

Social Beliefs that Legitimize Intrafamilial Violence and their Relationship with Sociodemographic Variables

María Elvira Aguirre-Burneo^a

^a Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja

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**All correspondence should be addressed to María Elvira Aguirre-Burneo. Email: meaguirre2@utpl.edu.ec*

Abstract: Domestic violence is a persistent social and public health problem that directly impairs individual well-being. Research indicates that socio-cultural beliefs foster violent practices that often remain hidden within the domestic sphere. This study aimed to examine beliefs that legitimise domestic violence and evaluate their relationship with sociodemographic variables in a sample of 95 adults. Participants completed the Beliefs About Family Relationships Scale, which assesses three dimensions: child maltreatment, domestic violence, and child and adolescent sexual abuse. Analyses comprised descriptive statistics, internal consistency estimates, and non-parametric group comparisons. Results showed significant differences across the assessed dimensions, with higher levels of legitimisation observed for child maltreatment. Significant differences were also found according to sex, whereas the remaining sociodemographic variables showed no statistically significant differences. These findings indicate that violence within the family remains normalised. Consequently, there is an evident need to reinforce educational and preventative strategies that promote family relationships grounded in mutual respect, assertive communication, conflict prevention and resolution, and a culture of peace supported by both families and schools.

Keywords: domestic violence, child maltreatment, intimate partner violence, social beliefs, sociodemographic factors

Introduction

Domestic violence is a multicausal social problem that significantly impairs comprehensive development, physical and psychosocial well-being, and mental health. This phenomenon encompasses manifestations such as child maltreatment, intimate partner violence, and the sexual abuse of children and adolescents (Burghart & Backhaus, 2024; Yu et al., 2022). Consequently, international organisations encourage the investigation of domestic violence, as it represents a major public health challenge given its long-term effects on the mental health, socio-emotional development, and quality of life of affected individuals (UNICEF, 2020; World Health Organization, 2022).

Scientific evidence highlights that violence within the fam-

ily is not confined to the individual behaviour of a family member; rather, it constitutes a phenomenon shaped by social, cultural, and structural factors (World Health Organization, 2021, 2025). In many contexts, certain violent practices are perceived as legitimate forms of discipline or control, sustained by shared belief systems and hierarchical power relations within the household (Bourdieu, 2000). From this perspective, beliefs do not operate as isolated opinions but develop into paradigms that normalise violence. This process involves systems of thought centred on male dominance over women and children, or practices that become entrenched as customary disciplinary methods (Herranz Velázquez, 2025).

Several studies indicate that social beliefs regarding physical punishment, gender roles, and family privacy con-

tribute to the normalisation of violent practices in the home (Bott et al., 2022; Heilmann et al., 2021). In some contexts, corporal punishment continues to be viewed as an acceptable disciplinary strategy, even though empirical evidence links it to adverse outcomes in the socio-emotional development and mental health of children and adolescents (Gershoff et al., 2018). Regarding intimate partner violence, the literature highlights the influence of cultural norms tied to gender inequality, male authority, and the notion that couple conflicts should remain private; such beliefs obscure violent behaviour and impede help-seeking efforts among victims (Illescas Zhicay et al., 2018). Similarly, in cases of child sexual abuse, persistent misconceptions attribute blame to victims, their families, or situational factors, thereby minimising the severity of the abuse and reinforcing dynamics of silence. Empirical evidence suggests that victims frequently experience guilt, apprehension, or fear of interpersonal and familial repercussions because prevailing cultural norms grant little credibility to children and adolescents. This disbelief forms a substantial barrier to disclosure, fostering a culture of silence around these experiences (Abdul Latiff et al., 2024; Alaggia & Collin-Vézina, 2020; McPherson et al., 2025).

The relationship between violence and psychological development has been extensively documented. Early exposure to family violence is associated with emotion regulation difficulties, attachment disruptions, and heightened stress sensitivity, all of which elevate the risk of repeating violent patterns later in life (Alaswad et al., 2026; Teicher et al., 2016). Furthermore, through intergenerational transmission, experiences of maltreatment or neglect often shape relational models, authority dynamics, and caregiving patterns in adulthood (Brown et al., 2023; Ying et al., 2025).

In Latin America, domestic violence is bound to multifaceted social and cultural factors, including gender inequalities, socioeconomic conditions, and normative expectations governing family interactions (Bott et al., 2019; Moreno Fernández et al., 2024). In Ecuador, recent research demonstrates that domestic violence remains a critical issue across diverse social groups and family structures, profoundly affecting mental health, community coexistence, and the exercise of fundamental rights (Aguirre-Burneo & Jaramillo Castillo, 2022; Caguana-Lasluisa et al., 2024; Observatorio Social del Ecuador, 2018; Ramírez et al., 2017; Serrano-Flores et al., 2024).

Understanding the beliefs that legitimise or conceal domestic violence is therefore essential for designing effective prevention and psychoeducational strategies. Examining these beliefs helps identify the cultural underpinnings

that maintain such behaviours, informing socially responsive interventions that encourage equitable, non-violent family relationships. Within this framework, the present study aimed to examine beliefs associated with the legitimisation and concealment of domestic violence and evaluate their relationship with sociodemographic variables in an adult sample.

Methods

The study used a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional correlational design. This design enabled the examination of associations between variables at a single point in time, providing empirical evidence on patterns of relationships within the target population without inferring causality. The sample comprised 95 participants aged 17 to 62 years. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; written informed consent ensured confidentiality in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. Recorded sociodemographic variables included age, sex, marital status, socioeconomic status, and parental educational attainment. For comparative analyses, age was categorised into three groups based on sample distribution and the requirement for sufficient subgroup sizes.

Data collection involved a sociodemographic questionnaire covering personal and family characteristics, alongside the Beliefs About Family Relationships Scale (Escala de Creencias sobre las Relaciones Familiares; Araya, 2003). The scale contains 39 items across three subscales: child maltreatment (14 items), domestic violence (12 items), and child and adolescent sexual abuse (13 items). Responses were registered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting greater legitimisation or concealment of violence. Total and subscale scores were derived by summing the corresponding item scores. Item 13 was reverse-scored prior to analysis due to negative phrasing.

The instrument demonstrated adequate internal consistency across all dimensions (child maltreatment, $\alpha = .88$; domestic violence, $\alpha = .88$; child and adolescent sexual abuse, $\alpha = .81$) and for the overall scale ($\alpha = .92$). Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Descriptive statistics were computed, and non-parametric tests were employed to evaluate differences across dimensions and demographic groups. The threshold for statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Results

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample

Category	<i>n</i>	%
Sex		
Female	60	63.2
Male	35	36.8
Marital status		
Single	72	75.8
Married	14	14.7
Divorced	3	3.2
Cohabiting	6	6.3
Age		
17–24 years	60	63.2
25–34 years	19	20.0
35–62 years	16	16.8
Socioeconomic status		
Low	1	1.1
Lower-middle	20	21.1
Middle	66	69.5
Upper-middle	8	8.4
Father's educational level		
No formal education	3	3.2
Basic education	23	24.2
High school	26	27.4
Technical degree	8	8.4
Undergraduate degree	28	29.5
Graduate degree	7	7.4
Mother's educational level		
No formal education	3	3.2
Basic education	19	20.0
High school	30	31.6
Technical degree	7	7.4
Undergraduate degree	29	30.5
Graduate degree	7	7.4

Note. *N* = 95.

The sample (*N* = 95) comprised 63.2% women and 36.8% men (see Table 1). Participants were predominantly single (75.8%) and aged 17 to 62 years, with the largest proportion falling within the young adult bracket (17–24 years; *M* = 21.45, *SD* = 3.12). In terms of socioeconomic background, most participants identified as middle class (69.5%). Regarding parental education, secondary education was the most prevalent qualification (31.6% for mothers, 27.4% for fathers), closely followed by undergraduate degree attainment (30.5% for mothers, 29.5% for fathers), reflecting marginally higher educational levels among mothers. Complete data were available for all 95 participants across all assessed variables.

Descriptive statistics were computed for the total Beliefs About Family Relationships Scale and its subscales to examine distribution patterns and compare legitimisation levels across violence subtypes (Table 2). Across the total scale, scores averaged 95.01 (*SD* = 24.85, range: 43–191). Among the subscales, child maltreatment yielded

the highest scores (*M* = 38.96, *SD* = 12.33), followed by child and adolescent sexual abuse (*M* = 30.64, *SD* = 9.38) and domestic violence (*M* = 25.41, *SD* = 9.16). A related-samples Friedman test indicated statistically significant differences across the three dimensions, $\chi^2(2) = 90.75$, $p < .001$, demonstrating that legitimisation of violence varied substantially by subtype.

Analyses examining associations between the three dimensions and sociodemographic variables (age, marital status, socioeconomic status, and parental education) revealed no statistically significant differences in legitimisation levels. Conversely, significant differences emerged according to sex, with men obtaining systematically higher mean ranks than women across all three subscales, indicating a stronger overall tendency among men to legitimise domestic violence.

However, the analysis using the Mann-Whitney *U* test showed statistically significant differences only in the child maltreatment dimension (*U* = 1338, $z = 2.22$, $p =$

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the Scale Dimensions

Dimension	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Total Beliefs About Family Relationships	43	191	95.01	24.85
Child maltreatment	16	66	38.96	12.33
Sexual abuse	13	65	30.64	9.38
Domestic violence	12	60	25.41	9.16

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation.

.026, $r = .23$), in which men obtained higher mean ranks ($R = 56.23$) compared to women ($R = 43.20$; Figure 1).

Discussion

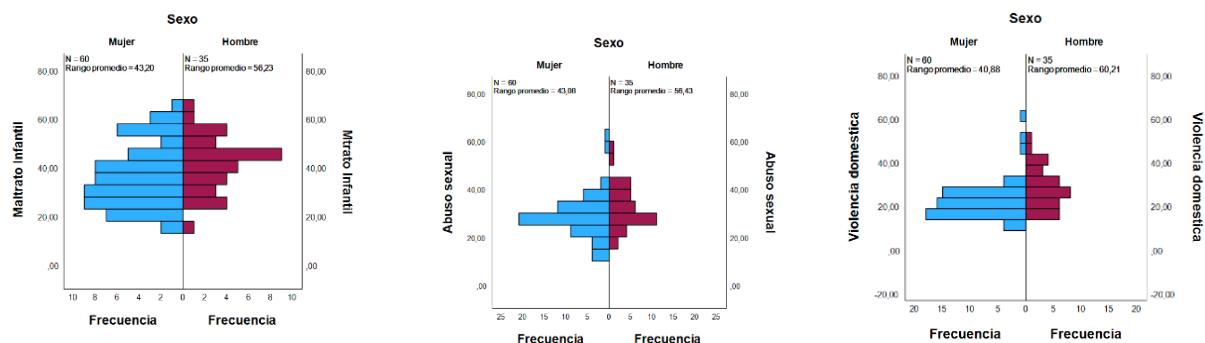
The present findings indicate that among the various forms of domestic violence, child maltreatment is the most widely legitimised, representing a known risk factor for subsequent mental health difficulties in adulthood (Cuartas, 2021; De Ruiter et al., 2022; Gershoff et al., 2025). Child maltreatment yielded the highest endorsement in this sample, corroborating previous evidence that physical punishment continues to be viewed as an acceptable disciplinary method in various settings (Gershoff et al., 2018; Lansford et al., 2014). Culturally, these results suggest the persistence of normative frameworks that equate parental authority with control and coercion. Rather than being recognised as violent behaviour, physical punishment is often interpreted as a legitimate corrective tool within child-rearing practices. This perspective reflects deeply ingrained beliefs regarding parental authority and the formative utility of punishment for behavioural regulation, thereby perpetuating its normalisation in everyday family dynamics (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2021; Richards et al., 2021).

From a sociocultural standpoint, such beliefs stem from traditional models of parental authority and the intergenerational transmission of coercive disciplinary practices.

Social expectations concerning authority, obedience, and control shape the interpretation of specific behaviours within the family, facilitating the legitimisation of violence when framed as essential to child discipline (Heilmann et al., 2021; Ying et al., 2025). These representations foster the justification of coercive acts, particularly when linked to adult authority and the socialisation process. Consequently, cultural norms regarding discipline play a decisive role in sustaining tolerance for domestic violence, reinforcing its repetition across generations (Fulu et al., 2017; World Health Organization, 2025).

The differences identified by sex suggest that gender roles significantly influence how disciplinary practices are perceived and justified (Heise & Kotsadam, 2015; Jewkes et al., 2017). Social constructions of authority within the household yield diverging attitudes toward violence as an instrument of behavioural regulation. In this study, men demonstrated significantly higher levels of legitimisation than women specifically regarding child maltreatment, aligning with broader findings reported across Latin America (Bott et al., 2019; Kleven & Ports, 2017; UNICEF, 2020). Conversely, the absence of significant differences across the remaining sociodemographic variables suggests that these beliefs are widely distributed across diverse social strata, echoing findings by Choi et al. (2018) and Gracia et al. (2020). This outcome does not imply that socioeconomic context is inconsequential, but rather highlights how thoroughly family violence has

Figure 1: Scores Obtained on the Dimensions of the Beliefs About Family Relationships Scale by Sex



been normalised across varying educational and economic backgrounds. These empirical findings underline the necessity of preventive strategies that extend beyond legal sanctions to directly target the underlying cultural beliefs that sustain and obscure domestic violence.

In conclusion, these findings demonstrate the persistence of belief systems that validate family violence, particularly child maltreatment, alongside significant sex-based variations in endorsement. Addressing these entrenched beliefs is crucial for safeguarding developmental and psychological well-being. Preventive interventions must therefore focus on dismantling cultural rationalisations of coercive discipline, promoting alternative models of family coexistence grounded in mutual respect, fundamental human rights, and non-violent conflict resolution.

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