

**PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL SCIENCES STUDENTS
REGARDING THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF MIGRATION
AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN PUERTO RICO**

**PERCEPCIONES DEL ESTUDIANTADO DE CIENCIAS SOCIALES S
OBRE LA INTERSECCIONALIDAD DE LA INMIGRACIÓN
Y LA VIOLENCIA DOMÉSTICA EN PUERTO RICO**

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Abstract

Femicides by domestic violence in Puerto Rico have significantly increased, and statistics do not include undocumented immigrant victims. Although domestic violence and immigration have been investigated separately, there is an evident limitation in the research generated by social scientists on the intersectionality of the terms. Part of the findings showed that students agreed with the questionnaire's premises about undocumented survivors' access to government services and systemic treatment. Moreover, professionals endure severe budget cuts that inhibit their abilities to assist survivors, who confront social and systemic oppressions. Students and professionals share perceptions of systemic mistreatment and stressors that hinder case reporting

Keywords: domestic violence, immigration, perceptions, oppression, undocumented

Resumen

Los feminicidios por violencia doméstica en Puerto Rico han aumentado significativamente, y las estadísticas excluyen a personas indocumentadas. Aunque se han investigado la violencia doméstica y la inmigración separadas, la literatura sobre pensamientos de futuros profesionales de las ciencias sociales sobre la interseccionalidad de ambos términos es limitada. Los hallazgos revelan que los estudiantes mayormente concordaron con las premisas del cuestionario sobre la

accesibilidad de personas indocumentadas a servicios gubernamentales y trato sistémico. Los profesionales enfrentan recortes presupuestarios que inhiben su ejercicio profesional. Los estudiantes y profesionales compartieron percepciones sobre el trato sistémico desigual y factores estresantes que dificultan el reporte de casos.

Palabras claves: violencia doméstica, inmigración, percepciones, opresión, indocumentadas

Problem Statement

Even though the government of Puerto Rico has established social policies and programs to protect those affected by domestic violence, it is still a growing problem, especially for those without a defined migratory status. These different social problems are rooted in a social paradigm that must be examined. Moreover, the paradigmatic approach influences social beliefs and collective actions. Consequently, it is vital to research the different perceptions that people may have toward immigration and domestic violence victims without a defined migratory status. Hence, this population risks becoming even more invisible to the state due to a lack of statistics and public awareness. Therefore, an effort was made to reverse these detrimental factors affecting this vulnerable community.

Regarding domestic violence in Puerto Rico, in 2018, femicides rose by 62% compared to 2019, making it a total of 60 femicides, of which 50% of these were not resolved (El Vocero, 2020). Considering this, the project aimed to discover the existing perspectives toward domestic violence survivors without a defined migratory status. This type of research is critical when considering that prospective professionals will directly work with these individuals. Consequently, it was vital to know their stance concerning stereotypes and discriminatory situations that immigrants face in Puerto Rico. Moreover, it is key to understand the rationale behind a negative perception, particularly from those that will be future social policymakers, social workers, and therapists.

Literature Review

Domestic Violence

In terms of legal protections, Puerto Rico has the *Domestic Abuse Prevention and Intervention Act*, better known as Law 54. This piece of legislation passed in 1989, is the first law in Latin America and the Caribbean to recognize domestic violence crimes. Furthermore, Law 54's statement of motives describes domestic violence as a type of antisocial behavior that is a heinous problem amongst Puerto Rican families. Moreover, this law describes that domestic violence lacerates dignity and integrity regardless of social standing. In 2013, there was an amendment to this piece of legislation that prevented a person's migratory status as reasoning for denying the protections provided by the law (Roure, 2018). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated domestic violence cases due to record levels of unemployment and financial instability (Piquero et al., 2021).

Perceptions on Migration

A study surveyed the knowledge and perceptions of 145 Social Work students concerning the stages immigrants face in immigration. The majority perceived that arrests, emotional stress, and detainment by the government were hardships that immigrants faced. Nonetheless, responders also indicated that 64.9% of them did not feel competent to work with undocumented immigrants, suggesting that perceived preparedness to work with this populations is associated with further knowledge regarding the matter (Lehman-Held et al., 2017). On the other hand, secondary data analysis from the 2007 Pew Hispanic Center survey with a sample of 2,000 Latino adults living in the United States of America, suggested that perceived discrimination may be a risk factor for perceiving a more challenging life for Latinos. Furthermore, these perceived discriminations also increase the fear of deportation, a lower sense of the quality of life, and scarcer use of government resources (Becerra et al., 2013).

Theoretical Framework

To further assess understanding of undocumented domestic violence survivors, it is crucial to be aware of the different oppressions they face every day. Through the intersectional framework, different aspects of a person's political and social identities merge to form different forms of privilege and discrimination (Runyan, 2018). Hence, the Intersectionality Theory provides an adequate structure to sustain the explanations of oppression and the realities that survivors endure. The

fundamental premise of this theory is that many identities of a person's life function concurrently to shape an individual's experiences. Therefore, intersectionality acknowledges that identities such as race and gender cannot be separated because they contribute to an overall experience. For example, if we focus on domestic violence, that experience can result from two intersecting patterns of sexism and racism. Consequently, the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of just sexism and racism, and it should be considered when addressing a particular manner in which Black women are subordinate to men (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Previously, the characteristics of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and ethnicity were conceptualized as distinct, unrelated, and treated differently. Integrating an intersectional lens challenges this assumption and establishes that oppressions like class exploitation, sexism, and racism build one another by drawing upon similarities and distinctive practices to shape a collective social reality. Additionally, these systems overlap and should not be understood as separate phenomena but should instead be interpreted as issues affected by the overlapping systems of subordination (Hill-Collins, 2019).

On the other hand, to further comprehend the perceptions to be collected via questionnaire, the Social Constructionism theory was used in this study. This theory emphasizes that the significance of an object or theme is rooted in people's interactions with them. Hence, according to (Gergen et al., 2007), people's actions are attributed to their thoughts, revealing patterns of acceptance or resistance nuanced by their backgrounds. Therefore, the social perceptions toward undocumented survivors of domestic violence in Puerto Rico may be rooted in social stigmatization and prejudice passed on by society throughout the years. Consequently, it was critical to utilize intersectional theory and social constructionism theory in this study to further address the gaps in terms of the perceptions of the intersectionality of immigrant domestic violence survivors in Puerto Rico.

Research Questions

In order to address the research problem, the next questions were developed:

1. What are the perceptions of the UPR-RP Social Sciences students regarding the intersectionality of domestic violence and migration in Puerto Rico?
2. What have been the experiences of professionals working with domestic violence survivors without a defined migratory status concerning

governmental response and accessibility of services for this particular population?

3. How do the responses of students interact with the experiences of professionals working with migrant survivors of domestic violence?

Method

This study employed mixed methods in order to better understand: 1) perceptions of students regarding undocumented survivors' access to services and systemic treatment; and 2) in-depth experiences of professionals working directly with immigrant survivors of domestic violence in Puerto Rico. It had an exploratory scope due to the limited information on student perspectives on the intersectionality of domestic violence survivors without a defined migratory status and the experiences of professionals working with this last population. Integrating qualitative and quantitative data was necessary to collect the diverse perspectives this study needs to answer the research questions. Therefore, even though the intention was to collect the different views, attitudes, and beliefs social sciences students have regarding domestic violence survivors without a defined migratory status, it was also crucial to collect the experiences of professionals that work with cases concerning this population.

Specifically, the quantitative portion of this study was a non-experimental cross-sectional design. The intent was to gather social sciences students' opinions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding common myths and misconceptions regarding domestic violence survivors without a defined migratory status. Non-experimental designs are observational, and the results are intended to be descriptive. Moreover, the researcher did this part cross-sectionally, which means that he collected the data only once because of the short time available, and it is ideal for calculating simple occurrence rates (Thompson & Panacek, 2007).

On the other hand, the qualitative part of this research project was a case study design. The experiences of professionals who work directly with survivors of domestic violence without a defined migratory status were gathered to understand the realities they confront when defending the human rights of this type of client when faced with the government and society. Case study research involves a detailed description of individuals or settings followed by analyzing the data to find themes of issues. Also, the researcher employed an inductive approach because the quantitative and qualitative data were collected and studied simultaneously (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, the analysis entailed an examination of how

qualitative and quantitative data interact, providing multiple angles to the problem studied.

Analysis

A convergent mixed-methods design was used to analyze the qualitative and quantitative data to be collected, which means that the analysis was done simultaneously. With this approach, a researcher can collect both types of data to analyze how the findings relate to the objectives of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A descriptive analysis was elaborated for the quantitative part of this research project to analyze frequencies and crosstabulations. For this, IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program was used to answer the research questions. An analysis was done for the qualitative part after an *ad verbatim* transcription was finalized to elaborate an *a priori* codification of said transcription. To comply with the answering of the research questions, ATLAS.ti program was utilized.

Quantitative Results and Analysis

The quantitative sample had the following inclusion criteria: (1) be a Social Sciences student and (2) be over 18. The total sample of the online questionnaire was 67, with a gender distribution of 64% for females, 34% for males, and 2% self-reported as non-binary. Results show that 37% were between 18-20, 52% were 21-23, 11% were 24-26, and none were over the age of 27. In terms of country of origin, 94% of the participants were born in Puerto Rico, 4.5% in the United States, and 1.5% in the Dominican Republic.

In terms of majors, 9% were from Political Sciences, 1.5% were from Anthropology, Labor Relations and Counseling and Rehabilitation, 3% were from General Social Sciences and Sociology, 6% were from Economics, 16% were from Psychology, 58% were from Social Work, and none from Geography. Regarding the year of study, 9% were first-year students, 21% were second-year students, 25% were third-year students, 22% were fourth-year students, 18% were fifth-year students, and 4.5% were sixth-year students. Regarding formal content in coursework on gender violence or related topics, 53% of the sample received little to no information regarding domestic violence in their courses. In comparison, 30% received some, and 17% received a lot. On the other hand, 77% of the sample received little to no information regarding immigration in their coursework, while 20% received some,

and 3% received a lot. Given that the Social Work population composed 58% of the sample, additional observations were done and found that 41% received little to no information regarding domestic violence in their courses, 31% received some, and 28% received a lot. On the other hand, 72% received little to no information regarding immigration in their studies, 23% received some, and 5% received a lot.

The analysis below is based on measures using a Likert scale with a range in premises from one to four. Also, the questions were developed in a manner that the higher the value a participant chooses, the more they agree with the premises that regard undocumented domestic violence survivors. For this analysis, the average formula was utilized to calculate the premises' averages. The results are as follows:

Table 1

Average premise responses regarding undocumented domestic violence survivors

Premises (P)	Average (\bar{x})
P35: There is greater economic dependence on the abuser if a survivor of domestic violence is undocumented.	3.34
P36: Undocumented survivors of domestic violence should have the right to apply for restraining orders.	3.84
P37: Domestic violence survivors without a defined migratory status should have access to government healthcare if they experience physical or psychological harm.	3.70
P38: The domestic violence situation for undocumented survivors is not the same as for Puerto Rican domestic violence survivors.	3.42
P39: The Puerto Rican judicial system does not treat survivors of domestic violence equally if they are undocumented.	3.38
P40: The police are not adequately trained to handle a domestic violence situation if the survivor is undocumented.	3.54
P41: The government of Puerto Rico should create more programs that work with undocumented survivors of domestic violence.	3.64

With the average, the same formula was applied, meaning that the averages were added and divided by 7, which resulted in 3.55. Therefore, the social sciences students greatly agreed with the premises that concerned domestic violence survivors without a defined migratory status.

Qualitative Results and Analysis

Participant's Description

A semi-structured interview was conducted utilizing 12 open-ended questions regarding the experiences of professionals working with undocumented survivors of domestic violence. These questions allowed to gain a broad scope about the accessibility of government services and their impact on this population. Two professionals were interviewed and were named Participant 1 (P1) and Participant 2 (P2) to guarantee confidentiality. P1 is identified as a 39-year-old female, who has a Master's degree in Social Work (MSW) and is currently a doctoral student. Additionally, she has 15 years of experience working with domestic violence survivors without a defined migratory status and is a service coordinator in a non-governmental organization (NGO) that provides services for domestic violence survivors. P2 is identified as a 63-year-old female who has an MSW and is currently the director of the NGO for 20 years. Regarding the accessibility of services, three quotes were identified and go as follows:

P1: “La ley en sala establece que cualquier persona, sin importar su raza, su género, su estatus migratorio, su posición socioeconómica, si tiene una condición de emergencia de salud, la sala de emergencia tiene la obligación de estabilizar a esa persona, eso es la ley. Sin embargo, cuando vamos a la implementación de la ley, si una persona migrante va y lo primero que le dicen: ¿dónde está tu plan médico? o ¿dónde está el dinero? Porque si no tienes dinero no te podemos atender. ¿En dónde queda ese recurso? Tiene que ser educado. Ese recurso tiene que estar atemperado por la legislación, porque así se siguen violentando los derechos de nuestras mujeres. Y la ley está, pero al momento de implementarla no se ejecuta.”

P1: “Una mujer indocumentada no es elegible para ningún tipo de beneficio público. Entiéndase vivienda, servicios del PAN, servicios de subsidio federal, servicios de plan médico. Ellas no son elegibles para ninguno de esos beneficios que provee el Estado.”

P2: “Prácticamente no tienen derecho a recibir algunas ayudas, aunque también son bien restrictivas con los fondos federales, como lo son los servicios médicos, los cupones de alimentos y estudiar inclusive.”

From these quotes, it is noteworthy that undocumented individuals do not qualify to receive any government-sponsored economic relief, including but not limited to

housing, nutritional assistance, and healthcare. Hence, if an undocumented individual is a domestic violence survivor and is economically dependent on their partner or spouse, it is virtually impossible to seek economic support from the government, further straining their abuse situation. Moreover, it is required by law to stabilize a patient's condition regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, age, migratory status, etc., if the situation is emergent. However, lack of knowledge by hospital staff and government officials exacerbates the condition of abuse and complicates the help-seeking of undocumented victims of domestic violence, which can be subjected to physical abuse, and thus are physically harmed. Concerning governmental response, two quotes were selected to answer question number two:

P2: “La situación de feminicidio no ha parado la respuesta del gobierno, pues ha sido un poco tibia precisamente a nivel de recursos que han sido recortadas muchas organizaciones y se ve que hay algunas organizaciones, pero hubo instituciones que no les dieron fondos y algunas que les recortaron hasta más de la mitad como el caso del centro.”

P1: “Yo entiendo que todavía hay mucho, pero mucho trabajo que hacer, porque a veces esto es como un ciclo. Al haber reducciones de fondos en las organizaciones que son las especializadas en brindar servicios de violencia doméstica, perdemos un empleado o una empleada que ha sido adiestrada, que ha sido provista de herramientas para la intervención de la violencia de género y ese empleado lo perdemos.”

From these quotes, it is noticeable that the government helps these organizations. However, these organizations suffer significantly economically and professionally with growing fiscal cuts. Moreover, these cuts prove to be a significant burden because these prepared employees are obligated to leave their workplace, and the organizations are left with a dangerously reduced number of workers, complicating the services undocumented survivors of domestic violence receive.

Relationship between quantitative and qualitative

Questionnaire premise

There is greater economic dependence on the abuser if a survivor of domestic violence is undocumented.

Interview quote

P1: “Muchas de nuestras mujeres, al tener ingresos limitados y sobreviven con \$12,000 anuales o menos, y esto pues bajó significativamente con la pandemia.”

As identified in the interview quote, many undocumented women have limited funds which leaves them with less than \$12,000 annually. This reduced salary leaves them impoverished and further strains their capacity to leave the relationship because of the economic dependence that such a low salary causes, especially when children are involved. Moreover, when an individual is undocumented, finding a legal job is not feasible, and therefore, they have to resort to what is available, which means that they cannot look for the good-paying jobs citizens have.

Questionnaire premise

The domestic violence situation for undocumented survivors is not the same as for Puerto Rican domestic violence survivors.

Interview quote

P2: “También está el miedo o el temor a las autoridades, el desconocimiento de su derecho y está ese temor de que la puedan deportar, de que la puedan arrestar, de que puedan perder a sus hijos e hijas.”

The fear of deportation is a feeling many, if not all, undocumented survivors of domestic violence face day-to-day. This fear worsens when there is so much disinformation regarding undocumented individuals. Regardless of migratory status, domestic violence is a problem many women endure, but this adds another level of oppression for undocumented women. In many cases, children are involved, which exacerbates the survivor’s situation because they do not only worry about deportation. Moreover, they worry about being arrested or having their children separated from them.

Questionnaire premise

The Puerto Rican judicial system does not treat survivors of domestic violence equally if they are undocumented.

Interview quote

P1: “A veces la legislación está para proteger a la población. Sin embargo, al momento de implementación vemos que hay unos desafíos o hay unos retos, porque vemos que lamentablemente en Puerto Rico podemos identificar que hay mucho racismo y mucha xenofobia internalizada, y muchas veces esa xenofobia y racismo internalizado salen a la luz y lo demuestran lamentablemente en la calidad de servicio que se le tiene que brindar a nuestras mujeres.”

Many survivors seek help through the legal system but confront racism and xenophobia. This obstacle certainly aggravates their domestic violence situation and makes us wonder how fair our justice system is. Law 54 states that a survivor may seek help, regardless of any condition, including being undocumented. However, the quality of services provided to undocumented people is deplorable and only shows how xenophobic and racist the system is. These survivors endure not receiving medical, nutritional, or housing assistance, but feeling like the legal system does not want you proves to show how difficult many of the daily difficulties these women must endure.

Questionnaire premise

The police are not adequately trained to handle a domestic violence situation if the survivor is undocumented.

Interview quote

P1: “A veces tenemos policías que no quieren tomar la querrela, que le dicen ve solicita una orden de protección habiendo los elementos para realizar un caso criminal o le dicen tienes que tener cuidado porque tú estás indocumentada y te pueden deportar. O sea que está la mala orientación que recibe esta mujer, entonces no es tan solo que es víctima del agresor, estamos hablando de que esta mujer puede ser víctima del propio sistema que la revictimiza.”

The significant level of disinformation the government has regarding undocumented survivors of domestic violence reinforces that the system does not consider properly training its workforce. Survivors become victims of not only their perpetrators but also of a system that victimizes them and does not provide the tools that are available by law.

Conclusions

The high averages in the premises indicated that most students agreed with the premises related to undocumented survivors' access to government services and systemic treatment. Therefore, recognizing that most of the sample has not received education regarding domestic violence and immigration is extraordinary. Even though more students agreed with the premises, is still concerning that some students disagreed. The interview responses showed that undocumented domestic violence survivors do not have access to government assistance.

Another critical point gathered from the interview is the xenophobic and racist sentiments undocumented survivors of domestic violence must endure, both socially and systematically. These sentiments are in accordance with what is found in literature since, as established by Intersectional Theory, these populations face stances of inequity, oppression, and discrimination because of their gender, race, and migration status, all inseparable identities that combine to create these discriminations (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Moreover, Social Constructionism Theory provides us that many of these sentiments are rooted in societal thought. Therefore, the ways we think, and act are developed in our environment (Gergen et al., 2007).

On the other hand, some similarities were found when combining the data sets. First, the student's high averages in responses to the questionnaire premises regarding economic dependence and the interview responses are in accordance with the fact that survivors face financial difficulties. Secondly, the questionnaire responses regarding differences in domestic violence situations if the survivor is undocumented displayed a high average and converse with the experiences of professionals that indicated that survivors constantly must deal with the fear of deportation and authority misinformation. Lastly, the responses on the unequal judicial treatment based on migration status were in accordance with the professionals' experiences mentioned, and the high averages inferred the unequal judicial treatment.

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