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## Original Research Article

# Characteristics of women who have suffered from violence during pregnancy



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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The problem of violence is an important issue for public health. The literature reports that the incidence of violence during the pregnancy is about 1%–25%. Forms of violence that are most often used against pregnant women include physical, psychological and sexual violence.

**Aim:** To determine characteristics of women experiencing violence during pregnancy.

**Material and methods:** One hundred and fourteen women, residents of the province of Lublin, were examined for characteristics of pregnant women experiencing violence. The method used in the study was diagnostic sounding. The technique used was a questionnaire developed by the authors. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The results were statistically analyzed.

**Results and discussion:** The analysis showed that 59.7% of the women studied experienced violence during pregnancy. The most common form of violence against the pregnant women was psychological violence (72.5%) and the rarest one was economic violence (26.7%). These percentage differences reached statistical significance ( $p=.02$ ). Moreover, the statistically significant correlation was found between experiencing violence and age ( $p=.008$ ), level of education ( $p=.0001$ ), marital status ( $p=.03$ ) and the occupational activity of examined women ( $p=.0001$ ).

**Conclusions:** Psychological and physical violence are the most common forms of violence used against the pregnant women. Unmarried, young women with a low level of education are the group of women who most often experience violence and due to this fact they should be taken into specialist care.

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## 1. Introduction

The problem of violence is an important issue for public health.<sup>6,17</sup> Violence is all deliberate acts threatening personal liberty or causing both physical and psychological damage of the person, beyond the social rules of relationships.<sup>19</sup>

Forms of violence that can be used against the pregnant women are physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence.<sup>9,21,24</sup> Using violence against pregnant women carries the risk of many complications in both the mother and child.<sup>2,5,15</sup>

Determination of characteristics of women experiencing violence is very important due to the serious consequences for both pregnant woman and her child, to allow early detection of violence victims and to take special care of them.<sup>6,15,24</sup>

## 2. Aim

The aim of the study was to determine the characteristics of women experiencing violence during pregnancy.

## 3. Material and methods

The study regarding the characteristics of pregnant women experiencing violence was conducted on 114 women, residents of the province of Lublin, coming to control visits to gynecologists in public, non-public and private gynecological and obstetric consulting rooms. This group included 29 (25.4%) women aged 18–20, 25 (21.9%) aged 21–25, 37 (32.5%) aged 26–30 and 23 (20.2%) over 30. There were 98 (85.9%) married women. In total, 46 women (40.4%) had a primary/vocational level of education, 34 (29.8%) – secondary and 34 (29.8%) high level of education. In the studied group 68 (59.6%) women had a job.

The method that was used in the work was diagnostic sounding. The questionnaire developed by the authors was the research tool used in the work. This questionnaire included closed-ended questions with both single and multiple choice answers, regarding the use of violence and forms of violence (sexual, economic, physical and mental) and characteristics of the group (age, level of education, marital status and occupational activity). Any questionnaire could be taken into account only if it was fully completed.

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

The results were statistically analyzed. The level of significance of  $p < .05$  was assumed. Database and statistical analyses were performed based on Statistica 9.0 software (StatSoft, Poland).

## 4. Results

Table 1 shows correlations between experiencing of violence during the pregnancy and form of violence used. Based on the analysis of the results it was found that 59.7% of the women experienced violence during their pregnancy and 40.3% did not experience it. The most common type of violence against the pregnant women was psychological violence (72.5%), the

**Table 1 – Women experiencing violence during pregnancy and form of violence used.**

Form of violence	Women experiencing violence					
	No		Yes		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Sexual	9	42.9	12	57.1	21	100.0
Economic	11	73.3	4	26.7	15	100.0
Psychological	11	27.5	29	72.5	40	100.0
Physical	15	39.4	23	60.6	38	100.0
Total	46	40.3	68	59.7	114	100.7

$\chi^2 = 9.591, p = .02.$

**Table 2 – Women experiencing violence and age of examined women.**

Age	Experiencing of violence					
	No		Yes		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
18–20 years	0	0.0	29	100.0	29	100.0
21–25 years	4	16.0	21	84.0	25	100.0
26–30 years	6	16.2	31	83.8	37	100.0
> 30 years	8	34.8	15	65.2	23	100.0
Total	18	15.8	96	84.2	114	100.0

$\chi^2 = 11.683, p = .008.$

**Table 3 – Women experiencing violence and level of education of pregnant women.**

Education	Experiencing violence					
	No		Yes		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Primary/vocational	19	41.3	27	58.7	46	100.0
Secondary	25	73.5	9	26.5	34	100.0
Higher	26	76.5	8	23.5	34	100.0
Total	70	61.4	44	38.6	114	100.0

$\chi^2 = 13.207, p = .001.$

rarest one was economical violence (26.7%). The percentage differences reached statistical significance ( $p = .02$ ).

The experiencing of violence according to the age of the examined pregnant women was shown in Table 2.

It was found that 100% of pregnant women aged 18–20 suffered from various forms of violence. A statistically important correlation ( $p = .008$ ) between age and experience of violence during pregnancy was found. Pregnant women aged 18–20 were more often victims of violence in comparison with women aged over 30 (34.8%) who had not suffered from violence during pregnancy.

**Table 4 – Women experiencing violence and marital status of examined pregnant women.**

Marital status	Experiencing violence					
	No		Yes		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Married	58	59.2	40	40.8	98	100.0
Unmarried	5	31.3	11	68.7	16	100.0
Total	63	55.3	51	44.7	114	100.0

$\chi^2=4.341, p=.03.$

**Table 5 – Women experiencing violence and professional activity of examined women.**

Professional activity	Experiencing violence					
	No		Yes		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	48	70.6	20	29.4	68	100.0
No	16	34.8	30	65.2	46	100.0
Total	64	56.1	50	43.9	114	100.0

$\chi^2=14.286, p=.0001.$

The level of education was also correlated to presence of violence during the pregnancy. In the group of examined women who experienced violence – the largest subgroup included pregnant women with primary or vocational education (58.7%). On the other hand, the biggest subgroup of women who were not victims of violence – included women with the higher level of education (76.5%). This correlation was statistically significant ( $p=.001$ ). The results are shown in Table 3.

Moreover, a statistically significant correlation was found between women experiencing violence and marital status ( $p=.03$ ) and occupational activity in the pregnant women group ( $p=.0001$ ). Violence was used more often against unmarried women (68.7%) and unemployed ones (65.2%). The results are shown in Tables 4 and 5.

## 5. Discussion

Pregnancy is associated with the joyful, hopeful expectation of birth of a healthy child, although it often is period of anxiety and fear – feelings that accompany pregnant women who are victims of violence.

Literature shows that psychological violence is the form of violence most often used.<sup>4,7,10,12,18</sup> Usually the perpetrator of violence is the woman's husband or partner.<sup>9,21,22,25,26</sup>

Our own studies showed that 59.70% of women experienced various forms of violence during pregnancy. In the examined group, psychological violence was used in 72.50% of women, physical in 60.60%, sexual in 57.10% and economic in 26.70%. These differences were statistically significant ( $p=.02$ ). The study by Modiba et al.<sup>16</sup> showed that 41% women experienced

violence during their pregnancy. Various forms of violence were used against pregnant women: psychological violence was used in 26%, physical in 17%, sexual in 5% and both physical and psychological in 9%. Women aged 25–29 more often experienced psychological (35%) and sexual violence (32%) than physical (22%). On the other hand, women aged 35–40 more often experienced sexual (38%) and physical (33%) violence than psychological aggression (21%). Likely works by Romero-Gutiérrez et al.<sup>21</sup> showed that 43.8% women experienced violence during pregnancy from their husband/partner. In this group 72.9% of women experienced psychological violence, 15.8% of pregnant women were victims of physical violence and 11.3% was sexually abused. Studies performed by Bacchus et al.,<sup>1</sup> Diaz-Olavarriet et al.,<sup>3</sup> Heaman,<sup>8</sup> Janssen et al.,<sup>11</sup> Krishnan et al.<sup>13</sup> and Rachan et al.<sup>20</sup> showed that physical violence was more often used than psychological and sexual violence. These results are different from our findings that the population of pregnant women in Lublin province have more often suffered from mental violence than physical and sexual forms of aggression.

Risk factors regarding the experiencing of violence included young age, low level of education, marital status and low socioeconomic status.<sup>26</sup>

Our own studies showed a statistically significant correlation ( $p=.008$ ) between experiencing violence during pregnancy and the age of the examined women. Women aged below 30 were significantly more often victims of violence than women aged over 30. Romero-Gutiérrez et al.<sup>21</sup> found that the average age of pregnant women who experienced violence was 25.8 years, while in data gathered by Humphreys et al.<sup>9</sup> it was 27.7 years. On the other hand data published by Silverman et al.<sup>23</sup> showed that violence was significantly more often ( $p<.001$ ) experienced by women aged below 20 than older women. In turn, Lipsky et al.<sup>14</sup> found that more than 80% of women experiencing violence were aged between 20 and 29 years whereas women aged below 20 constituted only 19.5% of the group. We found that 100% of pregnant women aged 18–20 had suffered from violence. In this regard, our results remain in compliance with the results of other authors.

Silverman et al.<sup>23</sup> found a statistically important correlation ( $p<.001$ ) between pregnant women experiencing violence and their level of education. Significantly more often victims of violence were women with a primary or secondary level of education than women with higher education. A similar correlation ( $p<.05$ ) was found by Lipsky et al.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, studies done by Modiba et al.<sup>16</sup> showed that women who were unemployed (84%) more often afraid of their partners and experienced all forms of violence in comparison with working women (63%) who most often experienced physical and sexual violence. The data also showed that unmarried women experienced violence more often than married women. Similar notes were made by Lipsky et al.<sup>14</sup> Based on our own research it was stated that women without any job, with a primary or vocational education and unmarried were more often victims of violence in comparison with professionally active married women with higher education. These differences reached statistical significance ( $p<.05$ ).

Literature and our own research indicate that it is very important to extricate women experiencing violence during pregnancy on control visits in consulting rooms and to perform

interventions preventing the appearance of complications in pregnant women and their children.<sup>9,21,24</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

1. Psychological and physical violence are the forms of violence most often used against pregnant women.
2. Unmarried pregnant women aged below 20 with a low level of education are the group of women who suffer from violence the most often and due to this fact they need to be taken into specialist care.
3. Psychological care for pregnant women experiencing violence should be based mostly on psychotherapeutic techniques: individual and group psychotherapy, meditation, relaxation techniques and visualization. These techniques aim to reduce stress levels and improve life's comfort. Moreover, using the best practices of western countries, it seems important to introduce specific questions regarding violence into standard perinatal care. It would help in the early recognition of the problem and enable appropriate actions to be taken.

## Conflict of interest

None declared.

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