" . . . There is No War Here; It is Only the Relationship That Makes Us Scared": Factors Having an Impact on Domestic Violence in Liberian Refugee Communities in South Australia

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Abstract

This article explores the factors that have an impact on domestic violence in African refugee communities, with specific reference to the Liberian community in South Australia. Seventeen focus group discussions were undertaken with women participants of the Liberian Women's Gathering. The nested ecological model (Dutton, 2001; Heise, 1998) is used to conceptualize the factors having an impact on domestic violence. The findings suggest that disruption to traditional gender roles has an impact on domestic violence at the cultural, socioeconomic, familial, and individual levels and that women's experience of domestic violence must be understood in relation to the acute and prolonged stressors of war, loss, and displacement.

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Introduction

Although violence against women occurs in most societies across socio-demographic groups, the literature indicates that refugee women are at particular risk in situations of domestic violence (Easteal, 1996; Kang, Kahler, & Tesar, 1998; Narayan, 1997; Walter, 2001). Menjivar and Salcido (2002) found that a lack of language skills, unemployment, and experiences of conflict and retribution in their home countries served to prevent refugee women from seeking assistance and early intervention. Rees (2004) argues that many of the issues increasing the risks associated with domestic violence for immigrant families are compounded for refugee families who are more isolated, have fewer opportunities to learn English and find employment, and may be suffering the mental and physical effects of trauma resulting from war, displacement, and encampment. Pittaway (2004) suggests that prearrival experiences, traditional masculine identities, and settlement challenges are significant factors in the incidence and manifestations of domestic and family violence for new and emerging communities in developed, Western countries such as Australia.

Although service providers and policy makers have become increasingly concerned that refugee communities are experiencing domestic violence and that this violence is negatively affecting their well-being and opportunities for successful settlement, there is a paucity of research and literature addressing domestic violence in refugee communities in developed countries (Pease & Rees, 2008). Even more sparse is literature and research focusing on domestic violence in African refugee communities. The aim of this article is to explore the factors having an impact on the occurrence and manifestation of domestic violence in African refugee communities, with specific reference to the Liberian community in South Australia.

Context of the Research

This research was carried out by the author as part of a larger project involving the Central Domestic Violence Service (CDVS)[1] in Adelaide, South Australia in partnership with the Liberian Women's Gathering. The "Getting Talking" project was developed in response to a growing recognition by the CDVS of the challenges faced by workers to provide culturally relevant and supportive services to women and children affected by domestic and family violence from new and emerging communities in South Australia. Following an analysis of their client population, the CDVS concluded that new and emerging communities in the region, especially Liberian women, are not accessing women's domestic violence services. Consultation with the Australian Refugee Association revealed that although Liberian women have identified domestic violence as a significant issue affecting their lives and their community, women from this community were not accessing or receiving domestic violence support or information. In addition, the CDVS recognized that their present service model was not meeting the needs of women and children experiencing domestic violence from new and emerging communities, indicating that this client group has limited access to information about and support for domestic violence. The "Getting Talking" project was designed to respond to these identified needs by:

- Consulting with Liberian women about their conceptions of healthy and unhealthy relationships as well as their knowledge and understandings of domestic violence in their community;
- Providing Liberian women with support and information on the issue of domestic violence;
- Consulting with community leaders and other relevant agencies to build the capacity of the Liberian community to prevent and respond to domestic violence; and
- Developing a practice manual that would assist the CDVS and other similar services in the sector to provide more effective and responsive services to Liberian women and their families experiencing domestic violence.

The research reported in this article was conducted as an applied study for the purposes of enhancing the domestic violence sector's capacity to provide services that reflect community needs, rather than as an academic investigation.

The Liberian community in South Australia. The Liberian community is a new and emerging community in South Australia. A new and emerging community is a term used to refer to people:

- Who have only recently settled in Australia;
- Whose numbers have increased significantly in the past five years and who are likely to have significant need for government services;
- From communities that do not yet have the resources or numbers to have established community infrastructure; and
- Many of whom are humanitarian arrivals, abiding by the international definition of a refugee.

Presently, there are more than 400 Liberian families living in South Australia. Women and children constitute the majority of this population group. Most Liberians who have come to live in South Australia have arrived through the Australian government offshore Humanitarian Entrance Program, and more recently a lesser number have arrived under the Family Reunification Program. Most Liberians who have settled in South Australia have come from a background of 14 years of brutal civil conflict, which has resulted in a significant loss of lives and infrastructure, intense physical and psychological trauma for survivors, the separation of families and loved ones, the destruction of the social and cultural fabric of Liberian society and the corresponding loss of a sense of belonging and safety (Liberian Community of South Australia, Incorporated [LICOSA], 2011).

Settlement issues. Many Liberians arriving in Australia have come from refugee camps in West Africa and it may take some time to adapt to a new physical location and cultural framework. Although the official language of Liberia is English, the form of English native to the country (known as Liberian Pidgin English or Liberian Kreyol language) is spoken by approximately only 20% of the population. The majority of Liberians speak Mande, Kwa, or Mel, all of which belong to the Niger-Congo family of African languages. In addition to these three major linguistic groups, more than 20 other languages are spoken in

Liberia. Many entrants, therefore, may have minimal English language skills and some may find Australian accents and expressions difficult to comprehend. In some cases, poor literacy or low levels of formal education may make the settlement experience even more difficult. This is particularly the case for women and for those children who were born and raised in refugee camps. The small size of the Liberian community in Australia and a lack of translators in West African languages may intensify feelings of isolation (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs [DIMA][2], 2006).

Although some Liberians have experienced living in an urban environment, many have not had the opportunity to develop a range of basic life skills required for everyday life in Australia. Entrants who have spent protracted periods of time in camps may lack work skills and experience, and many rural Liberians would have relied on subsistence farming to support their families. Even for those with transferable skills, often in trades or small-scale retail, the structure of the Australian labor market will be foreign to them, and entrants may not understand occupational health and safety (OH&S) and other workplace issues (DIMA, 2006).

Liberian entrants may lack experience with legal processes or have a limited knowledge of their legal rights, which may be the consequence of a historically weak and inefficient judiciary in Liberia and the characteristically lawless environment of the refugee camp. Entrants who have experienced the corruption and brutality of the legal system in Liberia may feel intense distrust of authority, especially police. A large number of new arrivals are young people who are unfamiliar with the Australian school system. Many have had limited educational opportunities and may need guidance to help them access education and training pathways and gain confidence and competency in these environments (DIMA, 2006). Many Liberian entrants have experienced torture and trauma, and this may manifest as posttraumatic stress or depression. Feelings of displacement, confusion, grief, loneliness, and a lack of control over life choices may also be evident (DIMA, 2006).

Method

Qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions, which provided an opportunity to explore complex social phenomena that can be more easily elucidated in a group discussion than in an individual interview. Focus group discussions have also been found to be a helpful way of gaining insight into cultural norms and collective beliefs about sensitive topics (Shiu-Thornton, Senturia, & Sullivan, 2005). Participants were not asked to discuss their own experiences of domestic violence, but rather to describe their general understandings of the problem in their community.

Facilitators. The focus groups were facilitated by two senior workers from the CDVS and a Liberian worker from the Australian Refugee Association, who is also the leader and facilitator of the Liberian Women's Gathering.

Participants. The participants were Liberian women members of the Liberian Women's Gathering. The Gathering brings Liberian women together to discuss various issues in their lives and to develop and maintain community cohesion and relationships. The Gathering is led and facilitated by a worker from the Australian Refugee Association, who is also a leader in the Liberian community. The Gathering, which comprises approximately 30-40

women, would meet weekly on a Sunday afternoon and the CDVS was invited by the leader of the Gathering to join these meetings on a monthly basis over the course of five months to conduct focus group discussions with the women. Approximately 3-4 groups of 8-10 women were involved in focus group discussions at each of the five monthly meetings. As most women were regular participants in the Gathering meetings over this period, many of the women participated in all five focus group sessions. This level of participation was encouraged as each focus group session focused on different issues relevant to women's lives and relationships. Liberian women appeared to embrace the opportunity to converse with the CDVS about issues of concern to them in relation to domestic violence, and the CDVS consistently encouraged women, as individuals and as a group, to voice their concerns and perspectives, particularly in relation to how the CDVS could improve its services to women and families affected by domestic violence in their community.

The Liberian community in South Australia is divided into two groups—the Christian group and the Muslim group. Approximately 20% of Liberians entering Australia identify as Muslim (DIMA, 2006). According to the Australian Refugee Association, many of the Muslim Liberians in Australia migrated to Liberia from Guinea and became Liberian citizens. In Australia, the Muslim and Christian Liberian communities tend to live and operate separately from one another. Most of the women in the Liberian Women's Gathering identified as Christian Liberians, which means that the voices of Muslim women were not included in the research. Further research could usefully explore how different religious beliefs have an impact on domestic violence in the Liberian community. It is important to note, however, that the Christian Liberian community is multiethnic and multilingual. The Liberian community is led by a management committee of elected members, each representing the various ethnic groups that make up the Liberian community.

Content of focus group discussions with Liberian women. A focus group discussion interview schedule was developed by the CDVS in consultation with the author and the Gathering leader. The schedule was divided into five separate sections as each focus group discussion would give attention to particular issues and aspects of domestic violence and related service provision. The schedule covered a range of issues relating to women's relationships and roles in the family and community, including women's perspectives on what constitutes healthy and unhealthy relationships, their views on parenting and caring for other family members, and their concerns about the impact of domestic violence on their families and communities. The schedule also sought women's views about their needs and wants in relation to services from domestic violence agencies, police, and the legal system as well as how men and children in their community should be included in discussions about domestic violence. All focus group discussions were conducted in the English language as all women participants were to a greater or lesser degree proficient in speaking and understanding English. Any difficulties experienced by the women in comprehending particular concepts and expressions used by focus group facilitators were dealt with by the Gathering leader who was fluent in both English and Mande languages, the latter being the predominant additional language spoken by the women.

Both the CDVS and the Gathering leader wanted to ensure that the meetings with the women would also be immediately helpful and informative. The CDVS provided women

with information about healthy and unhealthy relationships as well as how to keep themselves and their children safe if they found themselves affected by domestic violence. This information provided women with an important frame of reference upon which to form and articulate their concerns and perspectives in relation to their understandings of domestic violence as well as their views on how the CDVS could improve its service responding to women and families from new and emerging communities. Women were also provided with individual counseling by the CDVS workers at these sessions, if they required this. This was often taken up by women during the session or appointments were made with the CDVS for contact during the following week. In short, the meetings extended beyond focus group discussions in that they involved the CDVS and the Gathering leader in encouraging women to "get talking" about domestic violence through a dynamically interactive process whereby Liberian women were not only the providers of information via the focus group discussions, but also the recipients of services that could assist them to address domestic violence at both individual and collective levels.

Procedure. The research had two phases of data collection—focus group discussions with Liberian women, and consultation with leaders of the Liberian community. The data collection process was supported by the collaborative partnership developed between the CDVS and the Gathering leader who facilitated communication between the CDVS and the Liberian Women's Gathering.

The focus group discussions with the Liberian women took place over the course of five sessions, which were approximately 3-4 weeks apart. As previously stated, the focus group discussions formed part of the usual meeting of approximately 30-40 Liberian women on Sunday afternoons and 3-4 groups of 8-10 women were involved in focus group discussions at each meeting. A total of 17 focus group discussions were undertaken. The focus group discussions were conducted sequentially rather than concurrently at each meeting so that the majority of women could engage in social activities while the focus group discussion was taking place. This arrangement also allowed for both senior workers from the CDVS and the Gathering leader to be involved in every focus group discussion.

The CDVS discussed the focus group discussion plan with the Gathering's leader prior to each session and the latter assisted in facilitating the discussions in partnership with the CDVS workers. The author's role during these sessions was to record and synthesize the main themes of the focus groups discussions. The author would clarify points and develop understandings in collaboration with the CDVS workers and the Gathering leader immediately following and between the sessions.

The collaborative partnership developed between the author, the CDVS, and the Gathering leader was cultivated through frequent face-to-face meetings, peaking during and between the focus group discussion sessions with Liberian women. The author and the CDVS relied heavily on the advice and information provided by the Gathering leader, particularly in relation to cultural safety considerations in the planning of session content.

In addition, the Gathering leader, who is also a leader in the Liberian community, acted as a conduit between the CDVS and Liberian community leaders, which enabled a connection to develop between the CDVS and community leaders. This linkage was significant as it assisted community leaders to develop an understanding of how the CDVS and other

domestic violence services can assist the community to address issues of domestic and family violence. In turn, the author and the CDVS were able to gain important insights about the Liberian community, which provided a contextual frame for the data collected from the women during the focus group discussions. This connection also allowed for some direct communication between the CDVS and Liberian community leaders regarding the aims and purpose of the "Getting Talking" project. This communication explored the potential of developing a partnership approach between the CDVS and Liberian community leaders to prevent and address domestic and family violence in the community. Community leaders indicated their support of the collaboration between the CDVS and the Liberian Women's Gathering as well as their hopes that this collaboration would continue beyond the completion of the "Getting Talking" project.

Focus group discussions, meetings between the author, the CDVS, and the Gathering leader, and consultations with Liberian community leaders were recorded by the author via handwritten notes. During transcription (i.e., from handwritten to typed notes), all information that could potentially identify individuals (e.g., women's names and unique personal experiences) was removed from the typed notes and the handwritten notes were discarded in a confidential manner.

Analysis. The focus group data were analyzed inductively using qualitative analysis techniques. Initially, themes associated with key research foci, such as women's perspectives on what constitutes healthy and unhealthy relationships, were identified. These thematic chunks were then read and reread to identify a set of conceptual codes, such as gender roles in the family, which were then systematically applied to all the data. The author used her participation in the meetings between the CDVS, the Liberian Women's Gathering leader, and the Liberian community leaders to contextualize and provide depth to her analysis of the focus group data.

The findings were used to develop a practice manual designed to enhance the capacity of workers from the CDVS and the broader domestic violence sector to respond more effectively and sensitively to the needs of Liberian women affected by domestic violence. Although the findings related specifically to Liberian women and their families and community, the knowledge base developed was intended to be applicable to a wide range of refugee and new and emerging communities affected by domestic violence.

In this article, the data relating to factors having an impact on domestic violence in the Liberian community will be presented. The aim is to generate understandings about how these factors, and their intersection with the circumstances of refugee life, shape and influence Liberian women's conceptions and experiences of domestic violence.

Findings

The nested ecological model will be used as a conceptual framework to identify and organize the various factors that impact domestic violence (Dutton, 2001). An ecological approach to domestic violence conceptualizes abuse as a multifaceted phenomenon situated within an interaction among personal, situational, and sociocultural factors (Heise, 1998). The approach has been viewed as an effective way of incorporating the various theories
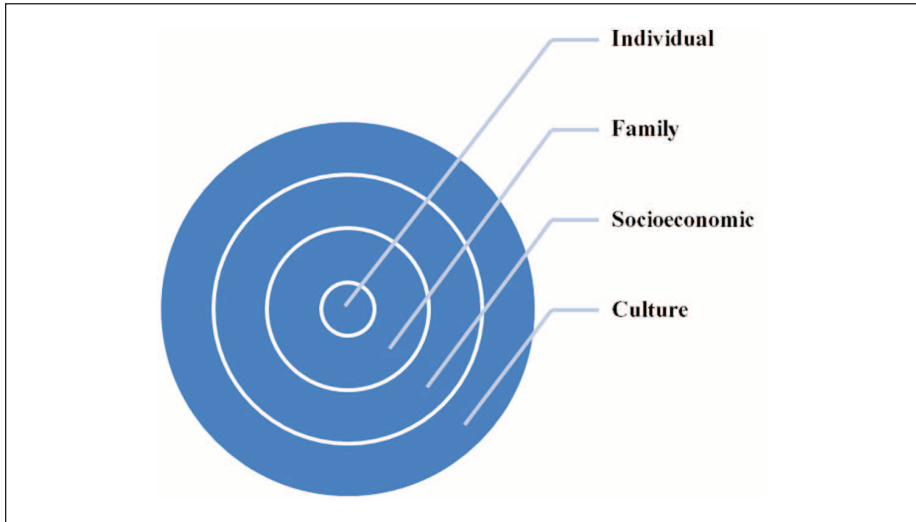
Figure 1. The nested ecological theory of domestic violence (Dutton, 2001)

about domestic violence into a single model (Carlson, 1984). Specifically, the nested eco-logical approach to domestic violence (Dutton, 2001) can be usefully applied to identify and organize the risk and protective factors associated with domestic violence (Walter, 2001). In this way, the approach will assist the author in identifying the factors contribut-ing to domestic violence within the Liberian refugee community.

The nested ecological theory of domestic violence comprises four levels or contexts (see Figure 1):

- Culture/macrosystem: The broad cultural values and belief systems that influence individual development and family contexts
- Socioeconomic factors/exosystem: The formal and informal social structures sur-rounding an individual, such as a person's social network of friends, work groups, and community groups as well as their economic and employment situation
- Family/microsystem: The family unit or the immediate context in which abusive events takes place, such as the style of interaction within the family and conflict issues that are unique to a couple's intimate relationship
- "Individual/ontogenetic: The factors related to the individual themselves, such as their own experience of family violence, capacity to manage emotions, verbal skills, and response to conflict (Dutton, 2001)

Culture

Even though domestic violence takes place in all communities, culturally specific factors have an impact on the kind of violence that occurs as well as how it is perceived, under-stood, and dealt with (Pease & Rees, 2008). Carlson (2005) suggests that the maintenance

of culture and traditions can be extremely important to refugees who may use these as a way of dealing with the loss of their identity, community structures, and social networks. In addition to culturally specific factors, domestic violence in refugee communities is also shaped by a context of war, displacement, encampment, and resettlement in a new country. Friedman (1992) argues that because many refugee women have fled hostile environments in which rape and violence against women and girls were often used as a weapon of war and persecution, or a common experience in the refugee camp, the effects of abuse among refugee women need to be taken into account in health and welfare policies and interventions in countries receiving refugees. She suggests that rape is often viewed as a violation in the eyes of husbands and communities and can lead to increased violence against women.

Friedman (1992) and Sharma (2001) also argue that refugee men may use domestic violence as a way of expressing feelings and dealing with the stress associated with settlement in a different country as well as a strategy for gaining control and reestablishing power following the experience of violence and trauma in their homelands. Pease and Rees (2008) argue that there is a conflict in Australian/Western societies, which, on one hand legally prohibits rape and violence against women and, on the other, demonstrates standards that resonate with the patriarchal values of male defendants on the grounds of cultural beliefs and traditions. Refugee women have had claims for justice following a rape or sexual assault undermined when the perpetrator invokes the cultural defense of his traditional right to have sex with his wife at his discretion (Dimopoulos & Assafiri, 2004).

From the women's perspective, there were four main aspects of culture impacting on domestic violence in their homes and communities. These were: disruption to traditional gender roles, beliefs surrounding rape in marriage, the acceptability of using violence within the family for child discipline and chastisement, and the belief that parenting is women's responsibility.

Disruption to Traditional Gender Roles. Most of the women were of the view that the radical change to men's traditional roles as husbands and fathers was a significant contributing factor in marital conflict and domestic violence. The role of women in Liberian culture revolves around housekeeping duties, such as cooking and cleaning, and taking care of children and other members of the family. The Liberian women in this study viewed tasks and responsibilities such as lifestyle development and maintenance, the health of their families, running the household, cooking and cleaning, and pregnancy and childbirth as fundamental to their role in family life. They identified the role of men in their community as primarily involving work, providing for the family, being the heart of the family, study, and tending to his lifestyle and appearance. Many of the women suggested that their husbands were free to come and go from the household and to spend time away from their families if they so wished without explanation or consequence. However, women felt that they were not able to enjoy the same kind of freedom because they would be seen by their community as being neglectful of their husbands and families, and their husbands would lose the respect of their community for not being able to control the actions of their wives. Women felt that expectations of women in Australia did not conform to those of the Liberian culture and that men were fearful that their wives and partners would abandon their

traditional gender roles in favor of Australian ways of living. These fears often translated into men being highly sensitive to any perceived changes in behavior and appearance of their wives and partners, which was a contributing factor in men's engagement in controlling and abusive behaviors.

> Our men are worried that we will turn our backs on them because they think we want to live the way of the women here. It is oaky for them to do what they want but we have to keep things the way they are and if they think we are not, they get angry and watch us more and keep us from going out.

The disruption to traditional gender roles of both men and women, and the discord that results from it, appeared to have an impact on domestic violence at all levels of the ecological model. For example, the payment of welfare to women rather than to men within families was perceived by men as a threat to their central role of provider in the family, which often led to women being financially and emotionally abused. Likewise, family functioning and individual well-being were affected by shifting gender role expectations in relation to coping with the impact of catastrophic experience resulting from war, loss, and displacement.

Beliefs Surrounding Rape in Marriage. Many of the women talked about how in Liberia they had never heard of rape occurring in marriage. They had always and only understood rape in terms of its perpetration by a stranger, because it is expected and accepted that women will have little say over their bodies in a marital relationship. However, the issue of sexual exploitation and/or marital rape by partners was frequently raised by the women in their discussions about what constitutes an unhealthy relationship. Many of the women made the point that prior to coming to Australia they were not aware that being coerced into having sex by their husbands or partners or that being forced to have sex against their will was abusive, even though they felt uncomfortable and often upset when this occurred in their relationships. Even though women indicated that this new knowledge provided them with a sense of empowerment in terms of navigating the sexual aspects of their relationships, many believed that it led to conflict between themselves and their partners, which for some increased the likelihood of physical and sexual abuse.

> We want our men to leave us alone when we don't want to have relations with them but this makes them very angry sometimes . . . They think it's their right and they think we are not doing what we should be doing if we turn them away. In Liberia the woman does what the man wants but here it is different . . .

The Acceptability of Using Violence Within the Family for Child Discipline and Chastisement. Many of the women talked about the importance of raising their children in accordance with their cultural values. Some expressed the view that although they understood that certain child disciplinary practices may be viewed as abhorrent in Australia, and may even be considered unlawful, they felt that respect for their culture should include following disciplinary practices that are consistent with their cultural beliefs. Many of the women thought that in Australia, children's rights tend to eclipse parents' rights and

that child protection authorities are not sympathetic to the difficulties involved in childrearing, particularly for Liberian parents who have had a history of raising children in refugee camps. They talked about the importance of children respecting and valuing their parents and that it is not uncommon in Liberian culture for children as old as 40 to still be living with their parents. However, several women expressed the view that certain traditional practices of childrearing were abusive and that they served to sanction other forms of violence in the family, including intimate partner violence.

> We teach our children the difference between right and wrong and sometimes we use the punishments we used in Liberia to do this . . . some of the children are all over the place and not listening to the parents . . . the husbands see the mothers using our traditional methods of punishment and they think it is okay for them to keep treating us the way they did in Liberia.

The Belief That Parenting is Women's Responsibility. Many of the women were concerned about their children becoming "lost" in Australian culture and expressed an awareness of their children being "caught between" two cultures. Some expressed dismay that their children were being acculturated into Australian society so quickly and were concerned that their children may lose or reject their Liberian culture. Some of the women talked about the tensions that had developed between Liberian parents and children, particularly during adolescence, when their children are attempting to gain more independence and develop identities that allow them to blend in with their Australian peers. Some of the women suggested that because parent-child discipline is considered to be the responsibility of mothers, husbands and partners often blamed women for their children's behavior, which sometimes contributed to violence and abuse against mothers.

> Our children run away from us, they have freedom now and they stay out all night . . . even the young girls. This causes problems between the husband and wife because the husband thinks the woman is not controlling the children properly . . . sometimes he beats her if the children stay away.

Socioeconomic

Many refugees experience poverty and/or an inability to generate income due to unemployment and lack of educational opportunities. According to Carlson (2005), the frustration stemming from poverty and economic stress has the potential to contribute to domestic violence. Men, in particular, may feel that their status within the family is threatened if they do not have control over the family finances and/or if they do not have the capacity to provide for their families. Men may use violence and abuse against family members as a tactic to compensate for their perceived loss of power and control in this situation (Yick, 2001). In this way, socioeconomic factors are inextricably intertwined with traditional gender role expectations.

Women indicated that there were two main socioeconomic factors having an impact on domestic violence in their homes and communities. These were the gendered allocation of welfare payments and fears surrounding the police and the legal system.

The Gendered Allocation of Welfare Payments. As previously identified, control over finances was a continual source of conflict in women's relationships with men. The fact that welfare payments are made to women rather than men within families means that women have a degree of control over the family income that men do not have, particularly if they are unemployed. This arrangement of finances in favor of women had never been experienced by the Liberian community prior to their arrival in Australia. Many of the women talked about how men would attempt to wrestle control of these welfare payments from women and when they refused, men would become threatening and/or would deprive women of money, which contributed to women's experience of financial and emotional abuse.

> Some of the men are very angry that the woman gets the money and not him because it means that he cannot do what he wants. Sometimes the man goes with the woman to the bank so that he can take the money from her . . . if she tries to hide the money or if she does not let him have the money, he beats her and does not let her have any money at all.

Fears about the police and the legal system. Many of the women expressed concern about accessing support for domestic and family violence from the police and the legal system. In particular, women were concerned that men's opportunities for education and employment would be seriously undermined if women were to engage the police or the legal system in their lives and that this could have a devastating impact on men's capacity to provide for them and their children. Women were clear that many of their concerns stem from their experiences in Liberia where the high level of police corruption meant that men were often taken from their families suddenly and for prolonged periods of time, leaving women and children to fend for themselves economically. Many women were of the view that men's knowledge of women's fears surrounding the police strengthened men's resolve to use violence against women because they would not have to legally account for their behavior.

> The men know that the women will not call the police . . . she will just go into her room and hope that he stops what he is doing. The man knows that she is worried about him having to leave the home or that he might lose his job . . . we don't want the men to be taken from us even when they hurt us because we need the man to be with his family.

Family

For many refugees, war and conflict have resulted in the decimation of communities and social networks, resulting in an increased reliance on the family structure as a source of support for refugees (Weine et al., 2004). However, war and conflict also result in family

members becoming separated, injured, or killed. According to Raphael, Taylor, and McAndrew (2008) the experience of catastrophic events such as these is the most severe form of adversity, so profound that it changes one's life course and world view, and challenges one's existence as a human being. Wessells and Montiero (2004) suggest that even when families have managed to stay together, their traumatic experiences may be so overwhelming that they are unable to effectively care for their children. These traumatic experiences may also impact family dynamics, with some family members unable to reprise their usual role and duties within the family. Rasco and Miller (2004) suggest that changes in gender role expectations are likely to have an impact on family dynamics and that these changes, in conjunction with the stressors associated with displacement and resettlement, are likely to result in increased rates of domestic violence.

Women indicated that there were three main factors having an impact on domestic violence in their families. These were the impact of war and conflict on family functioning, the belief that seeking help for domestic violence will hurt men and bring shame to their family and community, and the belief that seeking help for domestic violence will lead to family breakdown.

The Impact of War and Conflict on Family Functioning. Most of the women had been victims of war, which involved having violence perpetrated against them as well as witnessing violence against others; had family members injured or killed; had fled war-torn regions, which often involved leaving friends and relatives behind; and had spent protracted periods of time in refugee camps. Many of the women also indicated that the war and living in camps had led to a breakdown in their usual societal roles and standards for protecting children, and that as a result, children had experienced a broken sense of trust that adults would protect rather than harm them. Several of these catastrophic experiences were discussed in the context of the Victorian bushfires,[3] which had been occurring at the time the focus group discussions were taking place. Many women expressed profound sorrow and empathy for the victims of the bushfires, praying for them and reflecting on their own experiences of tragedy and loss. According to many of the women, the Victorian bushfires reminded them of how their villages and homes were burned during the war, how painful it was to be separated from family members, and their deep longing to be reconciled with family members still living in Africa.

> We had to leave so many people behind. . . . I think about them all the time . . . I want to go back to Liberia to be with them but I don't know where some of them are and we can't go back now to be with them.

On many occasions throughout the focus group discussions, women indicated that these traumatic experiences were often overwhelming and that the inability of family members to cope with the impact of these experiences was most likely the underlying cause of violent and abusive behavior among family members. This was especially the case for men, whose sense of identity relies heavily upon their capacity to deal with and overcome adversity but whose lived experience, including the complexities of resettlement, prevents the fulfillment of this self-concept. According to some of the women, the disjuncture

between what is expected of men in Liberian culture and what they are able to accomplish in their present contexts was extremely frustrating for men, often leading to their lashing out at other family members. Many of the women spoke about how important it was to minimize conflict and/or avoid situations and behaviors in their relationships that may provoke men whom they perceived were frequently on the verge of becoming violent.

> The men in our community want to be strong and the leaders of their families but so much has been taken from them and they can't always hide their anger at what they have been through . . . The women are careful around the men because she knows that he will put his anger on her because she is always there and the one closest to him.

The Belief That Seeking Help for Domestic Violence Will Hurt Men and Bring Shame to Family and Community. The women were very clear that although it is important and necessary for Liberian women to be informed about domestic violence and its impact, Liberian men also needed to be educated about the problem, especially the fact that it is both illegal and socially unacceptable in Australia. Many of the women were of the view that if this information was delivered to men by a respected third party that they would be more likely to take this information seriously and that it would relieve women of the burden of having to talk to men about the issue themselves, which they believed would only serve to bring about violence or to make a violent situation worse. The women believed that it was important for men to be better informed about domestic violence, not only because it would protect women and children from abuse, but also because it would protect men from getting into trouble with police and the justice system. In Liberia, it was not uncommon for men to be exploited and brutalized by a legal system that was often violent and corrupt and women expressed a great fear that men would be similarly victimized in Australia.

Moreover, many women expressed a profound fear of going to outsiders for help in cases of domestic violence because they were concerned about not having any control over what would happen to their families, particularly if the outsider is an authority figure who has the power to circumvent their needs and wishes. In particular, women were very concerned that interventions from outsiders would publicize their problems, thereby bringing shame onto their family and community.

> In Liberia, a woman would only call the police about domestic violence if her situation had become very bad . . . this was because going outside for help would show that the family was not able to help themselves and this would be a very shameful thing for the family.

The women made it clear that they wanted to work in collaboration with men and the Liberian community to address domestic violence and that an adversarial approach, such as involving the police and the legal system, should only be used as a last resort. At the same time, women were also concerned about seeking help from within their own community because this meant that other members of the community would learn of their

problems, which would affect their family's privacy and may lead to family members being stigmatized by the community. Women's desire to protect their families from outsiders as well as from members of their own community means that many of the potential pathways to addressing domestic violence are blocked and/or unavailable to women.

The Belief That Seeking Help for Domestic Violence Will Lead to Family Breakdown.
Some of the women were concerned that accessing support from domestic violence services would require them to leave their husbands and partners and break up their families. Women's concerns were supported by the prevalent view in their community that accessing domestic violence services would lead to family breakdown.

> We are worried about getting help from domestic violence services because we are scared that we will have to leave our families and our children. We want to get help for our problems but we don't want to leave our husbands and families.

Consequently, many women affected by domestic violence are discouraged from seeking help, reducing men's accountability for their use of violence and weakening women's capacity to safeguard themselves and their children from violence.

Individual

Some resettlement workers report that symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) usually begin to emerge about 8-12 months after arrival, when refugees are beginning to feel safe enough to deal with the traumas they have experienced (Schmidt, 2005). In addition, the actual or potential development of PTSD symptoms stemming from war, loss, displacement, and encampment can be compounded by the stressors associated with settlement in a new country. Many refugees are challenged by cultural and language difficulties and poverty and unemployment, which may be just as debilitating for refugees' psychosocial well-being as prior trauma (Boothby, Strang, & Wessells, 2006).

Women indicated that the main factor shaping the impact of domestic violence in their lives at an individual level was the trauma associated with their experiences of war and conflict. Specifically, women were of the view that domestic violence replicates the dynamics of war and conflict and compounds the effects of war-related trauma.

The Trauma of War and Conflict.
The women made it clear that the war has had a deleterious effect on them as individuals, as well as on their families, communities, and Liberian society as a whole. Most of the women indicated that they had witnessed or experienced violence of some kind, both during and following their escape from war-torn regions in Liberia. Many experienced violence in camps, particularly sexual violence, and were forced to flee with their children with little prospect of finding safe refuge. Many women also vocalized their distress about not knowing the whereabouts of relatives and friends who were left behind in Liberia as well as the torment of having lost close family members.

Although Liberian men have also experienced the catastrophe of war in terrible and damaging ways, the specific nature of women's experiences, including sexual violence and giving birth to and raising children in camps, often as single parents, means that women have been exposed to different forms of adversity than men. Many of the women reported that domestic violence serves to compound the effects of these previous traumas because certain forms of domestic violence, such as physical and sexual abuse, as well as living in fear of being abused, serve to replicate their experiences of war and conflict. In this way, domestic violence, even if only a one-off event, has a cumulative effect for women whose lives have been marked by a series of traumatic events. The fear associated with potential abuse is also a powerful phenomenon in making women relive the traumatic context of war.

> We are away from the war now but when the men get violent it is just like we are back there because we are scared and we are worried and we don't know what mood he will be in and we are in fear all the time . . . we feel just like we feel when we were in Liberia but there is no war here, it is only the relationship that makes us scared.

Discussion

There are clear indications that cultural values as well as the circumstances of refugee life, such as displacement and resettlement in a new country, compound the complexities normally involved in situations of domestic violence. The literature focusing on domestic violence in culturally and ethnically diverse communities established in developed Western countries suggests that cultural differences, gender roles, family privacy, shame and collectivism, and experiences of displacement and migration often put immigrant and refugee women at greater risk from domestic violence. Issues such as the potential for family shame if abuse is disclosed, community connections, and marital commitments taking precedence over concerns for the welfare of individual women, have all been identified in the literature, including issues of social isolation, racism, low socioeconomic status, and a lack of access to or knowledge about support services (Bhuyan, Mell, Senturia, Sullivan, & Shiu-Thornton, 2005; Easteal, 1996; Sharma, 2001).

The findings of this study highlight the ways that cultural, socioeconomic, familial and individual factors have an impact on domestic violence in the Liberian refugee community. The findings also underscore the utility of the nested ecological approach in illuminating how these factors are cumulative and mutually reinforcing. At the macro-level of culture, disruption to previously well-defined gender roles and an increase in women's understanding about their rights in relation to sexual assault were key areas of relationship conflict and violence in women's lives. The general acceptability of the use of violence as a form of child discipline and chastisement gave sanction to other forms of violence within the family, and the gendered nature of childrearing meant that mothers were often blamed and abused for their children's behavior.

Socioeconomic factors also affected domestic violence in the Liberian community and these aspects serve to illustrate the interconnected nature of the different layers of the

nested ecological framework. The fact that welfare payments are usually paid to mothers rather than fathers within families had an impact on domestic violence because it acted to further disrupt traditional gender roles that require men to control the family finances. However, women's general economic dependency on men was a major factor in how they responded to incidents of domestic violence. Women viewed calling the police as an action of last resort because they feared that doing so would affect their husband's capacity to engage in education and employment, which could have a devastating impact on their family's economic survival. Women were also hesitant to engage the police and the legal system in cases of domestic violence due to their previous experiences of police corruption and brutality in Liberia. Many of the women reported feeling traumatized by these experiences, which negatively impacted on their inchoate sense of safety and emotional well-being. War and conflict also disrupted Liberian family structures, with family members becoming separated from each other, injured, or killed. The enduring impacts of women's experience of catastrophe formed a formidable backdrop to women's discussions about domestic violence.

At a familial level, women's desire to keep their families together as well as a concern for the welfare of their husbands and partners, acted to block their access to potential sources of assistance from domestic violence services and the justice system. In addition, women's and children's experience of domestic violence introduced a further caesura in the development of family cohesion and stability, which had already been fractured by war and conflict. Domestic violence was viewed by women as both contributing to and sanctioning the use of violence as a way of dealing with family issues and problems.

At the individual level, Liberian women's experience of domestic violence appeared to deepen the wounds already inflicted on them by the catastrophes of war, loss, and displacement, leading to a double and even triple assault on their mental health. Whereas men appeared to use domestic violence to reassert their masculinity and to camouflage the effects of war, most of the women had internalized domestic violence as a continuation of their ordeal.

Implications for practice. The findings of this study have a number of implications for practice in domestic violence services responding to refugee women affected by domestic violence. The disruption to traditional gender roles was a continual source of conflict and violence in women's relationships, the repercussions of which were evident throughout the different layers of the nested ecological model. The relevance of gender roles to the socio-economic, familial, and individual factors impacting domestic violence suggests that practice must remain focused on gender as a central factor in the social and cultural arrangements of the Liberian community.

This finding is interesting on two levels. First, it has implications for the application in research and practice of the nested ecological approach to domestic violence. Traditionally, ecological analyses of domestic violence (see for example, Carlson, 1984; Dutton, 1988; Edleson & Tolman, 1992) have been criticized, particularly by feminist theorists, for their tendency to omit gendered power as a factor in domestic violence. To a large extent, this criticism has had its basis in the reluctance by feminists to acknowledge factors other than patriarchy in the etiology of abuse. This reluctance is justifiably rooted in the historical

disregard for the significance of gender power inequalities in domestic violence theorizing (Heise, 1998), rather than an inherent disregard for other factors operating at multiple levels. It is evident in this article that the application of an ecological approach does not preclude the identification of gender, and its relationship to inequalities of power, as a significant factor in domestic violence.

Second, this finding demonstrates how gender is inevitably altered by its intersection with other factors shaping the lives of refugee women, such as race, class, and ethnicity (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). A theory of domestic violence that recognizes the ways that other forms of structural power operate in conjunction with gender oppression can lead to a more nuanced understanding of how, for example, discrimination, the cultural values of the dominant culture, and the ethnocentrism of institutional and cultural practices of countries receiving refugees, put up particular barriers for women and their children, which result in them living in unsafe situations. Such barriers will have their own cultural specificity, including loyalty to one's partner, family, and culture. Pease and Rees (2008) propose that an intersectional analysis will assist in identifying both similarities and differences in men's violence against women in diverse cultures and communities. Issues such as community acceptance of violence against women and the low social status of women tend to be universally experienced and therefore transcend particular cultures. However, these issues are likely to manifest in culturally specific ways in refugee communities as well as being intensified by a context of war, displacement, political structures, and fundamentalist religious beliefs (Ely, 2004).

The concept of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), developed in postcolonial theorizing, has the potential to generate important insights into the experience of Liberian and other new and emerging communities in Australia because it provides a framework upon which to address the tensions and the pain that can often result from being "suspended in-between" two or more cultures. In very basic terms, cultural hybridity refers to the emergence of new identities through the melding of different and often incongruous elements of ethnic identification. Homi Bhabha (1994) defines hybridity as a "liminal space in-between the designations of identity . . . an interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of . . . difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (p. 4). Bhabha (1994) suggests that opportunities for hybridization open up spaces for negotiation where power is unequal, but where agency still exists in the interstices of the exercise of power. These spaces can give rise to new meanings for and about minority communities. The concept is particularly illuminative of the difficulties for children whose rapid acculturation by Australian society means being more sharply situated at the intersection of Liberian and Australian cultures and the associated problems of having to negotiate the tensions between the two. The concept is also relevant to achieving a better understanding of the position of men and the difficulties they face in attempting to come to terms with very different gender role expectations in Australia.

Another factor impacting domestic violence in the Liberian community, with its effects being felt at all layers of the ecological model, is the catastrophic experience of war, displacement, encampment, and resettlement in a new country. Given that sexual violence was a very common aspect of the Liberian conflict and was often used as a weapon of war, it is imperative that practice be focused on women's rights and on empowering women to have

control over their sexuality and their bodies. For many women refugees, rape is also a frequent risk during flight and often part of refugee camp life. Those who have experienced sexual violence bear the mental and emotional scars of the experience, as well as possible stigma from being a rape victim. Women who have gone through such experiences may have an increased vulnerability to further sexual exploitation, even after resettlement (Schmidt, 2005). Liberian women's experience of domestic violence, therefore, must be understood and dealt with in terms of its relationship to the acute and prolonged stressors to which the women have already been exposed as a result of war, loss, and displacement and the potential for domestic violence to exacerbate previous and unresolved trauma.

Conclusion

This article drew on the nested ecological framework to conceptualize the factors having an impact on the occurrence and manifestation of domestic violence in the Liberian refugee community. This model assumes an interconnection between the cultural, socioeconomic, familial, and individual factors impacting domestic violence, with changes at one level having an effect on other levels. Cultural factors, particularly those relating to a shift in traditional gender roles, were a continual source of conflict in women's relationships and a contributing factor in the Liberian women's experience of domestic violence. The disruption to traditional gender roles had repercussions at the socioeconomic, familial, and individual dimensions of women's lives. At the individual level, the traumatic effect of war, loss, and displacement was a significant factor in how women responded to and internalized the impact of domestic violence, and this was mediated through cultural, socioeconomic, and familial dimensions. For most of the women, domestic violence replicated and compounded these traumas, affecting their relationships with their children and destabilizing their inchoate sense of psychological and emotional well-being.

These findings have implications for practice, which suggest that interventions with women remain focused on gender as a central factor in the social and cultural arrangements of family life in the Liberian community, but which also highlight the importance of other structural determinants in their experience of domestic violence, such as racism and discrimination. The concept of cultural hybridity provides a useful framework to address the difficulties faced by women, children, and men in being "suspended in-between" two or more cultures and its concomitant effect on conflicting gender role expectations. Practice must be focused on women's rights and empowering women to have control over their sexuality and their bodies. This focus recognizes the relationship between women's experiences of domestic violence and the traumas to which they have already been exposed as a result of war, loss, displacement, and encampment.

Acknowledgment

Notes

1. The CDVS has been providing services to women and children affected by domestic violence and indigenous family violence since 1974, and it is the longest standing service of its kind in South Australia.
2. In 2001, DIMA was reformed and became the Department of Immigration & Multicultural & Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA). In 2007, DIMIA was renamed the Department of Immigration & Citizenship (DIAC).
3. The Victorian bushfires were a series of bushfires that ignited or were burning across the Australian state of Victoria on and around Saturday the 7th of February 2009. These bushfires are also widely referred to as "Black Saturday." The fires occurred during extreme bushfire weather conditions, and resulted in Australia's highest ever loss of life from a bushfire; 173 people died and 414 were injured as a result of the fires.

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Bio

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