



# AND FAITH, IMMIGRATION AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

## CONCEPTS FOR WORKING WITH FAITH COMMUNITIES

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### INTRODUCTION

Immigrant faith communities can be powerful allies in responding effectively to domestic violence. But understanding the intricate relationship between domestic violence, faith, and immigration is a complex task. Survivors of domestic violence in immigrant communities have unique barriers to help-seeking and support. The absence of interpreters, fear of deportation, social and familial isolation, past experiences with discrimination and prejudice, and a lack of knowledge of the legal system can stymie efforts at intervention. Structurally, these barriers also can hinder advocates and local domestic violence systems from effective community-level response.

This brief publication provides introductory guidance on the intersection between faith, immigration, and domestic violence. This information is important for both advocates and court professionals, as many immigrant survivors of domestic violence turn to their faith communities and personal religious beliefs during times of crisis. Religion is a critically important

dimension of culturally responsive services, and evidence also suggests that some forms of religious involvement may provide protective factors against external stressors (Reinert, Campbell, Bandeen-Roche, Lee & Szanton, 2015). Faith also influences how survivors react to and perceive system responses to domestic violence. While this publication is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the intricacies between faith, immigration, and domestic violence, it does provide several concepts that are important for advocates to understand when engaging with immigrant communities and survivors.

### 01 Understanding the interaction between faith communities and immigration is a critical part of domestic violence response.

Religion and religious spaces have been integral parts of immigrant communities historically. More than half of immigrants in the United States (58%) consider religion to be a very important part of their life, while 75% of immigrants attend religious services anywhere from once a week to once to twice

a month (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). Religious spaces such as churches, mosques, temples, and gurdwaras serve important roles in immigrant communities as places of cultural, ethnic, and social reinforcement (Matthew, 2017). Immigrant faith communities and houses of worship offer safety and support from discrimination, which often includes prejudice against an immigrant's faith or ethnicity.

Many immigrants consider membership in a religious group as a connection to their culture, faith, family, and homeland. One author aptly noted that religious involvement offered immigrants "the 3Rs:

- a refuge (a sense of belonging and participation in the face of the strains and stresses of adjusting to life in a new country);
- an alternative source of respectability for those who feel denied social recognition in the United States; and
- an array of resources such as information about jobs, housing, and classes in English" (Hirschman, 2004).

These communities are integral to communication for advocates and the legal system. The Center for Migration Studies further noted that "faith-based organizations often possess strong knowledge of and ties to immigrant communities that facilitate the provision of culturally and linguistically sensitive care. They often serve as 'cultural brokers' between immigrant communities and healthcare providers" (Nicholson, 2018).

Immigrant survivors of domestic violence may turn first to their faith leaders for help during crisis (Fortune, Abugideiri, & Dratch, 2010). Faith leaders are pivotal points of communication, leadership, and support in many immigrant communities. In

part, this is because questions of faith for a domestic violence survivor with religious involvement are primary, not secondary concerns (Fortune et al., 2010). Research has shown that violence itself can traumatically damage a survivor's world assumptions (Lilly, Howell, & Graham-Bermann, 2015). Likewise, advocates should be mindful that "a person's religious beliefs and community of faith (church, mosque, or synagogue) can provide a primary support system for an individual and her/his family in the midst of an experience of domestic violence" (Fortune et al., 2010, p. 1). Thus, during the process of disclosure, escape, and separation from a domestic violence relationship, immigrant survivors may rely heavily on (and be influenced by) their religious community (Lilly et al., 2015). It is therefore highly important that advocates hear, and do their best to understand, a survivor's religious concerns when voiced.

## **02 Spiritual abuse is a dimension of domestic violence and can be particularly harmful to immigrant survivors.**

Spiritual and religious abuse occurs when an abuser weaponizes aspects of a survivor's faith to isolate, manipulate, or control a survivor or to legitimize abuse or violence (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2015). Abusers may use formalistic or conservative interpretations of religious doctrine to justify abuse, or inhibit protective behavior by survivors. Further, an abuser may attempt to coerce or manipulate faith leaders or laity members from supporting the survivor.

Spiritual abuse can be devastating to immigrant survivors. Immigrant survivors already have significant barriers to seeking help and support such as a lack of "health, legal, and social services . . . fear of

deportation and separation from children; limited English proficiency, and the lack of health insurance” (Moya, Chávez-Baray, & Martinez, 2014, p. 889). Thus, when abusers use faith against immigrant survivors, they may lose one of their most culturally and linguistically effective lifelines. Immigrant survivors of spiritual abuse who are already isolated can feel bereft of their faith and find themselves feeling completely alone, gaslit, or even believing that help-seeking is fruitless or morally wrong (New York State Office of the Prevention of Domestic Violence, n.d.). Particularly for older immigrant survivors, for whom faith is “critical to their identity, their understanding of abuse itself, the decisions they make, and their healing,” spiritual abuse may be profoundly traumatizing (Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership & National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life, 2010, p. 5).

### **03 Culture, including religion, shapes how an immigrant survivor interacts with advocates and the system.**

Advocates should remember that a foundational part of their work is understanding how a survivor’s cultural background can “shape how women experience and respond to violence (e.g., manifestations, consequences, and individual and community reactions)” (American Psychiatric Association (2019, p. 1). While some immigrants may place great importance on faith, others may view it as less important. However, the importance of faith as a dimension of culture cannot be understated. Proper cultural sensitivity and humility will allow an advocate to understand how a survivor’s disclosure may be perceived by their faith community. In addition, faith and culture affect how a survivor perceives the system itself. Advocates should be mindful that immigrant

survivors may have traveled from countries where government and religion are not distinct, and where social and cultural mores may have been enforced by state actors or the legal system. Similarly, legal actors in an immigrant survivor’s home country may have been influenced by religious mores. Thus, an immigrant survivor’s perception of an advocate, an attorney, or the system writ large should be considered in light of their cultural background.

It is especially important for advocates to think about how their actions and advice will affect a survivor’s connections with their community of faith and their family. Advocates should consider how even routine activities such as speaking with a social worker, attending court, or filing for a restraining order may intersect with a survivor’s religious beliefs, cultural mores, gender roles, and social values. Immigrant survivors may continually consider how the process of disclosure, seeking help, and leaving a relationship will affect the collective identity of their community and religious group, or how their choices affect a faith community’s perception of their own family unit (Rana, & Marin, 2012; Ting, & Panchanadeswaran, 2009). This complexity should not be underestimated. A survivor seeking support should not be placed in a position where they must educate an unfamiliar advocate on the survivor’s culture and belief system in the midst of a crisis (Jayasundara, Nedegaard, Flanagan, Phillips, & Weeks, 2017).

### **04 Faith leaders in immigrant communities can be powerful allies in the domestic violence community’s response.**

Faith leaders in immigrant communities have a unique role in preventing and responding to domestic

violence. Immigrant community members may place great weight on the opinions of faith leaders, who often communicate the legitimacy of policies and social information to congregations (DeHart, 2010). Indeed, as noted by the Center for Migration Studies, “in close-knit communities, migrants place greater weight on the attitudes and opinions of community and faith leaders than of host country...[providers]” (Nicholson, 2018). For advocates, this means that collaborative partnerships can sensitively “tap into the credibility of faith leaders” to provide information about domestic violence services and support (Nicholson, 2018).

Likewise, collaborative partnerships between immigrant faith leadership and local systems have been successful in a number of areas including health care, legal services, and emergency response (Rivera-Hernandez, 2015; Bernstein, 2019). Faith leaders in immigrant communities have served as intermediaries between their community and local government, social, and health care services (Nicholson, 2018). Additionally, many faith communities, both immigrant and non-immigrant, have been receptive to cross-disciplinary education in domestic violence. In part, this is because religious leaders may be the “first ports of call” when members of their community experience domestic violence (Garcia-Navarro, 2019). This is consistent with the understanding that for many survivors (immigrant or otherwise), faith and spirituality is a primary, not ancillary, concern during domestic violence.

## 05 Partnership is a two-way street between advocates and faith-leaders.

It is important to understand that building strong relationships with an immigrant faith community requires a sense of respectful partnership, cultural humility, and equal collaboration. Advocates should recognize that immigrant survivors and their communities may be justifiably skeptical of outside assistance, particularly if their community has been the survivor of discrimination or prejudice (Futures Without Violence, 2009). The fear of deportation and disclosure of immigration status is an overriding concern for most immigrant survivors (Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, 2019), and many communities may feel apprehensive at sharing sensitive information with outside partners. Likewise, there is a longstanding tension between survivor service providers and faith communities based on the incorrect assumption that “ideological differences within the faith community or within the survivor service community would impede broader collaboration” (DeHart, 2010).

Ultimately, it is important for advocates and service providers to understand that power and privilege play a strong role in collaboration with immigrant survivors and their faith communities. In the past, service providers have approached collaboration from “places of power,” as they are uniquely situated to provide education and resources to immigrant survivors, as well as being vested with institutional and ethnic privilege (Women of Color Network, 2009). But as one commentator noted “immigrant women, communities of color, LGBTQ, partners of court system personnel, or power brokers in a community all have very different relationships with the state” (Women



of Color Network, 2009, Chapter 2, p. 43). Not only does this set the stage for an unequal partnership, but it is neither culturally responsive nor fair. As one essayist noted, “Both the secular advocate counselor and the religious leader have important roles to play when confronting domestic violence. Families in which there is abuse need the support and expertise of [both] in times of crisis” (Fortune et al., 2010, p. 3). Advocates who are forging new relationships should remain mindful that for many immigrant survivors, spirituality and faith are critical and important pieces of the journey of survival and healing, but that the backdrop to faith and help-seeking are the longstanding intersectional barriers faced by many immigrant survivors and communities. These barriers are reinforced through privilege.

Evidence suggests that the first step in building strong relationships within immigrant communities is to identify partners who work within the community (Battered Women’s Justice Project (n.d.). Faith communities that often function as service providers themselves are excellent examples of partners. Further, ensuring that language access is readily available is foundational to ongoing collaboration. It is a continuing source of frustration to many groups (Futures Without Violence, 2009) that language access remains widely unavailable for domestic violence immigrant survivors despite federal mandates requiring equal access (United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2000; United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2011). If language remains impeded there is a significant chance of heightening tension.

Building systems of accountability to allies of the immigrant community is also a method of countering

privilege (Women of Color Network, 2009). Allies should remember that, traditionally, neither women of color nor immigrants operated on equal footing when conducting “domestic violence discourse.” (Women of Color Network, 2009). Thus, domestic violence advocates and organizations should remain mindful that collaboration is a two-way street and that effective response requires humility and the ability to listen, particularly when faith communities are involved. When developing plans for collaboration and training, accessing national resource centers for assistance is an excellent first step, and it is available to virtually all communities regardless of their level of resource availability.

## **06 Providing context to an immigrant survivor’s decision-making is critical when working with courts.**

One of the most important tasks for an advocate of an immigrant survivor is to communicate the full picture of domestic violence to court decision makers. Understanding and communicating how culture and religion affect a survivor’s response to violence is a vital part of contextualizing the incidents for the court. When a survivor is from an immigrant community, the survivor’s decisions may be strongly influenced by cultural and religious norms (Sabri et al, 2018). For example, patriarchal cultural norms may place a high value on females maintaining their home and child care despite the presence of abuse (Sabri et al, 2018). A woman in this position may disregard certain restraining order protections to maintain child care roles and prevent ostracism in her community. A court without this background information on a survivor’s culture or faith, may incorrectly believe a survivor does not want the ancillary protection of a

restraining order and dismiss it out of hand.

Courts without background information on culture and faith may incorrectly impose their own value system on a survivor's decisions. This can easily result in a court incorrectly analyzing a situation. Studies have shown that systems may minimize violence toward survivors of color (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017), and implicit bias and a lack of cultural understanding continue to be blind spots for many courts (Bennett, 2016). This combination can be perilous for minority survivors (Levinson, Bennett, & Hioki, 2017).

## **07 Faith can be a protective factor in child welfare/domestic violence proceedings.**

Faith can be a powerful protective factor for immigrant survivors (Jayasundara et al, 2017). Immigrant survivors may look to their own faith (and faith community) to help guide protective behaviors such as help-seeking, safety-planning, developing support systems, and advocating for positive aspects of religious doctrine (Sabri et al, 2018). Faith leaders also may be linchpins in advocating healthy relationship behavior. Advocates should remain mindful that while religious doctrine is often misused by abusers, it can be a powerful ally in intervention with survivors, and that this positive interpretation of doctrine exists regardless of denomination (Sabri et al., 2018). Finally, when survivors emphasize faith in their recovery, advocates should emphasize role clarification. An in-depth discussion of religious

beliefs is not suggested, but gently challenging beliefs about abusive behavior through “the peaceful ideals set forth by all faith traditions and integrat[ing] them with secular social work approaches” may be an effective technique (Jayasundara et al, 2017, p. 59).

## **08 Where do I go for help or more information?**

There are numerous organizations that can assist advocates with navigating cases at the intersection of immigration, faith, and domestic violence. The Domestic Violence Resource Network allows advocates to tap into national agencies that specialize in domestic violence response. Organizations such as Safe Havens: The Interfaith Partnership on Domestic Violence, the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, Casa de Esperanza, the Battered Women's Justice Project, the Legal Resource Center on Violence Against Women, the Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Child Protection and Custody, and Futures Without Violence all can assist local advocates with training, education, resources, and advice on complex cases as well as community development, collaboration, and training. In many cases, these agencies are federally funded, which can help limit the cost for local jurisdictions and rural communities. A fast way to find a referral to the right organization is to access the RCDV:CPC assistance portal at <https://rcdvcpc.org/get-assistance.html>.

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