

How bad is violence? The case of wife abuse in Sri Lanka

Kanchana Sujananie Bulumulle*

The Open University of Sri Lanka, Nawala, Nugegoda

Violence against women is perhaps the most widespread form of violence across all societies and cultures. Research reveals that amongst diverse forms of violence against women within the domestic domain, the most prevalent form of violence is the violence of the husband against the wife. A multiplicity of issues related to the issue has been addressed and one of which is the magnitude of domestic violence. Evidence shows that the gravity of the injuries sustained by the victim in those situations is quite high in Sri Lanka.

The objective of this study was to identify the magnitude of the incidence of wife abuse among the urban community, its physical and social impact on the individual and the family at large. The methodology of data collection was qualitative and the information was collected through in-depth interviews. The sample consisted of 61 victims of wife abuse from two main geographical locations, drawn from privileged and underprivileged socio-economic classes.

The study revealed that the assault began during the very first year of marriage (49.2%) or second year (41%) of marriage. This increased during the first pregnancy and usually intensified with the arrival of the children. Usually victims referred to "physical violence" to be more abusive than emotional violence and hence recognised those incidents of "assault" as acts of typical violence. However, certain middle class victims clearly identified deprivation of social status, ill-treatment and obstructions to one's professional well being as abuse. The highest proportion of victims 32% stated that violence occurred due to in-law instigations, 23% said it was due to the dowry issue, and 16% extra marital affairs. The patterns of frequency of assaults on wives brought out 33% being assaulted daily, 45% nearly every other day and 14% at least a few times a month. The magnitude of assault showed 49% hit with hands and legs, 21% assaulted with weapons such as knives etc., 10% with clubs, 7% verbal and emotional assaults. It should however be noted that these categories are mutually inclusive rather than exclusive assault types. Most of the victims (28%) reported sustaining bruises, swellings, black marks on the body or dislocation of teeth; 13% percent cuts on throat, neck, hands, and body; 10% had suffered miscarriages; 13% injuries without prominent visibility; 13% with severe head injury and 8% reported severe psychological problems due to abuse.

However, it is hard to explain the high level of assaults in a context of social and economic reasons alone, because the reasons seem to relate also to the values and beliefs, and the socialisation experiences of these victims and perpetrators.

* kbulu@ou.ac.lk

Tel: 011-2853777 Ext.402