

HOPES FULFILLED OR DREAMS SHATTERED?
From resettlement to settlement responding to the needs of new and
emerging refugee communities
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“When a violent home is better than no home...”: domestic violence, refugees and mainstream service providers

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Introduction

I am acutely aware that the title of my paper, “when a violent home is better than no home...”, is confronting, perhaps especially for white, middle-aged, middle-class feminists like myself whose earliest memories of the women’s movement are embedded in slogans along the lines of “No violence, never, ever...”.

However, in deciding on a title for this presentation I took this risk because it is a statement that has been made to me, in various guises and on numerous occasions and with which I’ve been struggling. I think it reminds us of the need to actively engage not only with statements we find challenging, but with worldviews and life experiences that may be way beyond our comfort zones. I hope also that the statement may encapsulate the idea that sometimes our western paradigms just don’t fit. When domestic violence occurs against a backdrop of cumulative historic trauma from war, including systematic rape and genocide and other pre-arrival refugee experiences, when you’ve lived through danger that most of us can barely imagine, then abuse experienced within the family context is very likely to feel qualitatively different. And so we need to explore meanings of ‘violence’, ‘safety’, ‘home’ and ‘family’ in dialogue with refugee women if we (and I’m referring specifically here to those of us working in mainstream organisations) are to be of any real use.

Despite more than a decade of feminist work about using an intersectional analysis (see Crenshaw 1994, Bograd 1999, Sokoloff & Dupont 2005, Pittaway 2005) to unpack the complexities of women’s experiences of domestic violence, I think there is still a dominant tendency to universalize women’s experiences. The suggestion that white feminist ways of understanding and responding may not necessarily fit with black and/or non-western paradigms is not new (see Almeida 1993, Almeida et al 1998, Razack 1998, Yoshioka & Choy 2005, Bhuyan et al 2005). We talk a lot about how ‘one size does not fit all’ but to what extent are mainstream services changing practices to reflect this idea?

In this paper, I will report on some selected findings from a number of focus groups and interviews conducted as part of a project that I have been working on for the past eighteen months. The project is funded through the National Suicide Prevention Strategy and is looking at the links between experiences of interpersonal trauma (that is trauma resulting primarily from domestic violence, sexual assault and child abuse) and negative mental health outcomes, specifically suicidality. It has a particular focus on the experiences

and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities and what implications these have for mainstream service providers. The consultations were held with women from a range of backgrounds, including (but not exclusively) new and emerging refugee communities, as well as from more established groups. The focus was perceptions of the nature and impacts of violence within families, perceived prevalence within refugee communities and preferred solutions and strategies to address the issues. The findings will be compared with those from a series of consultations held with frontline service providers in a range of settings. Points of convergence and difference will be discussed, pointing the way towards a collaborative approach to working with refugee women and their families, based around what I am tentatively calling an 'intersectional cultural' framework. I will conclude with highlighting some implications for prevention and future research.

Mapping 'Sameness' And 'Difference'

The history of multiculturalism and of the 'access and equity movement' (if it can be called that) is steeped in often-conflicting discourses that revolve around notions of 'sameness' and 'difference'. The claim that 'fairness is about treating everyone the same because basically we're all human' invariably faces off with the 'but they're different so they need their own services' type of argument. Neither of course really gets to the nub of the issues, but there is some truth in both. So, it seemed to me that perhaps a useful way of approaching the task of unravelling and making sense of the findings from my project was to embark on a bit of a mapping exercise. What was similar in terms of the refugee women's responses and the service providers' responses and what was different? Where is there overlap and where are we heading off in different directions? And what might all this mean for practice and prevention?

Not surprisingly, such a mapping exercise proved more complex than I'd imagined. Not only were there similarities and differences between the women and the workers, but also among the women themselves and indeed among the service providers. So, the demarcation lines between 'same' and 'different' became less distinct. Without wanting to oversimplify the issues, then, what I've tried to do is draw out what emerged as the key areas of commonality and divergence between the service providers and the service users.

What was similar?

Across the board, among both the women and the service providers, the belief was expressed that violence against woman is an important issue. Similarly, the point was made that, despite cultural variations regarding gender roles and expectations, no woman likes it. 'Blaming the victim' however was seen to be alive and well, as of course it still is in the wider Anglo-Australian population, indicating the need for ongoing community education. There was also clear agreement that domestic violence can have serious negative consequences for women and families, as illustrated in the following quotes...

I know of some women who have become so depressed because their husbands are treating them badly...some of them try to kill themselves, but if they don't die, it will be even worse for them because everyone will know and they will blame them more... (Vietnamese woman)

I worked with a Kosovar family where all the children and the mother were suicidal...the kids knew how sad their mother was and this had a profound effect on their mental health (mental health worker)

There are a number of examples of similarities in responses, but in the interests of time, I'll move on to the differences.

What was different?

Areas of difference between the women and the service providers centred largely around, how context shapes meanings, perceptions of 'risk' and 'safety', perceived prevalence, understandings of terms, primacy of gender and preferred responses and solutions.

Importantly, how violence within families is viewed in the context of previous refugee experiences emerges as key to arriving at mutual understanding. In domestic violence work, we often talk about 'risk assessment' and 'safety planning', but how a refugee woman assesses her risks and relative safety might be very different to the sorts of risks that those of us who are not refugees usually think of, as this quote indicates...

If you move out of the violence, you risk being outcast by the whole community...and when you have been homeless for so long as we have been, and finally at last you have somewhere to call home...well, sometimes, a violent home can seem better than no home... (Afghani woman)

The potentially compounding effect of previous trauma was often mentioned by workers, but a different perspective also emerged from some of the refugee women, as is illustrated by this woman's comment...

Many years ago, when we were trying to escape from our country because of the war, the government put some of us in jail and terrible things happened there...and then we came to Australia on a boat that nearly sank...so what's a bossy husband compared to all that? (Vietnamese woman)

While it may be tempting to interpret a statement like this as evidence of a woman's minimizing of domestic violence, it's worth remembering that within a context of previous trauma, domestic abuse may well feel substantively different. It also reminds us of the need to clarify meanings – what's actually meant here by the word 'bossy'?

There was general agreement amongst those who participated in the project that domestic violence is widespread in refugee communities, although the

extent to which it is recognised and visible varies. A contested claim was that domestic violence had increased post-resettlement in Australia. While many women expressed the belief that it is 'worse' here than in their country of origin, this was disputed by others and was also a suggestion that was quite strongly resisted by some of the workers. Despite the fact that the evidence is that domestic violence does occur in refugee countries of origin, we can't know to what extent, or even whether it has occurred in individual families before. The point is that family and relationship dynamics are experienced differently in different contexts and so when a woman tells us that the violence has only started since coming here, or that it has got worse, then she is telling us something important about her post-arrival experience and this has to be our starting point in working together.

When it came to clarifying what it was we were actually talking about when we talk about 'violence in the home', understandings varied and the primacy of gender as the key axis of oppression was also questioned by some of the refugee women...

In our culture, the husband has to be the boss in the family...but we don't really call this violence (Cambodian woman)

Sometimes it's children or adolescents actually doing violence to their parents – it's not always the man to the woman. When we come here, our children learn the ways much quicker and so things can get turned upside down in families... I think family violence is a better name to call it (Sudanese woman)

Definitions of domestic violence that don't encompass the range of relationships and potential for altered power differentials in families may therefore be of limited use in achieving mutual understandings.

Similarly, a lack of common understanding of related concepts and terms, often taken for granted by workers, such as 'confidentiality' and 'child protection' is an issue. Negotiating shared meanings and locating common ground was seen as an ongoing challenge...

Sometimes we think that the Australian government is encouraging families to break up – bringing in the law doesn't help us; it just causes more bad feelings (Sierra Leonean woman)

Many of the women were very clear in making the point that a disjuncture between 'mainstream' approaches and 'community' approaches can magnify the negative consequences for women. Indeed, the dominance of western models of intervention was often seen as an impediment to effective support...

Sometimes involving the police can makes things worse for us...what happens is that the husband gets into trouble...and then the community will despise this woman and things will be worse for her because she will be on

her own and it is very hard for a woman on her own in a new country (Iraqi woman)

A desire to create a new life free of state intervention is entirely understandable, but is often interpreted as a 'failure to co-operate' with a system that is 'trying to help'. For many workers who are bound by statutory and legal obligations, finding points of connection from which to build a relationship of trust can seem overwhelmingly difficult.

There was a common perception among many of the newly-arrived refugee women that 'the system' in Australia can exacerbate tensions between men and women, by providing more support for women than for men. Before we are tempted to jump to the simplistic conclusion that this is evidence of brainwashing by the forces of the ever-growing and increasingly powerful men's rights movement in Australia, here is a cautionary reminder about what it's like to live at the intersections of a number of axes of oppression...

Maybe white men in Australia have lots of rights, but this doesn't mean that African men have the same rights...money is the real problem here...if your husband doesn't have money or work, then you don't have rights and freedoms (Sudanese woman)

However, we need to be careful not to be seduced into thinking that eradicating power differentials between white men and black men will solve the problem of domestic violence. As Crenshaw reminds us, women from non-dominant cultural groups should not have to "await the ultimate triumph over racism before they can expect to lead violence-free lives" (Crenshaw 1994:13). Nevertheless, the broader social context of refugee women's lives in Australia is significant and the fact is that for many new arrivals, resettlement difficulties often take priority over dealing with what are perceived to be private 'family issues'. When resettlement difficulties are seen as linked with the occurrence of the violence, many women see the solution to the violence as being inextricably caught up with resolving their fundamental settlement issues.

Preferred solutions for many of the women invariably involved community leaders, often elders or religious leaders, and the point was strongly made that community-based and owned solutions were seen as the best first line of defence. There was strong endorsement for a kind of 'community surveillance' system, as this Iraqi woman notes...

The perpetrators of this sort of abuse need to know they are being watched and that they can't get away with it! (Iraqi woman)

However, if community solutions fail, and certainly in instances of serious assault, it was conceded, by most of the women, that government authorities, including police, may need to be called in...

Go back to the community for the solutions first and if the elders can't resolve it, then go to the police...give him one chance and then if he doesn't mend his ways, send him to jail! (Sudanese woman)

A number of the refugee women talked about the need to develop strategies that blend the 'old' with the 'new' ways and involve reciprocal learning...

There needs to be a way of bringing the traditional ways together with the western ways. I know it's a lot easier to talk about blending cultures than to do it, but on the other hand, behaviours that are illegal here in Australia are also often considered inappropriate in other cultures, and so we can learn from each other ... and maybe the gap isn't as wide as we sometimes think (Afghani woman)

This brings us back, perhaps full circle, to the possibility of meeting-points and ideas in common about the way forward...

I would ask the service providers to work with us to remove the blocks and barriers for refugee women and not put extra ones in the way – sometimes we don't fit in with the guidelines – so maybe you need to do things differently to how you might normally do them...take the services to the people if they are not coming to you (Croatian woman)

This idea resonates with comments made by some mainstream workers about enacting 'flexible service provision'...

We need to get better at 'thinking outside the square' and ways of seeing that don't put people into generic boxes (alcohol and other drugs worker)

Towards A Model For Practice...

So, how might we achieve this new 'way of seeing'? How might we bring the 'sameness' lens and the 'difference' lens into focus with each other?

Part of the project that I've been working on has involved exploring this much-vaunted notion of 'cultural competence'. This is a concept that has spawned an enormous (and growing) body of literature, particularly in the health sector. Despite the wealth of information, many workers in many fields of practice are still asking 'but what does it look like?' At the risk of sounding too cynical, one does have to wonder how it might translate into practice in the current climate where the very foundations of multiculturalism (not to mention basic human rights) seem to be crumbling around our ears. Anyway, be that as it may, there are I believe some useful elements contained in the concept and I'd like to spend the time that remains to draw these out as signposts to a possible framework for practice in working with refugee women experiencing domestic / family violence.

Cultural Competence....

There are a number of definitions of cultural competence that have currency. Maureen Fitzgerald (2000) offers one that is useful on the individual level...

Cultural competence is about developing the ability to identify and challenge one's cultural assumptions, one's values and beliefs...the ability to see the world through another's eyes or, at the very least, to recognize that others may view the world through different cultural lenses (Fitzgerald 2000)

Of course, to be optimally effective, cultural competence must also operate and be supported by initiatives at a number of broader levels – program, organisational and systemic. Brach & Fraser (2000) offer this definition...

Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, policies that come together in an agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Brach & Fraser 2000)

The key word here, I think, is 'enable' for it is in the process of moving from conceptualising to operationalising that we often come unstuck.

Assuming that achieving cultural competence is possible, how might it be practised in the context that we're talking about here today? I would like to propose that a model that is based around an 'intersectional cultural approach' may form the basis for an inclusive practice framework.

There is not the time today to comprehensively articulate the elements of such an approach, but basically, the starting point is the individual woman, as of course it is in all good domestic violence intervention work. From here we can start to look at the range of possible differences among women in abusive relationships in terms of dimensions of identity and experience and then formulate strategies in relation to each of these dimensions. For example, in relation to previous experiences and perceptions of 'risk' and 'safety', an important first step might be to explore with a woman what it means for her to feel 'safe'. This might lead into a conversation in which she tells you about the circumstances that lead to her coming to Australia. From there, the engagement could broaden out into a discussion of cultural norms and help-seeking in her homeland and what might be similar and different here. What is important here is the process; the outcome may in fact not be that different than for Anglo-Australian women, but the route for getting there may be.

Using this approach, 'culture' is the lens through which all other aspects of identity are lived – an all-encompassing dimension because it shapes how we experience and construct our world. The model hinges on a broad definition of culture – much broader than ethnicity or country of birth - and encompasses ways of being and meaning-making that are particular to groups of people who are affiliated in any number of ways, including belonging to the same workplace and/or profession.

Such an approach highlights that it is how a woman, in this case a refugee woman, experiences her life at the intersection of these dimensions of difference, that colours and shapes her experience of intimate partner abuse. It also reminds us to be cognizant of the fact that part of her experience involves her interaction with service providers. How our own context (personal, professional and political) interfaces with hers is just as important a part of the total picture. The struggle to articulate our differences is an important one because it is as much about issues of power and privilege as it is about differing perspectives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I'd like to return to the title of this presentation and pose the question: are we any closer to understanding why and in what circumstances a violent home may seem better than no home? Taking a plunge into the sea of post-modernism, I'd venture to say that even if our understanding is only partially better, then this is a good outcome. We can only ever arrive at partial understandings, as none of us can hope to grasp the whole constantly shifting context of another's reality.

In terms of prevention, clearly the answers lie in big picture solutions – not only in relation to gender inequality, but also to discrimination, poverty, war and global instability. But, to avoid becoming overwhelmed I won't go down that road. I'd like to conclude by bringing things down to the smaller picture, to our own little corner of the canvas.

There are a number of innovative locally developed projects already operating in NSW and in other states¹. There are no doubt learnings that can be shared from these, but they need continued funding and resources to disseminate and consolidate these learnings and to continue to generate new knowledge.

More participatory action research would help us to further explore the lived experiences of refugees and asylum-seekers and help us to understand how these intersect with the lived experiences of service providers. However, such an enterprise requires careful navigation between the terrains of 'sameness' and 'difference': too far in one direction and we can lose sight of the particular details that can be vitally important to an intervention, too far the other way, and we can fall into the divisive trap of thinking in terms of 'us' and 'them'.

¹ For example: Religion & Family Harmony Project – Western Sydney Region (VAW/NSWP/Cumberland Women's Health Centre); Family Harmony - Understanding Family Violence in Somali and Eritrean communities in the Western Region of Melbourne (Women's Health West); Preventing Family Disintegration in CALD Communities: A Partnership Approach (Multicultural Women's Consortium W.A.); Rural Research Project: Responding to Domestic Violence in a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and Rural Context (Immigrant Women's DV Service of Victoria) to name just a few...

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