

Emotional characterization of women in a situation of refuge due to intimate partner violence

Caracterización emocional de mujeres en situación de refugio por violencia de pareja

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Abstract:

Intimate partner violence manifests itself through physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and economic abuse and is considered a global problem that affects women of all cultures and socioeconomic levels. In Mexico, 70.1% of women have experienced violence, with psychological violence being the most prevalent (INEGI, 2021). This descriptive correlational study analyzes six women's emotional profiles and character strengths in refugee situations. The instruments used were the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), the Multicultural Inventory of the Expression of Anger and Hostility (ML-STAXI), the Character Strengths Questionnaire (VIA), and the Resilience Scale for Mexicans (RESI.-M). The results revealed moderate levels of depression, high levels of state anger, low levels of trait anger, and difficulties in anger control. Regarding resilience, 67% of the participants showed medium and 33% high levels, with strength in social support and structure. The most prominent character virtues were persistence, gratitude, and hope, while open-mindedness and curiosity were the lowest. Significant positive correlations were found between depression and the internal expression of anger, as well as negative correlations between resilience and depression. These findings highlight the importance of integrating positive psychology approaches into shelter services to improve the emotional health and empowerment of women victims of intimate partner violence.

Keywords:

Intimate partner violence, Shelters, Resilience, Strengths, Emotional health.

Resumen:

La violencia de pareja se manifiesta a través de abusos físicos, sexuales, psicológicos, emocionales y económicos, y es considerado un problema global que afecta a mujeres de todas las culturas y niveles socioeconómicos. En México, el 70.1% de las mujeres han experimentado violencia, siendo la psicológica la más prevalente (INEGI, 2021). Este estudio descriptivo correlacional analiza el perfil emocional y de fortalezas de carácter de seis mujeres en situación de refugio. Los instrumentos utilizados fueron el Inventario de Depresión de Beck (BDI), el Inventario Multicultural de la Expresión de la Cólera y la Hostilidad (ML-STAXI), el Cuestionario de Fortalezas de Carácter (VIA) y la Escala de Resiliencia para mexicanos (RESI-M). Los resultados revelaron niveles moderados de depresión, altos niveles de enojo-estado, bajos niveles de enojo-rasgo y dificultades en el control del enojo. En cuanto a la resiliencia, el 67% de las participantes mostró niveles medios y el 33% niveles altos, con fortaleza en apoyo social y estructura. Las virtudes de carácter más destacadas fueron persistencia, gratitud y esperanza, mientras que la apertura mental y curiosidad fueron las más bajas. Se encontraron correlaciones positivas significativas entre la depresión y la expresión interna del enojo, así como correlaciones negativas entre resiliencia y depresión. Estos hallazgos subrayan la importancia de integrar enfoques de psicología positiva en los servicios de refugio, para mejorar la salud emocional y el empoderamiento de las mujeres víctimas de violencia de pareja.

Palabras Clave:

Violencia de pareja, Refugios, Resiliencia, Fortalezas, Salud emocional

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INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence represents a social problem of great magnitude and complexity that crosses geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic boundaries. This phenomenon is characterized by a pattern of abusive behavior used by a person in an intimate relationship to exert control and power over his or her partner. Abuse can be physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and economic, and often escalates in frequency and severity over time (Johnson, 2008; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022).

According to the Pan American Health Organization ([PAHO], 2023), approximately one in three women in the world has suffered physical or sexual violence by her partner at some point in her life. In Mexico, 70.1% of women have experienced at least one episode of violence at some point in their lives, with psychological violence being the most prevalent (51.6%), followed by sexual violence (49.7%) (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI], 2021).

Intimate partner violence is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, influenced by a combination of individual, relational, community, and sociocultural factors, as proposed by the ecological model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1987). Among the most prominent causes are individual factors such as personal history of violence: people who have been victims or witnesses of violence during childhood are more likely to become perpetrators or victims in adulthood (Brassard et al., 2020; Bridgett, 2020; Dugal et al., 2020; Rodriguez & Esquivel, 2020). In addition, mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are correlated with an increased risk of involvement in violent relationships. Aggressive personality and behaviors, including narcissistic and controlling tendencies, also increase this probability (Dugal et al., 2021).

Relational factors play a crucial role in intimate partner violence. Repetitive conflicts, feelings of jealousy, infidelities, and economic pressure can significantly increase the likelihood of violent behaviors (Anaconda et al., 2022; Nuñez, 2022). In addition, relationships with an apparent asymmetry of power and control, often in favor of the man, create an environment conducive to violence. Usually, the manipulative effect of the aggressors distances the victims from support networks, which become the leading resource to get out of the violent situation.

Socially, victims may withdraw from their support networks, making them even more vulnerable to continued violence (Aiquipa-Tello & Canción-Suárez, 2020). Children who grow up in violent homes are at greater risk of experiencing emotional and behavioral problems and repeating cycles of violence in their future relationships (Merino, 2024). Economically, intimate partner violence can result in lost productivity, as victims may have difficulty maintaining employment or schooling due to injuries and emotional stress. The costs associated with medical and psychological treatment of victims represent a significant burden on both families and public health systems (Mamarian, 2020).

The power and control dynamics underlying these abusive relationships create an environment where victims often feel trapped and vulnerable. When the victim decides to proceed legally, the implications of the process, such as complaints, restraining orders, and court proceedings, must be considered, which can have additional repercussions on the lives of the victims (Rodriguez et al., 2023).

In this context, shelters for women in situations of violence emerge as a crucial and often lifesaving resource (Toledo & Lachenal, 2015; Hasanbegovic, 2019). Shelters offer numerous benefits that significantly change the lives of the women who use them. Upon entering a shelter, women find a safe and secure environment where they can escape the immediate threat of violence. This safe space allows them to begin to heal both physically and emotionally. In addition, shelters provide access to emotional and psychological support through therapy and support groups, which helps women rebuild their self-esteem and confidence. They are also offered legal counseling, crucial to understanding their legal rights and options, as well as job training and educational services that facilitate their economic independence (Zavarce, 2013). These comprehensive resources enable women to transform their lives from vulnerability and fear to empowerment and autonomy (Canaval et al., 2007; Escalante, 2023; Estrada & Tobo, 2011).

However, life in a shelter can bring with it a number of additional challenges; women in these situations must deal with uncertainty, ongoing trauma, and the complexities of reintegration into society. Social support is a protective factor (Cordero & Teyes, 2016; Oña et al., 2023).

The importance of understanding the experience of women in shelters lies in the need to continuously improve these support services and policies. Through research and analysis of their experiences, the barriers they face and areas where programs can be strengthened can be identified (Escalante, 2023).

Integrating positive psychology into health interventions and services for women victims can be highly beneficial; this branch of psychology focuses on strengthening internal resources and promoting emotional well-being. Positive psychology provides tools and strategies that help women develop resilience, optimism, and a sense of purpose, essential aspects for their recovery and empowerment (Vilchis, 2019; Bakracheva, 2020). In addition, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and strengths-based interventions can teach practical skills to manage stress and anxiety, improve self-efficacy, and foster a growth mindset. The implementation of these practices can lead to a significant improvement in the quality of life of refugee women, helping them to rebuild their lives from a perspective of strength and hope (Vaca-Ferrer, 2020; Cañas, 2022; Ledesma-Ortega & Rosas, 2023).

Based on the above, the present study aimed to learn about women's emotional profile and character strengths in a refugee situation.

METHOD

Research design

The present study has a quantitative, non-experimental, descriptive, correlational, and cross-sectional design.

Participants

The sample used was non-probabilistic by subject type. It consisted of six women participants who were housed in a shelter of the National Network of Shelters for families who are victims of intimate partner violence. The shelter has a capacity of up to eight families, including mothers and children. Most of the participants in this study had at least two children and had been there for about three months (maximum length of stay).

Instruments

Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). The BDI was validated for the Mexican population by Jury and collaborators (1998). It consists of 21 Likert-type items that evaluate different dimensions of depression, classifying the results from minimal to severe. It has a Cronbach's alpha reliability of .87.

Multicultural Anger and Hostility Expression Inventory (ML-STAXI). Validated for Mexico by Alcazar and collaborators (2011). It consists of 44 items that evaluate three scales: Anger-State, Anger-Trait and Anger Expression and Control. It has a Cronbach's Alpha reliability of .65 to 86.

Character Strengths Questionnaire (CSQ). Developed by Park and Peterson (2006). It is a self-report test with 198 questions assessing 6 virtues and 24-character strengths. It has a Cronbach's Alpha reliability of .97. The instrument has been translated and applied in multiple Spanish-speaking populations showing adequate reliability.

Resilience Scale for Mexicans (RESI-M). Developed by Palomar and Gómez (2010). It consists of 43 items that confirm five dimensions: Strength and Self-Confidence, Social Competence, Family Support, Social Support and Structure. It has a Cronbach's Alpha reliability of .93.

Procedure

Before the evaluation, contact was made with those in charge of the shelter to agree on the logistics of the application in such a way that the participants felt comfortable and did not interrupt their daily activities. The application was carried out as a group in a single session with the supervision of the psychologist in charge of the shelter and the psychologist responsible for the application. Each participant received the printed battery and the informed consent form along with pencils and erasers, and it was also explained to them that throughout the application, they could express their doubts to the applicator or withdraw from the application.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed in the SPSS version 22 statistical program. Due to the nature of the data, the nonparametric

statistical test of the Rho Spearman relationship between variables was used, in addition to measures of central tendency.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic data

A total of six women from the shelter between the ages of 25 and 59 years, with an average age of 28.5 years, participated. The majority of the women (83%) had a maximum level of secondary education, the remainder had only primary education. Eighty-three percent of the women sheltered were mothers, with an average of 2 children per mother.

Descriptive data

A descriptive analysis of the results of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) showed that the mean score was 28, placing most of the sample at a moderate level of depressive symptomatology.

Regarding the anger-state, which refers to the sensations and desires to express anger while the test is being performed, that it is an emotion present in the participant on a regular basis, it was found that the mean obtained by the participants was higher than that of the general population. Now, in the anger-anger, which refers to the expression of anger towards situations or people in general and those that may represent a factor of frustration. It was found that the participants obtained lower means compared to the general population. Finally, in the expression and control of anger, it was found that the participants showed higher means in external and internal expression of anger and lower means in external and internal control of anger (See Table 1).

Table 1.

Comparison of means in the ML-STAXI.

Scale	Subscale	Mean in participants	Mean in general population
Anger-State	Desire to express anger	6.17	5.39
	Feeling angry	7.17	6.05
Anger-Trait	Angry reaction	8.17	10.28
	Angry temperament	8	9.05
Expression of anger	External	15.5	11.31
	Internal	13.83	11.89
Anger Management	External	7.83	19.64
	Internal	11.5	16.88

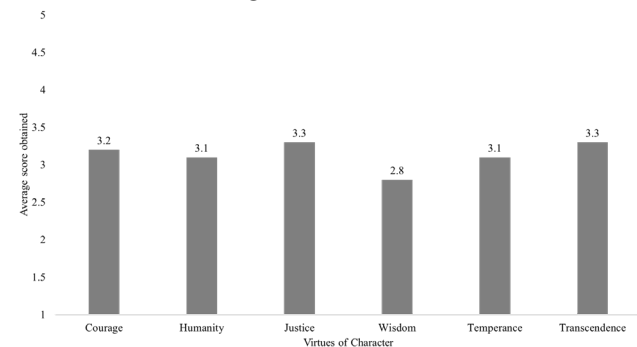
Note: Own elaboration

When analyzing the results obtained in the resilience instrument, it was found that 67% of participants obtained a medium level of resilience and the rest a high level. Likewise, it is recognized that the subscales of Social Support, Structure, and Social Competence were those in which more participants had higher averages.

Finally, the results of the Character Strengths Questionnaire show that the sample obtained adequate means in the character virtues except the virtue of justice, which is below the scores of the general population (See Figure 1). An adequate score is considered when the value is between 3 and 4.

Figure 1.

Character virtues average achieved.



Note: Own elaboration

On the other hand, when observing the character strengths scores, it was found that the highest, considering the means of the total sample, were Persistence, Gratitude, Hope, Fairness, and Appreciation. The lowest were Open-mindedness, Curiosity, Humor, Vitality, and Perspective (See Table 2).

Table 2.

Medians obtained in the Character Strengths Questionnaire

Strengths (high)	Means	Strengths (blow)	Means
Persistence	3.7	Open-mindedness	2.9
Gratitude	3.7	Curiosity	2.8
Hope	3.6	Humor	2.8
Fairness	3.5	Vitality	2.7
Appreciation	3.3	Perspective	2.7

Note: Own elaboration

Spearman's Rho test

Spearman's Rho nonparametric test was applied to determine whether there is a relationship between the variables evaluated in the participant population, which yielded the following results. When relating the anger and depression subscales, only a positive and statistically significant relationship was found between Internal Expression of Anger and depressive

symptomatology ($r=.829, p=.042$). When relating depressive symptomatology and resilience, a negative and statistically significant relationship was found ($r=-.943, p=.005$). Likewise, statistical relationships were found between the strengths of Learning, Integrity, Leadership, and Self-control with some subscales of the ML-STAXI (See Table 3).

Table 3.

Correlations between Character Strengths and Subscales of the ML-STAXI.

	Learning	Integrity	Leadership	Self-control
A-S	.883*			
A-T	.820*			
I-M		-.844*		
E-M		-.941**	-.812*	
Ex-Ex	.886*			.829*

Note: Own elaboration. A-S = Anger-State, A-T = Anger-Trait, I-M = Internal Management, E-M = External Management, Ext-Exp = External - Expression. *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral).

**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (bilateral).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results found here show similarity with others reported in research in different parts of the Mexican republic; for example, in the present study, it was found that the majority of participants (83%) had maximum schooling of high school, which coincides with that reported by Darcout (2017) and the Centro de Justicia para la Mujer (2016) in Torreón, Mexico, in which 70% and 50% of cases had primary or secondary schooling respectively. Likewise, Diaz et al. (2015) found that most of their sample (N=220) had a low schooling level in the Colombian population. Based on this, considering educational level as a risk factor is possible. It can also be related to other risks, such as economic dependence and lack of job opportunities.

Most of the participants have moderate depressive symptomatology, which indicates that clinically, these women present symptoms of deep sadness and hopelessness in their daily lives. In some cases, the presence of suicidal thoughts or ideation could be identified. This coincides with that reported by Amor et al. (2001) and Avdibegovic et al. (2017), who report an emotional profile characterized by an intense depressive state, feelings of abandonment, and isolation behaviors. It is thought that the obtained anger scores found describe the habitual lifestyle in which the women lived before entering the shelter since it is recognized that living for so long in a dynamic that makes it impossible to respond to discomfort or disagreement causes anger to concentrate and accumulate (anger-state) favoring a state of negative alertness that can trigger outbursts of anger (expression) without recognizing strategies for its

regulation (anger control). This is related to what was found by Avdibegovic and collaborators (2017), who found a profile of negative emotions such as aggression and destruction.

Regarding the positive variables, the role that entering the shelter may have played is recognized in similar studies such as those of Canaval and collaborators (2007) and Estrada and Tobo (2011), who, when evaluating women victims of violence who had received support, reported a resilience of moderate-high. Likewise, in a study by Cordero and Teyes (2016), they found that the factors that favored the construction of resilience in women victims of violence are social support.

In the population of this study, it was found that the most used virtues were those of courage, justice, and temperance, which is contrary to what was reported by Zavarce (2013), who, in a general adult population, without the presence of violence condition the most used virtues were those of justice, transcendence, and humanity. The differences in cultural, circumstantial, and life experience factors are probably the reason; however, it is worth commenting on the contrast since evaluations of positive psychology variables are scarce in institutional populations.

The study presented used a small sample from a single state of the Mexican Republic, so continuing with this type of research is essential to strengthen the scientific evidence on the characterization, implications, and effects of women who experience violence. Likewise, these data can be complemented with studies of women who do not choose to enter shelters, seek alternatives in their support networks, and may have different characteristics. An essential problem in the country is the number of shelters and their capacity to receive users. The shelter where this study was.

The shelter where this study was carried out has a reception limit of up to eight families (mothers and children), representing a very high cost since it implies investment in food, services, and salaries. In addition, these shelters cannot meet the needs of the country. In Hidalgo, Mexico, only one shelter provides this type of service (Toledo & Lachenal, 2015). Violence against women is a social problem that has a profound and severe impact on individuals, families, and communities, which leads to the conclusion that it is crucial to continue working on public policy measures to prevent intimate partner violence and to provide timely care for those who are already in a violent environment.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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