History of violence and subjective health of mother and child

Margret O. Tomasdottir, Hildur Kristjansdottir, Amalia Bjornsdottir, Linn Getz, Thora Steingrimsdottir, Olof A. Olafsdottir & Johann A. Sigurdsson


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From The Childbirth and Health Cohort Study in Primary Care, Iceland

Margret O. Tomasdottir, Hildur Kristjansdottir, Amalia Bjornsdottir, Linn Getz, Thora Steingrimsdottir, Olof A. Olafsdottir and Johann A. Sigurdsson

ABSTRACT

Objective: To study the self-reported prevalence of experienced violence among a cohort of women about two years after giving birth, their health during pregnancy, pregnancy outcomes and their experience of their child’s health.

Setting and subjects: In 2011, a total of 657 women participated in phase III of the Childbirth and Health Cohort Study in Icelandic Primary Health Care, 18 to 24 months after delivery. The women had previously participated in phase I around pregnancy week 16 and phase II 5–6 months after delivery. Data were collected by postal questionnaires.

Main outcome measures: Women’s reported history of experienced violence, sociodemographic and obstetric background, self-perceived health, the use of medications and their child’s perceived health.

Results: In phase III, 16% of women reported experiencing violence. These women felt less support from their current partner (p < 0.001), compared to those who did not report violence. Their pregnancies were more frequently unplanned (p < 0.001), deliveries more often by caesarean section (p < 0.05), and their self-perceived health was worse (p < 0.001). They reported more mental and somatic health complaints, and their use of antidepressant drugs was higher (p < 0.001). Furthermore, women with a history of violence considered their child’s general health as worse (p = 0.008).

Conclusions: Our study confirms that a history of violence is common among women. A history of violence is associated with various maternal health problems during and after pregnancy, a higher rate of caesarean sections and maternal reports of health problems in their child 18–24 months after birth.

KEY POINTS

Violence is a major concern worldwide. Understanding the impact of violence on human health and developing effective preventive measures are important elements of any public health agenda.

- The reported prevalence of experiencing violence was 16% among women attending antenatal care in the primary health care setting in Iceland.
- Women with a history of violence reported worse health in general during pregnancy and delivered more often by caesarean section, compared to women with no such history.
- Mothers with a history of violence also evaluated the general health of their child as worse than women with no such history.
- The findings of this study support the importance of recognizing and addressing experienced violence among women in primary care.
Evidence is growing that experiences of violence can be highly detrimental to health from a life course perspective.[2,3] Experiences of violence prior to or during pregnancy can affect both the mother’s health and increase her worries about the child’s health.[4–7] On the biological level, stressful experiences over time might lead to physiological dysregulation, which increases the person’s susceptibility to disease.[8–10] Recent experimental and clinical studies further indicate that a pregnant mother’s experiences can affect her unborn child and even future generations by epigenetic mechanisms, that is, alterations of gene expression in the absence of changes in the DNA.[11,12]

The Bidens study from Belgium, Iceland, Denmark, Estonia, Norway and Sweden showed that the prevalence of any lifetime abuse among pregnant women ranged from 23% to 45%.[13] In 2014, The Lancet published a series of papers on violence against women and girls, with a call for more research in the field, including regional prevalence variations, the wider consequences of violence on health and effective preventive measures.[14]

In Iceland, midwives, general practitioners (GPs) and primary care nurses are responsible for antenatal care of uncomplicated pregnancies, as well as well-child care. These contacts provide opportunities to identify and support women affected by violence. Evidence from the local context will support such initiatives. As part of a larger study of pregnant women in Iceland, we focused on the prevalence and consequences of violence experiences in the primary care setting. The aim of this study was to document the self-reported prevalence of experienced violence among a cohort of women about two years after giving birth, as well as the associations between experienced violence on the one hand and self-reported health during pregnancy, pregnancy outcomes and their experience of their child’s health 18–24 months after birth on the other.

**Study population and methods**

**Demography**

Iceland had 320,000 inhabitants at the time of the study, 70% of whom lived in the greater capital area. Primary health care is carried out at 45 health care centres, served by GPs, nurses, midwives and other ancillary staff.

**Design and participants**

This study is part of the Childbirth and Health Study (C&H (Barneign og heilsa; B&H in Icelandic) in primary care in Iceland in 2009–2011, using consecutive convenient sampling methods as described elsewhere.[15] It is a population-based cohort study of pregnant women attending routine antenatal care at the primary healthcare centres in the 16th week of pregnancy (phase I with 1111 participants, i.e. 23% of all pregnancies in 2009), at 5–6 months postpartum (phase II; 765 participants) and 18 to 24 months after delivery (phase III, 657 participants or 59% of the original sample). Participants answered comprehensive postal questionnaires about their sociodemographic and obstetric background, physical and emotional wellbeing, possible health complaints, use of medication, as well as questions regarding the child.

In study phase III, we asked about possible experiences of mental or physical violence or abuse, with the following introduction: “New evidence and reports from mass media have shown that adverse life events can influence the health of mother and child. The content of the following questions is about difficult life events which you might have experienced.”

The 13 questions about difficult life events included the following: (a) “Have you been subjected to psychological violence?” and (b) “Have you been subjected to physical violence?” If the woman responded “yes”, we asked about the timing: (c) Yes, during the last year, or: (d) Yes, more than one year ago.

Women who answered yes to one or more of the violence questions were classified as “having a history of violence”, regardless of the type and timing of the violence. Women answering no to both types of violence comprised the group “not having a history of violence”.

In all three study phases, we asked about 24 symptoms or complaints during the last 7 days. Women were asked to grade these symptoms from 1 (no discomfort) to 5 (great discomfort). A total symptom score was calculated for each individual as the sum of scores for each complaint. In this study, we report the symptom scores from phase I and III. Associations between experienced violence and individual symptoms were estimated but only the 11 most appropriate for our analyses are presented in tables. The women were as well asked questions regarding overall health, both mental and physical. Self-rated health was categorized as “Very good; Good; Neither good nor bad; Bad; Very bad”. The neither nor category was termed indifferent.

In phases II and III, we asked several questions regarding the child’s health, nutrition and family support but for this analysis only questions from phase III were used.
Validity of the data set

Evaluation was done for possible selection bias caused by dropout after phase I, compared to those who participated both in phase I and III. This analysis showed that those who participated in both phases were at baseline older (p < 0.001) and with a higher educational level (p < 0.001), compared to those who participated only in phase I. No difference was found regarding residency, civil status or parity.

Statistical analysis

We used Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows version 22.0 (IBM Corp, Armonk, NY) for statistical analyses. Descriptive data are presented as frequency and percentage. We used Pearson’s Chi-Square test to assess significance between groups on demographic variables.

Binary logistic regression analyses were used to estimate the association between groups, both crude odds ratio (OR) with 95% confidence intervals (CI) and ORs adjusted for age, education, civil status, region and parity at study entry. We considered a two tailed value of p < 0.05 to be significant.

Symptom scores were rank ordered and then divided into quartiles using SPSS visual binning. The percentage of women that had experienced violence was analysed for each quartile.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved the National Bioethical Committee in Iceland (VSNb2008010023/03-1) and reported to the Data Protection Authority (S3695/2008 LSL/). The study was also approved by the professional authorities of the health care centres approached.

Results

Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants. Most were well-educated, with 69% having higher education, and 93% lived with a partner. A total of 68% lived in the capital area.

Sixteen percent of the women participating in all three study phases reported experiences of violence. Table 1 also shows the demographics of these women, in comparison to women who had not experienced violence. Women with lower education reported a higher prevalence of violence experience than women with higher education (p = 0.003).

Table 2 shows that women with a history of violence reported significantly less support from their partner both during and after pregnancy. Their pregnancy was less often planned, and they had a higher prevalence of previous induced abortions. Furthermore, the mode of delivery was significantly more often by caesarean section.

Table 3 shows comparisons of self-perceived health, the prevalence of troublesome symptoms and drug use during early pregnancy (in phase I) among women with and without experience of violence. Women with a history of violence tended to classify their health as worse and also reported more severe symptoms during early pregnancy, compared to women with no history of violence. The difference was highly significant for mental and emotional symptoms, including worries, anxiety and depression (11 relevant symptoms for this study out of 24 from the questionnaire are shown in the table). Similar patterns of complaints were found in phase III of the study (results not shown).

As shown in Table 3, women with a history of violence used significantly more antidepressants, compared to those with no experience of violence.

Figure 1 shows the prevalence of a history of violence in different quartiles of the total symptom scores reported during early pregnancy (phase I) and 18 to 24 months after delivery (phase III). The figure shows a significant trend of reported experience of violence from the lowest total symptom score to the highest ($\chi^2 (3, N = 656) = 27.0, p < 0.001$ for phase I and $\chi^2 (3, N = 656) = 38.9, p < 0.001$ for phase III).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>History of violence</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–24</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–34</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥35</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary (10 years)</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (4 years)</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher (college/univ.)</td>
<td>68.9</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>57.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With partner</td>
<td>93.4</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>89.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner, not cohabiting</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parity at study entry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primipara</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multipara</td>
<td>61.0</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics and relationship with experience of violence among women in maternal care at entry to the cohort study "childbirth and health", 2009.

Table 3 shows comparisons of self-perceived health, the prevalence of troublesome symptoms and drug use during early pregnancy (in phase I) among women with and without experience of violence. Women with a history of violence tended to classify their health as worse and also reported more severe symptoms during early pregnancy, compared to women with no history of violence. The difference was highly significant for mental and emotional symptoms, including worries, anxiety and depression (11 relevant symptoms for this study out of 24 from the questionnaire are shown in the table). Similar patterns of complaints were found in phase III of the study (results not shown).

As shown in Table 3, women with a history of violence used significantly more antidepressants, compared to those with no experience of violence.

Figure 1 shows the prevalence of a history of violence in different quartiles of the total symptom scores reported during early pregnancy (phase I) and 18 to 24 months after delivery (phase III). The figure shows a significant trend of reported experience of violence from the lowest total symptom score to the highest ($\chi^2 (3, N = 656) = 27.0, p < 0.001$ for phase I and $\chi^2 (3, N = 656) = 38.9, p < 0.001$ for phase III).
Table 4 shows the mother’s view of her child’s health at 18–24 months of age. Mothers who had experienced violence considered their children to have worse general health and more nutritional problems, compared to women with no history of violence.

Discussion

The Childbirth and Health Study is the most comprehensive cohort study on maternal care and women’s health after delivery carried out in primary care in Iceland. We found clinically relevant differences between women who report experiences of violence and women who do not. Violence was associated with worse maternal health, and also appeared to influence the mother’s experience of the child’s health negatively two years after birth. Women with experience of
Table 4. Children’s health at 18–24 months of age as perceived by their mothers with and without their own experience of psychological or physical violence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Violence % (n)</th>
<th>No violence % (n)</th>
<th>OR (95% CI)</th>
<th>p value</th>
<th>Adj. OR* (95% CI)</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bad or indifferent general healtha,b</td>
<td>14.3 (15/105)</td>
<td>6.6 (36/549)</td>
<td>2.4 (1.3–4.5)</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>2.2 (1.1–4.3)</td>
<td>0.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s health worse, compared to other children at same age</td>
<td>6.7 (7/105)</td>
<td>4.0 (22/547)</td>
<td>1.7 (0.7–4.1)</td>
<td>0.234</td>
<td>1.4 (0.6–3.4)</td>
<td>0.490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability or chronic illness</td>
<td>7.6 (8/105)</td>
<td>3.1 (17/551)</td>
<td>2.6 (1.1–6.2)</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>2.3 (0.9–5.6)</td>
<td>0.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breastfeeding less than 6 months</td>
<td>18.1 (19/105)</td>
<td>12.3 (68/551)</td>
<td>1.6 (0.9–2.7)</td>
<td>0.113</td>
<td>1.3 (0.9–2.3)</td>
<td>0.428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child has</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food allergy</td>
<td>3.9 (4/102)</td>
<td>5.4 (29/536)</td>
<td>0.7 (0.3–2.1)</td>
<td>0.536</td>
<td>0.7 (0.2–2.1)</td>
<td>0.549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food intolerance</td>
<td>8.8 (9/102)</td>
<td>6.6 (35/528)</td>
<td>1.4 (0.6–2.9)</td>
<td>0.428</td>
<td>1.2 (0.5–2.6)</td>
<td>0.662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition problem (weight problem)</td>
<td>19.8 (20/101)</td>
<td>8.5 (45/528)</td>
<td>2.7 (1.5–4.7)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>2.5 (1.4–4.6)</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aAdjusted for age, education, civil status, region and parity.
*bVery bad, bad or neither good nor bad, categorized as indifferent (5-point scale).

violence more commonly reported bad mental health and had more mental symptoms such as anxiety, worries, sadness and depression. They also reported higher prevalence of antidepressant medication use during pregnancy. Furthermore they reported less support from partner both during and after pregnancy and had a higher rate of caesarean sections.

**Strength and weakness of the study**

The main strength of this study is the relative size of the original sample, encompassing 23% of all pregnant women in Iceland in 2009. The original sample has been considered relatively representative for pregnant women in Iceland,[15] but the women finishing all three study phases were older and better educated. It is known that violence/abuse is more prevalent among Nordic women attending gynaecological clinics. The rate ranges from 24–33%.[17] These rates are higher than those in our study. Selection to specialist gynaecological care partly explains this difference. Our prevalence figure is also somewhat lower than in the Bidens study,[13] where Icelandic women were recruited when attending routine prenatal ultrasound at the national university hospital. It found the prevalence of any lifetime emotional abuse was 16.3%, physical abuse 31.4% and sexual abuse 21.1%. The original study sample of women attending routine antenatal care in the primary care setting might present a certain underestimation of violence as they are in general less likely than those attending specialized care to have experienced violence.

Regarding the impact of violence on women’s health in general, our results correspond well with previous studies,[4,18–20] including the association with caesarean sections,[16,21] use of psychotropic medication[22] and unplanned pregnancies.[23] Regarding the health of the child, our material does not allow us to determine to what extent the mothers’ worries mirror low maternal mood, manifest problems in the child due to physiological and epigenetic imprinting, or a subtle mixture of effects, which is a highly plausible interpretation, in view of the most recent evidence.[11,24,25]

**Comparison with other studies**

Previous studies have shown experience of violence to be prevalent among Nordic women attending gynaecological clinics. The rate ranges from 24–33%.[17] These rates are higher than those in our study. Selection to specialist gynaecological care partly explains this difference. Our prevalence figure is also somewhat lower than in the Bidens study,[13] where Icelandic women were recruited when attending routine prenatal ultrasound at the national university hospital. It found the prevalence of any lifetime emotional abuse was 16.3%, physical abuse 31.4% and sexual abuse 21.1%. The original study sample of women attending routine antenatal care in the primary care setting might present a certain underestimation of violence as they are in general less likely than those attending specialized care to have experienced violence.

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**Conclusions and clinical implications**

Our study adds to the increasing body of international evidence showing that experiences of violence tend to have wide-ranging effects on health, with potential impact across generations. In the Nordic countries as elsewhere, primary care personnel must acknowledge this and develop adequate responses.

Generally high awareness and professional willingness and courage to ask about violence and abuse in
the presence of vague complaints or problems (case finding) are important,[26] both with respect to potential prevention and clinical management of the person/patient. Systematic high-risk strategies in relation to particularly vulnerable groups may yield results.[27] Various expert panels have during recent years also recommended systematic screening for interpersonal violence among pregnant women.[28,29] According to recent Cochrane review,[30] it is however not a given that identification strategies is enough to change the outcome. Effective programs to prevent violence are likely to depend on a context-sensitive combination of high awareness, willingness to act, and a repertoire of follow-up strategies.

**Disclosure statement**

The authors report no conflicts on interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.

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