

Intimate Partner Violence in Hawai'i: Communities in Distress

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Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a major health concern for women worldwide. Many studies have explored IPV within the (mainland) United States but very few have explored the topic in Hawai'i. Thirteen women from Hilo, Hawai'i who had experienced IPV participated in one-on-one interviews. An intersectionality perspective and an ecological or ecosystem framework guided the data analysis. IPV was considered common place, a norm, and part of a larger 'societal' problem. For some of the women, the need to belong was so strong that taking alcohol or drugs and experiencing IPV could be seen as a sign of acceptance into local culture. Multiple contextual factors acting at individual, relationship, community, and societal levels seem to increase women's vulnerability to IPV. Similarly, individual, family, community, organizational, and societal level barriers prevented women from seeking services and leaving abusive relationships. Once certain neighborhoods become labeled as 'violent,' people living within and outside it (including law enforcement officials), become indifferent to incidents of violence in these communities. Preserving the strong sense of interdependence within the family, and strengthening the ideal of reciprocity and balance at home could be highly influential in preventing perpetration of IPV and helping women access IPV-related services in Hilo, Hawaii.

Keywords: Relationship; Communities; Intimate partner violence; Families

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is defined as the threat of and/or actual physical, sexual, psychological, or verbal abuse and other forms of coercion by a current or former spouse or non-marital partner [1]. IPV is a major health and social concern for women worldwide [2] and there is a need for context-specific knowledge about IPV, its consequences, and how women, families, and communities respond to it, particularly in regions where it has not been well studied [2]. While many studies about IPV have been conducted in the United States, most have focused on the mainland; few have investigated IPV in Hawai'i. The available evidence points to high IPV prevalence (20-36%) and a regional variation in risk for women from different ethno-cultural backgrounds [3]. However, the social, environmental, and cultural context within which IPV takes place and how women respond to it are not well known. This paper aims to explore women's experiences and responses to IPV, and the specific barriers they face in leaving abusive partners in Hilo, Hawai'i.

Background

Of the 1,404,054 people living in Hawai'i in 2013, 38% identified themselves as Asian, 26% as White, 25% as belonging to multiple ethnicities, and 10% as Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders [4]. Approximately 11% of this population lives below the poverty line.

The reported prevalence of IPV in Hawai'i varied from 32% among native Hawaiians, 16% in Filipino and Pacific Islander communities, 10% in Caucasians, and 3% in the Japanese communities [3]. Baker and Naai [5] reported lifetime IPV rates of 20-25% among women aged 18-64 living in Hawai'i. According to the US National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 36% of women in Hawai'i reported

being a victim of rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner [6]. Various cultural groups perceive their experiences of abuse differently, which can result in barriers to receiving effective care [7]. For example, Hawaiian language has no term for IPV – the closest equivalent is 'hana'ino,' suggesting an act that is cruel, evil, or injurious, but the term is not limited to human relationships and applies to all forms of mistreatment [8]. Perceptions of IPV among women in most communities in Hawai'i (as is the case in most communities and societies) is reported to be influenced by gender-role socialization, which begins in the home and is then reinforced by the community and society [5,9]. According to the results from a Hawaii Domestic Violence Fatality review [10], only a minority of women living in Hawai'i report IPV to the authorities. The purpose of our study was to explore women's experiences and responses to IPV in Hilo, and the specific barriers they face in leaving abusive partners.

We used an intersectionality perspective and an ecological/ecosystemic framework in our analysis. An intersectionality perspective helps capture multiple dimensions of social identity (e.g., gender, race, class) and how multiple and multi-level factors create a higher risk of abuse for some individuals and groups than others [11,12]. Ecosystemic frameworks help clarify how individuals are situated within and influenced by micro- (family), meso- (community), and macro- (societal) systems, and provide insights into how victimization is affected by the dynamic interplay of multi-level influences [11].

Methods

Ethics approval was obtained from the ethics boards at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo and Ryerson University before participant recruitment began. We reviewed a variety of public documents (local newspapers, policy statements, police reports, and unpublished NGO reports), observed women's engagement within their communities (and where appropriate, informally interviewed them), and met with

several community organizations that work with women and families who have experienced and/or been directly affected by IPV. All observations were recorded as field notes and used in the development of the semi-structured interview guide that was used to subsequently conduct one-on-one interviews with women.

We used a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling via our community contacts and networks to recruit a diverse group of women. The main criterion for inclusion was that participants had experienced IPV in the context of Hawai'i. Participants were informed verbally and via the consent form of their right to refuse to participate or answer any specific questions, end the interview at any time, and ask any questions of the researcher at any time before, during, or after the interview. We attended to verbal and non-verbal cues to anticipate any signs of undue discomfort or stress; if we observed any, we checked with the participant to see whether she wanted to postpone or end the interview. No participants postponed or ended an interview prematurely or withdrew from the study.

Interviews were conducted at a time that was convenient for each woman at an unmarked office at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo. Participants were provided with an honorarium (\$20) to defray the costs of participating (time, transportation, and childcare). Interviews were conducted in English by the first two authors. Each interview lasted 1–2 hours on average, and was transcribed verbatim. We read the first three transcripts sentence by sentence to develop an initial coding scheme, which was used to code the remaining transcripts using NVivo 8. Afterward, we compared previously developed codes with new codes to identify commonalities and variations, and to develop subcategories and categories. To ensure trustworthiness, we used method triangulation (field notes and interviews) as well as peer debriefing and review.

Study Sample

Thirteen women participated in the study. Their age ranged from 19–55 years. The women's levels of education varied from junior high school to university. Eight were employed in either unskilled, semi-skilled, or professional jobs, while 5 were unemployed. Based on the socio-economic status, 7 belonged to very-low to low income groups, and others were of average income. Self-identified ethno-cultural and racial backgrounds were as follows: 1 Chinese, 1 Puerto Rican, 1 Black, 1 Native American, 1 American, and 8 Mixed. Overall, 3 women were born in Hawai'i; all others were born on the mainland and had varying lengths of residence in Hawai'i: 9 months (n=1), 8–15 years (n=8), and 18 years (n=1). The number of children for each woman varied between 0–4, and some women had up to 3 children with the abusive partner. At the time of the interviews, all women had left their abusive partners, in some cases, after numerous attempts.

Results

Women who participated in this study described experiences of severe physical violence, including choking, kicking, punching, hitting, being beaten with objects, and being dragged on the ground. Verbal abuse (insults, name calling), emotional abuse (threats of more violence, threats to life, threats to harm children), and controlling behaviors, such as restriction of movement (being captured, hijacked, kept in the house, isolation from family and friends, and losing control of possessions and of children) were also prevalent. They also talked about sexual abuse.

Contextual factors related to women's vulnerability to IPV

Various contextual factors were seen to increase women's vulnerability to IPV and also influence women's experiences in seeking recourse. These are discussed in detail in the next section. We use some parts of participants' quotes to label each theme. Pseudonyms are given to identify quotes from different participants.

Contextual factors increasing women's vulnerability to IPV are represented in 4 themes: experiences and history of family violence: *"She no listen? Whack her"*; community tolerance of violence: *"An island mentality"*; the need for belonging: *"Misery loves company"*; and patriarchal values: *"Titahs bull dogs, pit bulls and pig hunting"*.

Experiences and history of family violence: "She no listen? Whack her"

Participants told stories about various forms of violence in their own families and in their male partners' families. Many recalled witnessing their father inflict violence upon their mother and siblings. In their families, different generations of men and women, including grandparents, parents, and children were described as perpetrators of violence. One participant said: *"My grandmother was abusive to my mom; my mom was abusive to me. They are strong believers in spanking"*(Lea). The following excerpts illustrate the experiences of violence within the family:

Our father was very abusive and he couldn't control his anger. He beat on me, called me names, [long pause] spanked me... and sometimes he wouldn't just hit my bottom [he would] hit my back with a belt. Then it got worse. It went from just spanking me with a belt to punching me with his fists and hitting me in the back of the head because he figured there wouldn't be any marks. When I was 13 years old he was choking my sister (Lana).

Participants also spoke about their abusive partners' childhood experiences of neglect, abuse, and violence, and perceived these as continuing on and becoming part of their own experiences of violence:

He was born here and his dad kidnapped him and his brother from his mom when they were seven and five, his dad used to beat 'em real bad. Then his dad left his new wife for her daughter when she turned 18 and had kids. He was probably molesting her kids too, it's disgusting. So yeah, I mean that's [my partner's] background (Lea).

My partner's father abused the mother. So it's a learned behavior, it's an acceptable behavior. It's like "well, she no listen? Whack her" (Makani).

I think that's where the violence started and how it continues on. I notice that with my husband. His mom used to chase him through pastures so she could hit him (Meli).

For most participants, the family was the context within which violence was learned, accepted, justified, and perpetrated as a norm.

Community tolerance for violence: "An island mentality"

Participants talked about growing up and living in violent neighborhoods that tolerated violence because 'everybody gets abused.' They noted that once certain neighborhoods become labeled as 'violent,' people living within and outside it (including law enforcement officials), become indifferent to incidents of violence in these communities:

Violence is condoned here. It is just the way it is here. Windows get kicked out a lot; people are very physically and especially mentally abusive to each other. In a lot of the families, it's just tolerated. It may be an island mentality (Nui).

I don't know if it's like a cycle or something, they just have it in their mind it's like the normal thing. Everyone goes through it (Palani).

If you are experiencing domestic violence, forget it. People either don't acknowledge it, they don't wanna talk about, or they blame it on you, or if they're in it themselves, it's just like "yeah! It's really hard, it totally sucks, and I have no control" (Kaila).

The need for belonging: "Misery loves company"

Participants described a strong need for belonging and the influence peers, family, and neighbors had on their behaviors. For example, alcohol and drug use often began at a young age as a result of peer pressure or because 'everybody takes it.'

The sense of belonging that came from sharing alcohol and drugs was particularly important to cope with various situations that affected their self-esteem and/or sense of belonging, such as being bullied in school or moving into a new community.

You go in the bar and there's a whole bunch of people that you are born and raised with. The girl I first smoked weed with [pause], at eight years old, is there. And it's like, what's up. You know. And misery loves company (Kaimi).

I had lots of freckles so, from elementary school the local kids picked on me. When I got into 7th grade, I made this friend, this local chick, and I started smoking weed with her. And that was it. Never again did I get picked on (Palani).

Some participants noted that it was difficult for anyone living in this kind of situation to resist such practices because alcohol and drugs were an integral part of their community and, in order to belong to this community, they believed it was necessary to adapt these behaviors.

*I tried to stay clean but all around me was dope. And these are people I've been smoking with. The minute I walk out my door, they want you to f****g smoke again (Laka).*

*I was using drugs, his friends would come over, he would pass out... I was f****g with his friends. Just, everything, everything became so corrupt and dirty and gross, it all stemmed from this situation, the drugs and the alcohol (Kei).*

You see what I'm sayin'? It's so around the dope. That's what is making this really messed up. It intensifies the abuse, its island wide (Nui).

Participants linked alcohol and drug use to the perpetration of family violence and IPV. Women's narratives revealed extensive use of alcohol and drugs, such as weed [marijuana], coke [cocaine], ice [crystal methamphetamine], ecstasy, crack cocaine, prescription drugs (anti-depressants), and pain medications. Participants also said that men controlled women's access to or use of drugs so as to maintain control over them.

Participants elaborated: *It has a lot to do with controlling the women, he has to melt down the drug for you, and have you take it. That's control; they have access to something that is vital to you" (Makani).*

Patriarchal gender relations: "Titahs bull dogs, pit bulls and pig hunting"

Participants referred to the patriarchal views about female and male roles within their communities, and how these norms shape societal responses to violence. They explained that when these roles are challenged, for example when local women are seen as 'tough/titahs,' men are encouraged to be 'even more male,' to reinstate their power over women, resulting in violence.

The local women are probably as strong or if not stronger than the men. It's not unusual. They call them titahs, tough women, the kind you don't want to have a confrontation with. So men are like, to be with this kind of a tough female, you [men] gotta be tougher, testosterone times ten. You know. Hence the bull dogs, the pit bulls, the, you know, uh, the pig hunting. All these real male kind of stuff (Meli).

Men don't like it when they feel you are stronger than them. He said to me: "Oh your voice is so rough and gruffy, you think you're the man. You're not the man in the relationship, I am." I never said that I thought that I was the man. But for some reason they get this idea that you're trying to be overpowering, overbearing, and controlling (Lana).

Women's responses to IPV and finding recourse

For women experiencing IPV, finding recourse was difficult. Their interviews highlighted various barriers such as women's own sense of self-worth, family values and attitudes towards IPV, lack of accessible services and long term housing/shelter, lack of legal protection, cost of legal services, discriminatory attitudes of prosecutors and service providers, poverty and lack of jobs, and social welfare. The following section presents these results under different themes.

Self-worth and identity: "There is no chance at being normal"

The participants felt they had no control over their lives and felt trapped in their situation. Violence was an internalized and normalized aspect of their lives. Some women spoke about going from one abusive relationship to another, often feeling a low sense of self-worth. Their identity was often bound to the relationship and/or their partner as can be noted in these excerpts:

Because of that initial relationship with [partner's name] I never developed an identity of my own. You know ... a healthy identity of my own. And I was abused during that seven years and that led me to become even more dependent on somebody. After he broke my face, broke my nose, I broke up with him, and the next day I went and hooked up with another dude. Because I was getting beat up all the time, and, and then all you know is there is no chance at being normal (Laka).

My identity is so tied up in having him. In my opinion, this is what I've learned, like, it's so scary to be by myself, that I would rather be with him and take the abuse (Kaila).

Family values and attitudes: "Mom's house is not a retreat center"

Participants attempting to leave an abusive relationship faced many challenges, one of which is the inability to find safe temporary accommodation for themselves and their children. Some women also reported that their families failed to understand the seriousness of their situation until 'he showed up with a gun.'

My brother said that "mom's house is not a retreat center" and my sister said, "here I'll give you this van, leave your baby. Just don't come around" (Eleu).

His family's there but they never participated in anything. When I tell them what's going on, they don't get it. They were going with this 'tough love' thing until he showed up at their house with a gun. And they were just like I was making up this thing and exaggerating (Kaila).

Lack of services and supports: "All alone in the world"

Participants said that when they were attempting to leave abusive relationships, and they needed safe temporary accommodation for themselves and their children in the short-term, more permanent housing in the long-term, and access funds to support their families and begin legal proceedings for separation. Women's shelters provided temporary accommodation, which did not allow sufficient time to find permanent housing. Participants said they ended up going back to their abuser, moving in with family and friends, living in tents, or moving from place to place many times until they were able to find a place of their own.

They [the shelter] were helpful but after they sent you on your way you didn't hear nothing' from nobody and you just felt like you were all alone in the world. They should have some kind of support groups outside the shelter so that women can come and go, so, they don't feel like they are alone dealing with it (Kei).

I give thanks for being courageous enough to get on the land with the children, we lived in a tent for two years (Kei).

Lack of accessibility to services: "Living in the middle of nowhere"

Problems with access to services discouraged women from seeking formal supports and services. For example, one woman reported her attempts to access housing supports in the following way: *About a year ago I remember calling the number for the housing [support], and it rang and rang and rang and nobody answered. Then I called the number for housing [support] on the other side of the island, and they said, "Oh someone should be there, try again." And so I tried and tried and there was nothing and there was no answering machine, and I never tried again for, like a year (Alana).*

In some areas, lack of transportation and long distances to health and social service agencies made some participants feel as if they were living in the 'middle of nowhere.'

Here you're totally isolated. Way up in the middle of nowhere and no car, no help, no friends, it's very, very hard (Kei).

Services and services providers' negative attitudes: "Now everybody is starting their women on fire"

Some services and service providers were seen as also contributing towards promoting gendered notions about IPV and creating negative attitudes about IPV. Some program facilitators and prosecutors were seen as sexist and encouraging negative attitudes about women. Women's support groups too were seen as partial to men and failing to help women leave abusive relationships.

I think they [the service providers] are incompetent. xxxx is awful he's re-victimizing victims an encouraging domestic violence in his xxxx classes [with abusive men]. I mean these guys are graduating

[from these classes] with better ways to beat their girlfriend up, you know, they are like, "oh dude I am going to try that!" and they share their stories and then next thing, you know, there was one guy in the class who [said he] started a girl on fire and now everybody is starting their women on fire, you know what I mean? It's like they are sharing techniques (Lea).

The prosecution's office told me because I was [a] stripper, I deserved to get beat up. (Lea)

Support group wasn't helpful at all. Because it was bunch a women going "oh let's pray for the abuser" you know? This wasn't helping, it wasn't changing the situation. They thought they were doing what God was calling them to do (Kaila).

Legal barriers: "Why don't you have any proof?"

Some participants explained that the legal system limits women's options for leaving an abusive relationship. Having to bear the burden of proof, prosecutors' lack of sensitivity towards women's experiences (e.g., being required to face their abusive partner in open court), and high lawyers' fees discouraged women from seeking legal services.

Then they make it very hard in court. When they call a restraining order hearing what they do is [pause] before the session you're both sitting out there! [Long pause] it's very intimidating. So you don't wanna go through with-ya know? It's like a lot of women drop it at that point because they don't wanna go through that [long pause then sigh] so there's a lot of things procedurally [wrong] with the restraining order (Kaila).

I probably spent 100,000 dollars. I'm hiring a new attorney today that wants ten thousand upfront. I'm completely broke, he is providing no medical support, no childcare, no spousal support, you know in fact he's suing me for things in court, claiming I need to pay his lawyer fee and you know it just it goes on and on and on' (Kaila).

Even the attorneys are like "you're a stupid woman, you know? Why don't you have any proof?" (Eleu).

Even when they sought legal redress they felt it was unfair, as men received lenient and/or short sentences. Women reported feeling discouraged because the legal system treated IPV as different from other types of inter-personal violence, taking a more lenient attitude. Some said they had heard comments such as "it's always better to have two parents" and "just because he is abuser he is not a bad parent." They had very little faith in a legal system that they felt wrongfully protected 'father's rights' even when the father "is a proven abuser and/or addict."

There're very few lawyers that understand domestic violence, there're even fewer judges that understand...domestic violence. You say things like, it was emotional abuse, they're like "pffff" you know? Even the judge here is looking at it going "so he threatened to kill you. That's not reason for a restraining order." It's like, okay, if I was a stranger [and] walked up to you and said I was gonna kill you you'd come and arrest [him?] But because I'm married to this man he can say that and that's not considered a threat (Kaila2).

So, the police picked him up, he went to jail, he went to court, and the judge let him go, no nothing, no fine, no imprisonment, nothing! (Ele).

*He went to jail for three days, what's the f****g point? (Laka).*

Our legal system seems to think that just because one spouse is trying to kill another doesn't mean he is a bad parent; I would say trying to kill the mother is a pretty good start for being a bad parent (Lana).

Cycle of abuse and poverty: "There's no help"

Many women who experienced IPV were reliant on their male partners for money; some had been away from work for a long time and found they lacked employable skills to get a job. Even though they needed support while trying to find work and become independent, lack of social welfare meant women having to go back or to remain entrapped in a vicious cycle of abuse and poverty.

I thought my money would last a lot longer but one it's very expensive to live [here] I couldn't get places to rent because I don't have a job, and then they want to do a credit check and the first thing is they ask you is employment, if you're not employed they don't wanna....It-it's just really...difficult (Kaila).

Poverty is such a problem. Women can't get away even if they wanted to, because there's nothing (Alana).

You know why they go back? There's no help, there's no job, there's nowhere to live, the legal system is against you (Kaila).

Discussion

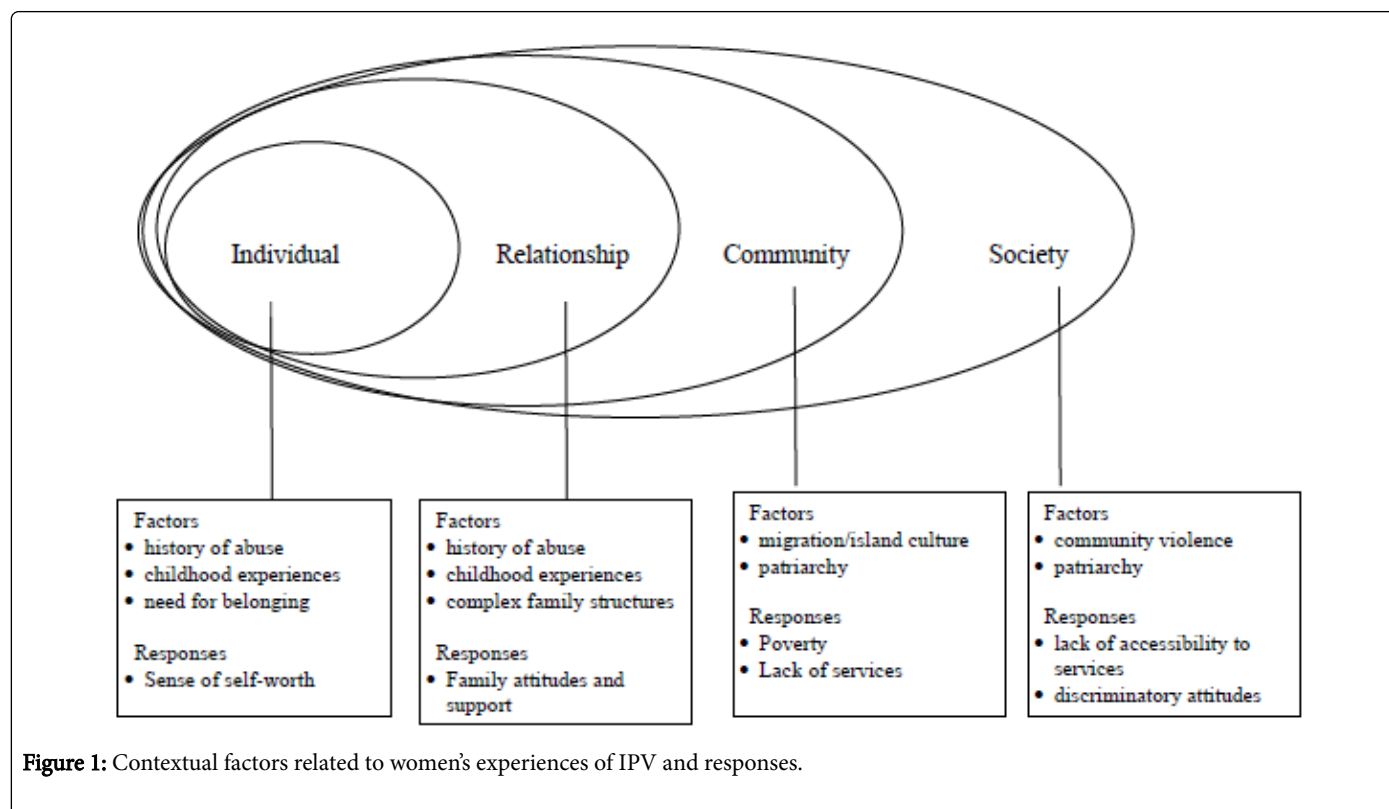
This is one of the first qualitative studies on IPV in Hilo, Hawai'i capturing the perspectives of women who have lived experiences of

IPV. Our interviews with a small, yet diverse, sample of female participants revealed that IPV was considered commonplace and a societal norm. IPV was seen as part of a larger problem in these disadvantaged communities that are prone to substance abuse. Out of the women interviewed, 7 belonged to the low socio-economic class.

Previous research has documented personal, situational, and socio-cultural factors that can predict risk for IPV, and these have been contextualized using an ecological framework [13,14]. This study explores some of the dynamics and interplay between a number of factors acting at the individual, family, relationship, community, and societal levels in Hawaii that increase women's vulnerability to IPV and determine their responses to it. These factors are placed within the different levels of the ecological framework in Figure 1 below.

Contextual factors related to women's experiences of IPV

History of previous abuse and childhood experiences of violence are known individual risk factors for IPV [14]. Participants referred to similar experiences in their own lives and of the partners' past experiences of abuse, and how they see this as related to their own experiences of abuse. Some women considered IPV as a continuation of the men's past abusive experiences. Childhood experiences of family violence is known to be associated with IPV perpetration and victimization during adulthood [10,15]. Also, witnessing violence as a child is considered a significant risk factor among men who are violent towards intimate partners [16]. These factors appeared to intersect at individual and relationship levels to influence women's experiences of IPV in this context.



Beyond the individual and family level, participants talked about neighborhoods within which violence was often normalized, accepted, and justified. Community violence and the acceptance of family violence as a norm is a known risk factor for IPV in many

communities where it is prevalent. In the Hawaiian context, this is discordant with the traditional concept of family harmony or 'ohana' the strong interdependence, reciprocity, and balance among immediate and extended family [9]. It is possible that many of the younger

generations and immigrant groups on the islands have failed to develop this traditional sense of family and instead seek to find ways to fit in with the community [17]. In fact, for some of the women in our study, taking alcohol and drugs was seen to create this sense of belonging with the local culture. Different ethnic groups in Hawai'i initially brought social ideologies from their countries of origin, but subsequent generations are more likely to have integrated into their post-migration communities, leading to social and cultural changes and complexities in family structure.

Participants alluded to or referred to patriarchal ideas about gender roles within their families and communities, and how these shape societal perceptions about IPV. Patriarchy and traditional gender role identification are well-documented risk factors associated with IPV perpetration at the societal level. In Hilo, Hawaii, challenging the normative gender roles and situations where women could be seen as 'tough' or 'manly' was believed to contribute to IPV [3]. Many of our participants lived within the 'island culture' that is heavily influenced by a combination of Western and Asian local patriarchy, which strengthen positions of power for men.

Contextual factors related to women's responses to IPV

We also identified various contextual factors operating at different levels that acted as barriers to those who were seeking help or attempting to leave the abuser. At the individual level, women's low sense of self-worth kept them entrapped within the relationship. How a woman perceived herself and her position within the relationship affected her responses to IPV: some women had internalized violence as a normal part of life, and felt they could never have a life free of violence. For women who feel entrapped and dependent on an abuser, developing a sense of identity that is not bound to their relationships is vital to their process of change and seeking recourse from IPV [18]. Many women in our study found this difficult to achieve while living in communities that accepted violence.

Family and community level barriers also influenced women's responses to abuse. Families and close-knit communities in Hawai'i appeared to 'accept' and normalize IPV, while at the same time keeping the violence private and thereby isolating and marginalizing abused women. Organizational barriers also affected women's ability to seek help; poor accessibility, as well as geographic and social isolation was evident as in previous research [5,19]. Although women's shelters provided temporary accommodation, this failed to support women's long term housing needs. The legal system presented many barriers to women discouraging them from seeking legal redress for IPV. In addition to the legal systems barriers identified by previous research [5,19], our participants also identified sexist and discriminatory attitudes toward women. Our participants lacked faith in the legal system, feared losing their children, and did not receive any support during the legal process.

There are many positive aspects in Hawai'ins, culture that are familiar to locals. For example, Hawai'ians use their strong connections to the land and their family to reconnect with themselves, their family, spirits, and natural elements [9,17]. Efforts to reduce IPV might also incorporate the idea of 'pono' (restoration of peace and balance to life; 18), because anger and the disruption of the flow of energy is seen as leading to a loss of 'mana' (spiritual energy and healing power). Both of these concepts are powerful and familiar within local culture and could be highly influential in addressing the community's perceptions of, and responses to, IPV in Hilo, Hawaii. This, in turn, could strengthen women's response to IPV.

Conclusion

Interviews with women from Hilo, Hawai'i about their experiences with IPV highlight multiple and unique contextual factors that seem to be significant determinates of their IPV experience. On the other hand, these same values and sense of belonging can help to address IPV using the strong grounding concept of family that permeates everyday life in Hawai'i. Preserving the strong sense of interdependence with the family, and strengthening the ideal of reciprocity and balance at home, can help promote a sense of belonging for all communities. Preserving traditional family values may be highly influential in preventing perpetration of IPV. Addressing multiple community and societal barriers that permeates into all other levels, however, requires improvement in women's access to education, employment, services, and status in society.

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