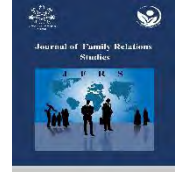




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## Research Paper

# Structural Relationship between Autonomy and Intimate partner violence: Mediation Role of Self-esteem



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Intimate partner violence represents a prevalent issue for women and is strongly correlated with mental health difficulties. Previous research has primarily concentrated on identifying factors that can anticipate intimate partner violence, specifically individual and interpersonal factors. This investigation examines the structural associations between autonomy and IPV among Iranian women who have encountered such violence, shedding illumination on the intricate factors contributing to IPV and potential avenues for intervention.

**Methods:** The research method is a correlation, and the structural equation modeling method was used to test the proposed model. The statistical population was all women referred to counseling clinics in Bandar Abbas City in 2023. Data were collected from a sample of 306 Iranian women who had undergone IPV via purposive sampling method, utilizing a domestic violence questionnaire (Mohseni Tabrizi et al., 2013), basic psychological need satisfaction scale (La Guardia et al., 2000), and Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1979).

**Results:** The findings corroborated the appropriate fit of the proposed model and disclosed that autonomy exerted noteworthy direct and indirect effects on IPV, which were mediated through self-esteem.

**Conclusion:** The findings show that with the increase in women's autonomy, intimate partner violence decreases, and self-esteem plays a moderating role in the relationship between these two variables. These outcomes provide valuable novel insights into the intricate dynamics of IPV and hold promise for the development of targeted interventions aimed at preventing IPV and supporting the well-being of affected individuals.

## 1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant societal concern that is observed across the globe in various manifestations and contexts (Alfaro Quezada et al., 2020; Black, 2011). IPV is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses one or more forms of psychological, physical, and/or sexual violence

(Whitaker, 2014). The ramifications of intimate partner violence are detrimental and can result in adverse health outcomes, heightened risk of suicide, and increased incidence of homicide (Low et al., 2017). In recent years, numerous sources have documented a surge in IPV on a global scale, partially

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attributed to stay-at-home orders and other governmental restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Evans et al., 2022; Parrott et al., 2023; Van Gelder et al., 2020). This concerning escalation underscores the ongoing necessity to identify risk factors and psychological correlates associated with IPV. Epidemiological findings reveal that a range of 21 to 34 percent of women worldwide suffer from assault and physical abuse by their spouses. Other forms of violence receive less attention, and women often choose not to disclose their predicaments due to various reasons (Gutowski et al., 2023). A study conducted in Iran demonstrates that the prevalence of IPV following the COVID-19 outbreak (65.4 percent) surpasses the prevalence of IPV before the pandemic (54.2 percent) (Fereidooni et al., 2023). It appears that women and girls are disproportionately impacted by domestic violence (World Health Organization, 2013). Domestic violence can manifest in diverse physical, verbal, emotional, psychological, sexual, and economic forms. Within intimate emotional relationships, the mistreatment of an emotionally connected partner constitutes a grave issue that contravenes cultural, social, and economic boundaries and profoundly affects the well-being of the family, both physically and mentally (Nazroo, 1995). Based on available studies and statistics, it can be asserted that violence continues to pervade many societies and families on a substantial scale, and investigation into spousal violence against women within the family is significant not only from individual and familial perspectives but also from a societal standpoint. This significance stems from the fact that the repercussions of husbands' violence against women extend beyond the victims themselves, affecting husbands, children, and the family unit as a whole, as well as society at large (Crowne et al., 2012). It could be noted that according to the findings of (Aleyaran et al., 2022), all types of maltreatment, including emotional abuse and sexual abuse, had a positive and significant relationship with violence against spouses.

In numerous research studies conducted thus far, a greater emphasis has been placed on exploring the repercussions of domestic violence. These consequences include but are not limited to depression, anxiety, fear, panic, and even suicide (Lambert et al., 2013; Mezey et al., 2005). Additionally, researchers have delved into examining related issues such as unwanted pregnancies and abortions stemming from violence, as well as the potential contraction of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV. However, there has been relatively less discussion regarding the emergence and initiators of this phenomenon. Risk factors that have

received attention tend to center around distressing experiences within the family dynamic, particularly within the context of interactions between couples. These factors underscore the importance of individual elements such as mental health problems (Crowne et al., 2012), personality traits (Pereira et al., 2020), relationship-oriented causal orientations (Øverup et al., 2017), perceptual biases in social cognition, and hostile attributional biases (Cavanaugh et al., 2010). Furthermore, basic psychological needs and self-esteem have also been investigated as supportive and preventive variables of IPV (Matheson et al., 2015; Petit et al., 2017; Mahboobzadeh, 2021).

In this study, we used Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to identify psychosocial factors that play a role in exposing or protecting women from IPV. SDT posits that humans have three psychological needs, namely competence, autonomy, and relatedness, that must be met in order for individuals to have good health outcomes. When the three SDT needs are met, individuals gain the psychological strength to initiate and maintain healthier behavior (Silva et al., 2014). In a systematic review, Samadzadeh et al. (2020) examined violence in romantic relationships. The findings of this investigation have revealed the existence of three primary categories of factors. These include "individual" factors, which encompass the observation of aggression during childhood. Additionally, there are factors associated with the "interactive context of couples" or "interpersonal factors," such as power differentials, sexism, communication patterns, attachment, and dominance. Lastly, there are "non-individual" factors, including education level, age, financial and economic difficulties, extramarital relationships, and polygamy. These factors have been the main focus of Iranian researchers and have significantly influenced this phenomenon. It is worth noting that although communication and attachment patterns are implicitly acknowledged in this study as being closely related to fundamental psychological needs, the direct connection between these needs and violence against intimate partners has not been explicitly explored. Petit et al. (2017) in his study also demonstrated that the anticipation of violent behavior toward women is substantially more reliant on satisfying women's fundamental needs. In contrast, the satisfaction of men's needs does not have a significant impact on the prediction of violence against women. In simpler terms, fulfilling women's needs serves as a safeguard against perpetrating violence towards them.

Self-esteem is fundamental to an individual's emotional well-being and psychological resilience.

It encompasses the overall opinion one holds about oneself and plays a crucial role in shaping one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Orth & Robins, 2014). A healthy level of self-esteem is marked by a positive and realistic self-perception, allowing individuals to navigate life with confidence and resilience. On the contrary, low self-esteem can lead to self-doubt, fear of failure, and a diminished sense of self-worth (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). Cultivating and maintaining positive self-esteem involves acknowledging one's strengths and accomplishments, learning from challenges, and embracing a compassionate attitude toward oneself (Abdel-Khalek, 2016). Building a strong foundation of self-esteem not only fosters a more fulfilling and satisfying life but also contributes to healthier relationships and increased overall well-being (Amiri & Taghinejad, 2022). Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in women can be influenced by various factors, and self-esteem is one such crucial aspect that plays a significant role in understanding this complex relationship (Costa & Gomes, 2018).

Women with low self-esteem may be more vulnerable to entering and remaining in abusive relationships. They may have a diminished sense of self-worth, making it harder to establish and maintain healthy boundaries (Sáez et al., 2021). Abusers often exploit this vulnerability by engaging in behaviors that further erode the victim's self-esteem, creating a cycle of abuse where the victim may feel trapped and unable to leave the relationship (Dhouib et al., 2021). Moreover, low self-esteem may contribute to a woman's reluctance to seek help or leave an abusive relationship. Several studies have shown a significant relationship between self-esteem and IPV (Güler et al., 2022; Lin-Roark et al., 2015; Matheson et al., 2015). Fear of judgment, societal stigma, and a belief that they deserve the abuse due to low self-worth can act as barriers to seeking support. In some cases, women with low self-esteem may also have difficulty recognizing the signs of abuse or may normalize such behaviors, further perpetuating the cycle of violence (Tariq, 2013).

Conversely, it is essential to note that IPV can, in turn, significantly impact a woman's self-esteem. Continuous exposure to abusive behaviors can lead to feelings of powerlessness, shame, and self-blame, further reinforcing a negative self-image (Tariq, 2013). Interventions addressing the relationship between self-esteem and IPV often involve empowering women to build their self-esteem and providing resources to help them break free from abusive relationships (Cherrier et al., 2023).

Counseling, support groups, and educational programs can be effective in helping women recognize their own values and develop the confidence to make choices that prioritize their well-being. Ultimately, addressing self-esteem and IPV concurrently is crucial for promoting healthier relationships and fostering empowerment in women (Noormohamadi et al., 2021).

Based on this and considering the determining role of basic psychological needs, especially autonomy, in preventing violence against intimate partners in couples' relationships, in the present study, the structural model of the prediction of IPV based on autonomy and the mediating role of self-esteem has been investigated.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The present research method is a correlational description. The current research population consists of all women living in Bandar Abbas (Iran) who were subjected to domestic violence at least once in the year 2022 and went to health and treatment centers. The statistical sample of the research included 306 eligible women referred to comprehensive urban health centers in Bandar Abbas City, which was purposive sampling. In this research, the inclusion criteria were informed consent to participate and be at least 18 and at most 50 years old, and the exclusion criteria were taking medication and being confused or unable to complete the questionnaire. It is crucial to emphasize that this study has obtained the necessary ethical endorsement from the committee responsible for ethical considerations at Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences, denoted by the Ethics ID IR.HUMS.REC.1402.077.

### Instruments

**Domestic violence scale:** The research tool employed in this study is a questionnaire designed to assess domestic violence (Mohseni Tabrizi et al., 2013). The survey encompasses a range of factors pertaining to the personal encounters of the participants, which include demographic data, forms of domestic abuse, patriarchal ideologies, traditions, and familial upbringing. Additionally, it also evaluates the influence of witnessing violence within the family. The survey comprises a total of sixty inquiries, which are further categorized into four components: physical violence (consisting of twelve items), sexual violence (consisting of ten items), economic violence (consisting of thirteen items), and psychological violence (consisting of twenty-one items). In total, the survey encompasses seventy-one items. The scoring system for the survey is founded on a five-point Likert

scale, enabling participants to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. A meticulous procedure was followed to ensure the authenticity of the survey. Initially, researchers aimed to incorporate items and inquiries from prior studies conducted under the supervision of seasoned professionals and some additional items specifically tailored for this research. Subsequently, the researchers sought the input of professors and social science experts, who provided guidance and validated the accuracy of the selected items and inquiries. The reliability of the survey was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which produced a value of 0.883 (Mohseni Tabrizi et al., 2013). This substantial coefficient signifies that the inquiries and elements contained within the survey and its diverse dimensions exhibit ample dependability. Additionally, within this investigation, the reported value of Cronbach's alpha is 0.94, further substantiating the dependability of the survey within this specific research setting.

**Basic Psychological Needs Scale:** The basic psychological needs scale was designed and developed by (La Guardia et al., 2000) to measure basic psychological needs. This survey comprises 21 inquiries and utilizes the Likert scale to assess fundamental psychological requirements. The dependability coefficients arising from its execution on the respondents' mother, father, romantic partner, and friends have been documented as 0.92, 0.92, 0.92, and 0.92 correspondingly (Ghorbani & Watson, 2006). In this study, Cronbach's alpha value is 0.75. We used the autonomy subscale as the predictor variable in the current work.

**Self-esteem scale:** The Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSES) is a widely used self-esteem measure in the

field of social science research. It employs a numerical scale ranging from 0 to 30, where a score below 15 may potentially indicate a concerning level of low self-esteem. Although originally designed for implementation with adolescents, it has been extensively utilized in studies focusing on adults. Among the ten items included in the scale, five are formulated as positively worded statements, and the remaining five are worded negatively. The purpose of the scale is to evaluate global self-worth by assessing both positive and negative emotions associated with the self. The development of the scale involved a sample of 5,024 high-school juniors and seniors randomly selected from 10 schools in the state of New York (Mohammadi, 2005). The Rosenberg self-esteem scale is widely recognized as a reliable and valid quantitative tool for assessing self-esteem. (Baumeister et al., 2003; Mohammadi, 2005; Tinakon & Nahathai, 2012). In the present study, its reliability was calculated as 0.78 using Cronbach's alpha method. The process of analyzing data was executed through the utilization of the descriptive approach using SPSS-26 software, while the inferential aspect was conducted employing the structural equation modeling technique with Amos-26 software.

### 3. Results

The results derived from the investigation indicated that the average age of the individuals (with a standard deviation) was 33.16 (with a standard deviation of 8.42) within the age range of 18 to 50 years. The average duration of marriage is 2.98 (with a standard deviation of 1.24) years. The mean and standard deviation of the research variables are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1. Mean, standard deviation and correlation of variables of IPV, autonomy and self-esteem**

Variable	Mean	SD	r with IPV
IPV	87.44	45.21	1
Autonomy	104.32	13.70	-0.37**
Self-esteem	17.56	3.21	-0.29**

\*\* p < 0.01

The correlation analysis revealed that there exists a noteworthy association between autonomy, self-esteem, and intimate partner violence.

The normality of the scores of the research variables was checked using skewness and kurtosis.

**Table 2. The results of the normality test of research variables**

Variable	Skewness	Std. error	Kurtosis	Std. error
Autonomy	0.26	0.27	-0.28	0.13
IPV	0.08	0.27	0.89	0.13
Self-esteem	0.02	0.27	0.44	0.13

The results confirmed the normality of the data. Structural equation modeling was used to examine the structural model relationship between autonomy and

IPV mediated by self-esteem. The examined model is presented in Figure 1.

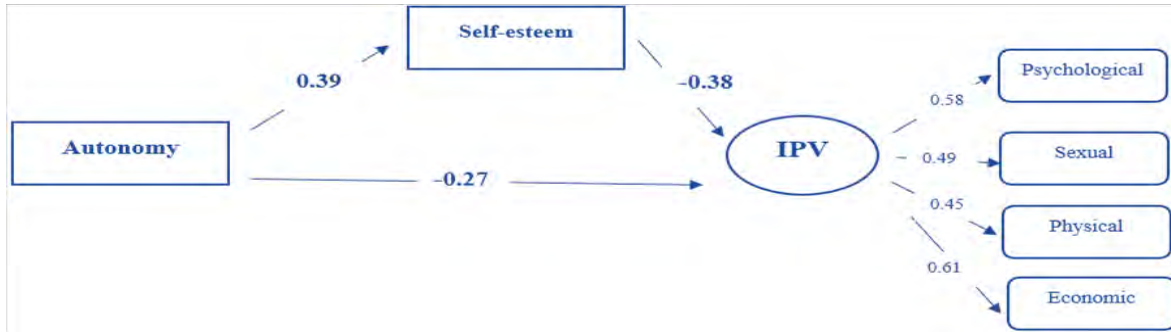


Figure 1. The proposed model

In this model, autonomy is considered an exogenous variable, self-esteem is a mediating variable, and IPV is a criterion variable. The findings of the direct associations among the research variables in the suggested model demonstrate that all path coefficients exhibit statistical significance. Within this model, the correlation between autonomy and IPV is negative and significant. Furthermore, the relationship between autonomy and self-esteem is positive and significant. Additionally, the relationship between self-esteem and IPV is also negative and statistically significant.

Regarding the model fit indices associated with the model, the findings demonstrated that the model exhibited an acceptable degree of fit. Within the model, the CMIN/DF index (2.12) yielded a value of less than 3, while the RMSEA index stood at 0.06, below the threshold of 0.08. Additionally, the TLI, NFI, CFI, RFI, and IFI indices surpassed the benchmark of 0.9. In aggregate, the variables of the model accounted for approximately 37% of the variance in IPV. A depiction of the standardized direct effects in the model can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. Measurement parameters of direct effects of variables in the model

Path	Unstandardized coefficients (B)	Standardized coefficients (Beta)	Std. error	C.R	p
Autonomy toward IPV	-.25	-.27	.11	-3.18	.004
Self-esteem toward IPV	-.27	-.38	.37	-6.37	.001
Autonomy toward self-esteem	.92	.39	.15	5.98	.001

The indirect relationship between variables in the proposed model was tested using the bootstrap method. Table 4 displays the results of the bootstrap method. If the confidence intervals for the mediator do not encompass zero, it signifies that the obtained

indirect effect is statistically significant. As shown in Table 4, the confidence interval related to the indirect effect does not include zero; therefore, this effect is considered significant.

Table 4. Analysis of indirect effect using the bootstrap method

Path	Effect	Boot	Low limit	High limit
Autonomy toward IPV through self-esteem	-.7093	.2414	-1.2052	-.2618

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The main aim of the present investigation was to predict intimate partner violence in women who reside in Bandar Abbas based on the influence of autonomy mediated by self-esteem. The results indicated that autonomy plays a pivotal role in estimating the occurrence of intimate partner violence. The findings demonstrated that individuals with higher levels of autonomy experienced lower rates of intimate partner violence and faced a reduced risk. This revelation emphasizes the importance of recognizing personal needs and autonomy within society. The findings are consistent with the previous studies conducted in this particular field (Knee et al., 2014; Petit et al., 2017). Individuals possessing elevated levels of autonomy are inclined to respond actively to various encounters

as opposed to adopting a passive stance, consequently heightening the probability of reacting to instances of intimate partner violence. Conversely, individuals exhibiting a diminished requirement for autonomy frequently demonstrate a defensive reaction, potentially opting for a passive response or even abstaining from reacting altogether in relation to the manifestation of intimate partner violence. (Ryan et al., 2016); Samadzadeh et al. (2020)(Knee et al., 2014; Petit et al., 2017). Such reactions may be construed as an implicit endorsement of individuals who engage in acts of aggression towards a close companion, thereby reinforcing the cycle of violence. The noteworthy negative correlation between self-esteem and intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant discovery that can be interpreted in various

ways. A strong association can be observed between elevated levels of self-esteem and a diminished occurrence of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in individuals. When individuals possess a robust sense of self-value and assurance, they are more prone to establishing and upholding boundaries within their relationships. High self-esteem empowers individuals to acknowledge their worth and establish expectations for respectful treatment, thereby rendering them less vulnerable to participating in or tolerating abusive behaviors (Whitaker, 2014). Furthermore, individuals with elevated self-esteem are often better equipped to identify warning signs in relationships and confidently address concerns, thus fostering healthier communication patterns. Moreover, those who possess a positive self-image are also more inclined to seek support and resources when confronted with potentially harmful situations, thereby decreasing the likelihood of prolonged exposure to IPV. Ultimately, the cultivation of high self-esteem not only contributes to personal well-being but also acts as a protective element against the occurrence and perpetuation of intimate partner violence (Matheson et al., 2015).

The intercession of self-esteem in the correlation between autonomy and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) can be comprehended through a psychological perspective. Independence, characterized as the capability to make autonomous judgments and exert command over one's own existence, is linked with a sentiment of empowerment and self-determination. When individuals encounter a heightened state of independence, they are more inclined to perceive control over their own fates, make choices that align with their principles, and assert their needs within interpersonal connections.

Within the context of IPV, an individual's level of independence can influence the dynamics of the relationship. Greater independence is tied to a heightened possibility of establishing and sustaining healthy boundaries, thereby diminishing susceptibility to abusive behaviors. Independence can enable individuals to identify indications of control or manipulation and take proactive measures to address or depart from potentially detrimental circumstances (Knee et al., 2014).

In this mediation model, autonomy is the independent variable affecting both self-esteem (the mediator) and IPV (the dependent variable). Greater independence is anticipated to result in heightened self-esteem, which, in turn, is associated with diminished encounters with IPV. Understanding the interceding function of self-esteem assists in illuminating the psychological processes through which independence can influence

the incidence and severity of intimate partner violence (Papadakaki et al., 2009). Interventions targeting the concurrent promotion of independence and self-esteem may prove efficacious in preventing and addressing IPV by granting individuals empowerment within the context of their relationships (Noormohamadi et al., 2021).

In addition to the aforementioned findings, the present study also highlights certain limitations. The primary limitations identified are the restriction of the sample exclusively to women in southern Iran and the utilization of self-report questionnaires. To address these limitations, it is recommended that future iterations of this study be conducted in other regions of the country and employ alternative data collection methods, such as interviews in conjunction with the questionnaire. Furthermore, based on the findings, it is advised to enhance women's awareness regarding the importance of healthy and effective self-esteem skills in order to reduce violence against intimate partners. It is crucial to foster autonomy and develop and implement training programs to strengthen these women's autonomy skills. Additionally, it is suggested that further research be undertaken to explore the role of psychological and social factors in predicting intimate partner violence within specific societies, particularly across different regions of Iran. These studies have the potential to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of this issue.

## 5. Ethical Considerations

### Ethics approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee of University of Hormozgan and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments. Furthermore, this article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors. Correspondingly, informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

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The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

### Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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