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## Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Intimate Partner Violence in a Group of Young Puerto Ricans

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## Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Intimate Partner Violence in a Group of Young Puerto Ricans

### Abstract

In this paper we aim to describe the beliefs and attitudes young people in Puerto Rico have toward intimate partner violence (IPV). Although Puerto Rico has a high rate of IPV, little empirical research has been conducted about the beliefs and attitudes people have regarding this issue. We conducted 20 in-depth qualitative interviews with young men and women. Data was analyzed using the qualitative content analysis approach. Participants expressed that men are more violent than women because of testosterone, machismo, and alcohol and other drug use. Both male and female participants stated that they believe they have the same rights to make decisions. Participants did not express directly stereotypical attitudes and beliefs that justify IPV. However, there remains a desire in some participants to have control over where their partner is and what he or she is doing. Preventive interventions are urgently needed to promote healthier relationships among young people.

### Keywords

Intimate Partner Violence, Machismo, Qualitative Content Analysis, Puerto Ricans, Young Adults

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## Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Intimate Partner Violence in a Group of Young Puerto Ricans

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*In this paper we aim to describe the beliefs and attitudes young people in Puerto Rico have toward intimate partner violence (IPV). Although Puerto Rico has a high rate of IPV, little empirical research has been conducted about the beliefs and attitudes people have regarding this issue. We conducted 20 in-depth qualitative interviews with young men and women. Data was analyzed using the qualitative content analysis approach. Participants expressed that men are more violent than women because of testosterone, machismo, and alcohol and other drug use. Both male and female participants stated that they believe they have the same rights to make decisions. Participants did not express directly stereotypical attitudes and beliefs that justify IPV. However, there remains a desire in some participants to have control over where their partner is and what he or she is doing. Preventive interventions are urgently needed to promote healthier relationships among young people. Keywords: Intimate Partner Violence, Machismo, Qualitative Content Analysis, Puerto Ricans, Young Adults*

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Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a serious public health concern. Worldwide, 10%-69% of women report having been physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). In Puerto Rico official statistics provided by the Puerto Rico Police reveal that incidents of IPV increased from 13,528 to 22,951 (69.66%) between 1990 and 2006 (Oficina de la Procuradora de las Mujeres, 2009). On average, in Puerto Rico 22 women are killed by their intimate partner every year (Oficina de la Procuradora de las Mujeres, 2013). In 2012, 83% of the victims were women and 72% of these women were between 20-39 years of age (Oficina de la Procuradora de las Mujeres, 2013). In that year the most common types of abuse was physical abuse (67%), followed by emotional abuse (14%). Women aged 16-24 are more vulnerable to partner violence than those in any other age group (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001), and 1 in 5 high school students in the US report having been physically and/or sexually abused by their partners (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). In Puerto Rico, 8% of female and 11% of male high school students reported in 2011 that they had been hit, slapped, or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). High prevalence rates of IPV have also been found among gay couples on the Island (Toro-Alfonso & Rodríguez-Madera, 2005). Physical and psychological abuse have been found to be more common in lesbian couples, while sexual abuse is more prevalent in gay male couples (Reyes, Rodríguez, & Malavé, 2005). If these data are alarming, it is worth mentioning that they do not accurately reflect the magnitude of the problem, as it is estimated that many people do not report episodes of IPV to the police. This is particularly true in Puerto Rico.

Tolerant beliefs and attitudes toward IPV have been identified as two of the most important risk factors for its occurrence (Ferrer Pérez, Bosch Fiol, Ramis Palmer, Torres Espinosa, & Navarro Guzmán, 2006). However, despite the magnitude of this problem the literature review shows that few studies have been conducted worldwide to identify the beliefs

and attitudes that people have toward IPV. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the findings from these studies have been used to design preventive interventions.

Many studies about the beliefs and attitudes about IPV have focused mostly on identifying the general patterns of differences by gender, ethnic group, or other specific groups or populations, but have failed to identify the specific beliefs and attitudes people endorse. For example, one study revealed that Jewish youth had lower endorsement levels toward dating violence than Thai and Arab youths (Pradubmook-Sherer & Sherer, 2011; Sherer, 2010). In this study women reported less endorsement of this kind of violence than men. Thai youth endorsement toward dating violence was found to be higher when compared with Jewish and Arab (Pradubmook-Sherer, 2011). Surprisingly, this study revealed that women endorsed dating violence more often than men. Another study conducted in Russia found that women have a higher perception of the severity of IPV than do men (Stikley, Kislitsyna, Tomofeeva, & Vaguero, 2008). There is no detailed information available in these studies about what specific beliefs and attitudes toward IPV people endorse. Another study conducted with college students in Balearic Islands revealed that boys and those with less information about IPV had a more tolerant attitude toward this behavior (Ferrer Pérez et al., 2006). There is no information available for this study of what specific beliefs characterize a tolerant attitude toward IPV.

Childhood victimization and endorsing traditional gender roles have been found to correlate with IPV among college students (Nabors & Jasinski, 2009). Tolerant attitudes toward IPV have also been found in groups of immigrants when compared with native-born in Spain (Gracia, Herrero, & Lila, 2008), and in male police officers in Taiwan (Chu & Sun, 2010). Another study conducted with Latino immigrants in the USA revealed that men and women endorsed some traditional attitudes toward domestic violence (Moracco, Hilton, Hodges, & Frasier, 2005). For example, both men and women reported a belief that women “provoke” their husbands, although men endorsed this belief more than women. Similar findings have been reported in studies conducted in Africa, where women seem to endorse more attitudes that justified violent episodes than men (Abeya, Afework, & Yalew, 2012; Speizer, 2010; Uthman, Lawoko, & Moradi, 2010).

A study conducted in New York City with an adult sample revealed that people perceive as IPV those acts that are directly related with physical violence (Carlson & Worden, 2005). However, only half of the sample perceived insults and stalking as acts of IPV, which suggests that these forms of violence are more tolerated. Another study that compared differences between violent and nonviolent men found no differences on explicit attitudinal measures (Eckhardt, Samper, Suhr, & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2012). No information was described as to what specific attitudes were measured.

Some studies have found that the lack of training and information about IPV among health personnel is a barrier for identifying possible victims (Mendez-Hernandez, Valdez-Santiago, Viniegra-Velazquez, Rivera-Rivera, & Salmeron-Castro, 2003; Rodríguez-Bolaños, Márquez-Serrano, & Kageyama-Escobar, 2005). Providing accurate and scientific information about what IPV is and how it can be prevented seems to be a fundamental component of any prevention intervention.

As previously mentioned, identifying the beliefs and attitudes people have toward IPV is a necessary step for designing and implementing preventive efforts. Despite the magnitude of the problem, we found no evidence in Puerto Rico of any published study and there seems to be a lack of research that illustrates, in a scientific manner, the specific beliefs and attitudes that young people have about IPV. This article provides important qualitative data about the beliefs and attitudes a group of young people have about IPV. It is imperative to identify such attitudes as a necessary step to develop preventive strategies.

## Method

### Design

We conducted a qualitative exploratory study aimed at exploring young people's attitudes towards IPV. We chose this design because of the lack of research on this topic in Puerto Rico.

### Participants

Study participants were 10 men and 10 women from 21 to 29 years of age, all of whom were in heterosexual relationships. As can be seen in Table 1, the mean age for men was 25.2 and for women 24.5. Just over half (55%,  $n = 11$ ) lived consensually with another person followed by those singles (35%,  $n = 7$ ). Most of the participants had a family monthly income of \$3,000 or less. Regarding their educational level, five had completed high school, three had graduated from a technical college, eight held a bachelor degree, and two had a master degree. Only eight participants were employed, and most of them lived in an urban area. Finally, seven identified as Catholic, seven as not being affiliated with any religion, and three as Protestants.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Characteristic	Frequencies		
	Male	Female	Total
Mean age	25.2	24.5	---
Marital status			
Legally married	0	1	1
Living together, not legally married	5	6	11
Single	5	2	7
Separated	0	1	1
Monthly family income			
Less than \$500	0	1	1
\$501 to \$1,000	0	2	2
\$1,001 to \$2,000	4	2	6
\$2,001 to \$3,000	1	4	5
\$ 3,001 to \$ 4,000	1	1	2
\$ 5,001 or more	3	0	1
Highest educational degree completed			
12 <sup>th</sup> grade (Senior year)	3	2	5
Technical grade	0	3	3
Bachelor	3	5	8
Master	2	0	2
Other	2	0	2
Employed	6	2	8
Area of residence			
Urban	9	10	19
Rural	1	0	1
Religious affiliation			
Catholic	3	4	7
Protestant	1	2	3
Mita	0	1	1
None	5	2	7
Other	1	1	2

## Instrument

We used a demographic questionnaire to describe the participants and a semi-structured interview guide. The demographic questionnaire included questions such as age, sex, marital status, income, education, labor status, and religious affiliation. The semi-structured interview guide contained 24 questions related to the attitudes and factors about IPV, and about the actions that need to be taken by the people and government to address this issue.

## Procedure

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras (Approval #1011-079). Once approved, we began the recruitment of participants. We recruited the participants via Facebook and *Clasificados Online*. The *Clasificados Online* is a website that post ads for jobs, sales, rental, among others, in Puerto Rico. Interviews were conducted between October and December of 2011. The interviews took place at the Institute for Psychological Research at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. Each participant received an incentive of \$40.00 for their participation.

A total of 105 potential participants contacted the study for information, 70 of whom were screened. We stopped the screening process when we reached the desired sample size. The screening consisted of six close-ended questions to ensure that participants met inclusion criteria. Then we obtained contact information and scheduled interview appointments. Before each interview, the interviewer discussed the consent form with the participant. This document contained a description of the study, the risks and benefits of the study, detailed information about participation, and information about the protection of confidentiality. A copy of the consent form was given to the participant. On average the interviews lasted two hours. The interviewer was of the same sex of the participant. After finishing the interview the demographic questionnaire was administered. We decided to do the questionnaire at the end of the interview to prevent this from affecting the interview. To administer the questionnaire we used Questionnaire Development System software V 2.6. This program is easy to use, allows creating skip questions that does not apply, provide flexibility in the order questions can be answered, and the interface is suitable for participants with low computer skills.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim before the analysis. To conduct this process we used the transcription protocol proposed by McLellan, McQueen, & Neidig (2003). This protocol considers the importance of preserving the nature and morphological structure of the transcriptions. To systematize the transcription process we created a list of transcriptions codes to be used in all interviews.

## Analysis

To analyze the data we used the qualitative content analysis approach. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), qualitative content analysis is "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). This type of analysis can include both inductive or conventional content analysis and deductive or directed content analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In an inductive analysis, categories emerge from the data, while in deductive analysis they emerge from existing theories. We used a combination of both types of analysis. The initial main categories emerged from the questions guide and then sub-categories emerged from the data. Interviews were analyzed using The Ethnograph v6.0.1.0 software for qualitative analysis (Qualis Research, 2009).

To assess the reliability of the analysis we used the double coding approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Burla et al., 2008). According to Burla et al. (2008), “In double coding, all transcripts are coded by two coders, and consensus is reached by comparing and discussing the codings” (p. 116). Coders were able to create new categories to document what they considered to be relevant themes. Reliability was measured in three different moments, with interviews number one, seven, and ten with men and women. Reliability was calculated using the percentage agreement between coders. It was established by dividing the number of agreements by the numbers of possible coding (Boyatzis, 1998). We calculated the reliability before and after the discussion between coders. In Table 2 we present the percent of agreement for the first, seventh and tenth interviews with men and women before and after the discussion. In all cases the percentage of agreement increases significantly in a comparison of the before and after scores. On average, the percentage of agreement was 51% before the discussion, and climbed to 97% after the discussion. A reliability criterion of 70% has been proposed for exploratory studies (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Campenella Bracken, 2002).

Table 2. Percentages of Agreement between Coders

Interview	Pre-Discussion	Post-Discussion
Interview number one of men and women	43	99
Interview number 7 of men and women	50	99
Interview number 10 of men and women	61	94
Average	51	97

## Results

Next we will explain the categories that emerged in this study according to the patterns found in the participants’ responses. We explored attitudes indirectly by creating questions that required participants to assume a position on the issue presented. The following categories emerged: (a) perception of verbal violence; (b) reasons why the majority of violent incidents are caused by men; (c) attitudes about prohibition of activities by the partner; (d) perception that the couple’s important decisions are primarily the man’s realm; (e) perceptions about the lack of control in men who commit violence; (f) perception of equal rights; (g) role of women; (h) traditional roles of men; and (i) traditional roles of women. Some categories were compared by gender.

### Perception of Verbal Violence

Most of the participants stated that they don’t have the need to yell at their partner. In Table 3 we show the frequencies of the categories in which participants provided different reasons for having yelled at a partner. In general, participants say that people yell at their partners mostly when they are angry and trying to communicate and impose an opinion. Frustration, lack of patience, and lack of education are some of the factors that lead people to yell at their partner. Also, the fast-paced lifestyle and some aspects of Puerto Rican culture can lead people to raise their voices frequently, as we can see in the following quotes.

I am completely against it. Um, it’s something that does happen a lot... Have I done it? I’m not going to deny it, you know, I have done it and it’s been in response to what they’re doing to me. Um, but, eh, honestly, when you raise

your voice you're really just trying to intimidate the other person's point of view. You're blocking out their opinion, you want to get their attention and be like, "it's like I say..." (Female)

I think it's true, Puerto Ricans, people think we're big screamers and I think we are. I've heard ... I've seen lots of people who yell [at their partner], just to, like, to command respect, to assert themselves as the leader, to be in charge, or above the other person. And I think that lots of people do it not because they want the other person to learn, but more, in a bad way, to be heard, which really isn't worth it because people aren't going to listen. (Male)

Several/Some participants also claimed that screaming or raising one's voice can trigger an argument that leads to an episode of violence.

You don't have to yell, because the person may feel offended and react in the same way, yell back at you, which start an argument and can cause something much bigger. (Male)

It, like, sets it off more. If the other person is yelling at you and you start yelling too... then you're both just arguing, you're both doing the same thing and, well, this tends to lead to violence ... verbal or physical. Because the person is probably already in attack mode, so you know they're going to attack you, right? So, just don't yell at them, just stay calm [laughs]. (Female)

Table 3. Perception of Verbal Violence

Category	Frequencies		Total
	Male	Female	
No need to yell	10	15	25
Reason why verbal violence occurs	10	7	17
Verbal violence as a trigger	3	6	9
Yelling adds nothing to communication	-	1	1
Sometimes you need to yell	-	3	3
Sometimes it is acceptable to yell	1	-	1

### Reasons Why the Majority of Violent Incidents are Caused by Men

We asked why most incidents of violence are caused by men. Participants expressed that men are more violent for two main reasons: (a) biological factors; and (b) *machismo*. In terms of biological factors they mentioned that, due to testosterone, men are physically stronger, which may explain why they are more violent than women. As can be seen in Table 4, we coded 12 comments made by men and five made by women. Seven men and two women mentioned physical factors that foster violence.

Testosterone, I would say [laughs]. I think testosterone is, um, this is just in the genetics of men. I don't know if I'm wrong, but that's what makes us... more impulsive when it comes to this stuff, and, I mean, obviously men are stronger too...so they can cause harm ...or get into foul play, I don't know, like a squeeze, a push or something, and, well, that's an act of violence. I think that's why ... that's why men are more ... in this way, more violent than women. (Male)



Well... that's also like just how men are, because women are more, like, their biological characteristic is that they are more, like, more sensitive, more passive, more peaceful, more understanding. Um, men, like ... and [women] are also more mature... men are like ... just the opposite [laughs], that is, they are immature and they don't know how to deal in a situation, how to, I don't know, how to control the situation, whatever it is, and they solve everything with violence. They don't have that delicacy and maturity that women have to sit down and talk. They think that they're going to solve everything... screaming, being violent, scaring women into submission so that he has total control over them and they do everything he says. They think that this is what will solve the problem. (Female)

Table 4. Reasons Why Most Violent Incidents are Caused by Men

Category	Frequencies		Total
	Male	Female	
Biological factors	12	5	17
Men are less tolerant	1	5	6
Lack of reporting by men	-	1	1

Notably, five women mentioned that because men are more explosive and less patient, they tend to resort to violence to solve their problems. Only one male participant addressed this sub-category. The following quote illustrates how the impatience in men is sometimes seen as a natural phenomenon. "I think it's because men can't stand as much as women." (Female)

[Laughs] Ay, Women are patient, I think. And ... and men, they, like ... explode. That's, well ... I'm also stigmatizing because that's not true, it's not necessarily true. But if it is true that men are more abusive, well I can't see any other reason than that, that they have less patience. (Female)

### Attitudes about Prohibition of Activities by the Partner

Table 5 shows four sub-categories related to the attitudes about prohibition of activities by the partner. Overall, most participants expressed that it is wrong to prohibit their partner from doing something.

Exactly, yes I see it the same way. Um, I see it equally - just as men have no right to prohibit women from doing anything she wants to do, well, women can't prohibit men from doing what he wants either. Um, I see it more like that because from my point of view men and women are in an equal position, you know, so to me a healthy relationship is when they are in the same place and both have to have the same rights, and... if he wants to go out and she doesn't let him... it's the same outcome. You know, then he is going to get upset with her and if he goes out when she didn't want to, then she gets upset with him, I mean, she doesn't have that right either. You have the right to say if something makes you uncomfortable, but not to forbid [your partner from] doing something. (Male)

Because, I mean, a relationship is not like a prison, I mean, it's not like you are mine and only mine. You know, like you cannot go out with anyone else. I

mean, in this society there are different types of relationships that must be maintained, that is, there are romantic relationships, but then there are also friend relationships, family relationships, it's like ... being in a relationship does not mean that I have the right to forbid you to do things. I mean, you have your independence and your personal life and you do what you want. It's just that they're both committed to be together, you know, but freely, that is, they can't prohibit each other from doing things. Because you have your freedom, and you deserve your freedom, and you work for your freedom. (Female)

Table 5. Attitudes about the Prohibition of Activities by the Partner

Category	Frequencies		Total
	Male	Female	
It is wrong to prohibit	20	20	40
Alternative actions to prohibit	12	13	25
Obvious circumstances that are prohibited	6	7	13
Free time is appreciated	6	7	13

However, in their narratives, some participants mentioned some strategies for not prohibiting their partners from doing certain things, but in the sub-text is a subtle prohibition.

No, no, not really, no, I mean, my girlfriend, for example I... Yeah go out, go out, go out; I may say you can go out, but you can at least tell me where you're going, or who you are going with. But now, I do not like it when you go out without telling me anything, because then a person, a person ... at least I, start to worry, you know, and I call and she doesn't answer, well you worry because you don't know where she is, she doesn't answer the phone, and then you worry, that's where the worry comes in. But if I at least know "Ah she's, for example, at Chili's with this friend and that friend and ... and I know she'll come back, whatever...at such and such a time, for example at 1:00 am, then I know that everything's ok. But if it's 3:00 am and I don't know where she is and I don't know that she's some place and I don't know who she's with, well then you worry. (Male)

Moreover, the participants expressed that there are some circumstances in which it is acceptable to prohibit their partner from doing something. Such circumstances would be if the partner wants to do something illegal or potentially harmful or risky to the couple or to one of the partners. Some participants expressed: "So it's ok to prohibit things that could put the relationship or one of the partners in danger." (Male)

I have no problem with my partner going out with her friends, but there are certain types of behavior that I don't agree with, according to my principles. I mean, I am not into my partner coming home at 4:00 in the morning because was partying with her friends, out drinking somewhere because I think that ... that other things can happen, you know, things that aren't healthy for the relationship itself. I don't see it this way just for me, but for the relationship. (Male)

I mean, well, it depends on what the activities are. But I think that a husband doesn't have to prohibit her from... see, provided they are good activities. He

shouldn't forbid his wife from doing the activities she wants to do. But I say that depends on what kind of activities they are. (Female)

### Perception that the Couple's Important Decisions Are Primarily the Man's Realm

As Table 6 illustrates, comments made by men and women agreed that decision-making is divided equally between both partners. It is a process in which both must agree and participate.

... It's like... a romantic relationship is something that involves two people, you understand, it's not like it's just me, thinking for two people, but rather it's two people thinking about both people, doing ... again, what's the point if I put so much of me into it, if the other person doesn't contribute anything. I think it's wrong for the man to be the one who makes all the decisions, or the most important ones. I think it should be fifty-fifty. (Male)

Because this is a couple, it's a collaboration; decisions are made together, because if you make the decision, for example if the husband or the boyfriend makes the decision, um, and something unexpected happens, then the woman says, "I told you not to do that. I told you it was like this." And then the fighting starts, so you have to work together ... and for that, well, you need to have good communication. (Female)

Table 6. Perception that the Couple's Important Decisions are the Man's Realm

Category	Frequencies		Total
	Male	Female	
The decisions concern each of them	11	14	25
New roles of women	4	2	6
Factors determining who should make the decision	2	3	5
Men should not make decisions in the relationship	2	2	4
Education	3	-	3
Immaturity to make decisions	-	3	3
Talk about important decisions before starting a formal relationship	-	2	2
The family is part of the decisions	-	1	1

In addition, participants mentioned that they are assuming new roles that were not acceptable within the traditional, patriarchal ideology. Therefore, nowadays many men make their decisions with their partners. Participants did, however, mention that there are still decisions that one member of the couple makes because he or she has the better knowledge or skills to do so.

### Perceptions about the Lack of Control in Men Who Commit Violence

Participants mentioned several factors about why men can "lose control." In this category, men had more coding than women. Overall, men mentioned testosterone, drugs and alcohol use as possible causes of violent behavior of men.

Well, the thing is, around here there are a lot of factors that I have seen, and it's the use of ... drugs. (Male)

I have always believed that, well, testosterone may be one of those indications that someone is ...um, like that, but being civilized, well, um I can't say that's the justification for... (Male)

Furthermore, some women believe that the loss of control is because men have less patience, as we can see in the following quote.

Like I said earlier, men are like ... I think they act without thinking. That's why they explode, because, it's like they can't deal with pressure. I don't know. They are volatile. They should learn a little more from women in that regard. We can endure more. (Female)

Finally, participants generally believe that it is wrong to lose control, but most women think that this is only an excuse for men.

That may be true, but they shouldn't lose control, that's the problem. I mean it's possible to avoid losing control ... the point is that it's their bad when they do lose control, cause I think you can avoid doing that. (Female)

It's an excuse, just an excuse, and if they really have a problem, because there are people who can't deal with their anger... but to me it's an excuse, because I deal with it. They should go get help. (Female)

### **Perception of Equal Rights**

As can be seen in Table 7, participants agreed that men and women should have the same rights. Overall, they talked about equal rights in the family and in society, and they also mentioned legal rights.

You have to understand what the rights are, firstly people's civil rights and secondly, the rights you have within the relationship. Whatever laws you have established within the relationship, um, and then you have to defend both your own rights and those of your partner. (Female)

At least in terms of finances, like in marriage lots of times the couple's belongings are split 50/50%. And then it's the same thing with shared custody and other stuff. Yeah, financially, even to get a mortgage you have to prove that you have your partner's support. So that's why I think that, well, they should have equal rights. (Male)

Yeah, rights, yeah. Yes, because we are equal; above all we are human. Well, you know, it's not like we are so different, men and women, though often we're taught otherwise, but I think we should encourage more equal rights. And ... now we are seeing it, lots more women than men are graduating with bachelor degrees, and it's like they want to get ahead because they know they can surpass us and there is this fear that women will dominate us or be better than us professionally. But we shouldn't have this fear, we really have to accept it, you know that maybe they are better than us in some things, but we should also offer them our help and let them help us. We should try to be receptive, not so competitive. (Male)

Table 7. Perception of Equal Rights

Category	Frequencies		Total
	Male	Female	
Men and women should have equal rights	11	11	22
Rights within society	4	2	6
Rights within the relationship	-	6	6
The rights granted by Law 54	1	1	2
Legal Rights	-	1	1

Another opinion that was expressed by both men and women was that Domestic Violence Law #54, which currently protects mostly women, should also provide some protections for men.

Well, civil rights I guess are all equal, but the only thing that comes up for me is the issue of Law 54, which gives women the right to accuse a man of assault. I haven't heard of any law that helps men in the case of assaults by women. That puts it in men's minds that women have an advantage, not by physical assault but by legal measures. What I would say is that if there is a law for women there has to be a law for men too, one that helps us both. (Male)

I don't know. Law 54, as I understand it, it does really favor women and there are also lots of men who are victims of violence. There is a lot of ... discrimination against men and there are many men who don't speak up or submit complaints, but women are also very aggressive. There are lots of women who are aggressive. Now, it's more common for men to kill women, and that is one thing. Here men will kill a woman just for fun. There are more women killed than there are dead dogs in the street, and that's a whole different story. (Female)

### Role of Women

Overall, participants concurred that women should not obey men. They agreed that this is an outdated notion.

No, that's not true. Maybe in another time, because that was once the norm, but in this society that we live in now, these days, that has changed and women now have a lot more independence and also the ability to think and make their own decisions, and, well, I don't think that what women do is subordinate to what men think, I think women have the ability to be independent and decide what they want to do and make her own decisions. (Male)

No, I don't think so. A lot of times in our current reality in Puerto Rico, ahhh, men often do want women to obey them, but not in my case, in my case I, we both have to obey each other or reach a middle ground, without disrespecting each other, without having to resort to any type of violence. (Male)

...The man is not your dad, I mean; he should be on the same level as you. He should have no power over you. In other words, you are you and you have control over yourself. Because you have your freedom and you do not have pay attention to anyone and nobody can boss you around. You know, when you

were a little girl, when you were growing up, someone had to teach you how to do things...or you were dependent on someone, you know, it was like you did have to do what your parents said so they wouldn't kick you out of the house, right? But, like, with a partner, your partner has no authority over you, I mean, they are on the same level as you. And no one should have authority over another, you know, there has to be a balance between the two people in the relationship. (Female)

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that several women mentioned that it is not right to obey everything your partner says, and that both partners should be equally obedient.

Women will submit. How does it go? I don't know the Bible well, but I was raised very Christian as a little girl. Um...but it says something like women will be submissive and all that stuff. And, um, men who like to use those things to their advantage, well in some sense they see it that way. But I think God wrote that many years ago [laughs] and now He thinks differently, I don't know [laughs]. But, um, women ... women have every right to obey and be obeyed, but not in the way of like you're bossing me around, but more like we are discussing and saying this should be like this or that because that's what makes us both feel good. (Female)

I think we do have to obey certain things. Um, I mean...to me the word "obey" encompasses lots of different things, but ... ok, obey, for example...let's see, how can I explain this. You know, like if, for example, if he requests that his girlfriend, right, if the man asks her to keep the house neat, clean, tidy, I think that yeah, the woman should obey that part because that is something that has to be done. You see mostly household things. (Female)

### **Traditional Male Roles**

This category refers to the popular notion that men must follow certain rules. Men and women mentioned conceptions we as a society have about men. Men reported discourses presenting them as the one who "earns money and makes decisions," "maintains the house," "work" and "bring the food to home." On the other hand, women described men as having a "strong character" and being "jealous." They also made the comment that men only communicate through sex.

### **Traditional Female Roles**

This category refers to the popular notion that women must follow certain rules. Unlike the previous category, when it came to talking about such notions, most of the comments came from women. Only three men made comments. These men mentioned that women are relegated to household chores such as cleaning and caring for the children, and that they are more delicate. The female participants mentioned the same roles, but more frequently than men. It seems that when it comes to men, both men and women have a lot to say, but when it comes to women, men tend to remain quiet.

## Discussion

This research is an effort to provide scientifically valid data on the knowledge we have in Puerto Rico about IPV. Several interesting issues emerged from our interviews. First, we confirmed that, in general, attitudes toward both verbal and physical IPV are negative in this sample. We were expecting that men would have a more tolerant attitude toward this behavior, but that was not confirmed by our data. For example, all participants stated that they believe it is not right to yell at a partner because this may produce, as consequence, an episode of violence. Also unanimous was the belief that both partners have the same rights to make decisions that affect the couple. It came clear that this generation of young people believe that important decisions must be made collaboratively in a romantic relationship.

Second, we were surprised by the viewpoint many participants offered that it is because of testosterone (a male hormone) and machismo that men are more violent than women, and these two factors explain why they “lose control.” According to some participants, there seems to be a direct association between testosterone and violent behavior in men. If we were surprised to hear men expressing this opinion, we were more surprised to hear that some women also endorsed that belief. Explaining, and in some cases, justifying that IPV is a result of testosterone implies that this behavior is impossible to prevent because every man is predisposed to be violent just by his very biological makeup. Also, machismo is presented as an almost static cultural expression. Most study participants verbally stated a rejection of the cultural phenomenon of *machismo*, however, we can see in their narratives that some of them defend a patriarchal ideology. While recognizing that much of violent behavior by men is due to the influence of the patriarchal ideology in relationships (Lucia, 2007), we don't perceive in the participants a level of consciousness that would allow them to locate this ideology as socially constructed and transformable. As Lorber (1994) argues: "Talking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water" (p. 13). Gender roles are assumed to be part of a patriarchal ideology and people do not realize how strongly this ideology still influences their worldview. That is, there seems to be a notion that sexism is a static and natural part of our culture. The danger inherent in this kind of view is that it does not provide an opportunity for change.

Participants also mentioned that women are more patient and men are more volatile, having more tendencies to lose control and become violent. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that both genders have a perception of women as passive and men as aggressive (Cantera & Gamero, 2007). Such beliefs imply, as does the patriarchal ideology, that men have an inherent genetic potential to be violent. These beliefs are worrisome in that they justify and naturalize a behavior that is actually socially constructed. By acknowledging that this belief is socially constructed, we emphasize that when a man commits a violent act against a woman he does it, in part, based on the belief that she is inferior to him, intellectually, emotionally, and physically. That belief has been socially and culturally constructed throughout history in what has become known as “the ideologies of patriarchy” (Crittenden & Wright, 2013).

According to Montero, García-Cerlay and Nieto Navarro (2002) patriarchy is a “hierarchical social structure based on a set of ideas, prejudices, symbols, customs and even laws regarding women, by which the male gender dominates and oppresses the female (p. 3, Trans.). Although it is true that there are biological differences between men and women, it is not true that men carry have a genetic predisposition towards violence. These socially constructed ideas, based on a patriarchal society, have the potential to criminalize men and to see women only as victims. This is a big concern because it limits a more comprehensive knowledge about IPV and its social consequences on the perception of gender discourses. We found that gender differences are legitimized by cultural discourses and by many ideologies

that have prevailed throughout the centuries of human civilization, even if participants attributed it to physiological or biological differences. “Gender, in other words, can be understood as the social organization of sexual difference. Although biological distinctions create female and male humans, society interprets these differences and gives us “feminine” and “masculine” people” (Shaw & Lee, 2004, p. 113).

Another issue that is highlighted by this study is the prohibition on the part of men of the activities carried out by women and vice versa. This prohibition may be subtle from both genders, and is reinforced by the perception that one’s partner, especially the woman, is one’s property. It is interesting to note that such prohibition is not looked upon favorably, but telling the partner of any dissatisfaction is a well-camouflaged type of prohibitive action. Nonetheless, there were several comments by participants that it’s a good idea for the members of a couple to spend time apart.

The findings of this study have important implications for the design of preventive interventions. They reveal that any prevention effort must take into consideration the existence of such beliefs and design strategies to modify them. Moreno Marimon, Sastre, and Hernández (2003) suggest that educational programs must include strategies for changing the beliefs that perpetuate IPV. Prevention efforts should incorporate a gender perspective to facilitate a discussion on gender roles and to explore how they have been assigned by society through the socialization process (Kugel et al., 2009). We need to teach that gender roles are not naturally given biological characteristics, but behavior patterns that are socially assigned by the institutions with which humans interact throughout their development, such as family, school, church, media, to name a few. In addition, it’s important to review the existing laws to identify gaps for the protection of both men and women.

These findings should be interpreted within the context of one main limitation of this study. The main limitation has to do with the use of the qualitative interview technique. We believe that some of the answers of the participants could have been influenced in one of the following three ways: By perceived social desirability; by the tendency of the interviewee to give the answer that he/she thinks the interviewer expects; or by lack of trust. For example, when faced with questions related to the prohibition of activities, the decision-making process, the equality of rights for either partners, or the manifestation of traditional gender roles, a participant’s lack of trust in an unknown interviewer may keep him or her from honestly revealing sensitive information (Myers & Newman, 2007). Also, we must consider the nature of face-to-face interviews, in which the interviewer’s voice, intonation, or body language may influence the interviewee’s answers (Opdenakker, 2006). Aware of this limitation, we decided that the interviews should be conducted by young adult peers. They were intensively trained on how to manage their non-verbal communication and to not express their opinions during the interview process.

Future studies should consider an in-depth exploration of how cultural values shape the norms or ideologies of how men and women should behave. We also think it is necessary to study relationship dynamics, specifically looking at what is deemed acceptable and what is not, and how such decisions are made.

Our analysis of the limitations of this study includes recognition that the problem of IPV is complex and multidimensional. This study has revealed the need to teach young people the skills and strategies they need to have intimate relationships that are completely free of violence, as well as to propose new ways of approaching IPV for improved prevention and intervention programs. Only then can we aspire to a more egalitarian society where men and women can live together with harmony and mutual respect.



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