

## Family and Social Support and the Brazilian Victim of Immigrant Partner Violence Abroad

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### Abstract

In recent months due to Covid-19 and lockdowns across the world, intimate partner violence has drawn increasing attention. In some countries, mandatory lockdowns and quarantines have been accompanied by rising rates of violence, sparking public awareness campaigns. However, intimate partner violence is a phenomenon which persists across time and cultures. This study focuses on the female Brazilian migrants who become victims of intimate partner violence and the role of social support networks, as previous research has indicated a need for research on specific communities. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 25 victims and professionals who work with these victims in Japan, the United States, Germany, and Portugal. The data provided examples of positive and negative social support from family and friends and suggested effective alternatives to informal social support and also how to give more effective assistance to family and friends who may be victims of intimate partner violence. The results show that Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence abroad often seek financial support from family members in Brazil; however, in the lack of such support, income from employment or government assistance may help a victim should she choose to leave an abusive relationship. In addition, the research suggests that professionals and friends can help victims by providing them with information about available social services and accompanying them to apply for these services.



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### Introduction


Intimate partner violence, also known as domestic violence, is a significant problem worldwide. The

Annals of Behavioural Science website (2020) defines the term "intimate partner violence" as physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current

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or former partner or spouse<sup>1</sup>. According to a 2013 WHO report, over one in three women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual partner violence, or sexual violence by a non-partner<sup>2</sup>. Awang and Hariharan (2011) noted “domestic violence occurs in countries worldwide and traverses ethnic, religious, and income groups, and that the only variation is in the patterns and trends that exist in countries and regions”<sup>3</sup>.

However, the interconnection of the different axes of oppression, such as race, social class, and nationality can contribute to a greater incidence of intimate partner violence and shape the ways that victims can react in this scenario. In regards to the economic aspect, studies demonstrate that victims with higher acquisitive power have more options to conceptualize and leave the abusive situation, while there are fewer choices and the tolerance threshold is higher for women in lower social classes<sup>4</sup>. Likewise, immigrant women have fewer options for finding housing and employment, which may also raise their tolerance thresholds.

In this article, the specifics of domestic violence against Brazilian migrants are addressed. Brazilian women, in particular, suffer discrimination abroad because of the sexualized representation of the image associated with the country and the “tropics”, independent of ethnicity or skin color<sup>5</sup>. Choi *et al.*, (2012), for example, cited previous studies that migrant women are more vulnerable to domestic violence than local women<sup>6</sup>. Migrant women also face limitations to accessing professional support networks because of obstacles, such as “language barriers, a lack of knowledge of the local welfare and transportation systems, cultural constraints on the participation of women in public life [...], and intentional control by husbands”<sup>6</sup>.

In accordance with the need to set the socio-cultural context in which abuse takes place and deepen the understanding about the help of the social network in these cases, this study evaluates the social and family help given to Brazilian migrants who were victims of domestic violence abroad. Consequently, this article is a qualitative analysis based of interviews with professionals who provided assistance to Brazilian victims in Portugal, Japan, Germany, and the United States. Four countries, including

Portugal, a country with a common language, were selected to explore the importance of language barriers and cultural factors. All countries were at least eight hours by plane from Brazil, and very few migrant victims noted having family in their new host country. The theoretical scope encompasses the help-seeking process, such as Liang *et al.*, (2005) and epistemological and theoretical feminist theory<sup>4</sup>. The findings indicate that victims seek help from their social network, especially their nuclear family and close local friends and that the responses from these groups differ.

There are many forms of intimate partner violence. Some studies have shown up to eight domains of abuse, including emotional punishment, instrumental abuse, coercion, detachment, humiliation, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and gender-based abuse<sup>7</sup>. Awang (2011) organized domestic violence into five types—financial, psychological, social, physical, and sexual abuse<sup>3</sup>.

The long-lasting effects of coercive emotional, psychological, and economic tactics on a victim have been noted to be potentially as damaging as those of physical abuse<sup>8</sup>. Even physical abuse encompasses a wide range of behaviors. Herrera Paredes and Ventura (2010) described the types of intimate partner violence as follows:

*There are different forms of violence, physical violence which encompasses a scale of behaviors that go from a push or a pinch to serious injuries that lead to death; psychological violence, which includes behavior such as permanently criticizing her body or ideas, comparing her to other people, questioning everything she does and how she does it; verbal violence which consists of disqualifying the woman and belittling her authority in front of her children, criticizing her family or the people she esteems; sexual violence, in which the woman is forced to perform sexual behaviors she doesn't want; and economic violence, in which the woman is excluded from taking financial decisions, and her expenses are controlled.*<sup>9</sup>

In the United States, intimate partner violence began to gain significant public attention through the feminist movement in the 1970s<sup>8,10</sup>, although Brazil's feminist movement and attention to the problem

became more visible in the 1980s<sup>10</sup>. Feminist theoretical approaches contributed to demonstrate that abuse and spousal violence reflected patriarchal hierarchical social structures, taking place more frequently in socio-cultural contexts in which gender inequality between men and women is greater<sup>11</sup>. Another contribution of feminism was to break with the privatization logic that limited the matter to the domestic or family sphere, characterizing domestic violence as a crime of less dangerous potential<sup>12</sup>.

It is important to highlight that criminal classification is a method adopted in many countries, including Brazil, to promote, among other positive effects, the reduction of the feeling of impunity. However, the literature emphasizes the possibility of revictimization in the case of seeking help from the judicial and criminal systems and their agents, for example, when questioning the victims' word on the abuse and demanding further proof<sup>11,12</sup>. As such, another feminist legacy was the proposition that domestic violence is a complex phenomenon that should be treated by a "intersectoral and cross-disciplinary approach"<sup>12</sup>, which includes the examination of social help networks.

While general population studies in Brazil have shown a prevalence of 11% to 35% of intimate partner violence, studies carried out by health centers have indicated higher rates, between 30% and 41%<sup>10</sup>. In a WHO study, the prevalence of physical and sexual violence against women varied greatly, with high levels of violence registered in Brazil, and especially in the rural area of Zona da Mata, Pernambuco<sup>13,14</sup>. There is little to no data on the rates of domestic violence in Brazilian communities abroad, although other studies on immigrant women, such as that of Gonçalves and Matos (2016) have indicated that immigrant women may be at an even higher risk of becoming victims of domestic violence, as their social networks are effectively severed when they move to a new area<sup>15</sup>. Liang *et al.*, (2005) divides these networks into formal networks, which include state agents or civil society, such as the police, social assistance, and legal assistance; or informal networks, which involve friends and family members<sup>4</sup>. The victims seek help from informal networks before formal networks<sup>16</sup>, primarily seeking encouragement and financial support<sup>4</sup>. The relationship with this support

network directly influences the victims' mental health, their ability to stay safe<sup>4</sup>, and also the readjustment process and well-being after the abuse<sup>16</sup>.

Although most of the literature discusses the positive impact of the social help network, research also shows a high possibility of this influence being negative, revictimizing, silencing, and stigmatizing the victim in the abusive situation<sup>6,16</sup>. The data collected by Trotter and Allen (2009) indicates that most victims experienced mixed reactions—positive and negative<sup>16</sup>, and that support from friends was more successful than family support. However, the findings of this study are contrary to this fact, possibly because the victims are migrants.

The negative reactions vary from showing discomfort and avoiding the topic, to advising victims to stay in the abusive situation, or even revealing the victim's location to the abuser<sup>16</sup>. According to Liang *et al* (2005), "[...] because the actual nature, severity, and presence of violence in an intimate relationship may be constantly shifting, with abusers alternating between violence and loving contrition, clarifying the relationship as abusive may be difficult and confusing"<sup>4</sup>. This complexity involves what is known as "triangulation", in which the abuser takes advantage of the victim's fear, but also seeks out common ties, such as children and financial and emotional dependence<sup>17</sup>. According to Bonomi and Martin (2020), abusers may try to lure family members and friends into helping them, causing even greater isolation and insecurity in the victim<sup>17</sup>. Importantly, in addition to being at a potentially higher risk of suffering intimate partner violence, immigrant women often face more difficulties getting out of violent or abusive relationships. These difficulties include immigration laws and visa dependence on the battering spouse, lack of language proficiency, social isolation (including distance from family and a lack of a support network), and lack of financial resources<sup>18</sup>. Immigrants lose informal social networks and support when they move to a new country<sup>19</sup>. In addition, cultural factors can play a role in immigrant women's decisions to leave their abusive partners<sup>20</sup>.

Reina and Lohman (2014) cited the lack of a social and familial support network as a reason immigrant victim may have difficulty addressing intimate

partner violence<sup>20</sup>. Although in the past, research on domestic violence often clustered immigrant women into one group, Bhuyan and Senturia (2005) observe that this “falls short of accounting for the subtle distinctions between and within cultural groups, differences that have a profound effect on how women experience and respond to violence”<sup>21</sup>. Among these factors, the relevance of family composition is noteworthy. One factor that has been neglected in previous literature is the effect of family structure on the help victims of domestic violence receive. In the phenomenon known as the “Cinderella Effect”, Daly and Wilson showed that children from adoptive homes or with divorced parents are less likely to have the protection they deserve from their parental figures, resulting in often tragic consequences<sup>22</sup>. Miller (2004) summarized the Cinderella Effect as follows, “beyond economic deprivation, stepchildren are abused, neglected, and murdered at the hands of their stepparents at significantly higher rates than their genetic counterparts”<sup>23</sup>. Although much of the literature on the Cinderella Effect focuses on minor children, the impact of the Cinderella Effect reaches into the adult lives of children from reconstituted families.

The particulars of social help networks vary depending on the culture and location studied. Fuchsel *et al.*, (2016) found that Mexican women in the United States who were victims of intimate partner violence were ashamed to seek help from family members and that some of the women had been pressured by their family to enter into relationships<sup>24</sup>. Other scholars found that informal networks (such as family, friends, and neighbors) can create additional conflict and stress in the case of intimate partner violence by not believing victims, blaming them for the abuse, discouraging them from seeking help from the police or service agencies, minimizing the abuse and its effects, or even by merely keeping silent about the problem<sup>19</sup>. Guruge and Humphreys (2009) cited Sri Lankan women’s reluctance to call community interpreters and noted that in some cases when the victims’ own family members found out what shelter they were staying at, they were forced to return to abusive husbands<sup>19</sup>. Fuchsel *et al.*, (2012), cited a need for further research as to whether families would help a victim leave a situation in which there is intimate partner violence or pressure a victim into staying<sup>24</sup>.

The local culture and environment can influence the availability of a support network. Some studies have shown that victims of intimate partner violence in rural areas suffer more than their urban counterparts. A 2013 multi-national study conducted by the World Health organization studied both urban and rural areas worldwide and found that the overall levels of intimate partner violence were consistently higher in rural areas than in urban settings. In countries where large cities and provincial settings were both studied, the overall levels of partner violence were consistently higher in the provincial settings, which had more rural populations, than in the urban sites<sup>14</sup>. In addition, laws and regulations may influence the availability of social support networks. For example, the Hague Convention was designed to prevent international child abduction but may prevent immigrant victims of intimate partner violence from returning to their countries of origin. The United States Department of State website describes the purpose of the Hague Convention as follows,

*The purpose of the Convention is to protect children from the harmful effects of international abduction by a parent by encouraging the prompt return of abducted children to their country of habitual residence, and to organize or secure the effective rights of access to a child. The idea is that custody and visitation matters should generally be decided by the proper court in the country of the child’s habitual residence*<sup>25</sup>.

However, the Hague Convention has previously been criticized for,

*an unrealistic faith in the ability of the legal system to protect women and children from violence; an underestimation or dismissal of the harm caused to children by experiencing domestic violence; and the irony that now that the presence of violence in relationships is recognized as so common any ‘special’ consideration to the victims of violence would undermine the Convention*<sup>26</sup>.

In this study, the effect of the Hague Convention on the availability of support networks to Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence was explored.

The present study on Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence abroad focused on support of their

social network. In regard to this topic, the following questions were explored:

1. Who do Brazilian women abroad reach out to when they experience intimate partner violence?
2. What type of support do Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence abroad seek and receive from family members and friends, both in Brazil and in their country of residence, and is it effective?

### Methods

Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence, psychologists, attorneys, interpreters, and social workers in Japan, the United States, Portugal, and Germany who work with these victims of intimate partner violence were interviewed. A qualitative and exploratory method was selected in order to identify important themes and patterns, as little past research is available on Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence abroad.

The purposive sampling method was used to select immigration attorneys, family law attorneys who work with immigrants, and psychologists as they often work with victims of intimate partner violence. E-mails or direct messages describing the study and requesting participation were sent to attorneys and psychologists who advertise themselves online as working with the Brazilian communities in Japan, the United States, Germany, and Portugal. In the United States, Portuguese speaking immigration attorneys were also recruited through an online portal for immigration lawyers.

Preliminary conversations were conducted with the professionals to make sure they had actual experience working with Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence as immigration or family lawyers or psychologists and had first-hand knowledge of the subject at hand. Individuals without significant experience working with victims of intimate partner violence were not selected for participation in the study. Some participants in Japan were selected by snowball sampling, including two psychologists and one community interpreter in Japan who were referred by other participants. The effect of snowball sampling was not as pronounced in other countries, perhaps because resources specific to Brazilian

victims did not seem to be as easily accessible in Germany, Portugal, and the United States.

It is important to note that many attorneys in Portugal failed to respond to requests as to whether or not they worked with victims of domestic violence. No Brazilian attorney specialized in working with domestic violence victims was identified in Portugal, perhaps because Brazil and Portugal share a common language. In addition, no Portuguese attorney was identified as specialized in working with Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence there. The Brazilian victims interviewed in Portugal all noted they were represented by local attorneys; however, they told of significant difficulties with their attorneys and the court system.

Likewise, although all of the psychologists who were identified as working with the Brazilian community in Germany through the Brazilian consulate's website were contacted by e-mail about the study, only two psychologists in Germany responded to initial inquiries about the research, and neither of the psychologists who responded cited significant experience working with Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence. This is important to note because Brazilian victims of domestic violence in Germany and the attorney interviewed noted that mental health services in Portuguese are very difficult for victims in Germany to find.

Victims were identified primarily through convenience sampling, as the victims are spread out across geographic regions. In addition, although some victims are eager to share their experiences to help others, other victims, especially those who recently left violent situations, do not feel comfortable talking about the issue. As such, convenience sampling allowed for the participation of victims who were willing to participate and easy to reach. Victims were recruited online in Facebook support groups for Brazilian victims of domestic violence, groups for Brazilian mothers, and also in general groups for Brazilians living abroad. Four victims were identified through snowball sampling when they were referred by psychologists, other participants, or people familiar with the author's research. Preliminary conversations were conducted with victims to ensure that they were victims of violence and that it was safe for them to discuss their experiences.

After preliminary conversations, 25 individuals were selected for qualitative interviews as follows:

**Participants in qualitative interviews**

Japan	United States	Germany	Portugal
2 attorneys, 3 psychologists, 1 community interpreter	2 attorneys, 2 psychologists	1 attorney	1 social worker, 1 psychologist
2 victims (1 abused by a Brazilian national she met in Japan, the other abused by a husband of South Asian descent)	2 victims (both abused by Americans)	5 victims (4 abused by Germans, 1 abused in Germany by a man of other European citizenship)	5 victims (4 abused by Portuguese citizens, 1 abused by Brazilian national who moved with her to Portugal)

Most victims interviewed moved abroad alone and met their abusive partners in the country where they were abused. A majority noted being involved in relationships with a partner of the nationality of the country they lived in at the time of abuse. Only two of the victims interviewed were abused by other Brazilians, one who met the abuser abroad and another who moved abroad with an emotionally abusive partner who became increasingly violent after the move. Only in Japan was neither victim interviewed abused by a Japanese national. This may be because relationships between native Japanese and Brazilian women are not as common as transnational marriages in other countries. Only one victim, who lived in Japan, had family members who lived in the same region, who she stayed with after leaving the abusive relationship. One additional victim, in Portugal, noted that she had a brother who was in another region of Portugal during part of the time she was in the abusive relationship. However, she did not seek his assistance. Some participants sought help from family members who were living in Brazil.

In countries in which fewer professionals with expertise in working with the Brazilian community were available for interviews, larger numbers of victims were selected. As to research ethics, participation was voluntary and consent forms were provided to participants which notified them that they could choose to end participation at any time

during the interview. Steps were taken to preserve victims' identities. All personal identifying data was deleted and no names or exact locations are given. In addition, participants were not given pseudonyms for the purpose of this research as giving chronological accounts of abuse and details that could be organized and attributed to a certain victim might result in the recognition of a particular case.

Participants chose the method of communication most convenient for their interviews. Several requested interviews through the telephone feature of the WhatsApp application, some chose to use Skype, and others requested the voice call feature of the Facebook Messenger application. Some participants asked for video interviews, and one requested a Zoom meeting. Three victims choose to type their responses, instead of participating in oral interviews. One psychologist who works with victims in Japan was interviewed in person while visiting Curitiba, Brazil, in three sessions for a total of four hours. All of the other interviews were conducted online, recorded, and transcribed. All of the interviews with professionals lasted at least two hours, with some interviews lasting as many as four hours. The interviews with victims ranged in duration from one to six hours. Several of the interviews were broken into two or more sessions.

A preliminary database of over 265 questions was created based on themes observed during the

literature review. The questions formed the foundation for the semi-structured interviews. Supplemental and follow-up questions were divided into themes including: social support, use of substances such as alcohol and drugs, employment status and financial situation, local culture, immigration status, experiences seeking medical treatment, experiences seeking help from the police, and experiences with social service agencies. Victims demonstrated a preference for first telling their stories in a narrative fashion. After carefully listening to victims' narratives, questions about the help-seeking process were asked. The transcribed text data from the interviews was organized by key words and themes. One area explored in the semi-structured interviews was that of social support.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **The Role of Support as Cited by Interviewees**

Most victims and professionals noted that generally Brazilian immigrants who are victims of intimate partner violence abroad first reach out for support to family and friends. A professional in Japan noted, "Generally victims tell family members and close friends who are on their side and do something to help." Another psychologist in Japan noted that while victims in Japan hope for financial support from family, they generally look to friends for emotional support. An attorney in Germany noted, "The victims go to the police, or to Caritas which is a type of Catholic institution that helps with advice, and sometimes they go to the Consulate or attorneys that are on Facebook." In the United States, a crisis hotline worker noted out that Brazilian victims there usually reach out to family first. Victims in Portugal sought moral support from friends, and one victim in Portugal sought financial assistance from a family member.

### **Family Support**

A psychologist in Japan noted that Brazilian victims generally only seek help from their families when they live nearby, "When there is a relative nearby, a brother, or a mother, they go to these people... Generally the type of help they hope to receive from their family is financial." In this case, the proximity with a family member reduces the victim's isolation, encouraging her to escape from the violent situation. On the other hand, distance from family prevented some women from disclosing the abuse.

A professional in Japan noted that many women in Japan don't tell their families abroad about the abuse, "Possibly most don't say anything. They always justify it, 'I don't want to worry them. They are not going to be able to do anything because they aren't nearby, so it is better not to tell.' They believe that."

Some professionals, however, were not as positive about the influence of the Brazilian family, which is consistent with the fact that most victims receive mixed positive and negative reactions from their social networks<sup>16</sup>. A Brazilian attorney in Germany stated that she feels that the reason that many people in Brazil live in multi-generational homes and help each other is simply because they have no other options due to financial considerations given the country's economic condition. A psychologist in Portugal noted that he sees cases where family members in Brazil pressure migrants to return to Brazil, even when they want to stay abroad.

The case of a victim in Japan with family nearby illustrated how the physical presence of family can be helpful for victims, "Not having family in Japan is very difficult. I was lucky that I had my brother... [although] my brother distanced himself from me for a while because of my ex-husband." This also illustrates how the social network relation with the abuser can generate a possible negative reaction. She told of how she asked her mother to have her brother help her because he was initially reluctant to get involved. She also noted that because her mother was previously a victim, her brother, instead of confronting her husband, promptly provided her with a car, so she could move her things while he was at work and allowed her to stay at his home. Generational abuse can also influence the conceptualization and the threshold of violence.

Feerick and Haugaard (1999) noted that many studies indicate that witnessing marital violence as children is associated with higher rates of violence in their own relationships as adults<sup>27</sup>. Although much focus has been on the negative effects of domestic violence on a family across generations, this case illustrated how women and family members who have experienced domestic violence may actually have valuable experience about how to provide assistance so that a victim can leave. In another case, a victim in Portugal noted that since her

extended family had no experience with domestic violence, she and a family member did not know what to do when her aggressor apologized profusely after a first violent episode in Brazil and that she did not recognize signs of severe psychological abuse, which led her to have a child with the abuser and stay in a situation which became increasingly more abusive after she moved abroad with him.

One victim in Germany who still is with her abuser noted she hasn't told her parents, "My parents are already older, and they have numerous health problems...If I go back without a job, I will be a burden to my parents." She noted, "I went through a similar situation before in Brazil, and I went right home. But here...Here I don't have my parent's house to run to." Sampaio (2020) noted a similar phenomenon in the way Brazilian immigrants in the United States filter the information they provide aging family members at home, sheltering them from problems at work, problems with immigration documentation, or health problems<sup>28</sup>. In this study, several victims noted they did not tell family members at home of the abuse so as not to worry them. This scenario shows another layer of the help-seeking process experienced by migrants.

An attorney in Germany cited another reason some Brazilian may not tell their families about the abuse, Some women don't tell their family. It may be out of shame. The poorer ones might tell them, but more educated ones don't necessarily mention it... because a lot of times her family already condemned this marriage, so she doesn't want to reveal that she is in a vulnerable relationship. If a family is poor, it is very hard for them to help, because generally the biggest problem for a woman is getting on her feet financially. Even though there is public assistance in Germany, it isn't always enough. The Brazilian family may help out, but it is very difficult.

Although financial status is an issue especially for the poorest women, it is not as relevant for those with higher incomes. However, in spite of the fact that financial security can provide an easier way out of abusive relationships, it is much less relevant to the fear of family judgment. Two victims with higher educational levels, one abused in the United States and the other in Portugal, were especially reluctant to reach out to family members. A victim who suffered

severe sexual abuse in the United States noted,

*It was even difficult to tell my mother who lives in Portugal, but she noticed that I had changed and I ended up telling her, because I was in crisis. We were fighting a lot, and she didn't understand why I was so agitated.*

In a similar finding to that of Trotter and Allan (2009), the family's role in helping a victim of intimate partner violence leave an abuser can be either positive or negative<sup>16</sup>. Both positive and negative examples of family support were observed during this research. A crisis hotline worker in Florida, the United States, noted that the Brazilian victims she has worked with usually reach out to their family first and that the family's reaction is usually positive. She noted that the family usually tells them to come home or that they will send them the money to get away. She noted, however, that not all victims decide to return to Brazil, "They are split, especially if they have children, because they don't want to take the children out of school. They don't want to mess up the family routine, and this is the reason why a lot of them just stay."

A victim in Portugal noted that she endured isolation and severe abuse for months before reaching out to her family. She blames herself for not telling her family sooner, because her family was very supportive. She gave an example of the help her family provided, "I couldn't receive money when I was in the safehouse. I asked for my family in Brazil to help me. I hired an attorney here and my brother sent her money directly. My brother paid the attorney over 5,000 Euros." It is important to note that this victim has a higher educational level than other victims and also comes from a family with a better financial situation that many of the other victims. The financial support received from her family would seemingly validate Liang et al's finding that victims with higher acquisitive power have more options to leaving violent situations<sup>4</sup>; however, it is important to note that this victim remained in a violent situation for months before contacting her family in Brazil, possibly because she lived abroad, and that even victims from more privileged economic positions may not be able to use them to their advantage abroad. In spite of her high educational level and privileged financial background in her home country, this



victim spent months in a Portuguese shelter for domestic violence victims because of discrimination against immigrants and difficulty finding employment commensurate with her experience and securing housing. She is very close to her family and would prefer to return; however, she noted that the other Brazilian victims that she met, even in safehouses, did not want to return to Brazil.

She said that her family's support gives her strength to carry on. However, although her family is supportive, the restrictions imposed by the Hague Convention have prevented her from leaving Portugal with her child and keep her from having the full social support of her family. She notes that her mother is elderly and is not able to visit her in Portugal.

Although parental rights of both parties are important, this study demonstrated that the Hague Convention's provisions leave some immigrant mothers with the unconscionable choice of leaving a child behind with a parent who is abusive and moving to live near their own family in their country of origin or even visiting their family, because of worries of leaving the child with the aggressor. In some cases, this can result in a type of forced migration, as victims would have to abandon their children in order to return to their country of origin.

Some stories of lack of family support were particularly troubling. At least one victim in the study noted that her family did not allow her to return to their home, although she originally planned to return to Brazil. On the first time she left the United States after a visit to return to Brazil, her stepfather hit her when she went back. She returned to the United States after this incident. However, after suffering intimate partner violence upon her return to the US, she asked her family in Brazil to help her buy a ticket to go home. Although her step-father bought her a ticket online, he bought a ticket with a layover in Canada. She believes he did this because he knew she did not have a Canadian visa and would not be able to embark, since he did not want her to return to Brazil.

It is important to note that a stepfather is not a blood relative. Debowska *et al.*, (2020) cited studies indicating higher levels of family violence in blended families, noting that the reason for this trend can be

a convergence of multiple factors and stressors<sup>29</sup>. Likewise, results in this study indicated that it may be more difficult for victims with divorced parents to receive family support, although this trend must be confirmed in further studies designed with a larger number of participants from families with divorced parents. Findings from this study indicate that the Cinderella effect may also come into play when adult victims of domestic violence seek help from their parents.

Several victims reported either being mistreated by in-laws who lived with them or nearby or, at a minimum, not offered assistance. One victim in Germany told of how her ex-husband restrained physically restrained her so that her mother-in-law could hit her after she accidentally knocked over the Christmas tree and broke a few ornaments. This case demonstrates triangulation, as her abuser also tried to turn her child against her. No victims reported receiving help from in-laws. One German mother-in-law, who lived near the victim and her husband in a small town in Germany, sent a message to her son telling him that his wife would leave if he didn't stop drinking; however, no effective assistance was provided.

Several professionals noted that family members may urge or even pressure victims to return home. Most of the victims in the study, however, remained abroad, either out of choice or because they were prevented from leaving their country of residency because of child custody orders. The victims who expressed the most interest in returning to Brazil had been more satisfied with their employment in Brazil before moving abroad, although a larger study focused on identifying which victims choose to repatriate post domestic violence would be helpful to identify problems women face upon returning to their countries of origin. As noted by Fraga Neto (2020), inequality is extreme in Brazil, both in absolute number and also in regard to opportunities<sup>30</sup>. The results of this study indicated that victims with lower levels of schooling or economically disadvantaged backgrounds may be less interested in returning to Brazil, while victims who enjoyed a stable career and financial circumstances while in Brazil may prefer to return to Brazil. In addition, as we have seen, even victims who may want to return to Brazil may be unable to do so.

### Role of Friends

An attorney in Germany noted, "Not all women know how to seek help. Sometimes they talk to their friends. Although there are some women that don't speak German at all that are isolated in very small towns, and if she doesn't have good Internet and at least search for information on Facebook, she ends up not having any help." This observation is consistent with the findings of the present study, and even illustrates additional problems involving language barriers migrant women face when seeking help. At least two victims noted residing in very small towns in Germany and being isolated with the abuser and his family. These victims did not have close friends they could turn to for assistance, exemplifying the social isolation suffered by many migrant victims. Victims also noted how Germans are generally reserved and keep to themselves. A victim in Germany noted, "The neighbors listen, but they don't get involved unless they are close friends...It isn't common to be friends with neighbors, generally it is good morning, good afternoon and nothing else. It's not guaranteed that they would help, here everyone is on his own." This demonstrated the need to comprehend the social and cultural context not only of the victim but of the place in which the abuse occurs.

A crisis hotline worker in Florida noted that Brazilians in the United States make similar observations, "Adjusting to the culture may be difficult, depending on where in the United States you are. I've heard about how Americans are not as welcoming or warm as the Brazilians. I don't think so, but...the college kids will say, 'Nobody talks to each other, they are cold and individualistic, and in Brazil, they are much more of a group.'" Victims in the United States, Portugal, and German all reported feeling judged and being stereotyped by men because of their nationality. As articulated by Piscitelli (2008), Brazilian women are sexualized abroad. This discrimination can affect the reactions of members of the victim's social circles, increasing even more the isolation and insecurity they experience.

Psychologists in Japan and several victims noted that Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence frequently seek help from friends or colleagues, especially when they do not have family nearby. A psychologist in Japan discussed potential outcomes

when a victim seeks help from a friend, "If it is a woman who understands the severity, she may even encourage her to file a police report, or it can be a woman who says, 'Marriage is like that' and contributes to the victim keeping quiet." A victim in Japan noted that she confided in a friend about turning in her husband for intimate partner violence, "This person started to talk: 'look, go to the police, but don't file suit, just make a notification' 'but, how? It's going to happen again' 'no, but, look, I know him and he isn't a bad person' and so on 'if you file suit, it's going to make things hard for him because he just financed the house....and he'll lose his job, and that's going to injure him, and automatically that will injure your daughter.'" This effectively made the victim feel she would be at blame for ruining her abuser's life so she decided to seek help from the authorities and as such, she did not press charges. This mixed reaction, besides being a common experience, contradicts Trotter and Allen's (2009) findings that the majority of the victims see the help received from friends as "fairly successful".

Although victims may usually seek help from friends, many abusers engage in behavior that effectively severs a woman from the support networks she had before the relationship. Guruge and Humphreys (2009), for example, found that many abusive husbands systematically and purposefully isolated their wives by placing restrictions on their social contact or not giving them bus fare<sup>19</sup>. Several victims interviewed noted being isolated because of moves or having their social contact constantly monitored and controlled. A victim in Japan told of how her abuser got upset when she went to a Brazilian restaurant with a female friend and a friend of her aggressor showed up at the same restaurant. He accused her of planning to go to the restaurant with the male friend. Several other abusers also monitored victims' phone and Internet activities.

Not all friends are willing to help or able to offer the kind of help victims need. A victim in Portugal, who had originally sought help from the police only to be interrogated about her immigration status and who chose to leave the police station after the threat she would be reported to immigration, told of her requests for help from friends, "I asked for help from a friend. She said 'no, it's too much of a problem. I don't want you here in my house', so I spent 10 days

on the street hungry, sleeping on the park bench, all dirty." It is important to note that this victim did not know of any social services and was afraid of the police because of her previous experience. She told of how she sought help from a second friend, "She told me, 'Seek help because you can't stay here because of my children's dad...He'll kill us all.'" Although the friend could not or did not allow her to stay at her home, the friend accompanied her to a charity where she was eventually routed to a shelter and given legal assistance. As a result of her friend's supportive act of escorting her to the charity, the victim received the help she needed from service providers. A psychologist in Japan noted it is common for patients to be referred to her by friends. She noted she often hears, "I told my friend, and she thought I needed to talk to a psychologist and gave me your contact information." This may also be an effective type of assistance that can easily be provided by friends and help these victims explore the options available to them in case they decide to take action. A victim in Portugal noted that although she has many Portuguese friends and is well assimilated, it didn't help her when she needed assistance because of intimate partner violence. Another victim in Portugal noted that several of her friends knew but didn't do anything, "When they see this type of aggression, they distance themselves from you because they don't want to be involved...You are killed inside your house. They know, but they don't have the courage to call the police to say anything. No one gets involved. No one knows anything." A victim in Germany noted that although her own friends did not help her, "Some Germans who are really friends help you out. They look for help on the Internet, for organizations and help centers, and motivate you to file a complaint." Both of the victims interviewed in the United States were very recent immigrants without close friendships in the areas in which they were living. This may indicate that it is difficult for Brazilian immigrants to make local friends there or may only be a result of their recent moves. Larger scale studies in specific geographic regions would be helpful in shedding light on the availability of friendship as a support network and cultural differences in the type of support provided by friends.

Even friends who want to help victims may face practical limitations. A psychologist in Japan noted that victims may ask friends to go with them as a

translator to the doctor or to report the abuse, "A friend may speak everyday Japanese, but if you go to a lawyer or a doctor, it is a little harder to find someone who knows these specific terms." Another psychologist in Japan noted that most victims need the help of friends to secure housing after separation, "I think that one of the biggest difficulties in finding homes for domestic violence victims is needing a guarantor, because sometimes people don't have family members." She noted that even friends who might be willing to help are sometimes unable to do so, because women in Japan have lower salaries than men.

In addition, victims who have undergone trauma may not feel safe at friends' homes. A victim in the United States told of seeking help from an acquaintance, "After another episode, I was really scared, and I managed to get in contact with a Brazilian who was married to an American. I stayed in their house for one night, but I was in panic, and I wasn't able to trust anyone."

Brazilian victims abroad noted being particularly unsuccessful at requests for help from mutual friends. A victim in Portugal stated, "When I asked a friend of my abuser to be my witness in court because she had witnessed a verbal discussion, she said 'you must have deserved to be beaten.'" Another victim in Portugal noted that a friend of her husband's, who was also a police officer, witnessed physical violence against her and didn't do anything to stop her abuser. A victim in Germany pointed out how mutual friends treated her as though she was making up the story of abuse, and a victim in Japan noted how a mutual friend discouraged her from seeking from the police. This negative reaction can be explained by the general sexism that permeates most societies that see intimate partner violence as a private matter instead of as a public matter. It can also be connected with the triangulation process of abuse: 1) the abuser can make displays of affection that 2) coexist with violent episodes, while 3) also reaching out to friends and family members in order to convince them to take his side on the dispute<sup>17</sup>.

At least one victim in Japan noted she was told not to spread the word about available services and also noted that friends may give faulty information,

*You know what I think, sometimes people go through domestic violence and they don't get information directly from townhall. They get information from third parties and these third parties talk about things even they don't know about. When I was in the situation, it happened to me, but I went to the townhall and at townhall they told me everything...about assistance and even gave me food. But the translator said not to tell anyone because there are a lot of people that take advantage and that some people, even not being victims of domestic violence, ask for help with food here at the townhall.*

As we have seen from examples of effective and ineffective assistance given by friends, even friends who are well-intentioned may not know how to help victims of intimate partner violence. Instead of merely raising awareness about the issue of intimate partner violence, the possibility of increasing public awareness campaigns about how friends can help victims, similar to those on how to help friends and family members with depression, should be evaluated.

#### **Alternatives to Support from Family and Friends Support Groups as an Alternative or Supplement to Support from Family and Friends**

Previous research has indicated that for certain populations, support groups for victims of intimate partner violence may be an effective addition to or substitute for support from family or friends. Morales-Campos (2009) found that support groups may create "a fictive kin group with other group members" for immigrant women who are physically distanced from family members in their home country or isolated by their abusers<sup>31</sup>.

However, none of the victims interviewed expressed an interest in participating in such groups, and professionals noted that they were unable to form online groups of Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence. This finding was unexpected, as some victims make public posts in Facebook groups about their situations. Perhaps Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence abroad are able to open up on a shallow level, but do not wish to create more intimate relationships with other women who know that they are victims of abuse. Canterino *et al.* (1999) found that victims of intimate partner

violence were more likely to report domestic violence in a questionnaire than during directed interviews<sup>32</sup>. Likewise, victims of intimate partner violence may feel more comfortable opening up online, to people they will not meet in person<sup>32</sup>.

Employment or government assistance as alternatives to family support for immigrant victims. Victims of intimate partner violence in their home countries or who have immigrated as part of a larger family group are sometimes able to stay with relatives, at least temporarily, if they decide to leave aggressors. When they are unable to stay with relatives, which is often the case, victims abroad sometimes use the income from their jobs or government assistance as a substitute for family support. The victims interviewed generally showed pride in their work and displayed independence. Independence is likely a characteristic of the Brazilian woman who moves abroad on her own. Due to this independence, Brazilian women who go abroad may be even more reluctant to seek help from friends and family members and prefer to rely on their own income and resources to take action when faced with intimate partner violence.

One victim who was ashamed to tell her family of the abuse she suffered in Germany told of the positive experience she had with Germany's Job Center,

*In the beginning, I was sent for interviews for jobs I didn't want to do. I told them I wanted to do vocational training, but they didn't want to pay. They eventually agreed. I did the vocational training to become a caregiver to the elderly, and when I finished, I got a job on my own. When I told them I didn't need them anymore, they were surprised, because a lot of people want to live at the Job Center's expense...They paid for my trips to job interviews, including lodging (of course they had to be low cost) and my move to another state and helped me until I got my paycheck. There were some months when I didn't make a lot, and they gave me additional support...They help with rent and food expenses until it is guaranteed that your salary is enough for you and your family.*

Although she notes lingering emotional consequences of the intimate partner violence she experienced, she expressed pride in her training and

finding a job independently. She partially credited her success to the fact that she speaks German and to the career training she received, which has helped her to obtain a certain level of economic stability for her and her children.

She told of how her job helped her transition to life as the head of household,

*When I started to work, I saved more than half of my salary in my oldest son's account (it was the only account he didn't have access to). One day I went on my own to an attorney. He told me to keep doing what I was doing, rent an apartment without saying anything, and put it only my name and my children's names on the contract. On my first day of vacation, I left in the morning and bought new furniture, paid the security deposit and rent, and filed for divorce. My ex-husband was shocked.*

This victim did not receive assistance from friends or family members. Instead, she relied on her job and income as a substitute for a support network. Instead of seeking advice from friends, she secretly consulted with an attorney and was able to plan and execute her exit from the home.

Her experience contrasts with another victim's experience at the JobCenter,

*The Job Center paid for my German course, but since I didn't pass, I wasn't eligible for any job. Without German, I can't even apply for blue collar jobs... The employees at the Job Center treat us like crap. They don't even pay attention to what we say. They treat us like a statistic. They just want us out of there. I think they don't believe that I really wanted to work. Not just wanted, I want to.*

Much of this victim's difficulty is due to the fact that she is struggling to pass the B1 level of German proficiency and does not qualify for employment. She noted that the instructor for her German course was disinterested in students' success and was often late to teach the class and allowed the students to leave early. Because she is unable to find work since she doesn't speak German, she has chosen to stay with her abuser for now. Reina and Lohman cited the lack of language skills to successfully find work in their host country as a reason immigrant victims may

have trouble addressing intimate partner violence<sup>20</sup>. Interestingly, although few Brazilians in Japan have a good command of the Japanese language, Brazilians in Japan do not seem to be expected to learn Japanese and are able to find work without mastery of the language. In Germany, however, even when they are married to a German national, Brazilians are expected to demonstrate a certain mastery of the language in order to find any job, even as cleaners or in other industries which do not require high levels of formal education. In addition, in Portugal, in spite of sharing a common language, victims reported significant difficulty securing stable employment. Language barriers and financial independence can be intertwined in how Brazilian migrant women experience the help-seeking process after the abuse; however, the weight of variables differs depending on the place they live abroad.

One victim in Japan returned to Brazil while the research was being conducted. She noted that it was difficult for her to get by as a single mother in Japan with two small children, juggling work and childcare responsibilities. She was fortunate to be allowed to return to Brazil, although the children's father stayed in Japan. She also was able to stay at a friend's home temporarily until she returned to Brazil. This may be in part due to the lower cost of housing in Japan as compared to that in some other regions surveyed. Another victim in Japan received help from a non-governmental organization (NGO) when she fled violence at home after having stayed in a public shelter on a previous occasion and returning to her aggressor. She noted that the NGO's help was fundamental in helping her transition to life on her own with her children. In addition, because she is a mother of a child with special needs, she receives certain government benefits and other help from friends and her church.

One victim in the United States is working to pay her living expenses there because her family would not allow her to return to their home in Brazil, while the other victim is working in Brazil at the same steady job she had before suffering the abuse. Of the victims interviewed, the victims in Portugal reported facing the most economic difficulty. One victim in Portugal is still unable to work because of the abuse and depends on a charity for help with her rent and a soup kitchen for food. Yet another victim works

side jobs on the weekend in addition to a full-time job during the week in order to make ends meet, in spite of having a graduate degree in Brazil. The Hague Convention has prevented her from returning to Brazil with her son, although she noted having a much better job offer there.

### **Conclusion**

Family support is not always available to Brazilian victims abroad. Women whose parents are older or have health conditions may be at increased risk for finding themselves trapped in abusive relationships, as consideration for their parents may make them especially reluctant to ask for help. Both victims and professionals noted that often Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence abroad often do not tell their family at home about the abuse. This may be a way of caring for relatives who are judged to be incapable of providing assistance. At least one Brazilian family did not allow its adult daughter to return home. Other Brazilian victims did not seek help from their families out of shame.

Although less than perfect, in the cases studied support from the family members of Brazilian victims was more effective than support from friends. Few victims interviewed reported significant support from friends. One positive example of support from friends was that of a victim in Japan who was allowed to stay temporarily at a close friend's home while she prepared to return to Brazil. Another example of effective support provided from a friend was that of a former victim who told another victim about services provided for victims of intimate partner violence and went with her to a charity in Portugal. Surprisingly, however, support networks were not significantly more available to Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence in Portugal, in spite of the common language of the countries.

It is important to contrast the case of the victim who stayed at a friend's home in Japan with that of a victim in the United States whose acquaintance agreed to let her stay at her home. In that case, the acquaintance was not a close friend, and the victim was traumatized because of the abuse and unable to trust her. This may indicate that when a woman is a more recent immigrant and does not have established friendships, she may return to her home

with the abuser instead of staying at the home of someone she doesn't know particularly well. A friend might be able to help her more by pointing her in the direction of charities and possibly accompanying her to find out about services available. Other victims told of friends who discouraged them from separating, told them they were lying, or even told them they deserved the abuse.

Although most victims interviewed worked, being employed, of and by itself, was not necessarily enough to immediately pay for housing on their own and some time (or assistance from a family member or friend) was needed as a buffer to prepare resources for deposits and initial moving expenses. Other victims who wanted to work were unable to do so. One victim in Portugal who suffers from trauma associated with the violence noted that she is still unable to work. Another victim in Germany lives in a rural area with little employment and does not have sufficient fluency in the German language to succeed in finding employment there. Nonetheless, some examples of income from employment were seen as effective alternatives to support from friends and family, especially when combined with planning, such as having a preliminary consultation with an attorney. Findings from this study indicated that migrant women need more information about institutions which can substitute or supplement informal social support networks. In Germany, specifically, victims need help meeting the language requirements to obtain permanent residency. This might be possible through the development of courses designed specifically for victims of intimate partner violence, in shelters, for example. In addition, awareness campaigns could help families and friends provide appropriate assistance to victims. It is important to note that the victims who sought help directly from professionals, such as attorneys specialized in family law or psychologists who work with victims, instead of relying on information from friends or family members, were able to make plans of action, which may aid in successful transitions. As such, when they first seek help from informal support networks, victims should be encouraged to consult with professionals, regardless of whether they plan to leave the abuser, in order to gain knowledge about their legal rights and take appropriate action.

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