

## Addressing Domestic Violence in Immigrant Communities: Critical Issues for Culturally Competent Services

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*“Increasing culturally competent domestic violence services to immigrant survivors and their communities entails understanding the complexities of survivors’ lives and the barriers survivors overcome when deciding to seek help. The research reviewed here found that several aspects of immigrant survivors’ lives influence their domestic violence experiences. Some of these aspects are specifically linked to experiences and realities of being an immigrant woman.”*

Applied Research papers synthesize and interpret current research on violence against women, offering a review of the literature and implications for policy and practice.

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Immigrant women as a social category are a diverse group. In the U.S., there are approximately 18 million women and girls who have emigrated from many countries around the world, under a myriad of circumstances, and with different types of immigration status (American Community Survey, 2008). They are from various socio-economic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Their age, sexual orientation, individual abilities, and levels of acculturation to the mainstream society vary. Amidst this diversity, immigrant women may share experiences, everyday realities, and a collective identity as immigrants, making them different from the mainstream society. These differences and similarities among immigrant women pose challenges in offering services to immigrant survivors of domestic violence, as well as highlight the importance of culturally competent services<sup>1</sup>.

Central to culturally competent domestic violence services to immigrant women is an in-depth understanding of domestic violence in immigrant communities. Cultural competence is a process that involves individual practitioners and systems responding to their clients in ways that recognize, value, and respect the clients’ cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors (NASW National Committee on Racial and Ethnic Diversity, 2001; Rothman, 2008). In offering culturally competent domestic violence services to immigrant women, knowledge about socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts within which immigrant women experience domestic violence can be a useful guide. Such knowledge may contribute to the development and implementation of policies, programs, and approaches that respectfully as well as effectively respond to the unique and specific needs of immigrant survivors. With this purpose in mind, this paper focuses on what we can learn from existing research on immigrant women and domestic violence.

This paper is organized into three sections: 1) overview of methodological issues in research used to generate knowledge

of the nature and dynamics of domestic violence in immigrant communities; 2) research findings that help us understand the broad contexts within which immigrant women experience domestic violence; and 3) considerations for culturally competent services. Legal protections available for immigrant women survivors are discussed in another VAWnet Applied Research document by Shetty and Kaguyutan (2002) and, therefore, are not discussed in this paper. The terms “immigrant women survivors,” “immigrant survivors,” and “survivors” are used throughout this paper to refer to immigrant women who survive domestic violence.

### **Research on domestic violence in immigrant communities**

Relatively little research exists on domestic violence in immigrant communities, and most have methodological limitations. In an extensive review of literature, Yoshihama (2008) identified the following methodological limitations commonly found in research on domestic violence in immigrant communities:

- *Exclusion* - Large-scale studies tend to exclude certain groups because interviewers recruited may not be able to speak languages spoken by these groups;
- *Uneven attention* - Research focuses mostly on Latina/Hispanics and Asians, and there is limited research focusing on other groups, such as Arabs, Africans, Caribbeans, and Europeans;
- *Aggregation* - Many studies aggregate subgroups of immigrant populations, which prevent identification of within-group variation;
- *Lack of attention to socio-cultural context* - Standardized instruments used in many studies are based on experiences of the mainstream population and may not be relevant to immigrant populations or may be interpreted differently by different groups; and
- *Limited comparability* - Existing studies vary in sampling criteria, measures used, data collection methods, and study framework, resulting in limited comparability of findings between studies.

While these limitations pertain mainly to quantitative studies, most qualitative studies of domestic violence in immigrant communities are based on relatively small samples of specific immigrant groups. This means that findings from these qualitative studies cannot be applied to immigrant women survivors who are not in these studies. Nevertheless, these qualitative studies generate a greater understanding and knowledge of domestic violence among those directly studied, as they situate the survivors’ domestic violence experiences within their specific social and cultural environment. Findings of these studies are discussed in the next section.

### **Domestic violence in context: A research review**

The contexts surrounding immigrant women’s experiences of domestic violence comprise formal and informal institutions, such as the U.S. immigration agency, employment agencies, communities, families, and their norms, values and practices. Within these contexts, a woman holds many social positions and these may overlap (Crenshaw, 1995; Shields, 2008). For example, an immigrant woman is (or is seen as) a woman, an immigrant, a mother, a partner, a daughter-in-law, a community member, an employee, and so on. She may be all of these at the same time or at different times. These social positions may increase or decrease her vulnerability to domestic violence. An understanding of these multiple contexts of domestic violence facilitates the development and implementation of culturally competent services to immigrant women. This section draws on existing research to describe these contexts, beginning with immigration status as a societal context of immigrant women’s lives.

#### ***Immigration status***

A survivor’s immigration status influences her access to legal protections, which in turn influences her risk for domestic violence. Abusive partners often use survivors’ immigration status to threaten them with deportation and to control them in various ways. For example, a study with 24 Russian-speaking immigrant women found that some abusive men used

threats of deportation, did not complete necessary paperwork for their partners, and did not allow their partners to acquire permanent resident cards (Crandall, Senturia, Sullivan, & Shiu-Thornton, 2005). This type of power and control is facilitated by legal immigration procedures that allow citizens or legal residents control over filing their foreign partners' immigration papers (Dutton, Orloff, & Hass, 2000). The U.S. Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) includes a provision for immigrant survivors to self-petition to obtain permanent resident statuses. While this opens up opportunities for immigrant survivors to leave abusive partners, studies have found that many immigrant women survivors were not aware of how legal systems work, legal protections available to them, or the necessity to gather evidence of abuse (Bhuyan, Mell, Senturia, Sullivan, & Shiu-Thornton, 2005; Crandall et al., 2005; Sullivan et al., 2005; Latta & Goodman, 2005; Ingram et al., 2010).

Immigration status influences survivors' responses to domestic violence. Survivors often consider their immigration status, as well as that of their partners, when deciding to (or not to) report domestic violence to the police. Studies have found that many immigrant survivors do not report domestic violence out of fear that their partners may go to jail and be deported, or that they and their children may be deported along with their partners (Sullivan, Senturia, Negash, Shiu-Thornton, & Giday, 2005; Acevedo, 2000; Shiu-Thornton, Senturia, & Sullivan, 2005). Thus, a woman's immigration status can limit her access to legal services and her opportunities to escape domestic violence. Immigrant status also influences employment opportunities, which may affect a survivor's ability to seek help or escape domestic violence. This is discussed next.

### ***Employment and financial independence***

Paid employment and financial independence can provide a means for survivors to escape violence, as financial resources can be used to plan for safety or leave abusive partners. Access to financial resources may also provide a sense of empowerment. For example, in a study with 20 Mexican immigrant

women and men, women reported that employment and access to regular income empowered them to tell their partners that they would not tolerate ill-treatment, and several women reported positive changes in their partners' behaviors (Grzywacz, Rao, Gentry, Marin, & Arcury, 2009). However, studies have found that many immigrant women in domestic violence situations had limited financial resources (Erez et al., 2009; Crandall et al., 2005; Bhuyan et al., 2005; Morash, Bui, Zhang, & Holtfreter, 2007; Abraham, 2000a). This may be partly due to some survivors having immigration statuses that did not grant them legal work permits. Even when immigrant survivors have legal work permits, many may not be employable because jobs in the U.S. often require specific skills, such as English language, driving, computer skills, reading maps and bus schedules, etc. Training and education received in their home country may not be comparable in the U.S. (Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2009).

Furthermore, studies have found that some immigrant women survivors working outside their home gave their earnings to their abusive partners who controlled household finances (Abraham, 2000a; Erez et al., 2009; Crandall et al., 2005; Bhuyan et al., 2005). By controlling household finances, abusive partners may have limited the survivors' ability to escape violence. This suggests that although employment has an important role in increasing survivors' safety, it may not be adequate by itself. Immigrant survivors' social networks can be important in increasing their safety, and they are discussed next.

### ***Community, extended family, and nuclear family***

Immigrant women survivors' community, extended family, and nuclear family play a major role in domestic violence situations. Many survivors have close ties with their communities and extended family members who condone or contribute to domestic violence by pressuring the survivors to stay with their abusive partners. This pressure may take several forms. It may be in the form of advice to not report abuse to the police and regard domestic violence as a private matter to be kept within the

family (Bhuyan et al., 2005). In a study with 18 Ethiopian immigrants, a few survivors talked about intimidation from community members or their husbands' friends when they engaged the criminal justice system (Sullivan et al., 2005). The pressure may also come as a threat to abandon or disown survivors if they leave their partners. And those who leave their partners may face social stigma, attributing divorce or separation to a woman's moral character and viewing them as bringing shame and dishonor to their families (Abraham, 2000a; Bui, 2003; Dasgupta, 2005; Shiu-Thornton et al., 2005; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2009). Rigid adherence to religious views of marriage as a life-long union may reinforce this social stigma. Such stigmatization can also prevent women who leave abusive partners from returning to their communities (Runner, Yoshihama, & Novick, 2009). In addition to these pressures to tolerate domestic violence, immigrant survivors' friends and extended family members may also participate in the abuse.

Domestic violence experienced by immigrant survivors can go beyond intimate partner violence to include extended family members and friends who may directly or indirectly participate in abuse (Kim, 2002). For example, in a study with 39 Cambodian survivors, many talked about domestic violence perpetrated by their husbands but some also talked about older family members, particularly father- and mother-in-laws, who abused them emotionally and verbally and required them to do most of the household work (Bhuyan et al., 2005). Furthermore, extended family members and abusive partners' friends may encourage abuse by supporting abusers and blaming survivors' for causing abuse or jeopardizing the abusers' immigration status (Shiu-Thornton et al., 2005; Abraham, 2000).

In some cases, extended family members can also be a part of survivors' support networks. For example, in a study with 17 immigrant women who self-petitioned under VAWA, some women reported that they found out about VAWA self-petition from their extended family members and some received emotional support from their family networks during

the self-petition process (Ingram et al., 2010). This suggests the important role of extended family members in preventing and responding to domestic violence.

Immigrant survivors' immediate family members also influence their domestic violence experiences. Concern about children's safety and wellbeing is often a primary reason for survivors to seek outside help or to stay in abusive relationships (Acevedo, 2000; Bui, 2003; Sullivan et al., 2005; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2009). When their children's safety is at risk, survivors may even take their children and flee to their countries of origin (Shetty & Edleson, 2005). This is viewed as abduction under the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. Abusive partners who are immigrants may also take their children and flee to their countries of origin. On the other hand, survivors may stay with their abusive partners out of concern for their children's wellbeing. In many studies, survivors reported being concerned that if they left their partners, they might lose custody of their children (Morash et al., 2007; Crandall et al., 2005); jeopardize their children's visas (Erez, et al., 2009), their children might react negatively to leaving their fathers (Shiu-Thornton et al., 2005), and they may be unable to financially support their children (Bhuyan et al., 2005; Sullivan et al., 2005). Immigrant women may also choose to stay with their abusive partners and work toward ending abuse because of their personal, cultural, and religious views of marriage as a life-long union (Crandall et al., 2005; Shiu-Thornton et al., 2005; Bhuyan et al., 2005; Sullivan et al., 2005; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2009).

Thus, community, extended family and friends, and immediate family affect how survivors respond to domestic violence. In some cases, as discussed next, abusive partners may prevent immigrant women from leaving them by using tactics to socially isolate them, thereby curtailing survivors' opportunities to escape domestic violence.

***Social isolation***

Social isolation masks domestic violence experienced by immigrant women, while giving spaces for their partners to continue the abuse. In several studies, immigrant women survivors reported experiencing social isolation, in part because when they emigrated they left behind their supportive social networks (Abraham, 2000a; Erez et al., 2009; Shiu-Thornton et al., 2005; Sullivan et al., 2005; Ting & Panchanadeswaran, 2009). This social isolation can be exacerbated by language barriers, negative experiences with or perceptions of the criminal justice system in their countries of origin, media news about anti-immigrant sentiments, and lack of access to English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, services with multi-lingual staff, and public transportation services. (Acevedo, 2000; Bui, 2003; Erez, Adelman, & Gregory, 2009; Kasturirangan, Krishnan, & Riger, 2004). Some of these barriers are more severe in rural areas.

Isolation can be a deliberate strategy used by abusive partners to exercise power and control over survivors. Studies have found that abusive partners prohibited survivors from talking to their neighbors and family members and leaving their houses (Abraham, 2000, Sullivan et al., 2005, Crandall et al., 2005). Abusive partners often limited survivors' access to financial resources that can be used to plan for safety (Crandall et al., 2005; Bhuyan et al., 2005; Morash, Bui, Zhang, & Holtfreter, 2007). Such social isolation may lead to higher dependency on abusive partners, as they become the survivors' only companions, their connection to their countries of origin, and the person they depend on economically (Abraham, 2000). But even within this context of isolation, survivors may be employing various ways to increase their safety, which is discussed next.

***Immigrant women's protective strategies***

Survivors use many strategies to respond to the violence being perpetrated against them. These may range from active resistance to passive acceptance of violence. Erez and colleagues (2009), in their study of 137 immigrant women, found that a majority (85%) made several attempts to leave their

abusive partners. Abraham (2000b) found that 25 South Asian immigrant survivors she interviewed used various protective strategies, including placating their abusers by doing what they wanted, praising them, apologizing to them, arguing with them, finding ways to access money, and seeking out family and friends for help. In another study, Russian-speaking immigrant women reported using similar strategies (Crandall et al., 2005). While not all of these strategies can effectively increase women's safety and they may not be different from the strategies employed by non-immigrant survivors, they show that these women use various means available to them to increase their safety.

In summary, various structural, social, and individual aspects of immigrant survivors' lives intersect to shape their domestic violence experiences, making them somewhat different from that of non-immigrant survivors. For example, a survivor's immigration status influences opportunities available to her for employment, the level of social isolation experienced, perceived and real options for leaving her partner, and strategies she may be using to secure safety. Gender roles, marriage, language competency, and employment skills may influence a survivor's access to supportive social networks. Children's safety, fear of deportation, local sentiments toward immigrants, and experiences with the criminal justice system may influence a survivor's decision to seek formal help. These experiences of domestic violence underscore the need for culturally competent services that address specific and unique needs of immigrant survivors.

**Critical issues for increasing culturally competent services**

The research reviewed suggests the culturally competent services to immigrant survivors must respond to several immigrant-specific needs, including the following.

- *Access to broad skill development training* – Increasing survivors' access to skill development training can be important because their skill sets may be different from those needed in the

U.S. to access services and earn an income. Such skill development training could include English language, using computers, taking public transportation, reading maps, driving, managing personal finance, and searching for jobs. Additionally, training could also focus on income generating skills (Pan et al., 2006).

- *Access to information* – Social isolation, culturally-based understandings of domestic violence, differences in legal protections and services available in immigrant women’s countries of origin and the U.S. are some of the factors that suggest the importance of increasing immigrant communities’ access to information about domestic violence as a social problem, the legal protections and services available, and how to access them.
- *Assistance in accessing services* – Services for immigrant survivors need to respond to their unique and specific needs. This may include services in survivors’ local languages or access to skilled interpreters, shelters that respond to culturally specific needs, assistance with maintaining legal immigration status and child custody, and assistance with access to other services. Some immigrant survivors may choose to stay with their abusive partners and abusive extended family members. In such cases, advocates can work with the survivors to develop and implement strategies that are culturally and individually appropriate and effective in protecting the survivors and their children from violence.
- *Culturally specific batterer intervention programs* – Batterer intervention programs (BIPs) could engage abusive partners in dialogue about culturally specific practices that promote violence and those that call for respecting women. Such BIPs could also address domestic violence by extended family members (Dabby & Poore, 2007).
- *Supportive social networks* – Survivors’ families, friends, and community members can be their supportive social networks and help increase survivors’ safety. There are various models for engaging immigrant survivors’ families, friends, and community members in domestic violence prevention (see Kim, 2005), but in doing so, it is essential to examine how domestic violence is viewed socio-culturally and what are culturally appropriate ways to engage community stakeholders to talk about and become active in preventing and intervening in domestic violence.
- *Support groups* – Support groups for survivors from similar cultural backgrounds could be a forum where survivors might reflect on and share their experiences, explore ways to make their lives safer and healthy, and organize in their communities against domestic violence (Bhuyan & Senturia, 2005; Morash et al., 2008; Yoshihama, 2000).
- *Collaboration with other agencies* - Domestic violence services that serve specific immigrant groups may not be present in all regions, and agencies may not always have the capacity or expertise to meet culturally specific needs of all immigrant survivors (Whitaker et al., 2010). Therefore, inter-agency coordination and collaboration are crucial to increasing culturally competent services to immigrant women.
- *Knowledge about domestic violence in immigrant communities* – Research findings can be critical in developing or expanding culturally competent services for specific groups of immigrant survivors. Lessons learned from existing programs and services for immigrant survivors may also be used to enhance culturally competent services. Therefore, future research on domestic violence in immigrant communities needs to address methodological limitations commonly found in research on this area (see Yoshihama, 2008). Future research might explore how various aspects of immigrant women’s lives, including socio-cultural backgrounds, sexual orientation, age, and disability status, intersect to influence their domestic violence experiences.

### Conclusion

Increasing culturally competent domestic violence services to immigrant survivors and

their communities entails understanding the complexities of survivors' lives and the barriers survivors overcome when deciding to seek help. The research reviewed here found that several aspects of immigrant survivors' lives influence their domestic violence experiences. Some of these aspects are specifically linked to experiences and realities of being an immigrant woman. For example, immigration status, legal permit for employment, employment skills, language barriers, access to supportive social networks, etc. can all influence the choices women make to increase their and their children's safety. This suggests that culturally competent services to immigrant survivors must respond to their specific and unique needs. These include increasing survivors' access to information about domestic violence and services available, offering culturally specific shelter and other services, helping survivors adapt to life and work in the U.S., helping survivors with VAWA self-petition, and working with survivors' communities to prevent domestic violence. Additionally, as the concept of cultural competency suggests, it is crucial to engage in a continuous process of learning and applying the knowledge gained in scale up culturally competent services immigrant women survivors and their communities.

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**Endnote:**

1. "Immigrant women" is also used to refer to women who are born of immigrant parents, although they are first generation U.S. born women. This paper focuses on women who have emigrated to the U.S.

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## In Brief: Addressing Domestic Violence in Immigrant Communities: Critical Issues for Culturally Competent Services

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Immigrant women are a diverse group of women from different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds and with individual histories and biographies. At the same time, as immigrant women, they may share certain experiences and everyday realities. These differences and similarities among immigrant women pose challenges in addressing domestic violence in immigrant communities and highlight the importance of culturally competent services to immigrant survivors.

Knowledge of domestic violence in immigrant communities can be a useful guide in developing and implementing culturally competent services. However, relatively little research exists on domestic violence in immigrant communities.

- Most have methodological limitations, including exclusion or uneven attention to certain groups, aggregation of subgroups of immigrants, lack of attention to socio-cultural context, and limited comparability of findings (Yoshihama, 2008).
- Most qualitative studies of domestic violence in immigrant communities are based on relatively small samples of specific immigrant groups, generating a greater understanding and knowledge of domestic violence but only among those directly studied.

Studies of domestic violence in immigrant communities have found that various aspects of immigrant survivors' lives intersect to make their domestic violence experiences somewhat different from that of non-immigrant survivors.

- A survivor's immigration status influences her access to legal protections, which in turn influences her risk for domestic violence (Crandall et al., 2005; Acevedo, 2000).
- Financial independence can provide means to escape violence, but many survivors have limited financial resources (Erez et al., 2009; Crandall et al., 2005; Bhuyan et al., 2005).
- Survivors' communities and extended families may contribute to domestic violence by pressuring survivors to stay with the abuser, stigmatizing those who leave or report violence to police, and by participating in abuse (Abraham, 2000a; Bui, 2003; Dasgupta, 2005).
- Many survivors experience social isolation, which may be a deliberate strategy used by their partners or because their families and friends are in their country of origin (Abraham, 2000a; Erez et al., 2009; Sullivan et al., 2005).
- Survivors respond to domestic violence with various strategies, ranging from active resistance to passive acceptance of violence (Erez et al., 2009; Abraham, 2000b; Crandall et al., 2005).

These research findings and others highlight the need for several culturally competent approaches to providing services to immigrant survivors. These include increasing survivors' access to information about domestic violence and services available, offering culturally specific shelter and other services, helping survivors adapt to life and work in the U.S., helping survivors with VAWA self-petition, and working with survivors' communities to prevent domestic violence. Additionally, it is crucial to engage in a continuous process of learning and applying the knowledge gained in scale up culturally competent services immigrant women survivors and their communities.

See the full Applied Research paper: Rana, S. (2012, February). *Addressing Domestic Violence in Immigrant Communities: Critical Issues for Culturally Competent Services*. Harrisburg, PA: VAWnet, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. Available

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