

COMMENT: Refugee Women and Domestic Violence

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Research suggests that refugee women are more vulnerable to domestic violence compared to non-refugee women. This vulnerability stems from negative externalities of forced migration, such as the inability to communicate and to navigate the justice system of the host country, fear of deportation, and economic and social dependency on third parties such as one's husband, sponsor, or ethnic/religious communities (Congress & Brownell, 2007; Tsankov & Mcshiras, 2014). In response to these challenges, advocates recommend steps such as creating workshops to make refugee women aware of the legal options and protections they have in the United States. These steps can help enable refugee women to report their abusers and to leave abusive situations (Jang, Lee, & Morello-Frosch, 1991).

Lack of language skills creates a vulnerability for refugee women who cannot communicate in their host country's language and must therefore depend on their husband or extended families to communicate for them (Crabtree-Nelson, Vincent, & Shalabi, 2018; Messing et al., 2013). The inability to communicate prevents refugee women from reporting their problems, but also precludes access to useful information on remedies, resources, and services available via health and justice systems (Erez & Hartley, 2003). By not having staff members and interpreters who can communicate in victims' native languages, institutions increase the risk of the word getting out to victims' families/communities and

puts victims at greater risk (Crabtree-Nelson, Vincent, & Shalabi, 2018). Even when a victim speaks the host country's language and is able to communicate their problems, they might not choose to do so; refugee women may have had negative experiences in their country of origin or fear unpleasant experiences in their new country (Crabtree-Nelson, Vincent, & Shalabi, 2018). This situation indicates the communication dependency of refugee women, putting them at greater risk of experiencing domestic violence and preventing them from accessing the justice system (Zanipatin et al., 2005).

Lack of necessary linguistic and occupational skills for employment, as well as feeling obligated to conform to gendered social roles – such as viewing husbands as the primary sources of income – makes refugee women economically dependent and financially insecure (Berkel, Vandiver, & Bahner, 2004; Erez & Hartley, 2003). Refugee cultural norms can make access to education, work, and social networks challenging for refugee women (Messing et al., 2013). Refugee women move to another country often by leaving their own families behind, sometimes starting a new life with their husbands and their extended families (Ellison et al., 2007). For this reason, they lack the support systems in cases of abuse; it may be difficult to seek help or report their abusers because they face negative stigmatization from their extended families (Jang, Lee, & Morello-Frosch, 1991).

For many refugee women, their husband represents their abuser, interpreter, and source of financial stability – and that situation is further complicated by legal issues arising from migration. Visa or immigration status might depend on their spouse or not allow engagement in paid employment, making refugee women more dependent on (and less likely to leave) their abusive partners (Kulwicki et al., 2010). When women's migration status is either dependent on a third party or uncertain, victims face such threats as "deportation, not having appropriate paperwork filled, having identification and immigration papers destroyed, loss of custody of children due to deportation, and threatening to inform immigration authorities for real or imagined infractions" (Crabtree-Nelson, Vincent, & Shalabi, 2018, p.265).

Saint Louis, Missouri, is a hub for refugee resettlement, but refugee women are not always offered sufficient resources for overcoming these challenges. This community requires training and workshops to make refugee women aware of legal system services, for instance. Organizations such as the International Institute are a resource for refugee women and have the capabilities for extending this knowledge and filling this critical information gap. Providing refugees with a specific training on available legal and social resources can diminish the vulnerabilities outlined in this article, hopefully giving refugee women more options when it comes to reporting abuse and leaving abusive relationships.

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