Understanding the role of patriarchal ideology in intimate partner violence among South Asian women in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This article explores intimate partner violence using a patriarchal framework, which sheds light on how the problem of intimate partner violence against women is anchored in social and cultural conditions, rather than in individual attributes. The study participants comprised South Asian women who have migrated to Hong Kong. Narrative analyses revealed how patriarchal norms are linked to intimate partner violence and how this has a direct effect on the position and role of females in the home and produces inequality in marriage. Within the framework of patriarchy, and the limitations of using a small, specific sample population, the article also identifies implications for practice.

Keywords

Context, family, gender, intimate partner violence, patriarchal ideology, South Asian women

Introduction

Domestic violence is not a new phenomenon and affects the lives of women worldwide, regardless of race, culture, and ethnicity. Domestic violence has deep historical roots, and patriarchy, which justifies male control over women, has been prevalent for a long time. The concept of patriarchy refers to a set of ideas and beliefs that justify male control over women (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). Patriarchal beliefs operate by affording men the right to exercise power within their family through enforcing and reinforcing the inequality of power between males and females, along with social arrangements that give males extra privilege (Alvarez and Bachman, 2008; Chesney-Lind,

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2006; Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Hunnicutt, 2009). Domestic violence refers to a wide range of violence and abuse perpetrated by one family member against another (Shipway, 2004) that includes different types of violence, such as child abuse, elder abuse, domestic abuse, and intimate partner violence (IPV) (McCue, 2008). IPV refers to violence that occurs between people in intimate relationships and may include physical, psychological, verbal, and sexual abuse as well as economic coercion (Arias and Corso, 2005; Hattery, 2009). It also includes various forms of controlling behaviors, such as restricting the partner/spouse from seeing their family and friends and limiting their access to information and assistance (World Health Organization, 2002). In this study, we focus on IPV that occurs within an intimate marriage or cohabiting relationship and is perpetrated by the husband/male partner against the wife/female partner.

In all societies there are cultural institutions, beliefs, and practices that undermine women's independence and may contribute to gender-based violence. In patriarchal societies where men assault their partners, such behavior is conventional practice and is an intrinsic part of patriarchal beliefs. This has a direct consequence on the position and role of females in the home and society. The concept of patriarchy has the potential for theorizing violence against women because it keeps the focus on dominance, gender, and power.

Throughout history, in most male-dominated societies women have often been treated as subordinate to men and have been vulnerable to male violence (Kennedy and Dutton, 1989; Strauss and Gelles, 1986). In much of the violence literature, patriarchy has been used to explain domestic violence against women, as well as other forms of violence against women that are patterned along gendered lines (Hunnicutt, 2009; Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000).

Dobash and Dobash (1979) have argued that patriarchy produces gender inequality in marriage and the family setting, and patriarchal norms are often linked to wife assault, and wife beating, which can be viewed as one form of men's exercise of control over women. In most traditional South Asian societies, when women marry, they move into extended families where they are subordinate to all men within the household as well as to other senior members in the household (Kandiyoti, 1998). Women are expected to follow traditional role expectations, such as obedience, upholding and maintaining the family's honor, and doing housework. If they differ from such behavioral norms, partner abuse can result.

The socialization of males and females into gender roles, along with cultural norms regarding the woman's position in marriage and duties to her husband, make it difficult for women to openly challenge these hierarchies of gender and status (Dasgupta and Warrier, 1996; Kanuha, 1987). Thus, it can be argued that gender role expectations within patriarchal South Asian societies likely form the foundation for the various struggles and pressures felt by women when they are expected to preserve the traditional values and norms of their cultures. The concepts of shame and the responsibility for maintaining the family honor are often used as a form of control to keep women from seeking further help when they experience abuse (Gill, 2004). Thus, fear of dishonoring the family may also hinder many abused women from seeking help or from leaving an abusive relationship.

Understanding the concept of patriarchy in domestic violence

The concept of patriarchy is defined as having two components: *structure*, in which men are seen to have more power and privilege than women, and an *ideology*, which legitimizes this conception (Smith, 1990). Some theorists have also elaborated that the concept of patriarchy can be further broken down into two forms: 'social' and 'familial' patriarchy (Smith, 1990: 257). While the former refers to male dominance in society as a whole, the latter refers to male dominance within the family (e.g. Barrett, 1980; Millett, 1969). Although the structure of familial patriarchy may have slowly dwindled over the past few decades or so, the ideology still appears to be prevalent (Ahmad

et al., 2004; Barrett, 1980). The concept of familial patriarchy suggests that wife abuse is justified if the wife fails to conform to culturally acceptable behavioral norms (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Kandiyoti, 1988; Kim et al., 2007).

Advocates of gender and feminist theories have expanded the definition of patriarchy to theorize on the ways in which broad societal structures are influenced by the concept of patriarchy. They highlight how, throughout history and in most male-dominated societies, women have been treated as subordinate to men and have been vulnerable to male violence (Kennedy and Dutton, 1989; Strauss and Gelles, 1986). Hunnicutt (2009) has discussed how violence against women falls along gendered lines and how the context in which violent victimization occurs also tends to be different for males and females. For example, women are more likely to be killed by an intimate partner than are men. Different views of IPV can largely be attributed to the historical context of male power, in which social laws and policies have discriminated against women and subjected them to the legal, cultural, and social acceptance of the use of violence against them.

Although the structures of patriarchal ideology may have changed, it has continued to endure despite these changes. Moreover, South Asian culture expects the women to take care of the family, while men take on the role of provider (Tonsing, 2014; Crabtree, 2011). Thus, South Asian immigrant women may continue to find themselves bound by patriarchal beliefs and norms within their marital families in their host country.

The context of South Asian women in Hong Kong

Hong Kong, a special administrative region (SAR) of the Republic of China since 1997, is a homogeneous society, with 93.6 percent of its total population comprising persons of Chinese ethnicity (Census and Statistics Department, 2012). The South Asians comprised about 0.9 percent of the total population of Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department, 2012). The majority of the participants in this study migrated to Hong Kong after their marriage to spouses from the same ethnic group who are Hong Kong-born. According to the Social Welfare Department (SWD), there are about 3000–4000 reported cases of domestic violence annually (SWD, 2017). Of these reported cases, there were only about 180 cases pertaining to ethnic minority families. Although the laws and policies in Hong Kong such as the Domestic Violence Ordinance (DVO) might reduce ethnic minority women's vulnerability to abuses, there are other forces that might leave them vulnerable. For instance, a lack of cultural sensitivity among first responders, a lack of relevant legal and practical knowledge (Kapai, 2015), and a lack of host language proficiency could place them in a disadvantaged position. Moreover, the majority of support services (e.g. shelter homes) for victims of domestic violence in Hong Kong are targeted mainly at Cantonese-speaking individuals. Therefore, language and/or communication often pose a barrier against their seeking help from these mainstream domestic violence support services or shelter homes. These women's belief that they should not dishonor their families also involves a high level of secretiveness, often hindering them from disclosing problems of wife abuse (Tonsing, 2014).

Although studies on domestic violence have been evolving – most of which were conducted in Western societies, with very limited research focusing on domestic violence among South Asians in the Hong Kong context – there is a need to advance our understanding of how patriarchal ideologies manifest themselves in domestic violence against women in the context of the South Asian immigrant community living in Hong Kong. The research outlined in this article helps to fill the research gap by examining how the concept of patriarchal beliefs and norms is linked to domestic violence experienced by a small population of South Asian immigrant women in Hong Kong, and how this affects their marital relations as well as the position and role of women and men in their

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants (*N* = 14).

Variable	*n*	% or *M*
Age (*M*)	14	33.92 (*SD* = 3.56)
Marital status		
Married (%)	6	42.9%
Divorced (%)	6	42.9%
Separated (%)	2	14.3%
Had children (%)	13	92.9
Education		
High school not completed (%)	4	28.6
High school (%)	9	64.3
Graduate degree (%)	1	7.1
Employment		
Part-time employed (%)	6	42.9
Not employed (%)	8	57.1

SD: standard deviation.

homes. Additionally, the research also examines the strategies the women have adopted as a way of coping with the abuse.

Research methods

Participants and procedures

The participants for this study were South Asian immigrant women who were experiencing or had experienced domestic abuse in their intimate relationships. Four social service agencies providing services to ethnic minorities in Hong Kong assisted in the initial recruitment of five participants. Utilizing the snowball sampling method, the five respondents, in turn, referred nine other women to the researchers. Thus a total of 14 women participated in this study. This study received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board. After identifying potential participants, they were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained from participants before conducting face-to-face interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identity. The author conducted all interviews, and each lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

At the time of interviews, 6 of the 14 women were still married, while the remaining 8 were separated or divorced and living independently. All but one participant had children. The majority of respondents (*n* = 10) originated from Pakistan, whereas two were from India and two from Nepal, ranging in age from 27 to 39 years (*M* = 33.9 years). All respondents had attained some level of high school education. Six respondents were employed part-time, and eight were not employed (see Table 1).

It was essential to choose a methodological approach that was best suited to the sensitive nature of the research and that would provide participants with an opportunity to express their experience in their own words and present their circumstances from their own subjective experience. As such, a qualitative method in the form of in-depth interviews allowed for the active involvement of the participants in the construction of data and in the findings that pertain to their experiences. All the interviews were audio-recorded with permission from participants and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed based on the procedures of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory. First, data

analysis involved open coding and then categorizing similar themes or concepts together and labeling them. Using axial coding, the various categories were reviewed and re-reviewed, making connections between categories. Although open and axial coding are said to occur in phases, they proceeded simultaneously as data were organized and analyzed.

Findings

Patriarchal beliefs

Patriarchal beliefs create power imbalances that may perpetuate violence (Erez, 2000), as men who uphold traditional beliefs about gender roles are more likely to sanction the use of violence (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). In this study participants talked about the power imbalance in their relationships, although the terms 'patriarchal belief' and 'gender role' were not mentioned specifically. For instance, the majority of participants said things like 'he controls the money', 'he stops me from going out', or 'he expects me to stay [at] home', and also talked of not being allowed to go out and meet their friends. Sunita and Ash talked about not being 'respected' by their husbands and of their husbands 'controlling them' by restricting their social interaction and expecting them to stay at home. Ash further stated, '*My partner does not respect me and thinks women are inferior to men. He thinks that a woman does not know anything. He makes all decisions in the house – very controlling ...*'. Similar sentiments were shared by eight of the participants, who indicated that their husbands expect them to fulfill the traditional wifely duties of obedience to their husband. Although the women in this study have migrated to Hong Kong, the families still uphold prescribed cultural gender role expectations. Previous studies conducted among South Asian women in Western societies have also reported that South Asian women are expected to fulfill the cultural expectations of women, and these studies have identified patterns of control and isolation events (Abraham, 2000; Chadhuri et al., 2014; Johnson and Ferraro, 2000).

In societies and ethnic communities with strong cultural and patriarchal ideologies, existence of domestic violence may be denied, and instead the women may be blamed for not upholding their duties (Dasgupta, 2000). For many women in such situations, keeping silent may become the preferred choice, rather than speaking out or seeking outside help. This concept is best reflected in Sunita's statement: '*Sometimes I just keep silent, because if I talk back, he will get angrier and beat me ...*'

Patriarchy and the family

Although other forms of male violence against women are shaped by patriarchy as well, men's right to dominate can be sacrosanct within a family (Dobash and Dobash, 1979), whereby patriarchy is maintained and reproduced through the socialization of patriarchal norms and values that are transferred from one generation to the next. Norms within such families are not only maintained, but also validate men's use of violence against them (Dasgupta, 2000; Sagot, 2005). Half of the participants (seven women) in this study shared that they were often told by their family members to keep quiet, to bear it, to preserve the family standing (reputation) and that the wife's duty was to obey her husband. Anita, for example, was 'advised' by a family member to '*try and live together with your husband ... be nice to your husband and your in-laws ...*' and was told that such '*problems*' are a normal part of marriage. Abraham (2000) had also recounted how the women in her study were also expected to suppress their needs and desires and to be self-sacrificing for the sake of maintaining the family reputation within the community.

Feminist theorists have argued that domestic violence is closely related to the historical development of the isolated nuclear family in a capitalist society. It relates to the division of public–private domains, to constructions of appropriate male and female family roles, and to the position of wives as being legally and morally bound to their husbands (Bograd, 1988). The public–private split has been a specific focus for feminist explanations of domestic violence because it emphasizes gender difference (Horsfall, 1991). In the private sphere of the family, the role of women has been that of wife, to help and serve the head of the house, the husband, and of fulfilling the expectation that the mother nurtures and rears the children. Hence, patriarchal role expectations for women in the family have been explicit and culturally constructed and embedded. Kelly and Radford (1996) further argued that women are encouraged to minimize the violence they experience from men, and this influences women's perceptions of the severity of violence they have experienced. Women find themselves caught between dominant mainstream definitions of acceptable behavior and their experiential knowledge.

Gender role expectations in the institution of marriage

IPV needs to be understood in terms of gendered power relations (Bograd, 1988), as male violence is an outcome of the social processes by which masculinity is constructed and stems from traditions and beliefs about what it means to be a man. An examination of the social context is vital in the theorizing of gendered power relations because women and men are bound by familial, cultural, and societal expectations of appropriate behavior (Hanmer, 2000). South Asian cultures have traditionally prescribed patriarchal gender roles, although there may be some variability in the degree to which families and cultures have ascribed to these (Segal, 1991). In patriarchal societies the male is the acknowledged authority, and women are expected to nurture and take care of the family and to maintain the family's honor (Assanand et al., 2005; Sagot, 2005). For example, Nina, one of the participants, stated that she felt it was her duty to take care of her husband and children, despite the abuse she suffered.

Women's roles in South Asian communities are inextricably linked to the men in their lives. According to Abraham (2000), for South Asians, marriage is seen as an essential institution which defines the status of women, irrespective of class, religion, or their country of origin. Within this marriage institution, patriarchal control is exercised over the woman, whereby the man dominates and demands various rights and privileges in his position as husband and son-in-law (Abraham, 2000), and women are expected to be self-sacrificing and obedient (Dasgupta and Warrier, 1996; Raj and Silverman, 2002). These cultural norms make it hard for the woman to challenge the hierarchies of gender, age, and status (Abraham, 2000; Siddique et al., 2008). The idea of male privilege may play a role in exacerbating the existing power imbalances. Participants in this study talked about the privileges enjoyed by men. For instance, Ash stated that '*Men have affairs, and if wives start to question them then the husband beats her … because he did not like the wife to question his action, he expects his wife to keep silent*'. Shamin also recounted some of the ways her husband controls her: '*He expects me to stay home and do housework and clean. He does not leave me any money … he keeps all the money ….*'

Ways of coping

Interview responses from the participants revealed that they have adopted various strategies to cope with the abuse. One of these was through envisioning a different future for their children. Most of the women in this study talked about how their hope for a better education and future for their children has helped them cope with their present predicament. This mode of coping

suggests a meaning-making process that arises from their experiences. The women were able to activate internal resources and formulate plans for the future by focusing on the needs of their children. For instance, Amira shared that whenever she feels sad and unhappy about her situation, she shifts the pattern of her thoughts from thinking about her '*bad marriage*' to thoughts about her children and the desire to give them a better future. This source of coping gave the women the strength to endure their situation. Saira, another participant, also had this to share: '*My children are my life, they mean everything to me. I live for them and wait for them to grow up and have a better future ….*' For Madhu, her children's future takes precedence over her suffering, as shared in her words: '*My children's future is my main concern. I want my children to have a better future in Hong Kong; both of them were born here ….*' Thinking of their children's future also gave the women the strength to bear the abuse they experienced, as evident from these excerpts: '*Every time I am depressed because of the abuse … just thinking about my children's future gives me the strength to bear it. I live for my children …*' (Shamin); '*I think of my daughter and her future … it gives me strength. I live for my daughter. She means the world to me …*' (Tamira).

Another form of coping was viewing their experience as being their 'fate' to maintain the marriage because they do not believe in divorce. For instance, Nina said, '*I feel it is my kismet (fate) in life that I take care of my husband, my children … it is not in my religion and culture to divorce*'. Sunita and Nina also echoed the same sentiment. Participants also talked about other modes of coping with the abuse, such as keeping silent in the face of abuse; locking oneself inside a room; withholding sex; seeking help from family, relatives, and friends; and shouting back at their husband when the abuse occurs.

Discussion

From this study, it can be hypothesized that South Asian women's experiences of abuse can operate along a continuum of cultural and social values and beliefs. The findings from our research among a small group of South Asian women living in Hong Kong suggest not only how patriarchal beliefs and practices have contributed to wife abuse, but also that the different gender roles for men and women are subject to different socialization processes. For example, women are taught to be good wives, to maintain harmony in the home, and to take care of the family, whereas men are taught to be the head and provider for the family. Another key finding of this study is the emphasis on collectivist cultural values, which sets it apart from Western concepts of individualist society (Yoshioka and Choi, 2005). It is therefore imperative to look for an alternative framework to help women who are facing abuse but are not ready to leave their abusive relationship. It is important to develop a continuum of services while at the same time focusing on ways to eliminate violence within an intimate relationship and providing women with the type of help they need while continuing to remain in their present relationship.

The ethnic communities of the participants, with their strong cultural and patriarchal ideologies, tend to deny the existence of domestic violence and instead put the blame on the women for not upholding their duties. The socially and culturally prescribed gender roles and norms have afforded more power to men, and women are expected to be self-sacrificing and obedient (Dasgupta and Warrier, 1996; Raj and Silverman, 2002), which makes it difficult for the women to challenge these hierarchies. The gender role expectations that exist within the family have formed the foundation of the various struggles and pressures felt by the women in this study as they have been expected to preserve traditional values and norms. With the responsibility of preserving the marriage being bestowed upon the wife, the women in our study were under added pressure to uphold the standards of family values.

The majority of our participants talked about their husbands restricting their social activities as well as controlling them financially. Some of the women shared that their husband restricted their social activities due to the fear that if the wife was exposed to ideas from outside the home, she might begin to assert herself and become less likely to obey him. To deal with their situation, the women in this study employed various coping strategies, such as focusing on their children's future rather than on their present situation and keeping silent. It is therefore important for helping professionals and service providers, such as social workers and counselors, to address the women's experiences of abuse in the context of their cultural experiences and other contextual factors.

Implications for social work practice

Community outreach is crucial to awakening the consciousness of the public and encouraging people to be cognizant of the detrimental effect of domestic violence. For a start, raising awareness in the community can be conducted through neighborhood publicity campaigns, domestic violence forums, working with youth to get the dialogue going among the younger generation, and teaching people how to respond in a supportive and non-victim-blaming way if a friend or family member is experiencing domestic violence. To address patriarchal ideologies and practices, it is necessary to increase knowledge about domestic violence in order to change the perceived community norms of silence, attitudes, and behavior related to domestic abuse. Equally, it is imperative for service providers and helping professionals to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the patriarchal cultural norms that affect women's lives and to recognize the important role the family and community play in a South Asian woman's everyday life. Recognition of this context is essential to the provision of effective services. Outreach among communities requires social workers to take a learning stance when working with ethnic communities and to create agendas that fit into and are not forced onto the communities they wish to engage. These processes promote change from within and allow communities to claim ownership of the issue being addressed and the changes that are required.

Social workers can assist South Asian women to be aware that while they are tolerating abuse for the sake of maintaining an intact family, their children's health, development, and well-being might, in fact, be jeopardized by their accommodation (Tonsing, 2014). When women understand that the cost of domestic violence to their mental and physical health can be high for both themselves and their children, it may help them to understand that it is not about disclosing a family secret, but rather that they are indeed saving lives. The women may also be more likely to make an active effort when they understand that even witnessing abuse can have a negative impact on their children (Holt et al., 2008). Knowledge can empower women, and educating women on the various physical and psychological impacts of domestic abuse on both themselves and their children can play a crucial role in helping to reduce male violence against women.

It will also be important to address obstacles that may prevent women from seeking help, such as the cultural stigma of divorce and the deeply embedded notions of family honor and shame. Women may feel ashamed to talk to others about abuse, thinking that if they had been a 'good wife' the abuse would not have happened, or fear being blamed for failing to maintain the marriage. One way a social worker can assist women is to help them understand that patriarchy is a universal social norm which expresses itself differently across different cultures, and help the women to make choices about which aspects of their culture they wish to continue practicing and those they find oppressive. It is also important to let the women know that they do not have to reject their culture or identity in order to resist patriarchal belief systems.

As observed in this study, one of the first sources of help the women sought was from family members. Therefore it is imperative for interventions to target the family in prevention and intervention strategies, such as through awareness-raising, information, and education using culturally valued processes. One way to do this is to make the family aware of the severity of the effect of abuse on women's and children's mental health and physical well-being and to develop programs and services to encourage family support for the women facing abuse.

Equally, it is imperative for service providers and helping professionals to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the patriarchal cultural norms that affect women's lives and to recognize the important roles the family and community play in a South Asian woman's everyday life. Recognition of this context is essential to the provision of effective services and to engage the community to develop non-traditional interventions that respect community values and perspectives. For example, focus groups can be used to gather an understanding of the way abuse is defined within a community. Outreach among communities requires social workers to take a learning stance when working with ethnic communities, to respect the needs and wishes of the community, and to be willing to create agendas that fit into and are not forced onto the communities they wish to engage. These processes promote change from within and allow communities to claim ownership of the issue being addressed and the changes that are required.

Limitations of this study

Our research is not without limitations. One limitation is the small sample size which limits the generalizability of the findings to women from the broader community. Another limitation is the lack of information about women in shelter (refuge) homes. Four shelter homes were contacted to solicit their assistance in recruitment of potential participants, but none of the four shelter homes were able to assist. Therefore, it cannot be ascertained here whether there are any differences in the experiences and modes of coping between the women who sought help from shelter homes and the women in this study. Future study is needed to assess their help-seeking behaviors and ways of coping among women who sought help from informal sources versus formal sources of support. Although the majority of our participants were from Pakistan (10 women), most of whom were Muslim, the shared common beliefs and values among them centered on the importance of family and children, irrespective of their ethnic background or country of origin.

Conclusion

This article draws upon the reflections and views of a small group of immigrant South Asian women living in Hong Kong who have been or are being abused by their husbands. Their narratives highlight the difficulties they have faced in challenging and dealing with a patriarchal ideology which is deeply embedded in their cultures. The qualitative data shared in this article emphasize that in order to address IPV in South Asian communities, social workers need to take into account the socio-cultural and historical context as well as the lived experiences of women experiencing IPV. There is also a concerted need for helping professionals, service providers, researchers, and conscientious community members to work together to address the issue of IPV at both the micro and macro levels. Additionally, it is needful to provide assistance, to lobby for community action and social services, and to initiate culturally specific programs and services for South Asian women experiencing IPV.

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