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Domestic Violence: Frequency and Women's Perception in Iran (I.R)

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Abstract: This study was aimed to estimate the prevalence of different kinds of domestic violence against women in an Iranian population and to explore their attitudes. A cross-sectional survey was conducted in Kerman, Iran. Three hundred ninety eight women referring to randomly selected health centers were interviewed in early 2005. The questionnaire explored the women's views regarding domestic violence and their experiences of domestic violence during the year before interview. Ignoring women's capabilities by their spouses (36.7%) was the most frequent type of violence. Roughly 27% of them were beaten by their husbands over preceding year. The respondents showed the least agreement with "violence toward wife ceases during pregnancy". Although the findings may not be generalizable to other parts of the country due to cultural diversity, considering the high prevalence of different types of domestic violence it should be regarded as a priority for health service policy.

Key words: Domestic violence, women, prevalence, Iran

INTRODUCTION

According to a report issued by the World Health Organization (Heise and Garcia-Moreno, 2002) between 10 and 52% of women from around the world report that they had been physically abused by an intimate partner at some point in their lives and between 10 and 30% of women had experienced sexual violence by an intimate partner.

Domestic violence leads to many physical and psychological injuries to women such as poor health, depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as well as anxiety and suicide (Coker *et al.*, 2000). Indirect psychological effects of violence can give rise to nonspecific physical symptoms such as stomachache, headache and alimentary tract problems (Kernic *et al.*, 2000).

In research about domestic violence the role of culture, as well as cultural and religious beliefs and attitudes of people about violence should be considered (Goel, 2005). Such beliefs may affect responding strategies of legal and social institutions to it (Nayak *et al.*, 2003). Cultural attitudes frequently justify violence against women on such grounds that they have not fulfilled their housekeeping duties, have not been faithful, or that their dress or behavior has elicited violence (Kim and Motsei, 2002). In many instances, such social norms as shame, fear, denial and self-reproach will prevent victims from

seeking help. Moreover, the idea that a victim is to blame will strip them of self-esteem in the long run (Koss, 2000).

Due to diversity of attitudes in various cultures, studies on violence against women can reveal new points in every culture. Such studies in Iran have been meager and their precedence compared to western countries (Since, 1970) has been negligible. However, this does not mean that violence is not a problem in our society. In Iran, such studies focused to prevalence of domestic violence (Faramarzi *et al.*, 2005a; Ghazizadeh, 2005) and the cultural views regarding of domestic violence was missed. This study is aimed at estimating the prevalence of different forms of domestic violence in Iranian women population and to explore their attitude toward the issue. It also presents the groups most vulnerable to physical violence.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This survey was conducted in Kerman the capital city of the largest province of Iran located in Southern Iran in early 2005. In this study, 420 women who referred to 12 randomly selected health centers located in different areas of city aged between 17 to 70 were requested to take part in an interview. Before interviewing the respondents were insured of the confidentiality of their answers and views and after obtaining their consent they were interviewed in a private area. The questionnaire consisted of three parts, background questions, questions regarding

domestic violence experiences and questions requesting the attitude toward domestic violence. Using likert scale ranging from high disagreement (score 1) to high agreement (score 5) and items considering experiences of abuse during the year before interview. Content validity of the questionnaire was established by an extensive literature review and an expert panel. The overall attitude scale stood on acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.81$).

A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation on the 16 attitude items did not yield coherent factors. So we examined separately the 16 items scores. In order to determine which questions generated positive or negative attitude at a greater than chance level, the mean Likert scores on each item was calculated and compared to a hypothesized mean of 3 (representing a natural score) using t-test, in this regard the significance level was set at $\alpha < 0.003$ for the comparisons regarding Bonferroni adjustment. Differences between the percent of women reporting violence by each subgroup were evaluated using chi square test. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software (version 15).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of 420 women invited for interview, 398 individuals (94.7%) participated in this study. The mean (\pm SD) age of the participating women was 34.4 (\pm 10.3). The mean numbers of children ever born was 3.0 (\pm 2.2). More than 8% of them were illiterate (Table 1). Fifty one percent of women and 95% of their husbands were employed (Table 1). Nearly 27% of women were beaten by their husband over preceding year. Threatening to divorce was the most common type of threatening violence (i.e., more than 13%) and ignoring women's capabilities by their spouses (36.7%) was more frequent than other forms of emotional violence (Table 2). About 25% of women reported any type of sexual violence during preceding year (Table 2).

Physical violence was reported by women who had a higher education, employed and lived with a mentally-ill husband (Table 3).

In Table 4, the mean scores are included for each attitude statement as well as the P value, which tests whether the average score is different from the neutral score of 3.0. There was no significant difference comparing to the neutral value of 3.0 regarding questions 3, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14 and 16.

Respondents most frequently agreed with the statement violence and wife abuse by husband is a normal part of marital life and showed the least agreement with the statement violence toward wife ceases during pregnancy (Table 4).

Table 1: Selected characteristics of women studied about domestic violence (n = 398)

Characteristics	No.	(%)
Women education		
Illiterate	34	8.6
Primary/Secondary	110	27.6
College	254	63.8
Husband education		
Illiterate	25	6.3
Primary/Secondary	118	29.6
College	255	64.1
Woman occupation		
Housewife	195	49.0
Employed	203	51.0
Husband occupation		
Unemployed	20	5.0
Office worker	172	43.2
Trader	125	31.4
Unskilled worker	81	20.4
Mental illness		
None	300	75.4
Wife	70	17.6
Husband	28	7.0

The study found alarming rate of different types of violence against women by their husbands (Table 2). Relevant studies conducted in the country showed that the prevalence of physical, emotional and sexual violence among North Iranian women were 81.5, 42.4 and 15%, respectively (Faramarzi *et al.*, 2005b). The prevalence rates differ widely from country to country. In Japan 50% of women reported experiencing at least one type of emotional violence and 20% experienced sexual violence and the prevalence of physically abused women was more than 30% (Weingourt *et al.*, 2001). A study in Turkey showed even higher rates of domestic violence; the prevalence of physical, sexual and emotional domestic violence was, respectively 57, 65 and 30.7% (Kocacik and Dogan, 2006).

The difference in figures may be to some extent due methodological differences in cohort recruitment (those who refer to police stations, coroner or emergency ward of hospitals) (Faramarzi *et al.*, 2005b; Ghazizadeh, 2005) but may also be due to cultural and social differences (Heise, 1998).

The study demonstrated that some acts, such as beating and shoving were more prevalent than threatening to kill with a gun or knife (Table 2) which may be related to impulsiveness in families or due to different cultural attitudes toward killing (Heise, 1998; Jewkes *et al.*, 2002; Haj Yahia, 2003). Meanwhile the prevalence of physical violence was higher in more educated and employed women (Table 3). Whilst some studies conducted in Iran, as well as other countries demonstrated a reverse relationship between violence and education and occupational status of women

Table 2: Frequency of violence over preceding year among studied women in 2005 (n = 398)

Type of violence	No.	(%)
Physical		
Has your husband beaten You?	107	26.90
Has your husband shoved you or thrown you down?	106	26.60
Has your husband tugged at your hair or wrenched your hand?	73	18.30
Has your husband ever slapped you in the face?	97	24.40
Has your husband attacked you with a belt, whip, or stick?	39	9.80
Any physical		41.40
Threatening		
Has your husband threatened you with a knife or gun?	19	4.80
Has your husband threatened to kill you?	30	7.50
Has your husband threatened to divorce you?	52	13.10
Has your husband threatened to take children away from you?	43	10.80
Any threatening		16.70
Emotional		
Has your husband ever called you names?	73	18.30
Has your husband despised you in public?	98	24.60
Has your husband ignored your capabilities?	146	36.70
Has your husband barred you from working?	79	19.80
Has your husband taken your money from you to spend it?	101	25.40
Has your husband been indifferent toward you ailments?	98	6.24
Has your husband ever boasted about fending for you?	88	22.10
Has your husband been stingy despite being affluent?	55	13.80
Has your husband locked you at your house?	24	6.00
Has your husband had unfounded doubts about you?	54	13.60
Any emotional		60.70
Sexual		
Has your husband been indifferent toward your sexual desires?	61	15.30
Has your husband forced sex on you despite your unwillingness?	78	19.60
Any sexual		25.20

Table 3: Frequency distribution of physical violence according to selected characteristics

Characteristics	n (%)	p-value
Women education		
Illiterate	6 (17.6)	0.020
Primary/Secondary	45 (40.9)	
College	123 (48.4)	
Husband education		
Illiterate	9 (36.0)	0.009
Primary/Secondary	39 (33.1)	
College	126 (49.4)	
Woman occupation		
Housewife	72 (36.9)	0.007
Employed	102 (50.2)	
Husband occupation		
Unemployed	77 (44.8)	0.210
Office worker	52 (41.6)	
Trader	32 (39.5)	
Unskilled worker	13 (65.0)	
Mental illness		
None	134 (44.7)	0.030
Wife	23 (32.9)	
Husband	17 (60.7)	

Values are given as n (%) of respondents

(Jewkes *et al.*, 2002; Faramarzi *et al.*, 2005a; Ghazizadeh, 2005; Romito *et al.*, 2005), others report that working women are exposed to more violence (Ezazy, 2003). Researchers in the first group argue that less economic dependence on husband reduces violence (Schuler *et al.*, 1996). However, it seems that inhibitory role of working is not limited to economic aspects, but working women gain more social status and opportunities including taking part in social networks, which gives them

more self-esteem and they would have more access to information or other social resources (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002). On the contrary, some researches believe that economic independence of women is a source of tension in the family which may lead to an increase in the probability of domestic violence (International Center for Research on Women, 2000). Since in the Iranian traditional culture man is the breadwinner of family, women's occupation and earning will face men with a kind of masculine identity crisis, which will undermine traditional image of an ideal man and so he tries to improve that image through violence (Nayak *et al.*, 2003). The finding that the man's education and occupation had no significant role in the prevalence of violence shows that cultural factors are much more effective than demographic ones (Kim and Motsei, 2002; Faramarzi *et al.*, 2005a).

Psychological disorders in men have been accompanied by increased prevalence of domestic violence and this has been noted in many studies (Nestor, 2002). Impulsiveness as well as borderline and antisocial personality types has been mentioned to increase spouse abuse (Edwards *et al.*, 2003).

Another form of violence against women is threat to divorce or taking children from mothers. In Iran, threatening to divorce is an act of violence against women because it means losing financial support, social respect as well as children.

Table 4: Mean scores of the responses to the attitude statements and results of comparing with neutral score (N = 398)

No.	Statement	Average†	p-value
1	Violence against women is something private between man and wife and other people should know nothing about it.	3.78	0.0001*
2	A wife is duty-bound to fully obey her husband.	2.67	0.0001*
3	If a women wants to be independent, this will provoke her husband to become violent toward her.	3.20	0.0040
4	Violence frequently occurs when a woman makes her husband angry due to putting pressure on him or having irrational expectations from him.	3.24	0.0010*
5	Violence toward wife ceases during pregnancy.	3.38	0.0001*
6	Leaving home in protest by woman will prevent further violence from husband.	2.54	0.0001*
7	A woman should tolerate her husband's violence for the sake of children.	3.22	0.0060
8	A woman should tolerate violence due to lack of financial independence.	2.81	0.0190
9	A woman should tolerate violence to prevent infamy.	3.12	0.1440
10	Violence and wife abuse by husband is a normal part of marital life.	1.98	0.0001*
11	Tolerating violence will cause it to abate.	3.18	0.0200
12	Complaining about violence from a man (to his or the wife's family) will hurt his pride.	3.26	0.0010*
13	Due to problems facing men in the society it is normal for them to be harsh and violent toward wife and family.	2.37	0.0001*
14	If a family does not need wife's money, the man is entitled to bar her from working	2.79	0.0070
15	Beating and insulting are not important and may occur whenever somebody is angry.	2.11	0.0001*
16	When a man is doubtful about faithfulness of his wife, violence is quite acceptable.	2.83	0.0150

†: Higher scores reflect more agreement. *: Significant difference comparing neutral value of 3.0 on the Likert scale

Slightly more than 19% of studied women complained about having sex without their consent and 5% reported inattention of their husband to their sexual needs. According to the World Health Organization multi-country study the prevalence of sexual violence ranged from 6 to 49% (Garcia-Moreno *et al.*, 2006). These observed differences in the rate of sexual violence may be due to differences in how it was defined and also cross-cultural differences (Garcia-Moreno *et al.*, 2006).

It should be noteworthy that some forms of violence could be overshadowed by other forms. For example, psychological consequences of beating or verbal abuse can be easily overshadowed by physical injury. Therefore, the magnitude of nonphysical violence may be higher than what our study revealed.

The attitude which sees violence to be a private affair between man and woman was identified in the study (Table 4), which is a precipitating factor that has always worked to intensify violence (Hou *et al.*, 2004). One of the most important notions in this regard, is much emphasis laid on privacy of home. Privacy of home environment makes family members to have difficulty for giving voice to their problems. In addition to home privacy, traditional cultural notions including contempt from other people, fears of being labeled with inappropriate conduct or fears about more violence from spouse are among important factors preventing women from seeking help (Shoham, 2005; Haj Yahia, 2003; Griffith *et al.*, 2006).

The mean attitude scores showed that overall, the studied women disagreed with the woman's full obedience to her husband (Table 4). Absolute obedience to husband is an attitude contrary to the belief of most women who have recognized their rights and give voice to their own ideas. Agreement to complete obedience

toward husband varied from 40 to 53% in different nations (Amoakohene, 2004).

A large percentage of women (43%) believed that women themselves are the most important catalysts for domestic violence. This is rooted in traditional beliefs that women's behavior provokes men to assault (Amoakohene, 2004).

The studied women believed that if a woman leaves her home as a sign of protest after violence from man, this would curtail further violence from her spouse (Table 4). Among major reasons for leaving home in protest, researchers have mentioned hope in improving husband's behavior, fears about increased violence and even death at the hands of husband, lack of family, financial and social support as well as children as a factor of threat against women (Hindin, 2003). It needs to further studies to elucidate the effect of leaving home on the rate of violence especially in non-Western countries.

More than half of the studied women believed that violence abated during pregnancy. This denotes the cultural notion that a child works to cement marital relationship and make man behave more sensibly. However, some studies have even reported escalation of violence during pregnancy (McFarlane *et al.*, 1996).

Tolerating violence by women for the sake of children or for the fear of losing financial support indicates implicit submission to violence or, at least, lack of disagreement to it (Amoakohene, 2004). Such ideas that violence will abate as a result of submission, the right of man to prevent his wife from working and prescribing violence when a husband doubts faithfulness of his wife indicate accepted cultural norms about women's rights that determine a woman's behavior (Haj Yahia, 2002). Such an acceptance of domestic violence by women will lead to escalation of violence in society and family.

In conclusion, although the finding may not be generalized to other parts of the country owing to cultural diversity, considering the high prevalence of different types of domestic violence it should be regarded as a priority for health policy makers.

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