

Cultural Issues Affecting  
Domestic Violence Service Utilization  
in Ethnic and Hard to Reach Populations

Executive Summary

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*Participating Agencies*

Consejo Counseling Services

East Cherry YWCA

Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans and Lesbian Survivors of Abuse  
(formerly Advocates for Abused and Battered Lesbians)

Refugee Women's Alliance

Seattle Indian Health Board

Seattle's Human Services Department, Domestic & Sexual Violence  
Prevention Office

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Public Health-Seattle & King County web site at  
<http://www.metrokc.gov/health/dv/dvreport.htm>.

## ***Background***

This research provides a window into the experience of domestic violence among women from eight ethnic minority communities and among lesbian/bisexual/trans (LBT) people. It details their stories of struggle and strength in addressing DV. This report is based on qualitative research, the purpose of which was to understand the depth and complexity of women's experiences in their cultural context. The richness of this report lies in the stories that women told. While many diverse groups participated in the research, commonalities of experience across cultural groups emerged: participants in this project share a common struggle against DV in their lives.

The City of Seattle's Domestic Violence Council (DVC) has had an interest in understanding the prevalence of domestic violence in Seattle and also the context in which violence takes place. A priority raised through a community stakeholder process was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of ethnic minority communities with domestic violence. The Health Department, as a member of the DVC, was asked to take the lead role in identifying potential sources of funding to support this work. This project is a result of this process.

This project gathered information on two specific topic areas: 1) access to and satisfaction with domestic violence (DV) services for certain women who are experiencing DV in Seattle (King County), Washington, and 2) the cultural experience of DV for women from specific ethnic groups and the LBT community in Seattle. The research was conducted in close partnership with the following community-based agencies: Consejo Counseling Services, East Cherry YWCA, the Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans and Lesbian Survivors of Abuse (formerly AABL), Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA), and the Seattle Indian Health Board. All provide services to victims/survivors of DV. Partnership among the Health Department and University researchers, advocates and agencies was essential to the success of this project and has ensured that the findings are relevant and usable.

Qualitative data were collected through focus groups and one-on-one interviews. Participating women were from the following communities and had all experienced DV: African American, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Amharic-speaking (Ethiopian), Cambodian, Filipina, Latina, LBT community, Russian-speaking, and Vietnamese. All focus groups and interviews were conducted in women's first languages by bi-cultural facilitators.

## ***Summary of Key Findings Across Cultural Groups***

In this summary we present key findings across cultural groups. The full report presents findings for each cultural group in detail. While there are many issues that are particular to individual cultural groups, there are also many commonalities across groups. We believe that these issues are relevant for other cultural groups in addition to the ones we

studied and may be helpful for understanding the experience of non-majority women in general.

While women from the communities included in the study experience forms of abuse that are very similar to those reported in the mainstream literature, it is clear that there are unique forms of abuse that non-majority women face. First, it is important to understand that domestic violence in these communities often takes place against the back-drop of social and economic marginalization. Among the English-speaking groups with which we worked, women frequently situated their experiences within the context of racial, sexual and economic oppression and for LBT people, societal homophobia. For non-English speaking women the back-drop sometimes includes major social upheaval including prior political oppression, war, and the strains of immigration and acculturation.

Participants reported multiple forms of domestic violence including emotional abuse, all forms of physical violence, sexual abuse/rape, lack of access to money and resources, and isolation from family and friends. Unique features for these survivors included threats based on immigration/visa status, threats against extended family, using minority status and language competence against women, and pressure to accept abuse and not seek help outside of the community. These issues compound the difficulty women from non-majority communities experience in seeking help. Even if help is available, and women know about it, it is often not culturally or linguistically appropriate, which is a further barrier to gaining assistance.

Across the groups, survivors described personal feelings of shame and humiliation, belief that abuse is “normal”, a commitment to keeping the family together, lack of economic resources, and the inability to speak English, all of which add significantly to the complexity of dealing with a domestic violence situation. Women in focus groups repeatedly said that they had nowhere to go when they experienced abuse, had few personal economic resources to draw upon and had difficulty finding out about culture- and language-specific DV services in Seattle.

### ***Responses to Abuse***

Women from immigrant and refugee communities reported pressure not to go outside of the family or community with what is considered a private family matter. Many women who are new to this country are now learning that they have a right to live free of violence and that help is available. LBT people had difficulty labeling abusive partners’ behavior as DV and confusion with identifying themselves as the victim or perpetrator. Many participants said that abuse eroded their self-esteem; personal embarrassment and shame kept them from seeking services. In addition, responding to abuse is made more difficult as a result of the abusers’ threats against them, their children, and those that might help them. Lack of material resources is a significant barrier for non-mainstream women seeking safety, particularly for non-English-speaking women and those who have not previously worked outside of the home to support themselves and their children. Women often reported seeking help when they reached a “breaking point”, when they

found out about resources, when the abuse escalated, or when they perceived themselves or their children to be at increased risk.

### ***Survivors' Needs***

Women across groups spoke of a profound need for social support when they are experiencing and recovering from DV. Since isolation is so often a tactic of abusers and since women in many of the cultural groups are already isolated by virtue of language ability and immigration status, the participants' emphasis on social support cannot be overstated. Some women thought of support in terms of a non-judgmental provider, often someone who had survived DV and could help a woman think and talk through her situation. Others described wanting social support in a community setting in which groups of women could come together for mutual support and to combat loneliness and isolation.

Participants in all cultural groups discussed significant material needs that can be barriers to seeking services or leaving a violent relationship. We heard frequently that lack of safe and affordable housing often keeps women in DV relationships. Additionally, women had significant needs for childcare and transportation. Many women expressed a desire for education and training so that they could develop the skills they need to live independently and free of violence.

Particularly for refugee and immigrant women, lack of knowledge about U.S. law, women's rights and resources to help with safety, immigration and legal issues were all seen as major barriers. Many reported that in their home countries domestic violence resources are simply not available; therefore the notion that outsiders will help is a new idea.

### ***Experiences with services***

Participants in focus groups reported using a variety of services, including community-based DV services, police, legal aid, courts and other social services. It should be noted that since non-English-speaking and LBT people were primarily recruited into the study by specialized service providers there is a bias in these groups towards users of services. Based on reports by participants, many services are working well for women in these cultural groups, particularly culturally-specific, community-based advocacy. Many participants describe such advocacy as their link to mainstream services and systems. Among services that do not work well, some women singled out shelters for having stringent rules and lacking privacy. Additionally, for many women shelter space was not available when they needed it. Legal services were problematic for some women who reported long waiting periods for assistance.

Across groups, participants stressed the importance of receiving services from others who share their culture and language. Trust, level of understanding, and increased comfort level with same-culture providers were all cited as important.

For those who used criminal justice services, experiences were mixed. Some participants had positive experiences with police who responded appropriately, thoroughly investigated the crime, and made referrals to community-based DV providers. Others reported negative experiences with police including feeling as if they had no rights, insensitivity on the part of officers, and problems with enforcement of protection orders. Among immigrant women, some aspects of the legal system were thought to be helpful and protective of women, but access is difficult without culture- and language-specific advocacy. Long waiting periods for such advocacy was mentioned as a barrier.

### ***Ideas for Helping Other Women***

Across communities, survivors see themselves as instrumental in helping other women and their communities address domestic violence. Isolated victims/survivors expressed strong desire for opportunities to get together with other women and organize themselves and their communities against abuse. Participants envision safe gathering spaces for women, such as women's centers or other community spaces for survivors to receive support from their communities. Women would provide each other with support, help to reduce isolation and learn skills for independence from each other. For immigrant and refugee women learning and skill building were viewed as critical to dealing with abuse. They expressed a desire to learn English, job skills, banking, driving and other essential life skills.

Access to and understanding of mainstream systems such as police, legal services, courts and mainstream community-based providers is essential. Culturally and linguistically appropriate advocacy is very important for helping non-mainstream women access these services. Availability of housing, money, and transportation sometimes dictates whether or not women can escape abuse and find safety.

Participants across groups called for more focus on men/abusers, including batterers' treatment and accountability. Many cultural groups place a strong value on keeping the family and the community intact. Participants said that because of this they would like help intervening with the abuser, to help the family or the relationship stay together. For small communities (such as recent immigrants and LBT) this is particularly important since victims/survivors are likely to have difficulty escaping their batterers. Across groups there was a call for increased focus on children and their needs related to family violence. Participants wanted enhanced service delivery and additional supports in the community to assist those children who have witnessed DV. Participants also saw education of children as central to stopping violence; they called for teaching young children models of healthy relationships and how to live violence-free lives. Culturally appropriate community education was suggested as a way to increase awareness about the issue and provide information to victims on resources in the community. In many communities, local institutions were seen as central to this effort—including religious institutions that in some communities have traditionally been silent on this issue or recommended that women endure abuse.

### ***Implications for the criminal justice system***

This research identified a number of barriers that inhibit access to the justice system. Participants reported being afraid of: accessing police and courts without the backup of some shelter to go to; police arresting the wrong person; losing the perpetrator's economic support if he goes to jail; contacting "the system" (which may lead to repercussions such as CPS intervention); and further angering the abuser and exacerbating the abuse, especially if the perpetrator has threatened to kill the victim if police are contacted. For immigrant women, the fears are compounded by a fear of deportation and immigration problems (sometimes due to the abusers' threats).

Participants recognized that intervention by police or the courts is sometimes delayed and often temporary. They are concerned that police response is too slow to help in emergencies and that the length of time needed to get a protection order means lack of protection for some period of time. They recognized that jail is temporary but a perpetrator's determination is long-term. Furthermore, neither jail nor court proceedings can guarantee safety.

Victims/survivors have a number of personal and cultural beliefs which also inhibit access to the justice system. Some do not want to let others know about their problems due to shame and embarrassment. Others do not want "the police in my business." Some in same-sex relationships feel that police do not take them seriously. Women and recent immigrants from several cultures report that police only respond if there is physical violence. Non-English-speakers are unaware of justice services, and lack the ability to communicate in order to access them. Many believe that legal help costs money that women do not have. For certain women, the community sanctions which occur if a husband is sent to jail outweigh the risks of staying in an abusive relationship. Finally, the isolation, threats and intimidation that are powerful tools of perpetrators of DV are some of the most important factors that work against victims/survivors trying to access services. Because barriers to accessing the justice system exist on many levels, various strategies should be employed to improve access.

### ***Recommendations***

The following are summarized key recommendations for improving responsiveness to ethnic minority women and LBT people. More formal and specific recommendations will emerge from our on-going dialogue with DV service providers, systems leaders and community leaders about the findings. Recommendations presented here are based on suggestions from participants themselves as well as interpretation of the data. Although some recommendations may also be relevant for mainstream communities, it is important to recognize the complexity of DV for disadvantaged and marginalized victims. Efforts to address DV in these communities must also address underlying social issues such as racism, homophobia, and economic discrimination and recognize the relationship of these forces to DV, to victims' responses, and to system responses. The recommendations are organized into three categories: systems level (public sector systems); service level (community-based services); and community level.

### *Systems level*

- Regulate international marriages by prohibiting those convicted of DV offenses from bringing a spouse from overseas.
- Provide women entering the U.S. with information in their own languages about DV resources available here.
- Provide information on U.S. law, government services and immigration services as they relate to domestic violence to women entering the country.
- Maintain what remains of the social safety net and give special consideration to DV victims/survivors.
- Reduce barriers to using the criminal justice system for non-mainstream women; lack of knowledge of the system, lack of trust, racism, homophobia, historic relationships and fear of stereotyping are all barriers to using services.
- Provide additional specialized training and skill development for child welfare workers with particular attention to the differences in family dynamics and parenting styles across cultures. Innovative programs which seek to provide supportive services to families within the context of their cultural norms might usefully bridge the gap between the need for services and the fear of interference.
- Improve child support enforcement and investigation. Child support is an important means of support for victims with children who are leaving abusive relationships.

### *Service level*

- Incorporate ways to address the extreme isolation many victims are experiencing.
- Fund same culture and language support groups to serve as a forum for victims to organize themselves and their communities against domestic violence, and reach out to other victims.
- Continue to support community-based, culturally and linguistically appropriate services for non-mainstream women. Such services are a viable model for serving an increasingly diverse U.S. population.
- Provide options for all women. Mainstream services must make their services more accessible to all victims by reaching out to women of color and LBT people, hiring bilingual and bicultural staff and training staff on the issues women from diverse cultural groups face in responding to DV.
- Develop multiple strategies for outreach in non-mainstream communities, including cultivating networks of survivors to do word-of-mouth outreach, and advertisement in community newspapers, on buses and through community institutions. Additionally in several communities, ads on language-specific radio stations are critical for reaching isolated and women who are unable to read.
- Provide more housing of all types, including emergency shelter, transitional housing, and long-term affordable housing. Focus group participants challenge all of us to advocate for more low-income housing so women do not have to choose between homelessness and violence.
- Expand community-based DV services to help victims/survivors access education, jobs, and job training programs to help them acquire the skills to

support themselves and their children. For non-English speaking women, expanded services should include ESL programs and teaching other basic skills such as how to use the bank, take public transportation and access various community services.

- Expand childcare in shelters and transitional housing as well as in the community at large. Because victims leaving DV situations often have to cut ties with family and community, they may be particularly challenged to find safe and affordable care for their children.
- Provide counseling, and recreational activities, and promote support in the community for youth to develop healthy relationships.

### *Community level*

- Implement culturally and linguistically appropriate community education campaigns to raise awareness about DV and how victims can get help.
- Develop and implement educational programs that promote healthy family relationships and provide culturally appropriate models of such relationships in the schools.
- Provide information to women about their right to live without violence and to get help for DV. Provide information on how the law can help to protect women.
- Provide information to community members about how they can best help and support those in DV situations.