

## Cross-Cultural Issues in Domestic Violence

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Many victims of domestic violence share the same fears: exacerbation of their abuser's anger, lack of shelter, loss of the abuser's economic support, and the possibility of a wrongful arrest. For immigrant women, these fears are compounded by additional worries caused by language barriers and possible immigration problems for themselves and their extended families. Like many minority crime victims, these women also face personal and cultural obstacles when they try to access the justice system—for example, they may find that language is a significant barrier; they may believe that the police will not take action on their complaints or that the police are insincere when dealing with same-sex domestic violence; they may even feel such shame and embarrassment that they are unwilling to involve the police.

To understand better how cultural factors affect services for victims, researchers in the Seattle area joined forces with five community-based agencies, the City of Seattle's Domestic Violence Council, and local university researchers.

The researchers conducted 38 focus groups and 16 one-on-one interviews, each of which was conducted in the participant's first language. A total of 254 members representing 9 minority populations in the Seattle area participated in the study: 39 African Americans, 47 American Indians/Alaskan Natives, 18 Amharic-speaking Ethiopians, 39 Cambodians, 13 Filipinas, 9 Latinas, 24 Russian-speakers, 43 Vietnamese, and 22 lesbians/bisexuals/transgenders.

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### Key Findings

Researchers learned that victims of domestic violence in these communities face a complex set of challenges. They may face acculturation problems and racial, sexual, and economic oppression in their new social setting, after already experiencing major social upheavals and political oppression. These issues increase the difficulty they experience in obtaining assistance and may exacerbate the view that what help is available is culturally and linguistically inappropriate.

In fact, services provided by the criminal justice system received mixed ratings from the study participants. Simply put, when police officers responded with sensitivity, the women reported positive experiences. However, when the police response was perceived as insensitive, the women viewed the experience as negative.

### Implications for Criminal Justice

The authors suggest that innovative solutions are needed to resolve the unique problems of minority victims of domestic violence in overcoming barriers to the justice system. Responding officers must consider the underlying social context of these women's lives, including

racism, homophobia, and low economic status. This social context not only shapes the experience of domestic violence, but also the survivors' and justice system's responses.

The report makes several recommendations based on participants' suggestions and on the authors' interpretation of the data. The recommendations address three areas—systems, services, and community. The authors call for providing more low-income housing and childcare services for victims and for conducting culturally and linguistically appropriate domestic violence education campaigns in the community.

The authors recommend more outreach on domestic violence by the police to

ethnic and sexual minority communities and multiple options for services to survivors of domestic violence. Also recommended are giving greater attention to the special needs of children who have experienced the pain and horror of domestic violence and explaining the variety of victim assistance services that are available at no cost.

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**For more information**

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