

**Report on the State of Affairs for Domestic Violence Survivors from
Multicultural and Underserved Communities in the City of Los
Angeles**

Prepared by the Los Angeles City Domestic Violence Task Force Multicultural and
Underserved Communities Committee

Executive Summary and Recommendations

The Multicultural and Underserved Communities Committee of the Los Angeles City Domestic Violence Task Force was formed in 2003 due to an absence of discussion around the issues pertaining to specific experiences of survivors of intimate partner violence within the multicultural and underserved communities.

Given the rich diversity and varied background of the City of Los Angeles, the focus of the Committee is on those individuals who as victims of intimate partner violence are the most vulnerable and at-risk because of the additional barriers they face when accessing services beyond the already numerous barriers faced by all survivors of intimate partner violence.

The Committee, which is comprised of members of agencies serving these communities, including community based organizations, city officials and law enforcement, has sought to bring attention to these experiences.

This report is the culmination of several years of discussion surrounding these issues.

Through this process and the collection of real stories, the committee has found that:

1. Cultural and language differences have to be taken into account while assisting intimate partner violence survivors.
2. Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, abilism, and ageism continue to create barriers for survivors of intimate partner violence when accessing services.
3. If differences are not taken into account that survivors are not adequately served and may even be put in further danger.
4. Thus, these community members remain more vulnerable, and in many instances, continue to be in the hands of their batterers.

With these issues in mind the panel has made these recommendations:

1. Additional services, and sufficient funding for them, are required to adequately address the needs of intimate partner violence survivors from the multicultural and underserved communities in the City of Los Angeles.
2. All agencies should receive appropriate training in the issues of intimate partner violence while serving members of multicultural and underserved communities, so that agencies are able to respond in a culturally appropriate way.
3. Each survivor's unique experience is paramount in any course of action and that recommendations as to an individuals safety consider the survivors individual circumstances.

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The dominant vision of intimate partner violence¹ (hereinafter referred to as “IPV”) is a scenario made familiar by TV and movies: the police entering a kitchen to find a bruised woman cowering in a corner while her husband prepares to strike again. Unspoken are the assumptions surrounding this scene: that the participants are married, heterosexual, and able to communicate with police. We assume the scenario has ended appropriately—the batterer will be arrested, and the victim will seek help. However for many the difficulties have only begun. For example, how can you explain to the police what has happened if you are deaf? A non-English speaking Chinese victim? What if the police mistake you for the batterer and arrest you, because you and your partner share the same gender?

“It is an epidemic affecting Americans in all communities, regardless of age, economic status, race, religion, nationality or educational background.”—National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

The predominant view of IPV shuts out many diverse communities, which are often the most vulnerable. All of these communities—the disabled, the economically disadvantaged, African Americans, cultural and ethnic minorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals, teens, immigrants—experience the ravages of domestic violence. Yet the realities of racism, as well as other forms of oppression that continues to exist in this country, means that the structure of traditional IPV services, combined with the specific needs of these groups, produce additional barriers to accessing services.

Listed below are some real-life examples drawn from a case study matrix collected and prepared by the L.A. City Domestic Violence Taskforce Multicultural and Underserved Communities Committee (*See Appendix A*). Of course, creating categories for these problems makes them easier to conceptualize, but can also be misleading. In real life one individual often experiences problems arising from several of these categories, and these problems can in turn complicate or give rise to other problems. The Committee has outlined some common barriers below that IPV survivors from the multicultural and underserved communities experience when seeking assistance. We recognize that the Committee is using only a limited subset of stories, that all survivors face barriers, and that many of the most vulnerable people have yet to be reached or have their stories heard.

Cultural Issues

Language:

For many communities, the overarching cultural barrier is the inability to communicate effectively in English. Without English, a survivor may have difficulty communicating with the police, IPV service providers, or the Courts. IPV service providers from first responders to the shelter to the court system often lack readily available interpreters and translators. In fact, in the absence of adequate bilingual service personnel many survivors must rely on their children to act

¹ “Intimate Partner Violence” is used here in place of the term “Domestic Violence” and it means “abuse committed against an adult or a minor who is a spouse, former spouse, cohabitant, former cohabitant, or person with whom the suspect has had a child or is having or has had a dating or engagement relationship.” Cal. Penal Code §13700 (b).

as interpreters or, in certain cases, the batterer. Further, many of the documents for survivors use are not translated from English to other languages or are only available in a few languages. Our case study matrix, which draws from only a small cross-section of L.A.'s diverse population, shows that monolingual Spanish, Mandarin, Korean, Hindi, and Gujarati speakers, as well as a survivor who knew only Chinese Sign Language and not American Sign Language all experienced problems as a result of language barriers when trying to leave their batterers. (See Appendix A: **Cases 2, 3, 4, 12, and 17**).

Pressure from family and community

Many cultures, particularly among Asian, Middle Eastern communities and oftentimes within the LGBT community, associate serious stigma and shame with leaving an intimate partner relationship or admitting IPV issues. For example in **Case 3**, the survivor Grace² was a 55-year old Chinese-American woman raised in China. She was repeatedly subjected to physical, emotional, and economic abuse. Her more traditional cultural values made her ashamed to admit her marital problems. Furthermore, due to her upbringing and recent arrival in the states, she was not even aware shelters existed, much less that they could provide her with help to deal with the abuse. See **Case 12**, where a Korean-born female who was sexually and physically assaulted by her husband initially refused to seek counseling in Korean despite her lack of proficiency in English. Because of the close-knit nature of the Korean community, she feared confidentiality would be impossible. Similarly, the South Asian Network reported a case where a survivor, originally from India, suffered severe physical mental and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband and brother. However the client received pressure from her native family to stay with her abuser. She was unable to leave the relationship until a particularly violent incident occurred in which the police intervened. (See **Case 19**.)

Racial Inequalities and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment

Racial and ethnic biases continue to impact victims' ability to access assistance. African Americans, especially African American Women, are distinctively at greater risk than other racial groups in the United States to suffer deadly violence from family members, yet there remain few resources to assist these survivors.³ Further, a historically violent relationship between African-Americans and state institutions, particularly the criminal justice system, often impedes survivors' willingness to reach out to law enforcement for assistance.⁴ Similarly, an unconscious bias can exist in favor of a batterer who is a US citizen, over a survivor who is an immigrant. See **Case 8**, where the police refused to file a report for a 22-year old woman who had emigrated from Russia. Members of the Committee have oral reports of incidents where officers threatened to deport survivors trying to file police reports against their abusers. Only last year a judge in Pomona told a survivor to get out of their courtroom and refused to grant a restraining order because of the survivor's immigration status.⁵

Isolation and unfamiliarity with U.S. practices and IPV resources

Many recent immigrants are isolated from the support network of family or friends, who are located in their home country. They are also unfamiliar with how to seek help in the US. See **Case 2**: An African woman married an American husband while in her home country.

² All names used in this document have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the survivors.

³ ABA Commission on Domestic Violence. See http://www.abanet.org/domviol/statistics.html#african_americans.

⁴ "Community Insights on Domestic Violence among African Americans" (San Francisco/Oakland, CA, 2002)

⁵ Sam Quinones, "It wasn't the Order She Sought," *Los Angeles Times* (7/20/2006).

Immediately on moving to the States, she was in his power and was daily sexually abused, deprived of food, and kept from attending school. She had no friends or family and did not know where to seek help. Her immigrant status made her much less able to escape or avail herself of resources, and made it easier for her batterer to intimidate and control her.

Marriages outside the U.S.

As in the case above, many survivors come to the states after marrying in their home country. This gives rise to a host of legal problems that IPV service providers are not presently equipped to deal with--problems tracking down clients and securing proper documents, lack of familiarity with laws governing the country of marriage, difficulty contacting clients who have returned to other countries. Take for example the transnational case of Priyanka, a survivor who returned to her home country of India while her divorce case was filed in California. IPV service providers faced barriers in contacting Priyanka in India, securing low-cost legal services, and ascertaining what services the client was eligible for while not a resident of L.A. See **Case 16**.

Unique Issues faced by Immigrants

Depending on immigration status, many survivors are not eligible for many of the public benefits available to citizens, which can mean that they are left without resources after the draining challenge of leaving an abusive relationship. Take for example the case of Cynthia, a monolingual Mexican woman who moved to the US with her partner ten years ago and suffered emotional and physical abuse. On leaving her abuser, she found herself ineligible for any type of assistance because she was undocumented. Unable to work without documents, she and her 3 children had to rely on charity groups and donors to provide financial support. (See **Case 4**). Many survivors are not so lucky, and they and their children, wind up completely financially destitute or returning to their batterer for financial assistance. Furthermore, receiving immigration assistance like VAWA and U-Visas can be difficult to obtain.

Immigration status deters seeking help or is used by batterer

Many immigrants, regardless of their status, resist seeking help for fear of being deported. Often, immigrants have left their home countries with mistrust of police and governmental agencies there and are equally reluctant to use those agencies here. Batterers can use this fear to maintain power and control over their immigrant partners. See **Case 7**, where Veronica, a 30-year old Ukrainian was brought to the country on a 90 day finance visa and was wholly financially dependent on her batterer. Within ten days of her arrival her abuser attempted to sexually assault her. However, she could not afford a ticket home and her abuser refused to give her money for one. Veronica did not know how to access the courts or legal system and was forced to overstay her visa. Without intervention the batterer may repeat this cycle of financial dependency, illegal status, abuse, and exploitation with multiple victims.

Disability Issues

Individuals with disabilities are at a higher risk of violence than those without and are more likely to be sexually abused and are often heavily dependent on their abusive partner for care.⁶ However, the resources that disabled survivors need are often lacking, such as sign language translators for the deaf, transportation, and other accessible services. See **Case 3**,

⁶ "Domestic Violence and Disabilities," National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Found at: <http://www.ncadv.org/files/disabilities.pdf>.

where shelter services were limited for a profoundly deaf monolingual Chinese woman. Other non-shelter service providers also could not communicate with her and give her the help she needed. She is not alone; see *Case 9*, where law enforcement and service providers were either reluctant or not equipped to provide assistance where both parties had a disability. In that situation the victim left a shelter where she felt so isolated and alone, she believed it was better to be with her abusive husband.

LGBT Issues

The LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) community is often overlooked when considering IPV. However IPV occurs at the same rate as in heterosexual unions.⁷ Continued homophobia and transphobia creates additional barriers for LGBT survivors when attempting to leave the situation or when accessing services. Further, threats by batterers to disclose the sexual orientation or gender identity to family, friends and employer is oftentimes an effective mechanism for maintaining control over their partners, particularly for teen victims and for those who are recently out.

The survivor can get mistaken for the batterer by police or IPV service providers.

Survivors in same-sex/gender unions are generally at higher risk of being mistaken for the batterer, whether because the abuser manipulates the situation or because police or IPV service providers have an incomplete knowledge of or lack understanding of non-heterosexual unions, and may rely on traditional and more heterosexually focused models of IPV (a man abusing a woman). See *Case 11*, where George, a 44-year old African-American man who had been abused by his partner for over 12 years was arrested by police, charged with IPV, and forced to attend a batterer's intervention program. There, two other members of the group learned of the survivor's sexual orientation and beat him while using homosexual slurs.

Scarcity of shelters and resources for gay male survivors of domestic violence

A 30-year old male was held hostage by his partner for eight years, during which time the survivor suffered a gunshot wound to the shoulder, a shovel blow to the head that ruptured his eardrum, and had his teeth knocked out. (See *Case 10*). It was understood that only one shelter in all of LA County accepted men, and the abuser, a wealthy and prominent community member, cut off the survivor's access to it. With successfully advocacy, the survivor was placed in another shelter temporarily, but had that not been possible, he most likely would have returned to the batterer as he had no other resources. (See also *Case 11*).

Teen Issues

According to the medical studies, a comparison of Intimate Partner Violence rates show that teens are at a higher risk for abuse than adults.⁸ Yet this issue is almost universally ignored by parents and schools or is dismissed as dramatics or puppy love.

One unique problem teens face is that school may get in the way of a survivor's ability to escape IPV. See *Case 6*, where the batterer actually attended the same high school and often

⁷ Janice Ristock, "Relationship Violence in Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer [LGBTQ] Communities: Moving Beyond a Gender Framework." Violence Against Women Online Resources (2005).

⁸ Jay G. Silverman et Al, "Dating Violence Against Adolescent Girls and Associated Substance Use, Unhealthy Weight Control, Sexual Risk Behavior, Pregnancy, and Suicidality." Journal of the American Medical Association, Vol. 286, 572, 576-577, (Nov. 5, 2001).

followed her to school or assaulted her on-campus. Even if the batterer is not a student, he/she knows the survivor's location for the majority of the day. This may force the survivor to have to change schools, interrupting their studies and support networks. In many cases, survivors might choose to drop out of school rather than face harassment/abuse from an abuser. As minors, these survivors have less ability to seek alternative housing, and may resist involvement by police, social workers, parents, or other authority figures.

Gang Issues

Traditional IPV protection such as restraining orders or shelters may not be sufficient for survivors being battered by a gang member. See **Case 15**, where the survivor managed to successfully access IPV help, literally jumping out a window and fleeing to a nearby police station. Service providers responded by getting her hospitalized for her serious injuries and placing her and her son in a shelter. However, when the client returned home to gather some necessities, her partner's fellow gang members saw her. She was then abducted and found, a week later, in the Utah desert. In this case, being in a gang gave the batterer the resources and opportunity to recapture the client even once she had escaped the relationship and found help.

Economic Issues

Poverty both aggravates the barriers described above and is often caused by these very same barriers. For example see **Case 4, 7, 12, and 16**, immigrant women were kept financially dependent on their batterers. In certain of these cases, their immigration status affected their ability to obtain employment or access public benefits; increasing their dependency on their batterers. Economic issues complicate access to phones and internet to find out about and schedule services, access to legal services, and transportation to get there. It can also compound bias against individuals whom society deems less worthy of help.

Conversely, a victim may be reluctant to leave a wealthy batterer with whom s/he is wholly financially dependent upon. Although the survivor may not have access to any of the financial resources, s/he is likely ineligible for legal assistance and public resources; whereas the Batterer has the means to track their partner down and/or hire private attorneys to seek custody of children.

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