women		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Ever beaten						
Yes	65	48.9	111	42.5	176	44.7
No	68	51.1	150	57.5	218	55.3
Current age						
15–29	23	17.2	111	42.5	134	34.0
30–44	78	58.2	92	35.2	170	43.0
45 to highest	33	24.6	58	22.2	91	23.0
Age at marriage						
Lowest to 19	19	14.3	137	52.5	156	39.6
20–23	46	34.6	86	33.0	132	33.5
24 to highest	68	51.1	38	14.6	106	26.9
Income						
Low	45	33.8	103	39.3	147	37.3
High	88	66.2	159	60.7	247	62.7
Women's autonomy						
Un-supportive	74	55.2	93	36.9	167	42.3
Supportive	60	44.8	159	63.1	219	55.5
Labor force participation						
In labor force	113	85.0	32	12.2	145	36.8
Not in labor force	20	15.0	230	87.8	249	63.2
Education						
Elementary	23	17.3	78	29.8	101	25.6
Preparatory	64	48.1	112	42.7	176	44.6
Secondary or more	46	34.6	72	27.5	117	29.8
Total	133	100.0	262	100.0	394	100.0

## Procedures

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews carried out by local staff specifically trained for this study. Personal interviews were conducted by field work teams, each consisting of four female interviewers and one supervisor. The Oslo-based research organization, Fafo, in collaboration with Yarmouk University in Jordan, supervised fieldwork, which took place in the spring and summer of 1999. The instrument consisted of three questionnaires: one for the household, one for a randomly selected person aged at least 15 years from each household, and the third for all ever-married women. The data pertaining to wife beating were obtained from randomly selected persons (person questionnaire). Only one person aged 15 and above was randomly selected from each household and asked whether she/he were married and currently living with a spouse. If no other person was present during the interview, those persons who answered in the affirmative to the previous two questions were asked questions concerning IPV. All respondents were informed of the objective of the study, and informed consent was verbally obtained prior to interviewing. The study followed WHO ethical guidelines

with particular attention to privacy and safety of respondents (WHO 2003), and the study protocol was reviewed and approved by a local committee at Yarmouk University. Details of the field procedures followed in the study as well as data quality consideration are described elsewhere (Khawaja and Tiltness 2001).

## Measures

### Dependent Variable

In this study, men and women were asked whether it would be acceptable for a husband to hit his wife if she: (1) “talks back” or speaks in a hostile way to him, (2) deliberately disobeys what the husband asks of her, (3) behaves in a way he dislikes at home / in public, (4) does not have meals prepared properly or on time, (5) does not do household chores properly, (6) goes out in public unaccompanied, (7) does not respect his family, (8) does not care for the children properly (i.e., the way the husband thinks it should be done). Answers to each of these items were coded as ‘yes,’ ‘sometimes,’ or ‘no.’ For the analysis, we combined the first two categories to denote ‘acceptability’ of wife beating by the respondent.

### Independent Variables

Our main independent variable was whether the woman was even beaten by her husband (= 1) or not (= 0): women were asked whether they had been victims and men whether they had perpetrated violence against their wife. Several other variables relating to the socioeconomic level of the household and the wife were examined. Women's education, labor force participation (in or out of the labor force), women's autonomy, age at marriage and current age in addition to household income were all recorded and studied in relation to men's and women's attitudes towards wife beating.

Women's educational level was measured by three categories: elementary or less, preparatory, or secondary or higher. Labor force activity was measured according to the International Labor Organization (ILO) guidelines (Husmanns et al. 1992). Respondents were classified into two possible categories distinguishing labor force participants (= 1) from non-participants (= 0). Household income was measured using the reported annual disposable income in Jordanian Dinars (JD) and grouped into quartiles. Given the sample size, and preliminary examination of the data, the four categories were dichotomized into “low” and “high” levels of household income for the analysis. Current age was grouped into 15-year age brackets (15–29, 30–44, 45 and higher). Age at marriage was also grouped into three categories (less than 19, 20–23, 24 and higher).

Women's autonomy was measured using an instrument that included nine questions which sought to elicit the opinion of those interviewed on the acceptability of a woman pursuing higher education, running a business, voting in elections, driving a car, etc. For each of these nine items 3 points were allotted for 'support', 2 points for 'indifferent', and 1 point for 'against.' A simple index was calculated by summing all the scores for the nine items, and individuals were then categorized as having 'supportive' (= 1) attitudes towards women's autonomy or 'un-supportive' (= 0). The dichotomous categorization was done by dividing the observations into essentially equal parts.

## Results

Figure 1 presents the percentages of women and men who justify wife beating in eight different hypothetical situations. Among men, 60.1% expressed support for wife beating in at least one situation compared to 61.8% of women. Notably, for each of the eight hypothetical situations, the percentages of support among male and female respondents are very similar. Almost half of the men interviewed reported having ever hit their wife, and 42.5% of women noted that they were victims of IPV (Table 1). Age at marriage varied greatly between men and women, with the majority of the women (52.5%) reporting that they were married in their teens as compared to 14.3% of men.

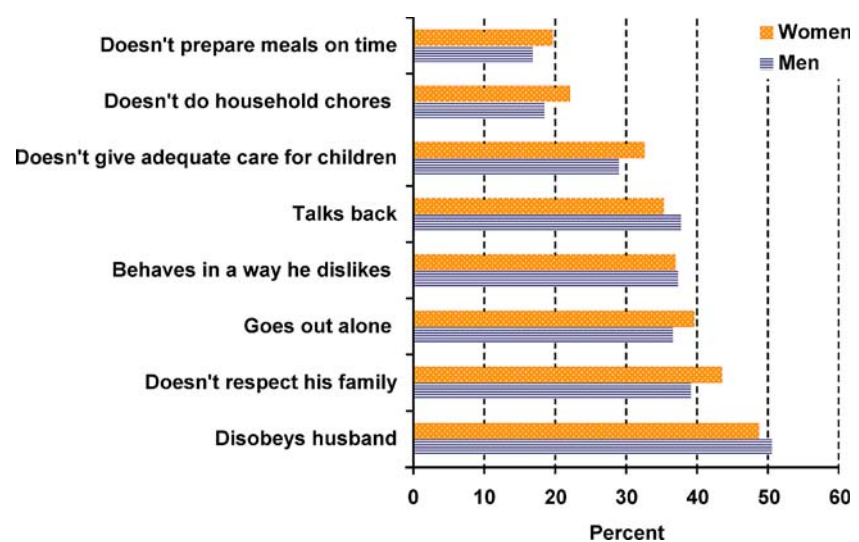
Table 2 presents the association between a supportive attitude towards wife beating and the independent variables examined for men and women separately. Interestingly, among women, their history of IPV and current age were the only variables associated with acceptance of wife beating, whereas among men, history of perpetrating IPV,

income, and employment status, as well as being un-supportive of women's autonomy were all associated with justifying wife-beating.

Table 3 reports the results of the regression models assessing the adjusted associations between "support towards wife beating" and the covariates for male and female respondents separately. Among women, the only variable that remained significant after controlling for all other variables, was reporting a history of IPV. Respondents who had never been beaten were significantly less likely to support wife beating (OR=0.52,  $p<0.01$ ). Unlike results of Haj-Yahia (2002), among women, beliefs around wife-beating were not associated with broader beliefs about women's autonomy. Among men, four variables examined were significantly related to their acceptance of wife beating: having previously hit their wife, young age, unemployment and restrictive beliefs surrounding women's autonomy.

Men who reported they had never hit their wife were less likely to support wife-beating (OR=0.15,  $p<0.00$ ). Male respondents below 29 years of age, and those aged between 30 and 44 years were almost 15 times ( $p<0.01$ ) and 6 times ( $p<0.03$ ) respectively more likely to support wife beatings. Men who were un-supportive of women's autonomy were significantly more likely to support wife beating (OR=3.54,  $p<0.01$ ). With respect to labor force participation, males who were in the labor force were significantly less likely to support wife beatings than their counterparts (OR=0.06,  $p<0.01$ ). Age at marriage was of borderline significance when comparing men that were married younger than 19 to those 24 and older when married (OR=4.86,  $p<0.07$ ). Income and education did not show any significant association with supporting wife beating by men or women.

**Fig. 1** Support for wife beating among currently married Palestinian refugees by gender, Jordan's Camps



**Table 2** Correlates of the support towards wife beating among currently married Palestinian refugees, Jordan’s Camps

Covariates	Men			Women		
	Un-supportive	Supportive	<i>p</i> value	Un-supportive	Supportive	<i>p</i> value
Ever beaten			0.000			0.006
No	54.4	45.6		44.7	55.3	
Yes	24.6	75.4		28.8	71.2	
Current age			0.149			0.008
15–29	21.7	78.3		29.7	70.3	
30–44	43.6	56.4		50.5	49.5	
45 to highest	43.8	56.3		34.5	65.5	
Age at marriage			0.134			0.335
Lowest to 19	21.1	78.9		34.3	65.7	
20–23	47.8	52.2		44.2	55.8	
24 to highest	39.7	60.3		37.8	62.2	
Income			0.041			0.160
Low	28.9	71.1		34.0	66.0	
High	46.1	53.9		40.9	59.1	
Women’s autonomy			0.001			0.688
Un-supportive	27.0	73.0		40.9	59.1	
Supportive	55.9	44.1		37.7	62.3	
Labor force participation			0.014			0.846
In labor force	44.2	55.8		40.6	59.4	
Not in labor force	15.0	85.0		37.8	62.2	
Education			0.595			0.407
Elementary	30.4	69.6		35.1	64.9	
Preparatory	42.2	57.8		35.7	64.3	
Secondary or more	41.3	58.7		44.4	55.6	
Number of cases	53	80	–	100	162	–

**Discussion**

The aim of this paper was to identify factors associated with the justification of wife beating in disadvantaged refugee populations. This is the first study to our knowledge to focus specifically on attitudes towards IPV in a Middle Eastern population and to offer a comparison in the views of men and women. Among women, the only independent variable associated with justification of wife beating was a woman’s own experience with being a victim of violence perpetrated by her husband. Women that had been victims of IPV were more likely to justify wife-beating than other women. Interestingly, no other variables in our model were associated with female justification of wife beating. Among men, there were additional variables significantly associated with the justification of wife beating. There was a strong relationship between a man’s previous experience of abuse against his wife and justifying wife beating in the hypothetical scenarios. Other variables that were associated with accepting wife beating in men included younger age (under 29 years), being un-supportive of women’s autonomy, and not being in the labor force.

There is limited research on attitudes towards IPV, but an important difference between western and non-western

countries is the rate of acceptance of wife beating among women. In the US, young males are significantly more likely than females to justify IPV (Simon et al. 2001), yet in patriarchal communities such as Jordan (Khawaja 2004) women are equally or more likely than men to justify wife-beating. One may argue that the attitudes of the community towards IPV are less important than the prevalence itself. However, attitudes of women towards wife beating can be considered markers of the social norms towards domestic violence (Hindin 2003).

One important implication of the results in this study is that the occurrence of wife beating in a community seems to legitimize this violence because both victims and perpetrators are more likely to report justifications for this behavior in hypothetical situations. These results challenge the conventional assumption that attitudes towards IPV need to be changed in order to reduce violence, by suggesting that the relationship between attitude surrounding violence and the actual occurrence may be cyclical rather than unidirectional. On a theoretical level, these results offer a plausible explanation for how social norms of accepting violence are reinforced and maintained in patriarchal settings.

The finding that female victims of IPV are more likely to condone wife-beating may be context specific. One



**Table 3** Logistic regression of support towards wife beating among currently married Palestinian refugees, Jordan's Camps

Covariates	Men		Women	
	Odds ratio	<i>p</i> value	Odds ratio	<i>p</i> value
Ever beaten				
No	0.15	0.0001	0.52	0.0129
(Yes)	1.00		1.00	
Current age				
15–29	14.81	0.0093	1.65	0.3250
30–44	6.00	0.0316	0.59	0.2542
(45 to highest)	1.00		1.00	
Age at marriage				
Lowest to 19	4.83	0.0681	0.72	0.4393
20–23	0.54	0.2214	0.59	0.2197
(24 to highest)	1.00		1.00	
Income				
Low	2.16	0.1625	1.28	0.3979
(High)	1.00		1.00	
Women's autonomy				
Un-supportive	3.54	0.0058	0.96	0.8936
(Supportive)	1.00		1.00	
Labor force participation				
In labor force	0.06	0.0090	1.36	0.4762
(Not in labor force)	1.00		1.00	
Education				
Elementary	1.46	0.6463	1.29	0.6158
Preparatory	0.67	0.4160	1.23	0.5816
(Secondary or more)	1.00		1.00	

Reference categories are within parentheses

possible explanation for this finding is that women living in patriarchal communities with no legal or social protection for victims of IPV may justify wife beating after experiencing abuse as a “coping mechanism.” Haj-Yahia (2000) suggests that the Arab family structure and the broader socio-cultural context prevent Arab female victims of abuse from seeking help, in order to maintain their family's reputation. In communities where women who leave abusive relationships are further victimized by a society that ostracizes them for divorcing their husband, women may choose to justify and accept the occasional wife-beating as “normal.” Further research in societies where divorce is socially accepted and there are legal and social options for victims, would be helpful.

This paper also offers important insight for prevention efforts because it identifies various factors that are associated with male attitudes towards wife beating. The age trend seen among men, whereby younger men are more likely than older ones to justify wife beating, is alarming. Similar findings pertaining mainly to women have been reported in the African context (Rani et al. 2004), but the generational differences reported here, are more striking. Two explanations for this trend are possible: (1) that within this population wife

beating is becoming increasingly more acceptable among men rather than what is seen in the West, and (2) that as men age, their views on violence against women become more tempered. Considering the recent changes in terms of women entering the labor force and public life, we are inclined to view the first explanation as more plausible.

In view of this discussion, it is also important to highlight that men who were un-supportive of women's autonomy were also more likely to justify wife-beating. This finding is consistent with the findings of Haj-Yahia among Arab men in Israel (Haj-Yahia 2003) and the hypothesis that the recent entry of women into the labor force and their greater independence may lead men to react through violence and the justification of wife beating. Precautions must therefore be taken to ensure that when promoting female empowerment, programs and policies do not unintentionally place women at higher risk of violence.

An important limitation of this paper is its cross-sectional study design. Although we may hypothesize that the association for women between ever being beaten and justifying wife beating is causal since on a temporal scale the reported behavior precedes the opinions, we cannot be certain of this causal relationship. It may simply be that women who prior to marriage accepted wife-beating as a normal part of marriage were more likely to be attracted to men with similar views, or more authoritarian dispositions, and were then at higher risk at becoming victims of abuse.

A second limitation is that the sample consists of a specific population, married Palestinians living in camps in Jordan, and therefore results may not be generalizable to other populations. Similarly, because of the interview protocol that required individuals to be interviewed in the absence of other adults or children, the random sample of 801 married respondents was reduced to only 395 persons. The small sample size also has led to broad confidence intervals and therefore many of the reported odds ratio were statistically non-significant. Third, another limitation of our study is that our measure of domestic violence does not encapsulate the entire Center for Disease Control (CDC) or WHO definition of intimate partner violence, which includes physical and sexual violence, threats of violence, and psychological abuse. In our survey, we looked specifically at married couples and only at physical violence against women: wife beating. Finally, the study was not designed specifically to investigate domestic violence, and many of the known risk factors such as self-esteem, religiosity, and drug abuse were not included.

## Conclusions

We conclude that although men and women have similar dispositions towards wife beating in terms of the rate of

justification, there are important gender differences that this paper highlights. Acceptance of wife beating by both men and women was strongly associated with previous experiences of abuse. Further research is needed to understand the broader context and magnitude of this phenomenon in the general Jordanian population and beyond, and to develop appropriate interventions to increase awareness about the many adverse consequences of wife beating on women and their children. Ending violence against women requires multiple strategies at the individual, organizational, community, and societal levels including changing community norms, empowering women, raising the ‘costs’ to abusers, providing for the needs of the victims, reaching out to men, etc. Furthermore, wife beating is not considered a serious offence in the Jordanian context. Strengthening the community response to violence against women through governmental legislations and active enforcement banning wife beating in this context are needed.

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