

# Profiles of Domestic Violence Victims and Perpetrators: A Qualitative Research Perspective

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**Abstract** – Domestic violence remains a problem in the Malaysian society. The national statistics on violence against women has shown that domestic violence was recorded among the highest in the category. Domestic violence is often described as a family-centred problem and generally understood as patterns of abusive and coercive behaviour which may cause physical injuries, psychological and emotional disturbances, sexual intimidations as well as financial oppressions to the victim. In this article, the demographics of the women victims and their spouses or ex-spouses were described. All data was collected using self-reporting questionnaires which filled up by those women themselves. Profiles of the women sample (and the perpetrators) were analysed via the PASW Statistics 18 Advanced Statistical procedure. The findings obtained from the analyses are discussed in relation to the demographical characteristics of the women and their male counterparts. These basic features of the sample aim to offer a glimpse of domestic violence occurrences rather than seek to be representative to the population. The purpose of this present study is to add to the growing body of knowledge on domestic violence against women (from the qualitative research point of view) as well as to enhance the understanding on the real circumstances of the problem. **Copyright © 2016 Penerbit Akademia Baru - All rights reserved.**

**Keywords:** domestic violence, wife abuse, violence against women

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence problem has been identified as occurring across all religions, ethnicities, cultures, ages and economic status [1]. Despite a large number of studies having been conducted around the globe focusing on these abusive relationships, knowledge about abused women's experiences is lacking. Notably, the impact of such victimization experiences may have adverse consequences not only for the victims, but their children, families, friends as well as the whole of society.

The problem is often described as a family-centred problem and generally understood as patterns of abusive and coercive behaviour which may cause physical injuries, psychological and emotional disturbances, sexual intimidation as well as financial oppression of the victim. In fact, it is portrayed as the act of maltreatment of one's partner by the other in the context of an intimate relationship. A similar definition, described by Healey et al. [2], is that acts of violence and abusive behaviours are used by adults to control and dominate their intimate partners, and is thus classified as domestic violence. In the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, adopted in 1993, violence against women is seen as [3]:

“Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and

other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation; physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere; trafficking in women and forced prostitution; and physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state, wherever it occurs”.

Taken together, authors such as Heise et al. [4] describe domestic violence as a significant social and public health problem in many countries. Besides being a tremendous burden to social services, health care and the criminal justice system, the harm wrought by domestic violence is more problematic in terms of the physical, emotional, psychological and behavioural damage [5]. Thus, issues of domestic violence need to be considered as an urgent and important matter because a substantial proportion of resources are demanded from everyone in dealing with this problem.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Domestic violence is often seen as a gender issue. According to Walby and Allen [6], women are more prone to be the victims of assaults compared to men, especially in regards to sexual violence. In a study conducted by Tjaden and Thoennes [7], twenty-two per cent of women had reported being assaulted by their male partner or ex-partner compared to a figure of only 7.4 per cent regarding male victims. Krug et al. [8] revealed that between 10 and 69 per cent of women in their survey had reported intimate partner violence at some point in their lives. Studies are beginning to estimate domestic violence occurrences within marital relationships but, as the understanding has evolved, the research scope has been extended to include non-marital relationships. The prevalence rates for abuse among cohabiting and dating relationships have been found to be as significant as between married couples (Deal & Wampler [9]; Makepeace [10]). In the United Kingdom, statistics show that one in every four women has experienced episodes of domestic violence at some point in their lives [11] whereas, in the United States, approximately two million women are subject to violence by their intimate partners every year [7].

In Malaysia, studies on domestic violence are relatively limited. The national survey conducted between 1990 and 1992 by the Women’s Aid Organisation of Malaysia (WAO) showed that the estimation of violence against women aged over 15 years was 39% (equivalent to 1.8 million women) nationwide [12]. Another significant study by Women’s Aids Organisation of Malaysia (WAO) was a survey on 25 ex-residents who sought shelter at WAO. The participants in this survey were all accounted as abused women who are now living independently. The survey aimed to access the residents’ needs once they left the shelter. This ‘Needs Assessment Survey’ comprises information in regards to employment, housing, source of support and domestic violence service assistances. At the time of the survey, eighty four per cent (21 women) were employed with monthly income ranged from RM 201 to RM 1400. Although the women were received salaries on monthly basis, it was far below the mean monthly gross household income of RM 2435. Over half of them reported expenditures between RM 200 and RM 799 in which mostly spent on rent, food and schooling for children. Sixty-eight per cent rented their home; three women respectively lived with their families and lived in housing provided by employer. Many of them were actually living in squatter areas, lacked of basic household necessities such as furniture and refrigerator [13].

Wong and Othman [14] has examined the importance of early detection and prevention of domestic violence by using a screening test on 710 female respondents attending eight health centres in Primary Health Care Clinics in Selangor. This quantitative study was carried out to determine the relationship between social correlates (i.e. ethnicity, income levels, education levels and partner’s abuse of substance) of adult patients and domestic violence screening. The research findings showed that through the WAST (Women Abuse Screening Tool) screening in respect to ethnicity distribution, almost 58 per cent of 40 female patients who screened positive for domestic violence were Indian, followed by Malay (32.5%) and another 10 per cent were Chinese. Further, the low-income group recorded the highest percentage of those screened positive while middle and high-income earners showed an incidence of

below 28 per cent for both groups (22.5% and 5% respectively). In relation to attitudes towards domestic violence, it was found that more than 90 per cent of the participants concurred that a man does not have the right to abuse his wife/girlfriend. There were significant differences obtained in social correlates such as ethnicity, income and husband/partner's abuse of substances between those screened positive and negative for domestic violence.

One study of domestic violence prevalence against pregnant women in Malaysia was conducted by Jahanfar et al. [15]. This cross-sectional study was based in Ipoh General Hospital in the State of Perak with a determination to obtain the prevalence of domestic violence among pregnant women as well as to measure the risk factors associated with domestic violence during pregnancy. A selection of 134 pregnant women was included in the study. Standardized questionnaire along with a medical health record checklist were employed during individual interviews with the female patients. Demographical data showed that most of the respondents were housewives (61.9%), had a mean age of 28.8 years old and lived in rural areas surrounding Ipoh and other parts of Perak state (54.0%). The prevalence of domestic violence among pregnant women in this study was 4.5 per cent. Overall, the study concluded that there was neither a significant correlation between any of the socio demographic variables (i.e. age, race, education level and occupation) with domestic violence nor with any of the pregnancy and delivery outcomes.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

The data collection stage involved asking the participant to complete their biographical details on the paper-based structured question form. A set of structured questions was divided into three sections, namely personal details, family details as well as an open-ended question regarding contributing factors to the domestic violence. The function of the questionnaire in this study is to gather the demographical characteristics about the women and their husbands or ex-husbands. A total number of 25 Malaysian women aged between 19 and 65 years were recruited ( $n = 25$ ). As this is a qualitative study and was small-scale in nature, some readers may question whether it is appropriate to describe the results quantitatively. Aware of such an issue, the authors believed that it is most probably useful to present those findings, even though the sample size was not representative of the population. Justifications for low number of respondents are mainly laid on the sensitive nature of this research as well as the cultural standpoint which had almost made this research impossible because disclosing marital problems to other people was still considered as improper in Malaysian society. The 'gatekeeper' technique had certainly enhanced the possibility in recruitments in this study. Several agencies and a few professionals who work with abused women were approached to be the intermediary persons between the researchers and the participants. The strategy was used to ensure success in terms of abused women's participations as well as gaining entry to the research site.

As mentioned earlier in the abstract section, these basic characteristics of the sample discussed merely aimed at offering a hint of domestic violence occurrences. The discussions were essentially meant to describe circumstances of this particular research within the context of the study. Therefore, the results of the research were not used in making generalizations about the violence experiences of Malaysian women as a whole. Hancock [16] 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.

## 4.0 RESULTS

### 4.1 Demographical Characteristics of the Female Victims

The participants for this study were 25 married women who volunteered to discuss their experiences of living in domestic violence relationships. The sample age was between 19 and 65 years, most were in their 30s and early 40s (mean age of 42.72 years). On the whole, the women in the study had been married for between two to 39 years. The majority of the women had met their husbands in the workplace ( $n = 16$ ). Only three women disclosed that they were couples since school whilst six marriages were arranged by close families. Among them, over half ( $n = 15$ ) were no longer currently involved in a relationship with the abusive husband. Four of the husbands passed away while the women were still in the relationships, whereas the remaining 11 women were divorced (with the abusive partner). Out of this, three women had been remarried. Marital status for the remaining 10 women were married; where four of them decided to continue living with the husbands as married couples and the remaining women are still waiting for a divorce to be granted by the court ( $n = 6$ ). Those women had left the marriage from one to 17 years previously. Generally, the women who reported leaving their husbands stated the reason was due to violence and abuse.

In terms of the length of abusive relationships, the findings showed the below five years category was recorded as the highest ( $n = 13$ ), followed by category of 11 years and more ( $n = 8$ ) and four women reported that the relationships had lasted between a six to 10 years period. Many women reported that they had experienced abuse within their initial years of marriage. Some women indicated that the violence had actually started as early as on day three after the wedding. The length of time women had suffered domestic violence ranged from one to 21 years, with the average of 7.72 years.

The twenty-three women that make up the narrative of this research were Malay-Muslims, in addition to one Chinese woman (Buddhist religion) and one Muslim who had converted to Islam with Chinese ethnicity respectively. The majority of the women had one to three children ( $n = 16$ ); six women had four to six children and two women had more children than the others (seven and ten children, respectively). One of them had no children at all after almost three years of marriage. Most of the women completed their upper secondary school education ( $n = 18$ ), one having a diploma in Electrical and Electronics Engineering and one a bachelor degree in Mass Communication studies. Two women attended lower secondary school while the remaining three had finished the primary school level.

During the occurrence of the violent relationships, more than half ( $n = 13$ ) of the women identified their occupation as housewife, then followed by government and private employees ( $n = 8$ ). One woman reported working as a domestic cleaner (labourer) while the remaining three had their own businesses set up, for example selling foods, food catering for special events like weddings as well as being a tailor. In relevance to the occupation reported by the women, all the housewives reported not having any source of income and they also admitted being financially dependent on their husbands. Over thirty per cent ( $n = 8$ ) of women reported having a monthly income of between RM 501 and RM 2000. Three women were receiving under RM 500 per month and a woman was getting irregular pay according to her hours of working on daily basis.

The results indicated that eight women had lived in an extended family arrangement such as with parent in-law or relatives while the rest of them lived in a nuclear family ( $n = 17$ ). A few reported they were staying together with as many as nine other extended family members in a household. Nonetheless, all of the violent incidents were reported to be perpetrated by the husbands only. The women claimed that parents' in-law and other family members acted as a 'bystander' who sometimes verbally encouraged the situation to become more violent, without displaying any desire to help them. Overall, less than one third of the women ( $n = 6$ ) were involved in arranged marriages, however the majority of them reported they knew their husbands well before they decided to enter the marriage.

#### **4.2 Demographical Characteristics of the Male Perpetrators**

The mean age of the abusers was 44.05 years (range 27 to 63 years). The majority of husbands or ex-husbands completed their upper secondary school education (n = 10) followed by lower secondary school (n = 6) and first degree/diploma (n = 2). Four of them stopped at primary school, while three women did not know about their husbands' education. Almost all of the husbands were Muslims with Malay ethnicity (n = 24), and a Buddhist (Chinese by ethnic origin).

There was an even distribution of the husband's occupation with three each who were government employees, owned private businesses and were unemployed respectively. Private sector workers contributed the highest number with 15 people. In regards to the income, seven had a monthly income of between RM 501 and RM 2000, three received more than RM 2001, while seven received under RM 500 per month. The remaining two of the husbands who were employed as a labourer and a domestic cleaner were reported to receive irregular pay. Three of the women's husbands were recorded as having no steady income because they were unemployed and the other three women reported they did not know at all about their husbands' pay.

#### **5.0 DISCUSSION**

Overall, the results of this study show that perpetrators were identified as the women's former or current male spouses. In details, the ex-husbands had accounted for more than half of the total percentages while a number of women were separated from their husbands at the time of the data collected. As Walby and Allen [6] state: "The worst incidents suffered in the previous year were from current partners/spouses and former partner/spouses". Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in all 25 cases of this study, none was reported with other kind of perpetrators such as parents' in-laws, siblings or relatives, although some women were actually living together with extended-family members. National Report on Health and Violence, Malaysia [17] has showed that the presence of other people in the household had probably contributed to the violence incidents between the couple where the statistics from Department of Social Welfare of Malaysia in the same report stated that conflicts with in-laws or other family members is one of the common cause in domestic violence. This study was unable to demonstrate the involvement of significant others in the violent relationships.

Although this result differs from some published studies mostly in South East Asian communities for example Dhakal [18] and Kumar et al. [19], the finding is consistent with those findings by Sarkar [20] who found that 72.73 per cent out of 141 female respondents in West Bengal were exposed to domestic violence where their husbands acted as the perpetrators. Similarly, it was reported that more than 45 per cent of domestic violence incidents in India were inflicted by male spouses [21]. The difference between the present study and the previous studies by Dhakal [18] and Kumar et al. [19] may be related to cultural variations. It is believe that the involvement of family in-laws was very much apparent among the Indian culture due to dowry related violence. Nonetheless, this explanation is largely speculative and needs further examination from various stances.

Previous studies conclude no specific pattern regarding the age of victims as well as perpetrators of domestic violence [22], [23], [24]. The present study found a similar age category of 30 – 40 years between the female victims and male perpetrators together with their average age of early 40s for the respective groups. This finding is in agreement with Catalano's [22] findings which showed that similar age was reported between the victims and offenders of intimate partner violence from 2001 to 2005 in the US Bureau of Justice Statistics. The finding also has supported previous studies which reported that people with younger age were usually experiencing more domestic violence than people with older age. As example, research results from Kernic and Bonomi [23] showed that the biggest age group reporting their victimization to the police were victims' age under 33, twenty-five per cent victims aged between 34 and 44 as well as the other 10 per cent of them were over 44 years old. Other authors for example Chen & White [24], however, demonstrate contrasting findings which show none of the age groups were increased or decreased the propensity of becoming violent. Chen and White [24] also claimed that

there was no significant relationship between age of intimate partner violence age and prevalence of committing domestic violence in their study.

In relation to duration of the violence relationship, the current study found that for some women their marriages had even lasted for more than 15 years. In line with the subject, the mean duration of living in the violence relationship was reported as 11.5 years in the research conducted by Dutton and Painter [25]. Nevertheless, the abuse was reported to have started at various points for different women. The present sample therefore reflects a high number of middle-age couples with prolonged episodes of violence. The reason for this is not clear but it may have something to do with the establishment of romantic bonding within the length of relationship. It is believed that the longer a woman remains in a violence relationship, the more they become attached in that relationship and the woman may consider that the abuse is not escapable due to the emotional bonding developed between themselves and their male abuser.

Another important finding was that the majority of the abused women in the study were low-academic achievers, unemployed and highly dependent on their husbands' income. These women were reported to be financially incapable of sustaining themselves, let alone provide for the children. This finding supports previous research into this area which links economic dependency and reasons of staying in the abusive relationship. The Sarkar's study [20] found that female respondents in his study who were exposed to domestic violence were in fact not economically independent. Likewise, other prior studies have also noted the importance of financial viability in families with domestic violence [26], [27], [28]. A possible explanation for this might be that many victims believe they should remain in the abusive relationship because primarily they are highly dependent on their husband's source of income. Indeed, some women may also have feelings of incompetence, lower self-esteem and lack of confidence to start hunting for a job. The strategy in which the abuser's power and control to some extent has undermined the women's sense of identity to survive on their own. The findings of this study suggest that women who are unemployed and uneducated are also at risk of domestic violence.

Similarly, Walby and Allen research [6] also claims economic distress such as unemployment and income are predictors for domestic violence. Their findings showed most women victims were unemployed (6.3%) compared to men victims (2.6%). According to gender, men victims recorded highest rate for 'inactive' group of employment with 2.9 per cent, followed by unemployed (2.6%) and employed (2.1%). Women on the other hand recorded highest rate on unemployed with 6.3 per cent and only 3.9 per cent of the women victims are working. By the same token, other literature stated that the majority of the abusers are economically unstable [29].

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

In summary, it was found that there were variations to the attributes of abused women and their husbands/ex-husbands. The majority of the women and their husbands were in their 30s and 40s. They were believed to be married for between two to 39 years, with the average length of the abusive relationship lasting for almost eight years. Some of the women were still married to the male perpetrator and some of them had decided to leave with a divorce. The majority of the abused women and their spouses/ex-spouses were Malay-Muslims. Similar levels of education were found between the women and their male counterparts where more than half of them had finished up to secondary school level. Many of these women were housewives and reported to be financially dependent to the men's income. Over half of the male partners were getting less than RM 2000 per month working as private employees, government servants as well as engaged in other kinds of occupation.

Globally, domestic violence has been recognized as a significant social and health problem in numerous parts of the world. Based on the literatures, violence against women has a strong association with socio-demographical factors, history of abuse, lack of social supports (i.e. family, friends and community) and the influence of alcohol or drug abuse. Much research on domestic violence has been conducted in Western countries, with little study addressing the experiences of abused women in Malaysia. The

present study aims to highlight attributes of the women as the domestic violence victims together with men as the perpetrators in the Malaysian context. Although the number of participants was small, this part of study may contribute a valuable source of data in terms of abused women and their abusers' demographical characteristics. The understanding of domestic violence obtained from this study in total is expected to increase public awareness as well as making such influence on the future policy development and practice concerning the problem of domestic violence in Malaysia.

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