

## Spouse Abuse in Sari-Iran

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**Objective:** Spouse abuse is a major worldwide health concern and includes a wide range of emotional, physical and sexual maltreatments. The objective of present study was to determine the prevalence and risk factors of spouse abuse among women who were registered with health centers in the city of Sari.

**Methods:** We distributed two specifically designed questionnaires among one thousand women whose name was in the list of health centers register in Sari. The subjects had been randomly selected from a list of 49330 registered women. Demographic data and data on spouse abuse were then analyzed by using Student's unpaired t-test and Chi-square test.

**Results:** Including mild forms of abuse, 73.5%, 92.2% and 49.6% of women reported that they were subjected to physical, emotional and sexual abuse respectively at least once during their lives. This figure was 3%, 10.4% and 5.8% for moderate forms, and 0.5%, 1% and 2.2% for severe forms of abuse. Younger age, unemployment, low level of education, substance misuse, presence of a physical or a psychological problem and having more children were risk factors for domestic violence.

**Conclusion:** The study revealed a high prevalence, especially mild forms of domestic maltreatment in the sample population. The type and risk factors of domestic violence seems to be similar throughout the world irrespective of differences in cultural and religious backgrounds. Authors believe that addressing unemployment, substance misuse problems and early treatment of mental illness in young couples in Iran will reduce the risk of domestic violence.

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### Introduction

Spouse abuse is a major worldwide health concern and includes a wide range of physical, sexual, and emotional (psychological) maltreatments (1). The United Nation's reports show that 17-38% of women are maltreated and injured by their husbands, and it may be as high as 60% in many areas of developing world (2). Studies in different countries report that 20-50% of women have been subjected to domestic violence at least once during their lives (3).

One study has reported a prevalence rate of 41% in London (4). In Athen, 1/3 of women reported to have been abused by their husbands (5). The prevalence of domestic violence is believed to be higher in developing countries (2). In Chile, one in four women has experienced physical and one in three, emotional maltreatment from their husbands or partners (6). The situation is similar in Turkey (7) and Taiwan (8).

A national project for the study of domestic violence in Iran in 2001 showed that the prevalence of domestic violence is on average 66.3%. In this study, prevalence of domestic violence in Sari (A city in Mazandaran province at the northern part of Iran and southern border of Caspian Sea) was 58.7% (9). A study on the reason of referral to criminal justice systems in another city near to Sari, Babol, showed that 36% of women were victims of domestic violence (10). Another study on married university student population has showed that 55% of them were victims of spouse abuse (11). In Tehran, out of

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1186 married women, 980 (83%) reported physical and sexual abuse, 835 (70.4%), emotional and sexual abuse and 818 (69%), physical and emotional abuse by their husbands (12).

Present research is an attempt to study this unpleasant phenomena and its relationship with certain demographic characteristics to pave the way for implementing the preventive measures, early recognition and appropriate management strategies to ensure the safety of the women and children in the family.

## Materials and Methods

Considering a 28% prevalence of domestic violence reported in previous Iranian studies, 1000 women were randomly selected from a target population of 49330 who were registered with health centers in Sari.

Two types of questionnaire were used for collection of data, demographic questionnaire and spouse abuse questionnaire. Demographic questionnaire was applied to elicit information about the victims and their family members. Spouse abuse questionnaire (SAQ), a self-reported questionnaire, has been specifically developed to assess physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Its validity (Cronbach's alpha coefficient: 0.92) and reliability (test-retest reliability:  $r = 98\%$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ) have already been established in previous studies (11).

Data were analyzed by SPSS software (SPSS version 11.5) using Student's t test and Chi-Square test.

## Results

Including mild forms of spouse abuse, the most common form of abuse reported in our study was emotional type (92.2%). Seven hundred and thirty five (73.5%) of the women reported a physical abuse. Five (0.5%) of them classified their abuse as severe physical aggression. About half of our sample population reported a history of sexual abuse from their husband at least once during their lives. Most of the victims of domestic violence suffered from mild degree of spouse abuse (Table 1).

Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of the study sample and their husbands.

**Table 1.** Prevalence of different types and severity of spouse abuse in Sari-Iran

Spouse abuse	Mild n (%)	Moderate n (%)	Severe n (%)	Total n (%)
Physical	700 (70)	30 (3)	5 (0.5)	735(73.5)
Emotional	808 (80.8)	104 (10.4)	10 (1)	922(92.2)
Sexual	416 (41.6)	58 (5.8)	22 (2.2)	496(49.6)

**Table 2.** Demographic characteristics of women and their husbands

	Women n(%)	Husbands n(%)
<b>Age (years):</b> 16-25	285 (28.5)	94 (9.4)
26- 35	511 (51.1)	576 (57.6)
36-45	168 (16.8)	229 (22.9)
46-55	57 (5.7)	82 (8.2)
56-65	6 (0.6)	14 (1.4)
66 <	0 (0)	5 (0.5)
<b>Education:</b> Not educated	34 (3.4)	65 (6.5)
Primary school	144 (14.4)	108 (10.8)
Secondary	180 (18)	186 (18.6)
school	436 (43.6)	385 (38.5)
Diploma	206 (20.6)	256 (25.6)
Higher education		
<b>Occupation:</b> House keeper	734 (73.4)	0 (0)
Laborer	58 (5.8)	220 (22)
Civil servant	108 (10.8)	318 (31.8)
Farmer	0 (0)	352 (35.2)
Unemployed	0 (0)	110 (11)
<b>Children:</b> 1-2	830 (83)	830 (83)
3-5	160 (16)	160 (16)
6<	10 (1)	10 (1)
<b>Physical Disease:</b> Yes	203 (20.3)	203 (20.3)
No	797 (79.9)	797 (79.9)
<b>Psychiatric Disorder:</b> Yes	128 (12.8)	128 (12.8)
No	872 (87.2)	872 (87.2)

We found an association between spouse abuse and number of offspring: the more the number of children, the higher the chance of domestic violence ( $\chi^2 = 24.34$ , d.f.=2,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Sixty (6%) of the women reported that their husbands were suffering from either alcohol or narcotic misuse. Our results showed that there was a significant association between low level of education of the husbands and physical maltreatment ( $\chi^2 = 25.81$ , d.f. = 4,  $p < 0.001$ ). Similar association was detected between physical abuse and the husbands' age: the younger the husband, the higher the prevalence of physical abuse ( $\chi^2 = 55.56$ , d.f. = 5,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Unemployed men and those with low profile jobs were more prone to abuse their wives physically ( $\chi^2 = 50.91$ , d.f. = 3,  $p < 0.001$ ). So were men with a history of substance misuse ( $\chi^2 = 23.34$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.001$ ).

We also found a significant association between husband's drug abuse and emotional abuse ( $\chi^2 = 51.9$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.02$ ), but there was no significant association between level of education in men and emotional abuse in the family.

Presence of mental illness in men was significantly associated with both physical ( $\chi^2 = 14.2$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.03$ ), and emotional ( $\chi^2 = 23.74$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.001$ ) abuse. Similar associations were found between physical illness in men and higher rate of physical ( $\chi^2 = 22.41$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.001$ ) and emotional ( $\chi^2 = 14.25$ , d.f. = 1,  $p < 0.03$ ) abuse.

Our study did not find a statistically significant association between any socio-demographic characteristics and sexual abuse.

## Discussion

Various types of spouse abuse are prevalent in the world especially in developing countries (9,13-15). Acknowledgment of widespread incidence of spouse abuse, combined with increasing public discourse, victim's testimonies, the efforts of women working in governmental and non-governmental organizations, and research have brought the issue of spouse abuse into public forum.

We explored several issues pertinent to the introduction of screening for spouse abuse, including the prevalence of problem and the distribution of possible risk factors. Definition of spouse abuse varies, and there are no definite criteria for this problem. The measurement of spouse abuse is very complex; in our study, we indicated any form and any degree of maltreatment as spouse abuse. Emotional abuse was the most common form of spouse abuse. This is in agreement with the results of some studies (16), and in conflict with some other studies (17-19). Some researchers have shown that most women continue to live with a husband who subjects them to a milder form of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Usually

victims do not report this type of abuse to criminal justice system (6). Our clinical experience shows a similar pattern in Iranian women.

Public health services are a good place to identify victims of domestic violence (20). We did our study in such a place. Younger women (21,22) and women with low level of education (20) have been shown to be more vulnerable to physical and emotional abuse (23). Similar to other studies (24,25), we found such associations with younger age of husbands and their lower level of education.

Substance misuse is a well-known risk factor for violence in western population (24,26-28). Present study and other studies in Iran (12) also confirm its association as well as severe physical and psychiatric disorder with domestic violence in Iranian population.

## Conclusion

Domestic violence occurs with a high prevalence rate in different societies around the world. The types and risk factors of domestic violence seem to be similar throughout the world irrespective of differences in cultural and religious backgrounds.

Early detection and intervention programs should be established in public health services. If not detected early, domestic violence can have lasting consequences on the victims' life. It also adversely affects the psychological development of the children. Domestic violence can also tragically result in the murder of the victim.

It is important thus, to tackle this problem by increasing the awareness of the victims and supporting them to report any form of abuse as early as possible to pave the way for establishing a safe and healthy family life. The survival of emerging women's support services will be vital to the welfare of women and families.

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