

Opening the Floodgates

The Aftermath of an Immigrant Women's Action Against Violence Project and its Evaluation

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Cet article décrit comment un programme de formation et une évaluation basés sur la communauté posent des défis qui mènent à mieux comprendre les participantes immigrantes, les préposés et les organismes qui offrent des services. Sous les pressions subies par les stagiaires en service, on a recommandé des ressources matérielles appropriées, des programmes pour les hommes et des sessions de formation pour les formateurs afin que les immigrantes soient mieux assistées et prévenues contre la violence domestique.

During a storm, water levels rise and waves of water rush forth. In the same way that nature causes water to overflow, so too can other human processes lead to waves that cannot easily be controlled. After the waves subside, we use the experience to improve strategies and methods for a better outcome in the future. This article describes how a training program and community-based evaluation started as a wave that posed challenges and led to learning and insights. We illustrate how community-based research of a training program to help immigrant women learn about domestic violence for themselves and their communities effectively led to individual change and community and program development.

Making WAAVs: The Immigrant Women's Action Against Violence Project (WAAV)

Domestic violence happens across all cultural, ethnic, social and economic groups. Attention to the association between immigration and domestic violence is beginning to surface (Menjívar and Salcido; Migliardi, Blum and Heinonen). To date there is no conclusive evidence of the prevalence and incidence of domestic violence in immigrant communities in Canada. While some studies show that the incidence of domestic violence is not higher in the immigrant population when compared to the general population (Menjívar and Salcido). Other studies indicate the opposite (Brownridge and Halli). In spite of these

discrepancies, the literature demonstrates the existence of factors that are unique to the immigrant context which contribute to the experience of domestic violence within immigrant communities. Some of the factors are changes in gender roles and the family, mistrust and/or lack of information about services and resources for domestic violence, isolation, community and personal attitudes toward domestic violence, and language barriers (Shiu-Thornton, Senturia, and Sullivan; Sullivan, Bhuyan, Senturia, Shiu-Thornton and Ciske; Sullivan, Senturia, Negash, Shiu-Thornton, and Giday).

Different strategies have been developed to prevent domestic violence. Many of these interventions have involved changes to the justice system. Other strategies focus on counseling women dealing with domestic violence or encouraging group support. However, little has been systematically explored regarding domestic violence prevention strategies engaging immigrant women.

The Women's Action Against Violence (WAAV) project was a prevention education initiative developed in partnership between the Immigrant Women's Counselling Services (IWCS) and the Sexuality Education Resource Centre (SERC) in Winnipeg, Manitoba with support from a Community Advisory Group (CAG). The project intentions were to provide a space for immigrant women from different ethnic and national backgrounds to examine, using a participatory workshop format, the issue of violence against women, with a focus on family violence. One of the objectives of the project was to enhance women's capacity to become informal resources in their communities on family violence.

Between 1999 and 2003, over 50 women attended the 10 to 12 two-hour interactive and participatory sessions focusing on topics that included definitions of abuse; the cycle of violence; cultural and social expectations and gender roles; sexuality; self-esteem; healthy and unhealthy relationships; community resources available to women facing violence; and the political, justice and social serv-

ice systems. Each new series of workshops included additional subjects identified by the women and facilitators such as, communication skills and community organizing to enable participants to provide information and referral in their communities; intergenerational conflicts; and the relation between having lived through war and its effects on families. Whenever it was possible, former participants were invited to sessions to discuss their experiences in dealing with domestic violence in their communities, and assess any impending educational interests and needs.

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Following the WAAV: The Research

The evaluation¹ of this project was undertaken in partnership with SERC, a number of academic researchers from different universities—University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg and University of Regina, community members and former WAAV participants. The evaluation aimed at gaining insights into the perspectives and experiences of women participants, the facilitators and members of the Community Advisory Group (Migliardi, Blum and Heinonen). We used a qualitative methodology that included principles of community-based research and participatory action research (PAR). Other research on domestic violence has also made use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in ethno-cultural communities (Sullivan *et al.* 2005a). Involved in the PAR approach is investigation, analysis and action around an issue or problem (Smith, Willms and Johnson). Ideally, in this process participants raise their consciousness, experience new insights and transformation, and initiate change, individually and/or collectively.

Our main method of data collection was focus group interviews. A community-based approach fit with the researchers’ philosophy of community development and empowerment. It also meshed with the aim of our research project, which was to develop better practices and policies to help immigrant women deal with domestic violence. In addition, since community education was the orientation of the training program, the immigrant women were familiar with the approach. After completion of the focus group interviews many of the training participants inquired about the analysis process, and some were interested in becoming more involved. Those who were participants in the evaluation research were invited to a data analysis session where two main themes emanating from

the research, “impact of the training on participants” and “recommendations for future programming in domestic violence prevention with immigrant and refugee women,” were discussed. They saw the research as beneficial to their own lives and their communities. Applying a community-based research approach provided the opportunity to both enrich the data analysis and offer basic research training to immigrant women.

Riding the WAAV: The Effects of the Training

Overall, the findings demonstrated that the respondents were very satisfied with the training. They increased understanding about the meaning of violence, their knowledge of resources and received emotional support from one another.

Some issues arising included whether to have the training in English or their heritage language, whether to use immigrant facilitators or Canadian ones. The necessity to provide childcare, transportation, a central location and nourishment was emphasized, as well as the importance of follow-up training.

A major result of the training was that participants enhanced their capacity to play leadership roles within their communities in the area of family violence. As one CAG member noted:

We have seen women ... from different communities ... who are helping other people that they know now that they recognize the issues in the community and tell them where the resources are and where to go.... There are women coming to the shelter who have been referred by one of the participants. It has worked very well.

Nevertheless, the community-based research showed that this assistance came with a price. Although the community women felt safe to talk about violence in their lives with the training participants, the trainees sighted a need for caution.

I have already [used what I’ve learned] with friends and people at work. Like I don’t tell them, “do this, do that.” I talk about the training, you can come and you know, join people here, participate in the training. I talk about ... my life, how it was before, and how it is now. But I never try to tell people, my friends, women, girlfriends, “leave your husbands. You’ll be better off by yourself.” I never do that. But, yeah, like I share the, whatever I learned in the training with these friends....

Still, husbands became mad at me.... They know I had the information.

The trainees wanted additional training to help them cope with the requests for help received. Immigrant women often are not ready or do not wish to seek formal

help, even from professional counsellors who immigrants themselves. As a result, training participants spoke of the stress they experienced due to the demands placed on them to assist women from their communities.

I have been working with the community and I think that in this training ... we need to have a sort of training to cope with these problems. To know how to respond without taking the problems [to heart]. It would be easy because that was my problem. I know that we have to say to the person go to [a counselling service] but sometimes they don't want to go. And sometimes they phone me and I didn't know how to cope with that tension. Maybe some kind of training for people [who help others is needed].

In addition to further training several strategies were suggested to alleviate the pressure on trainees and to help community women with issues of abuse. Having resource material readily available, involving men in the training and in family interventions, and establishing supportive peer networks for trainees were among the main recommendations that are elaborated upon below.

One of the trainees mentioned that resource material such as pamphlets and brochures that would help in informing women in her community about abuse were not available in different languages. Having these resource materials to distribute could have resulted in fewer requests for her help when women were abused.

Another thing that happened to me is I didn't have brochures or booklets to give away. Because I see abuse in my community... I photocopied some of them. I was trying to work very hard in my community. But I really ... it was too much for me. I didn't know how to cope with that pressure. It was very difficult for the person [who] has training like me. [We need] not a counsellor program but something like that.

Most of the participants thought that it would be a good idea to involve men in their cultural communities in violence prevention. Since many men are involved and well-connected to others in their ethno-cultural communities, they can serve as effective resources when trained in the area of domestic violence, and its prevention. One respondent said that hearing presentations from trainers who are experts on domestic violence would attract the men's attention more than information that they received second-hand from their partners. Furthermore, involving men in domestic violence prevention work would help to dispel men's suspicions about the training being given for women.

One trainee described how she asked her husband to assist in an abuse situation:

She told me that her husband hit her, cut her breast

and many things, kick her, many things. And I told her, what you want me to do? I would talk to my husband and my husband phoned and I told him that she was in trouble and she talked to me about what she wanted to do. When I phoned her again she said my husband asked her if she wanted to call the police or where she wanted to go.

In many immigrant communities it is the men who have the influence or power to intervene with both parties in the marital couple. For this reason alone, appropriate

"I know we have to say to them go to a counselling service but sometimes they don't want to go. And sometimes they would phone me and I didn't know how to cope with that tension."

training for men is so important. Another trainee concurred and added:

I think it's a good idea if men get involved too. Yeah 'cause ... some men are very much involved with their community and the people, and work with people all the time so... When we come to this kind of training or meetings, they have the wrong idea that we come and talk about them.... That the people in charge of the training tell us what to do, like against them. That's not right, they have the wrong idea. So it would be better I guess if they join us.

Another outcome of the WAAV program was that participation with immigrant women from different communities facilitated the creation of new social networks, and in so doing reduced the women's pain from abuse. As one trainee emphasized,

We can learn from each other. And we can see that sometimes what happened to me is happening to somebody else at the same time. Sometimes ... we don't know that—different people coming from different communities.

In an individual interview, another elaborated,

It was like, you develop your networks, helps you with your emergency plan. We gave each other our phone numbers knowing that we could count on each other. You knew if something happened you were not alone.... If they come at 3:00 o'clock in the morning crying, hiding....

A "train the trainer" program could similarly offer support

as participants become more involved in violence prevention and intervention in their communities.

Beyond the WAAV: Recommendations

Women who participated in the interviews referred to the importance of knowing that issues of violence are common to many women and the sharing of experiences and strategies deepens the significance of the training program. The realization that women can work together and in their ethno-cultural community to deal with violence against women and in the family was powerful for them.

The findings from this research point out the need for continued education, training, and dissemination of information about family violence among immigrant and refugee populations and the importance of alternative ways of providing help in cultural communities. People in ethno-cultural communities tend to rely on each other, and are less exposed to professional services due to language and cultural barriers as well as apprehension about what may happen when they seek help (Bhuyan and Senturia). As we observed in this research, often immigrant women who are trusted and who have shared similar settlement challenges and experiences are an important resource to many other women and as bridges to social and health services.

Although the importance of networks and supports developed by women with other women who are immigrants and refugees is evident in the research findings, these sources of help and what they signify to the women is unknown by many social service agencies. The research findings suggest that seeking formal help may be in fact, a last resort or is never attempted because women prefer to talk to immigrant friends or peers. However, the training participants after the program felt more comfortable about knowing and accessing services.

Follow-up training for lay women who have received training on prevention of family violence is needed so that these women can extend their knowledge and their support networks in order to learn how to help appropriately without feeling overwhelmed. Also, raising awareness about how to enhance the work of women in community organizations and continuing to build their capacity are important. Mainstream agencies can play a role by continuing to support “train-the-trainer” programs by offering services as trainers, facilitators, providers of space and childcare for programs and other ways. These can serve as steps in bridging the gap between formal and non-formal services.

Using men as allies is necessary so that responsibility for eradicating family violence is not targeted only at women. Men’s involvement is required in order for there to be greater understanding within families about the effects of violence and non-violent ways of dealing with conflict. As Susan Mattson and Ester Ruiz heard from participants in their research, “women consistently said that they did not

want their husbands to abuse them so that their sons (especially) would not see this happen and perpetuate it with their own families as adults” (527).

In conducting “train the trainer” programs that build capacity and teach women and men different strategies for working in the community, dealing with the pressure that comes with doing this work, is important to address.

Violence prevention can be addressed by including programs in English as Second Language classes, by providing longer term and stable funding to programs disseminating this information, by involving men in the awareness and training programs, and by encouraging “mainstream” agencies to become more responsive to cultural diversity.

Post Script

After the conclusion of our research, SERC and IWCS, with two new partners, Mount Carmel Clinic and Teen Talk, designed a multi-prong approach to the issue of violence prevention. This time, parallel to the women’s violence prevention education series, an immigrant youth violence prevention education series and a men’s needs assessment on violence prevention were conducted. The partners hope to secure further funding to develop a community-based “train the trainer” model for domestic violence prevention with women and men from immigrant communities in Winnipeg (for further details visit: www.serc.mb.ca). We encourage other initiatives and look forward to learning about them!

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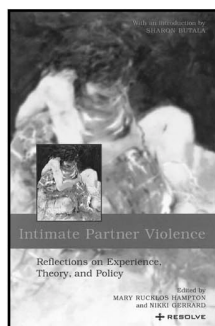
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