Violence Against Migrant Women:

a review of risk factors and barriers to accessing help

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1. Introduction

The burgeoning literature on Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) includes a growing body of research that has focused on the experiences of violence by migrant women. Arguably, such research has, at least in part, emerged to address the call for the need to adopt an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1994) to better understand how different facets of women's identity may condition how they experience and address violence that is rooted in patriarchal structures of oppression and manifest in unequal gender relations. As a result, much greater attention has been devoted to examining women's experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) through the intersections of class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age and other sociocultural characteristics. The interest on violence against migrant women is particularly evident in the growth of research conducted in countries of the Global North, which highlights how the condition of being a migrant subsumes several factors that shape their exposure, experience and response to violence. This paper reviews these factors, highlighting those that operate, to varying degrees, to discourage migrant women from seeking help, and although the focus is largely on literature on Latin American women, these factors largely apply to the case of migrant women in general.

2. VAWG: the case of migrant women

As the literature on issues around VAWG continues to grow, greater attention has been paid to examining the nature, incidence and effects of VAWG amongst migrant women (Menjivar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman, 2002; Ammar and Orloff, 2005; Sokoloff, 2008; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Reina, Lohman, and Maldonado, 2014; Gonçalves and Matos, 2016; Bridges, 2018). This added impetus is due, in part at least, to the turn towards the intersectional approach pioneered by Crenshaw (1994), which provides a more holistic and meaningful lens that allows for a more nuanced understanding of the causes, manifestations, and effects of VAWG, which recognises, crucially, that violence is shaped by and in turn shapes social structures and gender hierarchies that underpin inequality (Anitha, 2008; Sokoloff, 2008; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Hearn et al 2016; Neal and Beckman, 2016). The approach recognises that women experience multiple forms of discrimination based on various types of social identities, such as gender, race and class, sexuality, and faith, that intersect and are context-contingent (Bograd, 1999; Anitha, 2008; Kelly, 2013; Reina, Lohman and Maldonado, 2014). O'Neal and Beckman (2016) noted how examining violence without taking account of these different social identities excludes the experiences of marginalised women, and efforts to address research that employed an intersectional approach to marginalised women's experience of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) were first reviewed by Sokoloff and Dupont (2005).

Migrant women are particularly susceptible to experiencing further types of discrimination due to their migrant condition which affect their exposure to VAWG, disclosure and reporting of it, as well as access to support (Anitha, 2008; Sokoloff 2008; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Reina, Lohman and Maldonado, 2014; Gonçalves and Matos, 2016; O'Neal and Beckman, 2016). Indeed, research on VAWG among migrant women continues to increase, with extensive work addressing factors that make them more vulnerable to VAWG and influence their search for help and redress (Erez et al, 2009; Loya, 2014). But, as O'Neal and Beckman (2016) have argued in their own review of barriers that Latina migrants in the US face when seeking help for IPV, although research has documented numerous barriers (e.g. Bauer et al, 2000; Kelly, 2006; Ingram, 2007; Vidales, 2010), there is a dearth of research that examines them through an intersectional approach. Equally limited has been the adoption of the approach by policies that address violence against migrant women, so that emphasis on cultural difference leads to victim blaming and stereotyping (Sokoloff, 2008), although adopting intersectional thinking in research and policy allows for better understandings of GBV and its outcomes (O'Neal and Beckman, 2016).

A key feature on research on VAWG in general, and specifically on VAWG among migrants, is that it has focused predominantly on Domestic Violence (DV) or IPV which privileges the domain of the home as the locus of violence. Yet it has been increasingly argued that such focus underrepresents the pervasiveness of VAWG in public spaces (Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Gonçalves and Matos, 2016). As Hearn et al argue (2016), violence against women is often framed as DV and DV only because gender domination persists in institutions and the state control of violence. Such framing presumes a divide between the private and the public that obfuscates the linkages between them and limit the scope for addressing violence that actually crosses various 'social spaces' (Hearn et al 2016). Also, as Gonçalves and Matos (2016) contend, little attention has been paid to the fact that women often experience multiple types of violence throughout their lives, and although this has is now being addressed (e.g. Sabina, Schally, and Cuevas, 2013), to account for the wider spectrum of interpersonal violence, examination of co-occurrence of different types of violence in different contexts remains limited. However, more recently, a 'Transnational VAWG Spectrum' approach, adapted from the continuum of violence formulated by Kelly (1988), has been put forward (Evans and McIlwaine, 2016; 2017) to help understand how violence occurs in diverse, intersecting, concurrent and contingent ways across time and space, from the private domain of the home to the public sphere of wider social interaction, which heighten the vulnerability of migrant women to VAWG.

An extensive body of research now exists that has examined VAWG amongst migrant communities in the Global North, particularly in the North America and Europe (see Menjivar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman, 2002; Freedman and Jamal, 2008; Martinez Casado-Neira, 2016; Neal and Beckman, 2016). In the US, for instance, research is growing on VAWG amongst Latin American women, including examination of barriers to reporting violence and accessing support (Bauer et al 2000; Dutton, Orloff, and Hass, 2000; Kasturirangan and

Williams, 2003; Ammar et al, 2005; Rennison, 2007; Brabeck and Guzman, 2009; Vidales, 2010; Dias, Fraga, and Barros, 2013; Neal and Beckman, 2016). Reina, Maldonado, and Lohman, 2013). This research has demonstrated that the experiences of violence by migrant women are compounded by diverse interrelated factors that derive directly from their specific position as migrants which also operate to prevent, constrain or delay their search for help, as well as influencing the manner and quality of response from different service providers (Menjívar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman, 2002; Erez and Hartley, 2003; Ammar and Orloff, 2005; Whitaker et al, 2007; Sokoloff, 2008; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Neal and Beckman, 2016). These are factors that may operate at one time as both risk factors that increase the vulnerability of migrant women to violence, and factors that discourage women from seeking or receiving support to deal with violence. These can be broadly categorised as cultural, contextual, and institutional. These categorisations are necessarily artificial and are used here simply as a device to aid understanding, but it should be clear that, consonant with an intersectional approach, they interact and interrelate. Next, each category and its subcategories are examined in turn, followed by a brief discussion of key recommendations for improving the provision of supporting services to migrant women survivors of violence.

3. Violence Against Migrant Women: risk factors and barriers to obtaining help

3.1 Cultural norms and psychological influence

Although the cultural contextualisation of violence against women has sometimes been eschewed because it may help rationalise it (see Marcus, 1994, and Beasley and Thomas, 1994, on domestic violence), it has been shown that cultural norms and values are transposed through migration and influence the way women define what constitutes violence in host societies. These norms and values are often underpinned by patriarchal ideologies that prescribe gender roles and behaviour, and play an important role in discouraging migrant women from taking action about their experience of violence, whether to leave IPs, report them to the police, or ask for help from state agencies or advocacy agencies. Crucially, these cultural dictates may also prevent migrant women from realising that what they have experienced configures violence or even crime in the host society, especially if it is not characterised as such back home, and involves non-physical violence, and so the perception that violence comprises a cultural tradition may prevent women from seeking help (West, 1998; Menjivar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman; 2002; Erez and Hartley, 2003; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Reina, Lohman and Maldonado, 2014; O'Neal and Beckman, 2016). As Perilla, Bakeman and Norris (1994) argued, *machismo* comprises one cultural script that dictates the social expectations for Latino men based on differential gendered power notions that assert the moral and physical superiority of men over women, with *marianismo* codifying the roles for Latina women, based on submission to male authority; both can lead to violence towards women (see also Perilla 1999; McIlwaine, 2010; McIlwaine and Carlisle, 2011). Perilla (1999) is careful to note that *machista* values are not exclusive to Latino groups,

they are found to permeate societies around the world. Yet, research by Reina, Lohman and Maldonado (2014), for instance, has shown that *machismo* seems to be more acceptable among Latina women in the US than among other groups and this directly affects their decision to seek help.

Cultural norms may also produce or combine with self-doubt, instilling fear of being stigmatised by family and communities, and infusing feelings of shame and guilt for disclosing violence and bringing about sanctions against perpetrators for whom they may still have feelings, as well as fearing the impacts, especially on children, but also retribution (West, 1998; Bauer et al, 2000; Menjivar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman; 2002; Erez and Hartley, 2003; Whitaker et al, 2007; Anitha, 2008; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Vidales, 2010; Sabina, Cuevas and Shally, 2012; Reina, Lohman and Maldonado, 2014, O'Neal and Beckman, 2016).

3.2 Contextual factors
3.2.1 Language skills

Limited or lack of language skills has been shown to constrain migrant women's interactions in host societies, making them more vulnerable to violence, especially recent arrivals, limiting their access to information about income-earning opportunities, laws and rights, and a host of other resources that can help them navigate daily life in unfamiliar settings, including sources of support and protection from violence, such as health and social services. Also, abusive IPs often play a part in preventing women from developing their language skills, by controlling their social interactions and acting as intermediaries between them and the wider community (West, 1998; Menjivar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman; 2002; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Vidales, 2010; Reina, Lohman and Maldonado, 2014; O'Neal and Beckman, 2016).

3.2. 2. Isolation

Feeling isolated is a recurrent theme on research about migrant's women experience of violence. Isolation results from leaving behind when they migrate social networks that include family, friends and acquaintances that provide emotional, social and economic support, and is magnified by difficulties in creating new social networks in the host country or being prevented from doing so by abusive IPs (Bauer et al, 2000; Menjivar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman; 2002; Erez and Hartley, 2003; Whitaker et al, 2007; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Vidales, 2010; Reina, Lohman and Maldonado, 2014). Denham et al (2007) for instance, reported that half of Latina victims of IPV in their study had no social support of any kind in their host society and this hindered their access to formal supporting services. However, O'Neal and Beckman (2016) examined research that showed that social networks may also operate as a risk factor for violence by prescribing non-intervention by individuals or the community, and by maintaining and reproducing beliefs that lock women in violent

relationships, as illustrated in the adage '"the dirty laundry is washed at home", (Edelson, Hokoda, and Ramos-Lira, 2007, in O'Neal and Beckman, 2016:5).

3.2.3 Immigration Status

Being subject to immigration control plays a pivotal role in shaping women's response to violence, whether because perpetrators (particularly IPs) use it as a mechanism to control and manipulate them (especially undocumented women), or because women whose status is insecure or irregular fear the consequences of disclosing violence, for themselves, their partners and their children, or still, because immigration laws often circumscribe women's ability to access statutory services and legal help (Menjivar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman; 2002; Erez and Hartley, 2003; Whitaker et al, 2007; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Vidales, 2010; Reina, Lohman and Maldonado, 2014; O'Neal and Beckman, 2016).

Undocumented women live under continuous threat from IPs of being turned over to immigration authorities and being deported, which may also entail being separated from and losing custody of their children. Similarly, they may refrain from reporting violence to the police or social services for fear of being deported, or jeopardising their or their children's chances of becoming regularised (Menjivar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman; 2002; Erez and Hartley, 2003; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Reina, Lohman and Maldonado, 2014), although fear of deportation has been shown to influence the decision to seek help by both documented and undocumented migrant women (Bauer et al, 2000). Ingram (2007), for instance, reported that Latina women who experienced IPV were less likely to seek help than non-migrant women. Moreover, immigration policies that target the undocumented and stigmatise them through stereotypes act as powerful deterrents to searching for help and contribute to trapping women in violent relationships (Reina, Maldonado and Lohman, 2013; O'Neal and Beckman, 2016). Also, immigration legislation may bar undocumented and documented women alike from accessing public services (e.g. social, housing, and health services). Thus, immigration status may help configure a multiplicity of scenarios and outcomes that increase migrant women's vulnerability to violence, exacerbate their experiences of it, and circumscribe their access to help (Menjivar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman, 2002; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Reina, Maldonado and Lohman 2013; O'Neal and Beckman, 2016).

3.2.4 Knowledge about sources of support and redress

Lack of knowledge about support services is also a key factor in preventing migrant women from leaving violent relationships and obtaining help, and is directly linked to competence in the host language, given that services and resources may not available in their own language (Menjivar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman; 2002; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Reina, Lohman and Maldonado; 2014). Similarly, migrant women generally will have little understanding about their legal rights or about how the justice system operates, and may be reluctant to start legal action against violent IPs for a host of reasons, including concern about

the severity of sanctions against the perpetrator (i.e. a jail sentence, or even deportation if he is undocumented), and fear of tarnishing their reputation with a criminal record, which may also stigmatise their children (Menjivar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman; 2002; Erez and Hartley, 2003; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Vidales, 2010).

3.2.5 Socioeconomic factors

Extensive research has shown that education is an important factor in migrant women's experience of violence (Raj and Silverman, 2002; Menjivar and Salcido; 2002; Ingram, 2007; Whitaker, 2007; Vidales, 2010). O'Neal and Beckman (2016), for instance, have shown how low educational achievement is linked to Latina women's greater susceptibility to IPV, whereas higher educational attainment, conversely, reduces IPV and enables access to resources and sources of support.

Similarly, access to independent economic resources play a key role in women's vulnerability to violence. Thus, migrant women who depend on their IP's income or assets may be at greater risk of suffering DV/IPV and experiencing hardship than women who have independent economic resources (O'Neal and Beckman, 2016). For example, Vidales (2010) found that the great majority of participants in her research (80%) had suffered hardship from their abusive IPs. Also, restricted or lack of access to economic resources, which may result from immigration laws that ban women on certain visas from working or from limited income-earning opportunities, facilitate women's dependence on abusive partners, constraining their ability to leave violent relationship, as losing their partner's income will mean facing economic insecurity, which is further magnified when children are involved (Menjívar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman, 2002; Whitaker et al, 2007; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009; Reina, Lohman and Maldonado, 2014). Yet, Menjívar and Salcido (2002) have also shown that, whilst taking up paid employment enables women to exercise greater control over economic resources, it also sometimes increases the risk of violence from their IPs, especially if they themselves are out of work and feel emasculated by women's greater economic independence. All the same, helping women break out of violent relationships is seen to require interventions that ensure women's financial and economic security and self-sufficiency (Postmus et al, 2009), because it is extremely difficult for women to try to rebuild their lives when they must provide food and shelter for themselves and their children on their own (O'Neal and Beckman, 2016).

3.2.6 Institutional factors

Research has also examined the sources of help to which migrant women turn to deal with violence and its effects (Erez and Hartley, 2003). These sources may be formal (e.g. the criminal justice system, that includes the police and solicitors; social services; health professionals), or informal (friends, relatives, clergy) (Postmus et al, 2009; Sabina, Cuevas, and Shally, 2012). According to Erez and Hartley (2003), usually women first talk about violence to close female relatives and friends, but are prompted into action to try and put a

stop to violence once they have decided that they have 'had enough', although others may also intervene to bring help (e.g. concerned relatives or neighbours). Sabina, Cuevas and Shally (2012), in turn, emphasise that the search for help must be understood as a dynamic process that is contingent on the context of the violence experienced, and that in general women will take action that they see as commensurate with the severity of violence. For instance, the use of a weapon or sexual assault with physical assault increases the likelihood of reporting to the police or other formal sources (Sabina, Cuevas and Shally, 2012), even though the relationship with them may be marked by lack of trust, frustration and doubt about effectiveness, which partly derives from women's own experiences with these agents in their home countries (Reina, Lohman and Maldonado, 2014; O'Neal and Beckman, 2016).

Indeed, accessing sources of help, particularly formal sources, has not always obtained a positive outcome for migrant women survivors of violence, as other factors come into play that impinge on the quality and effectiveness of the services provided. Chief amongst these are the lack of cultural sensitivity and linguistic skills among professionals in social services, health services and the criminal justice system which affect their ability to communicate with the victims of violence, understand religious and cultural practices, provide adequate information and take appropriate legal action (Menjívar and Salcido, 2002; Ingram, 2007; O'Neal and Beckman, 2016). Studies of Latinas in the US, for instance, have shown their frustration with different types of services, including the police, health, counselling and the legal system (Sabina, Cuevas and Shally, 2012; O'Neal and Beckman, 2016). Postmus et al (2009) also note how research on women victims of violence (which include migrant groups) shows that even though women sought help from different services, they did not necessarily find them helpful, and that staff behaviour and attitudes (blaming the victim and disbelief) would compound their trauma, in a manner that has been described as 'secondary rape'.

One of the support services that have proved highly problematic for migrant women victims of violence is the criminal justice system (i.e. the police, prosecutors, lawyers, judges and jury). Erez and Hartley (2003) highlighted the 'tremendous barriers' (social, economic, cultural, and legal) women confront when trying to use the US criminal justice system, arguing that many more follow after these are overcome. They discuss how women struggle to make decisions about engaging with the system, especially involving the police, which many women see as 'a last resort, a matter of life and death'.

But this is often the first contact they will have with the system, which also serves as a conduit to other agencies, such as social services (Vidales, 2010). Problems include: the discretionary power that police officers use when deciding whether to make an arrest in a DV situation and how the decision may be informed by legal, ideological, practical and political considerations (Menjívar and Salcido, 2002); lack of translation services (Erez, Aldeman, and Gregory, 2009), or where these are provided, the potential for distortion of meaning that may even favour the perpetrator (Menjívar and Salcido, 2002); victims having to face perpetrators in courtrooms; processes being time-consuming, and confusing; justice agents who lack

knowledge of immigration laws; and inequality between women's legal resources and those of the perpetrator (Erez and Hartley, 2003; Erez, Aldeman and Gregory, 2009). As Perilla (1999 119) observed in relation to the operation of the justice system in the US, 'differential enforcement of domestic violence laws and the inconsistent or insensitive manner in which some courts treat these cases still minimizes the effectiveness of such legislation as a deterrent'.

4. *Improving service provision: VAWG as a human rights issue*

Various measures have been put forward to improve the quality of service provision to migrant women victims of violence. Silverman and Raj (2002), for instance, argue that, given the pervasiveness of GBV against migrant women, staff at state agencies (including immigration officers and judges) should be required to undergo training to develop cultural sensitivity skills. Erez and Hartley (2003), in turn, call for a therapeutic jurisprudence approach that requires criminal justice agents to develop an understanding of the context of immigration, and provide a culturally competent therapeutic response to service users. On a similar vein, Whitaker et al (2007) advocates the provision of culturally competent services, which require individuals and organisations to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes and attributes to be able to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. In this respect, a study of Mexican women in Southern California showed, for instance, that police officers who understand traditional Latino culture and value women provided much more effective assistance to women than those who lack such understanding (Vidales, 2010). O'Neal and Beckman (2016) also call for the training of law enforcement staff on cultural sensitivity to Latino culture and language skills in the US, along with the provision a host of supporting services in Spanish.

The argument can be made that these and similar measures would help improve the efficacy of service provision if placed within the wider framework of national policy that recognises VAWG as a violation of human rights, as expounded in United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (UN 1993). Marcus (1994) and Beasley and Thomas (1994) were amongst the first to call for domestic violence to be treated as a human rights issue, instead of a private matter that is confined to the home and normalised by cultural values and practices. Treating domestic violence as a private problem places it beyond the jurisdiction of international human rights legislation, whereas assigning it to the realm of human rights removes culture specificities, reasserting the universality of women's experience of violence, and providing universal recourse. Marcus (1994), for instance, traces parallels between domestic violence and terrorism (e.g. surprise and random acts of violence; psychological and physical violence used to silence protest and minimise opposition; confinement within atmosphere of terror), arguing that violence perpetrated against women at home by their partners should be treated as terror, as it has the same aims and produces the same effects as terrorist behaviour (e.g. domination, control, derive advantage, protect privileges).

Separately, Kelly (2005) showed how feminist activism brought about the mainstreaming of the 'gendering of human rights discourse', and how documenting the prevalence of violence against women was central to the effort, at the same time as revealing that 'perpetrators were not strangers or men with health mental problems, but women's intimate partners, male family members, work colleagues and other known men in positions of authority and/or trust' (Kelly, 2005: 475).

Stark (2009) also argued for a human rights approach to violence against women, highlighting how current interventions from governments have failed to improve the prospects for women and children who suffer IPV and failed to change the normative and criminal justice climate that allows violence to occur. This is because the current paradigm, within which 'shelters, police, courts, or personnel' operate, understands male partner in such as ways at to disaggregate, trivialise, normalise and render invisible the oppression that women experience, so that 'interventions become more perfunctory as subjugation becomes more comprehensive' (Stark, 2009:1510). Hence, Stark (2009) has called for a paradigm shift towards one that treats violence against women as a violation of human rights. But, whilst some argue that it is indisputable that adopting a human rights perspective for ending violence against women has gained global currency in the last three decades (Kelly, 2005), others note resistance to the approach which may be related theoretical and practical issues, including the divide between violence that occurs in the private domain and that which takes place in the public sphere (Libal and Parekh, 2009). Yet, Rose (2015), goes further, arguing that as IPV against women occurs with the 'authorisation, endorsement, toleration and complicity of the state and institutions' in ways that 'fundamentally disempower women, constrain their independence, and enhance their vulnerability to violence', it must be treated as both a crime against humanity and a state crime (Rose, 2015: 38). Hence, addressing VAWG as a violation of human rights has important implications for service provision, including removal of barriers to help which confront migrant women survivors of violence.

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