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Immigrant women and domestic abuse: Barriers to seeking services

Blair Meister and Lynette M. Renner

The experience of an immigrant woman in the United States who has been abused by an intimate partner presents an especially complex legal and social service situation due to her status as an immigrant. Any added complications may be seen as barriers to a woman seeking assistance, and can include such things as her cultural perspective on domestic abuse, her knowledge of the U.S. legal system, her immigration status, and her English language skills. In the United States there are many services available to victims of domestic abuse, as well as legal protection, yet there are still many immigrants who are not aware of these resources. The purpose of this work is to identify how barriers affect a woman's likeliness or ability to seek out assistance and how these barriers contribute to the extremely complex dynamics of domestic violence. The two barriers selected as the focus for this research project are cultural perceptions on domestic abuse and immigration status. Working in cooperation with the Columbia Domestic Violence Shelter, shelter case files of immigrant women were examined and one interview was conducted. A review of legal literature was conducted to identify the pathways to permanent residency and procedures that are in place to prevent residency status from being used as an abusive tool. Based on current results, it was found that due to their native cultural perspectives, some women did not even know that domestic abuse was a crime in the United States. In addition, some women reported they were told by their partner they would be deported if they sought help. The U.S. legal system does offer protection for immigrant women who have suffered abuse through legislation such as the Violence Against Women Act, which allows women to self-petition for permanent residency. Unfortunately, however, before these protections can be truly valuable, it is necessary to reach these women and inform them of their newfound American rights. One outcome from this research project is to develop literature explaining women's rights, and U.S. legal procedures and to make this information available in multiple languages for distribution in local shelters.