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Abused Latina Women's Perceptions of Their Postdivorce Adjustment

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This qualitative study explores the postdivorce adjustment of battered Latina immigrants. Three focus groups were conducted. Data were analyzed utilizing a grounded theory approach. Five conceptual themes were unearthed including: (a) intimate partner violence (IPV) as the precipitator for divorce; (b) motivations for leaving; (c) the impact of the Latino culture on marriage, separation, and postdivorce; (d) immigration and other legal and social issues; and (e) postdivorce/post-IPV experiences. Implications for practice are drawn.

KEYWORDS *domestic violence, intimate partner violence, Latina, postdivorce adjustment, undocumented immigrants*

Domestic violence is a major social problem in the United States (Frias & Angel, 2005). According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, there were 691,710 nonfatal violent victimizations committed by spouses, boyfriends, or girlfriends during 2001, with the majority of victims being women (Rennison, 2003). Domestic violence in minority populations living in the United States has become a growing area of interest for researchers, particularly in regard to the Latino population (Maas, Barber, & Butler, 2006). In the United States, the Latino population is the largest immigrant group, making up 15% of the total population, and growing rapidly (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006).

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Although domestic violence is a recognized problem in the Latino community, there has been a dearth of research on the cultural and contextual issues that characterize domestic abuse in the U.S. Latino population (Hampton, Carillo, & Kim, 1998). This paucity of knowledge also extends to the postdivorce experience of formerly battered Latina women (Molina, 2006). Given that separated or divorced women are 14 times more likely than married women to report domestic violence by a spouse or ex-spouse (Wolf Harlow, 1991), additional study in this area is clearly needed.

This article provides information about the lived experience of such women. It offers deeper understanding of the dynamics, challenges, and experiences of the postdivorce experience of immigrant Latinas who have survived domestic violence. Emphasis is given to gaining an understanding of the complexities and the consequences of the divorce process from the point of view of the participants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intimate partner violence (IPV) has been recognized as an international public health concern (Lipsky, Caetano, Field, & Larkin, 2006). Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) found that approximately 25% of women are raped or physically assaulted by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Latinos report a higher rate of IPV than Caucasians (Caetano et al., 2004). The rates of male-to-female partner violence (MFPV) and female-to-male partner violence (FMPV) are 1.5 to 2.4 times higher among Latino couples than Caucasian couples (Field & Caetano, 2004). However, a number of studies with differing sampling strategies or different measures of IPV have found different rates. For instance, in telephone surveys with a community sample, Ingram (2007) found that 57.2% of Latino respondents (52% of the Latino sample was foreign-born) reported experiencing any type of IPV in their lifetime and 16.2% reported experiencing any IPV in the past year. In another study that employed telephone surveys of a community sample of Mexican Americans and non-Latino Caucasians, Sorenson and Telles (1991) found lower lifetime prevalence rates than those reported by Ingram (2007), with 20.0% of Mexican Americans born in Mexico reporting any lifetime IPV, 21.6% of non-Latino Caucasians born in the United States reporting any IPV in their lifetime, and 30.9% of Mexican Americans born in the United States reporting any lifetime IPV. Additionally, Harris, Firestone, and Vega (2005) and Jasinski (1998) compared foreign-born and U.S.-born Latinos to investigate the impact of acculturation and gender role beliefs on IPV. Jasinski found that higher levels of acculturation, measured by generational status and age of arrival in the United States were associated with higher rates of IPV, whereas Harris et al. (2005) found that Latina women with more traditional gender role beliefs, regardless of whether they were born in the United

States or in Mexico, were less likely to report abuse to researchers than Latina women with less traditional gender role beliefs.

Latina battered women experience additional challenges in the United States as compared to Caucasian and African American women in that they often deal with a language barrier (Kasturirangan & Williams, 2003). Latinas also face financial difficulties due to less income; they tend to have more children, a "more binding" marital role, and traditional views of motherhood that make it difficult to leave an abusive relationship (Kasturirangan & Williams, 2003). Undocumented Latinas are even more vulnerable than other Latinas due to their immigration status limiting their access to resources (Dutton, Orloff, & Hass, 2000; Kasturirangan & Williams, 2003), and because many have left their family behind in their country of origin (Molina, 2006). Many undocumented immigrants who are survivors of IPV do not access benefits for which they or their children qualify because they fear that accessing benefits might affect their ability to attain legal immigration status (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002). Additionally, undocumented Latina immigrants who are victims of physical or sexual abuse have higher rates of immigration-related abuse (23%) than victims of psychological abuse (3%). Hass, Dutton, and Orloff (2000) also found that women who were physically or sexually abused received more than 10 times the rate of threats of deportation and threats of refusal to file papers than women who were psychologically abused.

The purpose of this study is to provide greater understanding of what the postdivorce period means for formerly battered Latina women. Specifically, the major objectives of the study are (a) to generate a description of the postdivorce experiences of Latina immigrants from which distinct profiles and taxonomy can be derived, and (b) to investigate the relationship of cultural factors to postdivorce adjustment of Latina immigrants. It is anticipated that this greater understanding will assist the social work community in developing appropriate services for this population.

METHOD

Prior to initiating the study, the research plan was submitted to a university-based institutional research board (IRB) for review. After obtaining IRB approval, we contacted key informants from community agencies to assist in identifying a small study sample that would be appropriate for a qualitative investigation.

Sample

To examine the impact of divorce and domestic violence on Latina immigrant women, the study focused on abused Latina women who received

legal services from the Palm Beach County, Florida, State Attorney's Office and social work services from the SafetyNet Program, an affiliated social service agency in that same county.

Self-addressed, stamped envelopes containing letters with informed consent forms in Spanish were mailed to participants who had terminated with the domestic violence groups offered in the agency. Letters provided direct information regarding the research process. Those interested in participating in the study were asked to sign and mail one copy of the informed consent form to the principal investigator and keep one copy for themselves. Following receipt of signed informed consents, the focus groups were scheduled. Out of the 30 women that were contacted, 24 agreed to participate.

Design

A qualitative design with inclusion of a short demographic survey was employed. Participants were interviewed in Spanish in focus groups by the primary investigator, a Latina woman, using open-ended questions about their postdivorce experiences. Although the literature suggests that some focus group participants might feel pressure to provide socially acceptable responses (O'Donnell, 1988), focus groups have been found to work particularly well in determining experiences and perceptions of people regarding IPV (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Tilley & Brackley, 2004).

Three focus groups of 8 participants each were conducted. The focus groups were 2 hours long. Focus group discussions were audiotaped and transcribed for the purpose of content analysis. The groups were conducted in the conference room of the social service agency.

The room in which the focus groups were held comfortably accommodated all participants and the facilitator. The atmosphere of the sessions was very lively. The women, having previously completed a support group for battered women together, were affectionate and caring with one another. There was a high level of familiarity and respect among all of the participants. In one session, a participant brought baby pictures of a child recently born to a woman who had remarried. In another group, a newlywed participant shared her wedding pictures with the group.

A self-administered short survey that was written in Spanish was also used to obtain personal data. The 31-item demographic survey takes approximately 10 minutes to complete. This anonymous survey was given to the women at the end of the focus group to complete.

Focus group questions elaborated on the following areas: (a) the impact of divorce on relationships, (b) the impact of cultural factors on postdivorce adjustment, and (c) the effectiveness of legal and social services in meeting their postdivorce adjustment needs.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is an interactive process that involves the constant comparison of data collection, analysis, and theory (Gingerich, Abel, D'Aprix, Nordquist, & Riebschleger, 1999).

All recordings of the focus groups were transcribed and translated from Spanish into English. The transcripts were first analyzed using an open coding strategy (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to tease out general themes of concern. Following the open coding, axial coding (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) was initiated to determine overall categories and subcategories.

After the data were classified and labeled, categories were refined. Five thematic areas arose from the analysis. They include (a) IPV as the precipitator for divorce; (b) motivations for leaving; (c) the impact of the Latino culture on marriage, separation, and postdivorce; (d) immigration and other legal and social issues; and (e) postdivorce/post-IPV experiences. The findings were written in a narrative form to inform the reader of the group participants' perceptions of their domestic violence and postdivorce experiences. Quotes that best described or summarized the content areas were chosen to support identified themes.

FINDINGS

Survey Results

All but one of the participants ($n = 23$) were Latina immigrants. One was born in the United States. Of the 24 participants, 11 (45.8%) were undocumented, 10 participants (41.7%) were documented, and 3 (12.5%) reported that they had working papers at the time of the study (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Cultural Background and Immigration Status

	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Birth place		
Mexico	5	20.8%
Colombia	5	20.8%
Guatemala	4	16.7%
Honduras	3	12.5%
Uruguay	2	8.3%
Peru	1	4.2%
Venezuela	1	4.2%
El Salvador	1	4.2%
Nicaragua	1	4.2%
United States	1	4.2%
Immigration status		
Documented	10	41.7%
Undocumented	11	45.8%
Working permit	3	12.5%

The number of years that the study participants reported being in the United States ranged from 5 to 21 years. The majority of the women (70.8%, $n = 17$) reported being in the United States for a period of 10 years or less (see Table 2).

In regard to education, four women (16.7%) completed eighth grade or less, eight women (33.3%) completed ninth to 11th grade, five (20.8%) of the participants were high school graduates, three of the women (12.5%) had completed some college, three (12.5%) reported being college graduates, and one participant (4.2%) answered "other."

Participant earnings ranged from under \$5,000 to over \$50,000 per year. Most reported incomes that would place them in the lower socioeconomic range. Details of participant incomes are found in Table 3.

Most of the women in the study sample (95.8%) were mothers, with only one woman (4.2%) having no children. Among the mothers, nearly 71% reported having sole custody of their children. Four of the women (16.7%) reported having shared custody, and three women (12.5%) indicated that they had lost custody of their children to the fathers.

Only five of the women in the sample (20.8%) reported receiving child support. The vast majority of the sample (70.8%, $n = 17$) indicated that they did not receive child support. Two participants (8.3%) did not respond to this item (see Table 4).

TABLE 2 Living in the United States

Years in the United States	<i>n</i>	Percentage
5 to 10 years	17	70.8%
11 to 15 years	4	16.7%
16 to 20 years	2	8.3%
More than 20 years	1	4.2%

TABLE 3 Participant Age

Age	<i>n</i>	Percentage
24 to 30 years	7	29.2%
31 to 35 years	10	41.6%
36 to 40 years	4	16.7%
41 to 45 years	2	8.3%
Over 45 years	1	4.2%

TABLE 4 Years Married

Years married	<i>n</i>	Percentage
1 to 5 years	9	37.6%
6 to 10 years	5	20.8%
11 to 15 years	3	12.5%
16 to 20 years	2	8.3%
No response	5	20.8%

TABLE 5 Years Divorced

Years divorced	<i>n</i>	Percentage	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1 to 3	12	57.1%	2.9	2.5
4 to 6	8	38.1%		
7 to 9	0	0.0%		
9 to 12	1	4.8%		

The age of the participants ranged from 24 to 55 years of age (see Table 5). The number of years the participants were married ranged from 1 to 20 with a mean of 7 years ($SD = 5.3$). Nine of the participants (37.6%) reported being married from 1 to 5 years. Five participants (20.8%) reported being married from 6 to 10 years. Another five (20.8%) reported being married from 11 to 20 years. Five participants did not report marital status.

The number of years that the women had been divorced ranged from 1 to 12 with the mean years of divorce being 2.9 years ($SD = 2.5$ years). One third (33.3%) of the women were remarried and 21% of the women reported having children after the divorce.

Most of the participants (79.2%, $n = 17$) stated that they were Catholic, one (4.2%) reported being Protestant, and two (8.3%) reported that they were of other Christian denominations. Two members of the sample (8.3%) did not report any religious affiliations.

Qualitative Analysis

Five conceptual themes arose in the data analysis process: (a) IPV as the precipitator for divorce; (b) motivation for leaving; (c) the impact of the Latino culture on marriage, separation, and postdivorce; (d) immigration and other legal and social issues; and (e) postdivorce/post-IPV adjustment.

IPV AS THE REASON FOR DIVORCE

Participants were asked what helped them to make the decision to separate from their abusive spouse. Most reported that the divorce came about as a result of a violent incident in which the client decided to call the police and the spouse was arrested. All of the women in the sample experienced severe physical abuse that resulted in their spouses being incarcerated for battery.

Attending the domestic violence support groups, according to several of the women, also helped them to make the decision to divorce their abusive partner (Molina, Lawrence, Azhar-Miller, & Rivera, 2009). Participants stated that the SafetyNet Program provided counseling for their children and they started seeing the results of the counseling sessions as

the children became less fearful and less aggressive toward them. One woman stated,

The help that 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!

Besides the emotional support from the group leader and other group members, the participants appreciated the help that they received locating community resources. The participants said the SafetyNet Program also helped them by teaching them the laws that can protect abused women.

Financial independence was another critical factor in making the decision to divorce. The women who were not working during their abusive marriage found jobs in their postdivorce experiences and became more economically independent. This economic independence resulted in the women feeling stronger and more capable of caring for themselves and their children.

Other factors that contributed to the divorce included concurrent child abuse, spouses' threats of taking the children out of the country, spouses' threats to kill their family members, children's behavior becoming increasingly aggressive and abusive toward others, not wanting their children to grow up in a violent home environment, and in some cases spouses' alcohol and drug abuse.

MOTIVATION FOR LEAVING

The women in this sample were similar in behavior to other abused women who have been reported in the literature in that they separated from their abuser and returned to their spouses numerous times. In the end, it appeared that concern for their children, not necessarily themselves, spurred the formerly battered women in the sample to decide to leave the abusive situation.

The impact of violence on children was a major theme of discussion and concern among the women in the focus groups. As the literature indicates, physical IPV often begins with the woman's pregnancy. This dynamic was reflected among the women in the study sample. One participant said,

I was pregnant and he hit me and I went into labor . . . he got me by my neck and shoved me against the wall, but so much tension and so many tears . . . it was too much, just too much. Then I went to the hospital and had the baby.

Another participant who related to the former comment added, "I was also pregnant and the baby was born with a lot of medical problems, they did not think he was going to live long."

The women agreed that their children did not want them to be abused and did not want them to stay in the relationship. As the children got older the children questioned their mothers about why they stayed in the marriage. For example, one participant said about her daughter, “She was a big girl, and she used to tell me ‘Mom, how can you let him do whatever he wants?’”

Finally, several women reported that painful memories of the abuse that they survived serve as a powerful constant reminder of the reason why they chose to separate and divorce and as the reason that they are not going to return. One participant said,

I believe that the bad memories stay with you. We don't want to return to the same thing. Remembering all the bad things that they did to us—that helps a lot.

Another stated,

Because, there was a time that the only thing that one does is to think about all the bad things that happened—it is like confronting the evil. Then, am I going to return to the same thing? To return to be turned over, to give away my entire salary and never be able to see a dollar not even to buy a candy—no, that's too ugly.

CULTURAL IMPACT ON POSTDIVORCE ADJUSTMENT

All but two of the participants indicated that the Latino culture did not help them with their postdivorce adjustment. In fact, the women concluded that the culture “does not help at all.” Participants asserted, “The Latino culture teaches women to stay married under all circumstances because it values family unity above all else.” Many of the participants noted that their parents and grandparents had advised them to stay married or to return to their abusive husbands after they separated “for the children's sake.”

Participants felt that the Latino community continues to view domestic violence as “normal” behavior. Many said that they witnessed domestic violence as they were growing up as their mothers were abused by their fathers. They also witnessed family violence in the neighborhood and communities of their country of origin, further reinforcing to them that violence among couples is acceptable. Several women asserted that men in the Latino culture are taught to be “machistas” and mistreat their wives.

Many of the participants said that they were blamed by sisters-in-law and parents-in-law for the problems in their marriage. Some were wrongly accused of having affairs with other men. As a result, they had no support from in-laws to help them during their postdivorce phase.

One of the participants felt very strongly that the lack of education in regard to IPV, more than the Latino culture, contributes to the lack of family

and community support. Others agreed that many Latin American countries do not have laws against IPV, so they were slow to recognize that the legal and social system in the United States offered help to stop the violence.

Only one participant mentioned that her mother and grandmother were very supportive of her during her postdivorce adjustment. She said that both of them had been abused by their spouses when they were younger and could empathize with what she was going through.

IMMIGRATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES

The women all agreed that immigration services were among of the most helpful forms of assistance that they received. One woman said, "Fear of being deported is the reason why many women don't talk about the abuse." Many of the women were undocumented when they first started receiving help at the Palm Beach County State Attorney's Office. Once documentation problems were identified, the women were referred to immigration lawyers for help with their legal status. By the time this study's focus groups took place many among the study sample had obtained work permits, allowing them to gain better employment opportunities. Some had also obtained the legal residency necessary for social service eligibility.

In fact, a number of women began receiving benefits such as food stamps and Medicaid for themselves and their children as a result of obtaining the necessary documentation to legalize their immigrant status in the United States. The legal help they received at the State Attorney's Office included assistance in the areas of protection orders, divorce, child custody, child support, and referral to the SafetyNet Program.

SafetyNet provided domestic violence support groups and parenting groups. The women in the sample reported that it was within these groups that they received the greatest level of support during their separation and divorce process (Molina et al., 2009). With the help of the support groups the women felt that they were able to build long-lasting relationships that aided them in their postdivorce adjustment.

The focus group participants all had very positive things to say about the program in general and about the group worker in particular. They credited the group worker for connecting the women to other social services in the community that helped the women financially and emotionally. All of the women said that these groups helped them to decide to separate from their abusive spouse by teaching them to be more independent, increasing their self-esteem, and motivating them to go forward and help themselves and their children. One participant summarized this sentiment:

Then, we come here and we learn that we have to keep going, and that we don't have to depend on anybody, that we can do it by ourselves, and then you become strong and say to yourself, "No, I am not going back to him!"

Several women reported that coming to the support groups had helped them to gain insight into the patterns and underlying causes of IPV.

Others identified their own parents' abusive relationships and discussed how living in a violent home made them grow up thinking that violence in relationships was normal. Some of these women also shared that they had been abused as children. Still others confided that they had been involved with two and three abusive partners or husbands. One participant acknowledged that she had been living with one form of family violence or another for 30 years and is only now learning to live without it in her life with the help of counseling.

POSTDIVORCE/POST-IPV EXPERIENCES

There was a wide range of experiences from positive to negative during the postdivorce process for the participants. With regard to the negative experiences, two participants mentioned that they had gotten depressed or anxious during the postdivorce time. One of these participants said,

After all that happened, well I fell into a depression, I had to quit my job. I was crying all the time for everything, without any real reason. I got isolated, I didn't want to talk to anybody, I didn't want to answer the phone, I didn't want anything.

Another participant had to seek the help of a psychiatrist and was taking medications for depression and anxiety.

Three participants had lost custody of their children and were very upset about it. These women believe that their ex-spouses "brainwashed" and manipulated their children by "buying them anything." In one case, the participant had "defended" herself against the ex-spouse's violence by fighting back and this led to her arrest and later affected her custody case. Arresting self-defending victims, an unintended consequence of mandatory arrest (Abel, 2001), was viewed as highly punitive by the participants.

A few women stated that the violence they had suffered has affected their relationships with men because they now find themselves being the ones who are aggressive in their relationships. These women expressed concerns about possibly becoming perpetrators.

Another pattern that affected about half of the participants was their fear that they might be abused by another man. This fear led them to be mistrustful of men and in many cases feeling that they are not ready to be involved in another relationship with a man. One participant said,

Yes, in trusting, we lose confidence and always think that, for example, in my case that I am going to lose my freedom again. Like if I say I am going to my friend's house and he says when are you coming back,

look nobody controls me anymore—I am free and I don't want anybody calling me and telling things like that. One thinks that it is going to be the same thing all over again, giving information and thinking that we are going to fall in the same trap that we were before. No, I want to continue to be myself, alone, not dependent on anybody, nobody has to support me and I can do whatever I want without having anybody asking me where I am, what do I do, or what am I going to do.

In addition to their fear of being beaten by other men, several women in the study were also afraid that their children might be abused and this prevents some of the women from wanting to start a new relationship with someone else. These participants summarized their feelings toward being with men at this time by stating that they “are not prepared to put up with anybody.”

Others stated they did not fear being abused by another man, but simply preferred to be living on their own or with their children because they feel very content living on their own. For example, one participant stated,

Well, I feel very happy being alone with my daughter—I don't know if at some time another person will appear in my life, but I feel very happy living with my daughter that is I feel that I don't need to have a man next to me in order to move forward because if I feel lonely I start doing something at home that would entertain me. I don't want to have another relationship—I feel happy living like this and it is not because I am afraid, I simply don't have to—the way I live, I feel happy.

In spite of the severe abuse that most of the women in the sample had gone through, one third have remarried men who are not abusive and express how happy they are in their new marriages. Five (21%) of these women have also had more children. One of those participants said, “We have a beautiful baby, she is eight months old . . . I am getting married (next weekend) because after all we have a daughter.”

Another woman had recently gotten married and brought her wedding pictures to the focus groups for the other women to see. One participant said,

My experience is that I have a new family, a home to offer my daughter, not with her father, but with someone who respects us, who loves us. I have been very strong in order to be able to do that, to study and go to work, those have been very good experiences.

Another woman added,

I got married again. I am very happy. I have a very good job, my son is fine. He is 7 years old and he sees my new husband as his father. I got a real estate license, and a mortgage broker's license. I believe that I have realized myself in this country. I feel happy. I now have a work permit.

In sum, although the participants' postdivorce experiences varied when it came to their relationships with men, they all had in common a feeling of being very happy about having learned to be independent, to work outside the home, to take care of their children on their own, and to feel happy, relaxed, and "realized." The women all agreed that although they were appreciative of the legal and social services that they had already received, they were well aware that they would need additional assistance as they moved through the postdivorce process. Several women mentioned being interested in educational programs such as English classes, GED classes, and college courses. More affordable child care was also mentioned by the women as something they could benefit from. Many of the women did not have health care because of their undocumented status and felt a great need for more help in this area. Several women asserted that, as single parents who were not receiving child support, they needed better paying jobs to support their families.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the postdivorce "lived experience" of a sample of Latina women who had survived IPV. Toward that end, three focus groups were held with a total of 24 formerly battered, divorced Latina women. Most of the women had been living in this country for a period of 5 to 10 years with about half of them (45.8%) being undocumented. The majority of the women in the study sample was in their 30s and had children. Two thirds of the women earned less than \$20,000 annually. More than half of the women had been married from 1 to 10 years and had been divorced for 1 to 3 years. One third of the women had remarried at the time of the study and most of these women had more children. Postdivorce adjustment focused around concerns for their children, their own mental health and stress, fears related to documentation, cultural violations, and becoming involved in new relationships.

What seems most clear from the focus group discussions is that the divorce process was empowering for the women in the sample. The desire of the women to live without violence was palpable and came across loudly in both the actual audiotapes and the transcripts. It was a tremendous advantage that the first author of this study, a Latina herself, was able to translate the focus groups into English and thus immerse herself in the discussions in both the native tongue of the participants (and herself) as well as in English. The bilingual analysis added nuances and more culturally competent understanding of the experiences of the Latina women in the sample.

Resiliency theory can be useful in explaining how well the women in this study have coped with IPV and their divorce. Walsh (2006) defined

resilience as “the capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful” (p. 4). Studies have found that people who have been in stressful situations do overcome adversity (Saleebey, 2005). Many individuals have reported being positively changed by a negative experience (McMillen, 1999). There is no question that these women have demonstrated a great ability to adapt to this society as immigrants and have shown numerous strengths and resiliency in their positive postdivorce adjustment.

In regard to culture, it was unfortunate that most of the women in the sample felt that the Latino culture was not only unhelpful to them as battered women, but that it was actually hurtful to them as they attempted to extricate themselves from their abusive relationships. The normalcy and acceptability of violence that the same women reported matches what has been noted in the literature as a continued adherence to sex-role rigidity and to the concepts of “machismo” and “marianismo.” Only one participant found support for her divorce from the other women in her family (i.e., her mother and her grandmother). The cultural acceptance of IPV, harkening back to lack of sanctions in the countries of origin, has clear implications for women struggling to escape from abusive relationships. Recognizing the cultural taboos and barriers impeding Latina women in abusive relationships from breaking out of IPV, social workers need to work more closely with staff, agencies, clients, and communities to educate them about these gender-specific cultural norms and encourage better understanding of the policies and laws that govern IPV in the United States.

Study participants all agreed that what helped them the most to not return to their abusive spouses was the legal and social work services they were receiving from the Palm Beach County State Attorney’s Office and SafetyNet Program. It was through these services that the women received orders of protection, assistance with obtaining a divorce, help with child custody issues, and in some cases child support. The women credited their positive postdivorce adjustment to the work of the bilingual and bicultural support group worker that helped them through the divorce process. By the time of the study, the women had been able to build a social support network that consisted of other women who had been members of the groups and the group worker, who was very helpful to their divorce adjustment (Molina et al., 2009). Given the lack of support from the families and communities that the women were associated with, the role of social services was key in helping the study participants find the ongoing strength necessary to leave their abusive relationships.

Obtaining legal immigration status is a clear goal when working with undocumented Latina women attempting to extricate themselves from an abusive relationship. All but one of the women who participated in this investigation were undocumented immigrants when they were married. However, focus groups analysis indicated that as a result of the postdivorce legal and social service interventions, 10 of the Latina women in this sample

had established legal residence and three others had received work permits. Although fear of legal reprisals at first kept the women in our sample from seeking assistance, in the end, many of these women felt that addressing their legal status was the key to their “realizing the American dream.” This is an important message that the legal and social service communities can bring to Latina women.

Although all of the focus group participants reported relief that they were no longer living with IPV, the postdivorce experiences were marked with great diversity. This was certainly true in the area of relationships with men. Although many of the women expressed fear of being abused in future relationships, one third of the women in the study were happily remarried. There were others who were not in intimate relationships, but expressed being very happy living alone or with their children.

Although this study does provide a profile of the battered Latina women in this sample, professionals working with this population should be keenly aware of the diversity among their clients and remember that Latinas, although they might share cultural backgrounds, are not a monolithic group. That being said, sharing the postdivorce stories of the women in this study might provide a wide range of modeling for other Latina battered women contemplating divorce. Similarly, social workers are encouraged to invite Latina women who have successfully escaped from IPV to speak with groups of Latinas still struggling with violence in their homes. Hearing the success stories of women from the Latino culture who have left violent relationships could be a useful approach for helping other Latinas move forward in their own separation and divorce process.

Finally, the voices of the women in this study strongly suggest that more domestic violence programs and other legal and social services need to be developed for women during the postdivorce phase. Study outcomes clearly demonstrate that even after the divorce, Latina women have many social, legal, emotional, financial, educational, and occupational needs that require social work intervention.

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