African women's experience of domestic violence and help-seeking behaviour in Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract

This study explored African refugee background women's experience of domestic violence and help-seeking behaviour. The women were part of a domestic violence prevention and intervention project run by a local community organisation. Underpinned by help-seeking frameworks such as Theory of Planned Behaviour, data were gathered via two focus group interviews with seventeen women in Melbourne, Australia. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The results showed that participants experienced different forms of violence. Many did not seek help early, and help-seeking was constrained by cultural considerations and children in the relationship. Implications are discussed in relation to formal and informal support or interventions.

Key Words: Domestic Violence, Experiences, Help-seeking, African Women, Refugees, Australia

Introduction

Domestic violence in families is a universal problem, occurs in all cultures and societies, and is precipitated by structural, personal, relational, and environmental factors (Rees & Pease, 2007). The negative impact of domestic violence is broad, far reaching and affects all members of a family, including children, in diverse ways (Lacey, McPherson, Samuel, Powell et al.,2013; Satyen, et al., 2018). In Australia, the causal factors, how they manifest in new, emerging communities or recently arrived refuge/migrant groups, and how people seek help, depart slightly from what is known about the phenomenon in mainstream society (Satyen, Rogic & Supol, 2019), and therefore worthy of investigation. Indeed, compared to non-immigrant women in Australia, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women experience relatively more violence, because theirs is one of "multi-perpetrator family violence, exacerbated by immigration policy, visa status and the stressors of the migration experience" (Vaughan, et al., 2015,p. 2).

Issue of study

The African community in Australia is relatively new, expanding and faces enormous post-settlement and integration challenges. As a result, a substantial percentage of African women in Australia have a refugee experience and face post-resettlement challenges resulting in poor living arrangements, financial difficulties, and marriage problems (Community Abundance, 2017). These challenges create fertile environments for domestic violence in families (Sullivan, Senturia, Negash, et al. 2005). However, there is limited research about the unique issues contributing to the domestic violence, community members' experiences of domestic violence and how they seek help. Furthermore, despite the availability of domestic violence services in Australia, evidence suggests utilisation of such services is not optimal or many victims do not seek professional help for various reasons (Dagistanli, et al., 2020). In the last few years, the Victorian government stepped up funding to community

organisations through the Multicultural Affairs and Social Cohesion Division to raise awareness of domestic violence and support victims and their families (Government of Victoria, 2021). Some African community organisations have been involved in this state-wide initiative and their experiences have revealed that cultural issues, lack of awareness of the law, support sources and how to seek help contribute to negative outcomes (Community Abundance, 2019). Based on these reports, there was a need for an exploration of the domestic violence experiences of African women (who participated in these project activities), their sources of support and approaches to help seeking.

Aim of Study

This study aimed to explore African women's experience of domestic violence, sources of help and help-seeking behaviours. As an exploratory study, its significance lies in the fact that the data emerges from a community-led participatory project that contributes to better understanding of the factors that contribute to domestic violence, and the enablers and constraints of help-seeking, as a foundation for developing better preventive and support programs.

Research Questions

- What are the refugee women's experiences of domestic violence?

- What are the help seeking behaviours of women victims of domestic violence?

Literature Review

Nature and Causes of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence involves an individual experience of abuse from an immediate family member or social environment through enforcing power and control over the victim (Flury, Nyberg & Riecher-Rossler, 2010). Domestic violence can take

many forms including physical (wherein victims suffer physical harm which could result in injuries and other health risks), psychological and emotional (wherein victims endure verbal harassment, defamation, threats or coercion), and neglect and financial abuse (Flury, et al, 2010, Hamby, 2017).

Past research shows that many factors are implicated in domestic violence, including partner incompatibility, financial stress, alcohol and drugs, cultural/ ethnic specific issues, among others (Al Ajlan, 2022; Vaughan, et al. 2015). Within refugee background families in Australia, Reese and Pease (2007) reported that history, social and economic context, structurally based inequalities, culturally emerged challenges, psychological stress and patriarchal foundations contributed to domestic violence. On their part, Fisher (2013) and Muchoki (2013) confirmed that disruption of traditional gender, family roles and expectations contributed to domestic violence among African refugee and migrant-background families. Fisher's (2013) study showed that in a post-settlement environment, cultural transitional factors related to "male loss of the breadwinner role and status," "financial independence," and "mismatch between formal response and (cultural) expectations" of the families played a major role in domestic violence. This finding is particularly useful in helping frame our understanding how victims of domestic violence might perceive and respond to abuse, protect themselves from abuse and seek help for abuse.

Impact of Domestic Violence

The impacts of domestic violence range from psychological, emotional distress, physical injuries, and poor general health to economic and social incapacitation (Lacey, et al.,2013; Sharps et al., 2021; Satyen et al., 2019). Women and children constitute the most vulnerable groups in domestic violence situations (Reese & Pease, 2007) and immigration increases the vulnerability of women to domestic violence (West, 2016). Female victims fear being attacked or killed by their male partners (Fisher, 2013; Zannettino, 2012), and are likely to face

many challenges such as trauma, physical harm, physical, financial, and housing insecurity or homelessness (Martin, et al. 2019). These varied impacts represent significant barriers to abused women leaving a domestic violence situation or unhealthy relationships (Sullivan & Goodman. 2019). In families with domestic violence, positive interactions are curtailed as violence deprives children of routine activities, recreation, play and education, resulting in reduced development opportunities and needs fulfillment. Repeated episodes of violence have considerable and enduring negative effects on children's mental health as they cause emotional/ psychological distress (Satyen et al., 2019; Sawrikar & Katz, 2017; Vaughan, et al. 2015).

Seeking Help for Domestic Violence

Social workers and families encourage victims of domestic violence to seek help early. While there is a generic approach to help-seeking, Di Fabio and Bernaud (2008) argue that there is also a distinct or problem-specific approach to help-seeking behaviour. Domestic violence poses a different risk to personal wellbeing and victims' reactions are based on several factors including the level of psychological distress, cultural factors, and motivation. Therefore, differences in help seeking are associated with individual differences including gender (Hines, 2016), cultural background (Fisher, 2013), level of psychological distress generated by the problem and motivation, power or capacity to seek help (Randell, Bledsoe, Shroff, et al., 2012). Landis et al. (2005) also found help-seeking to be influenced by individual thresholds for the seriousness of the violence, a perceived requirement to end the relationship, shame and criticism, service barriers such as counsellors, medical, police or supportive person in family/ community.

` Australian literature confirms that victims of domestic violence from migrant/ refugee backgrounds are reluctant to seek formal support due to language difficulties, limited access to interpreters, concerns about children, lack of knowledge of services, and legal rights and structural factors including finances

and unemployment (Ghafournia, 2011; James, 2010; Ogunsiji, et al., 2012; Satyen, et al., 2018; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2009). The lack of culturally suitable services is also reported by Fisher (2013) and West (2016), who note that mechanisms such as the police, the criminal justice system, and protective orders and restraining orders are barriers to help seeking as they are considered culturally inappropriate. It is possible that the help-seeking behaviours of African women in Australia will be affected by cultural differences and their perceptions of how to deal with domestic violence.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by theories of help-seeking such as the General Theory of Help-Seeking (Mechanic, 1978), the Cultural Determinants of Help Seeking (CDHS) Model (Arnault, 2009) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 2005).

One of the ten points outlined by Mechanic (1978) in the General Theory of Help-Seeking explains individual help-seeking behaviour towards illness or an adverse condition as a cost. While victims of domestic violence are not suffering illness as considered by Mechanic, the cost of seeking help is a useful point that relates to domestic violence. Mechanic observes that cost is not only about money people must pay to see a professional, but is also about the alternative cost to individual need: what repercussions will ensue if the victim seeks help is an important consideration that accounts for whether help is sought.

In the CDHS models, help-seeking relies on "cultural inputs as cognitive guides for perception, emotion and behaviour … [These inputs inform] the person to attend to certain aspects of his or her experience, what to ignore, what things mean and what should be done about them" (Arnualt, 2009, p.4). In the case of domestic violence, cultural norms are important in determining what the distress caused by violence means for the victim. As Arnault (2009) notes, when signs of wellness or distress are observed, people consider the meanings of their experiences and

symptoms based on cultural ideals, and when and where they seek help. This point is relevant to how the African women in our study perceived domestic violence help-seeking and where they sought help. The cultural considerations align with elements of help-seeking set out in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985).

This Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) has been utilised in numerous studies to understand behaviour and posits that behaviour can most accurately be determined by intentions, which can be predicted by three kinds of considerations - Attitudes Toward Behaviour, Perceived Behavioural Control, and Subjective Norm (Ajzen, 1985). In the TPB model, Attitudes, Perceived Behavioural Control and Subjective Norm combine to enable intention to enact a behaviour. According to TPB, these three considerations translate into beliefs about likely consequences or attributes of the behaviour (Attitudes towards behaviour), beliefs about factors that may further or hinder performance of behaviour (control beliefs or Perceived Behavioural Control) and beliefs about normative expectations (normative beliefs or Subjective Norn, which is the social expectations of significant others) (Rathbone, 2014). TPB indicates that people seek help differently for different issues (Rathbone, 2014) and in relation to domestic violence, women seeking help might consider the likely consequences of help-seeking, the normative expectations of others (especially their significant others) in their community (Fisher, 2013), and other factors (such as knowledge of the law). All three theoretical frames discussed above were considered in the interviews with participants and in the discussion of the study results.

Method

Design

Framed within the Interpretivists/Constructivists Paradigm (Creswell, 2018), this study used semi-structured focus group interviews to explore African women's experiences of domestic violence. The interpretivist paradigm holds that truth

about a phenomenon is socially constructed and therefore there is not one absolute truth, but rather multiple truths. In this study, the subjective experiences of domestic violence by African women in South-Eastern Melbourne, Australia which are varied, constituted differential constructions. Therefore, a qualitative approach to research was considered more suitable to investigate their experiences, allowing participants to co-construct and share their near similar and yet different experiences.

Participants

The participants were seventeen women of refugee and migrant backgrounds living in South-Eastern Melbourne, Victoria, who were already participating in a community-level ddomestic violence awareness, prevention and intervention workshops led by an African community organisation operating in Melbourne South-East. The participants, who all had children, ranged in age from 24- 56 years, and originally migrated from South Sudan (mainly), Kenyan, Sudan and Ethiopia. Eleven of the participants (65 %) were either separated, divorced or heading single-parent homes. Six were still married or in two parent homes.

Instruments, Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers employed an interview guide for data collection with the interview questions centred on experiences of domestic violence, when and how participants sought help and reasons for not seeking help early or not doing so at all. The use of focus group interviews was justified and recommended because domestic violence is a traumatic experience and the researchers believed that engaging with such difficult or traumatising experiences in groups could be therapeutic as group fellowship was likely to help participants cope better with the process. Consent (verbal or written) was sought from participants before interviews. The seventeen women were allocated randomly to two groups based on their availability on the scheduled interview

dates. The first focus group interview had nine participants while the second focus group interview had eight participants. Two members of the project team (one woman and one man) facilitated the focus group interviews using English, Dinka and Arabic languages to ensure full participation.

Guided by the notion of hermeneutic phenomenology, participants' responses were audio recorded, transcribed and shared with them for verification and corrections. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, along the lines recommended by Braun and Clark (2006), because it aligns with the epistemological and ontological positions of the Interpretivist / constructionist paradigm, which supports participants to construct and share their lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, domestic violence experiences are unique to each participant and thematic analysis helps to clarify their subjective human experiences (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, the interview notes were read several times to gain a better understanding of the content. After listening to the recordings, transcribing/reading, the *initial codes* were generated by looking for key words and/or phrases that reflected experiences of domestic violence, impacts on individuals and family members, why and how they sought help or did not seek help and what might be done to support victims of domestic violence. The main themes that emerged were personal Experiences of the domestic violence situation, Help seeking, enablers and barriers, Sources of help, adequacy and reliability, and Motivation for seeking specific types of help.

Results

The main themes emerging from the focus group interview data were (personal) Experiences of domestic violence, Help seeking enablers and barriers (which had sub-themes such as Family pressures and cultural beliefs, Concerns about Children in the Marriage, Fear of Repercussions); Sources of help, adequacy

and reliability; and Motivation for seeking specific types of help. These themes and sub-themes are presented below.

Experiences of Domestic Violence

The participants reported difficult and emotional experiences of domestic violence that involved physical and non-physical forms of domestic violence including fights and verbal exchanges, threats, humiliating comments and restrictions to normal living. Casual factors related to changing family dynamics post-settlement, job and financial difficulties, as well as meeting or supporting children's needs. They also reported the difficulties and/or frustration with explaining their situation to their larger family and relatives due to cultural beliefs about domestic violence in marriage. In general, the participants felt that their parents and relatives held cultural beliefs that somewhat required them to tolerate domestic violence as part of the norm of marriage. The participants did not share such beliefs and wanted to break free of the violence perpetrated by husbands. Regarding this, Respondent #1, speaking through an interpreter, said:

> *My marriage was good at first…but I had bad experience with domestic violence. It good to tell it. (but) sometimes if I want to talk about it , it gives me bad feelings, sometimes I am crying. It is very hard. Because I went through it…(Pause…becomes emotional, recovers). I got married to the man I like him. We have three kids, but we have separated. He engaged in violence; it was not physical violence always. It hurt me a lot and I felt sad and cried a lot. I did not get help with tasks in the home or with the children. I was suffering. I tried to be strong and keep it to myself. We come from culture where our mothers and grandmothers tell us that things will be fine because they went through these things, for example beating and if a man abused you, they will take you back to the house (i.e., the marital home) because the man has paid dowry.*

Respondent #3:

My experience was very bad. We were always fighting because many things were difficult in the house. The man did not have job and the kids were not happy, not enough food and things for school but there was no help. It is not like home [in Africa], there you get help from parents, and grandparents. Many people have pain and when the mothers and fathers start to fight more, the children run away from home. When the Corona Virus pandemic came, it made things worse. No job for the father and he got more angry…and it was more dangerous for me. I talked to my friend and then we talked a social worker and the worker helped me to find a solution.

Seeking Help for Domestic Violence: Enablers and Barriers

In responding to why some people don't seek help or take a long time to seek help, the participants' responses came under four key themes: Family pressures and cultural beliefs about Domestic Violence and how to approach it, Concerns about children in the marriage, Fear of Repercussions, and Reliable sources of help.

Family pressures and cultural beliefs

African societies have large/extended families. In such large families, collective expectations can create pressure on individuals, especially with marriage where high traditional bridal costs (dowry) and/or church vows constitute huge incentives for respecting the sanctity of marriage. The pressure to stay married has influence on how victims deal with domestic violence.

One of the participants (Respondent #9) said:

Our family is big family, and I was scared to tell the family. Also, we got married in the church and church things are difficult. When you give a vow, it is a very committed thing, especially for Christians. Not me alone, sometimes the women think that the person will change, but they don't change. And

besides that, because of the community, they are scared that people will talk about them and say that the person is a bad person.

Adding to the role of family pressure, Respondent #10 said:

....in large families, we have fear of telling people what is going on. If they tell you to stay with the man sometimes it is because of dowry the man paid....they don't want the marriage to finish. Also, marriage vows in the church, it makes women take time and even if the situation is not good.

Concerns about children in the marriage

The participant responses touched on concerns about the effect of domestic violence on children. In this case, it was the anticipated negative effects on children of separation or leaving the domestic violence situation rather the traumatising effect of violence on children's development. In this regard, Respondent #6 said:

Another reason for the problem with domestic violence is about the children. When you get married and you get kids straight away and you have problem with the man, you have big thinking about separating. Because in our culture, when you divorce, the kids have to be with their father and not the mother. So, this one keeps the women in domestic violence, in abuse. And it is one big reason to keep the Sudanese women with the men.

Respondent # 4 corroborated the above saying:

Like my sister said, when you have kids straight away in marriage, and abuse comes from the man, you are thinking about the kids. Here in Australia, when you separate with the man and you have kids, the kids have no future too. They are going to come up with excuse, my dad, where is my dad. And

they go in the street because of the dad. This one keeps us in the violence too. Because when you think about separating from the man, even last year, I wanted to separate from my man, but I think about my kids. If I separate, they are going to be with no father. When they grow up, this is going to be a big issue for me. So, this keeps us with the men, with abusive.

Respondent # 10:

Back home (in Africa) the women take it like a culture, but now we educated. We know what abuse is, but we are still abused now because in Australia, the culture is different, the kids are different, so this is confusing us now. You stay in abuse or you leave your kids to go to the streets. This is making us very confused.

Fear of repercussions

The women reported that there is fear of repercussion from larger family or husbands who are already disillusioned by the changing gender roles and empowerment of women. This hinders help seeking. In relation to this, Respondent # 12 said:

Many of us women, sometimes we don't want to upset our husbands. They are already angry and they can become more angry. Also we worry about our mothers, fathers and family back home, what they will say about the marriage.

Adding, Respondent #14 said:

I agree…especially for women, they say that Australia is become like women's power. Because before (we came here), men were up (above women) and now we are all equal. Men don't want that, they don't want you to have a voice, or say 'no, I am not going to do this'. And ours is not (a) supporting culture. Even my mother will say sometimes, no this is not how

we do things, and I will say mum, 'no, this is not you. It is us; this is my generation, we need things to change.

Sources of Help, Adequacy and Reliability

The data indicated that the main sources of help for participants are close family members and close friends, especially women. The lack of formal and informal sources of help was highlighted in the responses. Regarding help sources, Participant #5 said:

I ask my family and ask women friends. I try to tell my family that I have problem. I don't feel shy to tell my mother….I am not afraid to tell my mother that I have problem with my husband and that I fight….I mean we fight with our tongue….Some of the women cannot get help from their families.

For most participants help sources were inadequate or unreliable. In lamenting this reality, the women's responses contemplated the "reliable" nature of informal help sources in Africa vis-à-vis the unreliable informal and formal sources in Australia, including lack of support from government services for domestic violence and even financial difficulties, which contribute to violence. Explaining their dilemma, Participant #9 said:

Back home we get help from parents, uncles and aunties. But here in Australia you cannot get help unless you go to police. If I go to others here and say I have problem, maybe my problem is better than the other person's problem; because we are in the same situation in Australia.… So, as we sit here, …, we need help from leaders and whole community and churches. Some of the people, they are sitting at home and cannot get any solution….nowhere to go to get help and we are terrified of all things a lot. So I say, can you help us (as a community)?

Elaborating on the issues raised above, Participant #15 focused on economic difficulties and family dynamics, and lack of government support saying:

> *Also, we have problem (with our) economy. A lot of things happen if you don't have a job, the man will be by himself shouldering the economic problems. Because the woman is not working, it creates more opportunities for violence. If everything is not enough in the house, the kids run away, and mother and father start violence because there is no help for anything like school, transport, sports...And we need help for this, and the government is not helping.*

Motivation for Seeking Specific Type of Help

Responding to the question of what the motivation is for seeking specific type of help, participants said that taking that next step depended on the nature of abuse and whether particular sources of help could fix the problem. Their responses suggested that many women are motivated to seek help from different sources but are hindered by the lack of suitable avenues and other factors - family, neighbours, police, community leaders, and fear of stigma or backbiting after telling your story to others. Formal services such as police is considered problematic and informal local community resources are inadequate or ill-equipped. In general, if a victim considered that the man (perpetrator) could change their behaviour upon consultations with close family and community elders, such support would be sought. On the other hand, if the violence was severe and the first option was unlikely to succeed, formal services were considered, with caution and hesitation for fear of repercussions. In this regard, the participants explained as follows.

> Respondent #12: *Asking for help…. depends on type of problem. if the problem can be fixed, you can think of calling people to fix it or maybe you want to involve police. When police get involved, men get angry more. Police cannot give a solution; they make it worse for the person….(especially) when*

he (the man) is given the separation paper or intervention order or something. When they give the intervention order and the period is finished and the man comes back, then it will be worse. It will not be like the first one, they will revenge. Someone can kill you for that. Some people can kill for that.

Continuing, Respondent #7 said:

Yes some people can kill you for that. There was a case of a young woman. She was in a relationship; I think they have a fight she called the police in the first place,… and they have intervention order so the man cannot come home and see the kids., he killed the lady…

Fear of stigma and gossip

Research suggests that the stigma of being associated with domestic violence contributes to victims not speaking about their own experiences and to their reluctance to seek help (Satyen, et al., 2018). This was apparent in this study where fear or stigma and people talking about victims, led Participant # 4 to say:

Sometimes for the community, it is hard for us. When we deal with the community, there is bullying. If I have a problem and tell people like we are sitting right now, what is happening in my family, and I leave, people will start talking. That is why people keep their problem, you keep it and hide in your heart. Many people have anxiety, but if you express yourself, it's better because emotionally you cry, and then you feel better.

Corroborating, Participant #2 said:

Yes, yes….I think if people can keep whatever you say in open spaces, then it will be good. Because if you express yourself, people will bully you and the bullying is not good. Our children also experience bullying that is why they are on the

streets… the parents have too much anger and that is why we keep everything in the family, like private. We need help….

Discussion

This study aimed to explore African women's experience of Domestic Violence, sources of help and help-seeking behaviours. As an exploratory study, its significance lies in the fact the data emerges from a participatory community led intervention effort that contributes to better understanding of domestic violence, the enablers and constraints of help-seeking, as foundation for developing better prevention and support programs. Studies of domestic violence within the (relatively) newly settled African communities in Australia is limited. Bent-Goodley (2021) suggests that uncovering culturally specific and indigenous approaches to dealing with domestic violence will help reduce or eliminate intimate partner violence in populations that are barely researched.

The study's findings showed that domestic violence was experienced differently by the participants. They suffered violence in various forms including physical and psychological, which mirrors but also differs from other findings in Australia (Ogunsiji, et al. 2012; West, 2016; Zannettino, 2012). In the State of Victoria, Australia, where this study was undertaken, it is clear that domestic violence is linked to unhappiness in marriage, economic stress, conflicts related to gender role changes, and responsibilities around raising children. The findings confirm the interrelatedness of gender power dynamics (James, 2010), and cultural, psychological, social and economic factors as recognised by Al-Ajlan (2022), Reese and Pease (2007) and Sawrikar and Katz (2017) who highlighted the intersections of gender oppression with other forms of traditional and culturally based gender inequality and women's empowerment. In this study, some cultural issues specific to African communities such as dowry systems and who takes custody of children after separation/divorce have also been confirmed or unearthed,

contributing to calls for cultural-specific support as reported earlier (Sullivan, et al. 2005) among Ethiopian women in USA.

Seeking Help

The study found that the women did not seek help or sought help late or were hesitant to seek help. While their key reasons (family and cultural barriers, concern for children, and fear of repercussion) mirror barriers identified in previous reports (Satyen, et al., 2018; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2009), the women's concerns about children includes something new or unique. Many expressed fears that leaving their marriage could lead their children to leave home and go onto the streets; an issue of increasing concern among African families in Australia, which has been attributed to large numbers of single parent homes following separation. This finding therefore departs from other studies of refugee background communities in Australia (Braaf & Meyering, 2011;Meyer, 2010; Ragusa, 2012; Satyen, et al., 2018; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2009), which showed that victims' concerns for their children were related to potential loss of custody to child protection or harm in the marital home, rather than leaving home and going onto the streets. The link between increasing presence on the streets, of youth from refugee background of African descent, is one that highlights how Australia's diverse communities with refugee backgrounds experience the effects of domestic violence differently. It also emphasises the need for differing approaches to preventive measures, including targeted services for victims' children to ensure they are not tempted to leave home as domestic violence issues are resolved between parents.

The key reasons about help seeking reported in this study are in alignment with aspects of the help-seeking theories and models used to guide the study. Specifically, they are aligned with the role of cultural norms as explained by the Cultural Determinants of Help Seeking (CDHS) Model (Arnault, 2009), the alternative cost of seeking help in the General Theory of Help

Seeking (Mechanic, 1978), and the Subjective Norm aspect of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985).

In the CDHS models of help-seeking, victims of domestic violence rely on cultural inputs as cognitive guides for perception, emotion and behaviour (Arnualt, 2009). For many domestic violence victims, cultural norms are important in determining what they are expected to do about on-going violence, what others might think about them, and when or where they can seek help. In our study, all these were apparent alongside family expectations that they should stay in the marriage. The differing family expectations are related to the role of the Subjective Norm aspect of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) in supporting or hindering help seeking. As explained earlier under theoretical framework, Subjective Norm is the social expectations of significant others in the TPB model, which combines with a person's attitudes and their perceived behaviour control to influence intention to engage in a behaviour. For the women in our study, subjective norm played a part in how they sought help because their significant others (parents/extended family) held slightly different expectations of how they were to act in the domestic violence situations. The conflicting expectations were confusing and frustrating to the women. This difference in expectations was in part attributable to the fact that the participants' families and cultural beliefs (in the interest of protecting marriage), did not enthusiastically support leaving the marriage or reporting to the police; a position that was at variance with the victims' beliefs and how they wanted to approach issues in the Australian context.

Finally, the constraints to help seeking as reported by the participants are also partly explained by the cost aspect of General Theory of Help Seeking (Mechanic, 1978). Specifically, they are related to Mechanic's (1978) idea of alternative cost to individual need, which for our participants, include repercussions or negative consequences such as increased violence or revenge from male partners, losing relationships with their family, and jeopardising the future of their children.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have implications for practice with respect to how professionals engage with victims of domestic violence and communities such as the one investigated here. Victims of domestic violence have intersecting needs requiring integrated services (Breckenridge, Rees, Valentine & Murray, 2015). Therefore, it is recommended that any intervention for victims from this population group should consider appropriate supportive services for children simultaneously with mothers.

More importantly, participants indicated that police involvement was perceived as a trigger for more aggressive actions from perpetrators and many women were reluctant to get the police involved. Such a finding implies that routine law enforcement is inadequate and that alternative forms of support that are culturally appropriate (Fisher, 2013) are more likely keep victims safe and protected. Indeed, the failure of existing policies to capture the full spectrum of victims' needs, and the inadequacy of mainstream services (Federal Department of Social Services, 2015) have led to calls for more creative support approaches such as specialist outreach services and the involvement of community leaders (Vaughan, et al., 2016). This paper joins the call for establishing alternative sources of help other than the police, such as involving African community leaders to resolve initial domestic violence issues. This measure, our study participants contend, will support long-term family stability, and should be considered, because "*the community coming together to solve our problem, is like family*" (Participant # 3).

This proposed measure is consistent with traditional African systems whereby conflicts are resolved by a council of elders. And while some victims in this study have used this approach, there is no evidence the bulk of Victorian African communities have established such traditional councils in a manner that gives them broad recognition with families so that they are able to play an effective intervening role with domestic violence. As domestic violence awareness raising continues in the study communities, mediation skills training should be offered to

such elders' groups to augment their traditional African cultural knowledges and provide effective support to families. It is also recommended that police, social workers, psychologists, and other professionals consider strengthening community resources such as the elders' groups and faith-based committees and use them alongside formal services. Advocacy services should also work alongside these services (Sullivan & Goodman, 2019). Long-term preventive and intervention success regarding domestic violence may hinge on the flexible use of both formal and informal resources in the African communities.

Conclusion

This study was inspired by the opportunity offered to African women to be part of a participatory community led domestic violence awareness, prevention and intervention effort. And as part of the activities, they shared their experiences of domestic violence and how they sought help, including barriers to seeking help. The findings reveal some unique issues regarding domestic violence among African women and communities, contribute to diversity of knowledge regarding domestic violence experiences, and the supports that may be required. Family pressures, cultural beliefs, and lack of trust in the supportive resources available to victims contributed to limited help seeking behaviours. Such recognition by social workers, psychologists, and policy makers provides an opportunity for reform about how services are framed and delivered. We recommend that informal community resources, which are perceived by participants as culturally relevant, and likely to be used by victims should be explored. It will also be useful to explore modalities to enable the provision of support that mitigates fear of repercussion or cost of seeking help in terms direct threats, finance or alternative means of surviving.

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