Prevalence of domestic violence and abuse among Saudi women: an online based cross-sectional study

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Background: Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) has a major impact on women's lives, their psychological, physical, and reproductive health and mostly occurring behind closed doors. The objective of this study was to explore the prevalence of DVA among Saudi women, to determine factors related to each type of abuse, identify sources of abuse, and level of disclosure.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted through an online survey using social networking platforms. Four hundred and twenty-one women completed the validated Arabic version of the NorVold domestic abuse questionnaire.

Results: The lifetime prevalence of DVA was 69.9%. The most prevalent type of violence was emotional abuse, followed by physical abuse (47%), and subsequently sexual abuse (35%). Among the abused women, 25.6% (n=75) had experienced all types of abuse. Fathers, mothers, and brothers were the main perpetrators of emotional violence, while brothers, mothers, and fathers were the main perpetrators of physical abuse; relatives (not from the family) and brothers were the main perpetrators of sexual violence. Approximately 26% of the emotionally abused try to seek help, 78.7% did not disclose the abuse to their doctors, and 16.5% of the physically abused try to seek help; however, 82.2% were unable to inform their doctors after abuse, only 8.7% of sexually abused women try to get help after abuse, and 90% cannot inform their doctors.

Conclusions: DVA against Saudi women is unacknowledged, and national research data are urgently required to assess the prevalence of DVA and risk factors for abused women.

Keywords: Domestic violence, Saudi Arabia, Abuse, Family

INTRODUCTION

The world health organization (WHO) has identified domestic violence and abuse (DVA) as a major health issue. DVA is a worldwide epidemic of women's health and approximately one in three of women have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse from an intimate partner during their life. Any violence or abuse perpetrated by one of the family members or intimate partner toward another adult is considered a DVA, regardless of gender or sexual identity. DVA could be an incident or type of episode that controls, coerces, or threatens the victim and may be single or multiple forms of violence such as financial, psychological, physical, sexual, or emotional violence. International evidence usually focuses on intimate partner violence (IPV) rather than on DVA. Violence is defined as "the intended use of power or physical force, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, a group, or a community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in
psychological harm, death, injury, maldevelopment, or deprivation. The United Nations defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm/suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” Women usually are victims of DVA; however, other family members, such as children and the elderly, may suffer from such violence. Spouses, former spouses, intimate partners, family members, relatives, or friends are mostly the perpetrators, and they are a part of the victim’s domestic environment.

In coordination with the London school of hygiene and tropical medicine (LSHTM), the WHO multi-country population based household study on DVA collected evidence about the prevalence, risk factors, and outcomes of DVA for over 24,000 women. The data were collected from the following countries: Brazil, Bangladesh, Japan, Ethiopia, Peru, Namibia, Samoa, Serbia, Montenegro, Thailand, and the United republic of Tanzania. DVA is a public health issue worldwide. It transverses all countries, regardless of place, culture, or religion. DVA was also observed in Arab countries, as determined in a systematic review including 65 studies from 11 countries from January 2000 to January 2016 indicating that DVA prevalence ranged from 6% to 59% (physical), from 3% to 40% (sexual) and from 5% to 91% (emotional/psychological).

In Saudi Arabia, several studies have reported the prevalence of domestic violence in different regions of kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The prevalence ranged from 34% to 80.7%. The studies were conducted in Riyadh, Jeddah, Alhsa, Madina, Taif and Arar. However, these studies were conducted in specific settings, region or populations. Moreover, DVA as a sensitive and hidden issue could be affected once assessed through face-to-face interviews of participants; however, this study was conducted through an online survey among Saudi women. The objective of this study was to report the prevalence of different types of DVA against Saudi women and, to identify the sources and disclosures among abused women.

**METHODS**

A web-based cross-sectional study conducted among Saudi women in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia between December 2013 and February 2014. An anonymous online questionnaire was completed by 421 Saudi women. Data were collected using an online questionnaire tool powered by Survs. The self-administered questionnaire link was posted and shared on different social media platforms to be accessible to all target populations regardless of their education, socioeconomic status, or background. Furthermore, the questionnaire was distributed by various public social organizations in Saudi Arabia through official social media accounts. Personal consent was obtained for data collection, which was written on the first page of the survey. A validated Arabic version of the NorVold domestic abuse questionnaire (NORQA) was used to different type of abuse among women (Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Questions about abuse NORQA.](image)

The questionnaire was divided into four sections. The first section included participants’ demographic data (age, education level, marital status, job, type of residency, and monthly income) and questions about general health status, frequency of doctor visits, experience depression, insomnia, and somatic symptoms such as chronic abdominal pain or chronic headache during the previous year. The second section included questions about emotional types of abuse, which reflect the degree of severity of emotional violence. The third section included questions about physical types of violence with different degree of severity, and the last section included questions about different types of sexual violence.

Any women who answered “yes” to any type of violence were asked to answer the following: age of first abuse, violence during the previous year, the impact of that violence, and disclosure to the doctor or anybody. A preliminary pilot testing of the questionnaire on a group of women, not including those in the study, was conducted before to check for unclear or ambiguous terms of the survey, and appropriate modification were made. Participants who completed the survey were included in the final data analysis. SPSS version 18.0, statistical software package was used for data entry and statistical analysis. Means, standard deviations, and percentages were used for descriptive statistics, and analytic statistics were calculated using the chi-square test. A significance level of $p$ less than 0.05 was considered significant throughout the study. Approval
was obtained from the research committee of the family medicine residency program.

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics

In this study, 421 Saudi women completed the Arabic version of the NORAQ and enrolled in the results. The demographic characteristics of the women included in this study are represented in (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of 421 Saudi women.

| Characteristics       | N   | %   |
|-----------------------|-----|-----|
| **Age (years)**       |     |     |
| Mean±SD               | 29.88±8.82 | -   |
| Min-Max               | 14-55 | -   |
| **Marital status**    |     |     |
| Single                | 179 | 42.5|
| Married               | 203 | 48.2|
| Divorced              | 34  | 8.1 |
| Widow                 | 5   | 1.2 |
| **Educational level** |     |     |
| Elementary            | 2   | 0.5 |
| Intermediate          | 5   | 1.2 |
| High school           | 68  | 16.2|
| University            | 346 | 82.2|
| **Residency**         |     |     |
| Urban                 | 397 | 94.3|
| Rural                 | 24  | 5.7 |
| **Housing type**      |     |     |
| Own house             | 292 | 69.4|
| Rental house          | 129 | 30.6|
| **Rooms number**      |     |     |
| Mean±SD               | 6.32±3.56 | -   |
| Min-Max               | 1-30 | -   |
| **Employment status** |     |     |
| Working               | 178 | 42.3|
| Not working           | 243 | 57.7|
| **Income per month**  |     |     |
| <5000                 | 84  | 20.0|
| 5000-<10000           | 149 | 35.4|
| 10000-<15000          | 83  | 19.7|
| 15000-<20000          | 52  | 12.4|
| 20000 & above         | 53  | 12.6|

Participants’ ages were between 14 and 55 years, with an average of 29.88±8.82. Two hundred and three women involved in the study were married, constituting approximately half of the study population, 346 (82.2%) women had bachelor’s degrees or higher, and most women were from civilian cities (94.3%). Approximately two-thirds of the women in the study (69.4%) lived in their houses, while 30.6% lived in rental homes with an average number of rooms in these houses (6.32±3.56), 178 women (42.3%) were working in different jobs, and monthly income of 232 (55.1%) was ranging from to 5000-15000 SAR.

Prevalence of DVA

The lifetime prevalence of DVA in the study population (n=421) was 69.9% (N=293) (Figure 2). The most prevalent type of violence was emotional abuse (approximately 50%; N=210), followed by physical violence (47%; N=199), and the smaller group reported sexual abuse at 35% (N=148). Among the abused women, 25.6% (N=75) had experienced all types of abuse.

![Figure 2: Prevalence of domestic violence and abuse among Saudi women.](image)

Emotional abuse (characteristics, source and disclosure)

The demographic characteristics of emotionally abused women and was not significantly different from the number of rooms is represented in (Table 2). The severity of emotional abuse according to the NORAQ and when the women were exposed to that type of abuse; 33.3% (N=70) were abused during the previous year is represented in (Figure 3). Fathers, mothers, and brothers were the main perpetrators and sources of emotional abuse (Figure 4). The mean age of when they first experienced emotional violence was 15.91±6.99 years and the mean age of when they reported the abuse was 23.11±7.57 years. 60.2% (N=109) partly informed someone about the abuse, while only 14.9% (N=27) fully informed someone about the abuse; 26.5% (N=48) tried to seek help after the abuse and 78.7% (N=107) did not disclose the abuse to their doctors.

Physical abuse (characteristics, source, and disclosure)

The demographic characteristics of physically abused women were not significant (Table 3).
The different types of physical violence; 19.1% (N=38) were abused during the previous year (Figure 4). Brothers, mothers, and fathers were the main perpetrators of abuse, as presented in (Figure 4). The mean age when they were first exposed to physical abuse was 14.82±7.75 years and the mean age of when they reported the abuse was 20.42±7.82 years; 38.6% (N=61) of them partially informed somebody about the abuse, whereas 18.4% (N=29) fully informed somebody about the abuse; 16.5% (N=26) tried to seek help. However, 82.2% (N=74) were unable to inform their doctors after the abuse.

Table 2: Socio-demographic of emotionally abused women.

| Characteristics          | Total number | Emotional violence          | Chi aquare | P value |
|--------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------|
|                          |              | Yes (N=210) | No (N=211) |         |
|                          |              | Frequency % | Frequency % |         |
| Age (years)              |              |               |             |         |
| Mean±SD                  | 29.79±8.76   | 29.97±8.90    |             | 0.210   | 0.833  |
| t test*                  | 0.210        |               |             |         |
| P value                  | 0.833        |               |             |         |
| Marital status           |              |               |             |         |
| Single                   | 179          | 92             | 51.4        | 87      | 48.6   |
| Married                  | 203          | 96             | 47.3        | 107     | 52.7   |
| Divorced                 | 34           | 19             | 55.9        | 15      | 44.1   |
| Widow                    | 5            | 3              | 60.0        | 2       | 40.0   |
| t test*                  | 0.049        |               |             |         |
| P value                  | 0.961        |               |             |         |
| Educational level        |              |               |             |         |
| Elementary/intermediate  | 7            | 2              | 28.6        | 5       | 71.4   |
| High school              | 68           | 33             | 48.5        | 35      | 51.5   |
| University               | 346          | 175            | 50.6        | 171     | 49.4   |
| t test*                  | 0.871        |               |             |         |
| P value                  | 0.384        |               |             |         |
| Residency                |              |               |             |         |
| Urban                    | 397          | 198            | 49.9        | 199     | 50.1   |
| Rural                    | 24           | 12             | 50.0        | 12      | 50.0   |
| t test*                  | 0.012        |               |             |         |
| P value                  | 0.990        |               |             |         |
| Housing type             |              |               |             |         |
| Own house                | 292          | 143            | 49.0        | 149     | 51.0   |
| Rental house             | 129          | 67             | 51.9        | 62      | 48.1   |
| t test*                  | 0.560        |               |             |         |
| P value                  | 0.576        |               |             |         |
| Rooms number             |              | 5.96±3.49     | 6.67±3.59   |         |
| t test*                  | 2.011        |               |             |         |
| P value                  | 0.045        |               |             |         |
| Employment status        |              |               |             |         |
| Working                  | 178          | 88             | 49.4        | 90      | 50.6   |
| Not working              | 243          | 122            | 50.2        | 121     | 49.8   |
| t test*                  | 0.155        |               |             |         |
| P value                  | 0.877        |               |             |         |
| Income per month         |              |               |             |         |
| <5000                    | 84           | 41             | 48.8        | 43      | 51.2   |
| 5000-<10000              | 149          | 70             | 47.0        | 79      | 53.0   |
| 10000-<15000             | 83           | 42             | 50.6        | 41      | 49.4   |
| 15000-<20000             | 52           | 26             | 50.0        | 26      | 50.0   |
| 20000 & above            | 53           | 32             | 60.4        | 21      | 39.6   |
| t test*                  | 1.348        |               |             |         |
| P value                  | 0.179        |               |             |         |

*Linear regression
### Table 3: Socio-demographic of physically abused women.

| Characteristics       | Total number | Physical violence | Chi aquare | P value |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------------------|------------|---------|
|                       |              | **Yes (N=199)**   | **No (N=222)** |         |
|                       |              | Frequency %       | Frequency % |         |
| **Age (years)**       |              |                   |             |         |
| Mean±SD               | 29.43±8.66   | 30.28±8.97        | 0.989      | 0.323   |
| t test*               | 0.989        |                   |             |         |
| P value               | 0.323        |                   |             |         |
| **Marital status**    |              |                   |             |         |
| Single                | 179          | 82                | 45.8       | 97      | 54.2   | 4.935 | 0.177 |
| Married               | 203          | 92                | 45.3       | 111     | 54.7   |       |       |
| Divorced              | 34           | 22                | 64.7       | 12      | 35.3   |       |       |
| Widow                 | 5            | 3                 | 60.0       | 2       | 40.0   |       |       |
| t test*               | 1.427        |                   |             |         |
| P value               | 0.154        |                   |             |         |
| **Educational level** |              |                   |             |         |
| Elementary/intermediate | 7          | 3                 | 42.9       | 4       | 57.1   |       |       |
| High school           | 68           | 36                | 52.9       | 32      | 47.1   | 1.079 | 0.583 |
| University            | 346          | 160               | 46.2       | 186     | 53.8   |       |       |
| t test*               | 0.724        |                   |             |         |
| P value               | 0.469        |                   |             |         |
| **Residency**         |              |                   |             |         |
| Urban                 | 397          | 188               | 47.4       | 209     | 52.6   | 0.021 | 0.885 |
| Rural                 | 24           | 11                | 45.8       | 13      | 54.2   |       |       |
| t test*               | 0.145        |                   |             |         |
| P value               | 0.885        |                   |             |         |
| **Housing type**      |              |                   |             |         |
| Own house             | 292          | 140               | 47.9       | 152     | 52.1   |       |       |
| Rental house          | 129          | 59                | 45.7       | 70      | 54.3   | 0.175 | 0.676 |
| t test*               | 0.418        |                   |             |         |
| P value               | 0.676        |                   |             |         |
| **Rooms number**      | Mean±SD      |                   |             |         |
|                       | 6.16±3.2     | 6.46±3.84         | 0.823      | 0.411   |
| t test*               | 0.823        |                   |             |         |
| P value               | 0.411        |                   |             |         |
| **Employment status** |              |                   |             |         |
| Working               | 178          | 77                | 43.3       | 101     | 56.7   | 1.989 | 0.158 |
| Not working           | 243          | 122               | 50.2       | 121     | 49.8   |       |       |
| t test*               | 1.410        |                   |             |         |
| P value               | 0.159        |                   |             |         |
| **Income per month**  |              |                   |             |         |
| <5000                 | 84           | 41                | 48.8       | 43      | 51.2   |       |       |
| 5000-<10000           | 149          | 82                | 55.0       | 67      | 45.0   | 7.24  | 0.124 |
| 10000-<15000          | 83           | 34                | 41.0       | 49      | 59.0   |       |       |
| 15000-<20000          | 52           | 21                | 40.4       | 31      | 59.6   |       |       |
| 20000 & above         | 53           | 21                | 39.6       | 32      | 60.4   |       |       |
| t test*               | 1.977        |                   |             |         |
| P value               | 0.049        |                   |             |         |

*Linear regression
Table 4: Socio-demographic of sexually abused women.

| Characteristics                  | Total number | Physical violence | Chi square | P value |
|----------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|------------|---------|
|                                  |              | Yes (N=199)       | No (N=222) |         |
|                                  |              | Frequency         | Frequency  |         |
| Age (years)                      |              |                   |            |         |
| Mean±SD                          | 29.07±8.20   | 30.32±9.13        | 1.383      | 0.167   |
| t test*                          | 1.383        |                   |            |         |
| P value                          | 0.167        |                   |            |         |
| Marital status                   |              |                   |            |         |
| Single                           | 179          | 68                | 38.0       | 111     | 62.0 | 6.290 | 0.098 |
| Married                          | 203          | 61                | 30.0       | 142     | 70.0 | 0.070 | 0.945 |
| Divorced                         | 34           | 17                | 50.0       | 17      | 50.0 |       |      |
| Widow                            | 5            | 2                 | 40.0       | 3       | 60.0 |       |      |
| t test*                          | 0.070        |                   |            |         |
| P value                          | 0.945        |                   |            |         |
| Educational level                |              |                   |            |         |
| Elementary/intermediate          | 7            | 2                 | 28.6       | 5       | 71.4 | 1.358 | 0.507 |
| High school                      | 68           | 20                | 29.4       | 48      | 70.6 |       |      |
| University                       | 346          | 126               | 36.4       | 220     | 63.6 |       |      |
| t test*                          | 1.129        |                   |            |         |
| P value                          | 0.260        |                   |            |         |
| Residency                        |              |                   |            |         |
| Urban                            | 397          | 143               | 36.0       | 254     | 64.0 | 2.290 | 0.130 |
| Rural                            | 24           | 5                 | 20.8       | 19      | 79.2 |       |      |
| t test*                          | 1.514        |                   |            |         |
| P value                          | 0.131        |                   |            |         |
| Housing type                     |              |                   |            |         |
| Own house                        | 292          | 98                | 33.6       | 194     | 66.4 | 1.06  | 0.303 |
| Rental house                     | 129          | 50                | 38.8       | 79      | 61.2 |       |      |
| t test*                          | 1.029        |                   |            |         |
| P value                          | 0.304        |                   |            |         |
| Rooms number                     |              |                   |            |         |
| Mean±SD                          | -            | 6.35±3.45         | 6.30±3.62  | 0.134 | 0.894 |
| t test*                          | 0.134        |                   |            |         |
| P value                          | 0.894        |                   |            |         |
| Employment status                |              |                   |            |         |
| Working                          | 178          | 53                | 29.8       | 125     | 70.2 | 3.914 | 0.048 |
| Not working                      | 243          | 95                | 39.1       | 148     | 60.9 |       |      |
| t test*                          | 1.983        |                   |            |         |
| P value                          | 0.048        |                   |            |         |
| Income per month                 |              |                   |            |         |
| <5000                            | 84           | 31                | 36.9       | 53      | 63.1 | 5.898 | 0.207 |
| 5000-<10000                      | 149          | 56                | 37.6       | 93      | 62.4 |       |      |
| 10000-<15000                     | 83           | 34                | 41.0       | 49      | 59.0 |       |      |
| 15000-<20000                     | 52           | 14                | 26.9       | 38      | 73.1 |       |      |
| 20000 & above                    | 53           | 13                | 24.5       | 40      | 75.5 |       |      |
| t test*                          | 1.766        |                   |            |         |
| P value                          | 0.078        |                   |            |         |

Sexual abuse (characteristics, source, and disclosure)

The demographic characteristics of women who experience sexual abuse and is not significant, except for unemployed women, which indicates relatively more sexual violence among unemployed women are represented in (Table 4). During the previous year (N=7), only 4.7% experienced sexual abuse. The types severity of sexual violence is presented in (Figure 6). The mean age for first exposure to sexual abuse was 10.62±5.42 years.
Relatives, persons not from the family, and brothers were the main perpetrators of sexual violence (Figure 4).

The mean age of when they reported the sexual violence was 18.86±7.37 years. Most of those exposed to sexual abuse did not tell anybody; however, 30.5% (N=39) partially informed someone about the abuse and only 3.9% (N=5) fully informed someone about the sexual abuse experience; 8.7% (N=11) tried to seek help after the abuse, and 90% (N=39) could not inform their doctors.

**DISCUSSION**

DVA is a complex and multifactorial problem, and major public health concerns result from emotional/ psychological, physical, or sexual abuse. In Saudi Arabia, I can say during the previous decade, the DVA prevalence of DVA has increased from 32% to 80.7%. This study indicated a similar lifetime prevalence rate, comparing the prevalence of this study with other local
studies and using the Arabic version of the NORAQ as an assessment tool. Two studies were conducted in the same city, but with different study settings. The first study was conducted between December 2011 and May 2012 in three main tertiary hospitals in Jeddah and included 2301 ever married Saudi and non-Saudi women, with a lifetime prevalence of 34%. The second study was another cross-sectional study conducted in five primary health care centers in Jeddah between August 2017 and February 2018 including 1845 women and with a prevalence of 33.4%. A possible explanation for the relatively high rate in the current online study is that DVA is a hidden issue and most victims of violence will not share such experiences because of fear of social stigma and consequences of answering.

About the type or form of violence, this study indicated a relatively high rate of emotional/psychological abuse, followed by physical abuse, and subsequently sexual abuse. These findings were consistent with those of multiple studies in Saudi Arabia conducted in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Al-Hasa. Regarding the association between socio-demographic characteristics and violence, there was generally no association. This is contrary to different studies, which indicated that an association between violence and the level of education might be the reason for inconstancy for such findings as most study population had university-level education or higher.

In more detail on socio-demographics, the association between emotional violence and the number of rooms in the houses of victims and exposure to violence, even the small association in this factor between abused and non-abused women, may reflect variation in socioeconomic status, which is a known factor of abuse in general, as observed in multiple reviews. On the other hand, sexual violence is associated with employment status as a specific factor for abuse. This finding is consistent with the population-based analysis of women exposed to sexual violence in Turkey. Concerning disclosure of violence and abuse, the low rate of violence disclosure observed in this study for all types of violence, especially to their doctor, is consistent with other studies that show a lack of privacy and fear from perpetrators. In both emotional and physical violence, fathers, mothers, and brothers were the foremost perpetrators of violence, while relatives and known persons, not from the family, were sources of sexual abuse. This is consistent with other studies conducted in Saudi Arabia.

**Limitations**

The possible limitations of this study are, sample biasness, which implies that the study population was not representative of the Saudi population. The online survey accessible only to the educated population, especially DVA, may be considered a normal phenomenon in some populations.

**CONCLUSION**

DVA in all its type is highly prevalent among Saudi women. With the low level of disclosure among victims and significantly associated with the type of abuse, further studies are needed to explore barriers and challenges of disclosure. Also the level of awareness about DVA among health care providers for screening and management of violence victims.

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