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# PERCEPTIONS OF HETEROSEXUAL INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE
## A STUDY OF COLLEGE STUDENTS IN URBAN AND RURAL MAHARASHTRA, INDIA

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# PERCEPTIONS OF HETEROSEXUAL INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE:

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## Abstract

The paper is an exploratory inquiry into whether college students in urban and rural Maharashtra recognize and differentiate between two types of Intimate Partner Violence (IVP), i.e. coercive controlling violence (a pattern of power and control embedded in the dynamics of the relationship) and situational couple violence (isolated or sporadic incidents that do not manifest themselves into a pattern of power and control). This study will help recognize the need for employing the types of IPV in tailoring better educational programs, intervention programs, and law and policy. This is a qualitative study using focus group discussions in rural and urban Maharashtra. The clearest finding in the study was that majority of the participants were unable to recognize and distinguish coercive controlling violence from situational couple violence. If people can recognize coercive control they are better equipped to report it. Moreover, educational campaigns can be designed to educate the public about coercive control. Future research should investigate understanding a population's perceptions of partner abuse as this will help form better predictions of the circumstances in which victims are likely to approach service providers. It will help design draw better education campaigns and intervention programs as well as law and policy.

**Introduction**

Research on Intimate Partner Violence across different populations has been a challenge for researchers, in part because of the non-consensus on the definitions of IPV and in part because what is being termed as IPV includes a range of different experiences that require its own definitions (Johnson, 2008[1]; Stark, 2007[2]; Fincham et al, 2013[3]). The World Health Organization (WHO) has attempted to standardize the definition by including several types of violence. For example, WHO (2012)[4] defines IPV as "any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship". With regards to psychological abuse, WHO's definition focuses on emotional state of the victim and defines it as, "any act or omission that damages self-esteem, identity, or development of the individual" (Ellesberg & Heise, 2005, p.93)[5]. This definition equates partner abuse, often taken as separate units, with isolated assaults or threats. Further, it overlooks the existence of a pattern of acts and tactics that constitute one of the most major forms of violence against women across the globe. This has been termed 'intimate terrorism' or 'patriarchal terrorism' (Johnson, 2008) or 'coercive control' (Stark, 2007), the term this paper subscribes to. This pattern includes tactics of isolation, degradation, exploitation and control (Stark, 2007).What the WHO fails to do, Johnson (2008) and Stark (2007) achieve successfully, naming distinct phenomenon that exist under the umbrella of Intimate Partner Violence.

There are several types of IPV that include intimate terrorism (or coercive controlling violence), situational couple violence, violent resistance and separation instigated violence (Johnson, 2008; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). These are based in the context of power and control of the relationship in which violence takes place (Johnson, 2007)[6]. This paper considers two of these, namely coercive controlling violence and situational couple violence to explore college students' understanding of intimate partner violence. For the purposes of

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[1]Johnson, M. P. (2008). A typology of domestic violence. *Intimate terrorism, violent resistance*.
[2]Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive control*. New York: Oxford.
[3]Fincham, F. D., Cui, M., Gordon, M., & Ueno, K. (2013). What comes before why: Specifying the phenomenon of intimate partner violence. *Journal of marriage and family*, *75*(2), 319-324.
[4]http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/77432/1/WHO_RHR_12.36_eng.pdf
[5]Ellsberg, M. C., Heise, L., & World Health Organization. (2005). Researching violence against women: practical guidelines for researchers and activists.
[6]Johnson, M. P. (2007). Domestic violence: The intersection of gender and control. *Genderviolence:Interdisciplinary perspectives*, 257-268.

convenience, this paper uses the term 'coercive controlling violence' and 'abuse' interchangeably. This is an ongoing pattern of domination in which physical and sexual violence is interwoven with intimidation, degradation, isolation and control. Hence, it uses the term 'situational couple violence' with 'violence' interchangeably. This is a type of IPV that occurs in the context of specific circumstances of conflicts that turn into arguments, which then escalate from verbal aggression to physical violence (Johnson, Leone & Xu, 2014)[7].

The main aim of this paper is to inquire whether the people can recognize coercive control. Are they able to differentiate it from situational couple violence? Further, do they label coercive controlling violence as unlawful? This article explores these questions, among others, and reports the results of a study of perceptions of abuse and violence by college students within heterosexual intimate partner relationships. The paper discusses the implications of this knowledge for researchers and frontline practitioners and policy advocates.

First, this paper describes the two types of IPV, coercive controlling violence and situational couple violence. It then discusses the merits in differentiating between the two. Next, it explains the research undertaken on perceptions of abuse by late adolescents in two law schools in rural and urban India and presents the findings of this study. Finally, it discusses the limitations of the study and implications for further research and action.

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[7]Johnson, M. P., Leone, J. M., & Xu, Y. (2014). Intimate terrorism and situational couple violence in general surveys: Ex-spouses required. *Violence against women*, *20*(2), 186-207.

**Understanding coercive controlling violence and situational couple violence**

Over time, a growing body of empirical research has established the occurrence of diverse types and patterns of IPV (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003[8]; Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011[9]; Holtzworth-Munroe et al, 2000[10]; Johnson, 2006[11], 2011[12]; Kelly & Johnson, 2008[13]).

*Coercive controlling violence* is recognized by its pattern of power and control which is embedded within the dynamics of the relationship (Johnson, 2008; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003). It is characterized using intimidation, emotional abuse, tactics of isolation, minimizing harm caused, denying and blaming, using children as a tactic of control, economic abuse and coercion and threats (Pence & Paymar, 1993)[14]. Stark (2007) defines coercive behaviors as those those that involve the use of force or threats to obtain a desired response in return. Further, control includes structural forms of deprivation, exploitation and command which oblige submission. This is achieved using behaviours that curtail options and deny resources.

Tactics of coercion are used to hurt and intimidate the victim. It is used to instil fear, dependence, obedience, loyalty and shame and is induced primarily through threats, surveillance and degradation. Tactics of control further isolate and regulate the victim's behaviour. These tactics compel compliance to every regulation laid down by the perpetrator by curtailing vital resources, support systems and micro-managing the victim's behaviour. Tactics of control also restrict the victim's access to help and fosters dependence on the perpetrator as the victim has little to no access to vital resources required for autonomous decision making and independent living.

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[8]Graham-Kevan, N., & Archer, J. (2003). Intimate terrorism and common couple violence: A test of Johnson's predictions in four British samples. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, *18*(11), 1247-1270.

[9]Dixon, L., & Graham-Kevan, N. (2011). Understanding the nature and etiology of intimate partner violence and implications for practice and policy. *Clinical psychology review*, *31*(7), 1145-1155.

[10]Holtzworth-Munroe, A., Meehan, J. C., Herron, K., Rehman, U., & Stuart, G. L. (2000). Testing the Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) batterer typology. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, *68*(6), 1000.

[11]Johnson, M. P. (2005). Domestic violence: it's not about gender—or is it? *Journal of marriage and family*, *67*(5), 1126-1130.

[12]Johnson, M. P. (2011). Gender and types of intimate partner violence: A response to an anti-feminist literature review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *16*(4), 289-296.

[13]Kelly, J. B., & Johnson, M. P. (2008). Differentiation among types of intimate partner violence: Research update and implications for interventions. *Family court review*, *46*(3), 476-499.

[14]Pence, E., &Paymar, M. (1993). *Education groups for men who batter: The Duluth model*. Springer Publishing Company.

Thus, coercive control is a tactic that regulates behaviour of the victim to conform to gender stereotypes and perpetuates structural inequalities in place in society. Coercive control does not necessarily manifest itself in high levels of physical violence and is gendered, i.e., it is predominantly perpetrated by men against women (Johnson, 2006[15]; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; Stark, 2007).

On the other hand, *situational couple violence* is by far the most common type of physical aggression seen in the general population of partners, married or cohabiting. This is perpetrated by both men as well as women and is not gendered. It results from situational factors such as arguments between partners which on occasion escalate into physical violence. This signifies that one or both partners have poor ability to manage their conflicts or have poor anger management skills (Ellis & Stuckless, 1996[16]; Johnson, 2006). The most crucial factor however, is that violence and emotional abuse in situational couple violence do not go hand in hand with a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviors. This type of violence does not lead to isolation or exploitation or perpetuation of structural inequalities. Research suggests that this type of violence may include isolated or sporadic incidents or be regularly occurring but does not manifest itself into a pattern of power and control (Babcock et al, 2004[17]; Johnson & Leone, 2005[18]).

Perhaps the most important implication of this differentiation is that it establishes that coercive controlling violence (as opposed to situational couple violence) is a problem of male perpetrated violence against women (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; Johnson, 2006[19]). This is because of the added element of control that coercive control affects women primarily as it involves a qualitatively different dynamic and thus different harms as compared to situational couple violence (Stark, 2006)[20]. This differentiation also has significant bearing for designing intervention programs, policies and laws. Social scientists, the research community

[15]Johnson, M. P. (2006). Conflict and control: Gender symmetry and asymmetry in domestic violence. *Violence against women*, *12*(11), 1003-1018.
[16]Ellis, D., &Stuckless, N. (1996). *Mediating and negotiating marital conflicts*. SAGE Publications, Incorporated.
[17]Babcock, J. C., Green, C. E., &Robie, C. (2004). Does batterers' treatment work? A meta-analytic review of domestic violence treatment. *Clinical psychology review*, *23*(8), 1023-1053.
[18]Johnson, M. P., & Leone, J. M. (2005). The differential effects of intimate terrorism and situational couple violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey. *Journal of family issues*, *26*(3), 322-349.
[19]Johnson, M. P. (2006). Conflict and control: Gender symmetry and asymmetry in domestic violence. *Violence against women*, *12*(11), 1003-1018.
[20]Stark, E. (2006). Commentary on Johnson's "Conflict and control: Gender symmetry and asymmetry in domestic violence". *Violence Against Women*, *12*(11), 1019-1025.

as well women's advocates subscribe to this differentiation and uphold its value in addressing the problem of violence effectively for both, men as well as women (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Pence & Dasgupta, 2006[21]).

There are numerous studies that suggest that within intimate relationships men and women have near equal rate of perpetration of violence (Archer, 2000[22]; Straus & Gelles, 1985[23]; Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980[24]). However, these studies overlook the diversity types of IPV and their respective natures. They tended to apply a single yardstick to any use of force by family members. This in turn affected the issue of gender parity. Therefore, the first step must be to 'name' coercive control. While it is necessary to do so in law and policy, simply naming it in education campaigns is likely to go a long way in public education campaigns (Stark, 2012[25]). The multiplicity of tactics in coercive control suggests that the scope of identification and intervention must be broadened. It is important to recognize the materiality of these tactics that manifest themselves into a pattern of domination and not as singular acts in themselves.

**Method**

A qualitative study was conducted using Focus Group Discussions. This is a technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews and the sample of this group is purposive, even if not representative, and is focused on the topic at hand (Rabiee, 2004)[26]. The target population was late adolescents between the ages of 18-21, college-going law students as this population is rarely included in this type of study. The study chose late adolescents as this group of people has entered college and is more likely to be involved in dating relationships, particularly in the rural scenario. If they are educated about IPV during their pre-marital years, they might be able to recognize it better, feel less isolated and be more willing to seek help when it occurs.

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[21]Pence, E., & Dasgupta, S. D. (2006). Re-examining 'battering': Are all acts of violence against intimate partners the same. *Unpublished manuscript*.
[22]Archer, J. (2000). Sex differences in aggression between heterosexual partners: a meta-analytic review. *Psychological bulletin*, *126*(5), 651.
[23]Straus, M. A., &Gelles, R. J. (1985). (1986). Societal change and change in family violence from 1975 to.
[24]Straus, M. M. A., Gelles, R. J., & Steinmetz, S. K. (Eds.). (1980). *Behind closed doors: Violence in the American family*. Transaction Publishers.
[25]Stark, E. (2012). Re-presenting battered women: Coercive control and the defense of liberty. In *conference Violence Against Women: Complex Realities and New Issues in a Changing World, Les Presses de l'Université du Québec, Québec, Canada*.
[26]Rabiee, F. (2004). Focus-group interview and data analysis. *Proceedings of the nutrition society*, *63*(4), 655-660.

Once aggression is established in relationships, it becomes difficult to unlearn. Moreover, including this population also includes perceptions of populations on dating relationships.

The researcher was able to gain access to a network of students in rural as well as urban Maharashtra, India, and included this population in the study. Third- and fourth-year college students, male and female, from two colleges in Maharashtra were also included. One was located in Nanded (in rural Maharashtra) and the other in Pune (in urban Maharashtra). Therefore, the population has similar socio-economic characteristics and was comfortable talking to the researcher and to each other.

They were recruited to participate in this research project titled, 'Conceptualizations of abuse and violence within intimate partner relationships'. The researcher visited classrooms and introduced the study to the 3rd and 4th year students in the two colleges. Students between the ages of 18 and 21 agreed to participate in the study and were randomly assigned to one-gender (male or female) focus groups. One gender groups were assigned as there is significant evidence showing that women tend to speak less in group settings where men are present. [27] This may affect women's abilities to voice opinions on all issues, particularly those related to gender. Given the nature of the topic, this aspect of the discussion may be even more pronounced. 3rd and 4th year students were part of the same group. Volunteers who met the inclusion criteria were included. Participants received refreshments, but no other incentives were provided for participation.

Focus group data were individually transcribed, translated and recorded. This paper is based on the analysis of this focus group data.

*Procedure*

Four focus groups were first conducted in Pune and four in Nanded. The researcher first started the focus group by asking the question: (a) "How do you differentiate a healthy intimate partner relationship from an unhealthy relationship?"

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[27]Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N, and Rook, D. W. (2002) *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice.* Sage Publications: Thousand Oak, CA, pp 42-43.

Following the discussion, vignettes were presented to the group. Vignettes were created by the researcher to portray realistic scenarios faced by intimate partners. The first vignette included a scenario of a coercive controlling relationship signified by tactics of isolation degradation, exploitation and control along with incidence of sexual violence in a couple of unmarried college going characters. The second vignette included a married couple portraying incidents of situational couple violence with instances of physical assault. Each vignette was designed to realistically represent coercive controlling violence and situational couple violence in two different types of intimate partner relationships.

The researcher then asked the question (b) "What do you think of the behaviour of characters in this vignette?" In addition, participants were asked, (c) "Do you think any of the behaviour is abusive? Why? Why not?" (d) "Do you find any difference in behaviour between the first and the second vignette?" (e) "In cases where you think there is a victim, what should be the help-seeking behaviour of the victim?" (f) "What do you think of the current remedy available through the Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act, 2005?"

**Data analysis**

The first four focus groups were from the urban sample, whereas the remaining four were from the rural sample. Focus group data were individually transcribed, translated and recorded. During transcription, numbers were assigned to each participant to protect their individual identities. The researcher manually transcribed the audio recordings of the focus groups into English and Marathi. The researcher then proceeded to translate the Marathi documents into English. The researcher then used Krueger's (1994)[28] framework analysis as it provides a clear series of steps for first-time researchers. This method guided this researcher by pointing to a method of analysis that was systematic, sequential, verifiable and continuous. Kreuger's (1994) method was used to discover themes that emerged in the data that may explain what participants' perceptions of abuse were. The researcher categorized common thoughts by referring to notes taken during the focus groups and transcriptions.

In the focus groups, participants were given the opportunity to define, label and process behaviors in each vignette from their perspective within the group setting. When questions were posed to the researcher, she responded by reflecting the idea back on to the participants

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[28]Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2014). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Sage publications.

for clarification. The researcher also asked several confirmatory questions and gave the participants opportunities to clarify their statements and ideas. The findings of the study also suggest that the study is dependable as the largely similar themes emerged consistently across different focus groups. That is, focus groups conducted in rural Maharashtra displayed the same attitudes consistently. This was also the case for focus groups conducted in urban Maharashtra (Ellesberg & Heise, 2005[29]; Miles & Huberman, 2002[30]).

The data analysis displayed the following results for each question:

1. *What do the participants characterize as being healthy and unhealthy intimate partner relationships?*

In the first focus group, the themes of dependability, having a good mutual understanding of each other and good sexual intimacy were a few things the participants described as being the characteristics of healthy intimate partner relationships. On the other hand, the participants included excessiveness, and insecurity and controlling behaviours as being characteristics of an unhealthy intimate partner relationship.

In the second focus group, the participants included good communication among partners, trust, personal space, self-awareness and good physical intimacy. In listing the characteristics of an unhealthy intimate partner relationship, they included disrespectfulness, rigidity and insecurity.

In the third focus group, participants listed trust, personal space, good mutual understanding and good physical intimacy as being characteristics of a healthy intimate partner relationship. They listed dominating and controlling behaviours as being characteristics of unhealthy relationships.

In the fourth focus group, participants listed trust, good communication, good mutual understanding and personal space as characteristics of a healthy intimate partner relationship. While they listed dominating behaviours, manipulative behaviours and controlling behaviours as characteristics of an unhealthy intimate partner relationship.

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[29]Ellsberg, M. C., Heise, L., & World Health Organization. (2005). Researching violence against women: practical guidelines for researchers and activists.

[30]Huberman, M., & Miles, M. B. (2002). *The qualitative researcher's companion*. Sage.

In the fifth focus group, good mutual understanding, and trust and equality among partners were listed as the characteristics of a healthy relationship. On the other hand, infidelity and "torturing" the other person was listed as the characteristics of an unhealthy intimate partner relationship.

In the sixth focus group, participants stated trust, self-awareness, openness, good mutual understanding among partners and supportiveness towards each other as characteristic of a healthy relationship. Whereas distrust and using force or dominating the other partner were listed as characteristics of an unhealthy relationship.

In the seventh focus group, good mutual understanding and trust were listed as characteristics of a healthy intimate partner relationship. Infidelity, insecurity, excessiveness and controlling behaviours were listed as characteristics of an unhealthy relationship.

In the final focus group, the participants listed good mutual understanding among partners, trust and sexual attraction as characteristics of healthy intimate partner relationship. The participants did not list any characteristics of an unhealthy relationship.

2. *What do the participants think of behaviours of the characters in the first vignette?*

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*Vignette 1:*

*Neha and Rahul met each other at a college festival, in which Neha was representing her college in the dance competition. After spending about two months talking over the phone and meeting for coffee or to have meals together, Rahul professed his love for Neha. Neha says that she too has feelings for him. She tells him that because she comes from a conservative family, they must take care not to let her parents find out about their relationship.*

*As they go to different colleges, Neha suggests that they should have lunch together every day so that they can spend time with each other. Over the course of few weeks, there are a few times when Neha has to cancel lunch with Rahul because of her dance practice. She finds that Rahul withdraws emotionally and blocks her phone calls and messages and cuts of all channels of communication. In these circumstances, Neha has to approach his friends and have them help him approach Rahul and apologize to him and promise not to cancel any plans with him again.*

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> *Rahul has also expressed that he does not want Neha to continue with her dance practice as it makes her very tired and brings a stress on her as well as their relationship. Often times he has hidden her dance gear so that she may not reach her practice on time. When Neha has questioned this he says that it is due to stress that she forgets where she keeps her things and then blames him for it. He says if only she listened to him and let him take care of her needs that she would be rid of all the stress and lead a happy life with him.*
>
> *Rahul insists that because they are in a relationship with each other they must share their email, Facebook and other social media passwords with each other. Neha does not agree with this and till the time that she does, Rahul suggests that she refuses to share her password because she has something to hide and that she may be having an affair with someone. Rahul frequently checks her online accounts and generally keeps an eye on her online activity. Neha has also checked his accounts a few times.*
>
> *Rahul says to Neha that because they have each other, there is no need for them to spend time with anyone else. He says to her that she must choose between him and her friends. In the past, when Neha has tried to break-off relations with Rahul, he has threatened to call her father and tell her family about their relationship and even share their intimate pictures with them. He says that she must choose him as he loves her a lot and he can keep her happy and look after her properly.*

In the first focus group, most of the participants did not attribute fault to any one characters in the vignette. They suggested that the characters were unable to reach common grounds on the issues portrayed and that they were both trying to control each other. At the same time, one of the participants recognized isolating behaviours portrayed in the vignette. One participant attributed fault to the male character in the vignette stating that he was not giving her space and blackmailing her. The participant also suggested that the female character in the vignette was used to making compromises, hence the results.

In the second focus group, participants agreed that the scenario described was very common in dating relationships. They defined the relationship as being toxic and suggested that the male character was being a "classic possessive boyfriend who is insecure". They recognized

blackmailing as "borderline criminal behaviour" and suggested that instances of impinging upon the other person's privacy go away with age.

In the third focus group, one participant recognized the behaviour as a, "clear case of alpha male dominance. He is just not respecting whatever she does". The participants listed the male character's behaviour as being insecure, socially isolating and irrational.

In the fourth focus group, according to a participant, "over the course of time he seems to have handicapped her in every possible way". The participants recognized isolating behaviours and stated that the relationship described appears toxic. One participant termed the relationship described as being toxic.

In the fifth focus group, participants stated that the male character was trying to hinder the female character's individual growth. They stated that the characters did not understand each other well. One participant noted that the male character's behaviour amounted to "mental torture". Some participants believed that the female character was wrong; in that she belonged to a conservative family and had betrayed her parent's trust by entering into a romantic relationship. Most participants stated that in the relationship portrayed there did not seem to be anything akin to "love".

In the sixth focus group, participants suggested that the male character was not actually in love, but was trying to control the life of the female character. They suggested that complete privacy should exist for both characters. However, one participant blamed social media suggesting, "All this is happening because of social media. She pays more attention there than to her partner, then of course he will be suspicious".

In the seventh focus group, participants viewed the male character's behaviours as being intrusive to the female character's life. They suggested that privacy was an important factor in any relationship and that the characters in the vignette lacked trust. They viewed blackmailing as wrong and one participant suggested that it was indirect violence.

In the eighth focus group, participants viewed the male character's behaviour as being wrong. They suggested that asking someone to discontinue their hobbies or career was wrong as well. They stressed that everyone is entitled to their privacy and that wanting to share passwords is an invasion of that privacy. One participant suggested to the contrary saying that

sharing passwords is a reasonable request given the nature of the relationship. One participant used the word "torture" to describe the actions of the male character in the vignette.

3.  *What do the participants think of behaviours in the second vignette?*

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*Vignette 2:*

*Neha and Rahul studied together in the same college and were involved in a dating relationship for 3 years prior to getting married. After 2 years of marriage, Rahul met with a road accident which made him partially blind in both eyes. Owing to this he has to quit his job and has been unemployed for over one year. Rahul has recently gotten into the habit of drinking of alcohol, sometimes even during the day while Neha is at work.*

*Many times, Neha has told Rahul to seek medical help before the problem gets worse and he is rendered completely useless. This irritates Rahul and he says that Neha should leave him if she is unhappy.*

*Neha says that Rahul should help her around the house when she is away or at least help her clean and cook to make things easier for her. She says that Rahul is becoming useless day by day. Rahul is hurt by this and says that Neha should find herself another husband if he is so useless.*

*Often times when they have fights like these, they do not speak to each other for a few hours, but reconcile soon after.*

*Once when Neha comes back home after work, she finds Rahul completely drunk and on the verge of passing out on the floor. In anger, she pushes him away, due to which he falls and hits his head against the wall. In his drunken stupor, Rahul gets up and slaps Neha across the face and pushes her to the ground. Rahul then proceeds to go to the bedroom and fall asleep.*

*A few days later, Rahul sees Neha talking to a work colleague and out of jealousy pulls her away from the conversation and drags her home. He says that if she doesn't love him anymore she should leave him for that man. Deeply hurt and angered by this, Neha slaps Rahul and locks herself in the bedroom.*

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> *Neha then decides to stay at her sister's house for a few weeks. Rahul apologizes to Neha and she finally agrees to go back to their marital home and live together.*

In the first focus group, participants viewed the behaviours of both characters as constituting domestic violence and abuse. They suggested that both the partners were abusive towards each other.

In the second focus group, majority of the participants viewed the situation as being more complicated because of the nature of the relationship, i.e., marriage. However, they all agreed that both parties were at fault and that they needed to change the way they behaved towards each other.

In the third focus group, participants suggested that both were at fault and that the conflict was because of the circumstances. The participants did not condone the physical violence portrayed in the vignette.

In the fourth focus group, participants pointed to the lack of communication between the characters in the vignette. They suggested that the conflict was as a result of the circumstances portrayed in the vignette. One participant read a high level of insecurity into the male character's behaviour.

In the fifth focus group, participants recognized that the conflict was as a result of the circumstances. They were averse to the behaviour of the male character having taken to drinking alcohol but sympathized with him saying he may have been lonely. They suggested that both the characters needed to have been more understanding of each other's circumstances.

In the sixth focus group, participants suggested that the situation was more complicated because of the nature of the relationship, i.e., marriage. They did not attribute the fault in the conflict to any one party. They suggested that both the characters did understand each other well and hence that was resulting in the ensuing conflict.

In the seventh focus group, participants suggested that both the characters lacked understanding of the situation and each other and that was why the conflict had occurred.

In the final focus group, participants noted that the cause of the conflict was the underlying circumstances and that no one party was at fault. The participants noted that physical violence portrayed in the vignette was wrong.

4. *Can the participants distinguish between the behaviours in the two vignettes?*

In the first focus group, participants recognized both vignettes as being instances of abuse. Majority of the participants termed the first vignette, where no physical violence was displayed, as being less severe. One participant stated, "Would term the first one as very mild abuse, wherein physical aspects were not involved". One participant stated the opposite saying that, "Second one is a classic case of conflicting interest. There appears to be irreconcilable conflict rather than simple abuse which has a rather violent manifestation but would not borderline be called abuse".

In the second focus group, all participants viewed both the vignettes as instances of abuse. They pointed to instances of physical altercations portrayed in the second vignette and termed it as abuse.

In the third focus group, all except one participant termed the instances in both vignettes as constituting abuse. The participant stated, "The first episode I would label that as abuse, but the second one, I personally don't know if I would term it as abuse. It could just be a misunderstanding. One misunderstanding that has gotten them in this situation. So, I wouldn't title, purely title that as abuse."

In the fourth focus group, majority of the participants viewed both vignettes as being instances of abuse. Two participants however suggested that they were unable to reconcile the fact that the second vignette was an instance of abuse. One participant stated, "Second instance I can't really call it abuse, because there is a balance, she hits him, he hits her back. First example is definitely a more negative one."

In the fifth focus group, majority of the participants were able to distinguish between the two vignettes. They stated that the first vignette was an instance of abuse whereas the second vignette was not. One participant observed, "In the second, there is no abuse, these are suggestions, not orders. He didn't force her to do anything, just gave her some advice. When

she talked back, that's when he hit her, and which is why she pushed him in self-defense. She did not intend to hit him."

In the sixth focus group, participants were unable to distinguish between abuse and violence as portrayed in the vignettes. Pointing to the physical altercation between the parties in the second vignette, the participants labelled both the vignettes as abuse.

In the seventh focus group, participants agreed that the first vignette constituted abuse in which the female character was abused. In the second vignette, some participants stated that by asking the male character to help around the house, the female character had abused the male character and hurt his ego. Some participants however stated that the female character had been abused as she is doing all the work and is not being helped by the male character.

In the final focus group, all except one participant stated that there was abuse in both the vignettes. One participant stated that in the second vignette, by asking the male character to refrain from drinking, the female character abused him. All other participants stated that the female character was abused in both the vignettes.

5. *Do participants view any behaviours as being unlawful? What according to the participants should be the help-seeking behaviour of the victim?*

In the first focus group, majority of the participants stated that the victim in the first vignette should leave the abuser. One participant suggested that the victim should seek help from the police since there was an instance of blackmail. In the second vignette, even though the participants viewed it as abuse, they suggested that the couple seek counselling to solve their problems.

In the second focus group, one participant suggested that in the first vignette, "she has a very easy way out". The participants suggested that the victim should break relations with the abuser. Even though the participants viewed the second vignette as being an instance of abuse they suggested that, "They really need to talk it out." The participants did not view any behaviour as unlawful.

In the third focus group, majority of the participants suggested that the victim should seek legal help, with respect to the first vignette. Participants also suggested that she should exit the relationship and approach the police regarding blackmail. While in the second vignette,

majority of the participants viewed it as an instance of abuse. However, they suggested that the couple should get a mediator or a marriage counsellor to solve their issues.

In the fourth focus group, majority of the participants suggested that in the first vignette, the victim should break off the relationship and in the second vignette they should seek counselling. One participant suggested, "Every initiation of abuse should not result in you just leaving the person. Sometimes you can just talk it out. I mean there is always some kind of emotional abuse in every relationship. Just talk it out initially". None of the participants saw the behaviour as being unlawful.

In the fifth focus group, majority of the participants stated that the victim in the first vignette should seek help from friends and family. One participant suggested that the victim should seek legal help and get out of the abusive situation.

In the sixth focus group, majority of the participants suggested that the victims in both the vignettes seek help from friends and family. One participant suggested, "In both the examples, they must learn from everything that has happened, that they were both at fault and that is why all this had happened in their lives, so in the future they must not act this way, they must behave in such a way that it does not create any problems in the future."

In the seventh focus group, for the first vignette, participants suggested that the victim should break off from the relationship. In the second vignette, the participants suggested that they should try and solve the issues between them. One participant suggested that in the second vignette, the female character should approach the criminal justice system as well as seek divorce.

In the eighth focus group, one participant suggested that in the in the first vignette, the victim should seek help from the police. A few others suggested that the matter must be solved amongst themselves. One participant expressly suggested not approaching the criminal justice system as this may lead to incidents of acid attacks or such. In the second vignette, participants suggested that the matter should be solved amongst the parties or with the help of a mediator. One participant stated that separation was not an option as the couple was married.

**Results**

This section describes findings for the questions posed to the participants on the vignettes. The first question posed to the participants was to determine what according to them differentiated a healthy intimate partner relationship from an unhealthy one. In the focus groups with urban participants, good mutual understanding among couples as well as good physical intimacy and giving each other personal space appeared to be the dominant themes for characterizing healthy partner relationships. On the other hand, insecurity and controlling behaviours emerged as the dominant themes characterizing unhealthy partner relationships. In the rural focus groups, trust and good mutual understanding among partners emerged as the strongest themes for healthy relationships whereas infidelity emerged as the strongest theme for unhealthy relationships. Other characteristics listed by participants in both the samples for healthy relationships were reliability, self-awareness, equality among partners and dependency. Disrespect, a rigid attitude and 'torturing' the other person were some of the behaviours listed as characterizing unhealthy relationships.

The next question posed was regarding participants' perceptions and attitudes towards behaviours of the characters in the first vignette. Many of the participants in the urban sample agreed that scenario described was common among dating relationships. They defined the relationship as being toxic. One participant suggested that the male character was being a "classic possessive boyfriend who is insecure". One participant recognized the behaviour as being "a clear case of alpha male dominance. He is just not respecting whatever she does." Participants also recognized the male character's behaviours as being isolating, insecure and irrational. Much attention was not paid to the blackmailing described in the vignette, but one participant suggested that it was, "borderline criminal behaviour." In the rural sample, the participants recognized the male character's behaviour as being intrusive and controlling. Most of the participants stressed for the need for greater right to privacy of both the participants. In this sample, the use of the word 'torture' was a common occurrence. Some participants blamed the female character suggesting that she never should have entered the relationship since her family was conservative.

The next question was regarding perceptions and attitudes of behaviours in the second vignette. In the urban sample, the participants attributed fault in the scenario to both the parties and recognized that the behaviours were caused as a result of the circumstances. In the rural sample, the participants did not attribute fault to any one of the characters and

recognized that the behaviours in the relationship were caused as a result of the circumstances. In both, the urban as well as the rural sample, some of the participants stated that the situation in this vignette was rendered more complex as this relationship was a marital relationship and "not just dating", as one of the participants suggested.

The next question was regarding labelling of the behaviours in the two vignettes. This was the main aim of the study, i.e., to identify whether or not participants recognized and labelled and differentiated coercive controlling violence, termed 'abuse' for the purpose of this study, from situational couple violence, termed 'violence' for the purposes of this study. In the urban sample, even though the participants previously recognized the difference in behaviours in the two vignettes, they suggested that both vignettes were instances of abuse. Only one male participant stated that, "The first episode I would label that as abuse, but the second one, I personally don't know if I would term it as abuse. It could just be a misunderstanding. One misunderstanding that has gotten them in this situation. So, I wouldn't title, purely title that as abuse." While both vignettes were viewed as instances of abuse, the first vignette was seen to be 'less severe' by some of the participants. One participant stated, "I would term the first one as very mild abuse, wherein physical aspects were not involved." Another participant stated, "Second one is a classic case of conflicting interest. There appears to be irreconcilable conflict rather than simple abuse which has a rather violent manifestation but would not borderline be called abuse." In the rural sample, there were more participants who distinguished the behaviours in the two vignettes as constituting separate phenomena. These participants were mostly female. One participant stated, "In the second there is no abuse, these are suggestions, not orders. He didn't force her to do anything, just gave her some advice. When she talked back, that's when he hit her, and which is why she pushed him in self-defense. She did not intend to hit him." However, majority of the participants stated that both the vignettes constituted abusive behaviours.

The next question was whether the participants identified any behaviour as being unlawful and on what they thought the help-seeking behaviour of the victim should be. In the urban sample, even though majority of the participants had stated earlier that both the vignettes constituted instances of abuse, only two participants suggested that some of the behaviour, such as blackmailing, constituted unlawful behaviour. Only these two participants suggested that the victim should approach the criminal justice system through a police complaint.

Majority of the participants, for the first vignette, suggested that the victim leave the abuser. One participant stated, "She has an easy way out". For the second vignette, even though majority of the participants stated that the instances in the vignette constituted abuse, they suggested that they seek help from family and friends or as one participant stated, "They really need to talk it out." Some participants suggested that the couple should seek help from a mediator or a marriage counsellor. In the rural sample with regards to the first vignette, only two participants (out of the entire sample) suggested approaching the criminal justice system. To the contrary, one participant expressly suggested not approaching the criminal justice system as this may lead to incidents such as acid attacks in revenge. Majority of the participants suggested that the victim should seek help from family and friends. With regards to the second vignette, the couple should mediate the matter amongst them and solve it. With regards to both the vignettes, one participant stated, "In both the examples, they must learn from everything that has happened, that they were both at fault and that is why all this had happened in their lives, so in the future they must not act this way, they must behave in such a way that it does not create any problems in the future."

**Summary analysis**

The clearest finding in the study was that the majority of participants were unable to distinguish between coercive controlling violence and situational couple violence. Even though majority of them described controlling behaviours as characterizing unhealthy relationships, they labelled both the vignettes as being instances of abuse even though one was designed to be coercive controlling violence and the other was situational couple violence.

Most participants focused on the physical altercations and thus labelled the incident as being abusive. According to the participants, both vignettes constituted abuse. This suggests that physical altercation, placed in the context of situations and circumstances, still played a major role in the way the participants labelled the incidents. Even though some participants recognized the behaviours of the male character in the first vignette as being isolating, intrusive and controlling, only a few participants readily labelled the two vignettes differently as abuse or violence. It is also important to note here that more females in the rural sample were able to label the behaviours in the two vignettes differently. This could be due to greater experiences and familiarity with the effects of deeply-entrenched patriarchal norms and

values that these participants face on a day-to-day basis. Women in rural India not only fare badly on socio-economic indicators against males, but also against their urban counterparts (Rath, 1996).[31]The rural social system is more rigid and controlling and compels women to surrender their rights to it. Due to this, women in rural areas are affected more by patriarchal norms and gender roles as compared to their urban counterparts.

The next important finding of the study was that even though majority of the participants labelled behaviours in both the vignettes as being abusive, they did not label the behaviours as being unlawful. Only a minority suggested that blackmailing as described in the first vignette was to be looked upon as unlawful. This tendency to not look at partner abuse as unlawful has a profound effect on it being detected and reported. Further, only a minority of the participants suggested that the victim(s) should approach the criminal justice system or report the abuse to the police. Majority of the participants suggested the victim should seek help from family and friends. This reflects the perceptions of the degree of seriousness of the acts and incidents of partner abuse. Thus, the experience is normalized, accountability is not attributed to the perpetrator and the response of normalizing partner abuse is perpetuated.

**Implications for future research and action**

Further research into perceptions and attitudes of people towards partner abuse is the need of the day. Understanding what a population's understanding of partner abuse is will lead to better predictions of the circumstances under which victims are likely to approach service providers such as shelters or the criminal justice system. Future research should aim at documenting the perceptions of survivors of coercive controlling violence. By understanding how they negotiated their way through the violence and at what point they recognized the pattern of coercive control will help develop robust education campaigns.

Limitations of this study must be considered. First, there were a far greater number of female participants than male participants in the sample from urban Maharashtra. Gender differences cannot reliably be predicted based on this. Second, the sample does not represent the range of socio-economic groups present in the country. The researcher cannot authoritatively state that the findings of this study can be generalized to the other populations with similar socio-demographic characteristics in India or to the general population at large.

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[31]Rath, N. (1996). *Women in rural society: A quest for development*. MD Publications Pvt.Ltd..

Finally, findings of the focus group cannot be generalized to the larger population as purposive sampling is employed and the sample size is small. In addition, data can be firmly contextualized as the responses of the participants and their comments are influenced by and specific to the group situation in which they were produced (Plummer-D'Amato, 2008[32], 2008[33]).

In conclusion, future research that aims to explore the understandings and perceptions of partner abuse by college students should also include mixed methods. While the findings in this study are only applicable to the target population, future research should include quantitative methods to further explore how college students understand and perceive partner abuse.

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[32]Plummer-D'Amato, P. (2008). Focus group methodology Part 1: Considerations for design. *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, *15*(2), 69-73.
[33]Plummer-D'Amato, P. (2008). Focus group methodology Part 2: Considerations for analysis. *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, *15*(3), 123-129.