

## OVERCOMING CULTURAL BARRIERS IN WORKING WITH IMMIGRANT BATTERED WOMEN

Family violence crosses all race, class and cultural lines. Historically, all cultures failed to act to stop violence that occurred within the home. At the same time, no culture condones family violence and all contain forces within the culture that oppose violence and offer help to victims.

### Culture:

- **poses barriers that abuse victims must overcome to escape or end abuse.**
- **affects the relief an abuse victim will need to successfully flee violence.**
- **influences the abuser's justifications for his use of violence.**

Although domestic violence victims share common experiences with violence, the psychological, emotional, spiritual, economic, legal and social service needs of victims vary from culture to culture. We can only offer effective assistance to an abuse victim if we address her needs in her own cultural context and tailor relief to meet her needs. All battered women:

- believe promises that the abuse will reform
- suffer from damaged self-esteem
- bear physical and psychological scars from abuse
- fear retaliation or stalking if they leave

In addition, battered immigrant women need help surmounting barriers posed by:

- culture
- language
- immigration status

## PART ONE. BARRIERS THAT BATTERED IMMIGRANT WOMEN MUST OVERCOME IN SEEKING HELP

### Power and Control Factors

The following factors are used by abusers of immigrant women to solidify their power and control and inhibit the immigrant woman's ability to successfully flee violence or stop her abuser's violence. Most battered immigrant women:

- do not know that domestic violence is a crime.
- lack access to information about laws that can protect them. Their knowledge about what the legal system can do for them usually comes from their abuser.

- do not know that the legal, medical, and social service systems will help them even if they continue to live with their abuser.
- are not allowed to learn English.
- often work two jobs and do not have time to learn English, even if their abusers allow them to do so.
- are isolated from friends and social service providers who speak their language.
- believe that they cannot receive help from:
  - police and courts because they are an arm of a repressive government as in their home country.
  - courts because as at home the person with the most money and the strongest political connections wins -- usually the man.
  - judges because they come from countries where testimony is not valid evidence and the work of a man is legally worth more than the testimony of a woman.

### **Religion and Culture**

Religious beliefs and cultural expectations about the role of men and women in society pose large barriers to battered immigrant women's ability to flee violent homes.

- Leaving home is counter to her belief systems about her role and obligations in life.
- Women's appropriate role is believed to be that of wife, mother and homemaker.
- Women are responsible for keeping the family unit intact. The blame for family disintegration is hers.
- She is shunned and made to feel ashamed by friends and family members for talking about the abuse and seeking help.

### **Fear of Deportation**

Both documented and undocumented immigrant women fear deportation. Women who are legal immigrants:

- often believe that if their abusive spouse helped them get a green card and therefore can take it away, which is untrue.
- fear calling the police for help because they fear causing their abuser's deportation.
- fear seeking help because their abuser may be jailed, lose their jobs, and will stop supporting the family.
- are afraid that friends and family members will accuse them of seeking to have their abusers deported because they sought help to stop the violence.

Undocumented battered immigrant women additionally:

- fear that calling the police for help, going to a hospital or seeking a protection order will lead to their deportation because the health care center, police, judge may call the INS to report them.
- fear that if they seek help or try to escape that they will lose custody of their children to their abusers or that their abusers will have them deported.

It is important that the professionals helping battered immigrant women not succumb to myths that in certain cultures abuse is acceptable because women are docile and passive or that some cultures have more domestic violence than others.

**PART TWO.**

**USING OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS AND GOOD LISTENING SKILLS**

All battered women need a safe place in which to tell their story, and articulate their needs, fears, and concerns. In order to work effectively with any battered woman, we must ask open ended questions rather than read the abuse victim a list of things we can do for her. Such a list is limiting. All women minimize abuse as a survival mechanism and will volunteer more information if they receive culturally sensitive encouragement. When asked broad questions all women will describe what they need and fear from their own cultural perspective. Ask:

- What do you want?
- What are you afraid of?
- What are your concerns about your partner's reaction?
- Under what conditions do you think it will be safest to leave?
- What are your safety needs, fears, concerns while you continue to live with your partner?
- What are your safety needs if you plan to leave your partner?
- What are the methods your partner might use to get you to return to him?
- What are the means your partner might use to continue controlling your life?

Do not use labels: "spouse abuse," "domestic violence," "battered woman," "emotional abuse." Instead ask about specific actions:

- Were you ever told you were stupid or that no one else would have you?
- Did your partner ever destroy things or harm pets?
- Did your partner ever show you, use or threaten to use a weapon?
- Did your partner threaten to have you deported? to take your children away?
- Did your partner hit you, hurt you, pull your hair or force you to have sex when you did not want to?
- Are you afraid of your partner?

### **Careful listening and involving battered woman in developing solutions.**

- Listen carefully to the abused woman's answers.
- Make a list as you listen of problems and potential solutions.
- After listening to her story, go over other potential remedies that may be helpful.
- Explain all legal options, civil and criminal.
- Work through with the battered immigrant woman which solutions she thinks would be best for her.
- Identify which solutions can be achieved by:
  - safety planning.
  - self help.
  - support services available in the community.
  - legal remedies.
- In most cases battered women will first develop self help and safety planning solutions and later seek legal and social services.

When women will be seeking legal relief, it is particularly important that you ask broad open questions to determine what they truly need and fear. Only in this way will you be able to ask for specific relief that will address her needs and will close off potential areas of continuing conflict between the victim and her abuser. Courts in almost every state are given the ability to order whatever relief is needed to stop the violence. Too often, incomplete relief is granted because the victims fail to ask for everything she really needs.

### **Offering Support, Information and Assistance to Battered Immigrant Women**

It is important that all persons who offer assistance to battered women be supportive and gentle in affirming her decision to seek help. Many health professionals, social workers, friends and co-workers have an opportunity to support a battered woman as she attempts to seek help to break the cycle of violence in her

life. Some professionals and other support persons will continue to see the abuse victim as she tries to leave, encounters problems in receiving services and legal relief, and returns to her abuser. Battered women who return to their abusers often do so to survive. They often see no other option. Support persons who she continues to see even after she returns to her abuser have a special duty to continue providing support, encouragement and assistance. You can be helped in this role by:

- Knowledge about the legal and social services in your community available to assist battered women.
- Knowledge about the community based organizations that serve culturally diverse populations in your community.
- Learning about the pitfalls battered women will encounter in seeking social services and shelter:
  - difficulties of living in a shelter where no one speaks her language or is familiar with her culture.
  - difficulty of not being able to cook familiar foods in shelter.
  - lack of interpreters which allow her to participate in counseling sessions.
- Learning about frustrations she will face when seeking help from the legal system;
  - waiting hours for interpreters;
  - many delays in hearing dates and in obtaining relief.
- Becoming familiar with laws that affect immigrants in your community.
- Learning that certain actions can have dire immigration consequences:
  - divorce
  - receipt of public assistance
  - criminal convictions.
- Identifying immigration experts in your community who can help the battered women you see.

### **Summary Cultural Issues Checklist**

- Be sensitive to the barriers battered immigrant women have already overcome and must continue to face.
- Encourage battered women of all races, language backgrounds, and immigration status to seek help whether or not they are now ready to leave their abusers.
- Be familiar with laws that affect the populations you serve.
- Develop multi-cultural, multi-lingual staff.
- Develop multi-cultural, multi-lingual contacts in your community .
- Ask specific questions to identify abuse.
- Ask open-ended questions to identify all appropriate remedies.