

“He Said They’d Deport Me”: Factors Influencing Domestic Violence Help-Seeking Practices Among Latina Immigrants

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Abstract

Significant developments have been made in research on domestic violence experienced by women as well as on the practical front of the services women seek and receive when living with partner abuse. Yet, most of the studies that explore the experiences of victims of partner abuse in the United States have focused on nonimmigrant White women. The current study aims to contribute to the literature by exploring Latina immigrant victims' experiences with domestic violence service outreach in the Midwest. This exploratory study used one-on-one interviews and a focus group to identify the challenges faced by 10 Latina victims of partner abuse who had previously contacted an antiviolence organization in Iowa and had used its services. Findings demonstrate that immigration status and the inability to understand domestic violence within given cultural norms are major barriers keeping Latina victims from seeking help from formal advocacy agencies. Other impediments include feeling shame, isolation, along with the lack of bilingual service providers in mainstream institutions and, the lack of knowledge about resources among newcomers. We end with recommendations for research and practice.

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Introduction

Despite changes in U.S. public policies targeting the problem of domestic violence,¹ little progress has been made in protecting underrepresented groups (Moe, 2007), such as Latinas, especially immigrants. Studies have shown that many of the victims of domestic violence are women that have emigrated from Latin American countries (Fry, 2006). Indeed, Latino migration has increased consistently over the past few decades. In effect, Latinos have driven population growth in the nation, constituting the fastest-growing minority group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). It is estimated that Latinos may constitute up to 29% of the U.S. population by 2050 (Passel & Cohn, 2008). These trends exemplify why it is necessary to conduct further research on domestic violence within Latino populations. Our understanding of domestic violence among Latino populations is restricted, especially when it comes to the experiences of immigrants (Hazen & Soriano, 2007).

While many Latinas² in the United States experience domestic violence, a limited number of studies have attempted to explore their specific experiences within violent contexts. The literature that we have, though limited, suggests that Latinas' attitudes toward domestic violence are dependent on structural and cultural factors, including immigration status, cultural beliefs about domestic abuse, language barriers, isolation, lack of knowledge about resources (Acevedo, 2000; Aldarondo, Kantor, & Jasinski, 2002), and challenges related to acculturation and legal and economic pressures (Mattson & Rodriguez, 1999). These factors influence and compound each other, and are interrelated, making it more complicated for Latina victims to respond to domestic violence and access institutional services.

Previous research has investigated the factors that prevent Latina victims from seeking help (Flicker et al., 2011; Postmus, Severson, Berry, & Yoo, 2009; Fugate, Landis, Riordan, Naureckas, & Engel, 2005). However, this existing work is limited because it does not distinguish between recently immigrated Latinas, different types of Latin American origin immigrants, and U.S.-born Latinas. Using vague and general ethnic categories for Latinas or assuming that everyone is "the same" makes it difficult to fully comprehend the diverse experiences of various groups (Fontes & McCloskey, 2011, p. 151) with domestic violence services outreach. Knowledge derived from research reported here about the firsthand experience of undocumented

Latina immigrants is 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 resources and networks of assistance.

Scholarship on intimate partner violence among immigrant populations underlines the heterogeneity of Latina women across different Latino countries (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002). National origin, citizenship status, language proficiency, and length of residence in the United States entail different lived experiences regarding domestic violence for various Latino/a subgroups (see, for example, Reina, Maldonado, & Lohman, 2013). However, immigrant-related conditions superimposed on such social structural dimensions serve to prevent Latina immigrant victims from different Latino countries to seek out help (Hass, Dutton, & Orloff, 2000; Menjívar & Salcido, 2002). Elements such as language barriers, isolation, and economic and legal status are present not only in the domestic violence experiences of Latinas but also in the lives of immigrant women from Asian and Oceania countries (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002).

Existing literature on domestic violence among minority populations tends to overemphasize the role of culture in perpetuating violence in different racial/ethnic groups (Hampton, Carrillo, & Kim, 2005). In this article, we engage a concern with existing stereotypes regarding minority cultures that often perpetuate their cultural values as pathologic and deviant when compared with White communities (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2007). We argue that research on domestic violence within minority groups must not solely focus on victims, perpetrators, communities, or cultures, but rather must be viewed within the political, historical, and economic context in which domestic violence takes place (Martín-Baró, 1996). The intersectionality framework provides a multilevel analysis of multiple systems of oppressions, namely, race, class, gender, and sexuality to explain power dynamics and the structures and mechanisms that undergird oppression in our society (Weber, 2010). In this article, we approach the issue of domestic violence among Latinas from this standpoint, while also engaging a concern with immigration and citizenship status as additional intersecting systems of power, and describe how these socially constructed systems impact the ability of Latina immigrants to access and use domestic violence legal and social services. According to Weber (2010),

the meaning of race, class, gender, and sexuality is contested in struggles for ideological, political, and economic power and is constructed simultaneously at the macro social-structural (society and community) and micro social-psychological (family and individual) levels. Each of these domains of oppression,

although primarily reflecting societal functions and institutions, is integrally interdependent with others, just as race, class, gender, and sexuality are interdependent. (p. 43)

Violence against women has multiple interconnected sources and is not linked to a single source of male domination and control (Russo, 2001). There are structural inequalities, including poverty, unemployment and economic marginalization, racial discrimination, and unauthorized immigration status that contribute to and exacerbate “victimization outside of the intimate relationship, as the psychological consequences of battering may be compounded by the ‘micro-aggressions’ of racism, heterosexism, and classism in and out of the reference group” (Bograd, 1999, p. 281). If we are to understand fully the barriers Latina victims experience when they try to build effective connections with domestic violence services, we cannot do so by ignoring the social structural influences (e.g., poverty) and systematic oppressions (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2007) that inhabit their willingness to seek help.

There is a need to investigate coping strategies of abused Latina women in a wider variety of social contexts. While many of the studies cited above were conducted in large urban areas in the U.S. South, and the East and West coasts, the current study aims to investigate domestic violence among Latina women in a central Midwestern area of the United States, an area of the country in which domestic violence among Latina women has been minimally investigated. This gap in scholarship could translate into inadequate policies that disregard the situations of immigrant women, particularly undocumented immigrant populations who experience domestic abuse (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002). This work extends the domestic violence research on Latina immigrants to focus on those who were undocumented at the time of the abuse, and who have settled in a new area of immigration, the state of Iowa. This study investigates undocumented Latina women’s perceptions of the factors that influence their decisions about whether or not to seek help from advocacy agencies, shelters, or law enforcement.

Method

Guided by a feminist approach that perceives women as authoritative speakers of their own life stories (Gorelick, 1991), the present study³ relies on the stories of respondents to examine the factors that influence their help-seeking practices. The sampling methods used were semistructured interviews and a focus group. Through the use of these methods, rich and detailed data were gathered through the narrative accounts of Latinas. Furthermore, qualitative

data collection methods offered the possibility to clarify and corroborate participants' statements and to generate additional information when needed.

Sample

Participant recruitment. Our first source in locating interviewees was the director of a nonprofit antiviolenence organization in a metropolitan area of Central Iowa, with whom the principal investigator had established contact in previous visits to her office. Then, the advocate and volunteer coordinator of that nonprofit organization contacted Latinas who had used the services of the organization, informed them about the study, and asked whether they were willing to participate. After that, the lead researcher contacted by phone those individuals who were willing to participate, explained the study, and asked whether they were willing to participate in a face-to-face interview on a day, time, and location convenient for them. Participants were asked whether they were willing to participate subsequently in a focus group with other Latinas who had received services from the same antiviolenence organization. Only four respondents were able to participate in the focus group. Those who declined to participate in this second part of the study cited time limitations as the reason for doing so.

Participant information. Ten women were interviewed, and all described themselves as immigrants from Mexico and Central/South America. The length of time living in the United States ranged between 5 and 15 years. At the time of the study, most were separated or had divorced from their intimate partners. Several of the women did not live with or near extended family. At the time of the study, they all lived in urban or suburban communities in Central Iowa. One participant reported living in a rural community at the time she experienced domestic violence. Most participants had low-skill jobs when they were interviewed, and all were unemployed when they faced partner abuse. All participants lacked legal residency status when they experienced partner abuse, although at the time of the study some were in the process of adjusting their undocumented status. All Latina participants were native Spanish speakers and two reported having limited English proficiency. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to participants (see Table 1 for a description of participants' demographics).

Procedures

All interviews ($n = 10$) and focus group ($n = 4$) were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. The format of the interviews was semistructured,

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	No. Children	Education	Job Status at the Time of Domestic Violence	Current Job Status	Length of Time in the United States	Length of Time in Iowa
María	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

^aShe 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).

^bThis participant lived in a rural area in Iowa during the time of the abuse.

to allow researchers to steer the discussion. The questions were meant to evoke responses on a range of issues related to the obstacles Latinas face when seeking help or social services.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted at a private location chosen by the participants. Most participants chose to be interviewed at a private room at the service organization's facilities, though two individual interviews were conducted at the participants' homes. The focus group was conducted 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 lead investigator then discussed the particulars of the project, and informed the participants of their rights. Understanding that there could have been different levels and types of language use, and because the principal investigator is a native speaker of Spanish and fully bilingual, participants were asked for their language preference. All participants chose to participate in the study in Spanish, their primary language. The interviews and focus group took place between January and March 2010. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 60 min. The focus group session lasted 110 min. With participants' permission, all interviews and focus group were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher, who has previous training and experience in conducting qualitative research. Later, the lead investigator analyzed the data in Spanish and subsequently translated it into English for reporting purposes.

The questions in the interviews addressed issues related to the experiences of respondents with antidomestic violence institutions and their services. Related to the issue of factors influencing their help-seeking practices, women were asked about the type of help sought and institutional responses, the factors they felt prevent them from seeking help before, and perceptions and experiences with current services. A focus group was conducted to corroborate interview data and expand on information. The themes addressed in the focus group were also determined on the basis of the interview data. Questions addressed service recipients' experiences with domestic violence services outreach and the nature and frequency of interaction with such services.

Data Analysis

The lead investigator performed data analysis using continuous coding to identify themes and categories surrounding factors influencing domestic violence help-seeking practices among research participants. Data analysis

procedures by Arcury and Quandt (1998) for qualitative data inquiry were used. This process included reading and rereading the transcripts to get an initial sense of the data. After all responses were read line by line, an initial code was written in front of each line. There were more than 95 initial codes that later were grouped and regrouped into themes. This process allowed the lead investigator to condense and organize the data into categories that made sense in terms of the factors influencing immigrant Latina victims' help-seeking behaviors. After coded segments were sorted and merged together, all textual segments that had been coded for a specific theme from a single respondent were displayed together; then were compared with segments from other informants (Arcury & Quandt, 1998). Finally, analytic memos about each theme or category were written. Through the use of these memos and based on participants' responses, meaningful definitions were created of each category that were subsequently used to analyze and write about the data. For example, for the category "factors keeping participants from seeking help" a memo was written: "A noteworthy theme that emerged across many respondents was several factors preventing them from using antiviolence services." These factors included immigration status, inability to understand domestic violence given cultural norms, isolation, and so on. Subsequently, a memo for each subcategory was written. For instance, in the case of immigration status, "Immigration status is a barrier that occurs when a victim of domestic violence has no legal documents to live or stay in the U.S., and is afraid to report her abuse to authorities because she believes she may be deported." The same process was conducted with each category and subcategory. It is important to note that the present study was part of a broader project. This article reports and discusses data related specifically to the factors influencing participants' help-seeking practices, and the meaning of those practices for them.

Throughout the data collection phase, the investigator checked constantly with participants to see if she was interpreting their answers accurately. Upon completion of data collection, the investigator sought further coding validation by inviting respondents to review the transcripts and take part in interpretation and review of the initial coding. Regrettably, participants declined this offer due to personal time constraints.

Findings

Immigration status. Seven out of 10 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 have unstable residency, believed that reporting the abuse or seeking

help could have led to their deportation. In their responses, some participants identified their partners' threats of deportation as a main factor in avoiding disclosure of their abuse. Two participants expressed their perceptions in the following statements. Melba noted,

He beat me up and I could have called the police because that was what I thought to do . . . but he threatened me . . . he told me that if I called the police I was going to lose out . . . because they (police officers) would take him (deport him) but they would also take me, because I didn't have legal documents . . . he told me that police officers from B (name of town) would get the people from immigration authorities . . . and that I shouldn't do nothing . . . he said they'd (police officers) deport me.

Lucia also noted,

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 (antiviolence) 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.

A number of studies show that perpetrators often use their victims' unstable resident status to threaten deportation if the violence is disclosed (Dutton, Orloff, & Hass, 2000). As immigrants with lack of English proficiency and with little knowledge of the U.S. legal system, our study participants were unaware of legal procedures that prevent deportation of immigrants experiencing abuse (Hass et al., 2000; Raj & Silverman, 2002).

In addition, undocumented immigrant victims may not disclose the abuse because they feel intimidated by law enforcement service providers or have trouble trusting legal experts due to bad experiences with law enforcement in their home countries. This was the case for Maria, who noted,

The first time I tried to seek help was back home (Ecuador) because I was living in my country . . . and I called the police but it took them so long to get to my house . . . and I don't think they believed me when I spoke to them.

Indeed, research has shown that severe mistrust of authorities and lack of awareness about legal procedures makes it difficult for victims to access existing avenues for safety available in the United States (see, for example, Grossman & Lundy, 2007; Raj & Silverman, 2002; Hass et al., 2000).

Inability to understand domestic violence given cultural norms. Six out of 10 participants identified Latino cultural views of marriage as factors influencing their perceptions of abusive partner relationships, and that these cultural views were impediments to seeking help. Some participants cited greater difficulties in identifying abuse because of the absence of physical abuse in their relationships (it seems that they did not regard the abuse as such). This lack of understanding of domestic violence is in part the result of orthodox views about intimate relationships and gender roles that foster the notion of partner abuse as acceptable behavior among some Latino populations (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002). Consequently, if the husband or partner of a Latina chooses to abuse her, it may be extremely difficult for the victim to recognize the abuse because of the hierarchical and patriarchal nature of some Latino families. Among the most interesting comments were those by the following two participants:

I waited 5 years to seek help . . . you know it (domestic violence) is like a slow process, and you don't know it is happening . . . I have a friend who experienced abuse and I knew she came to this organization and everything . . . but it's hard to accept that you are experiencing domestic violence . . . it was hard for me . . . it was like I wasn't experiencing that . . . I didn't feel I was in that circle . . . I felt like I could handle the situation . . . I felt like . . . I felt like if we would separate for a while he would change . . . and you know . . . you think that's normal . . . in Mexico it is normal to have fights . . . that they (partners) can drink . . . is like there is still machismo in Mexico . . . like everything is part of marriage . . . I thought it (domestic violence) was part of marriage. (Lucia)

Similarly, Lina said,

What happened was that I didn't know I was experiencing domestic violence . . . I got married and I didn't know what was going on . . . he was very strange . . . he would hit the trashcan . . . he would get upset and I was scared . . . but I didn't know that was abuse . . . I thought that was normal . . . and he would be fine . . . but things got worse . . . things (violence) happened more often and I didn't like it.

These examples show that patriarchal values and practices within Latino populations contribute to the tolerance of partner abuse. In the case of Lina, the legality of her stay in the United States was linked to and dependent on her American husband who was her abuser, and who took advantage of her unstable immigration status as a form of blackmail; thus, Lina was reluctant to report the abuse as her own process to obtain residency status could have been jeopardized. This type of scenario has been documented by other researchers (Bechtold & Dzięwiecka-Bokun, 1999; Menjívar & Salcido, 2002).

The cases of these two participants remind us that we cannot rely on simplistic ideas of culture to understand how minority families experience and respond to domestic violence (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). For instance, Lucia interprets violence as “normal,” a process that can be explained by Bourdieu’s and Wacquant’s work on gender violence. Menjívar (2011, p. 46) cites Bourdieu and Wacquant, “the male order is so deeply grounded as to need no justification.” These authors argue that “symbolic violence accomplishes itself through an act of cognition and of misrecognition that lies beyond— or beneath—the controls of consciousness and will” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004, p. 273). In pointing to the inability of some Latinas to understand their entrapment in a circle of violence, we argue that violence is not a problem about a psychopathology of the abusers (or victims), or a cultural deficiency. Rather, the use of violence in both the public and private spheres is “embedded in institutions and in the quotidian aspects of life—the familiar, the routine; violence so commonplace and so much a part of life that is often not recognized as such” (Menjívar, 2011, p. 2).

Lina was married to a White American. Her experience with abuse demonstrates that partner abuse is, in fact, a product of complex power relations that include but extend beyond patriarchy: Female subordination and male dominance and control are characteristic of any patriarchal society (Brabeck & Guzmán, 2009). American men as well as Latino men use violence against their partner because “they learn that violence is an option; it works; and the consequences are minimal or nonexistent” (Perilla, 1999, p. 118). Perilla further argues that Latinos have to carry

the burden of “machismo” as a result of the fact that Spanish has a word for this concept (whereas other cultures don’t), and that the set of expectations for males in Latino culture is not that different from the set of expectations for males in any culture. (Perilla, 2006, p. 4)

Our findings show that greater levels of acceptance of “machismo” among some Latinas directly influence their help-seeking behaviors.

When we asked Lina whether Latino cultural views about marriage influenced her perceptions of her own situation or played a role as an impediment to seek help, she answered negatively; however, she believed that Latina victims are usually unaware of experiencing abuse. She said,

I didn’t . . . that idea at home no . . . we are Catholics . . . my parents got divorced . . . so we didn’t have the idea that if your husband hits you, you had to stay? No! . . . but I didn’t know what abuse was back then . . . didn’t know exactly what abuse meant . . . like in the movies, you can see a guy yelling at her or whatever but that’s

it . . . I mean, we, Latinas, we don't know how much could be abuse . . . we cannot recognize it . . . when we get married we do not recognize it . . . we think it's normal.

Other related cultural values might influence participants' responses to domestic violence. For instance, the idea of "familismo," or family loyalty, reciprocity and solidarity (Galanti, 2003; Perilla, Bakeman, & Norris, 1994) reflects the significance of interpersonal connections between family members (Marin & Marin, 1991) among Latinos. The strong sense of "familismo" can provide Latina victims with a sense of belonging, and support and care for husbands, partners, or family members. When thinking about disclosing their experience with partner abuse to others outside the family, it is not surprising that some respondents had to choose between having a commitment to preserve and maintain the marriage (or partner relationship) and keeping their obligations to themselves (Goldberg Edelson, Hokoda, & Ramos-Lira, 2007).

Isolation. Two participants described the difficulty they had in connecting with advocacy agencies because of isolation. Isabel stated,

I didn't know about these organizations (advocates) because . . . I never would go out . . . he didn't let me go out . . . and I didn't have a car . . . so I didn't leave my house . . . because you are isolated you don't know about those services.

Likewise, Ana commented,

I didn't know people . . . I never left the house (crying) . . . and when I got here was during snow time . . . you know, during the winter people don't leave their houses . . . I did go out sometimes, but I did it because he took me out . . . but if I wanted to leave (him) I didn't know where to go . . . all was white . . . there were not people outside . . . I think there might have been information about services back then (2001), but I didn't know about it because I never left the house . . . maybe the information was right there but I never saw it . . . Because now I can say there is a lot of information (about services) . . . I believe that if you stay in an abusive relationship is because of . . . I don't know . . . you love that person (abuser) too much, or you don't love yourself, or something is wrong.

As discussed above, the literature has shown that isolation is an issue related to immigration that exacerbates domestic abuse among Latinas. The feeling of isolation among victims is a major factor keeping them from seeking interventions or community resources (Lischick, 2007). Even participants who had their extended families with whom they constantly interacted with,

reported being highly isolated and unwilling to find alternative support among family members for fear of being judged, a finding that is congruent with the results of other studies (Acevedo, 2000). Nevertheless, once they fled the abusive situations taking place at their homes, participants heavily relied on familial ties for financial and emotional support. The findings from this study concur with earlier studies in that the control of the abuser over his victim and the isolation components of battering substantially reduce a victim's resources (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002; Stark & Flitcraft, 1996). The stories shared by our study participants show that social interaction outside the home was limited, most of the time nonexistent. They report not knowing a lot of people and not having anyone to talk to; for some participants, the isolation was heightened because the only person they depended on for social interaction was their partner or spouse (Abraham, 2000). Furthermore, these participants found it important to address issues related to lack of transportation that some other victims (those who do not own a car or who live in isolated areas) may perceive as a barrier to seeking help. In Iowa, as in other parts of the Midwest, not having a private car amounts to an almost complete lack of mobility, due to the almost complete absence of public transportation alternatives.

In addition, the fact that these participants did not speak English, did not work for pay, did not have any social networks, and were not aware of legal procedures in reference to their immigration status contributed to their isolation. Some research has shown that in areas of established Latino settlement, networks are key for connecting individuals to social and economic resources (Massey, Alarcon, Durand, & Gonzalez, 1987); however, in new contexts of reception such as those of rural areas, the situation is different. The lack of political and economic advocacy that characterizes rural settings serves to place Latinos in conditions of isolation, poverty, lack of upward mobility, and racial tensions (Torres, Popke, & Hapke, 2006). In our study, these factors have affected Latina victims' ability to develop and cultivate social networks, a critical source of information many immigrants resort to in order to obtain the necessities of life, and that are also key for solidarity and support (Massey et al., 1987).

Lack of language proficiency. Only 1 of the 10 participants cited the lack of language proficiency as a barrier at the time of obtaining help from authorities and advocacy services. The participant identified the lack of bilingual employees in law enforcement services and in a shelter as a significant impediment when she sought help and when she used services. This participant struggled with services provided by mainstream organizations such as the police. As she put it,

One time my partner was throwing pillows at me and I didn't even know why so I called a police officer who I knew spoke Spanish, but then he sent other officers . . . and I do not know how to speak English, and they did, so they talked to my partner because he speaks English . . . and my partner told them I was crazy and that he was leaving to go to work. So they left.

The same participant also cited the lack of bilingual staff as a problem when she stayed at a shelter:

I stayed there (shelter) for a week . . . like I said before I do not speak English and I didn't know how to drive . . . there was somebody speaking Spanish during the morning shifts and it was perfect . . . but later in the afternoon and night they change staff and it was hard . . . because you cannot . . . well, I couldn't tell them anything, I felt like I was there, but I wasn't, at the same time . . . and then he (partner) asked me to come back, and you know, I didn't have more options . . . I didn't want to go back to the shelter . . . I didn't do anything there.

Nine out of 10 participants did not cite lack of language proficiency as factor influencing them to seek or obtain help. This finding revealed that many participants found information about services in Spanish, and that all service providers had at least some personnel who spoke Spanish. Existing antiviolence services provided by advocacy agencies in Iowa are culturally competent and adequately reflect the demographics of the population being served. Most of the employees working at the research site were Hispanics and had extensive domestic violence training with minority victims. Informational resources such as websites, brochures, pamphlets, and outreach material were all in Spanish. In addition, institutional programs reflected some of the needs of undocumented immigrant victim Latinas (e.g., access to legal representation, one-on-one counseling, community referrals). The fact that advocacy agencies are incorporating language accessibility and cultural competency, demonstrates a level of regard for the Latino community in Iowa, and also attest to the organizations' willingness to employ practices that have positive impacts on immigrant victims. We would not want to excessively romanticize the effectiveness of social and advocacy services, as participants were facing additional stressors related to long-term financial security (e.g., acquiring employment, attaining economic self-sufficiency, starting or continuing education). Some participants in this study relied on low-wage jobs to ensure their own economic survival and that of their loved ones, while others were unemployed. These findings take us away from idealized policy responses as the lack of comprehensive and coordinated community responses linked to positive and long-standing outcomes for battered women still remain (Sabina, Cuevas, & Schally, 2012).

Lack of knowledge of resources. Only one participant, who had lived in a rural area at an earlier time in her life, perceived the lack of knowledge of services as a barrier to using antiviolence interventions.

Well . . . if they (victims) live in M (urban city) they can find information . . . like in the newspaper or the Latino phonebook . . . because I have seen it . . . but . . . like from my own experience I can tell . . . like I lived 8 years in S (town) Iowa, and there are no Latinos there . . . there is not a Latino community . . . we were the only Latinos in the area . . . and it took me a long time to learn about (services), there was no newspaper (in Spanish) . . . I didn't see any information about services. (Rubi)

According to this participant's response, it appears that domestic violence services may not be adequately integrated into some communities, especially in rural areas. There seems to be a lack of means for informing immigrant women in rural areas about antiviolence services, and current programs may not be effectively promoting the inclusion and meaningful participation of Latina victims living in those areas. It should be noted that only one participant addressed this issue, and that further research with immigrant victims of domestic violence in rural communities is needed.

Feeling ashamed. Feeling ashamed was a theme that emerged in our analysis. Four out of 10 participants indicated that feeling of shame and embarrassment was a strong factor that prevented them from seeking domestic violence services. The feelings of shame were reinforced by close friends' and family members' behaviors. This idea is best illustrated by the comments of two participants. Isabel stated,

I was embarrassed . . . I didn't want people to know about . . . that I was going to separate . . . because this was my second separation . . . I divorced once and it was hard for me to do it again . . . just to think about it . . . and then talking with my friends . . . then they would start asking you about what happened, and why . . . I mean . . . I was embarrassed . . . I don't know . . . it is hard to find friends you can trust, because they usually make fun of you . . . then they start talking, saying things like: hey! look at how bad he treats her, he doesn't love her . . . you know, people start gossiping . . . and everyone hears about your problem . . . that is why I never said anything.

Ana also commented,

At the beginning . . . I don't know . . . I was feeling so bad that I didn't want to tell anyone, because . . . I thought nobody was going to believe me, because I felt like

it was like gossip. So I felt embarrassed when I wanted to talk, but . . . I mean, it was something that I felt . . . I felt ashamed.

As some scholars have pointed out, when partner abuse occurs in Latino families, family members may say such things as “la ropa sucia se lava en casa,” (“the dirty laundry is washed at home”) a cultural saying or aphorism that identifies the problem of partner abuse as shameful (Goldberg Edelson et al., 2007, p. 2). These four participants, Ana, Isabel, Sonia, and Rubi, may not have considered telling anyone because they understood partner abuse as a private matter and did not want to “air their dirty laundry in public.” The central idea, that the family unit must be preserved at any cost (Goolkasian, 1986), may influence Latina victims to maintain their intimate relationship issues isolated from outside influences, and to avoid the possibility of embarrassment.

Discussion

This study on help-seeking practices among Latinas in Iowa supports the literature regarding Latina victims’ experiences with current antiviolence services in other areas (Brabeck & Guzmán, 2009; Hazen & Soriano, 2007; Sabina et al., 2012; Vidales, 2010). Findings from this study demonstrate that Latina victims are influenced by certain factors that, to a varying degree, often prevent them from connecting to antiviolence services. These factors include immigration status, inability to understand domestic violence given cultural norms, feeling ashamed, isolation, and to a lesser extent lack of language proficiency, and lack of knowledge of resources; all of which influence their willingness to utilize advocacy or social services, and make it particularly difficult for Latina victims to access these programs or interventions. These findings validate research that has found that Latina victims of domestic violence from other states in the United States face particular obstacles when they seek help in other states (Bonilla-Santiago, 2002; Dutton et al., 2000; Goldberg Edelson et al., 2007; Ingram, 2007; Rivera, 2003; West, Kaufman, & Jasinski, 1998), and helps to fill the gap that exists in the literature regarding undocumented Latina victims’ experiences with services outreach in the Midwest.

Participants indicated that their immigration status was a major factor influencing their help-seeking practices. In this regard three conclusions can be drawn: (a) Abusers use immigration to increase their control and power over their Latina victims, which exacerbate the victims’ vulnerability to domestic violence; (b) immigration status influences Latina victims’ help-seeking efforts to connect with law enforcement and social service personnel;

and (c) although there are policies such as The Violence Against Women Act of 1994 that prevent undocumented Latina victims or those who have unstable residency from deportation, there are still misconceptions among them regarding their unstable residency. There is a lack of awareness of domestic violence laws in Latino communities living in the Midwest and a great deal of education is required within these communities about policies, laws, potential solutions, and the availability of programs serving Latino communities.

Although there are agencies providing services for immigrant women experiencing domestic abuse, Latina victims have particular cultural scripts and norms that influence their response to partner abuse. Patriarchal structures found in Latino populations influence the way Latina victims respond to oppressive relationships. The perceptions of men having absolute power and control over women reinforce victims' fear of their batterer partners and create unsafe environments when Latina victims confront or leave them. Likewise, the perceptions of male dominance and control as normal traits of partner relationships in the Latino community make it difficult for Latina victims to identify abuse in their own relationships; thus, these perceptions prevent Latina victims from seeking help.

In addition, Latina victims' feelings of shame and embarrassment contribute to the inhibition of disclosing the abuse to advocates and social services. The women participants in the present study described feelings of shame and embarrassment as a factor that impeded their efforts to seek help. Shame is a concept that involves "feelings of not claim to worth, exacerbated by the lack of social acknowledgment of worth . . . not only do shamed people feel unworthy inside, but they also feel they lack worth in the eyes of others" (Aronson Fontes, 2007, p. 63). Thus, the internal experience of shame might tint the appropriate self-critique of victims when their own practices/experiences are questioned by society. Some Latinas may feel ashamed because they became the victims of the people they love, so they opt to maintain secrecy about the abuse. Because shame is a central concept within Latino populations, there is a need for further research.

There is some evidence that isolation and lack of knowledge of resources influence Latina victims' responses to domestic violence; two participants of this study indicated that these two factors were obstacles that at some point prevented them from seeking help. These victims did not have English proficiency or immigration legal status, factors that could easily isolate them from society. We can also conclude that isolation is not only an issue that exacerbates domestic abuse in Latinas but also a factor that prevents them from seeking advocacy services. For a victim living in a rural area or who is isolated by her abuser, it is difficult for her to know about services offered in the community, making it difficult for her to connect with service providers.

Only one participant cited the lack of language proficiency as a mainstream organizational barrier to provide Latina victims services culturally adapted. Her perceptions demonstrate that law enforcement and other service providers lack adequate training and language capacity to respond effectively to victims who are immigrants and who are not part of the Anglo-American population. This is clear evidence of culturally incompetent services that fail to recognize the dynamics of race in regard to the assistance immigrant victims need.

Although research demonstrates that Latina victims who do not speak English are affected by the lack of bilingual/bicultural services, and undocumented women are less likely to receive services (Rivera, 2003), the findings of this study were not consistent with the literature. In fact, some advocacy institutions, such as antiviolence agencies in the Midwest, are able to meet some of the Latina victims' needs because they provide a comprehensive response through bilingual/bicultural services. The provision of these core services in the context of Latina victims is evidence of trained advocates that understand the dynamics and consequences of domestic violence. Yet, coordinated response strategies must keep sight of the structural inequalities that place particular constraints on Latina victims as those serve to shape the victimization experience itself. Poverty, unemployment and economic marginalization, racial discrimination, and unauthorized immigration status contribute to and exacerbate victimization, and influence Latina victims' responses to their abuse.

There are some suggestions for action/program development that arise from the perceptions and experiences of our 10 participants. For instance, domestic violence strategies and educational efforts should "reflect the community's level of knowledge and sensitivity about domestic violence" (Rivera, 1994, p. 247) and account for factors such as cultural norms and forms of abuse. The cultural value of *familismo* can potentially be used in the development of domestic violence interventions, as family members can be a tremendous source of collective strength for the victim. In addition, interventions should aim at community awareness of the deceptive gender roles and expectations that social norms have imposed on men and women in (Perilla, 1999) patriarchal cultures. We all must work on a "cultural redefinition of what it is to be a real man based on the positive attributes of the *machista* ethos and a dismantling of its negative and extreme attitudes" (Perilla, 1999, p. 129). Further extensive educational and outreach efforts must be linked to bring awareness of legal protections and legal rights for battered immigrants, as well as knowledge of public health and social services available to them. An initial step toward these educational efforts would be the work of domestic violence advocates within the community through existing institutions (e.g., schools, church, public assistance offices) and media to educate (Rivera,

1994) community members on the nature, prevalence, and consequences of domestic violence.

We have “the political commitment to produce useful knowledge that will make a difference to women’s lives” (Letherby, 2003, p. 4). Although there was not follow up of services to the women who participated, the lead investigator joined the nonprofit antiviolence organization where she conducted the study for a period of 4 months. She helped develop a Life Skills and Empowerment Program for Latina victims that focused on economic and legal empowering, and parental skills. Later, participants were invited to participate in this program.

Despite the contributions of this study to domestic violence literature, it also has limitations that must be recognized. First, due to the limited sample size, we are unable to present information explaining the context of relationship among all the factors influencing Latina victims’ responses to domestic violence. Second, the findings and conclusions from these respondents cannot be generalized to all Latina women victims of domestic violence. Because the research sample was restricted to 10 participants and most of them were from Mexico, findings of this study cannot be generalized to Latina victims from different Latino countries. Finally, this study was based on the experiences of Latinas who wanted to make their lives public and share their narratives with others. These women also have contacted antiviolence services, and have received peer and legal counseling. These data cannot be extrapolated to Latinas who do not describe themselves as victims, have not sought out institutional help, or have no access to any type of advocacy services. Thus, generalizations must be made with caution.

While the study we present here is based on a small sample, our goal is not to make generalizations, but to report the observations of qualities of the experiences of a marginalized, vulnerable, and hard-to-reach population. The experiences of our study participants highlight the importance of subsequent research with a larger sample of Latina victims from different Latino-sending countries. In addition, there is a need to expand domestic violence research on Latina victims who have never contacted any type of advocacy service to learn what they perceive as factors influencing their help-seeking behaviors.

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Notes

1. For this article, we use the term *domestic violence*, broadly defined to include physical, psychological, verbal, sexual, and economic abuse in marital or cohabiting heterosexual relationships.
2. It is important to note that not all Latinas who live in the United States are immigrants. Some have been born in the United States or Puerto Rico. In this research, Latinas have been defined as female Latinos who migrate from Mexico and Central/South Latino countries.
3. Requests were submitted to the ISU Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the interviews and focus group. The board approved the research request.

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