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High Intimate Partner Violence Rates Among Latinas in Bushwick: A Literature Review

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Although intimate partner violence rates have declined over the past decade, this health and social problem remains serious and significant. Latinas are especially impacted, as they face greater negative outcomes from intimate partner violence experiences. Research has increasingly highlighted the need to incorporate the unique narratives of racial and ethnic populations into education and intervention measures. Unfortunately, current strategies often neglect the social and cultural context of this population group. The influence of this vulnerability is especially evident in locations experiencing increasing rates of violence such as Bushwick in northern Brooklyn, New York City. The present paper examines these vulnerabilities and focuses on intimate partner violence against females, particularly Latina females by their male partners, in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, New York. Also examined is the influence of Latina risk and protective factors contributing to the rate of violence and culturally competent approaches that may be suitable in combating rising rates.

Keywords: Intimate Partner Violence, IPV, Latina Women

Problem Definition

Intimate partner violence (IPV) includes acts of physical, sexual, and/or psychological (emotional) abuse by a current or former intimate partner. These acts also extend to stalking and controlling behaviors (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra, 2015). Common terms used to describe IPV are domestic abuse, spouse abuse, domestic violence, courtship violence, battering, marital rape, and date rape (Ali & Naylor, 2013). Both males and females may experience violence, but national trends reveal approximately 75% of victims are female and those between the ages of 18-24 are most commonly abused by a partner (Truman & Morgan, 2014). Overall, approximately seven million women in the United States have experienced some form of violence or abuse (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010).

Intimate partner violence ranges across all demographics, but vulnerability intensifies when considering specific groups such as the Latina population. Though Latinas experience similar rates of violence when compared to non-Latinas, family and cultural or community values expand the impact due to barriers discouraging awareness and effective

intervention (Bonami, Anderson, Cannon, Slesnick, & Rodriguez, 2009). Despite the comparable rate with non-Latinas, Latinas are also disproportionately impacted as they experience more serious adverse effects from intimate partner violence such as depression and low self-esteem (Edelson, Hokoda, & Ramos, 2007). Latinas are also reported to be more disadvantaged economically than non-Latinos, furthering the difficulty of seeking independence from the abuse (Klevens, 2007).

Prevalence and Context

Intimate partner violence has attracted greater attention as a social problem over the past few decades. Though findings have indicated many racial and ethnic minority groups have experienced related rates of violence, much of the past research is limited to Caucasian females (Bonami et al., 2009). Noting this disparity and the increasing population size of minority groups such as Latinos, attention has shifted to research concerning culturally competent interventions.

The literature used the terms Latina and Hispanic interchangeably to discuss intimate partner violence experiences and interventions. Hispanic was not

discussed as a reference to language or an ancestry connected to a Spanish-speaking country. Further, the term Latina was not explicitly defined, but tended to include females connected to countries in Central or South America or the Caribbean (Klevens, 2007; Postmus, McMahon, Martinez, & Warrener, 2014). Latino or Latina may also extend to immigrants, citizens, and undocumented persons, in addition to both English and Spanish speakers (Gutierrez, Yeakley, & Ortega, 2000). The lack of distinction among sub-groups and status within this population is a significant gap in the literature as it prevents analysis of the unique barriers faced by diverse groups.

According to the U.S. Census, the Hispanic population has reached 56.6 million, making people of Hispanic origin 17.6% of the nation's total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Within the Latino population, 24% of Latinas reported some form of intimate partner violence at some point during their lives (Lipsky, Caetano, Field, & Larkin, 2006). Research is advancing by examining racial and ethnic minority groups, but inconsistencies exist in the literature in reference to this population.

A number of systems intersect to support and sustain intimate partner violence within the Latino community. Literature themes have revealed intersecting barriers exist when considering family and cultural expectations (Postmus et al., 2014; Cho, 2012). At the family level, the value of *familismo* emphasizes family unity and encourages reliance on family connections. This value serves as both a protective and risk factor. The protective factor encourages females to invest in communication with extended family to speak about intimate partner violence experiences. The risk presents itself as women may fear blame and stigma from revealing experiences of intimate partner violence. Cultural barriers often influence whether Latinas are willing to seek help from formal systems (Macy, Nurius, Kernic, & Holt, 2005).

At the cultural or community level, traditional gender roles reinforce *machismo and marianismo*. Machismo is a set of values defining how Latino men should behave while marianismo is the set of values of how women in families approach their role. Machismo may exist as a protective factor in many ways, as men are taught to honor and take responsibility for their families. It may also have negative implications if other characteristics associated with machismo such as aggressiveness are exercised. Any use of power to assert control provides evidence of a patriarchal society, further complicating the ability of an individual to determine whether behaviors are abusive or the norm (Perilla, Bakeman & Norris, 1994). With marianismo,

the well-being of the family is considered before the well-being of the woman. Researchers have reported many Latina survivors of violence believe their families would perceive these events as evidence of an inability to be a good wife and would not be supportive of ending the relationship. This behavior further discourages women from revealing personal information to informal or formal support networks as the man is seen as the authority figure and the partner in control (Kasturirangan & Williams, 2003; Postmus, McMahon, Martinez, & Warrener, 2014; Klevens, 2007).

Demographics

The national rates for Latina intimate partner violence are comparable with non-Latina violence rates. The rate of violence among New York City boroughs shows more variability. In particular, Bushwick, located in the northern part of the New York City borough of Brooklyn, is an example of the disparity when comparing incident rates. Bushwick has approximately 113,000 residents and is 65% Hispanic, 20% Black, 9% White, and 5% Asian. Thirty-four percent of the Bushwick population is between the ages of 25-44. Bushwick has the fourth-highest percentage of adults (42%) who have not completed high school in the city and 33% have limited English proficiency. The economic strain in Bushwick is evident with an unemployment rate that is the second highest in Brooklyn and 30% of residents living below the Federal Poverty Level (King et al., 2015). Bushwick also has the highest rate of intimate partner violence among all the boroughs (New York State Department of Criminal Justice Services, 2015). These community trends reinforce studies showing low socioeconomic status increases the risk for intimate partner violence (Kessler, Molnar, Feurer, & Appelbaum, 2001).

In response to these increasing rates, a number of initiatives in Bushwick are integrating community-focused practices to combat the violence. Schools are prime locations to identify students experiencing or witnessing domestic violence. The after effects of these experiences impact emotional development, potentially encouraging mental health struggles and a cycle of destructive interpersonal relationships. Unfortunately, students are overlooked as educators often do not have the resources or training to spot warning signs. A collaboration between the education department and the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence aims to address this gap. In neighborhoods with high rates of domestic violence such as Bushwick and East New York in Brooklyn, teachers are partnering with community and mental health providers to assess the

severity of this violence for students. Professional development in this area includes trainers supporting personnel identify signs of abuse and how to intervene responsibly and appropriately (Wall, 2015).

In November 2016, Mayor Bill de Blasio also launched the NYC Domestic Violence Task Force, an effort to develop an early intervention citywide strategy to reduce intimate partner violence. The Task Force aims to address early reporting by increasing the comfort level of survivors to communicate the violence experience and to increase the partnership between social services and law enforcement to facilitate survivors receiving resources to ensure their safety (McKinley & Southall, 2016).

The literature has identified commonalities for minority racial and ethnic women experiencing intimate partner violence. These commonalities, including reluctance to share private information and loyalty to immediate family, should be understood and acknowledged to effectively collaborate with families in Bushwick (Klevens, 2007). Both initiatives attempt to compensate for the reluctance of survivors to stand by accusations of abuse due to fear by coordinating a comprehensive system tracking interactions among law enforcement, mental health providers, prosecutors, city housing officials, and organizations providing supportive services. This also supports research that has discussed the challenge in framing intimate partner violence for racial and ethnic minority groups. Connecting experiences and incorporating sociocultural experiences of these groups dictates how intimate partner violence is perceived and acknowledged (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

Human Rights and Social Justice Analysis

Analysis of intimate partner rates among Latinas can be viewed through the lens of social constructionism theory. The personal meaning extended to an experience of intimate partner is rooted in a person's perspective of Latino values such as *familismo* and *machismo* (Macy, Nurius, Kernic, & Holt, 2005). Validating a person's right to construct meaning to her own story articulates respect and dignity. Feminist social theories is another lens used to view this problem. This examines gender power needs impacting the oppressive effects of a culture. Intimate partner violence and its effects among racial and ethnic minority women is aggravated by societal trauma such as racism and sexism (Bryant-Davis, Chung & Tillman, 2009). The relationship between self and the collective group is another element of feminist theories that mirrors the relationship or conflict between U.S. values and Latino values

(Hardcastle, Wenocur, & Powers, 2011). Females think of their personal identity in terms of attachment to immediate and extended family while U.S. values promote the individual as priority (Campbell, 2016).

How Has the Issue Been Addressed Elsewhere?

Federal and state laws are framed as preventative responses to the nationwide issue of intimate partner violence. In 1994, the U.S. government passed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), to improve victim services and prosecution of batterers. Since 1994, the VAWA has been updated to reflect increased services and supports. At the state level, New York State's Domestic Violence Prevention Act (2004) required social services districts to offer services such as emergency shelter, counseling and referrals.

In December 2016, Governor Andrew M. Cuomo also announced New York State funding of \$7.7 million received through the federal Violence Against Women Act. This funding supports 117 existing programs in Chenango, Columbia, Greene, Kings, Monroe, Nassau, New York, Orange, Queens and Schoharie counties to expand advocacy, training programs, counseling services, legal services, and the salaries of those involved in serving and supporting survivors of domestic violence (Governor's Press Office, 2016).

Integrating cultural sensitivity into outreach and programming efforts is critical in reaching the Latina population despite the method used to influence rates of intimate partner violence. Currently, a number of practitioners working in the intimate partner violence field do not integrate the personal experiences of racial and ethnic minority women into their therapeutic work (Campbell, 2016). Cultural sensitivity serves several functions to remedy this challenge. As a proactive effort to raise awareness and prevent the onset of violence, culturally sensitive providers are able to demonstrate how their approach has been informed by Latino values and norms. Reception to information is more likely if providers are able to express understanding of this topic from the perspective of the community, including why intimate partner violence may not be perceived as abuse within this population and the obstacles perpetuating silence about this issue (Kessler et al., 2001). As an intervention to interrupt an existing cycle of violence, culturally competent programming integrates Latino values into its messaging and tailors service supports to meet this population's linguistic needs. Kasturirangan & Nutt-Williams (2003) discussed the need to consider that many Latinas may not be proficient in English. The lack of access to competent services due to this issue is damaging and encourages revictimization. Despite the

discussion of language barriers and research focused on culturally appropriate interventions, a gap in the literature existed for challenges such as immigration status impacting different Latino population subsets. Research available has concluded non-immigrant Latinas are more likely to connect with formal services for IPV resources more often than immigrant Latinas. Issues such as a lack of proper identification contribute to problems accessing IPV services (Ingram, 2007). This is a critical issue as the added challenges of associated factors burden efforts to leave an abusive partner.

Mutual aid or community-based programming is another effort to influence intimate partner violence rates. These intervention programs provide services, but also increase trust in community to shed the stigma of shame associated with sharing private issues. The dynamics of a mutual aid system addresses these factors. Mutual aid speaks to a union of individuals coming together in response to shared challenges. This encourages an arrangement of members helping and relying on one another for personal and interpersonal needs. Members within this system accumulate knowledge, views, and values by sharing different or similar experiences (Shulman, 2012).

A program such as the S.T.A.R.T. Education and Intervention Model is culturally competent and considers the role of mutual aid with respect to religion and spirituality. S.T.A.R.T. stands for Shatter the Silence, Talk about it, Alert the public, Refer, and Train self and others. The program respects cultural traditions while also incorporating NASW ethics and values. It relies on addressing the patriarchal society reinforcing abuse, being mindful of taboos silencing violence survivors, and advocating for social workers to become competent in creating links between mezzo level and institutional policies to support faith-based groups implementing policies that benefit their congregations (Brade 2009).

Under the START model, faith, ethnicity, and intimate partner violence practices are all explored with respect to diversity and the evolving needs of racial and ethnic minority groups. This intervention could be powerful in many communities as faith-based programs may be healing to those whose faith is a significant facet of their lives (Stennis, Fischle, Goodley, Purnell, & Williams, 2015). These programs may also leverage and integrate Latino values such as *familismo* as it is based on a system of teamwork and community.

Analyses of How It Has Been Addressed

Implementing federal and state laws are traditional approaches to combating a nationwide issue. From a human rights perspective, these laws do signify respect for the well-being of females. The intent behind the Violence Against Women Act and other laws is consistent with Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly, 1948), which states “everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of the person.” From a social justice perspective, equal opportunity and access to take part in these services is not guaranteed if an individual is unsure how to participate or navigate the system. These laws also attempt to manage the negative outcomes of abuse or the post-phase of violence rather than acknowledging the contributing factors leading to the issue. As Kivel (2007) explored, the balance between social service and social change is critical. Change agents must address root causes of violence with a balance of community education and intervention. Advancements have been made to improve direct services, but these advancements put a strain on direct services and overlook the need to mobilize women and to address the root causes of violence.

Discussion

National reports show similar rates of violence between Latinas and non-Latinas, but Latinas experiences higher adverse outcomes of violence, making this an especially vulnerable population. The intersection of cultural norms and risk factors create barriers discouraging participation in resources and services. These factors further isolate this population, potentially distorting the magnitude of the problem. As a result, efforts to influence high incident rates must address oppressive forces within this population and acknowledge risk factors unique to this population such as socioeconomic status. Attempts to influence IPV rates through federal and citywide interventions often neglect underlying factors contributing and the essential needs of reaching a population accustomed to denying violence. Culturally competent and community-focused interventions such as mutual aid systems incorporating faith and spirituality have been found to be central themes in support of addressing underlying factors and also intervening in the cycle of abuse.

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