

Barriers Preventing Latina Immigrants from Seeking Advocacy Services for Domestic Violence Victims: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract Domestic violence is a national public health problem resulting in numerous deaths, physical injuries, and mental and emotional disorders (Malley-Morrison and Hines 2007). While domestic violence influences communities of all races, socioeconomic statuses, educational levels, and geographical settings (Hass, Dutton, and Orloff 2000), some groups, such as Latina immigrants, are especially vulnerable as they face additional challenges. The purpose of this study is to document, analyze, and report the voices of Latina immigrants in Central Iowa as they share their experiences with outreach services. Through semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group with undocumented Latinas, we examine the multiple challenges faced by this vulnerable population. Our findings reveal that intersecting structural and institutional conditions make it more complicated for Latina victims to respond to partner abuse. Some of the most salient barriers include: unstable residency status, experiences of institutional discrimination, and economic inequality. Policy recommendations and implications are also discussed.

Keywords International · Women · Intimate partner/spouse abuse · Services outreach

Introduction

Domestic violence is a widespread problem that threatens women's health and safety (Ingram et al. 2010). An estimated

8.7 million women in the U.S. are physically abused by a male partner every year (Roberts and Roberts 2005), causing a national public health problem resulting in numerous deaths, physical injuries, and mental health disorders (Malley-Morrison and Hines 2007). Women who are victims of domestic violence report greater psychological problems and poorer social adjustment than women who have never been exposed to domestic violence (Rossman 2001). Despite changes in U.S. public policies targeting the problem of domestic violence, little progress has been made in protecting underrepresented groups (Moe 2007) such as Latinas, especially immigrants. Indeed, a handful of studies have documented the severity and health consequences of domestic violence among Latinas. For example, Hazen and Soriano (2007) found that 22 % of the immigrant women in their study reported physical assault in their lifetime, while 24.5 % of the female migrant-seasonal workers experienced physical violence. These women, as women from other studies, experience a high number of personal injuries and suicide attempts and struggle with mental health disorders such as depression (Malley-Morrison and Hines 2007; Valdéz and Juárez 1998).

This limited research reveals that not only do Latinas face mental and physical health problems as a consequence of domestic violence exposure, but they also have to deal with additional institutional and legal barriers when they try to escape victimization. Those barriers include unstable residency status, language barriers, experiences of institutional racism and discrimination, and gender and economic inequality (Menjívar 1999; Salcido and Adelman 2004; Rivera 2003; Yoshihama 2000). These intersecting factors inhibit Latina victims' ability to come forward to report the abuse and access institutional services.

The present study seeks to extend our understanding of domestic violence in the Latino population by exploring the experiences of Latina immigrants, predominantly Mexican

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women in a metropolitan area of Iowa, who faced domestic violence, had previously contacted an anti-violence organization, and had used its services at some point in their lives. Specifically, we examine the challenges they faced when they sought help from formal institutions and explore how immigration and domestic violence policies provide support to or endanger immigrant battered women (Salcido and Adelman 2004). Knowledge derived from research reported here about the first hand experiences of undocumented Latina immigrants might be helpful for understanding how Latina immigrant victims of domestic abuse can build more effective connections with advocacy and formal organizations and how they can better connect with formal systems of assistance and resources.

This paper first provides a review of current literature on the factors deterring Latina women from seeking institutional help, as well as the data and methodology used in this study. We explain how a narrative methodological approach was suited to exploring the experiences of women who have been marginalized and who, to a large degree, have been dismissed from scholarship (Boonzaier and Schalkwyk 2011). Then, building on previous work in Southern California and using a similar analytical framework (Vidales 2010), data is examined to provide an analysis of the factors that shape the ways in which immigrant women attempt to escape victimization, and to offer understanding of the ways in which intersectionalities affect Latina victims as they encounter structural and institutional barriers to the pursuit of safety (Vidales 2010). We end with policy implications.

Background

The recognition of domestic violence as a critical, severe, and widespread problem and the importance of protecting female victims from subjection to battery, assault, and extreme cruelty have seen major progress in the past 20 years (Mears and Visser 2005; Conyers 2007). However, despite public policy changes and the continuous public education about legal protection, numerous immigrant victims are uninformed about domestic violence services and are usually afraid to call or report the crime to the police (Erez and Hartley 2003). Several factors, including unstable residency status, legal proceedings, limited economic mobility, and level of education often constrain the ability of these victims to leave their abusers and seek help. Cultural norms have also been found to influence Latina immigrants' decisions to leave their abusive partner. We have addressed this issue in another article (see Reina et al. 2014).

Unstable residency status has been cited in literature as a contributing factor that deters victims from seeking help. In violence against women studies, findings demonstrate that undocumented Latinas or those who have irregular legal status

fear contacting authorities because they believe this may lead to their deportation (Salcido and Adelman 2004). For instance, in one study, researchers found that batterers used immigration status or "immigration-related abuse" as a tool to exert intimidation, power, and control over their victims (Hass, Dutton, and Orloff 2000, p. 105). Female victims who are undocumented or lack permanent legal immigrant status often do not leave their abuser for fear of deportation (Dutton, Orloff, and Hass 2000) or because they are often unaware of laws that may protect them from abuse (Raj and Silverman 2002).

Legal and social service proceedings make it difficult for Latina immigrant victims to comply with social policy requirements. Past studies have shown that after they leave an abusive relationship, low-income minority victims often rely on social services to fulfill their economic needs, as they regularly depend on their abusive partner or husband for financial support (Purvin 2007). Studies have shown that acceptance of government aid impedes undocumented victims' ability to obtain legal documentation to stay in the U.S., as the use of such assistance makes it difficult for them to demonstrate "good moral character" during a period of 3 years, one of the requirements for residency eligibility (Menjívar and Salcido 2002, p. 912). Furthermore, research across minority groups reveals that public aid workers, those individuals who are meant to aid low-income victims by assisting them in the steps to receive economic assistance and security, often increase the barriers and the victim's vulnerability and alienation. For example, Purvin (2007) found that her participants felt disrespected by caseworkers and other welfare staff so they opted to avoid going to their offices as much as they possibly could. In addition, social service providers failed to offer information to victims regarding additional policy protections that the victims were entitled to use. These types of interactions between victims and social services providers preclude their efforts to find material support to achieve some economic stability.

Research indicates that financial insecurity and dependency associated with unstable residency status constrain a victim's safety strategies. Latinas who face domestic violence tend to be more economically disadvantaged (Raj and Silverman 2002) and have lower levels of educational attainment (Vidales 2010), as many developing countries where undocumented Latinas come from may lack a public education system (Orloff and Garcia 2013). Latinos in the U.S. have the lowest levels of education when compared to all other ethnic groups (Ryan and Siebens 2012). In general, Mexicans born outside the U.S. have higher school dropout rates (Fry 2010). Scholars have argued that at the cumulative level, Latinas who do not have a level of education are more vulnerable to abuse at the hands of intimates and less informed about their legal rights when dealing with domestic violence (Vidales 2010). Moreover, for some immigrant women who

are able to obtain permanent legal immigrant status, finding work might be especially difficult as they often lack childcare, transportation, and formal education experience (see Reina et al. 2013) and often have restricted exposure to English language and occupational skills (Orloff and Garcia 2013); factors that might further confine them to their home space and deter them from seeking outside help.

Qualitative Study on Latina Immigrant Victims in Iowa

The purpose of this study is twofold. One goal is to examine women's narratives about the factors that influence Latina immigrant victims' efforts to reach out for formal help through qualitative and narrative data into their life experiences in the Midwest, more specifically Central Iowa. In addition, we aim to understand their responses to domestic violence within the context of American society. The exploratory research we present here was part of a broader project. The present study was guided by one research question: What barriers influence immigrant Latina victims' help-seeking behaviors and prevent them from building effective connections with advocacy organizations and public service institutions in the state of Iowa?

Methods

This study utilized qualitative methodologies; specifically, a narrative approach was used in this study because it allowed participants to express their experiences entirely and in their own terms (Bloom 1998). According to Boonzaier and Schalkwyk (2011), women attempt to relay reasoned stories about their experiences of abuse through their narratives. Boonzaier and Schalkwyk argue that:

A narrative approach acknowledges that narratives are not simply aimed at conveying meaning, but also at constructing subjectivity for the narrating individuals. Women therefore not only tell stories about their relationships and the violence but also they construct themselves (and significant others) in those stories (p. 269).

Furthermore, the same authors argue that women tell their stories to reconstitute the past, understand the present, and hypothesize about the future of their lives. In the present study, deep interpretations of personal narratives were used to “gain a greater understanding of women's lived experiences and the concrete realities of their daily life” (Bloom 1998, p. 8). In addition, this study is set apart from other qualitative work because it provides in-depth information about the unique experiences of domestic violence services outreach in a relatively understudied population.

Sample

Participant Recruitment Participant recruitment was secured through the director of a nonprofit domestic violence and sexual assault agency in a metropolitan area of Central Iowa, with whom the lead researcher had established contact in previous visits to the agency. The advocate and volunteer coordinator of that organization contacted fifteen Latinas who were currently using or had recently used the agency's service, informed them about the study, and asked if they were willing to participate. After that, the principal investigator contacted by phone those individuals who expressed their willingness to participate, explained the study, and invited them to participate in a face-to-face interview. Participants were also invited to participate in a focus group with other Latinas who had received services from the same nonprofit organization. Ten women accepted the invitation to participate in the interview phase of the study. Only four of those women were able to participate in the focus group. Those who refused to participate in this second stage of the study cited time constraints as the reason for doing so.

Participant Information The 10 women who make up the sample of this study described themselves as immigrants from Mexico and Central/South America. Their ages ranged from 25 to 42 years. The time they have lived in the U.S. ranged from 5 to 14 years. At the time of the study, most women were separated or had divorced from their partners or husbands. The majority of participants encountered domestic violence early in their marriages or relationships. Some participants had either low-skill jobs or were unemployed when they were interviewed, and all were unemployed when they faced partner abuse. No participants had legal residency status when they experienced partner abuse, though at the time of the study, nine were in the process of adjusting their undocumented status through the U visa and one was initiating the procedures. All Latina participants were native Spanish speakers and two reported having limited English skills. To protect individuals' privacy and research confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to participants (see Table 1 for a description of participants' demographics).

Procedures

Data collection strategies included open-ended interviews and a focus group. Both data collection procedures followed a semi-structured narrative format, which allowed the principal researcher to steer the discussion and permitted participants to tell their stories in ways they deemed relevant (Boonzaier and Schalkwyk 2011). The lead researcher conducted individual interviews to capture the full diversity of experiences among Latina participants and to protect their confidentiality. The focus group was used to elucidate, expand, and challenge

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of participants

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	No. children	Education	Job status at the time of D.V.	Current job status	Length of time in the U.S.	Length of time in Iowa
Maria	41	Ecuadorian	2	Technical degree ^A	Selling food from home	Unemployed	12 years	12 years
Sonia	35	Salvadorian	2	Elementary school	Unemployed	Retail sales	5 years	5 years
Melba	32	Mexican	1	High school	Unemployed	Housekeeping manager	10 years	10 years
Rubi ^B	37	Mexican	3	High school	Unemployed	Unemployed	14 years	14 years
Lola	25	Mexican	2	High school	Unemployed	Cashier at dry cleaners	8 years	8 years
Lucia	44	Mexican	3	Nurse	Unemployed	Office cleaning	15 years	11 years
Ana	31	Mexican	2	High school	Unemployed	Waitress	11 years	10 years
Isabel	34	Mexican	3	Elementary school	Unemployed	Hotel cleaning	11 years	5 years
Angela	37	Mexican	5	High school	Unemployed	Unemployed	10 years	10 years
Lina	37	Mexican	3	High school	Unemployed	Factory job	6 years	6 years

Notes. A) She obtained a high school diploma with a minor in accounting. High school technical degrees in some Latin American countries allow students to pursue specialization while they obtain their high school degree. In the case of this participant, she had developed skills in accounting knowledge, analysis and interpretation of financial statements, and computer skills (e.g., word, excel, power point);

B) This participant lived in a rural area in Iowa during the time of the abuse

the information that was collected from the individual interviews (Gill et al. 2008). The questions of the interview and focus group guides were meant to evoke responses on a range of issues related to the challenges faced by Latinas when seeking help or social services. Participants were asked to share their personal experiences as they were trying to extract themselves from their abusive partners. They also were asked if they had received support from other resources besides advocacy service providers (e.g., police, clergy, or government service providers), and what obstacles they encountered when trying to use them.

The interviews and the focus group were conducted at a private location chosen by the participants. Most participants chose to be interviewed at a private room at the agency's facilities, though two individual interviews were conducted at the participants' homes. The focus group took place at another service agency from which the participants had received services, and was conveniently located for them. At the beginning of the interviews and focus group the participants were given a copy of the consent form, which they read through completely. The written consent form was available in Spanish and English and participants were asked for their language preference. They chose to sign the Spanish version of the form.

The lead investigator then discussed pertinent details of the project, and informed the participants of their rights. Understanding that there were different levels and types of language use, participants were asked for their language preference. All the interviews and the focus group were conducted in Spanish by the principal investigator, who is a native speaker of Spanish and fully bilingual. The length of the interviews ranged from 60 to 90 min. The focus group session lasted 90 min. With participants' permission, all interviews and the focus group were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed verbatim; the data were analyzed in Spanish by the lead researcher, and were later translated into English for reporting purposes.

Data Analysis

Informed by a narrative approach, we sought to be attentive to how participants reflected on their ways of seeking advocacy services. We compiled narratives of each participant and developed a coding scheme that elucidated their interactions with domestic violence service organizations. The data analysis process included reading and rereading the transcripts to get an initial sense of the data. Then, we used continuous coding to identify themes and categories surrounding factors or barriers influencing domestic violence help-seeking practices among research participants. After reading the participants' narratives, an initial code was written in front of each response. Through these codes, items of information were classified as pertinent accounts for the factors perceived by

Latina victims as influencing their help-seeking practices. Then we coded data that identified exclusive and shared patterns of experiences across participants (Purvin 2007). Themes surrounding service connections or barriers to obtain formal services and how they mediated participants' ability to respond to domestic violence were identified and grouped into categories. Later, particular quotes were chosen to illustrate each category.

Building on previous work and using a similar analytical outline (Vidales 2010), this research identifies two primary categories involving barriers to domestic violence services: institutional barriers and structural barriers. To conceptualize both types of barriers, we offer the reader through a quote of Rivera (1994, p. 257) cited in Vidales (2010):

[We must acknowledge] that Latinas face multiple barriers because of their race, national origin, and gender: that this multiple discrimination factors into how Latinas experience and respond to domestic violence; and that *institutional racism* and *patriarchal structures* are inter-related in the experiences of Latinas.

In the present study, we refer to institutional barriers as obstacles imposed by federal and community-based organizations affecting the way Latina immigrant victims respond to partner abuse. Such institutions may include, but are not limited to domestic violence and sexual assault shelters, and victim services programs in police departments, hospitals, and public services agencies. Structuralism is a theoretical framework that was developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He states: “by structuralism or structuralist, I mean that there exist, within the social world itself and not only within symbolic systems (language, myths, etc.), objective structures independent of the consciousness and will of agents, which are capable of guiding and constraining their practices or their representations” (Bourdieu 1989, p. 14). We use his thesis to denote structural barriers as social categories attributed by society that position individuals in unequal status and disadvantage in respect to dominant groups. Those barriers comprise lack of English proficiency and education attainment, financial insecurity, and racism and discrimination among others. We would like to note that these structural barriers “are shaped by underlying social, economic, and political phenomena, not individual inadequacies” (Zabrocki et al. 2013, p. 7).

Institutional and structural barriers were the categories that framed our conceptualization of the themes discovered in the voices of these Latina victims of domestic violence. We allowed the themes to emerge under each barrier as they were discovered. During the process of data collection, the lead investigator consistently checked in with participants to verify that she understood their answers. After the data collection phase, the researcher requested further coding validation and invited Latina participants to review the records and join in the

interpretation and review of the coding process. Unfortunately, they refused to participate in this process due to time constraints.

Results

Across all individual interviews and the focus group, Latinas explained how institutional and structural barriers were the main challenges they faced as they tried to seek help from formal institutions. Interestingly, in the focus group data, we found that Latina respondents identified future changes in programs or interventions they wanted to see within the advocacy and public assistance service systems.

Institutional Barriers Preventing Latina Immigrants from Seeking Help

The Legal System and Unstable Residency Status Participants indicated that immigration status was one of the major reasons keeping them from seeking help or reporting the abuse to the authorities. Undocumented participants, or those who did not have lawful permanent residence, believed that turning to the criminal justice system for assistance could lead to their deportation, and therefore constrained their options regarding leaving their husbands or partners. For example, a participant explained the following:

I think there is fear to seek out help... because when you are married to an abuser he tells you “okay you don't have papers so if you leave me I will have you deported... I am not going to help you” and you are already with him. For example, I got married with an American and it is not that easy to look for help because you don't know. You are afraid you won't be able to make it, that everything would turn against you because you are not quite sure you would find the help you need, that they (immigrant officers) are going to support you or not...

One Mexican participant in the study described her community's fear and lack of awareness of legal procedures protecting undocumented victims:

I used to live here back in 1995. I was experiencing abuse from my first husband, but I never called for help because I didn't know there was an (anti-violence) organization. I don't know if Y (name of organization) existed, but you know, back then, any undocumented person was afraid. I never looked for help because people said we could be deported. I never sought help even though I knew I was here in the U.S. and I was experiencing domestic abuse.

Domestic violence offenders often use their victims' legal status as a form of blackmail to keep the violence from being disclosed (Menjívar and Salcido 2002). From our study participants, the decision not to report the abuse to authorities stemmed from an extraordinary fear of their partners and the lack of knowledge of legal remedies protecting undocumented immigrants experiencing abuse (Raj and Silverman 2002). Deportation threats deliberately used by abusers increase their power and control over their victims, and as such increases victims' dependency on their abusers (Vidales 2010). Furthermore, reflecting on the vulnerable positions of undocumented Latinos, scholars have observed that fears of deportation among Latino immigrants in the Midwest has been exacerbated by recent raids and deportations in Iowa and neighboring states (Jackson 2008). These anti-immigrant sentiments create a local context in which immigrant communities feel under constant surveillance and are afraid of being detained (Reina, Maldonado, and Lohman 2013) if they come into contact with local authorities.

Public Service Providers' Attitudes and Behaviors Public service providers' attitudes and behaviors toward immigrant Latina who experience domestic violence reflect our society's "perceptions of domestic violence and the status of women in U.S. society" (Vidales 2010, p. 539). As other scholars have argued, public policies that provide economic support to women in need have differentiated between those "deserving" and "undeserving" of public assistance (Purvin 2007). Those who are deemed less deserving are usually poor single mothers and their children (Gordon 1994). One participant who had left her partner criticized service responses from a government assistance provider. She felt that a staff member was disrespectful and insensitive to her needs and delayed her assistance for no apparent reason:

I went to request assistance (social services), and they would not help me... (The worker at service provider agency) asked me how I paid for rent, and I told her I did not have a job and that's why I was asking for assistance. She asked me how my brother paid the rent. I told her that's the reason I was there asking for assistance, because jobs were scarce for my brother at the time, and she didn't want to help me. She was making things harder. I didn't even have money to get food for my children for a full month. Then my lawyer told me I didn't qualify for state aid, but that my children did. So Daisy (advocate from anti-violence organization) sent them (service providers) a fax saying that I just needed money for my children. But it took so long, I waited so long. And now I know that it usually takes 24 h to get assistance approval, but in my case it took them so long. I don't know why.

This participant looked for assistance from public services so she could feed her US-citizen children, but getting the support she needed was challenging. One responsibility of the government is to provide assistance to those who are in need; however, the nature and extent of discriminatory practices and attitudes (by placing barriers to services) cripple Latina victims' efforts to escape from victimization and procure safety.

Civic Court Proceedings The U Visa allows undocumented victims to self-petition and grants them protection against deportation. At the time of the study, all participants had started the legal process to regularize their immigration status. Unfortunately, they were facing another set of barriers as they tried to comply with immigration policy regulations. For instance, a victim of partner abuse is eligible for government cash assistance; however, she is not allowed to apply for it under the law as this act may jeopardize her chances of "legalizing" her residency status.

Government cash assistance could make it difficult to demonstrate good moral character (one of the requirements for lawful permanent residence), as an immigration officer may perceive this as a flaw on a victim's record (Menjívar and Salcido 2002). This situation was common among most participants and is illustrated by the following accounts from the focus group:

My lawyer told me that I shouldn't (apply for cash assistance), because that was a problem for the government. She told me I couldn't apply for it if I was trying to get my legal papers, because I was gonna be like a burden to the government.

Another participant quickly added:

Lawyers like to frighten us, because my lawyer told me "if you get government benefits that would be play against your citizenship process." He told me that if I ask for help to the government they might think I was like a burden, so they could deny my petition...

Literature shows that victims of partner abuse often turn to social services agencies for assistance, including the welfare and mental health systems (Purvin 2007; Moe 2007). Victims seek public assistance because many of them suffer substantial material deprivation if they leave their abusive partners (Tolman and Raphael 2000). For Latina victims, the situation of abuse usually takes place within a context of poverty, underemployment, and legal status (Vidales 2010; Raj and Silverman 2002; Menjívar and Salcido 2002), which makes it extremely difficult for victims to leave their partners. Once victims leave their partners, they face economic struggles that may not leave them any other option than to seek assistance from federal programs.

Structural Barriers Preventing Latina Immigrants from Seeking Help

The opportunities that victims have to secure their safety and wellbeing are also conditioned by structural factors. Predominantly, the socioeconomic status of Latina victims has been described as a barrier to seeking assistance (Vidales 2010) because they tend to be economically dependent on their abuser. Latino immigrant women in particular have low levels of education and income (Perilla 1999; Vidales 2010), and thus minimal opportunity for economic upward mobility. As explained above, all participants in this study were unemployed when they faced domestic violence, and most of them worked in low-skilled and low-paid jobs once they obtained legal documentation. Only one participant had obtained a technical degree; the other participants obtained no more than a high school diploma. The following structural barriers contributed to their difficulty in seeking help.

Economic Status Some studies have found that immigrant women arrive in a new country with disadvantages in social status and limited human capital resources relative to men (Bui and Morash 1999; Raj and Silverman 2002). There is evidence that Latina women in households with incomes below \$10,000 per year are more likely than other women to be abused by an intimate partner (Vidales 2010). The findings in the current study validate what is already documented about the economic status of Latinas in the U.S. Most study participants reported having limited economic resources and were financially dependent on their partners. Their economic situations interfered (for several years) with their ability to access and secure the resources needed to leave their abusive partners. One participant described her financial dependence as a barrier as she struggled to leave her husband:

You know I wasn't working and I was taking care of my girls so I didn't look for jobs for a while. So I was dependent on him and that stopped me. Five years went by before I decided to look for help. I first looked for help with a friend because I was desperate. I wasn't working and I wanted to find a job.

The experiences of this participant reveal that, for women in situations of financial dependence, leaving their abusers requires them to be fully responsible for their own economic survival in a context in which they have very limited options for living-wage jobs (Reina et al. 2013). To complicate matters, for those who are undocumented and/or who lack English language skills, finding work might be difficult in Midwestern rural areas, where access to social networks that might connect them to job opportunities are restricted (Deeb-Sossa and Bickham Mendez 2008; Reina et al. 2013).

Level of Education Abusers often increase immigrant victims' insecurities about their ability to secure social and human capital without their husbands or partners by demeaning their victim partners or wives based on their lack of education and English proficiency (Perilla 1999; Vidales 2010). Data analysis indicates that most women participants have low levels of education, thus fewer opportunities for economic improvement. But regardless of their socio-economic situations, women felt optimistic and talked about their desires to have more opportunities to fulfill their potential as members of their community. Many participants were specifically interested in job skill training, English as Second Language (ESL) classes, education, and employment, so they could escape poverty and be able to participate in society and integrate into the U.S. economy.

One participant explained:

There should be support groups for victims of abuse, like focus on self-improvement, like instructing women in how to get back to school. And information about issues related to parental skills so we could be better mothers, yeah so we can go on with our lives. We need guidance. We also want to learn what type of opportunities we have in this country. We want to know if it is possible to get back to school and what are the requirements to do it. We would like to have information about schools and jobs.

Discussion and Conclusions

Prior to presenting the discussion and conclusions of the study, a number of limitations should be noted. First, our study sample was limited to ten Latinas and many of them migrated from Mexico; thus, findings cannot be generalized to Latina victims of domestic violence from all Latino countries. Second, the present research was based on the perspectives of Latina women who wanted to share their experiences and life stories with others. These participants also had previously contacted advocacy services, and used their interventions. Lastly, our results cannot be inferred to Latina women who do not perceive themselves as victims or have no information regarding or access to advocacy or public services.

Despite these limitations, the study data highlight the need to understand the unique structural and institutional barriers that prevent Latina victims from seeking advocacy assistance. Overall, this analysis echoes findings from earlier research (Vidales 2010) that undocumented Latina victims of domestic violence face institutional and structural barriers that deter them from connecting to anti-violence services. Specifically, Vidales found that some of the most salient barriers included language barriers, gender and economic inequality, and lack

of knowledge of laws and services that support victims of domestic violence (2010). While some victims report seeking help from advocacy services, barriers such as unstable residency, institutional discrimination, civic court proceedings, and economic inequality account for their unwillingness to utilize advocacy or social services. However, our results indicate that Latinas' inability to apply for government cash assistance even though they have the legal right to do so, and the lack of social nets and job opportunities are additional institutional and structural conditions that take place in communities of the Midwest, weakening the possibility of these women to escape from victimization.

The analysis presented in this research demonstrates that immigration status or unstable residency increases batterers' control and power over their victims. Because of their partners' threats, Latina victims often believe they could be deported if they report the abuse to authorities or any other public service institution. In this study, as in others, some women experienced a high level of insecurity in reporting violent crimes because it meant that they would have to make contact with law enforcement and eventually file with immigration authorities (Ingram et al. 2010; Vidales 2010). Undocumented victims' lack of information regarding how the criminal justice system responds to domestic violence within immigrant communities poses specific impediments for accessing advocacy services.

Participants perceived service responses by other service providers (such as the public welfare system) inadequate. Certainly, our participants' responses demonstrated certain government actions that disregard the basic survival needs of low-income Latina victims, constraining the lives of those who are trying to use public services (Purvin 2007). Such negative and unfriendly behaviors towards Latina victims are evidence of prejudice, discrimination, and the lack of multicultural understanding of mainstream institutions regarding the particular needs of minority group members.

Several women in our study qualified to apply for public assistance but did not, because under the law they were not allowed to accept government cash assistance as this may jeopardize their chances of changing their citizenship status (Menjívar and Salcido 2002). These rules interfere in Latina victims' ability to comply with immigration policy requirements and serve as a significant institutional barrier to their economic advancement. As other scholars argue, there is a fundamental mismatch between low-income minority victims' needs and the supposition about those needs that emphasize domestic violence, immigration, and public policies (Purvin 2007).

Menjívar and Salcido (2002) argue that economic hardship can prevent immigrant female victims from leaving an abusive relationship, which is worsened when they either do not speak English or are undocumented. Data from our research in communities from Central Iowa suggest that immigrant women

who decide to leave their partners or husbands usually become the head of the household (Menjívar and Salcido 2002). They have less chance for economic upward mobility because they are locked into low-skill jobs in precarious environments that do not allow for the development of language proficiency and offer limited educational advancement (Reina et al. 2013). In addition, the unique conditions of living in a Midwestern state, such as Iowa, might affect the potential for Latina immigrant victims to obtain protection. Data from our study in Central Iowa suggests that undocumented immigrant women living in this part of the Midwest have limited ability to access resources or information regarding advocacy or law enforcement services and face structural and institutional challenges once they try to seek out help. These complex factors amplify the necessity for further analysis of the obstacles experienced by Latina victims living in Midwestern states (see Reina et al. 2013).

Our study discovered findings unanticipated by earlier domestic violence scholarship. For example, Latinas would like to see changes in programs or interventions such as outreach efforts for victims who live in rural or isolated areas, domestic violence prevention education to school age children, young adults and abusers. This finding suggests the need for programs more culturally adapted for Latino populations who live in Midwestern communities. Next, we provide recommendations for policy makers.

Recommendations

The results of this study provide perspectives on the structural and institutional conditions affecting the potential for victims to respond to partner abuse. As previously found, these levels are usually interconnected and often times inseparable (Vidales 2010). Policy recommendations for each are provided in the following section.

Institutional Barriers

While there are policies such as Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (VAWA) or VAWA 2000 that prevent undocumented Latinas from deportation, they still face institutional and structural barriers that influence their response to domestic violence because of misconceptions regarding their unstable residency. Service providers, advocates, and members of the criminal justice system should consider the development of programs aimed at informing immigrant communities about legal options intended to help undocumented female victims. Such programs should involve the law enforcement system to address barriers to services related to deportation and immigration policies and share information regarding immigrant victims' legal rights (Raj and Silverman 2002; Menjívar and Salcido 2002).

Service providers and policymakers should address the issue of immigration status with undocumented services recipients when developing programs. It is essential to understand how the stigma of being undocumented influences the choices victims have when they seek help (Reina et al. 2013), as in some cases it is perceived as a badge of entitlements to public goods (Deeb-Sossa and Bickham Mendez 2008). This factor restricts victims' socio-economic resources because of biased and discriminatory responses to undocumented immigrants. Oftentimes public service providers and legislators know little about the particularities of undocumented migrants and their socio-economic motives behind their immigration to the U.S. (Raj and Silverman 2002; Reina et al. 2013).

Given the prevalence of domestic violence among Latino populations, public officials should evaluate current immigration and domestic violence policies that restrict benefits to victims with unstable immigration statuses. Undocumented immigrants who qualify for immigration benefits under VAWA must be able to access all public benefits they need to help them secure safety and economic security regardless of their residency status (Raj and Silverman 2002).

Structural Barriers

Most immigrant Latinas endure structural barriers such as economic inequality, lack of educational attainment, and other forms of discrimination that demand long-term solutions (Vidales 2010). An effective way to respond to these structural problems is a collaborative and coordinated community response in which advocacy services get involved with other social institutions (e.g., social services, schools, and local businesses) to develop programs intended to help Latina victims build additional life skills and navigate systems that might enable them to become full participants in their communities. These structured and socially organized and funded programs should enhance immigrant Latinas' life skills and access to programs and services including: English as Second Language classes, General Educational Development (GED) classes, computer literacy lessons, and welfare benefits and assistance. Furthermore, social services in cooperation with advocacy agencies and community organizations should engage in culturally and ethnically based practices focusing on job skill development and training.

Despite our focus on structural and institutional barriers to domestic violence help-seeking, we recognize participants of this study as agents who do not passively accept the conditions of victimization. Just as Latinas in other studies have shown, they developed survival strategies that include assessing advocacy services, leaving abusive partners, and seeking out public services for themselves and their dependents (Deeb-Sossa and Bickham Mendez 2008). Our central point is that intersecting structural and institutional conditions and the current policies addressing domestic violence in immigrant

populations critically restrains and impinges on Latina immigrants' efforts to carve out their safety and wellbeing.

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