The Paradoxical Approach to Intimate Partner Violence in Finland

KRIS CLARKE
California State University, Fresno

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received October 6, 2010
Received in revised form February 20 2011
Accepted July 5, 2011

ABSTRACT
Intimate partner violence (IPV) is internally recognized as a pervasive and underreported social and public health problem, with a preponderance of female victims. Finland is renowned for its woman-friendly comprehensive welfare state, yet it has relatively high rates of IPV against women. This article explores how IPV has been socially constructed in Finland through a survey of laws, government action programs, and reports on IPV. The recent rise in immigration to Finland has brought the conceptualization of IPV as a culturally essential attribute of foreign men, which continues to render the complexity of IPV in Finnish society invisible.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a major public health concern and human rights issue that affects millions of people around the world (Ferris, 2004). The effects of IPV are wide-ranging and costly. Comparative evidence indicates pregnant women may be at higher risk of domestic violence with negative outcomes for unborn children (Bailey, 2010; Devries et al., 2010), victims of IPV tend to be at higher risk of sexually transmitted disease (Campbell et al., 2008), and the economic costs of medical and mental health treatment, disrupted family relations, and lost working days are enormous (Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Intimate Partner Violence is defined as:

[A] pattern of coercive behaviors that may include inflicted physical injury, psychological abuse, sexual assault, progressive social isolation, stalking, deprivation, intimidation and threats. These behaviors are perpetrated by someone who is, was, or wishes to be involved in an intimate or dating relationship with an adult or adolescent, and are aimed at establishing control by one partner over the other. (FPV, 1999, p.17)

IPV is, therefore, fundamentally about how internalized power imbalances are played out in intimate relationships between partners, especially in domestic contexts. The intimate settings in which IPV occurs are culturally diverse and typified by relationships of oppression, inequality, unequal gender roles, and inappropriate social behaviors. The acquisition of knowledge about IPV in these diverse groups must, therefore, be both culturally sensitive and appropriate.

This article explores how intimate partner violence is socially constructed in Finland, a Nordic “woman-friendly” welfare state with a high rate of interpersonal violence. The emergence of violence as a research topic and IPV as a legislative issue in the 1990s reveals, until recently, a reluctance to address male violence against women in Finland. Factual reports of IPV cases appear regularly in the media, but rarely are the narratives of victims reported. Despite, this media focus, male violence against women remains a marginalized issue in Finnish society. Its prevalence is generally attributed to alcohol abuse or family dysfunction. Increased rates of immigration to Finland in the 1990s, however, did promote the discourse in the media about male violence towards women, although it was embodied in stereotypical images of patriarchal, foreign men.
Along with a rise of anti-immigrant sentiment, immigrant male IPV was characterized as an inability of such men to integrate into Finnish society. This cultural essentialization of male violence as an attribute of non-Finnish, usually “colored” males, has the potential to further marginalize the issue of IPV in mainstream Finnish society.

Every society has its own way of translating and conceptualizing IPV in its own cultural context. The meaning of “violence” changes over time and reflects shifting power relationships (Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999). Many cross-cultural studies of domestic violence tend to approach the phenomenon from a Western or Eurocentric perspective, which may not take into account the complexity of relationships, behaviors and their situatedness in diverse local contexts (Yoshihama, 2002). In Finland, the expression, perheväkivalta [family violence], is the most commonly used term used in public and academic discourse and implies that more than one family member is involved in the violence (Hearn & McKie, 2010). Nonetheless, perheväkivalta has been criticized as a genderless concept (Ronkainen, 2001), focusing on alcohol abuse and family breakdown, and in the way it limits women’s freedom to change the dynamics of their relationship with males. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the use of the expression parisuhdenväkivalta [intimate partner violence] is common, reflecting the importance of the intimate bond as the locus of violence. In addition, there has been greater focus on violence by women against male partners, as well as against same sex partners (Flinck, Åstedt-Kurki, & Paavilainen, 2008).

The term naisin kohdistuva väkivalta [violence against women] emerged in the 1990s as a means of naming and addressing the systemic relations of gender oppression that condone or collude with violent behaviors (Hearn & McKie, 2010). It reflects the view that violent behaviors (e.g. rape, harassment, or IPV) have been minimized or relegated to the private realm of social welfare interventions as a result of institutionalized sexism. As discussed later, this critique of male violence came much later in Finnish society than in many other western industrialized countries.

The term “intimate partner violence” [parisuuhdeväkivalta] is used because it encompasses the complexity of various types of violence between partners as well as focuses on gendered oppression, regardless of how these situations are culturally interpreted. Finally, the concept of IPV underlines the intricacy of forms of aggression and resistance that may occur in the home, but which also belong to the public arena of violence (Johnson, 2010).

The Welfare State And Gender Equality

The Nordic welfare state extends into almost every aspect of citizens’ lives. From national health services to day care services to elder care to income support, a system of egalitarian social rights underlies the everyday lives of people in these societies (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The organization of services and support is based on the history and gendered cultural traditions of each Nordic country, even though these differences are minimal. As almost all services are provided by the public sector in Finland, debate over targets and types of service delivery often take place within the structure of the state rather than in the public domain. This section explores how “the women friendly” Finnish welfare state developed a discourse on gender equality separate from that of prevention of violence against women.

Finland is culturally homogenous and a predominantly Lutheran social democracy that evolved from rural poverty to the economic level of other Nordic welfare states only in the 1980s (Raunio, 2000; Stenius, 1997). Despite its status as a grand duchy under Russian rule, Finland retained the social and legal traditions of Sweden, specifically with regard to family law (Bradley, 1999). Hence, social welfare policies have emerged from these cultural traditions that, in turn, have defined practice (Forsberg, 1994).

As in New Zealand, Australia and the rural states of the U.S., Finnish women attained equal suffrage around the turn of the 20th century (1906), perhaps, largely because they were expected to work alongside men (Markkola, 1990). Finland was a predominately agrarian society until the 1960s when industrialization of the Finnish economy ushered in a mass internal migration of agricultural workers to urban areas. Owing to its peripheral location in Europe, and its relative general poverty, there was limited external migration to Finland prior to the 1980s. However, upon joining the European Union in 1995 and with the rise of the Nokia corporation, along with growing numbers of refugees and other immigrants entering the county, Finish society intensified its contacts and interchange with other countries and a more globalized and multicultural Finland began to emerge.

Feminism and the Finnish Welfare State

The Nordic welfare state provides universal access to welfare services as a means to modernize the state and break the bonds of the tradition of poor
relief (Anttonen, 2002). While the concept of universalism in welfare state models was often based on masculine notions of agency from its inception, social policy in Nordic countries was influenced by women. Indeed, the notion of women as workers was accepted relatively early in comparison with Germany and many other western industrialized countries probably due to economic necessity (Anttonen, 1997). Few Finnish women had the option or even the expectation to be housewives. As the concept of universalism has a redistributive aspect at its core, Nordic welfare states have often been seen as “women-friendly” due to generous compensation measures and support for working women caring for family members through universal access to social services (Anttonen, 1994). Finland is renowned for its extensive support and services to women and children, including prenatal care, childcare and a guarantee to return to the same job after maternity leave. The many protections that women have as mothers and caregivers allow them a greater degree of economic freedom than in many societies, although these rights are being eroded by increasing privatization as the communitarian welfare state gives way to a rights-based society (Pylkkänen, 2007).

Moreover, gender inequalities remain in terms of wages and the division of labor.

Debate on equality between men and women in Finland intensified as the country rapidly industrialized in the 1960s and traditional gender roles were disrupted due to migration from rural areas to urban centers. At this time, the Finnish welfare state began to enhance its broad range of social and health services that served families and children. The evolution of the Finnish feminist movement may be characterized as follows:

1. Sex role debate (1965-70) challenged the gendered division of labor.

The emergence of feminism in Finland was influenced by specific socio-historic and cultural conditions. The period of the anti-authoritarian Left, for example, was brief in Finland. Feminist issues in Finland also tended to be dominated by Swedish speakers who were traditionally viewed as the privileged in Finnish society, which may account for the lack of interest in feminism by Finnish speakers. Finally, "body issues" such as abortion rights and availability of contraceptives were already guaranteed by the welfare state (Bergman, 2002). Hence, there was little critique of the primacy of the structure of the nuclear family, unlike other western countries. As Bergman concludes, “…Finland differed markedly from the rest of the Nordic countries, as well as from West Germany, since social movement activity did not emerge until the end of the 1970s and grassroots participation never became an established part of political life.” (Bergman, 2002) Many researchers have thus underlined the Finnish paradox of official gender equality co-existing with a fierce popular rejection of feminism (Julkunen, 1999; Parvikko 1988).

In 1970, the Committee on the Status of Women published a reform program to enhance gender equality and in 1972, the Council for Equality was founded to promote the implementation of these reforms (Kantola, 2004). One significant reform was that childcare became the responsibility of parents and the Communal Day Care Act (1973), guaranteeing the rights of working mothers. There are now extensive provisions to guarantee parental leave and adequate child benefits in Finland. Later legislative acts enshrined the right to municipal daycare, although the recent retraction of the welfare state threatens this right (Pylkkänen, 2007). The socialization of care in the Finnish welfare state raised the status of women and reinforced their social and economic rights (Anttonen, 1994). Notwithstanding, recent budgetary cuts in care services have affected working women more than men (Zechner, 2010).

In 1987, the Act on Equality between Women and Men came into force with the purpose of advancing gender equality and preventing discrimination, especially in working life. The legislation allows for positive action to be taken, but is non-binding. That is, the Finnish government is not required to initiate programs similar to affirmative action in the United States to alleviate or prevent disadvantages linked to discrimination. The Non-Discrimination Act of 2004, however, obliges the authorities to promote the realization of equal treatment, which should be accomplished by removing barriers to equality although it stops short of calling for the implementation of proactive measures to redress past oppressive practices. The institutional instruments that ensure gender equality in Finland mainly focus on labor and care issues.

**Finnish Family Law And Domestic Violence**

The Finnish cultural tradition of family legislation is complex. As with other Nordic countries, Finland enshrined the inheritance rights of children born “out-
of-wedlock” early in the 20th century, which served to fight stigma and enhance the equal position of all children in society. Sexual morality in Finland, however, tended to be more conservative than in other Nordic countries, especially with regard to the acceptance of homosexuality and the legal status of co-habiting couples (Bradley, 1999).

In general, Finnish laws regarding domestic violence fall under the category of violence rather than violence against women, a distinction that makes it difficult to ascertain the true extent of intimate partner violence (Eurobarometer, 2010). Assault in a private place (e.g. a home) became a mandatory public prosecutorial case in 1995. Until the 1990s, IPV was handled under an 1889 criminal law (Kantola, 2004). A revision in the law on restraining orders, which allowed such orders between members of the same household, came into force in 2005. Finland was one of the last countries in the European Union to criminalize rape in marriage in 1994, although there was a brief debate on this issue in the Finnish Parliament in the 1970s.

An important gap in the discourse on gender equality in Finland has been the absence of discussion of violence against women, an issue that became visible in public discourse in the 1990s as laws began to be developed against domestic violence. As noted by some scholars, discourse on gender equality tended to be divided into policies on children and care and policies outside the home, such as the percentage of female elected officials and wage equity (Borchorst & Siim, 2002). IPV has traditionally been subsumed into the broader categories of violence, in general, and alcohol-related violence, more specifically. A survey of police found that most officers characterized IPV as the combination of “a man, a woman and booze.” (Törönen, 2000, p. 14) Hence, domestic violence has often been perceived as a private matter (like alcoholism) best handled by the practitioners of the social welfare state, rather than as a public issue.

The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters [Ensi-ja turvakotien liitto], a national NGO, was founded in 1945 with the social welfare aim of assisting women with out-of-wedlock children, although many of their clients were IPV victims. Unlike the shelters founded in many other Western countries which focused on a feminist empowerment approach, until recently Finnish shelters had public addresses (with one exception) and emphasized child protection through professionalized social workers. When women came to the shelter, the perpetrator was generally contacted and invited to participate in a dialogue about the welfare of the child (Kantola, 2004). Increasingly, shelters have focused on the support of female victims of IPV and since 2006, for male victims. This group has largely been seen as one of the many groups, such as A-Clinic for those with alcohol problems and the Union for Senior Services that support elders and their caregivers, which provide specialized support often in conjunction with the basic social welfare services of the state.

In summary, the social policies of the Finnish welfare state have done a great deal to enhance women’s position in the labor market and in education, largely due to generous support of caregiving responsibilities. The legacy of Finnish family law is paradoxical: it is both progressive in terms of the rights of mothers and children and regressive in terms of how long laws against homosexuality have remained “on the books.” Many of these policies and practices are based on a gender-neutral ideal that does not take into account how gender and hetero-normative hierarchies actually function in the public and private sphere. The issue of violence against women as a public discourse emerged recently because violence in the home has often been associated with the notion that alcohol and social problems are private issues best handled by families or social workers. Until the late 20th century, the practitioners of the social welfare state have, thus, been expected to cope with violence against women through child protection and shelter activities, rather than through the police and legislation. The silence of feminists on intimate partner violence as a fundamental issue of Finnish gender equality until the 1990s was striking (Ronkainen, 1998).

Gender Violence and IPV

Gender studies began in Finland, as with most of the Western industrialized world, in the 1960s with a focus on research on equality and women in the labor market (see also Kolehmainen, 1999). Early studies focused on the unequal position of men and women in the labor market as well as the double burden of care placed on many women (Simonen, 1990). As described above, there have been many new laws enacted since the 1960s to reinforce women’s position in the labor market and share the burdens of caregiving with municipal services. However, while Finland may now have a greater degree of statutory measures to ensure gender equality, violence against women still remains a serious problem. In 2001, the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health estimated that the financial toll due to domestic violence amounted to 91 million euros in social, health and legal expenses for victims of domestic violence (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2006). A 1999 study on domestic violence by the European Women’s Lobby asserted that the rate of
IPV in Finland was as high as Spain—22% of women married or cohabiting was battered and 50% of separated women was threatened by ex-partners. Moreover, only about 10% of Finnish women filed complaints against perpetrators (European Women's Lobby, 1999). The figures show that IPV remains a problem in Finland despite a legal framework of gender equality. The data also suggest that barriers exist to reporting the abuse.

The rise of “violence research” in the academic discipline of social work in the late 1980s-1990s problematized various aspects of family violence, particularly against children (Paavilainen & Pösö, 2003). Most research has focused on the role of family dynamics in violent situations, although it tended to be gender-neutral (see Peltoniemi, 1984). However, it was the new wave of women's studies research in the late 1980s and 1990s that raised the issue of the gendered nature of violence in Finland (see also Ronkainen, 1998). This research challenged the dominant view of IPV in Finland as a result of family dynamics rather than gender violence (Kantola, 2004). The rising discourse on the gendered nature of violence in Finnish society in the 1990s emerged with a global discussion of IPV. The public silence on IPV was challenged when several television programs featured women in professional positions speaking about the toll IPV had taken on them personally. The discussions amongst researchers linked gender violence to systems of oppression and social inequality.

Increasing recognition of the devastating societal toll of interpersonal violence can be seen in the growing number of international agreements and declarations in the 1990s (e.g. the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, 1993) committing member states of the United Nations to alleviating violence through multisectoral efforts (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005). Since the mid-1990s, and partly as a result of these international pledges, the Finnish government initiated a wide range of programs to gauge the prevalence of violence against women and enhance prevention efforts. In implementing a Plan of Action for Gender Equality Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2005), the Finnish government, in accordance with the 1995 United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women, in cooperation with Statistics Finland, the Council for Equality, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, generated a more detailed picture of violence against women, among other gender issues. In 1992, the Council on Equality between Men and Women appointed a subcommittee in response to increasing pressure to tackle the problem of violence against women. One of the findings was that the discourse on the “woman friendliness” of the Finnish welfare state had actually stifled discussion on gender violence (Kantola, 2004).

Violence and Estimating IPV in Finland

Finland is an anomaly in the Nordic welfare societies due to its high rate of interpersonal violence (LaFree & Drass, 2001). In international comparisons, Finland is generally described as a nation with low-income inequality (Brezzau, 2010), little corruption (Davis & Ruhe, 2003), high levels of trust and education (Newton, 2001), and even high levels of self-reported happiness (Peiró, 2006). It is, therefore, paradoxical that interpersonal violence in Finland is significantly higher than in other Nordic welfare societies. A longitudinal study of murder and manslaughter in Nordic societies between 1950-2000 reported that Finland had nearly double the violent crime of Denmark and Norway, and the rate was significantly higher than Sweden (Lappi-Seppälä, 2001). The exceptionally high rate of violence in Finland has been attributed to the high prevalence of alcoholism (Lindman, 1995; Sirén, 2002), the cold climate (Maes, Suy, & DeMeyer, 1993), rapid industrialization and even the psychological impact of a traumatic history of war and impoverishment (Siltala, 1999; Ylikangas, 1999). A study of homicide statistics between 1955 and 1996 in 34 countries based on World Health Organization homicide victimization statistics showed that Finland had a high rate of violence in comparison to other industrialized nations (LaFree & Drass, 2001). The study demonstrated that although Finland had lower rates of homicide than North American countries, it had double the homicide rate of any other Western European country and triple the rate of other Nordic societies (LaFree & Drass, 2001). The research compared Finland's homicide rate to that of Hungary and Bulgaria.

Prevalence of IPV in Finland

IPV rates are difficult to ascertain due to shame, stigma, gender oppression, fear of police involvement, as well as power and control issues. Many women are afraid to report their abusers (Montalvo-Liendo, 2009). Some countries lack legislation that directly addresses violence in the home and the support of victims. Often such legislation to take into account the complexity of violence within the same household is implemented as a result of political pressure by women and other victims of violence (Weissman, 2007). One of the main challenges of determining the historic trajectory of IPV prevalence in Finland is that no separate
category for IPV has existed under Finnish criminal law. Hence, IPV has been included in the general category of interpersonal violence statistics, which includes assaults by strangers or acquaintances in public or private settings (Kantola, 2004). It is known that Finland is a more violent society than other Nordic countries, but it is not known whether intimate relationships are more violent in Finland than other comparable societies due to the lack of specificity of official police statistics. Government reports note that police often do not report domestic disputes, but the statistics are limited on which to base this assertion (Ahlstedt, 2005).

Domestic violence in Finland is legally defined as violence between people residing in the same household and who are considered to be family. Laws that address and make visible the complexity of prosecuting family members involved with IPV, such as mandatory prosecutions and restraining orders, came relatively late in Finland, as noted earlier. Despite legal reforms, some studies have suggested that authorities in Finland often do not take violence in the home as seriously as violence in public places (Piispa & Heiskanen, 2000). This assertion finds support in the framework of a legal system that often under-estimates violence against women. According to Amnesty International, 16% of rapes in Finland are reported and only 13% of reported rapes result in conviction (Amnesty International, 2010). Finland differs from other Nordic countries in that it categorizes the level of violence used by the perpetrator: that is, rape, aggravated rape, and coercion to sexual intercourse. In the latter category, also known as “lesser degree rape,” the complainant must file her case with the prosecutor who then assesses whether or not the victim acted of her “own free will” (Amnesty International, 2010). Thus, Finnish legal tradition can be seen as placing significant barriers to the prosecution of IPV, which has often been constructed as a private matter under the purview of social welfare rather than a criminal matter. It is unclear whether or not rates of IPV in Finland are increasing, stable, or decreasing. According to Finnish Police statistics, domestic violence against women increased by 47% from 1997 to 2005, and violence in a partner relationship by 38% (Statistics Finland, 2006). No rationale is provided to account for these increases, but it may be assumed that the new legislation coming into effect, in addition to growing awareness of domestic violence, has had an impact on the recent increase in reporting.

At the same time, medical reports of physical injuries due to IPV have declined (Heiskanen, Sirén, & Aromaa, 2004). Many current estimates of the prevalence of IPV in Finland by government and non-governmental organizations have relied on the survey method due to the acknowledged limitations of official police reports (Ahlstedt, 2005). As noted earlier, many victims do not report abuse for various reasons and IPV is often handled in the realm of social welfare rather than criminal law, perhaps adding to the difficulty of gauging the actual rate of domestic violence (Niemi-Kiesiläinen, 2004). According to a 2005 report by the State Provincial Office of Southern Finland, police often do not report IPV as such and hesitate to become involved in domestic disputes (Ahlstedt, 2005). A 1995 revision to Finnish criminal law (Finnish Criminal law 578/1995) mandates that all serious assaults be prosecuted regardless of the wishes of the victim, even if they take place in the home. One important aspect of the revision is that it gives more power to authorities to intervene in IPV by protecting victims through restraining orders, which could now be taken-out against members of the same household. A 2004 study of police and domestic violence calls found that of the 70,000 nationwide police house calls, 16,000 were due to IPV (Ahlstedt, 2005). Official statistics also show that from 1993-2003 29 to 53 Finnish women die annually due to assault by intimate partner (Ahlstedt, 2005). The issue of IPV in Finland is, therefore, recognized as serious by the authorities and efforts have been made to strengthen and enhance legal protections. However, the stigma and shame appear to remain significant barriers for many victims. Emergency room admissions of IPV victims, for example, demonstrate that the same victims appear repeatedly, suggesting that better procedures for connecting victims with support are necessary (Leppäkoski, Åstedt-Kurki, & Paavilainen, 2010).

Where older surveys utilized descriptions of violence that were not explicit regarding the complex power and control issues that many female victims face in IPV, more recent surveys have been more nuanced about gender-specific issues that women face in violent relationships (Piispa, 2002). In 1997, as the international focus on gender issues began to focus more on the impact of violence against women, the Finnish government commissioned a large survey to assess the prevalence of IPV in society (Heiskanen & Piispa, 1998). The construction of the survey questions was not unproblematic (Piispa, 2002). Issues about how violence was represented in questions influenced the types of answers given. At the same time, questions left unanswered, perhaps, were perceived as too sensitive to discuss. At least 40% of Finnish women were reported to have been victims of physical or sexual violence or threats in adulthood and 50% of divorced or separated women had suffered physical violence or threats (Heiskanen & Piispa, 1998). A postal survey conducted by...
Statistics Finland in cooperation with the Council on Equality in 1997 revealed that one in five Finnish women had experienced physical violence from a current partner, half of whom had physical injuries, and that one in four women in a violent relationship had sought refuge in a shelter (Statistics Finland, 2000). These statistics indicate that despite official gender equality, the prevalence of IPV in Finland is comparable to that of many other countries.

Among the key findings of these surveys was the role of shame in preventing women from seeking help. As privacy is highly valued in Finnish culture, the threshold for discussing violent personal experiences in the home or reporting such issues may be quite high (Piispa, 2002). Many women have also internalized the ideal of gender equality regarding autonomous independence which means that they believe the individual makes her own destiny (Julkunen, 1999). This belief may account for the reluctance of many women to involve authorities in resolving problems of violence in the home, a responsibility that they feel is their own to manage. However, living in an IPV relationship is anything but equal (see also Piispa, 2002). Until recently, there have been few public narratives of IPV in Finland, a deficiency which may reinforce the silence surrounding IPV, even though 38% of Finns reported knowing a woman who had been a victim of IPV (Eurobarometer, 2010). More research is needed to better understand how to capture the subjective experience of violence as well as the social stigma that persists in seemingly egalitarian Nordic societies which continues to raise barriers to getting help.

Cultural Essentializing of Immigrant Women and Intimate Partner Violence in Finland

Intimate partner violence in the Finnish home has traditionally been culturally constructed as alcohol-related and as the result of unhealthy family dynamics, rather than as violence against women. A study of images of addictive behaviors (e.g., alcoholism, gambling, etc.) in the main Finnish daily newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, between 1968-2006 shows until the end of the 20th century, addiction was largely constructed as a marginal phenomenon despite social statistics indicating a very different reality (Hellman, 2010). Only in the 1990s did media images and debate shift to show that addiction and IPV, as well as many other social problems, were far more common. The debate occurred at the same time as transnational immigration began to take hold in Finland. The final section explores how IPV has become increasingly constructed as a cultural essence of immigrant men, particularly Muslim men, or men of color.

Multicultural Finland

Transnational immigration began in the 1990s in Finland. Until then, emigration was higher than immigration, even though the proportion of immigrants in Finnish society is amongst the lowest in Western Europe at approximately 2% (or 200,000 people born in a foreign country). The largest source of immigrants is from the former Soviet Union. The primary reason for immigration to Finland is marriage (40,000)—transnational marriages are becoming increasingly common in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2010). There is also an increase in birth rates amongst migrants in Finland and, in concert with other trends, the assumption can be made that in the Finland of the future will be a more ethnically diverse nation.

Nation states embody an imagined community in which the members do not know all their fellow members yet consider themselves to be part of a similar identity and national story, and share a deep sense of solidarity despite inequalities (Anderson, 1991). Foreigners can, thus, be seen as strangers to the family of the nation-state. Finnish society has traditionally been composed of culturally and ethnically diverse groups, such as the Roma and Sami, but this diversity has been largely rendered invisible in the national narrative of Finnishness or deployed strategically in articulations of Finnishness (e.g. in the use of traditional Sami outfits in the winter Olympics as an exotic aspect of Finland). The growth in “mixed” marriages between people of Finnish and non-Finnish origin and the emergence of “New Finns,” a term describing immigrants who have become citizens, means that the Finnish national family is becoming increasingly hybrid.

With the impact of globalization and increasing immigration in the 1990s, terms such as “multiculturalism” and “integration” have become topics of public debate, social anxiety, and social welfare interventions in Finland. Anxieties about strangers in the national family are often focused on sensational stories that illustrate the fundamental distinction between “us and them,” and create a justification for their removal from “our space.”

Representations of Immigrant IPV

Discussions of IPV in immigrant communities in Nordic countries have tended to be dominated by sensationalist media coverage of “honor killings” and “forced marriages,” as in many other European countries (Keskinen, 2009). The murder of Fadime
Sahindal by her father in 2002 in Sweden was a rallying point for many who saw the murder as the intractable problem of integrating patriarchal and oppressive immigrant men (often represented as Muslim) into the new host societies. There has often been a culturalist explanation to legitimize violence by positing it as completely different from the violence faced by Nordic women at home (Keskinen, 2009). Underlying these discussions was the notion that “...violence was seen to be related to ‘cultural conflicts’ between two generations and to the transition from the presumed traditional, patriarchal family to an implicitly equal Swedish family” (Keskinen, 2009). IPV amongst immigrants is, thus, often represented as a fundamentally culturally distinct phenomenon that is an attribute of foreign men, rather than another facet of the gender violence that also affects Finnish women.

IPV appears to be a serious social and health problem in immigrant communities in Finland. The National Institute for Health and Welfare (STAKES) (2009) developed a preventive project against IPV in migrant communities from 1998-2002. Many seminars were organized and discussions were initiated about multicultural social work in the social and health care fields in Finland. Shelters began to target culturally sensitive interventions work specifically at women from migrant communities. An umbrella group, Monika—Naiset liitto (Monika-Women's Multicultural Association), was founded in 1998 to meet the needs of women in Finland’s emerging multicultural community. A survey in 2002 that was conducted as part of the STAKES research report showed that approximately 14% of the women in shelters were from a migrant background, although the migrant women make up only about 2% of the Finnish population (Kyllönen-Saarnio & Nurmi, 2005). Little research exists to document why this figure is so high. Some studies have suggested that migrants often did not understand the role of the social worker in helping them in an IPV situation (Haarakangas, Ollus, & Sini, 2000). Prevalence rates of IPV reveal a disconnect between migrant communities and the helping system. Therefore, an area to be further explored is that immigrant women know little of the social welfare system which has few immigrant representatives, yet these women represent a high proportion of the clientele in shelters.

Studies increasingly demonstrate that there are different typologies of IPV, which suggests a need for a diversity of interventions to address the complexity of situational violence (Sokoloff, 2004). Moreover, the lack of information about immigrant male perpetrators of IPV remains a serious problem when considering ways to better engage with immigrant communities. There is a need to approach IPV from a culturally appropriate perspective that takes into account the role of race, gender, class, and migration experience. The danger of displacing the primary issue of male violence against women to that of a culturally essentialist and fundamentally xenophobic explanation reveals that the issue of IPV is not understood and managed in a manner that reflects its complexity.

Conclusions

Violence is a serious problem in Finland. This is a paradox because Finland has one of the lowest disparities in wealth, little corruption, high levels of trust and self-reported levels of happiness in the West, yet its rates of interpersonal violence are much higher than other Nordic and industrialized Western European societies. Many explanations for the prevalence of interpersonal violence have been offered, including high rates of alcohol abuse, the cold and dark weather, as well as the legacy of historical traumas of rapid industrialization, poverty and war, although these explanations are not definitive. Finding more accurate instruments to measure the quantitative and qualitative nature of interpersonal violence in Finland is important to go beyond speculative stereotypes of the impact of living in “the far north.”

Gender equality in terms of equitable wages and care support was enshrined in the legislation of the emerging “woman friendly” Finnish welfare state. Paradoxically, this focus on “woman friendliness” coexisted with a general popular resistance to feminism that often silenced any discussion of gender violence. Gender violence in the form of IPV and rape has often been a hidden issue that has been explained away by alcohol abuse or dysfunctional family dynamics. Nordic gender-equal social policies paradoxically coexist with problematic gender inequalities in practice, specifically with regard to issues of violence (Hearn & McKie, 2010). The disconnect between official policy and inter-personal practices warrants further investigation regarding how laws against IPV are actually enforced. Research on the perspectives of the police, shelter workers, as well as perpetrators and victims, should be enhanced to better contextualize statistics.

With the rise in immigration to Finland, men from countries seen as “Other” (e.g. Muslim, non-white, non-western) have often been socially constructed by the mass media as patriarchal and repressive. Underlying these images is often a social anxiety about the growing multicultural nature of Finnish society and how this impacts socio-cultural identities.
A study of the reasons why children are taken into care shows that Finnish social workers view domestic violence as an isolated problem of Finnish families. However, when working with immigrant families, social workers construct cultural difference as an essential reason for violent behavior (Hiitola & Heinonen, 2009). Constructing immigrant men as innately abusive may satisfy those who want to close the national community of Finland to outsiders, but these stereotypes do little to explain the phenomenon of intimate partner violence in all its complexity in Finnish society. The recent surge in anti-immigrant sentiment, as demonstrated in the latest election in the political platform of True Finn candidate, Olli Immonen, paints immigrants as the reason for many of the social problems in Finland, particularly with regard to violence against women (Immonen, 2011). The prominent nature of this discourse may eclipse a necessary internal self-examination regarding the historical and ongoing prevalence of IPV in Finnish society. The exclusion of immigrant voices in policy and academic debates does nothing to supplant the image of violent immigrant men as inscrutable and, therefore, makes them a target for the projection of anxieties about the high level of violence in Finnish society. Finally, research is also needed within immigrant communities to explain the over-representation of immigrant women in shelters. Research from the perspective of immigrants themselves on the trauma of leaving one’s homeland and adjusting to Finnish society, as well as the expectations surrounding marriage and gender roles, would enrich the discussion of IPV among immigrants and build a firmer basis for interventions.

References


women: Initial results on prevalence, health outcome and women’s responses. Geneva: WHO.


