

REVIEW ARTICLE

Gender symmetry: A systematic review of men's experiences of intimate partner violence during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown

Dorothy N. Ononokpono¹ and Endurance Uzobo^{2*}¹Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria²Department of Sociology, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, Nigeria(This article belongs to *Special Issue: Population and Reproductive Health Dynamics under Covid-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa*)

Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a public health concern. However, men's experiences of IPV have been largely neglected in previous studies. This systematic review aimed to examine men's experiences of IPV during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Six online bibliographic databases were used to identify relevant published peer-reviewed journal articles and gray literature. A total of 19 journal articles and gray literature that examined the prevalence, types, and consequences of violence experienced by men during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown were extracted for review. This systematic review is anchored on the gender symmetry theory developed by Straus and Gelles. Expectedly, females were the major victims of IPV cases, but a significant number of men around the world also experienced IPV during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. This finding suggests that evidence-based approaches that also recognize men as victims of IPV should be taken into account for minimizing such cases.

Keywords: Gender symmetry; Intimate partner violence; COVID-19; Pandemic; Lockdown

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has no doubt altered the sociodemographic landscape across the globe. To contain the spread and manage the virus, stringent measures were put in place by various authorities in different countries. One of these measures was national and international lockdown to confine families in their respective residences. Such measure, however, led to escalating tensions among spouses, thereby pushing intimate partner violence (IPV) cases to a higher level. Compared to other forms of violence, IPV places its victims much greater danger as they have relatively fewer routes of escape from their abusers.

IPV can be defined as a form of domestic violence perpetrated against a spouse or partner who is or was in an intimate relationship (Larsen, 2016). A widely cited definition of IPV by the World Health Organization is "any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors" (Krug *et al.*, 2002). While this definition highlights various aspects of IPV, it should be

noted that extreme forms of IPV include coercive control, battering, and intimate terrorism. Hence, these extreme forms usually require medical attention and the provision of psychological services (Anglin & Homeier, 2014). Nevertheless, Brooks (2020) has added a few variables to the definition of IPV, such as food deprivation, monitoring of expenditure spending, and withholding of personal gadgets.

Although IPV was supposedly more prevalent among women during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown (Peitzmeier *et al.*, 2021), a significant number of men also fell victim to IPV perpetrated by their partners. This assertion is based on earlier findings that for every three IPV cases, one of the victims might be a man (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Some authors have also argued that these statistics may be a gross underestimation as only about half of the men who experience abuse have the courage to share their experiences with someone they know. Thus, men are less likely to report IPV cases and seek professional help for fear of social prejudice, shame, embarrassment, and discrimination (Tsui *et al.*, 2010).

In African societies, the issue of domestic violence against men is rarely discussed. The social stigma attached to men being abused by their spouses has downplayed the issue of domestic violence against men in African countries. Thus, the prevalence of violence against men is more common than what is documented. A commentary by Folorunsho-Francis (2020) also added that in Nigeria as a result of poor documentation, incidents of IPV cases against men across the country are often underreported. Narrating his experience with the level of the report of IPV cases against men, the Founder and Executive Director of a non-governmental organization in Nigeria stated that:

“Over time, we have discovered that when you refer these men, there is a preconceived judgement in some of these referral centres including the Office of the Public Defender. From the moment the victims start narrating that they were beaten up by their spouse, they tend to get discouraged by the attitude of some officials. Some men are further subjected to mockery and probing questions on why they didn't submit willingly to avoid being battered.” (cited in Folorunsho-Francis, 2020, para. 15-16).

The United Nations Nigeria (2020) reported that sexual violence against men and boys occurs, especially in the conflict-affected region of the North-Eastern part of Nigeria. However, most male survivors of sexual abuse failed to report this incidence due to sociocultural and personal factors. This phenomenon has also been noted by UNFPA and IPPF (2017). According to the reports, men are less likely than women to report an incident of

domestic violence perpetrated against them. According to a report by United Nations Nigeria (2020), disability has further compounded the IPV cases among males as men and boys with disabilities are as more likely to be the victims of domestic violence.

Although reports on domestic violence against men are scarce in developing countries such as Nigeria, there have been pockets of reports, especially from the newspapers in these countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recently in Nigeria, there has been a proliferation of cases of women being prosecuted and jailed for a series of IPV perpetrated against their male spouses. Two prominent cases in Nigeria were a woman who was jailed for 7 years for stabbing her husband in the neck which eventually led to his death and another woman who reportedly stabbed her husband to death while he was sleeping (Folorunsho-Francis, 2020).

On the severity of abuse, Warburton & Raniolo (2020) noted that IPV is less frequent among men, but it is of equal severity when compared to the abuse experienced by women. In addition, most of the abuses experienced by men have led to severe injuries and death in some cases. For instance, the UK Office of National Statistics (2018) estimated that about 16 men died between April 2018 and March 2019 at the hands of their partner or ex-partner and the probability of men (4.3%) sustaining physical injuries during IPV is higher than those of the women (0.4%).

Although the number for women might be higher, it is important to note that the number of men who suffer severe injuries from their female partners is significant enough for IPV discussions to steer away from a gender divide, opening up conversations on promoting zero tolerance to IPV for both men and women. This becomes expedient as it has been argued that men who suffer silently from intimate partner abuse are at a higher risk of developing serious mental health-related problems.

Notably, most studies on IPV during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown have exclusively focused on the prevalence and severity of IPV among women, while conversations on the severity of IPV among male victims have received little attention and remained poorly understood. Furthermore, little is known about the types of IPV suffered by men and their consequences against this backdrop, and this study examines the prevalence, types, and consequences of men's experiences of IPV during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown through a systematic review of past studies.

1.1. Theoretical perspective: Gender symmetry theory

In recent times, the debate about the nature of IPV, especially concerning the gender of perpetrators, has been

a burning issue among scholars, activists, and development organizations. This debate erupted mainly as a result of the claim that women and men are both equally victims of domestic violence (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1993). Thus, it was these premises that led to the formulation of the gender symmetry theory.

The gender symmetry theory was developed by Straus and Gelles in 1975 and was used in a survey study that examined violence in the American families. The theory stresses that IPV occurs among married couples with roughly comparable frequency and magnitude. This is reflected in their study, which revealed that 11.6% of men and 12% of women had experienced one form of IPV or the other in the 12 months before the survey, with men experiencing a more severe form of IPV compared to women (4.6% and 3.8%, respectively) (Gelles & Straus, 1988). Thus, there was no statistically significant difference in IPV between men and women. Straus *et al.* further stated that while women face far more frequent and severe physical and economic violence than men, a considerable number of men also face physical and economic abuse from women. However, men are more likely than women to be victims of psychological assault (Stets & Straus, 1990; Straus, 2008). The gender symmetry theory also indicates that IPV has repercussions ranging from mild to fatal. Considerably, more men than women commit murder of their spouses, and the rates of homicides of ex-spouses present even more gender asymmetrical distribution (Straus, 2009). In addition, the injury rate for men is almost seven times higher than that for women (Stets & Straus, 1990).

These findings sparked a lot of discussion on the issue of gender symmetry leading to Steinmetz's coinage of the controversial term "*battered husband syndrome*" (Steinmetz, 1977). However, other researchers have pondered the existence of gender symmetry in IPV (Saunders, 1988; Dobash *et al.*, 1992).

Some empirical findings have pointed to the existence of gender symmetry (Straus, 2011). These findings indicate that the rates of gender perpetration of IPV are symmetrical among males and females for both minor and severe violence (Cercone *et al.*, 2005). Buttressing the gender symmetry position in two recent studies, Straus concluded that about 70% of IPV involve mutual acts of abuse (Straus, 2008; Straus, 2011). However, according to Tjaden (2000), the gender symmetry in IPV is caused by the frequent use of violence by women as a tool of resistance or self-defense against their male partners. Nevertheless, Bair-Merritt *et al.* (2010) indicated that distinguishing between self-defense and retaliation in IPV was difficult. Besides, when the scope of IPV is expanded to include emotional abuse and

any form of hitting, there seems to be a gender symmetry in IPV, but when IPV is loosely defined to include physical harm, expression of fear, and other psychological harm, then IPV primarily affects women (Esquivel-Santovena *et al.*, 2013).

A more recent study has indicated that the gender symmetry theory is not applicable to all contexts (Esquivel-Santovena *et al.*, 2013). By implication, factors such as religion and other cultural elements might affect the symmetrical position of IPV. For example, in some religious and cultural settings, it is forbidden for a woman to either retaliate or raise her voice or abuse her partner. In sum, the proponents of this theory, however, acknowledged some asymmetrical aspects of IPV. Hence, they accepted that men often use more violent and use more deadly means of IPV in relationships (Swan *et al.*, 2008; Chan, 2011).

The gender symmetry theory is subjected to serious criticism. Michael Flood expressly denied the existence of gender symmetry when he wrote that "*there is no gender symmetry in domestic violence; there are important differences between men's and women's typical patterns of victimization; and domestic violence represents only a small proportion of the violence to which men are subject*" (Flood, 2004).

Other scholars have criticized this theory for excluding two important aspects of IPV: conflict-motivated aggression and control-motivated aggression (Kimmel, 2002). Hence, critics have noted that women in America mainly engage in IPV as a form of self-defense or retaliation (motivated aggression), which does not involve a high level of fear or injury (Swan *et al.*, 2008). Meanwhile, in cultural contexts such as Sub-Saharan Africa, where men tend to have higher decision-making power, the men generally engage in IPV as a form of control and cause some form of serious injuries and fear to their partners (Darteh *et al.*, 2019; Allen, 2013). Thus, critics of gender symmetry have argued that specific cases as indicated above must be taken into account when assessing IPV between women and men (Jewkes *et al.*, 2017). Notwithstanding these criticisms, this theory provides an important framework for more understanding of male and female experiences of IPV. Under the purview of this theory, the high frequency and magnitude of IPV among men and women during the COVID-19 lockdown period is proposed, with both genders experiencing the abuse in either equal or different intensity. Besides, considering the restriction of movements and social isolation, many men were confined together with their female abusers indoors. Because of limited route of escape when conflicts occur, male victims could suffer from both physical and psychological abuse and consequently severe injuries as women often use violence or harmful tools for self-defense against their male partners (Tjaden, 2000).

1.2. Study objectives

This study was designed to achieve the following objectives:

- (i). To find the prevalence of IPV against men during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown
- (ii). To identify the types and forms of IPV experienced by male victims during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown
- (iii). To investigate the consequences of IPV on male victims during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

2. Data and methods

Six online bibliographic databases were searched to identify gray literature from published studies on the prevalence, types, and consequences of IPV against men during the COVID-19 lockdown. The populations of interest were men who had been abused specifically by their female partners. The search was limited to the 2020 – 2021 period. This is because COVID-19 lockdowns globally were mainly instituted in 2020 and early 2021. The six bibliographic databases from which literature was searched in this study include PubMed, PsycINFO, Sociological Abstract, Social Sciences Citation Index, SpringerLink, and ProQuest. The search terms adopted include “men abuse,” “violence against men,” “IPV against men,” “domestic violence against men,” and “gender-based violence against men.” Reference listings from identified articles were further independently hand searched for articles with more specific themes. The number of articles gleaned from the various bibliographic databases is shown in Table 1.

In identifying relevant articles for this study, a four-stage screening process was adopted. At first, the authors independently conducted online searches using the terms mentioned earlier. In the second stage, the titles and abstracts of papers were selected using certain inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify relevant papers. In determining the inclusion criteria for articles, studies that reported gender-based violence, domestic violence, IPV, and abuses against men published between 2020 and 2021 were included in this study irrespective

Table 1. Number of articles gleaned and selected from online bibliographic databases

Name of database	No. of articles retrieved	No. of articles selected
PubMed	35	6
PsychINFO	9	2
Sociological Abstracts	7	1
Social Sciences Citation Index	14	1
SpringerLink	14	3
ProQuest	8	6
(for Newspapers and Magazines)		

of the nature of the study (*i.e.*, research, commentaries, and reviews). Nevertheless, studies published within the search period (2020 – 2021) that used data from previous years to analyze IPV against men were excluded from the interpretation of our hypothesis of this study but were discussed in the introduction and discussion sections. In the third stage, the selected papers with available full texts were reviewed to ensure that they met pre-determined inclusion criteria. Finally, the two authors independently and succinctly screened both the titles and contents of selected articles to evaluate their suitability for the review.

As shown in Figure 1, the process of database searching in stage 1 yielded a total of 87 citations/abstracts. After a review of the titles and abstracts of the 87 articles, a total of 35 articles were rejected either because they had unrelated themes, did not provide enough information on the issue under discussion, or are duplicates.

Further screening in stage 2 involved screening and review of the titles and abstracts of the remaining 52 articles. Subsequently, 29 articles were rejected because the studies they described were conducted in a period outside the scope of this study, thereby leaving a total of 23 articles in stage 3.

Furthermore, in stage 3, after the full texts of the 23 articles were reviewed, 4 studies were subsequently discarded on the grounds of methodological flaws. Finally, in stage 4, 19 studies that met the criteria were subjected to a final in-depth review.

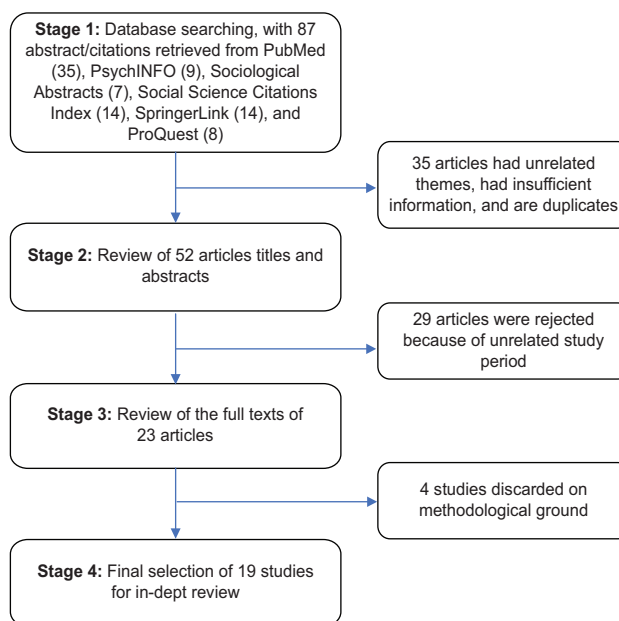


Figure 1. Flowchart of multistage selection and screening of articles retrieved from databases.

3. Results

Of the 19 studies reviewed, the majority of the papers originated in developed countries. Twelve (12) were from the United Kingdom, two were from Nigeria, and one each from England, Australia, Portugal, and India.

3.1. Prevalence of IPV

A study conducted in the United Kingdom indicated that in every three domestic abuse cases, two victims are females and one is male (Warburton & Raniolo, 2020). If the severity of IPV is measured by volume, the study found a prevalence of 28.4% in women and 13.6% in men. Almost all the 10 papers from ManKind Initiative on media and policy briefing reported that, just like their female counterparts, men were at higher risk of IPV because of the confinement with their abusers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Notably, pleas for help from men who suffered domestic abuse increased to 60% during the lockdown in England (BBC News, 2020). As shown in the report, contact with male victims of IPV came through emails, and charity organizations dealing with these men saw the volume increase of emails by 96% from 372 emails in June 2019 to 728 in June 2020. In March 2020, calls to the ManKind Initiative helpline were 20% higher when compared to the level during the pre-lockdown period and 35% higher between March and June 2020 than normal. The ManKind Initiative website saw a 175% increase in visitors more compared to before the lockdown period. The study in India indicated that a higher proportion of men (7.7%) reported experience of abuse compared to women (7.3%). A Nigerian study reported 89 cases of men abuse between early 2020 and the first quarter of 2021. Similarly, the NOI Polls revealed that 47% of Nigerians reported one form of domestic violence or the other against men in their locality during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Portugal, IPV ranged from 12.3% for men to 14.2% for women (Table 2).

3.2. Types and forms of IPV experienced by male victims

The majority of the papers from the United Kingdom reported that male victims who were trapped indoors suffered emotional abuse and isolation, a situation that made help seeking more difficult. Male victims are subjected to emotional abuses, such as spending monitoring, food deprivation, and concealment of personal property such as a phone or computer (Brooks, 2020). Seven (7) of the ManKind Initiative briefings indicated a breach of Custody and Child Arrangement Orders by several ex-partners (mothers). A breach of child custody agreement was identified as a form of IPV because it is a form of behavior

control. Some male partners had to resort back to family courts in ensuring that child arrangement orders were upheld. Some of the studies noted that male victims of IPV suffered financial/economic and psychological/emotional abuse from their female partners. Other forms of abuse experienced by male victims include sexual and physical abuse, which in most cases led to severe injuries (Table 2).

3.3. Consequences

A paper from the United Kingdom indicated that over one-third of men (41%) and more than half of women (52%) were more likely to suffer from emotional and mental problems emanating from IPV during the COVID-19 lockdown period (Warburton & Raniolo, 2020). Similarly, 4.3% of men and 0.4% of women suffered internal injuries such as fractures and broken teeth. Another study in Australia confirmed that there is little or no support for male victims (Gleeson, 2020). Counseling services for men are less widely available because they are less likely to report their experience of IPV. A male victim in Australia also reported homelessness. Some of the papers revealed that men were at higher risk of sustaining physical injuries and emotional trauma caused by their female partners (Warburton & Raniolo, 2020; ManKind Initiative Briefing 1, March 2020; ManKind Initiative Briefing 4, May 4 – 10, 2020).

The ManKind Initiative reported at least three homicidal cases involving male victims of IPV in the United Kingdom between May and June 2020. As indicated in some of the ManKind Initiative policy briefings, male victims of IPV suffered minimization, a topic brought up during the public hearing of the domestic bill in the United Kingdom (Table 2).

4. Discussion

Globally, the severity of men's IPV experience during the pandemic lockdown, although less frequent, is tantamount to spousal abuse suffered by women. In line with a previous study by Jewkes *et al.* (2017), women's IPV experiences were not significantly different from those of men. As indicated by one of the studies, if the severity of IPV is measured by volume, the severity of IPV in women and men is 28.4% and 13.6%, respectively. This shows that an appreciable proportion of men experienced severe abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

It is important to note that men's experience of IPV was on the rise. Findings indicate that two women and one man were victims of every three domestic violence incidents reported during the COVID-19 lockdown period, and calls from male victims remained 35% higher than the number recorded during the pre-lockdown period. The prevalence of male's experience of IPV in India was 7.7%, and in Nigeria, about 89 cases of men abuse were reported between early 2020 and

Table 2. Prevalence, types, and consequences of IPV

References	Region/ Country	Prevalence rate	Type	Consequences/Findings
Warburton & Raniolo, 2020	United Kingdom	Two women and one man were victims of every three domestic violence incidents reported during the period of the COVID-19 lockdown. When measured by volume, the prevalence is 28.4% for women and 13.6% for men.	Physical and emotional abuse	Compared to men (41%), women (52%) were more likely to suffer from emotional and mental problems emanating from IPV during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Data showed that 4.3% of men and 0.4% of women suffered internal injuries such as fractures and teeth.
ManKind Initiative Briefing 1 (March 2020)	/	/	Psychological/emotional abuse	Similar to female victims, men were found to be at greater risk as many were trapped with their abusers indoors. As a result, the male victims can be more easily controlled through physical, psychological, and social isolation. Besides, it is more difficult for male victim of abuse to find a safe space to seek help. There was generally a violation of custody and children arrangement orders and counseling facilities for male victims were lacking.
ManKind Initiative Briefing 2 (April 2020)	/	Calls to the ManKind Initiative helpline by male victims increased by 20% within the 3 weeks leading up to the lockdown (since March 30, 2020). Furthermore, the number of visitors to the ManKind Initiative webpage surged by 20% within the same period. Calls to the ManKind Initiative helpline were 20% higher than in the normal periods.	/	The ManKind Initiative reported a general decline in the cases of men coming forward to report an IPV case. Referrals also decreased during this period. This was attributed to the inability of men to get out for help. Counseling for male victims was also lacking.
ManKind Initiative Briefing 3 (April – May 2020)	/	Calls to the ManKind Initiative helpline were 35% higher than normal (pre-lockdown); visitors to the webpage of the initiative were also three times higher than the usual average reported cases (about 189% increase).	/	There was a general lack of counseling for male victims.
ManKind Initiative Briefing 4 (May 4 – 10, 2020)	/	Calls to the ManKind Initiative helpline from male victims remained 35% higher than the level during the pre-lockdown period; visit frequency to the webpage of the initiative was 175% higher.	Psychological/emotional and economic/financial violence was the major type of abuse witnessed by men	Men, just like women, were at a higher risk due to the violations of Custody and Child Arrangement Orders and a lack of counseling for male victims.
ManKind Initiative Briefing 5 (May 11 – 17, 2020)	/	Reported cases since March 30, 2020 remained 35% higher than the level during the pre-lockdown periods; visit frequency to the webpage of the initiative was 160% higher (<i>i.e.</i> , over 2.5 times higher) than in the pre-COVID-19 periods.	Psychological/emotional abuse	There was a lack of counseling for male victims and a breach of Custody and Child Arrangement Orders .
ManKind Initiative Briefing 6 (May 18 – 31, 2020)	/	There were two homicide cases involving male victims of domestic abuse; visit frequency to the webpage of the initiative was 150% higher.	Physical/psychological/emotional abuse	The counseling services for male victims were in short supply, and there was a breach of Custody and Child Arrangement Orders.
ManKind Initiative Briefing 7 (June 1 – 7, 2020)	/	Visit frequency to the webpage of the initiative in the 1 st week of June was 110% higher than the level in the period before the COVID-19 pandemic.	Psychological/emotional abuse	Three cases of homicide associated with additional domestic violence were recorded. There was a breach of Custody and Child Arrangement Orders and a

(Cont'd...)

Table 2. (Continued)

References	Region/ Country	Prevalence rate	Type	Consequences/Findings
ManKind Initiative Briefing 8 (June 8 – 21, 2020)	/	Visit frequency to the webpage of the initiative in the 1 st week of June was 115% higher than the level during the pre-coronavirus period.	/	lack of counseling for male victims. Groups representing female victims were convened, but no group spoke for the voices of male victims; debates and bill on domestic abuse were also discussed.
BBC News (September 24, 2020; https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-54237409)	England (UK)	Charity organizations dealing with men suffering from domestic violence who sought help during the lockdown period reported an increase of up to 60%. Approximately 22 emails and 92 phone calls were received by male victims per day as the lockdown continued from April to June. Contact with victims of abuse through email increased and other services increased by 96% from 372 emails in June 2019 to 728 in June 2020.	/	/
Gleeson, 2020	Australia	One reported case	Physical/emotional abuse	Victims' narrative: "I think most people think domestic violence doesn't happen to men, that men are the stronger sex and so it won't happen to them. But having experienced it first hand, I feel there's not a lot of support for men, there's not much help out there at all."
Mazza <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Worldwide	Lower-severity case reported	Physical abuse	This study indicated that IPV experienced by men was of "lower severity."
Brooks, 2020	UK	/	Male victims experienced emotional abuse such as monitoring of their spending by their spouse, food deprivation, and withholding of important personal gadgets such as computers and telephones.	There was a serious lack of awareness by the male victims on the severity of the IPV perpetrated by their partners.
Office of National Statistics (2020)	UK	About 16 male victims were killed between 2018 and 2019, while 80 female victims were killed in the same period.	Physical abuse	Mortality of male victims of abuse was under-reported.
Gama <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Portugal	Domestic violence was reported by both men (12.3%) and women (14.2%).	All forms of IPV Physical, sexual, emotional	Although women were more predisposed to any form of domestic violence against a partner than men, the observed differences were not statistically significant.
Sharma & Khokhar, 2021	India	More men reported having been abused (7.7%) than women (7.3%) during the lockdown period.	/	No significant difference was found between the domestic violence (DV) level of males and females.
Nwosu, 2021	Nigeria	In Lagos, Nigeria, the government reported 89 physical domestic violence	Physical violence	

(Cont'd...)

Table 2. (Continued)

References	Region/ Country	Prevalence rate	Type	Consequences/Findings
		cases against men by their wives between 2020 and the first quarter of 2021. In 2020, a total of 46 men reported being battered by their wives, while in the first quarter of 2021, about 43 men reported being abused by their wives.		
NOI Polls (2020)	Nigeria	This study revealed that 47% of Nigerians reported one form of domestic violence or the other against men in their locality during the peak of the COVID-19	All forms of domestic violence	

the first quarter of 2021. A study in Norway lends credence to the increasing prevalence of IPV in men during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period (Nesset *et al.*, 2021). Crime statistics from the German Federal Criminal Police Office in 2018 recorded that about 26,362 men experienced IPV (Kolbe & Büttner, 2020). Other studies elsewhere before the pandemic also corroborate this finding (Mitra *et al.*, 2016; Dienne & Gbeneol, 2009; Dass *et al.*, 2011).

Arguably, most cases of male experience of IPV during the lockdown period were under-reported (Gleeson, 2020). Notably, IPV cases targeted at men were more commonly reported in developed countries than in developing countries, such as Nigeria and other Sub-Saharan African countries. This may be attributed to the dominant patriarchal culture, the need to maintain a masculine image, and the culture of stigmatization and shame associated with men claiming themselves as victims of IPV cases. Another study elsewhere confirmed that men are less likely to report IPV cases and seek professional help due to shame, embarrassment, and discrimination (Tsui *et al.*, 2010). On this note, it is plausible to say that men's experience of IPV may have been under-reported in this study and this may be attributed to social and cultural contexts in which they occurred and exacerbated by the stringent lockdown restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the lockdown period, male victims were equally subjected to emotional and psychological abuses, such as spending monitoring, food deprivation, and the withholding of personal property (phone or computer). This situation could have resulted in serious emotional trauma and difficulty in accessing help. Consequently, the inability to access medical support and help may have adverse implications for their mental health and the economic well-being of families and the global economy.

Furthermore, some of the papers reviewed also showed that men experienced physical abuse and all other forms

of abuse, including economic or financial abuse, from their female partners. This result is in tandem with studies elsewhere (Evans *et al.*, 2020; Kolbe and Büttner, 2020; Kigaya, 2021) and other studies in Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and the United States before the pandemic (Stults *et al.*, 2016; Khalifeh *et al.*, 2015; Costa *et al.*, 2015; Umubyeyi *et al.*, 2014). The physical abuse could reflect the vulnerability of men in violent situations as the female partners may likely resort to using dangerous weapons for self-defense. The plausible explanation for financial or economic abuse could be job loss during the peak of the lockdown period, which apparently may have left some male victims completely dependent on their partners.

The papers reviewed in this study showed that there are severe consequences of abuse perpetrated against men by female partners. While some studies reported that women are more likely to suffer from emotional and mental disorders, some of the male victims suffered similar outcomes (Warburton & Raniolo, 2020; ManKind Initiative Briefing 1, March 2020; ManKind Initiative Briefing 4, May 4 – 10, 2020; Gleeson, 2020; Gama *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, 4.3% of men and 0.4% of women suffered internal injuries such as fractures and teeth injuries. This finding highlights the severe effects of IPV on male victims and the need to give equal attention to men who suffer spousal abuse. Generally, violations of custody and children arrangement orders, particularly in the United Kingdom, and the inability to get counseling services are prominent issues facing the male victims of IPV. These consequences have been confirmed by other studies (Ahmed *et al.*, 2021; Evans *et al.*, 2020). The lack of counseling support could be attributed to the inability of men to get out for help. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, male victims were trapped with their female abusers and due to social isolation, it becomes more difficult to find a safe space where these abused men can seek counseling. In the words of one of the male victims

in an Australian study “..... *But having experienced it first hand, I feel there's not a lot of support for men, there's not much help out there at all*” (Gleeson, 2020). There were also reported cases of homicide and homelessness. In a situation where the woman (partner) owns the house and feels threatened by the man's presence, the result could be a possible eviction. However, further research is needed to explore some of these findings in other contexts.

This study notably has some limitations. The IPV cases in this study were reported mainly by male victims from developed countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Norway, and Portugal; therefore, the findings may not be adequate for understanding men's experience of IPV during the lockdown period in other contexts. Besides, IPV cases among men may have been under-reported due to stigmatization and the feeling of shame. These limitations notwithstanding that the findings are still relevant in the public health domain.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review establishes that domestic abuse toward men is less frequent, but in terms of severity, types, and consequences, the abuse they are facing is similar to the domestic abuse suffered by women. Therefore, the discussion on domestic violence should be steered away from a gender bias. To address the issue of domestic violence holistically, there is a need to open up a discussion to promote zero tolerance of domestic abuse toward both men and women. The global health community must also address men's risks related to the pandemic and positively engage men in surmounting the challenges women face by recognizing gender as a key determinant. It is also important to identify men at risk, provide information about available domestic violence support services, and support at-risk men to access those services.

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Author contributions

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Data curation: All authors

Formal analysis: All authors

Methodology: All authors

Writing–original draft: All authors

Writing–review & editing: All authors

Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

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Availability of data

Data used in this paper were derived from secondary sources which are available to the public.

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