

“Plates and Dishes Smash; Married Couples Clash”: Cultural and Social Barriers to Help-Seeking Among Women Domestic Violence Survivors in Kyrgyzstan

Violence Against Women

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Abstract

This article develops a grounded theory of help-seeking to investigate the social and cultural determinants of help-seeking among Kyrgyz women who have experienced domestic violence. Results indicate that cultural traditions and social norms—most notably the social construction of marriage, the shame associated with divorce, and the status of daughters-in-law in Kyrgyz society—are used to justify domestic violence and prevent victims from seeking help. The proposed theory and results suggest that scholars, policymakers, and front-line contacts must emphasize dispelling myths, misconceptions, and traditional beliefs about gender and marriage to break the abusive dynamics and provide professional help.

Keywords

domestic violence, gender-based violence, Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, help-seeking

Background

Globally, violence against women is recognized as an important social, health, and human rights issue that crosses regional, social, and cultural boundaries (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005). However, researchers have only

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recently begun to address the prevalence of domestic violence across cultures, the cultural differences relevant to domestic violence, and the social structure and effects of barriers to help-seeking. To address domestic violence competently and effectively, health care, social service, and women's rights advocates must understand the familial and cultural influences on help-seeking for domestic violence as embedded in a particular cultural context. As part of a larger research project on barriers to help-seeking, this article focuses specifically on social and cultural barriers. Other articles from the project address other types of barriers (e.g., legal and institutional).

Although several organizations have issued reports emphasizing the broad scope and high prevalence of domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan (Human Rights Watch, 2015; National Statistical Committee and UNICEF, 2014; National Statistical Committee, Ministry of Health, & ICF International, 2013), there is a scarcity of data, especially self-reported data, about how women decide to seek help. To address this gap, in-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with survivors of violence to explore their experiences of help-seeking and to gather data on how domestic violence is created and perpetuated, and how it is addressed or neglected in Kyrgyz society because of the failures of systems at multiple levels, including family, community, and larger belief systems. Based on the women's reports, this study develops a grounded theory of how abuse occurs and how women seek help in the Kyrgyz cultural context. This theory extends the scholarly understanding of domestic violence internationally and is useful for future policy and interventions as well as research conducted by those in the incipient social work profession in Kyrgyzstan; in addition, the results create a more nuanced comparative understanding of domestic violence.

The Prevalence and Scope of Violence Against Women

A significant amount of anecdotal evidence suggests that domestic violence is commonplace in Kyrgyzstan, but because the issue has not been fully recognized as a social problem or a topic meriting serious research (Human Rights Watch, 2006, 2015), there are only a few governmental estimates¹ of the magnitude of such violence, and very few studies of the characteristics of domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan or the risk factors associated with it. In recent years, as a result of global concern over the increase in domestic violence, gang rape, and the trafficking of women in Kyrgyzstan (Coomaraswamy, 2003; United Nations, 1999), several organizations have conducted studies to assess the scope of domestic violence in the country. According to the Kyrgyz Republic Demographic and Health Survey,² 23% of all women aged 15-49 years have experienced physical violence at least once since age 15 years, and 13% have experienced physical violence within the past 12 months. Among ever-married women, one in four has been a victim of physical violence, 4% have experienced sexual violence, and 14% have suffered emotional violence inflicted by their current or most recent husband. More than half of all women surveyed indicated that they had suffered physical injuries or persistent health problems as a result of domestic violence, and only 39% of the women who had experienced physical or sexual violence (of any type) sought assistance.

The evidence from nongovernmental organizations working on women's issues in Kyrgyzstan suggests that the real numbers are actually much worse and that most abused women remain silent for multiple reasons, including the social sanctions and acceptance of violence within the society, a fear of retribution and jeopardizing their children's futures, and the lack of an alternative place to stay or exit options (Moldosheva, 2008). Given these societal conditions, it is not surprising that most Kyrgyz women perceive violence against them as unfortunate, but a part of "normal" family life, and as such, the issue is largely overlooked and ignored in media, policy, and public health discourse. For example, one in every two women in Kyrgyzstan accept and endorse at least one reason for beating a wife, with arguing with the husband being the most common justification for the use of violence among middle-aged women (Joshi & Childress, 2017).

The literature on domestic violence indicates that such high prevalence of acceptance of violence is most widespread in communities or societies where there is a relatively high level of gender inequality, with women having lower status than men (Jewkes, 2002; Levinson, 1988). While Kyrgyzstan has been described as a "highly patriarchal society, with women's roles in public and private life circumscribed" (Human Rights Watch, 2006, p.6), domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan must be understood not only as a manifestation of unequal relations between men and women, but also as a symptom of the difficult post-Soviet transition (Asian, Development, & Bank, 2005, 2006); both conditions are important aspects of gender relations in the Kyrgyz context.

The Role of Women and Gender Relations in Kyrgyz Society

Four major historical and sociocultural background factors influence gender relations in Kyrgyz society: (a) a moderate Islamic background; (b) traditional nomadic Kyrgyz values, under which women played an important role in family and society; (c) the influence of the Soviet period with a strong focus on gender equality and participation (Bauer, Green, & Kuehnast, 1997;) and (d) the postindependence resurgence of traditional family norms that subordinate women (Asian Development Bank, 2006).

According to Bauer and colleagues (1997), Kyrgyz women in traditional, pre-Soviet times were less conservative in behavior and dress than Muslim women in other countries. The Kyrgyz nomadic lifestyle required that both men and women operate independently, whereby both genders rode horses, hunted, and prepared food. Nevertheless, cultural norms necessitated women to be largely responsible for the domestic front such as putting up the portable tent called a "yurt," taking care of children, cooking and housework (Bauer et al., 1997, p.15). Traditional norms and religious practices, including polygamy, bride-kidnapping,³ and payment of *kalym* (from Kyrgyz: bride price) were widespread, and women traditionally became subservient to the husband's family upon marriage.

During Soviet times, Islam, along with other elements of the Kyrgyz cultural identity, was strongly discouraged and suppressed by the Soviets (Light, 2005), which resulted in expansion of women's roles in the economy and social and legal

protections for women. The emphasis on literacy and education provided women with new opportunities and training, thereby making them more progressive (Tabyshalieva, 2000). The removal of Soviet norms of gender equality and the resurgence of traditional roles for women in a context of weak institutions and limited social protection during postindependence and the transition period has created a situation in which abused women are largely on their own with regard to finding help for themselves and their children. Although the Government has taken measures to protect women's rights and promote gender equality through legislative initiatives and national policy, the profile of women in Kyrgyzstan during social-economic transition suggests that vulnerabilities of women to economic and social deprivation overwhelming the country are threatening to reverse many of the achievements of the Soviet past (Dudwick, Gomart, Marc, & Kuehnast, 2003; Kangelieva et al., 2005; Somach & Rubin, 2010).

This study offers an opportunity to learn directly from affected women by documenting what they know of domestic violence and gender relations in their own experience, and generating empirical evidence that challenges myths surrounding domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan. A grounded theory approach to systematically gather evidence and build a theory from the bottom up generates a robust set of concepts which explain barriers to help-seeking, based directly on women's experiences and words.

Method

This study focuses on women who left violent home situations and sought assistance at a domestic violence shelter in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Sixteen women were interviewed between November 2012 and December 2013; interview questions were designed to elicit data on how domestic violence is experienced and constructed, and how women seek help (see the appendix for Interview Guide). A qualitative, grounded theory methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used. In the absence of any preexisting empirical understanding of the cultural specificity of the domestic violence phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan, the empirical nature of grounded theory offers a basis for theorizing how domestic violence relates to sociocultural factors among the women in the sample, and how the specificity of individual cases as constructed and revealed in women's narratives reflect more general societal patterns.

Sample and Data Collection

Participants were selected via theoretical sampling. This type of sampling is an iterative process based on concepts that are relevant to the evolving theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). There was a relatively high degree of homogeneity among the women, who had similar backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnic background. While this did not allow for maximum diversity, it led to the relatively rapid emergence of patterns in the data (i.e., large similarities in qualitative coding categories within the group), which provided a solid basis for sampling.

The initial steps of the theoretical sampling process suggested that the researcher should include not only women from poor and vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds

but also women from relatively more well-to-do situations to compare the help-seeking mechanisms of the two groups of women. Further comparison indicated that data collection should be extended to women who lived with their husbands' families because the joint-living structure with its attendant role of in-laws in family conflict emerged as one of the most important factors underlying the occurrence of violence in the marriage. Memos were drafted to provide the researcher with an "audit trail" (Oktay, 2014) to support the theory as well as a record of her thought process throughout the study and her decisions about what to pursue in the next round of data gathering.

Procedure

The research was conducted in the domestic violence shelter with consenting subjects. The researcher volunteered for the shelter and worked closely with shelter staff to identify potential study participants. This study was approved by the institutional review board of a large university in the United States and the Ministry of Health of the Kyrgyz Republic. Interviews were conducted in Kyrgyz and Russian and were audio recorded. They were later transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and checked and rechecked for data accuracy, confirmability, and dependability (Easton, McComish, & Greenberg, 2000). The researcher iteratively read the transcriptions to develop an interpretive familiarity with the data.

Data Analysis

The data management and analysis utilized a constant comparative analysis process throughout the data collection stage (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The data included field notes, interviews, and the researcher's reflective journal. All interview transcripts were coded and analyzed using NVivo10 Qualitative Computer Software. NVivo helped the researcher uncover the relationships in the data and facilitated a complex coding and theory-building process.

The "open coding" technique was used for the microanalysis of key sentences and phrases via the comparison and identification of concepts in terms of their dimensions and properties. Axial coding was used to further explore the relationship between concepts and to reassemble the data fractured during the initial coding procedure. The next step of the analysis involved theoretical coding and developing themes or theory grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006). Based on this iterative process, a substantive grounded theory of help-seeking was constructed to disentangle the cultural dimensions of the problem, including the social construction of marriage, the status of daughters-in-law, and the role of mothers-in-law in Kyrgyz society. The resulting theory also explores how cultural barriers and myths hinder help-seeking.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data analysis was enhanced through analytic triangulation, prolonged engagement in the field, and the use of the "inquiry audit" technique (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). The confirmability of the findings was ensured by an audit trail, a peer-debriefing process, the use of researcher

Table 1. Profile of Study Participants ($N = 16$).

Variable	Value
Age (years)	
Range (M)	20-49 (33.4)
Ethnicity (n)	
Kyrgyz	14
Russian	1
Kazakh	1
Children (n)	
Yes	16
Number of children, range	1-4
Ages of children (years), range	1 month-18 years
Marital characteristics	
Common-law marriage (no legal registration)	7
Kidnapped or forced into marriage	5
Sold into marriage or in arranged marriage	2

reflexivity techniques, and the provision of examples of raw data in the presentation of findings. The external audit was conducted when data collection and analysis were complete. Once the final themes had been determined, the researcher sought feedback on these themes from gender scholars and shelter counseling staff (who had not participated as interview respondents; Bowen, 2005; Panchanadeswaran & Kovarola, 2005); the feedback confirmed the trustworthiness of the results.

Findings

The participants were 16 adult women between the ages of 20 and 49 years ($M = 33.4$). Table 1 contains a profile of the study participants. One participant reported receiving higher education (a 5-year university degree in accounting), one participant reported being a first-year university student working on a psychology degree (she worked as a social worker at the shelter), six participants reported receiving vocational education or some technical college (four years of specialized school in art, nursing, primary school teaching, legal studies, or sewing), four participants reported obtaining secondary education (a high school diploma), three participants finished ninth grade, and one participant reported finishing primary school (third grade). In terms of socioeconomic status, one participant (an individual farm owner) reported an income of \$2,000 a month, while the income of the remaining participants ranged from approximately \$200/month (a social worker) to less than \$1.90 a day (internal migrants, unemployed women, and those working in low-paying jobs).

The duration of abuse ranged from 2 to 20 years. Of those who considered themselves "married," nine women reported that they had legally registered marriages and seven women described being in a "common-law marriage."⁴ Some participants had

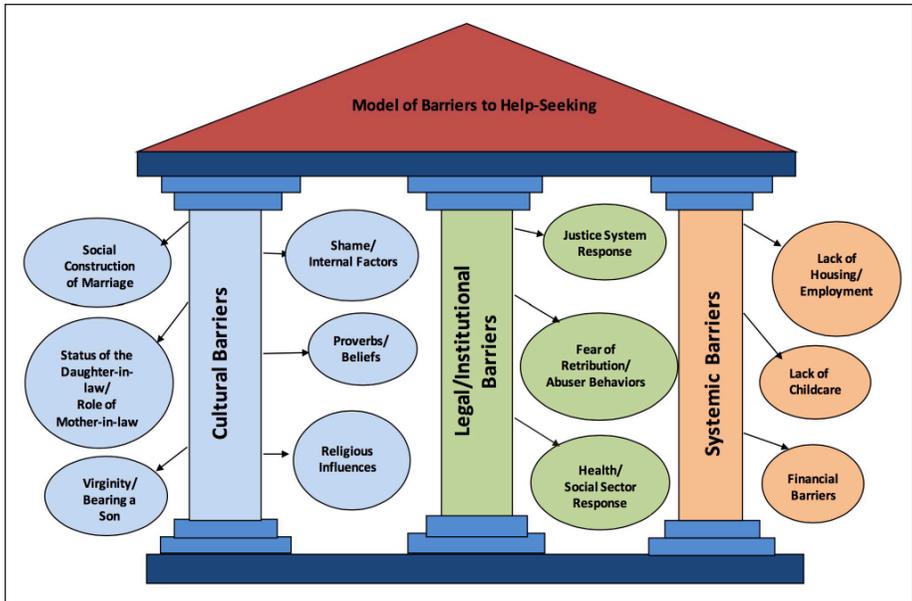


Figure 1. Conceptual model of barriers to help-seeking.

been married according to the religious ceremony called *nikah*.⁵ Five participants reported having been bride-kidnapped and forced into marriages and two said that an acquaintance or family member had arranged their marriage to a man with whom they had no previous relationship. Two participants were victims of human trafficking in addition to having a prior history of domestic violence. All respondents had children; the number of children ranged from one to three, and the children's ages ranged from 1 month to 18 years.

Cultural Barriers to Help-Seeking

Several important sociocultural barriers to help-seeking emerged in the women's narratives. The most prominent barriers were the social construction of marriage and the social stigmatization of divorce in the Kyrgyz context, cultural norms surrounding the roles of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, specific cultural biases that legitimate family violence, and a lack of family social support. Figure 1 illustrates the empirically based theory developed to explain help-seeking among abused women in Kyrgyzstan; in this theory, the culture of gender inequality and the acceptance of domestic violence are *primary* barriers to help-seeking. In Figure 1, cultural barriers are surrounded by the cluster of social norms and expectations that create important barriers to help-seeking. As one expands the conceptual model to encompass additional barriers, such as legal, institutional and systemic, together, these barriers show enormous difficulties preventing abusive situations from changing.

The Social Construction of Marriage and the Social Stigmatization of Divorce

According to Kyrgyz tradition, when a woman gets married, she leaves her birth family forever (Wedding Customs in Kyrgyzstan, n.d.). Proverbs such as “Chykkán kyz chiyden tyshkary” (trans: The girl who is married belongs to somebody else’s family) and “Kyz bashka eldin kishisi” (trans: The girl is a person of someone else’s clan) are commonly recited among the Kyrgyz people, who see the bride off to her new family as if paying a last tribute to her (Wedding Customs in Kyrgyzstan, n.d., para. 8). As illustrated by these sayings, in Kyrgyz culture being married means that a woman leaves her own family sphere and becomes part of her husband’s family, indeed almost the property of the new family. Thus, women are discouraged from seeking parental support after marriage; they are socialized to focus on their matrimonial family and try to solve their problems by themselves. As a result of this cultural expectation, women essentially lose the protection of and link to their birth families when they marry.

From the beginning of the marriage, these cultural biases hinder help-seeking and make it difficult for a woman to return to her birth family. Although some women in this study returned to their birth families for short periods of time, as a result of the cultural norm, the birth families did not want to accept these women—even when they were being abused—because doing so brought shame to the birth family. This refusal on the part of birth families removed one venue for these women to seek help or support.

In the following passages, Asem recounts being refused by her family of origin when she sought refuge after experiencing constant abuse at the hands of her husband. Even when she had been severely beaten, her birth family pushed her back into the house of the abuser because they had already experienced the shame of her older sister’s divorce and could not tolerate another scandal. Asem explained that her mother blamed her, rather than her husband, for the abuse:

I was rapidly calling my Mom, “Mom, hurry, my husband is going to kill me with an ax!” She yelled at me as if it were my own fault, “Men are men, they get angry! You know his character! And why did you do this and that?” I sat there, more stuff [comments] pouring over me. Now that I think about it, they [her parents] were afraid of gossip. They thought of their own dignity—feared that there would be gossip that they made their [second] daughter divorce.

The experiences of Asem and other women reveal how strong Kyrgyz cultural norms about marriage and divorce are, and how powerfully these cultural norms condition aspects of domestic violence, particularly help-seeking. Asem revealed that she eventually stopped asking her parents for help:

We just kept going like that. After he beat me, I would say I would not live with him anymore and go to my parents’ house, but they wouldn’t listen to me and [would] always send me back. . . . I had no support either from my Dad or my Mom. . . . At the end, even when I was beaten up till my skull was broken open, I didn’t go [to my parents’ house]. There was no point for me, as I understood.

These deep-seated cultural beliefs and social sanctions played a powerful role in discouraging women from seeking help. The interview participants offered several proverbs that explained why they endured abuse. One typical proverb cited by the women was “Good wife, good husband; good Vizier,⁶ good Khan.”⁷ This proverb reinforces the cultural notion that a husband’s behavior is shaped by his wife, and it is the wife’s responsibility to smooth out family disagreements if they arise. In other proverbs, the wife is compared to a “neck,” which can turn the husband’s head in the right direction, and if the woman is not able to manage the situation and avoid being hurt, she is seen as failing to fulfill her duty as a caretaker and the peacemaker in the family. Several women expressed concern that they were bad wives or had done something to provoke the abuse. Asem’s comments were typical in this respect:

They say, “Ayal zhakshy, Eer zhakshy; Vizier zhakshy, Khan zhakshy” [trans: Good wife, good husband; good deputy, good king] . . . “A good wife turns a bad husband into the good one, and a good husband into the Khan.” . . . If your husband is like that, how are you going to make him good? . . . They say, “Man is the head, and woman is the neck, and where the neck turns, [the] head turns too.” . . . That means that I am a bad woman . . . (Tears) . . . as I wasn’t able to turn him in that way.

Another common Kyrgyz proverb used to explain family conflict was “Idish-ayak kagyshat; erdi-katyn urushat,” [trans: Plates and dishes smash; married couples clash]. Two beliefs underlie this proverb: First, family conflict is a natural, universal, and inevitable feature of marriage because when people live in the same house a certain amount of conflict is normal and unavoidable, and second, marital disagreements and fights are temporary and thus not a significant problem. Sabina referenced this proverb as she explained why she endured her partner’s abuse:

I was beaten by my husband but didn’t fight much. I just tried to lie and escape. . . . Patience is needed between the wife and the husband. . . . If there is conflict, it may be because [as] they say, “In one house dishes clash, and quarrelling is possible.”

Asem referenced similar cultural beliefs—and her rejection of these beliefs—as she described how her neighbors discounted the abuse she faced:

Kyrgyz [people] have a saying, “Erdi-katyn urushat, idish-ayak kagyshat” [equivalent to the English saying “Lovers’ quarrels are soon mended”] . . . So the neighbors, who knew all about our life, used to say to me, “Oh, what to do? Just keep living without complaints, in the end he [her husband] will listen to you.”

Respondents also mentioned other proverbs that explained why they and other women endured abuse. Gulzinat listed a series of proverbs she had often heard from her parents, and acknowledged that these cultural references encouraged her to remain silent about her husband’s abuse. These sayings stressed that once a woman is married, she must stay with her husband and accept her fate, and that personal problems should remain hidden:

[My] parents always used to say, “Don’t sweep your litter outside the house” [equivalent to “don’t air your dirty laundry”], “A woman has to endure,” “Patience and labor will win everything” [equivalent to “Perseverance wins”]. I was raised up in such a way that if I got married, I had to endure; I had to live with this husband. . . . So I was enduring, I was afraid of the [people’s] judgment . . . (Sigh) . . . I didn’t tell my parents, because I didn’t want to upset them. . . . My husband also told me, “The wife has to be this, and the wife has to be that. You have to listen to your husband” . . . and God forbid I dare not to obey him, he would constantly assault and insult me.

Keremet heard advice from her mother-in-law, again with a focus on endurance, but also emphasizing the shamefulness of divorce:

His mother always told me, “Chyda, atagyng bolot, zhunung zhaltyrak bolot” [trans: “If you endure, you will be famous, your wool will be shiny,” which is equivalent to the proverb “Everything comes to him who waits”]. She would say “Live being patient; you will win later.” Most women, mothers, leave this pattern to us . . . that even if the life is tough you should stay, you shouldn’t be a shame to people . . . because if you divorce it is a shame. You may die but stay. This is how things are.

Many of the women referenced the cultural belief that it is unacceptable for children to grow up without a father, and that women are responsible for keeping their families intact for the sake of the children. Kukush voiced her fear of leaving her son fatherless: “It is always said that a child should grow up with the father. . . . I was afraid to make decisions for my son. Since he is so little, I am the one separating him from his father.” Almadan had experienced life without a father herself and did not want the same for her children. She lamented,

Since I grew up without a father, I promised to myself, regardless of who my husband was, I would endure anything for my children, so that they don’t grow up without a father. I knew how bad it was without a father. . . . I was jealous of all the girls who had fathers.

Even when Gulzinat’s daughter recognized the seriousness of her father’s abuse and asked her about the possibility of a separation, Gulzinat emphasized the importance of having a father in the household, even though she herself had experienced a period of separation from her husband at an earlier time. She recounted,

My daughter came to me and asked, “Mom, doesn’t Dad offend you? Why don’t you divorce?” I explained to her, “Divorce is not a solution. . . . You need a father and a mother, a full family, because the right direction can be found by those who have a full family, whose parents are together.

Salamat summarized just how restricting Kyrgyz cultural beliefs and traditional practices can be for women experiencing domestic violence. She made a clear connection between these cultural ideas and her decision to stay with her husband for a long time before finally leaving for the shelter:

A woman has to endure. If he kidnapped you, you have to stay and live with him. It's not important what kind of a man he is. . . . Perhaps I lived according to the traditions. . . . I didn't value myself. I didn't respect myself; I tramped on myself and my dignity. I thought a woman was supposed to be like this.

These statements offer evidence of the cultural construction of both shame and resistance on the part of the birth family to accepting a married woman back into her natal household; these culturally constructed responses create an impediment to women seeking help from their birth families.

Shame was also a powerful impediment to seeking help from formal institutions such as the law enforcement system. Participants feared being stigmatized by their community, an idea that was reinforced by the societal expectation to not embarrass the family or the father of the child. Even though the women saw the police and courts as viable resources, they believed that the potential consequences of using these resources exceeded any benefits—for most Kyrgyz women the social sanctions and penalties related to divorce were worse than simply enduring the abuse. Kukush explained why she never sought help from the police:

I know I can appeal to the police, but I don't want to . . . (pause). You know us, Kyrgyz people, "She dared to turn to the police, shameless! How dare she? How could she? He is the father of her child!" So silently I went away.

These themes were prominent in all of the interviews, illustrating the particular constructions of marriage and divorce in Kyrgyz culture, which tend to disempower and penalize women by reinforcing their obligation to preserve the family and maintain the status quo. In Kyrgyz society, great emphasis is placed on social standing, and an entire family's reputation can be damaged by the behavior of a single member. For a woman to acquire the socially unacceptable title of divorcee is considered enough to bring shame on the whole family. The interviews showed that the fear of being disgraced by the community was sometimes the most powerful constraint on a woman's ability to leave a violent situation.

Status of the Daughter-in-Law and Role of the Mother-in-Law in the Husband's Family

In addition to the social construction of marriage and the social stigma associated with divorce, a second theme that emerged from the interviews is that domestic violence is connected with Kyrgyz cultural traditions surrounding family structure as well as power and status within the family. In particular, when a new wife (*kelin*⁸) moves in with her husband's family, she is in a position of disempowerment—a new daughter-in-law is a subordinate and has low status in the husband's household. She is expected to obey her husband and his family members, including her mother-in-law, and she has almost no rights. These cultural expectations make it easy, possibly even likely, for husbands and mothers-in-law to take an abusive stance toward a new wife, and are

often used to justify domestic violence. Because the daughter-in-law already has a low status, it is easy for a husband or mother-in-law to claim that she is not doing the housework correctly, or not cooking the food correctly, or is not behaving well enough. Thus, in these situations, husbands and in-laws feel “justified” to abuse her.

Mairash discussed how within the traditional family hierarchy daughters-in-law have the lowest status and thus are vulnerable to abuse. She recalled the unrelenting insults she endured from her in-laws and being kicked out of the house because of her failure to adequately (in their opinion) fulfill her domestic responsibilities or to obey their orders:

My in-laws told me, “If you cannot do the housework properly, leave.” I cried when the in-laws beat me or yelled at me. I did what I was told to do. I clean up, I serve the tea, prepare all the food for them, I do everything.

Another culturally embedded theme is the role of the mother-in-law. The power of mothers-in-law was especially prominent in several cases and was a considerable part of the narratives or the lived experiences of these women. Mothers-in-law were often described as jealous power figures who essentially become the daughter-in-law’s boss and the decision maker in the family. Asem’s story exemplified the extreme control mothers-in-law often have over these women. She explained that her mother-in-law controlled every aspect of her life and left her with no money or resources of her own:

For 17 years I lived under my mother in law . . . she was my boss. . . . My mother-in-law could have made the right dough⁹ (kaineninenin kamyrynan) . . . she would intervene in everything . . . in what we do every day and throughout the day. All our life she knew every single needle and thread, controlled all the money, and eavesdropped on everything. She loved her son too much and didn’t value me . . . or she was afraid that her son would obey me, that I would establish my authority. She was protecting herself, in my opinion, she had a goal to live like that.

One important cultural pattern that emerged in the interviews is that Kyrgyz women typically do not live separately with their new husband (and later children) after marriage. They often live with their husband’s family, and in-laws are a major part of their lives. Culturally, a husband’s family plays a significant role, and this role often supports domestic violence. The women revealed that their husbands’ families provided rationalizations and justifications for the abuser, which perpetuated the abuse and inhibited help-seeking. Asem explained that her mother-in-law actively promoted, and even took apparent satisfaction in the abuse:

My mother-in-law took revenge on us. When my husband and I weren’t arguing, she would be in a bad mood. She would be irritated. If you served her tea, she would be angry. But when I had black eyes serving her tea, she would be all happy. . . . She would invite neighbors over for tea and ask, “Asem, come and serve tea.” And when I sat there serving tea with my black eyes, she would be so joyful and satisfied. She would go in and out smirking, smiling happily and watching me, as if saying, “Here, look how my son rules his wife!” Her mood would be great.

Cultural Biases That Legitimate Violence

The women explained that certain cultural biases legitimated their partners' violence. They focused most prominently on the effects of two cultural expectations: that a woman should be a virgin at the time of marriage and that a woman should bear a son for her husband.

Virginity at the time of bride-kidnapping. The cultural value placed on virginity at the time of marriage prevented women from seeking timely help. Asem disclosed that she felt the abuse was her fault because she was not a virgin when she married her husband (even though she lost her virginity as a result of rape):

I was feeling guilty as I came like that [not a virgin]. I thought all was my fault and I lived with the guilt that I wasn't a virgin. For all the quarrels I blamed myself, thinking I was the guilty one . . . that this is something for me to endure, this is my punishment.

The value placed on a woman's virginity also enabled bride-kidnapping, because once a woman had been raped, the man could claim her. Furthermore, if a woman was already not a virgin, others devalued her, thereby creating further rationalizations and justification for abuse. Some of the women remained silent about abuse due to the fear that their husbands would tell others they were not virgins at the time of the marriage and bring dishonor on their birth families. The husbands used this threat to blackmail the victims to keep them subordinated and under control. Asem described her husband's threats:

My husband used to say that if I divorced him, "I will go to your parents; I will tell them that you didn't come as a virgin . . ." I was ashamed. . . . Then my relatives would be disgraced. . . . Because he threatened that he would tell about it, I lived in fear . . . I was scared of that and stayed . . . for 17 years in that way.

Bearing a son. Another cultural theme cited by the respondents is the importance of bearing a son, because a son is critical for the continuation of the family line. As Asem explained, a woman is held responsible for having a son and is shamed if she does not produce a son.

If I said something to him, he would already shut me up, "You are such a great woman delivering me male children, aren't you?!" With that he would shut me up. I started looking down on myself. I started feeling like a handicap.

Not producing a son not only leads to the devaluation of a woman in the family, it also serves as a pretext or excuse and blaming trope for further violence and abuse. Asem chronicled the never-ending blame her in-laws heaped upon her:

From the very beginning I acknowledged that I had a fault. . . . First, I acknowledged that I didn't come as a virgin. . . . Second, I acknowledged that I turned my husband in for jail. . . . After that I acknowledged that I wasn't able to deliver him a son. . . . I kept acknowledging my faults and submitting myself . . . and enduring all that.

Religious influences on the justification of family violence. Some women reported that their partners used religion to justify domestic violence. For example, some husbands believed that a woman is full of sins and should be beaten from time to time to rid her of her sins. According to this philosophy, a wife should surrender to her husband, and the husband should surrender to God. Keremet explained that her husband beat her as a result of his religious beliefs:

Mullahs at the Mosque teach that once a week the husband should beat up his wife because women have a lot of Satans, and beating is the way of getting rid of these Satans. He says, "You must obey Me, and I will obey God!" I thought he would take care of me and sometimes imagined him as a God . . .

Lack of family support as a cultural barrier to help-seeking. The women had certain expectations about their relationships that influenced their decisions to endure the abuse. Several of the women discussed not feeling heard or supported by those around them. Ainura lamented,

I had no support from anyone. . . . My parents opposed me. They had their old lifestyles formed and thought that the child should stay with the in-laws. . . . I always had conflicts with my mom, "You didn't protect me, when I needed your help."

Families and friends appeared unwilling or unable to offer appropriate help and support to the women, or minimized the situation, leaving the women feeling trapped. Mehriqul described the way in which her protests were minimized and the way her family refused to provide any more help:

He [her husband] beat me; he almost made me a handicapped person. My relatives said, "What are you fussing over just one hit? You are not that righteous yourself, starting all these female hysterics. You start on him for little things. You should sort out your own problem yourself!"

This lack of support from the natal family proved to be a severe barrier to help-seeking in Kyrgyzstan, where women rarely have stable jobs or incomes. Almadan explained that it is nearly impossible for an abused wife to leave her husband without the support of her family:

In most of the fights, my husband keeps saying, "Where will you go? To your relatives, those bastards? They don't care about you; they don't even think of you. Even if I kill you, they won't care—dead or alive. I'll kill you, if I want to." Really, they never came, my relatives.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore Kyrgyz women's experiences of domestic violence and help-seeking behaviors from their own perspectives. An important aspect of

the study was the examination of the way Kyrgyz cultural and societal beliefs relate to abuse. The data revealed that the most prominent barriers to help-seeking were the social construction of marriage and fear of stigma and shame related to divorce, status of daughter-in-law and role of mother-in-law in the Kyrgyz family, and justification of abuse by cultural and social norms.

The results suggest that the sociocultural context of domestic violence sets the conditions and expectations under which help-seeking occurs. In Kyrgyzstan, these expectations, based on cultural myths and biases, create strong justifications for violence by devaluing women in families. The findings reveal that violence is seen as an everyday occurrence or as something that “just happens to everybody else.” Many women turn to their birth families for help; however, they also identify powerful impediments to seeking help, such as the fear of “becoming a burden” and embarrassing their entire extended family network.

The findings consistently show that mothers-in-law are expected to use physical, psychological, and economic abuse to rule over and discipline daughters-in-law. The women’s narratives reveal that daughters-in-law who do not fulfill the expected gender roles in regard to household duties, reproduction (in particular bearing a son), and virginity are subject to family violence. The findings indicate that most women accept their subordinate status as a daughter-in-law, which, in turn, reinforces the cultural norms that portray abuse as a legitimate means of exerting power and control within the family.

The results demonstrate that many of the barriers faced by the survivors of violence in Kyrgyzstan are similar to those experienced by other women globally. Similar barriers include cultural norms of gender inequality, the acceptance of women’s roles and low status in society, and the cultural stigma and shame attached to divorce. These findings support prior international research, which has shown that some women believe that abuse is justified and that abusive behaviors on the part of a husband and his family are normal and acceptable (Abeya, Afework, & Yalew, 2012; Bhowon & Munbauhal, 2005; Glantz, Halperin, & Hunt, 1998; Safadi, Swigart, Hamdan-Mansour, Banimustafa, & Constantino, 2013; Sullivan, Senturia, Negash, Shiu-Thornton, & Giday, 2005). In addition, women attributed domestic violence to interference from mothers-in-law and the influence of the mother-in-law on a husband’s behavior. The role of mother-in-law as decision maker and instigator of conflict in the family in the context of a joint-living structure has been documented in other research studies as well (Abu-Lughod, 2010; Hyder, Noor, & Tsui, 2007; Oweis, Gharaibeh, AlNatour, & Froelicher, 2009).

In this study, help-seeking was further hindered by women’s desire not to expose this “family issue” to outsiders—a desire rooted in the women’s wish to protect their abuser, their children, their birth and extended families, and themselves from stigma and shame. Women often considered it shameful to share such personal problems with others. These feelings of loyalty and hesitancy to step beyond the boundaries of traditional family and cultural norms are similar to those experienced by other survivors, and are a continual barrier to help-seeking (Midlarsky, Venkataramani-Kothari, & Plante, 2006; Nagae & Dancy, 2010).

Finally, women in this study tolerated violence out of a sense that children “should not grow up without a father,” and/or because they believed that women are supposed to be strong and endure hardship in life. The tendency in Kyrgyzstan to blame mothers for removing a child from the father and breaking up the marriage is widespread internationally. Research has shown that in many collectivist societies, women believe that they are responsible for maintaining family unity and harmony (Roland, 1996), and the notion of a “strong woman” and “good mother” is rooted in the act of a woman sacrificing herself (Ho, 1990; Root, 1996). Studies have found that the majority of women in such cultures view domestic violence as a private issue and are advised by their parents to carefully hide conflict and protect the husband’s honor from people outside the family (Hayati, Eriksson, Hakimi, Hogberg, & Emmelin, 2013; Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Women are constrained by practical difficulties, and normalize and endure abuse as a “cross to bear for the family’s sake” (Landenburger, 1989; Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005, p. 76).

The Kyrgyz case also confirms findings from prior international research on internalized family role expectations as a reason for women staying in abusive situations and not seeking help. Other international studies have suggested that commitment to the relationship may be a significant factor in the decision to stay in an abusive relationship while attempting to decrease the abuse and its effects on children (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001). These studies found that placing responsibility for the failure of marriage on women pressures them to normalize violence as an “impression management” mechanism that allows them to avoid acknowledging their experience as unacceptable and reject an identity of “incompetent, abused wife” (Rivas, Kelly, & Feder, 2013, p. 1123). The women prioritize their competency as “a good partner” at the expense of other abilities and roles, a pattern that is consistent with their prioritization of family and community expectations over their own expectations. In some cultures, “role adherence is a more respectable route to fame and admiration than speaking one’s mind or breaking the mold” (Goel, 2005, p. 653). Rather than risk being labeled as a “bad” character, women prefer to play their “role as a victim” and adhere to cultural norms and values that reward women with honor and “power” within the community for sacrificing themselves (Kanagaratnam et al., 2012, p. 655). Given the value of the social network and marriage as a lifetime social contract, women are not prepared to sacrifice their marriage and the respect it grants them throughout their lives. As a result, women follow a “code of silence” and hide the abuse, compromising their own physical and mental well-being and normalizing the abuse (Rivas, Kelly, & Feder, 2013). These themes of hiding, compromising, and enduring emerged strongly in the Kyrgyz findings.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Research

The experiences narrated by the women in this study emphasize the need for concerted multisector efforts to advance the safety and protection of women in Kyrgyzstan. More broadly, the findings highlight the wider societal issues that must be addressed

in Kyrgyzstan to combat the problem of gender-based violence, and suggest a number of important areas for future theory, practice, and research. At the societal level, interventions should focus on dismantling cultural myths and propagating novel messages about marriage and family within Kyrgyz society. At a minimum, interventions should help families understand and recognize the dynamic of domestic violence, and encourage them to accept women who are being abused when they want to return to their natal households, because birth families are the most natural and critical refuge for women seeking relief from abuse.

To this end, there is a need for professional capacity-building and educational development of the social work profession in Kyrgyzstan. Social workers, including counselors and domestic violence specialists, must be involved when domestic violence cases are brought to the police, who must connect victims to social services, shelters, and hospitals. Another recommendation is to provide education and information in schools, hospitals, and other social venues. Furthermore, the mass media can play a role in disseminating information that will (a) raise awareness of gender-based violence and raise the profile of these issues as matters of national health and development policy among a variety of actors; and (b) promote beliefs about marital relationships that are based on gender equality and independent relationships. However, policymakers and social workers should take care to avoid unintended consequences; public education campaigns that emphasize extreme images of physical abuse may make women reluctant to be labeled as abused and hesitant to seek outside intervention (Grauwiler, 2008).

The results point to the importance of mobilizing a Kyrgyz feminist social movement to improve the policy atmosphere for combating violence against women, as opposed to focusing solely on instrumental measures such as policies or laws. Engaging the domestic feminist social movement itself can push and change other areas of social work policy and practice, such as service provision and resource allocation. The results imply the need for a “Kyrgyz feminism” that will push back against patriarchal norms and traditions and empower women to seek help. The global feminist critique calls for confrontation with many cultural norms and values such as those in traditional Kyrgyz society, particularly in the context of violence or human rights violations. This critique calls for developing a type of “Kyrgyz” feminism—distinct from Western feminism—that has a unique starting point. While Western policy emphasizes economic opportunity and workplace equality, in Kyrgyzstan, the starting point is basic protection, basic dignity, and human rights.

The findings from this study raise numerous questions that could serve as the basis for future research. By design, this study focused on women survivors of abuse. Another line of inquiry necessary to develop a more holistic understanding of the problem of domestic violence is exploring men’s perspectives and experiences. To this end, future research could examine the different pathways of men who do and do not become abusive partners, and what measures or inputs would work to de-legitimize men’s beliefs that they are entitled to abuse their partners. It would also be useful to explore the views of mothers-in-law who do and do not perpetrate abuse, in order to understand what conditions shape their beliefs about abuse.

Finally, although qualitative research methods provided an in-depth narrative examination of women's experiences, the results do not necessarily apply across different social and clinical contexts. The current findings can serve as a call to bolster comparative research on domestic violence, not only throughout Kyrgyz society but also across Central Asia and the former Soviet Union, in order to investigate culturally competent practices in the areas of social development, social entrepreneurship, and empowerment.

The major contribution of this study is that it is the first study in the field of social work to examine the topic of domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan (Childress, 2013). The results have provided the insight that violence against women is best understood as a social problem resulting from powerful cultural factors and social norms that sanction violence and legitimize abuse. In addition, the study will serve as a fruitful resource for stakeholders in the emergence of a Kyrgyz feminist movement, as well as for public health and social service professionals and researchers working to enhance individual and environmental resources for this population.

Conclusion

Domestic violence continues to be a significant problem in Kyrgyz society and is deeply rooted in the intersections of individual, family, community, and societal factors. While there are progressive laws in Kyrgyzstan that prohibit all types of violence among family members, and some help exists for survivors in the form of temporary shelter and crisis centers at the institutional level, cultural barriers still significantly hinder the ability of domestic violence survivors to seek help. The article argues that women cannot make progress in their help-seeking if the societal norms, attitudes, and belief systems that justify violence and perpetuate these barriers are not addressed. Successful prevention requires more upstream efforts to change the social constructions of marriage and gender roles, and not a strategy limited to treating the symptoms of the problem at the individual level. Women who are experiencing domestic abuse need proactive structural support from civil society, the media, and community-based and formal institutions to become empowered and to strengthen their capacity to live in a violence-free world.

Appendix

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about how you came to this shelter (tell me your story). Probes include questions about the history of the abusive relationship and help-seeking mechanisms:
 - a. Can you tell me why you decided to come here?
 - b. Tell me more about how you entered into the relationship with the man who became abusive. Was it young age or inexperience? Bride-kidnapping? Does your abuser come from a troubled family?
 - c. How important were family and/or societal norms in keeping your relationship?

- d. Before you came to the shelter, did you ever tell anyone that you were having trouble at home? Who did you tell? What was your experience if any with the following groups/people when your relationship became abusive? What was their reaction?:
 - i. Your family/friends
 - ii. In-laws
 - iii. Health workers
 - iv. Shelter system
 - v. Religious or community leaders (e.g., aksakal courts)
 - vi. Police
2. What did leaving the abuser mean to you (e.g., in terms of financial implications)?
3. When did you first begin to realize that your relationship was abusive? What helped you see it that way? OR What do you consider abuse? What contributed to abuse (what are the situations that led to violence)?

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Notes

1. Although official statistics provide some general information about the level of crime against women, there are some important limitations to these data. First, data collected by Kyrgyz law enforcement agencies are not widely published or disseminated for public use, thereby making it difficult to conduct any trend analysis (Human Rights Watch, 2006). Second, it is difficult to discern from the official criminal statistics whether crimes against women were the result of domestic violence. Finally, throughout the world, domestic violence is significantly underreported to police and law enforcement agencies due to the hidden nature of the problem; thus, available statistics are likely to underestimate the magnitude of the problem (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Jwi, & Lozano, 2002).
2. It is important to point out here that government data on violence against women are limited, often referring to registered cases rather than estimating broader prevalence (Human

- Rights Watch, 2015). In many countries, including Kyrgyzstan, such surveys as the Demographic and Health Survey and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, provide the first national level estimates and/or acceptance of intimate partner violence.
3. Bride-kidnapping (in Kyrgyz: *alakachu*) refers to the Kyrgyz traditional practice of abduction for forced marriage (Kleinbach, Ablezova, & Aitieva, 2005). Bride-kidnapping includes a variety of acts ranging from staged abduction for marriage to violent nonconsensual kidnapping and rape. Bride-kidnapping typically involves a young man (who could be a complete stranger) and his friends taking a young woman by deception or force to the home of his parents or a close relative. The woman is held in a room until the young man's female relatives convince her to put on the marriage scarf. If necessary, she is kept overnight and sometimes raped, and is thus threatened by the shame of no longer being a pure and marriageable woman (Kleinbach et al., 2005).
 4. In Kyrgyzstan, the term "common-law marriage" is used to describe a situation in which a man and woman live together as husband and wife but have not legally registered their marriage.
 5. A Muslim marriage ceremony that does not involve legal registration.
 6. This term originated from the 16th-century Arabic word "wazir," which means "the Caliph's chief counselor." A wazir is a high official in some Muslim countries, especially in Turkey under Ottoman rule.
 7. Trans: king; a title given to rulers and officials in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and certain other Muslim countries.
 8. Literally, daughter-in-law, but the term is freighted with cultural expectations of that role. The root of the word *kelin* in the Kyrgyz language means "one who comes from outside" and positions daughters-in-law on the lowest rung in the family hierarchy.
 9. "The dough made by the mother-in-law" is a Kyrgyz saying that means that the mother-in-law supervises and trains the new daughter-in-law to obey the rules of the new family, thereby "molding" the new daughter-in-law's behavior according to the mother-in-law's guidance and rules.

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