

## **Spousal Educational Gap and Risk of Intimate Partner Violence across the Life Course**

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzed the correlation between the inequality level of education, spouse educational differences and the possibility of intimate partner violence (IPV) throughout the life course in terms of the socio-economic situation in Abia State, Nigeria. Drawing on qualitative data from 24 participants, The study examined the extent and direction to which educational differences influenced marital behavior, conflict, and the likelihood of IPV. On the one hand, the results show that educational differences have varied impact according to the life stage of couples: the younger couples are more likely to have increased tensions in the relationships when they have one, especially in early marriage, and it is often augmented with childbearing, lousy jobs and financial constraints. Conversely, later marriages show higher levels of adaptation, since experiences in life lessen the sensitivity of education differences as causes of friction. Nonetheless, risk factors of IPV are worsened by rampant unemployment and economic vulnerability wherever they may prevail. The study concludes that effective IPV interventions requires multi-level strategies that promoted educational equity, challenged harmful gender norms and enhanced economic empowerment.

Keywords: Educational gap, Intimate partner, Risk, Spousal, Violence

### **Introduction**

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a universal challenge in terms of population, cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and even age, not only in human rights but in public health as well (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). The factors that drive IPV are varied, with a part of them being social, economic, cultural, and relationship reasons. Out of this, education has become one of the main determinants that affect both susceptibility and

resilience to IPV (Vyas & Watts, 2009). The protective effect of education, especially the education of women, has been frequently noted and discussed, whereas the differences in education between married individuals have not met such interest among scholars, even though the education disparity between married couples may also influence the relationship dynamics and power balance during the life course (Abramsky et al., 2011).

The gap between the education of spouses is called the spousal educational gap. Such imbalance may affect the household's decision process, income sharing and gender roles (Bhana & Anderson, 2013). In case the educational degree of a male partner is far advanced, the pillars of a traditional patriarchal society might be strengthened, which could serve as the approval of male dominance and controllership. On the other hand, when the woman outstrips the man in educational achievement, roles reversal can threaten vested gender roles, and this often results in conflict and violence because of the desire to gain back the control (Jewkes, 2002). This tension can be in different forms and degrees at the various lifespan of marriage, due to economic shift in responsibilities, child bearing and health condition among others.

The current paper utilizes life course perspectives in explaining the interaction between spousal educational gaps and the risk of IPV across individuals over their lifetime. This method acknowledges that relationships do change overtime and that the relational vulnerabilities or protective factors can change with age or the length of a union or socioeconomic changes (Elder, 1994). To give an example, the question of power negotiation during the first steps of marital life may be affected by the dissimilarity in educational levels, whereas escalation or the downturn of conflict could be later in the couple life, depending on those stress factors or methods of coping with them that had accumulated during the life spent together.

Considering the complexity of IPV and the complex nature of the effect of differences in educational levels of a couple life course, the present study examines the association between spousal educational gap and IPV risk at different stages of life. In analyzing this association, the study will be able to provide directed interventions that take into

consideration the time and context of IPV leading towards more successful prevention measures involving educational equity and gender-friendly orientations.

## Literature Review

Education is widely recognized as a key determinant of the risk and dynamics of intimate partner violence (IPV). However, findings suggested that its influence was not solely tied to absolute levels of education; rather, disparities in educational attainment between spouses, referred to as spousal educational disparity, were equally instrumental in shaping relationship outcomes (Vyas & Watts, 2009). The difference between the educational level of a husband and a wife (i.e. husband more educated than wife or wife more educated than husband) is known as spousal educational disparity. These gender differences affect power sharing, communication and decision-making in the household that are accepted predictors of IPV (Jewkes, 2002; Abramsky et al., 2011).

Studies across the world have established inconclusive connections between educational differences and IPV. For example, in many patriarchal societies, women with lower educational attainment than their spouses were found to face a higher risk of IPV, largely due to economic dependence and limited bargaining power within the household (Aizer, 2010). On the other hand, women with higher education than their male counterparts are affiliated with higher illumination and may break the doors of gender norms, which in turn leads to a rebound effect consisting of men turning violent in order to regain power (Bhana & Anderson, 2013). However, evidence about educational gaps in 20 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) countries show that not only high but reversed education gaps can be linked to the possibility of having greater IPV, based on culture, and socio-economic situations (Ackerson et al., 2008).

These complexities are reflected in Nigeria. The results of an analysis of the 2018 Nigerian Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) reveal that women with higher education level report statistically significant lower overall IPV prevalence, yet this protective effect is lost or even inverted when the education level attained by women exceeds the same of the husband (Akinyemi & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). Research findings in the South-West and

South-East geopolitical regions have given indication that couples characterized by equal education level have the lowest rates of IPV, indicating that education parity also helps to level power distribution and encourage respect (Okenwa-Emegwa et al., 2016). In hypogamous unions, on the contrary, the risk levels are much higher and especially within the rural community where gender roles are more stringent (Isiugo-Abanihe & Akinyemi, 2017). Life-course perspectives provide additional context, and demonstrate that the influence of spousal educational disparity on IPV can change across time. Although in early marriage education differences can certainly affect the negotiation of household roles and decision-making, economic pressures or role reversals (e.g. the wife turns out to be the primary wage earner) can compound trouble (Elder, 1994). Further, socio-economic changes may increase the magnitude of educational disparities in predicting the risk of IPV (Aizer & Dal B, 2009).

Although these insights exist, there exist tremendous gaps in the literature. There is a paucity of longitudinal studies in Nigeria thus lack of insight into causal processes and time. Moreover, the majority of the studies address the aspect of women, whereas the views of men on the effect of educational inequality on relationship power and conflict are not reflected much. In addition, there is little qualitative investigation that examines the lived experiences underlying the statistical correlated issues. Closing the identified gaps using mixed-methods would assist in developing interventions that would support the gender equity agenda that considers the socio-cultural realities of Nigerian households.

### **Effects of Education on Intimate Partner Violence**

The role of education as a decisive social factor that determines life chances, attitudes, and behavior of its participants has been described at length, and its interconnection with intimate partner violence (IPV) has also been discussed in a substantial amount of literature. It is often argued that in low-, middle-, and high-income settings, a positive educational attainment is often linked with the lower likelihood to experience IPV, with the history of the issue linkage being complicated and mediated by economic, social, and normative context (Vyas & Watts, 2009; Abramsky et al., 2011).

Due to economic autonomy, one of the main mechanisms through which education is associated with a lower risk of IPV occurs. Education improves the level of positions that women attain in the job market which elevates their bargaining powers at home and cuts down material reliance on their oppressive spouses (Aizer, 2010). Economically empowered women were generally more capable of leaving abusive relationships, accessing legal or health services, and utilizing social support networks (Vyas & Watts, 2009). Education further equipped individuals with knowledge and cognitive skills to address problems constructively, manage conflicts non-violently, and remain aware of available rights and support systems (Heise, 2011).

Besides economic routes, education can affect gender attitudes, and social norms. Both women and men perceive the concepts of gender roles in a more egalitarian way as a result of schooling; this aspect can play a role in the diminishing of acceptance of violence as a useful course of control (Jewkes, 2002). Intergenerational outcomes are also reported: Children with more-educated parents are less apt to accept the normalization of domestic violence, possibly pre-destining low IPV infrastructures within the long run (Barker et al., 2011).

But education does not always buffer in the same way. In many studies, women education does not necessarily reduce IPV due to the contingency on societal norms and partner relationship. For instance, a population-based study in India found that women whose educational attainment exceeded that of their husbands were more likely to experience IPV compared to women with equal or lower education, suggesting that relative disparities can increase risk (Ackerson et al., 2008). Similarly, a recent study in Bangladesh demonstrated that the protective effect of education was undermined in communities where IPV-justifying norms were entrenched, indicating that societal attitudes can negate the benefits of women's education (Sultana et al., 2025). In Botswana, hospital-based data further revealed no significant association between women's education levels and IPV occurrence, underscoring that structural factors such as unemployment and economic dependence may outweigh educational attainment (Phetlho-Thekisho & Habedi, 2008). In situations where patriarchal norms are rigid, the expansion of women education without corresponding

transformation of attitudes among men can attract backlash so that males react to the status threat through exhibiting controlling behaviors or excessive violence (Bhana & Anderson, 2013; Jewkes, 2002). Analysis based on data collected by the Demographic and Health Survey indicate mixed trends: in certain contexts, the higher education of the women is highly protective whereas in others, it is either weak or contingent on the local gender norms and neighborhood economic opportunities (Ackerson et al., 2008).

The work in methodology notes that interpretation suffers bias when there are biases in the measurements and in reporting. Literate women have greater likelihood in the sense that they may identify and report IPV, thus yielding RDLs, which may lead to inaccurate cross-sectional correlates unless analysis is done to control absenteeism in the case of studies (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2015). Mixed-methods studies and so-called longitudinal studies are thus essential to identify causal pathways as well as to decompose economic, normative, or relational mechanisms through which education contributes to IPV.

Lastly, the finding has helped to inform intervention studies that education-based policies might bring success by applying gender-transformative programming. Curricula that bring about gender equality in school, life-skills teaching, as well as initiatives that keep girls at school helps in mitigating risks of early marriage, and future experiences of battering by any partner (Barker et al., 2011). Yet, scaling these kinds of interventions should focus on structural impediments (poverty, labor markets), how to engage men to prevent backlash.

To sum up, the literature implies that education acts as an important protective measure against IPV through economic empowerment, normative change, and increased agency. However, not all effects are generalizable with the impacts being affected by the dynamics of the partner, norms of the community, and policy context, necessitating integrated interventions in the forms of integrated educational access and gender-transformative and economic empowerment.

### **Life-Course Influence**

The life-course perspective provides a potent way of experiencing how patterns of occurrences, events in the social setting, and interconnected relationships influence the way individual lives develop as time goes by (Elder, 1994). The most important of these principles are (1) trajectories (long term patterns of behavior and occupancy of roles), (2) transitions (immediate changes such as marriage or becoming a parent), (3) timing (age at which transitions take place), (4) linked lives (dependence of family and social networks on each other), and (5) historical time and place (effects of cohort and historical context) (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). In combination, these elements make it possible to tell the story of how exposures at an earlier stage of life can accumulate or change risk at later stages of the life course-key to explaining patterns of persistent inequality and the development of health and social outcomes.

The life-course perspective explains the tempo and meanings of the educational disparities between spouses and the educational transitions experienced at different parts of the life course and the relative educational trajectory levels of the partners in terms of IPV risk. Education can be seen to operate either as a status course, that is, education impacts employment, income and social networks, as well as a resource that may impact attitudes and coping skills (Kuh & Ben-Shlomo, 2004). High levels of educational achievement at young ages may establish a course towards increased economic independence and more egalitarian gender attitudes that decrease risk of IPV, but educational or occupational mobility later in life (e.g., the acquisition of higher education or higher-paid employment by a woman than her partner) may change power relations within the household and, in some settings, trigger a power struggle or even a sense of feeling discounted by their fellowmen, what is referred to as a backlash (Capaldi et al., 2012).

The principle of linked lives asserts the interdependence of partners in their life courses: the education or job path of one partner influences the economic security of a couple, its decision-making tendencies, and exposure to stress, the last three of which are the immediate causes of IPV (Elder et al., 2003). An example is a husband losing his job or a sudden increase in education level of a woman, which can serve as a turning point and minimize or facilitate violence danger as per social standards, and the provision of support.

The timing could be important, well-educated gaps at the time of formation of the union could cause one to negotiate authority and roles initially differently than when gaps were higher (e.g. through adult education) that could drive renegotiation of status with potentially different IPV implications.

A second key feature of life-course research is the concept of cumulative disadvantage, whereby small disadvantages accumulate over time to produce significant gaps in outcomes. Applied to IPV, early-life adversities such as poverty, limited education, and exposure to violence can create pathways that heighten vulnerability to future abuse, with spousal educational disparities further reinforcing these risks (Kuh & Ben-Shlomo, 2004). Conversely, positive turning points such as stable employment or gender-transformative community interventions can alter life trajectories and reduce the likelihood of IPV.

Methodologically, to be able to conduct life-course analysis of IPV, one would need to adopt long-term designs, sequence analysis, and multilevel designs that would capture individual developments and couple processes and evolving contexts (Sampson & Laub, 1993). However, there are still limited number of studies with longer time extents that model over the educational and behavioral track of these partners in a communal method; the vast majority of the proof is cross-sectional or historical, which restricts the capacity to cause and effect (Capaldi et al., 2012). Mixed-methods and cohort studies with timing, linked lives, and historical information would contribute much to knowledge of when and how educational disparities become the source of IPV in the life span. The life-course approach situates spousal education gaps and IPV within historical and contextual processes, emphasizing how trajectories, transitions, and timing shape outcomes. By identifying critical points such as pre-union stages or periods of economic shocks this perspective highlights opportunities for interventions that promote safer and more equitable relationships.

## Theoretical Framework

### Social Learning Theory and Intimate Partner Violence

Social Learning Theory, as advanced by Albert Bandura (1977), provides a critical foundation for understanding intimate partner violence (IPV) within the framework of educational inequality and spousal educational differences. Bandura's theory departs from traditional behaviorist assumptions by positing that human behavior is shaped not only by direct reinforcement but also through observation, imitation, and modeling. Individuals acquire knowledge and behaviors by observing others, particularly influential figures such as parents, peers, teachers, and community leaders. When such behaviors are reinforced—whether positively or negatively they become internalized and replicated in future interactions.

In the context of IPV, Social Learning Theory suggests that violent behavior is often transmitted intergenerationally. Individuals who grow up in households where violence is used as a conflict-resolution mechanism are more likely to internalize such practices as normative within intimate relationships (Gelles, 1980; Bandura, 1986). For instance, a man who observed his father exercising control over his mother through violence may adopt similar strategies when confronted with marital tensions, especially in situations where educational disparities create perceived threats to his authority. In this sense, IPV is not merely a matter of individual pathology but a socially learned behavior that thrives in environments where violence is tolerated, justified, or rewarded.

Applying Social Learning Theory to spousal educational inequality, it becomes clear that education itself is a central determinant of exposure to, and acceptance of, violent norms. Education plays a dual role: it can either serve as a protective factor or exacerbate vulnerability depending on the relational and cultural context. Individuals with higher educational attainment are more likely to access information about gender equality, human rights, and non-violent conflict resolution strategies (Jewkes, 2002). Conversely, when a husband's educational attainment is lower than his wife's, he may perceive her education as a challenge to traditional gender roles and male dominance. In a patriarchal society such as Nigeria, where masculine authority is deeply entrenched, this perceived loss of status may provoke violent responses, particularly if the man has learned through social modelling that aggression is an acceptable means of reasserting control (Aihie, 2009).

Bandura (1977) emphasizes the importance of reinforcement in maintaining learned behaviors. In many African contexts, cultural expectations, peer approval, and even institutional responses reinforce male control and female submissiveness (Uthman et al., 2009). If violent behavior is not penalized by law enforcement or is even tacitly endorsed by communities, individuals are more likely to continue practicing IPV. For younger couples, the dynamics may be particularly pronounced. Early in marriage, educational differences may exacerbate insecurities, especially when compounded by childbearing responsibilities, unemployment, and financial instability. The lack of coping mechanisms and reliance on socially learned patterns of dominance may lead to heightened IPV risk.

On the other hand, Social Learning Theory also provides insight into the adaptive processes observed among older couples in the study. With age and experience, individuals may unlearn violent behaviors and replace them with more effective coping strategies. This transformation can be facilitated by exposure to new role models, changes in social networks, and shifts in community norms. Hence, while early marital life may be characterized by heightened sensitivity to educational differences, later stages may bring about resilience and reduced reliance on violent practices. This dynamic underscores the life-course perspective embedded in the present study.

Social Learning Theory highlights the mechanisms through which IPV is perpetuated within intimate relationships marked by educational disparities. It underscores the significance of societal reinforcement, cultural norms, and role modeling in shaping marital behavior. By situating spousal educational inequality within this theoretical lens, the study reveals how IPV emerges not solely from personal frustrations but from broader social processes that normalize violence as an instrument of control.

### **Resource Theory and Educational Inequality**

Social Learning Theory emphasizes the transmission of violent behavior through modeling, however, Resource Theory (Blood & Wolfe, 1960) provides a complementary perspective by focusing on the structural and relational determinants of marital power dynamics. Resource Theory posits that power within intimate relationships is distributed according

to the resources each partner brings to the union. These resources include material assets (income, wealth, property), symbolic assets (education, occupational prestige), and social capital (status, networks). According to Blood and Wolfe, the partner who contributes more resources to the relationship generally holds greater bargaining power, decision-making authority, and control over the direction of the household.

In Nigerian context, education is not merely an individual attribute but a powerful resource that influences employment opportunities, income potential, social prestige, and even cultural capital (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2004). Educational differences between spouses, therefore, represent asymmetries in resource distribution, which can disrupt traditional power structures in marriage. For example, when men have higher educational attainment than women, they are more likely to dominate household decision-making, reflecting both cultural expectations and resource control. However, when women possess higher educational qualifications than their husbands, tensions may emerge as resource dynamics conflict with entrenched gender norms that privilege male authority.

Resource Theory explains IPV as a potential outcome of threatened resource imbalances. When traditional expectations of male dominance are undermined by a woman's superior educational or economic status, men may resort to violence as a compensatory mechanism to reassert control (Goode, 1971). This is particularly relevant in societies like Nigeria, where patriarchal norms are strong, and male identity is closely tied to authority within the family (Makama, 2013). Thus, IPV can be interpreted as an attempt to restore equilibrium in power relations by force when resource inequality disadvantages the man.

The dynamics highlighted by Resource Theory are also shaped by socioeconomic conditions. The study's findings that financial constraints and unemployment exacerbate IPV risks align directly with this theoretical framework. Economic hardship diminishes the material resources that men traditionally use to secure dominance within households. When men are unable to fulfil provider roles due to joblessness or underemployment, their sense of authority may be threatened, especially if their wives' educational or economic standing surpasses their own (Jewkes et al., 2015). Violence, in such contexts, may become

a symbolic resource deployed to reclaim dominance in the absence of material or educational superiority.

Conversely, Resource Theory also accounts for the adaptive patterns observed in later marriages. Over time, couples may develop strategies for negotiating educational and economic differences without resorting to violence. Older spouses may place greater emphasis on cooperation, shared responsibility, and emotional intimacy, thereby reducing the salience of educational disparities. Life experience and accumulated resources such as family networks, social respect, or joint investments can help stabilize relationships and mitigate the threat posed by educational inequality.

Importantly, Resource Theory underscores the multi-dimensionality of power and resources. Education does not operate in isolation but interacts with other determinants such as income, employment, cultural expectations, and gender norms. The prevalence of IPV in contexts of unemployment and vulnerability, as highlighted in the study, reflects the combined effect of diminished resources and heightened insecurity. Thus, while education can be a protective resource, its effect depends on broader economic and cultural contexts.

In terms of intervention, Resource Theory suggests that promoting educational equity alone may not suffice to eliminate IPV. Rather, strategies must also address economic empowerment, job creation, and the restructuring of gender norms that tie male identity exclusively to dominance. Policies that enable men and women to share resources equitably and collaboratively such as joint financial planning, gender-sensitive employment opportunities, and community education can reduce the likelihood of IPV by diminishing the perceived need to assert dominance through violence.

### **Integrative Perspective**

Social Learning Theory and Resource Theory offer a robust framework for analyzing the intersection of spousal educational inequality and IPV. Social Learning Theory emphasizes the processes through which violent behavior is modeled and reproduced, while Resource Theory highlights the structural dynamics of power and resource distribution within

intimate relationships. Both theories converge in explaining why younger couples experiencing educational disparities and financial stress are more prone to IPV, while older couples demonstrate greater resilience. They also jointly reinforce the need for multi-level interventions that not only expand educational access but also transform cultural norms and strengthen economic security.

## **Methodology**

The research approach chosen was qualitative research design to unravel the association between spouses' educational differences and the risk of intimate partner violence (IPV) over the life course in the state of Abia in Nigeria. Various factors that may have an effect on marital relationships in Abia State necessitate the study of Spousal Educational Gap and Risk of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Across the Life Course due to the presence of socio-cultural, economic and educational dynamics. Abia State is a South Eastern Nigerian state with both urban and rural populations, which commonly enforce the traditional norms of gender and patriarchal family structures that can influence the role and expectations within marriages in terms of an unequal distribution of afterlife (Okorie & Anugwom, 2019). Such norms can also compound the effects of educational differences between two spouses, with the possibility of having a bearing on power instruments and more susceptibility to IPV. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the way participants live, perceive the world, and narrate their stories as individuals, the qualitative approach was selected to reveal the dynamics played by the constructs of the socio-cultural setting in which IPV occurs within a differentiation context between spouses at the educational level.

The research study population consisted of married/formerly married men and women of Abia State who were aged 18 years and above. These included people with a wide socio-economic, educational and occupational background so that they could bring in varied viewpoints. The research specifically targeted the communities of the three senatorial regions of Abia state namely Abia North, Abia Central and Abia South as these are both urban and rural settings where differences in access to education and living with IPV may

be experienced differently. Purposive sampling method was used to identify potential participants who had first-hand encounter or knowledgeable experience about the educational disparities between spouses and IPV. A total of 24 participants were employed, with 12 female and 12 male members and balanced around gender and diversity of opinions, to cover diverse opinions. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used in the collection of data and this allowed flexibility of probing and clarification of the responses. Interviews were either performed in English or in the local language (Igbo) according to preference of the participant and audio-taped with their consent. Analysis of the data was conducted in accordance with the thematic analysis published by Braun and Clarke (2006), which comprises four stages including transcription, coding, determination of the emerging themes, and interpretation. To manage and organize the data, NVivo software was employed so that the qualitative material would be handled systematically. The study was ethically approved and the participants reassured of their anonymity as well as their right of non-participation in case they chose to do so at whatever point of the research.

## Findings

### Socio-demographics of the respondents

The research sample was 24 people with a socio- demographic background that was diverse in terms of age, marital, educational, occupation and income. Regarding the age distribution, 6 (25.0%), 8 (33.3%), 7, (29.2%) and 3 (12.5%) of the participants were between 18-25 years, 26-35 years, 36-45 years and above 45 years, respectively. Describing using marital status, it was revealed that 17 (70.8 %) respondents were married, 4 (16.7 %) single, 2 (8.3%) were divorced or separated and 1 (4.2 %) were widowed.

In terms of academic level, 7 respondents (29.2%) passed on through high school education, 8 (33.3%) had tertiary level, 6 (25.0%) passed the primary level and 3 (12.5%) were illiterate. Observation in the educational disparity between spouses showed that 10 (41.7%) of the spouses had higher educational levels different with the wives compared to

the husbands, 8 (33.3%) reported no loss between the educational levels of the spouses, and in 6 (25.0%) the wives had a higher educational level in comparison to the husbands.

Occupationally, 9 (37.5%) respondents were involved in informal sector, namely petty trading, manual labour 6 (25.0%) respondents were civil servants, 5 (20.8%) respondents were artisans and 4 (16.7%) respondents were unemployed. In terms of monthly income distribution, 8 participants (33.3%) earned under the national minimum wage, 7 (29.2%) earned between 30,000 and 50,000 monthly, 5 (20.8%) earned between 51,000 and 80,000 monthly and 4 (16.7) earned above 80,000 monthly. Regarding residential location, 15 (62.5) were in the urban areas and 9 (37.5) in the rural areas. Regarding religions, 79.2 % of the respondents were Christians, 16.7% were Muslims and 4.2% were of other religions.

### **Disparities in educational attainment**

The study shows that couples with pronounced educational disparities particularly when the wife had lower educational attainment than the husband experienced higher rates of IPV. Qualitative data from Abia South with married woman indicated thus

I left school in primary six and my husband pursued to the university. He keeps on telling me that I know nothing and he always leaves me out of major decisions affecting the family. I know when I attempt to speak to him, he speaks to me inferiorly and at times, our conflicts have resulted in physical attacks. I felt that his higher level of education afforded him greater authority within the marriage, leaving me powerless and vulnerable to his abuse. (A woman 36 yrs)

Another woman stated

My husband is better educated than I am and he likes to use this to bring me down. When I offer to give suggestions in regard to the family affairs, he tells me that this is an illiterate talk. The verbal disrespect has over the years transformed to physical body abuse. I think that with comparable education we would have more respect, understanding and balance in our

marriage, and probably that there would be less violence. (A woman 29 yrs)

Report from a man revealed thus

I have a master's degree whereas my wife did only secondary schooling. There are times when I become angry when she cannot comprehensively grasp some of the things I say or propose. I confess, I ought to be more patient, yet these times of rage make me lose my temper and usually the disputes turn into fierce altercations. I have learnt that difference in levels of education can lead to communication breakdown and stress in marriage where one partner feels the other is not of the same intellectual caliber as the other partner. (A Man 38 yrs.)

Another man opined thus:

My wife never even finished primary school and I have been to college. I often have a feeling that she is not understanding or following what I say about future plans and this results to constant fight. I also have yelled at her and one time I even hit her. I understand it was not right but sometimes I feel like that better knowledge of her would help us realize each other more, communicate, and have less misunderstanding that causes problems in our home (A Man 45 yrs.)

Contrastingly, the associations, where the wife outsmarts her husband in regards to the level of education, can also be linked to the incidents of IPV, which can be ascribed to the challenges that are issued against the traditional gender roles, and the perceptions that the male power is threatened by these issues. This is illustrated by these data from IDI.

I am a university graduate whereas my husband only went to secondary school. In the moment when we argue, sometimes he tells me that I behave as though I am smarter and that I want to control him. He flares up when I tell him I saw him do what I call wrong in the presence of others. The

arguments have on a few occasions resulted in pugnacious activities. I feel that my education makes him insecure, yet my intention is simply for us to make better decisions together (A woman 37 yrs.)

However, Man who is a trader indicated:

My wife studied at the university and I just studied vocationally. I admire her intelligence but she speaks in an offending tone that has made me feel insignificant. It wounds my self esteem and I have responded negatively in the past shouting and even beating her. I believe that our disparity in education tests the method in which I was brought up in viewing the role of a man. (A Man 39 yrs.)

### **Educational gap and IPV Variation across the life course**

The results also prove that the correlation between educational gap and IPV is not constant throughout the life course. An example of this is that younger couples especially those in the initial phases of marriages might have experienced conflicts based on the differences in education than the older couples who might have learned to accommodate their differences. Factors of the stage in life including child bearing period, employment transitions and taking retirement may also affect the relationship of education and IPV risk. For example,

During the first three years of our marriage, conflicts were always caused by the husband telling me that he did not attain the same level in school as I did. It even served as a contest of who was better informed. At times it resulted in yelling and him pulling away in conversations. We are still young and none of us were taught how to handle those differences. I believe this is even more stressful now that we are combining work and raising our first child, and at the same time we are trying to adapt to married life. (Female, 27 yrs.)

Another respondent stated

My wife is better educated than I am and this used to cause confusion in our early marriage. I sometimes felt that she was second-guessing me since she thought that she was more judgeable on those matters due to schooling. I defended myself, and this initiated conflicts. We discussed it over the years, but with children growing up and the need to get a stable job it has been more difficult. I think that education between partners should not be an issue, however when one party feels a shadowing effect then it can lead to tension, especially when both parties are still finding their way in life. (Male and 31 years old)

Furthermore, IDI revealed thus

My husband also has a high level of education and when we got married he assumed that he has the last authority. Initially, it brought a lot of conflicts. With time as we both established ourselves in our family lives and I got more involved in our business we decreased the conflict. We are now almost 20 years in and it is not about education anymore but finances and the future of our children. It was the experience and mutual respect, I believe but, the first few years were hell due to the difference in terms of education. (Female, 39 yrs)

Also another male participant opined thus:

My wife never completed secondary school whereas I am a degree holder. In past, I have made stuff up out of my education to win arguments when we were younger, which has damaged our relationship. Those issues died out as we grew up and became older, particularly when the children became adults. At this point our conflicts are centered more on health and retirement planning, as well as, taking care of extended family. I found out that differences in education are not that important once you have developed a life together. In the early stage of marriage, however, it did

indeed cause stress and there were incidents that I am not particularly proud of. The fourth respondent (Male, 45 years)

Another female participant affirmed that during our early life, the higher education taken by my husband was a barrier strategy in life as I found it hard to keep some conversations. With decades of collective life experience, education is secondary now, but that does not mean less problems are encountered by younger couple I know to cover such differences. She said:

My husband got higher education in the early years and this made me feel like I cannot participate in some discussions. He would be going to meetings that I could not fully follow and that caused distance. However, with many decades of marriage behind us, we have come to a point where together we have more experiences than academic differences. Today, in old age, we encounter such problems as health expenses and maintenance of grandchildren. Even though education is still relevant, this is not in the same form that it used to be. Younger couples that I know tend to have a more difficult time due to the fact that they have yet to learn to connect that gap. (Female, 52 years)

A male respondents stated thus

My wife was better educated when I married her. At that time I was self-conscious, insecure, and I wanted to find other means to prove myself, being controlling at times. We bickered back and forth. But over the years we have established trust between us. We are now in our sixties and education is not a problem. We are oriented more towards spending time together and on the management of our retirement income. In retrospect, I find that younger couples are more rubbed up due to these kinds of gaps since they are still finding ways to define their roles, raise kids and support their careers which intensify the tension. (A Man 42 yrs)

The research identified that socio-economic conditions in Abia State, including differences of the rural-urban population, the level of unemployment, and cultural demands, contribute to the strengthening or weakening of the correlation between educational inequity and IPV. An example would pertain to the situation in rural settings and where more traditional gender roles are firmly established, a disparity in education could be more closely associated with instances of seek to control, words, or even physical attack due to the increased education found in women being potentially threatening to the male power structure. On the other hand, the same differences in urban, where there is an exposure to some concept of egalitarianism, empowerment of women, greater accessibility of jobs, etc, may not lead to as much tension or can be negated by engaging in better communication practices and making decisions together. All these contextual differences point to the idea that identical educational disparity may imply different levels of implication on IPV risk in accordance with the socio-economic and cultural setting, couples reside in.

### **Discussion of findings**

This study has confirmed the findings of previous studies that pointed out that educational differences between spouses have the potential to play a crucial role in intimate partner violence (IPV). In line with Jewkes et al. (2017) and Vyas and Watts (2009), the current study demonstrates that the higher educational level of wives in comparison with their spouses may pose a threat to the gender norms, thus, triggering controlling behavior on the part of male counterparts, verbal abuse, or even physical force. On the other hand, the greater power imbalance between the husbands and the wives may result in women not taking part in the decision-making which serves to confirm the findings by Kaukinen (2004) that the lower educational status can constrain the bargaining power of women in their respective marital relationships.

As past research on the variation of IPV across life course has indicated (Capaldi et al., 2012; Benson & Fox, 2004), the present results indicate that the effects of educational gaps have more significant in couples at younger ages. During the early years of marriage, the problem of educational differences has been found to overlap with stressors of childbearing, employment instability, and financial strain, and this makes the conflicts even

stronger. Nevertheless, as the couples get older and have more related experiences, these gaps seem to lose significance as causes of IPV, and older couples suggest that the gap becomes adapted with a high inventory to such issues as health, education of children, and retirement. This is consistent with longitudinal observations that relationship dynamics change with age stage and diminish the immediate effect that particular structural inequalities have upon it.

The findings also affirm the modifying influence of the socio-economic context in defining the relationship between educational disparities and IPV which is also exhibited by Okemgbo et al. (2002) and Ajuwon et al. (2011). In rural places, in Abia State, where the values of patriarch and strict gender norms are still predominant, the educational inequality, as well as the educational advantages of women in particular, has more chances to be viewed as a threat to the male power, leading to the increase of IPV risks. By contrast, the urban environments, which expose individuals to supremely high amounts of egalitarian principles, women and girls empowerment initiatives, and multiplicity of economic prospects, are able to dilute the charged atmosphere brought on by educational contrasts. However, the low unemployment levels and the budgetary difficulties in the countryside and cities worsen the IPV because the financial reliance increases and the stress levels turn extreme, in accordance with the results of the study conducted by Heise and Kotsadam (2015) that economic-based levels of pressure escalate the power balances among genders.

Therefore, it can be said that the disparities in education, the life course patterns, and socio-economic backgrounds contribute to the intricacy of IPV in Abia. These findings indicate that interventions need not only focus on gender norms and adjusting the education towards equity but also on age-specific relationship stressors and socio-cultural environment the couples live in. Along with the precedents in the studies, the research emphasizes the necessity of the multi-level approaches to a solution, covering the structural disparities as well as the dynamic relations that change over a time course.

## Conclusion

This paper illustrates that educational differences between spouses are a crucial factor that determines nature of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Abia State; the way that the gap goes in terms of being positive or negative establishes power levels, communication styles, and conflict resolutions. The results show that the impact of educational difference is not universal in all stages of life because when such a difference exists, younger couples are more tense especially at the life state characterized by presence of children, job instabilities, and economic stresses and older couples enhance over time. This relationship is also moderated by social economic conditions, where a village has stronger connections between the level of education and IPV, since the patriarchal values and norms are deeply rooted, and urban settings give more chance to equality and bargaining. High rates of unemployment and financial difficulties, however, are cross-cutting risk factors to increase IPV despite the setting.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were made:

1. Introduce initiatives to ensure continuous learning opportunities of both men and women especially in the rural setting in order to decrease attainment gaps and enhance rapport in the relationships.
2. Individual couples, according to their stage in life, tailor prevention and counselling programs, e.g. skills of interpersonal communication and conflict resolution among younger couples, health and financial planning among older couples.
3. Mobilize community, religious, and local leaders to counter patriarchal norms that portray women's education as a threat to male authority, especially in rural areas.
4. Increase livelihood access, employment creation schemes, and microcredit financing to minimize financial stress as it combines with educational inequality to increase the risk of IPV.
5. Media, schooling, and community discussions should be used to propagate egalitarian connections and enlighten them about the worth of mutual decision making in marriages irrespective of the education level.

6. Train health workers, social welfare officers, community-based organizations to recognize the cases of IPV in which educational inequalities are present as a causal factor and can offer proper referrals and providing support services.

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