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**Domestic Violence in Immigrant Communities:
Barriers to Service Utilization**

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According to the American Psychological Association (1996), nearly one in three adult women experienced physical assault by a partner in adulthood. However, the more recent National Violence Against Women (NVAW) survey (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) of 8000 women and 8000 men found prevalence rates closer to 1 in 4 women and 7.5% of surveyed men reporting rape and/or physically assault by an intimate partner at some time in their lifetime. In this survey, a total of 1.5% of the women had experienced intimate partner violence in the previous 12 months. Using these estimates, approximately 1.5 million women are raped and/or physically assaulted by an intimate partner annually in the United States. Because victimization can occur repeatedly, approximately 4.9 million intimate partner rapes and/or physical assaults are perpetrated against US women annually. According to the survey, only one-fifth of all rapes and one-fourth of all physical assaults are reported to the police.

Rates of domestic violence have been found to be consistent across racial and ethnic groups (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995), although the NVAW survey found that Asian/Pacific Islander women reported significantly fewer intimate partner physical assaults than other women and Hispanic women reported significantly more intimate partner rapes than non-Hispanic women. These differences may be due to reporting practices that differ among the racial and ethnic groups. Differences between minority groups diminished when certain demographic and relationship variables were controlled. The survey did not distinguish country of origin or level of acculturation among the ethnic women studied.

While some studies report no differences between Anglo and non-Anglo groups in prevalence of intimate partner violence (Neff, Holamon, & Schluter, 1995 ; Menjivar, 2002), Brownridge and Halli (2002) found that immigrant women from developing countries had higher rates of domestic violence than other immigrant women. The authors attributed these differences to the more sexually proprietary behavior exhibited by partners of the women from developing countries. Raj (2003) in a study of 160 South Asian women, found that spousal abuse among the Indian immigrant population is higher than that reported for women living in India. A total of 40% of all Indian women interviewed had experienced physical or sexual abuse in their current relationship. Of

those women, 90% had been abused within the past year. In contrast, Sorenson and Telles (1991) found that Mexican-born immigrants had significantly lower rates of intimate partner violence than either Caucasians or US-born Mexican Americans.

According to the report "Family Violence 2000-2001" produced by the Lowell Police Department through a grant provided by the US Department of Justice, in 2001 there were (n=2067) domestic related incidents reported in Lowell, where the overall population is (n=105,167). Males were responsible for 82% of the selected domestic crimes, and victimized women in nearly all incidents (90%). Women perpetrators of domestic violence victimized with less distinction between gender, offending against men in 63% of the instances and other women (37%). Men were more likely to be involved in violence with an intimate partner (44%) followed by ex-spouse/intimates (22%), and family members and spouses (17%). Conversely, women were most likely to be involved in violence against another family member (35%), followed by intimate partners (30%), ex-spouses/intimates (22%), and married couples (12%). Combined aggravated assault data from 2000 and 2001 revealed a total of 530 incidents, with (f=387) incidents perpetrated by men and (f=129) incidents perpetrated by women. In addition, male repeat offenders overwhelmingly are victimizing females (93%). Unfortunately, Lowell police report sheets do not include data regarding ethnicity nor country of origin and therefore it is not currently possible to determine the distribution of domestic related offenses between native and foreign born populations in Lowell.

According to Census 2000, 22% of Lowell residents are foreign born. More than 50% of students in the Lowell school system are ethnic minority students and nearly 40% of households are non-English speaking and nearly 20% of the population is limited English speakers. With such a large immigrant population, it becomes vital that service delivery for battered immigrant women be accessible in Lowell. However, barriers embedded in societal and community norms, systems, and service provision prevent immigrant women from effectively seeking services in Lowell and throughout the United States.

Volpp (2001) sees discriminatory barriers between the immigrant community and receiving community in the perception of domestic violence resulting from patriarchy as a cultural phenomenon in immigrant communities. She states that incidents of sexual

violence in western societies are viewed as the behavior of a few deviants rather than part of culture, contrasted to immigrant communities, where it is thought to characterize the culture. When culture is constructed as prescribing immutable behavior patterns, immigrants can be perceived as unable to make rational choices or determine their own actions. This view of culture dehumanizes immigrants even as it creates stereotypes.

However, cultural norms can play a role in preventing battered immigrant women from accessing services (Huisman, 1996), even if they do not prescribe behavior. Conceptual constructs of rape and domestic violence can be culture specific and affect issues related to marriage and divorce, paternal rights over children, rights of a husband over his wife, and the social stigmatization of being a single woman (Fahlberg, 2002). These issues can influence a woman's decision to leave an abusive partner. Latino women appear to be impacted by gender roles (Perilla, Bakeman, & Norris, 1994; Perilla, 1999) as well as by the Catholic Church (West, Kantor, & Jasinski, 1998). For Asian women, norms around shame and honor can prevent them from leaving abusive relationships (Narayan, 1995). Supriya (1996), reporting on an ethnographic inquiry at a shelter for Asian immigrant women, found that women constructed identities as "shameless wives." As one woman commented, "See, I should not be here without my husband...I must look after him, that's what a good wife does" p. 96. Other traditional Asian values such as privacy, honor, self-restraint, harmony, order, and family cohesion (Chan & Leong, 1994; Hofstede, 1984; Friedman, 1992; Hu & Chen, 1999; Kirkbride, Tang & Westwood, 1991; McLaughlin & Braun) may prevent a battered woman from seeking outside help. Asians reportedly have a reluctance to discuss issues publicly (Rimonte, 1991). As one Cambodian man commented, "Our people are not aggressive, we keep quiet and are passive until you block our way entirely. If there is still some room to get around you, we will keep quiet, you have to block the whole way. Our nature is soft" (Fahlberg, 2001). Raj (2003) found that 19% of 160 Asian women she interviewed had witnessed physical violence between their parents while growing up and 40% had witnessed emotional abuse. For some women, violence as a norm had been internalized, as 17% felt that some women deserved abuse and 4% felt that they sometimes deserved to be abused.

Immigrant women can often be isolated from family and community, when family members stay behind in the home country (Abraham, 1998; Menjivar, 2002). In a series of focus groups with battered immigrant women, Senturia, Sullivan, Ciske, and Shiu-Thornton (2000) found that many women were isolated because they couldn't drive. Fahlberg (2001) found that lack of transportation was a major barrier to immigrant integration because of its isolating effects. This isolation is exacerbated for victims when they are undocumented. Undocumented immigrants often live secret lives in which they literally have no legal identity and few if any ties to social services, friends, or family (Tiede, 2001). One study of undocumented immigrants found that for 64% of Latinas, a primary barrier to seeking social service agencies is the fear of deportation (Anderson, 1993). Members of linguistic communities are often connected with the husband and therefore unlikely to assist against him (Narayan, 1995). Denial of intimate partner violence in immigrant communities due to male leadership can work to silence victims and makes it hard to create, publicize, and maintain access to community services (Narayan, 1995).

Although many immigrants suffer from isolation, battered women's isolation can be enforced by the batterer, who often determines his wife's legal status (Abraham, 1998; Tiede, 2001). The batterer can utilize his partner's uncertain legal status by threats to report her to the INS for deportation, to withdraw the petition to legalize her immigration status, report her for working "under the table," (Narayan, 1995) or hiding or destroying her documentation such as her passport, Green Card, or health insurance card (Skagit). According to Dasgupta (1998), US immigration and welfare policies confer greater power and control to the masculine head of the household and are very dangerous for women. Immigration status can also keep women from working (Supriya, 1996) and prevent her from receiving government benefits. Immigrants who entered the US after August 22, 1996, are not eligible for federal assistance for five years, (Capallaro, 1997). Women immigrants are more dependent upon their husbands economically, socially, and often linguistically (Narayan, 1995).

Linguistic barriers prevent immigrants from integrating into mainstream life (Fahlberg, 2001). For the battered woman, linguistic barriers prevent her from accessing information regarding domestic violence as well as services (Coto, 1999; Menijar, 2002;

Narayan, 1995; Tiede, 2001). Erez (2000) noted that investigating police officers will gather information from the batterer, his extended family, or the victim's children when other interpreters are not readily available which can lead to distorted information. Immigrant victims often do not know protection is available, how to seek it, or can access information about US criminal and immigration laws and systems (Erez, 2000; Senturia et.al., 2000; Tiede, 2001). Battered immigrant women have reported being afraid to access police when shelters are not available or that the police might arrest the wrong person (Senturia et.al. 2000). Raj (2003) found that of the 40% of South Asian women who reported domestic violence, only 11% had sought counseling and only half of these women knew how to obtain services for countering domestic violence.

Services that provide support for victims of domestic violence may lack cultural sensitivity, such as the legal system (Coto,1999), and mainstream service agencies (Fahlberg, 2002). Mainstream service agencies often lack the linguistic and cultural competency necessary to be utilized by immigrants. They often don't understand the intricacies of immigration law and issues and therefore aren't able to address significant issues for battered immigrant women. Some battered women's shelters will not house women with various immigration statuses, or will not serve women who do not speak English (Volpp, 2001). However, the study by Senturia et. al. (2000) consistently recorded the voices of battered immigrant women stating how significant it is to have an advocate from the same ethnic group as the battered woman. According to Fahlberg (2002), mainstream agencies may not be able to provide the support needed without a bi-cultural/bi-lingual advocate because they do not understand the complexities involved. Immigrant advocates have high visibility within their community which can put them at greater risk of violence by client partners. She may be held accountable by her community to be available and competent, and can be seen or accused of being Americanized, which can compromise her ability to effectively relate to her community. Her high visibility can often affect her home life as well, as it is difficult to maintain a professional distance in a small community and when "distancing" is viewed as incompatible with the culture. It may be difficult to hire an immigrant advocate since she must be adept at cultural switching – using language and cultural rules of immigrant or receiving communities equally well. In addition, the immigrant advocate is often the

only bridge for her clients to other services due to lack of linguistic capabilities of other systems and lack of client transportation. She must know immigration law regarding rights of clients and how those rights interact with the client's immigration status. She needs to have relationships among service providers, court officials, and law enforcement. She needs to know how to access housing, welfare, health care and other benefits and often must be the one to fill out all the forms and make all the calls. Mainstream supervisors must allow for cultural differences and consider her the "expert" with her culture; not requiring her to conform to cultural expectations that would be contra-indicated for her clients (Fahlberg, 2002).

Most immigrant women, irrespective of ethnic background, prefer to work with an advocate of their own ethnic background, although not necessarily within their community as it might not be safe or comfortable (Senturia et.al., 2000). However, programs specifically designed for battered immigrant women often lack funding (Huisman, 1996). In addition, funders often fail to understand the enormous demands put upon the immigrant advocate, compared to mainstream advocates, because of the multiple tasks required of her (Fahlberg, 2002; Senturia et. al., 2000).

The barriers for immigrant and refugee women to seek services for domestic violence in the United States are enormous. These barriers are related to how the dominant American culture views gender violence within ethnic subcultures as well as how individual members within these subcultures view gender violence. Beyond cultural attitudes and values lies the difficulty in providing comprehensive and systemic services for victims of domestic violence who are limited English speakers. Currently, one in 11 residents in the United States is foreign born. The need for linguistically and culturally compatible services is as enormous as the barriers faced in creating these services. Yet, without these services millions of women across the U.S. will be condemned to a life of isolation and violence. It is important, now, today, to develop policies that move to meet the need of these vulnerable women.

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