



## Domestic Violence Experiences: The Perspective of Abused Women in Malaysian

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### Article Information

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### Abstract

This paper presents an exploration of Malaysian women's experiences living in domestic violence relationships. The participants were 25 abused women aged between 19 to 65 years old. Their accounts were recorded and analyzed to uncover their experiences of domestic violence in the context of their lives. First, the results showed that these women were abused in terms of psychological, physical, sexual, social as well as financially deprived. The next important subject related to spousal abuse is the presence of a weapon in domestic violence incidents. The data revealed that during the time violence is perpetrated, the husbands or former husbands had used their body parts or weapons to threaten or cause physical pain to the women. Although the small number of participants may not be representative of all abused women population in Malaysia, generalization is not what this study aimed for. Through this study, the experiences of these abused women were captured, and their world becomes clearly visible for others to be understood.

### INTRODUCTION

Globally, domestic violence has existed for centuries, but it is only in the past few decades that domestic violence has been recognized as a real problem (Mears & Visser, 2005). Since then, much empirical research has been conducted to gain a proper understanding and to attempt to resolve this matter. "Domestic violence is understood to be a critical problem-one that occurs along many dimensions, takes many forms, and arises under a range of different conditions" (Mears & Visser, 2005: 205).

Prior to the years of the 70s, domestic violence was thought to be a private matter and any disputes were mainly ignored and left to be settled within the family. As Gartner and Macmillan (1995: 394) state: "Women are most likely to be victimized by people they know well and because of this they are less likely to inform the authorities". In addition, a study by Dhakal (2008) found that most women experiencing domestic violence episodes in Nepal did not press any charges against the abusers so as to maintain male or family honor. Besides, Mitchell & Hodson (1983) explain that the reason for prolonged violence in a relationship is because families or couples are keeping the problem hidden from their social circle.

In some other countries, the growth of the women's movement has helped to raise awareness of the increase in the incidence of intentional injuries which had affected many people, especially women and children (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi & Lozano, 2002). This view is supported by Kilpatrick (2004), who notes that in the mid-

1970s, the impetus towards combating domestic violence had penetrated several countries such as Australia, the Republic of Ireland and Canada. Malaysia, on the other hand, had a later start in acknowledging the issue of violence against women. Since the 1980s, the recognition of domestic violence as a problem became evident with the establishment of Malaysia's first refuge for women victims.

Thereafter, as a result of feminist pressure, the enactment of The Domestic Violence Act 521 (1994) was then successfully implemented in 1996. Malaysia defines domestic violence as any incident of violence or abuse between adults who are engaged in an intimate relationship, or between members of the family. Those incidents of violence can include physical, psychological, and emotional, sexual, financial and/or social behaviors. In other words, it is an abuse of power with the intent to control and dominate one person by another through one or various forms of violence.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper explores the experiences of living in abusive relationships from the perspective of abused women in Malaysia. The discussions meant to describe circumstances of this particular research within the context of the study. Therefore, the results of the research were not used in generalizing about the violence experiences of Malaysian women. Hancock (1998) argues that there is a cooperative venture between the researcher and the reader regarding the decision about representative samples in a qualitative study. This is where the reader may reflect the similarities as well as differences of the researcher's viewpoint into his or her own perspective.

The primary source was drawn from 25 women who identify themselves as experiencing domestic violence at some point in their marital relationships. All participants were aged between 19 and 65 years. In addition, majority of the women recruited were housewives. The data collection stage involved asking the participant to complete her biographical details on the paper-based structured question form as well as semi-structured interview session. The structured questions sheet was divided into three sections, namely personal details, family details as well as an open-ended question. The 'PASW Statistics 18 Advanced Statistical Procedure' was used to analyze the data gathered from the sheet meanwhile analysis of the themes was performed by using NVivo software version 8.0.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### *Types of Abuse Experienced by the Participants*

The research found that physical battering was the most frequent form of domestic violence committed against these women. More than two thirds of the women (n = 20) reported that they experienced continuous physical assaults from their partners. They reported being slapped, hit, shoved, kicked, punched, and choked. Throwing things as well as burning also caused some of them injury and physical pain. In the analysis, it was found that out of these 25 women, six were kicked, fifteen were slapped, ten were hit and nine were choked. The husbands/ex-husbands were also reported committing such abuse like shoving (n = 6), punching (n = 3), hair pulling and burning (n = 2) respectively. Similar to findings of numerous research studies conducted worldwide, these physical acts are the most common type of violent crime committed in non-fatal partner abuse incidents.

In terms of social abuse, there were 17 women in the study who were exposed to social abuse which includes stalking, social isolation and controlling behaviours of the partners (dominance). From those 17 women stories, around 14 women reported that their current or former husbands kept the families, friends and neighbours apart from them. Ten of the women revealed that they had very few or no close friends at all since the relationships started. The women's time and whereabouts were occasionally being monitored (n = 8). In addition, they had been restricted regarding any outside home activities (n = 5) and the partners allowed no visitors at home (n = 4). Relatively few women were locked in their own house (n = 2) as well as exposed to stalking (n = 3). These abused women had reported that they had been constantly harassed at work by their spouses.

Sexual abuse in marriage is a taboo in the Malaysian context. The culture inhibits women and men broaching their sexual life outside the marriage. Hence, sexual abuse is still being treated as personal and private matters within society. Correspondingly, interviewing abused women regarding their sexual issues was a challenge. Nonetheless, sixteen women out of the total participants reported they had experienced this form of abuse in their relationships. Eleven out of 16 women had responded very well to the issue raised whereas a group of five women did admit to being sexually abused at least once during the relationships (including marital rape) but they refused to elaborate more on such incidents. For the time being in Malaysia, this kind of violent act is recognized in the federation as valid, not rape. Six women did not identify any form of sexual violence perpetrated by their partners. The remaining three of the abused women opted not to answer that particular question. They indicated the matter was 'private and personal', a 'sensitive issue' as well as 'inappropriate to share'. Those women also preferred not to discuss the issue further.

Turning to financial abuse experienced by the Malaysian abused women; it was found that 19 out of 25 women interviewed were exposed to financial abuse at some point in their relationships. Many of them were denied sufficient household expenses ( $n = 14$ ) which involves withholding money and being 'forced' to support jobless partners. The remaining four women reported that the husbands/ex-husbands demanded their salary for taking full responsibility for the household expenditures (i.e. rents, bills, groceries, and children's expenses). One woman reported that the husband prevented her from working but did nothing to financially support the whole family. As mentioned earlier, almost half of the women in the study ( $n = 13$ ) were housewives. Hence, many of them had no access to money resources, leaving them financially dependent on their partners. The dependency makes the women vulnerable to their partner's acts of violence. In fact, some of them no longer believed they could change their situation nor leave the abusive relationship.

The findings showed almost the entire number of respondents in the study reporting psychological and emotional abuse by their male counterparts ( $n = 23$ ). Only a small number of women interviewed noted conversely ( $n = 2$ ) with brief responses like 'I don't know' and 'I don't think so'. Some of the abused women, however, did not recognize or even feel that they had suffered such abuse all this time as this kind of abuse can be very subtle. Furthermore, abuse in terms of psychological and emotional behaviours are regarded as non-physical and are often overlooked by people. During the interviews, women were asked: "Did you ever experience such abuse as being called names, or receiving threatening or insulting comments or criticism of your physical appearance?" Shockingly, the women's answers were all down to 'yes' with false accusations made towards them being rated as the highest among all. Twelve women reported that the husbands/ex-husbands accused them of having an affair with another man, committing adultery as well as being a prostitute. The name calling, such as 'stupid' and 'bitch', had caused them to feel embarrassed as well as demeaned in front of their children.

Threats were also used to intimidate those women ( $n = 10$ ). The women were clearly vulnerable as they were financially unviable, thus incapable of looking after themselves and the children ( $n = 9$ ). The partners often wore down the women's sense of self-image and confidence by consistently saying they were worthless ( $n = 8$ ), an unfit mother and unwanted wife ( $n = 5$ ). The men also relentlessly criticized and blamed them for the violence perpetrated ( $n = 4$ ). It is believed that the impact of psychological and emotional abuse is severe. It may have longer lasting effects than physical abuse and can cause enduring damage to the sense of well-being of the abused women (and children).

#### *Types of Weapon Used During the Incidents*

The next important subject related to spousal abuse is the presence of a weapon in domestic violence incidents. The data revealed that during the time violence is perpetrated, the husbands or former husbands had used their body parts or weapons to threaten or cause physical pain to the women. There were only four women indicated that their abusive incidents did not involve a hand-held weapon. The perpetrators were reported to use physical force such as bare hands, fists, and feet to harm their wives (i.e. slapping, punching, kicking, choking and shoving them). The remaining 16 women experienced violent incidents involving weapons. Another five women said that the abuse was perpetrated by a mixture of both.

Overall, seven partners had used weapons such as a knife, stick and/or sports equipment like a baseball bat, hockey stick, golf club and badminton racket. Interestingly, a motorcycle helmet was also among the common type of weapon used for inflicting harm on these women ( $n = 4$ ). In similar cases during the violent incidents, a few other items were indicated as more likely to be the instruments, for instance bottles, furniture (i.e. chairs, coffee table and small shelves), crockery and electrical appliances (i.e. television and table fan). Two women experienced hazardous attempts of burning where kerosene was used by the abusers. The presence of this kind of 'dangerous weapon' in domestic violence events may result in serious injuries and most likely require immediate police intervention.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The following in Table 1 is a summary of the descriptive findings of the study on overall prevalence of domestic violence according to the types of violence experienced by those women and how did they being victimized by their husbands/ex-husbands. The table shows that almost all the women interviewed reported that they were abused psychologically by their partners. Many of them were also sexually abused, or in other words, raped by their husbands. In most cases, weapons such as a knife and helmet were used during their torture. The findings of the current study confirmed that most of the women respondents in the study experienced at least one form of abuse. The violence reported includes physical, psychological, and emotional, sexual, financial as well as social abuse.

The most interesting finding was that psychological and emotional abuse had been reported by 23 out of 25 women and followed by violence in physical terms. On the other hand, even though sexual violence was reported by the women, the study encountered difficulties in discussing the issue further due to the barrier of culture in the society. The results of this study indicate that social abuse as well as financial deprivation also occurred in the women's relationships for more than half of them. Therefore, the present study clearly demonstrates that Malaysian women are exposed to not only physical and psychological violence, but also sexual, social, and financial abuse.

TABLE I  
THE SUMMARY OF DESCRIPTIF FINDINGS

Characteristic	Frequency (out of 25 women)	Description
<b>Types of abuse</b>		
Psychological	<i>n</i> = 23 (92%)	Name calling/ accusation/ threat/ criticism
Physical	<i>n</i> = 20 (80%)	Slapping/ kicking/ punching/ choking/ burning
Financial	<i>n</i> = 19 (76%)	Withholding money/ demanding the salary of the women for household expenditures
Social	<i>n</i> = 17 (68%)	Social isolation/ stalking/ male dominance
Sexual	<i>n</i> = 16 (64%)	Forced sexual intercourse (marital rape)/ sodomy
<b>Types of weapon used</b>		
Unarmed	<i>n</i> = 4 (16%)	Hands/ fists/ elbow/ feet
Armed	<i>n</i> = 16 (64%)	Knife/ stick/ helmet/ sports equipment (i.e. badminton racket, baseball bat)
Mixture of both	<i>n</i> = 5 (20%)	Including throwing and smashing things

Previous studies suggest that sexual violence and non-sexual abuse such as financial deprivation, threats, physical force, stalking and intimidation precipitate comparable damage to the victims (Povey, Coleman, Kaiza & Roe, 2009; Kershaw, Nicholas & Walker, 2008; Walby & Allen, 2004). On the same subject, Povey *et al.* (2009) reported that more than a quarter of women victims (27%) had experienced two types of intimate violence (any two combinations of non-sexual family abuse, non-sexual partner abuse or sexual assault) whereas another six per cent had recorded an experience of all three types of violence mentioned above. According to the 2007/2008 British Crime Survey [BCS], the classification regarding types of violence is based on the relationship between the victim and the offender (Kershaw *et al.*, 2008).

The result of the present study also indicates that majority of the violence incidents reported by the respondents were subject to weaponry. There were several household items as well as sport equipment that had been used in those incidents including a knife, hockey stick, chair, and table fan. Amongst all, many cases in fact involved motorcycle helmets. It seems possible that this result is due to high rates of motorcycle use in Malaysia. As an affordable and convenient mode of transport motorcycles are widely used among low-and middle-income earners. Therefore, the possibility of the perpetrator using a motorcycle helmet as a domestic violence weapon in many abuse cases cannot be ruled out. However, more research on this topic needs to be undertaken before the association between motorcycle helmet as an opportunistic weapon and the occurrence of domestic violence incidents is more clearly understood.

The findings from the present study showed that 16 out of 25 women reported experiencing sexual violence in the relationships. Hence, this result revealed that sexual abuse was in reality experienced by most abused women in Malaysia. The prevalence of sexual violence found in the present study is rather interesting. Relatively few women cautiously discussed their sexual relationships and mostly the topic was down to marital rape. Nonetheless, not much information was gathered around this issue because these women appeared to be uncomfortable for a lengthy talk regarding this matter.

One possible explanation may relate to the shortcoming in the Domestic Violence Act 521 (1994) where marital rape is not recognized as a crime by Malaysian Law. Therefore, no legal provisions for such an offence are allocated, leaving the women in a helpless situation. On top of that, the misuse of a key tenet in Islamic Sharia (i.e. Islam forbids wives to refuse sex) also has worsened the problem. Examples of the Qur'an verses which mention sexual relations in marriage are presented as the following:

“If a husband calls his wife to his bed (i.e. to have sexual relations) and she refuses and causes him to sleep in anger, the angels will curse her till morning”. (Muslim)

“When a man calls his wife to satisfy his desire, she must go to him even if she is occupied at the oven”. (Ibn Ma’jah)

“... Your wives are your garments, and you are their garments.” (Qur’an 2:187)

“Your wives are as a tilth unto you; so, approach your tilth when or how you will; but do some good act for your souls beforehand; and fear God. And know that you are to meet Him (in the Hereafter) and give (these) good tidings to those who believe. (Qur’an 2:223)

When referring to the above statements, although the Qu’ran has given the right for Muslim men to engage in sexual intercourse with their wives whenever they please, mutual agreement as well as understanding must be established between the men and their female partners (as illustrated in the Qur’an verses 2:187 and 2:223). Conversely, in many circumstances, Muslim women have been manipulated with such verses (as narrated in the hadith by Muslims and Ibn Ma’jah) to make them believe that sexual relations is a compulsory duty for a wife and women are forced to accept the unwanted or coercive sexual acts without protest.

The present finding seems to be consistent with other research which found the prevalence of sexual violence in Australia was recorded as one to five women (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006) meanwhile in the UK statistics, there were over a million incidents of sexual assault against women that had been reported through self-completion module of the 2001 British Crime Survey [BCS] (Walby & Allen, 2004).

The overall evidence from this study highlights the value of research that provides an opportunity for abused women to express their feelings as well as sharing their stories with the purpose of making other people better understand their violence experiences. This paper expects the current findings will add to a growing body of literature on the experiences of abused women in Malaysia.

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