

Crossing Borders: A Collection of Advocates' Stories

Introduction

by Lupita Patterson for WSCADV

Immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence are an important part of the communities that domestic violence programs provide services to. We know that immigrant and refugee individuals face additional barriers and issues that require thoughtful analysis. The intent of *Crossing Borders: A Collection of Advocates' Stories* is to provide you with a variety of articles which reflect different points of view and strategies for working more effectively with immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence.

This publication has its limitations. It is neither complete nor exhaustive. There is no single approach to our work with the very diverse populations that comprise immigrant and refugee communities across the state. Therefore, we offer some different perspectives that can help you move forward with this challenging and important task. “*Crossing Borders*” is an invitation to keep a critical analysis and open mind on the issues and barriers that immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence face.

For this publication, we asked several colleagues who have extensive experience as domestic violence advocates to contribute. Laura Contreras focuses on the prioritization of hiring diverse staff and using interpreters. Andrea Parra offers important information on how to support your program participants in their immigration status process. Rubi Romero analyzes the relationship between mainstream agencies and specialized agencies and advocates. Vega Subramaniam offers some thoughts on how to approach cultural differences. Mette Earlywine offers her insights about oppression and how it affects the services we provide to immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence. We hope our writers' expertise will help you explore innovative ways for providing services to immigrant and refugee victims.

This publication, as part of the Coalition's “Crossing Borders: Working with Immigrant and Refugee Victims of Domestic Violence” program, encourages you to maintain a broader social justice vision. In addressing the unique barriers that confront immigrant and refugee victims, we improve our services for all victims and move closer to our goal of one day ending violence in the lives of all women, children and men.

Providing Effective Advocacy for Immigrant Survivors of Domestic Violence

Andrea Parra, Northwest Immigrant Rights Project¹

As service providers and other community members working with survivors of domestic violence know, domestic violence is an issue of power and control. Spousal domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behaviors used by adults against their intimate partners. The abusive partner uses the power in his or her hands to exercise control over the other partner. In the case of immigrant survivors, one of the main ways abusive partners exercise control over their immigrant partner is by using their partner's immigration status to maintain power over their access to resources and knowledge about their rights in the United States.

How the pattern of power and control manifests itself in the lives of our clients will determine what advocacy efforts will be the most effective in empowering them to break the cycle of violence. Even though the experience of immigrant survivors of domestic violence has many factors in common with the experience of non-immigrant survivors, immigrant survivors face specific barriers and obstacles and advocates should take these particular factors into account when providing services to them.

For many immigrant survivors, their abuser is their main tie to the community and usually that person has the power over access to services and resources.

Some of the most common obstacles that immigrant survivors face in breaking the cycle of violence are:²

- Fear of calling the police, both because of fear of being deported and because of the lack of trust in law enforcement authorities based on previous experiences in their home countries.³
- Enhanced economic hardship, especially if their immigration status prevents them from being authorized to work in the U.S. It is also very common that abusers have absolute control over household finances and property.

¹ As a staff attorney at the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP), Andrea represents immigrant survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault and other crimes in immigration cases.

² For a more detailed discussion about barriers faced by immigrant survivors, see: Lesley E. Orloff et al., "Battered Immigrant Women's Willingness to Call for Help and Police Response," *UCLA Women's Law Journal* vol. 13, Fall/Winter 2003, p. 43; Edna Erez and Carolyn Copps Hartley, "Battered Immigrant Women and the Legal System: A Therapeutic Jurisprudence Perspective," *Western Criminology Review* vol. 4 no. 2, 2003 (<http://wcr.sonoma.edu/v4n2/erezhartley.html>); Lesley Orloff, Deena Jang & Catherine Klein, "With No Place to Turn: Improving Legal Advocacy for Battered Immigrant Women," *Family Law Quarterly* vol. 29 no. 2 (1995), p. 313.

³ It is important for advocates to note that after the attacks of September 11, 2001, there has been a movement on the part of the current federal Administration to promote the enforcement of immigration laws by local law enforcement officials. This factor also has a chilling effect on the willingness of victims to contact the police for help. In 2003 the Seattle City Council passed an ordinance prohibiting city employees from inquiring into immigration status when a person is accessing city services.

- Cultural and language barriers. Immigrant survivors very commonly fear leaving an abusive relationship because of their lack of English language proficiency (e.g., abusers prevent them from taking ESL classes) and lack of services in their native language. In addition, they face cultural barriers related to their own conception of marriage, or fear of stigmatization by their communities for leaving their partner.
- Fear of losing custody of their children. A very common tactic used by abusers is telling the victim that if they leave the relationship or seek help, they will lose custody of the children because they have fewer rights in this country.

How should advocates address these barriers effectively when providing services to immigrant survivors, specifically when working on safety planning?

One of the main concerns of immigrant survivors is having the ability to gain or maintain a stable lawful immigration status in the U.S. Therefore, by providing advocacy to assist immigrant survivors in obtaining lawful immigration status, the other barriers are generally addressed.

Current immigration laws are structured in a way that when it comes to family visas or dependent visas, the abuser generally has the power to control the victim's immigration process.

Therefore, immigration status becomes a very powerful tool of abuse. In general, abusers have the power to decide whether or not they will sponsor their partner's visa, to withdraw the family visa petition once they have initiated the family visa process or to contact immigration authorities and give information about the immigration status of the victim. A tactic that abuser frequently use is contacting Immigration and denouncing their spouses for marriage fraud by telling the immigration authorities that the victim married them solely to get immigration status in the U.S.

Congress recognized the situation immigrant survivors were facing and passed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994 and amended it in 2000. VAWA created several options for immigrant survivors to obtain lawful immigration status in the U.S. without having to depend on their abusers.⁴ Obtaining benefits under VAWA allows applicants to also gain financial stability, as they are able to work legally in the U.S. and to access public benefits like food stamps and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

Advocates can play a major role in assisting an immigrant survivor in identifying what safety planning measures she or he should take to ensure that they would have a claim under VAWA that will allow them to obtain lawful immigration status in the U.S.

⁴ Among the benefits created by VAWA are self-petitions, VAWA Cancellation of Removal, T visas, and U visas. For a more detailed description of the benefits created by VAWA, see "An Overview of Domestic Violence and Its Effect on Battered Immigrants," American Bar Association Commission on Domestic Violence, Continuing Legal Education Teleconference: "Civil Legal Assistance for Battered Immigrants," May 23, 2001 (<http://www.abanet.org/domviol/textualmaterials.doc>).

The first step an advocate should take is determining from the initial contact whether immigration status is an issue of concern for a victim. **REMEMBER: NEVER send a person to the immigration authorities to inquire about the status of their case or to get information about their immigration options. You may be putting the person at high risk of being detained or obtaining erroneous information.**

Once it is determined that obtaining lawful immigration status in the U.S. is a concern for the client, an advocate should make every effort to accommodate the immigrant survivor in terms of access to information in different languages and explaining the resources available, without assuming that a survivor will already know what is available. Despite the fact that immigration laws have become increasingly restrictive, one should not jump to the conclusion that an immigrant survivor has no options under immigration law.

Finally, advocates should keep in mind the specific needs immigrant survivors have in order to avail themselves of the benefits created by VAWA.

The benefits created by VAWA generally require that the applicant show: good faith marriage to the abuser, immigration status of the abuser, the abuse she or he was subjected to (including physical, emotional and sexual violence) and cooperation with law enforcement (for U and T visas). It is recommended that advocates get in touch with an immigration practitioner (attorney or accredited representative) shortly after coming in contact with an immigrant survivor in order to assess in the best way possible what measures will benefit the client in their future immigration case.

To show good faith marriage to the abuser, an applicant can use photographs of their wedding, birth certificates of their children, utility bills, marriage certificate, love letters, presents, joint accounts, tax returns, etc. Advocates should advise their clients to collect these documents in a safe place and keep a copy of important documents like work permits, green cards, birth and marriage certificates in a safe place (e.g., with a close friend).

To show the status of the abuser, the applicant can obtain a copy of the abuser's passport, green card or birth certificate. If it is not possible to obtain these documents, the applicant should try to write down the A number that appears in the abuser's green card (if the abuser is a Lawful Permanent Resident), and in all cases, the date of birth and full name of the abuser's parents.

To demonstrate abuse, an applicant may use police reports, logs of 911 calls or Protection Orders. However, because of fear of calling the police, immigrant survivors may not have contacted the authorities to report the abuse. Therefore, it's important to have other ways to prove the abuse, like letters from people who witnessed the abuse (or at least their contact information), medical records if any, pictures, letters the abuser may have written mentioning the incident.

In the case of applicants whose abuser is not a U.S. citizen or Lawful Permanent Resident (green card holder), an immigrant survivor may be eligible for a U visa if it is

demonstrated that s/he was the victim of one of the violent crimes listed in the law (e.g., domestic violence, rape or assault, among others) and that s/he has cooperated with a law enforcement authority with jurisdiction over the investigation or prosecution of the crime.

To show eligibility for U visa benefits, the applicant must submit a certification from a law enforcement authority stating that the applicant is a victim and has cooperated with the investigation or prosecution of the crime.

Advocates can play a major role in assisting the immigrant survivor in obtaining the certification, because they are often present when the victim enters in contact with law enforcement officers. At this stage, it is very important that the victim obtain the contact information of the officer that responded to the incident or of the victim advocate at the prosecutor's office who usually provides crucial assistance in obtaining the certification.

This article is not all-inclusive with regards to the barriers immigrant survivors face in breaking the cycle of violence, or regarding the most effective advocacy that can be provided to them. Immigration laws are complex and change often. This article simply attempts to convey the message that advocates can play a fundamental role in assisting immigrant survivors in the preparation of a stronger immigration claim, and as a community, we need to take steps to increase cooperation among advocates and immigration practitioners (attorney or accredited representative) to make services to immigrant survivors as effective as possible.

Advocating for Battered Immigrant and Refugee Women

By Vega Subramaniam, Chaya

In your work, you will encounter domestic violence survivors from many different backgrounds, countries and cultures. Cultures are complex and diverse—a broad range of attitudes, behaviors and values, rather than a small, easily defined box. Any one person from a given culture has one perspective on that culture. Our families of origin, the communities we live in and the larger culture or country all define our experiences in the world: what we consider normal and ideal and how we choose to act or react in various situations. In the same way that no two Americans would define American culture the same way, no two individuals from any other cultural group would define their culture in the same way. In the same way that American culture has positive, negative, and neutral aspects that all come together to form a larger, more complex whole, so other cultures have positive, negative, and neutral aspects that together form a more complex whole.

It would be impossible to have a full understanding of or expertise in every single culture in the world. So developing skills for working with women from any culture is critical. When working with women from unfamiliar cultures, rather than believing you should know everything or worrying about making mistakes, it is more worthwhile to cultivate these skills.

Cultivate **humility**. Know how little you know. Cultivate **self-awareness**. Be aware of your own culture, its stereotypes and its values. When you are more self-aware, you will also be aware of the values of your own cultural background that bias your awareness of the survivor's experience. Cultivate the ability to **suspend judgment**. Take care not to judge the survivor. If you find yourself reacting strongly to an experience that the survivor is relating, check yourself to understand the source of that reaction, and to move beyond it in order to effectively continue working with that person. Cultivate an understanding that **the client is the expert on her experience**. Allow her to explain her experience, her view of her culture, and her concerns about her family and community. She is not a token member of a given culture, and her experience does not represent the experiences of everyone in her cultural group. Listen to her and ask questions—not about her “culture,” but about her experience and her thoughts about consequences of given actions she may take. Cultivate **respectful curiosity**. Remain curious about what you do not know, but without being invasive or forcing the client into uncomfortable generalizations. Respectful curiosity also involves taking the initiative to learn on your own, by attending book readings, cultural events, film festivals, lectures and other community events. Cultivate **knowledge** about local resources for battered immigrant women.

As you learn about different cultures, family structures and systems of oppression, your ability to detect different forms of abuse and serve as a more informed and effective advocate will increase.

Effectively working with clients who have limited English skills requires that you develop a similar set of skills:

Don't assume the client does or does not understand what you are saying. Ask her to explain back to you what you have said to make sure she understands. Don't assume that nodding means that she understands everything. Offer to find an interpreter to make sure you and she can communicate clearly and effectively, especially when you are communicating important information.

Become familiar with the resources and protocols your organization has around interpretation services.

Avoid using children (especially young children) to interpret important or sensitive information to the woman. Young children will interpret what they understand, not necessarily what you say. In addition, it is not fair to the woman or her child and forces both into awkward and inappropriate roles.

Be mindful of jargon. We use many terms that are unfamiliar to non-native English speakers or recent immigrants. Depending on how familiar she is with various systems, she may or may not know many of the terms you use freely, such as transitional housing, protection order, attorney, custody, DSHS, advocate, CSO or TANF.

You may find yourself in the position of needing to work with an interpreter in order to advocate for your client. Before you find an interpreter, you should ask the client if she would prefer to have a female interpreter. For some women, it is uncomfortable and embarrassing to discuss sensitive subjects with male interpreters. You should also ask her language as well as her country or region of origin. Some languages have different dialects, and if an interpreter speaks a different dialect from the one the client speaks, the interpretation will be inaccurate. You should be mindful that immigrant and refugee communities tend to be small and/or tightly knit. This increases the chances that the woman will know or be familiar with the interpreter. If you can find out the interpreter's name ahead of time, you can ask the client if she knows that person, and if so, if she is comfortable working with them. In addition, the client may be most comfortable either using an alias or not giving a name at all.

Once you have located an interpreter, you should also develop the skills to work effectively with interpreters. Make sure interpreters are professional and impartial. Of course, if you do not speak the language that the client speaks, your ability to judge the impartiality of the interpretation will be limited. But as you work more and more with interpreters, you can hone your ability to see signs of bias. The interpreter should interpret exactly what you say and exactly what the client says. The interpreter should not engage in side conversations, either with you or with the client. If you sense that the interpreter is going farther than interpreting what you or the client have said, politely interrupt them and ask them what they are saying, and also politely remind them to interpret exactly what you and the client say. Remember to stop talking every few sentences so that the interpreter can interpret word-for-word.

Finally, remember that when you are using an interpreter, you and the client remain in charge of the session. If either of you is uncomfortable with the interpreter, you have the right to let them know or end the session.

Crossing Borders: Bridging the Language Gap

by Laura Contreras, Columbia Legal Services

We must focus on having a diverse staff as the highest priority for domestic violence programs serving immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence. High and consistent standards for reaching linguistic and cultural competency will assist domestic violence programs in ensuring essential basic legal protections for victims where bilingual/bicultural staff is not available (“bicultural” – meaning people who have a deep understanding/experience of more than one culture, not just language proficiency).

Imagine what it feels like to be all alone, with broken bones and without any money or family. Imagine you do not have a good handle on the language, and you just recently arrived in Washington State after traveling thousands of treacherous miles from your home country. Imagine your new friend is a strong, intelligent, feminist American woman who thinks you should leave your partner. You love him; you just want him to stop hitting, shouting and insulting you in front of the kids. He provides you with food and a roof over your head. Yet he cannot keep his strong hands and words from beating and belittling you. If he would just file your visa application and let you leave the house to work, the added income might make him change. When you do consider the advice of your advocate to leave him, your mother screams over the phone that it’s *your* cross and you must now carry it. Plus, your father did the same thing to her and she turned out okay. Your priest reminds you of your vows “for better or for worse” and that it is wrong if you leave him and don’t attempt to work it out.

In a perfect world, the best ally for this person would be a bilingual/bicultural domestic violence advocate who speaks to her in her own language and understands the cultural pressures she is facing. In very diverse communities, where many different languages and cultural backgrounds are represented, it may not be possible to have bilingual/bicultural advocates for each cultural group, and programs must take other steps to provide the highest level of linguistically and culturally competent services for all victims in their communities. Title VI is a legal obligation which mandates that services be accessible to all in your community.⁵ This paper provides some suggestions on achieving, as high as possible, a level of linguistic and cultural competence within mainstream domestic violence programs.

Immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence remain underserved populations by mainstream domestic violence programs. Both federal and state government provide grants and other monies to help increase an immigrant’s access to basic domestic

⁵ Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits national origin discrimination (which includes discrimination on the basis of limited English proficiency). Any organization or individual that receives federal financial assistance (e.g., FVPSA, VOCA, STOP, HUD), either directly or indirectly, through a grant, contract or subcontract, must take reasonable steps to ensure that Limited English Proficient (LEP) persons have meaningful access to their programs. Meaningful access may entail providing language assistance services, including oral and written translation, where necessary. For further details, see <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/lep/guide.html> or <http://www.lep.gov>.

violence services. Nevertheless, significant barriers exist in serving battered immigrant or refugee victims. As described above, potential victims suffer linguistic and cultural barriers, often have an extreme fear of police and immigration processes, and battle prejudice in their communities. These barriers prevent victims from leaving violent relationships and seeking help.

A domestic violence program situated in a diverse community with no linguistic and cultural competency is a community with no domestic violence services for immigrants and refugees. There are important things that programs can do to effectively reach and serve these highly vulnerable populations.

A. Providing bilingual/bicultural staff

A bilingual/bicultural advocate makes it easier for an immigrant or refugee victim to successfully leave an abusive relationship. Yet many programs are still not prepared to hire and retain diverse, bilingual and bicultural staff. A domestic violence advocate must listen and understand the victim's cultural pressures for staying in the relationship. Some immigrants have no choice but to stay with the father of their children. He may be the only one who knows the language and is able to work legally. She doesn't know how to drive and relies on him to get her around town. Often advocates who have been in the movement for a while cringe at the idea of helping the victim stay with the perpetrator. With immigrants or refugees, this idea must be respected. Immigrants and refugees are courageous and strong women. Some have walked or driven thousands of miles under intolerable and unspeakable circumstances, and we must believe they do know what is best for *them*.

Some immigrants and refugees do find the additional strength to leave the violent relationship. Having diverse staff explain their options and understand the concerns of the immigrant helps. Diverse staff must be the ultimate goal for every program serving immigrants and refugees in crisis. When advertising for bilingual/bicultural staff, advertise in non-English newspapers and radio programs. Retaining diverse staff is an added responsibility. We must work to empower and foster the professional development of bilingual/bicultural advocates. If they lack a degree in Social Work, programs can provide incentives (e.g., offer paid leave to attend courses, assist with tuition.)

B. Assuring linguistic and cultural competency of staff working with immigrant and refugee populations

Bilingual/bicultural staff can be hard to find in some situations. Many programs will turn to interpreters to help monolingual advocates work with immigrant clients. A core group of interpreters should be identified in your community for your use. They should be *both* qualified interpreters *and* trained on domestic violence. Even qualified and trained domestic violence interpreters are problematic when working with immigrants and refugees. Some immigrants are ashamed or embarrassed to disclose sexual abuse by her husband because the interpreter is a young woman. Advocates, not the interpreters, should sit next to the immigrant and maintain eye contact with the victim, not the

interpreter. This is an important opportunity for you to foster a relationship with the victim regardless of the language barrier. Again, programs should consider using interpreters only where bilingual/bicultural advocates are not available. Also, programs should always include expenses for interpreters in their budget.

Further, programs should encourage existing staff to acquire basic vocabulary for the languages needed in their community. At the very least, advocates could have written translations available of key phrases, such as “Do you need a doctor?” Programs should encourage staff to attend seminars or trainings during work hours or provide staff leave time to take language classes.

Once you have the linguistic piece handled, then it’s necessary to move on to the more complex piece—cultural competency. The cultural piece is the most troubling because it could be taken to mean advocates and programs are *not* sensitive. It’s not a matter of not caring for the victims, but of taking the time to *understand* them. For some of us, it is hard to understand why, in one victim’s eyes, her bruised face “isn’t really that bad.” It was just a moment that the “devil came over us,” she says. If advocates devote the time and sit with her long enough, sometimes hours or days, we will hear the bruise wasn’t as bad as the beating with the whip by her husband last year in their home country. Also, do not let the interpreter form a relationship with the victim, rather than the advocate. You will lose much in terms of understanding the victim if you let the interpreter do the comforting.

Cultural competency is a challenging endeavor and we must leverage community resources to help us with this task. State coalitions, legal services and grassroots organizations targeting women and communities of color—such as Amigas Unidas, Asian and Pacific Islander women’s organizations—are resources which should be utilized by programs. Form allies with these organizations and volunteer your staff to participate in trainings or task forces relating to the issues of the diverse communities they serve. Lastly, accept any trainings or discussions on cultural competency as a learning experience, and not as a criticism of your sensitivity.

Collaboration Between Mainstream and Specialized Advocacy Agencies

by Rubi Romero, Consejo Counseling & Referral

In my experience as a manager of a domestic violence program and a former domestic violence advocate, it has been my personal experience that services provided to immigrant communities must be delivered in a linguistically and culturally appropriate manner. As an advocate serving the Limited English Proficient Latino community, I noticed that clients encountered barriers that other victims of domestic violence didn't have to face, such as a language barrier, a limited number of trained advocates, discrimination, lack of resources, cultural shock, and lack of family support. This makes the advocate's role even more important. However, this work can become a very difficult task for the specialized advocates, who many times have to face barriers such as lack of cultural competence and limited collaboration from mainstream advocates or service providers. In addition, limited resources and client eligibility issues can add further barriers for both the specialized advocate and the client.

Another task that specialized advocates have to take on in order to minimize all of these barriers for themselves and immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence is to provide information and education to mainstream advocates and providers. This can help mainstream advocates and providers to better understand the need for more appropriate services for immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence and the importance of collaboration with other specialized providers.

The lack of funding and additional restrictions on eligibility for services for the immigrant population has created another problem. Mainstream agencies find it more difficult to serve some of these particular communities. However, this problem can be addressed and solved by thinking more creatively and building stronger collaborations.

Here are some tips for specialized advocates that I found very helpful while working at other agencies:

- Remember that your main goal is to obtain the service that will allow your client to overcome their current situation. If you find some resistance in the collaboration that you are requesting, never turn this into a personal matter. You must remain calm and focused in your main purpose, which is to advocate for the person you are working with.
- When asking for services for your client, be polite but firm. Remember that sometimes you might be dealing with new staff that are not aware of some exceptions or applications that your client is eligible for. In addition, remember that there is always a supervisor for that staff person – suggest they ask their manager in case they need to double-check on a decision or ask permission. Remember that the client is relying on your ability to advocate.
- Maintain a close relationship with mainstream advocates at other agencies. Call them once in a while just to check in and remind them how much you appreciate their collaboration.

- Maintain a good record of staff information at mainstream agencies and other institutions (like welfare offices, DSHS, federal government departments). When you meet them and they give you their business card, write down a phrase on the back that will remind you of their services.
- Use Microsoft Outlook to prompt you with reminders about public relations with other agencies, such as anniversary calls, thank you cards, courtesy phone calls, etc.
- If a problem should occur, always try to avoid addressing it in front of the client. Also, try to resolve the problem directly with that particular advocate; if you can't get resolution, you could talk to that person's supervisor. But again, be aware not to turn the issue into a personal matter.
- Try to set up regular visitations or meeting with other agencies' staff to be updated with their services and operations.
- Always update other agencies on any changes in your agency: new staff, new services, new contact information, etc.
- Invite mainstream agencies' staff members to visit your agency and familiarize themselves with your work.

Remember that the work of an advocate is not an easy task, but you can always make it easier by cultivating useful collaborations with other mainstream agencies or institutions. This is essential to obtain access to the resources that your client needs.

These are some of the obstacles that specialized advocates or agencies have to face and some recommendations to mainstream agencies to help overcome these obstacles:

- Mainstream agencies' first response when serving a client from an immigrant community is to refer the client and her needs to a specialized provider. Sometimes mainstream agencies have the same resources as the specialized provider (e.g., a client in need of a hotel voucher), and often the specialized provider does not have as many resources as mainstream agencies. This situation makes it harder on specialized providers and the client.

Recommendation: Mainstream agencies should work first to try to support the immigrant and refugee clients before referring to specialized agencies. Mainstream agencies should develop a plan to better serve immigrant and refugee clients and ask for technical assistance from specialized providers to develop such a plan.

- Lack of appropriate language interpretation.

Recommendation: Agencies receiving federal funds or state DSHS funding are obligated to provide interpretation services for their clients. Mainstream agencies need to develop a plan to access their own interpreters. Mainstream agencies or institutions may not use specialized advocates as interpreters.

- Limited knowledge of mainstream provider staff on how to serve immigrant clients.

Recommendation: Mainstream agencies should provide training to their staff on how to better serve immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence. Mainstream agencies may contact a specialized provider to request technical assistance and information on available resources for a particular immigrant or refugee client.

I would like to emphasize the importance of a deeper and more thoughtful collaboration between mainstream agencies and specialized providers. With this, we can ensure and improve the quality of the services that we provide to immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence. Let us work as a team!

Reflections from a White Citizen

By Mette Earlywine, WSCADV

“Crossing Borders: Understanding How to Better Work with Immigrant and Refugee Victims of Domestic Violence”. . . I’ve been thinking a lot about what this means to me—a white citizen, an activist working faithfully to end domestic violence; me—a former legal advocate, community educator and program manager from eastern Washington. I started to get really tired thinking about how I could add this work to my long list of “things-to-do-in-order-to-be-all-things-to-all-battered-women-and-end-domestic-violence.” And then I started to think about fires.

Let me explain.

There is a fire that is raging outside our doors; it is the fire called Oppression, and within this fire burns domestic violence and sexism and racism and classism and all the oppressive structures of our society. “We didn’t start the fire; it was always burning, since the world was turning,” Billy Joel once sang. So we don’t need to waste our time feeling guilty about the fact that the fire exists. We *do* need to open our eyes, look out the window, acknowledge that the fire is there, and that it’s huge and raging. And we do need to remember that we’re in business to put out at least one fire: domestic violence. How are we going to do that?

We have one puny, grant-funded hose. At the beginning of every fiscal year, we wonder, “Will it turn on? How much water will come out this year? How much of the fire are we going to keep at bay with our piddly little hose?” Here we are, scrambling for more water, bigger hoses and more people to hold those hoses, to spray that fire from every different angle and try to put it out. Sometimes we get the fire to go down a little, and we feel a great big surge of hope. And when we turn back from celebrating, dang it, the fire’s right back again. Because the other parts of the fire just keep the whole thing burning and raging.

Our programs and services are like those emergency fire shelters that forest firefighters use. They provide a temporary refuge from the fire and shield us from the fire for a time, but they aren’t set up to put the fire out. Victims come through our temporary refuge, but when their time with us is up, it’s right back into the fire. Sometimes we manage to clear a path with our hoses so the victim can get away from the fire. But since we never have enough hoses and enough water to douse the fire entirely, there is always a steady stream of victims waiting for refuge. We’re left looking out from our tiny little refuge, which is getting hotter and feeling more desperate and precarious all the time, looking at all those burning women and children, wondering how we are going to make room or pull them from the fire in time. We can’t possibly do it this way.

But here’s the thing. You know what fire needs? It needs something to keep it burning—it needs something to consume, something to eat. So here’s what I think we should do:

We have to stop feeding the fire.

We have to take away the fire’s food. We can start from inside our own programs. We can dig a great big moat around our programs, a moat that says, “Oppression will not happen *inside here*—this place is safe from fire.” We can build a moat and fill it with fireproof rocks, and suddenly there’s a great big buffer and the fire can’t reach us anymore. Finally, we could be a safe shelter for victims, for *all* victims who not only have to deal with their intimate partners beating them and intimidating them and controlling them, but who also have to deal with racism and xenophobia and homophobia and ableism and ageism and everything else that makes their lives difficult and un-free on a daily basis. Then, when we’ve got our truly safe shelter, those victims who are burning in the fire—the fire of domestic violence, which is a part of the fire of Oppression—those victims will see that our program is a truly safe, fireproof space. Inside our truly safe shelter, victims can rest and recuperate from their burns. They can join us and together we can build that moat bigger and wider, stronger and more fireproof, day by day. As our moat grows, we can step beyond the shelter and expand the edges of our moat, creating new, safe, fireproof spaces. The fire may still be raging and burning, but it will be getting smaller, because we are taking away the fire’s food.

We are not going to end domestic violence with shelters and crisis programs alone. We have to realize that our current strategies for putting out the fire (dousing it with our piddly bunch of hoses) are not working. We have a responsibility to do things differently. We have to take away the fire’s food. That means: we have to work to dismantle all systems of power and control in which one person or group is able to effectively gain and use power and resources over another person or group in an abusive way. As long as any form of oppression exists, so will domestic violence. We can start by taking away the fire’s food in our own programs.

I believe we can get past our firefighter’s fatigue and examine the systems of power and control within our own programs. These are some of the questions I believe we can ask ourselves: How are decisions made in our programs? Who are the decision-makers? Where do the decision-makers fit on the power and privilege chart?⁶ At what point are the voices of victims and front-line advocates sought out and integrated into program decision-making? To which populations, what services, what projects, which staff positions/departments is our funding primarily allocated? In which languages? Who are

⁶ Power/Privilege Chart: Which groups have easy and consistent access to power, privilege and resources?

U.S.-born citizens	Foreign-born, immigrants, non-citizens
Men	Women
White people	People of color
Rich	Poor
Heterosexual	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender
Able-bodied	Persons with disabilities
Adults	Youth, elderly
Christians	Jews, Muslims, non-Christians

Adapted from Hugh Vasquez, M. Nell Myhand and Allan Creighton with Todos Institute, *Making Allies, Making Friends: A Curriculum for Making the Peace in Middle School* (Alameda, CA: Hunter House, 2003), p. 63.

we recruiting to work at our programs? Who feels comfortable in our programs? Do our program policies and organizational structures dismantle oppression or maintain it? Are our policies designed to protect the integrity or reduce the liability of the organization, at the expense of the integrity and safety of victims? Are we physically visiting programs and people who work with marginalized communities, asking how we can make our programs accessible and meaningful for *all* the residents of our community? Are we partnering with other social justice organizations and actively engaging in anti-oppression work, both inside our programs and in the community?

I don't want to be doing this work for the rest of my life. I want to look out the window one day and see that the fire has burned out because it ran out of things to consume. So I am going to do the only thing I can do: examine myself, examine my program and stop feeding the fire. I am going to ask you to do the same.

Talking Points

Immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence reside in all parts of Washington State.

Immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence face additional barriers when accessing domestic violence and community services.

Awareness of oppression issues is essential when working with immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence.

Domestic violence agencies providing services to immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence need to have a comprehensive plan that includes budget planning, staff and program development and a language access plan.

Immigrant and refugee domestic violence advocates shouldn't be the only staff responsible for providing services to immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence.

Immigration status is often used as a pattern of control by the abuser.

Immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence often fear calling the police because of fear of deportation.

Appropriate investigation and training about culture complexity and diversity are essential when serving immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence.

Specialized providers don't have the same access to resources that mainstream agencies often have.

When developing a plan for mainstream agencies to work with immigrant and refugee victims of domestic violence, specialized providers could provide technical assistance.