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## Educated Women's Experiences of Abuse: A Qualitative Study

Shayesteh Salehi<sup>1</sup>, Sohila Shafie<sup>2</sup>, Parastoo Afghari<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nursing Department, Nursing and Midwifery School, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (khorasgan) branch, Isfahan, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Fiaze Hospital, Isfahan Medical Sciences University, Isfahan, Iran

<sup>3</sup> Oral and Maxillofacial Radiologist, Isfahan Medical Sciences University, Isfahan, Iran

### Abstract

**Introduction:** Abuse and its misinterpretations refer to unique experiences of individuals especially women. Accordingly, the present study was conducted to explore and describe experiences of abuse among educated women. **Methods:** In the present study, the issue of women's experiences of abuse was probed. The research approach was 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 from different social classes in Isfahan, Iran in 2015. 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) abuse committed against you by other individuals". Data analysis Colaizzi's Seven-step Method. **Results:** According to the conducted interviews with the participants, 380 initial codes were obtained. After categorizing these codes, they were classified into 18 secondary codes, and finally two main themes of family abuse and social abuse were obtained. **Discussion:** According to the obtained results, it can be said that educated women, despite their active social position, suffer from different forms of abuse, however, their concept of abuse may be subtly different. In addition, during interviews, it was revealed that the participants did not tend to speak about some of improper behaviors especially the stigmatized ones, or retell some of the annoying abuse experiences. **Conclusion:** Taken for granted that the family is the first and the most important factor in education and in formation of people's beliefs, bringing about education for the family members and to change their attitude towards this issue (woman abuse) should receive prime attention. In this relation, the role of community- health nurses in families can be highly significant.

**Keywords:** Abuse, Educated women, Experience, Qualitative research, Community health nurse.

### 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

**\*Corresponding author:**

**Dr. Shayesteh Salehi**

Nursing Department, Nursing and Midwifery School, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (khorasgan) branch, Isfahan, Iran

Email: salehi@nm.mui.ac.ir, sh.salehi@khuif.ac.ir

experience abuse in their lives [7]. Violence against women has always been a main concern, and 10 to 65% of them 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 one of the most prevalent of which the psychological disorders of depression and of which 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].

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].

Investigations of forensic medicine in Iran indicate that during a 5.2 year period of time, more than a half of million individuals from among a total number of 2 million and 253 thousand women referring to forensic medicine, who 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 and in the economic dimension, and the degree of support by organizations supporting women, the role of media, and the support of the 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 domestic violence [15]. The basis of studies conducted on therapeutic costs of victims of abuse is 1633 dollars per each person annually or from 5 to 10 million dollars per a year [16].

In a research conducted in Tehran, per capita of direct costs of spouse abuse has been estimated high which include cost treatments and prosecution and approximate values indicate high costs imposed on the government and people. Therefore, it requires effective and legal interventions with the aim of reducing and controlling spouse abuse [17].

Although it is expected that abuse is prevalent among the non-educated women, some studies indicate that 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 to commit violence against individuals. This situation is 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 as there is no social prohibition to check the harsh behaviors of family members to each other and is mostly a component of education. That is violence is considered a natural issue because men have particular characteristics and it is deemed natural that they use violence in reaction to oppositions by others [19].

Regarding the issue that misbehavior can be a unique experience for everyone, using a qualitative approach and with the phenomenological method, this study aimed 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 viewpoints. Having the above points on mind, this study was conducted to explore and describe experiences of abuse among educated women.

## 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 another person based on the 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].

Participants of the present study were selected from among educated women with BA/MSc and higher degrees and in different social classes in Isfahan, Iran in 2015 and using the purposive method. The sample size included 20 women up to saturation. Inclusion criteria of the study included the voluntarily participation of subjects in the research with their consent, women with 20 years old and above and with BA/BSc and higher degrees, their ability to provide their information and experiences, and their ability to remind experiences. Data collection techniques employed for the present study is 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 being felt by participants for understanding them and extracting important statements in relation with the phenomenon under study, giving particular senses to the extracted sentences, classifying obtained concepts and formulas, referring to main issues and comparing ideas, describing the phenomenon under study, and finally returning the description of phenomena to participants for investigating trustworthiness of the results [22]. In spite of the explanations at 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:

Obtaining written consents for doing the research, explaining the aim of the research to participants under study, insuring them about the confidentiality of obtained information, obtaining conscious consent and agreement to participate voluntarily in the research, giving them the freedom to leave the research every time they wanted, submitting the results of the research to participants for being informed if they demanded them.

Trustworthiness of the findings were examined with credibility, dependability, conformability and transferability. The interviews and derived codes were discussed with participants. All accomplished activities were recorded precisely from the first of the study. Various participants were selected among in different old and education level. Sampling was done purposively.

This research was conducted after approval of the research committee of khorasgan branch in Islamic azad university .

**RESULTS**

According to the conducted interviews with participants (Table 1), 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.

**Table 1:** Women Characteristics

Age	25-62 year
Mean of age	38±0.6
Education	BS:10 MS:5 PhD:5
Marriage	Single:8 Marrige:12

**Table 2:** Categories and themes of the women’ experiences in having abuse

Categories	Themes
1. Family discrimination	Family Abuse
2. Domestic emotional abuse	
3. Domestic verbal abuse	
4. Cultural discrimination	
5. Domestic physical abuse	
6-domestic economic harassment	
7. Domestic psychological abuse	
8. Domestic annoying beliefs	Social Abuse
9. Economic discrimination	
10. Annoying social beliefs	
11. Social psychological abuse	
12. Social emotional abuse	
13. Cultural emotional abuse	
14. Social verbal abuse	
15. Cultural verbal abuse	
16. Social physical abuse	
17. Socio-economic abuse	
18. Social discrimination	

**Family abuse**

Surprisingly among educated women, experiences of abuse are observed in families.

**Family discrimination**

“in our family, there is a 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”. (single, age 25)

**Domestic emotional abuse**

“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 get tired as he does and need help and rest”. (married, age 35)

**Domestic verbal abuse**

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. (married, age 30)

**Cultural discrimination**

My husband swears at driving women and believes that women cannot drive. (married, age 40)

**Domestic physical abuse**

“Sometime when I struggle with my husband, he pushes me so harshly that I am about to fall. I do not expect him to do so”. (married, age 48)

“My husband has harsh treatment with me and sometimes beats me. I cannot speak about him. I suffer much from this”. (married, age 27)

**Domestic Economic Harrasment**

“He says that if I give him my house, he will be satisfied to divorce me”. (married, age 30)

**Domestic psychological abuse**

“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 treatment to my children”. (married, age 30)

**Domestic annoying beliefs**

“My husband always has his control on 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 sunset. Because of these misbehaviors, I get a lot of stress”. (married, age 25)

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 bored and I think I am weaker than men”. (married, age 60)

**Economic discrimination**

“I have no right to decide how to spend my earned money”. (single, age 35)

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 other savings and expenses. (married, age 62)

**Social abuse**

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

**Annoying social beliefs**

“When driving, if other men bully me, my husband says that it is natural, and I should ignore foul words of 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”. (married, age 35)

**Social psychological abuse**

"When I am driving in streets in my own car, even if I am driving properly, as soon as a man reaches me, he continuously horns, so I get stressful". (married, age 28)

**Social emotional abuse**

"we as women who live in small towns, when we are late at home or when go out when it is dark, people think us badly, if a women make up, even if she has no immorality, people think that she is immoral and judge her as immoral". (single, age 35)

**Cultural emotional abuse**

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". (single, age 33)

**Social verbal abuse**

"Sometimes when men see that a woman is single, they tell something intolerable". (single, age 38)

**Cultural verbal abuse**

"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". (single, age 28)

**Social physical abuse**

"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 have no appropriate behaviors and I get offended". (single, age 33)

**Social economic abuse**

"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". (married, age 56)

"In terms of profession, men are prioritized and they do not accept that women have sufficient proficiency at work in a lot places. Employers prefer to give responsibilities to men and this issue reduces our self-confidence". (single, age 58)

"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". (single, age 28)

**Social discrimination**

"In my work place, even if my male colleagues' activities have less quality than mine, but because they are male, my employer accepts their activities and I don't know why". (married, age 50)

**DISCUSSION**

To describe educated women's experiences of abuse, a semi-structured interviews with 20 educated women holding BA/MSc to PhD degrees and with 25 to 62 years of age was conducted. 380 initial codes and 18 secondary codes including domestic and social abuse were obtained.

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

Based on a study by Mirzaei et al, there is a negative and significant 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 criticizing women's moral traits and negligence to their emotions and feelings [24].

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 can be in 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 be come under psychological violence which threat dignity, pride, and self-confidence in women [23-25].

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

One of the dimensions of misbehavior which may not be clear at the first glance, is economic abuse particularly against those educated and employed women who work shoulder by shoulder of men and may 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.

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 [27].

The findings results of a lot of research studies indicate that the difference in the prevalence of depression among women and men, 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 committing suicide [28].

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 lower and weaker than men and credit the commitment of violence against them [29].

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 idea, this is 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].

Highlighting the issue of "equality of men's and women's rights" in different societies, considering the issue of violence and ways to fight

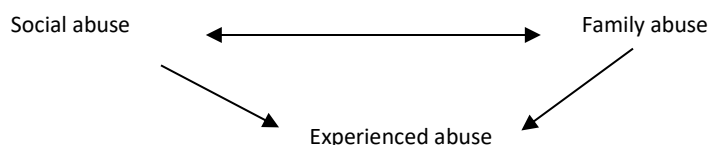
with it have been considered as efficient instruments for questioning the legitimacy of each kind of violence at the level of society for a lot of social researchers.

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 and the men consider themselves eligible to commit violence against them [29].

Social distinction between men and women in the Iranian society is a discrimination advocating men which put men at the top of affairs. 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 for 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 [30].

## 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 seemed that the participants did not tend to speak about some of improper behaviors and those with stigma, or retell some of the annoying abuse. However, these experiences can be sketched as follows:



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 because 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 training families. It can be claimed that the origin of a lot of abuse 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 this line, the role of nurses one of the most influential members of health team in families can plan necessary interventions for changing attitudes and culture building appropriate domestic behaviors.

In addition, 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 culture in relation with women.

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## Conflict of interest

None.

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