American Journal of Qualitative Research
2023, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 94-113
https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/12862

AMERICAN JOURNAL OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
ISSN: 2576-2141

The Latina Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence in the Rio Grande Valley

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ABSTRACT
Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a severe public health and criminal justice issue that disproportionately affects women more than men. This sought to explore Latina experiences of IPV in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). Twelve Latina IPV survivors from the RGV, ages 24 to 40 years old, were interviewed using purposive and snowball sampling methods. Several primary themes were discovered: types of abuse; perceived reasons for the abuse; education and economic insecurity; why stay or leave an abusive relationship; the criminal justice system's role; and self-blaming. All participants (n = 12) were college educated and endured IPV victimization at the hands of their male significant others. This study should be replicated on a larger scale to determine if the results are representative of all RGV IPV victims. These findings have implications for positively affecting IPV prevention, services, and interventions to reduce Latina IPV victimizations in the RGV.

KEYWORDS: intimate partner violence, Latina, college-educated, partner abuse.

The Latina Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence in the Rio Grande Valley

Over 43 million women experience intimate partner violence (IPV), no matter their racial-ethnic background (Breiding et al., 2015; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). IPV is the physical, emotional, psychological, and/or sexual abuse of a partner, spouse, or significant other, which also encompasses stalking and/or psychological aggression (Doerner & Lab, 2017; Espinoza et al., 2022a). One in four women has reported that they have been attacked or stalked by an intimate partner (Bhuyan & Velagapudi, 2013; CDC, 2021; Gonzalez-Guarda et al., 2011). The form and extent of violence vary from society to society, some research studies

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focus primarily on ethnic minority women (Espinoza et al., 2022a; Stockman et al., 2015; White et al., 2012). Thus, tools, instruments, and definitions associated with IPV may not always be able to detect the full scope of violence (Perilla et al., 2011; Satyen et al., 2019).

In the research literature, the terms Hispanics and Latinos are often used interchangeably; "[Hispanics and Latinos] refer to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race" (Ennis et al., 2011, p. 2). The problem with using these umbrella terms [Hispanics and Latinos] is that they obscure the indigenous and/or African differences that are present throughout colonial Latin America (Rinderle, 2005). This is important as many Latinos are of African descent; Afro-Latinos in many Latin American countries continue to experience racism and discrimination due to their skin color and tone (Charles, 2021). Much of the research on IPV victimization has been on White and Black women rather than on Latino women [also referred to as Latinas] (Cannon et al., 2019; Hardesty & Ogolsky, 2020; Lacey et al., 2015). This is despite the fact that Latinas experience IPV at disproportionately greater rates than non-Hispanic White women, which contributes to the health risks associated with IPV (Bosch et al., 2017; Espinoza et al., 2022a; Espinoza et al., 2022b).

Feminist theory highlights IPV as a display of men's gender-based dominance over women (Lawson, 2012). Dobash and Dobash (1979) were the first to describe, using feminist theory, that physical violence was a form of control and oppression, as well as a violent and blatant representation of the patriarchal rule of men in power. Patriarchy affirms male dominance and authority in the household and society, which promotes violence against women and undermines their own rights (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Herrera & Gloria, 2021; Mshweshwe, 2020). This theory accounts for added characteristics and/or factors that intersect with gender to put women at a disadvantage (De Coster & Heimer, 2021).

Hegemonic masculinity or toxic masculinity is associated with IPV because men are more likely than women to use violence to show their physical dominance and authority (Boots et al., 2016; Peralta et al., 2010; York, 2011). The concept of hegemonic masculinity is predicated on the continuation of a practice that allows males to maintain their collective power over 'others.' It should not come as a surprise that, in some circumstances, hegemonic masculinity refers to men's participation in harmful toxic behaviors such as physical violence or alcohol abuse (Peralta et al., 2010).

Within the context of Latino culture, *machismo* and *marianismo* refer to ideals and gendered roles (Espinoza et al., 2022a). The term erm *machismo* emphasizes the ideals of a man's hypermasculinity, strength, and patriarchal authority, which reaffirms control, sexism, and blind reverence (Herrera & Gloria, 2021; Espinoza et al., 2022a). *Marianismo,* on the other hand, refers to the ideals of women's virtuousness and spirituality, which encourages women to engage in activities that are self-sacrificing for the sake of their children and marriages (Flake & Forste, 2006). *Marianismo* may be a potential risk factor for IPV and one of the reasons why women may remain in abusive relationships, which reduces their help-seeking behaviors (Christensen et al., 2021). These cultural ideals contribute to Latinas' underutilizing IPV services and help-seeking behaviors (Bridges et al., 2018).

Latinas who encounter IPV in the United States may become detached from their own families and unaware of the social services available to them. This can lead to a sense of social isolation, which is worsened for women who rely on their partners for financial support (Espinoza et al., 2022a). Moreover, acculturation, which is the change in values, attitudes, beliefs, and behavior, may play a role in the violence experienced. The differences in acculturation have been found across the type, frequency, and intensity of IPV for Latinas (Alvarez & Fedock, 2018; Ayón et al., 2018; Grest et al., 2018; Sabri et al., 2018a, 2018b). To make it more difficult for Latinas,

barriers such as prejudice can exacerbate already-existing mental and physical health difficulties as well (Alvarez & Fedock, 2018; Amanor-Boadu et al., 2012; Clark et al., 2018; Davila et al., 2021; Reyes et al., 2021; Valdovinos et al., 2021).

As IPV research on minorities aims to address these challenges, this study focuses on Latinas in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). The RGV population is made up of United States citizens, legal permanent residents, and undocumented residents; the region's population is predominantly Latino (91.75%), followed by White (6.5%) and Black/African American (1.35%) (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). There is a distinct culture in the RGV, which is a mix of Mexican and American ideals, and as a result, its inhabitants display varying degrees of acculturation (Cuellar et al., 1997; Diaz, 2011; Hamer et al., 2018; Schumann et al., 2020).

This study sought to examine the following research questions:

1. What is the Latina experience of IPV in the RGV?
2. What are the implications of IPV for Latinas in the RGV?

Methods

Setting

In 2021, a total of 1,389,750 people resided in the RGV (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Located along the Rio Grande River, the RGV stretches from Roma, Texas, to Brownsville, Texas (Distancy, 2017). The RGV consists of 4 counties: Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy. A unique feature of the RGV is that it is located north of the U.S.-Mexico border and approximately 32 miles south of the U.S. Border Patrol interior checkpoint on Highway 281 (Leutert et al., 2020; U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2014). Additionally, the RGV is recognized as one of the fastest-growing regions in the U.S. (Rubi Group Capital, n.d.). In South Texas, 12 out of every 100 high school graduates earn a college degree within six years (Teach for America, 2022). One-sixth (16%) of Latinos in the RGV hold a college degree compared to 37% of Whites (Chlup et al., 2019).

Sample

Upon approval from The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley's Institutional Review Board, 12 participants aged 24 to 40 years old were obtained through purposive and snowball sampling of Latinas that live in the RGV who experienced IPV. Specifically, participants were recruited through the research team's professional contacts and ties. Three participants were recruited through referrals from participants in this study. Four participants were interviewed face-to-face by the primary researcher. Five participants were interviewed via phone as these participants no longer lived in the RGV and/or were unable to meet due to their busy work schedules. Three interview schedules were completed by email, and a follow-up by telephone was done.

Interview Schedule

The researchers developed an interview schedule based on the experiences of IPV survivors (Clark et al., 2018). Once the interview schedule was created, two IPV survivors not participating in this study pretested the interview schedule to verify that all questions were clear, non-judgmental, and neutral.

Data Analysis

To simplify data, open coding was done and entailed naming and categorizing data into themes and initial codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015a; Neuman, 2011). The data were segmented and conceptualized by separating observations, phrases, and paragraphs from the interview schedule transcripts into individual ideas and assigning each idea an element that describes the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2015b). After segmenting the data, axial coding was used to build links between categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015c). The data was synthesized once transcription and coding were completed. Each topic was examined separately and comparatively to examine each participant's responses to each interview question was investigated. General themes and subthemes were formed to identify the most essential themes for each response. In the coding process, the primary researcher was able to answer study questions using keywords that were related to each distinct theme.

Findings

College-Educated IPV Survivors

All participants (n = 12) were college-educated IPV survivors that experienced IPV at the hands of their male partners. Their ages ranged from 24 to 35 years old. Eleven of the 12 female survivors were no longer in committed relationships with their perpetrators. One respondent put it best regarding how their own IPV victimizations should not have happened, "I was educated, and I knew better. I am not ignorant..." When the study was conducted, one participant held an associate degree, two participants were pursuing bachelor's degrees, five participants held bachelor's degrees, two participants were pursuing master's degrees, and two participants held a Master of Education degree.

Survivor Occupations

Participants held occupations that ranged from administrative assistants (n = 3), educators (n = 2), research assistants (n = 2), criminal justice practitioners (n = 2), restaurant servers (n = 1), social service workers (n = 1), and unemployed (n = 1).

Perpetrator Occupations

Nine out of the 12 perpetrators were Latino, two were African American, and one was White. The perpetrators' educational backgrounds included seven with only a high school diploma, two with some college credits, two held bachelor's degrees, and one held a master's degree. Additionally, the reported occupations of the perpetrators were unemployed veteran (n = 3), unemployed with no form of income (n = 4), computer science technician (n = 1), oil field worker (n = 1), bartender (n = 1), postal service carrier (n = 1), and teacher (n = 1).

Themes

Following the interviews, the transcripts were thoroughly examined to determine the themes for this study. The following themes emerged from the interviews: (1) types of abuse; (2) perceived reasons for the abuse; (3) education and economic insecurity; (4) why stay or leave an

abusive relationship; (5) the criminal justice system's role; and (6) self-blaming.

Types of Abuse

Physical Abuse and Emotional/Verbal Abuse. There was a wide range of physical and emotional or verbal abuse suffered by all participants (n = 12), but the following incidents were particularly disturbing. One participant's spouse threw their 6-month-old baby on the bed and charged at her before beginning to physically assault her. Another participant had a sprained neck and a scar on her lip from being spit at by her perpetrator. Finally, one participant's spouse was so violent that she shattered her wrist. Many of the women (n = 9) in the study were forced to stay in an abusive relationship despite warning indications of violence. This was done so the victim would remain completely alone and dependent on the perpetrator. One participant described how the abuse she experienced was first verbal abuse and then developed into physical abuse,

> *I caught him trying to talk to somebody else... and [caught him] in the process of being [emotionally] unfaithful...I would tell him how I saw this and... his texts, and [we] both would argue... he pushed me around one time... Verbal abuse [was] always... there.*

The aggression often began as a disagreement over a relatively minor family matter, but quickly escalated with the victim receiving physical violence, and law enforcement being called. For example, one victim experienced an incident that resulted in their spouse losing his teaching license because he physically assaulted her by strangulation. This participant went on to describe:

> *He abused me over the years that we would have never been able to fix. He walked out on me, and I tried to make him love me... If it was up to me, I would have tried to make things work between us, but he closed that door for me.*

During their pregnancies, two participants suffered physical abuse at the hands of their partners. One participant noted,

> *I had a doctor's appointment the next morning and I asked my ex-husband if he could come with me. I was in my closet, and I remember him kicking me and pushing me into the closet; I hit my stomach with the closet bar.*

Another participant recalled, "Our last physical incident was when he grabbed my neck. I was eight months pregnant, and I could not retaliate against him, so I called [the police]."

Dating Abuse. Several participants (n = 3) were abused while casually or formally dating and before becoming parents. One participant said, "My ex-husband first hit me before we got married [when we were dating]. He would hit me when he would get stressed out." One participant remarked how when she was dating her partner,

> *I caught him trying to talk to somebody else. And did catch him being in the process of being unfaithful... I would tell him how I saw this and how I saw his texts, and [we] both would argue. He punched me and I defended myself.*

Cohabitation/Marital Abuse. Some of the participants (n = 5) indicated that they had never been physically or verbally abused by their partner until they lived in the same household. There was a consensus among these participants that the burden of living together for the first time had a negative impact on their relationships. According to one of the participants, "We were good, and we never had problems until we lived together... The abuse started once we were living together as a couple. We were planning our wedding and had several bills to pay." Another participant revealed, "He would tell me he didn't know why I would look for things if it was only going to hurt me when we first started living together."

A few participants (n = 2) said that their partners did not start physically abusing them until after they were married. The following is what these participants had to say, "I have been with my husband for almost nine years. Throughout these years, I had never experienced any form of abuse;" "The abuse started after we got married, and he became possessive, jealous, and controlling." In the midst of their marriage, when the violence became heated, one participant described, "His temper would get out of control, and he would throw objects at me to hit me."

The Perceived Reasons for the Abuse

Patriarchal Relationships. All participants (n = 12) were in patriarchal relationships with their respective partners. In their relationships and abuse, the focus was on being dominated and/or controlled by their male partner. The intimate relationships exhibited conventional male qualities, such as having a rough exterior and taking pride in their position of dominance. Three key features of patriarchal relationships were evident in the abuse faced by all participants: dominance or power, *machismo*, and control.

Dominance or Power. The participants' intimate partners intended to exert their influence and authority on the other participants by showing off their dominance or power. As a result of the participants trying to fight back, the male partners would respond by striking their female partners even harder. A few male perpetrators (n = 2) would cheat on their female partners, but they made sure that their female victims could not cheat within the relationship.

One participant remarked, "He got a knife and pointed it to me, saying he would cut my arm off if he ever caught me cheating on him. He would cheat on me all the time, but I could not do it to him." According to participants, certain male perpetrators (n = 6) exerted dominance and power over what their female partners could do. One participant stated, "He would leave his car blocking the driveway and take off with his friends, so I couldn't go out to look for him." As a sign of his dominance, this male perpetrator took steps to prevent the female partner from being able to follow him. Another participant commented,

> *If I did not want to have sex, he would sometimes become upset and coerce me into it. Or, if he thought he could convince me into having sex with him when I wasn't willing, he would continue to make physical contact after I had instructed [verbally and physically] him not to do so.*

This example shows how one male partner coerced the female participant who was his girlfriend through dominance to engage in sexual activity.

Machismo. Many participants (n = 9) reported that they were expected to do conventional tasks associated with women's duties, such as cooking and serving their male partners. Conventional feminine roles were expected of the participants, and they had to meet them. These participants said their male partners expressed their *machismo* by complaining about the supper

they had or had not prepared. A participant expressed, "We had an argument because he did not like the dinner I had made. He said, 'I am tired, and look [at] what you made me for dinner!" Another participant described, "He was upset, and he pushed me because I had not cooked dinner for him." In these examples, the participants had failed to uphold traditional gender roles, and thus the two male partners were upset.

There was a consensus among these nine participants that the RGV Mexican culture is to blame for *machismo* that is perpetuated. One participant added, "Abuse happens in our culture. The man is very sexist. My boyfriend would control my mind and control what I was doing while he was doing what he wanted." Another participant commented,

> *He became physical a few times while we were intimate because I was not in the mood, so he would tell me that I had to have sex with him because I was his wife. So, he forced himself on me.*

The above quote is an example of a perpetrator raping his spouse, the victim. Marital rape refers to having forced sexual contact with one's spouse in a marriage without their consent (Randall & Venkatesh, 2015). In the opinion of the aforesaid participant, her husband used physical abuse as a means of sexual abuse since he believed that as his wife, she was required to engage in sexual activity anytime he desired.

Control. A few participants (n = 3) had their sexual behavior, attire, and activities controlled. One participant was barred from dressing up and wearing make-up. This participant elaborated,

> *My ex-husband would make a show for the way I dressed and when I wore make-up; he would make a show over anything. I was not allowed to wear dressy shirts or make-up. I had to secretly buy make-up and hide it from him.*

Two participants had their sexual relationships with their partners controlled, and they made the following statements:

> *He wanted to experiment sexually, and I did not want that relationship with the father of my children. He said he would go get it from somebody else if I did not give it to him. I was manipulated into doing things I would never in a million years think I would ever do.*

> *He would manipulate me into doing things. If he wanted something he could not afford, he would make me buy it, and if I didn't buy it for him, he would withhold sex from me, and we would be moody until he got what he wanted.*

When it came to matters concerning the participants' schools and education, two participants' male partners exercised total control over them. One male perpetrator assured that his wife would not attend one of her graduate courses since he was jealous and wanted to confront his wife's classmate. This participant added, "He ensured that I would not be on campus when he made a surprise visit." A second participant commented, "He did not trust me talking to anyone that he did not know and did not want me to go to school because I would meet men." These two participants' male partners exercised control over their female partners by preventing them from

obtaining an education and preventing them from going to school.

Education and Economic Insecurity

Several of the participants' male partners (n = 5) developed feelings of insecurity due to the participant's education, employment, and salary. The male partners were jealous of their female partner's educational and professional occupational accomplishments, so they deliberately tried to obstruct their progress by police reporting IPV victimization, displaying no support, and making up unfounded and false allegations.

Education. Specific participants' partners (n = 5) disapproved of their educational pursuits, and one male partner attempted to obstruct her studies by showing up to school. According to the participant, who was in the midst of a master's education program, her spouse got quite uncomfortable when she became close to two peers; her spouse suspected her of having an affair with one of her classmates. According to her, her male partner created a "scene" when he made a "surprised visit" to her class. The participant remarked,

> *There was nothing more than a friendship. I believe that his secret goal was to try and take everything from me. He wanted to take away my friends, my school, and my job, so that I would be solely dependent on him.*

Every participant (n = 12) shared a common sentiment, they placed their male partners' education above their own. Three participants made the following statements: "I would put my own education on hold to help my ex-husband with his education;" "I would hold off my schoolwork to help my ex-husband with his schoolwork;" and "I would put my education on hold for him to graduate instead."

Professional Career or Occupation Opportunities Insecurity. Several participants (n=5) reported that their male partners experienced feelings of jealousy and/or insecurity over their female partner's career or occupation opportunities. This jealousy and insecurity would cause them [the male partners] to purposefully call the police on the respective participant, which could land them in problems with the law and influence their career. Because one male partner felt this way, one male partner purposefully reported the female participant to the authorities in the hopes that she would be fired as a police officer.

> *I told him I was going to start the police academy and he said he would not help with anything. After he pushed and choked [me] inside the car with my seatbelt, he said he was going to call the police when we got home so that I would get in trouble with the police academy.*

Another participant held a state position, which she had earned after putting in a lot of effort:

> *It took me 14 years to get an education. 12 years for my bachelor's degree and 2 years for my master's degree. I did not want to lose any of my hard work and my ex-husband wanted to call the cops on me so I could lose my job. All I've wanted was to build a career.*

Economic Insecurity due to Salary Disparities. Certain participants (n = 4) perceived that their male partners had feelings of insecurity over higher salary earnings. One of the participants indicated,

> *He works in the oil fields and makes enough money to support us, and he tells me that I would not be able to sustain myself if I were to ever leave him because I don't have any money. I have a plan in my head in case I have to walk out. I don't want him to know too much information on legal advice because I want to be two steps ahead of him [just] in case...*

According to one additional participant, her partner felt threatened by the fact that his wife made more money, and he was driven to assault her physically. "He started getting jealous of me because of my job since I was making a lot more money... it led him to begin getting physical [of] me again."

Jealousy. A few participants (n = 3) said their partners were very jealous of other men. Several examples of three participants' partners showing their jealousy toward their partners include: "He called me a bitch because I said hi to his friends;" "He was jealous of other men that were not in his circle;" "His [jealous] insecurities flared when I became close to two peers in my class;" and "He would get jealous when I would spend time with my own friends." Another participant stated this regarding jealousy, "The father of my kids was jealous, but I never gave him anything to be jealous about. I am not the cheating type."

Male Partner Infidelity. Specific participants (n = 3) shared their experiences of having been cheated on as their male partner's way of maintaining power in the relationship. These women's male partners frequently cheated on them, and they often became pregnant during their first or second sexual encounters after discovering the infidelity occurred. One participant remarked,

> *At the age of 18, my son was born. Throughout that whole time, he was having an extramarital affair, and I stuck around. At 21, my daughter was born, and I found out he was still having an affair with the same woman.*

The participant's male partner would physically assault her as a result of his infidelity. The male partners would physically beat these participants when they tried to question the reasons behind their cheating. This was because they did not want to talk about it.

> *If I was to dare ask him, he would blame me for upsetting him for asking, and he would take a shower and leave again. I would cry and tell him sorry, that I did not mean to upset him, and he spit at my face, pushed me to the ground, and laughed at me. I told him he needed to talk to me about the woman he cheated on me with. I asked him if he was still seeing her and if he had brought her over to our house. He pushed me, and I fell to the ground.*

There were multiple instances where a male perpetrator of one of the participants cheated on her and made it clear to her that she was not allowed to do so.

> *He would cheat on me all the time. When I would go out of town for business trips, he would video call me to make sure I was not cheating on him. He would make me show him the bathroom and under the bed of the hotel room to make sure nobody was in my room with me. One night I got home late from work, and he was sitting quietly on the couch. He pulled out a knife and said he would cut my arm off if he ever caught me cheating on him.*

Why Stay or Leave an Abusive Relationship

Guilt, Shame, and Silence. Participants had several reasons for staying or leaving an abusive relationship. A significant number of participants (n = 7) attempted to hide their abuse from close family members and friends due to feelings of guilt and shame. One participant stated, "I didn't report the abuse because, between women, you don't want to tell people out of shame, especially if you end up back in that relationship... I didn't want them to know the reality of how things were." Shame was voiced both overtly and implicitly by these participants. Although the participants' families were supportive, many (n = 9) felt shame and hesitation in telling them about the abuse they had suffered. "My ex-husband was welcomed in my household. Everybody liked him. I did not want to leave him because my family never talked about divorce, and I did not want to disappoint my family."

Some of the participants (n = 3) found it difficult to bring up the subject of the abuse with their parents due to secrecy. Participants shared the following commonalities: participants feared their parents would think poorly of their boyfriend or husband; participants feared losing their family's support; and most commonly, participants felt ashamed to tell their parents that they had been verbally, physically, or sexually abused by their partner. One participant stated,

> *You don't want to experience the shame of telling your family and getting back with him. I did not want them to know the reality of how things were. I did not want my family to see him as a negative person, because he is not a negative person. What I learned was to tell my mom and sister because I would want somebody to know if something happened to me.*

A different participant expressed shame and silence, "I did not want to tell my family. I always had their support, and I was afraid of losing it [their support]. I also did not want to hurt my mother."

Family Support. As a result of their family's support, participants were able to leave the abuse. According to one of the participants,

> *My parents were always supportive. My parents would tell me that if I was going to get a divorce, I was going to go all the way. I wanted to stay home and cry but being with my son helped me. My sister told me not to cry in front of my son and that also helped me a lot. I had my family, and I knew they would be there for me.*

Continuing, the same participant described:

> *When I had my second child my mom told me I needed help. If it wasn't for my mom, I might have still been in that relationship. Being in my parents' home with my mom, dad and sister really helped me decide to finally leave the father of my children. When I lived with him, I would try to leave him, but it never worked because he would just come back home, and we would make up.*

Family Values. All participants (n = 12) discussed cultural values that dictate what is expected of them and their families. As one participant put it, "I never left him because my family never talked about divorce, and I did not want to disappoint my family." Because of the Mexican family values her family upholds, the participant felt she had no choice but to stay in her abusive relationship. Another participant expressed, "My parents are Mexican and have a lot of family values. As a child, I did not see any type of abuse with or between my parents. My parents never argued in front of me."

For one participant, her partner had repeatedly abandoned her after they had reconciled, but despite this, she was always willing to give the relationship another try since she placed a high priority on remaining together for their children. This participant described her rationale, "I thought it was going to get better... If I had paid attention to it early on maybe I could have left, but I would not have my babies today."

The Criminal Justice System's Role

There was a mixed response when police officers responded to a domestic dispute report filed by the female participant versus her male partner. Some participants (n = 3) felt the police officers were indifferent to the situation: "When the police arrived, they did nothing about it; they said they would not arrest him and that either he or I had to leave the house." Another participant believed the police, in their attempts to intervene in cases of IPV, are a significant contributor to the problem.

> *When I sprained my neck because of him, the cops came to my house and said to just stay away from each other. Another time I called the cops for help, they sided with him because they thought I was being irrational. The cops told us to just work it out and stay with each other. Cops are a big part of the problem. They do not understand what is going on and they are in no way trained to give advice like that.*

One of the victim-survivor participants was a police officer and had the intention of letting IPV victims know they were not alone.

> *Even in my job right now, I get calls on domestic disputes and I have to show up to their location. I have been in that situation and these women may think they are alone. I always carry Mujeres Unidas pamphlets with me to let them know they are not alone. Helping abused women in my job makes me feel good because I know what it feels like to be there, and I am glad I can help them. I am not allowed to give them my personal phone number, but I do give them my name and let them know they can call me at the department at any time.*

Pressing Charges. When the police arrived at the scene of a domestic dispute, they asked the parties involved whether any of them wanted to press charges. However, not all female survivors (n = 9) wanted to report the abuse or even contact law enforcement to press charges. Participants who decided not to seek charges reached a resolution in which their male partner was escorted from their residence.

Lack of Police Reporting by Survivors. All participants (n = 12) frequently had the perception that "the arguments were too small" to warrant police reporting. However, the participants that the police reported did so after the first IPV victimization. Two participants stated, "I broke my wrist, but I did not tell anyone that it was him who pushed me because I did not want the state to pick up domestic violence charges on him;" and "I did report the abuse to the police, but I ended up dropping charges. I loved him, and I did not want to press any charges against him..."

Two other participants stated that their partners reported the IPV incident to the police. One participant shared, "He called the cops on me and we both pressed charges on each other." The police officer participant stated that her male partner intended to call the police on her so that she would get in trouble with the academy.

Left the Abuse. Several participants (n = 4) found it difficult to leave their abusive environment because of their partner's actions. The partners reportedly manipulated the participants by stating, "I am the best guy you will ever have," "no guy is going to want you," "you are too fat," and "you might as well stay with me." In the words of one participant who had just recently separated from her partner stated, "Fortunately, I have been able to escape with my life and the lives of my children." Another participant would have stayed in the abusive relationship if her male partner had not left her.

> *He walked out on me, and I tried to make him love me. I would have kept trying to make the relationship work if he did not leave me and if it was up to me, but he closed that door for me and now I see it as the best thing that could have happened to me.*

An additional participant had a similar experience regarding her partner leaving her, "The father of my kids left when our second son was four months old, and I have not had contact with him since."

Self-Blaming

Fifty percent of participants (n = 6) found it difficult to explain why they were abused in their relationship. One participant remarked, "No, it's not going to happen to me, I am educated. It just happened and it happens to everybody. Maybe he will change." A different participant recognized she justified her partner's abuse, "My ex-husband would hit me when he got stressed out. I would blame myself and I found myself justifying why he would hit me." One of the participants expressed remorse for reporting her partner to the authorities and attempted to explain the rationale behind her feelings of guilt.

> *I was 8 months pregnant, and he tried grabbing my neck to choke me; I could not retaliate so I called the police, and he lost his teaching license. I wasn't bloody or beaten, so I felt bad for calling the police. He only pulled my hair because he thought I was trying to get his phone.*

A few participants (n = 2) admitted that they blamed themselves for the violence that they had to endure at the hands of their male partners. One of the participants questioned her own actions, asking, "What did I do wrong? Was I not pretty enough?" The following are a few examples of participants that blamed themselves for the IPV violence that occurred:

> *It got to the point where I honestly thought it was my fault. I would cry and tell him sorry and that I did not mean to upset him, and he spit on my face, pushed me to the ground, and laughed at me.*

> *The police took the father of my children to jail, and he was deported to Mexico. For so long I blamed myself for being physically abused because I cheated on him. I still loved him, and I still wanted to be with him.*

Another participant elaborated, "I loved him, and I did not want to [press charges]... I felt [the charges] were my fault."

Discussion

This study's findings shed light on what it is like for Latinas in the RGV to cope with IPV. This group of Latinas differs significantly from other Latinas who have been subjected to IPV in previous studies (Espinoza et al., 2022a; Espinoza et al., 2022b). In this exploratory study, all participants were college-educated, and yet they experienced IPV victimization. This is interesting because there is still a stereotypical belief that IPV victimization only happens to lazy, uneducated, disadvantaged women (Peralta & Tuttle, 2013). Having a higher education was vital to making these Latina survivors more resilient as it provided improved access to social networks of family, and friends, much like that in prior research to leave or end their relationships (Castillo, 2018; Howell et al., 2018; Showalter et al., 2022). Research suggests that survivors are much more likely to seek help from family members, although they do so with some degree of discretion (Gonzalez, 2021; Harper, 2017; Satyen et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2014).

Feminist theory is beneficial to the study of IPV because this theory places a significant focus on the part that gender plays in the experience of IPV survivors. This study found that forced gender roles that adhere to traditional norms are a contributor to IPV victimization. Davila et al. (2021) noted when perpetrators of violence use economic control to limit access to resources as a form of abuse, that the survivor's well-being to seek help to end the abuse was reduced. In other words, financial co-dependence on the perpetrators because of economic control may contribute to longer exposure to abuse and further contribute to the barriers (i.e., poverty and employment) which stop them from ending the relationship. This very case situated the reasons to remain or leave in this study. The survivors' rationale was based on the social networks backing the survivor, which is the support needed to leave the IPV.

These findings support recent literature that has shown that many participants do not report abuse to law enforcement or seek IPV support services following victimization (Espinoza et al., 2022a; Satyen et al., 2019), which led to a lack of accessing IPV support resources (Espinoza et al., 2022b; Gonzalez, 2021). The study is important as it supports the work of Gonzalez-Guarda et al. (2011), who found that many women who experienced sexual abuse by a partner described being forced to have sex with their spouses because of their gender roles. Much like in other studies, participants also experienced manipulation, verbal threats, control, and harassment (Ahrens et al., 2010; Espinoza et al., 2022b; Thomas et al., 2019). Violence reported is in line with Rodriguez et al. (2015), who note that perpetrators experienced a loss of threat to their masculinity which serves

to enact violence to maintain control in the relationship.

The current study noted that the perpetrator could become violent when controlled through violence against their spouses, which is supported by Mshweshwe (2020), who acknowledged the physical and verbal abuse present as a result of losing control and pushing to maintain power. IPV researchers (Herrera & Gloria, 2021; Luo et al., 2020; Mshweshwe, 2020; Salazar & Öhman, 2015; Thompson et al., 2021) found IPV to be linked to participants' partners' envy and *machismo* to reinforce patriarchy in the relationship (Herrera & Gloria, 2021; Luo et al., 2020; Mshweshwe, 2020; Salazar & Öhman, 2015; Thompson et al., 2021).

Victim service providers and domestic violence agencies must create a level of transparency and dialogue with their communities and law enforcement to make certain survivors are provided the confidence and support to make an informed decision about their situation (Espinoza et al., 2022a). There needs to be an expansion of victim services beyond just arresting perpetrators through de-escalation and sensitivity training (Dutton et al., 2015; Espinoza et al., 2022b). It is also important to improve the ways of including the community in policing-oriented responses and addressing the needs of IPV victims through interventions (Espinoza et al., 2022a, 2022b; Lockwood & Prohaska, 2015). It is possible to improve victims' safety and overall well-being by evaluating existing measures aimed at preventing crime and securing resources.

Limitations and Future Research

This study had several limitations. The findings of this study cannot be generalized to the entire Latina population because they were only collected from a single region with a unique cultural background. Even though the study's sample size was modest, it was nonetheless meaningful. Some interview questionnaire responses were completed face-to-face, others by phone, and some via email. It is unknown if participants answered questions fully or in a socially desired way, which could produce prevarication bias. Additionally, participants may have experienced trauma from the IPV incidents, thus making it difficult for them to recall events leading to producing recall bias.

Despite this, further study is necessary to provide a comprehensive overview of IPV for Latinas in the RGV. Latinas who leave their relationship after IPV victimization should be studied to identify the specific role resiliency played in their decision and actions to leave the relationship. Additional issues like trauma bonding among IPV victims-perpetrator relationships should be examined due to the patriarchal relations and *machismo* as the study takes place in a Latino community. In addition, public initiatives are needed, particularly in the RGV, to reduce IPV prevalence.

Conclusion

In this study, a modest sample of 12 Latina victims of IPV living in the RGV ranging in age from 24 to 40 years old shared their experiences. IPV can have an impact on a woman's physical and emotional health that can result in significant personal, financial, well-being, and social expenses. Prevention, programs, and interventions aimed at reducing the number of Latinas who become IPV victims in the RGV can only be effective if they are grounded in the Latina experience. Due to its location north of an international border and south of a Border Patrol interior checkpoint, the RGV is unlike any other community in a predominantly Latino state. The findings of this study need to be replicated on a larger scale in order to determine whether they can be generalizable. It is imperative that additional public efforts be made in the RGV to address the issue

of Latina IPV to identify the reasons why victims do or do not seek social services and family support. These low reporting rates of violence and help-seeking behaviors illustrate the case that IPV does not occur in this population. However, studying IPV in this population provides a more concise understanding of the issues that victim-survivors experience in gaining access to resources and services. (Espinoza et al., 2022a).

Statements and Declarations

Funding

This work is not supported by any internal or external funding sources.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study follows compliance with ethical standards.

Conflict of Interest Statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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Manuscript received October 26, 2022
Revision received December 20, 2022
Accepted January 16, 2023