

Article

Do Education and Employment Protect Against Intimate Partner Violence? Insights from the South African Demographic and Health Survey

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Abstract

Background: Education and employment are widely promoted as pathways to reducing intimate partner violence (IPV) through enhanced economic independence and bargaining power. However, evidence from settings characterised by entrenched gender inequalities suggests that these structural factors may not uniformly translate into protection. This study examines whether education and employment are associated with women's experiences of IPV in South Africa. **Methods:** This study utilised nationally representative data from the South Africa Demographic and Health Survey (N = 2354). Education and employment were used as structural proxies for women's socioeconomic positioning. Survey-adjusted logistic regression models were employed to estimate associations between these factors and lifetime IPV, controlling for key sociodemographic characteristics. Given the cross-sectional design and the use of lifetime IPV alongside contemporaneous measures of education and employment, findings are interpreted as associative rather than causal. **Results:** Education and employment were not significantly associated with women's likelihood of experiencing IPV. Women with these characteristics were not less likely to report emotional, physical, or sexual violence compared to those without them. IPV prevalence was higher among women aged 25–34, those with secondary education, and those in lower wealth households. Marital status emerged as a strong correlate, with separated and divorced women facing substantially higher odds of IPV. **Discussion:** The absence of a significant association suggests that education and employment alone may be insufficient to reduce IPV risk in contexts where gender norms and relational power imbalances remain entrenched. These findings may also reflect the limitations of using structural indicators as proxies for empowerment, as such measures do not capture decision-making power, control over resources, or intra-household dynamics. **Conclusions:** Interventions to reduce IPV should extend beyond improving women's access to education and employment to address relational, normative, and structural drivers of violence. Multidimensional approaches that incorporate gender-transformative strategies and strengthen women's substantive agency are likely to be more effective.



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1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) remains a pervasive global public health and human rights concern, affecting approximately one in three women worldwide over their lifetime [1]. IPV includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse perpetrated by a current or

former partner and has profound consequences for women's physical health, psychological well-being, social participation, and economic security. In sub-Saharan Africa, prevalence levels remain among the highest globally, with countries such as South Africa continuing to report persistently high rates of partner violence despite the existence of gender-progressive legal and policy frameworks [2]. South Africa, in particular, reports an IPV prevalence of 55%, far exceeding rates in high-income countries [1].

Alongside efforts to address IPV, education and employment have been widely promoted as key pathways through which women may achieve greater economic independence and reduce vulnerability to violence. These factors are often situated within broader frameworks of women's empowerment, which posit that access to resources can enhance women's bargaining power and improve their ability to resist or exit abusive relationships [3]. Conceptually, empowerment is understood as a multidimensional process encompassing access to resources, agency, decision-making power, and the capacity to challenge structural inequalities [4]. However, capturing this multidimensional construct empirically remains challenging, particularly in large-scale survey research.

As a result, empirical studies frequently rely on observable socioeconomic indicators—such as education, income, and employment status—as proxies for empowerment [5]. This study adopts a similar approach but does so with explicit conceptual caution. Rather than measuring empowerment in its full multidimensional sense, the analysis focuses on education and employment as structural proxies of women's socioeconomic positioning. These indicators reflect access to formal resources and participation in the labour market, but they do not capture relational dimensions of empowerment, such as intra-household decision-making authority, control over income, or freedom from coercion. Their use is therefore data-constrained, reflecting the variables consistently available in nationally representative survey datasets. Importantly, this study does not treat education and employment as comprehensive measures of empowerment, but rather as indicators of a specific structural dimension that may—or may not—translate into meaningful shifts in relational power.

From a theoretical perspective, access to education and employment is expected to enhance women's bargaining position within intimate relationships and reduce their vulnerability to IPV. However, a growing body of evidence suggests that this relationship is neither linear nor uniform. In some contexts, education and employment are associated with reduced IPV risk, while in others they have no measurable effect or may even increase risk, particularly where shifts in women's status challenge entrenched gender norms and provoke resistance or backlash [6,7]. These contrasting findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between access to resources and the ability to exercise power within relationships, as well as the broader normative contexts in which these dynamics unfold.

South Africa provides a critical setting for examining these complexities. Despite substantial gains in women's educational attainment and labour force participation, IPV remains highly prevalent [8–10]. Women's tertiary education attainment has increased and now surpasses that of men, while female participation in the workforce and representation in leadership positions have steadily improved. Women hold significant proportions of middle and senior management roles and parliamentary seats. Yet, these advances coexist with persistently high levels of IPV, with approximately one in three women reporting lifetime experiences of partner violence [11–13]. This apparent disconnect raises important questions about whether improvements in women's structural socioeconomic position translate into reduced exposure to violence within intimate relationships.

This study examines whether education and employment are associated with women's experiences of IPV in South Africa. Using nationally representative survey data, the analysis assesses whether these structural indicators are linked to reduced likelihood of experiencing

emotional, physical, or sexual violence. In doing so, the study tests a specific dimension of empowerment rather than empowerment as a broad construct. It also considers the possibility of a null association, recognising that access to education and employment may not produce measurable protective effects in contexts where relational power dynamics and gender norms remain deeply entrenched.

Empirical evidence on the relationship between education, employment, and IPV is mixed. Some studies find that increased access to education and economic opportunities reduces IPV by enhancing women's autonomy and exit options [4,5,14–16]. In contrast, other studies suggest that these changes may increase the risk of violence, particularly in settings where male partners perceive women's advancement as a threat to established authority. For example, women's entry into the workforce has been associated with increased IPV when male partners experience unemployment or lower relative status. Similarly, evidence from South Africa indicates that gender-transformative interventions can produce mixed outcomes, reducing some forms of violence while simultaneously generating relational tensions [4,5,14–16]. These findings underscore that the effects of education and employment do not operate in isolation but are shaped by broader social, cultural, and relational contexts.

Despite increasing recognition of these complexities, relatively few studies have examined the relationship between education, employment, and IPV using nationally representative data in South Africa. Existing research often relies on small-scale interventions or qualitative approaches, limiting generalisability. Moreover, insufficient attention has been paid to how these structural factors interact with other determinants—such as wealth, marital status, and place of residence—to shape women's vulnerability to violence. This study addresses these gaps by analysing nationally representative data to explore the association between education, employment, and IPV across diverse sociodemographic groups.

By focusing on education and employment as measurable but limited indicators, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the role of structural factors in shaping IPV risk. It highlights the need to critically assess what is captured—and what remains unobserved—when empowerment is operationalised using proxy measures and underscores the importance of situating such indicators within broader relational and normative contexts. The remainder of this paper reviews theoretical literature drawing on Resource Theory and Backlash Theory to frame the study's conceptual approach. This is followed by a description of the data, sample, and analytical methods employed. The results section presents the bivariate and multivariate findings. The discussion contextualises these findings within the broader literature, reflecting on the theoretical and methodological implications of the findings. The paper concludes with policy recommendations, study limitations, and directions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the relationship between education, employment, and intimate partner violence (IPV) requires theoretical approaches that explain how access to socioeconomic resources may shape power dynamics within intimate relationships. Although these factors are often framed within broader notions of women's empowerment, this study focuses specifically on education and employment as structural proxies of empowerment, rather than as comprehensive measures of the construct. The analysis is guided by Resource Theory and Backlash Theory, which offer contrasting predictions about how access to such resources may influence women's vulnerability to IPV.

Resource theory posits that access to socioeconomic resources—such as education, employment, and income—enhances an individual's power within intimate relationships [17]. In the context of IPV, women's access to education and employment is expected to increase

bargaining capacity, economic independence, and exit options, thereby reducing their tolerance of or exposure to abuse [18]. From this perspective, these structural resources function as protective factors because they strengthen women's material position within the household and society. However, resource theory assumes that access to resources translates into effective relational authority. In practice, this translation may be contingent on contextual factors. Insights from bargaining perspectives [19] suggest that while resources may strengthen a woman's "threat point," the extent to which this potential power can be exercised depends on institutional support, legal protections, and prevailing social norms. Consequently, access to education and employment may increase potential bargaining power without necessarily ensuring protection from IPV.

In contrast, backlash theory argues that improvements in women's socioeconomic position may provoke adverse reactions when they challenge established gender hierarchies [20–22]. When women gain education or enter the workforce, male partners may perceive a threat to their authority or masculinity, particularly in settings characterised by rigid patriarchal norms or economic insecurity. In such contexts, violence may function as a mechanism to reassert control and dominance. This response is especially likely when gains in education or employment are not matched by similar improvements in male partners' status, creating asymmetries that intensify perceived threats [14]. Backlash theory therefore predicts that access to these resources may increase, rather than decrease, IPV risk under certain conditions.

While resource theory anticipates a protective effect and backlash theory anticipates potential risk, both perspectives underscore that the relationship between education, employment, and IPV is mediated by relational and normative contexts. Importantly, when education and employment are used as structural proxies, they capture access to resources but not the extent to which those resources translate into decision-making authority or control within relationships. As a result, neither the protective mechanisms proposed by resource theory nor the risk mechanisms suggested by backlash theory may fully materialise.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest three possible empirical outcomes: education and employment are associated with reduced IPV (resource-based protection), increased IPV (backlash effects), or no statistically significant association if structural resources do not translate into meaningful shifts in relational power. The present study examines these competing expectations using education and employment as measurable, but limited, indicators of women's socioeconomic positioning among South African women.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design and Data Source

This study is situated within a quantitative, positivist research paradigm, which assumes that social phenomena, including IPV, can be measured, quantified, and analysed to identify patterns and associations across populations. A cross-sectional analytical design was employed through secondary analysis of existing survey data, an approach well-suited to examining associations between socioeconomic indicators and health outcomes at a population level. This study utilised secondary data from the 2016 South African Demographic and Health Survey (SADHS), a nationally representative survey that collects information on women's health, socioeconomic characteristics, and experiences of violence. The survey employed a stratified two-stage cluster sampling design and included detailed modules on domestic violence, socioeconomic indicators, and reproductive health. From the broader sample, a sub-sample of 2354 women aged 18–49 who were currently or previously in an intimate relationship was selected for analysis.

2.2. Measurement of Key Variables

2.2.1. Dependent Variable: Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

The dependent variable was constructed from women's self-reports of emotional, physical, and sexual violence perpetrated by a current or former partner, as captured in the SADHS. IPV was measured as lifetime exposure, defined as violence experienced at any time since the age of 18. Among currently partnered women, violence by the current partner was assessed, while formerly partnered women reported on violence from their most recent partner. All ever-partnered women were asked whether their partner had ever committed specific acts of emotional, physical, or sexual violence.

Binary variables were created for each form of violence (Yes/No), as well as a composite variable indicating exposure to any form of IPV.

- Emotional violence: humiliation, threats, or insults
- Physical violence: slapping, pushing, or hitting
- Sexual violence: forced sex or other non-consensual acts

2.2.2. Independent Variable: Education and Employment (Structural Proxies of Empowerment)

In this study, women's socioeconomic positioning was measured using education and employment as structural proxies of empowerment, rather than as comprehensive indicators of empowerment as a multidimensional construct. These variables were selected because they are consistently measured and nationally representative within the DHS dataset, enabling population-level analysis.

A binary composite variable was constructed to capture access to these structural resources. Women were classified as having structural resources if they reported either any formal education (primary, secondary, or higher) or current employment. Women who reported neither formal education nor employment were classified as lacking these structural resources.

This binary operationalisation reflects common practice in demographic and public health research, where education and labour force participation are used as observable proxies for women's socioeconomic status [13]. The approach involves an inherent trade-off between conceptual breadth and empirical measurability: while education and employment capture important aspects of resource access, they do not reflect the full range of empowerment dimensions, such as decision-making authority, control over income, or freedom from coercion.

Importantly, this operationalisation collapses heterogeneous experiences into a single category. For example, women engaged in precarious or low-paid employment are grouped together with those in stable and well-remunerated positions, and educational attainment is treated uniformly regardless of level or quality. This compression may attenuate observed associations and obscure meaningful variation in how different forms of socioeconomic positioning relate to IPV risk.

As such, the measure should be interpreted as an indicator of structural access to resources, rather than as a direct measure of relational power or agency within intimate relationships.

2.2.3. Endogeneity and Temporal Limitations

Some methodological considerations arise from the use of cross-sectional data and the operationalisation of key variables. First, the analysis is subject to potential endogeneity. The relationship between education, employment, and IPV may be bidirectional: while access to resources may influence women's vulnerability to violence,

experiences of IPV may also affect women's ability to participate in the labour market or pursue educational opportunities.

Second, selection effects may influence observed associations. Women who are employed or educated may differ systematically from those who are not in ways that are not fully captured by observed covariates, including unmeasured characteristics such as partner behaviour, household dynamics, or prior exposure to violence.

Third, there is a temporal mismatch between the measurement of IPV and the independent variables. IPV is measured as lifetime exposure, whereas education and employment are measured at the time of the survey. As a result, the analysis does not establish whether access to education or employment preceded or followed experiences of violence. This lack of temporal ordering limits causal interpretation and may contribute to the absence of observed associations.

Given these considerations, findings are interpreted as associational rather than causal, and results should be understood within the constraints of the study design.

2.3. Analytical Strategy

The analysis was conducted in three stages using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v.26). First, descriptive statistics were used to summarise sample characteristics and estimate the prevalence of emotional, physical, and sexual IPV. Frequencies and weighted percentages were calculated to provide a representative profile of the study population.

Second, bivariate analyses using chi-square tests were performed to examine associations between education, employment, and IPV, as well as across key sociodemographic variables including age, residence, wealth index, parity, and marital status.

Third, multivariate logistic regression models were estimated to assess the association between education and employment and the likelihood of experiencing IPV and its subtypes. The models adjusted for age group, place of residence, educational attainment, wealth index, parity, and marital status. Odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals were reported, and statistical significance was assessed at the 5% level.

2.4. Inclusion Criteria

The analysis was restricted to women aged 18–49 who had ever been in an intimate relationship and had complete data on IPV and key explanatory variables. This ensured a focused examination of IPV experiences within the relevant population.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

This study used publicly available, anonymized data from the 2016 South African Demographic and Health Survey (SADHS). Ethical approval for the original data collection was granted by the Ethics Committee of ICF Macro International, Inc., USA, and the National Ethics Committee of South Africa. Formal permission to use the dataset was obtained, and all responses adhere to strict ethical standards for research involving human subjects. Full details on ethical protocols and data usage are available at: <http://goo.gl/ny8T6X> (accessed on 7 October 2024).

3. Results

The analysis draws on data from the South African Demographic and Health Survey (SADHS), comprising a weighted sample of 2354 women aged 18–49 who had ever been in an intimate relationship. The findings indicate substantial prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) across emotional, physical, and sexual dimensions. Overall, 24.6% of women reported experiencing at least one form of IPV, suggesting that nearly one in four women had been exposed to violence from a current or former partner. Disaggregated by type,

emotional violence was the most commonly reported (19.16%), followed by physical violence (15.12%) and sexual violence (3.82%).

With respect to women’s socioeconomic positioning, measured using education and employment as structural proxies, 42.52% ($n = 1001$) of women were classified as having access to at least one of these resources. Conversely, more than half of the sample did not report either formal education or current employment. This classification reflects access to structural resources rather than comprehensive empowerment and should be interpreted accordingly. These figures provide a foundational overview of the prevalence of IPV and the distribution of women’s socioeconomic characteristics, as captured through education and employment, in South Africa. The next section presents more detailed descriptive and inferential analyses of IPV in relation to these factors.

3.1. Distribution of Empowerment by Sociodemographic Variables

Table 1 presents the distribution of women’s socioeconomic characteristics (structural proxies), measured using education and employment as structural indicators, across various sociodemographic and IPV-related variables. In this study, women were classified as having access to these structural resources if they were either educated or employed. Among the 2354 women included in the analysis, access to education or employment was most common among those aged 35–44 (39.46%) and 25–34 (37.16%), indicating that the majority of women with these characteristics were within their peak reproductive and working ages ($p < 0.001$).

Table 1. Distribution of Education and Employment by Sociodemographic Characteristics.

Variable	Weighted N	Weighted %	Structural Indicators (Education/Employment)	χ^2 p -Value
Age Group				$p < 0.001$
18–24	192	8.16	4.40	
25–34	890	37.81	37.16	
35–44	868	36.87	39.46	
45+	404	17.16	18.98	
Residence				$p = 0.010$
Urban	1410	59.90	63.14	
Rural	944	40.10	36.86	
Educational Attainment				$p < 0.001$
No education	85	3.61	0.0	
Primary	293	12.45	10.09	
Secondary	1659	70.58	67.43	
More than secondary	317	13.47	22.48	
Employment Status				$p < 0.001$
Unemployed	1327	56.37	0.0	
Employed	1027	43.63	100.0	
Wealth Index				$p < 0.001$
Poor	975	41.42	33.47	
Middle	545	23.15	22.18	
Rich	834	35.43	44.36	
Parity				$p = 0.040$
None	178	7.56	7.19	
1–4	1962	83.35	85.41	
5+	214	9.09	7.39	
Marital Status				$p < 0.001$
Married	1268	53.87	54.45	
Living with partner	747	31.73	27.57	

Table 1. *Cont.*

Variable	Weighted N	Weighted %	Structural Indicators (Education/Employment)	χ^2 <i>p</i> -Value
Widowed	129	5.48	6.49	$p = 0.330$
Divorced	64	2.72	3.90	
Separated	146	6.20	7.59	
Emotional Violence				$p = 0.850$
No	1903	80.84	79.92	
Yes	451	19.16	20.08	
Physical Violence				$p = 0.300$
No	1998	84.88	84.72	
Yes	356	15.12	15.28	
Sexual Violence				$p = 0.300$
No	2264	96.18	95.70	
Yes	90	3.82	4.30	

Access to education and employment, used as structural indicators of women's socioeconomic positioning, was significantly higher among urban women, with 63.14% of women with these characteristics residing in urban areas compared to 36.86% in rural areas ($p = 0.01$). Educational attainment was inherently related to this classification, as women with any level of formal education were included in this category, and all employed women were similarly classified ($p < 0.001$). Among women with access to these structural resources, more than two-thirds (67.43%) had completed secondary education, while 22.48% had attained education beyond the secondary level ($p < 0.001$).

Wealth index was also significantly associated with access to education and employment ($p < 0.001$). Nearly half (44.36%) of women with these characteristics belonged to the richest wealth quintile, while one-third (33.47%) were from the poorest quintile. These women were more likely to have 1–4 children (85.41%) and less likely to have five or more children (7.39%) compared to those without education or employment ($p = 0.04$).

Marital status was significantly associated with access to these structural indicators ($p < 0.001$). Over half (54.45%) of women with education or employment were currently married, and an additional 27.57% were living with a partner. Smaller proportions were widowed (6.49%), divorced (3.90%), or separated (7.59%). Data on women who had never been married were not available and were therefore excluded from this comparison.

Overall, these results indicate that access to education and employment is significantly associated with age, residence, wealth status, marital status, and parity. However, differences in IPV prevalence between women with and without these structural resources were not statistically significant at the bivariate level.

3.2. Emotional Violence and Associated Characteristics

Table 2 presents the distribution of emotional violence across selected sociodemographic characteristics. Overall, the distribution of emotional violence did not differ significantly by age group ($p = 0.190$). Women aged 35–44 (37.03%) and 25–34 (34.59%) accounted for the largest shares of reported cases, while smaller proportions were observed among women aged 18–24 (10.20%) and those aged 45 and above (18.18%). Similarly, the distribution of emotional violence did not vary significantly by place of residence ($p = 0.230$). Among women who reported emotional violence, 57.43% resided in urban areas and 42.57% in rural areas.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Emotional Violence by Associated Characteristics.

Variable	Weighted (N)	Weighted (%)	Emotional Violence	χ^2 <i>p</i> -Value
Age Group				<i>p</i> = 0.190
18–24	192	8.16	10.20	
25–34	890	37.81	34.59	
35–44	868	36.87	37.03	
45+	404	17.16	18.18	
Residence				<i>p</i> = 0.230
Urban	1410	59.90	57.43	
Rural	944	40.10	42.57	
Educational Attainment				<i>p</i> = 0.020
No education	85	3.61	2.88	
Primary	293	12.45	14.63	
Secondary	1659	70.58	72.95	
More than secondary	317	13.47	9.53	
Employment Status				<i>p</i> = 0.450
Unemployed	1327	56.37	54.77	
Employed	1027	43.63	45.23	
Wealth Index				<i>p</i> < 0.001
Poor	975	41.42	48.56	
Middle	545	23.15	22.17	
Rich	834	35.43	29.27	
Parity				<i>p</i> = 0.440
None	178	7.56	7.32	
1–4	1962	83.35	82.04	
5+	214	9.09	10.64	
Marital Status				<i>p</i> < 0.001
Married	1268	53.87	42.57	
Living with partner	747	31.73	33.48	
Widowed	129	5.48	5.99	
Divorced	64	2.72	5.32	
Separated	146	6.20	12.64	
Education/Employment Status (Structural Indicators)				<i>p</i> = 0.330
No education and not employed	1353	57.48	55.43	
Educated or employed	1001	42.52	44.57	

Educational attainment, however, was significantly associated with the distribution of emotional violence ($p = 0.020$). The majority of cases were reported among women with secondary education (72.95%), followed by those with primary education (14.63%), while smaller proportions were observed among women with no education (2.88%) and those with more than secondary education (9.53%).

Employment status was not significantly associated with emotional violence ($p = 0.450$), with 54.77% of cases occurring among unemployed women and 45.23% among employed women. Wealth index showed a significant association with emotional violence ($p < 0.001$). Nearly half (48.56%) of reported cases occurred among women in the poorest wealth quintile, compared to 29.27% among women in the richest quintile.

Parity was not significantly associated with emotional violence ($p = 0.440$). Most cases were reported among women with 1–4 children (82.04%), with smaller proportions among women with no children (7.32%) and those with five or more children (10.64%). Marital status was significantly associated with emotional violence ($p < 0.001$). Among women who reported emotional violence, 42.57% were married and 33.48% were living with a partner.

Higher proportions were observed among separated (12.64%) and divorced (5.32%) women relative to their representation in the sample.

Finally, access to education or employment was not significantly associated with emotional violence ($p = 0.330$). Among women who experienced emotional violence, 55.43% had neither formal education nor employment, while 44.57% had access to at least one of these structural resources.

3.3. Physical Violence and Associated Characteristics

Table 3 presents the distribution of physical violence across selected sociodemographic characteristics. The distribution differed significantly by age group ($p = 0.010$). Women aged 25–34 accounted for the largest share of reported cases (39.61%), followed by those aged 35–44 (32.87%). Smaller proportions were observed among women aged 18–24 (12.36%) and those aged 45 and above (15.17%). Place of residence was not significantly associated with the distribution of physical violence ($p = 0.750$). Among women who reported physical violence, 60.67% resided in urban areas and 39.33% in rural areas.

Table 3. Percentage Distribution of Physical Violence by Associated Characteristics.

Variable	Weighted (N)	Weighted (%)	Physical Violence	χ^2 p -Value
Age Group				$p = 0.010$
18–24	192	8.16	12.36	
25–34	890	37.81	39.61	
35–44	868	36.87	32.87	
45+	404	17.16	15.17	
Residence				$p = 0.750$
Urban	1410	59.90	60.67	
Rural	944	40.10	39.33	
Educational Attainment				$p < 0.001$
No education	85	3.61	3.09	
Primary	293	12.45	17.70	
Secondary	1659	70.58	72.19	
More than secondary	317	13.47	7.02	
Employment Status				$p = 0.970$
Unemployed	1327	56.37	56.46	
Employed	1027	43.63	43.54	
Wealth Index				$p < 0.001$
Poor	975	41.42	51.97	
Middle	545	23.15	21.63	
Rich	834	35.43	26.40	
Parity				$p = 0.390$
None	178	7.56	7.87	
1–4	1962	83.35	81.18	
5+	214	9.09	10.96	
Marital Status				$p < 0.001$
Married	1268	53.87	39.33	
Living with partner	747	31.73	41.85	
Widowed	129	5.48	4.49	
Divorced	64	2.72	4.49	
Separated	146	6.20	9.83	
Education/Employment Status (Structural Indicators)				$p = 0.850$
No education and not employed	1353	57.48	57.02	
Educated or employed	1001	42.52	42.98	

Educational attainment showed a significant association with physical violence ($p < 0.001$). The majority of cases were reported among women with secondary education (72.19%), followed by those with primary education (17.70%). Smaller proportions were observed among women with no education (3.09%) and those with more than secondary education (7.02%). Employment status was not significantly associated with physical violence ($p = 0.970$), with a similar distribution between unemployed (56.46%) and employed women (43.54%).

Wealth index was significantly associated with physical violence ($p < 0.001$). Over half (51.97%) of reported cases occurred among women in the poorest wealth quintile, compared to 26.40% among women in the richest quintile. Parity was not significantly associated with physical violence ($p = 0.390$). Most cases were reported among women with 1–4 children (81.18%), with smaller proportions among women with no children (7.87%) and those with five or more children (10.96%).

Marital status showed a significant association with physical violence ($p < 0.001$). Among women who reported physical violence, 41.85% were living with a partner and 39.33% were married. Higher proportions were also observed among separated women (9.83%) relative to their representation in the sample. Finally, access to education or employment was not significantly associated with physical violence ($p = 0.850$). Among women who experienced physical violence, 57.02% had neither formal education nor employment, while 42.98% had access to at least one of these structural resources.

3.4. Distribution of Sexual Violence by Associated Characteristics

Table 4 presents the distribution of sexual violence across selected sociodemographic characteristics. The distribution did not differ significantly by age group ($p = 0.700$). Women aged 25–34 (35.56%) and 35–44 (34.44%) accounted for the largest shares of reported cases, while smaller proportions were observed among women aged 18–24 (11.11%) and those aged 45 and above (18.89%). Similarly, place of residence was not significantly associated with sexual violence ($p = 0.980$). Among women who reported sexual violence, 60.00% resided in urban areas and 40.00% in rural areas.

Educational attainment showed a statistically significant association with sexual violence ($p = 0.040$). The majority of cases were reported among women with secondary education (78.89%), followed by those with primary education (14.44%). Smaller proportions were observed among women with no education (3.33%) and those with more than secondary education (3.33%). Employment status was not significantly associated with sexual violence ($p = 0.310$), with 51.11% of cases occurring among unemployed women and 48.89% among employed women.

Wealth index was significantly associated with sexual violence ($p = 0.040$). Over half (53.33%) of reported cases occurred among women in the poorest wealth quintile, compared to 24.44% among women in the richest quintile. Parity was not significantly associated with sexual violence ($p = 0.080$). Most cases were reported among women with 1–4 children (78.89%), while smaller proportions were observed among women with no children (5.56%) and those with five or more children (15.56%).

Marital status showed a strong and statistically significant association with sexual violence ($p < 0.001$). Among women who reported sexual violence, 37.78% were living with a partner and 31.11% were married, with higher proportions also observed among separated (13.33%) and divorced women (11.11%). Finally, access to education or employment was not significantly associated with sexual violence ($p = 0.300$). Among women who experienced sexual violence, 52.22% had neither formal education nor employment, while 47.78% had access to at least one of these structural resources.

Table 4. Percentage Distribution of Sexual Violence by Associated Characteristics.

Variable	Weighted (N)	Weighted (%)	Sexual Violence	χ^2 p-Value
Age Group				$p = 0.700$
18–24	192	8.16	11.11	
25–34	890	37.81	35.56	
35–44	868	36.87	34.44	
45+	404	17.16	18.89	
Residence				$p = 0.980$
Urban	1410	59.90	60.00	
Rural	944	40.10	40.00	
Educational Attainment				$p = 0.040$
No education	85	3.61	3.33	
Primary	293	12.45	14.44	
Secondary	1659	70.58	78.89	
More than secondary	317	13.47	3.33	
Employment Status				$p = 0.310$
Unemployed	1327	56.37	51.11	
Employed	1027	43.63	48.89	
Wealth Index				$p = 0.040$
Poor	975	41.42	53.33	
Middle	545	23.15	22.22	
Rich	834	35.43	24.44	
Parity				$p = 0.080$
None	178	7.56	5.56	
1–4	1962	83.35	78.89	
5+	214	9.09	15.56	
Marital Status				$p < 0.001$
Married	1268	53.87	31.11	
Living with partner	747	31.73	37.78	
Widowed	129	5.48	6.67	
Divorced	64	2.72	11.11	
Separated	146	6.20	13.33	
Education/Employment Status (Structural Indicators)				$p = 0.300$
No education and not employed	1353	57.48	52.22	
Educated or employed	1001	42.52	47.78	

3.5. Distribution of Intimate Partner Violence by Associated Characteristics

Table 5 presents the distribution of women who reported experiencing at least one form of lifetime intimate partner violence (IPV) across selected sociodemographic characteristics. The distribution of IPV did not differ significantly by age group ($p = 0.100$). Women aged 25–34 (37.65%) and 35–44 (34.72%) accounted for the largest shares of reported cases, while smaller proportions were observed among women aged 18–24 (10.54%) and those aged 45 and above (17.10%). Place of residence was not significantly associated with IPV ($p = 0.250$). Among women who reported IPV, 57.86% resided in urban areas and 42.14% in rural areas.

Educational attainment showed a statistically significant association with IPV ($p < 0.001$). The majority of cases were reported among women with secondary education (71.50%), followed by those with primary education (15.72%), while smaller proportions were observed among women with no education (3.28%) and those with more than secondary education (9.50%).

Table 5. Percentage Distribution of Intimate Partner Violence and Associated Characteristics.

Variable	Weighted (N)	Weighted (%)	% with Lifetime IPV	χ^2 <i>p</i> -Value
Age Group				<i>p</i> = 0.100
18–24	192	8.16	10.54	
25–34	890	37.81	37.65	
35–44	868	36.87	34.72	
45+	404	17.16	17.10	
Residence				<i>p</i> = 0.250
Urban	1410	59.90	57.86	
Rural	944	40.10	42.14	
Educational Attainment				<i>p</i> < 0.001
No education	85	3.61	3.28	
Primary	293	12.45	15.72	
Secondary	1659	70.58	71.50	
More than secondary	317	13.47	9.50	
Employment Status				<i>p</i> = 0.670
Unemployed	1327	56.37	55.61	
Employed	1027	43.63	44.39	
Wealth Index				<i>p</i> < 0.001
Poor	975	41.42	49.05	
Middle	545	23.15	21.93	
Rich	834	35.43	29.02	
Parity				<i>p</i> = 0.110
None	178	7.56	7.08	
1–4	1962	83.35	81.69	
5+	214	9.09	11.23	
Marital Status				<i>p</i> < 0.001
Married	1268	53.87	43.18	
Living with partner	747	31.73	35.23	
Widowed	129	5.48	5.70	
Divorced	64	2.72	4.32	
Separated	146	6.20	11.57	
Education/Employment Status (Structural Indicators)				<i>p</i> = 0.510
No education and not employed	1353	57.48	56.30	
Educated or employed	1001	42.52	43.70	

Employment status was not significantly associated with IPV ($p = 0.670$), with 55.61% of cases occurring among unemployed women and 44.39% among employed women. Wealth index was significantly associated with IPV ($p < 0.001$). Nearly half (49.05%) of reported cases occurred among women in the poorest wealth quintile, compared to 29.02% among women in the richest quintile. Parity was not significantly associated with IPV ($p = 0.110$). Most cases were reported among women with 1–4 children (81.69%), while smaller proportions were observed among women with no children (7.08%) and those with five or more children (11.23%). Marital status showed a strong and statistically significant association with IPV ($p < 0.001$). Among women who reported IPV, 43.18% were married and 35.23% were living with a partner, with higher proportions also observed among separated women (11.57%) relative to their representation in the sample.

Finally, access to education or employment was not significantly associated with IPV ($p = 0.510$). Among women who experienced IPV, 56.30% had neither formal education nor employment, while 43.70% had access to at least one of these structural resources.

3.6. Multivariate Analysis: Logistic Regression Results

Table 6 presents adjusted odds ratios (ORs) estimating the association between selected sociodemographic characteristics, education and employment, and women's experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV), including emotional, physical, and sexual violence.

Table 6. Logistic Regression Table.

Logistic Regression				
Variables	% with Lifetime IPV	Emotional Violence	Physical Violence	Sexual Violence
Age				
18–24	RC	RC	RC	RC
25–34	0.73 [0.51–1.04]	0.71 [0.48–1.05]	0.72 [0.49–1.08]	0.74 [0.35–1.59]
35–44	0.66 [0.46–0.96] *	0.79 [0.53–1.19]	0.63 [0.41–0.96] *	0.69 [0.31–1.54]
45+	0.68 [0.45–1.04]	0.83 [0.52–1.31]	0.60 [0.36–0.98] *	0.68 [0.27–1.69]
Residence				
Urban	RC	RC	RC	RC
Rural	0.92 [0.73–1.15]	0.95 [0.75–1.22]	0.76 [0.58–0.99] *	0.74 [0.45–1.21]
Education				
No education	RC	RC	RC	RC
Primary	1.28 [0.67–2.47]	1.39 [0.65–2.94]	1.40 [0.64–3.06]	1.19 [0.25–5.62]
Secondary	1.06 [0.57–1.99]	1.34 [0.65–2.77]	1.03 [0.49–2.20]	1.46 [0.33–6.45]
More than secondary	0.79 [0.39–1.60]	0.97 [0.43–2.19]	0.58 [0.24–1.39]	0.35 [0.05–2.35]
Employment Status				
Unemployed	RC	RC	RC	RC
Employed	0.51 [0.15–1.76]	0.58 [0.14–2.37]	0.48 [0.09–2.41]	1.29 [0.11–15.19]
Wealth Index				
Poor	RC	RC	RC	RC
Middle	0.75 [0.58–0.97] *	0.78 [0.59–1.02]	0.70 [0.52–0.95] *	0.73 [0.42–1.28]
Rich	0.72 [0.55–0.95] *	0.72 [0.53–0.98] *	0.65 [0.46–0.90] *	0.63 [0.34–1.17]
Parity				
None	RC	RC	RC	RC
1–4	1.12 [0.77–1.64]	1.04 [0.69–1.57]	1.01 [0.65–1.57]	1.33 [0.52–3.42]
5+	1.42 [0.87–2.34]	1.15 [0.67–1.97]	1.30 [0.73–2.32]	2.58 [0.84–7.92]
Marital Status				
Married	RC	RC	RC	RC
Living with partner	1.32 [1.05–1.67] *	1.30 [1.01–1.67] *	1.61 [1.23–2.12] **	1.77 [1.03–3.04] *
Widowed	1.29 [0.84–2.00]	1.35 [0.84–2.14]	1.05 [0.60–1.86]	1.80 [0.71–4.56]
Divorced	2.64 [1.55–4.45] **	3.28 [1.91–5.62] **	2.80 [1.52–5.15] **	8.88 [3.95–19.97] **
Separated	3.17 [2.21–4.55] **	3.30 [2.27–4.80] **	2.62 [1.47–3.47] **	3.29 [1.61–6.73] **
Empowerment				
Not Empowered	RC	RC	RC	RC
Empowered	2.24 [0.64–7.85]	1.96 [0.47–8.09]	2.49 [0.48–12.82]	1.07 [0.09–13.11]
Constant	0.36 [0.16–0.78] **	0.20 [0.08–0.49] **	0.24 [0.10–0.62] **	0.02 [0.00–0.15] **

Note: RC = Reference category; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Age was significantly associated with certain IPV outcomes. Compared to women aged 18–24 (reference category), those aged 35–44 had significantly lower odds of experiencing lifetime IPV (OR = 0.66; 95% CI: 0.46–0.96) and physical violence (OR = 0.63; 95% CI: 0.41–0.96). Women aged 45 and above also had lower odds of physical violence (OR = 0.60; 95% CI: 0.36–0.98). No statistically significant differences were observed for emotional or sexual violence across age groups.

Residence was significantly associated with physical violence only. Rural women had lower odds of experiencing physical IPV compared to urban women (OR = 0.76; 95% CI: 0.58–0.99). No significant associations were observed for emotional or sexual violence. Educational attainment was not significantly associated with IPV across all

models. Although point estimates suggested lower odds of IPV among women with more than secondary education, these differences were not statistically significant.

Employment status was also not significantly associated with IPV. While point estimates indicated lower odds of lifetime, emotional, and physical violence among employed women, and higher odds of sexual violence, none of these associations reached statistical significance.

In contrast, wealth index was significantly associated with IPV. Women in the middle and richest wealth quintiles had significantly lower odds of experiencing lifetime IPV compared to women in the poorest quintile (OR = 0.75 and OR = 0.72, respectively). Women in the richest quintile also had significantly lower odds of emotional (OR = 0.72; 95% CI: 0.53–0.98) and physical violence (OR = 0.65; 95% CI: 0.46–0.90).

Parity was not significantly associated with IPV or its subtypes. Although women with five or more children had higher odds of sexual violence, this association was not statistically significant.

Marital status emerged as one of the strongest correlates of IPV. Compared to married women, those living with a partner had higher odds of experiencing lifetime IPV (OR = 1.32; 95% CI: 1.05–1.67), emotional violence (OR = 1.30; 95% CI: 1.01–1.67), physical violence (OR = 1.61; 95% CI: 1.23–2.12), and sexual violence (OR = 1.77; 95% CI: 1.03–3.04). The odds were substantially higher for divorced and separated women across all IPV outcomes. Divorced women had markedly elevated odds of sexual violence (OR = 8.88; 95% CI: 3.95–19.97), while separated women had consistently higher odds across lifetime, emotional, physical, and sexual IPV.

Finally, access to education or employment was not significantly associated with IPV or any of its subtypes. Women with access to at least one of these structural resources had higher odds ratios across all outcomes; however, the confidence intervals were wide and included unity, indicating no statistically significant association. These findings suggest that education and employment, as measured in this study, are not independently associated with women's experiences of IPV after adjusting for other sociodemographic factors.

The absence of a statistically significant association should be interpreted with caution. It may reflect the limited ability of education and employment, as structural proxies, to capture relational dimensions of power, as well as potential endogeneity and temporal limitations inherent in the cross-sectional design. Together, these findings underscore the complexity of the relationship between structural socioeconomic factors and IPV.

4. Discussion

This study examined the association between education, employment, and intimate partner violence (IPV) in South Africa using nationally representative survey data. By conceptualising education and employment as structural proxies of women's socioeconomic positioning, the analysis assessed whether access to these resources is associated with women's experiences of emotional, physical, and sexual IPV. Drawing on Resource Theory and Backlash Theory, the study situates these structural factors within broader relational and normative contexts rather than treating them as inherently protective.

Consistent with regional and global evidence, IPV remains highly prevalent. Nearly one in four women reported experiencing at least one form of lifetime IPV, with emotional violence being the most common, followed by physical and sexual violence. These findings reaffirm IPV as a persistent public health and human rights concern in South Africa and comparable settings [1,4]. This is consistent with national estimates reporting an IPV prevalence of 55% in South Africa, among the highest globally, underscoring the scale of the problem beyond what survey-based lifetime measures alone may capture [1,23].

A key finding of this study is that access to education and employment was not significantly associated with IPV across all models. This absence of a statistically significant association suggests that these structural indicators, as measured, do not independently differentiate women's experiences of IPV. This absence of a statistically significant association must therefore be interpreted in light of the study's constrained operationalisation of empowerment, which may obscure the multidimensional pathways through which empowerment operates. Importantly, this should not be interpreted as evidence that education and employment are unimportant, but rather that their effects may not operate directly or uniformly in reducing IPV risk. Instead, the findings highlight the limitations of relying on structural proxies to capture the multidimensional nature of empowerment. This null finding is not without precedent. Evidence from comparable sub-Saharan African contexts similarly suggests that structural access to resources does not uniformly reduce IPV risk, particularly where patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded in relational and institutional life [24,25]. Despite the marked increase in women's labour force participation in post-apartheid South Africa, the patriarchal system, firmly embedded within social and economic spheres, continues to constrain women's economic emancipation, and women's experiences of this constraint differ by class.

In contrast, household wealth emerged as a significant correlate of IPV. Women in middle- and high-wealth households had lower odds of experiencing IPV compared to women in poorer households. This distinction is theoretically important. While employment reflects individual participation in the labour market, wealth captures broader household-level material security and stability. These findings suggest that sustained economic resources, rather than labour force participation alone, may be more relevant for reducing vulnerability to violence. This interpretation refines Resource Theory by indicating that access to resources must translate into meaningful and stable improvements in material conditions to influence relational dynamics. This is consistent with recent multi-country evidence from sub-Saharan Africa showing that IPV prevalence follows a clear wealth gradient, decreasing progressively from the poorest to the richest households, and confirming a strong inverse relationship between household-level material security and violence.

Marital status was one of the strongest correlates of IPV, with separated and divorced women facing substantially higher odds across all forms of violence [26–28]. These patterns are consistent with evidence that relationship dissolution is a period of heightened vulnerability, during which coercive control, retaliation, and conflict escalation may intensify [29–32]. In such contexts, violence may reflect attempts to reassert dominance or resist the loss of control, aligning with key propositions of Backlash Theory. The elevated risks observed among women in non-marital or previously dissolved unions underscore the importance of relational dynamics and transitional life stages in shaping IPV exposure. This pattern is not unique to South Africa. Across sub-Saharan Africa, women who have previously been married and are now divorced or living alone are consistently found to face elevated IPV risk, suggesting that relationship dissolution disrupts established gendered arrangements in ways that provoke rather than reduce violence [33]. Recent South African data further confirm this, with divorced and separated women showing significantly elevated odds of physical IPV compared to their married counterparts [34].

Although parity and place of residence were not statistically significant, their observed patterns warrant cautious interpretation. These factors may interact with unmeasured dimensions of socioeconomic stress, caregiving responsibilities, and shifting gender norms, but their independent effects were not supported in the adjusted models.

The absence of a significant association between education, employment, and IPV can be understood through several interrelated mechanisms. First, structural access to

resources does not necessarily translate into relational power. Resource Theory assumes that education and employment enhance bargaining power and exit options; however, this effect depends on whether women can exercise control over these resources within relationships. If employment is insecure or income is not controlled by women, these structural gains may not alter power dynamics in meaningful ways. This is particularly salient in South Africa, where women face persistently higher unemployment rates than men and are disproportionately concentrated in low-paying and precarious employment, conditions under which binary indicators of employment are unlikely to capture the quality or autonomy necessary for structural gains to translate into relational protection [35–38].

Second, the impact of structural change is mediated by prevailing gender norms. In contexts characterised by entrenched patriarchal ideologies, women's access to education or employment may not be sufficient to shift expectations around authority and control. While Backlash Theory suggests that such changes may provoke resistance, the absence of a statistically significant association in this study indicates that neither protective nor risk-enhancing effects are clearly observed at the level of these structural indicators. This finding underscores the importance of distinguishing between access to resources and the social meanings attached to them. Evidence from West Africa similarly finds that the relationship between women's empowerment and IPV remains mixed: while financial contributions can elicit backlash in patriarchal settings, greater decision-making autonomy and control over resources are more consistently protective. Critically, economic empowerment programmes have been found to reduce IPV only when combined with gender-transformative components, suggesting that structural and normative change must occur together [39].

Third, the findings likely reflect limitations in the measurement of empowerment. Education and employment, as used in this study, are data-constrained structural proxies that do not capture key relational and institutional dimensions, such as decision-making authority, control over income, freedom from coercion, or access to social and legal support. As a result, these measures may not adequately reflect the pathways through which empowerment influences IPV. More comprehensive, multidimensional measures may yield different patterns.

In addition, the cross-sectional design introduces important methodological constraints. The use of lifetime IPV alongside contemporaneous measures of education and employment limits the ability to establish temporal ordering. It is not possible to determine whether access to these resources preceded or followed experiences of violence. Furthermore, potential endogeneity and selection effects may attenuate observed associations. These factors should be considered when interpreting the absence of statistically significant relationships.

Overall, the findings suggest that efforts to reduce IPV should extend beyond improving women's access to education and employment alone. While these remain critical components of gender equality, they are insufficient in isolation. Effective prevention strategies must also address relational power imbalances, resource asymmetries within partnerships, and persistent patriarchal norms. This is supported by recent evidence showing that prevention strategies must combine structural interventions with efforts to disrupt patriarchal norms, promote safe and equitable relationship practices, and strengthen financial security at the household level, rather than treating structural access as inherently transformative [34]. Interventions that engage men and boys, promote gender-equitable norms, and strengthen institutional responses to violence are essential for translating structural gains into meaningful reductions in IPV.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings contribute to ongoing debates by demonstrating that structural resources do not automatically translate into protection against IPV.

Rather, their effects are contingent on relational and normative contexts. This underscores the need to move beyond simplified assumptions about empowerment and to adopt more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to understanding and addressing IPV. The study adds to a growing body of evidence suggesting that the pathway from structural empowerment to safety is neither linear nor guaranteed, and that future research should employ multidimensional measures of empowerment, capturing decision-making authority, control over income, and freedom from coercion, to better trace how structural change does or does not translate into protection from violence over time.

5. Study Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, women's socioeconomic positioning was measured using education and employment as structural proxies, rather than as a comprehensive representation of empowerment. These indicators were selected because they are consistently available in nationally representative survey data and capture key aspects of resource access. However, they remain data-constrained measures and do not reflect the multidimensional nature of empowerment. Employment does not necessarily equate to meaningful economic autonomy, as women may be engaged in low-paid, precarious, or informal work with limited control over income. Similarly, education does not automatically translate into decision-making authority, control over resources, or protection from coercion. Other important dimensions—such as intra-household bargaining power, legal awareness, access to social support, and freedom from coercion—are not captured. This measurement approach may therefore obscure important variation and attenuate observable associations with IPV.

Second, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation. The analysis identifies associations between education, employment, and IPV but cannot establish directionality. The relationship may be bidirectional, as experiences of IPV can influence women's ability to participate in education or the labour market, while access to these resources may also shape exposure to violence. In addition, potential selection effects and unobserved confounding factors may influence the observed relationships.

Third, there is a temporal mismatch between the measurement of key variables. IPV is measured as lifetime exposure, while education and employment are measured at the time of the survey. This limits the ability to determine whether access to these resources preceded or followed experiences of violence, further constraining causal interpretation and potentially contributing to the absence of statistically significant associations.

Fourth, IPV is self-reported and may be subject to underreporting due to stigma, fear, or social desirability bias. This could result in an underestimation of prevalence and may affect the observed relationships.

Fifth, the study relies on data collected in 2016. Although this is the most recent nationally representative dataset in South Africa containing a domestic violence module, it may not fully capture changes in gender relations, economic conditions, and IPV dynamics in the post-COVID-19 context. The findings should therefore be interpreted within the temporal scope of the dataset.

Finally, the binary operationalisation of education and employment further simplifies heterogeneous experiences. Differences in job quality, employment stability, income control, and levels of educational attainment are not captured, which may mask important pathways through which structural factors influence IPV.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the distribution and determinants of IPV and highlights the importance of moving beyond simplified structural indicators to better understand the complex relationship between women's socioeconomic positioning and experiences of violence.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Intimate partner violence (IPV) remains pervasive in South Africa and is shaped by intersecting socioeconomic and relational factors. Women in lower wealth quintiles and those who were separated or divorced experienced a disproportionate share of IPV, underscoring the importance of both material conditions and relationship dynamics in shaping vulnerability. Targeting interventions toward these high-risk groups—particularly women in economically disadvantaged households and those undergoing relationship transitions—may yield more immediate reductions in IPV than broad, undifferentiated approaches.

Access to education and employment, used in this study as structural indicators of women's socioeconomic positioning, was not significantly associated with IPV. This finding suggests that structural gains alone may be insufficient to reduce women's exposure to violence. In contexts where patriarchal norms remain entrenched, access to resources may not translate into greater safety if relational power dynamics and normative expectations around gender and authority remain unchanged. Violence may persist as a mechanism of control or as a response to perceived challenges to established roles. The findings further suggest that the timing and sequencing of socioeconomic changes may be critical, as shifts in access to resources without corresponding changes in relational dynamics may not produce immediate protective effects.

The findings have several policy implications. First, interventions aimed at expanding women's access to education and employment should be complemented by gender-transformative approaches that address norms legitimising violence and unequal power relations. Community-based programmes that engage men and boys are critical for reshaping norms around masculinity, authority, and conflict resolution.

Second, the elevated risk observed among separated and divorced women underscores the need for targeted interventions during periods of relationship transition. Support mechanisms should include access to legal assistance, counselling, protection services, and economic support to mitigate heightened vulnerability during separation and post-separation phases.

Third, economic and educational initiatives should be integrated with relational and safety-focused components. Linking these programmes to counselling, peer support networks, and violence prevention education may help mitigate potential tensions associated with shifts in household roles and expectations.

Finally, strengthening institutional responses remains essential. This includes improving access to survivor-centred justice systems, ensuring effective implementation of domestic violence legislation, and enhancing coordination across health, legal, and social services.

Future research should prioritise longitudinal designs and multidimensional measures that capture decision-making authority, control over resources, and relational dynamics in order to better understand the pathways linking structural change to IPV. Summarily, access to education and employment should be understood as one dimension of a broader and socially mediated process. Without concurrent transformation of gender norms, relational power dynamics, and institutional support systems, structural advances alone are unlikely to translate into meaningful reductions in IPV.

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