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Growing Rate of Intimate Partner Violence and Psychosocial Effects in Women Living in The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico During The SARS-Cov-19 Pandemic

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Through the years, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico has failed in the collection of adequate and consistent data of hundreds of incidences and prevalence of intimate partner violence against the Puerto Rican women. Hence, there is no research on the health effects of intimate partner violence against Puerto Rican women who reside in the island. The objective of this paper is to examine the correlation between the growing rate of intimate partner violence against women and its psychosocial effects in victims residing in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico during the SARS-CoV-19 (COVID-19) pandemic [1].

Families and partners in Puerto Rico, as in other parts of the world, have been under multiple stresses such as physical and psychological health risks, isolation and loneliness, economic vulnerability, job losses, and the closure of many schools during the SARS-CoV-19 (COVID-19) pandemic. Consequently, children and their mothers are particularly vulnerable [2] to the risk of domestic violence. Domestic violence refers to a range of violations that happen within a domestic space. It is a broad term that encompasses intimate partner violence (IPV), a form of abuse that is perpetrated by a current or ex-partner. Experience in New Zealand and internationally has shown that family violence (including IPV, child abuse and elder abuse) and sexual violence can escalate during

and after large-scale disasters or crises [3]. Therefore, around the world, as communities have gone into lockdown to stop the spread of coronavirus, the mass efforts to save lives have put women in abusive relationships more at risk. A very recent article published in The Guardian [4], reported on how the surge of domestic violence cases is a pattern being repeated. Home is not always a safe place to live; in fact, for adults and children living in situations of domestic and familial violence, home is often the space where physical, psychological, and sexual abuse occurs [4].

Violence against women is a global public health priority [5]. Consequently, in the United States it is targeted as one of the major objectives in Healthy People 2030. Knowledge about the psychosocial effects of abuse on Puerto Rican women can potentially improve nursing interventions, designed specifically to help recognize, and reduce the risk of exposure to increased danger, psychosocial exacerbations, and lethality. Therefore, it might provide avenues for effective health and social advocacy.

The Puerto Rican Police Department reported 3,434 domestic violence incidents since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2021, including situations related to kidnapping and disappearance of women [6]. Although these statistics represent 593 fewer cases than the preceding year from March 15 to

September 24th 2019, the number of women who have disappeared has raised criticism towards the government for its lack of action related to this topic. By the end of the 2021 year the Observatory of Gender Equality informed that 52 women and a trans person were assassinated, but half of these cases were not solved. Twelve of these deaths were intimate feminicides perpetrated by their partners or ex partners. This non-government institution identified 26 cases that are still being investigated. The Observatory uses the Latin American Protocol of Women Violent Deaths and Feminicides which establishes the need to count these cases to highlight the magnitude of violence against women which includes negligence and low clearance rates of deaths and murders [1].

According to El Nuevo Día [7], the 2021 data show an increase in domestic violence as compared to preceding years although the convictions for Domestic Abuse Prevention and Intervention Act No. 54 is low and statistics problem persists. On the other hand, on September 9, 2021, 9 out of 19 (47 %) identified domestic violence programs in Puerto Rico participated in a national count of domestic violence services conducted by the National Network to

End Domestic Violence [8]. The following information was shared by the participating programs about the services they provided during the 24hour survey period.

- 198 adult and child victims of domestic violence found refuge in emergency shelters, transitional housing, hotels, motels, or other housing provided by local domestic violence programs.
- 177 non-residential adult and child victims received supportive services including
 - counseling, legal advocacy, and support groups.
 - 22 hotline contacts received- lifelines for victims in danger providing support,
 - information, safety planning, and resources via phone, text, and email.
- 48 unmet requests for services that programs could not provide due to lack of resources. 100% of these requests were for housing and emergency shelter.

Services provided and the percent of programs providing the services were the following:

Therapy / Counseling for adults by a licensed practitioner	67%
Emergency Shelter	56%
Prevention and/or Educational Programs	56%
Transitional Housing (run by DV program)	
Legal Representation by an attorney	44%
Transportation	44%
Childcare/Daycare	33%
Children's Support Advocacy	33%

In January 2021 Governor Pedro Pierluisi ordered the start of a state of emergency, ordering new government programs for the education and prevention of domestic violence in response to the 83% increase of domestic violence during the pandemic. Although officials in charge of various shelters described the order as positive, a lack of government funding is the most significant challenge. Officials say the government has yet to implement the executive order, and shelters are struggling due to the lack of adequate resources. According to Borgen Magazine, the Women's Advocate Office has not responded to media inquiries about the rise in domestic violence in Puerto Rico during the pandemic. Therefore, domestic violence activists recognize that the state of emergency is not a definite solution for this problem. First, because they state it should go hand in hand with gender perspective education in childhood and adolescence as well as with an anti-patriarchal awareness in adults. Secondly, because the State of Emergency Order was supposed to end in June [9]. Many questions need to be answered, but in the meantime these women are at risk for mental health effects such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress

disorder, alcohol and drug abuse and suicide as a consequence of domestic violence as stated by Sharma et al (2019). Moreover, often the abused women themselves are not aware of the increase in violence over time and the effects that this violence has in their health.

In summary, violence against women has been studied by different organizations and has received scholarly attention, but still many questions remain unanswered. Since limited research has been conducted in Puerto Rico, the scarcity of information is a hindrance to guide advocacy interventions and policy change that will help improve the situation of many women who are victims of intimate partner violence and whose circumstances and health worsened during the pandemic [10].

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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