

Domestic violence: a cross-sectional study in an Iranian city

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العنف المنزلي: دراسة شاملة لمختلف القطاعات والفئات في مدينة إيرانية

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الخلاصة: استهدفت الدراسة التعرف على مدى انتشار العنف الجسدي المنزلي ضد النساء والعوامل المرتبطة به في مدينة سنندج، في جمهورية إيران الإسلامية. وفي إطار هذه الدراسة قامت عينة عشوائية من 1000 امرأة متزوجة بملء استبيان. وبيّنت الدراسة أن 15٪ من المُجيبات على الاستبيان، تعرّضن لاعتداء من قِبَل أزواجهن مرة واحدة على الأقل في العام المنصرم، وأن 38٪ منهن تعرّضن لذلك في وقت ما خلال مدة الزواج. وكانت المشكلات الاقتصادية هي السبب الغالب للخلافات الزوجية. ولوحظ ترابط يُعتدُّ به إحصائياً بين مستوى تعليم الأزواج وبين العنف تجاه الزوجات. وتبيّن أيضاً أن العنف الجسدي ضد ربات البيوت أكثر تكرراً بدرجة يُعتدُّ بها، منه ضد الزوجات العاملات، وأن لوظيفة الزوج ارتباطاً مهماً باللجوء إلى العنف. كما تبيّن أن وجود ابن أو بنت في الأسرة له يترافق بانخفاض نسبة العنف الجسدي ضد الزوجات.

ABSTRACT To determine the prevalence of domestic physical violence against women and its associated factors in Sanandaj city, Islamic Republic of Iran, a random sample of 1000 married women completed a questionnaire. Of the respondents, 15% had been assaulted by their husbands at least once in the previous year and 38% at some time during the marriage. Economic problems were the most frequent cause of domestic quarrels. There was a significant association between husbands' educational level and violence against wives. Physical violence against housewives was significantly more frequent than against employed women. Husband's job was also significantly associated with violence. The existence of a child or daughter in the family was associated with less domestic physical violence against women.

Violence familiale : étude transversale dans une ville iranienne

RÉSUMÉ Afin de déterminer la prévalence de la violence familiale physique à l'encontre des femmes et les facteurs qui y sont associés dans la ville de Sanandaj (République islamique d'Iran), un échantillon aléatoire de 1000 femmes mariées a rempli un questionnaire. Quinze pour cent (15 %) des répondantes avaient été agressées par leur mari au moins une fois au cours des douze mois précédents et 38 % à un moment ou un autre de leur mariage. Les problèmes économiques étaient la cause la plus fréquente des querelles conjugales. Il y avait une association significative entre le niveau d'instruction du mari et la violence envers la femme. La violence physique contre les femmes au foyer était significativement plus fréquente que contre les femmes ayant un emploi. La situation professionnelle du mari était également associée de manière significative à la violence. L'existence d'un enfant, garçon ou fille, dans la famille était associée à une moindre violence familiale physique envers la femme.

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Received: 14/11/02; accepted: 06/07/04

Introduction

Physical violence against women is a world-wide problem, crossing all ethnic, economic and social strata. According to the UN declaration at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace [1]. Historically, women have not been legally protected from battering. In many cultures, abuse has been an accepted, even legally sanctioned, fact of marriage. In the United States of America (USA), a man had the legal right to strike his wife until 1884 [2], and even now, by a conservative estimate, 2 million American women are severely assaulted by their partner each year [3].

A World Health Organization study of 24 000 women from 10 different countries and cultures reported that 15%–71% had experienced physical or sexual violence from their partner at some time in their lifetime [4].

In the past few years, violence against wives has become documented with increasing frequency [5,6]. It is a common type of crime, which is seldom reported to the police. It occurs at all social levels, though some authors have claimed that it is more frequent in families of low socioeconomic status [7]. Similarly, specific cultures and laws may have important roles, and hence the pattern of domestic violence may be different in developing countries from those in industrialized countries. Moreover, such influences may differ between the developing countries themselves, and thus it is important to establish the pattern for individual nations. Researching the phenomenon of violence and evaluating its aetiology is essential for any attempts to prevent the problem.

Iranian women suffer many types of violence, the consequences of which are

exacerbated by specific cultural traditions and laws. Married women are fearful of the prospect of separation or divorce, the difficulties of living a single life, losing custody rights or even being unable to visit their children following divorce [8]. For this reason we conducted a study of married women living in Sanandaj city, Islamic Republic of Iran, to determine the prevalence of domestic physical violence against women and socioeconomic factors that predicted it.

Methods

This was a cross-sectional study of married women resident in Sanandaj city during the year 2000.

Sample

The subjects were 1040 women selected by multistage cluster random sampling. The health care of the city is divided into 16 urban health centres, each of which has a health file for every individual household under its coverage. The number of subjects selected from each was proportional to the size of the population served by each centre. A total of 40 women (3% of the sample) refused to participate in the research, giving a final sample of 1000.

The sample size was calculated from the formula $n = Z^2 PQ/d^2$, where $P = Q = 0.5$, $d = 0.05$, $n = 520$. Given the cluster sampling method, this number was doubled. The power of the study was 80%, $\beta = 0.20$.

Questionnaire

A 23-part locally constructed questionnaire collected demographic data about: woman's age, education level of the woman and her husband, woman's job, number of children, age of husband and wife at marriage, duration of marriage and number of previous marriages for the woman and her husband.

The questionnaire asked the woman: "In your opinion, what are the reasons for domestic quarrels?" (answers were pre-coded in 8 categories plus other) and "What are the reasons for physical violence against women?" (11 categories plus other). The woman was asked to pick the most important reasons for violence from the list (they could mention as many as they wished). "What is the best way to prevent physical violence against women?" (5 categories plus other). The woman was then asked if she had been beaten during the last year, and at any time in their marriage, and if so how many times and her opinion about the reason for the violence. Participants were interviewed by students of the Faculty of Medical Sciences of Kurdistan University who had been specifically trained for the task.

The pre-post-test reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.82, tested on 30 women and repeated after a month.

Data analysis

The correlates of current domestic physical violence within the previous 12 months and at any time within the marriage were determined using the variables: age, woman's and husband's education level, woman's and husband's job, number of children, woman's and husband's number of previous marriages. Chi-squared tests (univariate analyses) and forward stepwise logistic regression analyses (multivariate analyses) were applied using *SPSS*, version 10.05 and *STATA*, version 6 software.

Results

Of the 1000 women who answered the questionnaire, 150 (15%) had suffered physical violence from their husbands in the year before the study and 380 (38%) at some time during their marriage. Of the 150 women

who had been exposed to violence in the previous year, 22 (15%) had experienced 1 to 5 episodes of violence and 10 (1%) had suffered 11 or more episodes.

All age groups of women reported suffering violence at some time during the marriage but violence was more frequent against women aged 30–39 years old (32.4%) (Table 1). The prevalence of physical violence ever in the marriage was lower in marriages of longer duration: 30–39 years (15.4%) and 40+ years (6.2%). The highest prevalence was in marriages of 10–19 years (29.5%) and 20–29 years (26.6%). The association between physical violence and the woman's age and marriage duration were statistically significant ($P = 0.025$ and $P < 0.001$, respectively). There was no association between ever suffering physical violence and the husband's age at marriage. Physical violence against women with a history of previous marriages was relatively higher than for women without it, and the association was statistically significant ($P = 0.012$) (Table 1).

Of the husbands, 18% were illiterate, but 10% had completed higher degrees. There was a significant association between physical violence in the previous year and the educational level of the wife and the husband (Table 2). The husband's job had an association with domestic physical violence, with violence significantly more common among men working as piece workers and drivers ($P < 0.001$).

Physical violence ever in the marriage was more common against housewives than against employed women and the association between physical violence and women's employment was statistically significant ($P < 0.001$) (Table 2).

There were no association between the occurrence of violence ever in the marriage and whether there were sons in the family or not, but the association between physi-

Table 1 Physical violence against women according to woman's age and duration of marriage and number of times woman and her husband have been married

| Variable | Suffered physical violence ever in marriage | | | | Total | |
|-----------------------------------|--|------|-----|------|-------|------|
| | Yes | | No | | No. | % |
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| <i>Woman's age</i> | | | | | | |
| < 20 | 10 | 2.6 | 18 | 2.9 | 28 | 2.8 |
| 20–29 | 92 | 24.0 | 164 | 26.6 | 256 | 25.6 |
| 30–39 | 124 | 32.4 | 218 | 25.3 | 342 | 34.2 |
| 40–49 | 97 | 25.3 | 103 | 16.7 | 200 | 20.0 |
| 50+ | 60 | 15.7 | 114 | 19.5 | 174 | 17.4 |
| | <i>P</i> = 0.025 | | | | | |
| <i>Duration of marriage</i> | | | | | | |
| < 10 | 85 | 22.3 | 192 | 31.1 | 277 | 27.7 |
| 10–19 | 113 | 29.5 | 193 | 31.3 | 306 | 30.6 |
| 20–29 | 102 | 26.6 | 116 | 18.8 | 218 | 21.8 |
| 30–39 | 59 | 15.4 | 67 | 10.9 | 126 | 12.6 |
| 40+ | 24 | 6.2 | 49 | 7.9 | 73 | 7.3 |
| | <i>P</i> < 0.001 | | | | | |
| <i>No. of times man married</i> | | | | | | |
| 1 | 340 | 88.8 | 562 | 91.1 | 902 | 90.2 |
| > 1 | 43 | 11.2 | 55 | 8.9 | 98 | 9.8 |
| | OR = 1.29; 95%CI = 0.85–1.97; <i>P</i> = 0.231 | | | | | |
| <i>No. of times woman married</i> | | | | | | |
| 1 | 349 | 91.1 | 587 | 95.1 | 936 | 93.6 |
| > 1 | 34 | 8.9 | 30 | 4.9 | 64 | 6.4 |
| | OR = 1.96; 95%CI = 1.15–0.17; <i>P</i> = 0.012 | | | | | |

OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

cal violence and existence of any child or daughter in family was statistically significant ($P < 0.001$). Domestic physical violence was more frequent in families without a child (Table 3) and with a girl, whereas the risk factor for physical violence in families without a child was 2.5 times that of families with a child (OR = 2.58).

As to opinions on the best way to deal with a probable assault, there was a clear

difference between wives of differing educational levels; 71.0% of illiterate women believed that remaining silent was the best way, whereas this figure was only 41.0% for those with a higher degree. There was also a clear difference between women of different employment status; 57.4% of housewives believed that remaining silent was the best way of coping, whereas 35.3% of employed women believed that establishing a law

Table 2 Physical violence against women in terms of woman's and husband's level of education and employment

| Variable | Suffered physical violence ever in marriage | | | | Total | |
|--|---|------|-----|------|-------|------|
| | Yes | | No | | No. | % |
| | No. | % | No. | % | | |
| <i>Husband's education</i> | | | | | | |
| Illiterate | 79 | 20.6 | 102 | 16.6 | 18 | 18.1 |
| Elementary | 171 | 44.6 | 186 | 30.1 | 357 | 35.7 |
| High school | 100 | 26.1 | 194 | 31.4 | 294 | 29.4 |
| Higher education | 33 | 8.6 | 135 | 21.9 | 168 | 16.8 |
| $P < 0.001$ | | | | | | |
| <i>Woman's education</i> | | | | | | |
| Illiterate | 177 | 46.3 | 190 | 30.8 | 367 | 36.7 |
| Elementary | 136 | 35.5 | 187 | 30.3 | 323 | 32.3 |
| High school | 61 | 15.9 | 181 | 29.3 | 242 | 24.2 |
| Higher education | 9 | 2.3 | 59 | 9.6 | 68 | 14.8 |
| $P < 0.001$ | | | | | | |
| <i>Woman's employment</i> | | | | | | |
| Employed | 23 | 6.0 | 96 | 15.6 | 119 | 11.9 |
| Housewife | 360 | 94.0 | 521 | 84.4 | 881 | 88.1 |
| $OR = 2.88; 95\%CI = 1.79-4.64; P < 0.001$ | | | | | | |

OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

Table 3 Physical violence against women according to presence of children in the family

| Variable | Suffered physical violence ever in marriage | | | | Total | |
|---|---|------|-----|------|-------|-----|
| | Yes | | No | | No. | % |
| | No. | % | No. | % | | |
| <i>Children in family</i> | | | | | | |
| Yes | 369 | 39.6 | 562 | 60.4 | 931 | 100 |
| No | 14 | 20.3 | 55 | 79.7 | 69 | 100 |
| $OR = 2.58; 95\%CI = 1.41-4.71; P < 0.001$ | | | | | | |
| <i>Boy in family</i> | | | | | | |
| Yes | 316 | 39.6 | 481 | 60.4 | 797 | 100 |
| No | 67 | 33.0 | 136 | 67.0 | 203 | 100 |
| $OR = 1.33; 95\%CI = 0.96-1.85; P = 0.082$ | | | | | | |
| <i>Girl in family</i> | | | | | | |
| Yes | 72 | 27.9 | 186 | 72.1 | 258 | 100 |
| No | 311 | 41.9 | 431 | 58.1 | 742 | 100 |
| $OR = 0.54; 95\%CI = 0.39-0.73; P < 0.0001$ | | | | | | |

OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.

to support women would be the best way of preventing domestic physical violence.

From the women's point of view, the most important etiological factors for domestic violence were household economic problems, the existing patriarchy laws, "wrong culture" (folklore) and distrust. Women who were employed outside the home considered the patriarchy law to be the most important factor (55.0%), whereas housewives mentioned domestic economic problems as the leading cause (32.0%).

In regression analysis, the occurrence of domestic physical violence was entered with the demographic and interview variables in a forward stepwise Wald procedure, but only woman's age, number of children, man's education and woman's job remained as significant predictors of domestic physical violence. The logit regression model of this study for prediction of physical violence against women (Y) during the marriage was: $Y = 0.014 - 0.029 \text{ woman's age} + 0.199 \text{ number of children} - 0.238 \text{ husband's education} + 0.589 \text{ woman's employment}$.

Discussion

The prevalence of domestic physical violence is high in Sanandaj city, as it is in other communities of the Islamic Republic of Iran [8]. The percentage of women in this study who reported a history of physical violence ever in their marriage (38%) was greater than that reported in a South African study [9] and greater than the prevalence of physical violence among female medical students in the USA [10]. It is higher than the rate reported by Egyptian adult women who had been physically assaulted by an intimate partner in 1991–99 [11,12]. This prevalence is consistent with the findings of Nicaragua (38.5%) [10]. Also the 1-year prevalence of physical violence (15%) was greater than the annual rates of husband–wife violence

found in a 1985 national survey in America (11.6%) [13], but is consistent with the findings in South Dakota (15%) [14]. The differences are probably due to the different cultures and populations.

It was found that women aged 30–39 years were more likely to be at risk of violence from their partner than were older women and this is consistent with an Australian study in 1996 [15]. The multivariate analysis showed a significant correlation between domestic physical violence and age, which was also found in Neuberger's study [16]. Husband's education emerged as an independent predictor of current physical violence. Factors that aggravate the physical violence, such as illiteracy, unemployment and lower education, for both men and women, placed our population at greater risk, suggesting that the topic of the outcome of domestic violence must be incorporated into the high school and medical education curricula.

A weakness of the study was the potential for recall or reporting bias. Women that experience domestic violence may be reluctant to acknowledge this because of shame or embarrassment. A small proportion of women refused to participate in the research, perhaps from shame or fearing further reprisals for revealing "family secrets". There were a number of strengths of this study, however, in that our findings are consistent with those of other studies. Further research is necessary to explore the prevalence of domestic physical violence in other populations of the Islamic Republic of Iran to enhance our understanding of the relationship between socioeconomic status and domestic physical violence.

Our study supports the need for the development of a screening protocol for the detection of domestic violence, perhaps based in family planning programmes, and that counselling and intervention initiatives

should be considered. The high prevalence of physical violence found in this study, together with the etiological factors of physical violence mentioned by the women themselves, argue for a law to be established to give more support for women's rights for protection against violence in the home.

Acknowledgements

Financial support for the study was received from Medical Sciences University of Kurdistan, Sanandaj, Islamic Republic of Iran.

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Correction

Knowledge of and attitudes towards family planning by male teachers in the Islamic Republic of Iran. R. Tavakoli and H. Rashidi-Jahan. *Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal*, 2003, Vol. 9 Nos 5/6, pages 1019–1025.

The name in Arabic of the second author should read:

حجت رش جهان