Newspaper reports: a source of surveillance for burns among women in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Background Our study attempts to describe the demographics, characteristics of victims and perpetrators, and circumstances leading to burn events among females in Pakistan.

Methods Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) systematically collected data on burns among women using newspaper reports from January 2004 till December 2005. We analyzed the aggregated data and estimated burn rates.

Results A total of 222 burn events were reported from 2004 to 2005; complete data were not available for all variables. Adults (>18 years) constituted 74% (91/123) of cases with 95% (121/127) being married. Most burns were caused by bursting of stoves (34%; 64/189) or victims set-on fire (33%; n = 63/189). Burns using acids accounted for 13% (25/189). Husbands (52%; 51/98) and in-laws (23%; 23/98) were the perpetrators in known burn events. Burns were classified as accidental in half of cases (51%; 97/189) and related to domestic issues in a quarter (25%; 47/189). There were 49% of (92/189) burns that were reported as intentional. The mean annual rate of burns among women (15–64 years of age) was found to be 33 per 100,000.

Conclusion Newspaper reports are good source of surveillance when information is otherwise limited. Majority of burns (51%) were classified as accidental while 49% were reported as intentional, though there is a limitation in the accuracy of reported accidental events. There is a dire need for systematic data collection and devising preventive strategies for this important public health problem that remains largely neglected in Pakistan.

Keywords burns, cultural practices, dowry, gender, pakistan, stove, violence

Introduction

Violence against women is a problem of public health concern. In 48 population-based surveys from around the world, 10–69% of women reported being physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives.1 Violence against women can take many forms, ranging from humiliation, harassment and exploitation to torture.

Despite the Charter of United Nations Endorsement of the equal rights of men and women and the international declaration for elimination of violence against women,2 the social and cultural rights of women continue to be violated. Women in Pakistan and other South Asian countries are at risk of multiple forms of violence including: sexual violence, torture and burning,3 disfigurement with acid,4 beatings and threats,5 spousal murders6 and ritual honor killings.7

Newspapers are an available, inexpensive source of potential information.8,9 Newspaper reports especially become valuable if no traditional public health data set collects mortality data.9 Studies have utilized news reports as a potential source of surveillance in documenting fire-related burns in homes10 and also as a tool of communication for preventive strategies.11

One of the most extreme forms of domestic violence is the continued occurrence of stove-burning. Many of these burnings appear to be carried out by husbands and in-laws due to dissatisfaction with the victim’s dowry. A report by

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Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor described incidents of violence against women and the killing of married women by either husbands or relatives over dowry or other domestic disputes. In most of the instances victims were burned to death, allegedly in kitchen stove accidents; some women reportedly were burned with acid. In the same year, 471 dowry deaths were reported; however, according to a report of one NGO, only 60–70% of such cases are reported. Our study attempts to describe the demographics, characteristics of victims and perpetrators and circumstances leading to burn events among females in Pakistan.

Methods

Human rights commission of Pakistan
Human rights commission of Pakistan (HRCP) is an independent, voluntary, non-profit organization that is not associated or affiliated with the government or any political party. It is committed to act with impartiality and objectivity in all matters. Among its main aims are spreading awareness of human rights among the population, mobilizing public opinion, collecting and disseminating information about human rights abuses.

Data sources and data collection
The aggregated data were collected from the website of HRCP. One author (M.N.) conducted detailed telephone and in-person interviews with the HRCP director, database manager and information officer to understand the data sources, the process of data collection and the mechanism for data storage. This author also visited the facility where data were managed and archived, and reviewed annual HRCP reports. The process is explained below.

Process
The national daily newspapers DAWN, NEWS, NATION and JANG, NAWA-E-WAQAT, Khabrain are Pakistan’s largest English and Urdu language broadsheets, respectively. These papers regularly report the occurrence of burns from different parts of the country. The reports vary in their details from very brief, giving the gender, age and method used, to extensive details of the circumstances of the act. To standardize all the available information of burns in the newspapers, a ‘Report Form’ was developed by the HRCP. The report form abstracted the victim’s age group, reason for the burn event, relationship of the victim and the perpetrator, victim’s social status (including marital status), the source of burns and medical aid provided to the victim after the event.

Local HRCP sub-centers throughout the country reviewed the above-mentioned newspapers along with the local newspapers in local languages for burn reports, completed the standard ‘Report Form’ and mailed it to the HRCP head office in Lahore, a capital city of Punjab province. Each sub-center thoroughly compared all the national and local newspapers for their duplication. Recurring news reports were only counted once during completion of the report forms. In the head office, staff reviewed the reports for quality. The data manager entered these reports into a final data set that was used for the analysis.

Data management and analysis
The HRCP aggregated data on events of burns among females occurring from 1 January 2004 till 31 December 2005 were compiled in Microsoft Excel. An ‘event’ is defined as any occurrence that resulted in burns among one or more females. We present descriptive statistics using as the denominator the number of events with available information for a particular variable. Thus the denominators vary on the basis of completeness of reporting. Events were classified into nine major causative categories: (1) acid, (2) cylinder explosion, (3) electric shock, (4) bursting of stove, (5) bursting of pressure cooker, (6) gas leakage, (7) heater, (8) victims set-on fire and (8) ‘others’ (that does not fall into any of the above-mentioned category). Close relatives included cousins, maternal and paternal uncles, grandparents and nephews where as father-, mother-, brother-, sister- and son-in-law were categorized as in-laws. ‘Acquaintance’ category was used when the perpetrators knows the victims either directly or indirectly through someone and does not fall into any of the other categories.

The rates of burns were determined for each year using estimates of Pakistan’s female population age 15–64 years from 2004 to 2005. This age group was selected because it was considered vulnerable for the burns and is considered as ‘domestic age’. Total number of burn victims for each year was divided by the respective estimated female populations to determine the rates of burns per year for whole of the country.

Results
A total of 222 events of burns were recorded during the period of 2 years. Age was available for 123 events (55% of 222): 91 of these (74%) were adults (£18 years) and 32 (26%) were minors (<18 years). Most of burn events were
classified because of bursting of stove (34%; 64/189) and victims being set-on fire (33%; 63/189). Acid burns (13%; 25/189), cylinder explosion (3%; 6/189), electric shock (2%; 4/189), heater (2%; 4/189), gas leakage (2%; 3/189) and pressure cooker (1%; 2/189) were subsequently labeled as causes of burns among victims. Ten percent \((n = 18/31)\) of cases could not be categorized and were grouped as ‘Other’ causes.

Marital status was available in 127 events (57% of 222): 121 of these (95%) were married, 3 (2%) unmarried, 2 (2%) divorced and 1 (0.8%) widowed. Medical attention was given to 98% (163/166) of the victims. Among the burn events caused by victims set-on fire, majority (57%; 36/63) of them were labeled as ‘domestic’ problems, followed by issues with in-laws (12.7%; 8/63) and ‘matrimonial issues’ (9.5%; 6/63). On the other hand ‘old enmity’ and ‘property issues’ account for equal amount of burns, i.e. 4.2% (1/63). All the burn events \((n = 64)\) caused by bursting of stoves were classified as ‘accidental’. Of the known burns events as a result of throwing of acid, 40% (10/25) were caused by domestic problems followed by matrimonial issues (24%; 6/24) and ‘others’ (20%, 5/25) whereas old enmity and property issues accounted for equal number of burns (8%; 2/25). All known burns caused by cylinder explosion \((n = 6)\), heater \((n = 3)\), gas leakage \((n = 3)\) and pressure cooker \((n = 2)\) were classified as accidental. However, the 75% (3/4) burns caused by electric shock were classified as accidental and 25% (1/4) were labeled as caused by property issues.

The distribution of perpetrators where information was available for victims being set-on fire, husbands were found to be the culprit in 52% (37/71) of the cases, followed by in-laws (30%; 21/71), close relatives (8%; 6/71), some sort of ‘acquaintance’ (7%; 5/71) and local resident (3%; 2/7). Among the available information on burns due to acid, most (57%; 13/23) of the events were caused by husbands followed by close relatives (17%; 4/23) and in-laws (4%; 1/23). Local resident and people under the category of ‘acquaintance’ each accounted for same number of burn events (9%; 2/23). All the electric shock burns were caused by local residents \((n = 1)\). There was no information available for the perpetrators who caused burns by stove bursting, cylinder explosion, heater, gas leakage and pressure cooker.

**Discussion**

**Main findings of this study**

The results show a huge burden of burns to Pakistani society. For the cases in which age and marital status are known, the majority of victims were married adults. Among the nine categories, most common burns occur due to victims being ‘set-on fire’ followed by bursting of stoves and burns using acids. The most alarming finding is that more than half of the events occurred because of victims set alight and bursting of stoves in kitchens. The frequent reason of the burns was found to be accidental and domestic issues. Husbands followed by in-laws were found to be perpetrators in majority of the cases.

**What is already known on this topic?**

Bestowing of dowries is an ancient tradition more prevalent in India. Pakistan and India were together for centuries before their independence, as a result they share many cultural and traditional values. The tradition consists of giving wealth, either in the form of money or gifts, before and after the marriage in order to ‘comfort’ the husband and his family. In contrast to Western cultures where both partners contribute the welfare of their new family in Pakistan husband's family takes in the bride. Many a times this creates a financial burden to the extended family. When the dowry expectations of husband’s family are not met, husbands and in-laws may threat the bride to kill, or they may torture the bride mentally and physically in an effort to encourage her family to fulfill their dowry obligations.

Newspaper reports are good source of surveillance when information is otherwise limited. Daily newspapers can provide reliable, useful and timely surveillance data on the incidence of fire-related deaths. Study has shown that newspaper reports covered 96% of the fire-related fatalities and contained more information on several factors including cause of fire when compared with medical examiner records.

**What this study adds?**

Homicidal burning of married women constitutes a significant proportion of dowry deaths. Many a time the event is reported to police by in-laws or husband as accidental burns/deaths that either resulted by ‘stove burst’ or gas leakage while a women was cooking in the kitchen. The mystery of burnt females is revealed when the post-mortem is done of the deceased. Frequently, husbands did not report the incident to the police station or to victim’s family and often even police may suppress the facts for one reason or another, ranging from corruption to bureaucracy. Undetermined violent deaths should also be kept in mind while assessing the burden of...
homicidal burn deaths in a society. Another stigma of the society is that women were hesitant to file charges because of societal customs that stigmatize divorce and make women economically and psychologically dependent on their relatives. Relatives also were reluctant to report abuse to protect the standing of the family. Police and judges more likely to see domestic violence as a family problem, and were reluctant to take action in such cases. Thus it was difficult for women to obtain relief from the justice system in cases of domestic violence.

West Pakistan Dowry (Prohibition on Display) Act 1967 had imposed ban on the display/exhibition of dowry and presents but there was no restriction as to quantity/value of dowry, bridal gifts and presents given to bride and bride-groom. The agony of giving huge gifts for poor cause significant evil in the society as a result the Federal Government enacted the Dowry and Bridal Gifts (Restriction) Act 1976 and imposed restrictions on the aggregate value of dowry. According to this act it became prohibited to exceed the bride’s gift and total expenditure on marriage ceremonies from a minimum amount. The penalty was decided an imprisonment, fine or both. Unfortunately, the law was not generally followed or strictly enforced. In 1992, the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan reviewed this Dowry Act 1976 and recommended the increase in amount to be given as gifts to the bride. Even then the recommendations of the Commission were not implemented because of deep-rooted custom of giving of dowry by the parents/guardian of bride. In 1997, the Federal Government enacted the Marriages (Prohibition of Wasteful Expenses) Act 1997, which prohibited wasteful expenses on marriage ceremonies to lessen the burden of bride’s family. Since then there were various efforts by the government of Pakistan to limit the dowry and marriage expenses but there was no significant improvement in the condition either through lack of enforcement or deep-rooted custom in Pakistani society.

Accidental burns can also occur. Mishandling of kerosene pressure stoves, wearing loose garments and ignorance of safe usage techniques, more common in poor socio-economic groups, poor housing and illiteracy causes a lot of deaths. But women said to be burned in this way, if there are suspicions that the accident was related to above-mentioned conditions, the husband and in-laws may still be held responsible.

There is a need to increase education and job opportunities for women so that they become more independent, economically and emotionally. Strict laws against dowry-related crimes should be implemented. Community program focusing on pre- and post-marital counseling of the couple along with facilitation of mutual understanding among extended family members of the couple are important in reducing the crimes. Efforts should be made in raising awareness and advocacy of the problem among the community. Policy changes to reduce poverty and inequality may help in alleviating these crimes in Pakistan.

Limitations of this study
Newspaper surveillance is useful to identify events of burns where the information is limited, but they are likely to be underestimates of the true incidence. However, the number of events detected may be a fairly representative sample. The information provided in many newspaper reports is certainly limited. The data set in many of the reports is incomplete. For example, there is no mention of the education level or social class of the subjects, nor of any psychiatric illness the perpetrator may have had in the past or was currently suffering from. Similarly, no distinction is made between urban and rural areas. This is important as 70% of the population of Pakistan lives in rural areas and it is anticipated that more burns take place in rural areas as of low literacy rate there. In addition, we did not have direct access to the victims and perpetrators. Though in our study the most frequent reason of burns was reported to be accidental but it should be kept in mind that burns among women, especially in South East Asia, is very difficult to assess whether the incident was accidental, suicidal or homicidal. The death certificates and forensic reports can give information about victim and perpetrators but our study only looked at the newspapers reports. Follow-up of the victims’ family with interviews may have proven useful, but it was impossible in our studies because of missing information. The denominator while calculating rates of burns constitute only females below ages 15 and 65 years. We might overestimate the figures by not counting the female population below and above 15 and 65 years of age, respectively, in our denominator. Lastly, the descriptive design of our study has a risk of losing important details like effect of education and socio-economic on burn events, and associations found in our study may not be causative. These limitations should, however, be seen in the context of the overall dearth of information on burns among women from Pakistan. Despite these shortcomings the study highlights important findings.

Conclusions
In summary, newspaper reports are good source of surveillance where there is limited availability of official and authentic information on burn events among women. Such
newspaper reports, though of limited values, can still provide useful information on the social dilemma of female burns victims. There is a dire need for systematic data collection and devising preventive strategies for this important public health problem that remains largely neglected in Pakistan. In addition, there should be strict laws against dowry-related crimes along with means of sentence to the perpetrators. Measures to reduce poverty and inequality along with efforts in raising public awareness against dowry-related burns are important to tackle this problem.

Acknowledgements

We greatly appreciate the support, guidance and data provided by the team of HRCP especially Saira Ansari, the HRCP Information Officer and Naveera Khan, the HRCP Database Officer. We would like to thank in particular Mr. I. A. Rehman, country director HRCP without the support and encouragement of whom this manuscript was impossible.

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