SOCIOECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN ALASKA

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INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence as being accepted, sanctioned and legalized within society and its potential detrimental influences on families has existed throughout history since Biblical times (1). The Women's Suffrage Movement in the 1800's slowly ignited feminist action against these sanctioned acts. The 1960's and 1970's Women's Movement, the sexual revolution and the Civil Rights Movement heightened societal concern for womens issues. In 1971, the first actual refuge for women originated in Chiswick, England; the Chiswick Women's Aid. By 1979, 60 similar shelters had been established in the United States and 100 in England (1). This evidence indicates a long and enduring history of women's suffrage with respect to domestic violence and its often "untold" effects on the lives and deaths of women.

Current national statistics indicate one of every six American families within the United States experiences some form of domestic violence (2). In 15 million existing American families within the United States, violence has taken place at least one or more times (2). Approximately 2,000 to 4,000 women lose their lives due to domestic violence (3), and an estimated 40% female and 10% male homicides are murders committed by their partners (3). In the United States, every 15 seconds a woman is beaten and every day four women lose their lives to violence delivered by a batterer (4). Although these rates appear startling, many women fail to report for a variety of reasons which may include shame and guilt (1), varied levels of abuse accepted by society (1), victim perceived as a loser and that victims are often viewed as participants unless evidence exists to determine otherwise (5). Carmen (6) examined an emergency trauma service and found initially one in twenty women reported an occurrence of domestic violence. In actuality, one in four women experienced abuse from domestic violence (6).

During the past 10-15 years with the growing concern of women's issues, researchers have begun exploring domestic violence within the family as a system and as a familial issue as opposed to the initial theoretical orientation of the psychoanalytic approach. The psychoanalytic approach incorporated several myths about victims of domestic violence, i.e. female victims are masochistic and husbands are sadistic, or battered women choose not to leave an abusive relationship and/or are attracted to abusive partners (7). Professionals often perpetuated these beliefs and would often blame the victim for the responsibility of the abuse (8). In actuality, most women: are not masochistic; do not find the abuse enjoyable; often meet a batterer by chance occurrence and not by some deep-seated need that includes violence; and are in fact, often physically injured if any attempts are made to leave the relationship (7).

Research currently cites four basic theoretical constructs describing domestic violence: 1) a tension-reduction hypothesis (11); 2) a structural or sociopsychological model which explores marital violence from a familial systems perspective; 3) societal or socio-cultural issues surrounding sex role attitudes; socialization processes and inequalities of males and females; as well as legitimized practices and values of a particular society or culture (1); 4) the prostrate-detonate-dominate-ingratiate syndrome (2). A common characteristic of each of these theories is the abused individual truly has the desire to believe the abuse will not occur again. This belief assists in the perpetuation of the abusive cycle. Several aspects of these theories incorporate the impact of employment and its inherent social support networks (12); perceptions and impacts of environmental stressors (11); inability to develop appropriate coping mechanisms (7); alienation (6); ethnicity (1); alcoholism (2,16,17); learned helplessness (6,13,16); entrapment (17); the loss of extended family and the isolated nuclear family (12); externalization/internalization (6); social roles (14); socialization of females and males (7,3) and isolation (15).

The occurrence of domestic violence in Alaska is relative to the incidence reported for the United States. In 1986, Stockholm and Helms (9) conducted what appeared to be the first statewide exploration of domestic violence towards women in Alaska. The study revealed the prevalence of domestic violence to be 26% (approximately 1 in 4) of adult women having been abused by a spouse or live-in partner at some time during their adult life. A total of 13,200 women required some form of medical care from a physician or hospital for abuse-related injuries during this same year. These women reported alcohol as a contributing factor in relation to violence for 45.7% of those abused the previous year. Of those women abused during their lifetime, 64.7% indicated alcohol was a factor. This report cited 63.3% of women were abused during the past year with most reporting abuse occurring at least once a month and 34.5% of those abused during their lifetime reported their children had been abused as well. In 1986, 20% of all murders in Alaska were the

result of domestic violence.

Assistance for women of domestic violence is available for women and their children within the state of Alaska by means of shelters designed to provide respite, safety and freedom from violence occurring in the home. Anchorage hosts the largest shelter within the state with respect to its large population. The AWAIC (Abused Women's Aid in Crisis, Inc.) shelter client profile for 1989 indicated 414 women utilized the shelter of which 40% repeated admissions once and 72.74% of this population repeated admissions two or three times during 1989. The number of walk-ins and ongoing appointments for 1988 were 220 women and 479 women in 1989; individual counseling hours recorded were 364 in 1988 and 588.75 in 1989 as documented by the shelter's community based services. The number of shelter nights and clients year to date for the past five years varied from 3,281 to 5,501.

Average length of stay was approximately ten days. Upon discharge from the shelter women were requested to designate their destination. Thirty percent returned to a relationship where abuse had occurred (half of these anticipated change), 20% relocated independently, 18% moved in with family or friends while 15% were unknown.

This paper explores socioeconomic and environmental issues unique to an Alaskan environment to describe such trends as documented. The areas of potential influence with regard to the incidence of domestic violence include: drug/alcohol use; seasonal changes; cold; darkness; isolation; depression; transportation; support networks; economic trends/financial resources; as well as history of frequency and severity of abuse.

METHOD

Subjects

Women admitted to the AWAIC shelter were asked to voluntarily complete a self-report questionnaire. During a four month period 35 admissions completed the questionnaires. The mean age for these women was 35.4 years. The ethnicity represented within this population was 54.5% Caucasian, 18.2% Native Alaskan, 15.2% Black, with 6.1% Hispanic, and the remaining 6.0% Oriental or non-specified. The mean years of education completed for this population was 11.8 years.

Procedure

The operational definition of abuse utilized in the data gathering of this study was the physical and/or psychological injury of the individual towards their partner (10). Previous concerns about data collection regarding domestic violence included sampling bias, generalizability, failure to employ appropriate comparison control groups, use of self-report for data, and an operational definition for spousal abuse. This study is limited to Alaskan women experiencing domestic violence within the Anchorage area which may include unique socioeconomic and environmental aspects which may increase severity and frequency of incidence. Biodemographic data was provided through the completion of a self-report questionnaire. The clinical data collected consisted of the following variables: ethnicity, length of time in Alaska; income and primary source of income; education; children; transportation; affects of seasonal changes; depression; length of relationship; abusive history as a child; alcohol/drug abuse and history of violence of parents; alcohol/drug abuse and history of violence as an adult; frequency and severity of abuse; use of social networks; and influences in decision making processes to leave or stay in the current abusive relationship.

RESULTS

The age of women entering the shelter during this time ranged from 21 to 69 years. The average length of time living in Alaska was 12.5 years. Monthly income of $800 and below was reported by 46.9% while 53.1% reported income of $801 and above with 28.1% of this proportion reporting an income of $1200 to $1400+. Primary sources of income were 42% receiving public assistance, 35.5% indicated their partner, and 19.4% reported self. A majority of women, 45% reported owning their own car, 29% utilized public transportation, and 26% indicated other means of transportation. There were 76% of women stating they had 0, 1 or 2 children. The mean length of time in their current abusive relationship was 9.25 years with 61.6% reporting 6 or less years. The batterer's relationship was 63% legal spouse, 8.6% common law, 14.3% live-in partner, 8.6% not live-in, and 5.7% other, which some indicated as other relatives.

In reference to physical and sexual abuse of the subjects as children, within their family of origin, 42.4% and 21.2% respectively reported incidence. With regard to alcohol use in the family of origin, 55.8% reported their mothers drank sometimes to very often and 74.3% indicated their fathers drank sometimes to very often. Few reported any other types of drugs taken by either parent. The childhood history of each subject was explored to determine any observation of violence in the home. Subjects reported 54.3% viewed violence in the home between parents. A majority, 54.3% reported they had never been in an abusive relationship in the past and 25.7% reported they had been in several. Self-report of alcohol use indicated 76.5% had used alcohol sometimes to very often with 67.6% of this population reporting sometimes. Use of other drugs elicited a response of 62.9% denial with 34.3% of this proportion reporting sometimes to very often. In exploring the batterer's use of alcohol and other drugs, 84.4% used alcohol sometimes to very often

with 34.4% of this population using very often and 78.8% using other forms of drugs on a sometimes to very often basis. Alcohol use was related to the abuse 68.9% on a sometimes to very often basis with 37.9% of this proportion identified as very often. The use of other drugs which may initiate an abusive incidence was reported to occur with 58.2% of the batterers use of other drugs sometimes to very often. In relation to the incidence of physical abuse, Table 1 illustrates the frequency and means of abuse toward subjects.

As the current definition of abuse includes physical injury as well as psychological insult, the types of injuries and insults as a result of abuse from the current batterer were examined. Table 2 represents the responses.

Actual and perceived support networks for women of domestic violence can often play a crucial role in assistance with gaining the support which is often necessary for their recovery and/or survival. The subjects were asked about the frequency of use of their current emotional support networks. Table

TABLE 1. TYPE AND PERCENTAGE OF ABUSE REPORTED BY WOMEN OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

	Never	Once	Once a month or Less	2 - 3 times per Month	Once a Week	Twice a Week to Daily
Threw things	15.6	9.4	28.1	37.5	0.0	9.4
Held against your will	21.1	12.1	18.2	24.2	9.1	15.2
Pushed you around	18.2	6.1	27.3	24.2	9.1	15.2
Slapped you	22.6	12.9	25.8	25.8	3.2	9.7
Punched you	42.4	6.1	24.2	15.2	3.0	9.1
Pulled you	24.1	6.9	34.5	20.7	3.4	10.3
Pulled your hair	37.5	15.6	21.9	18.8	3.1	3.1
Choked you	53.1	12.5	9.4	18.8	3.1	3.1
Burned you	87.1	12.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Kicked you	45.2	25.8	12.7	9.7	3.2	3.2
Used a weapon or object against you	63.3	23.3	3.3	0.0	0.0	10.O
Forcing sex	39.4	9.1	9.1	12.1	6.1	24.2
Deliberate failure to provide necessities	33.3	3.3	10.0	13.3	6.7	33.3
Personal insults	0.0	3.2	9.7	12.9	6.5	67.7
Threatened physical harm	9.4	18.8	25.0	25.0	6.3	15.6
Threatened sexual harm	58.1	19.4	12.9	3.2	0.0	6.5
Threatened to use weapons	50.0	12.5	18.8	12.5	3.1	3.1
Threatened to kill you	25.0	28.1	28.1	9.4	6.3	3.1
Threatened to harm your child(ren)	75.0	9.4	9.4	0.0	0.0	6.3

TABLE 2. TYPE AND PERCENTAGE OF PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INJURY

	Never	Once	Once a month or Less	2 - 3 times per Month	Once a Week	Twice a Week to Daily
Bruises	21.9	12.5	31.3	25.0	6.3	3.1
Cuts	58.1	12.9	22.6	3.2	3.2	0.0
Sprains, dislocations	69.7	21.2	3.0	3.0	3.0	0.0
Teeth knocked out/broken	97.0	3.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Burns	87.1	6.5	6.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
Head injury/concusion	64.5	22.6	9.7	0.0	3.2	0.0
Broken bones	84.8	9.1	3.0	0.0	3.0	0.0
Miscarriage	93.8	6.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Permanent injury	78.1	9.4	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.1
Low self-esteem	6.3	9.4	3.1	18.8	3.1	59.4
Feelings of being helpless	3.3	6.7	3.3	13.3	13.3	60.0
Fearful to reach out for help	13.3	6.7	13.3	23.3	10.0	33.3
Fearful for children	40.6	15.6	6.3	3.1	6.3	28.1
Fearful for my life	15.2	18.2	6.1	18.2	9.1	33.3

TABLE 3. FREQUENCY OF USE OF SUPPORT NETWORKS

	Never	Once	Once/Mo	2-3/Mo	1/wk	2/wk-daily
Immediate Family	58.6	6.9	13.8	0.0	3.4	17.2
Extended Family	63.0	11.1	7.4	7.4	0.0	11.1
Friends	16.7	16.7	20.0	6.7	13.3	26.7
Church	64.5	3.2	12.9	0.0	9.7	9.7
Batter's Family	71.4	14.3	3.6	0.0	0.0	10.7
Counseling	26.7	26.7	16.7	10.0	6.7	13.3
Social Service Agency	42.9	28.6	7.1	3.6	3.6	14.3

3 depicts the frequency of use of these specified networks.

Environmental conditions unique to an arctic region which may affect ability to cope with the consequences of living in a domestic violent situation were explored as well. Table 4 describes the influence of specific conditions relative to women of domestic violence.

Subjects were asked what their immediate actions after abusive incidents entailed. These actions ranged from nothing to social supports to legal action. Table 5 demonstrates the frequency of actions utilized by subjects.

In examining the variable of ethnicity with respect to the population served by AWAIC to the population at large within Anchorage and surrounding areas, it was found the shelter serves a higher proportion of Blacks and Native Alaskans. A Chi Square revealed a significant difference between expected versus observed frequencies with a critical value of 26.48 at $p < .01$.

Subjects were requested to select the most import-

TABLE 4. INFLUENCE OF ARCTIC ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS ON WOMEN OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Conditions	Positive	Negative	No Difference
Cold	19.2	80.8	0.0
Darkness	0.0	61.5	38.5
Snow and ice	0.0	92.6	7.4
Isolation of self	3.7	66.7	29.6
Isolation from family within Anchorage area	0.0	50.0	50.0
Isolation from family outside Anchorage area	3.7	55.6	40.7
Access to transportation	24.0	52.0	24.0
Long daylight hours	73.1	3.8	23.1
Long winters	0.0	82.8	17.2
Warm summers	84.0	0.0	16.0
Ability to find employment	34.6	46.2	19.2
Ability to maintain employment	37.0	37.0	25.9
Affordable clothing	21.4	50.0	28.6
Contact with family outside Alaska	24.0	40.0	36.0
Public assistance	12.5	33.3	54.2
Lack of transportation	0.0	70.4	29.6
Contact with family within Alaska	18.2	13.6	68.2

TABLE 5. PERCENTAGE AND ACTION TAKEN IMMEDIATELY AFTER ABUSE BY WOMEN OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Action	Never	Once	Some-times	Often times	Very often
Nothing	24.2	6.1	30.3	18.2	21.2
Contacted a friend	12.5	28.1	34.4	9.4	15.6
Contacted my minister	66.7	16.7	13.3	0.0	3.3
Called a shelter/safe home	22.6	48.4	12.9	12.9	3.2
Called the police	32.3	35.5	22.6	3.2	6.5
Visited a shelter	16.1	54.8	19.4	3.2	6.5
Contacted my family members	43.8	12.5	28.1	6.3	9.4
Contacted batterer's family	66.7	16.7	10.0	0.0	6.7
Called social service agency	48.4	35.5	12.9	0.0	3.2
Threatened the batterer	50.0	21.9	18.8	6.3	3.1
Left home	15.2	30.3	21.2	9.4	24.2
Took legal action	40.0	33.3	13.3	6.7	6.7

ant factors which would influence their decision to stay or leave an abusive relationship. The respondents ranked the following factors as most important to least important in their decision making process to stay in an abusive relationship: determined to make marriage work, sense of family, children, preservation of self, love, religion, finances, and health and security. The following factors were ranked as most important to least important in their decision making process to leave an abusive relationship: children, preservation of self, health and security, religion, love, determined to make marriage work, sense of family, and finances.

DISCUSSION

Heise reports the frequency of violence toward women is prevalent throughout the world (4). The level of acceptance, legitimacy, and sanctioning of violence towards women vary as well as the label applied which often assists in its justification of occurrence.

Within the realm of this study, examination of the data reveals Alaskan women of domestic violence appear quite similar to women of other geographical areas within the United States with regard to frequency and history of abuse. However, environmental and socioeconomic issues of living in Alaska appear to increase levels of stressors, decrease tolerance thresholds and effect decision making abilities. O'Nell (19) explored the effects of violence control among nonviolent Zapotec of Oaxaca, Mexico and found the underlying theme of the nonviolent nature of those people to be that of mutual respect for one another as an individual. The literature, as well as this study, appears to indicate the lack of mutual respect among individuals within domestic violent situations.

The Alaska Native Women's Statewide Organization (20) has made efforts to explore solutions to violence within the village communities. It appears as though part of the cycle which leads to the fear to reach out for assistance, feelings of helplessness and alienation and isolation are being served. The approach being taken is community based and appears to be twofold: 1) since the incidents become a community issue or concern, neither the woman nor the batterer are alone in the process of recovery, and 2) the community instills the inherent responsibility of the children's welfare (20).

With the extreme stressors women of domestic violence encounter, perhaps a closer examination of areas which are stress inducing would assist in developing new or replacing ineffective coping mechanisms which often are learned as a child and are the only means known to cope. Mirowsky and Ross (21) provide a most useful model which incorporates many of the predicted stressors within this study. Although stress and alcohol do not cause domestic violence to occur, it has been previously documented as a concern for Arctic regional countries as well as reported to influence the frequency and severity of physical and psychological abuse towards women as evident in this study.

As presented in the literature, as well as this study, many inequities exist for women. This process occurs early in the developmental orientation of sense of self for both males and females (17). Perhaps it is this sense of self that is to be re-established within women of domestic violence prior to education of "co-dependency", self-assertiveness, empowerment, etc. If a woman suffering from depression and anxiety to the extent of warranting a diagnosis of Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (5,18), low self-esteem, feelings of helplessness, etc., she may not perceive herself as being assertive or empowered. Therefore, the skills learned within a shelter setting may not be utilized and the cycle of violence occurs again.

Heise reports when infant mortality rates were increasing primarily in the Third World countries, the single most effective means to decrease fatalism, improve self-confidence and change the power balance within the family was education (4). Heise continues to state the critical element to the reception of such education is women's sense of self (4).

Most shelters are voluntary admissions as well as discharges. Education is a critical element which most shelters implement within the programs designed for women. However, the length of stay often prohibits all educational aspects to be delivered to all women. Since domestic violence occurs at all levels of socioeconomic, cultural, educational and geographical areas, women not seeking assistance from a shelter may seek individual therapy via private practitioners. Regardless, of the mode of assistance, it appears the development of a sense of self for women is critical in the recovery process of the effects of domestic violence. Thereby, the educational programs previously described may be more successful, beneficial and utilized more freqently by women of domestic violence.

Future research may explore methods of delivering services to women of domestic violence which incorporates the development of a sense of self as well as examining the specific stressors which may influence the decision making processes of women in these situations. Through these efforts, women learn to respect themselves, break the cycle of violence, live without fear and future generations will learn to live without the detrimental consequences of domestic violence.

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