Is Domestic Violence a cultural tradition?...and other questions about gender and migration.

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Although the experiences of women in international migration has begun to draw attention from researches, policy makers, service providers, and the public at large, there is still a lot to learn about this group. Sometimes what passes for knowledge about immigrant women is nothing more than an accumulation of preconceived ideas. One such area of confusion is the issue of domestic violence in immigrant populations.

Let me start by saying that no matter how strong the similarities in the experience of migration, vast differences are also present. Differences originate in the dissimilar countries of birth, ages at migration, historical period when the migration took place, circumstances surrounding it, and the consequences of the process of each individual life.

So let us explore some of these similar and different experiences among immigrant women before addressing the issue of domestic violence.

Migration and Women's Gender Roles

As migrants cross borders, they also cross emotional and behavioral boundaries. Becoming a member of a new society stretches the boundaries of what is possible. One's life and

roles change. With them, identities change as well. Everyone living in a given place is unavoidably shaped by it and therefore indebted to it. Most immigrant and refugees crossing geographical borders, rarely anticipate the emotional and behavioral boundaries they will confront.

At each step of the migration process, women and men encounter different experiences. Women's roles and sexual behavior may be modified more dramatically and profoundly than men's (Espín, 1987, 1999, 2006). For both heterosexual and lesbian women, the crossing of borders through migration provides the space and "permission" to cross emotional boundaries and transform their gender roles (Espín, 1987, 1999, 2006). Displacement may empower women to develop new selves.

However, this is usually not a smooth process, even for those women who seem to have acculturated easily to the new society. Regardless of differences in their countries of birth, many women appear to benefit from the liberating effects of being "outsiders" in the new culture (Espín, 1999, 2006). Women's gender roles may shift because of their relocation to a country with more egalitarian gender norms and also because of the necessity of their greater participation in the workforce or simply because of the distance from the familiar environments and/or their families. (Espín, 1999, 2006; Yakushko & Espín, forthcoming).

Immigrant women's employment may change their identity and their families' dynamics in considerable ways because it may entail women's increasing bargaining power due to their increasing economic contributions (McCloskey *et al*, 1995; Perilla, 1999; Salgado de Snyder, 1994). This new financial independence may provide a chance to leave unsatisfying partnerships or to improve their gender role status by increasing control over household decisions and

building personal autonomy (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Pedraza, 1991; Simon, 1992). But it can also become a cause for conflict precisely because it subverts power structures inside the family.

In other words, migration offers women the opportunity to transgress established gendered norms. But migration can also contribute to a situation where immigrant women and men embrace more traditional gender roles while embodying a "reimagined" home culture in new cultural milieu (Mahalinham & Leu, 2005). Migration carries with it the possibility of limiting women's private spheres of influence and their moral authority within traditional cultural contexts. Traditional patriarchal contexts have always provided the opportunity to carve separate—if inferior—spaces for women. The cultural transformations brought about by migration upset these spaces without yet giving women full access to equal power in the public sphere (Espín, 1999, 2006). Some immigrants of both sexes subscribe to the traditional ideas of male superiority. But many reject it outright. Let us remember that there are many immigrant women who are involved in activism and who are unwilling to submit to the authority of male relatives.

Indeed, migration can be both emancipatory and subjugating for women. Gains seem to be more pronounced in the economic domain whereas gender subordination may continue in different forms (Pesar, 2003). In any case, for both men and women, "[n]ew learning opportunities emerge, as host society institutional structures interact with the psychological equipment immigrants bring and create in the host society" (Rogler, 1994, p.706). Successfully negotiating these new identities and relationships occurs on many levels and depends on a variety of contextual factors, such as the quality of women's pre-migration relationships and current social support network.

Gender Power Differentials and Migration

*As immigration researcher Patricia Pesar (2003) and other authors (e.g. Espín, 1999, 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; 2003) tell us, it is important to acknowledge that "although household members' orientations and actions may sometimes be guided by norms of solidarity, they may equally be informed by hierarchies of power along gender and generational lines" (Pesar 2003, p.24).

The impact of migration on gender relations and the impact of gendered power structures on the migratory process cannot be ignored if we are to have a clearer picture of how migration experiences intersect with women's individual psychological processes. To fully grasp the interplay of gender and the migratory process it is important to understand that even though women migrate for a whole range of reasons such as poverty, displacement from the land, debt, and many other external constraints that they share with men, the impact of these problems is always gendered because of the impact of specific problems such as wage differentials in sender areas and in receiving areas (Kofman et al., 2000). Indeed, "all women face the constraints of sex segregation in employment" (p.25). In addition to these common economic needs and their gendered consequences, "some non-economic factors are especially important causes of migration for women. Social constraints facing women […] also influence sex selectivity patterns in migrations streams. Marital discord and physical violence, unhappy marriages and the impossibility of divorce [as well as other instances of sexual/gendered oppression] often influence women's decision to migrate" (Kofman et al., 2000, p.21).

Women's agency, "viewed within the context of resisting oppression and exploitative structures […] is particularly vital for a gendered account of migration, because it so often assumed that women simply 'follow' men and that their role in migration is reactive rather than

proactive" (Kofman et al., 2000, p.23). In other words, it is important to keep in mind "the extent to which [women's] migration is not simply an enforced response to economic hardship by single, widowed or divorced women [or wives following their husbands] but also a deliberate, calculated move on the part of individual gendered actors to escape from a society where patriarchy is an institutionalized and repressive force" (Kofman et al., 2000, p.24). Therefore, "so-called 'cultural' issues such as concerns with the body, sexuality and representation, might also be significant for a gendered account of migration" (Kofman et al., 2000, p.34).

We cannot ignore "the impact of immigrant women's regular wage work has on gender relations" (Pesar 2003, p.27). "Employed immigrant women generally gain greater personal autonomy and independence…[W]omen's regular access to wages and their greater contribution to household sustenance frequently lead to more control over budgeting and other realms of domestic decision making…[There is evidence that] migration and settlement bring changes in traditional patriarchal arrangements" (Pesar 2003, p.27). Many women learn to contest the patriarchal narratives of ethnic solidarity and thus, change the content of some of those narratives (Pesar, 2003). It is, therefore, essential to keep in mind that "households are not the cozy rational decision making units that neo-classical economists would lead us to believe. Migration decisions reflect the power relations within the household and are influenced by both individual as well as collective interests" (Kofman et al., 2000, p.26).

"Patriarchal structures take many different economic, social and political forms throughout the world" (Kofman et al., 2000, p.25); women immigrants and refugees encounter these many forms both in their home countries and in receiving societies.

Conversely, much is made about the incidence of male dominance in immigrant cultures by individuals in the host culture. It is important to remember that any expression of male

dominance among immigrants is nothing but the specific culture's version of the myth of male superiority that exits in most cultures, including mainstream American and European cultures.

Frequently, women are made to "carry" cultural values and behaviors at the expense of their own lives. Pressures to be the "bearers of culture" may bring significant stress to the lives of immigrant women (Dion, 2006; Espiritu, 2001; Pesar, 2003). *Policing women's bodies and behavior in the name of "tradition"is an attempt to preserve the past amidst the constant transformations of social norms. It becomes for immigrant communities the main means of asserting moral superiority over the host culture and it gives the feeling that not all is changing (Espiritu, 2001). Groups that are transforming their way of life through a vast and deep process of acculturation, focus on preserving "tradition" almost exclusively through the gender roles of women. Women's bodies become the site for struggles concerning disorienting cultural differences. Gender becomes the site to claim the power denied to immigrant men by racism (Espín, 1999; 2006).

It is as if the immigrant's psychological sense of safety and self depended on a sharp contrast between two sets of cultural values conceived as rigidly different and unchangeable. The preservation of "old versions" of women's roles becomes central to this sharp contrast. For people who experience a deep lack of control over their daily lives, controlling women's behaviors becomes a symbolic demonstration of orderliness and continuity. Obviously, it is easier for immigrants to maintain control over their private world than over their public lives: work schedules, types of work and schooling, and the structures of daily life are controlled by the customs and demands of the new society. But, in the privacy of their homes, they can seek to maintain the sense that they are still in control. This is why, frequently, women themselves join actively in adhering to traditions

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that, from the point of view of outsiders, appear to curtail their own freedoms and opportunities for self-fulfillment (Espín, 1999, 2006). All these factors—challenges created by women's greater access to education and financial resources, the emphasis on preserving "traditions" at all costs, and the unavoidable stress created by the migration process itself— contribute to increased tensions in immigrant households.

Domestic Violence

It is a common belief that there is a larger incidence of domestic violence among immigrant populations and, therefore, immigrant women suffer higher rates of battering because they may come from cultures that accept domestic violence.

So, let's take a look a few statistics to assess the reality of this situation.

In a study with 280 immigrant Latina women ages 14 to 56, Hass, Dutton and Orloff (2000) found that 136 women reported experiences of physical abuse by their intimate partner whereas 33 women reported experiences of psychological abuse. A recent study in New York City found that 51% of intimate partner homicide victims were foreign born, while 45% were born in the United States. The National Council for Research on Women (1995) documented that nearly half of immigrant women surveyed experienced domestic violence and that this violence intensified after their relocation, probably due to the evolving family power dynamics that may increase the levels of stress and, in turn, result in increased incidences of domestic violence. In particular, women who have refugee status experience high incidence of interpersonal violence because their relationships are often marked by severe distress due to previous trauma and the stress of relocation (Bhuyan, *et al.*, 2005). (These studies do not provide information about the birthplaces of the perpetrators).

Now let's see how this information compares to other data on domestic violence. When we look at data on domestic violence for the general population in the United States, we discover that "three to four million women are battered in their homes by their husbands, ex-husbands, and male lovers" (Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, 1991, p.12) and that "domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women between the ages of 15 and 44 in the United States: more than car accidents, rapes, and muggings combined" (Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, 1992, p.3). Approximately 95% of victims of domestic violence are women and one woman is beaten by her husband or partner every 15 seconds in the United States (Uniform Crime Reports, FBI, 1991). In the year 2000, 1247 women were killed by an intimate partner. In recent years, and intimate partner killed approximately 33% of all female murder victims. Males were 83% of spouse murderers.

Among the U.S. military, rates of marital aggression are considered three to five times higher than civilian rates (*The War at Home*, Sixty Minutes, September 1, 2002). An average of 45 to 48 homicides occurs every year in the armed forces. 75% to 84% of alleged offenders in cases of spouse physical abused are honorably discharged, (i.e., not punished for their violence to their partners). Indeed, militarized masculinity, no matter how patriotic, can be lethal for women (and, of course, I am limiting my comments to domestic violence and not addressing the issue of rape during war).

As we can see from this limited number of examples, domestic violence is a widespread problem among all U.S. populations, not only a "cultural" issue pertaining to immigrants or even more prevalent among them.

However, the reality is that "immigrant-specific factors exacerbate the already vulnerable position of immigrant women in domestic violence situations" (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002, p. 898). A review of scholarship reveals

> that the incidence of domestic violence is not higher than it is in the native population but rather that the experiences of immigrant women in domestic violence situations are often exacerbated by their specific position as immigrants, such as limited host-language skills, isolation from family and community, lack of access to dignified jobs, uncertain legal status, and experiences with authorities in their origin countries (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002, p. 898).

Economic hardship created by immigration laws that restrict the possibility of legitimate employment reduces women's autonomy, increases their vulnerability in relationships, and leaves them more susceptible to abuses in personal relationships.

Concerns and fears such as visa status or fear of deportation for self or the spouse may prevent immigrant and refugee women from asking for help (Abraham, 2000). Especially difficult is the situation of women who are undocumented immigrants and who experience domestic violence while in the U.S. Women who reside in the U.S. without documents are least likely to seek help and protection from domestic violence. Moreover, abusers often use their partners' immigration status as a tool of control. They may subject her to constant threats of deportation, threatening to report her to the authorities to deport her and keep the children. They may destroy important documents such as passport or identification cards, or make constant derogatory comments about her or her culture and race… (It is important to note here that the abusive partners of immigrant women may be U.S. born white men).

The U.S. federal government has made provisions for women and their children who are abused with the passages of the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 and the Battered Immigrant Women Protection Act of 1999, the goal of which is to remove immigration laws as a barrier that kept battered immigrant women and children locked in abusive relationships (U.S. House of Representatives, 2000). Although new laws provide a temporary visa status and protections against deportation to undocumented immigrant women and children who are experiencing domestic violence in their homes, multiple barriers continue to exist for women who find themselves in these situations in seeking and obtaining legal and other forms of help. Lack of language skills, ignorance of the law, and lack of access to other resources, practically nullify the provisions of the law.

Another problem is that shelters sometimes are concerned about the legal or funding consequences of serving battered immigrant women despite the fact that non-profit organizations are explicitly exempt from verifying immigration status as a condition for service. But even when they are willing to provide services, language barriers may prevent from doing so because they may not have bilingual personnel.

From the above figures and comments, we can gather that it is difficult to get a clear picture on the issue of domestic violence in immigrant communities. We do know that in situations of increased stress (e.g., the military, the tensions created by migrations, economic crises) men use violence, displaced to women and children, to deal with their frustrations. We also know that in some social contexts it is acceptable to speak publicly about men's prerogatives to be violent against women. But that may not be the whole picture.

The Dangers of Misguided Cultural Sensitivity

Pressures on immigrant women also emerge from cultural values and attitudes present in the host society which imposes its own burdens on immigrant women through prejudices and racism. While "returning women to their 'traditional roles' continues to be defined as central to preserving national identity and cultural pride" (Narayan, 1997, p.20) by some immigrants, those same values and behaviors are perceived by their hosts as a demonstration of immigrants' "backwardness."

Frequently, when outsiders to a given cultural group are trying to be "sensitive," they may attribute behaviors that would be unacceptable in members of the mainstream culture as being part of "the culture" of this group. Under the guise of respect, they contribute to the oppression of immigrant women. This perspective can distort efforts to enhance cultural awareness into dangerously destructive practices for women. Even more so because they are carried out with such good intentions.

Our notions of "cultural sensitivity" are frequently based on a notion of "culture" as a form of preserving otherness and difference that may involve our need to see others as "picturesque" even though it may be at their own expense.

I am convinced that racism and sexism derive their strength from each other. In an effort to manage some of the guilt generated by largely unacknowledged racism, it is possible to easily forget that *sexism is no more deserving of respect when it is spoken in other languages or dressed in other cultural robes*. Similarly, racism is not to be tolerated in the name of advancing "women's rights." The balance between these two is a delicate, but absolutely necessary one. Sensitivity toward other cultures does not imply unquestioning acceptance of patriarchal definitions of cultural identities and behaviors. We

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should ask ourselves why is the focus of cultural traditions placed on women's roles rather than other aspects of culture and traditions. Deployment of "tradition" and "culture" to justify sexist or racist behavior should never remain unproblematized (Espín, 2006).

Prejudices also influence how immigrant women are represented in social sciences. Societal intolerance has led many social scientists to narrowly conceptualize immigrant women as oppressed and helpless (Darvishpour, 2002) and to disregard women's strengths, resilience, resourcefulness, and the importance of community networks. It is true that such systemic forces of oppression and discrimination play a powerful role in shaping immigrant women's access to resources. But, it is easy to assume that most poor, uneducated women immigrants do not understand the meaning and subtleties of women's oppression. It will be easy to dismiss any woman who expresses concern or opposition to male domination by labeling her as a traitor who has "sold herself" to "Western" influence. The reality is that in all cultures—U.S. and European cultures included—there will be resistance to women's transformations of their roles by those invested in maintaining the status quo. But, in all ethnic groups, women are perfectly capable of undertaking this transformative task. Those who have a stake at preventing the development of consciousness among women will not be pleased when those women take their lives in their own hands. Sometimes, apparent "cultural sensitivity" is nothing but another variety of racism that, in fact, fosters a conservative politics which locks women into the past. Some of these practices perpetuate the "colonial gaze" and reinforce exclusionary practices used by those who have a vested interest in keeping "their" women outside critical sites of power over their own lives (Espín, 2006).

Indeed, when trying to understand other cultures, we need to reflect about the implications of maintaining a customary system that targets mainly women. We need to reflect on the implications of showing respect for those customs that have serious consequences for their right to bodily and emotional integrity. This is not just a benign manifestation of interesting "traditions." It can cost women their lives.

The question is, obviously, how we preserve sensitivity and respect for others and their cultural differences while continuing to foster liberatory/emancipatory ideals and principles applicable to all oppressed groups, not just to some with exclusion of others. It is not enough to be supported in efforts at liberation from ethnic oppression if women's gender oppression is not taken into consideration. The guilt generated by failure to acknowledge racism or sexism can become a symptom of it. Perhaps if we reflect on how we address our own racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism (and other "isms") in a more careful way, we would be more able to refine our understanding and manifest a more authentic cultural sensitivity. This will demand more work to develop awareness about the interlocking nature of oppression and the continued weight of its many subtle forms, a daunting but necessary task.

On the one hand, as we understand the complexities and nuances of human diversity more thoroughly, we realize we can no longer speak of generic "women" or force our own version of "the good life" on women from diverse cultural backgrounds. Moreover, each group contains its own diversities. But, paradoxically, some efforts to enhance cultural awareness may become dangerously destructive for women. In this misguided effort to explain violence away as a product of traditions in "other" cultures, we seem to forget that broken bones hurt the same regardless of culture and murder is murder regardless of place of birth or relationship between

perpetrator and victim. Therefore, we need to question not only "customs and traditions" but also the nature of power and the structures that perpetuate the exercise of that power. Women's bodies are sites of power relations in all cultures. Power relations can turn violent. And violence against any person should be prevented at all costs, not justified in the name of "cultural sensitivity." But, regretfully, a common legal issue contributing to problems in women's struggle to gain protection from violence is that "culture" is used in court as a defense against the victims of domestic violence (Renteln, 2002). Even in cases of "honor killings," this reasoning is used by the defense to gain reduced sentences that would not be accepted in other instances of murder.

I could not tell you how many times in my consultation and training activities concerning immigrant communities, professionals often tell me that wife abuse is "part of these people's culture," implying that it should be tolerated as a demonstration of "cultural sensitivity." My response to these comments is always this: wife abuse is *also* part of mainstream U.S. and European cultures and, as legal or helping professionals or educators, we would not dream of advocating tolerance for it in mainstream cultures. And I bring to their attention the life-threatening implications of this willingness to accept and justify violence against women in the name of cultural differences.

I understand the dynamics of immigrant men's displacement of their anger onto women and children as, in part, a function of their frustration about not having their "manhood" recognized in mainstream society. I understand that this is a response that comes out of their deep frustration at not being valued and recognized by mainstream society. Indeed, as I have said, evidence exists that when men suffer economic hardships, loss of jobs or reduced income, the incidence of violence against women rises (Barriteau, 2008, p. 21). However, acceptance of violence against women as an outlet for frustration or as a legitimate reaction to these men's own

oppression is unjustifiable and immoral. And it should *not* be cloaked in the mantle of cultural sensitivity. (In fact, what is this need for recognition of their "manhood," but another manifestation of sexism and racism?)

Concluding Thoughts

Ultimately the question is who "owns" immigrant women's lives? "Modern" ideas about women's rights and free choices concerning their lives have not entirely replaced more "traditional" ideas about gender obligations and differences in rights. These questions are alive in all societies. Yet, they become more poignant for immigrant groups trying to acculturate in a new context which is itself in transition concerning the roles of women.

Anthropologist Emmanuel Todd (1994) believes that the defining factor in the adjustment of immigrants is the social status of women. He sees the freedom—or lack of it—afforded to women as the most important indicator of the quality of the experience of migration for any group.

The United Nations (1994, 1995) unequivocally states in documents concerning the status of women immigrants and refugees that

> improving the status of women is increasingly recognized as fundamental to
> improving the basic human rights of over half the population of the world
> and also contributing to social economic progress...Women's migration,
> both internally within developing countries and internationally across
> borders... to developed countries, is inextricably linked to the status of
> women in society.

And domestic violence is without doubt one of the greatest barrier to improving the status of women in any society.

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