

CULTURAL ISSUES IN SHELTERS

Domestic violence shelters provide a safe supportive environment for women and children from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. In order to best serve women with their diverse beliefs, norms, values, religious practices, languages, sexual preferences, ages and abilities it is essential that all frontline workers be open to knowing about and accepting individual uniqueness. The Alberta Council of Women's Shelter's Aspirational Service Standards state that shelters serve individuals from all cultures and socio-economic groups, while striving to follow principles of inclusiveness, recognition of cultural differences, valuing differences as well as striving for employment equity. This module will explore the concept of culture, what it means to be culturally competent as well as examine issues specific to immigrant and refugee women. Other diversity issues will be addressed in individual modules – including abuse in Aboriginal populations, abuse in same sex relationships, elder abuse, abuse and disabled women.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

To understand that culture needs to be understood in all of its complexities

To be aware of the importance of being aware of your own biases and prejudices

To be more aware of the challenges that immigrant and refugee women face

To understand how to work with an interpreter

CULTURE DEFINED

The term culture has been used in a variety of ways and many theories have been developed to explain the idea of culture and what it involves. Some theories have associated culture with norms, values and traditions that are passed on from generation to generation. Culture has also come to be associated with ethnicity and race in order to explain the differences between groups of people.

Warrier (2005) “states that thinking of culture as fixed results in making generalizations based only upon ethnic or racial identification. Such thinking conveniently overlooks the intersection of other categories such as class, sexual orientation, disability, immigration status, etc.,.....All of these categories intersect in individuals and groups differently and change over time as the social and political landscape changes” (p. 3). Viewing culture as fixed suggests that a particular culture is made up of specific customs and ways of relating and doing things and that does not change over time. This perception does not take into account the complexities of culture and people's lives.



Warrier suggests that cultures are “fluid” and culture is “about how the norms and values of a particular group are expressed or thought about in different ways depending upon the socio-economic position, their immigration status or sexual orientation or any number of other axes. Norms and values may also differ for individuals within the same group” (p.4).

Warrier defines culture as the “shared experiences that develop and evolve according to changing social and political landscapes. It includes race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, immigration, location, time and other axes of identification understood within the historical context of oppression” (p. 4). Warrier stresses that that by using the most visible identifiers (race and gender) to come to some sort of conclusion about someone is ultimately dangerous and oppressive especially when working with women impacted by violence.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality is an analytic tool for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege. It begins from the premise that people live multiple, layered lives derived from social relations, history, and the operation of the structures of power. Individuals are members of more than one community at the same time, and can simultaneously experience oppression and privilege. “Intersectionality analysis aims to reveal multiple identities, exposing the different types of discrimination and disadvantage that occur as a consequence of the combination of identities” (Women’s Rights and Economic Change, 2004). It aims to address the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other systems of discrimination create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women. It takes into account the historical, social and political contexts of individual’s lives and also recognizes the unique individual experiences resulting from the coming together of different types of identity. Understanding intersectionality exposes all types of discrimination that occurs as a consequence of the combinations. Warrior stresses that at the point of intersection something unique is produced, namely the full complexity of experiences of individuals. Intersectionality analysis states that we should not understand the combining of identities as additively increasing one’s problems but instead as producing “substantively different experiences”. Warrior states it is essential to think about intersectionality when working with women impacted by domestic violence.

CULTURAL IDENTITY

Warrier (2009) states that cultural identity “refers to the way in which a person defines himself or herself culturally based on that person’s unique set of experiences.” She stresses that cultural identity may contain “contradictory, multi-faceted and often-changing elements”. Warrier provides the following examples: a person might identify as an Italian and not speak Italian. A person who grew up working class might now identify as a white collar professional. A bi-racial individual might identify with both of the languages she speaks. A lesbian may identify with an organized religion that does not accept homosexuality. Individuals might identify more strongly with one culture than another, or might experience several identities at the same time or might shift between different cultural identities.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Cultural competence is a useful term in that it suggests that individuals can gain knowledge, acquire skills and develop attitudes that are useful when working with individuals who appear different than the helper. Cultural competency is about becoming more aware and critical in thinking. There are some dangers in using the term culturally competent in that the term suggests that there is a point at which we all can become competent by developing certain skills which are learned by attending a specified number of training sessions. It is more beneficial to view cultural competence as a “lifelong” process involving continuous self-assessment and the development of critical thinking.

Cultural competence is a very complex process which is developed over time by engaging in a variety of activities and sources of information. In doing so it is essential to take into account the long history of oppression and peoples’ experiences of oppression in their lives. It is important to be “aware of and understand our own biased cultural lens.” (Warrier, 2005, p.6)

According to Warrier the following principles are important to keep in mind when developing cultural competency in the area of domestic and sexual violence:

- All cultures contain a continuum of inconsistencies – on one end of the continuum there may be an apparent acceptance of violence and at the other there may exist long standing traditions that oppose violence against women and children.
- Women who experience violence come from different communities and have varying values and norms; they are unique individuals and their responses to the violence they experience will be impacted by a variety of influences.
- Competency has to be developed at both the individual and the institutional level.
- It is important that education and training be provided to all frontline workers and it should not only occur once.
- Domestic and sexual violence occur in every community and group. It is essential to work against institutional differences that negatively impact underserved communities – especially those inconsistencies that deny equal access to the range of services needed by victims of domestic abuse.
- Competency is a complex process that includes the development of self-awareness; being aware of what impacts one's decisions, cultural biases and world view. Competency requires willingness for individuals to adapt and alter their attitudes as they acquire additional information.
- Information about specific cultures needs to be understood critically.
- It is essential to work collaboratively with different communities and hear diverse perspectives from a variety of resources and individuals.
- Culture cannot and should not be used as an excuse for violence.

Warrier (2009) provides the following checklist for reducing the influence of cultural misinformation:

- Recognize that it is impossible to reduce the receipt of misinformation about different cultures
- Examine generalizations that you hear about different groups.
- Broaden your understanding and sensitivity to other cultures through a variety of means.
- Listen to expressions about stereotypes of other cultures.
- Gather information from individual and evaluate the information as it relates to that person's experiences.
- Be aware of your thought process.
- Reach beyond your comfort level.
- Avoid temptation to generalize – apply only to the situation in which you received it.
- Increase your attention to cultural information.





A THREAD FOR YOUR TAPESTRY OF INTERVENTIONS

Following are some recommendations for frontline counsellors: (Warrier, 2005).

Build cooperation and collaboration and interact with diverse communities.

Recognize and be aware of your own biases and prejudices. These need to be examined and challenged in order not to create distance between you and the women needing support.

Recognize your own history and the interdependence and independence of people, lives, histories and contexts. It is important to be aware of how each individual is placed within their own special social, cultural and historical contexts and then be aware of how these interact. We do not live in vacuums.

Negotiate the acceptance of a different set of values without imposing your own. It is important to uphold the value that domestic and sexual violence is unacceptable and where it is important to negotiate is in how you challenge the practices that are counter to this value.

Recognize the power that you have over the lives of women accessing the shelter.

Listen to and build on the strengths of the women.

Gather information on the each individual woman's interpretation of her own culture. This provides a more complete picture of her background; it helps you to understand the power dynamics as well as the supports within her community.

Insure victim safety and self-determination. For example: develop safety plans that take into account culturally specific needs.

PROVIDING SERVICES TO WOMEN FROM DIFFERENT ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS

Women, new to Canada, experience the same emotions and reactions as all women that experience abuse - including fear, shame, hope for change. In addition, immigrant and refugee women may find seeking assistance from our social and legal systems overwhelming and complex due to their lack of information and knowledge about how these systems operate.

When a refugee or immigrant woman arrives at the shelter, it is likely that she will require more time from the counselling staff than other women. There may be issues of language differences as well as more complex issues that require staff time and energy to deal with – legal issues related to immigration or refugee status, pressures from religious/cultural groups to return to the partner. More time will likely be needed to provide information about resources and supports available for her as well as acting as an advocate in order that services are more readily accessible.

It is important to be aware of the multitude of challenges that women from diverse ethnic backgrounds may experience as a result of domestic abuse. Immigrant and refugee women experience all of the impacts of violence that mainstream women experience and stay in abusive relationships for many of the same reasons.

In addition to these typical reasons, immigrant and refugee women are faced with even greater barriers when confronted with the possibility of leaving their relationships. These include:

- Financial dependency – for a woman new to Canada this often is a great barrier restricting her from leaving a relationship. She may not have any source of income other than that from her partner and may not be aware of the possibility of receiving income supports.
- Pressure to keep the family together. Family is often the one stabilizing force that enables immigrants to weather the turbulent process of migration. For many women family is very important and they may believe it is their responsibility to keep the family together no matter what. Some women stay in an abusive relationship for religious or cultural reasons.
- Optimism and a belief that things will change for the better. Some women came with their partners to Canada for a better life than they left behind and they tend to hold on to the belief their situation will improve over time.
- Shame and stigmatization – a woman may be concerned about how others in her community will treat her if she leaves her partner. She may fear being shunned from her community. Being new to the country she may feel that if she left her partner she would be isolated and alone in a setting that is unfamiliar.
- Lack of English language may create many barriers for women trying to access information and support.
- Deportation threats. Some women may be unaware of their immigration status and their rights. They may fear being deported if they report the abuse within the home.
- Partners sometimes use sponsorship to be controlling including:
 1. Threaten to break the sponsorship and have the woman sent back to her homeland
 2. Threaten to not send in sponsorship documents
 3. Keep the woman dependent by not paying for English as Second Language classes
 4. Threaten to report false criminal offences or breaches of the Immigration Act so that she would be deported

See APPENDIX for Power and Control Wheel for Immigrant Women

CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: “The phrase cross cultural communication describes the ability to successfully form, foster and improve relationships with members of a culture different from one’s own. It is based on knowledge of many factors, such as the other culture’s values, perceptions, manners, social structure, decision-making practices, and an understanding of how members of the group communicate- verbally, non-verbally, in person, in writing, and in various business and social contexts but to name a few.” (Taken from a presentation by Immigrant Services Calgary).

The following have been identified as being necessary for cross cultural communication – awareness of self and own culture as well as awareness of the other and their culture. Weaver, (1986) stresses that culture

involves many complex layers. Typically we only look at the “tip of the ice berg” and tend to get trapped into generalizing about a culture.

So how do we move deeper when working with clients from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds?

- It is necessary to be open to hear about the experiences, beliefs and values of another. It is essential to suspend our biases and generalizations about specific groups of people and listen to be able to gain a greater understanding of the women’s needs and goals.
- When communicating with a woman whose first language is not English use simple and plain language. It may be helpful to use gestures, pictures, drawings or other non-verbal methods to express yourself.
- It is impossible to be aware of all ethno-cultural beliefs, traditions and practices. It is inevitable that you will make mistakes in working with women from diverse cultural backgrounds. Despite all one’s best efforts, it is very possible that you will do or say something that may be perceived as offensive to a client. It is important to be sensitive to signs that this has occurred. Cox and Ephross (1998) recommend apologizing, give the client a chance to respond and then move on. “Social workers are not expected to be perfect, but rather to model appropriate behaviours at times of imperfect behaviour” (p. 34).
- It is also essential to acknowledge that how you perceive the world will be different than how many of your clients see their worlds. It is okay to name these differences which can open up the opportunity to have a dialogue about the woman’s experiences, beliefs, values and traditions. “Perhaps the biggest mistake one can make is to pretend that the difference between the client and the worker does not exist” (Cox & Ephross, 1988). When you do not understand something ask open ended questions to gain a greater understanding of each woman’s reality.
- Because the needs of immigrant and refugee women can be complex and challenging it may be helpful to engage others in working collaboratively with you in order to provide the best possible services. Check with the client to see if she would like a support person from her community to work with you, for example someone from her faith community. By working together, you will more likely become aware of the deeper cultural issues impacting the woman’s situation.

USE OF INTERPRETERS IN SHELTERS

Interpreters are important resources when providing support to women whose first language is not English. Access to appropriate interpretation in order to more clearly understand a women’s needs as well as better facilitate their accessibility to services is essential. At times there may be a need to have certain information translated into residents’ first languages.

It is important to understand the difference between translation and interpretation. **Translation** refers to written materials that are translated from one language to another; **interpretation** is the oral transferring of information from one language to another.

It is necessary to have an interpreter when:

- The clients requests one

- If you have any doubt about communicating with the individual
- If you think that it is better for the process
- If you feel there are problems in being understood

Use care when obtaining an interpreter. If at all possible obtain an interpreter from a service specializing in interpretation. Check with the client, prior to booking an interpreter to see if she would prefer a male or female or if she has any concerns regarding accessing an interpreter. If possible secure the name of the interpreter prior to the session in order to check if the client has any reservations about a particular individual interpreting for her. Some communities are very small and it may be possible that the client will know the individual interpreting and this may or may not be an issue for her. It is not advisable to use family members or friends to interpret.

The Association of Translators and Interpreters of Alberta may be able to suggest an interpreter:

www.atia.ab.ca.



A THREAD FOR YOUR TAPESTRY OF INTERVENTIONS

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH AN INTERPRETER:

When scheduling an appointment where you are going to work with an interpreter, it is important to book extra time. It is inevitable that a session that normally takes one hour, will likely take at least an hour and a half.

At the first Interview with a resident and an interpreter:

Explain your role and the role of the interpreter

Explain that both you and the interpreter are bound by codes of ethics in regards to confidentiality

Explain the purpose of the interview

During the interview:

Ensure that the seating is arranged in such a way that a triangle is formed between the client, yourself and the interpreter.

The interpreter is the “bridge” between you and the client; his/her role is to interpret what you say to the client and to interpret what the client says back to you and nothing more.

Keep your sentences or questions brief and concise

Avoid jargon or colloquial language; if need be explain any difficult concepts or terms; if technical terms need to be used it is your responsibility to explain their meaning, not the interpreters

Pause at the end of each statement to allow the interpreter time to interpret

Maintain eye contact with the client and speak to her rather than the interpreter

Use the first person "I" and "you" instead of "ask her ..."

It is your responsibility to maintain the structure of the interview and to intervene if necessary if it appears that the interpreter and the client are having a private conversation.

After the interview

Check in with the interpreter without the resident present. Ask the interpreter about any comments they would like to make; explore if the interpreter would like to discuss any aspect of the interview they may have found confusing or difficult.

-Points to remember:

It is your responsibility for maintaining control of the interview.

Avoid engaging in lengthy discussions with the interpreter during the interview as this tends to isolate the client. If discussing a particular issue is unavoidable explain to the client what you are doing and why.

If you sense that the client is telling the interpreter information that is not being relayed to you – it is important to review the roles that each of you have

Children should not be used for interpreting; **it is also not advisable to ask family members or friends to act as interpreters. Always check with the woman to see if she has any concerns regarding specific interpreters.**

Try to arrange for the same interpreter for each of the sessions

-Unsatisfactory practices by interpreters: (examples)

Not interpreting everything that is said

Carrying on a side conversation with the client during the interview

Speaking on behalf of the client

Answering a phone during an interview

Demaneing behaviour or attitudes towards a client

If you encounter any of the above it is important to discuss the issues with the agency providing the interpreter services. (Adapted from a presentation by Elena Oursou, Language Bank Manager, Immigrant Services Calgary.)

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES:

Immigrants:

- Have a choice of country to resettle
- Have time to plan for resettlement
- Often bring the entire family
- Usually become self-sufficient quickly and attain some level of social mobility
- May have Canadian relatives
- Often adapt more quickly to the social environment
- Can return to their country of origin
- Come to Canada because of better opportunities for material and social success

Refugees:

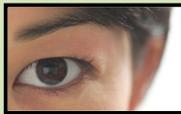
- Have no choice where to resettle
- Usual have no time to plan for resettlement
- Are sometimes separated from family
- Have a difficult time finding work in their area of specialization
- Usually have no relatives living in Canada
- Have difficulties becoming self-sufficient
- May have difficulty adapting because of the stress factor
- Usually cannot return to their country of origin
- May have not thought of immigrating

(Source: Presentation by Elena Oursou, Language Bank Manager, Immigrant Services, Calgary).

- Women with refugee status may be not only dealing with domestic abuse concerns but also issues related to living in refugee camps and war trauma and torture. It is important to be aware of this possibility. Having this knowledge about a resident in the shelter may allow for a greater understanding of some of the challenges she is dealing with. Women may be reluctant to talk about these experiences as their focus will likely be dealing with the recent abuse in their lives. If a woman does talk about her experiences and want additional assistance she would benefit from being referred to someone who has experience in this area.

- The Edmonton Centre for Survivors of Torture and Trauma www.emcn.ab.ca helps victims of torture and trauma heal from the effects of torture through specialized psychological counselling. Contact number is 780-424-7709.
- In Calgary, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society runs a Host Support Program for Survivors of Torture. This program is designed to offer social and emotional support to refugees and others who have been subjected to torture and who have experienced trauma due to political instability in their country of origin or in the migration process to Canada. Volunteers are matched with families based on their specific needs. Connections are also made to professionals for assistance with physical and mental health needs. The coordinator of the Host Support Program for Survivors of Torture can be contacted and she may be able to provide information regarding service providers in other locations for individuals suffering from the impacts of war trauma or torture. Contact information: 403 262-2006.

For information about Legal Issues and Refugee and Immigrant women see Legal Issues Module.



THROUGH HER EYES

Mybet was brought to the shelter with her three small children by the police. Mybet spoke limited English therefore an interpreter was contacted to assist with the intake process. Mybet stated that she and her husband and three of her children had arrived in Calgary about 13 months prior from a refugee camp in Ethiopia. She also shared that she left an older child in Ethiopia with her mother. Her goal she stated was to some day sponsor her son to come to Canada to live with her. Mybet said that the abuse that she experienced from her partner began shortly after they were married but the physical violence increased considerably since arriving in Calgary. She stated that she believed that a neighbour called the police after hearing an argument between her husband and her. Mybet showed the counsellor the marks left on her arms where her husband had hit her with his belt. The counsellor obtained consent from Mybet to contact the Victim's Assistance Unit who informed the counsellor that Mybet's husband had been charged with assault with a weapon and he had been released with a no contact condition. It was determined that Mybet could return to the subsidized housing complex that she had been living in. When the counsellor contacted a staff member with the housing agency she was informed that Mybet owed rent money and would not be able to return to the home until arrangements had been made to pay the outstanding amount. Mybet was unaware that she owed money as her husband had been the one to manage the money. An outreach counsellor accompanied Mybet to a meeting with the housing agency. An agreement was made whereby Mybet was to pay an extra \$25 a month to the housing company. Mybet was then supported to apply for Income Supports. Mybet was encouraged to maintain contact with the Victim Assistance Unit to be updated regarding the criminal process. Mybet returned home and was supported for an additional 9 months by one of the follow-up counsellors. Initially each appointment that Mybet attended, she required the services of an interpreter but gradually she was able to speak for herself. Eventually Mybet was referred to an agency that provided English classes as well as free childcare. Later she attended a six month office support worker course offered for new Canadians. She was also referred to an immigrant serving agency that provided opportunities for Mybet and her children to socialize with other immigrant families. Today she is self supporting and was able to eventually sponsor her oldest child to come to Canada. The counsellors working with Mybet spent lots of time with her and her children. It was challenging to work with an interpreter because of the scarcity of individuals who spoke Mybet's dialect. But with lots of patience and resourcefulness on the part of the staff, Mybet is managing very well.

RESOURCES

www.rosenet.ca – is a joint project of the Legal Resource Centre and Changing Together: A Centre for Immigrant Women; provides information for immigrant women; information is available in the following languages Arabic, Chinese, Polish, Spanish, Punjabi, and Vietnamese

Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies – www.aalsa.ca provides a link to immigrant serving agencies throughout the province as well as a link to a booklet titled Welcome to Alberta. This booklet provides information for immigrant and refugees regarding life in Alberta including issues related to health, education, employment, legal, immigration, human rights, etc. Welcome to Alberta is available in the following languages: French, Spanish, Farsi, Arabic, Mandarin, Amharic, Dinka, Punjabi and English.

Alliance to End Violence has Help Cards in 15 languages. Contact number 403-283-3013

Alberta Network of Immigrant Women Is a provincially based network of immigrant women's organizations. Has links to immigrant women's organizations in Edmonton, Calgary and Red Deer. www.aniw.org.

Alberta Solicitor General and Public Security – Publications Victims of Crime Handbook in English, Amharic, Arabic, French, Kiswahili, Punjabi, Spanish, Somali, Tigrigna, Vietnamese
www.solgen.gov.ab.ca/publications/Default.

Community Legal Education Ontario – has information regarding immigration and refugee legal issues
www.cleo.on.ca/english/pub/onpub/subject/landlord.htm.

Department of Justice Canada- Family Violence Initiative. Access to Abuse is Wrong in Any Language – in English, French, Albanian, Amharic, Arabic, Chinese-simplified and Chinese-traditional, Czech., Hungarian, Punjabi, Serbian, Somali, Spanish, Swahili, Tagalog. www.justice.gc.ca/eng/pi/fv-vf/pub/index.html.

OCASI – the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Women has a self-directed online course for frontline workers. Prevention of Domestic Violence against Immigrant and Refugee Women through Early Intervention is available free and can be accessed at <http://learn.settlementatwork.org/>.

Tunstall, L & Damjanovic, Z. (2008). Violence knows no boundaries: Diverse cultural perspectives, legal resources and safety information on domestic violence for service providers. Includes copies of safety plans in other languages including Arabic, Spanish, French. Copies are available from the Alliance to End Violence office in Calgary. Phone number is 403- 283-3013.

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APPENDIX A: IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND THE DOMESTIC ABUSE WHEEL