

# BATTERED WOMEN: ANALYSIS OF DEMOGRAPHIC, RELATIONSHIP AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CHARACTERISTICS

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*Violence against women, in general, and particularly domestic violence, occurs in all social and ethnic groups, and is not related to social class, educational level, or race. Nevertheless, some studies, carried out with women in shelters and offering a partial view of the problem, still insist on the idea that it occurs exclusively in problematic environments (broken families, with economic problems, low educational level, etc.). In this article we describe the demographic, relationship and domestic violence characteristics of a sample of 142 "battered" (abused) women from specialised and non-specialised centres. The results obtained are analyzed and discussed.*

*La violencia contra las mujeres, en general, y el maltrato en concreto, se da en todos los grupos sociales y étnicos, y no está relacionada con la clase social, el nivel cultural, o la raza. Sin embargo, ciertas investigaciones, bien porque se han realizado con mujeres en centros de acogida o refugios o bien porque ofrecen una visión parcial del problema, aún tienden a insistir en la idea de que ocurre exclusivamente en entornos problemáticos (familias desestructuradas, con problemas económicos, de bajo nivel cultural, etc.). En este trabajo se describen las características sociodemográficas, de la relación de pareja y del maltrato a partir de las entrevistas realizadas a una muestra de 142 mujeres maltratadas provenientes tanto de centros especializados como no especializados en el abordaje de estos problemas. Se analizan y discuten los resultados obtenidos.*

## INTRODUCTION

On analyzing the incidence of abuse of women, researchers have come almost unanimously to the conclusion that it is a **concealed crime**. It is suggested that the number of reported cases corresponds to approximately 5%-30% of actual cases (Medina, 1994; Sarasúa et al., 1994; Zubizarreta et al., 1994; Caño, 1995; Echeburúa & Corral, 1998). The reasons why women do not formally report abuse are many and varied, including fear, dependence, difficulties to accept failure of the relationship, lack of confidence in the judicial system, and so on (Benítez, 1998; Abril, 1999).

In addition to the difficulties arising from reluctance or refusal to report or make public the abuse, the type of statistics available on the issue (biased reports, different measurement criteria, etc.) make it difficult to obtain a general idea on the magnitude of the problem (Goodman, Koss & Russo, 1993; WHO, 1998).

Even so, there are currently sufficient data to suggest,

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as do Heise and cols. (1999) or Walker (1999), for example, that no country in the world is free of abuse. Thus, it can be stated in a general way that between 10% and 60% of women have at some time suffered acts of violence in their relationship, and that 25% have experienced or are experiencing a situation of violence (WHO, 1996, 1998; Eriksson, 1997; British Council, 1999; Heise et al., 1999; García-Moreno, 2000).

In the case of Spain it can be observed that in recent years the number of reported cases stands at around 20,000 per year, with a slight rising trend (Instituto de la Mujer, 1994, 1997, 2000; Defensor del Pueblo, 1998).

On the basis of such figures for reported cases and of the assumed percentages of concealed cases, some authors (Caño, 1995; Pérez del Campo, 1995) had suggested that between 600,000 and 800,000 women may be abused each year in Spain. The data from the macro-survey carried out by the *Instituto de la Mujer* (Institute for Women) (Vives, 2001) on more than 20,000 women point in a similar direction, and suggest that 12% of Spanish women over 18 (around 1,865,000) would suffer some form of domestic abuse, and that 4% (640,000) would admit having suffered some type of violence in their immediate social context in the past year (more than 2,500,000 women in total), in over 75% of cases by their partner.

Having reviewed the data on the incidence of the problem, it is appropriate to begin looking more closely at the characteristics of those that suffer abuse and those that commit it. However, and given the breadth and complexity of the issue, in this work we shall deal exclusively with the analysis of the characteristics and experience of women that suffer abuse at the hands of their partner or ex-partner.

In this regard, it should be borne in mind that Villavicencio and Sebastián (1999) review some of the early works in this field carried out in Spain in order to analyze these characteristics.

Among these is the study by Aparici, Colom and Sau (1986), who examined the data from 148 women that had sought professional attention because of abuse. Of these, the majority had been abused by their husband or partner (82%), were aged between 27 and 41 years (59%), were married to or lived with the aggressor (95%), had between 2 and 4 children (84%), had elementary education (49%), and had suffered beatings (62%) and threats (74%). It was frequently the case that the abuse began shortly after the couple started living together.

In the Madrid Autonomous Region, in a study carried out by the Regional Shelter House (*Casa Refugio de la Comunidad*) (1989), researchers examined the data on women who had sought help there that year (a total of 65), finding that the majority were married to their aggressor (74%), that their mean age was 33 (though 42% were in the range 21 to 30 years), that there was a predominance of women with elementary education (54%) and of homemakers ("housewives") without another job (60%), that the mean number of children was 2-3 (31% had 2 children), that the mean number of years cohabiting was 11.53, that the mean number of years of abuse was 9.31, and that the majority of them (60%) had not suffered abuse in their family of origin.

Similar findings in relation to educational level, occupation or mean duration of the abuse were obtained in reviews carried out in the Basque Country, Valencia and Spain in general (Generalitat Valenciana, 1990; Instituto Vasco de la Mujer, 1991; Coordinadora de Casas de Acogida para la Mujer Maltratada de España, 1993).

More recently, Echeburúa and cols. (1996) studied the characteristics of women attending the Domestic Violence Service in Bilbao (a total of 62), finding the following characteristics: mean age was 37 years (range 19-71), mean number of children was 2 (range 0-9), and there was a predominance of women who were married (52%), with low socio-economic level or status (34%),

with elementary education (50%) and who were homemakers (39%). As regards the abuse, there was a predominance of those that had suffered physical abuse (60%), for more than 10 years (59%), beginning in the first year of cohabitation (50%), that was absent during their pregnancy (53%) and that did not include forcible sexual relations (67%). Mean duration of abuse was around 160 months (range 8-540 months).

The report by the *Defensor del Pueblo* (People's Ombudsman) (1998) presented detailed data for the Madrid Autonomous Region on 667 women who had sought help at the Region's shelter houses between 1984 and 1997. Of these, the majority were still married to their aggressor (71%) and had an elementary level of education (50%). Mean age was 32.5 years, mean number of children was around two per woman, mean number of years cohabiting with the aggressor was 10 years, and mean duration of the abuse was 7.5 years.

The *Asociación Consuelo Bergés* (Cagigas, 1999) published an analysis of the most relevant characteristics of the 1,009 women from the Cantabria Autonomous Region (northern Spain) who had sought advice over a 5-year period (1993 to 1998). Four percent of these women strongly denied suffering abuse, in 42% of cases the question of abuse was not discussed, and the remaining 54% stated that they were victims of violence. As regards the last-mentioned group, all had suffered psychological abuse, and the majority also physical abuse (65%); the majority had reported the situation (to some kind of official body or service) (60%) and had informed the authorities that their children also suffered psychological (75%) and/or physical (54%) abuse; mean age of these women was 40.3 years, and the majority (54%) were under 40, lived in urban environments of more than 10,000 inhabitants (80%), had been born in Spain (94%) and were married (70%). Mean number of years cohabiting with the abuser was around 16, and 33% of them had lived with him for more than 10 years. The majority had only elementary education (60%), and less than 10% were graduates. Slightly over half of them did not work (no paid employment) (52%). The report concluded by claiming that the characteristics of these women were similar to those of women in Cantabria in general.

Finally, the data obtained in the macrosurvey by the *Instituto de la Mujer* (Vives, 2001) showed that approximately two-thirds of the abused women were aged between 30 and 64, and more than three-quarters had children. As regards marital status, 57% were married, 13% were separated or divorced, 2% were unmarried and 9% were widows. Their educational level and

employment situation were similar to those of Spanish women in general. Nine percent of them had suffered abuse over a period of at least 1 year, 19% for between 1 and 5 years, and 70% for more than 5 years.

Based on this data and on other available findings (Hornung, McCullough & Sugimoto, 1981; Echeburúa et al., 1990; Clow, Hutchins & Vogler, 1992; Vázquez, 1993; Caño, 1995; Hyde, 1995; Pérez del Campo, 1995; Eriksson, 1997; Heise et al., 1999), the hypothesis from which we start out in this work is that we are dealing with a social problem without limits or frontiers, so that abused women (and their abusers) can come from any country, social class, educational level or occupation.

In addition to analyzing these characteristics, a further objective of this work is to examine in more depth the experience of abuse in women that have suffered it.

## METHOD

The hypothetical universe of our study was made up of women victims of physical and/or psychological abuse by their most recent partner. The technique for selecting the sample was consecutive non-probabilistic sampling, that is, including all adult women that had formally reported physical and or psychological abuse by their most recent partner (or had sought help) during the data-collection period at the centres we contacted.

The sample eventually studied was made up of a total of 142 women from different regions and types of centre. A total of 31% of them lived in the area we refer to as north (Aragón, Asturias, Cantabria, Cataluña, Galicia, Navarra, Basque Country and Rioja), 28.2% in the central region (Castilla-La Mancha, Castilla y León, Valencia and Madrid), 21.8% in the south (Andalucía, Ceuta y Melilla, Extremadura and Murcia) and 19% in the islands (Balearics and Canaries).

In all, 57% were from specialized centres (shelter houses, Crime Victims' Office, specialized associations, etc.) and the remaining 43% from centres not specializing in attention to women victims of abuse (Social Services of municipal councils and Autonomous Regions, Women's Councils, women's associations, professional advisers/counsellors, etc.).

Mean age of the abused women (at time of interview) was 39.38 years (range 18-72,  $sd=10.60$ ), distributed in such a way that 19% were aged between 18 and 30, 44.4% between 31 and 40, 19% between 41 and 50, and

17.6% were 51 or over.

A total of 85.2% of these women had children, with a mean of 2.11 children per woman (range 1-7,  $sd=0.98$ ).

Seven percent of the women interviewed had less than elementary education, 45.1% elementary education, and 14.8% secondary education; 16.2% were qualified in a trade or craft, and 16.9% were graduates.

At the time of interview, 57% were in paid employment; of the remainder, 19% were homemakers, 16.2% were receiving unemployed benefit, 2.8% were pensioners, 2.8% were on sick leave and 2.2% were students. Among those in employment, the commonest occupations (expressed in relative percentages) were cleaners (34.6% of cases) and salespersons (16% of cases).

Economic status at the time of interview was assessed as low in 23.2% of cases, lower-middle in 31.2%, middle-middle in 25.9% and higher-middle in 7.7%.

## INSTRUMENTS

For collecting data on the sociodemographic variables, antecedents and characteristics of abuse we used an interview that included both closed (previously categorized) questions and open (categorized afterwards) questions, and both questions with exclusive response (the interviewee had to choose a response option, so that the percentages obtained totalled 100), and those with non-exclusive response (the person could choose as many options as she thought appropriate, so that the percentages obtained could total more than 100). As already pointed out, in this work we analyze solely the information provided by the women, and relating to these variables.

## PROCEDURE

In order to carry out the present study we contacted a wide spectrum of centres from different points within Spain, both those specializing in attention to abused women and those that, while not dealing specifically with this problem, were nevertheless disposed to helping women such a situation. By means of these contacts we secured the participation of a total of 26 centres from all over Spain, and it was agreed with them that it would be the female professionals working at each centre (psychologists, lawyers, social workers, etc.) who interviewed the women seeking help or advice<sup>1</sup>. Once completed, the interviews were sent to the researchers, who

<sup>1</sup>There is insufficient space here to provide a full list of all the people, associations, institutions, etc., involved in the data collection for this work. Nevertheless, we feel it is important to express our thanks to all of them, and particularly to those who made all the contacts and carried out the interviews. Without their help this work would not have been possible.

coded them and carried out the data analysis.

Although the fact of the interviewers being so numerous and diverse may constitute a limitation of this study, it was considered that the particular conditions of abused women who seek help (doubts, indecision, fear, etc.) made this the best option possible. In fact, some of the centres that agreed to collaborate were unable to carry

Coercive method	% of non-use	% of threat	% of use
Heavy object	87 (61.3%)	7 (4.9%)	48 (33.8%)
Sharp weapon	90 (63.4%)	32 (22.5%)	20 (14.1%)
Thrown object	110 (77.5%)	10 (7.0%)	22 (15.5%)
Firearm	127 (89.4%)	8 (5.6%)	7 (4.9%)

Acts committed	n (%)
Threats	133 (93.7%)
Humiliation and contempt	132 (93.0%)
Insults	132 (92.0%)
Making partner feel guilty	127 (89.4%)
Pushing	104 (73.2%)
Isolation (physical or social)	99 (69.7%)
Blows	97 (68.3%)
Breaking things	88 (62.0%)
Imposing economic hardship	83 (58.5%)
Punching	72 (50.7%)
Sexual violence	65 (45.8%)
Kicking	54 (38.0%)
Strangling	51 (35.9%)
Shutting in the house	39 (27.5%)
Throwing objects out (of the window, in the rubbish bin)	24 (16.9%)
Fractures	15 (10.6%)
Biting	14 (9.9%)
Abusive treatment of pets	12 (8.5%)
Hiding or stealing her things	7 (4.9%)
Emotional blackmail	6 (4.2%)
Hair-pulling	6 (4.2%)
Burning	6 (4.2%)
Head-butting	4 (2.8%)
Deprivation of food or sleep	3 (2.1%)
Spitting	2 (1.4%)
Silence	2 (1.4%)

out any interviews because the women who sought help there refused to participate out of fear. It was therefore considered unfeasible to set specific appointments for a research interview or to introduce personnel different from those normally working at the centre. In order to offset as far as possible the effects of this circumstance, the interview design was adjusted so that it could be applied with maximum guarantees by different people.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The descriptive data obtained are expressed for each case in the form of frequencies and percentages. In those cases (indicated in the text) in which only a particular group responded (for example, only those who had answered a previous question in the affirmative) we provide relative percentages; in the rest of cases we give absolute percentages. In some cases we present contingency tables, compared by means of the chi-squared test for determining whether the relationship between two variables is statistically significant, and we use the contingency coefficient in order to indicate the magnitude of this relationship. All of these analyses were carried out using the SPSS statistical package (version 10 for Macintosh).

## RESULTS

Given that the sociodemographic data of the interviewees were presented in the sample description section, the present section will be confined to a presentation of those results relating to the antecedents and description of the abuse, and to those on the possible relationship between the variables studied.

As regards antecedents, around a third of the women interviewed (37.3%) had antecedents of abuse in their family of origin context. Of these (relative percentages), in 58.5% of cases the father abused the mother, in 15.1% the father abused the mother and the children, and the remaining 26.4% of cases were distributed among other situations (abuse of grandmother by grandfather, of children by mother, among siblings, etc.); also in relative percentages, 43.4% stated that the abuse in their family of origin had been physical and psychological, 37.7% said it was psychological only, 17% that it was physical only and 1.9% that it was sexual.

As far as the abuse itself is concerned, mean duration was 147.08 months (range 1-600 months,  $sd=122.03$ ); 36.1% of interviewees reported having been abused for 60 months or less, and the remaining 63.9% for 61 months or more.

All the women interviewed had suffered psychological abuse and 88.7% had also suffered physical abuse.

As regards use of coercive methods, as Table 1 shows, heavy objects constitute the commonest method, either as a threat (4.9%) or in an effective way (33.8%). It is noteworthy that in slightly more than 10% of cases firearms were involved as a coercive element – a substantial proportion considering that in Spain there are fairly strong restrictions on the possession of arms.

As regards the acts of abuse, as Table 2 shows, practically all the interviewees had received threats, humiliations and expressions of contempt, or insults (93.7%, 93%, 92%, respectively). Commonest among the acts of

Commencement	n (%)
Time elapsed from start of relationship until commencement of abuse	
Less than 1 year	26 (18.3%)
Between 1 and 2 years	62 (43.7%)
Between 1 and 2 years	25 (17.6%)
Between 1 and 2 years	16 (11.2%)
More than 10 years	10 (7.1%)
Don't know/No answer	3 (2.1%)
Circumstances of abuse onset (non-exclusive response)	
During courtship	43 (30.7%)
In the first year of courtship/living together	53 (37.9%)
After 1 year or more of marriage/living together	17 (12.1%)
After birth of first child	19 (13.6%)
After the first argument	12 (8.6%)
Money problems	9 (6.4%)
Others	3 (2.1%)
Description of first abuse	
Physical violence	57 (40.1%)
Insults, threats and/or humiliations	42 (29.6%)
Jealousy episodes with insults	17 (12.0%)
Left her alone	10 (7.0%)
Others	16 (11.4%)
Her reaction (non-exclusive response)	
Feeling hurt, offended	45 (31.9%)
Feeling guilty	28 (19.7%)
Feeling humiliated	25 (17.7%)
No reaction	23 (16.3%)
Incredulity	22 (15.6%)
Walking out of the relationship for a while	17 (12.1%)
Denial, dismissing it as unimportant	16 (11.3%)
Fear	14 (9.9%)
Feeling powerless	14 (9.9%)
Anger	6 (4.3%)
Someone realized	
Yes	64 (45.1%)
No	64 (45.1%)
Don't know	14 (9.9%)
Told someone	
Yes	46 (32.4%)
No	96 (67.6%)

physical abuse are pushing (73.2%) and blows (68.3%); almost half of the women had suffered some type of sexual violence (45.8%).

Over half the interviewees (59.2%) had reported the abuse to the authorities at some time. Of those that had reported it, the mean time elapsed between the first occurrence of abuse and the first formal report was 103.49 months (range 0-372 months, sd=92.38), that is, slightly over 8.5 years. We next examined some of the characteristics of these reports (all expressed in relative percentages). Still with regard to time elapsed before reporting, 54.8% of those who reported the abuse took more than five years before doing so. Of these, 48.8% made just one report, 39.2% between two and five, and 12%, six. A total of 41.7% of those who reported the abuser subsequently withdrew the charges; 51.4% withdrew a charge once, 42.9% did so between twice and five times, and 5.7% did so 6 times or more.

As regards onset of the abuse, it should be pointed out first of all that the mean age of the women at the beginning of the relationship was 21.78 years (range 11-44 years, sd=5.75) and their mean age at onset of the abuse was 25.09 years (range 11-48 years, sd=6.62). As can be seen in Table 3, on comparing the two ages for each case, in more than 60% of them the abuse began during the first two years of the relationship. A similar result is obtained on asking about the circumstances associated with the onset of the abuse. As regards specifically the

Evolution, frequency and course of the abuse	%
Evolution of the abuse (from 1st occurrence to 2nd and subsequent)	
Between a few hours and one day	12 (8.5%)
Between a few days and one week	44 (31.0%)
Between a few weeks and one month	35 (24.6%)
Between a few months and one year	39 (27.5%)
More than one year	9 (6.3%)
Others	3 (2.1%)
Frequency (after 1st occurrence)	
Once per month or less	31 (21.8%)
Several times per month	51 (35.9%)
Several times per week	25 (17.6%)
Daily	28 (19.7%)
Others	7(5%)
Course of the abuse	
With periods of total calm	38 (26.8%)
Becoming more and more intense	10 (7.0%)
Becoming more and more frequent	23 (16.2%)
Becoming more and more intense and frequent	69 (48.6%)
Others	2 (1.4%)

first abuse event, 40% of the women said that it consisted in physical violence. The most frequent reaction to this first event was to feel hurt or offended (31.9%), while the second most common reaction was to feel guilt (19.7%). The same percentage of them thought that someone close had realized what was going on as thought that nobody had noticed (45.1% in either case), and almost a third (32.4%) told someone.

With regard to the evolution, frequency and course of the abuse, as can be seen in Table 4, approximately a third of the interviewees stated that between the first and second abuse events there was between a few days and one week (31.0%); after the first occurrence, in 35.9% of cases there were several per month, and in 48.6% of cases they became more and more frequent and intense.

In the descriptions of the usual development of the abuse events (Table 5) it is noteworthy that a little over

Usual development	%
Did you have any way of anticipating the abuse?	
Yes	112 (78.9%)
No	30 (21.1%)
If so, how? (relative %; non-exclusive response)	
Whenever we failed to agree	51 (45.5%)
Whenever he got angry	41 (36.6%)
Whenever he drank alcohol	40 (35.7%)
Whenever we had a row	35 (31.3%)
Whenever we had problems with money/work	31 (27.7%)
Whenever anything worked out badly	5 (4.5%)
Others	7 (6.3%)
Did you try to defend yourself against the abuse?	
Yes	99 (69.7%)
No	43 (30.3%)
If so, how? (relative %; non-exclusive response)	
By returning the blows or insults (or threatening to do so)	38 (38.4%)
By trying to persuade him not to do it	37 (37.4%)
By not contradicting him at all, calming him down	23 (23.2%)
By fleeing	20 (20.2%)
By protecting yourself against the blows	10 (10.1%)
Victim's usual reaction (non-exclusive response)	
Feeling depressed, sad, unhappy	67 (47.5%)
Crying, feeling humiliated	58 (41.1%)
Fleeing the situation	29 (20.6%)
Anger, impotence	26 (18.4%)
Trying not to be noticed, keeping quiet	25 (17.7%)
Feeling guilty	23 (16.3%)
Trying to put things right	20 (14.2%)
Feeling helpless	13 (9.2%)
Feeling alone	5 (3.5%)
Did you hope he would change?	
Yes	126 (88.7%)
No	16 (11.3%)

three-quarters of the women interviewed (78.9%) considered that they had some way of anticipating the abuse, and of these (relative percentages), almost half (45.5%) claimed that abuse occurred whenever the couple failed to agree. Almost two-thirds (69.7%) stated that they tried to defend themselves against the abuse in some way, the most cited forms of defence being returning (or threatening to return) the blows or insults (38.4%) and trying to dissuade the abuser (37.4%) (relative percentages). The reaction most frequently reported as customary after the abuse events was to feel depressed, sad or unhappy (47.5%), followed by crying and feelings of humiliation (41.1%). Finally, the vast majority of those interviewed (88.7%) hoped for a change in the abuser's attitude or behaviour towards them in the future.

As far as the termination of the relationship is concerned (Table 6), 90.8% of the women interviewed expressed at some point their intention to end the relationship. Among these (relative percentages), the reason most often cited was fear that the violence toward her would increase (46.6%). As regards the current situation, at the time of the interview less than a fifth of the women were still living with their abuser (19.7%); in the remainder, the commonest situation was to be separated, divorced or in the process of divorce (43%).

Termination	n(%)
Did you at any time express an intention to end the relationship?	
Yes	129 (90.8%)
No	13 (9.2%)
If so, why? (relative %; non-exclusive response)	
Fear that the violence toward you would increase	64 (49.6%)
Desire to end the relationship	61 (47.3%)
Fear of being killed	39 (30.2%)
Fear that the violence toward my children would increase	32 (24.8%)
The advice of a professional	22 (17.1%)
The advice of a relative	17 (13.2%)
Fear that he might kill my children	10 (7.8%)
I realized he was not going to change	5 (3.9%)
Others	6 (4.7%)
Current situation	
Still living with the abuser	28 (19.7%)
Separated, divorced or in the process of divorce	61 (43.0%)
In a shelter house	22 (15.5%)
Still harassed by ex-partner	19 (13.4%)
You have a new relationship	6 (4.2%)
You live somewhere unknown to your ex-partner	3 (2.1%)
You are a widow with no new relationship	2 (1.4%)
The abuser has left home	1 (0.7%)

**Table 7**  
**Economic status**

		Economic status of the couple				
		Low	Lower-Middle	Middle-Middle	Upper-Middle	High
Current economic status	Low	5 (31.3%)	8 (25.8%)	16 (26.2%)	3 (10.0%)	1 (25.0%)
	Lower-Middle	7 (43.7%)	18 (58.0%)	15 (24.6%)	5 (16.7%)	2 (50.0%)
	Middle-Middle	4 (25.0%)	5 (16.2%)	29 (47.6%)	12 (40.0%)	1 (25.0%)
	Upper-middle	-	-	1 (1.6%)	10 (33.3%)	-

**Table 8**  
**Relationship between the variable "centre" and other variables studied**

	Specialized centre	Non-specialized centre	Significance
Education Primary Intermediate Higher	39 (48.1%) 29 (35.8%) 13 (16.0%)	35 (57.4%) 15 (24.6%) 11 (18.0%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.2)=2.061 p=0.357
Employment situation In paid employment Unemployed/homemaker	42 (51.9%) 39 (48.1%)	39 (63.9%) 22 (36.1%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.1)=2.073 p=0.150
Current economic status Low Lower-middle Middle-middle Upper-middle	21 (25.9%) 23 (28.4%) 30 (37.0%) 7 (83.6%)	12 (19.7%) 24 (39.3%) 21 (34.4%) 4 (6.6%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.3)=2.107 p=0.550
Duration of abuse Less than 60 months More than 60 months	25 (30.9%) 56 (69.1%)	24 (39.3%) 37 (60.7%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.1)=1.107 p=0.293
Reported to authorities Yes No	51 (63.0%) 30 (37.0%)	33 (54.1%) 28 (49.9%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.1)=1.132 p=0.287
Course of the abuse With periods of total calm Becoming more and more intense Becoming more and more frequent Becoming more and more intense and frequent	17 (21.0%) 8 (9.9%) 8 (9.9%) 48 (59.3%)	21 (34.4%) 4 (6.6%) 15 (24.6%) 21 (34.4%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.3)= <b>11.869</b> p=0.008 Contingency coefficient: 0.278
Abuse anticipated Yes No	62 (76.5%) 19 (23.5%)	50 (83.3%) 10 (16.7%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.1)=0.973 p=0.324
Defended herself Yes No	56 (69.1%) 25 (30.9%)	43 (71.7%) 17 (28.3%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.1)=0.106 p=0.745
Current situation Still with abuser No longer with abuser	16 (19.8%) 65 (80.2%)	12 (19.7%) 49 (80.3%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.1)=0.001 p=0.990

Once this descriptive analysis had been completed we proceeded to examine the relationship between some of the variables studied.

Thus, we carried out an initial analysis with the aim of determining the relationship between current economic status and economic status during the period as a couple, as they were perceived by the interviewees (Table 7).

The data obtained indicate that there is a significant relationship ( $\alpha^2=52.265$ ,  $p=0.000$ ; contingency coefficient=0.519), between the two variables. Specifically, it can be stated that interviewees perceived their economic status as having fallen in relation to the level when they were in the relationship, so that the percentages of low and lower-middle cases increased and those of middle-middle, upper-middle and high decreased substantially.

We then proceeded to determine whether the fact of being attended at a centre specializing in attention to abused women or at a non-specialized one was related to

the demographic and abuse characteristics of the interviewees (Table 8).

The results obtained indicate that the variable “centre at which woman was attended” is significantly related to the variable “course of the abuse”, though even in this case the relationship is weak, as indicated by the contingency coefficient.

Subsequently, we proceeded to determine whether duration of the abuse was related to the demographic and abuse characteristics of the women interviewed (Table 9).

These results show that the variable “duration of the abuse” is significantly related to the descriptive variable “current situation”, though the relationship between the two variables is weak, as indicated by the contingency coefficient.

Finally, we examined whether the fact of reporting the abuse to the authorities (or failing to do so) at any time was related to the demographic and abuse characteristics of the interviewees (Table 10).

**Table 9**  
Relationship between the variable “duration of abuse” and other variables studied

	5 years or less	More than 5 years	Significance
Antecedents of abuse in family of origin			
Yes	22 (46.8%)	31 (34.1%)	$\chi^2(d.f.2)=2.127$ $p=0.145$
No	25 (53.2%)	60 (65.9%)	
Reported to authorities			
Yes	28 (57.1%)	56 (60.2%)	$\chi^2(d.f.1)=0.125$ $p=0.723$
No	21 (42.9%)	37 (39.8%)	
Course of the abuse			
With periods of total calm	12 (24.5%)	26 (28.0%)	$\chi^2(d.f.3)=0.419$ $p=0.936$
Becoming more and more intense	5 (10.2%)	7 (7.5%)	
Becoming more and more frequent	8 (16.3%)	15 (16.1%)	
Becoming more and more intense and frequent	24 (49.0%)	45 (48.4%)	
Abuse anticipated			
Yes	42 (87.5%)	70 (75.3%)	$\chi^2(d.f.1)=2.899$ $p=0.089$
No	6 (12.5%)	23 (24.7%)	
Defended herself			
Yes	37 (77.1%)	62 (66.7%)	$\chi^2(d.f.1)=1.643$ $p=0.200$
No	11 (22.9%)	31 (33.3%)	
Hoped abuser would change			
Yes	42 (87.5%)	84 (90.3%)	$\chi^2(d.f.1)=0.265$ $p=0.606$
No	6 (12.5%)	9 (9.7%)	
Expressed intention to end relationship			
Yes	45 (91.8%)	84 (90.3%)	$\chi^2(d.f.1)=0.088$ $p=0.766$
No	4 (8.2%)	9 (9.7%)	
Still with abuser			
Yes	3 (6.1%)	25 (26.9%)	$\chi^2(d.f.1)=8.736$ $p=0.003$ Contingency coefficient: 0.241
No	46 (93.9%)	68 (73.1%)	



The results show that the variable “reporting the abuse” is significantly related to the descriptive variables “intention to end the relationship” and “current situation”.

## DISCUSSION

In general terms, and as a first conclusion, it can be said that the results obtained corroborate the hypothesis proposed. That is, that abuse victims come from all types of sociodemographic backgrounds, so that they are similar in this regard to the non-abused women in the same environment.

Considering these results more closely, it should be pointed out, for example, that our sample includes women who are still in the relationship with their abuser, others who have just left it and are in a shelter house, and others whose relationship with their abuser finished at some indeterminate point in the past. Thus, the data on present age is not strictly comparable with those of other studies carried out with women who had just left the abusive relationship. In fact, our sample is quite similar, in this regard, to that studied by Cagigas (1999),

whose results do indeed coincide with our own in relation to the predominant age segment.

The employment situation and level of education obtained in our sample are, in general, comparable to the distribution of these variables in the general female population (Instituto de la Mujer, 2001, 2002). It is noteworthy, however, that the percentage of women with a job outside the home is more than 15 points higher than that for Spanish women in general (40.4% in the general female population and 57% in our case). This may be related to the financial difficulties of these women (reflected in the data indicating a substantial reduction in their economic status), which may have led them to rejoin the labour market in order to support themselves.

An important point to mention is that while data on abuse (both from official statistics and from the media) frequently reflect a marked presence (sometimes an overwhelming majority) of women from the most disadvantaged social sectors, this is not the case of the studies such as those referred to here or our own.

A possible explanation for this would be that, on experiencing abuse, those with limited economic resources

**Table 10**  
Relationship between the variable reporting to the authorities and other variables studied

	Reported	No report	Significance
Antecedents of abuse in family of origin			
Yes	32 (39.0%)	21 (37.5%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.1)=0.033 p=0.857
No	50 (61.0%)	35 (62.5%)	
Course of the abuse			
With periods of total calm	17 (20.2%)	21 (36.3%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.3)=5.632 p=0.131
Becoming more and more intense	7 (8.3%)	5 (8.6%)	
Becoming more and more frequent	13 (15.5%)	10 (17.2%)	
Becoming more and more intense and frequent	47 (56.0%)	22 (27.9%)	
Abuse anticipated			
Yes	68 (81.9%)	44 (75.9%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.1)=0.769 p=0.381
No	15 (18.1%)	14 (24.1%)	
Defended herself			
Yes	61 (73.5%)	38 (65.5%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.1)=1.039 p=0.308
No	22 (26.5%)	20 (34.5%)	
Hoped abuser would change			
Yes	74 (89.2%)	52 (89.7%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.1)=0.009 p=0.925
No	9 (10.8%)	6 (10.3%)	
Expressed intention to end relationship			
Yes	81 (96.4%)	48 (82.8%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.1)= <b>7.709</b> p= <b>0.005</b> Contingency coefficient: 0.227
No	3 (3.6%)	10 (17.2%)	
Still with abuser			
Yes	6 (7.1%)	22 (37.9%)	$\chi^2$ (d.f.1)= <b>20.545</b> p= <b>0.000</b> Contingency coefficient: 0.356
No	78 (92.9%)	36 (62.1%)	

tend to turn to public bodies or services (reporting the situation to police, appealing to social services for help or counselling, etc.), which customarily keep (and publish) detailed registers and statistics of the cases they deal with; those with higher social and economic levels tend to seek the services of private professionals (lawyers, psychologists, etc.), who do not make public the figures on cases attended (Jovaní et al., 1994; Defensor del Pueblo, 1998; Echeburúa et al., 1998). According to this hypothesis, the reality of abuse would occur in all social classes, but there would be differences between women from different classes with regard to the knowledge of these events that is socially available.

In conclusion, and considering the findings presented here, we can state that abuse is a universal phenomenon that occurs regardless of social class, economic circumstances, level of education, and so on. The key to revealing the reality of the situation continues to be the design of alternative data-collection systems that would permit us to see beyond the official statistics of reports to the authorities and calls for help to social services; otherwise, the “invisibility” of the problem will persist, even if only for certain social classes or groups.

As regards other questions, the data relating to the antecedents of abuse in family of origin are, for example, similar to those obtained in the 1989 study carried out in the Madrid Autonomous Region, and show that these types of antecedents are present in a considerable proportion of abused women (a third of them), though not in all of them, as has been suggested on occasions from the so-called theory of intergenerational transmission of domestic violence (Strauss, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Browne, 1993). In any case, the significance and effects of such antecedents are issues pending review and reanalysis, since new data available on the incidence of abuse (and presented in the first part of this work) indicate that this is a more extensive phenomenon than it was thought, so that, obviously, the presence of this type of antecedent will also be more widespread.

As far as abuse by partner or ex-partner is concerned, the results obtained coincide with those already described in the earliest literature in the field (Dobash & Dobash, 1978; Walker, 1979; Rosenbaum & O’Leary, 1981) and with those of more recent studies, such as that of Echeburúa and cols. (1996), in that in the majority of cases the abuse starts at the beginning of the relationship or marriage and, having begun, does not disappear – indeed, the probability of the occurrence of abuse increases.

An interesting result concerns the finding of a percentage of women who state that the abuse did not begin until 5 or 10 years into the relationship. Without rejecting this as false, it would seem reasonable to make a closer analysis in order to determine whether the abuse did indeed commence so late, or whether what in fact occurred is that the awareness of suffering abuse failed to emerge in some cases until well into the marriage or relationship.

Likewise, duration of the relationship is similar to that indicated in the literature on the subject, situating the mean number of years spent in the abusive relationship at around ten (Casa Refugio de la Comunidad de Madrid, 1989; Echeburúa et al., 1996; Informe Defensor del Pueblo, 1998; Cagigas, 1999; Vives, 2001).

In relation to this, it should be pointed out that the classic literature in the field has repeatedly insisted on mentioning masochism (Snell & cols., 1964; Gayford, 1975), passivity or lack of reaction in women in situations of abuse (Star, 1978). However, our own results are more in line with those of Cantera (1999, 2000) or Kelly (2000), and suggest that these women develop a whole series of survival strategies. Indeed, the abused women interviewed for this study show awareness of struggling actively to defend or protect themselves against the abuse, and consider as defensive actions both more active strategies (such as returning the blows or insults) and more passive ones (such as flight or protection). Thus, these results show that abused women do not accept their situation either willingly or passively, but rather attempt to modify it using strategies (passive or active) they consider appropriate. In view of this, it would appear necessary not only to undertake a more thorough analysis of this data, but also, from the point of view of intervention, to work towards providing women at risk (for example, those that have sought help but still live with their abuser) with effective strategies for protecting themselves and their children.

Another interesting finding concerns the phenomenon of anticipation. Thus, according to the responses given, the great majority of women interviewed felt that there were indicators for anticipating abuse events – that is, they considered that they possessed a “control mechanism”, and that they could perceive “danger signals”. As Walter (1989, 1991) points out, this is a characteristic element of the so-called phase of accumulation or construction of tension within what is referred to as the “cycle of domestic violence”, and this detection of “signals” of tension would lead the woman to try and deploy

the survival strategies we have just mentioned (as well as producing reactions described in the results section, such as trying to calm down the abuser, avoiding things that might irritate him, etc.) in an effort to control the situation.

What is even more important, in our opinion, is that women not only have a certain "feeling of control" of the situation, but that the vast majority of those we interviewed were openly convinced that they could change their abuser. This may well be linked to a mistaken idea of love (deep-rooted in our culture), in which it is seen as all-powerful. Thus, in a survey by Spain's Centre for Sociological Research (CIS, 1995) on affective attitudes and behaviours, 75% of respondents (77% of women and 74% of men) agreed with the statement "love can conquer all". This idea can easily contribute to transferring feelings of failure and guilt (for not having done enough to save the relationship and/or change the abuser) onto the woman suffering the abuse. Moreover, not only do these types of feelings emerge as highly important among the women in our sample, but they are also repeatedly mentioned in the literature. Thus, for example, Roy (1977), or later Hyde (1995) argue that the hope that their partner will change is one of the reasons that explain women's decisions to stay with their abuser.

As far as the acts of abuse themselves are concerned, the extensive list (drawn up from an initial list with additions from the women themselves) constitutes a "catalogue of horror"; as authors such as Ferreira (1995) suggest, the strategies employed by abusers are comparable to those used in torture.

Another interesting point emerges from analysis of the situation in relation to reporting the abuse to the authorities. As is repeatedly stressed in the literature, abuse is a concealed offence, and abused women do not always report their abuser (Echeburúa & Corral, 1998); the reasons for such non-reporting are many and varied (Benítez, 1998; Abril, 1999), and include fear, lack of confidence in the outcome, social pressure, and so on. Even in the case of the sample examined here, in which the women had actually sought help, nearly 41% had never reported their abuser. Of those that had indeed filed one or more reports, almost half had subsequently withdrawn the charge(s). It is clearly necessary to look more closely into the reasons why women fail to report abusers or withdraw reports they have made. This would help us not only to understand them better, but also to provide the means for dealing with these reasons and for providing such women with the protection they require or need.

As regards the reasons for ending the abusive relationship, there is a degree of debate: while some of the authors who did early work in this area, such as Gelles (1976), suggested that the severity and frequency of the abuse were determining factors in the decision to end the relationship, later studies (Zubizarreta et al., 1994) suggest that the longer the abuse goes on and the more severe it is, the lower the probability of ending the relationship, given the emergence of fear, low self-esteem, guilt, and so on. Our results would be in line with the former argument, showing that fear for one's own safety (in relation to both increasing violence and the possibility of being killed) constitutes the most powerful reason for terminating the relationship. Our data also suggest that the advice of other people, despite its importance, is not a determining factor for ending the relationship. Thus, our findings provide new indications about how to deal with situations in which women stay with their abuser and seek help or counselling about the problem.

On analyzing the relationships between the variables studied, we see that the variable "centre at which woman was attended" is only significantly related to the course of the abuse, so that women who are subject to more and more frequent and intense abuse tend to seek help in specialized centres. We also find that the variables "duration of the abuse" and "reporting" are significantly related to the variable "current situation", so that among the women who are still with their abuser, the percentages of those that have not filed reports and of those who have been abused for longest are higher.

The small number of significant relationships found in our analyses suggests that the true element these interviewees have in common is the fact of being in an abusive relationship, and that type of centre attended, reporting or non-reporting, or time spent with the abuser are not significantly related either to their sociodemographic characteristics or to the abuse itself.

Thus, for example, in the case of type of centre attended, the data obtained suggest that while course of the abuse does indeed influence the fact of choosing one type or another, it is not related to any other abuse or sociodemographic variables, but rather to different elements, such as proximity of the centre, previous knowledge of it, accessibility for the woman seeking help, and so on. Such aspects clearly need to be analyzed in depth, especially with a view to rationalizing the provision of services, improving those most commonly used and avoiding duplication in the distribution of resources.

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