

ABSTRACT

The overall aim of the research was to explore the magnitude and characteristics of domestic violence against women in León, Nicaragua. A cross-sectional survey was carried out among a representative sample of 488 women between the ages of 15-49 years. In-depth interviews were performed with women who had experienced violence. Also, participatory techniques were used in 19 focus groups of men and women from diverse sectors of Nicaraguan society to gain an understanding of how Nicaraguans view social and legal sanctions for domestic violence.

Among ever-married women ($n=360$) lifetime prevalence of physical violence was 52%, and current prevalence (during the last 12 months) was 27%. Seventy percent of the violence was classified as severe. No significant differences were found with regard to women's age, educational attainment, or occupation and the prevalence of partner abuse. Significant positive associations were found between the risk of wife abuse and poverty, number of children, history of violence in husband's family, husband's controlling behavior and lack of social networks. Abused women were six times more likely to present emotional distress than non-abused women. Emotional distress was more related to the severity of the abuse than to how long ago it had taken place. A significant positive association was found between wife abuse and problems among the children, including physical abuse. Nearly half of the abused women reported that their children had witnessed the violence. Both the qualitative as well as the quantitative data indicated that abused women frequently experience feelings of shame, isolation and entrapment, which in turn contribute to their difficulty in recognizing the violence and disengaging from the violent relationship. Women in Nicaragua used a variety of strategies to protect themselves from violence and most abused women eventually did leave abusive relationships. Temporary leaving and help seeking were critical steps in the process of overcoming violence. However, many women indicated that they did not receive support for their situation.

The results of the prevalence survey were compared to findings from two other population-based studies carried out subsequently in Nicaragua. This comparison suggested that under-reporting is a significant threat to the validity of prevalence research on violence, and underscored the importance of incorporating specific measures to enhance disclosure into the research plan, such as providing more than one opportunity to disclose violence and using behaviorally specific language.

Moreover, measures that have been primarily viewed from the perspective of ethics and safety, such as ensuring privacy and confidentiality and providing special training and support for interviewers, may have a significant impact on data quality, due to their effect on the disclosure of violence.

The survey results and the narrative analysis suggest that domestic violence is a serious public health problem in Nicaragua. The focus group research found that opinions regarding domestic violence differed sharply between men and women, but that broad sectors of society felt that psychological violence was as serious as physical violence, and that new laws and programs were needed to punish violent offenders and to prevent future violence.

The results of the research were discussed widely in Nicaragua, and contributed to the debate on the reform of the Nicaraguan Criminal Code with regard to sanctions for domestic violence and protection for victims of violence.

Key words: *domestic violence, partner abuse, Nicaragua.*