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Help-Seeking Behaviors and Practices among Fijian Women Who Experience Domestic Violence: An exploration of the role of religiosity as a coping strategy

**Abstract**

Domestic violence continues to be a persistent social problem, tragically affecting large number of women and children. Many religious women look to their faith community for guidance in the aftermath of domestic violence. This paper focuses on help-seeking behaviors and practices among Fijian women. Help-seeking behaviors and practices of abused women in Fiji have hitherto, received little or no attention and the present study seeks to address this lacuna in knowledge and understanding. Qualitative method was employed in the form of in-depth one-on-one interviews with eighteen abused women to explore the nature of women’s help-seeking in response to domestic violence. Women in abusive relationships utilized a variety of coping strategies to deal and heal from the abuse. In their attempt to survive and heal from experiences of abuse, the findings in this study reveal that women turn to their faith in their search for solace, support and strength. For the women in this study, their faith in God is integral to their healing. This paper offers an analysis of how religious involvement also provides women with possibilities of enhanced social and cultural capital that can help to reduce social isolation and enhance support networks. Implication for practice are discussed.

Key words: Help-Seeking, Domestic Violence, Religion, Coping Strategies, Gender

**Background:**

Domestic violence continues to be a persistent social problem, tragically affecting large number of women and children across the globe. Women abused by their intimate partner suffer physical and psychological consequences, yet the majority of them do not seek help (Montalvo-Liendo et al.,2009). Despite the continuing nature of domestic violence, many women remain silent or do not specifically seek help to deal with abuse until many years after the abusive event (Meyer et al., 2007). Seeking help is important as it can lead to prevention and cessation of further violence (Jewkes et al.1999; Liang et al, 2005; Meyer et al. 2007). Moreover, witnessing violence can be traumatic for children and could have deleterious effects on their well-being (Eriksson, 2013, Jarvis et al, 2005).

The conceptualization of the phenomenon of domestic violence by the two dominant schools of thought, namely family violence and feminist theory help us understand the personal and structural factors. Family violence theorists tend to emphasize individual and personal vulnerability whereas feminist theorists privilege structural explanations. Similarly, a number of theoretical perspectives consider help-seeking to be a matter of individual choice that range from the psychological to micro approaches that focus on individual motivation, thoughts and feelings (Lynch et al., 1997). A World Health Organization (WHO) study showed that between 55% and 95% abused women had never sought help from formal services (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2005), and in many countries, when women do seek help they prefer informal social networks to formal organizations (Gracia-Moreno et al., 2005, Kaukinen, 2002). Hayati et al (2013), in their study among Javanese women in Indonesia, found that the coping strategies used by abused women occurred through a spiritual framing of their experiences and a positive diversion of the self, while remaining in the [abusive] relationship. Korean Americans women’s experience of domestic violence and help-seeking is turning to their churches and religious leaders instead of utilizing formal services (Choi, 2015). Similarly, based on the study among African American domestic violence survivors, Potter (2007) also found that these survivors utilized spiritual practices as a strategy to cope with or getting out of the violent relationship. According to Hassouneh-Phillips (2001), because of their faith, abused women would rather turn to God and suffer the abuse rather than leave. This may be in keeping with the central role that religiosity plays in the lives of abused women. When women of faith (religious) seek help and counsel from their places of worship and religious leaders, they are also looking for practical help as well as assistance to deal with emotional and spiritual needs (Nason-Clark and Kroeger,2004). It is reported that women sometimes may be torn between religious teaching/ advice received from religious leaders, and their personal safety and emotional health (Nason-Clark,1999).

Domestic violence continues to be a persistent social problem, tragically affecting large number of women and children. A survey conducted by Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre and the Fiji Bureau of Statistics (2014) has revealed the prevalence and widespread nature of violence against women in this country, and the report placed Fiji fourth out of 25 countries in the world that has the highest rates of violence against women. In Fiji, there are a number of governmental and non-governmental organizations which provide services to victims of gender violence such as the Fiji

Women’s Crisis Centre (FWCC), and the Pacific Counselling and Social Service (PC and SS), amongst others. The services provided by these organizations include but are not limited to, counselling, advocacy, community engagement, amongst others (Newland, 2012). Fiji is a patriarchal society that supports and maintains gender hierarchy and Fijian families are characterized by male domination that upholds patriarchal beliefs such as the husband is head of the home and all members are expected to comply to his will (Adinkrah, 2001; Chattier,2015 ). Gender role underlie all forms of abuse which lends itself to power and control (Rozee,1993; Levesque,1999), and women are abused when they overstep the gender role expectation. Men are considered to be the main income-earners, and may view their wives as challenging their status if the wife’s earning are higher than their own. Often, the men would make decisions without consulting their wives who are expected to obey their husbands (Newland, 2012). Based on her study of Fijians, Newland (2012) found that issues of hierarchy, power and control in the household were often the cause of violence against wives and daughters. This patriarchal structure in marriage has reflected the beliefs of male dominance. Thus, wife abuse may be accepted as a “normal” part of marriage, especially in marital dispute as a form of discipline and punishment for women. When abuse occurs, women may be blamed by the husband for the abuse, and for not giving respect to her husband (perpetrators). This means that culturally bound gender roles, norms and values may significantly influence women’s decisions.

Religion plays a significant role in the lives of women who experienced domestic violence and studies indicate that abused women often rely on their faith and the support from a religious community for their survival (Nason-Clark,2009; Cares and Cusick,2012). Christianity in Fiji and in western countries holds similar biblical teaching from the bible, and in cases of domestic violence, religious women would often seek council from the clergy/pastor. In Fiji, religion has always been an influential and important facet of Fijian culture (Toren, 2004), Christianity is a core element in the Fijian way of life, and the church provides the primary attachment beyond the family (Srebrnik, 2002). Christianity plays a key role in the social sphere and Christian ideology shapes morality (Toren,2004) and can profoundly influence what is deemed as ‘acceptable behavior’ (Filemoni-Tofaeno, 2006). For example, the wife is portrayed as a helper to the husband, and a woman’s role is largely perceived as one of procreation and nurturance of the family. As such, there is a moral impetus for women to stay married (Smith, 2006), and if there are children, this impetus is reinforced, and often supported by clergy who counsel them (Filemoni-Tofaeno, 2006). When women experience abuse they may feel morally obligated to stay. Studies also found that religious women who seeks council from the clergy may feel they cannot leave the abusers for fear of reprisal from the church and fear that the church may support the perpetrators for refusing to divorce (Buxton,2000;Gillum,Sullivan and Bybee,2006; Wendt,2008) and if the victim chooses to divorce she may be “excommunicated, physically, emotionally and possibly spiritually” (Buxton,2000: 57). Thus, religion can play a major role in how abused women cope and respond to domestic violence. Although social services and helping professional may work with victims of abuse by providing counselling etc. customary and traditional practices also help shape people’s attitudes and behaviors. In cases of domestic violence, when the wife returns to her natal or other relative’s household to seek sanctuary, the husband would be compelled to offer a *soro* as a means of making amends to the wife’s family, and the wife is then expected to accept the *soro* offering, irrespective of whether she is ready or not. *Soro* is a traditional practice of collective apology (from the husband and his family) and atonement as a way to right the wrong (an atonement for his action) (Newland, 2012). The practice of ‘soro’ can be problematic because for the most part it prioritize the perpetrator rather than justice for the abused women. Help-seeking behavior and practices of abused Fijian women has received scant attention. The current study seeks to address this gap in knowledge by exploring the help-seeking behaviors and practices, and the role of religiosity as a coping strategy among abused Fijian women.

**Method:**

*Procedures and design*

This study employed a qualitative research design in the form of in-depth interviews. An in-depth interview is a useful tool as it allow the researcher to explore and understand abused women’s help seeking practices, while privileging respondents’ subjective views and lived experiences. Respondents in this study are Fijian women, aged 18 years and above, who had been or were in an abusive relationship at the time of this study. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, there was a challenge to recruitment of potential participants. Initially, two social services agencies for domestic violence were contacted for their assistance in the recruitment of potential participants, but both were unable to assist. Potential participants were then identified through a snowball sampling method with the assistance of three students who had taken a course taught by the first author. Snowball sampling method is considered an effective and appropriate method among members of a vulnerable or stigmatized group who are difficult to locate (Rubin & Babbie, 2008) and the intermediaries are known and trusted by the potential participants (Lee, 1999). The three students initially referred four women, and these women in turn referred other women. Potential participants were also identified through the first author’s personal and professional contacts. A total of 18 women were identified through this method who agreed to be interviewed for this study. Each interview lasted about 60-90 minutes.

Prior to conducting the interview, respondents were informed about the objectives of the research, confidentiality of their responses, and the voluntary nature of participation. All those who agreed to participate gave written consent. This study obtained ethics approval from the University Research Ethics Committee Board.

*Participants:*

Data for this study came from eighteen women, who had experienced domestic violence, and some who were still experiencing domestic violence at the time this study was conducted. The inclusion criteria were, Fijian women, aged 18 and above, and who have children above the age of 3 years, and who were in an abusive relationship or who are currently experiencing domestic violence at the time of this interview. Data were collected through one-on-one in-depth interview and a total of eighteen women participated in this study, aged between 27 to 42 (mean age=34.94). At the time of conducting this study, 61.1% were married, 22.2% were divorced and 16.7% were separated. In terms of education, 78% of participants had completed form 5 and above, and 77.8% were employed. The names used are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

*Data Analysis:*

Braun and Clarke’s ([2006](#_ENREF_3)) thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts that produced the key concepts evident in the data. Using a detailed line-by-line review of each transcript, all initial codes relevant to the research aim were incorporated into a theme. Each transcript was read several times and the audio-tape recording was listened to numerous times to ensure accuracy of the transcription and provided the researchers with a firmer grip on the interview data and to ensure clear presentation of what is evident in the data. Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) suggestion for the development of thematic maps to aid the generation of themes helped the researcher to consider the links and relationships between themes. This refinement of the themes took place on two levels, primarily with the coded data ensuring they formed a coherent pattern, and second, once a coherent pattern was formed the themes were considered in relation to the data set. This ensured the themes accurately reflected what was evident in the data set as a whole (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Once a clear idea was obtained of the various themes and how they fit together emerged, the analysis moved to the stage of naming the themes and making sense out of them.

**Results:**

Women’s help-seeking is shaped by a combination of individual and structural factors. A decision to seek help is impacted by the women’s own positionality and determined by available choices and constraints in a given social, economic and cultural context (Lochart and Danis, 2010). The women in this study did not feel that seeking formal help for domestic violence in itself was justifiable due to cultural tradition and religious beliefs, which can be problematic due to the negative psychological consequences both for the women and children.

**The Role of Religion**

Religion plays a particularly significant role in the lives of the women in this study. The women’s stories indicated that they deeply valued their faith in God as a coping mechanism with their experience of abuse. Many women said they confided in their pastor and/or religious leader, or friends in the church, in seeking help/and or solution to their problem. However, their help-seeking behavior was also influenced by the advice they received from these sources, who often advised to pray and to turn to God. In the words of a participant:

*I shared with one of our leaders in the women’s group in the church. I went to her and told her I want to get a divorce. She encouraged me just to pray about it and leave it to the Lord, and I prayed to God … (*Molly*).*

Lori shared with one of her friends in the church, and this is what she narrated:

*I shared with one of my friends in the church, and she said that the main thing we must do is fast and pray. And I managed to get through (cope) with my experiences of abuse because of prayers to God. I don’t know where I would have ended up without it (prayers and God) (*Lori).

For Polly, who disclosed to her church pastor, and the ladies’ group (in the church) for support, she was advised to pray and turn to God:

*“I think the word of God is the most powerful tool when facing this kind of situation (abuse). When I pray it gives me strength, prayer really helps me a lot” (*Polly)*.*

Women in this study also tended to rely on their faith/religion to give them direction in handling the abuse. For example, Sally, a participant shared:

*As much as I know my rights, I must always forgive him because of what the bible says, that you must forgive 70x7 times. As much as I know my rights, I will always make God’s word the final authority in my life so all the time when it happens (abuse) I will be like, oh I will have to forgive him (husband), I will have to keep forgiving him because it says in the Bible to forgive 70x7 times…*

In addition to sharing with members in the church, participants also described a personal relationship with God. The women’s personal relationship with God here can be understood as their faith based on their strongly held religious beliefs. Such a faith illustrates the strength of their belief in God and is engendered by a religious tradition, and its doctrines such as communicating to God through prayers, reading the bible and personal quite time with God. This gives meaning and value to their lives in spite of the abuse, adversity, and hardship. Below are some quotes from the women about how their personal relationship with God helps them cope with the abuse they were experiencing.

*When facing problems (abuse), when we pray to God, God is there to help. I have faith in God and I know he can solve my problem. I have a personal relationship with my God. I share with my heavenly father and tell him everything. After praying I would feel better and stronger (*Kate)*.*

*I was praying to my Lord, Lord you can help me with this problem (abuse), the problem (abuse) is getting worse. I cried and cried a lot and most of the time I prayed a lot, and I know my prayers gets me through. Most of the time I lost myself in reading the bible and praying to cope with my situation (abuse)* (Mickie).

*I just look forward to my personal quiet time with God, just pour everything to the Lord, and put everything in prayers. Once I come out of my prayer corner, I feel relieved. That is why I hardly share it with anybody*…(Vickie).

Ann, another participant, said that she could not share with her friends or colleagues due to fear that they might reveal to other people and everyone would get to hear about her problem. Instead, Ann turned to God and prayers:

*At times, I just kneel and pray, that’s all I can do. My friends at work asked me why you have bruises on your face and I never shared with them. It’s like I am ashamed to share…if I share everybody will come to know and they will gossip. So instead I turn to God and pray about it.*

**Family and Friends:**

In this study, a few of the participants sought help from family and friends. Cathy, one of the participants, has this to share:

*The first time I shared was with my senior colleague, who is also my mentor (at work) and because of her I am alive today. I had suicidal thoughts and attempted suicide. she took me to her home, encouraged me, supported me and prayed with me... If not for her, I would have died.*

Bobbie, another participant shared that she disclosed the abuse to her sister who advise her to go to Women’s Crisis Center. And for Bobbie it was her sister who advised her to seek help from the social service agency.

My *younger sister told me to go to women’s crisis center and seek help and gave me money for the bus fare. She told me to go and come back quickly while my husband was away because we both knew that if my husband comes to know, I will be in serious trouble… but somebody must have seen me and reported to my husband because that night he beat me severely for going to women crisis center for help…(Bobbie)*

Formal Sources of Support:

In this study only a few women reported seeking help from formal sources such as the police and social service agency. Below are excerpts from the women’s narratives:

*I went to the police station and they said, you know we cannot do anything because we know her (husband’s) family very well. My husband holds the chief title in the village and they [people in the village] respect their chief, and so they [police] were not willing to help and do anything. The policeman told me to go home and make it up with my husband (Susan).*

*When I went to the police station to get the Domestic Violence Restraining Order (DVRO) against my husband, one of the police officers, who is also my brother-in-law, advised me not to do that. He asked me to think of my kids and my family…that people in the village will talk about my family. Later in the evening, my husband’s family came to present their “Soro” like that* [a Fijian traditional way where they come with gifts, as mentioned above], *to ask for forgiveness and to forget the wrong doings (Mary)*.

Women who approach social service agency shared that the agency would tell them about programs and activities offered by the agency and also about DVRO. Miriam, shared about her experience of seeking support from social service agency:

*I shared it with Women Crisis Center, they were very helpful and suggested that I put the DVRO on my husband…. He (husband) knows that he is under the law and if I call the police they will be at my door step. Men in Fiji are afraid of the DVRO.*

Another participant, Nancy, also shared about her experience of seeking help from the Women Crisis Center:

*I went to women crisis center. They look out for programs that I can fit into, so I participated in women support group which was very helpful.*

Personal beliefs about preserving the family unit, and the belief that the social service agency may separate the family were not uncommon as shared by Jill below:

*I mean if I go to women crisis center, they might do something to my husband, like put DVRO on him and this may separate the family…how will it look, I always think then the children will be bullied in school...*

**Discussion:**

Domestic violence is a complex social problem located in social vulnerability that affects women’s physical health, well-being and spirituality and it is crucial to address each of these dimensions. Religion and faith hold significance for many people and can play a major role in how abused women deal with domestic violence. In the current study, we found that women victims of abuse largely look to their religious leaders for advice instead of formal domestic violence services. For Fijians, religion is an influential force in their lives and their faith is an important facet of their lifestyles (Toren, 2004), and the church provides the primary attachment beyond the family (Srebnik, 2002). Although most churches in Fiji have conservative notions about women’s roles in the family, women often turn to the church leaders for advice (Newland, 2012). However, religion may be paradoxically, both a source of support and a barrier to women’s help-seeking. While religion has been found to be a source of emotional and spiritual support (Fraser et al, 2002; Nason Clark, 2000), survivors of domestic violence have also reported that often the advice they received from their clergy is to stay in the marriage and not seek divorce as this may be in keeping with the biblical teaching (Fortune, 2000). In the current study we also found that the women who look to their religious leaders and members of the church for guidance were also advised to pray and to surrender to God. Women in this study also shared that in keeping with the Biblical teaching of forgiveness, their faith in God gave them the strength to cope with their situation and to forgive their husband. Additionally, the women also utilized their own agency such as their faith, prayers and reading the Bible, which gave them the strength to cope with their situation. Thus, the women’s faith and trust in God stand out as one of the vital avenues for coping with the abuse. In this study, religious factors are central to the victim’s understanding and response to abuse as their assessment to help-seeking.

In Fiji, the land (vanua), the chiefly government (matanitu) and the church (lotu) are inseparably related in Fijian beliefs and ceremonies (Srebrnik, 2002). Although NGOs, and social service institutions, can, in principle, play a vital role in empowering women, through their programs and activities, seeking help from these institutions was rare for the women in this study. Our findings showed that religion play an important role for the women in this study. When face with domestic abuse women’s first step to help seeking was through informal source of support such as religious leaders, family, and members of church. The advice they receive from these sources plays a significance role in how they response/and or handle the abuse. Our findings also suggest that women utilized their own agency to cope with their situation through their faith/personal relationship with God. They reported that reading the Bible, praying and their faith in God gives them the strength to endure and cope with their situation. Their preference to turn to God rather than seek formal support from social services is evident in their narratives. Often, abused women do not seek help and instead continue to stay with their partner due to societal expectation of being a good wife, which means being supportive, maintaining family unit, forgiving and self-sacrificing (Laviolette and Barnett, 2000), which is reinforced by society that poses a barrier to women’s help-seeking behaviors and practices (York, 2011). The socially constructed roles and responsibilities that are ascribed to mothers (Gabb, 2001) influence the women help seeking process when experiencing abuse. Thus, the women’s own faith and the support of church and church members can be vital in helping them through the healing process. As they tend to rely on these means as a way of coping rather than turn to formal social support, this would suggest that an examination of religious aspects is particularly critical for Fijian women, and a culturally relevant coping mechanism for this sample.

Informal help-seeking was the largest source of support for women in this study. An informal caring community of support can greatly enhance a woman’s ability to evaluate her situation and decide what assistance she needs. Efforts to educate communities and the church about domestic violence and the impact of violence on women’s and children’s well-being is also vital.

For Fijians, interpersonal relationships are governed by links of kinship and household affiliates with household, forming an extended family group and kinship lie at the heart of everyday life for Fijians (Toren, 1999), which means social network is relational. Domestic Violence Ordinance Restraining Order (DVRO) was enacted in 2009 in Fiji, for the safety and well-being of the victim. Under Section 77 of the Domestic Violence Decree, any person who, having being served a notice of the DVRO by which they were bound is guilty of a criminal offence and liable for conviction if they contravene the order or part of the order without reasonable excuse (Judicial Department of Fiji, n.d.). Since Fijian society is organized around kinship which encompass the family, community, and village (Belshaw, 1964), thus, if a woman decides to take action or assert her rights, it would be viewed as harmful to the entire community that comes at the expense of her household responsibilities and cultural obligation (FWCC, 2013). Lodging an official complaint is also often disapproved by family members and the community (Percival et al., 2010). Therefore, it is probable that although the women in this study were aware and know that they have rights under the DVRO, however, they tended to rely more on their faith and advice given by religious leaders to give them direction in handling the abuse. As such, in cases of domestic violence, maintaining harmony is valued rather than reparations for the victim (Newland, 2014).

**Implication for Practice:**

Domestic violence is a universal phenomenon transcending a common feature of patriarchal societies, and is often seen as a legitimate form of social control, usually exerted by men over women. When domestic violence is generally accepted as part of disciplining women not to deviate from the expected gender role and norms, there is greater tolerance for such acts within the community. Fijian communities deeply thrive on customary and communal values, and the community and church can play a vital role in the women’s lives and their response to domestic violence. As such, understanding how the church and community define and view domestic violence is crucial. Participation of religious leaders at the forefront in addressing domestic violence could be of vital importance. Capacity-building in the church and community are essential as is the need to raise critical consciousness about norms, attitudes that might sanctioned what is ‘acceptable behavior’ and the impact of violence on women’s and children’s well-being. Service providers could consider including members of religious institutions in their community domestic violence program teams, whereby religious leaders and social service agencies can collaborate and work together in response to domestic violence. Promoting the recognition of domestic violence as a community issue and increasing collective efficacy to address it among community and the church is vital. Combining efforts of formal and informal support systems could serve to remove many of the barriers in keeping women and children safe in their struggle and efforts to end violence in their lives.

As domestic violence is considered a family/private issue, often the police would act as the mediator and focus on reconciliation mainly due to the police officer not considering domestic violence as a criminal offence (FWCC, 2014). This would also be probable since Fijian society is organized around kinship which encompass the family, community, and village (Belshaw, 1964), and if the police personnel happen to be from the same community/village as the women/and or perpetrators this can be problematic. The police can also play a fundamental role in responding to abuse. Norms and attitudes of police that excuse domestic violence can weaken protection for victims and further their victimization, and it is important to address domestic violence as a criminal offence, and it will help paved the way to eradicate domestic violence in the community.

**Conclusion:**

While great attention has been devoted to understanding prevalence rates of domestic violence, relatively less attention has been given to understanding women’s decisions to remain in or exit abusive intimate relationships (Bell and Naugle, 2005). This study highlights how women’s disclosure of help-seeking was significantly influenced by women’s religious beliefs and the advice received from faith leaders/members of the church. The current findings add to a growing body of knowledge on abused women’s help-seeking behaviors. It is clear from this research that the context of culture and religious beliefs among Fijian society play an important role in determining abused women’s help seeking behaviors. However, with a small sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings may not be transferable to the general population of women from the broader community who experience domestic violence.

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