

# Wife abuse in Esfahan, Islamic Republic of Iran, 2002

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معاملة الزوجات بالعنف في أصفهان، جمهورية إيران الإسلامية

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**الخلاصة:** أجرى الباحثان دراسة مستعرضة (شاملة للقطاعات) بأخذ عينات عنقودية عشوائية لدراسة مدى معاملة الزوجات بالعنف في أصفهان في الفترة بين نيسان/إبريل وتموز/يوليو 2002، وذلك بإجراء مقابلات مع 386 امرأة متزوجة باستخدام استبيان معياري. وقد بلغ متوسط العمر 35.7 سنة (وبحاله من 15 إلى 78 سنة)، وكان معدل انتشار ممارسة العنف مع الزوجات 36.8%، ومعدل وقوع ذلك 29.3%. واشتملت أنماط العنف على تجاهل مشاعر الزوجة في 44.8% وتهديدها بمنعها عن التواصل مع أهلها في 38.1% وصَفْعها في 31.9% وضربها في 27.2%. وكانت ممارسة العنف مع الزوجات مترابطة مع عمر الزوج، وتعاطيه للمخدرات أو معاقرة للكحول، أو التدخين، كما كانت مترابطة مع الدخل وعدد الأطفال ( $P < 0.05$ ). ويوصي الباحثان بالمزيد من التقصّيات لكشف عوامل اختطار تعنيف الزوجات في هذا المجتمع المحلي، إضافة إلى التثقيف الجماعي حول المسؤوليات الجنسية والتصرّفات تجاه الزوجة. وقام الباحثان بالدعاية لتعزيز الإجراءات الداعمة للنساء اللاتي كنَّ من ضحايا العنف.

**ABSTRACT** We carried out a cross-sectional study with cluster random sampling to study the status of wife abuse in Esfahan from April to July 2002. We interviewed 386 married women using a standard questionnaire. Mean age was 35.7 years (range 15–78 years). Prevalence of wife abuse was 36.8%; incidence was 29.3%. Types of abuse included inattention to wife's feelings 44.8%, threatening to prevent communicating with the wife's family 38.1%, slapping 31.9% and beating 27.2%. Husband's age, use of drugs or alcohol, smoking, income and number of children were all associated with wife abuse ( $P < 0.05$ ). We recommend further investigation to detect the risk factors for wife abuse in this community along with mass education concerning sexual responsibility and conduct towards wives. We also advocate the promotion of supportive measures for abused women.

## La maltraitance conjugale à Ispahan (République islamique d'Iran), 2002

**RÉSUMÉ** Nous avons réalisé une étude transversale avec échantillonnage aléatoire par grappes sur la situation de la maltraitance conjugale à Ispahan d'avril à juillet 2002. Nous avons interrogé 386 femmes mariées à l'aide d'un questionnaire standard. L'âge moyen était de 35,7 ans (extrêmes : 15-78 ans). La prévalence de la maltraitance conjugale était de 36,8 % ; l'incidence était de 29,3 %. Les types de maltraitance comprenaient le mépris des sentiments de l'épouse (44,8 %), la menace d'empêcher tout contact avec la famille de l'épouse (38,1 %), les gifles (31,9 %) et les coups (27,2 %). L'âge du mari, l'usage de drogues ou d'alcool, le tabagisme, le revenu et le nombre d'enfants étaient tous associés à la maltraitance conjugale ( $p < 0,05$ ). Nous recommandons d'autres études pour identifier les facteurs de risque de la maltraitance conjugale dans cette communauté parallèlement à une éducation de masse concernant la responsabilité sexuelle et la conduite envers l'épouse. Nous préconisons en outre la promotion de mesures de soutien pour les femmes maltraitées.

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## Introduction

Wife abuse is a negative attempt to control the behaviour of a wife. Wife abuse occurs when a husband threatens or harms his spouse to gain power and control over her. This includes emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

In the United States of America, between 1 million and 4 million women experience serious assault by an intimate partner each year [1,2]; 47% of the men who beat their wives do so at least 3 times per year [3]. Nearly 1 in 3 American women experience at least 1 physical assault by a partner during adulthood [2]. It has been estimated that 1 in every 10 women in Canada is abused by her partner every year [4].

Recognizing wife abuse as an issue that impacts on the community is a new idea in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Till recently, it has been believed that wife abuse was not a major problem, that it happened to only a minority of women and that it was a private family matter.

There have been only a few reports on wife abuse in the Islamic Republic of Iran [5–10], however, it happens among every socioeconomic group [11]. Reports from emergency rooms of many hospitals and legal medical centres suggest there are many cases of trauma due to physical spouse abuse [12–15].

Now, with the increased awareness of the pervasiveness of this phenomenon and its devastating psychological and physical impact it is important to determine the extent of the problem in the community. We, therefore, carried out a cross-sectional study to determine the prevalence of wife abuse and associated factors in Esfahan in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Our main aim was to gather basic data which may be useful in reducing this problem in the community.

## Methods

We carried out a cross-sectional study of a sample of married women in Esfahan, selected using cluster random sampling. The study was carried out from April to July 2002. Using a map of Esfahan, the city was divided into 495 blocks and we selected 50 blocks randomly. Then we selected 4 residential units randomly in each of these 50 blocks; the total number of homes was 458. The total number of married women living in these homes was 434. We explained the study to the women and invited them to participate; 11.1% refused to participate. The main reasons given were their husbands would not agree or they were satisfied with their relationship. Oral consent to take part in the study was given by 386 women. They were interviewed in their homes by trained interviewers using a standardized questionnaire. In some cases, other family members were present during the interview, but in no case was the husband present.

Using variables based on our goals, we drew up a questionnaire. This was utilized after its validity, reliability and objectivity were tested on a random sample of 30 women from the clustered random sample. We used 24 closed questions to collect information about demographic variables and the socioeconomic situation of participants and 38 closed questions to detect the prevalence, incidence and types of wife abuse.

We used *SPSS*, version 11.0, to manage the data and perform descriptive and inferential statistical tests. The data were analysed using the Pearson chi-squared test;  $P < 0.05$  was considered significant.

The age group of the sample was representative of the population of Esfahan according to the latest census (Statistical Centre of Iran, 1996) [16]. There was no statistically significant difference between the

age group of married women in the sample and in the general population ( $P < 0.05$ ).

## Results

The mean age of the women in the study was 35.7 years [standard deviation (SD) 10.88; range 15–78 years] and that of their husbands was 41.6 years (SD 12.64; range 18–82 years). Mean age at marriage for the women was 19.3 years (SD 4.85; range 9–44 years) and for their husbands was 25.2 years (SD 5.2; range 14–58 years). Non-Iranians constituted 2.4% of the sample; 1.8% were Christians and the others were Muslims, 75.6% were natives of Esfahan and 7.5% had migrated there within the past 10 years. Mean number of children was 2.28 (range 0–9). Mean family income per month was US\$ 179 (range US\$ 0–3614). Most of the participants had some education, only 7.5% of the women and 6.5% of their husbands were uneducated. Prevalence of smoking was 1.8%, alcohol use 0.5% and drug use 0.5% in the women and 33.7%, 7.8% and 5.7% respectively in husbands. Only 26.9% of the participants were employed outside the home; 1.8% stated their husbands were unemployed. About 57% of the families were householders and about 30% rented their home (Table 1).

Reported prevalence of wife abuse during the marriage was 36.8%, with an incidence rate of 29.3%. There was a statistically significant association between history of spouse abuse in the marriage and the following characteristics of the husband ( $P < 0.05$ ): history of smoking, using alcohol or using drugs; nationality; and age. It was also associated with being a family native to Esfahan; immigration of the family to Esfahan; family income; and number of children (Table 2). The typical time for abuse was at night.

More than 70% of wives of alcohol users and drug users said they were abused. Prevalence of wife abuse was also very high if the husband was of non-Iranian nationality; 32.5% of husbands who were natives of Esfahan and 50.0% of non-natives were wife abusers (Table 3). Of husbands who were immigrants to Esfahan, 55.2% of those who had been there  $< 10$  years were wife abusers compared to 35.3% of those who had been there  $\geq 10$  years.

Increasing age of the husband was associated with an increase in the prevalence of wife abuse, 28.8% for those  $< 35$  years, 40.1% for those 35–45 years and 48.8% for husbands  $\geq 45$  years. Also, prevalence of wife abuse was significantly related to family size. For families with 0 children, wife abuse was 21.3%; for those with 1–2 children, it was 37.4% and for those with  $\geq 3$  children, 42.2% of wives reported being abused.

Physical abuse was reported to be in the form of beating 27.2% [with history of ecchymosis (16.3%) bleeding (7.3%) fracture (3.1%) and hospitalization (2.6%)]. Other forms of physical abuse were reported such as slapping (31.9%), stabbing (3.4%) and throwing objects at the victim (23.6%).

Psychological and emotional abuse was mainly reported to be insulting (32.4%). Abuse in the form of threats to: isolate the woman from her family (38.1%), or leave (17.6%), divorce (15.3%), beat (24.1%), attack with a knife (5.7%), shoot (1.6%) or kill (7.0%) her were also reported.

About 45% of the participants reported that they did not get any attention from their husbands regarding their feelings. Aggression was reported by 43.8% and 15.8% said they did not feel secure inside their house. Other types of abuse included belittling the woman, 31.6%; not responding to her feelings, 31.3%; intentionally refusing to

Table 1 **Cross tabulation for all variables**

Variable	Total (n = 386)	History of wife abuse (n = 142)	
	No.	No.	%
<i>Woman's education</i>			
Uneducated	29	17	58.6
Primary	72	29	40.3
Secondary	71	30	42.3
Diploma	134	43	32.1
University degree	66	20	30.3
Higher degree	14	3	21.4
<i>Husband's education</i>			
Uneducated	25	15	60.0
Primary	66	29	43.9
Secondary	71	25	35.2
Diploma	123	42	34.1
University degree	80	25	31.3
Higher degree	21	6	28.6
<i>Woman's work status</i>			
Works in the house	282	102	36.2
Employed outside the home	104	40	38.5
<i>Husband's work status</i>			
Unemployed	7	2	28.6
Employed	379	140	36.9
<i>Woman smokes</i>			
Yes	7	5	71.4
No	379	137	36.1
<i>Husband smokes</i>			
Yes	130	67	51.5
No	256	75	29.3
<i>Woman uses alcohol</i>			
Yes	2	2	100.0
No	384	140	36.5
<i>Husband uses alcohol</i>			
Yes	30	22	73.3
No	356	120	33.7
<i>Woman uses drugs</i>			
Yes	2	1	50.0
No	384	141	36.7
<i>Husband uses drugs</i>			
Yes	22	17	77.3
No	364	125	34.3
<i>Accommodation</i>			
Householder	220	70	31.8
Rented	113	50	44.2

Table 1 Cross tabulation for all variables (continued)

Variable	Total (n = 386)	History of wife abuse (n = 142)	
	No.	No.	%
Family house	51	22	43.1
Government apartment house	2	–	–
<i>Husband's nationality</i>			
Iranian	377	135	35.8
Afghan	6	5	83.3
Other	3	2	66.7
<i>Esfahan native (husband)</i>			
Yes	292	95	32.5
No	94	47	50.0
<i>Husband migrated to Esfahan (years)</i>			
< 10	29	16	55.2
≥ 10 or native	357	126	35.3
<i>Religion</i>			
Muslim	379	139	36.7
Christian	7	3	42.9
<i>Woman's age (years)</i>			
15–24	3	2	66.7
25–34	206	71	34.5
35–44	109	42	38.5
45–54	50	18	36.0
55–64	14	8	57.1
65–78	4	1	25.0
<i>Woman's age at marriage (years)</i>			
9–17	189	74	39.2
18–34	193	67	34.7
35–44	4	1	25.0
<i>Husband's age (years)</i>			
18–24	1	1	100.0
25–34	148	42	28.4
35–44	192	77	40.1
55–64	27	13	48.1
65–82	18	9	50.0
<i>Husband's age at marriage (years)</i>			
14–17	16	8	50.0
18–34	358	128	35.8
35+	12	6	50.0

Table 1 **Cross tabulation for all variables** (concluded)

Variable	Total (n = 386)	History of wife abuse (n = 142)	
	No.	No.	%
<i>Monthly family income (000 rials)<sup>a</sup></i>			
80-< 1 250 <sup>b</sup>	155	68	43.9
1 250-30 000	157	41	26.1
No response	74	33	44.6
<i>No. of children</i>			
0	61	13	21.3
1-2	171	64	37.4
≥ 3	154	65	42.2

<sup>a</sup>8300 Iranian rials = US\$ 1 (2002).<sup>b</sup>Below the poverty level.

give her money, 10.4%; refusing to give her food, 7.8%; not providing suitable housing, 14.2%; refusing to provide clothes 14.2%; and refusing to provide supplies for basic needs, 12.4%.

Verbal abuse was mainly reported to be in the form of loud speech (51.0%) or using indecent language (29.3%).

Sexual abuse included ignoring the wife's sexual enjoyment, 19.2%; forcing the wife to have sex, 31.3%; and forcing the wife to engage in sexual activities she does not want, 18.4%

For 92.0% of men who abused their wives, there was a history of wife abuse by their fathers.

In response to the question: "Who was most responsible for wife abuse occurring?" 22.5% of the women responded that they were responsible.

The commonest motivations reported for continuing to live with their abusing husbands were being concerned for the children and their family life and the lack of social support for women after divorce.

## Discussion

The meaning of wife abuse had not previously been explained to the women who participated in this study: we were the first to explain it to them. There may, therefore, be recall bias for some types of abuse. In this study, overall prevalence of wife abuse was 36.8%, ranging from 1.6% for threatening with a weapon to 51.0% for using loud speech. Since 12.5% of the women we approached refused to participate, the prevalence and incidence rate may have been affected.

A study conducted in 1997 in Tehran reported that prevalence of physical spouse abuse was 27.7% [10] while in a hospital-based study conducted in 1999 in Yazd, reported prevalence was 55.7% [17]. Physical spouse abuse in a Nicaraguan study in 1999 was reported to be 52% in women 15-49 years old [18] while in a study from southern Ethiopia in 1998, prevalence of spouse abuse was reported as 45% [19]. In our study the overall prevalence of wife abuse

**Table 2 Statistical relationship between some variables and history of wife abuse in the marriage, Esfahan, 2002**

Variable	Pearson chi-squared test		
	<i>r</i>	df	<i>P</i> -value
Woman's education	11.119	5	0.049
Husband's education	9.779	6	0.134
Woman's work status	0.172	1	0.679
Husband's work status	0.207	1	0.649
Wife smokes	3.679	1	0.055
Husband smokes	18.341	1	< 0.001
Wife uses alcohol	3.455	1	0.063
Husband uses alcohol	18.682	1	0.000
Woman uses drugs	0.151	1	0.698
Husband uses drugs	16.444	1	< 0.001
Accommodation	7.089	3	0.690
Nationality	6.897	2	0.032
Esfahan native	9.328	1	0.002
Migrated to Esfahan	4.558	1	0.033
Religion	0.113	1	0.737
Woman's age	4.519	5	0.477
Woman's age at marriage	1.050	2	0.591
Husband's age	9.977	4	0.041
Husband's age at marriage	2.266	2	0.322
Family income	12.975	2	0.002
No. of children	8.258	2	0.016

was 36.8%, with physical abuse ranging from 3.4% to 31.9% for different types. For almost all the men who abused their wives, there was a history of wife abuse in their parents. Similar results have been reported in other studies [18–20].

Studies done in Lebanon [21], the United States of America [22,23] and Norway [24] have found an association between alcohol consumption and history of spouse abuse. In our study also, the association was significant ( $P < 0.001$ ).

Association between age of the husband and history of spouse abuse has been previ-

ously reported [25] but in a study from Nicaragua no such association was found [18]. In our study, increasing age of the husband was associated with increased prevalence of wife abuse but another study found it was related to the age of the wife, being much more in women aged 16–24 years [26].

For the question about monthly family income, 19.1% of the women in our study didn't respond. In these cases, therefore, we used the best case–worst case analysis. When family income was < 1 250 000 rials per month (below the poverty line), 43.9% of men were spouse abusers; this figure was

**Table 3 Prevalence of wife abuse according to some characteristics of husbands, Esfahan, 2001**

Characteristic of husband	Wife abusers (%)
Smoker	51.5
Non-smoker	29.3
Uses alcohol	73.3
Does not use alcohol	33.7
Uses drugs	77.3
Does not use drugs	34.3
Iranian	35.8
Non-Iranian	77.7
Native of Esfahan	32.5
Non-native of Esfahan	50.0
Migrated to Esfahan < 10 years ago	55.2
Migrated to Esfahan ≥ 10 years ago	35.3
Family income < 1 250 000/ month	43.9
Family income ≥ 1 250 000/ month	26.1

8300 Iranian rials = US\$ 1 (2002).

26.1% for family income ≥ 1 250 000 rials per month.

As in our study, reports from Lebanon [21] and Nicaragua [18] found an association between family income and spouse abuse.

Our results also show that the greater the number of children in the family, the greater the prevalence of history of wife abuse but the causes of this were not determined.

We found no association between husband's education level and history of spouse abuse. The results of a number of other studies support this finding [18–23].

## Conclusion

One of the neglected health problems in the Islamic Republic of Iran is wife abuse. In this study, we found a high prevalence of this problem in Esfahan city.

Since the prevalence of wife abuse in this community is high, we recommend:

- carrying out analytic studies to determine the risk factors for wife abuse using case-control studies;
- planning for the prevention of wife abuse based on the risk factors determined from such studies;
- mass education in the field of sexual responsibility, conduct towards a wife, a wife's rights in regard to support and protection from abusive husbands;
- promotion and revision of supportive laws for abused women.

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**WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women. Initial results on prevalence, health outcomes and women's responses**

This report presents initial results based on interviews with 24 000 women by carefully trained interviewers. The study was implemented by WHO, in collaboration with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), PATH, USA, research institutions and women's organizations in the participating countries. This report covers 15 sites and 10 countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, Japan, Peru, Namibia, Samoa, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand and the United Republic of Tanzania.

Report findings document the prevalence of intimate partner violence and its association with women's physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health. Data are included on non-partner violence, sexual abuse during childhood and forced first sexual experience. Information is also provided on women's responses. The report concludes with 15 recommendations to strengthen national commitment and action on violence against women.

Data from the report show that violence against women is widespread and demands a public health response.

Further information on the report can be found at: [http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who\\_multicountry\\_study/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/gender/violence/who_multicountry_study/en/index.html)