

Polygyny and Women's Justification of Intimate Partner Violence in India: Evidence from NFHS-5

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Abstract

Intimate partner violence is a major public health concern worldwide. Several studies have attempted to identify its underlying determinants. From a socio-cultural perspective, polygyny—defined as the practice in which a man has multiple wives—is considered a key determinant of IPV. This study examines the association between polygyny and women's justification of IPV in India. Using data from the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), and binary logistic regression models to estimate crude and adjusted odds ratios with corresponding 95 per cent confidence intervals. The results showed that women in polygynous unions had higher odds (AOR: 1.035; 95% CI: 0.910–1.177) of justifying IPV compared with women in monogamous unions. However, the association was not statistically significant after adjusting for socio-demographic characteristics. In addition, women residing in rural areas, with lower educational attainment, belonging to poorer wealth quintiles, identifying as Muslim, residing in the southern region and having limited media exposure were more likely to justify IPV. The findings suggest that polygyny is not independently associated with attitudes justifying IPV once socio-demographic factors are considered. Rather, socio-economic and demographic characteristics appear to play a more substantial role in shaping women's acceptance of IPV. Therefore, interventions aimed at reducing the acceptance of IPV should prioritize improving educational opportunities, improving women's socio-economic status, increasing access to information through media and promoting gender-equitable norms among the sexes.

Keywords: Polygyny, wife-beating, intimate partner violence, NFHS, India.

I. Background

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a significant element of human rights violations and a serious public health issue across the world (Begum et al., 2015). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines IPV as any behaviour by an intimate or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm. It includes physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviour (McCloskey et al., 2016; WHO, 2021) and is linked with a wide range of social and health repercussions. These include unintended pregnancies, stillbirths, miscarriages, preterm births, sexually transmitted infections (McClintock & Dulak, 2021; Muluneh et al., 2023), post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, phobia and suicidal thoughts (Costa & Botelho, 2021; Yonga & Onarheim, 2022).

Given its widespread prevalence and severe consequences, the WHO has characterized it as a “global hidden epidemic” (Mondal & Paul, 2021). Worldwide, nearly 30 per cent women have

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experienced it at some point or the other in their lives. The rate is higher in South Asia (37.7%). It is significantly more prevalent in India than in other South Asian nations (García-Moreno & Amin, 2016). Approximately 41 per cent women in India experience lifetime IPV, which means that nearly four in 10 Indian women have experienced it in their lives (Mittal et al., 2023).

India is a signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and has committed to advancing their targets through national policy and programme implementation. Goal 5.2 of the SDGs aims to eradicate all types of violence against women and girls in both public and private domains by the year 2030 (Nilsson et al., 2016). Over the years, the Government of India has implemented a range of policy and programmatic initiatives aimed at addressing its persistently high prevalence. Its elimination is a critical policy priority and, accordingly, the offence has been codified as a criminal act under Indian penal code 498-A since 1983 (Manna et al., 2024).

However, despite the interventions and legislation aimed at eliminating IPV, its prevalence remains high in India. One important explanation for its persistence is the social acceptance and justification of violence against women (Krause et al., 2016). Evidence suggests that in many societies, including India, it is normal in marital or intimate relationships (Jejeebhoy, 1998; Bukuluki et al., 2021; Onayemi & Ogungbemi, 2022). A recent study conducted across 26 sub-Saharan African countries found that nearly half of the women surveyed justified it - particularly wife beating - most notably in situations where women were perceived as failing to meet their husbands' or broader societal expectations (Aboagye et al., 2021). Evidence also suggests that women who justify wife beating are more likely to believe that their husbands have the right to use violence to discipline or control their wives' behaviour (Dickson et al., 2020; Chauhan and Jungari, 2022). In such situations, women may delay seeking medical care, choosing to remain in abusive relationships. Conversely, women who reject IPV are more likely to be aware of their rights and demonstrate greater autonomy and empowerment (Wado, 2018).

Women's acceptance and justification of IPV are deeply rooted in patriarchy and traditional gender norms (Gardsbane et al., 2022). In male-dominated patriarchal contexts like India, men are commonly accorded authority as household heads and primary decision-makers, whereas women are often assigned roles that emphasize obedience and submission. (Garg et al., 2021). These rigid gender norms cause unequal power relations and legitimize male domination of women (Wandera et al., 2015). Consequently, violence against women may tend to be tolerated when they fail to conform to socially prescribed gender roles and expectations. Previous studies have shown that limited autonomy, lack of participation in household decision-making and controlling behaviour by husbands are significantly associated with IPV and women's acceptance and justification of it (Chauhan and Jungari, 2020; Tran et al., 2016; Wandera et al., 2015; Zegeye et al., 2022).

Patriarchy and polygyny are interrelated. Both rely on unequal gender power dynamics that favour men over women (Anderson & Bidner, 2022; Salahudeen et al., 2026). Polygyny refers to the practice in which one man is married to multiple women simultaneously (Smith-Greenaway & Trinitapoli, 2014). Extant literature suggests that the form of marital union significantly influences the occurrence of spousal violence (Jansen & Agadjanian, 2020; Ahinkorah, 2021). Studies have also identified polygyny as a significant predictor of IPV (Heath et al., 2020). Although the prevalence of polygyny has declined in recent years, it persists in certain communities, particularly in several Islamic and African countries (Jansen & Agadjanian, 2020; Kramer, 2020), as well as in India (Rahaman et al., 2022). In patriarchal settings, polygynous unions reinforce male dominance and unequal power relations within marriage, thereby increasing women's vulnerability to IPV and shaping their acceptance of such violence. Despite the seriousness and widespread prevalence of IPV, relatively few studies have empirically investigated the relationship between polygyny and IPV in

the Indian context (Nagarajan & Sahoo, 2022; Das & Kamthan, 2023), particularly with respect to women's justification of wife beating.

This study aims to address this gap. The findings will not only offer empirical evidence on the role of polygyny in shaping IPV, but will also provide valuable insights for governmental and non-governmental organizations in designing policies and programmes aimed at reducing and ultimately eliminating IPV.

II. Data and Methods

Data

The present study used data from the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) which was conducted in 2019 – 21. India's NFHS - part of the global Demographic and Health Surveys - collects data on a range of emerging issues, including fertility, mortality, family planning, maternal and child health, domestic violence, and communicable and non-communicable diseases at both the state and national levels.

For NFHS-5, a two-stage stratified sampling design was adopted in rural and urban areas. A total of 724,115 women aged 15 - 49 years were interviewed. In the present study, the sample was restricted to currently married women with complete information on all five justifications for IPV, polygyny status and selected covariates. After excluding women with missing information, the final analytical sample consisted of 7,7729 women.

Outcome variable

Justification of IPV was the main outcome variable in this study. It estimated IPV justification using responses to five questions on the justification of wife-beating by their partners. The five circumstances under which wives were reported to be beaten included: (i) going out without informing the husband, (ii) neglecting the children, (iii) arguing with him, (iv) refusing sexual relations and (v) burning food. All questions included three response options: "no," "yes," and "don't know." Responses indicating "don't know" and "no" were re-categorized as "no = 0." Further, women who responded "yes" to any of the five items were considered to have justified IPV. In contrast, those with "no" responses to all the items were categorized as not justifying IPV.

Exposure variable

In this study, the primary explanatory variable was the number of additional wives (co-wives) in the union. In NFHS-5, women who were married or cohabiting were asked, 'Besides yourself, does your husband have other wives?' Women who responded that their partner's had co-wives were classified as being in polygamous unions and were coded as '1', meaning 'Yes', while those who responded that their partners had no other wives were classified as being in monogamous unions and were coded as '0', meaning 'No'. A dichotomous variable was created, with '1' representing polygamy and '0' representing non-polygamy.

Covariates

The covariates included women's age (categorized in the 15 – 24, 25 – 34 and 35 – 49 years ranges), place of residence (rural, urban), level of education of the women and their husbands (no education, primary, secondary, higher), employment status (working, non-working), wealth index (poorest, poorer, middle, richer, richest), geographical region (north, central, east, northeast, west, south),

number of living children (0, 1-2, 3-4, 5+), social group (Hindu, Muslim, others), social group (SC/ST, OBC, others), media exposure (no exposure, any exposure, full exposure).

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to present the sample characteristics. The chi-square test was performed to assess the associations between justification of IPV and the explanatory variables. Binary logistic regression was employed to estimate crude and adjusted odds ratios with 95 per cent confidence intervals. SPSS (version 23.0) was used to perform the statistical analysis.

III. Results

Demographic and socio-economic characteristics

The study found that 1.5 per cent of the women in the sample were in polygynous unions of whom over two-thirds were from rural areas. Nearly half of the women belonged to the 35-49 years' age group followed by 37.9 per cent aged 25-34. With respect to their educational attainments, 27.5 per cent of the women and 16.9 per cent of their partners were illiterate. About half of the women and more than half of their partners had completed secondary education. A quarter of the women were currently working and more than half of them reported having 1-2 children. Over 80 per cent of the women were Hindus, including 43.8 per cent who belonged to the Other Backward Classes (OBC) group. Just over two-fifths of the women reported exposure to at least one form of mass media. The highest proportion of women was in the east and central regions (Table 1).

Bivariate analysis of justification of IPV by background characteristics

Table 2 shows the distribution of justification of IPV by the background characteristics of married women aged 15 – 49 years. The findings indicate that nearly half of the women in polygynous unions gave at least one reason for IPV, which is more than the proportion of women in monogamous unions (39.4 percent) ($p < 0.001$). Women in polygyny consistently reported greater acceptance of IPV than those in monogamous unions. Two-fifths of the women from rural areas offered at least one justification for IPV, the proportion being higher than that of women justifying IPV in urban areas (34.8%). The prevalence of women justifying IPV is seen to increase with age (38.2% among women aged 15 – 24 years and 41.1% among those aged 35 – 49 years). Household income is significantly associated with justification of IPV. Our findings indicate that the proportion of women from the richest wealth quintile justifying IPV was the lowest.

Similarly, the likelihood of justifying IPV was lowest among women with higher levels of education and highest among those with no formal education. A similar pattern was observed with the husband's education, whereby the acceptance of IPV decreased with increasing level of education. "Unexpectedly, employed women exhibited a higher likelihood of justifying IPV compared with women who were not employed. The prevalence of justification of IPV was highest among women from the south region (70.7%). The prevalence of justification of IPV was the lowest among women without children and those with full media exposure relative to their counterparts in the respective comparison groups. The prevalence of justification of IPV was slightly higher among Muslim women (40.6%) and those belonging to the OBC group (42.6%).

Table 1: Demographic and socio-economic characteristics of currently married women aged 15-49 years NFHS-5

Background characteristic	Percentage	Total
Type of union		
Monogamous	98.5	76549
Polygynous	1.5	1127
Place of residence		
Urban	31.0	24074
Rural	69.0	53655
Age group		
15-24 years	16.8	13060
25-34 years	37.9	29434
35-49 years	45.3	35235
Social group		
SC/ST	30.6	23768
OBC	43.8	34020
Others	25.7	19941
Religion		
Hindu	81.2	63121
Muslim	13.8	10697
Others	5.0	3910
Educational level		
No Education	27.5	21392
Primary	13.8	10757
Secondary	45.7	35504
Higher	13.0	10076
Wealth index		
Poorest	18.7	14573
Poorer	20.4	15829
Middle	20.5	15969
Richer	20.4	15867
Richest	19.9	15491
Currently working		
No	73.4	57083
Yes	26.6	20646
Husband education		
No Education	16.9	13134
Primary	14.6	11360
Secondary	52.6	40910
Higher	15.9	12326
Number of living children		
0	9.4	7337
1-2'	57.2	44580
3-4'	27.7	21496
5+	5.6	4316
Media exposure		
No exposure	24.7	19207
Any exposure	43.8	34049
Full exposure	31.5	24473
Geographical region		
North	14.0	10914
Central	23.1	17971
East	24.1	18763
Northeast	3.7	2896
West	14.1	10990
South	20.8	16195
Total	100	77729

Table 2: Bivariate analysis of justification of IPV by background characteristics among currently married women aged 15–49 years, NFHS-5

Background characteristics	Goes out without telling husband % (n)	Wife neglects the children % (n)	Wife argues with husband % (n)	Wife refuses to have sex with husband % (n)	Wife burns the food % (n)	At least one reason % (n)
Type of union						
Monogamous	19.9 (15232)	28.4 (21753)	23.0 (17574)	11.4 (8751)	14.2 (10896)	39.4 (30148)
Polygynous	26.9 (303)	37.6 (423)	37.6 (355)	14.8 (167)	17.0 (192)	49.0 (552)
<i>P-value</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.007	0.000
Place of residence						
Urban	16.8 (4040)	26.0 (6253)	18.3 (4406)	9.3 (2235)	10.8 (2610)	34.8 (8381)
Rural	21.4 (11506)	29.7 (15937)	25.2 (13539)	12.5 (6691)	15.8 (11209)	41.6 (22346)
<i>P-value</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Age group						
15-24	19.5 (2549)	27.3 (3569)	22.8 (2977)	10.6 (1385)	13.6 (1778)	38.2 (4986)
25-34	19.2 (5664)	27.3 (8049)	22.5 (6611)	11.3 (3317)	13.4 (3947)	38.2 (11244)
35-49	20.8 (7333)	30.0 (10571)	23.7 (8357)	12.0 (4225)	15.3 (5377)	41.1 (14498)
<i>P-value</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Social group						
SC/ST	21.0 (4999)	29.5 (7012)	24.7 (5863)	12.8 (3031)	15.3 (3635)	41.0 (9734)
OBC	21.7 (7380)	31.3 (10636)	23.8 (8093)	11.4 (3886)	15.2 (5168)	42.6 (14502)
Others	15.9 (3168)	22.8 (4541)	20.0 (3989)	10.1 (2009)	11.5 (2299)	32.6 (6492)
<i>P-value</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Religion						
Hindu	19.9 (12584)	28.7 (18125)	22.7 (14302)	11.2 (7073)	14.3 (9015)	39.6 (24980)
Muslim	21.1 (2254)	28.0 (2992)	27.0 (2892)	13.7 (1464)	15.2 (1627)	40.6 (4345)
Others	18.1 (708)	27.4 (1073)	19.2 (752)	10.0 (389)	11.7 (459)	35.9 (1402)
<i>P-value</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Educational level						
No education	22.8 (4870)	30.2 (6454)	27.0 (5779)	14.6 (3115)	17.6 (3775)	43.1 (9228)
Primary	22.0 (2367)	30.7 (3305)	27.3 (2933)	13.2 (1420)	16.3 (1753)	42.7 (4589)
Secondary	19.8 (7022)	28.7 (10198)	22.1 (7838)	10.6 (3771)	13.4 (4742)	39.4 (13989)
Higher	12.8 (1287)	22.2 (2232)	13.9 (1396)	6.2 (620)	8.3 (832)	29.0 (2921)
<i>P-value</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Wealth index						
Poorest	22.1 (3223)	27.7 (4031)	28.0 (4080)	14.5 (2116)	17.6 (2559)	40.9 (5963)
Poorer	21.4 (3381)	28.7 (4537)	26.4 (4181)	12.8 (2019)	16.1 (2548)	41.5 (6563)
Middle	22.5 (3585)	33.5 (5351)	25.1 (4005)	12.3 (1971)	15.3 (2444)	44.2 (7057)
Richer	20.1 (3182)	30.9 (4896)	21.0 (3329)	10.7 (1705)	13.3 (2115)	41.3 (6550)
Richest	14.0 (2175)	21.8 (3375)	15.2 (2350)	7.2 (1115)	9.3 (1435)	29.7 (4595)
<i>P-value</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Currently working						
No	18.7 (10701)	26.4 (15085)	22.0 (12545)	10.9 (6204)	13.3 (7575)	37.4 (21323)
Yes	23.5 (4845)	34.4 (7104)	26.2 (5401)	12.7 (2723)	17.1 (3527)	45.6 (9404)
<i>P-value</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Husband education						
No education	24.5 (3217)	33.7 (4421)	28.9 (3798)	16.1 (2117)	18.7 (2455)	46.4 (6090)
Primary	22.7 (2579)	31.2 (3549)	27.4 (3112)	13.2 (1501)	16.5 (1875)	43.8 (4971)
Secondary	19.6 (8025)	27.9 (11407)	22.2 (9077)	10.8 (4413)	13.7 (5612)	38.8 (15874)
Higher	14.0 (1726)	22.8 (2813)	15.9 (1958)	7.3 (896)	9.4 (1160)	30.8 (3794)
<i>P-value</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Number of living children						
0	17.7 (1301)	26.0 (1908)	21.0 (1538)	10.0 (735)	12.9 (943)	36.7 (2694)
1-2'	20.0 (8902)	29.7 (13234)	22.6 (10055)	11.0 (4923)	13.5 (6012)	39.9 (17783)
3-4'	20.6 (4432)	27.7 (5948)	24.3 (5217)	12.4 (2659)	15.9 (3410)	39.8 (8560)
5+	21.1 (911)	25.5 (1099)	26.3 (1136)	14.1 (609)	17.0 (736)	39.2 (1690)
<i>P-value</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Media exposure						
No exposure	21.7 (4177)	26.4 (5068)	26.4 (5073)	14.3 (2746)	17.3 (3316)	39.6 (7614)
Any exposure	20.4 (6946)	30.2 (10292)	23.6 (8044)	11.1 (3783)	14.0 (4776)	40.8 (13891)
Full exposure	18.1 (4423)	27.9 (6829)	19.7 (4828)	9.8 (2398)	12.3 (3010)	37.7 (9223)
<i>P-value</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Geographical region						
North	13.0 (1415)	14.9 (1621)	16.5 (1797)	7.9 (862)	9.3 (1020)	24.2 (2639)
Central	18.2 (3269)	20.2 (3622)	22.0 (3955)	10.7 (1931)	14.6 (2624)	33.8 (6070)
East	16.9 (3179)	21.8 (4086)	23.1 (4326)	11.0 (2067)	12.6 (2369)	32.8 (6160)
Northeast	11.0 (318)	16.9 (489)	14.9 (432)	7.5 (216)	9.0 (260)	26.5 (767)
West	14.7 (1617)	23.2 (2548)	18.1 (1986)	10.9 (1202)	15.8 (1740)	33.1 (3641)
South	35.5 (5748)	60.6 (9822)	33.6 (5449)	16.4 (2648)	19.1 (3088)	70.7 (11452)
<i>P-value</i>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Total	20.0 (15546)	28.5 (22189)	23.1 (17945)	11.5 (8926)	14.3 (11102)	39.5 (30728)

Determinants of justification of intimate partner violence

In Table 3, the unadjusted model indicates that women in polygynous unions were 48 per cent more likely to justify IPV than those in monogamous unions (UOR: 1.480; 95% CI: 1.316–1.665). After adjusting for socioeconomic and demographic covariates, women in polygynous unions had 3.5 per cent higher odds of justifying at least one reason for IPV compared with their monogamous counterparts. However, this association was not statistically significant (AOR: 1.035; 95% CI: 0.910–1.177).

The adjusted results further show that place of residence, wealth quintile, education levels, women's employment status, social group, religion, geographical region and mass media exposure were significant determinants of IPV justification. Women residing in rural areas had 25.5 per cent higher odds of justifying IPV than urban women (AOR: 1.255; 95% CI: 1.206–1.307). The likelihood of justifying IPV declined steadily with increasing household economic status and higher educational attainment among both women and their husbands was associated with significantly lower odds of IPV justification. Interestingly, employed women had 7.2 per cent higher odds of justifying IPV than those not employed (AOR: 1.072; 95% CI: 1.033–1.112). Women belonging to the OBC group had lower odds of justifying IPV compared with those from SC/ST groups (AOR: 0.946; 95% CI: 0.911–0.983), while Muslim women had higher odds than Hindu women (AOR: 1.166; 95% CI: 1.111–1.224). Furthermore, women from the southern region had higher odds of justifying IPV compared with women from other regions (AOR: 7.984; 95% CI: 7.526–8.471). Finally, women with full media exposure exhibited lower odds of justifying IPV than those with no exposure.

IV. Discussion

This study examines the association between polygyny and justification of IPV among married women in India. The findings show that a significant proportion (49%) of women in polygynous unions justified IPV for at least one reason. This proportion is significantly higher than the proportions of married women from other countries who justified IPV: Turkey (41%) and Bangladesh (32.4%) (Marshall & Furr, 2010; Jesmin, 2015). More specifically, the study revealed that the prevalence of IPV justification was consistently higher among women in polygynous unions across multiple scenarios, including going out without informing the husband, neglecting children, arguing with the husband, refusing sex, and burning food. These findings are congruous with those of studies conducted in Ghana, sub-Saharan Africa and Mali (Amo-Adjei & Tuoyire, 2016; Dickson et al., 2020; Aboagye et al., 2021; Aboagye et al., 2025).

The feminist theory suggests that IPV is rooted in patriarchal beliefs and gender power imbalances, where men use violence to prove dominance over their partners (Pradhan & De, 2024). Similarly, Dalal et al. (2012) mentioned that gender power imbalance is an important cause of wife-beating in patriarchal societies. In a traditional patriarchal society, polygynous marriages are more prevalent and women typically hold less power while men's authority is strongly reinforced.

Table 3: Regression analysis of factors associated with justification of IPV among currently married women, NFHS-5

Background characteristic	Justify at least one reason for spousal violence			
	UOR	95% CI	AOR	95% CI
Type of union				
Monogamous®				
Polygynous	1.480***	[1.316, 1.665]	1.035	[0.910, 1.177]
Place of residence				
Urban®				
Rural	1.336***	[1.295, 1.379]	1.255***	[1.206, 1.307]
Age group				
15-24 years®				
25-34 years	1.101***	[0.959, 1.044]	0.953	[0.907, 1.001]
35-49 years	1.132***	[1.087, 1.180]	0.988	[0.937, 1.041]
Social group				
SC/ST®				
OBC	1.071***	[1.036, 1.108]	0.946**	[0.911, 0.983]
Others	0.96***	[0.669, 0.724]	0.974	[0.930, 1.020]
Religion				
Hindu®				
Muslim	1.044*	[1.002, 1.089]	1.166***	[1.111, 1.224]
Others	0.853***	[0.798, 0.913]	0.923*	[0.855, 0.995]
Educational level				
No education®				
Primary	0.981	[0.936, 1.028]	1.033	[0.981, 1.089]
Secondary	0.857***	[0.828, 0.887]	0.898***	[0.856, 0.943]
Higher	0.538***	[0.512, 0.566]	0.603***	[0.559, 0.650]
Wealth index				
Poorest®				
Poorer	1.023	[0.977, 1.070]	0.909***	[0.865, 0.955]
Middle	1.144***	[1.093, 1.197]	0.827***	[0.782, 0.874]
Richer	1.015*	[0.970, 1.063]	0.750***	[0.705, 0.798]
Richest	0.609***	[0.580, 0.639]	0.576***	[0.536, 0.619]
Currently working				
No®				
Yes	1.403***	[1.359, 1.449]	1.072***	[1.033, 1.112]
Husband education				
No education®				
Primary	0.900***	[0.856, 0.947]	1.001	[0.947, 1.058]
Secondary	0.733***	[0.705, 0.763]	0.910***	[0.866, 0.956]
Higher	0.514***	[0.489, 0.541]	0.855***	[0.797, 0.917]
Number of living children				
0®				
1-2'	1.144***	[1.087, 1.203]	1.051	[0.991, 1.114]
3-4'	1.140***	[1.079, 1.204]	1.019	[0.953, 1.089]
5+	1.109***	[1.027, 1.198]	1.051	[0.961, 1.151]
Media exposure				
No exposure®				
Any exposure	1.049***	[1.012, 1.088]	0.958	[0.909, 1.009]
Full exposure	0.921***	[0.886, 0.957]	0.956*	[0.917, 0.998]
Geographical region				
North®				
Central	1.599***	[1.516, 1.687]	1.333***	[1.260, 1.411]
East	1.532***	[1.453, 1.617]	1.141***	[1.076, 1.209]
Northeast	1.129***	[1.028, 1.239]	0.830***	[0.753, 0.916]
West	1.553***	[1.464, 1.648]	1.532***	[1.441, 1.629]
South	7.571***	[7.163, 8.001]	7.984***	[7.526, 8.471]

Note: level of significant: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001; UOR= unadjusted odds ratio; AOR= Adjusted odds ratio; CI= 95% level of confidence Interval. ®= reference category.

In patriarchal societies like those found in India, women are expected to remain submissive and reliant on male family members throughout their lives (Bhuyan & Senturia, 2005). In polygynous marriages, this dynamic may become more pronounced than monogamous union because co-wives may compete for household resources and rights which can further reduce women's negotiating power. Consequently, women in such relationships may be more inclined to justify IPV (Rahaman et al., 2022). However, a polygynous marriage is not the only contributing factor to the justification of IPV. The results of this study also reveal that several socio-economic factors impact women's justification of IPV. Well-educated women had lower odds of justifying IPV.

Education empowers women by enhancing their autonomy and strengthening their capacity to resist forms of suppression (Doku & Asante, 2015). Hence, those with higher levels of education are less likely to justify IPV. Studies in other countries including sub-Saharan Africa and Malawi (Ahinkorah et al., 2018; Conroy, 2014) also reported similar findings. Similarly, women whose husbands were highly educated were less likely to justify IPV. Well-educated husbands are more likely to be aware of women's rights, as found in a study conducted in Mali (Seidu et al., 2022).

An unexpected finding was that employed women were more likely to justify IPV than their unemployed counterparts. A similar finding was in a study conducted by Sabri et al. (2014). However, this contradicts a finding of studies by Linos et al. (2010) and Rashid et al. (2014). One possible explanation may lie in women's employment status, which may be perceived by husbands as a threat or source of embarrassment in patriarchal settings where men are expected to serve as the primary breadwinners for the family (Kimuna et al., 2013). From the perspective of gender socialization, a husband may interpret a woman's employment as a challenge to his traditional masculine role, which can, in turn, contribute to the risk of IPV (Alo et al., 2012).

Consistent with earlier research conducted in Kenya (Odero et al., 2014) and Uganda (Ogland et al., 2014), the present findings indicate that women residing in urban areas were less likely to justify IPV than their rural counterparts. One plausible explanation is that cultural norms and traditional gender expectations tend to be more deeply entrenched in rural settings, potentially limiting the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing the acceptance of IPV. Prior studies similarly suggest that strong cultural ties in rural communities may be significant barriers in the efforts to shift attitudes toward IPV (Gurmu et al., 2017; Putra et al., 2019).

Socioeconomic status also emerged as an important determinant. Women in the highest wealth quintile exhibited significantly lower odds of justifying IPV compared with those in lower wealth categories. Economic disadvantage may increase women's tolerance of IPV due to heightened financial dependence on male partners (Mann & Takyi, 2009). This pattern aligns with broader evidence from sub-Saharan Africa, where economic dependency is significantly associated with women's acceptance of IPV (Darteh et al., 2014; Ahinkorah et al., 2018). As Dhungel et al. (2017) argue that individuals who rely on others for their livelihood may be more inclined to view the actions of those on whom they depend as legitimate or acceptable.

Regional variation was also evident. Women residing in the southern states had higher odds of justifying IPV than those in other regions. This finding corroborates previous research documenting a higher prevalence of IPV in the southern states than in other parts of the country. On the influence of media exposure, women having full exposure to mass media were less likely to justify IPV. Earlier studies carried out in India and Nigeria reported similar findings, showing that regular exposure to mass media significantly reduces the prevalence of IPV justification (Bhattacharya, 2016; Oyediran, 2016). Mass media exposure improves women's awareness and knowledge regarding gender equality, legal rights and the dangers of IPV (Dasgupta, 2019).

Consistent with evidence from Ethiopia (Gurmu & Endale, 2017) and broader sub-Saharan Africa (Uthman et al., 2009), the present study found that Muslim women exhibited higher odds of justifying IPV compared with women from other religious groups. This association may reflect the influence of religiously grounded moral frameworks that shape gender norms and marital power relations within specific sociocultural contexts. However, such patterns arise from context-specific interpretations and social practices rather than from religion per se. This underscores the need for nuanced, culturally sensitive approaches when examining the relationship between religion and attitudes toward IPV.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that women in polygynous unions demonstrate higher levels of IPV justification. However, its justification becomes statistically insignificant after adjustment for socio-demographic factors. The study found that educational attainment, wealth status, regional disparities, religion and media exposure were stronger predictors of justification. Addressing gender norms through education, community awareness and mass media interventions is essential for reducing social acceptance of IPV in India.

Limitations of the study

The study is not free from limitations. The cross-sectional design of the NFHS-5 data imposes important limitations on the ability to draw causal inferences regarding the relationship between polygyny and women's justification of IPV. Because exposure and outcome are measured simultaneously, it is not possible to determine the temporal ordering of events or to rule out the influence of unobserved confounding factors. Further, the study relied on self-reported responses, which are likely to be prone to social desirability biases, potentially leading to under-reporting or over-reporting of attitudes. Additionally, polygyny may be under-reported in NFHS-5 due to reasons like potential legal issues, stigma, social norms, or misreporting, which could affect the accuracy of the estimates. Contextual factors that may have significant influence on justification of IPV such as gender norms, patriarchal beliefs and community-level cultural influences were not directly measured in the survey and, therefore, could not be included in the analysis.

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