

PREVALENCE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING PREGNANCY IN A TURKISH COMMUNITY

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Abstract. This study was carried out to determine the prevalence and risk factors for domestic violence victimization of women during pregnancy by intimate partner throughout marriage in a Turkish community. Pregnant women living in the servicing area of selected health centers in Elazig were considered for the study and data were obtained through a questionnaire. A total of 249 pregnant women, mean age 26.8 ± 5.2 years and the mean gravidity 2.6 ± 1.7 , were involved. Of the 249 women, 28.9% were exposed to at least one case of physical violence throughout matrimony, 12.4% being abused during the previous year and 4.8% during the current pregnancy, 30.5% were exposed to verbal insult and 4.4% exposed to sexual abuse during the current pregnancy. In addition, 25.7% were exposed to one or more types of domestic violence during previous pregnancies. There was a significant correlation between the rate of violent victimization and number of children, and the partner's alcohol habits and socio-economical status of the families ($p < 0.05$). Results from the self-report of the receiving end of violent behaviors indicate that the rates of any type of intimate partner violence were very high among pregnant women in this studied Turkish population. Efforts to reduce the incidence of this women's rights and public health problem should be given high priority.

INTRODUCTION

Exposure to domestic violence during pregnancy is an important social and public health problem that presents critical risks for the mother and her baby (Muhajarine and D'Arcy, 1999; Fisher *et al*, 2003). Domestic violence inflicted on women can be physical, verbal, or sexual (Langan and Innes, 1986). Generally, low socio-economic and educational status, early marriage, alcohol and substance abuse habits of the partner, and unemployment are among the main risk factors for domestic violence (Muhajarine and D'Arcy, 1999; Subramaniam and Sivayogan, 2001; Fisher *et al*, 2003).

Studies have shown that domestic violence exposure to pregnant women is more prevalent than pregnancy-related complications, such as preeclampsia, and gestational diabetes, that have detrimental effects on both the physical and mental health of the mother, as well as presenting risk for the baby (Bohn, 1990; Hilberman and Munson, 1990; Webster *et al*, 1996).

In USA, a survey found that 11-41% of pregnant women have a history of exposure to violence, and 4-17% of these cases were exposed to domestic violence during pregnancy (Hillard, 1985; Helton *et al*, 1987; Amaro *et al*, 1990; Norton *et al*, 1995). According to the results of the Ministry of Family Research Foundation of Turkey, 29.6% of women in Turkey are exposed to physical violence by their partners. Of these women, 9.1% also stated that they were exposed to sexual abuse among all types of domestic violence (Turkish

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Republic Prime Ministry Directorate General on the Status and Problems of Women, 2000; Ayranci *et al*, 2002). However, there has been no comprehensive study on the rate of domestic violence victimization during pregnancy in Turkey.

This study was carried out to determine the prevalence of and risk factors for domestic violence victimization among pregnant women by their intimate partner throughout matrimony in a Turkish community.

METHODS

This study was carried out in Elazig, a typical eastern Turkish city. Two of the 18 health centers in the city center were randomly selected. A total of 249 pregnant women with pregnancy follow-up records in these two health centers were included in this study and all were contacted.

A questionnaire was conducted with face-to-face house visits by a midwife who had been trained in interview techniques. The rationale for this method was that the midwives were known to the women and therefore they could answer the questions more freely. The questionnaire included questions about the socio-demographical information about the women; the types of domestic violence they were exposed to (physical, verbal, sexual) throughout matrimony, during the previous year, and throughout present or past pregnancies; domestic violence experience before marriage; and exposure to violence of their children. Physical abuse was defined as beating; verbal abuse was defined as exposure to partner's insults, and sexual abuse was defined as experience of any form of forced sex or sexual degradation. In addition, the demographical information about their partners was also described.

The data were analyzed by SPSS program; χ^2 test, Fisher's exact test and *t*-test were used for data analysis. Data are ex-

pressed as mean values with standard deviations.

RESULTS

A total of 249 pregnant women living within the service areas of the two selected health centers were included. The mean age of the women was 26.8 ± 5.2 years, the mean age of their partners was 31.4 ± 5.6 years, the mean gravidity was 2.6 ± 1.7 , the mean matrimony period was 74.9 ± 62.3 months, and the mean number of children was 1.4 ± 1.5 (min = 0 and max = 8). The mean monthly income per person was 132 ± 83 YTL (US\$ 1 = 1.4 YTL). Other socio-demographical characteristics of the women involved and their partners are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Socio-demographical characteristics of subjects.

Demographical features	Number	Percent
Matrimony period		
0-5 year	135	54.2
>5 year	114	45.8
Legal marriage		
Yes	214	85.9
No	35	14.1
Family type		
Core family	192	77.1
Large family	57	22.9
Working status of women		
Employed	11	4.4
Unemployed	238	95.6
Working status of partner		
Employed	225	90.4
Unemployed	24	9.6
Educational status of women		
Primary school or lower	205	82.3
High school or above	44	17.7
Educational status of partner		
Primary school or lower	132	53.0
High school or above	117	47.0

Table 2
Types and frequencies of domestic violence among pregnant women by male counterparts during marriage.

Frequency	Type of violence					
	Physical		Verbal		Sexual	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
At least 1-2 times a week	3	4.2	21	16.9	-	-
At least 1-2 times a month	4	5.6	23	18.5	3	11.1
At least 1-2 times a year	23	31.9	23	18.5	6	22.2
Less than 1 time a year	42	58.3	57	46.1	18	66.7
Total	72	100.0	124	100.0	27	100.0

Table 3
Types and frequencies of violence exposure during present pregnancy.

Violence type	Violence frequency	Number	Percent
Physical (n = 12)	1 time	7	58.3
	2 times	3	25.0
	3 times	2	16.7
Verbal (n = 76)	Very frequent	14	18.4
	Occasionally	28	36.8
	Rare	34	44.8
Sexual (n = 11)	1 time	6	54.5
	2 times	2	18.2
	3 times and more	3	27.3

Of the pregnant women involved, 28.9% (n = 72) reported that they were a victim of physical violence during marriage, 12.4% (n = 31) recently (within the past year), and 4.8% (n = 12) during their current pregnancy. In addition, 49.8% of the women reported that they were victims of verbal abuse, and sexual abuse 10.8%, perpetrated by intimate partners. Data relating to the exposure to violence during marriage are presented in Table 2.

When the recent victimization of abuse during pregnancy was assessed it was found that 25.7% (n = 64) of women were exposed to any form of violence during previous pregnancy. And, 4.8% (n = 12) were exposed to physical abuse, 30.5% (n = 76) were exposed

to verbal abuse, and 4.4% (n = 11) were exposed to sexual abuse by intimate partners during the present pregnancy. The types and frequencies of exposure to violence during present pregnancy are shown in Table 3.

Among the women who reported intimate partner violence occurring during marriage and before pregnancy, 16.7% (n = 12) reported such violence had occurred during pregnancy ($p = 0.0001$). They did not report injury that would require medical attention. Some socio-demographic data of the women and exposure to partners' physical abuse according to risk factors in the previous year are shown in Table 4.

As the educational level of the partners

Table 4
Analysis of current victimization of women to partners' physical abuse according to the socio-demographic data.

Demographic features and risk factors	Violence exposed (n = 31)	Violence non-exposed (n = 218)	Violence incidence	p-value
Age of women, Mean \pm SD	27.7 \pm 5.4	26.6 \pm 5.2		0.271
Age of partner, Mean \pm SD	32.3 \pm 5.0	31.3 \pm 5.7		0.347
No. of children, Mean \pm SD	2.2 \pm 1.9	1.3 \pm 1.4		0.001
Matrimony period, no. (%)				
5 years and less	11 (35.5)	124 (56.9)		0.02
More than 5 years	20 (64.5)	94 (43.1)		
Educational status of women, no. (%)				
Primary school and below	28 (90.3)	177 (81.2)	13.7	0.16
High school and above	3 (9.7)	41 (18.8)	6.8	
Partners' educational status, no. (%)				
Primary school and below	21 (67.7)	111 (50.9)	15.9	0.058
High school and above	10 (32.3)	107 (49.1)	8.5	
Family type, no. (%)				
Core family	21 (67.7)	171 (78.4)	10.9	0.137
Large family	10 (32.3)	47 (21.6)	17.5	
Working status of women, no. (%)				
Employed	3 (9.7)	8 (3.7)	27.3	0.144
Unemployed	28 (90.3)	210 (96.3)	11.8	
Working status of partner, no. (%)				
Employed	28 (90.3)	197 (90.4)	12.4	0.6
Unemployed	3 (9.7)	21 (9.6)	12.5	
Partners' alcohol habits, no. (%)				
User	12 (38.7)	35 (16.1)	25.5	0.005
Non-user	19 (61.3)	183 (83.9)	9.4	
Legal marriage, no. (%)				
Yes	25 (80.6)	189 (86.7)	11.7	0.254
No	6 (19.4)	29 (13.3)	17.1	
Income/month, no. (%)	(n=27) ^a	(n=197) ^a		
400 YTL and below	20 (74.1)	98 (49.7)	16.9	0.014
More than 400 YTL	7 (25.9)	99 (50.3)	6.6	
Income/person, no. (%)				
140 YTL and below	24 (88.9)	121 (61.4)	16.6	0.003
More than 140 YTL	3 (11.1)	76 (38.6)	3.8	

^aThose who would not give any data on their income/month were not included in the statistical analyses. SD = standard deviation

increases, the verbal-abuse rates during matrimony ($p = 0.032$) and during pregnancy ($p = 0.023$) decreased. Of those women with an educational level of primary school or below, 12.7% were exposed to sexual abuse at least

once during the marriage; whereas, this rate was 2.3% for women with a high school education or above ($p = 0.029$).

Of the subjects, 5.6% ($n = 14$) were exposed to physical abuse and/or verbal abuse

by persons, other than their partner, who lived within the same household during the marriage. Among the study population, 21.3% (n = 53) reported an experience of violence perpetrated by their parents before marriage. Of these, 26.4% were exposed to physical abuse, 37.7% were exposed to verbal abuse, and 35.8% were exposed to both verbal and physical abuse. It was found that 24.5% (n = 13) of women who had been exposed to parents' violence before marriage were beaten by their partners during the previous year; whereas, only 18 women who had not been exposed to parental violence were beaten, a rate of 9.2% ($p = 0.004$).

Of the women who had children, 114 (67.9%) reported beating their children, at least once; and 39.3% (n = 66) stated that their partners also beat their children.

DISCUSSION

Domestic violence is an important public health and human right problem that needs to be highlighted. Exposure to domestic violence during pregnancy has devastating physical and emotional consequences (McFarlane *et al*, 1992; Stewart and Cecutti, 1993).

It was found that a considerable number (28.9%) of the pregnant women included in this study were exposed to physical violence: 49.8% verbal violence and 10.8% sexual violence during their marriage. The rate of women who were beaten by their partners within the previous year was also high, indicating current and continuing victimization. In a study that investigated physical and sexual abuse prevalence during and before pregnancy among Swedish couples, it was reported that 27.5% of women were exposed to physical violence by their husbands or their boyfriends, and 24.5% of women were exposed to a physical or sexual violence threat in the previous year (Hedin *et al*, 1999). A study by Lown and Vega (2001) investigating the rate of ex-

posure to physical violence to Mexican-American women perpetrated by their husbands found that it was 10.7%. Coker *et al* (2000) also reported that in the United States more than half of the women consulting at the primary health centers were exposed to different types of domestic violence of current or past. In a study of the Igbo population in Nigeria, 52.6% of women were exposed to partners' violence, and 21.3% of them were forced into sexual intercourse (Okemgbo *et al*, 2002). It can be seen that, although the rates differ by country, class, ethnicity, and cultural groups, women are exposed to their partners' violence, and this violence usually includes more than one type of physical, verbal, or sexual abuse.

In our study, 25.7% of the women were exposed to at least one type of violence during their previous pregnancy; of which, 4.8% were exposed to physical abuse, 30.5% to verbal abuse, and 4.4% were to sexual abuse by partners during their most recent pregnancies. In some studies on the relationship between pregnancy and domestic violence, it has been observed that pregnancy protects women from violence, and violence diminishes during pregnancy (Hilberman and Munson, 1978; Stark and Flifcraft, 1991). Conversely, some studies assert that pregnancy is a high-risk period. Domestic violence begins or it increases during pregnancy because the pregnancy increases the partners' responsibility and problems (McFarlane *et al*, 1992; Tollestrup *et al*, 1999). In a study investigating violence exposure of pregnant women in China, it was found that 4.3% of women were exposed to physical abuse during pregnancy, and 9.4% were exposed to sexual abuse during the previous year (Leung *et al*, 1999). According to Fisher *et al* (2003), who conducted a study in north Israel, 8.1% of pregnant women were exposed to severe physical violence, 17.0% were exposed to mild physical violence, 24.0% were exposed to psychologi-

cal abuse, and 5.6% were exposed to sexual abuse. Hedin *et al* (1999) found that in Goteborg, Sweden, 11% of women were exposed to mild, 4.3% to minor, 2.4% to moderate, and 4.3% to severe physical abuse, and that 3.3 % of women were exposed to sexual abuse during pregnancy. We have not found any results related to the onset of violence or the relative severity of violence during pregnancy. However, the types and rates of domestic violence exposed to during pregnancy are similar to the literature.

In the present study, none of the woman who reported being victims of domestic violence during present pregnancy reported any injury. According to Stewart and Cecutti (1993), 66.7% of women who were exposed to domestic violence during pregnancy sought medical help due to exposed violence. This rate is about 31% according to a study by Webster *et al* (1994). Fisher *et al* (2003) found that 5.4% of physical violence is applied to the abdominal area of pregnant women. It is difficult to explain domestic violence to persons, other than family members, due to the cultural and traditional structure in the Turkish population. Therefore, women do not admit that they have been exposed to abuse or violence, and do not give any information about the details. Furthermore, the result that any time they were not injured may be due to the fear of partners hearing this and the pressure they are under not to admit to such an injury.

It was found that physical violence was directly proportional to the number of children, matrimony period, and partners' alcohol habits, and that it is inversely proportional to monthly income and income per person (Table 4). The higher the educational level of the women, the less they are exposed to sexual abuse; and, the higher the partners' educational level, the less the verbal abuse ($p < 0.05$). Fisher *et al* (2003) reported that there was a relationship between poor socio-economical status and working status, and in-

creased physical violence towards women. Okemgbo *et al* (2002) reported that the increase in physical violence was indirectly proportional to age at marriage, partners' educational level, and women's income. Muhajarine and D'Achy (1999) reported that women whose partners use alcohol were exposed to 3-4 times more domestic violence than women whose partners do not. Lown and Vega (2001) reported that the risk factors for violence as early marriage, city life, and having four or more children. The differences between risk factors for domestic violence in different countries may be due to different social and cultural structures. The risk factors for increased violence found in our study were consistent with the literature.

In conclusion, domestic violence also continues during pregnancy. Women are exposed to physical, verbal, and sexual abuse at a significant rate during pregnancy. The problem of exposure to domestic violence of pregnant women should be addressed in every society. This must be a priority of public health because only awareness of domestic violence is not sufficient. There is also a need for further study in order to identify and ultimately eliminate the risk factors. In addition, more functional women's shelter houses should be established and the relevant laws should be enforced.

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