

# The Relationship Between IPV and Freedom: Dangerous Homes

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**Abstract:** It is estimated that approximately 30% of women face intimate partner violence (IPV). This instance is more of a gendered issue with women predominantly reporting more cases of IPV than men. This paper focuses on the female victims and is not limited to heterosexual couples only. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a spike in IPV cases which makes it an imperative issue to evaluate and tackle. When taking a closer look at IPV, it is one indicator of lack of freedom. It entails the encroachment of the natural rights of the victims in terms of privacy violation; more specifically with the ownership of a person's wellbeing. The paper aims to study the relationship between IPV and freedom through case studies of three countries: the USA, Syria and Estonia. A deeper dive into the cause behind domestic violence shows that factors such as religion, toxic masculinity and gender stereotyping play a role in IPV. Increasing education about gender and gender equality, providing a safe space for victims to speak about their experiences and offering resources for them to find a way out of the situation are some ways that can help reduce IPV. The stigma around this topic too needs to be eradicated to ensure there is success in reducing the cases of IPV.

## 1. Introduction

The most dangerous place in the world for a woman is at home, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The statistics support that 30% of women worldwide suffer from intimate partner violence or IPV [1], and 85% of all female homicides are committed by a current or former intimate partner [2]. In a world where freedom seems closer at hand than ever, these facts beg the question – are freedom and IPV correlated?

IPV is behavior by an intimate or ex-partner that causes harm [3]. This is a gendered issue, with 24.8% of women surveyed by the National Institute of Justice stating that they had suffered from IPV compared to 7.6% of men surveyed [4]. Though men and women can both be victims of IPV, this paper will focus on female victims, since women are predominantly impacted by this type of violence [1]. Apart from gender distinctions, IPV is not limited to just heterosexual couples; an estimated 1 in every 5 same-sex relationships are affected [5]. The discussion of IPV is imperative now. According to Sana Malik and Khansa Naeem in a 2020 paper, the COVID-19 pandemic has made women more susceptible to IPV as they are impacted more economically by the pandemic, rendering them more vulnerable to imposed isolation by their abusers. Indicators and reports of IPV have increased in all continents since the pandemic [6].

The relative freedom of countries is evaluated using the Human Freedom Index (HFI). This index measures the freedom of individuals in their countries, considering economic and personal freedom, with the former including analysis of freedom in governmental rule and regulation of the legal and economic systems; the latter includes rule of law, religious choice, civil society, and relationships [7].

Additionally, this paper uses John Locke's definition of innate rights; the natural rights to life, liberty, and property, including ownership of self [8]. A free society recognizes these rights and implements no other obstacles to free action besides the protection of them [9].

## 2. The Relationship Between IPV and Freedom

In the discussion of the relationship between IPV and freedom, it must first be acknowledged that IPV is an indicator of the lack of freedom as an encroachment upon the natural human rights of the

victims. One type of IPV, intimate partner stalking, illustrates this point well. The statistics retrieved from the U.S. Census Bureau estimate, that 503,485 women are stalked by intimate partners annually [4]. This privacy violation is not just a violation of legal rights, but also a violation of natural rights, particularly the right to ownership of one's wellbeing. By trespassing on another's private life, perpetrators of IPV are violating victims' freedom. Other forms of IPV, including physical assault and rape, violate victims' natural rights by threatening their lives with physical violence. As previously noted, natural rights are the basis of a free society, and thus a society that does not protect victims of IPV cannot be called a free society.

However, being a victim of IPV has implications far beyond physical harm as it impacts the education and economic aspirations of victims, and creates feelings of internalized blame. According to a 2018 report by Cynthia Hass and Alona Del Rosario, 78% of victims reported that they were unable to receive education because their abusers restricted their financial access. About 83% of victims reported that jobs and opportunities were disrupted because of IPV, whether that was being stalked by a former partner at their workplace, or being restrained from attaining opportunities through threats and intimidation. In 1995, IPV costs in the USA amounted to \$4.1 billion in medical care alone [10]. The cost of such violence is felt dearly by both the victims and their countries.

Even more alarming than the economic statistics is the way the victims begin to perceive themselves. Victims reported internalizing degrading comments. They also reported feelings of helplessness against the threats abusers made toward the physical well-being of themselves or their dependents. Many stated that even after they escaped the situation, their traumatic experiences continue to affect their lives [11].

Although IPV is an indicator of the lack of freedom, it is not always negatively correlated with freedom. To study this further, this paper will discuss three countries – the USA, Syria, and Estonia – to best explore this relationship. These countries were selected based on the correlation between their HFI ranking and their ranking in the 2021 US News ranking of “Best Countries for Women”, ranked by consideration of human rights, gender equality, income equality, progress, and safety [12].

### **3. IPV and Freedom: Case Studies of USA, Syria and Estonia**

The USA is a developed country in North America and is ranked 15 in the HFI 2021 rankings, indicating a comparatively high level of freedom (or emphasizes human rights, gender equality, income equality, progress, and safety more in their legal systems and society) out of the 165 countries ranked. This paper stands as an example of free countries with less IPV. Syria is a developing country in West Asia and is ranked 165 out of 165 countries in the HFI 2021 rankings. Syria represents countries that are both less free and more endangered by IPV.

An interesting paradox is Estonia, a developed country in Northern Europe, which is ranked 4 in the HFI 2021 rankings but is ranked at a low of 33 out of the top 73 best countries worldwide for women. In this paper, it will represent those countries that are free but have more instances of IPV than their levels of freedom would suggest.

The USA is known as the land of the free, and its ranking on the HFI (15) is indicative of the credibility of the name. While America is vocal about its shortcomings, it is ranked well on rankings for women's safety, ranking 18 in the 2021 US News ranking. This could, in part, be due to American culture's emphasis on equality: in “Democracy in America”, French author Alexis De Tocqueville commends American equality [13]. Modern-day America is still engrossed in the process of achieving equality in all its forms, notably gender equality. Though IPV has not been completely eradicated in America, since the #MeToo movement and others, domestic violence has not strayed too far from the public consciousness. The aforementioned recent reauthorization of VAWA, for instance, is a marked step towards equality in America and adds a protective layer for victims of IPV [14].

Syria is entirely on the other end of the spectrum when it comes to freedom and IPV. Syria has been embroiled in a civil war since 2011, and the political instability in Syria has resulted in low rankings in terms of both freedom and treatment of women, with Syria experiencing one of the largest humanitarian crises in the twenty-first century. Women in Syria in particular suffer rape, kidnapping, and even induced puberty [15]. Violence against women is normalized, with attempts to challenge

this belief often seen as a betrayal of family and societal values [16]. Syria, therefore, is representative of countries that remain unequal and are not free.

In both Syria and the US mentioned above, freedom and IPV are correlated. But in some countries, this is not the case, as in Estonia. Estonia is ranked at 4 on the HFI ranking, and values of freedom are prominent in Estonian history. For instance, the Estonian Song and Dance Festival has been a tradition in the country since 1869 and is the zeitgeist of a freed Estonia; during the Soviet occupation of the country, the festival kept national identity alive [17]. The presentation of the Song of Freedom in 2014 at such a highly esteemed cultural festival indicated the value at which Estonians hold freedom [18]. Yet though Estonia is ranked high in freedom, women in Estonia do not fare as well as this freedom ranking would suggest. It is ranked 33 on the US News ranking, and according to the UN Women Count, 4.2% of Estonian women between the ages of 15 and 49 have suffered from IPV at the hands of a partner in the past 12 months. In terms of legal frameworks that promote gender equality, Estonia is ranked lower than the rest of Europe [19]. Even more troubling is the large information gap in Estonia on gender, including the lack of comparable methodologies to measure violence against women, which makes the creation of gendered legislation more difficult. This may have to do with the culture of the country. Estonian women are often expected to play the role of a subordinate, which may have to do with the diverse culture of the country, with Soviet influences when it comes to emphasizing the woman's role at home [20]. Estonia is an example of a country that is relatively less free for women than one might expect based on its economic and personal freedom.

Though it may be irrational to hope to completely eradicate IPV, there are still ways to lessen IPV to create freer and more equal societies that can be implemented now.

#### **4. How To Reduce IPV?**

Fortunately, IPV is being recognized as a violation of natural rights, and countries are taking steps, such as the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in the USA, to address it. However, to truly find the roots of the causes of IPV, it is important to delve deeper into the issue of domestic violence and ask why it occurs. There are many underlying societal issues that cause IPV, some of the most prominent reasons amongst them religion, toxic masculinity, and gender stereotyping [21]. Often, abusers have an idealized masculine identity, and when that is challenged, it makes them more susceptible to aggression and violence [22]. Perpetrators of violence often believe themselves to have an inherent right to harm the victim. Countries can deal with the core of this issue by increasing education about gender and domestic violence while also promoting gender equality, lessening the belief that men should be dominant and women should be subservient.

Besides primary prevention, it is also important for victims of IPV to feel safe speaking up. This would help lessen the vulnerability and perceived helplessness of a victim, as they would know that they have the power to escape the situation. Too often victims of IPV are subject to "victim blaming", with society often attempting to justify a perpetrator's actions rather than recognizing the violence that is out of place in a world that prizes civility. The main aim should be to put a spotlight on the behavior of the perpetrator. In a study published in 2012 by Eve Waltermaurer, every single country had at least one incident of IPV justification, with reasons ranging from infidelity to not having chores done [23]. It is because of this victim blaming, patriarchal societal structure, and lack of intervention structures that women often feel pressured to keep the IPV to themselves, and to continue to bear it rather than seeking out help. To help these victims, the government can provide institutions such as those mentioned in the Violence Against Women Act in the US, including hotlines for victims to call and housing protections for victims who are unable to stay in their homes for fear of an intimate partner [24]. These programs show victims that their stories are heard and they are supported by the government. Non-government organizations can also help support victims escaping IPV. For instance, in a 2016 nation-wide survey, 42% of Indian men believed that a husband is justified in hitting his wife [25]. But NGOs in India have stepped up to address the legal loopholes when it comes to IPV. The organization Majlis Manch is amongst many of the NGOs in India that provide some form of assistance for victims of domestic violence. In particular, Majlis Manch provides legal support and litigation lawyers for women who face domestic and intimate partner violence [26].

Another way to help victims of IPV is to offer them a way out of the situation. Victims are oftentimes trapped by their economic dependence on an abuser, and their fear of being unable to re-enter society after imposed seclusion [10]. The best way to combat this is to offer financial literacy and asset-building programs that teach victims how to be economically independent [27]. This safety net makes it easier for the victims to leave their abusers.

These proposals are not without their flaws. The stigma surrounding the discussion of IPV and all forms of domestic violence makes it harder for the victims to speak up about the abuse they suffer, and make it less likely for them to reach out to get help. Additionally, the elimination of IPV is a long-term issue, with short-term results not likely. Research and studies need to continue to promote discourse around this topic, so the issues of IPV and domestic violence are not set aside until they are truly solved.

Too often the emphasis in the discussion about intimate partner violence focuses on the “intimate partner” aspect of the issue, rather than recognizing the “violence” as the true problem. And while IPV is related to the lack of freedom, “freedom” is such a holistic concept that even with relatively high occurrences of IPV, countries can still be classified as “free” by current standards, as shown in the case studies presented in this paper. Freedom and what is considered to be “free” also changes by culture, and for multi-cultural regions such as Estonia in this paper, can vary even by region. Regardless, until the day that IPV is dealt with satisfactorily and addressed as a national emergency by all countries, there can be no society in the world that can truly declare itself to be “free”.

## 5. Conclusion

Even though there is a rise in the issues of IPV, especially given the COVID-19 pandemic, there is still a long way to go in reducing the cases. As seen in the paper, countries like the USA have fewer cases of IPV as compared to countries like Syria. In cases of countries like Estonia, even if the HFI is high, women don't need to have total freedom. Thus, better education on gender and equality is a significant component in the reduction of IPV cases. With better education, and endeavors to reduce the stigma surrounding the same, there can be changes we can predict. Taking into consideration that are fuel to IPV and trying to eradicate them as indicators igniting these cases can make a big difference. Here too, education will play an important role.

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