



# Aggression in Intimate Relationships: An Examination of Female Dominance and Aggression

Ali Edalati (Corresponding author) & Ma'rof Redzuan Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Tel: 60-1-2279-3206 E-mail: alisq2008@yahoo.com

#### **Abstract**

Several researches have shown that both men and women involve in intimate partner aggression within their relationship. In relation to this, this study attempts to examine the relationship between female's dominance (disparagement, restrictiveness, and authority), and their aggression (physical and psychological). The study employed survey design. It was carried out among a sample of 337 married women (wives) in Shiraz City, Iran, who were identified as engaging physical and psychological aggressions. Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) was employed to measure aggression; meanwhile dominance was measured using Hamby Dominance Scale (HDS). The study employed correlations test to determine the relationships between variables, and Regression Analysis was used to identify the factors that contribute aggressions. The study found that there were positive significant relationships between dominance (disparagement and restrictiveness) and female physical aggression. There were also positive significant relationships between dominance (disparagement, restrictiveness and authority) and psychological aggressions. The result of Regression Analysis showed that the selected factors contributed 10.9% in explaining the psychological aggression. However, two predictor variables of authority and disparagement were found to be significant in explaining psychological aggression. These findings imply that dominance is an important variable to be considered in the analysis of intimate partner aggression.

**Keywords:** Dominance, Female aggression, Women aggression, Physical aggression, Psychological aggression

### 1. Introduction

Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in family aggression, and have heightened the need for investigating this phenomenon. Meanwhile, as more researches become available, more researchers are pointing out the female tend to be more aggressive than men. The preliminary work on female aggression was undertaken by Straus (2008). In his study, it was found that, almost one-third of females as well as male students have physically assaulted a dating partner in a 12 month study period. However, men and women express anger differently. Men tend to use physical aggression, whereas women use more hidden forms of aggression such as rumor spreading and gossiping (Conway, 2005). Because women use covert way, their aggressions are often overlooked since there is no physical, obvious threat to society or partners.

Meanwhile, dominance in family life has been often discussed. One of the questions related to this issue is that who should hold the authority and make decisions in the family. The issue is an inevitable part of human life, discussed in different aspects of society, including families. However, the meaning of dominance in society is not clear. Theoreticians have different ideas about conceptualizing aspects of dominance in families; however many scholars use the term "decision making" for dominance in families. In other words, when it is questioned who holds authority, it specifically refers to decision making in families. Moreover, the criterion of authority among husband and wife can determine the degree of patriarchy in families (Sarookani, 2005). In this context of the study, dominance was referred to the perception of the wives in relation to their dominance in their family life. In other words, it is related to the perception of their dominating role in decision making regarding family affairs. Thus, in this study, it was presumed that the perception towards the their dominance would lead to the their aggressions. In other words, because women felt that they are dominant, it makes them aggressive. According to Hamby (1996), dominance plays an important role in

theoretical framework regarding female aggression in which dominance may be the most widely mentioned risk factor for psychological and physical aggression on an intimate partner. However, as pointed out by Mignon, Larson, & Holmes (2002), male dominance over female has given way to female victimization, thus would lead to female aggression..

Thus, this paper examines the relationship between the perception of female (maried women) dominance and aggression. It focuses on how they use dominance in dealing with their partners. The negative effects of the family aggression on the children and the society are undeniable, and have marked detrimental consequences for both victims and aggressors (Kanoy, Ulku-Sreiner, Cox, & Burchinal, 2003). These latter effects make it worthy of attention from the viewpoint of female aggression.

# 2. Literature Review

According to Berkowitz (1989), aggression stems mainly from an externally elicited drive to harm others. He disagrees with the idea that human beings are somehow "programmed" for violence by their basic nature as was suggested by evolutionary psychologists. As the advocate of the social structural theory, Berkowitz proposes that external conditions cause a strong motive to harm others. In the context of present study, dominance is a belief and behavior that is acquired through experiences that could influence aggression. Meanwhile, Feminist theory proposes that men's dominance over women has lead to victimization of women (Mignon, Larson, & Holmes, 2002). However, others believe that the lack of men's dominance or power in a relationship may cause greater possibility of women violence. In relation to this, Coleman & Straus (1990) argue that women's dominance is related to occurrence of women's violence. They chose 1975 families and identified four groups for making decisions about relationships as follows: male dominance, female dominance, divided power and equalitarian. They found that most of the families were grouped among divided power and equalitarian parts. They found that when hostility between couples is frequent, and it is a women dominant relationship, thus women's violent behaviour toward her husband increases. In term of sex difference in aggression, different theories propose different reasons. Dutton (1994), for example, indicated about mutually violent couples. Meanwhile, Strube (1984) points out that females are more likely to engage in various forms of indirect aggressions such as spreading vicious rumors about the target person and gossiping behind this person's back.

In relations to dominance in family, Sarookani (2005) has noticed three levels for investigation of structure of authority in families. The level are:

- Level one includes the relationship between the couple which is no more than decision making. In this level, either there is women's dominance, men's dominance or the authority is equally distributed.
- Level two discusses the couple as parents.
- Level three is training children composing of one spectrum at one end of which there are parents and at the other end, there is minimum supervision on children.

Based on the structure of authority as suggested by Sarookani (2005), the current sutdy focuses on the level one which deals with the power relationship between husband and wife. Meanwhile, other classifications were developed by Hamby (1996), namely, (a) authority, (b) restrictiveness and (c) disparagement. This current study applied Hamby's classification of dominance in family in which the classification is related to intimate partner aggressions.

Meanwhile, Adi (2007) argued that effort to equalize power is one of the motivations for female aggression. The aim of her study was to recognize how women aggression impacts couples in situationally violent relationships and to realize the motivation for the women to use aggression against their husband. She found that the reasons for women aggression against their partner were due to a desire to equalize the dominance in the relationship, to release built up tension, abandonment, wanting control and retribution. However, Hamberger & Guse (2002) argued that self defence is the main reason for women aggression towards their husbands while men primarily use aggression in order to dominate and control.

In a measurement research, the data of which have been collected from a sample of 300 married women of Shiraz, Mansourian & Ghaderi (2002) was investigated in regard to power dominance in families. They studied the effects of socio-economic variables of family power structure. Survey method was used to measure the effects of the variables. In their study, dominance was been measured under two concepts of work distribution pattern and resolution pattern. Based on the results, husband and wife's education is one of the significant variables in relation to power dominance in families. The women who have higher educational levels have a more crucial role in cooperation and resolution. There existed a negative significant relationship between man's education and his exerting power in families. In other words, the more educated the men are, the less power dominance there will be and women have more chances for cooperating in relations.

Mahdavi, & Saburi (2003) investigated dominance distribution in families living in Tehran. They studied a 200 married woman sample that had at least one child. According to the outcomes, the structure of 37.5% of Tehran families is

Asian Social Science February, 2010

democratic; 39% of them are democratic only to some extent, and 23.5% of families have structures other than democratic. Factors such as conception of husband's tendency toward exercising power against his wife, women's conception about their obedient roles, women's collaboration in choosing their husbands and women's level of education have had crucial roles in the quality and quantity of democratic structure of families.

Mahdavi & Sabouri Khosrowshahi (2003), in an empirical study on power in the family, studied the structure of power within family in three aspects: symmetric relation, area of power and couple strategy. They attempted to offer a definition of the democratic family, which leads to the construction of scales in order to measure the dimensions of family structure. Social survey was applied as the methodological orientation with a sample covering 200 cases. The findings indicate that the structure of power in the south of Tehran is less democratic than that of north Tehran. The results showed that factors such as women's education, their employment and participation in spouse choosing would incline power structure closer to a more democratic family, while submissive self-conception, on the part of women, and the authoritarian one, on the part of men, causes power structure to lean toward a less democratic family.

#### 3. Methodology

Generally the objective of this study were to determine the relationships between dominance (disparagement, restrictiveness, and authority) and aggression (physical and psychological) among married women in Shiraz city, Iran. The other objective was to determine the factors which predict physical and psychological aggression. To achieve these objectives, the study was carried out among married women in Shiraz City, Iran. Having a population of around 1,800,000 people, Shiraz is the fourth biggest city and the biggest southern city in Iran.

The study employed survey design where 346 marired women involved in the study. The number of respondents invloved (sample size) was determined using a formula suggested by Krejcie & Morgan (1970). During the time of the study there were 3510 aggressive married women in Shiraz (the population of the study) who were referred to counselling centres for counselling in relation to their aggressive problem. Thus, Shiraz City provided the researcher with a valid sample of aggressive women. There are over sixty clinics for guidance and family counselling in this Shiraz City. The City is divided into six regions, and from each region A number of clinics was chosen randomly from each regions. From each clinic, the sample was chosen according the proportional number of aggressive women that were referred to them. The selection of the respondents used simple random sampling technique, where the respondets was chosen randomly from the sampling frame (the list of names of the potential respondents in the particular clinic). From the clinics in region one 53 (15.31%) respondents were selected, region two 55 (15.89%) resp[ondents, region three 55 (15.89%) respondents, region four 58 (16.76%) respondents, region five 60 (17.34)respondents, and region six 65 (18.78%) respondents. After choosing the sample and obtaining written consent, the questionnaires were distributed among the sample in person and with the help of other colleagues who were experienced in conducting survey research. However, for those women who have been chosen as respondents, but refused to participate, they were replaced by other women in the same list in which they were selected randomly.

The respondents who agreed to participate were asked to be present an hour prior to their consultation time. Questionnaires were delivered to them and were collected in the same day. The data collection employed self-administered technique in which the respondents themselves completing the questionnaire. This technique was preferred in order to make sure that there was a confidentiality for the women in answering the questions in the questionnaire.

Two main variables in this study are dominance and aggression. The study used Hamby scale (1996) to measure dominance. Hamby had developed 32 Likert-type item scale that examines three forms of dominance - authority, restrictiveness and disparagement. This measurement is called Hamby Dominance Scale (HDS). The term "authority "refers to the power of decision making in a relationship, "restrictiveness" describes the feeling of a partner of the right time when she or he could intrude upon the behaviour of the other one, even when that behaviour does not directly involve Example of the statement says: "I respect my partner's need for privacy" (Hamby, 1996). Furthermore, Hamby describes disparagement (example, "My partner is basically a good person.") as the failure of one partner to evaluate the other partner equally in addition to the overall negative view about the worth of their partnership. Each item was measured using Likert Scale, from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). The measurement of dominance has the reliability coefficient (cronbach alpha) of .85. Meanwhile, the measurement of aggressions used Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) originally developed by Straus (1979). The questions (items) used in this study include the subscales of physical and psychological aggression. The instrument was translated into Persian language. The Cronbach Alpha value of CTS was 0.79.

For data analysis, this study employed a correlation research that investigates how scores on one variables decrease or increase as there is a change in the scores of the other variable(s). Product-moment correlation (for parametric data) and Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Coefficient (where the data obtained from physical aggression questionnaire were not normal and they were non parametric) were calculated to determine the degree of relationship. Positive correlation coefficient index (r) indicated a positive relationship while a negative coefficient reflected

otherwise. Meanwhile, Multiple Regression Analysis was used to determine the contribution of independent variables (types of dominance) and female aggression (physical and psychological). This analysis helps identify independent variables that can be combined to form the best prediction of the dependent variable.

#### 4. Results

In this section, the descriptive data is presented in Table 1 which includes the level of dominance, and aggression (physical and psychological) of the respondents.

The respondents of this study were 337 married women who were voluntarily seeking treatment for domestic violence and aggression. The mean and standard deviation of restrictiveness is m= 24.97 and sd=4.23; the mean and standard deviation of disparagement has been observed as m= 6.77 and sd=4.18; and the mean of authority has been observed as m= 30.33 and sd=5.27. In terms of dominance levels, quite a number of the respondents were in the high level of restrictiveness (30.3%) and authority (22.5%). However, only a small number of them (2.7%) were in high level of disparagement. Moreover, majority of them (51.9%) were in the low level. Thus, the findings reflect that there was a tendency that the respondents had high dominace in terms of restrictiveness.

In terms of aggression, the data show that the mean and standard deviation of physical aggression was m= 6.19 and sd= 8.68. The tabulated data show that 310 (92.0%) of respondents have a low level of physical aggression, while 21 (6.2%) have medium physical aggression levels and 6 (1.8%) have a high level of aggression. The findings reflect that majority of the respondents did not display physical aggression. For psychological aggression, the mean and standard deviation was m= 19.28 and sd=8.13. The frequency distributions show that 78 (23.1%) of respondents have a low level of psychological aggression, whereas 164 (48.7%) of them experience medium psychological aggression and 95 (28.2%) of respondents have high levels of psychological aggression. The findings reveal that more respondents were in the high level psychological aggression compared to those in the high level of physical aggression.

The data representing the correlation between, three types of dominance (disparagement, restrictiveness, and authority) and women aggression (physical and psychological) is shown in Table 2. The Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation test was utilized to determine the relationship between three type of dominance (disparagement, restrictiveness and authority) and psychological aggression. The results show that there were positive and significant relationships between psychological aggression and disparagement (r=.227, and p<.01), restrictiveness (r=.205, and p<.01), and authority (r=.290, and p<.01). The findings imply that the greater the dominance, the more the psychological aggression will be.

Meanwhile, the Spearman's Rho for Rank Order Correlation test was carried out to determine the relationships between three type of dominance (disparagement, restrictiveness, and authority) and physical aggression. The results (in Table 3) show that there are positive relationships between physical aggression and disparagement (rs=.296 and p=.000) and authoriti (rs=.2-7 and p=.000). However, there is no significant relationship between physical aggression and restrictiveness (rs=.079 and p=.150).

As it is transparent, there is a direct positive relationship between dominance (disparagement and restrictiveness) and women's physical aggression. The greater the dominance (disparagement, restrictiveness), the more the physical aggression will be. Although there have always been attempts towards idealizing families, sometimes families can change to be the causes for humiliation. Even the happiest families can be authority oriented because often one of the partners tries to implement authority against the other party. Due to the traditional patriarchal setting of Iranian society, men are not willing to lose their authority as the main decision maker in the family, and when they feel their status is to be threatened, they react against it. As a result there will be verbal arguments and rows.

The Multivariate Regression Analysis was used to determine factors that contribute in explaining psychological aggression. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 4. The result shows that from the three predictor variables, only two predictor variables, namely authority and disparagement were found to be significant in explaining the observed variation in psychological aggression. However, the three predictors has explained only 10.9% of total observed variance to psychological aggression ( $R^2$ =.109).

In the model, the first variable, namely authority, explained the highest variance to psychological aggression and this result is further supported by Pearson product moments correlation analysis. After that, disparagement explained the next highest variance to psychological aggression (DV). The other variable, namely restrictiveness, did not explain any significant variance to psychological aggression (DV).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study focuses on the relationship between dominance and aggression among married women in Shiraz City, Iran. The also attempted to determine the factors that contribute in the explanation of psychological aggression. The results of the analysis show that the three types of dominance (authority, disparagement and restrictiveness) have significant relationship with psychological aggression; however only authority and disparagement have positive significant relationships with physical aggression. Meanwhile, the result of multiple regression analysis reveals that the three types

Asian Social Science February, 2010

of dominance only contribute 10.9% in the explanation of psychlogical aggression. It implies 89.1% of the variation of psychological aggression could be explained by other variables which were not included in this study. Meanwhile, the result also indicates that authority and disparagement were significantly explained the variation in psychological aggression.

Dominance and its accessibility is one of the most important issues in Iranian families in which power is an important phenomenon in the family. However, in Iranian contemporary society, gender roles in the family is not convincing any more. Due to social change, male domination is shifting within the family sphere and with women's involvement in the decision-making process, gender inequality in the family is changing. In other words, inequalities between men and women in terms of power is also changing.

Result showed that there was a direct positive relationship between dominance (disparagement and authority) and women's physical aggression. However, there was no relationship between restrictiveness and physical aggression. On the other hand, there are significant relationships between women's dominance (disparagement, restrictiveness, and authority) and psychological aggression. These findings reflect that the women who have higher dominance have the higher tendency to become physically and psychologically aggressive. Meanwhile, the three types of dominance have small contorbutions (10.9%) in the explanation of psychological aggression. Thus, other independent variables which were not considered in this study might explain the other 89.1% of the variation of psychological aggression. However, from this study it is indicated that the authority and disparagement are important predictors of psychological aggression.

Research on women's aggression and investigation is still in its initial stages in Iran and there is a need felt for such research. With regard to the spread of aggression among women, especially of the psychological type, the destructive effect of psychological aggression compared to the physical one means there must be much more focus on this issue. This matter should be discussed at an academic and university level and there should be more research carried out in this regard. Unfortunately, there exists the patriarchal attitude at universities and always this is the women who are the victims of family aggression of men. This has hardly been considered by researchers. The family disputes, like any other social problems and issues, are bilateral. Both men and women play a role in creating them. This taboo of studying women's aggression should be broken and based on the existing literature, everybody should notice that there is no difference between men and women in showing aggressive behavior, but there is equal likelihood for the amount and type of aggression in both genders. They both should be studied in the contexts and conditions in which aggression occurs. Only in these situations will there be better results, as well as healthier and better families. Lastly, the Government, which is responsible for planning and the related organizations and institutes in charge of counselling and treatment, should be aware of that fact so that they can take better action more consciously as denying this fact will do no good to improve the situation. Women aggression is so important because it led both partners to question their commitment to each other and to the relationship.

#### References

Adi, S. G. (2007). Understanding Female Aggressioni in Situationally Violent Relationships: A Qualitative Study. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Virginia.

Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., & Razavieh, A. (2002). *Introduction to research in education (6th ed.)*. Belmont: CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Berkowitz, L. (1989). Frustration-aggression hypothesis: Examination and reformulation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 106, 59-73.

Coleman, D. H., & Straus, M. A. (1990). Marital power, conflict, and violence in a nationally representative samples of American couples. In Straus, M., and Gelles, R. (eds.). In *Physical Violence in American Families*. Transaction: New Brunswick.

Conway, A.M. (2005). Girls, aggression, and emotion regulation. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 75(2),334-339.

Dutton. (1994). Patriarchy and wife assault: The ecological fallacy. Violence & victims, 9(2), 167-182.

Hamberger, L. K., & Guse, C. E. (2002). Men's and women's use of intimate partner violence in clinical samples. *Violence Against Women*, 8(11), 1301-1331.

Hamby, S. L. (1996). The dominance Scale. Preliminary Psychometric Properties. *Violence and Victims*, 11(3), 199-212.

Kanoy, K., Ulku-Sreiner, B., Cox, M., & Burchinal, M. (2003). Marital relationship and individual psychological characteristics that predict physical punishment of children. *Family Psychology*, 17(1), 20-28.

Krejcie, R. V., & Morgan, D. W. (1970). Determining sample size for research activities. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 30(607-610).

Mahdavi, M. S., & Saburi, H. (2003). Investigating the structure of power distribution in family. *Women Studies*, 2(1), 29-65.

Mahdavi, M. S., & Sabouri Khosrowshahi, H. (2003). The structure of power distribution witin the family. women research, 1(2), 27-68.

Mansourian, M. K., & Ghaderi, F. (2002). Fectors affecting power dominance in families of Shiraz. *Scientific Research Journal of the Faculty of Literature and Humanities. Esfahan University*, 2(30 &31), 269-294.

Mignon, S. I., Larson, C. J., & Holmes, W. M. (2002). *Family abuse: Consequences, theories, and responses*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Sarookhani, B. (2005). Women, power and family. A study on position of women and hierarchy of power in the family. *Women's Research (PAZHUHISH-I ZANAN)*, 3(2), 29-50.

Straus, M. A. (1979). Measuring interfamily conflict and violence: The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). *Journal of Marriage and the family*, 41, 75-88.

Straus, M. A. (2008). Dominance and symmetry in partner violence by male and female university students in 32 nations. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 252-275.

Strube, M., Turner, C.W., Cerro, D., Stevens, J., & Hinchey, F. (1984). Interpersonal aggression and the Type A coronay-prone behavior pattern: A theoretical distinction and practical implicatios. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, 972-987.

Asian Social Science February, 2010

Table 1. The Distribution of Respondents in Relations to Levels of Dominance and Aggression

Variables	n	%	Mean	SD.
Restrictiveness (n=336)			24.97	4.23
Low (< 20)	54	16.1		
Medium (20-27)	180	53.6		
High (>27)	102	30.3		
Disparagement (n=335)			26.77	4.18
Low (< 26)	174	51.9		
Medium (26-35)	152	45.4		
High (>35)	9	2.7		
Authority (n=333)			30.33	5.27
Low (< 26)	81	24.3		
Medium (26-34)	177	53.2		
High (>34)	75	22.5		
Physical Aggression (n==337)			6.19	8.68
Low (<17)	310	92.0		
Medium (17-34)	21	6.2		
High (>34)	6	1.8		
Psychological Aggression (n=337)			19.28	8.13
Low (<12)	78	23.1		
Medium (12-24)	164	48.7		
High (>24)	95	28.2		

Table 2. Correlation Coefficient (r) between Types of Dominance and Psychological Aggression

	Psychological Aggression		
Types of Dominance	r	р	
Disparagement Restrictiveness Authority	.227** .205** .290**	.000 .000 .000	

<sup>\*\*</sup>P≤.01

Table 3. Correlation Coefficient (r) between Types of Dominance and Physical Aggression

Types of Dominance	Physical Aggression		
	r	p	
Disparagement Restrictiveness Authority	.296** .079 .207**	.000 .150 .000	

Table 4. Summary of Regression Analysis of the Main Variables Contributing to Psychological Aggression

Predictors of	Unstandardized	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
DV	coefficients		Unstandardized		
			coefficients		
constant	-1.87	3.53		532	.595
Authority	.303	.097	.196	3.11	.002
Restrictiveness	.162	.116	.084	1.39	.165
disparagement	.297	.109	.151	2.72	.007

 $R^2 = .109$ 

<sup>\*\*</sup>P≤.01