

Accounts of Brazilian Victims of Intimate Partner Violence Abroad on Smartphones and the Internet: Weapons or Tools?

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Abstract: *Access to information and the availability of making an informed and dignified decision are fundamental conditions to any immigrant, especially for women who are victims of intimate partner violence. Unfortunately, information on services for victims of intimate partner violence is not always available or where to find it is not always clearly disseminated. In this context, the advent of the Internet and social networks could have a very important role in changing this scenario, by facilitating the access to necessary information to deal with this situation. Although the Internet can be a useful tool to promote awareness about the issue of intimate partner violence and spread information about how to access social services, the online activity of many victims is monitored and, instead of serving as a tool, smartphones and computers can even become weapons. Victims also reported that information is hard to find and not necessarily available in their native languages. As such, there is an urgent need for up-to-date websites and informational videos to guide victims in resolving practical issues they face. In addition, the Internet and social media can be used to harass and stalk victims, steal money from them, and monitor their activities. With this in mind, this article seeks to discuss the relationship between immigrant victims of intimate partner violence and the use of the Internet, exploring the contradiction of the tool that at times is a means of access to information and independence and, at other times, is used by aggressors to reinforce the violent situation within the home.*

Keywords: Intimate Partner Violence, Cyber Abuse, Stalking, Brazilian migrants, Domestic Violence

1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence affects us all. No region or social class is immune, and both men and women can be victims of intimate partner violence. Intimate partner violence encompasses a wide range of abusive and controlling behaviors. Although physical violence is the most easily recognizable type of violence, psychological abuse, controlling behaviors, and financial abuse are also commonly recognized as types of intimate partner violence^{1,2,3}.

2. Literature Survey

In recent years, along with the growth of the Internet and technology, novel types of intimate partner violence, sometimes known as cyber violence or technology-facilitated abuse, have appeared^{4,5}. Research has shown how in recent years victims are harassed and stalked through social networking sites, text messages, and even by the installation of tracking or spy software or identity theft^{6,7}. Immigrant women are especially dependent on the Internet to maintain ties with family and friends in their home countries and especially vulnerable to attempts of control by limiting access to the Internet and social networks as they may be their sole source of communication with others⁵. Woodlock, Guruge and Humphreys (2009) noted that when immigrants move abroad, they often lose support from their families, friends, and other informal support networks⁸. However, few studies on technology-facilitated abuse are focused on the immigrant victim of intimate partner violence. In fact, the number of studies on technology and intimate partner violence in general is much less than would be expected given the importance of the Internet in modern day life⁶.

Although in the past, intimate partner violence research often clustered immigrant women into one group, Bhuyan and Senturia (2005) observe that this “falls short of accounting for the subtle distinctions between and within cultural groups differences that have a profound effect on how women experience and respond to violence⁹.” Poteyava and Wasileski (2016) found that immigrant women are at a higher risk of suffering abuse from partners and face numerous difficulties upon leaving abusive relationships¹⁰. Some of the difficulties immigrant victims of intimate partner violence face are related to social isolation, as they often live away from friends and family members), economic difficulties (due to underemployment or unemployment), and issues related to residency status. In addition to practical difficulties, Reina and Lohman (2014) cited cultural factors as a reason immigrant victims may be reluctant to leave their abusive partners¹¹.

2.1 Intimate Partner Violence and Brazilians Abroad

Brazil is the sixth most populous country in the world, with approximately 212.3 million people^{12,13}. It is also a country with significant inequality, which may lead to increased migration amongst certain social groups, such as women, a social group which is traditionally more vulnerable to both underemployment and violence. As mentioned by Johnson and Alloatti (2020), women were traditionally excluded from migration discourse, as they were considered to be passive companions to men who migrated¹⁴; however, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in 2019, almost 807,000 people left Brazil, 46% of whom were women. There was an increase in almost 100,000 people when compared to 2015, and the number has consistently increased since 2000. In regards to gender, the data show a pattern over the years, with men

representing almost 54% of immigrants and women around 46%¹⁵. According to the Brazilian government's most recent statistics, in 2016 approximately 3 million Brazilians live abroad¹⁶.

Brazilians are among the world's most active users of social media. In 2019, Facebook was the largest social network in the world¹⁷. Brazil is in third place in terms of the largest number of Facebook users, with 130 million accounts. The country is only behind India, with 300 million user accounts, and the United States, with 210 million user accounts, in total number of users. When calculated in percentages, this means that 23% of Indian users have Facebook access, compared to 64% of Americans and 62% of the Brazilian population. It is worth noting that Brazilians are in second place in the world in regards to the amount of time spent on social networks (on average 3 hours and 34 minutes per day), behind only Filipinos, who spend 4 hours and 12 minutes a day logged onto social networks¹⁷.

3. Methods / Approach

The challenges Brazilian women who experienced intimate partner violence abroad faced were explored in interviews with 12 Brazilian victims and 12 professionals who worked with these individuals as either psychologists or attorneys in Germany, Portugal, Japan, and the United States. Four countries were selected in order to discuss similarities and differences in women's experiences with intimate partner violence and possible causes of phenomena observed. A qualitative method was selected for the study in order to hear the voices of these victims and explore differences amongst the countries. The interviews were semi-structured and exploratory in nature. In all countries surveyed, victims reported problems with access to information, the absence of legal and financial autonomy, and the lack of social and legal protection.

4. Discussion

5.1 Cell phones and the internet—weapons or tools

Several themes emerged from the interviews with Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence, psychologists, and attorneys. At least two victims met their abusers online. One of the most persistent themes involved the use of cell phones and the Internet, both as a weapon, used to gain control of victims, and a tool, used to maintain connection with their families abroad and sometimes access information which could potentially help victims leave the abusive relationships. The use of the Internet and social networks emerged in conjunction with almost all other topics explored in the research, and there was a strong correlation between technology-assisted abuse and other types of abuse, such as physical and financial abuse.

One of the main uses cited of technology by victims involved keeping in touch with family and friends in Brazil. The importance of digital media to the maintenance of transnational families has been widely documented. Baldassar and Wilding (2019) noted, "Although essential to the well-being of older migrants, distant support networks and the digital kinning practices that sustain them receive

little attention from policy makers and health practitioners¹⁸." Although Baldassar and Wilding specifically referenced older adults, immigrant victims of intimate partner violence also use the Internet for social connection and support and protection of social identity. A Brazilian victim of intimate partner violence in Portugal noted fear of losing her support network, "The abuser is following me again, controlling my cellphone. He logs into my Facebook Messenger, and I use it to talk to my family and childhood friends in Brazil...I have a lot of friends in Brazil since I was a child and teenager, and I don't want to lose contact."

The current research also showed how practices at safehouses, although probably designed to ensure women's physical integrity, may make it difficult for victims of intimate partner violence to maintain contact with their families. A psychologist in Japan remarked on the difficulties victims face in losing their connection to the outside world:

To stay in this safehouse, the women doesn't have any contact with the external world...She can't even keep her cell phone...She can't let anyone know how she is doing or hear from anyone, neither her, nor her children. For Brazilian victims, this makes staying in a safehouse very difficult, because it is very different in a strange country, speaking another language, and completely isolated from everyone who can offer support or affection. Few women are able to stick with their decision.

A victim who spent time at a safehouse in Portugal commented, "There didn't give us access to the Internet in the safehouse. I was allowed to call my family, but if I hadn't had WhatsApp, I would have only been allowed to talk to them once a week for 2 or 3 minutes." Because she was not allowed to use her cellular phone and laptop to contact family members or monitor her finances online during the first two weeks at the safehouse, her abuser managed to empty their joint bank account, stealing her life's savings.

In some cases, especially when victims are not completely isolated or monitored, online social networks may help victims escape some of the isolation they would traditionally face. One psychologist in Japan noted that due to the Internet and interactions online Brazilian women today are less isolated than they were in the past, "More and more, social networks provide advice and women interact with each other."

One victim in Portugal explained how she was able to use her cell phone to tape the threats and abuse of her husband, "I taped the conversation...he told me go put your cell phone in the room. I started recording, rolled it in a sweatshirt that I had and put it in my lap, and I taped the audio." She noted that the audio was accepted in court; however, depending on the jurisdiction, conversations taped without consent of the other party are often not admissible in court. Although in this case, the outcome for the victim was positive, if her abuser had found out she was taping the conversation, the consequences could have been tragic.

Psychologists noted controlling of social media as a possible precursor to other types of abuse. One psychologist in Japan mentioned a patient who was a victim of psychological abuse, "They had agreed to erase the past. So, she can't have contact with anyone from the past. She had to erase all her contacts on social media. He gave his passwords so that she would give hers, but these small behaviors got more and more intense...If we focus on transforming the mentality of these women, we are able to prevent relationships with more serious abuse. It is already abusive, but we are able to prevent more violence if we are able to show this."

Several victims also noted how abusers used smartphones and the Internet to control them and how abusers tried to limit their contact with family members through mobile devices. A victim in Portugal told of how she was first kept from letting her family members know she had suffered a miscarriage, "Everything I wanted was for my mother to be there, everything that I wanted was to have my family by my side...They took out the baby, and I was there for two nights and three days in the hospital alone with him, with the cell phone off because he didn't allow me to let anyone in my family know." She added, "After we moved to Portugal, my ex wouldn't let me call my brother. I could only call my sisters, my mother, and my cousin, but it had to be on speakerphone. He never let me talk in private. I couldn't send emails or WhatsApp messages because he had my password." One victim in Germany told of how her abuser and his parents messaged her son in order to keep her under constant surveillance, "He turned my own child [from a previous union] against me and his parents did the same thing. My son sent them messages about what I was doing at home." When a woman has immigrated and lives far away from her family, limiting her access to virtual means of communication with her family can likely weaken family bonds even more than if she lived nearby.

Some behaviors similar to those previously classified as *obsessive relational intrusion* were reported by victims in the current study^{6,19}. A victim in Portugal explained how her abuser stalks her on social media, "He starts to follow me. He gets onto Instagram in someone else's name and says, 'I really like you', 'you are really pretty', and starts saying things he used to tell me in the past...I tell him leave me alone, and he blocks me. The Prosecutor told him not to invade my privacy on social networks, but he doesn't respect it. He is crazy." A victim in Germany noted how she was also stalked, "He liked to call me anonymously and make threats or ask where I was and who I was with. I changed my number 3 times. Finally, I left the old number activated just for him, and I have a new one he doesn't have." It is important to note that none of the victims who reported suffering from cyberstalking received effective assistance from the police when they sought help.

Several victims reported that their telephones or computers were thrown or destroyed by the abuser. One victim in Portugal noted,

Another thing - when we got married, he asked me for the password to my laptop, my cellphone, my Facebook password, my LinkedIn password, social media, Instagram, everything. He had all of my passwords and I had all of his. I never went into his accounts, but, for

example, when my father passed away, he posted under my account, without my authorization, asking for prayers and thanking others....He posted pictures on my Facebook account, tagging himself, to make it look like we were a very happy family....Two months after I first asked him for separation, I decided that he wasn't going to part ways amicably, so I decided to change my passwords, for both social networks and e-mail. He controlled me so much that he noticed the first day. I sent a desperate email to my brother, who told me to tape things in case something happened. When he found out I changed the passwords...he accused me of cheating on him. I told him that we spent 24 hours a day together and that we hadn't been working for almost a year. He told me that if I wouldn't give my password, it was okay, and he threw my laptop to the ground. I started to cry.

Another victim in Portugal said, "My phone was tapped, and I didn't know it. He heard all of my conversations. There was a camera at home, and I didn't know it. He got into my Facebook, my Messenger, and my WhatsApp to control me...He got on my phone while I was asleep and read everything. He is a hacker. He can do anything he wants to do."

Victims who reported cyber abuse also mentioned financial abuse through the use of technology. A victim in Germany told of how her abuser used her credit cards to pay for his bills online and also stole her identity online in order to make purchases:

After I moved to another city, the police here indicted me once for having shopped online and not paid. I was able to prove that at the time I wasn't in Germany and I was in a neighboring country on a trip. Nothing happened after that, but I also wasn't compensated. After everything that had happened, I lost faith in justice in Germany and simply gave up.

It is important to note that none of the victims interviewed who suffered from digital or technology-facilitated enabled violence was able to receive effective assistance from the police to combat the cyber abuse. Other researchers have found that laws have not been updated to adequately deal with the challenges of modern technology^{6,20}.

Problems with misinformation on the Internet were cited by interviewees. A psychologist in Portugal noted, "Brazilian victims in Portugal get a lot of information on the Internet, but I think that the help on Facebook hurts more than it helps. I see a lot of incorrect information. And a lot of pessimism, that everything is difficult." Such misinformation or pessimism might discourage women from seeking help. He compared the misinformation in Facebook groups to fake news.

When victims expose abuse in public groups online, they may face criticism or even bullying. An attorney in Germany commented on how Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence encounter criticism instead of support in online groups,

It is really odd. Some people offer help, while others only criticize the person... Sometimes a victim says, "my partner hit my child from a previous relationship," and another person says "you put your child at risk for a man", but how is the woman going to imagine that the guy is going to hit her son. These are unnecessary criticisms from other Brazilians, although you do see people that offer help, too, people that offer money. When I see a very extreme case, I offer my services regardless of payment...but unfortunately, there are people that are false, hypocritical, or attack these victims. Regardless of what the woman may or may not have done, she feels shamed, because sometimes other people seem to want to blame the woman that suffered abuse.

A victim in Portugal noted that she also sees harmful comments directed towards victims who post in online groups. She told of comments towards victims to the effect of, "You got married to get the nationality, now you have to put up with it and be beaten." Another victim in Germany observed, "I see comments such as, 'You scammed the foreigner and it didn't work out' or 'What did you think? That you were going to find a European prince?'" Because of this a lot of people don't ask for help, because they are already upset and they have to deal with jokes from fellow countrymen. This lowers anyone's morale."

A psychologist in Japan noted there are a few online Facebook groups for victims of intimate partner violence. One victim in Portugal mentioned that although not the main focus of the groups, it is more common to see the issue of intimate partner violence discussed in groups of Brazilian mothers than in other groups. A victim in Portugal also mentioned these groups, "There are a lot of informal support groups, and victims ask for help on Facebook, but I don't think it is a good idea because the abusers have access to Facebook." In some groups, there have been problems with confidentiality. As an example, in some groups for survivors of intimate partner violence, other members of the groups have taken screenshots and sent them to women's abusers, putting them in potentially dangerous situations.

Administrators of Facebook groups, often with little or no training on the subject of intimate partner violence, who are likely rarely employed in related fields are left to supervise conversations on difficult subjects. An attorney who coordinates a group notes that in her group, she tries to exclude people who judge victims, but posts regarding intimate partner violence are often either left unsupervised or blocked entirely. A victim expressed frustration with censorship noting how a message she wrote had been blocked on Facebook, "An attorney wrote that the police in Portugal are very helpful. I responded that they are not helpful, because I was a victim of intimate partner violence, and she hasn't been through that experience, and my message was blocked." However, if victims see posts on Facebook groups, for example, about individual police officers who were not helpful, as a group women may become reluctant to seek help, even when they need it.

A victim in Portugal also noted that instead of being helpful on Facebook groups, some people try to gain benefit at

others' expense by charging for services that are offered for free, "I think that Brazilians try to take advantage of each other. I see a lot of cases of people who get here and in the Facebook groups, they say, 'I need to get my NIF', which is the equivalent of the social security number here, and then you see another Brazilian 'look I can get one for you, but give me 20 €.'"

5.2 The Internet as a possible solution

Both professionals and victims noted that many Brazilian women are unaware of services available to victims of intimate partner violence in their communities. One difficulty immigrant victims of intimate partner violence may face is that of finding information in a foreign language. A psychologist in Japan noted, "Accessing formal services can be difficult because of prejudice since they are foreigners, since they are women, difficulty accessing information, knowing where she has to look, what she has to say, what she has to ask for, because it isn't her habitat...because she doesn't know how to get to these places. A crisis hotline worker cited the language and lack of knowledge of how the system works as problems Brazilian victims in the United States face.

Several psychologists and attorneys interviewed cited the Internet as the ideal medium for disseminating resources for Brazilian victims of intimate partner violence. A crisis hotline worker in Orlando pointed out the potential of reaching Brazilian immigrants in the United States online. "Well, through the Internet. Brazilians have their own Facebook groups and social media groups. A lot of the Brazilian communities have their own groups on Facebook or Instagram."

Although both psychologists and attorneys interviewed cited online resources for victims of intimate partner violence, the victims themselves reported difficulty finding information. One victim in Germany, with limited German language skills, noted that she searched for resources online in both English and Portuguese and was unable to find information about resources for victims of intimate partner violence. Another victim in Portugal noted that she was unable to search for information about intimate partner violence online because her abuser went through her search history daily; however, she noted that she has searched even recently and there is little information online.

One psychologist in Japan noted the importance of getting public figures, such as youtubers, to talk about the issue, because of their influence on the Brazilian population. She suggested a popular youtuber who teaches Japanese online from the channel Nihongando com Amanda, as a potential way to reach victims in Japan. Youtubers are an important feature of modern Brazilian culture. She cited a need to be more vague in order to capture women who are at risk of more serious violence in the future, "I think when you say 'if you are a victim of domestic violence directly' you don't necessarily get the public you need...A lot of times a woman hasn't suffered physical or sexual violence and she doesn't know she is a victim. So to have a campaign that is really able to reach a larger public, which isn't people at this level of violence, you need to have small affirmations, like

‘if you can’t stand your husband watching you and feel controlled’, to get those more key behaviors.”

Professionals also cited the need for reinforcement of traditional means of getting information to victims. A crisis hotline worker in Orlando noted that posted announcements at the popular Brazilian supermarket could be a good way to reach Brazilian victims there. She observed that she has seen business cards from attorneys and resources from the community or the churches advertised at the market. In addition to online resources, a psychologist in Japan also recommended putting information about intimate partner violence in places only women go, such women’s restrooms. This is also important as victims’ online behavior may be controlled by aggressors.

Some service providers cited participating in Internet lives on the topic of intimate partner violence. However, one psychologist in Japan cited a problem she faced when she tried to disseminate information about the topic through Facebook lives.

In a live I was doing about relationships at least 5 women said something like, ‘I am participating here, but I am afraid of my husband coming in and finding out that I am watching.’ So we see that all of the sudden people would leave the live and come back, and it seemed it could be something like that. They have to hide it, even to do therapy. When they seek help, they always say, ‘I want therapy. I am just going to do it when my husband isn’t at home,’ because if he is nearby she isn’t going to be able to talk.

A crisis hotline worker from Orlando, Florida, in the United States, noted that most victims of intimate partner violence who are invited to participate in an educational program offered by the police department on domestic violence do not attend the course. She offered several possible explanations as to why they may not attend, including shame or practical concerns. She gave the possibility of an online session with a live teacher offered over Zoom as a potential solution to the lack of attendance, so that victims would be able to ask questions and be provided with the information they need. She noted that in such a class, victims would have the ability to turn off their cameras, to eliminate privacy concerns. A taped session could also be an alternative, as many victims have small children or may stay with their abusers, so being able to select a time to watch the class in private might be helpful.

Although lives are helpful, given the dangerous circumstances that abused women face and also because recorded information sessions will likely have more views because they can be accessed at any time, it is recommended that short, and potentially professionally produced informational videos be created for victims of intimate partner violence. Instead of long videos about multiple topics, the most appropriate formatting might be by dividing them into quick topics that the victims could view in secrecy. In addition to information about services for victims of intimate partner violence in a particular geographic region, other services, such as interpreters, were found to be unavailable in certain regions. Although the Internet and

machine translation services may provide limited help, they have some limitations. A psychologist in Japan noted, “I have noticed that in hospitals, companies, and organizations, as I said the Japanese person is welcoming and tries to communicate. They are going to try hard to understand you, for example, they pull up Google translator on the phone and tell you to translate. This may help, but if you need to fill out a form or make another type of request, you will need more Japanese.” Although in person interpretation services might be ideal, interpretation services by video with trained and specialized professionals could be a solution to this shortage for police stations, town halls, and hospitals who work with foreign victims of intimate partner violence.

Professionals in Japan also noted a lack of services for Brazilian immigrants with alcohol and substance abuse problems. Addiction to alcohol or narcotics was cited as a factor or aggravator in many cases of intimate partner violence. The promotion of treatment programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous programs in Portuguese for Brazilians living abroad could potentially help treat these abusers and reduce or eliminate violence in some homes.

An attorney in Germany noted that finding a Portuguese speaking psychologist for therapy in Germany is very difficult, “Sometimes health plans don’t cover therapy, or when a doctor prescribes therapy...it can take two to three months for the person to find an opening...and it is certainly much more difficult in Portuguese. A Brazilian psychologist has to be registered here, too, and it isn’t easy for a psychologist to become a clinician, because in Germany there is a separate course for giving consultation, and the Brazilian degrees aren’t recognized. Therapy is available online from Brazil, but it is expensive and not everyone has money left over for therapy, because you don’t go to a psychologist once, you go for ten or twenty sessions.” Expanded use of online therapy for foreign victims of intimate partner violence could help fill this void.

Another area observed where Brazilian victims face significant difficulties is in learning the language of their new home country, sometimes because of family and work obligations. Victims in Germany cited difficulty obtaining B1 level proficiency, which is necessary to obtain permanent residency or citizenship and also to qualify for vocational training or find jobs in most areas. During the Covid-19 pandemic, even schools which did not traditionally teach online courses were forced to adopt new methods, with online courses. The Goethe-Institut, a prestigious German language school has three options for online classes—online classes without a teacher, online classes with a private tutor a few hours a week, and online classes with group video lessons. A victim in Germany who has chosen to stay with her abuser because she does not have a good enough command of German to secure employment noted, however, that her government funded German classes were cancelled during the pandemic. Another victim noted that advanced level German classes were much more expensive than lower levels, and she couldn’t continue the in-person courses offered by the German government. The government could help immigrants continue to learn the language by providing online courses, while possibly also saving money. Also, if learners were offered a hybrid learning system with

exercises they could complete levels at their own pace and at their own convenience, and students having difficulty might be able to overcome challenges with specific areas of language learning and obtain B1 proficiency faster.

Both psychologists and attorneys agreed that getting the word out about available services is critical. Social service and government agencies should take measures to keep up with the times, providing digital resources which are up-to-date and provide victims with valuable information to help ensure their safety. It would be especially helpful if these videos were available on popular platforms, such as YouTube, because victims have demonstrated difficulty finding the homepages of social service agencies. In order to obtain a larger audience, short informational videos about resources could start with introductions by popular Brazilian bloggers, youtubers, Instagrammers, or even public figures. Some ideas of topics for videos identified during this research would include both general information and specific information about local resources, such as:

- 1) What is a restraining order, and how do I get one locally (in Germany, Japan, Portugal, the United States, etc.)? (with information on where to go to seek help, what to expect during the what kind of proof to bring, application process, etc.)
- 2) How to protect my financial assets in a violent relationship
- 3) Going to a shelter (what do I need to take, what should I expect during my time in the shelter, do I have any other options)
- 4) How to seek long-term housing
- 5) Job training and educational opportunities available to victims
- 6) Brief information about police units specialized in domestic violence such as Portugal's Espaço Júlia
- 7) Child custody and intimate partner violence

5. Conclusion

Technology plays a complicated role in the lives of Brazilian women who face intimate partner violence abroad. While the use of technology allows women to maintain contact with family and friends and access information which may help them to leave abusive relationships, some abusers also use technology to stalk and monitor their victims or control their usage of social media and messaging applications. Although all of the interviewees were of Brazilian nationality, it is likely that women of other nationalities face similar problems with technology.

Although technology has great potential as a tool to help victims of intimate partner violence, much room remains for improvement. Victims noted trouble finding information about available resources online. Detailed information is not necessarily available online and may also not be available in the native language of the victim. In addition, in today's ever increasingly digital society, additional online resources, such as practical videos on how to deal with specific aspects of violence, educational classes for victims, and language courses could help these women.

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