Women and Victimization

Intimate Partner Abuse

Section Highlights

- Historical overview of intimate partner abuse (IPA)
- Contemporary issues in IPA
- Barriers to leaving abusive relationships
- Legal remedies and policy implications for IPA

Much of history has documented the presence of violence within relationships. Throughout history, women were considered the property of the men in their life. Wife beating was a legal and accepted form of discipline of women by their husbands. During ancient Roman times, men were allowed to beat their wives with “a rod or switch as long as its circumference is no greater than the girth of the base of the man’s right thumb” (Stevenson & Love, 1999). The “rule of thumb” continued as a guiding principle of legalized wife beating throughout early European history and appeared in English common-law practices, which influenced the legal structures of the early settlers in America. While small movements against wife beating appear in the United States throughout the 18th and 19th century, it wasn’t until 1871 that Alabama and Massachusetts became the first states to take away the legal right of men to beat their wives. However, significant resistance still existed in many states on the grounds that the government should not interfere in the family environment. It wasn’t until 1882 when wife beating became a crime in the state of Maryland that the act received criminal consequences. However, the enforcement of the act as a crime was limited, and husbands rarely received significant penalties for their actions.

The rise of the feminist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s gave a foundation for the battered women’s movement. Shelters and counseling programs began to appear throughout the United States during
the 1970s; however, these efforts were small in scale and the need for assistance significantly outweighed the availability of services. While police officers across the nation began to receive training about domestic violence calls for service, most departments had a non-arrest policy toward cases of domestic violence, as many officers saw their role as a peacemaker or interventionist, rather than as an agent of criminal justice. In these cases, homicide rates continued to increase due to the murders of women at the hands of their intimate partners, and more officers were dying in the line of duty responding to domestic violence calls.

The grassroots battered women’s movement of the 1970s led to systemic changes in how the police and courts handled cases of domestic violence. The Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment illustrated that when an arrest was made in a misdemeanor domestic violence incident, recidivism rates were significantly lower compared to cases in which police simply “counseled” the aggressor (Sherman & Berk, 1984). However, replication studies did not produce similar results and instead indicated that arresting the offender led to increases in violence.

Throughout the 1980s, state and nonprofit task forces assembled to discuss the issues of intimate partner abuse. By 1989, the United States had over 1,200 programs for battered women and provided shelter housing to over 300,000 women and children each year (Dobash & Dobash, 1992, Stevenson & Love, 1999). In 1994, Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) as part of the federal Crime Victims Act. The VAWA provided funding for battered women’s shelters and outreach education, as well as funding for domestic violence training for police and court personnel. It also provided the opportunity for victims to sue for civil damages as a result of violent acts perpetrated against them. In 1995, the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) was created within the U.S. Department of Justice and today is charged with administering grant programs aimed at research and community programming toward eradicating intimate domestic and intimate partner abuse in our communities (OVW, n.d.).

### Defining and Identifying Intimate Partner Abuse

A number of different terms have been used to identify acts of violence against women. Many of these descriptions fall short in capturing the multifaceted nature of these abusive acts. The term “wife battering” fails to identify cases of violence outside of marriage, such as violent relationships between cohabitating individuals, dating violence, or even victims who were previously married to their batterer. Excluding these individuals from the official definition of “battered” often denies these victims any legal protections or services. The most common term used in recent history is “domestic violence.” However, this term combines the crime of woman battering with other contexts of abuse found within a home environment, such as the abuse of children or grandparents. Today, many scholars and community activists prefer the term “intimate partner abuse” (IPA) as it captures any form of abuse between individuals who currently have, or have previously had, an intimate relationship (Belknap, 2007).

According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, cases of intimate partner abuse have steadily declined over the past 12 years. However, these rates remain high and indicate that intimate partner abuse remains a significant issue in society. In the majority of cases, men are the aggressor and women are the victim (85%) with an estimated 1.3 million women physically victimized each year (CDC, 2003). A review of state laws across the nation reveals that most crimes of domestic violence are considered a misdemeanor offense,

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1Given that the majority of data finds men as the perpetrator and women as the victim, this text generally uses to term “he” to refer to the abuser and the term “she” as the victim. The use of these terms is not meant to ignore male victims of violence or abuse within same-sex relationships, but only to characterize the majority of cases of intimate partner abuse.
even for repeat offenders. Most of the time, prosecutors charge offenders with the crime of simple assault (77.9% of cases), which carries with it a penalty of no more than 1 year in jail (Klein, 2004, Smith & Farole, 2009).

Violence between intimates is often a difficult crime for researchers to measure. Much of the abuse occurs behind closed doors and is not visible to the community. Many victims are reluctant to report cases of abuse to anyone (police, friends, or family members) due to the high levels of shame that they feel as a result of the battering. Many victims also do not disclose their victimization out of fear that it will happen again or because they believe that the police will not do anything to help. Research demonstrates that women have both positive and negative experiences in reporting crimes of intimate partner abuse. Some women indicated that the police scolded them for not following through on previous court cases. For others, they were either blamed for causing the violence or were told to fix the relationship with the offender (Fleury-Steiner, Bybee, Sullivan, Belknap, & Melton, 2006).

For a small number of women, physical violence in an intimate relationship escalates to murder. While intimate partner homicide is on the decline, women are more likely to die at the hands of a loved one than a stranger. In 2004, 1,159 women were killed by their partners (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). For these women, death was the culmination of a relationship that had been violent over time, and in many cases, the violence occurred on a frequent basis. The presence of a weapon significantly increases the risk of homicide, as women who were threatened or assaulted with a gun or other weapon are twenty times more likely to be killed (Campbell et al., 2003). Three fourths of intimate partner homicide victims had tried to leave their abusers, refuting the common question of “why doesn’t she leave?” While many of these women had previously sought help and protection from their batterers, their efforts failed (Block, 2003).

Most people think of physical battering/abuse as the major component of intimate partner abuse. However, abuse between intimates runs much deeper than physical violence. Perhaps one of the most common (and some would argue the most damaging in terms of long-term abuse and healing) is emotional battering/abuse. Those who batter their partner emotionally may call them derogatory names, prevent them from working or attending school, or limit access to family members and friends. An abuser may control the finances and limit access and information regarding money, which in turn makes the victim dependent on the perpetrator. Emotional abuse is a way in which perpetrators seek to control their victims, whether it be in telling them what to wear, where to go, or what to do. They may act jealous or possessive of their partner. In many cases, emotional abuse turns violent toward the victim, child(ren), or pet(s). Following acts of physical or sexual violence, the emotional abuse continues when a batterer blames the victim for the violent behavior by suggesting that “she made him do it” or by telling the victim that “you deserve it.” Emotional abuse is particularly damaging because it robs the victim of her self-esteem and self-confidence. In many cases, victims fail to identify that they are victims of intimate partner abuse if they do not experience
Victims of Intimate Partner Abuse

Dating Violence

While initial laws on intimate partner abuse only recognized physical violence between married couples, recent laws have been changed to reflect the variety of relationship types where intimate partner abuse can occur. One such example is dating violence. Even though two people are unmarried and not living together, such relationships are not immune from violence. Prevalence rates of dating violence on college campuses indicate that 32% of students report a history of dating violence in a previous relationship, and 21% indicate that they currently experience violence in their dating relationship (Sellers & Bromley, 1996). Teens, in particular, are at high risk for dating violence as a result of their inexperience in relationships and their heightened views of “romantic love,” combined with a desire to be independent from their parents (Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence [ACADV], n.d.). Rates of intimate partner violence indicate that teens may be at a greater risk for abuse by a significant other than adults (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). Given the severity of this issue, it is concerning that few parents believe that dating violence is a significant issue for their children (Women’s Health, 2004). Research estimates that one third of youth experience dating violence during adolescence. Unfortunately, few states allow for legal action in teen dating violence, such as protective orders. Adolescent girls who experience physical and sexual dating violence are at an increased risk for a variety of health issues, including (1) use of alcohol, tobacco, and cocaine; (2) poor eating habits and dangerous weight management methods; (3) risky sexual health behaviors, including unprotected sex, multiple partners, and risk of pregnancy; and (4) suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. The early onset of violence and abuse in a relationship carries on for victims into adulthood, as adolescent victims often find themselves in a pattern of abusive relationships as adults (Silverman et al., 2001).

Children of Intimate Partner Abuse

Intimate partner abuse not only affects the victim, but her children as well. Research indicates that 68–87% of incidents involving intimate partner abuse occur while children are present (Raphael, 2000). Children are significantly affected by violence within the home environment, even if they are not the direct victims of the abuse. Despite attempts by mothers to hide their abuse from their children, children are affected. One battered woman spoke of the effects this victimization has on children: “Our kids have problems dealing with us. When we argue and fight in front of them, when they see our husbands humiliating, beating, and cursing us, they will get affected. They will learn everything they see” (Sullivan, Senturia, Negash, Shiu-Thornton, & Giday, 2005, p. 928).
Children who reside in a home where violence is present tend to suffer from a variety of negative mental health outcomes such as feelings of low self-worth, depression, and anxiety. Affected children often suffer in academic settings and have higher rates of aggressive behavior (Goddard & Bedi, 2010). Additionally, many children exposed to violence at a young age continue the cycle of violence into adulthood, as they often find themselves in violent relationships of their own. In an effort to respond to families in need, many agencies that advocate for victims of intimate partner violence are connecting with child welfare agencies to provide a continuum of care for children and their families.

**Same-Sex Intimate Partner Abuse**

While the majority of intimate partner abuse involves a female victim and a male offender, data indicate that battering also occurs in same-sex relationships. The National Crime Victimization survey found that 3% of females who experienced IPA were victimized by another woman, while 16% of male victims were abused by their male counterpart (Catalano, 2007). Like heterosexual victims of intimate partner abuse, many same-sex victims are reluctant to report their abuse. A review of 16 urban counties found that only 4% of cases handled by the courts involved same-sex offender and victim relationships (Smith & Farole, 2009). Research indicates that female victims of same-sex intimate partner violence face many of the same risk factors for violence as heterosexual battering relationships, including jealousy and controlling behaviors, substance use, a history of violent behaviors, and attempts to leave the relationship. However, additional factors, such as homophobia and discrimination at individual and societal levels, also act as risk factors for female same-sex intimate partner violence (FSSIPV). Gender-role stereotyping has a significant effect on the perceptions of FSSIPV. Research by Hassouneh and Glass (2008) identified four themes where gender-role stereotypes affect women’s experience of violence within a same-sex battering relationship. Each of these themes has a significant impact on the denial of harm and victimization. The first theme, “girls don’t hit other girls,” illustrated that many of the women involved in same-sex battering relationships saw their abuse as an indicator of relationship problems where they were to blame, rather than a relationship where abuse occurred. The second theme, “the myth of lesbian utopia,” suggested that the absence of patriarchy meant that there is no oppression or violence within a lesbian relationship. The third theme, labeled “cat fight,” discussed how many women thought that violence within their relationship was less significant than the levels of violence that occur in a male-female domestic violence situation. The fourth theme, of “playing the feminine victim,” made it difficult for outsiders to identify cases of intimate partner abuse, particularly when agents of law enforcement were involved. Playing the victim allowed offenders to avoid arrest, as law enforcement would rely on traditional gender-role stereotypes to identify who was the victim and who was the perpetrator. Given that victims of FSSIPV are in the minority, few programs and services exist to meet the unique needs of this population. Effective programming needs to address the use of gender-role stereotypes when developing education and intervention efforts for the community.

**Effects of Race and Ethnicity on Intimate Partner Abuse**

Issues of race and ethnicity add an additional lens through which one can view issues of intimate partner violence. While much of the early research on intimate partner violence focused exclusively on the relationships of gender inequality as a cause of abuse, the inclusion of race and ethnicity (and socioeconomic status) adds additional issues for consideration. For women of color, issues of gender inequality become secondary
in the discussion of what it means to be a battered woman. Here, scholars acknowledge the role of cultural differences and structural inequality in understanding the experiences of IPV in ethnically diverse communities (Sokoloff, 2004). When investigating issues of violence among women of color, it is important that scholars not limit their discussions to race and ethnicity. Rather, research needs to reflect on the collision of a number of different factors. “Age, employment status, residence, poverty, social embeddedness, and isolation combine to explain higher rates of abuse within black communities—not race or culture per se” (Sokoloff, 2004, p. 141).

As a population, African American women are at an increased risk to be victimized in cases of intimate partner violence. Scholars are quick to point out that it is not race that affects whether one is more likely to be abused by a partner. Rather, research highlights how economic and social marginalization can place women of color at an increased risk for victimization (West, 2004). Research by Potter (2007b) highlights how interracial abuse among Black women and men is related to feelings of being “devalued” by social stereotypes about “the Black man.”

Racial and ethnic identity also affects how victims deal with the abuse perpetuated by an intimate partner. Within the African American community, research highlights how the role of religion and spirituality can serve as methods through which victims are able to cope with the violence in their lives. While many of the women were not active members of a church at the time of their violence, many drew upon spiritual beliefs or connections for support in both enduring the abuse as well as leaving their batterers. For the women who did have a relationship with a Christian congregation and sought out religious leaders for advice and support, many were discouraged by the response they received from their clergy, as they were encouraged to try to stay and work things out. While the women did not generally waiver in their personal faith and spiritual connections with God, these experiences led many to leave either their current congregation or to abandon organized religion in general. In contrast, women who associated with the Islamic (Muslim) faith received greater levels of support from religious leaders and citizens within their community, as they were more likely to condone the violence against women (Potter, 2007a).

Women experiencing IPV may be faced with a multitude of physical and psychological issues, and race and ethnicity can affect whether a victim will seek out support from social service agencies, such as therapeutic and shelter resources. While there were no racial/ethnic differences in the use of services provided by domestic violence agencies, Black women were significantly more likely to use emergency hospital services, police assistance, and housing assistance, compared to Caucasian and Hispanic/Latina women. For example, 65.4% of Black IPV females indicated that they used housing assistance during the past year, compared to only 26.9% of White IPV women and 7.7% of Hispanic/Latina women (Lipsky, Caetano, Field, & Larkin, 2006).

**Unique Issues for Immigrant Victims of Intimate Partner Abuse**

While intimate partner abuse is a considerable issue for any community, the effects are particularly significant for immigrant communities. Research indicates that men in these communities often batter their partner as a way to regain control and power in their lives, particularly when their immigrant status has deprived them of this social standing. Battering becomes a way in which these men regain their sense of masculinity. For many of these men, their education and training in their home countries does not transfer equally upon their arrival to the United States. “Vietnamese immigrant men have lost power after
immigrating to the U.S. Many felt bad because they lack language and occupational skills and could not support their families” (Bui & Morash, 2008, p. 202). Faced with their husband’s inability to find a job to support the family, many immigrant women are faced with the need to work, which many immigrant men find to be in opposition to traditional cultural roles and a threat to their status within the family. This strain against traditional roles leads to violence. Many men blame the American culture for the gender clash occurring in their relationships. However, many women accept the violence as part of the relationship, as such behavior is considered normative for their culture. For example, violence is accepted behavior in Vietnamese traditional cultures, wherein men are seen as aggressive warriors and women are seen as passive and meek. Research on intimate partner violence in the Vietnamese immigrant community reveals high levels of verbal (75%), physical (63%), and sexual abuse (46%), with 37% experiencing both physical and sexual abuse (Bui & Morash, 2008).

For Ethiopian-immigrant women, the violent behavior of men is also accepted within the community, making it difficult for women to develop a community understanding that battering is a crime and to seek out services. Help seeking is seen as a complaint by women, and in such cases, members of the community turn to support the perpetrator, not the victim (Sullivan et al., 2005). Intimate partner abuse is also discussed as a normal part of relationships for Russian-immigrant women. One woman stated that domestic violence “is part of the destiny, and you have to tolerate it” (Crandall, Senturia, Sullivan, & Shiu-Thornton, 2005, p. 945).

Cultural expectations may inhibit women from seeking out assistance, as it would bring shame onto the victim and her family, both immediate and extended. Strict gender-role expectations may lead women to believe that they do not have the right to disobey their partner, which legitimizes the abuse. One woman who emigrated from Russia describes the cultural silence that prohibits women from talking of their abuse: “We were raised differently. I do not know, maybe this is a very developed country, and maybe they think it is best if they tell everyone what is going on in their families, their lives, and everything. We are not used to that. We were ashamed of that. But here it is all different” (Crandall et al., 2005, p. 945). Latina victims of intimate partner abuse are less likely to leave an abusive relationship, and in many cases stay with their batterer. For these women, a desire to maintain the family unit, fear of losing their children in a custody battle, and a hope that the batterer will change his behavior all contribute to their decision to remain in a violent relationship (Dutton, Orloff, & Hass, 2000).

Many perpetrators use the fear of deportation to prevent victims from leaving an abusive relationship. Indeed, Latina women are likely to remain in a battering relationship for a longer period of time due to fear surrounding their undocumented immigration status. In addition, Latina immigrants are less likely to seek out help for intimate partner abuse compared to Latina non-immigrants (Ingram, 2007). While the 2005 reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act increased the protection of immigrant women who are victims of a crime (including domestic violence), it is unclear how many immigrant women are aware of these protections.

Perpetrators often build upon a negative experience of law enforcement from their home country in an effort to create a sense of distrust of the U.S. legal system. For many Vietnamese women, a call to the police for help was a last resort and often done not to facilitate an arrest, but rather to improve the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim by stopping the violence. Most victims did not want to have their partner arrested or prosecuted for domestic violence, but rather wanted to send a message that the abuse was wrong. However, many were reluctant to seek police intervention as they feared losing control over the process and expressed concern and fear over any civil implications that a criminal record would bring, particularly in jurisdictions with mandatory arrest policies (Bui, 2007).
Language barriers may also affect a victim’s ability to seek help, as they may not be able to communicate with law enforcement and court personnel, particularly when resources for translators may be significantly limited (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, n.d.). In an effort to expand access to the courts in domestic violence cases, California amended its domestic violence laws in 2001 to ensure that legal documents in domestic violence cases would be made available in multiple languages. Today, paperwork to request a restraining order and other related documents are available in five different languages: English, Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Korean.\(^2\) Language skills, combined with a lack of understanding for the American legal system, also can prevent an immigrant/refugee woman from leaving her violent relationship. Not only may a victim not know what services are available, she may not understand how to navigate social systems such as welfare and housing and educational opportunities that are necessary in order to achieve economic independence from her batterer (Sullivan et al., 2005).

Immigrant victims are often unlikely to seek out traditional domestic violence services due to cultural norms. In order to provide assistance to these victims, training and education on intimate partner violence should be made available to other service providers likely to come into contact with these women, such as immigration lawyers and health services personnel. Additionally, public service announcements on the laws against intimate partner abuse and the availability of social services should be made available to all women of an immigrant community regardless of whether they are a victim. This ensures that even if a victim is unlikely to report her abuse to the police, she may tell a friend or family member, who could then direct her to available services (Dutton et al., 2000).

\[\textit{The Cycle of Violence}\]

In explaining why women stay in abusive relationships, Lenore Walker (1979) conceptualized the cycle of violence to explain how perpetrators maintain control over their victims over time. The cycle of violence is made up of three distinct time frames. The first is referred to as “tension building,” where a batterer increases control over a victim. As anger begins to build for the perpetrator, the victim tries to keep her partner calm. She also minimizes problems in the relationship. During this time, the victim may feel as though she is “walking on eggshells” because the tension between her and her partner is high. The tension-building phase is characterized by poor communication skills between the partners. It is during the second time frame, referred to as the “abusive incident,” where the major incident of battering occurs. During this period, the batterer is highly abusive, and engages in physical and/or sexual violence to control his victim. Following the abusive event, the perpetrator moves to stage three, known as the “honeymoon” period. During this stage, the offender is apologetic to the victim for causing harm. He often is loving and attentive and promises to change his behavior. While this stage is filled with manipulation of the victim’s feelings by the perpetrator, he is viewed as sincere and in many cases is forgiven by the victim. Unfortunately, the honeymoon phase doesn’t last forever, and in many cases of intimate partner abuse, the cycle begins again, tensions increase and additional acts of violence occur. Over time, the honeymoon stage may disappear entirely. While Walker’s (1979) cycle of violence does not explain all relationships where intimate partner abuse occurs, it does provide a framework to understand the cyclical nature of battering.

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\(^2\) Each state has different policies on the availability of legal documents in languages other than English. Forms for the State of California are located at http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov.
**CASE STUDY**

**Molly Midyette**

Molly Midyette is in many ways a classic case of intimate partner violence, yet her story is very different. Like many battered women, she ignored the concerns of her friends about a new relationship with a man named Alex. She suppressed her own apprehensions and before long was engaged to be married. Alex’s charming personality soon gave way to a different persona, and he began to express episodes of anger that were often directed toward Molly. He would yell at her, call her names, and throw things at her—abusive acts that define the nature of intimate partner violence. Yet Molly would overlook her husband’s behaviors. Even the news that she was expecting did little to stem the violence by Alex toward Molly.

Their son, Jason Jay Midyette, was born on December 17, 2005. However, his life was cut short a mere two months following his birth. On February 24, 2006, Molly and Alex
learned that their son had multiple broken bones and a skull fracture. Jason later died from his injuries. With only Molly and Alex as the caregivers for their son, they soon came under scrutiny. Her father-in-law hired a high-powered defense team of attorneys for both his son and daughter-in-law. Even though she had her own attorney, Molly would defer her comments and questions to the family attorney. Here, her father-in-law’s power over the situation would add another layer to her experience with living in an abusive relationship.

Despite her faith that the legal system would accept that there must have been a medical explanation for Jason’s death, she grew increasingly concerned with her husband’s behavior and her father-in-law’s control of their legal strategy. Her friends shared that Alex had continued his partying ways and Molly later learned that he had even cheated on her. Concerned that his anger and use of cocaine may have played a role in the death of her son, she finally shared her concerns with her own attorney. Alex was infuriated with Molly’s “betrayal,” and his anger escalated to the point where he physically threatened her and her parents. Even her father-in-law threatened to take away everything she valued if she ever spoke negatively of her husband in the future. Even Alex’s attorney made threats about potential consequences if she suggested that Alex was responsible for Jason’s death. As a result, Molly remained silent on her concerns throughout the trial and kept important details from her attorney. She also refrained from expressing any of her concerns about her husband when she testified in her own trial.

Molly was ultimately convicted of child abuse resulting in death and sentenced to 16 years in prison. The court didn’t need to prove that Molly was personally responsible for the injuries to Jason, only that she didn’t do anything to protect her son from harm. Yet, Molly says that behind bars she finally felt free of the abuse and control that she had experienced at the hands of her husband and father-in-law. While in prison, Molly divorced Alex, who was later convicted of a lesser charge and was also sentenced to 16 years behind bars. Today, she is currently appealing her sentence and fights for her freedom. Her case is but one example where her experience of intimate partner violence ultimately led to tragedy and her own incarceration.

Women Who Kill Their Abusers

For a small group of women, their abuse ends when they kill their batterer. These women typically sought out the help of the criminal justice system numerous times in their attempts to leave their violent relationships. The very system from which women unsuccessfully sought assistance now treats these once-victims as criminals and works to punish them for their crimes, despite their documented history of abuse,
outreach for assistance, and lack of a criminal history of violent behaviors. Their status as a victim is trumped by their conviction for manslaughter or murder sentences (Leonard, 2001).

Developed by Lenore Walker (1979), the battered woman syndrome has become the most recognized explanation of the consequences of intimate partner abuse for victims and has been introduced as evidence to explain the actions of women on trial for killing their batterers. The goal of introducing evidence of abuse is to provide an understanding to juries regarding why women in these extreme cases of intimate partner abuse believed that their lives were in danger and believed that violence was the only option to ensure their own safety. However, juries and judges generally show little sympathy for women who kill their abusers, and many of these women receive life sentences (Leonard, 2001). Indeed, the use of the battered woman syndrome as a theory of self-defense is often negated by the defendant’s own actions to defend herself from her batterer, as research suggests that women who fight back or act aggressively at any time during their relationship are less likely to prove to a jury that killing their abuser was an act of self-defense (Schuller & Rzepa, 2002).

**Barriers to Leaving an Abusive Relationship**

When hearing of cases of domestic violence, many members of the public ask the question “why doesn’t she just leave?” Leaving a relationship where intimate partner abuse is present is a difficult and complex process. There are many issues that a victim must face, including housing relocation and safety concerns, as well as the needs of children and family pets. One of the greatest barriers in leaving a battering relationship is the financial limitations that victims face. Women who lack economic self-sufficiency are less likely to report intimate partner abuse and less likely to leave the relationship, as they depend on their abuser for financial support.

Inherent in the question of “why doesn’t she just leave?” is the question of “why does she stay?” This question places the responsibility on the victim for staying with a violent partner, rather than focusing on why her partner chooses to be violent. The reality is that many women do leave their batterers. The average battered woman leaves seven to eight times before she is successful in leaving for good (ACADV, n.d.). Violence doesn’t always end when women report their crimes or leave their abuse. For some women, the levels of violence increase; women who were separated from their batterers reported higher rates of violence, compared to women who were married or divorced from their batterer (Catalano, 2007). These acts of violence can involve not only the initial victim, but can spread out, placing children, friends, and extended family members of the woman at risk. Concerns regarding these potential increases in violence may influence these women to remain in the relationship out of concern for their loved ones.

For some women, their children become the deciding factor in leaving intimate partner abuse. Some mothers believe that it is their responsibility to keep the family together, and despite the violence they endure, do not want to take the children away from their father. While many women were more likely to tolerate the abuse when it only occurred to them, they were less likely to continue the relationship once their children were negatively affected. In these cases, the decision to leave was based on either a child’s request for safety from the violent parent or the mother’s conclusion that her child’s physical and emotional needs overruled any question of remaining in the relationship (Moe, 2009).

In their search for support, some women may turn toward religious institutions for assistance in leaving a relationship characterized by intimate partner abuse. For many women, their faith gave them strength to leave (Wang, Horne, Levitt, & Klesges, 2009), even if they were not regularly attending a congregation
Unfortunately for some of these women, their spirituality may hinder their abilities to leave. Cultural scripts of some religious doctrines may encourage women to try to resolve the struggles of their relationship, as divorce and separation are not viewed as acceptable under the eyes of the church. Here, congregations encourage women to forgive the violence that their partners display (Potter, 2007a). Additionally, clergy may be ill equipped to deal with the issue of intimate partner abuse within their congregations, due to a lack of understanding of the realities of the problem and limited training on service and support needs (Shannon-Lewy & Dull, 2005).

Many women struggle with their decision to leave an abusive relationship. Some women may still love their partner, despite the violence that exists within the relationship. Others may hope that their partner will change and believe the promises made by their loved one for a different life. In some multicultural communities, there is a greater pressure outside of the family unit to return to one’s batterer. Members of these communities often place significant pressures on victims to reunite with their batterer (Sullivan et al., 2005). For many women, they fear what their lives will be like without their partner. These fears may include how they will support themselves (and their children), the possibility that future relationships will have similar results, and even fear of loneliness. A key to successfully leaving an abusive relationship is the victim’s belief that she will be better off without her batterer and have the confidence to make a new life free from violence.

Policy Implications

Restraining Orders

With the increased attention on criminal prosecutions of intimate partner violence, several jurisdictions began to issue civil protection orders or restraining orders as a way for victims to receive legal protection from their batterers. Today, domestic protection orders are available in every jurisdiction in the United States. Protection orders are designed to provide the victim with the opportunity to separate herself from her abuser and generally prohibit the perpetrator from contacting the victim. As a legal document, violations of the protection order are subject to sanctions by the judiciary. For some victims, the restraining order gives them a sense of safety from the batterer.

In some jurisdictions, temporary restraining orders are issued by a police officer when they are called to a domestic violence incident and an arrest is made. By virtue of their name, temporary restraining orders are indeed temporary and are usually only valid for a specific period of time. In many cases, temporary restraining orders expire within a few days, or at the time of the first court appearance by the offender. Following the expiration of a temporary restraining order, victims must apply for an order that will remain in effect for a longer period of time. Not all victims of intimate partner violence seek out a restraining order against their batterer. Victims who believe that their partner will change his behavior are less likely to seek out a civil protection order against their loved one. Those who do apply for protective orders generally do so following a long history of violence and abuse. In order for protective orders to be an effective tool in combating intimate partner abuse, they must be enforced. Federal and state sentencing guidelines require punishment for violations of restraining orders. However, a review of these processes demonstrates that the “full enforcement of the law” is rarely enacted for restraining order violations. Sentencing guidelines in Utah mandate that violators shall be sentenced to batterer intervention programs and jail time, and be ordered to pay restitution as punishment for violating a protective order. However, only 24.1% of offenders were sentenced to batterer intervention programming, while 48.9% were sentenced to jail time and 39.1% were
ordered to pay a fine. In addition, the surrender of firearms was requested in only 4.5% of cases, even though laws in all 50 states require that offenders in domestic violence cases be required to surrender their guns to the police. This finding is particularly disturbing given that the leading cause of death in intimate partner homicides involves firearms (Diviney, Parekh, & Olson, 2009). By not sentencing offenders to the fullest extent under the law, we send a message to perpetrators of intimate partner violence that following the guidelines of a protective order is optional and that protecting the victim is not a primary concern for the criminal justice system.

**Mandatory Versus Discretionary Arrest Policies**

Drawing from criticisms regarding the discretionary arrest policies of many police departments, mandatory arrest or pro-arrest policies began to surface in police departments across the nation during the 1980s and 1990s. The intent behind these laws was to stop domestic violence by deterring offenders. The movement toward mandatory arrest clarified roles of officers when dealing with domestic violence calls for service. It also removed the responsibility of arrest from the victim's decision and onto the shoulders of police personnel. For many women, they believed that a mandatory arrest policy would make officers understand that domestic violence is a serious issue and that it would legitimize their victimization. Here, women believed that an arrest would decrease levels of violence and send a message to the offender that battering is a crime and he would be punished. However, they acknowledged that the decrease in violence was only a temporary measure and that there existed a possibility of increased violence after an offender returned to the family home following an arrest or court proceedings (Barata & Schneider, 2004). In contrast, research by Sokoloff (2004) reflects that many women call the police simply to stop the abuse, not to facilitate an arrest of their partner. While one study found that the majority of women supported the application of mandatory arrest policies in a theoretical sense, they did not believe that such laws would benefit them directly (Smith, 2000). This belief that mandatory arrest policies would not be applicable to their lives is an example of Walker's theory of “learned helplessness,” which suggests that a victim may believe that her batterer is exempt from laws against battering and that her status as a victim is unworthy (Walker, 1979). While mandatory arrest policies removed the victim's responsibility for instituting formal charges against an offender, there were some unintentional consequences. In many cases, a victim's call to the police for help resulted in her own arrest, as officers responding to the scene were often unable or unwilling to determine who was the victim and who was the offender. Other victims may be less likely to call for intervention knowing that their batterer (or themselves) would be arrested (Gormley, 2007; Miller & Peterson, 2007). For many women experiencing intimate partner abuse, they supported the concept of mandatory arrest in general, and for other victims, but were less likely to agree that it was necessary in their own lives (Barata & Schneider, 2004).

In response to many mandatory arrest policies, many jurisdictions instituted “no-drop” policies. Rather than force a victim to participate against her will, these jurisdictions developed evidence-based practices that would allow the prosecutor to present a case based on the evidence collected at the scene of the crime, regardless of any testimony by the victim (Gormley, 2007). Such policies were developed in response to a victim's lack of participation in the prosecution of her batterer. These policies may actually work against victims. When victims feel that their voice is not being heard by the criminal justice system, they may be less likely to report incidents of intimate partner violence. While no-drop policies were designed to prevent victims from dismissing charges against their batterer, they instead led to disempowering victims.
Programming Concerns for Victims of Intimate Partner Abuse

Not only are programs needed to address the needs of victims, but it is important to consider the role of battering prevention programs for men. Over the past three decades, batterer intervention programming has become one of the most popular options when sentencing offenders in cases of intimate partner violence. Given the high correlation between substance use and intimate partner violence, most programs include substance abuse treatment as a part of their curriculum. The majority of these programs offer group therapy, which is popular not only for its cost effectiveness, but scholars suggest that the group environment can serve as an opportunity for program participants to support and mentor one another. One criticism of battering intervention programs is that they generally assume that all batterers are alike. This approach does not offer the opportunity for programs to tailor their curriculum to address the differences among men who abuse (Rosenbaum, 2009). In addition, victims of domestic violence voice their dissatisfaction with many of these types of programs, arguing that they are ineffective in dealing with the issues that the men in their lives face (Gillum, 2008).

One of the major themes highlighted by the research findings is the need for services and programming that reflect the unique needs of women. Intimate partner violence attacks every community, age, religion, race, class, and sexual identity. Like rape crisis, programs that provide services for victims of battering are acknowledging the need for options that are culturally diverse and reflect the unique issues within different racial and ethnic communities. The need for culturally relevant programming also extends to shelter programs for victims of domestic violence. In particular, women noted the absence of women of color (particularly African American women) within the administration and staff, even in environments where the majority of the clientele was Black (Gillum, 2008). Additionally, scholars have noted the need for such programs to be based within the targeted community to ensure participation from the community residents—if programs are difficult to access geographically, women are less likely to seek out services as a result of time, money (work and child-care responsibilities), and transportation limitations. Research has also highlighted the need for increased public service information in communities, particularly in neighborhoods where women of color and immigrant women reside. Victims of violence also discuss the need to be proactive and engage in prevention efforts with young women and men in the community (Bent-Goodley, 2004).

However, as Sokoloff (2004) points out, culturally diverse programs are not enough to combat issues of violence between intimate partners. Rather, intervention efforts need to attack the systems that create social inequalities—racism, sexism, classism, and so on. In addition, the legal system and program providers need to understand how these issues are interrelated and not dominated by a single demographic factor. Regardless of their individual effects on a single person, many of these interventions have the potential to fail at the macro level, as long as the social culture of accepting male violence against women remains (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 2008).

Summary

• Intimate partner abuse is difficult to identify, as much of the abuse occurs behind closed doors and victims are reluctant to report cases of abuse.
• The Violence Against Women Act of 1994 provided funding for battered women shelters, outreach education, and training on domestic violence for police and court personnel.
• Women are more likely to be killed by someone close to them, compared to a stranger.
- Children who are exposed to violence in the home are at risk for negative mental health outcomes. Additionally, many children continue the cycle of violence as adults.
- Gender-role stereotypes and homophobic views have a significant effect on identifying and receiving assistance for victims of same-sex intimate partner abuse.
- Immigrant victims of domestic violence face a variety of unique issues, such as cultural norms regarding violence, gender-role expectations, and a fear of deportation, that affect their experience with battering.
- Walker’s Cycle of Violence (1979) helps explain how perpetrators maintain control within a battering relationship.
- Women are confronted with a variety of barriers in their attempts to leave a relationship where intimate partner abuse is present.
- Most women make multiple attempts to leave a violent relationship before they are successful.
- Restraining orders (also known as protection orders) are designed to provide victims of intimate partner abuse the opportunity to separate themselves from their abuser, and generally prohibit the perpetrator from contacting the victim.
- For many women, mandatory arrest policies have resulted in only a temporary decrease in the violence in their lives, with the potential of increased violence in the future.
- In response to mandatory arrest policies, many jurisdictions instituted no-drop policies, which allow prosecutors to file charges without the consent or participation of the victim.

**KEY TERMS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Battered women's movement</th>
<th>Dating violence</th>
<th>Battered woman syndrome</th>
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<td>Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment</td>
<td>Immigrant victims of intimate partner abuse</td>
<td>Restraining orders</td>
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<td>Violence Against Women Act</td>
<td>The cycle of violence</td>
<td>Mandatory arrest</td>
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<td>Intimate partner abuse</td>
<td>Tension building</td>
<td>Discretionary arrest</td>
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<td>Physical battering/abuse</td>
<td>Abusive incident</td>
<td>Learned helplessness</td>
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<td>Emotional battering/abuse</td>
<td>Honeymoon period</td>
<td>No-drop policies</td>
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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. How have mandatory arrest policies improved the lives of women involved in cases of intimate partner abuse? How have these policies negatively affected victims?
2. What unique issues do immigrant victims of intimate partner abuse face?
3. Describe the different forms of violence that can occur within an intimate partner abusive relationship.
4. Explain how the cycle of violence attempts to explain incidents of intimate partner battering.
5. How has the identification of battered woman syndrome been used in cases of women who kill their batterers?
6. What effects have no-drop policies had for victim rights?
7. What barriers exist for women in their attempts to leave a battering relationship?
In this reading, Martin Schwartz and Walter S. DeKeseredy discuss the need for a shift in the way we think and respond to acts of violence against women. They argue that while efforts at the individual level may provide assistance to victims, these efforts do little to solve the problems of violence at the societal level. Indeed, they suggest that men can be the strongest tools in fighting a culture that is accepting of violence against women.

Interpersonal Violence Against Women

The Role of Men

Martin D. Schwartz and Walter S. DeKeseredy

Many years ago there was a story told so often it became a cliché. Because we have not heard it for a while, it might be useful to drag it out again in a new context. In any of the story’s variants, a group of people were being tested for mental health, common sense, or intelligence. They were told that it was essential to keep as much water off the floor as possible to prevent damage. They were issued mops, and a faucet was turned on. The winners in this exercise were not the ones who devoted their lives to mopping as long and hard as they possibly could, but the ones who went over and turned off the faucet.

In many ways this can be applied to the problem of interpersonal violence against women. The authors here have cumulatively put in more than 20 years work in the shelter house movement, and have only the greatest respect for those who are devoted to the sometimes dangerous and always difficult cause of protecting and sheltering battered women from their intimate partners. Unfortunately, such aid sometimes does not solve the problem. It may ameliorate various pieces of the damage caused by violent men, although it may also make things worse, possibly even leading to a male backlash that results in the death of the women (Dugan, Nagin, & Rosenfeld, 2003). Shelters have been called “Band-aids” to the problem, but sometimes they might not even be that.

Generally, the first call of social scientists is for funds to study the problem more. At least on the level of discovering how much interpersonal violence against women exists, we have and have had for many years ample evidence that a phenomenal amount of such violence is committed in North America every day (not to mention the rest of the world). It is not that we do not have enough data, although the issue is sometimes purposely confused by men’s rights groups claiming that minor or self-protection violence by women must be counted as equal to extreme or injury-causing violence by men. The problem is that our policies do not reflect the extraordinary amount of information already in our possession.

To speak directly to the issue of programming, there are several major problems with programming...
over interpersonal violence against women. In a short article we will center our comments on three issues, although they will not be given equal attention.

Programming—

Attention and Money

The first problem is one of attention and money. In a badly divided country where politics and media-induced moral panics too often overrule logic, money tends to flow to the issues du jour, rather than the most important problems. Barry Glassner (1999) asks whether we as a people are afraid of the wrong things. The American media and the populace following behind are afraid of whatever is being newly hyped: terrorist attacks, road rage attackers, methamphetamine, rape drugs, school shootings, and other events that are statistically relatively rare. Meanwhile, statistically more likely events are ignored: homelessness; the lack of proper medical care, particularly among pregnant women (leading to a truly embarrassingly large infant mortality rate) and children; malnourishment of children; and the most extraordinarily low literacy rate in the Western World. A large percentage of our population is highly organized to protest against abortion, for example, but once the child is born there seems to be much less interest in helping to keep the child alive, or later to educate the child. And, of course, various studies have provided statistics that show that as many as one in four college women are the victims of some sort of sexual assault and more than 10% of all women are physically abused.

In the United States today, in addition to the War in Iraq, the popular place to spend money is on the prevention of terrorist attacks, even in places where it boggles the mind to imagine a terrorist attack ever occurring; and fighting wars against either more minor outbreaks of drug use, or relatively harmless drugs. There is very little call to spend more money, for example, on preventing stalking, a crime that absolutely terrifies many women and even men. National Institute of Justice-sponsored studies, for example, estimate that more than 13% of college women were stalked in one school year, most often by what they characterize as an intimate partner (Office on Violence Against Women, 2007).

Looking at all Americans, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that a smaller but still amazingly large number of women have been stalked in their lives (1 in 12 to 1 in 14), and a smaller but still significant number of men (1 in 50) (Basile, Swahn, Chen, & Saltzman, 2006). Not to misrepresent the situation, there has been an enormous reaction to these statistics, resulting in most states passing laws on stalking, and the federal government beefing up similar laws. Stalking incidents are now counted so that reports can be written. There does not, however, seem to have been much imaginative interest in developing programs beyond increasing penalties for people we don't often convict, and keeping track of reports. Programs to actually stop stalking are not very popular.

The same CDC basic study also looked at forced sex, and found that in a national study that victimization rates have remained constant since the 1990s, and that most victims (female or male) were 17 or younger at the time of the first forced sex (Basile, Chen, Black, & Saltzman, 2007). In other words, we have been fairly ineffective not only in preventing physical abuse of women and children, but also in preventing sexual abuse of intimate partners and their children.

One of the most popular pieces of U.S. legislation is the Violence Against Women Act, but most American programs dealing with the results of such violence operate on shoestring budgets. Worse, for a long and complicated set of reasons, those who try to provide services for victimized women find that to maintain funded facilities they must conform to governmental requirements. To get money from county mental health budgets their clients often must have diagnoses and prognoses. Services must be aimed at the individual problems of the client. Child Protection Services often are required in the first instance to try to maintain the family, even if one member is a batterer or child sexual abuser. Services, money, and programs do not deal with broader social forces in America. Miller and Iovanni (2007) make it clear: “These concessions have shifted the discourse and action away from challenging the root causes of battering—including issues related to power and privilege—and away from prevention efforts” (p. 294).
Most important of all, in a climate where most violence against women consists of men harming women, it is not the women who will stop violence by changing. Rather, men will need to change if there is to be a reduction in the amount of violence against women in North American society. The main place this has been recognized is with the development of batterer intervention programs for men. Although a variety of programs have been tried, and the political popularity of “doing something” has made them the darlings of judges, for the most part they have not been very successful (Jackson, Feder, Davis, Maxwell, & Taylor, 2003; Saunders & Hamill, 2003). One or two hours now and then of counseling, perhaps an emphasis on anger management, and the lack of a system that motivates men to attend and enforces their attendance, all have created a flawed system in most of the country. Most recently attention has been centered on sophisticated programs of coordinated community response plans among courts, probation, shelters, and other community agencies. The main thrust of these programs has been to sweep offenders off the street and lock them up to prevent them from repeating their offenses. These programs have been subject to the most detailed evaluation of any batterer intervention programs, but unfortunately what seems to be the finding is that any changes that come from judicial oversight demonstration projects have come in incapacitation, not in changes in attitudes or deterrence (Harrett, Schaffer, DeStefano, & Castro, 2006). In other words, once the men are let go, they pose the same danger that they posed before.

What all of these programs have in common are two things. First, they deal with men one at a time. To incapacitate all of the spousal assailers in North America would require a hard-to-imagine further dramatic expansion of our already extraordinarily overloaded penal system. Yet, the problem only gets worse. If men leave batterer treatment programs or batterer incapacitation jail cells and return immediately to their patriarchal families, patriarchal places of work, and patriarchal places of leisure, it is hard to imagine that there will ever be any change in their attitudes, and eventually in their behavior. And, of course, this is exactly what we have been finding.

Few programs have dealt with the problems that started this article: turning off the faucet. If we live in a patriarchal society that encourages male violence against women, we must deal with that society, not only with men one by one. To take an example, a tremendous amount of outrage was unleashed on Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick in 2007 when he was alleged to have taken part in the killing of two dogs. It was not only a campaign by the radical People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, but a broad national sense of outrage. People do not like to see dogs harmed. Imagine a Hollywood movie that featured the torture and death of a dog. It will not happen. A few hundred men can be killed in a movie, often very graphically, and rape scenes are no problem at all. In real life, a full-time scorekeeper would be required just to keep track of the number of college and professional athletes in the United States and Canada who have been accused or convicted of beating or raping women, let alone assaulting and/or killing men. It would be quite understandable if Michael Vick were sitting in prison wondering why murderers, rapists, and vicious assailters of women were playing sports without penalty today. The outrage and economic pressure (e.g., losing lucrative endorsements) just is not there in America for people who harm women. Just dogs.

As we shall see later, the first step thus in programming for the end of interpersonal violence is to actually program for it.

Violence Against Women as a Cause of Crime

Today there has slowly been a growing recognition that being a witness to woman abuse as a child is dangerous to healthy development. We have known for quite some time that many adult criminals grew up in homes marked by domestic terrorism, where they were forced to witness and sometimes experience woman abuse on a regular basis. We know that although they were still children, these witnesses to violence against women act out in serious problematic ways, and suffer from important stress and strain that can lead to drug and alcohol use as time goes on (Emery, 2006).
What has not been commonly recognized has been the relationship between the two. If we have a large number of adult criminals with this background, then we can make the direct connection that growing up in a home marked by extensive violence against women can be seen as a cause of some unknown but certainly large amount of the juvenile and adult delinquency in America. This has been mostly studied in terms of whether there is an intergenerational effect, where children grow up to beat their wives. What has not been studied is the extent to which children who live in terroristic households grow up to join gangs, commit armed robberies, use and sell illegal drugs, commit burglaries, and generally become what society calls street criminals (Schwartz, 1989).

Thus, one important area for study in the future is the extent to which ending interpersonal violence against women can be seen as a strategy for reducing adolescent and adult criminal behavior in later years.

Male Peer Support

Some years ago we proposed a male peer support model of woman abuse, which has been tested many times on both college and community populations, including a national representative sample (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997; Sinclair, 2002). This complex model starts with the proposition that the ultimate cause of woman abuse is societal patriarchy, and provides a corollary that more patriarchal men are more likely to be batterers. What is different about this model is that it suggests that the focus of our attention should not be on women’s behavior, but on men’s behavior. Unfortunately, and this is very difficult to say, services for women are good to ameliorate many kinds of pain. Counseling and therapy can be very important for dealing with the individual suffering of women, and can help them look at their lives to see if they wish to make changes. Shelters can provide short-term protection, and under some circumstances longer term protection, if they can separate the woman some physical distance from the abuser. However, shelters may not solve the problem. Shelter house directors are fond of saying that under the best of circumstances—if this particular woman is put into a permanent protective environment—batterers will just go on to their next victim; it is hard to see how this can solve any problem except for one particular woman one particular time.

Solving Problems

The most obvious beginning in most introduction to sociology books is the distinction made by C. Wright Mills: the difference between private and public troubles. Private troubles are terrible. One may have cancer or gangrene, be unable to find housing or a sufficient amount of food to eat, or any of a host of other problems. For most of us, sleeping under a bridge in the winter while in pain would be a terrible thing, but it is a private problem; it is our problem. To be a sociologist is to look at public problems. If it is not one person who is homeless, but a large percentage of the population, then there is a confluence of social forces here that causes a broad amount of pain. The same applies to interpersonal violence against women. Centering attention on counseling, batterer intervention, protection orders, shelter houses, and the like will not end the problem of male violence, although it may ameliorate the private troubles of some smaller group of women.

There is an emerging number of men who believe that if men are the problem here, then men have to be part of the solution. Jackson Katz (2006) in particular has written on this subject, decrying the fact that so few institutions that affect young males (e.g., schools) actively program to try to reduce misogynist and violent attitudes. Meanwhile, these same institutions may through sports, games, role models, films, and other devices work hard to reinforce the notion that men have an entitlement to be in charge, and to force their way if women resist. Katz has found that there are many men willing to listen, if not actively participate in bystander intervention, having been silenced all their lives for fear of not being manly. He developed his extremely popular MVP program with athletes, the Marines, and others, not because these men are the most difficult or dangerous, but because they make effective leaders: If football linemen can speak out against violence against women, others may feel similarly enabled. Others (e.g., Banyard,
Moynihan, & Plante, 2007) have found that bystander education can be effective and long lasting.

What these programs point out is something that we have long known in dealing in crime, which is that informal social control is more effective than formal social control. For more than a decade men have been recommending a variety of informal social controls. Ron Thorne-Finch (1992), for example, has suggested a variety of one-on-one confrontations that men can make to convince their colleagues not to engage in abuse or sexist jokes. Rus Ervin Funk (1992) argued that men could reduce violence against women by engaging in extensive efforts at what he calls “educational activism.” DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1996) argued that men can work in community and local political forums to develop political and informational campaigns. None of these ideas are likely to have an immediate dramatic impact, but all might begin to have a smaller impact, chipping away at the problem.

Rather, what is needed is a major national effort to end interpersonal violence against women. The Michael Vick example may be a good one. There are many similar ones, of course, such as when filmmakers portrayed the death of an animal, and did not make it clear enough that it was not a real animal. Why do people get so upset by the death of animals, but not women? In Pittsburgh, a sports radio personality pointed out that Michael Vick would never have gotten into as much trouble if he had limited himself to raping women. He got into trouble, and was removed from the air, but the fact remains that he was right. Why do most athletes accused of battering or rape end up with the charges dismissed and the woman complainant vilified (Benedict, 1997)?

Many of the activists cited here recommend individual-level patterns of confrontation and struggle to let people know that such behavior and the attitudes that facilitate it is not acceptable (Banyard et al., 2007; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996; Katz, 2006). However, this is not enough. Although there are education programs across the country in this area, there must be significantly more. What is needed is a national-level discussion of programming sufficient to change people's overall attitudes, to where, who knows, maybe raping a woman will come to be seen as bad as killing a pit bull.

**Conclusion**

The main argument in this essay has been that interpersonal violence against women will not be ended by ameliorative efforts aimed at women. These may be necessary, important, and useful for the women involved, but they will not stop the flow of violence. It is just as unlikely that individual programs such as batterer intervention programs will have much effect, especially if they remain short interventions that have little effect on men's overall environment. Rather, what is needed is major intervention aimed directly at the patriarchal attitudes that facilitate interpersonal violence against women in the United States, and that allow men who commit such crimes to get away with them.

**References**


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How is intimate partner violence a “male” issue?
2. How does a patriarchal society perpetuate violence against women?
3. What type of programming and interventions are necessary to stop violence against women?

READING

In this article, students will learn about the various help-seeking methods that women engage in as part of their attempt to leave a battering relationship. These include seeking help from friends, relatives, the legal or justice system, victim services, and social services. Women also face a number of barriers in their help-seeking efforts, including their criminal history, homelessness, language and immigration barriers, and racism.

Silenced Voices and Structured Survival
Battered Women’s Help Seeking

Angela M. Moe

Conceptual Framework

Ptacek’s (1999) notion of social entrapment provides a contextual framework for understanding the ways in which battered women survive and resist violence. According to Ptacek, the combination of coercive control tactics by abusers, and social and institutional failures to adequately address battering, are largely responsible for the social entrapment of battered women. Abusers, backed by a patriarchal, racist, classist, and homophobic society, effectively stunt women’s efforts to safely live. When deserted by community support networks that

could help them resist victimization, including friends, family, neighbors, schools, workplaces, and various victim services such as shelters, hotlines, and advocacy centers, women may feel as if there is little they may do to stop their victimization. Failures of social institutions, such as the criminal justice system, social services, and health care, in appropriately responding to women also contribute to their entrapment.

Social entrapment is similar in conceptualization to Gondolf and Fisher’s (1988) survivor hypothesis, which as a response to earlier theories on learned helplessness (Walker, 1984), held that women continually resist their victimization through help-seeking efforts that are largely unsuccessful because of institutional failures. Gondolf and Fisher argued that if women have sufficient resources and social support, they will leave abusers and live independent lives. This hypothesis has been supported by research by Websdale and Johnson (1997) on the effects of appropriate services and support on women’s abilities to end abusive relationships, live productive lives, and avoid reassault.

It is from this framework that I examine the success and failure of help seeking from the perspectives of battering survivors living in a domestic violence shelter. Through qualitative, semistructured interviews, women in this study described a myriad of help seeking, including calling the police, obtaining orders of protection, asking friends and family for support, utilizing victim and social services, and seeking medical attention. Although some successful and empowering experiences were reported, most efforts were fraught with failure and disappointment. With respect to their standpoints, I argue that women’s resistance to intimate partner abuse and success at utilizing avenues of help seeking are shaped by structural inequalities predicated on patriarchy, poverty, and racism or ethnic bias. Indeed, although most battered women are likely to face some amount of disbelief, discreditation, or even outright hostility in their efforts to seek help with their victimization, in the long run they may fare better or worse within the social welfare, criminal justice, or political-legal system depending on the intersection of various sociostructural inequalities in their lives. To begin, I will review the literature on the social, legal, and institutional outlets from which battered women may seek help.

Literature Review

Justice System

Police have historically neglected battered women’s requests for protection. Although there has been widespread implementation of proarrest and mandatory arrest policies during the past two decades, in large part because of Sherman and Berk’s (1984) policing experiment, such efforts have been critiqued as to their appropriateness in specific situations and their effectiveness at deterring future violence. Specifically, studies suggest that situational factors, such as the officer’s beliefs about the likelihood of future violence, seriousness of the assault, victim’s willingness to cooperate with the criminal justice system, suspect’s demeanor, and whether the suspect was present at the time the police arrived at the scene, have been correlated with arrest rates (Feder, 1996, 1999; Kane, 1999; McKean & Hendricks, 1997). Further research has found that the race of the perpetrator and victim affects how officers interpret these factors (Robinson & Chandek, 2000) as well as the characteristics and beliefs of responding officers (Feder, 1997; Saunders, 1995; Stith, 1990). Departmental policies and political affiliations have also been correlated with police responses (Belknap & McCall, 1994).

Assuming an arrest is made, further problems abound because of high recidivism (Dunford, 1992; Sherman, 1992), which may also be influenced by court and correctional responses to domestic violence. Several laws have been passed during the past 30 years to help ensure that batterers are criminally processed. However, many of the earliest laws relied on the cooperation of victims, who had to raise criminal complaints against their batterers and testify in court about their experiences. Many victims were unwilling to cooperate with police investigations or prosecutorial efforts out of concern for their safety and economic stability or because they were discouraged by the ways in which the justice system had previously failed to
address their victimization (Erez & Belknap, 1998). To make these laws more effective, prosecutors have been given the ability to continue in their efforts with or without victim cooperation. Victims may even be held in contempt of court for failing to appear to testify against their batterers when subpoenaed. These reforms prohibit women from withdrawing criminal complaints against their abusers and strip them of the ability to control the processing of criminal cases regardless of their personal or financial positions (Schechter, 1982). Such practices contradict studies that find that criminal justice practitioners may best protect victims of domestic violence and lessen the risk of batterer recidivism by respecting abused women's wishes with regard to prosecutorial efforts (Fleury, 2002; Ford & Regoli, 1993).

One way that women have been able to seek legal protection aside from criminal prosecution is through a court injunction (i.e., restraining order or protective order). These orders allow women to initiate cost-effective legal actions against their abusers, which may be processed more quickly and with lower standards of proof than criminal proceedings (Chaudhuri & Daly, 1992). There are also psychological benefits for women who feel a sense of empowerment by initiating legal proceedings over which they have control (Fischer, 1993). However, restraining orders have been criticized because of their ineffectiveness in preventing future violence (Davis & Smith, 1995). This is partly because protective orders are limited in scope with regard to the types of situations to which they apply. They also require an immediate and total separation between abusers and victims, which is difficult for women with few economic and social resources (Horton, Simonidis, & Simonidis, 1987). Moreover, police have been inconsistent in their enforcement of these orders (Erez & Belknap, 1998; Rigakos, 1997).

**Victim Services**

Battered women may also seek help from various services unrelated to the justice system. The most popular of these has been shelters, which provide temporary housing, food, counseling, and support services. However, shelter practices have been found to be inconsistent and infantilizing, wherein traditional notions of individualism, self-sufficiency, and financial independence are emphasized, without an appreciation for the benefits of social support (Ferraro, 1983). With the continual struggle for scarce resources, a more recent study (Donnelly, Cook, & Wilson, 2004) found that agency administrators and staff often make choices about which women they will serve based on whom they see as most appropriate or legitimate. The study found that such decisions are made using long-standing stereotypes about women of color, lesbians, middle-class women, homeless women, rurally located women, mentally ill women, and elderly women.

Moreover, some shelters seem to be moving toward a more traditional, social-service type of agency, adhering to increasingly rigid bureaucratic expectations of self-sufficiency, similar to the philosophy of welfare reform (Chang, 1992; Schillinger, 1988). Such changes lessen the autonomy and control shelter residents have over their lives, slow their development of self-confidence and self-esteem, and impede their creation of supportive networks. Thus, these shelters are, in effect, fostering women's psychological, economic, and legal dependence on the state (Schillinger, 1988).

In contrast, shelter programs and victim services that are flexible in providing women assistance specific to their needs, along with continuous social support, report higher success rates in terms of recipient satisfaction and long-term independence (R. Campbell, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995; Chang, 1992; Sullivan & Rumpitz, 1994; Websdale & Johnson, 1997). Within such programs, victim advocates can provide a helpful link to resources. For the most part, advocates work within the legal arena, assisting women with obtaining legal documents, filing petitions, and negotiating the court system. Although little research has been conducted on advocacy, one study (Weisz, 1999) found that legal advocates provided an empathic presence during court proceedings and were instrumental in disseminating valuable information to women. As a result, many who had received legal assistance from an advocate felt empowered to seek further legal action against their abusers. Other studies (McDermott & Garofalo, 2004; Moe Wan, 2000) have
confirmed these findings, while also pointing out the ways in which such intervention may be undesirable and contrary to the goal of empowering women, depending on how services are provided. In a more recent study, Allen, Bybee, and Sullivan (2004) called attention to the need for advocacy in a more comprehensive manner. Based on the needs of a sample of 278 past shelter residents, approximately half of whom were selected to receive advocacy services, the researchers found support for community-based advocacy that would address a myriad of women's needs, including housing, education, employment, and legal issues.

Social Services

Child protection services (CPS) and welfare agencies are also very likely to have contact with battered women and are well positioned to offer victims assistance with safety planning and referrals to appropriate victim-based agencies. CPS often becomes involved with battered women after being alerted to allegations of child maltreatment within their families, as the co-occurrence of woman battering and child abuse or neglect is common (Appel & Holden, 1998; Jones, Gross, & Becker, 2002). The involvement of CPS places battered women in precarious positions as they struggle to survive their own victimization and comply with state interventions on behalf of their children. Court hearings, mediations, mandated counseling, and home visits can be risky for women whose abuse has not yet been publicly disclosed. The risk that a batterer will retaliate against a woman or manipulate her into lying to authorities is heightened in this context, forcing many to negotiate their own and their children's safety. Subsequently, women may appear uncooperative, subversive, and resistant to intervention during court appearances and communications with CPS caseworkers. Moreover, battered women are increasingly being charged with neglect for failing to protect their children from the abuse of their partners (Jacobs, 1998; Jones et al., 2002).

For women who flee abuse, homelessness and poverty are often inevitable consequences (Zorza, 1991). According to Browne and Bassuk's (1997) longitudinal study of low-income and homeless women, more than 83% suffered intimate partner battering. Baker, Cook, and Norris (2003) found similar results among a sample of 110 battered women, 38% of whom had experienced homelessness after separation. A myriad of problems plagued the women who were able to eventually find housing, including being late in paying rent (40%), skipping meals (32%), or neglecting other bills to save for rent (50%), and leaving their homes because of financial problems or continued harassment by their abusers (25%). This study, in particular, illustrated the interconnectedness of various institutions in their responses to domestic violence, finding that women's homelessness was mitigated through positive contact with social service and law enforcement agencies.

Under such circumstances, welfare subsidies often become necessary for economic survival. However, the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) substantially eroded welfare benefits for the poor (Brandwein, 1999). The law encourages marriage, mandates the establishment of paternity in exchange for assistance, and makes it increasingly difficult for women to receive assistance for any length of time (Brush, 2000; Raphael, 1996). Although PRWORA provides a stipulation for domestic violence victims whereby they may be exempted from the time limits placed on recipients for receiving benefits, these exemptions are rarely made available to abused women, and many do not seem to know that they may request such exemptions (Brush, 2000; Busch & Wolfer, 2002). State-by-state policies for implementing the Family Violence Option widely vary as welfare case workers are not always required or encouraged to offer the exemption and have been found to question the legitimacy of women’s claims of abuse and require documentation through police or medical records (Brandwein & Filiano, 2000; Levin, 2001). Thus, asking for help through social service agencies, for many women, is inviting heightened scrutiny over their personal lives.

Other Means of Help Seeking

Battered women may also seek medical services or the support of friends, relatives, or clergy as means of dealing with their victimization. Unfortunately, medical and
mental health care professionals, as well as religious leaders, too often have no training on domestic violence. The predominant thinking that the family unit ought to be preserved at whatever cost (Goolkasian, 1986) has infiltrated the teachings of various religious institutions (Fortune, 1993). Inconsistent responses to domestic violence, if not outright support for patriarchy and violence against women, has been documented in studies of Christian (Cooper-White, 1996; Dixon, 1995), Muslim (Ayyub, 2000), and Judaic (Cwik, 1997; Graetz, 1998) traditions. Such was evidenced in Fowler and Hill’s (2004) study of battered African American women’s coping mechanisms, wherein depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) remained significantly related to abuse despite the women’s reliance on spirituality.

Of specific concern are health care professionals because they are well positioned to intervene in domestic violence situations when women come to emergency rooms or family practitioners for treatment of injuries or routine checkups (Kernic, Wolf, & Holt, 2000). However, this intervention, let alone recognition of the obvious cause of the injuries, has been slow and intermittent (Gerbert, Johnston, Caspers, & Bleecker, 1996; Warshaw, 1993). Women report concealing their abuse out of fear of retaliation from their partners because they encountered health care providers who were not interested in or sympathetic toward their needs and/or because they felt that the health care system was not structured in a way that allowed doctors and nurses sufficient time to deal with issues beyond the treatment of immediate injuries (Gerbert et al., 1996; Hathaway, Willis, & Zimmer, 2002).

Fortunately, progress has been made in recent years (Sheridan, 1998). In particular, administrators of emergency rooms have developed protocols for recognizing, documenting, and intervening in domestic violence. Specific attention is paid to assessing the dangerousness of relationships for battered women through these protocols (J. C. Campbell, 1995). Women who have sought medical care by such providers report feelings of validation, relief, and comfort (Gerbert, Abercrombie, Caspers, Love, & Bronstone, 1999; Hathaway et al., 2002).

With regard to relatives, studies have found that reaching out to family members is one of the most common, and often one of the first, ways in which women seek help (Goodkind, Gillum, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003; Gordon, 1997; Lockhart & White, 1989). Unfortunately, it has also been ranked as among the least helpful, as women have too often felt that their disclosures were met with judgment and a lack of empathy. Specifically, Goodkind et al. (2003) found that the responses of family and friends depended on several factors, such as the nature of the woman’s relationship with her abuser, the number of times she had tried to leave her partner, how many children were involved, and whether friends and family had also been threatened. Such responses affected women’s well-being when they were negative in nature or when they included offers of tangible support. Lempert’s (1997) findings shed further light on the way in which women’s well-being may be affected by the negative responses of friends and family. In this study, women who told their stories felt that the complexity of their situations were ignored; the focus instead turned to the violence without attention to other aspects of the relationship. As a result, the women felt that they were placed in a subordinate position, similar to the one they occupied with their abusers, in that they needed to accept someone else’s definition of the situation to receive support and assistance. The mental health consequences of such responses can be devastating. Kocot and Goodman (2003) found that women’s coping mechanisms were worsened and statistically associated with PTSD and depression when they received mixed advice or advice to stay with their partners from their closest friends and relatives.

Method

In the present study, qualitative, semistructured interviews were conducted under the auspices of epistemic privilege and standpoint feminist theory with the goal of understanding the help-seeking efforts of a sample of shelter residents. Epistemic privilege holds that members of marginalized groups are better positioned than members of socially dominant groups to describe the ways in which the world is organized according to the oppressions they experience (Collins, 1989; Hartsock, 1987; Smith, 1987). Thus, I approached this research
with the assumption that battered women serve as experts of their own lives. This view coincides with standpoint feminism, a central tenet of which supports privileging the experiences and voices of women who participate in our projects over other available discourses (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1983, 1985; Smith, 1974, 1989).

In this research, the focus was on battered women’s perspectives about their help-seeking efforts. My purpose was to emphasize their accounts over other, more commonly accepted explanations for their victimization offered, for example, by medical professionals, therapists, police officers, politicians, and even batterers themselves. Thus, the *survivor speech* (Alcoff & Gray, 1993) included here challenges hegemonic discourses on women’s victimization. Although I do not mean to suggest that all of the women in this study were completely cognizant or critical of the ways in which various social structures affected their life experiences or world views, I do argue that their voices are at least as, or perhaps more, legitimate sources on the realities that battered women in our culture face.

The interview process was facilitated through my position as a fill-in staff member at Tami’s Place (pseudonym), an emergency shelter for victims of domestic violence in the Phoenix metropolitan area of Arizona. After obtaining permission from the administrators of the shelter and human subjects approval from my university, I discussed this project with the shelter residents and conducted 19 confidential interviews in the summer and fall of 2000. With each participant’s permission, the interviews were audi-taped and transcribed. The interviews were conducted at the discretion of the women in private rooms of the shelter and lasted an average of 55 minutes. Each woman was given the opportunity to provide her own pseudonym for identification purposes, a remuneration of $10 cash, and access to her transcript. The transcripts were then coded for emergent and recurring themes and analyzed using a grounded approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As many narratives as possible were included in this article to illustrate these themes. However, in the interest of brevity, for areas where multiple narratives spoke to a similar theme, the most succinct were chosen.

Although working in the shelter may have hindered the level of trust the women had with me, they actually exhibited a great deal of comfort through their honesty and candor. I asked my interviewees to describe what had brought them to the shelter, the ways in which they had sought help, and responses by social entities to their efforts. All of my questions were intentionally open ended and semistructured so as to provide the women with opportunities to shape the flow and content of their contributions (Reinharz, 1992). This approach yielded a wealth of information on various aspects of the women’s lives while simultaneously allowing them to stay within their personal boundaries of comfort and safety. Though this method may be criticized because of its lack of reliability and generalizability, it may also be credited for producing a richly detailed and descriptive set of narratives that would not have been possible through alternative means of data collection (Kvale, 1996).

### Profile of Participants

The women were diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age, educational attainment, and socioeconomic class. Of the women, 9 (47%) identified themselves as White, 4 (21%) as African American, 2 (11%) as American Indian, 2 (11%) as Latina, and 2 (11%) as biracial (American Indian and White, African American and White). Five (26%) women were between the ages of 18 and 25, 10 (53%) were between 26 and 35, and 4 (21%) were between 36 and 45. Eight (42%) women had obtained less than a high school education, 5 (26%) had either graduated from high school or obtained a GED, and 6 (32%) had completed at least some college. Of the women, 5 (26%) reported being consistently poor and/or homeless prior to their stay at the shelter, 10 (53%) reported being lower or working class, and 4 (21%) described themselves as middle class.

The women were quite homogenous in terms of motherhood and their experiences of abuse. Sixteen (84%) had children, and all but one of these children were minors. The majority of the children were living at the shelter. Four (21%) women were also pregnant at the time of the interviews. All had suffered severe and
multiple forms of battery: 18 (95%) stated that they had been physically assaulted, 7 (37%) reported having been sexually assaulted, 16 (84%) described instances of emotional or psychological abuse, and 13 (68%) recounted experiences of financial and/or property abuse.

Findings

Attempting to Leave

Most of the women's help-seeking efforts occurred during their abusive relationships as they attempted to prevent further assaults and salvage their relationships. However, such efforts were not divorced from their attempts to leave and terminate their relationships. Indeed, at the time of the interviews, all of the women were separated from their abusers by virtue of residing in the shelter. Prior to this, 6 (32%) women had moved within the state to escape their abusive partners and 4 (21%) had moved out of state. All of them returned to their abusers for reasons such as having no money; being threatened, stalked, sabotaged, or harassed by their abusers; being encouraged by their families to reconcile; feeling guilty; being lonely; and still loving their partners. Thus, the women's help-seeking efforts occurred amid the realization that ending their abusive relationships was not as simple as leaving a physical residence. Despite this realization, however, few exemplified learned helplessness, as suggested by early research (Walker, 1984). On the contrary, they were very active help seekers who felt entrapped in their relationships, largely because of the failures of various agencies to adequately assist them. Indeed, they expressed more of a learned hopelessness than helplessness (LaViolette & Barnett, 2000), which the following sections illustrate.

Relying on Friends and Relatives

Seeking help or support from friends and relatives was among the most common and initial help-seeking strategies employed by the women, which substantiates previous findings on the use of relatives and friends along with or in lieu of formal sources of help (Gordon, 1997; Lempert, 1997; Lockhart & White, 1989) and the importance of social support for women in domestic violence situations (Tan, Basta, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995). Of the women, 13 (68%) reported that they had told at least one friend or family member about their abuse and, in many cases, had asked for emotional or financial support from them. Responses by friends and relatives varied greatly with some women reporting that they had received much assistance, whereas others reported being abandoned by those close to them. Unfortunately, the latter appeared to be the most common. As Michelle recalled, “My mom calls me and says, ‘Well what did you do? What did you do to deserve that?’” After such reactions by family members, feelings of guilt and self-blame emerged. As Terri explained,

"My older sister goes, “I don't understand you not leaving him before.” It makes you feel bad when your sister says that. You kind of question who you are and what you’re about...what really happened. It makes you want to say, “It was really my responsibility. How did I cause him to do that to me?”"

Although some women had little or no support from their families or friends, others were too ashamed to tell their relatives about the abuse. Anna Marie, an undocumented immigrant, was particularly concerned about her parents’ reaction:

"Now that I went through all this abuse, I'll try to do the best I can to go forward and not go back to Mexico defeated. They don't know what happened between my husband and me. I don't want to tell them anything."

Similar concerns have been noted by immigrant Mexican women in other research (Acevedo, 2000) and by Vietnamese American women (Bui, 2003). In this way, cultural and ethnic norms seem to play into the ways in which women view and approach sources of help.

For those who did have family or friends on whom they could rely, help sometimes came with an ultimatum. Women described instances in which friends or relatives agreed to help them on the condition that they
were never to have contact with their partners again. Such scenarios did little to help the women, as Michelle described: “My dad flew out . . . He told me I needed to leave this man before he killed me. And he said if I ever go back to this man he would disown me, and I did go back to him.”

Fortunately, some women did receive unconditional support from their friends and relatives. In these cases, such assistance helped women escape abuse. As Michelle stated, “I went to a friend’s house who was a domestic violence counselor and she gave me the list for the hotline and all of the domestic violence shelters.” Mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, best friends, and small cliques of friends all were named as people who offered this type of support. Even women who left their abusers a number of times reported going to these people for assistance over and over again. It was very important to them to know that someone they trusted would unconditionally help them, without blame or judgment.

**Involving the Legal or Justice System**

Another popular means of help seeking were efforts to involve the legal and justice system. Of the women, 13 (68%) reported taking such actions as calling the police, requesting that their partner be arrested, and cooperating with investigators and district attorneys to bring criminal charges against their abusers, and 11 women (58%) reported filing for restraining orders, seeking divorces, and attempting to maintain full custody of their children on separation. These rates are comparable to previous studies (Gondolf, 1998; Gondolf, Fisher, & McFerron, 1990) and to the National Crime Victimization Survey, which found that 58% of women called the police after being assaulted by their partners (Rennison & Welchans, 2000).

It was clear from the women’s narratives that more would have called the police had they been able to. This type of help seeking was extremely dangerous:

I tried the last time to call the police and he ripped both the phones out of the walls . . . That time he sat on my upper body and had his thumbs in my eyes and he was just squeezing. He was going, “I’ll gouge your eyes out. I’ll break every bone in your body. Even if they do find you alive, you won’t know to tell them who did it to you because you’ll be in intensive care for so long you’ll forget.” (Terri)

In a few situations, taking the risk proved somewhat worthwhile when batterers were arrested. Women reported that abuse sometimes ceased for some time after an arrest; however, no women reported that their abuse completely stopped after their partners were arrested. None of them stated that their abusers had spent substantial time incarcerated either. In one of the most brutal assaults described, the sentence levied was just more than 1 month in jail and 3 years on house arrest. Rachel described the incident that nearly killed her:

I don’t remember a lot of it. I remember being hit in the head with a can opener, a couple of slashes, a fist to my left side, and a dragging feeling out of my hair. Then 3 days later I woke up in the hospital. He broke four bones in my face, broke my nose, broke a rib so bad that it cut my lung and my kidney, bruised my collarbone, and he stabbed me 47 times. Four or five times I went to court trying to keep him in jail. They sentenced him to 37 days in jail and 3 years house arrest.

Although this attack occurred more than one year before her interview, Rachel was back in the shelter because she had come home one evening to find this man sitting on her porch. This case suggests that the historical complacency toward violence against women and violence within our homes continues to affect the processing of domestic violence cases.

Despite the failure to deter further assaults, arrest did serve other purposes. Having their partners arrested gave some women time to move out of a shared residence. Nina described an incident during which police intervention enabled her to flee the state with her children: “We drove right into a police
station and he followed, cut us off right in front of the police department. They said to get as far from Arizona as we could and just held him for 3 or 4 hours.” Although her boyfriend did eventually find her, arrest did at least provide Nina with a temporary respite from abuse.

In the majority of cases, batterers were not arrested, and many women reported that calling the police did nothing to improve their situation. Cynthia’s experience typified many others: “He’d be gone and they’d say, ‘Well he’s not here now.’ They didn’t show up for 2 hours. I called the police all the time at first . . . and then I just said, ‘Forget it. They’re not helping me.”’

Although many women complained that the police did nothing, others complained of being arrested right along with their abusers. As Amanda explained,

He assaulted me and my mom at the front office of the apartment complex where we were at. Called the police and the police took us both to jail. He said that I hit him, but there was no marks but there were marks on me, so they took us both to jail for 24 hours. They then let me go and let him go without any charges. After that I told my mom, “I’m never going to call the cops again. If I’m gonna get arrested, I might as well just stay here.”

The more women called for police protection to no avail, and the longer the court system failed to respond, the more batterers seemed to learn that they could continue doing what they were doing without repercussions. As Patsy explained,

I called the police. My manager at the apartments where we were moving out of called the police. The manager of the apartments that we moved into, she called the police. He’s went to jail. He’s got out. I was scared to press charges on him because he used to tell me some crazy stuff . . . like telling me he would chop me up. He told me I was never going to leave him. They would let him out, and he would be like pounding on the door. I had an order of protection on him. He just kept on coming around. He ripped up the paper.

Such experiences with protective orders were common for the women who obtained them, as were complications with obtaining orders of protection in different states. Markeelie explained how the court system responded to her when she tried to obtain an injunction prior to fleeing the state in which her abuser resided: “I tried to get an order of protection but they won’t do it because we’re in two different states.” In Markeelie’s case, it appeared as if she had been given inaccurate information because at the time she filed for the injunction, the Full Faith and Credit provision of the Violence Against Women Act would have required that the order be enforced out of state (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2000). For those who were able to obtain restraining orders and whose abusers had not violated the injunctions, the experience of going to court was incredibly empowering. As Terri described, “When the judge gave me the order of protection for me and my kids it was so validating . . . he didn’t even question it.” Unfortunately, such stories were few and far between.

In addition, diversion is amply available for first-time domestic violence offenders in Arizona. According to the state’s domestic violence statute (Arizona Revised Statutes, 1980), first-time offenders may complete a treatment program in exchange for a suspended sentence. A guilty plea is not always required of offenders before entering treatment, and, under certain circumstances, all criminal charges may be dropped on successful completion of the program. The success of batterer intervention seems to be contingent on various factors, including the curriculum and the theoretical underpinnings, format, and duration of a program (Gondolf, 1999; Tolman & Edleson, 1995). Debate has ensued as to the appropriateness of the anger-management curriculum, which has been generally discredited as misdirected and short sighted (Hollenhorst, 1998; Orme, Dominelli, & Mullender, 2000). Despite these findings, women reported that the intervention programs their batterers attended were indeed called “anger management.” Moreover, these classes were
sometimes not even pertinent to domestic violence. In some cases, alcohol and drug abuse counseling was the focus of the program. Follow-up for noncompliance seemed to be lacking as well:

He said it seemed like it was an alcohol and drug treatment program rather than anger management. He refused to go. The deal was if he didn’t go to that he was going to get arrested. Like 5 years later they caught him and arrested him. Because we’re not together anymore, the judge just threw it out. (Nina)

Given such experiences with the legal and justice system, many of the women increasingly turned toward services specifically tailored to victims of domestic violence.

Utilizing Victim Services

Prior to their current shelter stay, 15 (79%) of the women had relied on victim-based services such as shelters, hotlines, support groups, and advocacy centers. This percentage is higher than in an earlier study, which found that, of a sample of 6,612 shelter residents, 63% had previously contacted a shelter or obtained legal advice and that 14% had previously resided in a shelter (Gondolf et al., 1990). This discrepancy is perhaps indicative of the increased number of victim-based services available today and the heightened recognition of domestic violence. However, the women still encountered problems.

For some, finding shelter space had been problematic, either because of their recent drug or alcohol use (many shelters have policies against admitting substance users) or because of a lack of space. During fiscal year 1999–2000, 16,600 women and children requested bed space from the eight domestic violence shelters in Maricopa County (Phoenix metropolitan area). At the time of request, 14,164 women and children were denied shelter, primarily because of a lack of availability (Arizona Department of Economic Security and Department of Health Services, 2001).

Finding bed space was even more problematic for women with children. The shelters in Maricopa County are consistently filled to capacity and usually do not have several beds available at one time to accommodate large families. Moreover, many shelters will not accept children, particularly boys, older than a certain age; only one of the eight shelters in the Phoenix area accepts boys older than 13. As Nina recalled, “My kids are 9, 11, 13, and 14. Most of the shelters don’t take kids over 13 and most of the ones that do separate them overnight.”

Finding and being admitted to shelter were just the first obstacles women faced; remaining at the facility was another challenge. A woman’s stay at the shelter was usually contingent on her (and her children’s) compliance with numerous policies. Many of the women found these rules to be restrictive and counterproductive, particularly with regard to the time limits placed on their stay. Tazia’s comments were indicative:

They give you 30 days to do what you have to do. . . . Not many women that have kids and don’t have a car are able to hurry up and get a job within 30 days. Hurry up and get a place in 30 days. It’s a lot of pressure and deadlines living here. I’m thinking that a shelter is a place to gain self-esteem, to get out of that controlling situation, and get the will power to be self-sufficient and independent, and really there’s more stress here with all the rules and extensions and groups and time limits.

The pressure women faced in trying to reestablish their lives in less than a month was enormous. Although the shelter did provide extensions, looming deadlines were always imminent. The most feasible option for most women under these circumstances was to enter a transitional housing program, which provided counseling and subsidized apartments for up to two years. Like shelters, a woman’s stay in such a program was contingent on her compliance with numerous policies.

Despite their concerns, those who were able to abide by shelter policies found the experience to be generally positive. Many were grateful to have a safe place to sleep, food for their children, and access to clothing and personal supplies. As Cynthia stated,
It’s a place to stay, they give you food, they give you clothes, they give you the counseling you need, they try to make available to you services that you can get...assistance with housing, and everything. They go out of their way to try to make it a good experience and try to make it as much like home as possible.

For a few women, shelter stays played a pivotal role in their efforts to escape abusive men, and many women who resided at a shelter were able to secure subsidized transitional housing. However, others were not as fortunate, particularly those with criminal records. As Lee, who had a felony on her record for drug possession, described,

There’s supposed to be all this help out there. You get in here, you get safe and that’s wonderful, but now I find out that they can’t help me. I have all this ambition. I was going to be able to go to college. I was going to be able to go to a decent job...now to be just slapped in the face. “I’m sorry there’s nowhere for you to go.” Nobody has an answer. It seems like the system is working more against me than for me.

Beyond shelter, women utilized numerous other victim services, including crisis hotlines and legal advocacy services. As has been documented in previous research (Gondolf et al., 1990), residing in the shelter seemed to open doors to a myriad of other services. Although the women had been quite active help seekers prior to their shelter stay, they became even more active during their stay.

Few complaints were issued with regard to non-shelter victim services. However, Anna Marie, who was a monolingual Spanish-speaking woman, reported that she had difficulty reaching any of the agencies that offered services in Spanish to which she had been initially referred: “A lot of those times I would get someone in Spanish but it was an answering machine so I didn’t get the immediate help that I needed.” Fortunately, Anna Marie eventually found a bilingual legal advocate who helped her file for a divorce and an order of protection. She also found transitional housing with bilingual support services. Again, all of these services were only made available after she had been admitted to the shelter. Her experiences were consistent with other research, which has found that preference or necessity for services in Spanish are a significant cultural barrier to help seeking for Latinas (West, Kantor, & Jasinski, 1998).

Resorting to Social Services

Women also turned to social service agencies for assistance, including the welfare system, CPS, the mental health care system, and child support enforcement. Eleven (58%) women reported such help-seeking efforts, which was a much higher figure than that reported in an earlier study (Gondolf et al., 1990), which found that only 11% of shelter residents had contact with social service agencies. Social service agencies were seen as powerful extensions of the state’s social control mechanisms yet also potentially helpful outlets for those with relatively few alternative resources. The women relied on such help-seeking outlets with hopeful ambivalence, knowing that cooperation could yield many benefits (e.g., counseling, financial support) but that revictimization was also possible (e.g., having their children removed for failing to protect them from abuse).

The women in this study reported that they received food stamps, subsidized health insurance, and cash assistance through Arizona’s Department of Economic Security. The main concern expressed about welfare had to do with the recently revised employment requirements. Some of the women were forced to leave their children to work when they felt their kids were too young to go to day care. The sacrifice hardly seemed worthwhile to those who could only find short-term and low-paying employment with few, if any, fringe benefits. Without resources to improve their education, the women found the employment requirements shortsighted. As Amanda explained,"I asked about schooling ‘cause I don’t have a GED. They can’t help you. People that are undereducated, the only way that they are
going to find good jobs to support themselves and their families is if they have a good education. If they can’t help with that then there’s no point in going out there and lookin’ for a job.

Another concern expressed about the welfare system had to do with transfer of benefits and eligibility renewals. Women who had to move to escape their abusers found that transferring their cases to another office sometimes took months, during which time they did not receive benefits. Moreover, they faced constant challenges to their eligibility, which required continual submission of renewal applications. Given these difficulties, few women used the benefits for extended periods of time or in excess, and several expressed guilt for relying on government subsidies: “I feel like less of a woman sometimes because I can’t take care of my son” (Amy). They often opted for the minimal amount of assistance possible.

Although some social service agencies seemed willing to help the women, sometimes these agencies were unable to do so because of a lack of resources. Women were subsequently placed in a double bind in that the agencies on which they depended for assistance harmed them as well. In some cases, these unfulfilled promises of assistance were caused by nonsensical bureaucratic policies. For example, Markeelie looked into applying for child support benefits from her ex-boyfriend, only to find out that doing so would mandate her to disclose her whereabouts. Her ex-boyfriend had previously shown no interest in parenting the child and was actually legally barred from visitation because of his criminal record. Despite this, Markeelie was told that she could not collect child support without disclosing where she was living, thus endangering her safety:

I’m supposed to be receiving child support from my child’s father but they won’t help me because I don’t want to tell him where I’m at. If he pays his child support, he has the right to know where his son is. They’re asking me to choose between my life and receiving child support benefits for my son.

Such contradictions have been noted elsewhere (Varcoe & Irwin, 2004) in terms of custody arrangements, whereby women are expected to preserve their children’s relationships with their fathers while simultaneously protecting them from their fathers. Given these scenarios, it seemed relying on government-sponsored social service agencies provided marginal assistance to the women, which is disheartening given that such public services are often essential to the livelihood of people in difficult circumstances.

**Further Sociostructural Impediments to Help Seeking**

The experiences of the women in this study lend support to Ptacek’s (1999) notion of social entrapment and to Gondolf and Fisher’s (1988) survivor hypothesis. Women who received unconditional and empathetic institutional and/or social support in response to their help-seeking efforts felt legitimated in their survivor status. They were empowered to continue resisting the coercive control tactics of their partners and continued to pursue safe, productive, and independent lives. Alternatively, those whose abuse had been ignored or downplayed when they reached out for help felt as if they had been deserted, silenced, and blamed for their victimization. These women seemed more likely to internalize their hurt (often through depression, self-mutilation, or suicide attempts), blame themselves, and return to their batterers.

Examining the ways in which social institutions respond to battered women must involve a critical analysis of gender relations and the maintenance of institutionalized forms of patriarchy. Indeed, some of the women’s narratives exemplified the patriarchal underpinnings within and outside the law that disqualify women’s voices, concerns, and interests, effectively disempowering many of those who try to use social systems for protection (Smart, 1995). However, it is not as simple as labeling the entire social and legal system misogynist, as the process of gendered exclusion and marginalization is more complex. Of foremost concern are the sociostructural barriers that contribute to battered women’s failed help seeking (Zweig, Schlchter, & Burt, 2002).
For example, 5 (26%) of the women in this study had some sort of criminal record that excluded them from many of the services from which they could benefit. Decent-paying jobs and transitional housing were largely unavailable to these women. Even the decision to call for police protection was a risky one for women with outstanding warrants. Although such exclusion may be a matter of agency policy and prioritization processes (e.g., selecting candidates for sparse transitional housing), legal barriers may also affect women’s help-seeking efforts. As Hirsch (2001) found in a study of abused women with drug convictions, those with felony drug records face lifetime bans on public subsidies such as cash assistance and food stamps. Given that women’s use of drugs has been correlated with battering and that the majority of women in the criminal justice system have experienced intimate partner battering, it may be particularly damaging to be excluded from public assistance because of such criminalization (Hirsch, 2001; Moe, 2004).

Another structural barrier was homelessness. Four (21%) of the women reported having been homeless intermittently throughout their adulthood, often as a consequence of fleeing abuse. These women were told by police officers, social service providers, and victim service providers to obtain orders of protection against their abusers. However, to obtain these injunctions, petitions usually require a street address for both parties. In this way, homeless women, and women whose abusers are homeless, are blocked from obtaining a form of legal protection. Even for those with homes, financial difficulties prevent other means of legal intervention, such as divorce, that could provide some protection. So although the legal system may not always be helpful to women, it is not even available to others.

A third structural barrier to help seeking relates to race and ethnicity. Services geared toward specific populations, such as the Phoenix Indian Hospital, proved extremely helpful for women of color, such as Patsy. However, being monolingual in Spanish and undocumented produced obstacles for Anna Marie. Although she eventually found the help she wanted, many other women who are either undocumented or under the auspices of immigration law are not as fortunate (Acevedo, 2000; Bui & Morash, 1999; Dasgupta, 2000; Davis & Erez, 1998). It is likely that race and ethnicity influenced the women’s interactions with criminal justice and social service personnel as well, based on prior literature on such responses to women of color (McGillivray & Comaskey, 1999; Rasche, 1995; Razack, 1998). However, subtle and institutionalized forms of racism are not easily detectable, particularly by persons in the middle of a crisis, as were the women in this study. Hence, it is likely that their help-seeking efforts were affected in ways beyond those explicitly identified.

Discussion and Conclusion

The women in this study reported horrific abuses at the hands of their partners. Their experiences signify the way in which our most intimate of spaces may be infused with violence. Given the extent of their victimization, the women’s strength and perseverance in resisting the abuse was compelling. They sought help multiple times from various outlets and, in some cases, continued to do so despite compounding failures. Constructive critiques of the ways in which our societal structures and institutions are responding to battered women are an important first step toward eradicating violence against women.

Indeed, being socially marginalized in ways beyond gender plays an important role in one’s accessibility to institutional assistance. As Gondolf and Fisher (1988) argued, women are active help seekers. Given the psychological consequences of battering, combined with the social isolation and emotional degradation caused by batterers, it is quite remarkable that abused women are such active help seekers. Of course, selection bias affected the findings of my research, as the women in this sample were active and, to some extent, successful help seekers because of their ability to secure temporary housing in the shelter in which I conducted interviews. Women who have never told anyone or reached out to social service, victim-based, or criminal justice agencies for help are certainly a much more difficult population to
study. In addition, it would be hard to discuss help seeking with a woman who either does not label herself battered or who is so deeply controlled and isolated that nobody can gain access to her. Thus, my conclusions are necessarily limited to the population of battered women who do identify their experiences as abuse, have reached out for help, and have to some extent been successful at obtaining it.

Among these women and, more specifically, the sample of women in my study, diligence was an overriding theme in their narratives. Beyond the success of obtaining shelter, the women remained diligent in their efforts to stay safe and removed from their partners, obtain legal protection and intervention, maintain custody of their children, be good mothers, and build a support system of family and friends. In instances in which one or several help-seeking mechanisms came through for them, the women’s stories illustrated positive outcomes. Unfortunately, such stories were too few and far between, confirming Ptacek’s (1999) social entrapment thesis. Most of the women interviewed for this study seemed to be cumulatively affected by their partners’ abuse tactics and the failed or inadequate responses by social and institutional outlets. The main conclusion to be drawn from this is that every little bit matters. One helpful response may spur further help-seeking efforts. It may also legitimize a woman’s claims to other agencies. Just as failed help seeking may be cumulative in effect, so too might the fallout of working in such environments have reached out for help, and have to some extent been successful at obtaining it.

In terms of pragmatic policy change and advocacy, many of the problems women face during the course of seeking help could be addressed without a complete overhaul of the social structure and, in some cases, without substantial increases in funding. Such changes are a matter of increased integrity and empathy and perhaps a bit of ingenuity and legal reform. However, such changes are not the obligation solely of those working in programs that have contact with battered women. As Gondolf and Fisher (1988) acknowledge, service providers often feel overwhelmed in workload and limited in the resources they may direct toward any particular individual, despite sincere feelings of empathy and compassion. The fallout of working in such environments has been deemed a kind of learned helplessness in itself, in that as service providers are faced with restricted resources and indefinite need, less effort may be devoted to any particular case. Thus, coordinated community-response protocols that provide support and collaboration within and between various social service, victim, and criminal justice agencies could go a long way toward efficient use of resources (Uekert, 2003).

References


**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What methods of help seeking did women use in their efforts to exit their battering relationships? How successful were these efforts?

2. What barriers did women face in an attempt to leave their abusers?

3. How did women’s involvements with police, courts, and social services place them at risk for continued victimizations?

4. How do criminal justice and social welfare policies act as barriers in building a new life following a violent relationship?
In the section introduction, you were exposed to a number of different conditions that can alter the experience of being victimized by a significant other. This article highlights how immigration status can alter women's abilities to seek help in a domestic violence setting. By listening to the voices of women involved in these types of situations, you will learn not only how their access of resources and responses to domestic violence are limited, but that many women fail to identify themselves as victims. Here, immigration provides a new lens through which we can learn about the experience of battering by an intimate partner.

Intersections of Immigration and Domestic Violence

Voices of Battered Immigrant Women

Edna Erez, Madelaine Adelman, and Carol Gregory

Over the past 30 years, feminist academics and practitioners have revealed the extent and variety of gender violence, ranging from street-level sexual harassment (Stanko, 1985) to woman battering (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). According to Chesney-Lind (2006), “naming of the types and dimensions of female victimization had a significant impact on public policy, and it is arguably the most tangible accomplishment of both feminist criminology and grassroots feminists concerned about gender, crime, and justice” (p. 7). Indeed, feminist criminological research was part of the battered woman's movement's hard-won efforts to criminalize domestic violence (Adelman & Morgan, 2006). Feminist criminologists, their cross-disciplinary associates, and others also have been part of the growing critique of the limits or unintended effects of the criminalization of domestic violence (Britton, 2000; Chesney-Lind, 2006; Coker, 2001; Snider, 1998). Together, scholars and activists have identified harms induced by the criminal justice system not only on battered women, and poor battered women of color in particular, but also on men who batter, and in particular poor men of color who batter (Merry, 2000).

Noting the interconnection between racist violence, violence against women, and the institutionalization of the battered woman's movement within U.S. social service and criminal justice systems, feminist criminologists and others have called for antiracist, multicultural feminist analyses of gender violence and other forms of crime (Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Potter, 2006; see Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996, and

Crenshaw, 1991, for foundational elaborations on intersectionality). Much of this analysis has looked at immigrant status as part of one’s racial location in the social hierarchy (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991; Scales-Trent, 1999). Here, we build on the history of feminist criminology with an integrated feminist analysis of immigration and domestic violence. Rather than consider immigration as a variable or static category within race, we consider immigration as part of the multiple grounds of identity shaping the domestic violence experience. It is part of the interactive dynamic processes that, along with race, gender, sexual orientation, and class, inform women’s experiences of and responses to domestic violence. We do so by analyzing one-on-one interviews with immigrant battered women from a variety of countries, revealing common experiences among immigrants in an effort to highlight immigrant as a separate and multiplicative aspect of identity, violence, and oppression.

We situate our study within the literature on gender, immigration, and domestic violence, noting the scholarly focus on discrete groups of immigrants (e.g., by ethnicity or national origin) rather than the commonalities experienced by various immigrant groups. We then outline our research methods and sample, followed by an analysis of the data that focus on commonalities across immigrant battered women’s experiences. Specifically, we suggest that although significant investment has been made by federal and state governments, and local community-based organizations, to improve the criminal justice system response to immigrant battered women in terms of legal reform, law enforcement training, and increased services, immigrant battered women continue to face considerable structural barriers to safety. These barriers exist prior to immigration (e.g., social pressure to marry) and as a result of immigration (e.g., economic disadvantage that has gendered consequences). In turn, immigration law and women’s perceptions of law enforcement inform their attitudes toward reporting intimate partner violence. We conclude with a discussion of our research findings and their implications for theory and practice, expressing concern with the level of awareness of existing legal options for battered immigrant women and the growing anti-immigrant trend across the United States to devolve enforcement of federal immigration law to local authorities.

**Feminist Theory of Intersectionality**

Feminist discourse on intersectionality has developed over the past two decades. Although there are some differences in interpretation and application, intersectionality theory considers the ways that hierarchies of power exist along multiple socially defined categories such as race, class, and gender. These categories mutually construct each other via structural inequalities and social interaction, creating a matrix of intersecting hierarchies that is not merely additive but multiplicative in terms of unearned privilege, domination, and oppression (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996; Collins, 1991/2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Higginbotham, 1997; Steinbugler, Press, & Johnson Dias, 2006). In this way, both opportunities (including social and material benefit) and oppressions may be simultaneously created by intersecting forms of domination (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996; Steinbugler et al., 2006). Thus, for instance, “a gay Black man may experience privilege vis-à-vis his maleness but be marginalized for his race and sexuality” (p. 808). Angela Harris (1990), along with other critical race feminism legal scholars, refers to this notion of intersecting, invisible identities as “multiple consciousness.” Theories of intersectionality have inspired scholars across many disciplines to notice how various forms of privilege and oppression operate simultaneously as well as to reveal those forms of social identities that go unnoticed.

Writings on intersectionality use country of origin as an example of how racial and ethnic identities result in domination or oppression. Crenshaw (1991) specifically refers to immigrant status as an example of how race affects violent victimization in the United States. In this article, we show how the experiences of legal and undocumented immigrants are different from those of U.S. citizens and yet similar to one another, regardless of country of origin. Notwithstanding the racialized politics associated with immigration in the
United States, and recognizing the racism that many immigrants face, our effort here is to build on the substantial literature on intersectionality to reveal the intersection of immigration and domestic violence. We do so to highlight the salience of immigration for battered women in terms of how immigration affects the level and types of intimate partner violence women experience and shapes marital dynamics and women’s helpseeking opportunities. We also examine how immigration and the policing of immigration may compromise women’s safety. Thus, although we attend to the racialized category of immigration and the racist anti-immigrant sentiment aimed at immigrants, analytically, we have separated immigrant status from race/ethnicity as a category of intersectionality.

**Immigration**

Twenty-first century migration across international borders is a significant global phenomenon (Sassen, 1998). Motivated by a combination of push and pull factors such as impoverishment and economic opportunities, political instability and the opening of previously closed borders, and the loss or gain of family ties, large numbers of people enter key receiving countries such as the United States each year. The United States is considered “a nation of immigrants.” Nevertheless, who is allowed to legally immigrate has varied over time. U.S. immigration and naturalization laws have shaped the resulting immigrant pool in terms of gender, race or nationality, sexual orientation, and marital status. These social identities have been central to U.S. immigration law, ranging from the exclusion of Chinese prostitutes in the 1870s to the men-only Bracero Program instituted in 1942 (Calavita, 1992). Subsequent changes in immigration policy, including an amnesty initiative in the mid-1980s, led to heterosexual family reunification and an increase in the numbers of women and children who migrated to the United States. Such gendered, racialized, and sexualized patterns reflect how immigration and naturalization law serves to police the purported moral as well as political boundaries of the nation (Gardner, 2005). These immigration laws affect why, when, how, and with whom women immigrate and their experiences of domestic violence subsequent to arrival in the United States.

One factor among many that motivates emigration from southern toward northern tier states is immigration policies that focus on family reunification. Other factors include the intensification of economic globalization under neo-liberal policies and relative ease of movement between political borders. Together, these factors are responsible for women making up an ever-increasing proportion of immigrants to the United States. Indeed, by the turn of the century, “close to 60 percent of immigrants from Mexico, China, the Philippines and Vietnam were female”; a similar percentage of female immigrants were between ages 15 and 44, significantly younger than their native-born counterparts (Zhou, 2002, p. 26). This young age cohort requires of female immigrants a long-term commitment to domestic and workplace labor in their new country of residence. In addition to their unpaid domestic and paid workplace labor, female immigrants also frequently contribute financially to the economy of their countries of origin via remittances home. In areas other than age and labor, however, female immigrants, as a whole, are a diverse group: migrating alone or with children and family; undocumented and/or dependent on male kin who sponsor their immigration. Some women arrive as highly skilled workers and successfully secure well-paid jobs. Other women, regardless of their skill sets, become among the lowest paid in the U.S. workforce. Still, female immigrants share the gendered effects of their border crossing.

As research on the gendered nature of immigration has emerged in terms of changing patterns over time of migration, identity formation and transformation, education, fertility, health care, and employment (Gabaccia, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Pessar, 1999; Strum & Tarantolo, 2002), so too has insight into the so-called domestic lives of immigrants. Ethnographers, for example, have analyzed how the meaning of marriage, along with women’s and men’s expectations of intimate relationships, may change as a result of migration patterns, access to education, and women’s economic opportunities (Hirsch, 2003). These studies of
immigrant domestic life help trace continuities and disruptions of the construction of gender across the migration process. For our purposes, one of the most critical links lies between the transformation of gender across the migration process and domestic violence.

**Immigration and Domestic Violence**

Violence against women is one of the most common victimizations experienced by immigrants (Davis & Erez, 1998; see also Erez, 2000, 2002; Raj & Silverman, 2002). Working together, battered immigrant women, activists, and scholars have documented how immigration intensifies domestic violence and creates vulnerabilities that impair immigrant women’s management of domestic violence, preventing them from successfully challenging men’s violence, from securing decreases in rates or types of men’s violence, or from leaving their intimate partners. According to domestic violence scholars, “immigrant women arrive with disadvantages in social status and basic human capital resources relative to immigrant men” (Bui & Morash, 1999, p. 774) or cannot participate as actively in networks as male counterparts do (Abraham, 2000). As a result, barriers to safety for immigrant women include a lack of resources for battered women, social isolation or lack of local natal kin, economic instability, and perceptions that disclosure of battering to outsiders sullies community status. Criminal justice agencies that lack translation services and/or knowledge of immigration law, lack of trust in law enforcement and/or government authorities, and immigration law that dictates legal and sometimes economic dependency on the batterer, who may be undocumented or lacking legal immigrant status, also pose significant barriers (Bui, 2004; Dasgupta, 2000; Wachholz & Miedema, 2000).

U.S. immigration law endangers battered immigrant women by giving near total control over the women’s legal status to the sponsoring spouses, replicating the doctrine of coverture, under which “a wife could not make a contract with her husband or with others” (Calvo, 1997, p. 381). Coverture, in effect, identifies the married couple as a single legal entity, within which the husband has control over the property and body of the wife and their children. Similarly, women who immigrate as wives of U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, diplomats, students, or workers are legally dependent on others to sponsor, pursue, and complete their visa petitions. This legal dependency intensifies gendered inequality, creates new ways for men to abuse and control their intimate partners, and entraps battered women (Erez, 2002; Salcido & Adelman, 2004). As part of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), legal reforms have been instituted to relieve some of the legal and economic dependencies imposed on battered immigrant women. These reforms include self-petition, which lets an abused spouse apply for a green card on his or her own; cancellation of removal, which lets an abused spouse who has already been subjected to removal proceedings request to remain in the United States; the U-visa, which lets a victim of crime (including domestic violence) who has been helpful to its investigation or prosecution apply for a nonimmigrant visa and work permit; and access to public benefits such as food stamps (Orloff, 2002; see also Wood, 2004). Obstacles to these well-intentioned legal reforms for immigrant battered women remain, in particular due to the complex nature of legal qualifications, including who is eligible to apply for which form of legal relief, and meeting the threshold required to demonstrate having been subjected to battery or extreme cruelty. The rise in anti-immigrant public sentiment has resulted both in the exclusion of some immigrants from access to education and medical care and in increased local law enforcement of federal immigration law. When coupled with post-9/11 delays in processing visa applications, the consequences of anti-immigrant sentiment further complicate the implementation of legal reforms for immigrant battered women.

Knowledge of immigrants’ experiences with domestic violence is largely culled from case studies of discrete communities. Due in large part to the depth of social and cultural capital required to conduct sensitive research with members of marginalized immigrant communities, researchers tend to focus on small, local
samples of battered women from specific immigrant communities (but see Menjivar & Salcido, 2002). Thus, we have insightful contributions based on the experiences of domestic violence by immigrant women to the United States from, for example, Bosnia (Muftic & Bouffard, 2008), Cambodia (Bhuyan, Mell, Senturia, Sullivan, & Shiu-Thornton, 2005), Mexico (Salcido & Adelman, 2004), Russia (Crandall, Senturia, Sullivan, & Shiu-Thornton, 2005), South Asia (Abraham, 2000), and Vietnam (Bui & Morash, 1999). These studies generate critical albeit partial knowledge with regard to immigration and domestic violence. In addition, until now, much of the holistic knowledge on immigrant battered women has been (rightly) directed toward services and policy-based interventions.

In this study, we take a different approach. We offer a detailed analysis situated within a theoretical framework of intersectionality, using immigrant as a positioned identity within the social structure as well as within interactions. This approach highlights the commonalities experienced by battered immigrant women, regardless of their ethnic or national group membership or countries of origin. Aware of the specific and unique contextual elements affecting domestic violence in each immigrant group, and the heterogeneity of domestic violence experiences that immigrant women from different cultures or ethnic groups endure, in focusing on the commonalities experienced rather than the unique elements of violence against immigrant women, we expect to highlight the theoretical value of the findings as well as draw public policy implications.

Research Methods

As previously noted, extant case studies of immigrant battered women typically consist of small, local samples derived from within one discrete community group. Our goal was to create a relatively large sample of diverse participants to be interviewed about their experiences with immigration and domestic violence. Diversity of participants in this study is based on each participant’s language, ethnicity, nationality, cultural groupings, and country of origin. The sampling frame originated in states with large numbers of recent immigrants, with diverse immigrant communities, and with communities residing in both urban and rural areas: California, New York, Florida, Texas, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa were selected as research sites.

Major immigration legal assistance organizations in these states helped to identify relevant social service agencies that provide direct services to immigrants. The directors of the social service agencies were contacted by phone about possible participation. In addition, members of social service agencies from other parts of the country who attended various regional and national meetings related to training or discussions about battered immigrant women and other issues concerning domestic violence and immigration were also approached for possible participation. Representatives from several agencies in New Jersey, Ohio, and Washington who expressed interest in participation were added to the list of participating agencies. Altogether, 17 agencies participated in the study, conducting interviews.

The interviews also addressed contacts with the criminal justice system, which some immigrant women may be unwilling to discuss with strangers. In light of the sensitive nature of the interview content and common reluctance among immigrant battered women to disclose detailed accounts of victimization and criminal justice experiences to outsiders, each participating agency instructed its bilingual social service provider to initiate contact with battered immigrant women with whom the provider had previously established rapport and a helping relationship of trust. As with much feminist research, one considers the positionality of the research subject in devising the methodology and conducting the research. The providers’ relationship with the immigrant women was an integral component of the data collection phase because the providers were not only familiar with interviewees’ strengths, concerns, and needs but also shared their language and, commonly, their culture. Therefore, the provider asked each woman if she was willing to be interviewed, explained the purpose of the research project, and, once the woman gave her consent, conducted the interview.
We recognize that where a power differential existed between the social service agency staff and the helpseeking interviewees, it may have compromised the validity of those data pertaining directly to access to or quality of social services. However, as noted below, many of the social service agents were battered immigrant women turned advocates, where the power differential was minimal. Furthermore, given the logistical barriers (e.g., training and sending interviewers to agencies in multiple states) and skill-based challenges (e.g., language competency) involved in collecting sensitive data from such a diverse sample, on balance we determined that access to a range of immigrant battered women, secured in large part due to the relationship of trust they had established with the agency staff and the linguistic comfort afforded to participants, overrode this limited, albeit important, methodological concern.

The bilingual social service providers who conducted the interviews ($N = 20$), were employees or volunteers who either had training in social services or, in some cases, were themselves survivors of domestic violence who had become battered women advocates. Each was given sets of questionnaires and instructions concerning the interviews (e.g., ethical standards such as confidentiality and interview techniques such as probing questions). The questionnaires, originally written in English, were sent ahead of time to the agencies so that the interviewers could become familiar with their content and be prepared, if necessary, to conduct simultaneous translations. The social service providers/interviewers most often conducted interviews in the immigrant women’s native language (i.e., in about two thirds of the cases).

The interviewees ($n = 137$) were immigrant women who sought help related to their immigration and/or domestic violence problems. As such, they are not necessarily representative of all battered immigrant women but represent a subsample of this population: those who have overcome barriers to reveal abuse or seek help, and those whose battering came to the attention of social services, often due to the gravity of their victimization. Furthermore, they are not representative of the subgroup of immigrant women seeking help, as they have been recruited through requests for interviews by agencies that agreed to participate in the study. There were several organizations that for practical or resource reasons did not elect to participate ($N = 8$). Some could not afford the time to conduct lengthy interviews; others were not successful in identifying battered immigrant women who were willing to participate. The sample, therefore, is not a random representation of the universe of battered immigrant women in the United States. The value of the data reported in this study, however, lies in providing accounts of the dynamics of the interaction between domestic violence and immigration from a diverse sample of women who vary by language, ethnicity, nationality, and country of origin.

Most interviews were conducted in the first (non-English) language of the interviewees, as reported by the interviewers. English also was used in some interviews in part or throughout the interview, if the woman being interviewed was well versed and expressed comfort in speaking English. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2½ hours and included closed- and open-ended questions about the women’s demographic characteristics, circumstances of their arrival in this country, experiences with abuse and violence in their home countries and in the United States, and their attempts to seek criminal justice and/or social services to ameliorate their situations.

Interviewees were offered a modest stipend ($20) for their time, regardless of whether they completed the interview. Interviews were completed most commonly in one session, but a few were completed during a second session. Any requests to skip a certain question because an interviewee was uncomfortable about describing issues she considered private were honored. Despite an extensive list of interview questions, most women responded to our questions in great detail. Translation problems invalidated some of the responses or resulted in partial responses. For these reasons, the results for a small number of items in the interview schedule present only the range of responses rather than a quantified version of the responses.

Quantitative data were calibrated and the open-ended questions transcripts were analyzed through coding techniques described by Glaser (1992). As we read
each response, we searched for and identified patterns and variations in participants’ experiences and we reached a set of conceptual categories or propositions. The analysis was conducted by applying the logic of analytic induction, which entails the search for “negative cases” and progressively refining empirically based conditional statements (Katz, 1983). When negative cases were encountered, we revised our propositions until the data were saturated, making the patterns identified and the propositions offered consistent throughout the data. Once no new conceptual categories could be added, or propositions had to be reformulated, it was assumed that saturation had been reached.

Research Sample Profile

Female immigrants to the United States in the final research sample \( n = 137 \) came from 35 countries.\(^5\) They self-identified with a variety of religions: Christian (58%, of which 36% identified as Catholic),\(^6\) Muslim (22%), Hindu (5%), and Jewish (1%). The age of the women ranged from 19 to 56 years, with a mean age of 32.5 and median age of 31.

In terms of marital status, approximately the same percentage of women were married in their home countries (45%) or were never married (i.e., single and/or living apart from an intimate partner) before coming to the United States (43%). The rest of the sample were either divorced (4%), separated (2%), or living with someone (2%) in their home countries prior to immigrating to the United States. At some point after immigrating to the United States, most single women got involved with an intimate partner. The percentage of “never married” decreased from 43% to 6% and those living with someone increased from 2% to 18%. Although the percentage of women in the sample who were married during the interview was the same as those who were married in their home countries prior to the move to the United States (45%), the percentage of women who stated their marital status was “divorced” at the time of the interview increased from 4% to 18%, and the percentage of women who were separated from their spouses rose from 2% to 23% of the sample.

The range of years the women have lived in the United States was from 1 to 30 years, with a mean of 8.7 years and a median of 6. The length of time they lived with the abuser was between 1 and 30 years, with a mean of 7.6 and median of 6 years.

In terms of family size, the overwhelming majority of interviewees had children (86%). The mean number of children was 2.4, and the median was 2. The educational level of the interviewees ranged from 5 to 16 years of education, with a mean of 11.6 and a median of 11 years of education (where 12 refers to high school graduate), excluding one woman who stated she had no education at all.

A quarter (25%) of the women in this sample had no ability to speak English, whereas 48% had some ability and another 26% were fluent English speakers. Thus, the use of interviewers skilled in the participants’ native language was imperative. Only 27% were fluent readers of the English language, whereas 25% were fluent writers. The vast majority of women sampled had only some or no ability to read (46% some ability; 27% no ability) or write (37% some ability; 38% no ability) in English. The English proficiency of the sample as reported by interviewees is detailed in Table 4.1.

Immigration status varied among interviewees and between interviewees and their intimate partners at the time of the interview (see Table 4.2). Immigration status was divided into the following categories: U.S.-born citizens, naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents (LPRs), VAWA self-petition, work visa, undocumented, and temporary visa. Consistent with the definition of immigrant, none of the women in this sample were U.S.-born citizens, whereas 11% of partners were natural-born citizens. Two categories described the largest percentage of female participants: LPR and undocumented. Thirty-four percent of participants were LPRs whereas 36% of their partners were LPRs, and 24% of participants were undocumented immigrants whereas only 15% of partners were undocumented. Naturalized citizens were 19% of our sample of women and 34% of partners. Nine percent of participants and 4% of partners had temporary visas, 9% were VAWA self-petitions, and 5% had work visas. No partners in this study had work visas or were VAWA
self-petitions. In general, male partners occupied a citizenship status with greater rights and privileges than did the female victims in this study.

More than half of the women (58%) were employed at the time of the interview. Most often, employment involved unskilled work, and domestic labor was the most common type of work reported (15%) by those employed. Almost half of the women (42%) had no gainful employment. More than three quarters of the husbands or partners (78%) were employed, most often in menial, service, unskilled, or skilled labor.

About one quarter of both men (27%) and women (26%) sent money remittances to family in their home countries. More than one third of the women (39%) either used or planned to use public benefits.

Women reported being subjected to a lengthy period of abuse, ranging from 6 months to 25 years, with a mean of 5.5 years and median of 4 years of mistreatment, which included physical, mental, and sexual abuse, as well as verbal assaults. Women were also subjected to threats of being reported to Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS, now referred to as...
Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE]), being deported, or having their children taken away. The abuse also included tactics of isolating the woman to perpetuate her dependency on the abuser (e.g., she was not allowed to go to English classes, to go to school, to have employment, to be in touch with friends or family members, etc.).

**Becoming an Immigrant Battered Woman**

Women reported various reasons for coming to the United States. One third (34%) followed their spouses, and one eighth (13%) married U.S. citizens, most of whom (n = 10) were military men. About one fifth (16%) came for family reunification. A substantial proportion of the women immigrated for economic reasons: 29% came to improve their economic status and 12% to work. Another significant proportion fled violence in the home country (18%) or political repression (10%).

In the United States, most of the women (87%) reported that the gendered division of labor was clear-cut; women focused on being a wife and mother and were solely responsible for housework and child care. In a minority of cases (17%), women were responsible for grocery or child-related shopping. Most often, they did not have access to a car or did not have a driver’s license (60%). Men were responsible for gainful employment and money transactions related to the family, and only in a minority of cases (13%), the women stated that their men helped with work around the house.

According to female interviewees, the abuse resulted in severe mental and physical harm, including depression, withdrawal, numbness, and anxiety. About one third of the women (34%) required hospitalization to treat the injuries that resulted from the battering. Almost half of the women (46%) reported being battered while they were pregnant, with the abuser often trying to hit, kick, or otherwise interfere with the pregnancy. This abuse took place in all parts of the house, in particular in the bedroom or kitchen. Contrary to popular myths concerning domestic violence, it also occurred in public areas such as medical clinics, cars, and various social service offices, in front of family, children, neighbors, and other community members. Members of the husband's family often participated in the abuse. Victimization in the presence of others is indicative of a perception that the abuse is justified or that it will garner no consequence to the perpetrator. The former suggests that the offender's actions are condoned by friends, family, and the community. The latter raises questions about institutional responses to publicly displayed abuse and how the immigrant status of the victim affects the perceptions and reactions of medical and social service workers.

Immigrant women have an added risk of victimization due to relocation. For women who immigrated with a spouse or partner, the move seemed to have an adverse effect on men's level of violence and control tactics. Following their arrival to the United States, for half of these women, the level of violence increased, and almost one quarter (22%) stated that the violence began after arrival: “It has gotten worse. Now he takes out all the frustration on me.” For one fifth (20%) of the women, the level of violence stayed the same, for 6% it decreased, and for 2% it stopped. The escalation of abuse was particularly difficult for immigrant women who had left their natal families behind: “I don't have family here, so he tells me that I don't have another choice but to stay with him.” Another woman argued that “if he were in Syria, he would take into consideration my parents and would not act abusively as in U.S.” Lacking natal family and an extended kin network led to a high rate of social isolation and a deep sense of vulnerability for immigrant women.

Immigration affected husbands and wives differently. For example, some women reported that immigration removed what they understood as constraints against domestic violence, which were rooted in their home countries. “If I want to compare it to Iraq and the U.S., of course the move has affected us. In Iraq we have family, parents, relatives. Here there is drinking and open society, especially for men.” Women explained that men acquired new interests, such as alcohol, drugs, gambling, and women, which often accompanied the abusive behaviors of the spouse.
In addition to marital arguments to which men who batter often respond with abuse (e.g., jealousy, infidelity, drinking, money issues, child discipline, or education issues), there also were distinct issues created by the move to the United States that caused tension in the marriage and exacerbated the abuse. For example, many of the women reported that remittances they or their husbands made (i.e., sending money to family members in country of origin) often precipitated arguments or fights. Other issues included the husband’s inability to provide for the family in the new country or his insistence that the wife, although now in the United States, continue to be a “traditional woman and never ask him about anything” or that she remain “a very traditional Latina wife, waiting on him hand and foot and never raising my voice on him.” Women often explained the reasons for their battering as “my being a bad wife and mother” or “I needed to do what he told me to do, when he told me to do it.”

According to women who took advantage of economic opportunities opened for them in the new country, this change provoked their spouses and led to abuse: “In the U.S. he suffered jealousy attacks and saw me prosper—he did not like that.”

**Economic Challenges**

Economic challenges are not unique to immigrant families, but finding suitable employment or any job at all presents major difficulties for most immigrant families. The difficulty of securing employment that matches one’s skills is a significant source of conflict between husbands and wives (e.g., being an engineer but working at a gas station). One woman attributed domestic violence to her husband’s unemployment and resultant idleness: “He did not work, stayed home, which made him crazy.” Another suggested that unemployment, per se, was not the problem. Rather,

the dissatisfaction, failure, disappointment, not being able to meet one’s economic expectations in life switches the burden on the wife. She becomes the reason of his failures. She is blamed all the time. She consistently tries to please him; it doesn’t work. She gets all the frustration and all kinds of abuses.

At the same time, battered immigrant women also are deprived of supportive community, extended family, or a social network that could help them during such difficulties.

If a spouse did not have work in home country, family or relatives would extend him money and help him. Here in U.S., there are many bills to pay; there is no one to give you a hand. One gets embarrassed.

On the other hand, for women working outside the home, their absence is often seen by men as a threat to the gender hierarchy. Women reported that although they worked outside the home, they controlled little to none of the money they earned and were subject to abuse and domination by their husbands.

It was really good in the beginning, and then he lost his first job and things started getting really bad. It has not been very happy at work, and that is why he would take things out on me. We used to be happy. He would always keep the money and occasionally would demand a lot of sex, but then after a few years, he really started beating me up... [in particular] when I had to file his immigration papers.

**Immigrant Status**

Some women reported that the increase in emotional, sexual, and physical abuse coincided with immigration-specific activities such as entering the country, filing immigration papers, or accessing social welfare systems. The majority of women who came with their spouses reported that the transition and move to the United States altered the dynamics of the relationship: “He has had more power to manipulate in the U.S. because I am illegal and depended on him and I didn’t have any rights here.” An immigrant woman’s dependency on her male partner elevates his position of dominance over her. At
the same time, legal dependency represents a macro-
structural vulnerability that systematically marginalizes
immigrant women by limiting their access to goods and
resources, such as work, social services, protection under
the law, and so on. Although law is not intentionally gen-
der biased, one that creates a status-marriage depen-
dency, such as immigration law, makes immigrant
women more vulnerable to the domestic violence power
dynamic (Erez, 2000; Menjivar & Salcido, 2002).

Husbands became increasingly abusive, and the
physical and emotional battering became more con-
spicuous and severe. One woman explained that “the
relationship had gotten bad in Mexico and continued
the same in the U.S. The abuse changed from verbal to
physical.” Another woman agreed that the violence
worsened after immigration: “I believe when I came to
the U.S. my husband treated me more like a kid. I do
not have control over my life.” Still another woman
explained how “he has become more abusive. He knows
the system; I don’t. He speaks English; I don’t. I don’t
have family support or someone living with me, so he
can lie about me.” Even one woman who had divorced
her husband still was being threatened by him with
regard to her immigration status: “He’s going to call
INS, because I lied that I was single instead of divorced.
[From California] he stalks me, contacts me at home, at
work in Michigan.”

The overwhelming majority of women (75%) des-
cribed how men used immigrant status to force
them into compliance. “He used my immigration status
against me. He would tell me that without him, I was
nothing in this country.” Men threatened women in a
number of ways with regard to immigration including
that they would call ICE officials and report their immi-
gration status (40%); get them deported (15%); with-
draw their petition to immigrate or otherwise interfere
with the naturalization process (10%); take away the
children or deny their custodial rights (5%); and, more
generally, use immigration status to humiliate or
degrade them (5%). One undocumented woman suc-
cinctly stated, “He makes threats to report me to the
INS if I don’t do what he wants.”

Women also illustrated the connection between
immigration and domestic violence being particularly
painful for mothers. “He would tell me I did not have
any rights in this country. He threatened to take our
children—and he finally did!” In another instance, a
woman was forced to trade custody of her children for
an adjustment of her immigration status. In addition,
mothers feared that their children would be deprived
of opportunities for a brighter future that, in the
minds of the women, the United States can provide.
One woman was concerned about “employment for my
older children and their immigration status. [My] son
wants to be a U.S. citizen, to attend school and work
here.” Women did not want to jeopardize their chil-
dren’s immigration status and thought that divorce or
leaving the United States would have negative conse-
quences for their children.

Many battered immigrant women who do not
have lawful permanent residency believe that divorce
means losing their right to work or stay in this coun-
try. “If ever I challenge him to stay here, he will
divorce me; I will lose my green card and will not be
able to financially survive.” This translates to jeopar-
dizing her ability to sustain herself financially.
Although the VAWA (1994) and its subsequent reau-
thorization (2000) Public Law 103-322, Violence
Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994
Public Law 106-386, Victims of Trafficking and
Violence Protection Act of 2000 provided battered
immigrant women a self-petition option, most immi-
grant women are not aware of it. A husband uses the
woman’s lack of knowledge, dependency, and immigra-
tion status as a weapon to threaten and demand com-
pliance. A man can easily manipulate his control over
the relationship and the family because of an immi-
grant woman’s actual or perceived legal dependency:
“What prevents me from leaving is the immigration
status. I need my green card.” Abusers commonly
convinced immigrant women that they have no rights
(or that they are not entitled to any rights in this
country) or that the abusers have the power to cancel
their status at any time. Some threatened to withdraw
the petitions already filed on the women’s behalf or to
tell ICE officials that the women married for the sole
purpose of legal residency. Most of the women
reported enduring abuse for long periods of time.
because of their desire to remain in the United States, in hopes that their husbands would change their immigration status to legal.

Culture and Community

The majority of the women (65%) reported abuse-tolerant perspectives in their home countries where, they explained, domestic violence is not considered a crime. On one end of the abuse tolerant-intolerant continuum, a woman stated that “my national community doesn’t believe that domestic violence exists.” Another woman described another position along the continuum: “In Armenian culture, it is okay for a husband to hit his wife, and she should accept it. In America, it is considered a crime.” Other women also drew a sharp contrast between their home countries, where domestic violence is a normal part of the marriage, and the United States: “There’s a difference because here it’s a crime. In Nicaragua if the couple makes up, then it’s okay.” Overall, women reported being raised in households where fathers and husbands were considered authoritarian decision makers with the right to wield violence as needed to secure women’s compliance and that their communities expected them to reproduce such marital arrangements.

The man is the center of authority. He is the supreme decision maker. He is the breadwinner; without him, in general, it is very hard to survive financially, especially if you are unskilled or uneducated.

I was raised in a Hindu household . . . to be obedient and considerate of your elders.

Tradition [says] that you stay with the person you married no matter what he does. Women stay home, to be housewife and put up with domestic violence. Here divorce is acceptable more so domestic violence not accepted.

Women in Latin America and Mexico are supposed to suffer a lot with their husbands.

We have to listen to men more than the American women. We have to stay home most of the time when we get married. We have to be more responsible for children and husbands.

These general comments were reinforced by more individualized lessons:

My mother and father told me to go back and be a better wife. Otherwise I would be shaming them.

My mother told me to bear it, since it was my decision to marry him.

At first they were sad, told me to be patient. God will solve it.

Family members warned that divorce would negatively affect their children’s welfare or chances for a good marriage or would decrease their younger sisters’ prospects to marry. They used fear of shame, gossip, and guilt to convince their daughters to stay with their abusive husbands. In addition, some women also expressed fears, based on their respective husbands’ threats, that leaving would lead to serious injury or even death. Despite their fear and familial admonitions to “put up with domestic violence” and “listen to men,” the majority (85%) of women made one or more attempts to leave the abusers. Many of the women tried from 1 to 15 times to extricate themselves from the violence. Some women stated that they attempted to leave hundreds of times.

Reporting Abuse

Women reflected on the expectation that “everything stays in family. Sometimes we don’t even tell our families, only after many years of problems.” According to their immigrant communities, marital strife was to be kept private and should not be disclosed:

A man can do anything; he is the head of the family, and a woman should always sacrifice to make things work. The expectations for men and women are different. Our culture does not welcome outside intervention. We don’t involve outsiders in family issues. We do not consider
domestic violence as a crime; police do not get involved. We don't go to shelters. Legal system does not get involved.

They don't like [public intervention], because they want to have the liberty of committing family violence at will.

In this town, it will label the woman. It will make it harder on the woman. [Public intervention is] not a good idea.

In the face of abuse-tolerant and privacy-affirmative perspectives, more than half (54%) of the women stated that they did not report the abuse because of their culture or religion. Nearly half the women did end up dealing with the criminal justice system as a result of the abuse (46%); however, in one third of these cases (35%), it was because someone other than the victim called the police (neighbor, family member, friend, or hospital staff).

Given the public pressure to keep domestic violence private, women struggled to maintain their social identity and status within their immigrant communities as they struggled to obtain safety for their children and themselves. “I will be ostracized and then where will I go?” Women reflected on distinctions between “home” and “here” attitudes toward criminal justice and other public interventions into domestic violence: “Here the police will help you. In El Salvador, they won’t.” Unaccustomed to involving outsiders or reporting domestic violence to the police at home (“I’m from Haiti; there is no such law to protect women against domestic violence”), women discussed the tension here in immigrant communities about disclosing abuse to family members and law enforcement.

Female interviewees “became aware of domestic violence in this country, because we know that many people can help us with our problem,” including law enforcement, who “are very responsive here and very helpful.” Immigrant women “now ... think [domestic violence] is a crime here,” and “Americans treat it like a crime, because that's what it is.” Moreover, “here in U.S., a woman demands her rights. The Arab woman does not have a say in Arab countries.” As a whole, women identified that “in the U.S. there is more support and protection for the victims, more services” and that “a woman in U.S. has her say, can make her own decisions. The government helps her to have the kids. In our country, no welfare benefits.” One woman was impressed that “the clergy here in U.S. encourage you to report [domestic violence] to authorities.”

Overall, women felt empowered by having at least the option to mobilize the justice system for help. It provided them a “big relief,” or they found it “positive” or “helpful.” In some cases, individual women’s growing awareness was matched by communal acceptance of domestic violence as a behavior that deserves intervention, in particular when abuse resulted in serious injury. Women distinguished between those who shared ethnic or national identities in the home country and those in the United States.

The Armenians from Armenia think police intervention is bad but Armenians in the U.S. generally do not think police intervention is a bad thing.

In Mexico, they do not interfere until the woman is sent to the hospital; in the U.S. they interfere at an early stage, before there is need to send women to hospital.

Women also distinguished between known cases of domestic violence and those that remain hidden from sight, due to either literally or figuratively closed doors:

It depends. When cases are really bad, like publicly seen abuse, the community 100% supports. When cases happen behind closed doors, the community is hesitant.

It depends from case to case. If you or your family has a social standing.

However, they were well aware that their communities, or segments thereof, did not view favorably intervention by outsiders, in particular law enforcement.

The community is accepting the outside intervention, except the religious leaders. Still even
if the spouse is very abusive, they do not give religious divorce to victims. The batterer immediately remarries while the victim is helpless. Also, the community is not very supportive to a divorced woman.

In light of these mixed messages, “it makes you hesitate. Even if you know it is the right thing to do, you postpone the outside intervention.”

Some immigrant women had negative experiences (either in the home country or here) with the justice system. Ambiguous messages about and ambivalent attitudes toward law enforcement when coupled with a persistent lack of material resources made many battered women reluctant to seek such intervention. These immigrant community views affected women’s responses to the abuse, prolonged their marriages, or prevented them from seeking outside help. Still, individual women prevailed with assistance from immigrant community organizations to secure a semblance of physical security, social standing, and legal stability: “My children and the family unit is what keeps me in the relationship. However, he has promised to stop hitting me. I used to fear deportation, not anymore—I filed my own papers. I also wanted to protect my children.”

\section*{Conclusion}

Battered women in general face a number of interrelated and intricate barriers that complicate their pursuit of safety. Women struggle with, among other factors, embarrassment and shame about disclosing abuse and seeking help from social service or criminal justice agencies; emotional connection to and economic dependency on batterers; reluctance to break up families; and fear of myriad forms of violence, control, and retaliation by abusers and their communities. Although heterosexual men who batter are found in all social groups and at all economic levels, regardless of ethnicity, religion, national origin, cultural affiliation, or immigration status (Volpp, 2001), we have demonstrated that men who batter immigrant women, the majority of whom are immigrants themselves, have access to unique forms of domination and control, some of which are facilitated or even sanctioned by federal immigration law.

In our analysis of 137 battered women who had immigrated to the United States from 35 countries across the globe, we found that the general difficulties that battered women face coexist with challenges they experience as immigrants. Battered immigrant women face a range of legal, economic, and social challenges to safety. Legal challenges include lack of familiarity with or access to social service or criminal justice systems that possess limited immigrant-related cultural and linguistic competencies; legal dependency on batterers; and lack of legal knowledge. In terms of economic barriers, immigrant battered women report that their communities’ economic marginalization combined with the continued responsibility for sending remittances home figures large in batterers’ justification for abuse. The social implications of battering are no less central to immigrant battered women than legal and economic barriers. Internal to the community, individual women are limited by a deep fear of losing social status in and the support of their immigrant communities—often the only communities they know—and a fear of various forms of violence, control, and retaliation by the husband and his family, often the only kin they have in the new country. Among other social complications external to the community, immigrant battered women face racist anti-immigrant public sentiment that exacerbates their desire to keep violence private in order to transmit an untarnished and positive image of the immigrant community. These patterns persist, despite any differences among the sample.

The interaction of domestic violence and immigration informs not only the level and type of abuse men perpetrate but also individual and community-based responses to the abuse. We found that, over time, immigration shaped the meaning that battered women gave to the controlling behaviors and violence perpetrated against them by their intimate partners. For the most part, women distinguished between attitudes
and practices related to domestic violence “here” and “there.” That is, they labeled their home countries as abuse tolerant and their adopted country as abuse intolerant. Moreover, despite existing antiracist critiques of the institutionalization of the criminalization of domestic violence, and mixed messages from their own communities as to the appropriateness of reporting domestic violence to the authorities, immigrant battered women seemed to appreciate that domestic violence was considered a crime in the United States and perceived that law enforcement officers were willing to assist as they sought safety for themselves and their children.

However, although at least some immigrant battered women feel empowered to mobilize the criminal justice system, few seem to be familiar with new policies promulgated to protect battered immigrant woman, such as the VAWA self-petition option. And even for those who obtain relevant information and meet legal criteria, pursuit of such remedies may be limited by lack of access to legal assistance or fear of turning to legal authorities, including the criminal justice system. Undocumented immigrants, as well as those in the midst of applying for legal status, or even legal immigrants may avoid engagement with the criminal justice system, in particular if they are part of a “mixed-status” immigrant family or in order to prevent law enforcement from entering an immigrant-majority neighborhood.

The commonalities among immigrants from across such a wide range of countries of origin raise two additional concerns related to immigrant battered women and the criminal justice system. First, over the past decade, the criminalization of immigrants has escalated in the United States, where immigrants are perceived of as criminals-in-the-making who make “real” Americans vulnerable to uninsured drivers, lower wages, unemployment, and property crimes as well as drug, gang, and trafficking-related violent crime. It is “immigrant” on “American” visible forms of crime that populate public discourse. Rarely mentioned is the less visible crime of intimate partner violence. When referenced, intimate partner violence among immigrants is either naturalized (i.e., that’s just the way they are) or culturalized (i.e., that’s how they treat their women). Naturalization and culturalization of immigrant domestic violence blame intimate partner violence on membership within the group, minimize the effect of intimate partner violence on its victims, and dismiss victims’ claims for justice. Moreover, it erases intimate partner violence among so-called “assimilated” and/or native-born members of U.S. society. As such, although we acknowledge that meanings and patterns of domestic violence vary across cultures, we write against the tendency to stereotype domestic violence as an inherent part of “other” cultures (Razack, 1998; Volpp, 1996, 2001). Such views reinforce the notion that gender-based violence does not warrant state intervention because it is part of the “way of life” (Ferraro, 1989), is the “mentality,” or is “part of the culture” (Adelman, Erez, & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003) of certain religious, ethnic, or national groups. This perception also precludes examinations of how structural inequalities and systemic responses (e.g., criminal justice system) may sometimes diminish the material conditions and safety options for individual immigrant women and their families. Dismissing domestic violence as an immigrant or cultural problem also precludes serious considerations of how to ameliorate commonly experienced structural inequalities or how to work with battered immigrant women to identify helpful systemic responses.

Second, in the post-9/11 era, the trend in cities, counties, and states is to enter “287(g) agreements” with the federal government to enforce immigration law as proxies for ICE (Versanyi, 2008). This means that local law enforcement officers, those charged with protecting battered women, are now responsible for enforcing the civil matters of federal immigration law as well. Undocumented immigrants, as well as legal immigrants who face criminal charges, are at risk for deportation, with or without their children. As a result, immigrants, in general, and immigrant women, in particular, regardless of legal status, may go further underground with their need for domestic violence...
services, thereby rejecting the investment made into the criminal justice system for victims of domestic violence. Further complicating immigrant battered women’s pursuit of safety is the recent move by local governments to bar undocumented immigrants from education and social services. These developments make ambiguous which government agencies, including the criminal justice system and members of law enforcement, immigrants and their families have the right to approach—and whom to trust. Individual immigrant women, who commonly shoulder the responsibility for their children’s welfare, face the structurally produced hardship of choosing between their safety and a stable, brighter future for their children. Designing social and legal policies that do not further entrap battered immigrant women will continue to challenge feminist criminologists.

**Notes**

1. Collaborative efforts among battered immigrant women, activists, and researchers also have resulted in the identification of strategies productively used by immigrant women. For examples of barriers and safety strategies, see online materials available at www.immigrantwomennetwork.org, produced by the National Network to End Violence Against Immigrant Women. Many of these issues shaped the legislation addressing the plight of battered immigrant women in the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 and its subsequent revisions.

2. Due to confidentiality requirements, it was not possible to conduct quality control of the translation. However, agencies did not report translation of the questions as a problem.

3. Primary languages included Arabic, Armenian, Bengali, Farsi, French, Haitian, Hindi, Japanese, Malaysian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish.

4. Most questions invalidated due to translation pertained to criminal justice procedural issues associated with the events described during the interviews.

5. These countries are Armenia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Egypt, El Salvador, Former Yugoslavia, Albania, Germany, Great Britain, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Japan, Latvia, Lebanon, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Peru, Syria, Trinidad, Turkey, Venezuela, Vietnam (South), and Yemen.

6. Christians described themselves as Adventist, Armenian Apostolic, Assyrian Christian, Baptist, Jehovah’s Witness, Lutheran, Mormon, Pentecostal, Protestant, or Roman Catholic.

7. The circumstances and experiences of these “military brides” are described in Erez and Bach (2003).

8. This clear-cut division of labor was also the case in the home country. We focus on the U.S. responses to examine whether division of labor changed as a result of immigration to the United States.

9. Those who have family members in the United States can immigrate due to family unification laws. Thus, men who immigrate have family members in the United States whereas women who follow their husbands leave their own families behind.

**References**


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does immigration status affect the levels of violence experienced by the women in this study?

2. How does a culture of violence in a woman’s home country affect her experience of domestic violence in the United States?

3. What implications do cultural values about domestic violence have for help-seeking strategies for victims of intimate partner abuse?