

## Magnitude of Dating Violence among Undergraduates in Selected State Universities in the Western Province, Sri Lanka

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### INTRODUCTION

Dating is defined as a dyadic relationship involving meeting for social interaction and joint activities with an explicit or implicit intention to continue the relationship until one or the other party terminates or until some other more committed relationship is established (e.g., cohabiting, engagement, or marriage) [1]. Dating violence has been stated as “any behaviour in an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm and controlling behaviours” [2]. It is a very important global concern of public health and essentially an important issue of human rights [3].

A study done in USA has reported that violence in unmarried relationships to be three times more prevalent than that among married couples [4]. A study done among undergraduates in Philadelphia, USA reported 42% physical, 21% emotional and 12% sexual violence [5]. In a large survey done in a university in Florida, USA, a DV of 21% was reported in current relationships and 32% in previous relationships with 20% of physical violence [6].

The study done in Japan among university students determined the experience of harassment/dating violence [7]. It reported that having at least one episode of perpetration of any type of harassment and being the victim of any type of harassment was significant (adjusted odds ratio: 37.9, 95% CI: 18.6 - 77.1,  $p$  0.001). A study conducted among Spanish university students to assess the presence of physical and psychological violence revealed a high prevalence of both [8]. In UK a study done among 16–19-year-old college students to assess the association between DV victimization and socio-demographic characteristics, sexual identity and behaviours found 46% controlling behaviours among females and 50% among males [9].

A study was conducted on DV in three faculties in a leading university in the Western Province, Sri Lanka [10]. Its aim was to determine awareness related to DV among 283 unmarried female students and not about the individual experiences of DV. However, to the best of my knowledge, this was the only research study available related to latter topic in this country [11].

In 2015, culmination of assault and sexual harassment including rape and murder of female undergraduates among dating couples have been reported by the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka [12]. Realizing the gravity of the problem, it has initiated steps towards preventing gender-based violence by publishing relevant strategies.

Although, intimate partner violence among married women have been studied [13, 14, 15, 16, 17] in Sri Lanka, DV has failed to gain the due recognition as a critical public health issue despite its high prevalence and resultant negative outcomes experienced. Thus, the objective of this study was to determine the magnitude and types of DV among undergraduates in selected state universities in the Western province.

### METHODS

A retrospective longitudinal study was conducted in three randomly selected state universities out of seven in the Western Province, from May to December 2016. A study unit was a second-year university student (laity) of both sexes with a heterosexual relationship of  $\geq 6$  month's duration. The computed sample size was 1296. Twenty-seven clusters (nine study programs from each university) with 48 study units from each were selected using multistage stratified cluster sampling.

The relevant tool (Revised Conflict Tactics Scale) containing 33 items was purchased with permission to use. It was translated to Sinhala and adapted to suit culture related semantics. Judgmental validity was confirmed through Delphi technique.

Factor structure of the revised tool was assessed using both exploratory and confirmatory (CFA) factor analysis. Final structure, consisted of a four-factor model with 23 items. Construct validity (convergent and divergent validity) were performed using CFA. Cronbach alpha value was 0.8 which indicated a good internal consistency. The kappa value also was 0.8 which indicated a strong test re-test reliability. Final outcome was an anonymous, pre-tested, self-administered questionnaire. The tool was administered in

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all three languages. The types of violence assessed were physical, verbal and sexual abuse and controlling behaviours. The reference period was six months prior to the time of the survey.

Study tool proper was administered with the screening questionnaire (to select eligible study units) to all undergraduates available at a given lecture hall of a given cluster. Once the data collection from the 27 clusters were completed, 48 eligible study units from each cluster were selected by applying simple random sampling.

Information related to both victimization to violence and perpetration were obtained only from the respondent, as it was not feasible to assess the partners, because most of them were from different localities in and outside the universities. Principal investigator and four trained Sociology graduates of both sexes assisted in the data collection process.

The first act of DV committed by either partner was considered as incidence during the reference period. The qualitative variables including incidence of DV acts were presented as proportions and expressed as percentages with 95% confidence intervals. Quantitative variable age (normally distributed), was presented as mean with standard deviation (SD). Statistical analysis was conducted using chi-square and Fisher's Exact (two tailed) tests to compare DV between males and females and significance was considered as a probability value of 0.05.

## RESULTS

Response rate for screening was 100%. Of the 2327 screened, only 2219 (95.4%) were eligible. Among them, computed sample size of 1296 (58.4%) study units (here in after referred to as respondents) was selected for the study proper.

### Selected socio-demographic characteristics

Sixty four percent (64%; n=829/1296) of respondents were females. Their age ranged from 21 to 27 years with a mean age of 22.7 years (SD=1.1). A majority (95.4%, n=1236/1296) of the respondents were Sinhala whereas 3.2% (n=41) and 1.1% (n=14) were Tamils and Muslims respectively.

### Description by overall DV and types

#### Overall incidence for all acts of DV

The total number who reported DV was 1013 with an overall incidence of 78.2% (95% CI: 75.8-80.4%; n=1013/1296) and all of them have been victims as well as perpetrators.

#### Sex specific overall incidence of DV

Females reported a significantly ( $p=0.04$ ) higher overall incidence (80%; 95% CI: 77.1–82.6%; n=663/829) in comparison to males (75%; 95% CI: 70.8–78.8%; n=350/467).

#### DV related to physical violence (Table 1)

Incidence of acts of overall physical violence was 13.3% (95% CI: 11.5 – 15.2%; 172/1296). A significantly ( $p=0.02$ ) higher proportion of males (78.3%, 47/60) were perpetrators in comparison to females (59.8%, 67/112). Commonest violent act seen among males was twisting arm/hair (60.0%, n=36/60) whereas among females it was the above act in addition to being pushed (52.7%, n=59/112). The least common act among both males and females was throwing objects (16.7%, n=10/60 vs 8.9%, n=10/112) respectively.

**Table 1. Distribution of respondents by acts of physical violence**

Physical Violence	Frequency (N=172)	
	Yes	No
Twisted arm/hair	94 (54.7%)	78 (45.3%)
Pushed/shoved	89 (51.7%)	83 (48.3%)
Dragging	66 (38.4%)	106 (61.6%)
Slapped	38 (22.1%)	134 (77.9%)
Threw objects	20 (11.6%)	152 (88.4%)

Overall Incidence for physical violence = 13.3 % (95% CI: 11.5 – 15.2%; 172/1296\*)

\*1296 – Total at risk

#### DV related to verbal aggression (Table 2)

Incidence of acts of overall verbal aggression was 56.9% (95% CI: 54.2 – 59.7%; 738/1296). A significantly ( $p= 0.001$ ) higher proportion of females (83.3%, 409/491) were perpetrators in comparison to males (66.8%, 165/247). The commonest act committed by males was insulting/cursing (64.0%, n=158/247) and females shouting/yelling (55.2%, n=271/491). Subjecting the partner to humiliation was the least common among both males (8.9%, n=22/247) and females (3.5%, n=17/491).

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**Table 2. Distribution of respondents by acts of verbal aggression**

Verbal Aggression	Frequency (N=738)	
	Yes	No
Shouting/Yelling	451 (61.1%)	287 (38.9%)
Said things to make partner angry	429 (58.1%)	309 (41.9%)
Insulting/Cursing	427 (57.9%)	311 (42.1%)
Stomp out of the place after disagreement	375 (50.8%)	363 (49.2%)
Acting in way to make partner jealous	300 (40.7%)	438 (59.3%)
Humiliated in front of others	39 (5.3%)	699 (94.7%)
Overall incidence for verbal aggression = 56.9% (95% CI: 54.2 – 59.7%; 738/1296*)		
*1296 – Total sample at risk		

## DV related to sexual harassment (Table 3)

Incidence of acts of overall sexual violence was 1.1% (95% CI: 0.6 – 1.8%; 14/1296). There was no significant difference ( $p=0.54$ ) between the proportions of males (75%; 6/8) and females (50%; 3/6) who were sexually aggressive. The commonest type (87.5%;  $n=7$ ) of harassment committed by males was to make threats to have vaginal sex. The commonest committed by females was to make threatening requests to have oral sex (66.7%,  $n=4$ ). Least common act committed by both males (50%;  $n=4$ ) and females (50%;  $n=3$ ) was having vaginal sex by using force.

**Table 3. Distribution of respondents by acts of sexual violence**

Sexual violence	Frequency (N=14)	
	Yes	No
Threatened with oral sex	10 (71.4%)	4 (28.6%)
Subjected to vaginal sex using physical force	7 (50.0%)	7 (50.0%)
Used threats to have vaginal sex	7 (50.0%)	7 (50.0%)
Overall Incidence for sexual violence = 1.1 % (95% CI: 0.6 – 1.8%; 14/1296*)		
*1296 – Total at risk		

## DV related to controlling behaviours (Table 4)

Incidence of acts of overall controlling behaviours was 64.8% (95% CI: 62.2 – 67.4%; 840/1296). A significantly ( $p=0.001$ ) higher proportion of females (85.7%, 468/546) were perpetrators in comparison to males (59.5%, 175/294). The commonest controlling act faced by both females (74.7%,  $n=408/546$ ) and males (70.4%,  $n=207/294$ ) was their partner checking their whereabouts. Least common was “forbidding going out with friends/family” (19.7%,  $n=58/294$  males vs 18.5%,  $n=101/546$  females).

**Table 4. Distribution of respondents by acts of controlling behaviours**

Controlling behaviours	Frequency (N=840)	
	Yes	No
Checks whereabouts	615 (73.2%)	225 (26.8%)
Decides on the attire	417 (49.6%)	423 (50.4%)
Decides what other person should do	381 (45.4%)	459 (54.6%)
Angry when spoken to opposite sex	360 (42.9%)	480 (57.1%)
Checks phone/ e-mail without permission	275 (32.7%)	565 (67.3%)
Decides how to spend money	264 (31.4%)	576 (68.6%)
Restrict extra-curricular activities	235 (28.0%)	605 (72.0%)
Separate from friends/family	215 (25.6%)	625 (74.4%)
Forbid going out with friends/ family	159 (18.9%)	681 (81.1%)
Overall Incidence for controlling behaviours =64.8 % (95% CI: 62.2 – 67.4%; 840/1296*)		
*1296 – Total at risk		

## DISCUSSION

The overall incidence of dating violence among the respondents during the reference period was 78.2%. Controlling behaviours had the highest incidence followed by verbal, physical, and sexual violence.

This was a retrospective longitudinal study, where incidence was assessed retrospectively due to time, financial and logistical constraints encountered in conducting a prospective longitudinal study. The reference period for assessing DV was set at six months prior to the survey [18] to overcome recall issues. Although psychological harm was included in the description given in the

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introduction regarding DV, verbal aggression was assessed instead. The former has an insidious onset which makes it difficult to determine the point of onset and thus incidence. Further, it may also be due to factors other than being subjected to dating violence, assessment of which will be a study of its own.

First year students are generally getting adjusted to the new environment and take time to settle down, whereas third- and fourth-year students need more time to attend to academic work. It was assumed that by the second year, they are more accustomed to the environment and more likely to be relaxed and to find time and consent to participate in a survey. In addition, during this time, they come to know the fellow students/seniors better, and thus have the tendency to initiate dating relationships. The above assumptions were proven by the high response rate of 100% observed at the screening stage.

Dating violence in general is a very sensitive topic involving a substantial amount of stigma to both sexes. Hundred percent response rate at the screening stage further reflects the burning desire they had to initiate a dialogue regarding DV.

During the initial stage of the study, all students present at each lecture were recruited to avoid discrimination which is considered ethical. Based on the serial numbers that were given, the required 48 from a cluster were selected using computer generated random numbers to make it representative.

Computing incidence was based on the first act of DV (which was assumed to be well remembered) that took place during the reference period. However, the relevant question on subsequent occurrences was left blank by a substantial number of respondents, making it invalid. Thus, inability to assess repeated occurrences of DV was a limitation. This may be attributed either to recall issues or the need to conceal the degree of hostility, conflict or friction that is there between the dating couple.

All the respondents happened to be both perpetrators as well as victims [7, 8] which made the analysis difficult. It is the norm that when there are conflicts between a couple, a victim one time, can be the perpetrator another time and vice versa, and this phenomenon was observed for all types of DV in the present study.

Despite almost all the foreign studies [19, 20, 21] were assumed to have been based on prevalence which was not clearly defined, an attempt was made to compare the results. Twisting arm/hair had been the commonest act of physical violence (54.7%) in the present study which was only 18% as reported by Njagi [22] in 2012.

Incidence of acts of verbal aggression was (56.9%) and the Spanish study [8] has reported that it was more females (83.4%) than males (77.3%) who were perpetrators, similar to the present study. The reason why females resort to verbal aggression more than males may be attributed to the inherent biological differences between females and males, as females are more sensitive and reactive. Incidence of sexual violence reported (1.1%) is considered an underestimate. It may be attributed to social desirability bias (which makes people to have a strong desire to be seen positively by others in the society), despite the data collecting tool was an anonymous self-administered one (social desirability bias is generally seen with interviewer administered questionnaires). Victims are likely to conceal the truth of having a sexual relationship, owing to the socio-cultural implications such as humiliation and distress they have to face. Further, the respondents are more inclined to be true to their conscious regarding promises made to the partner and not divulge the truth. Also being a victim and disclosing the truth might affect their safety and put them in a vulnerable position, if the partner is likely to end the relationship where some may resort to causing serious physical harm through retaliation [8].

Checking whereabouts which was the commonest among controlled behaviours was higher for females in the present study, in contrast to the study done in Spain [8], which reported a very low figure for both sexes (5.6% in males vs. 3.7% in females). However, being angry when spoken to opposite sex was almost equal among females (74.7% versus 72.3%) and males (70.4% versus 63.7%) in the present study and the Spanish study respectively, irrespective of the socio-cultural differences between the two countries.

With regard to psychometric properties, validity of the tool was ensured by performing convergent and divergent validity through CFA to confirm construct validity. Satisfactory internal consistency and test-retest reliability in addition to composite reliability determined through CFA were ensured. Use of a valid and a reliable tool is considered as a strength of the study. It was also observed that the 95% CI of incidence for all the types of violence was reasonably narrow reflecting satisfactory precision and thus adequacy of sample size.

The number and types of faculties present in a given university and the number of study programs (clusters) in a given faculty varies, although the three universities were selected applying probability sampling. Therefore, determining external validity of this study is not feasible. Thus, the findings of this study will be applicable only to the study programs of the individual faculties/universities which were recruited for the study.

Internal validity is more important than external validity. As far as the present study is concerned, it may be assumed that it has been possible to achieve a reasonable level of internal validity with minimal selection bias in the selection of study units within a cluster.

The overall incidence of acts related to DV (except for sexual abuse) was high during the immediate six months prior to the survey with controlling behaviours having the highest incidence. All the types of DV can lead to psychological distress and in addition all the acts related to physical violence reported can result in serious physical injuries.

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## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Hence, it is recommended that educational programs are conducted for all undergraduates on a regular basis and make available counseling services especially meant for dating couples. Future research should focus on prospective descriptive studies which would enable compilation of accurate data avoiding inherent deficiencies in a retrospective study such as recall issues and assessment of frequency of occurrence of DV. It is advisable to take steps to include both partners and also conduct qualitative research to uncover the true nature of acts of dating violence.

### Public Health Implications

- The overall incidence of dating violence is high with controlling behaviours having the highest incidence.
- Awareness programs on developing healthy relationships among dating couples seems essential.
- Prospective descriptive studies involving both partners with a qualitative component is recommended to identify the true nature of dating violence.

### Author Declaration

**Competing interests:** Authors declare none.

**Ethical approval and consent to participate:** Ethical clearance for the study was taken from the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo before the initiation of the study (EC – 15 – 162). Informed, written consent was taken from the participants and participation was voluntary.

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**Author contributions:** EHF: Developing the study proper, data collection, analysis and preparation of the manuscript. PLJ & AB: Designing the study, revising and planning data analysis, reviewing and correcting the manuscript

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