

Educated Women's Experiences of Abuses in Iran: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract:

Introduction: abuse and violence include different physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional behaviours committed for establishment of dominance and control over victims of abuses. Since abuses and their misinterpretations are unique experiences for individuals especially women; therefore, the present study has been conducted with the aim of describing experiencing abuses in educated women.

Methods: in the present study, because the issue of women's experiences of abuses was aimed, the research approach is qualitative and it was conducted using the phenomenological method. Participants of the present study were selected from among educated women with BA/MSc and higher degrees and in different social classes using the purposive and convenience method. The sample size included 20 women from different social conditions up to saturation. The data were collected using the semi-structured interview with participants with the main question "state your experiences of different types of (annoying) abuses against you committed by other individuals". Data analysis Colaizzi's Seven-step Method.

Results: according to the conducted interviews with participants, 380 initial codes were obtained. After categorizing them, they were put into 18 secondary codes, and finally two main themes of family abuses and social abuses were obtained.

Discussion and conclusion: according to the obtained results, it can be said that educated women, in spite of their active social position, suffer from different forms of abuses, however, their considerations of abuses may be subtly different. In addition, during interviews, it was seemed that participants did not tend to speak about some of improper behaviors and those with stigma, or retell some of the annoying abuses.

One of the basic strategies in encountering this problem is training in families because the origin of a lot of harassments experienced by women is cultural and is rooted in the individuals' education and attitudes in families and societies. If it is accepted that family is the first and most important factor in education and formation of beliefs; therefore, their education and changes in attitudes should be started from families. In this relation, the role of community health nurses in families can be highly significant.

Keywords: *abuse, educated women, family abuse, social abuse, community health nurse*

1. INTRODUCTION

Abuse and violence include various physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional behaviors committed in order to establish dominance and control over victims of abuse. Victims mostly do not report abuse to authorities or do not speak about them with their families or friends due to feelings of shame and guilt. Abuse can be committed in all races, age groups, economic and educational levels, or nationalities (1).

There may be no physical damage to victims, but they may feel that they have been psychologically harassed; therefore, trying to terrorize, isolate, and control people can be considered as abuse (2). Violence ranges from very harsh and damaging behaviors to negative reactions such as indifference and negligence (3).

The United Nations General Assembly in 1993 defined violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of freedom, whether occurring in public or in private life" (4).

The WHO declared the prevalence of violence as 25-50% (5), and research indicates that the highest degree

of the prevalence of domestic violence (by spouses) can be observed in countries in the southeast of Asia (37.07%), East Mediterranean countries (37%) and African countries (36.6%) respectively (6).

Violence against women has been of different forms such as physical, sexual, physiological, and economic which can affect them from birth to oldness. In addition, maltreatment with women is not special to a particular society, culture, or country and according to the obtained statistics, about 7% of women experience abuse in their lives (7). Violence against women has always been a main concern, and 10 to 65% of woman experience it during their lives and which is very important in terms of health and requires attention (8).

Today, violence against women is one of the basic problems of public health and human rights. This global phenomenon can affect millions of women in all cultures and social layers. It has a lot of physical and psychological side-effects, the most prevalent of which are the psychological disorders of depression and anxiety (9).

Violence against women is so prevalent that international institutions such as the UN and human rights organizations have become sensitive to this issue and emphasize that men's attitudes in this regard should be changed (10).

Women who experience violence suffer from health problems in different dimensions and their ability to participate in social life decreases. In addition, maltreatment with women can damage the society and families and will give rise to other types of violence in the society (7).

The prevalence of abuse and misbehaviors is different in different parts of the world. It is estimated that violence is prevalent in more than a half of families and out of each four women; one of them has been exposed to violence (9). Approximately one third of the women in the world have experienced violence at least once in their lives (11).

National research for investigating domestic violence against women in the centers of 28 provinces in Iran during 1996 to 2001 indicates that 66% of families under study had experienced domestic violence at least once and in 30% of cases, there were serious physical types of violence (12).

Documents of forensic medicine in Iran indicate that during a 5.2 year period of time, more than a half

million individuals from among a total number of 2 million and 253 thousand women referring to forensic medicine, had been beaten and had been victims of domestic violence (13).

Factors affecting violence against women include personal and family factors, environment as well as social class, men's dominance, the economic status, and the degree of support by organizations supporting women, the role of media, and the support of law (14). Several factors including economic pressures, loose kinship ties, men's more power in the family, and social, cultural, and legal supports which result in the spread and adoption of physical power in family (naturalness of violence in family as an instrument for education, patriarchal and misogynistic culture, knowing women weak and wicked, the loss of women's rights in issues such as blood money and custody death) are effective on execution of domestic violence (15). The basis of studies conducted on therapeutic costs of victims of abuse has been estimated at 1633 dollars per each person annually or from 5 to 10 million dollars per year (16).

In a research conducted in Tehran, direct per capita costs of spouse abuse have been estimated to be high. This includes high cost treatments and prosecution. This approximate cost indicates the financial burden on the government and people. Thus, it requires effective and legal interventions with the aim of reducing and controlling spouse abuse (17).

Although it is expected that abuse be prevalent among the non-educated women, some studies indicate that all women, regardless of their different conditions, may be at the exposure of violence and abuse (18).

In the Iranian society, some social and family situations create conditions which are conducive to commit violence against individuals. These situations are reinforced both via law and social attitudes. Moreover, in Iran, the use of violence, particularly if it mild, is not prohibited and is considered as an instrument for the training of women. One of the characteristics of domestic violence in Iran is that violence is considered as an allowed behavior and there is no social prohibition to check the harsh behaviors of family members to each other. It is mostly a component of education. In other words, violence is considered a natural issue because men are believed to have particular characteristics and it is deemed natural that they use violence in reaction to oppositions by others (19).

Regarding the issue that maltreatment is a unique experience for everyone, a qualitative approach and a phenomenological method was used in this study to identify experiences of abuse and their dimensions against women as clearly as possible particularly in Iran. Most of the studies done in this respect in Iran have used quantitative approach and the issue as unique experiences of each person has not been investigated with a description of its nature and structure from women's perspectives. Having the above points on mind, this study was conducted to illustrate the unique abuse cases experienced by women in Iran.

2. METHODS

As the main objective of conducting this research study was to explore cases of abuse against women, it was decided to design a qualitative research and phenomenological study. In qualitative methods, it is assumed that reality is not absolute and that it differs from a person to person based on their perceptions which change over time (20). In the present study, phenomenology was employed and the objective was to understand the main structures of humanly experienced phenomena via analyzing oral explanations given by the participants (21).

The population of the study included all educated women with BA/MSc and higher degrees in Isfahan, Iran. Participants of the study were selected from among educated women with BA/MSc and higher degrees and coming from different social classes using the purposive and convenience method. The sample size included 20 women up to saturation. Inclusion criteria of the study included the voluntarily participation of subjects in the research, twenty-year old women and above and holding BA/BSc or higher degrees, their ability to report their information and of their experiences, and their ability to remember experiences. Data collection techniques employed for the present study was semi-structured interview with participants with the main question "state your experiences of different types of (annoying) abuse against you committed by other individuals". Analysis of the data was based on Colaizzi's Seven-step Method including careful reading of the important findings and extracting the meaning of the sentences as meant by the participants in relation to the phenomenon under study, giving particular senses to the extracted sentences, classifying obtained concepts and formulas, referring to main issues and comparing

ideas, and describing the phenomenon under study, and finally returning the description of phenomena to participants for investigating trustworthiness of the results (20). In spite of the explanations at or during interviews, some of the women, due to their attitudes, had problems for stating their experiences. For the issue of confidentiality, the following cases were observed:

Written consent was obtained from the participants after explaining the aim of the research. Moreover they were insured about the confidentiality of the obtained information. Also the participants were told that they could leave the research any time they intended to do so, and that they could have access to the findings of the research at their demand. This research was approved by the research committee of the Islamic azad university at Isfahan (khorasgan) branch

3. RESULTS

According to the conducted interviews with participants, 380 initial codes were obtained. After categorizing them, they were put into 18 secondary codes, and finally two main themes of family abuse and social abuse were obtained. (figure 1)

4. DISCUSSION

To describe educated women's experiences of abuse, semi-structured interviews with 20 educated women holding BA/MSc to PhD degrees and with 25 to 62 years of age were conducted. 380 primary codes and 19 secondary codes including **family** and **social** abuse were obtained.

Family abuse

Domestic discrimination

Participant 6:

"In our family, there is discrimination between my dressing and that of my brother and I am not free in dressing as my brother is. My family members criticize the color and fashion of my dressing, while I'd like to have freedom of selection".

The results of one study indicated that there is a significant correlation between gender inequality and patriarchal attitudes and violence against women. (22)

Domestic emotional abuse

Participant 8:

"When I come back home from workplace, my husband expects that I do the whole housework. He believes that

I should be a house wife and I should be responsible for affairs at home, while I am as fatigued as he is and need help and rest”.

Based on a study by Mirzaei et al, there is a significant negative correlation between the variable of help and cooperation of husbands in doing housework (the distinction between gender roles of men and women) with psychological violence and general violence against women. (23)

Women experience emotional violence much more than physical violence and the most frequent type of emotional violence is criticism of women’s moral traits and negligence of their emotions and feelings. (24)

Domestic verbal abuse

Participant 4:

Always, my husband speaks to me in a selfish and complaining tone as if I were his maid. In such situations I really want to cry.

Cultural discrimination

Participant 1:

My husband swears at women’s driving. He believes that women cannot drive.

The sense of discrimination and considering others as submissive is an outcome of patriarchal culture which is annoying for women and is the cause of mistreating women.

Domestic physical abuse

Surprisingly among educated women, experiences of physical abuse are observed in families. For example, participant 8 stated that:

“Sometime when I argue with my husband, he pushes me so harshly that I am about to fall. I do not expect him to do so”.

Participant 5 stated that:

“My husband has harsh treatment with me and sometimes beats me. I cannot speak about it. I suffer much from this”.

Domestic Economic Harassment

Participant 6

“He agrees to divorce me provided that I give him my house.”

It seems that economic abuse against educated women who themselves earn money and have their own salary is another source of abuse against women.

Domestic psychological abuse

Participant 4:

“My husband does not meet my psychological needs, so I cannot do my tasks appropriately because I do not enjoy psychological and mental calmness. When my husband does not understand me, I get depressed and it influences my happiness and calmness. Even it affects my behavior towards my children”.

Among different types of abuse, the domestic psychological abuse from which women suffer is a type of violence which is important as it may harm women’s dignity, honor and self-confidence. This behavior appears in the forms of undue criticism, contempt, blackguard, ridicule, insults, cursing, taunting, isolating women from their friends or family members or children, and constant threats of divorce or remarriage. In Iran, some cases can come under psychological violence which threaten dignity, pride, and self-confidence in women. (23-25)

Domestic annoying beliefs

Participant 2:

“My husband always has his control over me. I have no authority to go to language classes, do exercises, or continue my education. He warns me that educating children is more important. When I go out, even in my own car, he warns me to come back home before dusk. Because of these misbehaviors, I get a lot of stress”.

Participant 3:

Whenever I start doing a task, my husband scorns me and says “let men do it”, or “you cannot do it”. What does it mean? There are a lot of tasks that I can perform on my own but because men hinder me not to do them, I feel annoyed and I think I am weaker than men”.

Cultural beliefs are among cases which have a powerful role in exercise of abuse. Fogarty et al. found out that women who are victims of psychological abuse suffer from anxiety, obsession, and depression and might even commit suicide. (26)

Economic discrimination

Another issue considered as cause of experience of abuse in women who suffer from financial independence is economic discrimination.

Participant 1:

"I have no right to decide how to spend my earned money".

Participant 2:

I don't know how my husband spends my money. I am sure he does not spend them for bad aims, but I want to know about the expenses and savings. Yet, he only lets me know about costs but not about total earnings and the savings and expenses.

Participant 2:

I am not free to spend money without my husband's consent. He gets my salary every month.

One of the dimensions of misbehavior which may not surface at the first glance is economic abuse particularly against those educated and employed women who work shoulder by shoulder of men and may even have more income than men. These women, in addition to getting their education and growing children as well as doing housework, take professional roles and expect to have financial independence.

Family is considered as a safe and secure environment for its members. Yet, it seems that this security is not full at least in cases of abuse that women are unwilling to talk about and which is the source of behavioral problems. Those women who experience violence suffer from health problems and lose their ability to participate in social life. In addition, abuse against women can damage both the society and family and give birth to violence in the society. (7)

Social abuse

Annoying social beliefs

Participant 3:

"When driving, if other men bully me, my husband says that it is natural, and I should ignore foul words by these men. In his mind, men are superior to women and he believes that I am a woman and there is no way of advancement for me. I am submissive to my husband".

Usually, in case of argument between the two genders, it is the female who is demanded to have more modesty by statements such as: women should take care of their dignity, men can do everything they want to, and accepting the legitimacy of these statements for men are among roots which cause that the most fundamental methods of preventing men from application of abuse, namely, be ignored. Even in some

cases, violence against women is not considered a shameful behavior.

Social psychological abuse

Participant 7:

"When I am driving in streets in my own car, even if I am driving properly, as soon as a man drives up to me, he continuously horns and I get stressed".

According to studies, from among socio-psychological violence prevalent in Iran, cases such as rumors at work or home which can reduce social dignity and credit of women, and at work, sometimes men belittle their female colleagues to the extent that they consider women unable, women gradually believe that they cannot do anything and cannot compete with men. In practice, they get marginalized. (8)

Social emotional abuse

Participant 6

"When we women who live in small towns, are late home or when go out at dusk, people think about us badly. When a woman does make up, even if she has no immorality, people think that she is immoral and judge her as immoral".

The findings of a lot of research studies indicate that the difference in the prevalence of depression among women and men is not due to biological differences, rather due to factors such as poverty, gender discriminations, and violence caused by gender are psychological types of violence. According to research studies conducted in Australia, Nicaragua, Pakistan, and the US, women who are psychologically abused by their husbands suffer from depression and anxiety and panic more than other women. Studies conducted in some countries such as Nicaragua, Sweden, and the US indicate that there is a close link between psychological violence and high rate of depression and suicide committing (28).

Cultural emotional abuse

Participant 10:

In case of performing tasks, in a lot of cases, the priority is given to men. Women are not believed to be as efficient as men are. The employer prefers to give the responsibilities to men. This action reduces self-confidence in women". The cause and root of occurrence of violence is in the patriarchal society based on which, gender classifications and unfair

division of power and facilities of the society in terms of gender can cause that women be considered lower and weaker than men and that violence against women is legal and permissible. (29)

Social verbal abuse

Participant 12

"Sometimes when men see that a woman is single, they spell out intolerable utterances."

Educated women, due to their working conditions in the society and professional environments are at the exposure of verbal abuse caused by direct and indirect men's conversations.

Cultural verbal abuse

Participant 14

The boss shouts at women, but usually, he treats male employees in a better way.

Participant 2

"In our [Iranian] society, men and women do not enjoy equal rights. For example, when there is an argument, men believe that they've got the right to swear at women and use bad words".

To highlight the issue of "equality of men's and women's rights" in societies, and to consider the issue of violence and ways to fight it have been considered as efficient instruments for challenging the legitimacy of each kind of violence in of society for a lot of social researchers.

According to the model of gender socialization in which masculinity is considered as a value, women are submissive objects in the patriarchal structure of family and they suffer a lot of restrictions in private domains, while men are present at the usual world and work. According to this belief, it is the behavioral violence which is acquired and usually forcing women and committing violence against them are considered legitimate. This issue reinforces traditional gender reactions of violence. (23) Believing patriarchy, gender discrimination, conflicting tastes have direct relationship with spouse abuse. (24)

Social physical abuse

Participant 8

"On buses and in taxis, men's behavior is annoying. For example, in taxis you are pushed by men. Sometimes in taxi in case of getting on and getting off, men has no appropriate behaviors and I get offended".

Social economic abuse

Participant 15

"In my profession as a physician, even if the capabilities of a female physician are better at work, men say that they prioritize male physicians. I cannot tolerate this. and this is intolerable for me".

Participant 20

"In terms of profession, men are prioritized and they do not accept that women have sufficient proficiency at work in a lot of places. Employers prefer to give responsibilities to men and this issue reduces our self-confidence".

Participant 5

"In case of salary, the quality of work is important, but men receive more fees while men's and women's education and working time are the same".

According to the feminism, violence against women can only be committed in the social context in which women are submissive to men. (28)

Social discrimination

Participant 3

"In my work place, even if my male colleagues' activities have less quality than those of mine because they are male. Their performances are more acceptable to the boss simply because they are men. I do not know why. The cause and root of occurrence of violence is in the patriarchal societies based on which, gender classifications and unfair division of power and facilities of the society in terms of gender can cause that women be deemed lower in status and the men consider themselves eligible to commit violence against them (29).

Social discrimination between men and women in the Iranian community emerges as placing men at the top. Excluding women from public domains and the no power for decision making in domestic domains put men and women at unequal levels in which a large part of chances of advancement are exclusive to men. These limitations not only deprive women, but cause that the society be deprived of the possibility of enjoying an important part of human resources as the most key instrument of development. The results of the present study indicated that women suffer from the misogynist view of the society.

5. CONCLUSION

According to the obtained results in this study, it can be claimed that educated women, in spite of their active social status, suffer from different forms of abuse. Although their concept of abuse may be subtly different from that of men's, it seems that the participants did not tend to speak about some of improper behaviors and the stigmatized, or retell some of the annoying cause of abuse. However, these experiences can be sketched in figure 2.

In fact, it may not make distinctions between domestic experienced abuse and social ones because family originates from social behaviors and society cannot be separated from family behaviors as family members and their education is the result of modeling influenced by social characteristics in a lot of cases.

One of the basic strategies in encountering this problem is to train families. It can be claimed that the origin of a lot of abuse cases experienced by women is cultural and are rooted in individuals' training and attitudes in families and societies. If it is accepted that family is the first and most important factor of training and formation of beliefs, training and changes attitudes should be started from families. In the same line, the role of nurses, one of the most influential members of health team in families, can act as necessary interventions for changing attitudes and culture building appropriate domestic behaviors (30).

Moreover, using interdisciplinary programs in the field of growing social behaviors such as coordination and integration of health teams with psychological, sociology, economic, and cultural experts can be very effective. Finally, the role of media should be considered as important because they have undeniable roles in changing attitudes and creating appropriate behavioral acts as related to women.

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