Reviewer's report

**Title:** Controlling behavior, power relations within intimate relationships and intimate partner physical and sexual violence against women.

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**Reviewer:** Victoria Frye

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Controlling behavior, power relations within intimate relationships and intimate partner physical and sexual violence against women

Review

This paper focuses on a critical public health and social issue, examining the prevalence of controlling behavior and intimate partner physical and sexual violence among a population-based sample of Nigerian women. The paper has several strengths, including the importance of the topic and the large and representative population-based sample. However, there are a number of weaknesses that significantly diminish this reviewer’s enthusiasm for the report. The journal has asked the reviewer to answer several questions about the manuscript; in so doing, I will also attempt to draw out what I see as the problems of the analysis as reflected in the manuscript. Below, I describe the paper’s weaknesses; I would consider all such weaknesses to require “major compulsory” revisions in order to render the paper suitable for publication.

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
   - The authors focus their analysis on controlling behaviors and how this phenomenon relates to other forms of partner violence. This is an understudied form of violence outside of the US, thus this is important to document in the Nigerian context.
   - The introduction emphasizes the role of feminist and other theories of violence. The authors emphasize the focus on social structure that feminist theory posits, but the analysis presented focuses very much at the individual level. The authors need to tie the theories within which their research question is contextualized much more tightly to the specific research question asked. Controlling behaviors, according to some, may be a manifestation of an individual-level personality type or psychological factors; how does the analysis presented reflect the various structurally-focused theoretical frameworks presented by the authors?
   - In defining the issue, the authors make several statements that either need to be supported with citations to the relevant literature or elaborated upon in other ways. Specifically, the first sentence is simply no longer the case in the United States; there is a growing body of research that posits that there are various “forms” of partner violence, with some that are the result not of the need to control the partner entirely, but of an argument gone out of control (Michael
Johnson is he architect of this work that sprang from an attempt to understand better the gender symmetry finding in the US literature.). Later the authors assert that controlling behavior is “highly injurious,” but the citations do not specifically support these statements. In the spirit of accuracy and specificity, the authors ought to attempt to locate a reference that specifically identifies the adverse physical or mental health and/or well-being outcomes of controlling behavior.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

- The authors describe the data sources, measures and analyses well.
- The most significant problem with this analysis is with the time frames surrounding the outcomes and primary independent variable. The outcome is lifetime intimate partner violence; the primary independent variable is current experience of controlling behavior by a partner or husband. Thus, it is not possible to connect directly the exposure to the outcome.

3. Are the data sound?

- The DHS dataset is a generally sound one and the authors note that care was taken in conducting research on intimate partner violence and in accordance with WHO standards.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

- Generally, yes. I would have liked to see a reporting of the items endorsed for the controlling behaviors measure. Given how little is known about this form of partner violence in the Nigerian context, such a detailed reported would like be appreciated by readers.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

- This is another major problem of the manuscript. The authors, from the start, use language that implies causality when this is a cross-sectional study where causality cannot be established. Thus, in the abstract’s conclusion they state that “controlling behavior … significantly increases the risk of physical and sexual IPV.” But they cannot establish the direction in the analysis so to conclude that one causes the other (and not vice versa) is simply not supported. The same issue applies to another independent variable assessed “justifies wife beating;” we do not know if this attitude resulted from the lifetime experience of being beaten or is antecedent to experiencing abuse.
- “Throughout the paper, the authors use the term “risk factor” and phrase “increases risk,” but given the problem described above related to the measures and that this is a cross-sectional study where a causal relation may not be established, I think it wise to use a term such as “correlate” or a phrases like “associated with” or “related to” to describe the relations.
- I am also somewhat unclear on how the authors assessed the “cultural context” here. In the Conclusion they state that “the cultural context that they live in predispose them to violence by conferring power upon men…” How did this
paper establish that it is the cultural context that does this?

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
   • Most of the limitations are clearly stated, except they do not note that the major independent variable, controlling behavior, is specific to a current partner, whereas the outcome is a lifetime measure. If this is not the case, then the authors need to make the measurement section much more clear.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
   • Generally yes.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
   • The title should indicate that it is set in Nigeria or was conducted with a sample of Nigerian women.

9. Is the writing acceptable?
   • Yes.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests