Variations in Women's Help Seeking in Response to Intimate Partner Violence: Findings From a Canadian Population-Based Study

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Abstract

This study examined the role of sociodemographic factors and violence characteristics in influencing women's use of informal and formal supports in response to intimate partner violence (IPV) in a national survey of Canadian households. A subset of female respondents in the 1999 Canadian General Social Survey who experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual IPV by a male current or former intimate partner was used for this analysis. Findings suggest that although there are significant sociodemographic variations in women's help seeking, the largest independent predictor of women's use of supports is fear that one's life is in danger.

Keywords

help seeking, intimate partner violence, violence against women

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV), which includes physical, sexual, emotional/ psychological, and financial forms of abuse, is a global phenomenon (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006). In a World Health Organization study of male intimate partner violence against women in 10 countries (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006), prevalence rates for

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IPV occurring in the past year ranged from 4% to 54%. Within a Canadian context, Clark and Du Mont's (2003) systematic review of IPV prevalence studies found that 0.4% to 23.0% of Canadians are affected by IPV annually. Despite changes in policy that promote the ending of violence against women in North America (e.g., procharging and mandatory arrest policies), intimate partner violence continues to be a major risk factor threatening women's psychological and physical well-being.

Research on IPV in heterosexual relationships has flourished in the past few decades. In particular, the area of battered women's help seeking has received substantial attention from researchers in this field. Within the scope of this area, some of the topics investigated by researchers have included what types of resources (formal and informal) are most often sought by victims and why (e.g., Du Mont, Forte, Cohen, Hyman, & Romans, 2005) and barriers to help seeking (e.g., Bauer, Rodriguez, Quiroga, & Flores-Ortiz, 2000). One critical area of previous research has been the potential association between women's sociodemographic characteristics and their use of informal and formal supports in response to violence (e.g., West, Kaufman Kantor, & Jasinski, 1998). Despite the relatively large body of work in this area, however, empirical evidence documenting how, or even if, sociodemographic factors influence women's help seeking remains largely inconclusive (Hutchison & Hirschel, 1998). As inconsistencies remain in our collective understanding of the impact of sociodemographic factors on battered women's help seeking, further empirical examination of these relationships is vital.

Sociodemographic Factors and Battered Women's Help Seeking

This section summarizes research efforts on the potential influence of sociodemographic factors on battered women's help seeking. Given the complexity of women's intersecting identities based on membership in multiple social categories, it is important to recognize that women's experiences of victimization and help seeking are simultaneously molded by myriad factors related to their various social positioning. Although contemporary research has attempted to incorporate a more thorough understanding of the complexities of women's experiences, the majority of efforts have primarily considered the issues of race, income, and age. Our understanding of other sociodemographic factors, such as disability, religiosity, and Aboriginal[1] status, and the manner in which they intersect with other aspects of women's identities is more limited. For the purpose of clarity, the following sections discuss the previous research in this area by individual categories, with an understanding that this necessarily overly simplifies the complex intersections in women's lives.

Ethnicity

Research focusing on the help-seeking experiences of women of color highlights the unique barriers faced by these women. Common deterrents to service utilization cited in the literature, including a perceived lack of cultural sensitivity and inaccessibility of services, social isolation, distrust of service providers, and lack of specialized services, are

examples of some of the ways in which help seeking may be compromised for ethnic minority women (Barnett, 2001). Given these additional barriers to help seeking, to what extent do women of color's help-seeking efforts differ from those of white women? A review of research on the impact of ethnicity on battered women's use of services and supports yields contradictory findings. Some studies have revealed differences between ethnic groups (Henning & Klesges, 2002; Kaukinen, 2004; West et al., 1998), whereas other researchers have found that ethnicity does not influence battered women's help seeking (e.g., Berk, Berk Fenstermaker, Newton, & Loseke, 1984).

One explanation as to why inconsistencies have been found regarding ethnicity and help seeking has been offered by Christi-McMullin (2005), who suggests that it is not race that has an impact on help seeking, it is a woman's financial situation, and ethnic minority women are at a clear economic disadvantage when compared to their white counterparts. The feminization and racialization of poverty have resulted in a disproportionate number of women of color experiencing economic marginalization. Consequently, a combination of these economic factors can make it difficult for battered women of color to seek help. These factors are often further compounded for battered immigrant and refugee women.

Immigrant Status

The literature on the experiences of immigrant women in violent partnerships appears to yield consistent findings; however, additional research is needed to more fully understand the experiences of battered immigrant women (Hyman, Forte, Du Mont, Romans, & Cohen, 2006). Qualitative studies focusing on the experiences of battered immigrant women have documented several barriers to help seeking encountered by these women, including lack of education, limited access to culturally appropriate services, and financial insecurity (Bui, 2003; Wachholz & Miedema, 2000). Immigrant women may be further disadvantaged as they tend to be in lower paying jobs, thus increasing their vulnerability for falling below the poverty line even when employed (Bui, 2003; Wachholz, & Miedema, 2000). The link between economic circumstances and help seeking was made by Bui. In her study, Vietnamese immigrant women who were educated and earned higher incomes were more likely to seek help. This finding suggests that economically marginalized immigrant women may have access to fewer social and material resources to help them to effectively cope with their experiences of violence. A multitude of other barriers impeding immigrant women's help seeking have also been reported, including language barriers, cultural norms that condone IPV by encouraging women to stay with their partners, potential ostracism from the community for exposing "private" family issues, and threats of deportation (see Raj & Silverman, 2002, for a review). A recent study conducted in Canada by Hyman et al (2006). showed how length of time in Canada had an impact on help seeking for battered immigrant women. Findings indicated that nonrecent immigrants' (i.e., women who had lived in Canada for 10 or more years) help seeking was similar to women in the general population. Findings from this and other studies (e.g., Bui, 2003; West et al., 1998) suggest that women who are more acculturated are also more likely to seek formal help.

Aboriginal Status

Brownridge reports that Aboriginal women in Canada experience significantly higher rates of intimate partner violence than non-Aboriginal women. However, due to the unique, historical context of oppression and trauma faced by Aboriginal peoples (e.g., colonization, residential schools, geographic/social isolation; Brownridge, 2003), the help-seeking experiences of Aboriginal women may be severely compromised.

There are limited data available on the help-seeking initiatives of battered Aboriginal women living in Canada. Studies focusing on the experiences of battered Native American women living in the United States show how these women are active help seekers (e.g., Evans-Campbell, Lindhorst, Huang, & Walters, 2006; McGillivray & Comaskey, 1999). However, when Aboriginal women's help seeking is compared to that of non-Aboriginal women, LaRocque (2002) suggests that far fewer Aboriginal women in Canada report sexual assault. This hypothesized difference can likely be attributed to a mistrust and lack of confidence in service providers, such as the police and the criminal justice system, by Aboriginal peoples (Thibodeau & Peigan, 2007), which research shows is not unfounded (McGillivray & Comaskey, 1999). However, Aboriginal women may not have many options in terms of where they can seek help, as they tend to have access to fewer alternative resources, due to the physical and social isolation associated with living in rural areas (Paterson, 2009). Furthermore, because Aboriginal peoples tend to live in persistent low-income situations ("Study: Trends," 2005), their help-seeking options may be restricted.

Income and Economic Independence

Perhaps one of the most consistent sociodemographic characteristics associated with help seeking for battered heterosexual women is economic independence. Research suggests that women who earn higher incomes or who are financially independent from their partners are more likely to seek help (Henning & Klesges, 2002; Kim & Gray, 2008). Furthermore, a woman's access to financial resources may affect what types of services she can access. Macy, Nurius, Kernic, and Holt (2005) found that Caucasian battered women who had higher incomes were more likely to use legal services; access to legal services was a barrier for low-income women, who were more likely to turn to public assistance. African American women, who tend to have access to fewer economic resources, were more likely than other ethnic groups to call the police in one study (Hutchison & Hirschel, 1998), highlighting the complex interplay between race and class for women in multiple socially oppressed categories. Collectively, research on the impact of economic factors on help seeking suggests that access to financial resources broadens while lack of access to material resources limits a woman's help-seeking options.

Age

Qualitative research focusing on the experiences of older women victims of IPV speaks to the challenges faced by these women. Qualitative research by Zink, Regan, Jacobson, and

Pabst (2003) contextualizes the help-seeking experiences of older women, revealing that these women are trapped in abusive relationships for financial and physical reasons. Quantitative studies examining the effects of age on a woman's help seeking, however, have yielded inconsistent findings. In line with the qualitative findings reported above, some research has suggested that as a woman's age increases, her help-seeking efforts decrease (West et al., 1998). Other studies have found no effects for age (e.g., Hutchison & Hirschel, 1998; Kingsnorth & Macintosh, 2004; Sansone, Wiederman, & Sansone, 1997). And yet other studies have found that older women are more likely to seek help or that they engage in greater help-seeking efforts (Henning & Klesges, 2002; Kaukinen, 2002). However, as Henning and Klesges caution, age differences could be due to other factors (e.g., the financial situation of older women as compared to that of younger women). Whether or not help seeking in relation to IPV differs according to age has yet to be determined.

Religiosity

Nason-Clark (2004) argued that religious women survivors of abuse are more vulnerable because they tend to stay with their abusive partners, are reticent to seek professional help, and experience guilt. Findings from qualitative studies also suggest that religious women encounter unique barriers to seeking formal help related to religious beliefs concerning the sanctity of marriage (e.g., Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001; Potter, 2007). How do religious battered women's experiences compare to those of nonreligious battered women? Given that studies have tended to focus on the experiences of battered religious women (without including a comparison group of nonreligious women), more research is needed to make meaningful comparisons between battered religious and nonreligious women's help seeking.

Disability

A barrier to accurately understanding the victimization and help-seeking experiences of women with disabilities lies in the homogenizing of women's experiences across disability categories. Given the vast range of disabling conditions (e.g., physical, cognitive, learning, and developmental disabilities), women with disabilities face varying vulnerabilities for violence as well as distinct barriers to help seeking in response to violence. When a longer time frame is considered, prevalence research conducted by Brownridge suggests that women with disabilities (i.e., women who have long-term physical, mental, or health limitations), when compared to abled women, are at an increased risk of severe partner violence. Unfortunately, though, there is a dearth of research dedicated to understanding the experiences of battered women with disabilities (Brownridge, 2006; Nosek, Howland, & Hughes, 2001). Due to the physical and structural barriers to help seeking encountered by women with disabilities (e.g., impaired mobility, complete dependency on the perpetrator, lack of accessible services; Chang et al., 2003), Milberger et al. (2003) suggest that women with disabilities are less likely to seek help than abled women. Furthermore, the

reality that women with disabilities tend to belong to multiply disadvantaged social groups (i.e., Aboriginal, unemployed, and older; Brownridge, 2006) may make it especially difficult for them to seek help. Findings from Milberger et al.'s study on violence against women with disabilities suggest that a relatively small proportion of women with disabilities seek help (33%); as well, mixed responses were given regarding service providers' ability to adequately respond to victims. However, in the absence of a comparison group, the question of whether women with disabilities seek help less or more frequently than abled women remains unanswered (Nosek et al., 2001).

The Current Study

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the impact of sociodemographic characteristics on battered women's help seeking in a national survey of Canadian households. A limitation of previous research is that few sociodemographic characteristics on women's help seeking were examined (e.g., age, race, and income). To address this limitation, a more comprehensive understanding of women's help-seeking experiences was sought by considering the potentially confounding effects of multiple sociodemographic factors on women's help seeking. In addition, as the severity of violence experienced by women may further influence their help-seeking efforts, this study investigated the extent to which sociodemographic variations in help seeking exist when controlling for the impact of violence characteristics on help-seeking behavior. By examining these questions in a national, population-based survey, this study contributes to the violence against women literature by providing valuable information regarding the help-seeking experiences of battered women in the general population.

Method

This study involves a secondary statistical analysis of data from the 1999 Canadian General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a yearly national survey of Canadian households conducted by Statistics Canada, with a specific focus on a different topic area annually. The focus of the 1999 version of the GSS (Cycle 13) centered on criminal victimization and family violence. Detailed information regarding the methodology of the GSS, summarized briefly below, has been previously published (Statistics Canada, 2000).

The GSS is a national telephone survey whose target population is all individuals in the 10 provinces of Canada who are aged more than 15 years and who reside in private residences. Excluded from the survey are individuals residing in the Yukon, Nunavut, and the Northwest Territories, and individuals residing in institutions. As a telephone-based survey, households without telephones and homeless individuals were also excluded from participation in the study (Statistics Canada, 2000). Population-based Canadian data for the time period in which Cycle 13 of the GSS was conducted indicate that land-line telephone ownership was high among households of all income categories; however, those with

incomes lower than CAN$10,000 per year (less than 3% of the general population) were less likely to own telephones than were higher-income households. The rate of telephone ownership for households with incomes of less than CAN$10,000 per year was 92.6%, as compared to 96% for the general population (Statistics Canada, 2000). Given the small number of households without telephones, survey weights were constructed to represent all individuals in the target population, including those who did not possess land-line telephones (Statistics Canada, 2000).

Sampling was conducted through the use of a geographically stratified random sample. Geographic strata were designated within each of the 10 provinces, for a total of 27 strata. Households were then randomly selected through simple random sampling within each stratum using Random Digit Dialing technology. One individual from all eligible individuals in the residence was then randomly selected to participate in the survey. Of the 31,878 households for which contact was attempted, a total of 25,876 persons participated in the study for a response rate of 81.3% (Statistics Canada, 2000). The present analysis involves a subset of GSS respondents: all women who experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence by a current or former male intimate partner in the past 5 years ($n = 922$).

Data for GSS were collected from February through December 1999. Interviews were conducted via Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) by trained interviewers at centralized telephone facilities at Statistics Canada regional offices. Due to the sensitive nature of the interviews, all interviewers received additional specialized training by a psychologist.

To ensure representation of all persons in the target population, survey weights were constructed. A detailed description of the constructed weights and recommended weighting procedures is available through Statistics Canada (2000). All analyses in the present study were conducted consistent with the weighting protocols established and required by Statistics Canada for use with this dataset.

Intimate Partner Violence

Physical and sexual forms of intimate partner violence were assessed in the 1999 GSS through a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). This scale inquired about specific behaviors perpetrated against the respondent, including the following: threatened to hit with fist or object; threw an item that could hurt; pushed, grabbed, or shoved in a way that could hurt; slapped; kicked, bit, or punched with a fist; hit with a harmful object; beat; choked; threatened to use a gun or knife; and forced unwanted sexual activity. Respondents were asked separately about behaviors perpetrated by current and former intimate partners. Separate questions were asked regarding recent violence (past 12 months) and violence in the past 5 years. Each individual item was then dummy coded to indicate the experience of each form of violence. As emotional and financial abuse may differ in their correlates from physical and sexual violence, the present study limited its analysis specifically to individuals who had experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner anytime in the past 5 years.

To assess the severity of violence, individuals were asked about the number of incidents of violence experienced, whether they feared for their lives during the violence, and whether they received physical injuries as a direct result of violence. The number of incidents of violence was measured on a scale from 1 to 11 (1 = *one incident*, 2 = *two incidents*, 3 = *three incidents*, through 11= *more than 10 incidents*). Fearing for one's life and receipt of physical injuries were both dummy coded (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*).

Sociodemographic Characteristics

Ten sociodemographic variables were included in the present analysis. Age was assessed as a continuous variable (years). Dummy coding was used for all other variables: visible minority[2] (0 = *nonvisible minority*, 1 = *visible minority*), Aboriginal (0 = *non-Aboriginal*, 1 = *Aboriginal*), immigrant status (0 = *born in Canada*, 1 = *born outside Canada*), education (0 = *high school graduate*, 1= *did not graduate high school*), income below CAN$30,000 (0 = *income above CAN$30,000*, 1 = *income below CAN$30,000*), geographic region (0 = *urban*, 1 = *rural*), participation in religious activities (0 = *less frequently than once a month*, 1 = *at least once per month or more often*), and household language (0 = *English or French*, 1= *other*). Physical and/or mental limitations were assessed by asking respondents, "Are you limited in the amount or kind of activity you can do at home, or work, or at school because of a long-term physical or mental condition or health problem?" Responses were then coded 0 to indicate no limitations or 1 to signify the presence of physical or mental challenges.

Help Seeking

The 1999 GSS inquired about specific forms of help sought in direct response to the violence. Four forms of informal support were assessed with the following questions: "Other than to the police, did you ever talk to anyone about (these) this incident(s) such as a family member; a friend or neighbor; a coworker; a minister, priest, clergy, or other spiritual advisor." A dummy variable was created for each specific form of informal help (0 = *did not talk about the incident to this source*, 1 = *did talk about the incident to this source*). Nine forms of formal support were evaluated with the following questions: "During the past 5 years, did you ever contact or use any of the following services for help because of the violence, such as reported violence to the police, talked about the incident to a doctor or nurse, talked about the incident to a lawyer, contacted a crisis center or crisis line, contacted another counselor or psychologist, contacted a community center or family center, contacted a shelter or transitional home, contacted a women's center, contacted police or court-based services?" A dummy variable was then created for each specific service utilized (0 = *did not contact or use this service*, 1 = *did contact or use this service*). A composite score for total number of informal supports used was calculated by summing the values for the four forms of informal support, and a composite score for the total number of formal supports used was calculated by summing the values for the nine forms of formal support utilized.

Results

Sample Characteristics

The sample included in the present analysis involved any female respondent who reported at least one incident of physical or sexual violence perpetrated by a male current or former intimate partner within the past 5 years (n = 922). The age of respondents in this sample ranged from 16 to 80 (M = 35.83, SD = 10.81). Approximately one third (34.5%) of respondents were currently married, and 19.6% were presently residing with a common law partner. Roughly half (47.4%) of respondents reported no current romantic partner residing in the home. More than half of the sample (60.0%) reported children under the age of 14 living in the household. The majority of the sample lived in urban regions (79.3%), with 20.1% residing in rural regions and 0.7% living on Prince Edward Island. Visible minority women comprised 7.5% of study respondents, and Aboriginal women comprised 6.5% of the total sample. Approximately 14.4% of respondents were born outside of Canada. Most women (92.8%) reported English or French as their primary household language, and 7.2% resided in households whose primary language was neither English nor French. The majority of respondents had completed at least a high school degree (87.1%), with 30.3% possessing a diploma or certificate from a community college and 15.7% possessing education at the bachelors, masters, or doctoral levels. Approximately 23.5% of respondents reported a long-term physical or mental condition that limited their daily activities. The majority of respondents reported working in paid employment (63.8%), with 8.2% reporting participation in educational programs and 13.9% reporting caring for children as their principle activities. Less than one third (28.4%) of women reported attendance at spiritual or religious events at least once a month. The average total personal income for respondents was CAN$29,005.80 (Range = CAN$1-CAN$999,995; SD = CAN$73,704.53), with 71.2% of women reporting a personal income below CAN$30,000 per year. Comparisons on key sociodemographic characteristics of female respondents of the GSS may be found in Table 1.

Victimization Experiences

The majority of respondents reported previous violence in the past 5 years but had not experienced violence in the past 12 months (63.5%), with 31.8% of women reporting recent violence in the past 12 months only, and 4.7% reporting both historical (past 5 years) and current (past 12 months) experiences of violence. The most common type of physical violence reported by respondents was being pushed, grabbed, or shoved (28.1%), followed by being forced into sexual activity (20.0%), choked (10.3%), beaten (6.8%), slapped (6.8%), and threatened with or actually violated with a knife or a gun (6.5%). The number of violent instances ranged from 1 to 11 (M = 5.05, SD = 4.17). Almost half (41.3%) of women reported being physically injured as a result of violence, with 37.5% requiring medical attention and 26.1% being hospitalized as a result of injuries. Many respondents indicated that they had feared for their lives at some point during the violence (38.4%). Women also reported high rates of emotional (81.9%) and financial abuse (24.7%) perpetrated

Table 1. Group Comparisons on Sociodemographic Characteristics of Female Respondents of the 1999 GSS Who Experienced IPV in the Past 5 Years and Female Respondents Without a History of IPV in the Past 5 Years (Weighted Data and Percentages)

	IPV in the past 5 years (%)			No IPV in the past 5 years (%)			Weighted analyses	
	M	%	SD	M	%	SD	χ^2	t
Age	35.83		10.81	45.86		14.22		713.45**
Visible minority		7.5	—		8.2	—	356.31**	—
Aboriginal		6.5	—		1.8	—	64424.16**	—
Born outside of Canada		14.4	—		20.0	—	12420.16**	—
Did not graduate high school		12.9	—		7.2	—	23346.05**	—
Physical or mental limitations		23.5	—		16.3	—	22843.80**	—
Income below CAN$30,000		71.2	—		69.3	—	932.07**	—
Region						—		—
Rural[a]		20.7	—		23.7	—	3189.94**	—
Urban		79.3	—		76.3	—	—	—
Participation in regional activities in the last month		28.3	—		43.2	—	45286.30**	—
Other household languages (not English or French)		7.2	—		11.3	—	10805.86**	—

a. Including Prince Edward Island
**$p < .01$.

by a current or former intimate partner in addition to their experiences of physical and/or sexual victimization.

Help Seeking

Survivors used an average of 1.72 (Range = 0-4, *SD* =1.12) forms of informal support and an average of 1.86 (Range = 0-9, *SD* = 2.02) forms of formal support in response to violence. The majority of women (66%) reported using at least one type of formal service and/or support in response to violence, and more than 80% reported using at least one form of informal support. Less than one in five women (18.6%) reported using no informal support, and roughly one third of women (34.0%) reported using no formal supports or services. The percentage of women surveyed who utilized each specific form of informal and formal support is outlined in Table 2. In general, women more frequently utilized informal sources of support as compared to the use of formal supports. The most common form of help seeking utilized was talking about the incident to a friend or neighbor (67.5%), followed closely by discussing the violence with a family member (66.5%), and the most frequently used form of formal support utilized by women was contacting a counselor

Table 2. Victimization and Help-Seeking Characteristics of Female Respondents of the Canadian General Social Survey Who Experienced At Least One Incident of Physical or Sexual Violence in the Past 5 Years by a Current or Ex-Intimate Partner (Weighted Data and Percentages)

	Weighted values				
	Mean	Min.	Max.	%	SD
Number of incidents	5.05	I	II		4.17
Feared for life	—	—	—	38.4	
Physically injured as result of violence	—	—	—	41.3	
Talked to family member	—	—	—	66.5	
Talked to friend or neighbor	—	—	—	67.5	
Talked to coworker	—	—	—	27.8	
Talked to spiritual or religious advisor	—	—	—	11.5	
Reported violence to police	—	—	—	29.8	
Talked to doctor or nurse	—	—	—	31.9	
Contacted a lawyer	—	—	—	24.0	
Contacted a counselor	—	—	—	39.1	
Contacted a crisis line or crisis center	—	—	—	17.3	
Contacted a community center	—	—	—	15.5	
Contacted an emergency shelter or housing program	—	—	11.0		
Contacted a women's center	—	—	—	11.2	
Contacted police or court-based services	—	—	—	6.0	
Total number of informal supports used	1.72	0	4	1.12	
Total number of formal supports used	1.86	0	9	2.02	

(39.1%). The least commonly used form of formal support was contacting police or court-based services (6.0%), followed by contacting an emergency shelter or transitional housing program (11.0%), contacting a women's center (11.2%), and discussing the issue with a spiritual or religious advisor (11.5%). Of note, less than one third of respondents (29.8%) self-reported the violence to police.

Hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to determine whether there were significant sociodemographic differences in the overall use of informal and formal supports after controlling for the impact of victimization characteristics on help seeking. A first block was entered containing the following variables: number of incidents of violence, physical injury, and feared life was in danger. A second block was then entered containing the 10 sociodemographic variables of interest: age, visible minority status, Aboriginal status, immigrant status, level of education, physical and/or mental limitations, income, geographic region, participation in religious activities, and primary household language. All analyses were conducted using the weighting procedures outlined by Statistics Canada. Results from these analyses can be found in Table 3.

The full model containing both blocks accounted for 12.3% of the total variance in the number of informal supports used and 25.5% of the total variance in the number of formal

Table 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Women's Total Number of Informal and Formal Supports Used (Weighted Data)

	Beta coefficients for total number of informal supports used			Beta coefficients for total number of formal supports used		
	B	SEB	β	B	SEB	β
Step 1						
Feared life in danger	0.54	0	.24*	1.26	0.01	.30*
Number of violent incidents	0.02	0	.07*	0.08	0.00	.16*
Physically injured	0.14	0	.06*	0.40	0.01	.10*
Step 2						
Age	−0.01	0	−.10*	0.01	0.00	.08*
Visible minority	−0.12	0.01	−.03*	−0.59	0.01	−.08*
Aboriginal	0.11	0.01	.03*	0.32	0.01	.04*
Born outside Canada	−0.07	0.01	−.02*	0.24	0.01	.04*
Did not graduate high school	0.07	0.01	.02*	0.40	0.01	.07*
Physical or mental limitations	0.19	0	.07*	0.57	0.01	.12*
Income below CAN$30,000	−0.30	0	−.12*	−0.07	0.01	−.02*
Rural	0.00	0	.00	0.13	0.01	.03*
Participation in religious activities	0.04	0	.02*	−0.04	0.01	−.01*
Household language "Other"	0.04	0.01	.01*	0.24	0.01	.03*

Note: $R^2 = .10$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ($p \leq .01$) for Step 2 for total number of informal supports; $R^2 = .23$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .03$ ($p \leq .01$) for Step 2 for total number of formal services/supports.
*$p \leq .01$.

supports utilized. The strongest independent predictor of the overall number of both informal (β = .24, $p < .01$) and formal supports (β = .30, $p < .01$) was feeling that one's life was in danger as a result of the violence. The number of incidents of violence (β = .07, $p < .01$), being physically injured as a result of the violence (β = .06, $p < .01$), being Aboriginal (β = .03, $p < .01$), not possessing a high school diploma (β = .02, $p < .01$), experiencing physical or mental limitations (β = .07, $p < .01$), residing in a household whose primary language was not English or French (β = .01, $p < .01$), and attending religious or spiritual services at least monthly (β = .02, $p < .01$) were all found to be significantly associated with an increased number of informal supports utilized. Age (β = −.10, $p < .01$), visible minority status (β = −.03, $p < .01$), being born outside of Canada (β = −.02, $p < .01$), and possessing an income lower than CAN$30,000 annually (β = −.12, $p < .01$) were all significantly associated with a decreased number of informal supports used. There was no statistically significant relationship between residing in a rural region and number of informal supports used.

An increased number of formal supports were significantly and independently predicted by the number of incidents of violence (β = .17, $p < .01$), being physically injured as a result of the violence (β = .10, $p < .01$), age (β = .08, $p < .01$), being Aboriginal (β = .04, $p < .01$), being born outside of Canada (β = .04, $p < .01$), not possessing a high school diploma (β = .07,

$p < .01$), experiencing physical or mental limitations ($\beta = .12$, $p < .01$), residing in a rural region ($\beta = .03$, $p < .01$), and residing in a household whose primary language was not English or French ($\beta = .03$, $p < .01$). In contrast, being a visible minority ($\beta = -.08$, $p < .01$), possessing an annual income of less than CAN\$30,000 per year ($\beta = -.02$, $p < .01$), and attending religious or spiritual services at least monthly ($\beta = -.01$, $p < .01$) were all found to be significantly associated with a decreased number of formal supports used.

Finally, to assess the impact of sociodemographic characteristics on each specific form of informal and formal support after controlling for victimization characteristics, a series of binary logistic regression analyses were conducted. A summary of these findings can be found in Tables 4 to 6.

Discussion

This article examined variations in women's help seeking in response to intimate partner violence and sought to determine the extent to which sociodemographic distinctions among women impacted their participation in both informal and formal help-seeking behaviors. By examining these questions in a large Canadian population-based survey, the article provides an important addition to the violence against women literature.

A principle finding of this analysis is that survivors of intimate partner violence engage in a wide range of help-seeking behaviors in response to violence. Although the common image of a "battered woman" is often grounded in cultural ideologies of learned helplessness, findings from this study suggest that survivors of intimate partner violence are actively engaged in myriad strategies to address their victimization experiences. In contrast to the widely perpetuated image of women in violent relationships as passive recipients of violence, the findings of this analysis indicate that women in abusive partnerships actively attempt to utilize the informal and formal resources available to them to facilitate their survival in and/or exit from these relationships. As feminist scholars and activists continue to counter deficit-based public discourses of violence against women, which all too often pathologize and disempower survivors of such violence, the continued development of a strengths-based analysis of women's help seeking is particularly vital. The findings of the present study make a valuable contribution to such an analysis.

The results of this study also highlight the complexities of help seeking for women in socially and/or economically oppressed populations. Although distinctions have been made in the scholarly literature between informal and formal help seeking, findings of this study indicate that women in marginalized social categories commonly rely on *both* types of assistance in response to violence. More important, however, significant variations were found in regards to the specific kinds of help sought *within* each of these categories. The finding that visible minority women, Aboriginal women, women with physical and/or mental limitations, women whose primary household language was not English or French, and low-income women were all significantly more likely to use some (but not all) of the kinds of *both* informal and formal help seeking explored in this study (see Tables 4-6) suggests that a primary focus on the distinction between "informal" versus "formal" sources of help may be overly simplistic. To understand the help seeking of women in socially and/or

Table 4. Logistic Regression Predicting Women's Use of Informal Help Seeking (Weighted Data)

	Talked to family member	Talked to friend/ neighbor	Talked to coworker	Talked to spiritual advisor
	Odds ratio (CI)	Odds ratio (CI)	Odds ratio (CI)	Odds ratio (CI)
Feared for life	2.20* (2.16, 2.24)	1.76* (1.73, 1.79)	1.61* (1.58, 1.64)	2.79* (2.72, 2.86)
Number of instances	1.05* (1.05, 1.05)	1.05* (1.05, 1.05)	1.03* (1.03, 1.04)	1.03* (1.03, 1.04)
Physically injured	1.36* (1.34, 1.38)	1.41* (1.38, 1.43)	1.59* (1.56, 1.62)	1.10* (1.66, 1.74)
Age	1.00* (1.00, 1.01)	0.98* (0.98, 0.98)	0.99* (0.99, 0.99)	1.06* (1.06, 1.07)
Visible minority	1.22* (1.18, 1.27)	1.13* (1.10, 1.18)	0.63* (0.60, 0.65)	0.98 (0.92, 1.04)
Aboriginal	1.99* (1.91, 2.06)	1.24* (1.20, 1.29)	0.39* (0.38, 0.41)	0.81* (0.76, 0.96)
Born outside Canada	0.92* (0.90, 0.95)	0.83* (0.80, 0.85)	0.69* (0.67, 0.71)	0.19* (0.18, 0.20)
Did not graduate high school	1.01 (0.98, 1.04)	1.40* (1.37, 1.44)	1.26* (1.22, 1.28)	0.53* (0.50, 0.55)
Physical or mental limitation	1.68* (1.65, 1.72)	1.78* (1.15, 1.20)	0.88* (0.86, 0.90)	1.21* (1.18, 1.24)
Income below CAN$30,000	1.07* (1.05, 1.09)	0.90* (0.89, 0.92)	0.63* (0.62, 0.64)	0.13* (1.11, 1.16)
Rural	1.44* (1.41, 1.47)	1.43* (1.40, 1.46)	1.29* (1.26, 1.31)	0.95** (0.93, 0.98)
Participation in religious activities	0.69* (0.68, 0.70)	0.90* (0.89, 0.92)	0.76* (0.74, 0.77)	5.19* (5.07, 5.31)
Other household language	0.64* (0.62, 0.66)	0.81* (0.78, 0.83)	2.15* (2.08, 2.23)	1.68* (1.58, 1.79)

Note: CI = 95% confidence interval.
*$p \leq .01$.

economically oppressed populations, researchers must look beyond this dichotomy to understand why some specific forms of informal and formal help are utilized more often than others. Such an understanding is crucial for strengthening the continuum of resources available to survivors of intimate partner violence.

Recent policy initiatives in Canada have focused dually on enhancing formal systems responses to violence against women while simultaneously promoting the responsibilities of "neighbors, friends, and families" to respond to woman abuse. In 1995, the federal government released the report, _Setting the Stage for the Next Century: The Federal Plan for Gender Equality_, a comprehensive document outlining strategies to be undertaken by the federal government to improve the status of women in Canada (Status of Women Canada, 1995). Outlining the government's commitment to promoting gender equality, this document prioritized the reduction of violence against women as the fourth key objective for creating a more equitable society for women. To achieve this goal, several key strategies for action

Table 5. Logistic Regression Predicting Women's Use of Formal Help Seeking (Weighted Data)

	Reported to police	Doctor or nurse	Lawyer	Counselor
	Odds ratio (CI)	Odds ratio (CI)	Odds ratio (CI)	Odds ratio (CI)
Feared for life	2.85** (2.80, 2.90)	2.47** (2.42, 2.51)	3.41** (3.34, 3.47)	2.40** (2.36, 2.44)
Number of instances	1.06** (1.06, 1.06)	1.07** (1.07, 1.07)	1.08** (1.08, 1.08)	1.08** (1.07, 1.08)
Physically injured	1.58** (1.56, 1.61)	1.29** (1.27, 1.31)	1.50** (1.47, 1.53)	1.23** (1.22, 1.26)
Age	0.99** (0.99, 0.99)	1.05** (1.05, 1.05)	1.03** (1.03, 1.03)	1.03** (1.03, 1.03)
Visible minority	3.23** (3.12, 3.35)	0.84** (0.81, 0.87)	0.64** (0.62, 0.67)	0.44** (0.42, 0.45)
Aboriginal	2.13** (2.06, 2.20)	0.65** (0.62, 0.68)	0.82** (0.79, 0.86)	1.58** (1.53, 1.63)
Born outside Canada	0.83** (0.80, 0.85)	0.79** (0.76, 0.81)	0.89** (0.86, 0.92)	1.22** (1.19, 1.25)
Did not graduate high school	2.17** (2.11, 2.22)	1.68** (1.64, 1.72)	2.00** (1.95, 2.06)	1.61** (1.57, 1.65)
Physical or mental limitation	1.61** (1.58, 1.64)	2.22** (2.18, 2.26)	0.78** (0.77, 0.80)	1.45** (1.43, 1.48)
Income below CAN$30,000	0.97** (0.96, 0.99)	1.21** (1.19, 1.23)	0.76** (0.75, 0.78)	0.80** (0.79, 0.82)
Rural	1.06** (1.04, 1.08)	1.21** (1.19, 1.24)	1.78** (1.74, 1.81)	0.84** (0.83, 0.86)
Participation in religious activities	1.17** (1.15, 1.19)	1.27** (1.25, 1.29)	1.02* (1.00, 1.04)	0.95** (0.93, 0.96)
Other household language	1.38** (1.34, 1.43)	1.06** (1.03, 1.10)	1.30** (1.25, 1.35)	0.45** (0.43, 0.46)

Note: CI = 95% confidence interval.
*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$.

were outlined, including the promotion of community-based action, enhanced support for education and information exchange, increased support for battered women's shelters, criminal justice reform, initiatives to support community-based services for First Nations women residing on reserves and those in Inuit communities, and increased immigration protections for refugee women at risk of violence (Status of Women Canada, 1995). Although this document provided both a comprehensive framework for addressing violence against women and federal leadership in solidifying governmental responsibility for eliminating such violence, it did not guarantee any long-term budgetary commitment to ensure that all aspects of the plan could reasonably be carried out at the provincial and local levels. Although subsequent federal initiatives, such as the *Family Violence Initiative* launched in 2001 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2007), have provided further monetary support to specifically address violence against women and children in the family, the current fiscal and political climate in Canada threaten the continued viability of such programs. As the findings of the current study demonstrate that women do access vital domestic violence resources,

Table 6. Logistic Regression Predicting Women's Use of Formal Help Seeking (Weighted Data)

	Crisis line or center	Community center	Shelter or housing	Women's center	Police/court services
	Odds ratio (CI)	Odds ratio (CI)	Odds ratio (CI)	Odds ratio (CI)	Odds ratio (CI)
Feared for life	2.67** (2.61, 2.73)	1.90** (1.86, 1.95)	2.61** (2.54, 2.69)	2.70** (2.62, 2.77)	1.53** (1.47, 1.59)
Number of instances	1.07** (1.07, 1.07)	1.13** (1.23, 1.14)	1.04** (1.03, 1.04)	1.06** (1.05, 1.06)	1.08** (1.07, 1.08)
Physically injured	1.68** (1.65, 1.72)	0.67** (0.66, 0.69)	1.72** (1.67, 1.76)	1.57** (1.52, 1.61)	2.22** (2.13, 2.31)
Age	1.04** (1.04, 1.04)	1.04** (1.04, 1.04)	1.03** (1.03, 1.03)	1.04** (1.04, 1.04)	1.00** (1.00, 1.00)
Visible minority	0.76** (0.72, 0.81)	1.74** (1.65, 1.83)	0.57** (0.54, 0.61)	1.08* (1.02, 1.14)	1.24** (1.15, 1.33)
Aboriginal	2.23** (2.14, 2.31)	2.03** (1.95, 2.11)	2.21** (2.11, 2.32)	0.69** (0.65, 0.73)	0.74** (0.68, 0.81)
Born outside Canada	0.45** (0.43, 0.46)	0.48** (0.46, 0.50)	1.69** (1.62, 1.76)	0.86** (0.82, 0.90)	1.17** (1.09, 1.24)
Did not graduate high school	1.99** (1.93, 2.04)	1.74** (1.69, 1.79)	1.67** (1.61, 1.73)	1.80** (1.74, 1.87)	0.85** (0.80, 0.90)
Physical or mental limitation	1.80** (1.76, 1.84)	0.94** (0.91, 0.96)	2.30** (2.25, 2.36)	1.86** (1.82, 1.91)	3.05** (2.95, 3.16)
Income below CAN$30,000	1.09** (1.07, 1.11)	1.14** (1.11, 1.16)	1.86** (1.81, 1.91)	1.30** (1.27, 1.34)	1.13** (1.08, 1.17)
Rural	0.91** (0.89, 0.93)	0.42** (0.40, 0.43)	0.98 (0.95, 1.10)	1.15** (1.11, 1.18)	0.52** (0.49, 0.54)
Participation in religious activities	0.74** (0.72, 0.75)	0.64** (0.62, 0.65)	1.27** (1.24, 1.30)	0.86** (0.84, 0.89)	0.77** (.75, 0.80)
Other household language	2.87** (2.75, 3.00)	0.73** (0.69, 0.77)	2.01** (1.91, 2.12)	1.68** (1.59, 1.77)	2.81** (2.62, 3.01)

Note: CI = 95% confidence interval.
*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$.

it is critical that such programs remain adequately funded and supported at the federal level. Indeed, the majority of women (66%) in the present study reported using at least one type of formal service and/or support in response to violence. Because socially and/or economically oppressed women may possess fewer material resources to purchase these services in the private sector, it is imperative that the federal government provide adequate budgetary support to the provinces to ensure that these crucial services remain accessible to the women most in need.

The findings of this study also indicate the importance of informal support from friends, family members, coworkers, and spiritual or religious advisors in the lives of women in marginalized populations. Findings from this study support previous research by suggesting that survivors of violence more commonly utilize informal sources of support than formal supports and services. More than 80% of women in the present study reported using at least one form of informal support in the aftermath of violence. As such, the continued development and funding of public awareness and education campaigns are essential to ensure that such individuals are adequately prepared to support women in violent relationships. Programs such as the Ontario Women's Directorate's Neighbors, Friends, and Families are important avenues through which to educate the public about empowerment-based approaches to assisting women in violent relationships. This initiative provides and distributes community action kits to be used by local organizations and community groups to "provide accurate information and strategies directly to communities, to help them better understand how to respond effectively to a woman who is abused and how to approach her partner about his abusive behavior" (Ontario Women's Directorate, 2007, p. 4). The primary goal of the Neighbors, Friends, and Families program is to change public attitudes about violence against women and to reframe gender-based violence as a community issue. The campaign strives to increase public accountability for preventing and intervening in cases of violence against women through educating individuals on specific strategies they can utilize to combat common myths about violence against women, to assist women being abused, and to open a dialogue with perpetrators regarding their violent behavior. The resource kit includes educational materials, safety cards outlining safety planning tips for abused women, a book and video list of media materials on violence against women, and brochures on how to identify and help women as well as how to talk to men who are abusive (Ontario Women's Directorate, 2007). The continued expansion and development of these programs to specifically speak to violence against women in oppressed populations, such as the *Erase Your Tracks* program to address violence in Aboriginal communities (Kanawayhitowin Campaign, 2008), is important to ensure that these materials are provided in a culturally relevant and appropriate fashion.

As the findings of this study suggest that women who have experienced severe forms of violence are most likely to seek help through both formal and informal avenues, ensuring that professional service providers as well as members of the general community are equipped to explore issues of safety with women in a supportive, empowering, and nonjudgmental manner is particularly vital. In the present study, women who reported fearing for their lives were significantly more likely to report seeking help from all forms of informal and formal sources identified in this study than women who did not report fearing for their

lives, and fearing for one's life was the strongest independent predictor of the overall number of both informal and formal supports used. Similarly, women who reported a higher number of violent incidents were significantly more likely to seek all forms of help than were women with fewer violent incidents. Women who reported suffering physical injuries as a direct result of the abuse were also more likely to utilize all forms of informal support identified in this study and all forms of formal support, with the exception of community centers, than were women who had not experienced physical injuries. Because women in these situations are at a heightened risk of escalated, and potentially life-threatening violence, it is imperative that their efforts to seek assistance are met with care. Ensuring that both the professional and public communities are appropriately trained to explore safety options with women is essential to promoting the health and well-being of women in violent relationships.

Although findings of this study highlight the use of both informal and formal supports by women in socially and/or economically marginalized populations, it is important to note that visible minority women and women with incomes less than CAN$30,000 per year used significantly fewer forms of both informal and formal support than did nonvisible minority women and women with incomes above CAN$30,000 per year. Furthermore, immigrant women and older women report using comparatively fewer forms of informal support help than do women born in Canada and younger women. These findings suggest that women in these oppressed categories may have fewer social and/or material resources to assist them in coping with their victimization experiences. Although the quantitative nature of this study did not allow for an examination of the reasons why such group distinctions exist, the comparatively fewer help-seeking resources accessed by women in these social categories is concerning. As social isolation and economic marginalization may increase a woman's continued risk of violence while simultaneously minimizing the coping resources available to her, it is imperative that practitioners not only identify barriers to service provision to these populations of women but also implement efforts to eradicate such barriers in their practice.

This study had several strengths in its research design. The use of a large, population-based sample greatly enhanced the external validity of this study. As many previous studies on women's help seeking are drawn from treatment samples of abused women, the use of a nationally representative community-based sample of women provided important information about the help-seeking behaviors of women in the general population. Furthermore, as the vast majority of research on women's help seeking in response to violence has been conducted in the United States, the use of a Canadian population-based sample provides an important contribution to the international literature on violence against women.

Despite these strengths, there were several limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings of the study. Because of the large sample, one must be cognizant of issues of statistical power. As large samples increase the power of an analysis, it is possible that the effects found may, in some cases, represent findings that are "statistically" significant yet reflect small actual differences between groups. As such, one must balance their interpretations of these findings with a consideration of both statistical and "practical" significance.

Another limitation of the present study is the dated nature of the data set used. Cycle 13 of the GSS was collected in 1999 and, as such, must be interpreted with an understanding of the evolving social, cultural, and legal contexts. In Canada, significant public education efforts (e.g., the Neighbors, Friends, and Families program, the Family Violence Initiative) over the past 10 years have attempted to increase public awareness of intimate partner violence and enhance both the quantity and quality of support available to survivors. Consequently, the increased availability of resources may have enhanced women's help-seeking abilities. Previous research comparing women's help seeking in Canada between 1993 and 1999 suggests that women's help-seeking efforts increased during this time period, indicating that women's help seeking is highly contingent on temporal contexts (Du Mont et al., 2005). As such, the findings of this analysis may not accurately reflect the current realities of women's help seeking in Canada; however, they do provide an important baseline from which to evaluate future changing trends in women's help seeking.

As a telephone survey, the GSS necessarily excluded individuals without land-line telephones and individuals who were homeless. As previously noted, Canadian population data corresponding to the time period of data collection suggest that households living in extreme poverty (e.g., those with household incomes less than CAN$10,000 annually) were less likely to own phones than higher-income households. Although such households comprised less than 3% of the Canadian population at that time (Statistics Canada, 2000), the exclusion of data from such households as well as the exclusion of participation by homeless individuals must be noted as a limitation of the present study. Previous research has suggested high rates of physical and sexual victimization among both low-income housed (Wenzel, Tucker, Elliot, Marshall, & Williamson, 2004) and homeless (Stainbrook & Hornik, 2006) women. Additional empirical work has also documented that violence against women is both a pathway to and a consequence of homelessness for women (Levin, McKean, & Raphael, 2004). As extremely impoverished and homeless women are at a heightened risk of violence and material deprivation may constrain the help-seeking resources available to them, their experiences of victimization and help seeking may be distinct from that of other Canadian women. Thus, although the present study did attempt to account for the experiences of women in lower-income categories, the most economically marginalized women were excluded from the present analysis.

Because this study was based on a secondary analysis of a large national dataset, problems common to secondary statistical analysis were encountered. As the authors of the present study did not design the original survey on which this analysis was based, it was necessary to rely on sociodemographic indicators that were operationalized by Statistics Canada for census-based research. As such, many sociodemographic characteristics were operationalized using single-item indicators. The use of such indicators did not allow for an exploration of within-group variations. Because the sociodemographic categories examined in this study, such as race, income, household language, immigration status, and physical and/or mental limitations, encompass populations that are not homogeneous, it was not possible to analyze critical distinctions among members of these various populations. Future research must be conducted that further examines within group variations from an intersectional perspective.

Also of importance, the GSS did not inquire about respondents' frequency of contact with each source of formal and informal support, but rather simply whether or not an individual had sought out or used a particular form of help at least once. As such, it was not possible to analyze in the current study differences among women based on the frequency with which they utilized each form of support. In addition to failing to assess the total quantity of support received, the GSS also did not evaluate the quality of support received (e.g., respondents' self-assessments of how helpful each source of support had been and the outcome of receiving that support). Women may have sought out support from sources that were decidedly unhelpful and disempowering (such as by reinforcing victim blaming or by prescribing an appropriate course of action rather than facilitating women's own decision making processes). By simply assessing the sources of support sought rather than the frequency of contact with each source of support and the overall quality of support received, the complexities of women's help seeking were necessarily overly simplified in the current analysis. These shortcomings must be noted as a critical limitation of the present study.

Although the use of a large data set provided important information about sociodemographic variations in help seeking, the quantitative nature of this study did not allow for an exploration of *why* these variations exist. The further development of qualitative research that explores women's help-seeking narratives is critical to understand women's perceptions of various forms of help and their reasons for selecting (or avoiding) assistance from certain sources. As qualitative research provides a richer contextual understanding of women's experiences and allows for a deeper exploration of the ways in which social identities and positioning affect help-seeking choices, it is important that the current study be followed by qualitative research with women in socially and/or economically oppressed populations to enrich our understanding of the impact of sociodemographic characteristics on women's help seeking. Such an understanding is critical for the development of survivor-centered and -driven public responses to violence against women.

Authors' Note

The 1999 General Social Survey is a product of Statistics Canada that was obtained for use by the authors through the Internet Data Library System (IDLS) as part of the Data Liberation Initiative (DLI). The results and views expressed are solely those of the authors and are not those of Statistics Canada.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. According to the Constitution Act, 1982, s. 35(2), the term "Aboriginal" in Canada refers to Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Although "Aboriginal" is the term most commonly used and accepted in Canada, this may not be the case elsewhere.
2. According to Statistics Canada departmental standards (1998), the term "Visible Minority" in Canada refers to persons who are identified according to the Employment Equity Act as being non-Caucasian in race or nonwhite in color. Under the Act, Aboriginal persons are not considered to be members of visible minority groups (Statistics Canada, 1998, ¶ 1).

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Bios

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