

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Culture, Health & Sexuality

An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care

ISSN: 1369-1058 (Print) 1464-5351 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/tchs20

Psychosocial barriers to, and enablers of, intimate partner violence disclosure among Asian-American immigrant women

Paula Tavrow, Kirsten Paulus, Dan Huynh, Caroline Yoo, Di Liang, Wanda Pathomrit & Mellissa Withers

To cite this article: Paula Tavrow, Kirsten Paulus, Dan Huynh, Caroline Yoo, Di Liang, Wanda Pathomrit & Mellissa Withers (2023) Psychosocial barriers to, and enablers of, intimate partner violence disclosure among Asian-American immigrant women, Culture, Health & Sexuality, 25:12, 1659-1674, DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2023.2175910

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2023.2175910

Published online: 15 Feb 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 852

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 6 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=tchs20

CULTURE, HEALTH & SEXUALITY
2023, VOL. 25, NO. 12, 1659–1674
https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2023.2175910

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Psychosocial barriers to, and enablers of, intimate partner violence disclosure among Asian-American immigrant women

Paula Tavrow[a], Kirsten Paulus[a]*, Dan Huynh[a], Caroline Yoo[a], Di Liang[a], Wanda Pathomrit[a] and Mellissa Withers[b]

[a]Community Health Sciences, University of California Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA; [b]Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

Although Asian women immigrants to the USA rarely disclose intimate partner violence, local research indicates that among them domestic abuse is prevalent. This study aimed to determine the main psychosocial barriers and enablers to disclosure among Asian-American women in California, and whether barriers outweighed benefits. We used a novel qualitative methodology of indirect and direct questioning with sixty married women from four ethnicities (Korean, Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese). Overall, barriers to disclosure were more compelling and tangible than enablers, particularly among Mandarin Chinese and Korean speakers. Five main barriers were found: victim-blaming, beliefs in female inferiority and male dominance, familial shame, individual shame and fear of undesirable consequences. Only extreme violence and the need to protect children from harm were seen as warranting disclosure. As a result, health and other providers' encouragement of disclosure is unlikely to be sufficient to achieve behavioural change. Abused Asian immigrant women need anonymous ways of obtaining professional counselling, information and resources. In addition, community-level awareness programmes in Asian languages are needed to reduce victim-blaming and misinformation.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 12 August 2022
Accepted 30 January 2023

KEYWORDS
Barriers; disclosure; intimate partner violence; cross-cultural comparisons; women

Introduction

Despite Asian immigrant women's low reporting of intimate partner violence in national surveys, various community-based studies in the USA suggest that lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence could be as high as 50–60% (Cho 2012; Hicks 2006; Kim and Sung 2016; Kim et al. 2018). One study of Chinese immigrant women found that 21% had experienced intimate partner violence in the past year (Li et al. 2022). The main reason for the underreporting may be that Asian immigrant

CONTACT Kirsten Paulus Kirsten.Paulus@gmail.com
*Kirsten Paulus is currently a doctoral student in Social and Behavioural Sciences at Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2023 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

women are extremely reluctant to disclose their intimate partner violence status (Cho 2012; Kim 2017). Traditional cultures in Asia, which prioritise saving face and preserving family reputation, and financial dependency may inhibit immigrants from revealing intimate partner violence, even if severe (Lee and Hadeed 2009; Kim 2017). This hinders health providers from assisting victims with vital counselling, protection and resources.

In the USA, Asian immigrant women's circumstances may make them more vulnerable to intimate partner violence than other groups, particularly if they are undocumented (Ho 1990; Kim and Sung 2016; Lee 2007). Unlike female immigrants from Latin America who may cross the southern US border to escape abusive marriages or seek work opportunities (He and Gerber 2020), female immigrants from some Asian countries are often sponsored by their husbands, who arrived before them. Typically, these women are unfamiliar with US culture, speak little or no English and do not know their legal rights. They may also lack the support of extended family members who remained in the home country. Hence, Asian immigrant women often become isolated and rely heavily on their spouse (Bui 2003; Lee and Hadeed 2009).

For some Asian immigrant men, their wife's dependency and isolation may trigger controlling and abusive behaviour, in part because they do not fear repercussions (Bui and Morash 2007). As newcomers, Asian women's social circles consist mainly of other immigrants who speak the same language. While interacting reduces loneliness, judging and policing within immigrant communities can cause distrust and reservation (Fernbrant et al. 2014; Kasturirangan, Krishnan, and Riger 2004; Lee 2000). Consequently, not only do men have the upper hand because of cultural values, their work status and their greater familiarity with the US but they also know that their partner generally will not disclose abuse (Fernbrant et al. 2014; Lee 2000).

Because Asian-Americans are often grouped together in surveys of intimate partner violence, important differences by ethnicity may be masked. For example, Korean immigrant women comprise the majority of intimate partner violence victims in shelters for Asian-American women in Los Angeles, even though they constitute a small proportion of the overall immigrant population (Lee 2007). Little is known about whether some immigrant groups face greater hurdles to divulging intimate partner violence, which may make them more susceptible to abuse and less likely to access and obtain services.

Community-based agencies have identified structural barriers to disclosure–such as unfamiliarity with the English language, lack of transport, unawareness about resources, fears of deportation and financial concerns (Kim and Sung 2016; Lee 2007). Undoubtedly, these barriers are major impediments. But agencies may also overlook a foundational issue: do abused immigrant women believe there are real benefits from disclosing? When psychosocial costs seem to outweigh the benefits, victims will not even begin the process of seeking help, unless the abuse is life-threatening (Bui and Morash 2007; Kasturirangan, Krishnan, and Riger 2004). Victims are concerned about losing control and privacy, as well as being stigmatised by peers (Liang et al. 2005; Meyer 2012). They also fear retaliatory abuse from their violent partner if they attempt to leave the relationship (Meyer 2012). While the decision to disclose intimate partner

violence is not dependent on any one factor, it does require a woman to believe her situation could be improved if she speaks up.

In this study, we sought to determine the main psychosocial barriers to Asian immigrant women in California of divulging intimate partner violence, and whether the benefits of seeking help seemed apparent to them. To assess possible differences by ethnicity, the study involved immigrants from China, Thailand, Vietnam and South Korea. California has the highest concentration of these four immigrant populations, who differ in some socio-demographic characteristics. Vietnamese immigrant women have less education and lower levels of English language proficiency; Thai women are more likely to be separated and have a lower income; Korean and Vietnamese women have lived the longest in the USA; and Chinese and Thai women are less likely to be US citizens (Budiman and Ruiz 2021). We used a novel methodological approach to collect data which involved participants providing comments on a video depicting an abused woman who had disclosed intimate partner violence. We followed up with direct questions about intimate partner violence. This combination of indirect and direct questioning yielded new insights into the main psychosocial issues that underlie intimate partner violence disclosure by Asian immigrant women.

Materials and methods

Data collection

A previous study involving some of this paper's authors developed 3-minute videos to be shown in the consultation rooms of primary care providers to encourage female patients to disclose intimate partner violence (Tavrow, Bloom, and Withers 2021). Videos featured an Asian immigrant woman who described her experience of intimate partner violence, one in each language – Korean (K), Mandarin Chinese (C), Thai (T), or Vietnamese (V). Each video adopted the same storyline, consisting of what she endured, why she decided to disclose intimate partner violence, the services she had received and how her life improved. At the video's conclusion, viewers were encouraged to talk to their primary care provider about intimate partner violence. The videos were intended to facilitate discussion on intimate partner violence by promoting women's self-reflection and providing a safe and private opportunity to divulge abuse (Levinson, Lamb, and Gorawara-Bhat 2000).

In this study, we used these videos to learn indirectly about immigrant women's views about those who disclose abuse. Our data collection procedure entailed asking participants to view a video and then have an in-depth individual interview with a research assistant of the same ethnicity. The interviewer began by asking the participant if the video was believable and how it might be improved (Tavrow et al. 2022). This approach reduced standard response bias, because participants focused on improving a video, not on intimate partner violence per se. After commenting on the video, the interviewer transitioned to more direct questioning about whether intimate partner violence was ever acceptable, if there were cultural reasons why intimate partner violence persisted, barriers to revealing intimate partner violence and how to facilitate intimate partner violence disclosure.

The interviews were conducted in participants' first language so they could use local idioms and speak freely. Interviewers were four trained female graduate students who spoke the respective languages fluently. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 min. Eligible participants were married women, ages 25–55, who had been born outside the USA. They were recruited using flyers, online chat groups, visits to religious temples and centres, newspaper advertisements and by word of mouth. It was not required for women to have experienced intimate partner violence. All participants were offered a $25 gift card.

Data analysis

Fifteen women from each ethnicity were interviewed (sixty altogether). The interviews were recorded in the participant's language, then transcribed and translated into English. The research team developed a codebook to line-code the transcripts using Quirkos data software. The second author undertook the initial coding, then the first author reviewed the codes and flagged areas for refinement or additional coding. During discussion with the team, answers to indirect and direct questions were compared and contrasted. This iterative process led to the identification of themes. The team then assessed ethnic differences by reviewing the frequency and range of comments.

Ethics

The Institutional Review Board of the University of California Los Angeles approved this study (IRB# 12-001825). The interviewers informed each potential participant of the study's purpose and obtained verbal consent. Interviews were conducted in private. Women were not asked if they had personal experience of intimate partner violence, although some volunteered the information. All participants were told about available support if they wished to get assistance.

Findings

Participants of all ethnicities were able to articulate profound and compelling psychosocial reasons why women might be averse to divulging intimate partner violence. In contrast, most were vague or silent on the potential benefits of doing so. When asked directly, virtually all respondents stated that men do not have the right to abuse their partner and expressed sympathy for victims. However, when commenting on the video of an abused immigrant woman, nearly half felt that the victim was at least partially at fault. Many also questioned why a victim would bring such shame to her family and herself by disclosing intimate partner violence. Respondents provided numerous detailed explanations for why women would not disclose abuse, compared to very few reasons for informing a health provider.

Five major psychosocial barriers were identified that hindered the disclosure of intimate partner violence: victim-blaming, beliefs in female inferiority and male dominance, worries about familial shame, concerns about individual shame and fear about

Table 1. Barriers and enablers for intimate partner violence disclosure among Asian-American immigrant women ($N = 60$).

BARRIERS (many responses); by ethnicity and overall		ENABLERS (few responses)
Blaming of IPV victim • Blamed for causing it • Blamed for letting it get out of hand, not minimising • Blamed for not leaving once it started • Blamed for revealing it	V-7 T-7 C-3 K-8 (42%)	Belief it is not woman's fault • Blame should be on the husband
Belief about female inferiority and male dominance • Cultural sayings reinforce inferiority • Men's rights and needs predominate • Women's learned submissiveness and helplessness • Men have more power which they can use to maintain female inferiority	V-3 T-4 C-14 K-4 (42%)	View that women have the right not to be abused
Worry about bringing shame on the family • Unacceptability of divorce; could make it difficult for children to marry • Hurts the lineage and family name • Primacy of motherhood roles	V-8 T-5 C-7 K-11 (52%)	Need to protect children • More important than anything else • If children are at risk, mother should leave husband
Concern about "losing face" as an individual • Don't want to be pitied, which brings shame • Other people's "empathy" includes pity, which would make her miserable • Don't want people to know; best to be reserved to avoid stigma	V-7 T-5 C-10 K-10 (53%)	
Fear of undesirable consequences • Worry about deportation • Could have dire effects financially • Not able to turn back the clock if something goes wrong • Retaliation: husband could become even more abusive	V-5 T-9 C-6 K-4 (40%)	Could avoid divorce if husband gets help Woman could get concrete help (e.g. financial, legal, housing) • Not interested in psychological help, which is stigmatising

Notes: V = Vietnamese, T = Thai, C = Chinese, and K = Korean. Counts are the number of respondents who spontaneously mentioned the barrier. Percentages are the proportion of all respondents.

undesirable consequences (see Table 1). For four of these barriers, we found significant differences by ethnicity. Only the most common barrier – individual shame – seemed equally important across ethnicities. After examining these barriers, we then sought to identify any counterbalancing 'enablers' that could motivate women to disclose intimate partner violence. These enablers came up infrequently and were rarely described in detail. We will return to them later.

Barriers

Victim-blaming

About half of respondents of all ethnicities other than Chinese mentioned some aspect of victim-blaming – including self-blaming by the victimised woman – as a major barrier to disclosing intimate partner violence. Although many women expressed sympathy for the victim, they noted that society would presume that the woman was at least partly to blame. As one Vietnamese respondent stated, 'I think 30% would have empathy, but the other 70% would think it's some kind of shame, and you did something wrong to deserve that.' A woman experiencing intimate

partner violence might be blamed for causing the intimate partner violence in the first place, either by marrying the wrong man or provoking him. Victims themselves often internalised the cultural belief that their behaviour had incited the abuse.

> Some people may blame her for marrying such a [bad] man, saying, 'Why was she so blind at that time?' Especially when her marriage was originally objected to by her parents, relatives and friends. People will say that we had told you early on. This man was bad. But you insisted on marrying him. Now you see the consequences! (C4)[1]

> The feeling of fault is beaten into the victim and reinforces the culture. We are taught that it's our fault; we need to admit it first. No one will shelter us. (V7)

Even if the victim was not blamed for causing abuse, some respondents felt that she would be criticised for letting the situation get out of hand, rather than controlling or minimising it. Wives were expected to be stoic and to withstand some suffering for the sake of the family.

> [Some people] think, 'Why would [victims] talk out loud about such a small thing? It is not such a big deal to curse and yell sometimes.' Or, 'She is making a big fuss, when all she does is cook at home and raise children, while using all the money the husband brings.' (K1)

> [Some would] say, 'Why don't you know how to take care of your family?' … There are people who have never encountered this situation. And they say, 'I know how to control my husband.' (V5)

Other respondents tended to blame the victim for not leaving an abusive relationship. In their view, wives should not tolerate intimate partner violence and should get help swiftly. Those who remained in a violent situation were not worthy of respect.

> I think that people would ask her why she stayed. To be really honest, I would ask her why she was stupid, why she put up with it for so long. (T15)

However, many respondents would also blame a woman for disclosing domestic abuse, believing it is wrong to reveal what is going on within the household. They would dissect the victim's life and cast doubt on her intentions.

> The first response typically is: 'What has she done wrong?' Then the second is: 'This is private; why would she share the details of her family life?' It is a habit of the Vietnamese … People who are nosy … wanting all the details, but not really out of a sincere desire to help. (V8)

> According to what I've heard, there would be no sympathy for the new [female] immigrant because [people assume] they don't love the man. That the woman just wants to cause trouble and drama to get a divorce. People will not speak positively of that person. (V4)

In sum, in respondents' view, an Asian immigrant woman experiencing violence could be blamed for causing it, not controlling it, not leaving the abuser sooner, not getting help, or all of these. Her life might become the subject of gossip and scorn, which could be a major impediment to speaking out.

Female inferiority and male dominance

Respondents of all ethnicities mentioned traditions and cultural sayings that emphasised women's inferiority to men. This was particularly pronounced among Mandarin

Chinese speakers, all of whom noted that it was generally believed that men are superior and women must know their place. Fathers' rights and needs take precedence because they are considered the most important person in the family. Numerous respondents commented that it was socially acceptable for husbands to need (and want) to control their wives, and for their wives to stay in their shadow. About four in ten respondents volunteered common sayings that illustrated women's inferior role in society.

> The idea that 'men were superior and women were inferior' is always there. There is an old saying in China: 'When a woman gets married, she should listen to her husband. When she gets old, she should listen to her son.' … In other words, a woman should obey her father as a daughter, obey her husband as a wife, and obey her son as a mother. (C10)

> There is a deep-rooted patriarchal culture in Thai society. 'Thai women are the elephant's back feet, and men are the elephant's forefeet.' A woman has to follow her husband's orders. She has to show him respect at all times. (T8)

> There's the [Vietnamese] saying, 'Husband is god and wife is the servant.' Everything is husband first. (V2)

> You know the old [Korean] saying, 'Dried fish and women need to be beaten every three days.' (K12)

Cultural traditions of male dominance can serve as a barrier to intimate partner violence disclosure, because it is not normative for a wife to challenge her husband's authority. It is more culturally acceptable for women to be submissive – a form of learned helplessness. Some participants said that wives should be timid, introverted, fearful and dependent. As one Korean speaker declared, 'It is bred into her.' Dependence is exacerbated because 'Korean culture does not really allow the woman to work.' Even if a woman knows that domestic violence is wrong, she may feel trapped in her marriage.

> Within our culture, we hold men in esteem and disdain women. Vietnamese men have all sorts of rights. But Vietnamese women who are well-behaved and virtuous can only have the right to stand behind her husband and remain silent. (V7)

> A woman will not think it's right for her husband to beat her or curse her. They think it's very cruel or violent behaviour. It's an injustice. She is also angry. But she feels helpless. They see their children are afraid. They see their children hurt mentally. But she doesn't know how to [deal with] it. (C3)

Many respondents felt that, as the main breadwinner, men have more power and rights. It is culturally accepted for husbands to make demands and wives to follow orders. Men who work hard believe they can 'control women however they want' and 'hit their wives at will.' When this happens, societal beliefs about male prerogative can lead abused women to accept their lot and not reveal the abuse.

> Some men think women are weak. They want to uphold their authority at home … so they keep abusing their spouse. They brainwash their spouse. They want their spouse to be absolutely submitted to their minds. (C3)

> The man in the family has greater rights. Because of that, he believes he has the ability to use a heavy or soft hand against his wife or children or anyone with less power than him. (V8)

In all four cultures, respondents noted that some men feel they have the right to control their spouse similarly to how their father controlled their mother, which ensures that women remain inferior – not only within the marriage but in society at large.

Familial shame

More than half the respondents, with the exception of Thai women, identified bringing shame or dishonour to the family as a major impediment to intimate partner violence disclosure. For Asian immigrant women, particularly Koreans, divorce should be avoided because of the shame it could bring to the entire family, including elderly parents and children. Some Koreans tolerated intimate partner violence due to the stigma directed towards divorced mothers, as well as worries about financial insecurity, both of which they feared more than staying in an abusive relationship. Respondents noted that disclosing intimate partner violence could spoil the family name, for past and future generations.

> The culture of Vietnam is to hide their feelings inside, keep silent, keep everything in and never speak of it until they die. They fear losing face, they fear dishonour to the family, and so they do not reveal to the outside. Sometimes they even say the opposite of what has occurred … Shame to oneself and one's family needs to be avoided … people take things to their grave. (V14)

> My parents are old and conservative, so they told me divorce is not acceptable. Shockingly, they told me to tolerate it, including physical abuse … My father thinks it is shameful and stigmatising for children not to have a father and grow up under a single mother. (K7)

The importance of motherhood also contributed to women's reluctance to disclose intimate partner violence. Respondents of all ethnicities stated that their culture expected a woman to be a 'good mother' first, ensuring her children's needs are met before considering her own. Many respondents felt that the lingering shame of divorce would make it difficult for children to marry, because potential future partners might worry that the children of divorced parents could not maintain a marriage. While Thai women were the least averse to divorce, one respondent noted that 'most Thai-born and Thai-raised women tolerate their husband's infidelity' because they believe strongly in maintaining the family. If a woman thought that leaving her husband would harm the children, she would be very reluctant to reveal intimate partner violence.

> Chinese people tend to think *jia chou bu ke wai yang* [the ugly side of a family should not be known by others]. Some women don't want to speak up for the sake of their children, or for the sake of the entire family [and their reputations]. (C11)

> In my family, we never divorced. And getting divorced is like something's wrong, that's why you divorced. And the wrong is always blamed on a woman. You keep your family together. (T2)

Individual shame

Losing face as an individual, and losing the respect of others, were possibly the most important barriers to intimate partner violence disclosure. Respondents of all

ethnicities spoke extensively of the embarrassment that could come from other community members knowing one's predicament. Many respondents noted that abused women would not want to be pitied, which brings shame. Wives abused in their home country who followed their husbands to the USA were considered lacking in self-respect.

> People would look down on her for putting up with all the abuse just so she could be here in the US. (T5)

> People will think you are pitiful. You came here to suffer. It's very miserable. (C1)

Respondents were wary of others' sympathy because they felt it 'hurts one's pride,' as 'others will think you are pathetic.' A woman's husband is supposed to love her the most and not abuse her. Interestingly, respondents were not particularly worried that they would be disbelieved if they revealed intimate partner violence. Instead, they feared the 'feeling of shame after revealing the experience.' In their view, divulging intimate partner violence is humiliating because a woman has to 'show [her] weakness and tell everything.' This in turn could lead to isolation and judgement. One Korean respondent noted that 'it is actually shameful to live at a shelter.' Another stated that if she went to a counselling centre and saw someone she knew there, she would be 'so embarrassed.' It is not a question for these women if society will shame them for disclosing– it is a guarantee.

> People will say they've never seen it. They will judge and condemn them … They don't want their daughters to associate with that woman. Shame and guilt, shame shame shame. They exclude the women, making them feel isolated. So that's the price to pay. The woman will need to walk past that price to move on. (V7)

> People will gossip or spread false rumours. They might start with little information, then exaggerate it. (T4)

Because of negative opinions about women revealing intimate partner violence, most choose to suffer in silence rather than share their experience and get help. Some revert to online forums to discuss their experiences but will change their name to conceal their struggle. Anonymity is key, as women 'cannot speak poorly of their husband because they must save face.' Intimate partner violence disclosure to health providers does not seem a viable option for many Asian immigrant women.

Consequences of disclosure

Fear of undesirable consequences was identified as the last major barrier to intimate partner violence disclosure. About four in ten participants worried that divulging intimate partner violence would eventually lead to divorce, which could result in financial hardship or affect their immigrant status. Many envisaged that divulging abuse might ultimately end with deportation or could 'ruin their chance of becoming a permanent resident.' Having to travel home under these conditions could bring a life of misery.

> Returning to Vietnam just adds more shame - so much shame that [survivors] would think that the only route to escape is through suicide. Once you leave you cannot return to your village. If you marry a husband from outside your country, to leave Vietnam is an honour. To return is a disgrace and dishonour. (V7)

Other respondents did not know what transpired when an abused person tried to get help. They worried about not being able to turn back the clock if something went wrong. One respondent reported that after a friend disclosed intimate partner violence, her husband severely attacked her and 'made death threats against her if she told anyone [else].' He took away her cell phone and said that 'if she spoke to anyone about this, he would beat her to death.'

> [Victims of abuse] do not dare to seek help. They fear that if their spouse knew about this, they will suffer more. They are afraid that their children will suffer more. They are afraid that they will die before they can stand up. (C3)

> What I was afraid of the most was the possibility of retaliation, loss of my children, and shame I would bring to my father. (K7)

Without knowing what the future might hold, respondents felt that it was an unacceptable risk to reveal their husband's abuse.

Enablers

Very few respondents identified enablers or benefits of disclosing intimate partner violence when commenting on the video, even though in it the formerly abused woman stated that her life was now much improved. Most were sceptical of her assertion. However, a few respondents noted that divulging intimate partner violence could reduce the victim's suffering. Without disclosing, women will continue to 'suffer alone … no one will know [their] sadness,' whereas if they shared their experiences, they might get a useful confidante.

> [A benefit is] to have someone close that a woman can consistently talk to, someone who will support and encourage her will give her the strength to resist and push back [against abuse]. (V14)

Not only would the woman receive support if she disclosed, but the husband might also get help. As intimate partner violence sometimes is linked to alcohol dependency, one respondent felt that 'any help [through disclosing] for husbands to stop drinking could be helpful, too. Alcoholism needs to be treated.' Another respondent mentioned that couples counselling could be beneficial, although she acknowledged that it is considered 'the last resort before divorce.'

The only other major enabler of disclosure mentioned by several respondents was that it could protect the children. Refraining from speaking out could be 'bad for your children'. In situations where children's safety or well-being is jeopardised, abused women might feel compelled to get help. However, women would be conflicted because they might be afraid of losing their children, so they may choose instead to stay silent. An abused mother will constantly be weighing whether it is better for the children to divulge intimate partner violence or stay silent.

> Women love their children more than they do themselves. If it was just a woman and her abuser, she might be able to endure the pain by herself. But when children are involved, it gets tricky and scary. Women don't want their children to suffer. (T14)

> They are afraid to lose their children. If the children are tortured and the mother is moved by her anxiety over her children's safety, that may convince her to leave with their children. Or mothers would try to endure so that they don't lose their children. (V13)

One respondent noted that disclosure can also help connect children to counselling, usually through their schools, to help them process and heal. Counsellors may 'make you sign a contract that you cannot argue in front of the children' and provide counselling for the whole family, with the children's interests paramount. After disclosure and getting assistance, a few respondents stated that children will be more successful, their economic rights will be protected, and the family will be better off.

When directly questioned, many respondents stated that women have the right not to be abused and are deserving of support. Some noted that they would sympathise with victims because women 'should never be abused by anyone.' A few respondents felt that getting sympathy and support from others could motivate a victim to seek professional help to end the abuse and 'fight for her rights.' But others felt that an abused woman would be wary of sympathy.

> Most people will blame the husband and will not think that the woman is stupid or to be blamed. But the victim will probably think people will look down on her and therefore hide. (K8)

Ultimately, the barriers to intimate partner violence disclosure seemed to far outweigh any potential enablers except in cases of severe abuse or where children were being harmed.

Discussion

Disclosure of abuse is generally the first step to getting assistance and obtaining legal protection from the perpetrators of intimate partner violence. For Asian immigrant women, this study revealed a multitude of psychosocial barriers that impede disclosure, with somewhat different intensities by ethnic group. Mandarin Chinese and Korean speakers identified considerably more barriers to intimate partner violence disclosure than Vietnamese and Thai speakers. Barriers seemed to be deeply rooted in cultural understandings of who is to blame for domestic disturbances, the focus on preserving a family's reputation, the prerogatives of men, the importance of preventing harm to children, and fear of the undesirable consequences. Benefits of disclosure seemed to pale in comparison to the shame, dishonour, and financial hardship that seemed likely to arise if a woman spoke out. When Asian immigrant women are legally and economically dependent on their husbands, their reluctance to divulge intimate partner violence is exacerbated. Clearly, intimate partner violence disclosure is a serious and difficult issue for Asian immigrant women, and simple encouragement by health providers is unlikely to be sufficient.

The transtheoretical theory of behaviour change provides insight into why intimate partner violence disclosure among Asian immigrant women is so fraught. The theory posits that people pass through six main stages en route to achieving behaviour change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance and termination (Prochaska and DiClemente 1983). Women who do not know what constitutes intimate partner violence, or believe that all relationships include some form of

abuse, may be in the precontemplation stage. To move to contemplation and preparation stages requires knowledge about intimate partner violence and the kinds of resources available to victims, but obtaining this information often requires divulging abuse. When health providers or social workers screen for intimate partner violence, they may believe that abuse disclosure is part of the 'contemplation' or 'preparation' stages, whereas Asian immigrant women may consider it to be an 'action' that sets wheels in motion toward potentially unwanted outcomes like divorce or deportation. An abused immigrant woman may not even contemplate disclosing intimate partner violence because the costs are too high and the benefits too small, which may prevent her from taking preparatory steps.

Moreover, as she contemplates whether or not to divulge intimate partner violence, the woman may experience so much worry about being demeaned by others' pity and finger-pointing that she is prevented from taking preparatory steps. A key finding from this study was that shame constitutes the most critical barrier to intimate partner violence disclosure – shame not just to the woman herself, but also to her family. This concern about shame reverberates to both sides of the extended family, and even to children's future families (Lee 2000). If it was only a matter of individual shame, the decision to disclose could involve a cost-benefit calculation of potential individual risks, such as social isolation; however, when shame extends to others, the costs are much greater (Bauer et al. 2000; Ho 1990; Lee 2000). As noted by Yoshioka et al. (2003), Asian immigrant women prioritise saving face, not only for themselves but for their families. Preserving the family's reputation and individual honour was critical to Korean women, but less important to Thai women.

Our study found that another major barrier to intimate partner violence disclosure was the persistent belief that men are superior to women, who must suffer and persevere. For many women, disclosing intimate partner violence means undermining these values ingrained from childhood (Ho 1990, Kim-Goh and Baello 2008). In addition, some Asian immigrant men may use violence to keep women feeling inferior. These men may find their power threatened in US society. To maintain a sense of control and compensate for feelings of inadequacy, they may abuse their spouse to preserve dominance in the household (Kim and Sung 2016). Other researchers have noted that immigrant women who internalised more patriarchal values were more likely to experience intimate partner violence, because their husbands could act against them with impunity (Lee 2007; Kim 2017). Husbands may threaten their wives with deportation if they speak out, which further compounds wives' sense of vulnerability and helplessness (Bauer et al. 2000; Hicks 2006; Kim and Sung 2016; Lee and Hadeed 2009).

A noteworthy finding from our study, not highlighted in previous research, was the extent of victim-blaming. Two in five respondents were inclined to find women at least partly to blame for their own abuse, and very few declared that husbands are entirely responsible for the violence that took place. In contrast, a review of nineteen qualitative studies of intimate partner violence among Mexican immigrants found no mention of victim-blaming (Finfgeld-Connett 2017). When victim-blaming is widespread, it can contribute to self-blame and stigmatisation, which may further silence women and perpetuate intimate partner violence in the community (Aujla 2021;

Kasturirangan, Krishnan, and Riger 2004; Lee 2007). It is possible that our unconventional methodology, which included encouraging respondents to comment on a video of an abuse survivor, may have helped reveal that victim-blaming is prevalent. Direct questioning on sensitive topics may yield strongly normative responses, particularly in cultures where discretion and reserve are valued.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, only fifteen women of each ethnicity were interviewed. Although the interviews were in-depth, they may not have captured the entire range of barriers to intimate partner violence disclosure that exist. Second, the women interviewed self-selected to participate in this study. Some reported unprompted that they had been or were currently experiencing intimate partner violence, while others had no prior experience of abuse. Although this variation allowed for a wider breadth of experiences and opinions, it was not possible to assess whether victimised women had different views to non-victimised ones. Finally, the interviewers did not directly ask respondents whether there were benefits to intimate partner violence disclosure. It is possible that more women would have cited benefits if queried directly. However, the fact that very few spontaneously identified benefits of disclosure after viewing a video suggests that they did not see many upsides to divulging intimate partner violence.

Implications

There are several important implications of this study. First, health providers and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) need to provide absolute confidentiality for Asian immigrant women who disclose intimate partner violence. It is recommended that NGOs create and promote online mechanisms for abused women anonymously to access professional counselling, practical advice, links to services, and information, such as through the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Ideally, these opportunities should be multilingual and offer other kinds of health information, so that using the services, apps or forums would not be stigmatising (Tarzia et al. 2017).

Differences identified in this study regarding the shame associated with divulging intimate partner violence, victim-blaming and beliefs about women's inferiority, suggest that certain approaches might work better for some ethnicities. For instance, Korean respondents mentioned using an online forum to divulge intimate partner violence secretly, more to vent than to get help. Expanding Korean immigrant women's access to anonymous forums that provide targeted counselling might improve their ability to get assistance. Professional counsellors assisting women through anonymous forums or in health clinics need to adopt a trauma-informed approach, but must also practise cultural humility and sensitivity to build trust and avoid re-traumatisation (Ahrens et al. 2022; Palmieri and Valentine 2021). For Chinese immigrant women, building their confidence in dealing with abusive husbands and overcoming their sense of inferiority is essential. The language used by counsellors is critical because

tone or inappropriate word choice (such as when offering sympathy) can be humiliating.

Finally, NGOs working with the Asian immigrant community need to focus on raising awareness about how victim-blaming is detrimental to individuals, families, and the community (Yoshihama et al. 2012). Studies have found that fostering compassion for victims, expanding the concept of community to support open dialogue about intimate partner violence, and explaining how stigma hinders disclosure can help create an environment in which women feel safe to seek help (Pennington-Zoellner 2009; Yoshihama et al. 2012). It is also vital that the personal benefits of disclosure are clearly articulated.

While there are differences in how Asian immigrant women of different ethnicities perceive barriers to intimate partner violence disclosure, fear of shame, dishonour, retaliation, financial ruin, and harm to children were common. Unless services and resources directly address and mitigate the psychosocial barriers identified in this study, it is unlikely that abused immigrant Asian women will get the help they need.

Note

1. For each quote, we provide the ethnicity (e.g., C = Chinese) and the participant's transcript number (e.g., 4).

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the participants for sharing their perspectives.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This study was funded by a community partnership grant from the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health.

ORCID

Paula Tavrow http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8679-1955
Kirsten Paulus http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4655-479X
Mellissa Withers http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7754-0206

References

Ahrens, C., P. Nguyen, S. Phan, and M. Mechanic. 2022. "Creating Culturally Responsive Services for Vietnamese-Heritage Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence." *Journal of Family Violence* 37 (2): 207–219.

Aujla, W. 2021. "'It Was like Sugar-Coated Words': Revictimization When South Asian Immigrant Women Disclose Domestic Violence." *Affilia* 36 (2): 182–203.

Bauer, H. M., M. A. Rodriguez, S. S. Quiroga, and Y. G. Flores-Ortiz. 2000. "Barriers to Health Care for Abused Latina and Asian Immigrant Women." *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 11 (1): 33–44.

Bui, H. N. 2003. "Help-Seeking Behaviour among Abused Immigrant Women." *Violence against Women* 9 (2): 207–239.

Bui, H. N., and M. Morash. 2007. "Social Capital, Human Capital, and Reaching out for Help with Domestic Violence: A Case Study of Women in a Vietnamese-American Community." *Criminal Justice Studies* 20 (4): 375–390.

Cho, H. 2012. "Intimate Partner Violence among Asian Americans: Risk Factor Differences across Ethnic Subgroups." *Journal of Family Violence* 27 (3): 215–224.

Fernbrant, C., M. Emmelin, B. Essén, P. O. Östergren, and E. Cantor-Graae. 2014. "Intimate Partner Violence and Poor Mental Health among Thai Women Residing in Sweden." *Global Health Action* 7 (1): 24991.

Finfgeld-Connett, D. 2017. "Intimate Partner Violence and its Resolution among Mexican Americans." *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 38 (6): 464–472.

He, Q., and T. P. Gerber. 2020. "Origin-Country Culture, Migration Sequencing, and Female Employment: Variations among Immigrant Women in the United States." *International Migration Review* 54 (1): 233–261.

Hicks, M. H. R. 2006. "The Prevalence and Characteristics of Intimate Partner Violence in a Community Study of Chinese American Women." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 21 (10): 1249–1269.

Ho, C. K. 1990. "An Analysis of Domestic Violence in Asian American Communities." *Women & Therapy* 9 (1-2): 129–150.

Kasturirangan, A., S. Krishnan, and S. Riger. 2004. "The Impact of Culture and Minority Status on Women's Experience of Domestic Violence." *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 5 (4): 318–332.

Kim, C. 2017. "The Impact of Perceived Childhood Victimisation and Patriarchal Gender Ideology on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Victimisation among Korean Immigrant Women in the USA." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 70: 82–91.

Kim, C., and H.-E. Sung. 2016. "The Effects of Acculturation on Intimate Partner Violence among Chinese Immigrants in New York City." *Journal of Family Violence* 31 (3): 325–336.

Kim, S. K., A. M. Teitelman, M. Muecke, P. D'Antonio, M. Stringer, and J. A. Grisso. 2018. "The Perspectives of Volunteer Counsellors of Korean Immigrant Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence." *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 39 (10): 888–895.

Kim-Goh, M., and J. Baello. 2008. "Attitudes toward Domestic Violence in Korean and Vietnamese Immigrant Communities: Implications for Human Services." *Journal of Family Violence* 23 (7): 647–654.

Lee, E. 2007. "Domestic Violence and Risk Factors among Korean Immigrant Women in the United States." *Journal of Family Violence* 22 (3): 141–149.

Lee, M. Y. 2000. "Understanding Chinese Battered Women in North America." *Journal of Multicultural Social Work* 8 (3-4): 215–241.

Lee, Y. S., and L. Hadeed. 2009. "Intimate Partner Violence among Asian Immigrant Communities." *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 10 (2): 143–170.

Levinson, W., J. Lamb, and R. Gorawara-Bhat. 2000. "A Study of Patient Clues and Physician Responses in Primary Care and Surgical Settings." *Jama* 284 (8): 1021–1027.

Li, Y., F. Dong, L. F. Bullock, and T. Bloom. 2022. "Exploring Help-Seeking Experiences of Chinese Immigrant Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence in the U.S." *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 14 (1): 91–98.

Liang, B., L. Goodman, P. Tummala-Narra, and S. Weintraub. 2005. "A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Help-Seeking Processes among Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 36 (1-2): 71–84.

Meyer, S. 2012. "Why Women Stay: A Theoretical Examination of Rational Choice and Moral Reasoning in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence." *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 45 (2): 179–193.

Palmieri, J., and J. L. Valentine. 2021. “Using Trauma-Informed Care to Address Sexual Assault and Intimate Partner Violence in Primary Care.” *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners* 17 (1): 44–48.

Pennington-Zoellner, K. 2009. “Expanding ‘Community’ in the Community Response to Intimate Partner Violence.” *Journal of Family Violence* 24 (8): 539–545.

Budiman, A., and N.G. Ruiz. 2021. "Key Facts about Asian Americans, a Diverse and Growing Population." Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-americans/

Prochaska, J. O., and C. C. DiClemente. 1983. “Stages and Processes of Self-Change of Smoking: Toward an Integrative Model of Change.” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 51 (3): 390–395.

Tarzia, L., D. Iyer, E. Thrower, and K. Hegarty. 2017. “Technology Doesn’t Judge You’: Young Australian Women’s Views on Using the Internet and Smartphones to Address Intimate Partner Violence.” *Journal of Technology in Human Services* 35 (3): 199–218.

Tavrow, P., B. E. Bloom, and M. H. Withers. 2021. "Challenges of Using Videos in Exam Rooms of Safety-Net Clinics to Encourage Patient Self-Disclosure of Intimate Partner Violence and to Increase Provider Screening.” *Violence against Women* 27 (15-16): 2990–3010.

Tavrow, P., D. Azucar, D. Huynh, C. Yoo, D. Liang, W. Pathomrit, and M. Withers. 2022. “Encouraging Asian Immigrant Women to Disclose Intimate Partner Violence in Primary Care Settings.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37 (7-8): NP5626–NP5648.

Yoshioka, M. R., M. Baig-Amin, N. El-Bassel, and L. Gilbert. 2003. “Social Support and Disclosure of Abuse: Comparing South Asian, African American, and Hispanic Battered Women.” *Journal of Family Violence* 18 (3): 171–180.

Yoshihama, M., A. Ramakrishnan, A. C. Hammock, and M. Khaliq. 2012. “Intimate partner violence prevention program in an Asian immigrant community: Integrating theories, data, and community.” *Violence against Women* 18 (7): 763–783.