

## Prevalence and factors associated with domestic violence against women in cotonou

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### Abstract

The fight against domestic violence is a key public health challenge. We carried out this epidemiological survey on domestic violence among 416 women living together as a couple in the city of Cotonou, and above 15 years of age. The data collected or gathered were sociodemographic and were related to acts of violence as well as medical care and judicial management procedures.

In total, 77% of the women interviewed reported that they had been victims of one form of domestic violence over the past 12 months. Psychological violence was the predominant one. The prevalences of physical and sexual domestic violence were respectively 19 % and 17 %. Only 12% of cases of those violence motivated medical consultation. In addition, only one case was reported to the judicial authority.

In Cotonou, the prevalence of domestic violence against women is high. However, a hypo-judicialization of its management i.e. low rate of its management by judicial institutions is noted. In order to improve women status and health, actions are required for the prevention and repression of violence exerted against them.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence, Women, Cotonou.

### Introduction

Violence against women represents a serious violation of fundamental human rights; it is also a serious and major public health issue.<sup>1</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) defines this type of violence as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life."<sup>2</sup> The violence endured or suffered by woman in her private life is called domestic violence. This kind of violence is exerted against a woman by her husband or her sexual partner.<sup>3</sup> That form of violence exists in all parts of the world and affects 15 to 71% of women.<sup>4</sup> Domestic violence may manifest itself psychologically, physically and sexually.<sup>5</sup>

Studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa have reported that more than 50% of married women had been victims of violence at least once in their life. Reported prevalences were 81% in Ethiopia,<sup>6</sup> 42% in Ghana<sup>7</sup> and 60% in Senegal.<sup>8</sup> Despite those high prevalences, African women are generally poorly informed about their rights and do not complain to the judicial authorities.

Benin women are also affected by that form of violence. Studies conducted by NGOs report that 65% of Benin women would endure at least an episode of violence either in the intimacy of the couple, in their family or in their work environment during their lifetime (unpublished data). This epidemiological study conducted in the city of Cotonou focus exclusively on violence exerted in the intimacy of marital life. Its purpose as a research work was to describe the

epidemiological aspects of domestic violence against women and to identify associated factors.

### Study Setting and Methods

This research work is a cross-sectional study with descriptive and analytical purpose, which was carried out from April to May 2017 in Cotonou which is the economic capital city of the Republic of Benin.

The said study involved all women who were not less than 15 years old and living in a household for at least two years prior to the beginning of recruitment. The minimum sample size estimated using Schwartz formula was 384 subjects.

We used a four-stage cluster sampling method. The first stage was about selecting boroughs. Seven out of the 13 boroughs of the city of Cotonou were randomly selected. The second stage was related to the selection of some city neighborhoods or wards as administrative areas. One city neighborhood was randomly selected by borough. The third stage was about selecting houses and the last stage was about selection of households. At each stage, a simple random sampling was performed.

The data were collected in households, by means of a customized questionnaire consisting of semi-open questions. The questionnaire was previously tested and validated in a neighborhood not included in the study area. Eight social workers trained for that purpose administered it. As appropriate, the questionnaire was administered in French and in local languages most widely spoken in the city of Cotonou i.e. Goun, Fon and Mina.

The said questionnaire focused on households' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics as well as households' composition, violence suffered over the

past 12 months, types of violence and their consequences on woman's health.

The survey data were verified before being entered into a database.

Frequencies, percentages, averages and standard deviations were used for the description of the study population. Chi-square test and Fisher's test served to compare ratios. Associations were considered as statistically significant if  $p < 5\%$ . Statistical analyses were done with Epi-Info software Version 7®.

Participation to the survey was voluntary and its implementation was subject to expression of oral consent. A subject's decision to not be administered the questionnaire was respected. The interview confidentiality was paid a particular attention; women were also reassured as regards anonymity of the questionnaire.

## Results

**General Characteristics of the Study Population:** Four hundred and sixteen women were involved in the study. Mean age was  $35 \pm 11$  years with extremes from 15 to 72 years. The mean age of their husbands was  $42 \pm 13$  years.

Table 1 shows the general characteristics of the population which consisted of 95.2% of women cohabiting with a man without legal marriage and 22.5% of women living in households. De facto union or cohabitation was agreed upon by 97.8% of women interviewed as respondents. The average duration of de facto unions or cohabitations was  $14 \pm 10$  years. More than half (64.7%) of the husbands were less than 45 years old. Forty-four percent of women had never gone to school and 77% of them claimed to have incomes lower than those of their husbands. The women who had no child born alive accounted for 4.6% of the study population.

**Prevalence of Domestic Violence :** Among the women interviewed, 77% reported that they had been victims of domestic violence at least once during the past 12 months. Psychological violence is the most common form (77%); physical (19.2%) and sexual (17.3%) violences come second in importance. Table 2 indicates the frequencies of the different forms of domestic violence.

The methods most commonly used in case of physical violence were slaps, throwing to the wall or to the ground; punches and blows inflicted using blunt objects. These methods or means were respectively reported by 17.8%, 13.2%, 12.9% and 8.7% of the women interviewed. We did not identify any case of violence involving the use of a firearm or a bladed weapon. For 66.7% of the women, violence was repeated and happened on average  $2 \pm 1$  times per year. The consequences of physical violence are registered in Table 3.

**Risk Factors for Domestic Violence:** According to women, the main triggers of domestic violence exerted

against them were husband's financial difficulties (50.6%), husband's jealousy (47.8%), different views on topics related to children's education (44.4%) and refusal to consent sexual solicitations (18.3%). According to 99.2% of women, alcohol drinking or illicit drug consumption and professional stress play only a minor role in the outbreak of domestic violence.

Multivariate analyses (Tables 4 and 5) show the characteristics of women, husbands and households which were associated with risk for domestic violence and physical violence. Violence was more common in young couples. The women less than 41 years old ( $p=0.006$ ) and those whose husband was under 45 years of age ( $p=0.038$ ) were more at risk to suffer domestic violences. Violence was three times more common within couples with less than 10 years of marital life. The households with no living child were 5 times more exposed to violence than those with living child. Physical violence is also more common in young couples and in those who had no child. Women's schooling is also a factor associated with physical violences.

**Table 1: Characteristics of respondent (n=416)**

Characteristics	n	(%)
<b>Age (years)</b>		
15-29	168	(40,4)
30 - 45	174	(41,8)
45 - 59	61	(14,7)
> 60	13	(3,1)
<b>Education</b>		
Illiterate	186	(44,7)
Primary	86	(20,7)
Middle	121	(29,1)
High-school	23	(5,5)
<b>Type of household</b>		
Monogamy	311	(74,8)
Polygamy	105	(25,2)
<b>Duration of union (years)</b>		
<9	202	(48,6)
10 - 20	128	(30,8)
>20	86	(20,7)
<b>Number of children</b>		
0	19	(4,6)
1 - 2	241	(57,9)
3 - 5	123	(29,6)
>5	33	(7,9)

**Table 2 : Current frequency of domestic violence (n=416)**

Domestic violence	n	(%)
<b>Psychological violence</b>	321	(77,1)
Humiliations	59	(14,2)
Threats	64	(15,4)
Blackmail	7	(1,7)
Insults	292	(70,2)
Control of time	145	(34,9)
Control of money	91	(21,9)

<b>Physical violence</b>	80	(19,2)
Punches or slaps	51	(12,3)
Use of blunt weapon	13	(3,1)
Use of firearm	0	(0,0)
Objects Projection	37	(8,8)
Projection on the ground/ wall	32	(7,7)
Attempted strangulation	9	(2,3)
<b>Sexual violence</b>	72	(17,3)

**Table 3 : Domestic violence conséquences**

<b>Domestic violence conséquences</b>	n	%
Violence causing mild or moderte injury	76	(18,3)
Violence with severe lesions	3	(0,7)
Violence that prompted a medical consultation	0	(0,0)
Violence that motivated hospitalisation	0	(0,0)

**Table 4: Bivariate association of individual level variables and current domestic violence (n=416)**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Current domestic violence</b>		<b>P value</b>	<b>Crude odds ratio (95%-IC)</b>
	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>		
<b>Age of women (years)</b>				
<40	238(80.9)	56(19.1)	0.006	1.997(1.237-3.224)
≥40	83(68.0)	39(32.0)	reference	
<b>Education (years of formal education)</b>				
<10	281(81.9)	62(18.1)	<0.001	3.739(2.186-6.395)
≥10	40(54.8)	33(45.2)	reference	
<b>Type of household</b>				
Monogamy	250(80.4)	61(19.6)	0.0103	1.963(1.196-3.221)
Polygamy	71(67.6)	34(32.4)	reference	
<b>Duration of union (years)</b>				
<10	176(87.1)	26(12.9)	<0.001	3.221(1.950-5.320)
≥10	145(67.8)	69(32.2)	reference	
<b>Number of children</b>				
0	18(94.7)	1(5.3)	0,089	5.584(0.736-42.389)
≥1	303(76.2)	94(23.7)	reference	
<b>Spouse age (year)</b>				
<45	271(80.4)	53(19.6)	0.038	1.653(1.036-2.639)
≥45	104(71.2)	42(28.8)	reference	
<b>Spouse education (years of formal education)</b>				
<10	249(77.8)	71(22.2)	0.581	1.169(0.687-1.990)
≥10	72(75.0)	24(25.0)	reference	

**Table 5 : Bivariate association of individual level variables and current physical violence (n=416)**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Current domestic violence</b>		<b>P value</b>	<b>Crude odds ratio (95%-IC)</b>
	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>		
<b>Age of women (years)</b>				
<40	63(21.5)	230(78.5)	0.077	1.708(0.953-3.060)
≥40	17(13.8)	106(86.2)	reference	
<b>Education</b>				
<10	56(16.3)	287(83.7)	0.003	0.398(0.226-0.702)
≥10	24(32.9)	49(67.1)	reference	
<b>Type of household</b>				
Monogamy	53(17.0)	258(83.0)	0.063	0.594(0.350-1.006)
Polygamy	27(25.7)	78(74.3)	reference	
<b>Duration of union (years)</b>				
<10	176(87.1)	26(12.9)	<0.001	3.221(1.950-5.320)
≥10	145(67.8)	69(32.2)	reference	
<b>Number of children</b>				
0	12(63.2)	7(36.8)	<0.001	8.294(3.150-21.837)
≥1	68(17.1)	329(82.9)	reference	

## Discussion

**Domestic Violence Exerted Against Women :** Within the framework of the implementation of this study, 416 women were asked and they all accepted to participate to a survey. Their answers to our questions enabled us to have a complete overview of violence exerted against women in the intimacy of couples in Cotonou.

Three out of four women had been victims of one form of domestic violence during the 12 months preceding our research work. The African countries are generally characterized by very high prevalences (9)(6)(10). Those societies are formatted according to a gender-based approach that defines roles, assignments and responsibilities within the couple. For instance, woman finds herself in a situation of inferiority in both public and private spheres. Violence is a method used to maintain woman in that position.

**Psychological Violence:** In this research work, psychological violence is the most common form of domestic violence. All the women who reported to have been victim of violences mentioned psychological violences. This was a recurrent observation. However, the management of psychological violence is still inadequate. In fact, many health workers tend to focus only on serious physical and sexual violences which leave physical marks.<sup>11</sup> Psychological violences are as serious as the other forms of violence for they may cause a post-trauma syndrome likely to cause disabling effects.<sup>12</sup>

Physical violence affected 19.2 % of the women investigated as respondents during this study. The frequency of physical domestic violence through the life cycle varies significantly from one country to another. It is estimated at 23% of women in Cote d'Ivoire,<sup>12</sup> 30 to 35 % of women in Ghana<sup>7</sup> and in Tunisia,<sup>13</sup> 18% in India;<sup>4</sup> 14% in France and in Spain and 22.1%<sup>14</sup> in the USA.<sup>15</sup>

The frequency of physical violence observed in our cohort is lower than those noted in nationwide studies as in Ghana. This may be due to the fact that in urban areas violence frequency is lower than in rural areas.

This remark has been made in Nigeria.<sup>16</sup> In urban areas, psychological methods and societal pressure are generally sufficient to maintain woman in her position of servitude. The use of physical violence is nothing but a sign that the male partner has lost his self-control or authority. More particularly in Benin, physical violence against one's spouse is prohibited by families. During traditional ceremonies of marriage, the important rule according to which woman must remain under the authority of her husband is always emphasized but the latter is warned about any physical violence against his wife.

**Physical Violence:** The physical violence observed in Cotonou mostly manifest itself through the use of natural arms (punches and kicks) or throwing of a close object. We did not register any case of violence produced with bladed or edged weapons or firearms.

None of those kinds of violence was followed by medical consultation. This is due to the fact that those violences are generally light or moderate and are more reactive acts than deliberate violences. By contrast, in Iran, 52% of physical violences within the couple are followed by consultation in surgery or medical emergency unit.<sup>17</sup> In the region of Tambacounda (Senegal), the frequency of use of firearms during domestic violence is also null, but the one of violence with bladed weapons is around 10.2%.<sup>18</sup>

**Sexual Violence :** The frequency of sexual domestic violence is 17.3%. It may also vary across countries. in Senegal<sup>8</sup> and Tunisia,<sup>19</sup> the said frequency is respectively estimated at 8.3 % and 6.1 % of women. In the United States of America, a 21.2% prevalence is reported in the Afro-American and afro-Caribbean communities.<sup>15</sup> In Benin, reported cases of violence are mostly sexual intercourses without woman's explicit consent. Benin women who are victims of such sexual intercourses do not consider them as domestic violence for the husband does not use physical strength or threat. Indeed, considering the authentic culture of Benin, a woman should not refuse her husband's sexual solicitations. However, the legislator of Benin decided otherwise by passing the Act No.2011-26 of January 9, 2012 related to prevention and repression of violences against women. The article 3 defines rape as «any of vaginal, anal or oral penetration by another person's sex or the virginal or anal penetration with any object without the informed and voluntary consent of the penetrated person. However, consent is not valid in minor women under sixteen years old ». The same article specifies that « The fact of being married with the penetrated person in not an excuse to the rape crime ». <sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, this law has not been properly disseminated. In France where domestic rape has been acknowledged as a criminal offence by the Court of Cassation (Supreme Court) since 2012,<sup>14</sup> 37.5% of the women who consult for domestic violence reported acts of sexual violence.<sup>14</sup>

**Factors Associated with Domestic Violence:** Domestic violence does not entirely spare any category of woman. However, this research work points out that some groups may be more exposed than others. For instance, violence is more common in couples in which women are under 40 years old and men less than 45 years old; the same reality is observed in households with less than 10 years of existence. This situation may be due to the fact that in young couples, equilibriums are still unstable and tensions are more common. So, violence occurs in order to enable man to maintain his dominant position. In older couples or couples with more than 10 years of marital life, equilibrium is more stable and each spouse has a better understanding of responsibilities and assignments. Infertility in a couple is also a trigger of violence in general and physical violence in particular. Frustrations related to absence of offsprings foster tensions within the households.<sup>8,21</sup>

As well, this study highlights that women with higher education are also affected by the phenomenon of physical violence as reported in Nigeria.<sup>22</sup>

### Limitations of the Study

This research work has some limitations. Like in all the studies on violence, under-reporting of violence has been noted and therefore domestic violence frequency was under-estimated. Maybe, Women did not want to report violences, especially those which are of humiliating nature. The second limitation is related to the perception that female respondents have of the concept of violence. For many of them, the notion of sexual violence was difficult to discern. Indeed, according to them, satisfying the sexual desires of one's husband is more a marital duty than violence.

### Conclusion

This survey conducted in 2017 in the city of Cotonou describes knowledge about the issue of domestic violence in Benin. It demonstrates that domestic violence is a major and critical problem which is a great concern for many women. The data gathered confirm that it is a social and public health issue. This survey also points out that assistance to victims is not sufficient. Populations' awareness about relevant legal provisions should be strengthened. Moreover, the access of battered and abused women to medical consultations and legal counseling should be facilitated.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors have not stated any conflict of interest.

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