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Exploring gender norms, agency and intimate partner violence among displaced Colombian women: A qualitative assessment

Michelle E. Hynes**, Claire E. Sterka, Monique Hennink, Shilpa Patel, Lara DePadilla and Kathryn M. Yount

°Department of Behavioral Sciences and Health Education, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA; °Hubert Department of Global Health, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA; °Department of Sociology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA

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Women displaced by conflict are often exposed to many factors associated with a risk of intimate partner violence (IPV) such as high levels of community violence and the breakdown of social support systems. Previous research found that Colombian women perceived IPV to increase after displacement. This study explored how the experience of displacement altered gendered roles in ways that influenced the risk of IPV. Thirty-three qualitative interviews were conducted with displaced partnered Colombian women. Women disclosed that couples often held patriarchal gender norms; however, the roles of each partner necessitated by conditions of displacement were often in conflict with these norms. Men’s underemployment and women’s employment outside the home were viewed as gender transgressive within some partnerships and increased relationship conflict. Economic resources intended to empower displaced women, notably women’s earnings and home ownership, had unintended negative consequences for women’s agency. These consequences included a corresponding decrease in partner financial contributions and reduced mobility. Women’s ability to obtain support or leave violent relationships was hindered by interpersonal, social and structural barriers. For women to have agency to leave violent relationships, power relationships at all levels from the interpersonal to societal must be recognised and addressed.

Keywords: intimate partner violence; gender; displacement; Colombia; agency

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a global problem with physical and mental health consequences (Campbell et al., 2002; Campbell, 2002; Devries et al., 2013; Jina & Thomas, 2013). A recent global study estimated that 30% of women have experienced physical or sexual IPV in their lifetime, with similar rates of 29.5% in central Latin America (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2013). Moreover, estimates are almost certainly under-reported, given the stigma around IPV globally.

Conflict-related displacement is an understudied risk factor for IPV. Current data measuring IPV within conflict settings are problematic, with studies often relying on non-probability samples or using different definitions and methodologies, making comparisons difficult (Stark & Ager, 2011). The available evidence suggests, however, that

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*Corresponding author. Email: mhynes@cdc.gov
internally displaced women are at particular risk for violence in the home and wider community (Alzate, 2008; Wirtz et al., 2014). Circumstances such as the breakdown of formal protective systems, fractured social support structures and increased economic instability may contribute to increased violence within relationships and communities (Ward, 2002).

Feminist theories seek to explain IPV through the interaction of gender norms, power and patriarchy such that gender construct is used to subordinate and discriminate against women (Gage & Hutchinson, 2006). These theories hold that economic power held by men is closely tied to ideas of masculinity, and that a man who holds patriarchal gender norms may feel threatened when the roles of either partner fail to conform to those norms and react with violence (Atkinson, Greenstein, & Lang, 2005). This issue is particularly salient in displaced communities where altered living conditions may produce rapid changes in the roles of men and women but gender norms remain patriarchal (El-Bushra & Sahl, 2005; Falb et al., 2014). New roles for women may provide new or increased access to resources and opportunities and thus increased empowerment and agency. Kabeer (2005) describes empowerment as one’s ability to make choices, while agency is the ability to act on those choices even when power relationships may be in direct opposition to those choices. Whether the existence of these resources and opportunities translates into women’s empowerment and agency depends largely on a complex interplay of gender norms on individual and societal levels, community context and the structural nature of those opportunities (Boudet, Petesch, & Turk, 2013).

IPV prevention initiatives often seek to improve access to social, educational and economic resources in order to empower women and increase their agency to avoid or leave violent relationships (Gage & Hutchinson, 2006). However, the empirical findings of studies examining the link between IPV and resources in intimate relationships is mixed, particularly with regard to women’s labour force participation (Salway, Jesmin, & Rahman, 2005; Villarreal, 2007; Vyas & Watts, 2009; Yllo, 2005; Yount, 2005).

**Colombian context**

There are approximately four million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Colombia, the second largest IDP population in the world after Syria (UNHCR, 2014). Decades of conflict between state, paramilitary and guerrilla groups have driven largely rural, poorly educated people from agricultural areas into urban areas. Colombian IDPs are disproportionately Afro-Colombians and indigenous groups who faced social and economic marginalisation even before displacement (Economic Commission for Latin America [ECLAC], 2009; Meertens, 2010). IDPs in Colombia are often exposed to many factors associated with a risk of IPV. IDPs are exposed to high levels of community violence, lived in poor sanitary conditions, experienced familial breakdowns, have little access to social services and health care, and are more likely to live in poverty than non-displaced populations (Caceres, Izquierdo, Mantilla, Jara, & Velandia, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2012). Displaced women may work outside the home more frequently than women in the general population due to the lack of steady employment for their partners, which may be viewed as transgressive of expected gender norms and increase risk of IPV (Calderón, Gáfaro, & Ibáñez, 2011). Levels of IPV against displaced women are high and may increase after displacement (Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium, 2003). One study found over 50% of displaced women had suffered physical abuse from their spouse versus 20% of non-displaced women (Alzate, 2008). Rates of prior year IPV among displaced women in another study were between 19% and 24% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006; Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas, 2005). Even when
services are available, stigma, shame, discrimination and a lack of trust in the legal system may all be barriers to receiving help (OMCT, 2003; Wirtz et al., 2014).

This research was part of a larger study exploring gender norms, women’s empowerment and IPV in Colombia and was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Emory University. In this paper, we explore, through Colombian women’s voices, the complex relationships within a displaced community context, gender norms held by men and women, men’s and women’s employment, and how these elements contribute to IPV and women’s agency to seek help or leave abusive relationships.

Methods

Study setting

Participants were recruited from a displaced community of about 100 households on the outskirts of Cartagena, Colombia. The community was established in 2006 by a local human rights organisation, Liga de Mujeres Desplazadas (LMD) seeking to provide better living conditions for displaced women and their families. LMD works closely with the community on a variety of projects, addressing issues of human rights, security and violence prevention, and also provides education and job training opportunities. Community women participated in the building of their homes and hold sole ownership. As such, husbands or common-law partners have no legal rights to the property; a highly unusual situation for Colombia.

Training and recruitment

Two women working with LMD who had prior research experience and expertise on IPV were selected to act as both recruiters and interviewers. Training was held over the course of 10 days and continued throughout the data collection period. Training consisted of technical practice of qualitative interviewing techniques as well as safety and ethics using the guidelines established by the World Health Organization (2007).

Women were eligible to participate in the study if they were displaced, currently living with a partner or husband, between 18 and 49 years of age, were living in the target community, Spanish speaking and able to get to the interview location. Women were invited to participate through the LMD using a ‘gatekeeper’ strategy in which potential participants were identified based on personal knowledge of community members (World Health Organization, 2007). Potential participants were approached by the recruiters and given a brief general description of the project. If women agreed to participate, they were read, in private, a detailed description of the research project, risks and benefits of participating, confidentiality procedures and contact information for the research team. Participants were consented in front of a witness (who was not present for the details shared with the participant) and the interview was then scheduled at the convenience of the participant, usually within 1–2 days. Consent information was reviewed again with the participant at the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted in private at the community centre and audio-recorded. Participants were given the equivalent of about US$10 as compensation for their time.

Data collection and analysis

The 33 women who participated in this study were interviewed in Spanish using face-to-face semi-structured interview guides between May and June 2010. Interview guides
contained questions on pre- and post-displacement living conditions, gender norms, economic arrangements between partners and IPV. Interviews lasted on average one hour and were auto-recorded. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim on a rolling basis after data collection began and translated from Spanish to English. Subsets of interviews were checked periodically to ensure correct transcriptions and translations. Preliminary analyses of data during the collection period sought salient terms and emergent themes from the interviews to inform questions for subsequent interviews.

Translated interviews were entered into MAXQDA 10 (VERBI Software, 1989–2010) to facilitate data coding and analysis. The analysis was guided by modified grounded theory techniques in which systematic analysis of textual data is used to develop theory (Leonard & McAdam, 2001). Textual analysis was conducted using open coding to develop inductive themes from the data resulting in the development of an initial list of reoccurring subject areas. Preliminary labels were given to each theme to develop a filing system. Once the initial coding scheme was finalised, a subset of transcripts was coded by the principal investigator and an independent coder to determine inter-coder reliability. Inconsistencies were discussed until discrepancies were resolved and adjustments were made to the codebook as needed. Next, transcripts were coded and thick descriptions were developed to help delineate how domains and codes were related to each other. New codes were incorporated in the codebook and a second subset of interviews was coded. A final codebook was developed following this final round of reliability testing.

Data were organised into three main themes related to women’s experiences of IPV: (1) contextual circumstances in which women and their partners currently live, (2) women’s perceptions of gender normative behaviours for men and women and (3) economic conditions – specifically men’s unemployment and women’s employment and other resources. These three themes reflect the complex interaction of societal, community, interpersonal and personal factors on IPV.

Results

Sample characteristics

Demographic characteristics of the 33 women interviewed are listed in Table 1. Participants had been displaced for an average of 10 years. Women were of an average age of 35 years and their partners were of an average age of 40. About 85% of women were in ‘free unions’, or common-law partnerships and 57% of women were with the same partner as before displacement. Participants had an average of three children living at home and about 57% of women had children at home from a previous relationship. The majority of women (76%) and their partners (70%) had a secondary education or less. Only four women were not working for remuneration in or outside the home. Working women often had several income-generating activities. The majority of women (88%) had worked in the prior month, either from home (21%), at an outside location (39%) or both (27%). Fifteen participants (45%) reported IPV by their current partner.

Contextual circumstances

Living conditions in the community were perceived as an improvement from the conditions women lived in immediately following displacement. Some women upon displacement were able to find housing with a relative or in-law, but often in crowded conditions that put additional stress on their relationships. Others were forced to move from place to place when they were unable to pay rent. The formation of the community in 2006 brought
about many benefits to displaced women, including sole ownership of a home. However, the community was somewhat isolated by distance and the cost of transportation to Cartagena and other nearby towns, which led to economic strain in order to reach work, schools and other services not available in the community. The transition from rural agricultural life to a cash-based economy was particularly salient for many. Women most often discussed the self-sufficiency of their lives pre-displacement. Food, water and wood had been readily available and at no cost. In contrast, life in displacement presented many additional expenses. Food, utilities and transportation for work and school outside the community were some of the expenses frequently mentioned.

Because of the unique conditions of its formation, the community was largely viewed by women as a community by and for women. This perception of a women’s community was felt to be empowering by some, allowing for greater protection against IPV. However, as one woman noted, men may feel marginalised and this may result in compensating with violence to assert control:

It is kind of difficult for a man to mistreat a woman and women won’t let men mistreat them, because this is a women’s community, not men’s … [M]y partner feels badly since he cannot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (N=33).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% (Range)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner’s age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years displaced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children living at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced IPV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same partner as pre-displacement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None–primary (0–5 years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary (6–9 years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>High school or greater (10+ years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner’s education</td>
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<td>None–primary (0–5 years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary (6–9 years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>High school or greater (10+ years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has children from a previous relationship at home</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work from home only</td>
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<td>Work outside of home only</td>
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<td>Work from home and outside of home</td>
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do what he wants, as this is a community of women only. (Age 18, partnered, displaced 11 years, IPV)

Women more often sought family members, when available, than other community members for support and advice. Women felt that support came from specific individuals more than an overall feeling of support and cohesion within the community. Some felt the lack of support and cohesion was due to the diversity of places community members had originated from. Others felt that the economic hardships shared by everyone in the community prevented people from helping others:

If we cannot provide food to our children and they keep crying due to this situation, we cannot be happy, but we look for a way to solve such a situation like going to our neighbors, but in the end they are facing the same situation and cannot help us. (Age 46, partnered, displaced for 11 years, IPV)

Trauma from experiencing or witnessing violence during the events which led to displacement, or during the displacement itself made some distrustful of others or hampered their ability to interact with others. One woman spoke of her reasons for isolating herself in the community:

[Pre-displacement] I could go out without being afraid of anything, along with the people I trust, but nowadays, I cannot go out in peace. I am always thinking that something bad is going to happen to me [like] under those circumstances in which I displaced. (Age 18, partnered, displaced for 11 years, IPV)

**Women’s perceptions of gender normative behaviours**

Gender norms in Colombia are patriarchal where masculinities are linked to ideas of men who are dominant, aggressive, and the provider and protector of the family (Flake & Forste, 2006). Women, in contrast, are expected to be submissive and responsible for domestic duties and family (OMCT, 2003). Women in the study were asked to reflect on their own perceptions of gender normative behaviours and also how they believed men viewed gender normative behaviours.

When women discussed their perceptions of men’s desired roles for women, many mentioned gender norms around care of the household and partner, such as having the house clean and organised, having dinner ready on time, faithfulness in the relationship and cheerfulness. Women frequently mentioned that men did not like women going outside the house, both with regard to their partner and for men in general. A woman outside the house represented a transgression in several ways for men; she was neglectful of her duties to the house and family, she was gossiping to neighbours and she was potentially being unfaithful. Women attributed this to men’s desire to control women:

They are the kind of men who like to see their wives at home, locked between the four walls. They like when [wives] do not go out to anywhere, that we stay there like we’re dead, without having the chance to go out to the corner, but they do have the chance to go out to any place that they want. They want us to have a lot of children, to make the food for them, to wash their clothes. It is like being their slaves, not to be free, or not to get ahead in life. (Age 41, partnered, displaced for 12 years, IPV)

Another woman spoke of the double standards men held with regard to women’s fidelity:
They want their women to be serious, not to have any lovers or affairs. That is exactly what they like and want; they do not want to be cheated on, they can cheat on us, but we cannot cheat on them. (Age 34, partnered, displaced for 9 years, no IPV)

Women frequently mentioned desired male gender normative behaviours in economic terms, such as providing family financial support, although male transgressive behaviours were also frequently mentioned in economic terms. However, women also spoke of respect, love and family involvement as desired attributes of partners. One woman felt that women should have greater input in couple’s decision-making processes, although she still assumed that the men would have the final say:

… [T]here should be no differences in terms of the making of decisions, if they are going to make a decision, they should take women into account before coming up with a final decision; they should also appreciate women and show respect to their opinions. (Age 18, partnered, displaced 11 years, IPV)

Another felt burdened by her husband’s lack of participation in household decision-making and wished that he would take a more traditional role as the head of the household:

… I would like him to be a more decisive man somehow… not to be stuck, to be a trouble-shooter, to have more prompt initiative. I would like him to change in that aspect, because sometimes I am the one who has to make the decisions to get out of trouble, because he stays still there, without any initiative, he only reacts after a long while, when things have happened or advanced a lot, so he does not make himself feel what he really is – the head of the family. (Age 38, married, displaced 10 years, no IPV)

Women were asked to describe what constituted mistreatment by an intimate partner. Virtually all women described mistreatment in terms of physical and verbal acts of violence, with some mentioning forced sexual relations with a partner as mistreatment. Women’s perceptions of severity varied with the type of mistreatment. Verbal mistreatment was defined as more severe than physical mistreatment by a number of women. Some women felt that IPV was permissible under certain conditions:

He treats me right, providing that I do not give him any reasons; he is a good partner. (M42, age 48, partnered, displaced for 7 years, no IPV)

Economic mistreatment was frequently mentioned as co-occurring with other types of mistreatment and was linked to gender expectations of men to provide for the family. Extramarital relationships were perceived as both emotional abuse and economic abuse by using family financial resources on another person. One woman described mistreatment by male partners as a combination of verbal, physical and economic abuse:

… when they arrive home all drunk and they start mistreating us with some bad words or they start beating us… or not having what we need in that moment, knowing that we do not work; they are not fulfilling our needs. (Age 41, partnered, displaced 12 years, IPV)

**Economic conditions**

Women, regardless of whether they experienced IPV, linked conflict in relationships to men’s lack of employment, either directly or indirectly. Women felt that men, stressed by...
the lack of work, reacted in a number of negative ways, including withdrawal, alcohol, gambling and IPV. Women spoke of men’s feelings of failure and low self-worth when unable to find enough work to support the family. Even when men were working, the insufficiency of men’s financial contributions contributed to conflict in relationships:

Sometimes he says that he doesn’t know what I do with what I make a month. And I tell him that he doesn’t notice that we don’t have curtains and that I have to buy them, and that also he makes more money than I do, and he just gives me the money for the food and that sometimes I have to pay for the public service bills. So sometimes we end up having an argument because of that. I tell him that he is the man and that he has to be in charge of all of the expenses from the house, and that if I made the money that he makes, I would always pay the public service bills and that I would not let anybody cut those services. (Age 41, partnered, displaced 12 years, IPV)

While men felt that they had failed to meet gender norm expectations of the family provider, women also pressured their partners to fulfill their role as economic providers. Various reasons were given for men’s inability to provide adequately for the family; some were factors within the partners control while others were not. One woman who was experiencing IPV had to take care of most of the household expenses because of her partner’s illness. Despite her partner’s illness she nonetheless felt that he was failing to fulfill his role as the financial supporter and that he was responsible for the couple’s emotional and financial problems:

Yes, the relationship between us currently is very bad; wrong, wrong in every way. First of all, I think that everything I am living is his fault. Second, because of his sickness … it shouldn’t be like that, but that is what I think and feel – in part that he isn’t a normal man. He does work one or two hours because his health doesn’t permit it … and all that stuff has deteriorated our life as a couple. (Age 45, partnered, displaced 9 years, IPV)

Virtually all women had done something to earn money in the prior month. Of the four women who did not, three had been working in the recent past and one planned to work in the near future. Most women were doing more than one activity to earn income either from home, away from home or both. Only seven women were working exclusively from home, nine had income-generating activities both at home and outside the home, and 13 worked outside the home. Of the 22 women working outside the home, 12 were working outside the community as maids. A few women were able to find work inside the community working in small shops or at the children’s center. Income-generating activities at home consisted of taking in laundry and ironing, selling food and drinks from a shop attached to the home, or providing beauty services. For many women, working was not a choice but an economic necessity given the intermittent nature of employment for both men and women. However, a few women felt empowered by their increased contribution to the family:

I have learned so much, the truth is, I’ve learned a lot – to handle the things, or to work, to depend on me, to help my husband, to help my children. (Age 40, married, displaced 7 years, no IPV)

Working women were expected by men to conduct these activities in addition to their traditional duties in the home and with family. Women working outside the home were most at risk for transgressing gender expectations of taking care of the home and family. Most women framed their employment as an extension of their duties to support their husband, despite transgressing expectations of staying home to take care of the home and family:
Well, I think he should feel … that he is being supported, that if she goes out to work … if she leaves the house, the children alone, it’s not because she is in the streets but because she is helping economically to help their family move forward. (Age 30, partnered, displaced 7 years, no IPV)

One woman viewed women’s employment as an adoption of the patriarchal male role, although she justified it in terms of conforming to a woman’s role as a supportive partner:

If the man is not working at the moment, she can take the food home, like taking the man’s place, to contribute to the … supply the food for them. When the men are working, women love them, but they should love them in good and bad times, being alert, taking good care of the house and the family. (Age 38, married, displaced 10 years, no IPV)

With women’s work framed in a gender normative way, and with patriarchal roles still maintained, women sought to avoid conflict with partners:

Because he knows I am just helping … and he knows I don’t work every day so I don’t leave the house unattended. (D48, age 23, partnership status unknown, displaced for 11 years, no IPV)

Others women felt that women’s work was threatening to men and represented a loss in their authority. Women working outside the home were particularly problematic for men:

My husband does not like that I work outside home and then he fights with me; we drew blood. I left to another place [temporarily]. Now we fight a lot lately. (Age 29, partnered, displaced for 8 years, IPV)

Most working women had cost-sharing strategies with their partners. Strategies including assigning specific expenses to each partner or alternating responsibility for the bills as each partner had employment. However, as women made economic contributions to the household, some men seemed to feel less responsibility to provide for the family and withdrew financial support, even during periods in which the women had no work:

I have to ask him for some money, because I am not working, so I have to ask him, and he replies that I don’t have the right to ask him for anything, and asks me what I do with the money I earn, and trouble shows up between us. (Age 18, partnered, displaced for 11 years, IPV)

There was no indication from the women interviewed that they had increased decision-making power within the household as a result of their work. This may have been due in part to the fact that men, when they did have work, earned substantially more than women. Some men used their greater earning power to reinforce discriminatory gender norms of male dominance. A woman describes how, despite her contributing money towards the household:

… [He] says that he is the one that works, the one that gives money, and he is the one that is in charge. (Age 38, partnered, displaced for 10 years, IPV)

Many women mentioned positive aspects of home ownership, such as not having to pay rent, not having to live with extended family, better security with the sturdiness of the building or the location of the neighbourhood and being able to leave a legacy to their
children. However, for some women the economic responsibilities that came with home ownership outweighed the advantages:

Even though it is our own house, we feel as if the house is not our own property, like we are living in a rented house, because we have to pay a lot of money for the public service bills. (Age 21, married, displaced 10 for years, no IPV)

Having a fixed residence restricted employment options to the local area, which could create conflict in couples where the partner desired to look elsewhere for employment. One woman describes the conflict that arose when her husband wanted to sell the house and move to another location with greater employment opportunities:

My husband wanted to sell the house to move to [another town] and [a relative] advised me not to sell my house, not to leave my sons without a place to live. Then my husband and I had a very strong argument. (Age 28, married, displaced for 7 years, no IPV)

Women’s home ownership may have also led men to feel less responsibility for the household. One woman spoke of her partner’s verbal abuse when she requested help with the upkeep of the house, even when the upkeep involved male gender normative tasks:

We have many years together and I insist that he help me with the house, to finish the yard, fix the doors, but he doesn’t pay any attention to me. I told him that if he doesn’t help me I’d leave him because … I don’t like for him to insult me in front of the children, so then he gets angrier and he starts insulting me. (Age 47, partnered, displaced for 4 years, IPV)

Housing could also hinder a woman’s ability to separate from an abusive partner. A woman described how her violent partner continued to be unfaithful, but refused to leave:

He knows the comfort he has here. If he goes with another woman … he has to pay the washing, food, rent and to maintain her, and in addition … he would have to send alimony to my children. He hasn’t stopped disrespecting [me]; [women] call him and he answers at whatever hour. He thinks he has more right to the house … if I throw him out he will burn it. (Age 38, partnered, displaced 10 years, IPV)

Women’s agency to deal with IPV was also constrained by a legal system that did little to help. One woman described how she was forced to leave her home after calling the police on an abusive partner:

I told the police that if he didn’t go, I would go. Well, they told me to get what I was going to get and leave … I called my friend to go to my house so the little I had he wouldn’t steal … he would say he wasn’t leaving; that if he was going to die he was going to die in the house. (Age 45, partnered, displaced for 9 years, IPV)

Although women legally owned the homes, some men still felt that they had greater rights to the property as males.

Discussion
Our findings highlight how the complex relationships between community context, patriarchal gender norms, and the ways in which men and women’s employment failed to conform to those norms affect the quality of intimate relationships. Conditions of displacement...
exacerbate interpersonal conflict, including IPV (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Wirtz et al., 2014). Changes in gender norms lag behind the rapid change of the roles of displaced men and women. These role changes are largely imposed rather than aspired to, which may create even more of a backlash when they are perceived to transgress gender norms. Barriteau argues that power and agency derive from both material resources and ideological gender norms (2006). Both must be addressed in order to increase women’s agency.

Gender normative roles of provider and family authority remain male domains. Women were still expected to remain at home and take care of the family and women who worked outside the home were expected to do so without affecting their traditional duties. Changes in the roles of women may be even more threatening to men who feel disempowered by their own lack of ability to fulfil their prescribed role of provider, a role closely tied to constructs of masculinity. The view that the community was a ‘women’s community’ where women owned the homes may have contributed to some men’s feelings of disempowerment. Adding to the stressors in relationships are trauma from conflict and displacement, weak social support, structural systems which reinforce unequal gender norms and discrimination due to class, group and displacement status. All these elements may counteract gains in women’s empowerment and agency.

As with many other displaced populations, Colombian IDPs come from rural areas with low levels of education. IDP women may be better placed than men to find employment in an urban setting, particularly in the informal sector as domestic workers. The disempowerment of displaced men through the loss of one of the definitions of masculinity – of provider – can lead to greater negative reactions towards women who are themselves taking on transgressive roles by earning income, particularly when working outside the home (Fisher, 2013; Grabska, 2011; James, 2010). A study among ever-married women in rural Egypt found that IPV was associated with women’s market work in the prior month (Yount, Zureick-Brown, & Salem, 2014).

Evidence has shown that in both conflict and non-conflict settings, increased economic resources for women may not increase agency without also addressing underlying discriminatory gender norms (Chattier, 2013; Gupta et al., 2013). For women to be empowered within the household, they must be able to have the agency to participate more fully in the decision-making with their partners. In our study, women’s material resources of earned income and home ownership did not uniformly increase women’s agency to respond to IPV. While there was some evidence that labour force participations made some women feel that they were more independent and could participate more in the care and well-being of the family, for most women such advantages were eroded by negative reactions of their partners. For women, earning supplemental income was an economic necessity in a context of scarce and intermittent work for their partners.

Women may use various strategies to reduce the risk of IPV when participating in roles that are viewed as transgressive. For example, studies in Egypt have shown that women employ various strategies, such as increased domestic work, which conform to patriarchal norms to counteract the risk of IPV from transgressive economic activities (Yount, 2011; Yount et al., 2014). Women sought to mitigate the transgressive aspect of working, particularly away from home, by situating their work within their traditional role as caretakers of the family and their partner, even if it meant reducing her ability to take care of the household and children. However, this work did not release a woman from her obligations at home – a view shared by both women and their partners. Women who reported less conflict in their relationships had partners who were more supportive of her contributions to the household expenses. Partners who were not supportive of women’s work resented the time away from the household and the perceived neglect of family. Partner support was
also more likely to be given when women were able to work from home, thus lessening the transgression. These findings are similar to those in a study of economic interventions and IPV in Ecuador in which the impact on IPV reduction was in part dependent on the initial power relations between partners (Hidrobo, Peterman, & Heise, 2013).

Women’s economic opportunities were restricted to low-wage and often non-formal options such as domestic work and small-scale retail. The lack of women’s agency within her relationship may have been due in part to the comparatively low wages earned by women’s menial labour. The average income earned by women in the community was about 2500 Colombian pesos per day (~US$1.35) (Guerrero, 2010). One woman stated that her partner could earn in three days what she received in a month. Their relatively lower and often sporadic wages made it less likely that women would have the resources to leave an abusive relationship. Moreover, a woman’s employment may exacerbate her dependency on an abusive partner (Salway et al., 2005). Women’s incomes were frequently insufficient to support them independently and partners sometimes withdrew financial support when women were working. A similar dynamic was found in Burkina Faso when husbands reduced economic support as a result of women’s microcredit participation (Hennink & McFarland, 2013). Research from Colombia has shown that displaced women’s labour participation did not increase bargaining power within the household while IPV rates were higher than that in non-displaced populations (Calderón et al., 2011).

Women’s property ownership provided some financial and social advantages as well as some unintended negative consequences. The freedom from rent payments or freedom from having to stay with extended family or friends reduced stress in the relationship. Having something to pass on to children was also particularly salient in view of the loss of lands and possessions resulting from displacement. However, women were constrained by the fixed nature of their housing to economic opportunities available in the immediate area. It was not clear that women’s home ownership provided her higher status within the family. Instead, some narratives suggested that men resented the lack of control over the home and viewed this as an added transgression. Unemployed or underemployed partners may have felt especially threatened by their lack of home ownership. A study in South Asia found that the protection from IPV resulting from an income-generating property brought to women was no longer in evidence when men were unemployed or irregularly employed (Panda & Agarwal, 2005). Women’s agency to leave abusive relationships was often not supported by social and structural resources so that they were faced with the choice of remaining in the relationship or abandoning the house.

Of equal, if not greater, importance to relationship quality was the inability of men to fulfil their masculine role as economic provider for the family. Pervasive unemployment and underemployment mean that men in the community are unable to fulfil their prescribed role as the family’s provider and protector and may exacerbate men’s violence against women (Johal & McKenna, 2005). Women frequently ascribed men’s stress and fear of not being able to provide for their family as the impetus for IPV. More proximal behaviours linked to IPV such as excessive drinking and controlling behaviours were also attributed to men’s lack of employment. Controlling behaviours such as jealousy and accusations of infidelity, and close surveillance of women’s activities were also mentioned by women whose partners were abusive. Often this behaviour only occurred after displacement, or had gotten worse since displacement. Controlling behaviours are frequently correlated with IPV. In Colombia, 76% of women with husbands who accused them of infidelity reported IPV in comparison with 36% of women whose husbands did not accuse them (Kishor & Johnson, 2004).
The same patriarchal gender norms held by IDPs are also held by individuals in the larger community and legal system which act against women’s agency to leave violent partners. Community members may be unwilling or unable to help women who are seeking help for violent relationships. While laws exist in Colombia on IPV and equality of women, the reality experienced by IDPs is often one of stigma, inaction and victim-blaming by legal, health and social services (Wirtz et al., 2014). Already facing discrimination on the basis of race and class, IDP women may mistrust legal or social services fearing further prejudice against them (OMCT, 2003).

It is difficult to disentangle the relative contributions of stress from economic conditions in general and conflict brought about by transgressions of gender roles in the face of patriarchal gender norms. Working women have been at risk for higher rates of IPV across different settings, including Colombia (Ackerson, Kawachi, Barbeau, & Subramanian, 2008; Atkinson et al., 2005; Macmillan & Gartner, 1999) and among displaced Colombian women specifically (Calderón et al., 2011; Wirtz et al., 2014). Another contributor to IPV risk is the partner’s employment status. In a longitudinal study in India, women with husbands who had intermittent employment were at higher risk of IPV, and women whose husbands who had lost stable employment were at even greater risk for IPV (Krishnan et al., 2010). It is evident that displaced couples in this community face multiple stressors which cause strain and conflict even in non-violent relationships. Largely undesired changes in gender roles in a community which subscribed to patriarchal gender norms caused resentment by both partners. While LMD has made efforts to educate the community on IPV, it is unclear if men were being successfully included into these activities. Comments by women interviewed which referred to men feeling disempowered by the ‘community for women only’ indicate that at least some men feel marginalised by the nature of the community in addition to feeling disempowered by underemployment and the necessity for economic support by their partners. The lag between rapidly changing gender roles and patriarchal gender norms along with severe contextual circumstances put women in this community at increased risk for violence within their relationships.

The interpretation of the results must be viewed in light of some limitations. First, this was a purposive sample which may not be representative of other displaced populations. The study community had a number of unusual features such as women’s home ownership and targeted education and programmes on women’s rights and IPV which may result in perceptions and opinions that differ from other displaced women. Second, only the viewpoints of women were collected. Additional research on men’s views on the study topics would provide valuable additional information on the linkages between community context, perceived gender role transgressions and IPV.

Conclusions

Our findings highlight how complex relationships between community context, patriarchal gender norms and the ways in which displaced men’s and women’s employment failed to conform to those norms affect the quality of intimate relationships. Contextual circumstances of displacement and current living conditions such as weakened social networks and limited economic opportunities contributed to conflict within relationships. Within this setting, women and their partners still largely subscribed to patriarchal gender norms even though circumstances dictated changes in gender roles, most notable in men’s and women’s employment status. The ways in which couples’ employment was viewed as transgressive or conforming by each partner impacted the quality of the
relationship and the occurrence of IPV. Women’s enhanced economic resources though labour force participation and home ownership often did not increase agency within or outside the household generally, and specifically with the ability to leave violent relationships. Economic resources intended to empower displaced women, notably women’s earnings and independently owned houses, had unintended negative consequences for some. These consequences included a corresponding decrease in partner financial contributions and reduced mobility.

In the face of conditions of displacement and economic insecurity, couples depend on intermittent employment that comes into conflict with couples’ patriarchal gender norms and raises the risk of IPV. Where masculinity is defined in part through financial responsibility for the family, the inability to fulfil this expectation may lead to alternative expressions of masculinity through aggression and violence against partners. Women’s employment not only transgresses women’s traditional roles as homemaker and family caretaker, but also implies that men cannot fulfil their obligations to provide for their families. Issues of women’s mobility, both in the necessity of leaving the house for work and in the fixed resource of women’s homes played a role in women’s risk of IPV and their agency in leaving a violent partner. Even when women seek support and assistance for IPV, social and economic structures work against women’s agency. Programme and policy interventions should address women’s employment opportunities and structural gender inequalities to help mitigate possible backlash against perceived gender norm transgressions that put women at risk for IPV.

Women’s agency to obtain support or leave violent relationships was hindered by interpersonal, social and structural barriers. These barriers must be addressed before IPV prevention and response efforts can be successful. IPV initiatives often seek to increase a woman’s agency by providing access to educational and economic opportunities. However, power relationships at all levels from the interpersonal to societal must be recognised and addressed before women’s agency can result in true empowerment to leave abusive relationships.

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Note
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