

## Abused Latina Women's Perception of their Post-Divorce Adjustment

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## Introduction

- Intimate partner violence (IPV) is an international public health concern.

(Lipsky, Caetano, Field, & Larkin, 2006)

- 691,710 nonfatal violent victimizations committed by intimate partners in 2001

(Rennison, 2003)

- There is a gap of knowledge on this subject within the Latino community

## Literature Review

- In comparison to married women, separated or divorced women are 14 times more likely to report domestic violence

(Wolf Harlow, 1991)

- Studies suggest that about 25% of women are raped or physically assaulted by an intimate partner throughout their lifetime.

(Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000)

## Latino Specific Issues with IPV

- Language barrier
- Financial difficulties
- "More binding" marital role
- Traditional views of motherhood

(Kasturirangan & Williams, 2003)

## Latino Specific Issues with IPV

- Many Latino immigrants have left family behind in country of origin
  - Less social support

(Molina, 2006)

- Undocumented Latinas
  - Are more vulnerable due to limitations on access to resources
  - Fear that accessing benefits might affect ability to gain legal immigration status

(Dutton, Orloff, and Agilar Hass, 2000; Menjivar & Salicido, 2002)

## Purpose of Study

- To provide greater understanding of what the post-divorce period means for Latina women

## Objectives of Study

- 1) To generate a description of the post-divorce experiences of Latina immigrants from which distinct profiles and taxonomy can be derived.
- 2) To investigate the relationship of cultural factors to post-divorce adjustment of Latina immigrants.

## Method

- Design
  - Qualitative
    - Short demographic survey included (anonymously completed)
  - Three focus groups of 8 participants each
  - Participants were interviewed in Spanish by a Latina woman
  - Open-ended questions about post divorce experiences

## Method

- Sample
  - Abused Latina women who received legal services from The Palm Beach County, Florida, State Attorney's Office and social work services from the Safety Net Program
  - Letters were mailed to women whom had terminated with domestic violence groups offered at the agency
  - 24 of the 30 women contacted agreed to participate

## Method

- Data Analysis
  - Grounded theory approach
  - Recordings were translated into English
  - At first: *open coding*
    - Tease out general themes of concern
  - Subsequently: *axial coding*
    - To determine overall categories and subcategories

## Method

- After data was classified and labeled, categories were refined.
- 5 thematic areas arose:
  - 1) IPV as the precipitator for divorce
  - 2) Motivations for leaving
  - 3) The impact of Latino culture on marriage, separation, and post-divorce
  - 4) Immigration and other legal/social issues
  - 5) Post-divorce/post IPV experiences

## Demographics

- 23 of the participants were immigrants. The other was born in the U.S.
- 11 (45.8%) were undocumented, 10 (41.7%) were documented, and 3 (12.5%) had working permits
- Years in the U.S. amongst immigrants ranged from 5-21
  - The majority (70.8%; n = 17) had lived in the U.S. for less than 10 years

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## Demographics

- Education
  - 4 (16.7%) completed 8<sup>th</sup> grade
  - 8 (33.3%) completed 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grade
  - 5 (20.8%) were High School graduates
  - 3 (12.5%) completed some college
  - 3 (12.5%) were college graduates
  - 1 (4.2%) responded “other”

## Demographics

- Annual financial earnings ranged from \$5,000 to \$50,000.
- 23 of the participants were mothers
  - 17 (70.8%) had sole custody
  - 4 (16.7%) had shared custody
  - 3 (12.5%) had lost custody to children’s fathers
- Child support
  - 5 (20.8) received child support
  - 17 (70.8%) did not receive child support

## Demographics

- Age ranged from 24-55 years
- Number of years the participants were married ranged from 1-20 ( $M = 7, SD = 5.3$ )
- Amount of years married
  - 9 (37.6%) reported 1-5
  - 5 (20.8%) reported 6-10
  - 5 reported 11-20
  - 5 did not report

## Demographics

- Amount of years divorced ranged from 1-12 ( $M = 2.9, SD = 2.5$ )
- 8 (33.3%) were remarried
- 5 (20.8%) had children after the divorce
- Most (79.2%,  $n = 17$ ) identified as Catholics

## Results

- IPV as the reason for divorce
  - Most reported that divorce came about as a consequence of a violent incident resulting in police involvement
  - All women in the sample experience physical abuse resulting in their spouses being incarcerated

## Results

- IPV as a reason for divorce
  - Attending domestic violence groups helped the women make the decision for divorce
    - “The help you get from one another is one of the things that helps you keep focused because there is first the decision to separate, and then there is the decision not to return. That is the most difficult one!”

## Results

- IPV as the reason for divorce
  - Participants stated the *Safety Net Program* provided valuable services and resources
    - Counseling for their children
      - The children became less fearful and aggressive towards their mothers
    - Taught the participants laws that protect abused women
  - Financial independence increase the women’s perception of caring for themselves and their children
  - Concurrent child abuse

## Results

- IPV as a reason for divorce
  - Deterrents to divorce
    - Spouses’ threats of taking child out of country
    - Spouses’ threats to kill family members
    - Children’s behavior becoming increasingly aggressive and abusive

## Results

- Motivation for leaving
  - Concern for children was the ultimate factor
  - Painful memories of abuse they survived
    - “I believe that the bad memories stay with you. We don’t want to return to the same thing. Remembering all the bad things they did to us – that helps a lot.”

## Results

- Cultural impact on post-divorce adjustment
  - Participants concluded that Latino culture “does not help at all”
    - Latino culture pushes family unity under all costs
    - They witnessed domestic violence in their country of origin reinforcing that IPV is acceptable
    - The women felt they were blamed for their familial problems

## Results

- Immigration and social services
  - “Fear of being deported is the reason why many women don’t talk about the abuse.”
  - The women all agreed that immigration services were one of the most helpful assistance they have received.
  - Obtaining working permits for undocumented women helped them gain financial independence
  - Gaining legal residence provided access to social services such as food stamps and Medicaid for them and their children

## Results

- Post-divorce/post IPV experiences
  - 3 women had lost custody of children
    - In part due to self-defense arrests
  - 2 mentioned isolation and feelings of depression
  - A few mentioned feeling violent towards new intimate partners
  - About half feared they might find themselves in another abusive relationship
    - Did not want children in this environment again
  - Still, one third of the sample re-married

## Discussion

- Support groups were empowering for the women in the sample
- Unfortunately, the women felt that the Latino culture was unhelpful and impeded their progress
  - However, in practice it important to recognize cultural taboos and barriers preventing Latina women from leaving IPV

## Discussion

- All participants agreed that the legal and social work resources they were receiving were the most beneficial
- Post-divorce was marked with great diversity
  - Especially regarding relationships with men

## Implications/Recommendations for Practice

- Latinas that have experienced IPV are not a monolithic group
- Due to cultural and language factors, social workers are encouraged to invite Latinas whom have successfully escaped IPV to speak in support groups
- More domestic violence programs and legal services need to be established to combat the ongoing issues with IPV that occur during and after the abuse
- The divorce process empowers Latina IPV survivors

## Implications/Recommendations for Practice

- Support groups are essential
  - Due to the lack of social support, the women found motivation and energy in their focus groups
- Social workers should focus on linking legal resources such as immigration, protection, child custody, and child support
  - Obtaining legal immigration status is a clear goal
  - Gaining financial independence empowered the women
- Social workers should also link clients to the following assistances
  - Needed medical
  - Educational
  - Financial
  - Occupational

## Implications/Recommendations for Practice

- Social workers
  - Should help Latina women explore the impact that childhood abuse/witnessing abuse has on current intimate relationships
  - Need to engage Latinas on discussions of how the Latina culture impacts on their decision to leave an abusive relationship
- Social work agencies
  - need to employ bilingual/bicultural social workers who are culturally competent to work with the Latina population

## Implications/Recommendations for Practice

- Social work agencies (continued)
  - provide transportation and child care services so that Latinas can keep appointments
  - provide services to the women's children e.g. group, individual, and family services
- More research is needed in the area of post-divorce Latina IPV survivors
  - Some of the women were happily remarried, while others feared intimate relationships

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