

Feb 23, 2026

Mapping Women's Agency in Intimate Partner Violence Research: A Scoping Review Protocol

DOI

<https://dx.doi.org/10.17504/protocols.io.yxmvm1m2bv3p/v1>

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Protocol Citation: April Mackey, Jodie Bigalky, Aja Toste, Lori Boen, Pammla Petrucka 2026. Mapping Women's Agency in Intimate Partner Violence Research: A Scoping Review Protocol. **protocols.io**

<https://dx.doi.org/10.17504/protocols.io.yxmvm1m2bv3p/v1>

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Protocol status: Working

We use this protocol and it's working

Created: February 21, 2026

Last Modified: February 23, 2026

Protocol Integer ID: 243784

Keywords: women's agency, intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, violence against women, agency in intimate partner violence research, intimate partner violence research, intimate partner violence, violent relationship, research with adult women survivor, adult women survivor, mapping women, portrayals of women, passive victim, dangerous circumstance, social support, agency in ipv, adult women, scoping review, legal framework, women, safety planning, scoping review protocol objective, contested concept, legal response

Abstract

Objective: This scoping review aims to map how agency is defined, described, and applied in intimate partner violence (IPV) research with adult women survivors, and to clarify how women's actions and decision-making in violent relationships are understood in relation to structural conditions, intersectional positionings, and key IPV-related processes such as staying, leaving, resistance, safety planning, and help-seeking (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; McCleary-Sills et al., 2015). **Introduction:** Agency has become a central but contested concept in this scholarship, moving beyond portrayals of women as passive victims toward a view of agency as a socially mediated capacity to act; how women make decisions, take action, and exert influence within constrained and often dangerous circumstances (Sen, 1985; Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Mannell et al., 2015). In IPV contexts, women's actions are shaped by socio-cultural norms, economic dependence, legal frameworks, and intersecting forms of marginalization, yet across these conditions they navigate danger, protect children, seek support, and sometimes reshape or leave violent relationships (Govindsammy, 2024; Hynes et al., 2016; Meyer, 2016).

Eligibility Criteria: The review will include primary empirical qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies and empirically grounded conceptual papers focused on adult women's agency in IPV across health and mental health services, justice and legal responses, housing and emergency/crisis services, income and social supports, community-based IPV services, and informal supports from family, friends, and broader community networks.

Methods: The review will follow Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology for scoping reviews and the PRISMA-ScR framework. A three-step search will be performed in Scopus, PsycINFO, SocIndex, Web of Science, and Academic Search Complete, supplemented by grey literature (e.g., Government and NGO reports, policy reports). Two reviewers will independently conduct screening, data extraction, and charting in Covidence, and findings will be presented in narrative and tabular form.

Introduction

- 1 Agency has become a central but contested concept in scholarship on women's experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV), as researchers seek to move beyond paradigms that portray women as passive victims of abuse (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Mannell et al., 2015). Despite ongoing research, there remains limited consensus as to how agency is conceptualized and defined, and no standardized method currently exists to evaluate it in IPV contexts (Cavazoni et al., 2022). Agency can be understood as one's socially mediated capacity to act, encompassing how women make decisions, act, and exert influence within highly constrained and often dangerous circumstances (Sen, 1985; Richardson et al., 2019; Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Mannell et al., 2015). In IPV contexts, women's actions are shaped by socio-cultural norms, economic dependence, legal frameworks, and intersecting forms of marginalization; yet across these conditions, women navigate danger, protect children, seek support, and sometimes reshape or altogether leave violent relationships (Govindsammy, 2024; Hynes et al., 2016; Meyer, 2016). Attending to agency centres women's actions and interpretations, and how these are made possible or constrained by structural conditions, rather than viewing these actions solely through risk or pathology. Expanding the construct of agency resists narrow standards of "empowerment" by foregrounding how women navigate violence, care for others, and pursue what is livable and meaningful within coercive contexts (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Mannell et al., 2015).

Evidence across diverse settings demonstrates that women exercise agency through multiple, sometimes subtle, strategies that are easily overlooked if only disclosure, reporting, or separation from the relationship are taken as markers of action. Studies document a wide range of responses to IPV, including engaging formal and informal support systems, modifying behaviours to manage risk, seeking work or material resources, cultivating emotional support, and, at times, remaining silent or staying in relationships as a way of preserving dignity, safety, or children's stability (Govindsammy, 2024; Mannell et al., 2015; Meyer, 2016). These agentic practices often represent deliberate efforts to navigate danger and to do one's best within coercive conditions, rather than simple acquiescence (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; McCleary Sills et al., 2015). Collectively, such studies challenge binary distinctions between "agentic" women who leave and "victims" who stay, and instead conceptualize agency as distributed, incremental, and context dependent, fluctuating over time and across relationships and social spaces (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Meyer, 2016; Mwaba et al., 2021).

Quantitative work has tended to formalize agency as a measurable capacity, often distinguishing between intrinsic and instrumental forms and linking these to IPV and related outcomes (Kabeer, 1999; Miedema et al., 2018; Navarro Mantas et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2019). Intrinsic agency is typically understood as power within,

including dimensions such as critical consciousness, awareness of rights, gender equitable attitudes, and rejection of justifications for IPV (Kabeer, 1999; Miedema et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2019). Instrumental agency, in turn, is conceptualized as “power to,” encompassing decision making autonomy, freedom of movement, access to and use of resources, and the ability to mobilize social support (Kabeer, 1999; Miedema et al., 2018; Navarro Mantas et al., 2022). Together, these dimensions have been associated with IPV risk, mental health, and other well being outcomes, with several studies suggesting that higher levels of instrumental agency are linked to lower likelihood of IPV and better mental health, while intrinsic agency is more consistently associated with psychological well being (Miedema et al., 2018; Navarro Mantas et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2019). At the same time, this literature highlights tensions in how agency is operationalized: for example, increases in women’s economic power, without corresponding shifts in rigid gender norms, can heighten the risk of backlash and IPV, complicating simple narratives that “more empowerment” automatically reduces violence (Hynes et al., 2016; Navarro Mantas et al., 2022). These findings underscore both the promise and the conceptual ambiguity of existing agency measures in IPV related research.

Qualitative work, by contrast, often infers agency inductively from women’s narratives, identifying acts of resistance, strategic compliance, emotional self management, storytelling, and collective organizing as agentic (Govindsammy, 2024; Mannell et al., 2015; Mwaba et al., 2021). Importantly, these actions can still be understood as expressions of agency even when they operate within, rather than openly challenge, dominant social norms. Behaviours that might look like compliance or accommodation from the outside can, in context, be deliberate strategies that women use to survive, manage risk, and preserve a sense of self. When studies equate agency only with discrete behaviours like reporting to police or obtaining protection orders, they risk erasing these everyday practices and misreading women who cannot or choose not to engage formal systems as lacking agency (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; McCleary Sills et al., 2015).

An agency focused lens is particularly important for understanding how structural inequality and intersectionality shape women’s options and the meanings attached to their actions. Research has shown that class position, racialization, migration and refugee status, citizenship, sexuality, disability, and geography influence what is possible or legible as agentic in violent relationships (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Hynes et al., 2016; Waller & Bent Goodley, 2023). For example, economic empowerment may, in some contexts, reduce women’s room to maneuver by provoking partner resentment or withdrawal of financial support, while in others it expands their capacity to negotiate or exit violence (Hynes et al., 2016; Navarro Mantas et al., 2022). Work on constructed agency illustrates that women’s agency can unfold over time in distinct phases, including resistance, persistence, rejection, and resignation, shaped by encounters with racism, institutional betrayal, and services that are inconsistent, ineffective, or stigmatizing (Waller & Bent Goodley). Similarly, scholarship on personal storytelling highlights

intrapersonal, relational, and collective levels of change, showing how narrative practices can reframe experiences, build connection, and, in some contexts, underpin activism and legal mobilization (Mwaba et al., 2021). These strands of work underscore that the same behaviour can carry different meanings and consequences depending on the structural risks and resources that women navigate (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; McCleary Sills et al., 2015; Waller & Bent Goodley).

Exploring agency in violent contexts is therefore not about romanticizing suffering or denying coercion, but about more accurately understanding how women navigate power, constraint, and care for self and others, and about designing interventions that fit women's lived realities. When agency is misdefined as synonymous with leaving, formal help seeking, or individualized economic success, programs may inadvertently blame women who remain, expose them to further danger by promoting structurally unfeasible strategies, or pathologize their survival tactics as non compliance (Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Horn et al., 2016; Meyer, 2016). Conceptualizing agency as distributed across time, space, relationships, and institutions allows practitioners and researchers to recognize and support a wider continuum of actions—from emotional support groups and narrative sharing to strategic silence, harm minimization, and collective activism—as meaningful efforts to survive, resist, and transform oppressive conditions (BenPorat & Aharoni Lir, 2025; Mannell et al., 2015; Mwaba et al., 2021). This broader understanding is crucial for survivor centred, equity oriented practice and research, and points to the need for clearer concepts, more nuanced ways of measuring agency, and interventions that work with, rather than against, the context specific ways women exercise power in and beyond abusive relationships (Aromataris & Munn, 2024; Campbell & Mannell, 2016; Govindsammy, 2024).

Against this backdrop, there is a need to systematically map how agency is defined, described, and applied across IPV related studies with adult women survivors, and to clarify the relationships drawn between women's actions and key IPV related processes such as staying, leaving, safety planning, resistance, mothering, help seeking, and recovery. This scoping review therefore aims to synthesize how agency is conceptualized and operationalized in IPV research with adult women, to identify points of convergence and tension across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods work, and to highlight where intersectional and structurally informed understandings of agency are present or absent.

Eligibility Criteria

- 2 The population for this review is adult women (18+ years) who have experienced IPV in any form (physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, economic, or coercive control) and in any relationship configuration (current, former, or dating partners). The focus is on women who are identified as survivors or victims in primary research, including those who remain in abusive relationships, are in the process of leaving, or are post-separation. This includes women recruited through services such as health and mental

health services, justice and legal responses, housing and emergency/crisis services, income and social supports, community-based IPV services, and informal supports from family, friends, and broader community networks. This will also include women participating in intervention or service evaluations where their lived experience of IPV is central; If a paper evaluates an IPV-related service or intervention and uses women's lived experiences of IPV as a central source of data (rather than only reporting service outcomes or provider perspectives), it will also be eligible for inclusion. Studies with mixed-gender samples will be included only when data specific to adult women can be identified and meaningfully extracted. Child, adolescent, and perpetrator-only samples will be excluded. This population framing intentionally centres women's lived experiences and decisions in the context of IPV, while allowing for diversity in social locations (e.g., Indigeneity, race, migration/refugee status, disability, sexuality, class, rural/northern residence) that shape how agency is defined, described, and applied.

Concept

- 3 The concept of interest is women's agency in the context of IPV. For this review, agency is understood broadly as how women act, decide, navigate, resist, and exercise influence within conditions of violence and constraint. The review will capture how agency is explicitly defined (e.g., through formal definitions or conceptual statements), implicitly constructed and described (e.g., through the way women's actions are described and interpreted), applied (evaluated or measured) or left undefined but clearly central to the analysis. Sub-questions will explore: (i) how agency is defined or implied in primary IPV studies with adult women; (ii) how authors describe the relationship between women's agency and key IPV-related processes such as staying, leaving, safety planning, resistance, mothering, help-seeking, and recovery; and (iii) how agency is applied, including qualitative themes and narrative patterns, behavioural indicators (e.g., specific actions or strategies), and quantitative scales or indices derived from empowerment, autonomy, decision-making, or control measures. This conceptual focus allows the review to map similarities, differences, and tensions in how agency is framed across disciplines, methods, and theoretical traditions, and to identify where intersectional and structurally informed understandings are present or absent.

Context

- 4 The context for this review is IPV as a social, relational, and structural phenomenon. IPV related studies will be included when violence by a current or former intimate partner is a central focus of the research question, analysis, or sample characteristics, rather than a peripheral variable. Context is intentionally broad and may include community, clinical (e.g., primary care, emergency, mental health), social service, shelter, legal, and justice settings, as well as community-based and participatory projects. Both low, middle, and high-income country settings will be included.

Types of sources

- 5 The scoping review will include primary studies (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods) and conceptually rich articles that focus on adult women's agency in the context of IPV. Eligible qualitative designs will include interviews, focus groups, ethnography, narrative inquiry, phenomenology, grounded theory, and community-based or arts-based studies where women's actions, decisions, resistance, safety strategies, or navigation of services are central. Quantitative studies will include surveys, cohort studies, and intervention or evaluation research that measure agency or closely related constructs (e.g., autonomy, decision-making power, perceived control) and explicitly link them to IPV experiences, trajectories, or outcomes. Mixed-methods studies will be included when they integrate qualitative and quantitative data to illuminate how women act and decide within violent relationships. In addition, theoretical or conceptual papers and formal concept analyses that define, theorize, or model women's agency in relation to IPV will be included as long as they engage with primary data or are grounded in empirical literature. Editorials, commentaries, dissertations, theses, opinion pieces, news items, reviews (systematic, scoping, narrative) as data sources, and studies will be excluded.

Search strategy

- 6 The search strategy will consist of 3-steps (Pollock et al., 2024). First, an initial limited search of Scopus and SocIndex will be completed to identify key terms from titles, abstracts, and index terms from relevant articles on the topic (see Appendix I). The second step will involve a more specific, comprehensive search using the identified index and key terms in Scopus, SocIndex, Web of Science, Academic Search Complete, and PsychInfo using Boolean operators. In addition, grey literature will be searched using these terms. The search strategy, including all identified keywords and index terms, will be adapted for each included database and/or information source. In the third step, the reference lists of select included sources of evidence will be hand searched for both peer reviewed articles and grey literature. English language studies published in the past 15 years will be included. This is supported by the emergence of agency as a parallel to empowerment in the early 2000's (Alsop et al., 2005; Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005; Narayan, 2002, 2005; Petesh et al., 2005).

Grey literature search

- 7 To identify relevant grey literature, the team will search publicly available reports and documents produced by government bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and policy or research institutes in Saskatchewan, across Canada, and internationally that explicitly address women's agency in the context of IPV. We will focus on materials that examine or describe how adult women make decisions, take action, or navigate options within violent intimate relationships (e.g., help-seeking, safety planning, staying,

leaving, resistance), rather than documents that only report prevalence or service utilization without attention to women's actions or decision-making. At the provincial level, we will search the Government of Saskatchewan Publications Centre and relevant ministry pages (e.g., Justice, Social Services, Health) for reports, evaluations, and policy documents on IPV and gender-based violence that discuss women's choices, strategies, or autonomy in relation to violence and services. At the federal level, we will search key Canadian sources such as Women and Gender Equality Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Department of Justice Canada, and major Canadian NGOs (e.g., women's shelter networks, feminist and anti-violence organizations) for reports and program evaluations that explore women's decision-making, agency, or self-defined goals in IPV related contexts. Internationally, we will search organizations such as the World Health Organization, UN Women, UNFPA for reports, guidelines, and evaluations that conceptualize or describe women's agency within IPV, including how women navigate structural constraints and available supports. Across all sources, we will use internal site search functions and site-restricted web searches combining terms for women, intimate partner violence, and agency or related concepts. We will record the sources searched, search terms, and number of records screened to ensure transparency and reproducibility of the grey literature search.

Study/Source of evidence selection

- 8 Following the search, all identified citations will be collated and uploaded into Covidence (Veritas Health Innovation, Melbourne, Australia) and duplicates removed. Following a pilot test by all reviewers using ten articles for title and abstract screening and two articles for full text screening, two independent reviewers will screen the titles and abstracts of all citations with consideration to the review eligibility criteria. Potentially relevant sources will be retrieved in full and imported into Covidence. The full text of selected citations will be assessed in detail against the eligibility criteria by two reviewers. Reasons for exclusion of full-text sources that do not meet the inclusion criteria will be recorded and reported in the scoping review. Any disagreements that arise between two reviewers at each stage of the selection process will be resolved through discussion, or with a third reviewer/s. The results of the search and the study inclusion process will be reported in full in the final scoping review and presented in a PRISMA flow diagram.

Data extraction

- 9 Data will be extracted from papers included in the scoping review by two independent reviewers using a data extraction tool developed by the reviewers in Covidence. The data extracted will include specific details about the participants' characteristics (age, sample size), concept of agency (defined and described), context defined (IPV), agency applied or measured, study methods (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, article attributes, and key findings relevant to the review question. The draft data extraction tool

will be modified and revised as necessary during the process of extracting data from each included evidence source. Modifications will be detailed in the full-text scoping review. Any disagreements that arise between the reviewers will be resolved through discussion, if appropriate, authors of papers will be contacted up to two times to request missing or additional data, where required. The data extraction table can be found in Appendix II.

Data analysis and presentation

- 10 Extracted data will be analyzed descriptively (frequencies and distributions across time, geography, populations, and study designs) and using basic qualitative content and thematic analysis to identify and categorize key concepts, definitions, and themes in relation to the review question. The evidence presented in the review will directly respond to the review objective and question(s). Data such as year of publication, country, methodology, key findings, definitions of key concepts, and implications will be presented graphically or in tabular form. A narrative synthesis will accompany the tables and figures, structured around the review objectives and questions, to describe major themes, patterns, and gaps in the evidence, and to explain how variations in methodology, context, and definitions influence the findings.

Appendices

- 11 Appendix I: Search Strategy
Scopus
Search conducted on January/2026

Scopus	(TITLE-ABS-KEY (woman OR women OR female* OR "adult women")
Total: 885	AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (survivor* OR victim* OR "abused women" OR "battered women") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (agenc* OR "personal agency" OR "women's agency" OR agentic) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("intimate partner violence" OR IPV OR "domestic violence" OR "partner abuse" OR "spousal abuse" OR "wife abuse" OR "gender-based violence" OR "violence against women")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English" AND (LIMIT-TO (YEAR , "2005-2026"))

Appendix II: Data extraction instrument

- 1. Study Citation
- 2. Study Design
- 3. Study Population (including Location)
- 4. Agency or related term mentioned?
- 5. Concepts
- 6. Application/Measures
- 7. Contexts
- 8. Key Findings (including outcomes)
- 9. Study Limitations
- 10. Patterns/ Themes
- 11. Evidence Gaps
- 12. Implications for Future Directions

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