Reviewer’s report

**Title:** Intimate Partner Violence Against Women Married as Children: A Qualitative Study in Urban Slums of Lahore, Pakistan

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**Reviewer:** Lauren Ferreira Cardoso

**Reviewer’s report:**

**General Points**

The study’s aims – to describe the types of IPV and contributing factors for experiencing IPV among women married as children are important for the field. As well, research on the IPV experiences of women living in urban slums of Pakistan would be a critical addition to the literature. However, this study exhibits significant limitations to accomplishing these goals. These are enumerated below. In addition, writing quality, grammar, and use of English are another major impediment. An English language expert should help with revisions, though I am concerned that the translations of the interview transcripts may also need validity checks.

**Major Compulsory Revisions**

**Background:**

1. In the third paragraph, the authors begin to establish the scope of the problem of child marriage in Pakistan, but do not go far enough. They state that child marriage is “prevalent” and is “associated with negative health outcomes,” but do not indicate how prevalent or which health outcomes. This needs elaboration. The authors also state that women married as children suffer more violence than women married as adults and includes the statistic “38% vs 25.1%” without giving any context. What study is this from? Is it a representative sample? If not, what was the sample size? Finally, the authors also state that “IPV against young and adolescent women who are married as children is also prevalent in Pakistan,” without offering any figures.

2. The authors do not justify in the background why they chose to conduct their study in urban slums of Lahore. There is a literature that discusses the unique risks of IPV among urban women, particularly those that live in slums. This should be included here.

3. Missing from the background is a discussion about acceptance of IPV in Pakistan. Most readers will not have a familiarity with the context, so including information on attitudes/norms related to violence against women, as well as legal implications, is important.

**Methods:**
Generally, justification of the methods was weak and need much deeper explanation and clarification.

Participant selection:

1. It is not clear why the authors chose interviewees that had “prenatal and postal experience.” At no point in the manuscript do they discuss that participants had to have children. Also, what NGOs did the “gatekeepers” work for? And how did the NGO employees identify the 19 participants. This is critical information.

2. How were the six localities randomly selected and why did the authors choose six? And out of how many localities?

Data collection:

1. Why did the authors choose to use in-depth interviews? Some justification of this approach (as opposed to surveys or focus groups, etc.) would legitimize the methods for the reader.

2. Authors state “Themes for interviews were developed using published scientific literature and everyday observations of the researchers.” What does this mean? Please provide concrete examples of literature, interview questions, and observations of the researchers.

3. If the interview guide was revised based on the feedback of pre-test interviewees – were these cognitive interviews? The manuscript reads as though these were informal comments given to the researchers. The authors should elaborate on this process.

4. Were the interview guides initially written in Urdu? Or were they translated from English? Later it says the transcripts were translated to English. If this is also the case with the interview guides, the authors should explain this process.

5. Who were the interviewers? Are they also the researchers? Or people contracted for this research? And who were they trained by?

6. Interviewers “sharing their respective experiences of married life” with interviewees is not standard research protocol. Is this a customary practice in Pakistan? Please justify.

7. Further elaboration on safety, privacy, and anonymity protocols is needed. Is there any way to link the participant with her responses? How can you ensure privacy and safety? Also, it is standard to implement protocols in anticipation of participants experiencing emotional distress when collecting data on IPV. Did the authors have such protocols? If so, what were they?

Data Management and Analysis

1. It reads as though one person conducted translation and back translation between Urdu and English. Is this the case? If so, accuracy of translations might be compromised. This process is supposed to be completed by at least two
people to ensure quality of translation.

Results

Psychological Violence

1. One major concern I had was the use of the categories “psychological violence, threatened physical violence, attempted and completed physical violence, and unwanted sex” to parse out the results. Types of IPV are not typically delineated this way. Usually, IPV is categorized as physical, sexual, and emotional, though each group has sub-categories (e.g., sexual IPV includes both forced sex using threats/intimidation and physically forced to have sex). See: World Health Organization. (2013). Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence. World Health Organization. The authors need to state whether or not they created these categories (and if so, how) or if these categories were derived from the data collected for this study. Even if the latter is the case, better definition of these categories is needed and more precise differentiation. Isn’t threatened physical violence a form of psychological violence? According to most IPV literature, this is the case. This is a major concern because identifying the “types of IPV” women married as children face is one of the stated aims of the study.

2. The contextual factors contributing to “psychological violence” are vague and needs further explanation. For example, “issues with in-laws, instigation of mother in law, poor house management” are all highlighted as contributing factors, but I’m not sure what the authors mean by these.

3. Authors need to better integrate quotes and findings. Specifically, the quotes should elucidate the finding or findings in the text written just prior. Here is an example of where the authors fail to link the quotes to the narrative (page 9): “It was believed by the victims that men adopt humiliating behavior to show their supremacy over women. According to one of the participant (sic), ‘It not only depicts that they their (sic) husbands were ignorant of the principals (sic) of Islam (which forbid violence and humiliation) but also had poor training by their parents that they legitimize violence against women.’” This quote should demonstrate that the participants believe men perpetrate violence to enact their supremacy, but instead it addresses a different issue.

4. In the third paragraph on page 9, the authors discuss the difference between couples who are closer in age and those that have a “greater age difference.” In order to make a meaningful comparison, additional information is needed. First, how do the authors define close in age? And how do they define greater age difference? Also, how many participants fall in each category? I would be cautious about drawing general conclusions about these two categories.

Threatened Physical Violence

1. Participants’ explanation of drivers of threatened physical violence – like those of psychological violence – need further explanation. What do the authors mean
by “a technique by their husbands to release tension, hide their faults”? Also, what do authors mean by “children’s future” and “family honor” as reasons for participants staying in abusive relationships?

2. Here too, the second quote does not link with the paragraph just preceding it. In fact, it appears to contradict the finding. In the text, “children’s future” is given as a reason women stay in abusive relationships, but the quote highlights how this participant’s children also experience abuse at the hands of her husband.

3. Two participants did not experience threatened physical violence because the couples had “developed mutual trust.” Please explain. Also, did these participants experience any other type of violence? Or no violence at all?

4. The authors stated that “it was interesting to explore that ‘wife’s limits’ were defined by her husband.” This needs further explanation.

5. The authors might want to consider dropping the quantification of different experiences. The sample size is small, so it does not really add to the analysis. As well, in many instances the frequencies are not used with precision. For example, on page 11, the authors state that 13 out of 19 participants stated that “quarrel on domestic issues, financial problems…” contribute to threatened physical violence. Do all 13 agree on all of the reasons? Or just some? This is a problem throughout the manuscript.

6. What do the authors mean by “anything happening against the will of husband led to their threatening behavior”? This is another example of contextual factors needing further exploration/explanation.

Attempted and Completed Physical Violence

1. Were the categories “hit, push, slap, and hurt” derived from participant interviews? Were there other categories? How is “hurt” defined?

2. The distinction between attempted and completed physical violence is unclear. This needs further explanation. What prevented those who attempted violence from actually perpetrating the violence? And how is attempting different from threatening?

3. This section also provides another example of an unclear use of frequency. “It was reported by 4 of 19 participants that some men consider themselves honored, glorious and masculine if they beat their wives.” Did all four participants state all three “honored, glorious, and masculine”? Also, what did the participants mean by these descriptions?

4. The three women who “had not faced violence in their life” because of submissive behavior – they didn’t face any violence? Does this also include the threat of violence? Further exploration of “submissive behavior” would also add a meaningful contribution to the manuscript.

Unwanted Sex
1. The authors title this section as “unwanted sex” and then state in the first sentence that women reported an “unwanted sexual encounter.” Are these the same? They both need defining. As well, why isn’t this called “sexual violence” in the same way the authors use “physical violence”? “Forced sex” could be another possibility. Authors need to substantiate the use of terms.

2. The second sentence needs to be addressed for two reasons. First, the authors highlight two of the “reasons” for the perpetration of unwanted sex, one of which is intoxication. It is important to frame “reasons” instead as “contributing factors.” Forced sex does not occur solely because of intoxication, but it does contribute to the perpetration. Second, the other contributing factor given is “sexual arousal with intense love of husbands.” The meaning of this is unclear.

Discussion

1. In the discussion and conclusion, the authors claim that their data substantiate the “prevalence” of certain phenomenon, including IPV, among women married as children. As a qualitative study, this research does not support any conclusions about prevalence among the broader population. For example, in the second paragraph the authors state, “Our data indicated that a majority of women married as children belonged to a low socio-economic class…” And later in the third paragraph, “Consistent with previous national and international research, our study found that women married as children are at an increased risk or IPV.” The authors cannot make this claim. While the findings of the study can be contextualized within the broader literature, they do not offer quantitative support to previous studies.

2. In the discussion the authors discuss findings from their study that were not mentioned in the results section. This needs to be addressed. For example, in the third paragraph, the authors state that participants did not consider psychological violence a form of violence, particularly if it was perpetrated in private. This was never mentioned previously. The authors state, in paragraph four, that participants living with extended family were more likely to experience IPV. The study does not support these quantitative claims. As well, the authors did not discuss in the findings the difference in experiences of IPV among participants living in extended families and those who were not. This is also the case on page 16 when the authors discuss that people who have previously experienced family violence are more likely to experience violence later in life. In the discussion, the authors suggest this is a finding of the study, but it is never mentioned in the results.

3. As discussed in the results section, the authors need to further clarify the difference between couples closer in age and those with greater age difference. These findings are re-emphasized in the discussion and need a much deeper explanation.

4. The limitations need broadening. Not only can the authors not generalize to rural or “upper social class” women, they cannot generalize at all. The findings
might reflect the experiences of other women married as children living in poor urban areas of Lahore, but it is not certain - particularly given that the method for participant selection is unclear from the manuscript.

Conclusion

1. Here too the authors draw conclusions that are not supported by their findings. This study does not indicate that “women married as children are more vulnerable to IPV” nor that they “have little autonomy and control over their lives.”

2. For the first time authors discuss “patriarchal norms.” The authors should introduce this concept, particularly in the context of Pakistan, in the background.

3. Given that this study does not add to the literature on prevalence of IPV among women who were married as children, but instead contributes contextual factors on the types of IPV this population experiences, conclusions might also include that this group needs specific types of services, etc.

Minor Essential Revisions

Background:

1. The authors need to update their global statistics on intimate partner violence. They state that estimate lifetime prevalence is from 15-71%, however, it is standard now to cite WHO’s new figures from the 2013 study, Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women, which indicates that 30% of ever-partnered women globally have experienced IPV. The full citation: World Health Organization. (2013). Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence. World Health Organization.

Methods:

1. How many people coded the transcripts? Were there systematic cross-checks among coders to ensure agreement on codes/themes? Was this a dialogic process? If so, please elaborate.

Conclusion:

1. Add citations to the first sentence of the second paragraph.

Discretionary Revisions

N/A

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.