



Research article

“I just need respect as a man that’s all”: dynamics of respect and physical intimate violence among African men in Johannesburg

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Abstract: Respect serves as a protective factor for the quality of intimate relationships. In the current paper, the potential loss of respect for the male partner as a predictor for the female partner’s use of physical intimate violence was examined. The analysis drew upon the perceptions and experiences of 25 African men who sought medical assistance following episodes of physical intimate violence. Additional perspectives from five specialists who worked with the victims were also included. Findings demonstrate that the quality of a relationship is positively predicted by mutual respect toward partners. The loss of respect for the male counterpart is positively predicted as a risk factor for the female partner’s use of physical intimate violence. The results and their implications are discussed within the scope of the related literature.

Keywords: respect; loss of respect; physical violence against men; intimate relationships; African men; Johannesburg; South Africa

1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pervasive global social and health burden affecting people of all ages, languages, skin colors, genders, socioeconomic statuses, and all types of relationships [1–3]. IPV, as a harmful and/or destructive behavior, is intended to exert power and control over a partner by a current or former intimate partner [2,4]. It includes physical intimate violence (PIV) (such as punching, hitting, kicking, biting, use of weapons, or scalding with hot water), sexual assault, rape, other forms of sexual coercion, emotional abuse (such as insulting,

cursing, intimidation, threats, manipulation, or isolation), and economic manipulation (such as controlling spending, making excessive financial demands, and preventing access to resources) [5–10]. PIV represents the most severe manifestation of IPV, often resulting in immediate and long-term consequences such as physical injuries, psychological trauma, and increased risk of mortality [1,11–14]. It is estimated that around 27% of ever-partnered women worldwide have experienced PIV during their lifetime [1,15]. While substantial attention is given to PIV against women, the issue also affects men, though it is less frequently discussed.

Research has shown that a range of personal and sociocultural factors contribute to both the risk and protective factors associated with IPV perpetration. These factors include alcohol abuse, relationship dynamics, childhood exposure to violence, gender attitudes, cultural norms, and inequality [12,16–22]. For men, specific risk factors include jealousy, short relationship duration, gender stereotypes, and economic insecurity [2,7,12,23–26]. On the other hand, social support, help-seeking behavior, and access to community-based services have been identified as protective factors [27]. However, the role that respect as a sociocultural norm can play, whether as a risk or protective factor, remains underexplored within the context of IPV.

Scholars argue that respect is foundational to the quality of intimate relationships [28–30]. It fosters love, trust, emotional support, healthy communication, and equality [31–33]. Abi-Hashem [30] characterized respect as ongoing displays of esteem, regard, and empathy, which collectively reflect dignity, courtesy, and kindness. Ugur [32] conceptualizes respect as a pro-social behavior that encompasses emotional support, care, and a commitment to equality and humility within the relationship. Gowen et al. [34] highlighted respect as the avoidance of actions that may embarrass or harm a partner. However, in patriarchal settings, respect is often framed as a privilege primarily afforded to men, deeply rooted in societal norms, religious doctrines, and cultural discourses [35–37]. This perspective typically associates respect for men with automatic deference, reverence, entitlement to domestic care, and unquestioned familial authority [38,39]. However, in this article, respect is defined as a dynamic social construct that significantly impacts the quality and stability of intimate relationships. It serves as a protective factor against PIV when it promotes mutual understanding and effective communication. Conversely, the lack of respect, especially in contexts where traditional gender roles are disrupted, can increase the risk of PIV against men.

As a protective factor, respect serves as a linchpin in fostering healthy relationships and helps to buffer against the potential for PIV. By promoting shared expectations and mutual understanding, respect creates a supportive framework for intimate partners to navigate the complexities of life together [31,33]. As such, prioritizing respect in relationships is not only essential for cultivating enduring bonds built on trust, empathy, and mutual admiration, but it is also indispensable for decreasing the likelihood of experiencing or perpetrating PIV [28,40]. In a study conducted by Zoppolat et al. [41] involving 253 romantic partners in the Netherlands, the researchers observed how appreciation or respect is rooted in mutual admiration based on meeting shared expectations and arising from the sacrifices one person makes for another. The study revealed that participants who perceived their partner's sacrifice experienced greater appreciation or respect for their partner and subsequently felt more satisfied with their relationship, particularly when their expectations of sacrifice were low rather than high. However, perceiving a partner's sacrifice had no impact on appreciation or relationship satisfaction when the recipient held strong expectations of sacrifice. These findings underscore the significant influence of expectations on how intimate partners perceive respect for their partners. This study resonates with Strong and Cohen's [42] assertion that,

in present times, the quality of intimate unions is determined by the values and gendered expectations that people intend to realize in the relationship. As a result, partners often assess their relationships through a cost-benefit lens, where gendered roles play a significant part. Typically, this exchange involves men providing economic security and women serving as domestic caregivers [7,42,43]. Another study by Louis et al. [28] utilized the Love and Respect Marriage scale to examine a nonclinical community sample in Singapore (n = 400), demonstrating how the mutual construct of love and respect between partners fosters an environment of mutual appreciation and acceptance, leading to feelings of validation. This finding was consistently supported across different cultures, including samples from the USA (n = 396), South Africa (n = 390), Nigeria (n = 364), and India (n = 306), suggesting its cross-cultural applicability. The study highlights that the prioritization of mutual love and respect by partners positively contributes to relationship protection and longevity. Similarly, research further indicates that fostering an environment of mutual respect cultivates long-term psychological attachment, feelings of loyalty, and devotion between partners [44]. Kennedy-Lightsey et al. [45] noted that partners who feel respected and understood by their significant others are more likely to express greater happiness in their marital relationship. They observe a strong association between general discomfort with intimacy, lack of trust and respect, and lower relationship satisfaction, which is crucial for overall happiness and the avoidance of intimacy-related issues. Furthermore, Kokoric et al. [40] study in different regions of Croatia observed that intimate partners with egalitarian attitudes tend to have more egalitarian intimate relationships and experience lower levels of family conflicts. They are less likely to engage in controlling or manipulative behaviors compared to partners with patriarchal attitudes toward intimate relationships. Those with egalitarian attitudes may receive higher social support from family members and have a higher quality of family functioning [40]. In effect, these studies highlight the importance of congruence of respectful attitudes in intimate relationships and underscore the significance of shared or mutual respect in fostering healthy and non-violent intimate relationships, serving as a protection against the risk of PIV.

As a risk factor, the absence of respect has been identified as crucial in influencing the perpetration of PIV. For instance, Fleming et al. [38] found that in the Dominican Republic, men who perceive a loss of respect or humiliation from their partners are more likely to respond with PIV, driven by feelings of emasculation and a desire to reassert their masculinity. Similarly, Dery et al. [39] observed that feelings of humiliation and loss of respect significantly contribute to PIV in intimate relationships in Ghana, highlighting how these dynamics intersect with gendered hierarchies and power imbalances. In South Africa, extensive research has examined various risk factors for PIV, including structural, gendered, and racial inequalities, which are compounded by a historical legacy of colonialism and apartheid, as well as the normalization of violence within this context [46–48]. Research has also highlighted the construction of masculine respectability and its link to PIV perpetration [49–52]. For example, Mshweshwe [49] underscores how patriarchal cultural beliefs and traditions in South Africa shape masculine respectability, reinforcing PIV against women by legitimizing and normalizing aggressive behavior as a means of asserting power. Gibbs et al. [36] found that young Black men in urban informal settlements who align with traditional views of masculinity are more prone to enact PIV to reinforce their sense of dignity and control when they perceive threats to their masculine identity or social respectability. However, although some existing research has highlighted masculine vulnerability and men's susceptibility to PIV from female partners [16,53–56], the role of respect in exacerbating this risk remains underexplored. This

dynamic is especially relevant within the context of South Africa's sociocultural landscape, characterized by male dominance and female subordination [46,47,57,58]. This article examines how respect exacerbates the risk of PIV against men, offering nuanced insights into the gendered discourses within the South African context. As Ratele [58] asserts, "Violence demands to be accounted for at structural, symbolic, and subjective levels." By exploring these intersecting levels, the article aims to enhance our understanding of PIV against men and advocate for respect as a crucial protective factor for fostering healthier and more equitable relationships.

2. Methodological approach

The current analysis is part of a larger study that investigates the impact of IPV on African men's understanding of masculinity. The study focuses on the experiences of 25 African men in Johannesburg who sought medical help after episodes of IPV perpetrated by their female partners. The current article specifically examines how these men perceive their experiences of physical violence, particularly in relation to the loss of respect from their female partners. The aim is to understand how the presence or loss of respect can serve both as a protective factor and as a risk factor for PIV against men.

2.1. Study design and setting

This study utilized a qualitative approach to examine PIV experienced by African men in heterosexual relationships. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for exploring phenomena in their natural contexts and understanding participants' perspectives [59,60]. By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, this approach provides a detailed analysis of how sociocultural norms influence their perceptions of respect and PIV [61–63]. The aim is to uncover the complex relationship between the risk and protective elements of respect and PIV within intimate partnerships, offering in-depth insights into these interconnections.

Fieldwork was conducted at a Referral Health Facility (RHF) in Johannesburg between October 2018 and February 2019. This facility, as one of the Seven Clinical Forensic Medical Services centers under the Gauteng Department of Health, provides specialized health services for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, making it a pertinent setting for this research. The study setting was integral to the research design, as it offered a contextual background that enriched the data collection and analysis.

2.2. Sampling procedure

The study utilized a non-probability convenience sampling method to recruit African men who sought medical care at the RHF after episodes of PIV. This approach was particularly suited for studying sensitive populations like PIV survivors, allowing the researcher to access a readily available and visible group at the RHF [64]. Although convenience sampling limits the sample's diversity and representativeness, it was effective in this context. Conventional probability sampling techniques would not have been suitable for accessing this population, because in general men are reluctant to identify as victims of female partner abuse and are unwilling to share their experiences [59,65]. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: African men aged 18

years and older, who identified as victims of domestic violence and visited the RHF for medical care. This age range reflects legal definitions of adulthood and aligns with the cultural expectations of masculinity in the African context [66,67]. The sample included men aged 23–58 years, engaged in various types of heterosexual relationships (marital, cohabiting, or dating) with relationship durations between eight months and ten years. The final sample consisted of 25 men from various African countries, including Zimbabwe, South Africa, Congo, Nigeria, Mozambique, Malawi, and Eswatini. Additionally, the study incorporated insights from five key informants: two medical doctors, one nurse, one police captain, and one police constable, all with extensive experience in supporting male IPV survivors. For instance, one doctor had 31 years of experience in clinical forensic medicine, while the police captain had 20 years of service in handling abuse cases. These informants were selected through purposive sampling to provide valuable perspectives and enhance the study's findings [60,68].

2.3. Data collection

Semi-structured, one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted. These interviews allowed the study participants to fully articulate their experiences of abuse at the hands of their female partners [62,63,69,70]. Participants were asked questions such as, “Could you describe your experience with physical violence?” and “Have you noticed any changes in how you perceive your masculinity?” These questions were designed to elicit detailed accounts of their experiences and masculine understandings. The participants also shared their impressions of respect within the broader discourse of respect and gender norms in Johannesburg, South Africa. Although many participants did not speak English as their first language, the language proved effective for conducting the 25 interviews, each lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. My background as an African male from Nigeria facilitated a connection with the participants, who were predominantly African males. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy [71]. In addition to the interviews, the study incorporated data from several key weeks of participant observation at the RHF. Observing men arriving with injuries from IPV provided supplementary data and enhanced the richness of the findings. Detailed field notes from these observations, along with the interviews, contributed to the study's overall credibility and depth [61,62].

2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis followed Braun et al. [70] step-by-step thematic analysis process. The researcher transcribed and manually coded the verbal data in a single-blind manner to ensure familiarity with the data and minimize potential bias. Themes were then identified, reviewed, defined, and named. The integration of verbatim responses into the analysis added authenticity and allowed the participants' voices to be prominently featured. The current analysis delves into the theme of physical violence and men's desire for respect to elucidate the dynamics of respect as a risk and protective factor for PIV perpetration and aligns the analysis with existing literature on intimate relationships and IPV.

2.5. Ethical considerations

The study obtained ethical clearance from two Research Ethics Committees: The Faculty of Humanities at the University of Johannesburg and the District Research Committee of Johannesburg Health District. This dual clearance underscores the rigorous ethical oversight involved, ensuring that the study adhered to the highest ethical standards [72,73]. Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the research, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. The informed consent process was robust, with participants signing a consent agreement that affirmed their understanding and willingness to participate. This process is vital in safeguarding the autonomy of participants and ensuring they are fully aware of what their participation entails. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assured that their identities would be protected through pseudonyms, and interviews were conducted in a private setting, the social work office at the RHF, to ensure their privacy and safety. This approach aligns with ethical guidelines that prioritize the safety and well-being of participants in trauma-focused research [9,74]. Moreover, the study was sensitive to the potential emotional distress that could arise from discussing experiences of IPV. Participants were offered ongoing psychosocial support, which is crucial in minimizing harm and providing necessary resources for those who may be affected by the research process [9,75]. This aligns with best practices in trauma-focused research, which emphasize the importance of providing care and support to participants who may experience distress during the study [76,77]. Interestingly, the participants did not find the interviews distressing; instead, many found them valuable. This outcome is consistent with previous research that suggests that participants in trauma-focused studies often find the process to be beneficial, as it can provide a sense of validation and an opportunity to share their experiences [78,79].

3. Results

This section delves into participants' perceptions of respect and examines its relationship with their experiences of PIV. It begins with examining the many ways the studied African men conceptualize respect in relation to relationship quality. Subsequently, it unveils the dynamics of how the erosion of respect influences their encounters with PIV. The following table highlights details of the study participants and examples of their PIV experiences (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants details and examples of PIV experiences.

S/N	Participant	Age	Country	Relationship type	PIV acts/weapon used/injury sustained
1	Simba	36	Zimbabwe	Married	Scalded with boiling water: superficial burns from the forehead to the chest.
2	Gwagwa	44	Zimbabwe	Cohabiting	Bitten, hit with a bottle, slapped, and punched
3	Misa	30	Zimbabwe	Cohabiting	Scalded with hot water: superficial burns
4	Bafana	43	South Africa	Cohabiting	Scalded with hot water: superficial burns on left arm and face, hit with a stick and steel bar, stabbed with a knife

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S/N	Participant	Age	Country	Relationship type	PIV acts/weapon used/injury sustained
5	Kgaogelo	35	Zimbabwe	Cohabiting	Stabbed three times with a bottle. Hit with an aluminum pan while sleeping
6	Langa	31	South Africa	Dating	Pointed and hit with a gun
7	Chucks	39	Nigeria	Dating	Scratched groin with artificial fingernails
8	Khathu	29	Zimbabwe	Dating	Hit with a fry pan
9	Ndlovu	36	South Africa	Cohabiting	Slapped, hit with an elbow, and pushed to the window
10	Makwakwa	36	Zimbabwe	Dating	Hit with a glass close to the eyes
11	Kabola	49	Congo DRC	Dating	Bitten on the chest, hit by two passersby, had a mobile phone stolen
12	Sfiso	41	South Africa	Cohabiting	Stabbed with a knife, hit with a stone
13	Tinyinko	34	Zimbabwe	Cohabiting	Stabbed on the right-hand
14	Lukah	37	Congo DRC	Married	Beaten by the partner and her son, had his head smashed on the pavement, sustained visible bruises
15	Thabiso	47	Zimbabwe	Cohabiting	Stabbed at the back
16	Thabo	33	South Africa	Ex-partner	Slapped, hit with a pot
17	Thokozani	35	Malawi	Cohabiting	Slapped, hit with a pan, hit with a brick, bitten, destruction of property, strangled by partner
18	Obinna	34	Nigeria	Married	Hit with an object and scalded with hot water
19	Themhani	24	Zimbabwe	Dating	Hit with an object
20	Senzo	42	Zimbabwe	Cohabiting	Stabbed when asleep, punched in the eyes when asleep, hit with a frying pan
21	Andile	36	Swaziland	Cohabiting	Stabbed in the back, bitten, hit with a bottle
22	Jabulani	36	South Africa	Dating	Bitten on the arms
23	Mpho	23	South Africa	Cohabiting	Injured himself by hitting on a glass object. Reported as being the aggressor
24	Mandla	30	Mozambique	Cohabiting	Stabbed with a knife on the face, bitten on the face and hands
25	Kabila	58	Congo DRC	Ex-and current marriage	Had clothes torn by current wife, spat on in the face by ex-wife

Source: Rowlands 2021.

The table consists of a sample of 25 African men, aged between 23 and 58, who sought medical help after experiencing PIV from their female partners. The participants come from diverse countries, including Zimbabwe, South Africa, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Mozambique, Malawi, and Eswatini. They were involved in various types of heterosexual relationships, such as marital, cohabiting, and dating, with relationship durations ranging from eight months to ten years.

3.1. Perceptions of respect and harmonious relationships

The African men in this study perceive respect as a crucial protective factor for maintaining harmonious relationships, though some view it as a privilege and entitlement inherent in traditional gender roles. These roles often emphasize male provision and economic support. However, the men also acknowledge a growing disillusionment as women's economic status and rights evolve, shifting the paradigm of respect toward one of mutual exchange and equality. Kgaogelo, a thirty-five-year-old Zimbabwean, draws on traditionally gendered discourses [39,43], stating:

“I think for me as a man I should provide, love, and take care [of her]. I think for [her as] a woman [she should] respect [me her] man and take care of me. That is the starting point to have a good relationship.”

He emphasizes the expectation that men should provide economic care and love for their partners, while women should primarily offer respect and domestic care. To align respect with male privilege and entitlement as heads of the household [7,39,43], he further recounts his partner's disrespect:

“The way she reacts when she speaks to me, she doesn't even show respect, even in front of the kids.”

Thus, he reacted:

“I just need respect as a man that's all”.

Kgaogelo's “need for respect” reflects his deep desire for recognition and validation, which he views as integral to his male identity and self-worth. His concept of respect, tied to fulfilling traditional roles and male privilege, is viewed by many men as essential within a traditional framework for maintaining harmony in their relationships [32,37,39,41].

Foregrounding respect as a traditional “African thing”, men like Jabulani from South Africa, Kaloba from Congo DRC, and Mandla from Mozambique express concern over the changing attitudes of women and the perceived loss of respect among men in intimate relationships in some African countries [35,80,81]. Thokozani, a thirty-five-year-old Malawian, remarked:

“In most African countries such as Mozambique, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Malawi, respect is lost. They live that “Beyoncé” life. They need to turn back to their ancestors [to learn] how they behaved and lived. It is no longer that mama Africa.”

Thokozani's observation suggests that modern-day African women's behavior is increasingly influenced by foreign cultures. The general concern among these men is that the shifting nature of gender roles and the loss of respect associated with these changes are contributing to intimate relationship tensions in “modern” African societies [37,81].

Linking the loss of respect to women's socioeconomic empowerment, Themhani, a twenty-eight-year-old Zimbabwean, commented:

“Present-day women are very disrespectful to men because they know that they can provide for themselves without a man. Another thing is they have equal rights with men, so they can do whatever a man does.”

Themhani underscores the notion that the economic dependence of women is fundamental to men's respectability. He implies that women's occupational empowerment and articulation of rights can be problematic, creating tension and conflicting with men's respectability within intimate relationships [7,36,81]. Similarly, men like Sfiso, Thabo, and Mpho from South Africa express concerns about women's increasing awareness of their rights and the legal protections available to them. To this end, Thabo remarked: “Men are now afraid to be in relationships with women who

know their rights too much because they end up abusing them. A woman who knows too much about rights is a problem.” This implies that some men might view women’s awareness of their rights as a threat to their authority, which can lead to conflict and abusive reactions. It follows that these men’s views on women’s rights and their traditional perceptions of male privileges significantly influence how they perceive and receive respect from their intimate partners [40,82].

In response, Mr. Mabaso, a key informant, argues that respect should not be seen as a male privilege but as a principle of mutual exchange. He explained:

“If you want to be respected, you also must give respect. What you get is what you deserve. You should also know about the golden rule. The golden rule means that if you do anything to your partner, the same thing you get.”

Mr. Mabaso is a nursing practitioner with three years of experience assisting GBV victims at the RHF. He views the “golden rule” of respect as essential for achieving harmony in relationships. He suggests that the respect one receives is directly proportional to the respect one gives, implying that men who feel disrespected may have disrespected their partners in return [14,42,83,84]. This perspective highlights respect as a mutual and reciprocal dynamic necessary for feelings of loyalty and devotion between partners [44]. Consequently, the absence of mutual respect can deepen the erosion of respect and harmonious relationships, potentially heightening the risk of PIV perpetration, in this case against men.

3.2. *Respect and physical intimate violence (PIV)*

Some of the men in the study suggested that the erosion of respect in their relationships served as a risk factor for their victimization of PIV, as outlined in Table 1 (participants’ details and examples of PIV experiences). For instance, Kaloba, a forty-nine-year-old man from the DRC, described his experience with a South African girlfriend:

“She knows that when I have money, I do give her. I tried to speak to her. I told her that she is always asking for money and this and that, but you disrespect me. As I attempted to leave, she started her fights, and she bit me on the chest. She started screaming and inviting more people saying that I want to kill her, and one of the guys hit me and took my phone. That’s why I’m here in the hospital.”

This account reveals how financial tension, perceived disrespect, and escalating conflict can quickly lead to violence, illustrating the complex dynamics that contribute to PIV against men [1,7,36,53]. This is supported by Dr Menzi—a key informant with 31 years of experience assisting GBV victims at the RHF. He notes that financial expectations can exacerbate tensions within the relationship, leading to further disrespect and aggression toward men. He noted that when women feel unsupported financially because the “male can’t afford”, the female partner may resort to verbal abuse and PIV as a way to express their frustration [7].

Another man, Ndlovu, a thirty-six-year-old South African, further illuminates the dynamics between the loss of respect and PIV. He describes enduring significant disrespect from his partner, including verbal abuse and public humiliation, which reflects a profound disregard for his dignity and autonomy [29,30,31,53]. Ndlovu recounted:

“She doesn’t beat me; she just disrespects me too much in front of people to show that she rules the house. She calls me names anytime and even starts swearing at me in front of people.”

When asked what brought him to the hospital, he replied:

“She just pushed me to the window, and the window got broken, but before that, she injured me here with her elbow. She doesn’t do much physical abuse; she’s just abusing me emotionally, and I’m depressed. She doesn’t want to sleep with me, she doesn’t want to cook, she doesn’t help me.”

These narratives illustrate how the absence of respect, whether through verbal abuse, public humiliation, or neglect, can escalate tensions and lead to physical violence, underscoring the complex dynamics between respect and PIV in these African men’s intimate relationships.

4. Discussion

The aim of this article is to understand how the presence or loss of respect can serve both as a protective factor and as a risk factor for PIV against men. The results show that for many of the men interviewed, respect is perceived as a protective factor, integral to maintaining relationship harmony [28,31–33]. However, these men approach their meanings and expressions of respect through the traditional lens of male identity and privilege, where men, as providers, are entitled to respect by virtue of their position within the household [39,43]. As gender roles evolve, particularly with the economic empowerment of women, this traditional notion of respect is increasingly challenged, leading to tension and conflict within these men’s relationships [40,45,81]. For example, men like Kgaogelo articulate the traditional expectation that men should provide for their families, and in return, they expect respect and care from their partners. This transactional view of respect, where economic provision by men is met with respect and domestic care by women, is rooted in long-standing cultural norms that define the roles of men and women within the family [43,49,50]. Kgaogelo’s assertion that this traditional framework of respect is central to a “good relationship” underscore how deeply these norms are ingrained [32,35–38,49]. This notion resonates with Zoppolat et al. [41] study of 253 romantic partners in the Netherlands, which found that respect is often rooted in shared expectations arising from sacrifices made by each partner. However, while their study highlights the significant role of expectations in shaping how intimate partners perceive respect, it does not account for the gendered framework evident in the current study.

Moreover, as women become more economically independent and assertive of their rights, the traditional framework of respect is being questioned. Thokozani’s observation that respect is “lost” in modern relationships, particularly among women influenced by global cultures, reflects a broader anxiety among some men about the erosion of traditional values of respect [35,80–82]. This sentiment is echoed by Thembani, who links the perceived disrespect of women to their financial independence and awareness of their rights. The notion that respect is tied to economic dependence suggests that as women’s roles change, traditional forms of respect are perceived to be diminishing, creating friction in relationships [36,81]. The tension between traditional expectations of respect and the realities of contemporary relationships is further exacerbated by the legal and social advancements that empower women [46,47,57]. Men like Thabo express concerns that women’s increasing knowledge of their rights challenges traditional male authority, leading to a power struggle that some men find threatening [35,40,81]. Thabo’s comment that men are “afraid to be in relationships with women who know their rights too much” highlights the difficulties some men face in navigating these changing dynamics [35,68,81]. This “fear” of losing control or authority in relationships can contribute to a sense of insecurity and may lead to conflict over respect and power [40,82,85]. This observation is in line with Kokoric et al. [40] observation among Croatian married couples, noting that traditional attitudes toward respect correlated with traditional marriages

and higher levels of family conflict, while egalitarian attitudes toward respect were associated with egalitarian marriages and lower levels of family conflict. The study indicates that mutual agreement between dual-income spouses on marital roles and mutual respect among partners had a positive protective impact on the quality of relationship functioning.

To help drive home the argument that the quality of a relationship is positively predicted by mutual respect toward partners, Mr. Mabaso advocates for a more balanced approach to respect, viewing it as a mutual exchange rather than a one-sided privilege. Although the disrespect many men experience in the study may not be due to any disrespectful behavior on their part, Mr. Mabaso's mention of the "golden rule" suggests that respect should be reciprocal, with both partners deserving and giving respect in equal measure [44,45]. This perspective challenges the traditional notion of respect as something owed to men by virtue of their privileged status and instead promotes a more egalitarian view of relationships [40,41,44]. The idea that respect must be earned and reciprocated aligns with contemporary views on relationship dynamics, where mutual respect is seen as foundational to harmony and stability [14,43,84]. This perspective aligns with Louis et al. [28], whose study of men in Singapore, supported by findings from the USA, South Africa, Nigeria, and India, shows that mutual respect and love between partners nurture an atmosphere of mutual appreciation and acceptance, leading to feelings of validation and relationship longevity.

On the other hand, the current study's findings also reveal that the erosion of respect, particularly when linked to unmet financial expectations or the perceived loss of male privilege, can be a significant risk factor for PIV against men. For instance, Kaloba's experience, where a conflict over money and respect escalated into physical violence against him, illustrates how deeply intertwined respect and economic provision are in these men's lives [80,85–87]. His story highlights the vulnerability men feel when not meeting financial expectations and reflects a harmful dynamic that leads to situations where they may be subjected to violence [1,36,40,53]. In contrast, this is inconsistent with the observation in Gibbs et al. [36] study of Black South Africans' construction of respect and masculine identities. The men in the study prioritize the use of PIV to reinforce respect and protect their masculine dignity in the face of humiliation, even as they aspire to "traditional" masculinity characterized by economic power over their partners.

In a similar vein, Ndlovu's account of enduring verbal and emotional abuse underscores how the absence of respect can lead to psychological distress and, ultimately, PIV [10,11,23]. The escalation from emotional abuse to physical violence in Ndlovu's case demonstrates the complex relationship between respect and PIV, where the loss of respect can destabilize a relationship and lead to violence [29,31,40,88]. His experience of public humiliation and neglect within his relationship reflects the broader theme that respect is not just about outward behavior but is deeply connected to a person's dignity and sense of self-worth [29,30,32]. While the feelings of emasculation and shame due to public humiliation align with the study by Fleming et al. [38] of men in the Dominican Republic, the current study presents an inconsistency: it identifies a potentially heightened risk for PIV perpetration against the male partner, rather than the female.

Overall, this result highlights the evolving concept of respect in South African intimate relationships, where traditional gender roles have historically framed respect as men's privilege [49,50,52]. However, as the rapid empowerment of women advances, allowing for challenges to these norms, respect is increasingly being redefined as a mutual exchange grounded in equality [42,47,81]. This redefinition introduces tension between traditional and modern expectations, which can lead to conflict, violence, or the fear of violence. By examining these dynamics at both

structural and subjective levels, where societal norms intersect with individual perceptions and anxieties [58], this study underscores the importance of addressing the presence or loss of respect as one of the root causes of PIV.

5. Conclusions

This article sheds light on the dynamics of respect among African men in intimate relationships, revealing how these men perceive respect in relation to their experiences of PIV. Respect emerged as a crucial protective factor for maintaining relationship quality, closely tied to these men's identities and understandings of traditional gendered values. However, the erosion of respect, especially amid shifting gender dynamics and socioeconomic changes, significantly heightens the risk of their partners using PIV against them.

The findings have profound implications for understanding and addressing IPV, particularly PIV against men, within African communities. First, they underscore the need to recognize and challenge traditional gender norms that perpetuate unequal power dynamics and expectations within relationships [43,49,50]. By promoting more mutual respect among partners, interventions can help mitigate the risk of violence and promote healthier relationship dynamics [28,41]. Furthermore, interventions aimed at preventing PIV should consider the multifaceted nature of respect and its role in shaping relationship quality [28,32,41]. This includes addressing underlying issues such as economic inequality, gender-based discrimination, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. By addressing these root causes, interventions can work toward creating safer and more supportive relationship environments for all intimate actors [31,45,33]. Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of holistic approaches to addressing PIV, including both prevention and response strategies. This includes providing support services for individuals experiencing violence, as well as education and awareness programs, to challenge harmful beliefs and behaviors. By spotlighting the close relationship between respect and PIV, interventions can better support survivors and prevent future incidents of IPV.

Overall, the dynamics of respect in intimate relationships could play a central role in global discourses on both risk and protective factors in the perpetration of PIV. While mutual respect serves as a potential mediator of a protective factor of PIV, its absence or compromise can serve as a predictor of an increased risk of violence within relationships. Addressing issues related to traditional notions of respect is crucial for promoting healthy and non-violent intimate relationships and reducing the prevalence of PIV within African communities. Further research and interventions aimed at fostering mutual respect and equality within relationships are warranted to address PIV as a pressing public health burden.

Use of AI tools declaration

The author declares he has not used Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools in the creation of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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