

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

POSTNATAL MOTHERS' EXPERIENCE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN DURING PREGNANCY

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ABSTRACT

**Background:** Violence against women is a social problem that has serious consequences on women's physical, and psychosocial well-being. The violence against women ultimately also affects children, families, and society as a whole. This study aimed to identify the experience of domestic violence against women during pregnancy.

**Methods:** A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among purposively selected 302 postnatal mothers of postpartum A, B and Gynae ward of Patan Hospital. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews using a structured interview schedule. Data were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics version 20.0 using descriptive statistics.

**Results:** Postnatal mothers experienced sexual violence by their husbands (8.9%), physical violence (12.9%), and emotional violence (43%) from their husbands and or family members. Regarding other forms of violence, mothers experienced not being given nutritious food during pregnancy (38.4%) and violence by their mother-in-law (45.4%). Likewise, few number of mothers have reported the violence (17.2%). Among them, 76.9% reported the incident of violence to the maternal side.

**Conclusions:** The findings suggest a concerning prevalence of various forms of violence against postnatal mothers like sexual, physical, and emotional. Among those form of violence, existence of emotional violence was high and often perpetrated by husbands or family members. Moreover, the low reporting rates highlight the urgent need for enhanced support structures and interventions to empower victims and address the underlying issues contributing to this pervasive problem.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is widely recognized as an important public health problem as well as a violation of human rights.<sup>1</sup> Globally about 35% of women have experienced either physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. It has adverse effects on women's physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health, and may increase vulnerability to HIV, depression, post-traumatic stress, sleep difficulties, eating disorders, suicide attempts, and other anxiety disorders.<sup>2</sup>

In Nepal, violence against women is also rising day by day which has affected women of all ages, caste, religion, and educational status, even during pregnancy. According to the Nepal Demographic Health Survey (NDHS, 2023), women in Nepal aged 15–49 years had experienced physical violence since age 15 (23%) and sexual violence (8%).<sup>3</sup> Likewise, 6% of women had experienced violence during pregnancy.<sup>3</sup>

Domestic violence was prevalent among pregnant women in Nepal (27.2% to 53.2%).<sup>4,5</sup> They experienced sexual (17.3%), psychological (16.6%), and physical violence (3.2%) during

pregnancy by different perpetrators.<sup>5</sup> Experiencing violence significantly heightens the risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, pre-term delivery, and low birth weight babies among women.<sup>2,6,7</sup> Additionally, when violence persists or intensifies during pregnancy, it can lead to enduring impacts on the well-being of children.<sup>6</sup> This evidence indicates that it is essential to study domestic violence among postnatal mothers as it provides insights into the unique challenges faced by this vulnerable population, informing tailored interventions to support their physical and mental well-being. Understanding the prevalence and impact of violence in the postnatal period is crucial for promoting healthy maternal-child relationships and fostering safer family environments. Thus, this study aimed to identify the experience of domestic violence against women during pregnancy.

METHODS

A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted in postpartum A, B, and Gynae wards of Patan Hospital from September 2018 to February 2019. All the postnatal mothers delivered through any mode of delivery and admitted to

Patan Hospital were included in this study. Postnatal mothers were selected through a non-probability purposive sampling technique after reviewing the patient file after permission was taken from the nursing director and ward in charge. Despite thorough explanations regarding the study's purpose, relevance, confidentiality, and privacy, postnatal mothers were hesitant to provide written informed consent due to the sensitive nature of the issues. Nevertheless, they all verbally consented to participate in the study. Postnatal mothers who were health personnel such as Female Community Health Volunteers, Auxiliary Nurse midwives, Auxiliary Health Workers, Health assistants, Nurses, and doctors, and who had stillbirth and neonatal death were excluded. The sample size was 302 calculated by using the following formula: Sample size (with replacement or infinite population) =  $z^2 * pq / e^2$ , where  $p = 27.2\%$  (Prevalence of domestic violence during pregnancy 27.2% based on prior literature<sup>7</sup>),  $q = 1-p$  (i.e., 72.8%), margin of error ( $e$ ) = 5%, and  $z$ -value=1.96.

The research team developed the questionnaire on domestic violence using the references of NDHS (2011). This questionnaire was validated in terms of content adequacy and relevancy by the two experts from Kathmandu University, Dhulikhel Hospital who were working in this field. Based on the feedback received from the experts, the team finalized the questionnaire on domestic violence. Additionally, demographic questions were developed following a review of relevant literature. Permission to utilize the Nepali version of the questionnaire was granted by New Era. Data were collected through the Nepali version structured interview schedule via face-to-face interviews.

Data were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics version 20.0 using descriptive statistics namely frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

## RESULTS

The mean age of the mother was 27.9 years and more than half of the mothers 191(63.2%) belonged to the age group 20-30 years. Likewise, 73(24.2%) mothers were Chhetri. Additionally, 113(37.4%) mothers had completed the higher secondary level education. Likewise, 164(54.3%) were Gravida one, and 157(52.0%) mothers were living in a joint family (Table 1).

**Table 1: Respondents' demographic information (n= 302)**

Variables	Frequency (%)
<b>Age in years</b>	
< 20	8 (2.6)
20- 30	191 (63.2)
30-40	97 (32.1)
41-43	6 (2.0)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Brahmin	72(23.8)
Chhetri	73(24.2)
Newar	50(16.6)
Dalit	6(2.0)
Others	101(33.4)
<b>Educational Level</b>	
Cannot read and write	2(0.7)
Primary level	39(12.9)
Secondary level	97(32.1)
Higher Secondary	113(37.4)
Bachelor and above	51(16.9)
<b>Gravida</b>	
One	164(54.3)
Two	120(39.7)
Three	18(6.0)
<b>Type of Family</b>	
Joint	157(52.0)
Nuclear	145(48.0)

**Table 2: Experience of emotional violence by husband/partner or/and any family member (n = 302)**

Emotional violence	Yes	If yes, frequency (%) of emotional violence during the last pregnancy		
	n (%)	Almost daily n (%)	Only sometimes n (%)	Rarely n (%)
Say or do something to humiliate you in front of others	118(39.1%)	8(6.8%)	79(66.9%)	31(26.3%)
Threaten to hurt or harm you or someone you care about	64(21.2%)	6(9.4%)	39(60.9%)	19(29.7%)
Insult you or make you feel bad about yourself	104(34.4%)	8(7.7%)	65(62.5%)	31(29.8%)

**Table 3: Experience of physical violence by husband/partner or/and any family member (n =302)**

Physical violence	Yes	If yes, frequency/percentage of physical violence during the last pregnancy		
	n (%)	Almost daily n (%)	Only sometimes n (%)	Rarely n (%)
Push you, shake you, or throw something at you Push you, shake you, or throw something at you	29 (9.6)	4(13.8)	14(48.3)	11(37.9)
Slap you	24 (7.9)	4(16.6)	10(41.7)	10(41.7)
Twist your arm or pull your hair	26 (8.6)	2(7.6)	12(46.2)	12(46.2)
Punch you with his fist or with something that could hurt you	22 (7.3)	2(9.0)	10(45.5)	10(45.5)
Kick you, drag you, or beat you up	20 (6.6)	2(10)	10(50)	8(40)
Try to choke you or burn you on purpose	18 (6.0)	2(11.2)	8(44.4)	8(44.4)
Threaten or attack you with a knife, gun, or any other weapon	18 (6.0)	2(11.2)	8(44.4)	8(44.4)

**Table 4: Experience of sexual violence by husband/partner (n =302)**

Sexual violence	Yes	If yes frequency/percentage of sexual violence during the last pregnancy		
	n (%)	Almost daily n (%)	Only sometimes n (%)	Rarely n (%)
Physically force you to have sexual intercourse with him even when you did not want to	27(8.9%)	6(22.2)	10(37.1)	11(40.7)
Force you to perform any sexual acts you do not want to	14(4.6%)	2(14.3)	2(14.3)	10(71.4)

**Table 5: Experienced on other forms of violence(n = 302)**

Other forms of violence	Yes	No
	n (%)	n (%)
a. Not given enough food to eat during pregnancy	54 (17.9)	248 (82.1)
b. Not given nutritious food during pregnancy	116 (38.4)	186 (61.6)
c. Not cared for when you were too ill during pregnancy	44 (14.6)	258 (85.4)
d. Not allowing Ante Natal Care visit	49 (16.2)	253 (83.8)
e. Asked to go for forced abortion	2 (0.7)	300 (99.3)
f. Threatened divorce by a husband or in-laws during pregnancy	8 (2.6)	294 (97.4)
g. Asked to go for forced divorce during pregnancy	6 (2.0)	296 (98.0)
h. Abused for not bearing a son	12 (4.0)	290 (96.0)
i. Forced to deliver at home	14 (4.6)	288 (95.4)
k. Increased workload during pregnancy	32 (10.6)	270 (89.4)

During pregnancy, a minority of mothers encountered physical and sexual violence in contrast to emotional violence. Specifically, out of the total, 27 (8.9%) mothers reported experiencing sexual violence from their husbands, while 39 (12.9%) endured physical violence, and 130 (43%) faced emotional violence from their husbands or family members.

The predominant form of emotional violence reported by mothers was humiliation in front of others, with 118 (39.1%) experiencing this. Additionally, 104 (34.4%) mothers reported being insulted or made to feel bad about themselves, while 64 (21.2%) disclosed threats of harm or injury by their husbands or family members. Among all forms of emotional violence, 79 (66.9%) mothers experienced it only sometimes, while 8 (7.7%) reported experiencing it almost daily (Table 2).

Regarding physical violence, 29 (9.6%) mothers reported experiencing being pushed, shaken, or having something thrown at them, with 14 (48.3%) experiencing this sometimes. Similarly, 26 (8.6%) mothers reported having their arms twisted or hair pulled, among whom 2 (7.6%) experienced it daily. Slapping was reported by 24 (7.9%) mothers, with 10 (41.7%) experiencing it rarely or sometimes. Additionally, punching with a fist or object that caused harm was reported by 22 (7.3%) mothers, with 10 (45.5%) experiencing it rarely or sometimes. Furthermore, 20 (6.6%) mothers reported being kicked, dragged, or beaten, with 10 (50%) experiencing it sometimes. Lastly, attempting to choke or burn and threatening or attacking with a knife, gun, or other weapons were reported by 18 (6%) mothers, among whom 8 (44.4%) experienced it rarely or sometimes (Table 3).

Regarding sexual violence, 27 (8.9%) mothers reported being physically forced to have sexual intercourse by their husbands,

with 10 (37.1%) experiencing this only sometimes. Similarly, 14 (4.6%) mothers reported being forced to perform any sexual acts against their will, with this being a daily experience for 2 (14.3%) mothers (Table 4).

Among 302 mothers, the most common form of violence experienced was not being provided with nutritious food during pregnancy (38.4%). Similarly, not being allowed to attend antenatal care (ANC) visits (16.2%), and not receiving proper care when too ill during pregnancy (14.6%). Only 2 (0.7%) mothers reported being asked to undergo a forced abortion by their family members (Table 5).

Regarding perpetrators, 137 (45.4%) mothers reported experiencing violence from their mother-in-law, while 52 (17.2%) experienced it from their husbands. Additionally, 23 (7.6%) mothers reported experiencing violence from their sister-in-law, and only 6 (2%) from their father-in-law (Table 6).

**Table 6: Perpetrator of domestic violence against women during pregnancy (n = 302)**

Perpetrator	Yes	No
	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Husband	52 (17.2)	250 (82.8)
Mother-in-law	137 (45.4)	165 (54.6)
Father-in-law	6 (2.0)	296 (98)
Sister-in-law	23 (7.6)	279 (92.4)

Out of 302 mothers surveyed, only 52 (17.2%) reported incidents of violence, while 250 (82.8%) did not report experiencing violence. Among the 52 mothers who did report violence, 40 (76.9%) disclosed it to their maternal side, while only 12 (23.1%) reported it to friends (Table 7).

**Table 7: Reported the incident of domestic violence (n = 302)**

Report the incident of domestic violence	n (%)
Yes	52 (17.2)
No	250 (82.8)
Places to report the incident of domestic violence (n = 52)	
Neighbourhood	-
Friends	12(23.1)
Maternal side	40(76.9)
Police	-
Others	

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study highlight that emotional violence (43%) emerged as the most prevalent form of violence experienced by mothers, followed by physical (12.9%) and sexual (8.9%) violence. These findings diverge from studies conducted in various locations, including Nigeria, Sunsari, Siraha, Kathmandu Valley, and Dhulikhel Hospital, where differing proportions of women experienced physical and sexual violence. For instance, in those studies, physical violence rates ranged from 1.5 to 62.7%<sup>8-10</sup> while sexual violence rates varied from 0.9% to 61.1%,<sup>8-10</sup> along with a study in Brazil reporting a sexual violence rate of 4.9%.<sup>11</sup> Emotional violence rates also varied significantly, from 5.2% to 88.19%.<sup>9,10</sup> However, the present study's focus on emotional violence, i.e., humiliation in front of others (39.1%) aligns with findings from research in India (Nagpur) during the COVID-19 pandemic (47%).<sup>12</sup>

Among different forms of physical violence, 9.6% of mothers reported experiencing being pushed, shaken, or having something thrown at them, with 48.3% experiencing this sometimes. Similarly, 8.6% of mothers reported having their arms twisted or hair pulled, among whom 7.6% experienced it daily. Slapping was reported by 7.9% of mothers, punching with a fist or object that caused harm by 7.3%, kicking, dragging, or beating by 6.6%, and attempting to choke or burn and threatening or attacking with a knife, gun, or other weapons by 6%. These forms of violence were reported at higher rates in studies conducted in Nepal outside the Kathmandu Valley, where battering was reported by 59%, slapping by 35%, hair pulling by 22%, burning by 4%, and throwing boiled water or acid by 2%.<sup>12</sup> In this study, 8.9% of mothers reported experiencing physical force to have sexual intercourse against their will by their husbands, with 37.1% experiencing this only sometimes. Similarly, 4.6% of mothers reported being forced to perform any sexual acts against their will, and this was a daily experience for 14.3% of them. These findings differ significantly from the reports in the NDHS 2016<sup>13</sup> and NDHS 2023<sup>3</sup> which could be attributed to variations in sample size, sampling techniques, and differences in the background characteristics of the populations studied.

In the present study, 38.4% of mothers reported not being

given nutritious food, while 17.9% reported not receiving enough food to eat during pregnancy. Additionally, 16.2% reported not being allowed to attend ANC visits, and 14.6% reported not being cared for when too ill during pregnancy. Furthermore, 4% reported being abused for not bearing a son, and only 0.7% reported being asked to undergo a forced abortion by their family members. These findings closely mirror national data from Nepal, where 6% of women reported not receiving enough food, 12% reported not being cared for when ill, 5% reported being abused for not bearing a son, and 2% reported being asked to undergo a forced abortion.<sup>3</sup> In the present study, the majority of perpetrators were mother-in-law (45.4%), followed by husbands (17.2%), sister-in-law (7%), and father-in-law (2%). These findings contrast with a study conducted in Nagpur, India, where husbands were reported as the primary perpetrators (66.4%), followed by mothers-in-law (25.4%), father-in-law (8.2%), and sister-in-law (0.7%).<sup>12</sup> Additionally, in this study, only 17.2% of mothers reported incidents of violence, with 76.9% of them reporting to their maternal side and only 23.1% reporting to friends. These findings contradict those of other studies conducted in different locations, such as Nagpur, India, and Siraha and Sunsari, Nepal, where half of the respondents kept the incidents secret (50.67%)<sup>10</sup> and 87.4% reported to their family and friends.<sup>12</sup>

This study has several limitations. Firstly, there may be a selection bias due to the non-probability sampling technique employed. Secondly, the sensitive nature of violence in Nepal may have led to underreporting, especially considering the short duration of the interviews in the quantitative method.

**CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that a minority of mothers experienced physical and sexual violence compared to emotional violence during pregnancy. Mothers-in-law were identified as the perpetrators in many cases, and only a small proportion of mothers reported incidents of violence. This study recommends implementing targeted interventions aimed at raising awareness and providing support for mothers experiencing emotional violence, with a focus on empowering them to report incidents and access resources for assistance.

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