



Issue Brief: Domestic Violence in Southeast Asian American Communities

Over one million Southeast Asian refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam arrived in the United States in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. As refugees, many Southeast Asians arrived lacking any kind of capital, formal education, knowledge of English, or marketable job skills. As a result, many Southeast Asian American families find themselves struggling to overcome the barriers associated with the cycle of extreme poverty and low educational attainment levels. Many of these stressors become compounded within families and can result in domestic violence. The proliferation of domestic violence in these communities is often masked in silence.

Most studies and reports on domestic violence in North America have neglected to include or identify Asian American women, particularly Southeast Asian American women, as a population at risk. Although domestic violence in Southeast Asian American communities is a large problem, it is frequently not discussed, even though it is a public health concern for Southeast Asian Americans just as cervical cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure or post traumatic stress disorder are.

There are many cultural and linguistic barriers in the Southeast Asian American communities that prevent many women from speaking out about domestic violence. They may range from:

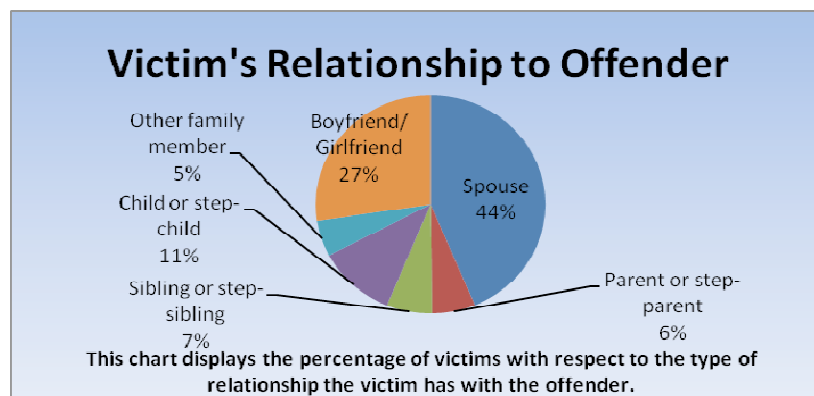
Fear of being alienated or discredited by their own communities;

Belief that domestic violence is a private dispute within the family that must be resolved internally because of the shame it will bring to the family and/or¹

Traditional Asian values and cultural stigmas that prevent women from reporting physical and/or sexual abuse from their spouse.²

As such, domestic violence is often disregarded at the community level as a familial issue rather than a community or societal one and as a result, the issue of domestic violence remains a silent epidemic.

Chart 1: Asian Pacific Islander American Individuals Involved in Domestic Violence Offenses³



¹ Ho, Christine K. "An analysis of domestic violence in Asian-American communities: A multicultural approach to counseling" (1990). Special issue: Diversity and complexity in feminist therapy: I. *Women & Therapy*, v9 (n1-2), 129-150.

² Women of Color Network "Facts & Stats Collection" Domestic Violence (2006). Available: http://womenofcolornetwork.org/Fact_Sheets/SVFactSheet.pdf

³ Snyder, H., Finnegan, T. Adams, B., Puzanchera, C., and Kang, W. (2007). "Easy Access to NIBRS: Victims of Domestic Violence." Available: <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/ojstatbb/ezanibrsdv/>

Cultural Barriers that Contribute to Domestic Violence

Many cultural factors attribute to domestic violence in the Southeast Asian community. One in particular is the changing gender dynamics that are a result of the Southeast Asian communities integration into the U.S.⁴ In traditional Southeast Asian families, men are often the sole provider and decision makers for their families. Their patriarchal roles went unchallenged because many women were taught and conditioned at a very young age to never challenge the men in their lives: whether it was their father when they were young, their husband when they married, or their son(s) when they are older.⁵ However, since arriving in the United States, many Southeast Asian women were able to access opportunities that allowed them to become more independent through learning English, going to college, working outside the house and earning an income. These new skill sets and experiences have empowered women to make decisions regarding the household that were traditionally made by men.

Compounded with the recent refugee experience, these traumatic and sudden changes have left many men feeling emasculated and powerless.⁶ As a result, many men turn to domestic violence as a means of having control and reclaiming their masculinity. According to the *Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence: Asian Family Violence Report (2000)* in Boston, Massachusetts, “39 percent of Vietnamese surveyed know a woman who has been physically abused or injured by her partner in the past year and believe that a man has the right to discipline his wife.” In this same report, the Cambodian respondents overall believe that the victims do not have the right to divorce the batterer, leave the batterer or even call the police.

Linguistic Barriers that Prevent Equal Access to Information

There are linguistic barriers that keep Southeast Asian women from accessing necessary information and resources about domestic violence. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the following live in “linguistically isolated” homes (homes where everybody over the age of 14 speaks limited English, if any):

- 31.8 percent of Cambodian Americans
- 35.1 percent of Hmong Americans
- 31.8 percent of Lao Americans
- 45 percent of Vietnamese Americans

This linguistic isolation frequently results in Southeast Asian families not being able to access the services they need. Although there are many direct service organizations that serve the Asian American community in general and have resources directed toward Southeast Asians, there is a tremendous disconnect between the information that is available and who is able to access that information due to linguistic barriers.

In addition, family members are often asked to be interpreters in domestic violence situations because of the lack of professional interpreters. Spouses, who could either be the victim or the abuser, must translate to the authority both sides of the story. However, knowing that they have this linguistic advantage will allow them to construe the story in a biased manner. Children, if required to be the interpreters, not only have to be subject to the violence by having to re-tell it, but they may also be persuaded and threatened by both the parents to tell the story to favor either one or the other. This forces the children to choose between parents and splits the family farther apart.

Health Implications Associated with Domestic Violence

Domestic violence goes beyond the immediate physical and mental injuries sustained from the abuse. According to the Family Violence Prevention Fund, domestic violence has been found to be associated with a number of physical health effects. Domestic violence victimization often interferes with health access which results in the lack of preventative

⁴ Healy, K., Smith, S., and O’ Sullivan, C. 1998. *Batterer Intervention: Program Approaches and Criminal Justice Strategies*. National Institute of Justice, Department of Justice, pp. 68-70.

⁵ Foo, Lora Jo. 2002. “Hmong Women in the U.S.: Changing a Patriarchal Culture”. *Asian American Women: Issues, Concerns, and Responsive Human and Civil Rights Advocacy*. Ed. Lora Jo Foo. New York: The Ford Foundation, pp. 145-161. http://www.aapip.org/pdfs/aaaw_10_chapter8.pdf

⁶ Healy, K., Smith, S., and O’ Sullivan, C., *Batterer Intervention: Program Approaches and Criminal Justice Strategies*. (1998). National Institute of Justice, Department of Justice, pp. 68-70

healthcare as well as chronic healthcare management. Victims hesitate to seek healthcare due to the fear that healthcare providers will report the abuse which the victim believes will endanger her and her family.⁷ Some physical injuries and complications include:⁸

- Arthritis
- chronic neck or back pain,
- migraines and other frequent headaches
- stammering
- problems seeing
- sexually transmitted infections
- chronic pelvic pain
- stomach ulcers

Although physical abuse may be the most visible, many Southeast Asian American women are also greatly affected by mental and emotional abuse that causes damage to their self-esteem and self-image. According to the Office on Women's Health, "being a victim of violence is widely recognized as a cause for mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and panic attacks." Not only can domestic violence result in victims experiencing a variety of mental health challenges, mental health issues that are the direct result of the past traumas many Southeast Asian refugees experienced have also been found to be causal factors in domestic violence situations. In the previously mentioned study conducted by the Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence, Cambodian participants felt that domestic violence can be a result of the stress and depression of surviving the Khmer Rouge back in Cambodia.⁹ This experience with genocide and the history of being refugees leaves many Cambodian Americans susceptible to mental disorders that can result in domestic violence.

The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children and the Family

Children are impacted by domestic violence just as much as the actual victim and batterer. According to a study by the Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence, 70 percent of Cambodian and 72 percent of Vietnamese respondents reported being hit regularly as children.¹⁰ In a study conducted in 1989, researchers found that children who were physically abused by a caretaker or a parent were at higher risks of becoming an abusive adult or/and tolerating an abusive intimate partner.¹¹ In addition, the Family Violence Prevention Fund found that children who witnessed domestic violence are more prone to behavioral and physical health problems such as depression, anxiety, and violence towards their peers.¹² Implications from marital violence and neglectful parenting are risk factors that contribute to not only a child's pediatric health issues, but can externalize into lifelong problems that may inhibit the child to have a healthy relationship with close loved ones.

This may result from the conditioning of children at a very young age to accept domestic violence and possibly engage in it because of its perceived normalcy. The Prevention Fund found that "men who as children were exposed to their parents' domestic violence are twice more likely to abuse their own wives than sons of nonviolent parents."¹³ This means that the cycle of domestic violence can become cyclical and is found to be repeated generation after generation by men who were exposed to domestic violence by the generation before them.

Clearly, domestic violence affects the entire family as well as the entire community. Parents' behaviors are patterned by their children, who in turn may develop negative behaviors that will eventually impact the next generation as well. This negative behavior may escalate further into crimes and criminal behaviors that will affect the safety of the community. As

⁷ Coker, A., Smith, P., Bethea, L., King, M., McKeown, R. 2000. "Physical Health Consequences of Physical and Psychological Intimate Partner Violence." *Archives of Family Medicine*.

⁸ Family Violence Prevention Fund, "The Facts on Health Care and Domestic Violence." <http://www.endabuse.org/resources/facts/HealthCare.pdf>

⁹ Yoshioka, MR, Dang Q., "Asian Family Violence Report (2000)." Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence. <http://www.apiahf.org/apidvinstitute/GenderViolence/Cambodian.htm>

¹⁰ Yoshioka, MR, Dang Q., "Asian Family Violence Report (2000)." Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence. <http://www.apiahf.org/apidvinstitute/GenderViolence/Cambodian.htm> and <http://www.apiahf.org/apidvinstitute/GenderViolence/Vietnamese.htm>

¹¹ McKibben L, DeVos E, and Newberger E. "Victimization of mothers of abused children: a controlled study" (1989). *Pediatrics* 84:531-535. <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/107/4/728>

¹² Family Violence Prevention Fund, "The Facts on Health Care and Domestic Violence." <http://www.endabuse.org/resources/facts/Children.pdf>

¹³ Family Violence Prevention Fund, "The Facts on Health Care and Domestic Violence." <http://www.endabuse.org/resources/facts/Children.pdf>

a result, domestic violence is not a personal family issue, but an issue the community needs to examine and prevent before it escalates into becoming a larger epidemic.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The silence surrounding domestic violence in Southeast Asian American communities is one that permeates all aspects of their daily lives, including their health along with the well being of children and families within these communities. There are numerous factors that can be attributed to such an epidemic which are not only limited to the history of post war trauma, but also include cultural and linguistic barriers. There are few domestic violence service providers across the country with cultural knowledge about pre-existing social and gender hierarchies within Southeast Asian American communities. Linguistic barriers also prevent victims of domestic violence from accessing services or even reporting an incident. In addition to not having trained interpreters present when reporting a domestic violence incident, many victims are unaware of services that are available for their legal matters, for shelter or for therapy because of the lack of outreach in their native language. The continued lack of awareness about domestic violence issues in the Southeast Asian American community is present both among the providers as well as the victims and their families. Left unaddressed, the prevalence of this epidemic will continue to affect the Southeast Asian American communities' overall mental and physical health, as well as lead to a cyclical pattern of dangerous behavior in future generations.

Recommendations:

- ◆ Increased data collection and research is needed on domestic violence in general, but also disaggregated data is important to document domestic violence and its impact in particular communities, including Southeast Asian American communities
- ◆ Federal and State funds and additional resources need to be allocated for community based organizations to encourage dialogue regarding domestic violence within the Southeast Asian American communities through workshops and empowerment trainings to promote awareness of the issue as well as provide resources.
- ◆ Outreach regarding domestic violence awareness and resources must target the Southeast Asian American communities through written materials and through media such as radio or television in the major Southeast Asian American languages.
- ◆ Organizations providing services to domestic violence victims and batterers must recognize the specific needs of the Southeast Asian American communities and provide culturally appropriate services that address the social hierarchies as well as the stigma surrounding the issue.
- ◆ Legislation should ensure that linguistic interpretation and translation services be offered to victims of domestic violence at the time of reporting and throughout any proceeding court procedures.