

Battered Mothers Involved with Child Protective Services: Learning from Immigrant, Refugee and Indigenous Women's Experiences

REPORT SUMMARY: JULY 2003. REVISED 2010

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On behalf of

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GOALS

- To share the voices of immigrant, refugee and indigenous women survivors of intimate partner abuse who have been involved with child protective services;
- To inform the development of policies, practices and interventions that will more effectively address the physical, emotional and spiritual health of individuals, families and communities;
- To learn how CPS and DV can be more responsive to the needs of families where DV and Child abuse and neglect are present;
- To explore how community (family, friends, neighbors, church, civic organizations) can be more responsive to partner abuse and child abuse and neglect and provide support to survivors involved with CPS; and
- To experiment with a research design that accomplishes the first step of participatory research and at the same time empowers advocates and survivors.

CONSTITUENCY

30 immigrant and indigenous women – Brazilian, Latin American, Vietnamese, Hawaiian and Native American – currently or previously involved with the child protection system participated in focus groups in Hawai'i and Massachusetts.

18 community researchers recruited participants and conducted focus groups and translated findings. A special effort was made to recruit researchers from the same ethnic communities as the participants were from; some had been involved with CPS as clients themselves.

MASSACHUSETTS

Three groups conducted in participants' native languages; one group conducted in English.

Most participants resided in the greater Boston area; some were from central and southern Massachusetts.

HAWAI'I

Five focus groups of Hawaiian women, including one Native American, from five of the islands.

Groups were conducted in native language and English.

PROJECT DESIGN

This social action research project included three separate methods of information gathering.

9 FOCUS GROUPS	SURVEYING ADVOCATES	KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS
The majority of effort and time was devoted to this component of the project. 30 mothers participated in the groups. 18 Community Researchers facilitated and translated the groups.	74 advocates and service providers who work with battered immigrant, refugee and indigenous women completed a written survey to provide context to the focus group findings.	Key informants worked for systems related to child protection interventions including CPS staff and supervisors, shelter workers, attorneys, domestic violence advocates, and family law attorneys.

KEY INSIGHTS

- **Defining Culture And Community:**

Many participants did not have a framework for analyzing identity and place within community unlike those of us who are accustomed to working cross-culturally and studying cultural competence. Despite living in richly diverse environments and surrounded by distinct cultural affiliations, many did not immediately identify as part of a particular ethnic group.

More than a few of the women identified as having no affiliation with any community presently or in the past, stating they felt completely isolated and alone. This they attributed to growing up in an abusive family, to the isolation resulting from living with an abusive partner or the stigma associated with CPS interventions or public assistance programs.

- **Child Welfare System is Overwhelming & Confusing:**

Participants described feeling hopeless and overwhelmed because they reported that

- Caseworkers are always changing the rules and adding more conditions to their promises;
- They are required to complete an impossible amount of tasks for their service plans;
- Many of the services are irrelevant to them;
- CPS threatens to take away their children if they do not file for a restraining order against their abuser.

“Get an advocate and have them help you go to supervisors to get services and to be treated right.”

- **Speaking Up:**

Providing women with a safe place and time to share their experiences around CPS served two important purposes. First, many women stated that sharing in this context was a healing experience. Also, freedom to talk about abuse and their involvement with CPS amongst others who were similarly situated allowed participants to critically analyze their experiences and their effects.

“I had lots of held in resentments and feelings that I shut down and never expressed. Fear of CPS is always haunting me. I have so many feelings of hopelessness, no control. I feel good about getting it out. It’s good for me to remember where I came from...I needed this. It reminds me how precious my life and my kids are to me.”

▪ **What Family, Friends and Neighbors Can Do:**

Trust in communities and neighborhoods needs to be restored in order for people to reach out in a domestic violence or child abuse situation. Participants were reluctant to rely on community and neighbors, unsure of what they would or could do to help. More attention needs to be given to help community members identify ways that they can be helpful. Some ideas shared by women in the groups include:

- Neighbors could provide respite and care for children.
- Family and friends can help women complete different parts of their service plans.

“I’d hold rallies and have women who’ve been through it share what they went through and how they got through it. I’d have more women who understand or know about family background, and how we were raised, working with families. People have to realize it’s generational. I’d help the kids to deal with the effects of taking them away. Make sure that if women complete the service plan caseworkers cannot add more stuff for them to do.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants had several suggestions for the child welfare system:

(1) Treat parents with respect.

- a. CPS should advise all parents of their legal rights. CPS should provide paperwork that explains what is going on.

(2) Improve training of caseworkers and provide them with support and resources.

- a. Supervise caseworkers to ensure they are doing the right things for families. Make sure that caseworkers do not make big decisions in isolation.
- b. Provide emotional support for caseworkers.

(3) Hire people who have been through the system or who have had relevant life experiences.

- a. Conduct focus groups with women who have been through CPS so they know what is really needed from the client’s point of view.
- b. Ensure that workers who are making decisions about families respect cultural values.

(4) Do more thorough investigations BEFORE taking action.

- a. Take the time to learn about each situation, don’t make assumptions; don’t take kids away unless there are no other choices.

(5) Care and learn about domestic violence.

- a. Workers should be able to recognize the tactics used by abusive partners instead of falling for their tricks

(6) Provide more preventative services before violence escalates.

- a. Provide more parenting education, especially in the home, help people to find ways to meet their basic needs for food, clothing etc.

(7) Help people who are in trouble rather than punishing them.

“Provide support services if moms need help with cooking or shopping. Don’t take the kids away because mom needs help.”

(8) Provide language services for all clients in all situations where people do not speak English as a first language.

- a. Be sure that services are offered in the client’s language

(9) Take the time to learn about cultural contexts and values.

- a. Seek out bi-cultural advocates well trained in domestic violence and child abuse/neglect.
- b. CPS should recognize that domestic violence happens in all cultures.

(10) Need to provide better services to children.

- a. Important to explain to kids what CPS is for. People need more education about what services are available and how to get the services. CPS should provide a child with a counselor who explains why the batterer is doing what he is doing and what mom needs to do to protect kids.

(11) Find new ways to deal with family abuse that involve parents and community.

- a. Have workshops/seminars for the particular ethnic groups to talk with them about domestic violence and child abuse/neglect in their community.
- b. Funding agencies should require that service providers work with community members to build community driven intervention and prevention strategies that people believe will work in their area. People from within communities should be hired to implement these strategies rather than hiring people who may have higher educational degrees but have no knowledge about, or investment in, the community.