Why Immigrants Face Increased Levels of Domestic Violence Risk

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Abstract

To understand why domestic violence among immigrant populations in Western cultures occurs at a higher prevalence rate, a literature review was conducted to identify unique challenges that increase vulnerability to abuse. Unique challenges were defined as risks in addition to common domestic violence risk factors such as low income, high stress, inadequate support systems, and living in crime-ridden communities. This literature review of 13 peer-reviewed articles (based on interviews, focus groups, literature reviews, client records, and protection orders) written between 2018 and 2024 on immigrants (including refugees) in Western countries revealed three themes: 1) immigrants face barriers to accessing help, 2) patriarchal beliefs facilitate domestic violence, and 3) the Western system for supporting survivors of domestic violence can appear culturally insensitive. Awareness of challenges enhances cultural humility and assists social workers in meeting the needs of domestic violence survivors from diverse cultures. Further research on diverse immigrant populations could enhance understanding and identify strategies to reduce the gap between Western support and collective cultural needs.

Keywords: domestic violence, immigrant, collective culture, cultural humility

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Introduction

The United Nations defines domestic violence "as a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner" (n.d., p. 1). Domestic violence, also called domestic abuse or intimate partner violence (IPV), happens across the globe to people of all genders (United Nations, n.d.). In the United States, one in four women and one in 10 men have experienced domestic violence (CDC, 2020). Prevalence is higher for immigrant populations, which consist of "naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, refugees and asylees, people on certain temporary visas, and unauthorized immigrants," who have lifetime domestic violence rates estimated between 13.9% and 93% (Batalova, 2024, p. 2; Morrison et al., 2024). This increase in prevalence correlates with an increased presence of domestic violence risk factors such as low income, high stress, inadequate support systems, and living in crime-ridden communities (Morrison et al., 2024; Sabri et al., 2018a). This literature review aims to further explore why immigrants face increased levels of domestic violence risk based on research published in the past six years.

Method

Searches in EBSCOhost and Google Scholar resulted in peer-reviewed articles that referenced domestic violence in immigrant populations. Key search terms included ('immigrant' or 'refugee'), ('domestic violence,' 'abuse,' 'survivor,' 'victim'), and ('risk factor'). Articles on immigrant and/or refugee populations experiencing domestic violence were reviewed and included if they were published between 2018 and 2024. Of the 13 articles selected for inclusion in this literature review, eight contained information on immigrants in the United States, of which six were based on focus group and interview findings (Messing et al., 2022; Njie-Carr et al., 2021; Rai & Choi, 2022; Sabri et al., 2018; Wachter et al., 2019, 2021). The others were a

literature review (Morrison et al., 2024) and a review of protection orders (Alsinai et al., 2023). Of the remaining five articles, one was a focus group on immigrants in Italy (Gillespie et al., 2022), one was a review of Canadian client records (Park et al., 2021), and three were global literature reviews that included immigrants in the United States (El-Moslemany et al., 2022; Goliaei et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2023). Three themes emerged in the examination of the 13 articles: 1) immigrants face barriers to accessing help, 2) patriarchal beliefs facilitate domestic violence, and 3) the Western system for supporting survivors of domestic violence can appear culturally insensitive. Implications from this research are discussed, including areas for future research.

Results

Theme 1: Barriers to Accessing Help

Barriers to accessing help increase the risk of domestic violence in immigrant populations because they limit the survivor's power to end the abuse. Many of these barriers are not unique to immigrants (Hulley et al., 2023; Morrison et al., 2024; Sabri et al., 2018a). Likewise, not all immigrants experience these barriers, but those who do are at increased risk of domestic violence. Additionally, many of the barriers are linked and exacerbate each other. Across articles reviewed, barriers included fear of deportation, lack of language and financial resources, and education and acculturation barriers.

Fear of Deportation

Survivors of domestic violence may face an increased risk of continued abuse for fear of being deported. Additionally, if a survivor has children, there is fear of being separated from one's children because of deportation (Alsinai et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2023; Messing et al., 2022; Morrison et al., 2024; Sabri et al., 2018a; Wachter et al., 2021). Both fears increase when

the abuser is a citizen or controls the victim's documentation (Messing et al., 2022; Sabri et al., 2018a). As a citizen, the abuser has the advantage of knowing the laws and having protection for their parental rights (Alsinai et al., 2023; Njie-Carr et al., 2021). Fear increases the risk of domestic violence because it may compel the victim to endure the abuse. Similar barriers have been noted in other domestic violence situations where the abuser uses fear tactics, control, and power to threaten the survivor; such as threatening to harm pets or threatening to have the survivor arrested (Robinson & Clausen, 2021; Tolmie et al., 2024). Specific to immigrant populations, abusers may use deportation as another fear tactic to exercise control.

Language and Financial Resources

Language becomes a structural barrier that increases the risk of domestic violence when low skill levels isolate immigrants, limit their job options, or exacerbate their unfamiliarity with protective laws and services (Goliaei et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2023; Morrison et al., 2024; Njie-Carr et al., 2021). Just as fear of deportation can deter a victim from seeking help from formal systems of care, an inability to communicate conditions and know one's rights and available resources prevents victims from accessing available help. Likewise, poor language skills limit an individual's employment opportunities, directly impacting their financial resources. Without adequate financial resources, a victim may become dependent upon their abuser for survival (Goliaei et al., 2023; Morrison et al., 2024; Njie-Carr et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021). This dependency increases when the victim has children because, with limited job options and language skills, they cannot afford to leave and support their children (Sabri et al., 2018a; Wachter et al., 2021). Additionally, their citizenship status intensifies their financial needs by creating barriers to their gaining employment and making them ineligible for welfare programs (Alsinai et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2023; Messing et al., 2022; Morrison et al., 2024; Njie-Carr et

al., 2021; Park et al., 2021; Sabri et al., 2018a; Wachter et al., 2021). Financial abuse is seen in many domestic violence situations (Johnson et al., 2022). However, utilizing language and finances as an abuse tactic may be exacerbated within relationships where the survivor is an immigrant. While sources concurred on the negative impact of a language barrier and financial constraints, there was disagreement on the impact of education.

Education and Acculturation

Education can be a risk or protective factor against domestic violence. A higher level of education implies enhanced language capabilities and job opportunities, which can be interpreted as threats to control by abusers (Morrison et al., 2024; Park et al., 2021; Wachter et al., 2019). The difference in the impact of education on domestic violence risk appears to correlate with a culture's norms on violence. In cultures where wife or spousal abuse is normative, education was "more strongly associated with reduced risk of IPV" (Sabri et al., 2018a, p. 350). As education broadens a victim's perspective, the victim becomes less accepting of abuse (Goliaei et al., 2023). However, a less accepting victim can be a threat to the abuser's control because knowledge encourages individuals to question abuse and take steps to leave.

A global literature review based on 23 studies found that 10 of the studies addressed the association between lower levels of education and higher risks of IPV. However, only five found a significant association between low education levels and high victimization (El-Moslemany et al., 2022). An explanation of the inconsistent results was not given in the literature review. However, Rai & Choi found through a cross-sectional study of 468 South Asians (primarily Indian) living across the United States that individuals with a high school, vocational, or undergraduate degree experienced the highest risk of domestic violence (2022). Their results mirrored a 2002 study that found a curvilinear relationship between education and domestic

violence; the risk of IPV in response to education level increases before it decreases (Jewkes). As women become educated, they challenge gender norms, but without adequate domestic violence support, they increase their risk of being abused by someone desperate to retain control.

A curvilinear risk relationship is not unique to education. Acculturation, "the process by which a culture adopts the customs and ideas of another culture," can also be a risk or protective factor (Nickerson, 2024, p. 1). A cross-sectional survey of 468 South Asian immigrants did not confirm a 2018 study of 16 South Asian immigrants, which found acculturation becomes a risk factor as women assert their power (Rai & Choi, 2022; Sabri et al., 2018b). However, literature reviews found acculturation represents a risk to women before it empowers them to navigate available resources (Goliaei et al., 2023). Likewise, 84 in-depth interviews with women from Africa, Asia, and Latin America who survived domestic violence in the United States found women had to move through the acculturation process to become emotionally prepared to utilize safety planning and social support strategies (Njie-Carr et al., 2021). Emotional preparedness is critical because gender norms are at the heart of why immigrant victims of domestic violence are at higher risk and choose to respond differently to assistance.

Acculturation increases emotional preparedness because, during the process, individuals replace beliefs that condone violence with ones that reject abuse (Njie-Carr et al., 2021). For example, in many highly patriarchal cultures, people believe sexual violence within marriage is acceptable (Morrison et al., 2024). This belief does not support the emotional readiness to seek Western domestic violence support. Additionally, it enforces gender norms such as machismo, "a social construction of masculinity common across Latin American and Spanish culture that maps out how men should engage with their gender based on virility, courage, strength, and power" (Hulley et al., 2023; Morrison et al., 2024; Sabri et al., 2018a; Sotelo, 2023, p. 1). Before seeking

support, individuals must believe they are worthy of help and be ready to put themselves before the group.

Theme 2: Patriarchal Beliefs Facilitate Domestic Violence

Cultural norms vary, but when patriarchal beliefs permeate a culture, women and gender-minoritized individuals are at higher risk of domestic violence. When the underlying belief is men are superior to other gender identities, a man's right to dominate is established through traditions and gender norms (Goliaei et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2023; Morrison et al., 2024; Njie-Carr et al., 2021; Rai & Choi, 2022; Sabri et al., 2018a). Therefore, oppression may appear in different forms, but the result is the normalization of violence against women (within heterosexual relationships).

Fear of Ostracization

Gender norms based on patriarchal beliefs lead to gendered roles where women are viewed as responsible for serving their male partners and maintaining family harmony (Hulley et al., 2023; Njie-Carr et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021; Rai & Choi, 2022; Sabri et al., 2018a). This type of gendered role leaves women powerless and subject to societal expectations. Therefore, if a woman complains about abuse, she is likely to be met with scorn. Rather than being offered protection, victims of domestic violence are often ostracized by their families and communities for failing to obey their husbands (Goliaei et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2023; Njie-Carr et al., 2021; Sabri et al., 2018a). The majority of research has focused on domestic violence within heterosexual relationships; significantly less research has examined the role of patriarchal beliefs within lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other sexually minoritized relationships or among partners who identify as transgender or gender nonbinary. Societal expectations are reinforced by religious beliefs that promote patriarchal beliefs.

Religious Support

Five of the articles reviewed found religion increases the risk of domestic violence when it promotes patriarchal gender roles (Goliaei et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2023; Njie-Carr et al., 2021; Rai & Choi, 2022; Sabri et al., 2018a). Additionally, 13 of the papers reviewed by Hulley et al. highlighted religion impedes help-seeking by victims of domestic violence (2023). Religion is used as a tool through scripture and when religious officials prioritize church and community over a woman's safety (Hulley et al., 2023; Sabri et al., 2018a). When divorce is viewed as a failure, and women are shamed and humiliated for not saving their marriage, victims of domestic abuse feel pressure to accept the abuse.

Theme 3: Culturally Insensitive Support

The Western model of addressing domestic violence is punitive, as the pervading goal of most domestic violence programs in Western countries is to remove the victim and punish the abuser (Wachter et al., 2019). This model supports the wants of individualistic cultures, which emphasize personal liberty within a loosely knit social framework (Rajkumar, 2023). However, in collectivist cultures, which operate in a tightly knit social framework, a punitive model risks alienating individuals who value the well-being of the social structure over the self (Rajkumar, 2023). Therefore, domestic violence support that fails to honor the wants of collectivist cultures increases the risk of domestic violence among immigrant populations.

Marriage is viewed differently in collectivist versus individualistic cultures (Sorokowski et al., 2023). Collectivist cultures are more likely to have arranged marriages that operate at a family, not individual, level (Goliaei et al., 2023; Sorokowski et al., 2023). Therefore, when an individual leaves a marriage, they leave the family and risk dishonoring themselves and their family (Goliaei et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2023; Messing et al., 2022; Njie-Carr et al., 2021; Rai

& Choi, 2022; Sabri et al., 2018a; Wachter et al., 2019). Often, religious beliefs add to the pressure of maintaining the marriage regardless of the personal cost. For example, "in Islam, the family forms the basic building block of society," and "Latina women's religious beliefs most often hindered help-seeking, as their predominantly Catholic faith advocates tended to side with the abusers" (Goliaei et al., 2023, p. 4; Hulley et al., 2023, p. 1007; Sabri et al., 2018a). This pressure can lead individuals only to seek aid that allows them to remain in the marriage; their goal is to change their husband's behavior (Wachter et al., 2019). While the other sources did not address clients wanting to change their husbands, most called upon agencies to improve their cultural appreciation of marriages (Goliaei et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2023; Messing et al., 2022; Morrison et al., 2024; Njie-Carr et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021; Rai & Choi, 2022; Sabri et al., 2018a; Wachter et al., 2019). These articles were based on heterosexual couples where the male partner was the abuser.

Reasons for feeling compelled to stay in an abusive marriage vary. In the Ethiopian culture, divorce "is considered disrespectful and a violation of cultural norms," and in Somali and Congolese cultures, wives are expected to obey their husbands or be shunned by social networks (Njie-Carr et al., 2021, p. 8). Others stay because they fear being unsuitable for marriage. In cultures that value virginity, women can fear divorce because they would be "unlikely to find another husband" (Hulley et al., 2023, p. 1005). Still others, such as the Hmong, fear being cursed if they divorce (Sabri et al., 2018a). Regardless of the underlying fears, the commonality is a disconnect from the Western model, which supports the idea of leaving the marriage.

Fears increase when the marriage involves family members. Western societies value individualism and view marriage as a union between individuals, but collective cultures view

marriage as a "social and financial contract between two families" (Goliaei et al., 2023, p. 4; Rai & Choi, 2022). This difference in perspective puts immense pressure on partners to stay in the marriage. The pressure could be financial. For example, when marriages involve families, they are more likely to be arranged and include dowries that obligate the wife to stay regardless of abuse (Rai & Choi, 2022; Sabri et al., 2018a). Furthermore, if a woman leaves her marriage, she risks the future of her children and sisters because other families will not want to marry into a "bad" family (Hulley et al., 2023; Sabri et al., 2018a). Likewise, when providers fail to offer language support and options honoring religious practices, they increase the risk that people stay in abusive relationships (Alsinai et al., 2023; Gillespie et al., 2022; Goliaei et al., 2023; Hulley et al., 2023; Messing et al., 2022; Njie-Carr et al., 2021; Rai & Choi, 2022; Sabri et al., 2018a). A failure to provide culturally sensitive support increases the risk of domestic violence in immigrant populations because it deters individuals from leaving abusive circumstances. Individuals may only seek and commit to formal support if they trust the source.

Conclusion

This literature review illuminates the complex interplay of factors contributing to the heightened risk of domestic violence among immigrant populations. By examining barriers to accessing help, probing the impact of patriarchal beliefs, and scrutinizing the cultural insensitivity of support systems, it becomes evident that vulnerability to domestic violence in immigrant populations increases exponentially because of the interplay between risk factors.

One key implication of this review is the potential to mitigate vulnerability by implementing structural improvements in accessing support services. Providing language support, paths to employment, housing, and family unification with children can empower individuals to regain their power. However, it is critical to realize the influence of Western

culture on these interventions. Therefore, a second implication is the need to address individuals holistically by developing interventions that minimize the risk of ostracization from family and community in collective cultures with patriarchal beliefs.

Furthermore, gaps exist in how protective factors that challenge patriarchal gender norms, such as education, can be leveraged to minimize vulnerability. Likewise, religion, in societies where violence against women is not normalized, can provide community support to survivors of domestic violence. Research on more extensive and more diverse immigrant populations could explore these gaps and identify strategies to minimize ostracization from family and community as survivors of domestic violence leave abusive relationships.

By reframing these challenges as opportunities, researchers, social workers, and policymakers can work toward creating safer environments that respect cultural beliefs and values while protecting survivors of domestic violence. By addressing diverse needs and wants through culturally competent support systems and interventions, individuals are empowered to create healthy, safe, and fulfilling lives.

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