




Acculturation and Intimate Partner Violence Among Kenyans in the United States

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Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is abuse by a partner or spouse. This study focused on IPV among Kenyan immigrants to the United States. Several studies reported connections between IPV and cultural tensions experienced during the acculturation process. Scholars disagree whether acculturation buffers against IPV by exposing immigrants to adaptive social norms or heightens risk factors among those facing challenges acclimating to new settings. Whereas this association has been researched among Latinx and Asian communities in the United States, it is understudied among African and especially Kenyan diasporas. This descriptive study explored how acculturation and IPV among U.S. Kenyans were experienced depending on age, gender, and years of acculturation to determine measures for reducing IPV within U.S.-based diasporas. Results indicated that IPV was most prevalent among long-term immigrants. In terms of gender, women endured IPV more frequently than men. Virtually all participants expressed hesitancy to report abuses for fear of partner retribution or legal repercussions. To minimize the prevalence of IPV, several individuals advocated for community organizations that provide education programs and victim assistance. While most participants agreed that such organizations provide helpful resources, they disagreed on whether these groups could eliminate IPV or achieve household equity among spouses.

Keywords: acculturation, intimate partner violence, IPV, Kenyan diaspora, migration studies

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Introduction

U.S. diaspora studies commonly highlight the major sociocultural stressors immigrants encounter when resettling in a new country. This notion is typically operationalized within the concept of acculturation, the process of social, psychological, and cultural change arising from balancing often incongruent cultural expectations during adaptation to a receiving society, or dominant culture, in the case of modernization (Andronic & Constantin, 2022; Stein, 2018). Immigrants are faced with integrating into a prevailing culture by adopting or adjusting to new norms and values at the expense of cultural beliefs and traditions acquired in their initial enculturation (Guarnaccia & Hausmann-Stabile, 2016; Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2013).

Culture change literature suggests acculturation stress is caused by tension resulting from sociocultural incongruities between host and origin communities (Dressler, 1999; Martinez et al., 2011; Sorensen et al., 2009). Context-specific stressors may arise abruptly from shifts to family responsibilities, gender roles, and lifestyle aspirations, and are often compounded by low social support that frequently characterizes migrant experiences (Kyriakakis, 2014). Moreover, discord resulting from acculturation stress may spill over into other domains of life, frequently leading to deterioration of interpersonal relationships among family, and particularly, abuse of intimate spouses or partners (McNeil et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2022).

Literature Review

Distinct from the broader category of domestic violence, *intimate partner violence* (IPV)—also referred to as interpersonal victimization (Cuevas et al., 2012)—refers specifically to abuse, harm, or manslaughter one commits against their current or former partner, spouse, or intimate relation, but excludes domestic violence involving children, in-laws, grandparents, or other close family (Miller & McCaw, 2019). IPV may include physical battery and death; sexual or emotional abuse, such as controlling behavior; and is not limited to heterosexual relationships (Kaggiah et al., 2022; Tummala-Narra et al., 2019). Importantly, not every disagreement or physical interaction among intimate partners constitutes IPV. As Mitchell and Anglin (2009) have observed, the prevalence, pattern of abuse, intent of action, and power dynamics are largely shaped by cultural values. For example, an instance of a wife jokingly slapping her husband in response to a rude comment is not automatically IPV, but both behaviors (physical and verbal) may constitute abuse if they were to occur regularly and outside of lighthearted intention.

High acculturation stress may exacerbate existing tensions and ultimately lead to more instances of IPV (Sabina et al., 2013), especially among immigrants who relocated to the United States as refugees or endured adverse childhood experiences that already increased their risk for traumatic disorders (Cao et al., 2023; Njie-Carr et al., 2021). Prior studies suggested that rapidly shifting gender and relationship expectations of host societies are primary causes of IPV (Nguyen et al., 2023; Rennison & Planty, 2003; Scott-Storey et al., 2023; Waithera et al., 2022). But research among first- and second-generation immigrants suggested instances of IPV often involve clashes between expectations of origin and host communities regarding traditional family responsibilities (Deslandes et al., 2012; Stiller et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2022).

Available literature proposes two divergent views about acculturation stress and IPV. On the one hand, acculturation may buffer against IPV, especially in the United States where cultural and legal consequences are more severe than in original communities (Chenane et al., 2022; Tobin-Tyler, 2023). For example, immigrants who reported positive acculturation experiences were less likely to experience IPV, especially when more exposed to education resources for victims of domestic violence (Sabri et al., 2018; Small et al., 2022). Immigrants who experienced IPV were likely to seek such support if they embraced norms outside their home culture (Tenkorang et al., 2023). Generally, access to protective resources was more common among those whose support networks were less dependent on relevant diaspora communities (Muruthi et al., 2022).

On the other hand, acculturation stress may heighten individual risk factors for IPV due to the challenges associated with adapting to a new culture and still meeting family expectations; these challenges may lead to increased substance abuse, perceived stress, family disruption, and other deleterious health and social outcomes (Reyes et al., 2022, 2023). Victims are also less likely to seek support when subscribing to traditional beliefs (Cuesta-Garcia & Crespo, 2022), and even those who desire help may feel discouraged due to fear of retribution, deportation of abusive partners, or their children ending up in state custody; these factors call into question the accuracy of official statistics on IPV (Cullen, 2023; Kalunta-Crumpton, 2017; Rennison & Welchans, 2000). The lack of clear consensus about this issue highlights growing needs to understand the prevalence of IPV as an outcome of acculturation.

Purpose of the Study

The current study evaluated acculturation experiences and views of IPV among Kenyan immigrants in the United States. While much research among U.S. immigrant communities has focused on families of Latinx and Asian descent, there are gaps in the literature regarding African diasporas, and particularly those from Kenya (Nnaji & Ojikutu, 2022; Rowlands, 2022). Our research aimed to examine acculturation in relation to experiences of IPV among a sample of Kenyan immigrants, specifically how their length of time living in the United States shaped their encounters with IPV. We further sought to assess age-based and gendered differences regarding the frequency of IPV. In doing so, we hoped to elicit practical strategies for better understanding how individuals and families were impacted to recommend concrete measures for reducing IPV among Kenyan and other diaspora communities in the United States.

RQ: How do experiences of intimate partner violence among Kenyans living in the United States differ depending on one's age, gender, and years of acculturation?

Methods

This descriptive study evaluated the self-reported frequency of IPV among U.S.-based Kenyans to examine how their experiences differed by gender, age, and years of acculturation. We conducted research with $n = 50$ Kenyans residing within U.S. diaspora communities by distributing a 10-question Qualtrics survey through community organizations and leaders via social media, WhatsApp group chats, and email listservs. Invitations to participate in the study were also shared with virtual attendees of meetings hosted by such organizations as Diaspora One Voice Consortium (<https://onevoiceconsortium.org/>) and African Diaspora for Good Governance (<https://adgg.org/>).

In the survey, respondents were asked their gender (male, female, other); age group (<40, 40–59, >60); marital status in Kenya and in the United States (single, married, divorced, widowed); evaluation of relationship change (negative, no change/NA, positive change); experience of IPV in Kenya and United States; frequency of IPV in the United States (infrequently, monthly, weekly, daily); whether they reported experiences of IPV to authorities and the outcome of reporting; whether shifting roles and responsibilities worsened IPV; and whether they believed community organizations that offer protective resources accomplish any change (negative change, no change, positive change). Respondents were also asked to make recommendations for solutions to IPV.

We downloaded raw data from Qualtrics and imported it into SPSS for cleaning and analysis to generate descriptive statistics for evaluating IPV experiences by gender, age, and years of acculturation. Specifically, crosstabulations were used to assess the distribution of IPV outcome variables across categories of age, gender, and years of acculturation. Qualitative data regarding respondent views about the effectiveness of community

organizations for reducing IPV were manually examined for any patterns or insights. Data collection and analysis were overseen by the Florida Gulf Coast University Institutional Review Board (OSRP#:2021-07).

Results

As noted previously, this descriptive study explored acculturation and IPV experiences among U.S.-based Kenyans to determine differences in prevalence by age, gender, and years of acculturation. Demographic attributes and migration details are reported in Table 1 for the total sample ($n = 50$) and by gender. Men comprised roughly a third (32.0%) of respondents and were older than females, with over three quarters in middle and older age groups. Women were overall younger than men, and their age distribution more closely paralleled the total sample, with nearly half in the middle-aged cohort (48.4%). Women distributed evenly by years in the United States (Figure 1a). Only five men migrated in the last 15 years compared with over half of women (53.1%), and about the same proportion of men have resided in the United States for at least 15 years (55.6%). Comparing age groups by years in the United States (Figure 1b) indicated new arrivals typically migrated before the age of 40. Just about an eighth (12%) of middle and older cohorts arrived in the last 10 years and only three from the younger cohort resided in the United States for at least 15 years.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics for the Total Sample and by Gender

Variable	Total Respondents ($n = 50$)	Female Respondents ($n = 32, 64.0\%$)	Male Respondents ($n = 18, 32.0\%$)
Age group	($n = 49/50$)	($n = 31/32$)	
<40	30.6% ($n = 15$)	35.5% ($n = 11$)	22.2% ($n = 4$)
40–59	42.9% ($n = 21$)	48.4% ($n = 15$)	33.3% ($n = 6$)
>60	26.5% ($n = 13$)	16.1% ($n = 5$)	44.4% ($n = 8$)
Years in United States			
<5	20.0% ($n = 10$)	21.9% ($n = 7$)	16.7% ($n = 3$)
5–9	12.0% ($n = 6$)	18.8% ($n = 6$)	11.1% ($n = 2$)
10–14	12.0% ($n = 6$)	12.5% ($n = 4$)	-
15–19	24.0% ($n = 12$)	21.9% ($n = 7$)	27.8% ($n = 5$)
>20	32.0% ($n = 16$)	25.0% ($n = 8$)	44.4% ($n = 8$)
Marital status in Kenya			
Single	60.0% ($n = 30$)	68.0% ($n = 22$)	44.4% ($n = 8$)
Married	36.0% ($n = 18$)	31.3% ($n = 10$)	44.4% ($n = 8$)
Divorced	2.0% ($n = 1$)	-	5.6% ($n = 1$)
Widowed	2.0% ($n = 1$)	-	5.6% ($n = 1$)
Marital status in the United States			
Single	22.0% ($n = 11$)	21.9% ($n = 7$)	22.2% ($n = 4$)
Married	58.0% ($n = 29$)	53.1% ($n = 17$)	66.7% ($n = 12$)
Divorced	18.0% ($n = 9$)	21.9% ($n = 7$)	11.1% ($n = 2$)
Widowed	2.0% ($n = 1$)	3.1% ($n = 1$)	-
Relationship change rating			
Negative change	20.0% ($n = 10$)	25.0% ($n = 8$)	11.1% ($n = 2$)
No change/NA	30.0% ($n = 15$)	31.3% ($n = 10$)	27.8% ($n = 5$)
Positive change	50.0% ($n = 25$)	43.8% ($n = 14$)	61.1% ($n = 11$)

Post-migration changes to marital status conformed to age- and gender-based patterns for the total sample. Single respondents dropped from 60% in Kenya to just over a fifth in the United States (22.0%), while the proportion of currently married men (66.7%) exceeded both women (53.1%) and the total sample (58.0%). Just under a fifth of respondents (18.0%) reported current marital status as divorced, a nine-fold increase borne by women respondents (21.9%) at nearly double the rate of men (11.1%). Larger proportions of men also characterized their change in relationship as positive (61.1%), compared with half of the entire sample, while fewer women reported the same (43.8%). Approximately 30% of respondents reported no relationship change regardless of gender, while four times as many women ($n = 8$) than men ($n = 2$) reported a negative change in their relationship, more than double by proportion.

Figure 1. Frequency of Gender and Age Groups by Years in United States

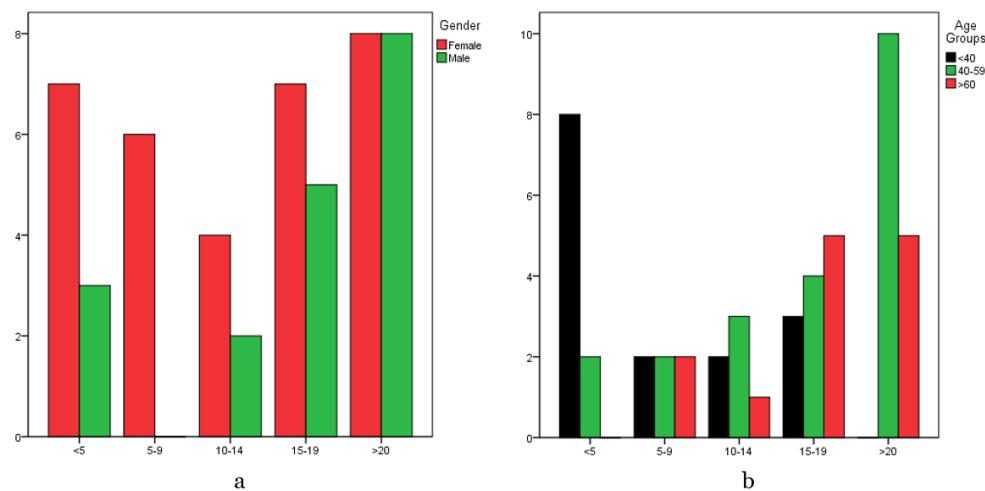
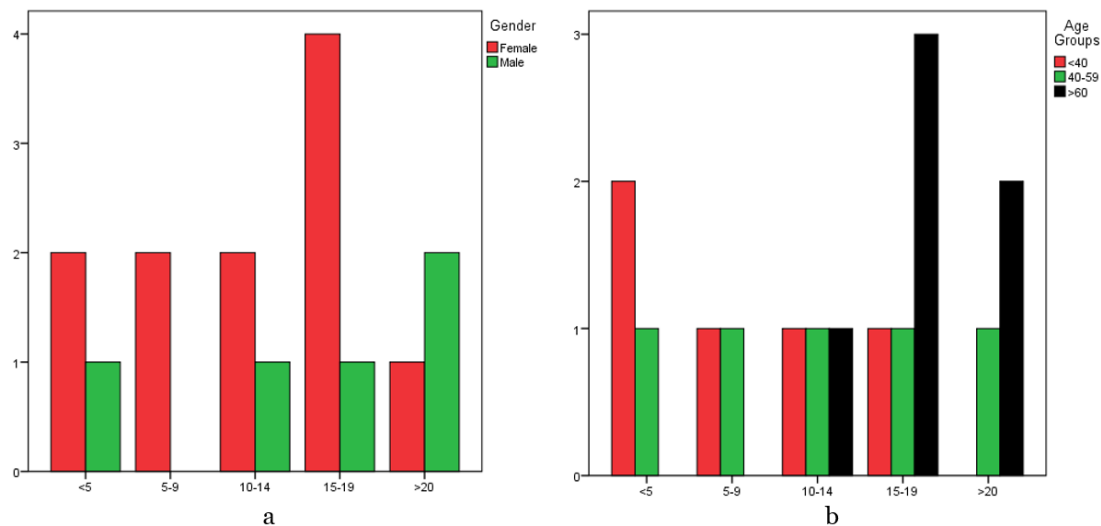


Table 2 shows respondent experiences and perspectives on intimate partner violence. The proportion of respondents who reported experiencing IPV increased after migration to the United States. Men respondents experienced IPV at somewhat lower rates than women in Kenya and the United States but still followed the post-migration increases faced by women and the sample overall. Similarly, when comparing the frequency of IPV by years in the United States (Figure 2), the highest prevalence for women and men was among those residing in the United States for at least 15 years and appeared to impact older migrants more often. But generally, the incidence of IPV was consistent by years residing in the United States despite the greater reported frequency among settled migrants.

Table 2. Respondent Experiences and Perspectives on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Variable in Percentages (%)	Total Respondents ($n = 16/50$)	Female Respondents ($n = 11/32$)	Male Respondents ($n = 5/18$)
Impacted by IPV in Kenya	22.0% ($n = 11/50$)	25.0% ($n = 8/32$)	16.7% ($n = 3/18$)
Impacted by IPV in United States	32.0% ($n = 16/50$)	34.4% ($n = 11/32$)	27.8% ($n = 5/18$)
Frequency of IPV in United States			
Infrequently	62.5% ($n = 10/16$)	63.6% ($n = 7/11$)	60.0% ($n = 3/5$)
Monthly	25.0% ($n = 4/16$)	18.2% ($n = 2/11$)	40.0% ($n = 2/5$)
Weekly	6.3% ($n = 1/16$)	9.1% ($n = 1/11$)	-
Daily	6.3% ($n = 1/16$)	9.1% ($n = 1/11$)	-
Reported IPV to Authorities	32.3% ($n = 5/16$)	36.4% ($n = 4/11$)	20.0% ($n = 1/5$)
Negative Result From Reporting IPV	100.0% ($n = 5/5$)	100.0% ($n = 4/4$)	100.0% ($n = 1/1$)
Say Shifting Roles Worsen IPV	42.0% ($n = 21/50$)	46.9% ($n = 15/32$)	33.3% ($n = 6/18$)
Impact of Equity Orgs. on IPV			
Negative change	4.0% ($n = 2/50$)	3.1% ($n = 1/32$)	5.6% ($n = 1/18$)
No change/NA	74.0% ($n = 37/50$)	78.1% ($n = 25/32$)	66.7% ($n = 12/18$)
Positive change	22.0% ($n = 11/50$)	18.8% ($n = 6/32$)	27.7% ($n = 5/18$)

Figure 2. Frequency of IPV for Gender and Age Groups by Years in the United States

Like the total sample, most women (87.4%) and all men, who reported currently being impacted by IPV, described occurrences as infrequent or monthly, while only two women reported experiencing violence weekly or daily. Men were less likely to report IPV to authorities (20.0%) than women (36.4%), and the IPV victims who made reports to authorities ($n = 5/16$) all claimed negative outcomes. Respondents were also asked whether they thought that changing family roles and responsibilities worsened IPV and if community organizations were successful in effecting change. Fewer than half of respondents (42.0%) attributed worsening IPV to shifting family roles and responsibilities, though proportions were higher among women (46.9%) than men (33.3%). While only a few respondents claimed community organizations caused negative outcomes, about three-quarters agreed that these groups do not bring about any change (74.0%), while men constituted the largest proportion who averred positive effects (27.7%).

Discussion

The purpose of this descriptive study was to explore how experiences of acculturation and frequency of IPV among U.S.-based Kenyans differed with respect to age, gender, and years of acculturation. Survey results indicated that the frequency of IPV was higher among Kenyan immigrants in the United States than in Kenya, and that such experiences of abuse, while consistent by years of acculturation, were most prevalent among long-term immigrants. Still unclear is whether reported increases in IPV are an effect of acculturation stress and shifting cultural expectations, or age-relative due to recent migrants being younger and often single. Change in marital status conformed predictably to age- and gender-based patterns, but what could not be inferred from the present data was how Kenyans in the United States found partners, and particularly, whether those who met partners through the diaspora network were more likely to experience IPV (Kyriakakis, 2014; Muruthi et al., 2022; Stein, 2018).

Women reported experiencing more frequent abuse than men, although males still reported a rather high prevalence of IPV for such a small sample. But men were also more likely to evaluate their relationship change as positive. This may owe to women having endured more severe abuse, which would be consistent with gendered differences documented in the IPV literature (Ngyuyen et al., 2023; Rennison & Planty, 2003; Waithera et al., 2022). But such factors could not be determined from the current data other than the fact that only women reported weekly or daily abuse. However, prior studies have indicated male victims were less likely to report abuse, seek help, and were less frequently the focus of resources for reducing IPV (Scott-Storey et al., 2023; Tenkorang, et al., 2023). Respondents suggested income discrepancies between women and men

as a cause of IPV, especially within families in which women were breadwinners, contrary to the traditional Kenyan ideal of the male provider (Stiller et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2022). Substance abuse among men was a related explanation for abuse and further supported the idea that acculturation stress contributes to IPV (Martinez et al., 2011; Reyes et al., 2022, 2023; Rowlands, 2022).

Proposed solutions for IPV were somewhat divergent. Some respondents suggested increased resources, such as counseling services for couples, education programs, abuse shelters, and greater support for immigrant communities. Past research also found that resources from community organizations were effective for curbing IPV among immigrant groups (Cuesta-Garcia et al., 2022; Deslandes et al., 2012; Kalunta-Crumpton, 2017). However, data indicated a low proportion of respondents who viewed these resources as effective. Additionally, despite many insisting that victims of IPV should be encouraged to report abuse, few respondents admitted to doing so. Kenyans in the sample migrated early and have stayed in the United States for the long term, so reporting IPV could potentially cause legal repercussions, such as deportation or child separation, as the literature further supports (Cullen, 2023; Chenane et al., 2022; Tobin-Tyler, 2023).

Other respondents claimed that the breakdown of traditional gender roles and religious beliefs exacerbated IPV, but the majority asserted that traditional religious beliefs contributed to IPV by encouraging incompatible couples to stay together even with the presence of abuse. This was not surprising, given that Kenyan religious leaders may encourage forgiveness for IPV amid Christian prohibitions against divorce. Consistent with existing literature, acculturation may buffer against IPV by exposing immigrants to different sociocultural norms, greater educational opportunities, and resources for victims, while also heightening risk factors among those who face challenges adapting to a new culture (Andronic & Constantin, 2022; Cao et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023; Small et al., 2022; Tummala-Narra et al., 2019). Future research should elaborate on how new cultural norms specifically pose hurdles to acculturation to evaluate how such elements increase the likelihood of experiencing IPV. Researchers should also examine how U.S.-based Kenyans find partners to assess whether the frequency of IPV differs between relationships formed via diaspora networks and those developed outside immigrant communities.

Conclusion

This study focused on intimate partner violence (IPV) among Kenyans living in the United States to examine the link between IPV and the acculturation process. We found that while acculturation may buffer against IPV by introducing adaptive cultural norms and opportunities, it may also heighten risk factors among those who face challenges adapting to a new culture. IPV was most prevalent among older immigrants who had lived in the United States long-term, and was reported more frequently by women, though a notable share of men claimed to have experienced abuse. Many respondents argued that increased resources and support for immigrant communities are necessary to combat IPV, but disagreed whether existing community organizations are capable of effecting positive change. These findings address gaps in the literature regarding acculturation and IPV experiences of Kenyan immigrants in the United States. Further research must assess specifically how new cultural norms may both alleviate and exacerbate IPV as an outcome of acculturation stress to advance tangible measures for reducing IPV among Kenyan and other diaspora communities in the United States.

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