Asian Community Work Groups: Exploring Experiences of Family Violence Among Asian Women in Connecticut

JULY 2016
Purpose & Introduction

Asians in the United States & Connecticut

Rates of Domestic Violence Among Asian Communities

Patriarchal & Collectivist Cultural Values: Implications

Help-Seeking Behaviors

Pronounced Isolation

Work Group Meeting Summary

Collaboration & Initial Stages

Timeline & Meeting Goals

Findings

Do Asian survivors of violence identify with the terms “domestic violence” and “trauma”?  
Is domestic violence best conceptualized as “intimate partner violence” or “family violence” among Asian families?  
Formal and informal supports for Asian women in Connecticut  
Barriers to formal service  
Outreach strategies

Conclusion & Preliminary Recommendations

References

Appendix: Work Group Materials

This report was prepared by:

Marianne R.M. Yoshioka, PhD, MSW  
Dean and Elizabeth Marting Treuhaft Professor  
Smith College School for Social Work

Janet Chang, PhD  
Research Associate and Visiting Assistant Professor  
Smith College Department of Psychology

In collaboration with:

Wendy Mota Kasongo, MS  
Director of Diversity & Accessibility  
CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Citation for report:


For questions:

Wendy Mota Kasongo, MS  
wmotakasongo@ctcadv.org  
860.282.7899

This project was supported by Award No. 2012-WF-AX-0015 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, Office of Justice Programs.
Purpose & Introduction

This report is intended to be an exploration of experiences and strategies as reported by participants of Asian community work groups, which were developed and facilitated by Marianne Yoshioka, PhD, MSW and Janet Chang, PhD of Smith College for Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV). The findings and recommendations included in this report will assist CCADV in further developing culture specific programming and interventions for Asian victims of domestic violence.

This report focuses on four major areas:

1. Strategies for Engaging Asian Women with Service Providers in Connecticut
2. Help-Seeking Behaviors Among Asian Women Survivors of Domestic & Family Violence
3. Culture Specific Outreach
4. Strategies for Community Collaboration

Although potential best practices were discussed in the context of key themes and strategies, this report is not meant to be conclusive about evidence-based best practices. That type of analysis is beyond the scope of the report given the number of work group meetings and participants as well as a lack of available research on Asian women and families living in Connecticut with domestic violence. The views of the service providers and community advocates who attended the meetings enriched this report, and their perspectives suggest the need for further discussions with CCADV regarding culturally relevant forms of domestic violence programming and advocacy.

28.5% of Asian women report knowing a woman who had experienced abuse by her in-laws. In some Asian families, male and female in-laws exert physical, sexual and psychological abuse.

(McDonnell & Abdulla, 2001)
Individuals self-identifying as Asian comprise 4.5% of the Connecticut state population according to the 2014 Census.

The Census defines Asian as: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Within the state of Connecticut, the counties with the largest Asian communities are Fairfield, Hartford, and New Haven respectively, according to the Connecticut Asian and Pacific Islander Commission. The largest groups of Asians in the state are South Asian and Chinese. Although individuals of Asian descent comprise a relatively small proportion of the total population in Connecticut, they are one of the fastest growing communities in the state. Domestic violence service providers reported experiencing an increase in the number of Asian clients. They are also experiencing challenges in both providing effective outreach services to Asian families living with domestic violence and delivery of advocacy services.

The Story of Chuntao

Chuntao is a 25-year-old woman who emigrated from Fujian Province, Republic of China 2 years ago to join her husband who immigrated 5 years prior. An American neighbor called the police after listening to crashing sounds and stifled screams coming from Chuntao’s apartment. Unfortunately, neither of the police officers spoke Mandarin, and after an hour of trying to communicate and gather information, left because there was not enough evidence to make an arrest.

As badly as Chuntao wants the abuse to end, she does not want the authorities involved. The police do not play a rehabilitative role in her hometown, and she fears their involvement here. Chuntao is in the country without legal papers. Her husband is a citizen, and he promises to get her a green card but just as often tells her that he will never help her and sometimes threatens to have her deported. Chuntao’s English language ability is not as good as her husband’s, and she must depend on him to negotiate everything. Everyone she knows is a friend of her husband. At times her husband threatens to divorce her, and she hopes that he does not. How could her mother and father face their own parents with a divorced daughter? Even though divorce is becoming more common in Fujian, her parents do not accept it. Once Chuntao read a poster on the subway that talked about a woman who left her abusive husband, but for Chuntao, being a wife and mother are two of the only vehicles of status available to her in her family. How could she tell her parents and grandparents that she broke up her family because she was unhappy?

Chuntao resolves to be stronger. She visits an herbalist to ask for medicine to make her calmer. She drinks a tea twice a day knowing that it is helping. She visits a fortune teller to ask advice about what the future will hold. The fortune teller reassures Chuntao that things will improve. Chuntao drinks her tea, she asks her ancestors for help, and strives to be a better wife. She is doing everything she can to make the situation better.
The rates of domestic violence among Asian immigrant communities in the United States are quite varied across existing studies. Among South Asian families, the range has been reported to be from 20-40% (Adam & Schewe, 2007; Mahapatra, 2012; Raj & Silverman, 2002). For Chinese families, it has been estimated to be 18%-24% (Yick 2000; Midlarsky, 2006). These rates represent estimates of heterosexual, male-to-female intimate partner violence. They vary because of the difficulties of establishing a community sample and measurement differences between studies.
Patriarchal & Collectivist Cultural Values: Implications Regarding Help-Seeking Behaviors

The research indicates that there are unique factors that impact help seeking for domestic violence by Asian women. Asian cultures are founded on both patriarchal and collectivist values that shape perceptions of a husband’s role and rights with and over his wife and the woman’s sense of responsibilities toward her family (Yoshioka, 2008).

These cultural values set a foundation within which violence and abuse is experienced and options for help are defined. In collectivist cultures, relationships are given primacy even if associated with personal costs. In individualist cultures, high personal costs justify the breaking of the relationship. Individuals from collectivist cultures tend to prefer passive and collaborative conflict resolution strategies that will maintain relationships. In contrast, adults from individualist cultures tend to emphasize the importance of justice over relationship. They are more likely to select active, assertive, confrontational and if necessary, adversarial approaches to achieve equity.

In Chuntao’s story, she must weigh the value of her own happiness with that of her family’s and the cost associated with trying to resolve her situation against bringing embarrassment to her parents. Many participants from the community work groups reported that Asian women were often told by their family members that they should work out the problems with their husbands and try to maintain harmony within the family. Many Asian women may arrive at the conclusion that, because the violence is escalating, they must leave the marriage and possibly damage family relationships. However, first, they are likely to use indirect strategies to try to change their situation but maintain their family’s honor.

Chuntao seeks help in a way that makes sense to her. She tells herself to be stronger and gets help for that. She seeks information from an available community source and she asks for guidance from the powerful spiritual source of her ancestors.

Help-Seeking Behaviors

The strong collectivist nature of Asian cultures gives rise to a powerful stigma against having family “troubles” known publicly. Cultural values regarding saving or maintaining face (ensuring that one’s reputation that is tied to the family upholds, honors, and respects the family) and avoiding shame are major deterrents to formal help seeking. All women and Asian women in particular prefer informal assistance from family members and relatives and trusted members of the community over more formal venues.

Disclosure of personal problems and emotional states, an essential precursor to accessing help, is tied to the desirability of involving others to solve one’s problems. In a survey of several hundred Korean adults in Massachusetts about their beliefs of help seeking among battered women, almost 29% of these men and women reported that a battered woman’s best strategy to deal with the abuse was to keep it to herself (Yoshioka, 2008). The undesirability of involving others in what was perceived as the individual woman’s problem was so great that it precluded disclosure of any kind.

Asian women’s level of acculturation to U.S. values and culture likewise plays a role in their experience of violence. Her English language ability and general familiarity with U.S. laws around domestic violence and formal social services influence her access to resources, her perception of their relevance to her situation, and her willingness to use them (Mahapatra, 2012).

“WITH LIMITED SUPPORTS, WHO CAN SHE REALLY TELL, ESPECIALLY IF SHE DOESN’T SPEAK ENGLISH?”
WHAT KEEPS WOMEN ISOLATED?

“Loneliness, isolation, and dependence that comes from being an immigrant.”

“Women are often stay-at-home mothers without financial stability.”

“Language barriers.”

Pronounced Isolation

One of the most pronounced findings across the majority of domestic violence studies speaks to the role that isolation plays in the experience of domestic violence. To exert control over another person, the individual must be isolated physically and/or emotionally (Choi, Cheung, & Cheung, 2012; Eisikovits & Band-Winterstein, 2015). This sense of isolation is pronounced for Asian immigrant women who additionally have internalized collectivist values that inhibit disclosure of problems, may have lower levels of acculturation in addition to immigration restrictions on her employment status, and may not know how to drive or travel locally on her own. Real and perceived isolation is one of the most powerful barriers to identifying women living with violence.

Although collectivist values reinforce the importance of social relationships as a potential means of social support, cultural norms also discourage the disclosure of distressing problems that may undermine group harmony, make matters worse, invite criticism, cause face loss, and burden others (Chang, 2015). This paradox of collectivism raises important questions about how to get Asian women the help that they need given the increased risk of isolation for those coping with personal and employment issues related to immigration status, English language proficiency, and adjustment to life in the U.S. and communities without Asian enclaves. In effect, the underutilization of social support may contribute to self-reliance, a barrier to formal help seeking, and culturally grounded coping strategies, including forbearance (i.e., persevering and minimizing distress; Chang, 2015).

In Chuntao’s story, her lack of legal status in the country leaves her with fewer options for services and her lack of social fluency feeds her fear of the authorities and prevents her from knowing about available service options. Her lack of language fluency prevents her from reaching out, resulting in little to no social support network. Her belief in respect for elders means that her parents’ expectations are hugely important to uphold.
Work Group Meeting Summary

Collaboration & Initial Stages

During the summer of 2015, CCADV convened a number of over the phone and in-person meetings with the purpose of discussing how to best assess Asian communities in Connecticut and measure the need for culturally relevant domestic violence services and interventions.

As a result of these meetings and conversations, the coordination of Asian community work groups began as a way to gather information from community providers and Asian community members regarding their experiences with domestic violence services in Connecticut. In preparation for the work group meetings, we requested from CCADV a list of domestic violence service providers working with Asian individuals in Connecticut. The goal was to interview these providers and develop case material to guide the discussions that would shape the work groups.

Each of the service providers and advocates were asked to identify a client situation involving an Asian family that they believed highlighted cultural differences, strengths, or challenges. They were told that they might draw upon more than one client situation if necessary; we emphasized the importance of focusing on cases and aspects that were illustrative of those key issues. They were asked to draw their attention in particular to the impact of immigration, socioeconomic status, and English language ability, as well as the role of family and informal supports. They were informed how we would be using the case material during the group discussion, and they provided their consent to participate. We maintained the anonymity of the Asian women discussed in the cases, and we retained all materials that were disseminated to participants at the meetings.

Timeline & Meeting Goals

Between November 13, 2015 and February 10, 2016, we held a total of three meetings with community members and service providers who have a vested interest in serving Asian communities in Connecticut. It is important to note that when time came to promote the meetings, we intentionally framed them as meetings focused on increasing support for Asian women and their children. Terminology related to domestic violence, family violence or abuse was purposely excluded.

The aim was to solicit feedback and discussion from attendees/participants about their experiences serving Asian families in Connecticut to identify strategies they have found effective and the issues with which they have struggled. In order to build knowledge to better serve Asian families living with domestic violence, we invited participants to draw on case material and their experiences serving Asian families. The work group meeting goals were to identify:

- What prompts Asian women to seek services
- What they want from services
- Who they go to for help and who could be an ally
- What they are already doing to improve their situation
- Missed outreach opportunities for agencies
- Barriers to help seeking among Asian women in CT
- What is happening culturally that both facilitates access to services and hinders Asian women from getting services?
- What are possible outreach strategies for improving collaboration and partnerships within Connecticut's Asian Communities?
- Who would she tell?
- Who would she mostly likely take help from?
- What are useful strategies for engaging Asian women with service providers?
- Who are the best people to do outreach?
- How does she perceive or define domestic violence, including trauma?
- What are useful strategies for engaging Asian women with service providers?
Findings

DO ASIAN SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE IDENTIFY WITH THE TERMS “DOMESTIC VIOLENCE” AND “TRAUMA”?  

Case material and discussion among participants in the work group meetings revealed that Asian women do not define domestic violence in traditional/mainstream terms or Western ways. The term domestic violence was not used by Asian women who were utilizing services for domestic violence. These individuals referred to acts of violence and verbal, emotional, and physical abuse, typically in terms of behaviors and actions (e.g., choking, hitting harassment, threats, and assaults). These women did not appear to perceive their experiences with domestic violence as trauma.

IN ONE CASE EXAMPLE, A VIETNAMESE AMERICAN WOMAN DID NOT SEEK HELP AND REJECTED THE IDEA THAT SHE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA STATING, “I DON’T THINK BEING SLAPPED AND STRANGLED CAN BE CLASSIFIED AS TRAUMA.”

IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE BEST CONCEPTUALIZED AS “INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE” OR “FAMILY VIOLENCE” AMONG ASIAN FAMILIES?  

Traditionally, domestic violence is conceptualized as abuse between a male and female in an interpersonal relationship. Discussion among community work group participants and review of the cases revealed that abuse in Asian families could involve extended family members (e.g., abuse at the hands of the mother-in-law). For example, one of the illustrative cases revealed abuse of an elderly Asian woman by her son and daughter-in-law. In another case, a woman’s child was given to her husband’s ex-wife, who was living with them. Some participants reported that Asian women may have conflicts with their mother-in-law, and respect for elders can prevent Asian women from acting or addressing the abuse. These examples reflect the complexity of social relationships in Asian cultures that do not reflect traditional households in the U.S.

These illustrative examples suggest that some Asian women minimize the severity of their suffering and tolerate risks for harm to avoid family conflict and as a means of coping (e.g., forbearance). There was consensus among the community work group participants that greater outreach and education was needed to increase Asian women’s understanding of their experiences with domestic violence.

The following are observations made by participants:

• They belittle what happens
• The terms ‘abuser’, ‘victim’, ‘domestic violence’ are not useful labels
• Abuse at the hands of the mother-in-law
• Conflict with mother-in-law is seen as something that can happen
• Respect for elders can prevent the woman from acting

FORMAL AND INFORMAL SUPPORTS FOR ASIAN WOMEN IN CONNECTICUT  

Although some Asian women take action to change their situation by disclosing to close others (e.g., family), Asian women also appear to be underutilizing formal services in Connecticut. In keeping with the literature, community group participants reported that Asian women are turning to their family members or other trusted community members for help. However, it is also important to note that a number of factors complicate the use of informal supports by Asian women.
For instance, in some case examples, Asian women were geographically separated from their families of origin and did not have strong friendship networks in their local community. They also felt pressure to maintain their marriage in spite of the hardships disclosed to their families of origin. Moreover, formal services for domestic violence are typically a last resort, involving court orders, police interventions, and emergency calls from neighbors. Therefore, the sense of familial, cultural, and linguistic isolation experienced by Asian women undermines reliance on both formal and informal supports.

Community group participants felt that it would be effective to cultivate informal support systems for Asian women in locations to which she might have to travel during her day (e.g., English as a second language (ESL) classes, grocery stores, pediatricians, and dentists).

In one documented case, a South Asian woman was referred to services when a store owner in her community called a local domestic violence agency. Participants felt that women could form trusting relationships with staff at community based domestic violence organizations who are either peers from the community or very knowledgeable about the community. There was not strong endorsement overall for the use of religious and faith leaders, given the potential intersection of religion and patriarchal values for some Asian groups.

BARRIERS TO FORMAL SERVICE

As reported in the literature, the community group participants identified isolation as one of the significant barriers to women accessing services. Group members discussed the isolation that stems from limited English language proficiency, not being able to work or go to school either because of immigration status or not being permitted to by her husband, not having access to a bank account, and her inability to drive a car. As a result, she is restricted to her home and kept dependent on the abusive partner to navigate and live. As evident in some case examples, local agencies that provide linguistic, cultural, emotional, and instrumental/practical support are integral to countering these challenges.

Both the literature and community members identified the following as barriers:

- Distrust of formal services stemming from a lack of familiarity with formal services
- A fear of triggering immigration problems
- Concerns about face loss
- The risk of disrupting familial relations

Community group participants reported that women may be fearful of deportation because they do not view their country of origin as a safe place. Their return can bring shame to their family and bring real penalty to their family (e.g., loss of face). With marriage seen as a union between families, divorce or separation is not regarded as a viable option in Asian cultures. This issue is compounded by some Asian women’s desires for their children to have their father in their lives.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO SERVICE?

“Lack of language fluency.”

“Lack of knowledge of the domestic violence, legal and immigration systems.”

“Lack of family support.”

“Lack of staff reflective of population served.”

“Fear of the legal system.”

“Stigma.”

“Lack of immigration documentation prevents working or going to school.”
OUTREACH STRATEGIES

The community group participants reinforced women’s preference for informal assistance as a way to outreach. This underscores the importance of provider agencies to work with Asian communities to build their outreach efforts. It suggests the importance of recruiting community members into the agency as either peer volunteers or staff so that women perceive the agency as familiar. Also, this would increase the availability of cultural and linguistic supports for Asian women seeking services.

This also suggests that community education strategies could be directed not only to women themselves, but also to family members and neighbors whose knowledge of domestic violence services and their positive endorsement of help seeking could break the victim’s isolation.

Similarly, community education strategies involving ESL teachers, physicians, dentists, storeowners serving the Asian community may be helpful as well. It is important to consider that mental health symptoms may co-occur with domestic violence; therefore, medical settings may be a potential gateway to formal services for domestic violence.

“Outreach where people go, for example, grocery store, schools.”
“We need to involve men in public education efforts.”
“Community education is essential.”

Discussion also revealed that agencies could develop and offer community workshops to promote the learning of new skills (e.g., driving and English language) as a creative way to do outreach. This type of programming serves a functional purpose for Asian women and also provides a parallel aim of reaching out to potential Asian women and families experiencing domestic violence. In particular, language barriers can have a negative effect on getting Asian women needed care.

In one case, a South Asian woman and local police officer were unable to communicate with one another; the police deferred to the English-speaking husband (perpetrator) and took the woman (innocent wife) into custody. This is a troubling case of miscommunication resulting in a different form of trauma that can perpetuate distrust of formal services and legal options.
Conclusion & Preliminary Recommendations

Providing culturally relevant services to Asian women and their families in Connecticut is a vital goal. It is also a complex process that must address the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of Asian cultures and experiences in Connecticut. The lack of widely available language accessible services and sufficient numbers of culturally competent providers is a major challenge to providing culturally relevant programming and services. Significant cultural and structural barriers that deter Asian women from finding services, utilizing services, and resolving issues related to domestic violence exacerbate this problem.

Based on the illustrative cases and discussions with community work group participants, the following preliminary recommendations are suggested:

**Recommendation #1 - Education and Capacity Building**

Educate providers on how the traditional model of domestic violence does not fully encompass the experiences of Asian women who come from collectivist cultures that emphasize the person in relation to close others (e.g., family).

**Suggested Strategies:**

1.1 Provide workshops and develop a feedback system to increase the cultural competence of providers and the advocacy potential of community members.

1.2 Debrief and analyze cases within an agency to identify how collectivist values may have influenced the woman’s choices and preferences.

1.3 Attend or create a special meeting at domestic violence conferences specific to providers serving Asian communities (e.g., San Diego annual conference) for professional networking and continuing education.

**Recommendation #2 - Outreach**

Develop outreach efforts to educate and involve Asian communities.

**Suggested Strategies:**

2.1 Have exploratory discussions with local ESL and medical providers to understand their experiences serving Asian women and families, including anecdotal reports of domestic violence.

2.2 Explore other outreach messages and public education strategies in Asian communities.

**Recommendation #3 - Accessibility**

Develop a long-term plan to increase accessibility of shelters for Asian women.

**Suggested Strategies:**

3.1 Consult with providers who specialize in working with Asian women, such as Boston’s Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence and New York Asian Women’s Center.

3.2 Consider identifying, deeply developing, and supporting one organization’s capacity to shelter Asian women and use a referral system to connect Asian women to that organization.

**Recommendation #4 - Best Practice & Service Delivery**

Identify gaps in understanding at different levels of services and develop research strategies to inform evidence-based practices

**Suggested Strategies:**

4.1 Complete a needs assessment regarding the experiences of family violence victims in Asian communities in Connecticut, of Asian women currently being served, and/or of the providers serving them. A partnership with university based researchers can facilitate this.
References


Appendix:
Work Group Meeting Goals & Case Study Questions

Asian Work Group Meeting Goals
In order to build knowledge to better serve Asian families living with domestic violence in CT, the work group meeting goals were to identify:

• What prompts Asian women to seek services?
• What they want from services?
• Who they go to for help? Who could be an ally?
• What they are already doing to improve their situation
• Missed outreach opportunities for agencies
• Barriers to help seeking among Asian women in CT

Case Study Questions
During the community group meetings, participants reviewed case materials and provided responses to questions specifically developed to structure the work group discussions. Participants were asked to address the following questions:

1. Who would she tell?
2. Who would she mostly likely take help from?
3. What are useful strategies for engaging Asian women with service providers? (e.g., how are these strategies different for younger vs. older Asian women?)
4. Who are the best people to do outreach?
5. How does she perceive or define domestic violence, including trauma?
6. What is happening culturally that both facilitates access to services and hinders Asian women from getting services?
   a. What role did immigration play? Socioeconomic status? English language ability?
   b. Generational/age differences? Urban vs. rural origin differences?
   c. Identify available family and informal supports
   d. Identify challenges and barriers to formal services
7. What are possible outreach strategies for improving collaboration and partnerships within Connecticut’s Asian Communities?
This project was supported by Award No. 2012-WF-AX-0015 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, Office of Justice Programs.