

Cultural Contexts of Domestic Violence in Asian Communities: Ten Tips for Advocates

Domestic violence is a systematic pattern of abusive behaviors that include physical battering, coercive control, economic abuse, emotional abuse and/or sexual violence. It is intended to gain or maintain power and control over a romantic or intimate partner to intimidate, frighten, terrorize, humiliate, blame or injure. Domestic violence is more than a series of incidents. It is about living in a climate of fear and disempowering restrictions that threaten and affect one's selfhood, psychological well-being, health, economic security, and the emotional labor of parenting. The presence of domestic violence tells us about the presence of inequality in a relationship, the extent of the abuse tells us about the extent of the inequality. Addressing domestic violence in an ethnic community, in this case, Asians, typically raises questions about the role of culture and how a deeper understanding of cultural issues can guide and improve practice.

1. Culture is more than ethnicity; culture is context.

Culture defines the spaces within which power is expressed, gender, and other relations are negotiated, and traditions are re-designed. There are three intersecting cultures that affect everyone because we all have cultural identities: a culture of violence that makes domestic abuse, sexism, and the devaluation of women normative; the culture of ethnic communities enforcing gender roles; and the culture of systems that domestic violence victims/survivors and their advocates have to contend with. Culture is responsible for *how* domestic violence is viewed: it is used as a convenient excuse for abuse by communities, or as encouragement to racial stereotyping by systems. Domestic violence must be understood within these intersecting cultural contexts for professionals to design meaningful interventions that acknowledge how survivors negotiate the barriers and gateways cultures afford them. Culture is also the site of being nurtured by community, a vital link that risks getting broken if services for survivors are only predicated on leaving. The importance of connection to community guides the many promising practices designed to serve Asian immigrant and refugee survivors.

2. Domestic violence is gendered; it is not gender-neutral.

Women are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence (GBV). The CDC reports the following lifetime prevalence rates: 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men have been raped; 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men have experienced severe physical violence by an intimate; and 1 in 6 women and 1 in 19 men have been stalked.¹ A compilation of community-based studies estimates domestic violence prevalence rates at 21-55% for Asian women.² In a 6-year period, 160 Asian intimate homicide cases resulted in 226 fatalities, 83% of perpetrators were men.³ In many Asian communities, women who use physical violence and coercive control usually target other women, i.e., their daughters or sisters-in-law. Asian families that subscribe to very traditional ideas of women's role and place in society compound the gender inequality that domestic violence is rooted in. Professional neutrality is imperative: it doesn't however mean overlooking the disproportionality of women's victimization.

¹ Centers for Disease Control. *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS)*. Atlanta: 2010.

² Yoshihama, M. and Dabby, C. *Facts & Stats Report: Domestic Violence in API Homes*. Oakland, CA: Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, 2013.

³ Dabby, C., Patel, H., Poore, G., *Shattered Lives: Domestic Violence, Homicides & Asian Families*. Oakland, CA: Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, 2009.

3. Assess if physical violence includes abuse by in-laws.

The dynamic of multiple perpetrators against a single victim is present in some Asian families (similar to elder abuse in all communities). So, in addition to her husband, a woman's mother-, father-, sister- and/or brother-in-law may abuse her—employing a range of tactics. Professionals should assess the presence and effects of multiple batterers abusing a single victim in an extended family home.

(a) Do not assume there is no domestic violence because the intimate partner is not abusive.

Battered women may be viewed as denying, minimizing or not co-operating because a professional's questions assume the intimate partner is the batterer.

(b) Explicitly gather additional information about who other abusers are.

Systems may respond inadequately, given a lack of understanding or training about multiple batterers. Practitioners, therefore, should rely on getting this information directly as it may not appear in regular documents such as police or medical reports.

(c) Do not assume that accompanying female or male relatives are part of a support system.

Greater family collusion accompanies multiple abusers. Male or female women relatives from the extended family or the family of origin are not necessarily a battered woman's allies or friends. Even if they are not actively violent, they may collude with the other abusers.

4. Identify if emotional abuse includes 'push' factors that coerce women to exit the relationship.

Asian women may more frequently experience 'push' factors out of a relationship than 'pull' factors that draw her back into the relationship—signaled, for example, by an abuser's apology/contrition. Push factors (e.g., 'get out; I never wanted you anyway') constrict autonomy and decision-making. Women experiencing push factors early on in the relationship will not be in a position to make decisions, and what may look like an inexplicable decision, e.g., to leave without her children, could in fact be a function of push factors exerted by a single batterer and reinforced by multiple batterers. Professionals can then understand the context for a survivor's poor decision-making skills, lack of agency, and/or anger at being pushed out of her home.

5. Evaluate how maternal authority and child safety are compromised by multiple abusers.

An extended family home may be viewed as a better environment for children, but multiple abusers increase children's exposure to domestic violence and their access to maternal nurturing. Mothering in an abusive extended family home can be severely undermined by multiple perpetrators and maternal decision-making inhibited by push factors. Custody evaluators should identify these factors pre-separation to assess for them in post-separation parenting arrangements; and scrutinize paternal and familial allegations against the mother of child abuse, neglect or abandonment in light of multiple abuser dynamics. In addition, when multiple individuals give the same story of maternal culpability and paternal scrupulousness, the credibility of mothers, and even their children, is jeopardized or dismissed. In Asian families with acculturated, English-speaking fathers and recently immigrated non-English-speaking mothers, a further credibility gap develops to be exploited by abusers.

6. Consider a range of sexual violence perpetration.

In a study that interviewed 143 domestic violence victims, 56% of Filipinas and 64% of Indians reported sexual violence by an intimate.⁴ Asian women's experiences of sexual coercion and violence can include

⁴ Yoshihama, M., Bybee, D., Dabby, C., Blazeviski, J. *Lifecourse Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence and Help-Seeking among Filipino, Indian and Pakistani Women: Implications for Justice System Responses*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 2011.

being forced to watch and mimic pornography; bodily humiliation; forced (*contra* arranged) early marriage; being forced to marry one's rapist; and/or sexual harassment by male in-laws. Asian women's reluctance to discuss sexual violence may be stereotyped as prudery, but it is influenced by the tight nexus of visiting shame on the family through public disclosure; by significant histories of sexual abuse (sexual violence starts early in all cultures⁵); and victim-blaming attitudes from communities and systems. Given these cultural contexts, professionals cannot limit their inquiry to intimate/marital rape, and need to build a repertoire of sensitive questions to gather a sexual violence history.

7. Be alert to abuses that exploit victims' immigration status and refer them to immigration lawyers/services.

Asian immigrant women face particular vulnerabilities when their immigration status is insecure. Most often, they fall out of status because abusers make false declarations to immigration authorities; refuse or delay filing paperwork that converts temporary status (e.g., a 3-month fiancée visa) to permanent residency; hide important documents like birth certificates or passports, so she cannot prepare her own application. Abusers may threaten deportation and loss of access to children if she reports domestic violence; abandon her a few months after marriage; or severely isolate her from family and friends. Domestic violence victims might behave compliantly in the mistaken belief that their immigration problems will be resolved, and at least they will not be forced out of the country and permanently lose access to their children. Practitioners should collaborate with or refer immigrant battered women to programs that help them obtain legal relief through U-Visas.

8. Do not accept culture as an explanation for domestic violence, or as a barrier to solutions.

When someone justifies domestic violence by claiming "this is how women are treated in my culture," what's being described is the culture of patriarchy, the culture of gender oppression, the culture of sexism. Cultures of patriarchy differ from place to place and in how rigidly they are maintained over time—the culture of patriarchy on an army base in Kentucky is different the culture of patriarchy in rural Chile, or in metropolitan London, etc. Cultural explanations of domestic violence can help professionals understand how tightly prescribed and rigid gender relations are within the community; how their interventions will challenge conventional practices; and what battered women are up against (e.g., tradition requires silence) and what risks they may encounter (e.g., from disclosure).

Because we are talking about domestic violence, a gender lens is at times equally, or more, illuminating than a cultural one. For example, a rural shelter frames an Indian woman's reluctance to use common bathrooms as a function of her cultural attitudes to nudity and contrasts them to American women's attitudes to nudity. The more appropriate question is: what would any abused woman in this situation want—privacy for sure; and not how an Indian woman's attitude to nudity impinges on her ability to shower in front of others. Practitioners should ascertain if the lens of gender answers a question or suggests a solution more effectively than the lens of culture.

9. Use an understanding of cultural differences to prompt better interventions, rather than confirm or sensationalize stereotypes.

Clearly, whilst domestic violence is a universal phenomenon, the cultural expressions of it differ, and some types of violence can be more horrific than others based on what people are exposed to in their own culture. For example, burning a woman to death or shooting her dead—the former may seem more

⁵ In the United States, almost half of female victims experienced their first rape before age 18, and a quarter of male victims were age 10 or younger.

disturbing than the latter and our cultural stereotypes step in to confirm this view, but in fact both acts are equally awful. If practitioners don't adequately guard against cultural biases, they might risk misunderstanding their client's narrative. So, in the above example: asking if a batterer has threatened to use a gun does not rule out homicide risk by other means. While it is not possible to understand/learn all cultural contexts, it is possible, as professionals, to be trained and guided by best practice standards that mitigate cultural bias.

10. Considerations in serving clients with Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

Interpretation:⁶ Arrange for professional in-person or telephonic interpreters for parties with Limited English Proficiency for all meetings. Allow extra time to familiarize yourself and all parties about how to work with an interpreter; as well as for the sessions. The same applies to working with sign language interpreters for a deaf client. Do not have adult or child family members, friends, or other bi-lingual individuals interpret for a client—and especially not the alleged abuser. Such practices can vitiate practitioner-client confidentiality. Fluent bilingual professionals could, of course, practice in a foreign language (and produce a report in English).

Test Instruments: Standard psychological tests for individuals with limited English proficiency are contraindicated. They would require every item to be sight translated and every response interpreted—introducing unknowable degrees of error and jeopardizing the integrity of assessment methods and test result validity.

Bias: Immigrant or refugee families who lack proficiency in English should not be considered uneducated or disadvantaged at parenting; and greater credibility should not be attached to more acculturated fathers.

⁶ To learn more on interpretation ('translation' refers to rendering *written* text from one language into another), go to <http://www.api-gbv.org/organizing/interpretation.php>.