Reviewer’s report

Title: Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in the Arab World: A systematic review

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Reviewer: Henrica Jansen

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Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in the Arab World: A systematic review

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General comments

Thank you for this opportunity to review this paper. I realize this has gone through a first review and that substantial improvements have been made. I would like to contribute additional comments and suggestions.

This paper is a valuable contribution to global work about monitoring IPV, providing information from a region where IPV data is relatively scarce. It is well written, providing a summary of approaches across the Arab region and highlighting where comparability issues exist. It points out the significant gaps in IPV data and how internationally recognized and widely used survey methodology, such as the methodology that was developed for the WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence, have not been picked up and used much in the region.

In some areas the flow of the paper is a bit hard to follow, especially because data from different data sources (population based vs facility based; peer reviewed literature vs reports; DHS vs other surveys) are grouped and presented in various ways, thus the reader needs to be clearly guided to know what is looked at each time, and it is sometimes unsatisfying that rates found by different sources within one country or across the region cannot be easily compared (while this was not the purpose of the paper, expectations of readers may be different).
The conclusion section could be strengthened somewhat with clearer indicating the implications of the review in this paper and considerations and recommendations for future measurement of IPV in this region and the value of better comparability for SDG monitoring.

The paper could be strengthened further by clarifying the points as outlined below. All comments are in the spirit of providing a constructive contribution! I enjoyed reading this paper.

Page and line numbers refer to the version with track changes.

Detailed comments

Abstract

I realize comments on the abstract may be hard to address because of word count limit but the following points may be considered to be addressed

P2 line 34: is this PRISMA guidelines or PRIMSA guidelines (as mentioned in the body text)?

P3 line 4 include the percentage where you refer to 'more than half (physical)'.

P3 line 9 Given wide variation in definitions you could hint how this impacts comparability (e.g. 'limiting comparability').

Background

P4 line 1: Arab Leagues should be Arab League (singular). In the paper Arab League and Arab region are used interchangeably. You could clarify this for the readers by adding something like "also referred to as Arab region in this paper". Minor: it will be helpful to have a listing of all 22 countries of the Arab League (e.g. in footnote) so that readers understand the geographical scope of the region.

P5 line 24-31 refers to 'intimate partner'. Subsequent sentences use 'partner'. Knowing that in particular in the Arab region the concept of 'partner' is misunderstood and its use contested it may be good to upfront give a definition of partner and indicate that partner and intimate partner are used interchangeably in this paper and in the Arab context mainly refers to spouses.

P5 line 31-41 include reference year or period for the WHO regional estimate.

P5 line 56. Instead of 'To date' could you indicate 'By… (give the date when this data was checked).
P5 line 58. Could you include the names of the three Arab countries?

Methods

P6 line 29: "Researchers define and measure IPV in diverse ways". Would be good to add 'partnership' because currently the para only talks about types of violence.

P6 line 41-44 can you expand on the number of cases where controlling behaviour was considered separate to IPV and in what way? You also may want to refer to the UNSD operational definition of psychological violence, breaking it down in two domains: emotional and controlling.

P7 line 7-9: PRISMA or PRIMSA? Could you briefly expand on what these guidelines are? What are MeSH terms?

P7 line 21 can you clarify screened for what? For meeting the inclusion criteria?

P8 line 12 could briefly mention why these sources were excluded.

P8 line 14 could you briefly expand on why systematic reviews were treated this way.

P7 line 31 and P8 line 57. Minor: please briefly mention why limit the search to studies done before 2016?

P9 line 9. Minor: year of data collection is a study characteristic rather than part of the article identification.

P9 line 14-17, should you add under d) 'and composite IPV measures as published'?

P9 line 19 etc. There is quite a gap between the introduction of the Risk of Bias assessment approach and to seeing the scores used in Table 3a. Can you include some examples of a final score in this earlier part of the paper (e.g. 'possible range of scores 0-11, with 11 meaning least bias.') and a reminder of the possible range of scores and how to interpret (high/low) in a footnote at the table?

P9 line 31 could you add a brief explanation as to why 300 is an adequate sample size

P9 line 51 explain how you use 'dataset' here, e.g. by adding '(i.e. individual survey)'

Results

Please refer to my comment in general section above about that the flow of the result section is a bit hard to follow. Not sure how and if that could be resolved. It will be good to point out very
clearly each time totals numbers (of studies, articles etc.) are used to refer to which category of studies and to give an explanation where numbers do not match.

Please give Fig 1 a title (assuming this is the result of the search of peer review articles). Please indicate in the figure for the last box (n=63) that this refers to articles (rather than individual surveys).

P10 line 24. Nine were excluded: is this '9 out of the 63' or 'nine that were not included in the 63'?

P10 line 34. You may want to finish this para by concluding how many individual studies were included in the first search arm?

P10 line 46-48. For clarity may add that the excluded studies were not part of the 11 identified in the first line.

P 11. Table 1. I note here 56 individual surveys. Additional File 1 has 45 surveys. For the reader this is confusing. Clarify for example that Additional File 1 contains only the surveys in peer reviewed articles, if that is the case? Note that page 18 (line 46) speaks of 46 studies.

P11 line 43 could you briefly expand on "except in pregnancy", e.g. do you mean 'except for studies measuring prevalence of IPV in pregnant women'?

P11. Line 45 'all national surveys'. You may want to add here (n= xxx) for clarity.

P11 line 45-48. 'Distribution by type' -- add 'of study' for clarity.

P12 line 17-22 you refer to 'ever or currently-partnered' here. As commented for p5, I have experienced that in some Arab contexts, the word 'partner' was NOT understood as meaning 'husband' and in most cases using ever-married would make more sense. In this paper the term ever-partnered is used from global measurement perspective. It may thus be good to refer early on to Tables 2a and 2b here where the partnership definition for each study is indicated. [I see this is addressed in the section on operational definitions, later in the paper, p 15].

P15 line 32. The majority (n=32) of studies… As I am trying to follow what is what it would be good to indicate here out of how many studies.

P15 line 34. Seven additional studies: additional to what: to the 32? If so, explain the relevance of stating that they name or describe the instruments. E.g. you may add 'and thus operational definitions could be derived'

P17 line 56 on controlling behaviours. The (older) WHO-based surveys would have done the same, yes?

P18 line 14. Heading. Would it be clearer to change into 'Prevalence indicator construction'?
P18 line 26 'disclosed emotional, but no physical or sexual abuse' not clear if this is 'only emotional without other physical or sexual violence', please describe clearer.

P18 line 29 similarly 'emotional abuse only, with no physical IPV'. Do you mean emotional abuse only, when occurring without physical abuse? Please describe clearer.

P18 line 29. Add space in of any

P18 line 46. For clarification, those 12 out of 46 studies are only those from peer reviewed journals? Table 1 has 56 studies/surveys. What about the reports?

P19 line 12 include percentage when you refer to 'more than half'

P19 and 20: tables - consider including a footnote with short explanation of risk of bias score

P20, footnote h. Have you explored whether perhaps 'ever' was calculated by using 'before last 12 months'? Not sure if you can check that from the paper, but I have seen this happening.

P21 line 4 could remind readers at this point why so few studies measured sexual IPV given it is a standard component of the WHO, DHS methods (cultural reasons as stated earlier in the paper). Although, this is discussed later in the paper (P24 line 14-19).

Discussion

P 23 line 8 could comment briefly on which countries did VAW prevalence surveys and which not (and perhaps possible reasons for this?)

P23 line 17-37. Readers may expect some more in-depth commentary on the patterns of violence across region, so could remind them that that was not the purpose of this paper.

P23 line 35 could remind at this point the impact that being facility-based is likely to have on estimates of IPV during pregnancy. Not only recall but also selection bias (age, social class etc.).

P24 line 53: Typo: indicators should be indicator (singular)

P24 line 28-p25 line 7. Among the barriers could also mention political-religious barriers underlying the reluctance to measure or address VAW in general (not sure how to word this properly but there is a certain denial of the relevance of VAW in some Arab countries saying that Islam is protecting women and thus VAW is not happening). This could also be referred to in the limitations section.

P25 line 36 reluctance to report and disclose violence is not just a possibility. It is actually true in all regions and all VAW prevalence studies. It is the nature of measuring sensitive issues.
P25 line 46-51 the sentence about reporting quality and other risks of bias is unclear. What do you mean to say here? Can you review and make this clearer?

P26 line 14-17. "…. such analysis were not feasible". May want to add 'in the scope of this paper'.

Conclusions

P26 line 36 rather than 'more high quality data collection' suggest you call for strengthening skills for better data production, hand-in-hand with data literacy and use to shift emphasis from data collection to include analysis and effective understanding and use of statistical information.

P25 line 46 it would be valuable to also recommend dedicated surveys using the WHO methodology as internationally recognized gold standard as usually providing higher quality data than recurring modules in the DHS. The former has the advantage of providing more reliable estimates and usually includes gathering of qualitative information that can be used to triangulate and contextualize the results.

It could be useful also to stress in the conclusions which areas would need most work to improve comparability for international comparison (e.g. psychological violence?). Finally, it would be good to refer also to the value of better comparability for SDG monitoring (and thus not only to achieve SDG goals). [You are actually saying this in the abstract!]

Good luck with the finalization!

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes
Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

I am able to assess the statistics

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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

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