

Violence against women and the girl child

Attitudes towards physical violence against women



Key points

- Acceptance of wife-beating is generally higher in countries in Africa, Asia and Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand, and lower in countries in Latin America and the Caribbean and Europe.
- Intimate partner violence is becoming less acceptable. During the 8-year period from 2012 to 2019, women's acceptance of physical violence by their partners decreased in almost 75% of countries with trend data.
- Younger men view physical violence against their partners as more acceptable than older men.
- Although it may be assumed that wife-beating is more widely justified by men than women, in the 53 countries with data on the attitudes of women and men, reported acceptance rates were actually lower among men than women in 40 countries.

Background

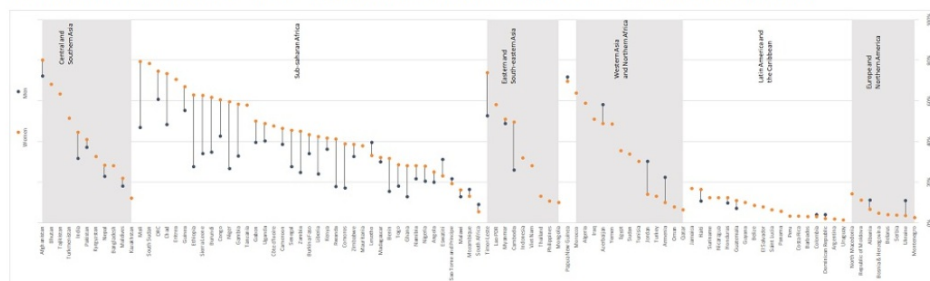
Although it should be universally understood that physical violence is never an acceptable practice, unfortunately, in many parts of the world both men and women still believe that wife-beating is justifiable and/or acceptable under certain circumstances. Specific survey questions on wife-beating¹ are designed to capture the social justification of violence as a disciplinary action when a woman does not comply with certain expected gender roles.



Current situation

In some countries and cultures, wife-beating is seen as justifiable and/or acceptable in a wide range of contexts, a fact that makes it difficult to change behaviour patterns and creates a challenging situation for women victims of domestic violence who want to talk to someone about their experiences and/or to ask for help. Research indicates that perpetration of and victimization by violence is higher among those who accept or justify such abuse than those who do not.²

Figure I: Percentage of women and men who consider that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife under at least one of the five specified circumstances: 2012-2019 (latest available)



Source: Compiled by United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, based on demographic and health surveys (DHS), multiple indicator cluster surveys (MICS), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and national surveys (some surveys have different reasons for justifying wife-beating).

Note: Most data cover the period 2012-2019, with the exception of 16 countries with data prior to 2012. Ranking of countries is for presentation purposes only.

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Wife-beating remains acceptable in some countries throughout the world: reported levels of acceptance were generally higher in countries in Africa, Asia and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) and lower in countries in Latin America and the Caribbean and Europe. Levels of acceptance among women ranged from 2% in Uruguay (2013) to 80% in Afghanistan (2015). Among men, levels of acceptance ranged from 4% in Colombia (2015) and the Dominican Republic (2013) to 72% in Afghanistan (2015) and Papua New Guinea (2017).

It should be noted that it is difficult to compare reported levels of acceptance of wife-beating across countries and contexts because willingness to talk about violence and attitudes towards it vary, a factor that can affect individual response rates. Although it might be assumed that wife-beating is more widely justified by men than women, in the 53 countries with data on the attitudes of both women and men, reported acceptance levels were actually lower among men than women in 40 countries.

Evidence also suggests that attitudes are changing. In 2019, women generally viewed domestic violence as being less acceptable than they had in 2012. Between 2012 and 2019, 15 countries conducted multiple surveys and provided multiple data points for trend analysis on women's attitudes towards physical violence: in 11 countries levels of acceptance of wife-beating had decreased, while in the other 4 countries levels of acceptance had increased.

Trend data on men's attitudes towards physical violence against women is not widely available, which makes comparable trend analysis challenging. It is possible, however, to look at the differences between the attitudes of adolescents and adult men to see whether attitudes differ across age groups within a given country. Worryingly, data suggest that young men view physical violence against women as more acceptable than older men whereas differences in attitudes by age are less pronounced among women (see table).



Comparing the attitudes of adolescent males with adult men towards physical violence against women reveals higher levels of acceptance among younger males than among older men: reported levels of acceptance are higher in 40 out of 46 countries (87% of countries with data). In contrast, the attitudes of women towards physical violence against women appear to vary less by age: reported levels are higher among younger women in 45 countries (54% of countries with data) and lower in 38 countries (46% of countries with data).



About the data

Coverage

Women and men aged 15–49 worldwide.

Availability

For the years between 2000 and 2019, 99 countries have data on the attitudes of women towards wife-beating, and just over half of those countries (53) also have data on the attitudes of men. Between the years 2012 and 2019, 83 countries collected data on the subject, and 15 of those countries conducted multiple surveys during that same time period.

Oceania (excl) refers to Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) throughout the publication.

Definition

- The percentage of women and men aged 15–49 who think a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife under at least one of the following circumstances: (a) she goes out without telling him; (b) she neglects the children; (c) she argues with him; (d) she refuses to have sex with him; or (e) she burns the food.



Sources

- Demographic and health surveys (DHS)
- Multiple indicator cluster surveys (MICS)
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- National surveys
- World Bank

Related stories and further reading

- [Intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence](#)



Footnotes

1. Data from multiple indicator cluster surveys (MICS) and demographic and health surveys (DHS).
2. World Health Organization (WHO), 2005; and Instituto Promundo and the International Center for Research on Women, *Evolving Men: Initial Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey*, 2011.

