Providing Human Services to Latina Immigrants: Victims of IPV

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Abstract

In many instances, the human services delivery system is unable to meet the needs of the foreign born Latina immigrant, concerning domestic violence or Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) situations. Researchers and most observers conclude that women are more likely to be the victims of IPV than men and that White women are more commonly researched as victims of IPV, than Latina immigrants. This report discusses the barriers that abused foreign born Latina immigrants face as well as the competencies that human services agencies need to embrace in order to effectively assist these immigrants in the State of Texas.

Introduction

Researchers and most observers conclude that women are likely the victims of domestic violence or Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) more so than men. Moreover, white women are more commonly studied, researched and brought to the forefront as victims, when discussing this phenomenon, while the foreign born immigrant woman shadows her counterpart (Garcia-Mareno, Jensen, Elsberg, Heise, and Watts, 2006). This lack of research and information challenges some human service agencies in meeting the needs of the foreign born Latina immigrant concerning IPV situations.

In many instances, foreign born immigrant women have been pushed and pulled across the borders to the United States alone, with their significant partners, or with their families in search of a better life. They come to the United States for a variety of reasons that include socioeconomic advancement, maintenance of sociocultural ties, war, and severe poverty or to escape abuse (Martinelli, 2009). The abuse that some foreign born immigrant women face may be in the form of forced prostitution, state-sponsored sterilization, female genital mutilation or IPV (Raj, 2002). Each of these abusive states has the ability to wreak varying levels of human devastation upon the victim including death, both across the borders and here in the United States.

Traveling across borders to the United States, however, may not be sufficient in rescuing the foreign born Latina immigrant from IPV as human services may be limited in its ability to serve this population. This article discusses the challenges and barriers that often bind foreign born Latina immigrants to a lifetime of IPV or death. More importantly, this article also discusses the challenges that human services faces in assisting these women in the state of Texas. These challenges include, but are not limited to the dynamics of cultural sensitivity, the awareness of the language barrier and its implicit impact on foreign born Latina immigrants, and the efforts to
shore up human services’ ability to provide accessible services for the well-being of abused Latina immigrants.

**Background**

The rapid growth in the population of Latino immigrants and immigrant couples in the United States (Vidal de Haymes and Kilty, 2007) signifies the importance of the human services delivery system and its necessary engagement in a variety of social problems for this population, particularly the IPV phenomenon. In light of this awareness, several studies, at the hands of experts and scholars, have attempted to determine the levels of IPV as it pertains to various groups of people. According to Carrillo and Zarza (2006) overall IPV comprised over 22% of all violent crimes against women and an estimated 4.8 million women fall victim to abuse by intimate partners each year in the U.S. According to Godinez (2007), 43% of all reported incidences of violence against Latina immigrants in Texas were IPV related or at the hands of someone they knew.

Some studies reported higher levels of IPV for Latino families than White non-Hispanic families. One such study conducted in a rural Southeastern community of Latina immigrants (legal status undetermined), reported that 70% of the participants were victimized by their partners (Murdaugh, Hunt, Sowell and Santana, 2004). Studies, however, reflected no significant differences in IPV between Latino families and White non-Hispanic families (Tjaden and Thonnes, 2000). Moreover, 48% of foreign born Latina immigrants reported that IPV increased, once arriving to the United States (Hancock and Siu, 2009). Although the magnitude of the abuse of foreign born Latina immigrants is not entirely conclusive, as studies are limited in comparison to White non-Hispanic families, the vulnerability of the Latina immigrant is clear based on relevant external and internal predictors that include socioeconomics, culture and linguistic factors.

IPV is violence that occurs between a victim and a perpetrator who are current or former spouses or partners (Women of Color Network, 2006). IPV consists of coercive and assultive behaviors intended to establish varying levels of control by an intimate partner. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) (2009), through a pattern of coercive and abusive actions, the perpetrator forces the partner to behave in a specific controlled manner against his or her will. These behaviors include physical and sexual violence, threats of physical and sexual violence, and verbal and emotional abuse. IPV usually begins with verbal or emotional abuse, but in way too many instances, IPV ends with the death of the female partner or femicide. The term femicide (Frye and Wilt, 2001) is defined as the misogynist killing of women by the male intimate partner. According to the Family Violence and Prevention Fund (2009), 136 women died from femicide in 2008. Statistics on the number of foreign born Latinas killed, during IPV incidences in Texas, is lacking.

The majority of Latino immigrant couples are young adults, who have resided in the United States less than five years. Formal education and formidable skills are lacking, thereby, subjecting many Latino immigrants to low-wages, dirty and dangerous work and bouts of unemployment (Orrenius, Zavodny and Kerr, 2009). Hazen and Soriana (2005), identify the importance of socioeconomics and poverty as predictors of violence among Latina immigrants. The phenomenon of IPV, however, is not limited to socioeconomic factors as the epidemic
proportions of IPV exists across all classes, races, and ethnic groups in America. While IPV, according to Hancock and Siu (2009), may be more related to environmental than cultural factors, it is the Latina immigrant’s response to her abuse, which leans heavily toward her cultural background, that often places the Latina immigrant in longer abusive situations than her White non-Hispanic counterpart.

**Challenges in Leaving the Abuser**

In light of the fact that women of all races ethnicities and cultures are about equally vulnerable to violence and even death by an intimate partner, the foreign born Latina immigrant also experiences additional difficulties while attempting to escape abuse (Hazen and Soriano, 2005). Many foreign born Latina immigrants will not or do not seek refuge from abuse in Texas because of socioeconomics, legal concerns, language barriers, cultural differences, and religious values.

*Socioeconomics and Legalities*

In Texas, as a whole, the Latino population wage gap is larger than in any other areas of the country (Orrenius, Zavodny and Kerr, 2009). If the Latina immigrant does not find work legally, she may find work at substandard pay. Due to the fact that Latina immigrants are generally paid less than White non-Hispanic women and even less than Latino males, the ability to seek legal recourse or escape from her perpetrator is unlikely without sufficient funds or assistance from human service entities. If the foreign born Latina immigrant is undocumented, the Latina immigrant’s susceptibility to IPV escalates, in many cases. Escape from the violent relationship is compounded because of the Latino immigrant’s undocumented status, thereby causing further marginalization, while the perpetrator takes advantage and uses the intimidation of deportation to control the Latina immigrant. According to Orloff and Little (1999), fears of deportation are heightened as abusers employ tactics that convince the Latina immigrant that she may lose permanent custody of her children after deportation, should she seek aid or intervention from her abuser. Additionally, the foreign born Latina immigrant may not be aware of specific laws that offer forms of protection, such as the national Battered Immigrant Women Protection Act of 2000 and the Violence Against Women Act of 2006, of which both are actively engaged in the state of Texas (Lehmann, 2002).

It is critical to recognize that in providing assistance and services to abused foreign born Latina immigrants that the Latino population is concentrated in the agricultural and outlying rural areas in Texas, where a vast number of Latinos become readily employed in manual labor jobs (Orrenius, Zavodny and Kerr, 2009). The major reason for this population’s settlement in these areas concerns the limited job skills and qualifications of many young first generation Latino immigrants who cross the borders either legally or illegally.

*Race and Biases*

Dealing with the all too common aspects of racial or ethnic biases takes the forefront position as a barrier to the Latina immigrant’s quest to end IPV. Because Latinos are often thought of as being violent and Latinas as being prone to victimization, discrimination and gender bias is often projected (Valdez, 2005). Americas’ and Texas’ historical record of institutional and individual racism directed at people of color (Eitzen and Baca-Zinn, 2003) provides another reason why some Latinas avoid law enforcement and the court system. Some abused foreign born Latinas fear brutality from the police against their men, if the IPV is reported.
In many instances, the Latina immigrant’s country of origin either lacks domestic violence laws or the laws are not actively enforced by the courts. As a result, a level of mistrust of the police or the court system is prevalent among foreign born Latina immigrants. The belief that the police or the courts will not listen or take action is reinforced because of past experiences across the border, where repressive or non-responsive law enforcement and judicial systems often favored the male in the relationship (Ammar, Orloff, Dutton and Hass, 2005). These fears are further substantiated in a study conducted by Ayuda in 1999, in which 83% of foreign born Latina immigrants did not contact authorities about their abuse because of their fear of law enforcement and (or) deportation (Orloff and Little, 1999). If law enforcement is interjected into the abusive relationship and the Latina immigrant is unable to communicate effectively with the law enforcement officer, the chances are that she will not have knowledge or understand how the law enforcement and judicial systems work. When these fears are compounded with language deficiencies, perpetrators, who speak English, have an advantage as the law enforcement officer may place more credence into what the perpetrator claims than the victim. Or, if an English-speaking child is used as a translator out of pressure and fear from the abuser, the child may not accurately report the situation to the officer (Valdez, 2005).

**Culture and Communal Perspectives**
Whereas socioeconomics and the environment do play heavily in the dynamics between the victim and the abuser, culture is a greater factor in the abused Latina immigrant’s level of tolerance. The cultural dynamics of the abused foreign born Latina immigrant have a great deal of bearing on the victim’s decision to seek services from IPV. The cultural mores within the Latina immigrant’s community subscribe to the traditional passive role of women as it concerns the sanctity of marriage (Clutter and Zubleta, 2009). Maintaining strict privacy concerning marital and family matters is of the utmost importance in Latino culture. According to Perilla, Bakerman and Norris (1994), speaking out against an abusive husband could result in ridicule or the loss of social respect from the community, thereby forcing the Latina immigrant to search for resolution to end the abuse through other options. One such option includes continued cohabitation with the abuser, while the Latina immigrant seeks to end the violence. In some instances, this tolerance can be fatal to the Latina.

Without culturally comprehensive services, abused foreign born Latina immigrants who do leave their homes may find it difficult to reside in shelters or in other types of American safety settings. Orloff and Little (1999) noted that as a result of the deeply engrained cultural traditions, Latina immigrants may feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, alienated or alone because of the variances and unfamiliarity associated with the shelter’s eating and sleeping arrangements that have no tolerance of the Latina immigrant culture.

**Religious Perspectives**
The strong religious beliefs of the abused foreign born Latina immigrants, typically Roman Catholicism, may present conflicting options concerning IPV (The Family Prevention and Violence Fund, 2009). For example, divorce may not be an option as the sanctity of marriage and the family is firmly engrained within the Latina immigrant’s religious perspective. If the abused Latina immigrant chooses to disclose the abuse to clergy, the Latina may fail to receive the necessary supportive assistance from the clergy. The Latina may be told instead, to be “dutiful and to make the couples’ marriage work.” Within the power dynamics associated with machismo
or the support of male bravado and dominance, community members will often support the perpetrator, particularly when the religion emphasizes the rights of men to rule their families (Torres, 1998).

**Recommendations**

If human services is to provide effective assistance to abused foreign born Latina immigrants in the U.S., particularly in Texas, then addressing the language barriers, cultural competencies, and accessibility concerns is paramount to the effectiveness of the services being rendered. Overcoming the language barriers eliminates the overcasting fear of discrimination. Staff and workers must possess either bi-lingual or Spanish speaking skills as part of their job description. If not, then proficient and competent translators or interpretators must be employed to assist in carrying out the helping process. This creates a culturally sensitive atmosphere and lays the groundwork for solution building and problem solving between the human services professional and the client.

Harmful stereotypes and a lack of cultural competencies harbored by some professional workers and staff members serve to diminish the delivery of human services to the abused Latina immigrant. Establishing cultural competencies that promote diversity awareness can be achieved by implementing extensive ongoing trainings. Trainings that focus on ‘cultural humility reflection’ intend to recognize the differences between cultures by stimulating the ‘culture to culture concept’. These types of culturally sensitive educational trainings tackle the burdensome forces of prejudice, oppression and stereotypes, during the facilitation of services.

Providing advocacy and awareness training for all individuals who have contact with the foreign born Latina immigrant allows for an effective and efficient delivery of human services. By seizing the opportunity to strengthen the community infrastructure with collaborative efforts that include former Latina IPV victims, the preventative process could become instrumental in the model implementation. Using former Latina IPV victim’s voice and actions as preventative witnesses could offer inspiration, thereby, lending personal agency and power to other foreign born Latina immigrants in preventing and remaining victim free of IPV.

The final recommendation concerns promoting and disseminating information on Texas’ existing services in combating threats of deportation. The Violence Against Women Act Self-Petition Project is a unique self-help program in Texas’ rural borderline communities. The program assists undocumented foreign born immigrant women who are victims of IPV by their legally permanent or U.S. citizen spouses who use threats of deportation against their wives, if they seek help or file a complaint. In addition to self-petition filings with INS for legal status, Latina immigrants are also granted the ability to work and to become financially capable and self-sufficient. This program can be of great benefit to the IPV Latina immigrant only, if the information about the program is made available to the people who need it the most.
References


Dr. Amanda Coleman-Mason is an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and a Visiting Professor at the University of North Texas Dallas teaching Human Services at both institutions. Dr. Coleman-Mason’s involvement and passion for disenfranchised and underserved women who seek assistance in attaining self-sufficiency, has led to her interest in the well-being of Latina immigrants in the Texas area. Her research includes minority women leaving the welfare arena and women seeking refuge from Intimate Partner Violence situations. Dr. Coleman-Mason proudly accepted the offer as Guest Editor for the Spring 2010 edition concerning various immigrant issues and Human Services.

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