

Domestic Violence amongst Migrant Communities in Ireland

March 2009



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Organisational Background

Established in 2001, **AkiDwA** is the leading African and migrant women's organisation in Ireland, and it is the only migrant women's network operating at a national level in the country. The organisation provides support and a platform for, and advocacy on behalf of, African and other migrant women. AkiDwA's work focuses on their areas of interest, including employment, gender-based violence (including domestic violence and female genital mutilation), other health services and training/education, with a specific gender-based focus and a human rights and gender perspective. AkiDwA provides opportunities for African and other migrant women to identify and voice their needs, through individual and group support, consultative processes with members, capacity training and information provision on rights and access to services.

AkiDwA's Work on Domestic Violence

Since its establishment in 2001, AkiDwA's work in the area of domestic violence has been influenced by women coming to seek support and information. So far, 65 African women experiencing domestic violence have been supported. AkiDwA was contacted in 2003 by women in hostels/accommodation centres experiencing domestic violence, and some of the organisation's founding members were actually experiencing domestic violence when the group was established. Consequently, issues relating to African women and domestic violence became a primary concern.

Despite limited financial resources and staff capacity, AkiDwA has so far achieved the following:

In 2002, awareness-raising workshops on domestic violence were held in five counties in Ireland.

Seminars on African and other migrant women and domestic violence were held in:

- November 2002: Catherine McAuley Centre, Dublin
- March 2006: Dublin Central Mission
- March 2006: With Women's Aid
- November 2006: Together with Amnesty International, Islamic Cultural Centre and input by Pavee Point
- November 2008: With the Immigrant Council of Ireland

Information brochure for service providers entitled: Challenging misconceptions of violence against minority ethnic women including Travellers in Ireland. By AkiDwA and Pavee point.

Since 2002, training and presentations have been delivered to 325 service providers in the area of domestic violence:

- Two presentations were made to the national and regional committees on domestic violence, in 2005 and 2006.
- Between August 2007 and August 2008, awareness-raising training was delivered to five African women's groups in Ireland.
- A specific one-year, national-programme-funded project by the former Gender Unit, currently under COSc, was initiated in August 2007. This was to provide support, information and awareness-raising for African women living in Ireland, and to conduct a baseline survey with service providers – a process that is ongoing.

Baseline Survey

Rationale

The issue of domestic violence has become less hidden and a more apparent reality in parts of African and other migrant communities. However, Ireland still lacks statistics, culturally appropriate information, and delivery of services or documented research that clearly articulates challenges and experiences faced by African women accessing services and the service providers.

In relation to statistics, AkiDwA has found through its work that many African and migrant women are reluctant to report the issue of domestic violence for various reasons. These may be related to culture, immigration status or gender status. Moreover, the increase in uptake of State and other services by migrant and African women presents challenges to these women and the service providers. Thus, there is a need to incorporate a culturally appropriate approach into existing services, i.e. those set up prior to African and other migrant women accessing them, or those recently built to provide for the needs of indigenous (Irish) women. So far, AkiDwA is the only organisation that has initiated a domestic violence service, including one-to-one guidance, awareness-raising and capacity-building, specific to the needs of African women.

In the course of its work on domestic violence, AkiDwA realises that, although domestic violence affects all women, regardless of ethnicity, race, age and class, African women may be the most vulnerable group in Ireland. This may be for a variety of reasons, including residency status (e.g. asylum-seekers, spouses of Irish/EU citizens and migrant workers, undocumented migrants, refugees and applicants waiting for a change in immigration status). Many migrant women living and working in Ireland do not have proper access to family reunification, and thus face a further vulnerability, due to a lack of extended-family support.

Other challenges unique to African women will be outlined in this baseline survey:

- AkiDwA will use the findings in networking with service providers and to inform its work now and going forward.
- The findings will also help AkiDwA to respond to the needs of African women experiencing domestic violence, and to focus on areas in which it should lobby government – on immigration and social welfare policies that pose a challenge to African women, e.g. restricted welfare entitlements, which can negatively effect African women in their access to domestic violence support services, such as women's refuge services.
- The findings also give AkiDwA information on how to aid service providers to overcome these challenges, to respond and deliver their services with a culturally appropriate approach to meeting the needs of a diverse population.

Limitations of this Study

Data for this survey is based on a small scale. Despite a call for more regional input, most responses came from Dublin. However, some service providers from other counties did not respond to correspondence or were not available, due to time and capacity constraints. The AkiDwA Domestic Violence Project was only funded for a year, part-time, this imposed time and capacity constraints for interviews. Thus, fewer-than-anticipated service providers participated. Subsequently, this survey presents findings mainly from Dublin-based service



providers. One service provider stated that it has only provided a service to about three African women, and did not see the need for taking part in this survey. The availability of greater financial and human resources would have enabled the broadening of the scope of this survey.

Objectives

This survey was conducted with two target groups: African women and service providers in Ireland. With regard to African women in Ireland, this survey was intended to ascertain a baseline of their understanding and perception(s) of domestic violence. Through discussions with African women, AkiDWA came to realise that this objective was influenced by the realisation that some African women only recognise the physical part of such violence, such as battering, as domestic violence. In awareness-raising training, AkiDWA saw in its small sample that verbal abuse and psychological/mental abuse is more or less tolerated and accepted, and not as recognised or acknowledged as a form of domestic abuse.

With service providers, the intention was to find out if African women were accessing their services. If so, what challenges were they facing as service providers in supporting African women, and was there an increase in African women accessing services? Through its work, AkiDWA has realised that there is an increase in requests and calls from African and other migrant women experiencing domestic violence, seeking support and information. In addition, there are few cases in which teenage children have called AkiDWA on behalf of their mothers being abused.

AkiDWA has posited a few reasons for the increase in requests for support and information:

- In 2005, many African women were granted residency in Ireland based on parentage to their Irish-born children.
- Furthermore, violence could be seen to be on the increase because some African women came to Ireland as de facto single parents and got residence permits before their partners arrived.
- Most of these African women have upskilled themselves and, in addition to being the primary carers of their children, have become the primary providers and heads of their households.
- This reversal of 'traditional' roles can be a challenge for husbands/male partners who are still waiting for residence permits to be granted (many times in long immigration queues), are not allowed to enter into gainful employment until they have residency status, and thus have to be idle while their wives/female partners go to work.
- Additionally, this challenges the roles of men and women from originally patriarchal societies. Irish society has become quite progressive over the years in the promotion of women's rights. This would be, for the most part, greater than that of many African countries.



Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used with both service providers and African women's groups. Only a brief review of relevant literature, for statistics and for definitions, was conducted, due to the fact that this is a practical piece of research that gains its relevance from the base foundation of service providers' experiences and focus-group discussions with African women.

Service Providers

To ascertain interest, correspondence was sent to domestic violence service providers in Ireland, followed by telephone contact. The selection criterion for potential respondents was random. Twenty (20) letters were sent requesting an introductory meeting, and this was to be followed by an interview for the baseline survey. In two cases, service providers were invited to deliver an information session to African women's groups, and they were also asked to take part in the baseline survey. All the services that agreed to take part in this survey are Dublin-based, apart from one, in Longford. Some managers and support workers granted all six interviews. A semi-structured questionnaire was used during interviews with all respondents.

Respondents were from:

- Aoibhneas
- Dublin 12 Domestic Violence Support Services
- Rathmines Women's Refuge
- Saoirse Women's Refuge
- Longford Women's Link
- Women Overcoming Violent Experiences (WOVE).

African Women's Groups

All women's groups taking part in this baseline survey were participants from the awareness-raising workshops on domestic violence delivered by AkiDwA nationwide. A majority of participants were from Nigeria, followed by women from South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Somalia, Angola, Ivory Coast and Ethiopia.

Feedback from these focus-group discussions was very similar, despite the fact that the women came from diverse countries in Africa. In this regard, this survey was intended to ascertain a baseline level of their understanding and perception(s) of domestic violence. Focus-group discussions of no more than 15 participants per group, lasting for two hours, were held. The sessions began with a facilitation of participants to brainstorm their understanding of domestic violence. Feedback was recorded, and this was followed by a workshop on domestic violence, including definition(s), its dynamics and how it affects children.

Respondents were from:

- Waterford
- Galway
- Ballyhaunis
- Balbriggan
- Tallaght (two groups).

Interviews with Service Providers

Generally, findings among individual service providers were similar. However, there are differences in the way various service providers responded to challenges presented to them by African women. All respondents do provide a service to African women, and the number of women accessing those services is increasing, as are the challenges.

These challenges include:

- religious leaders' influence on female victims of domestic violence in decision-making
- responses to their (or others') experiences
- behaviour influenced by cultural backgrounds.
- responding to needs of trafficked women

Immigration status also poses great challenges for women experiencing domestic violence, as the degree of options varies, based on a woman's status. This may be that of asylum-seeking, those waiting for a Stamp 4, holders of a Stamp 3 (i.e. spouses of migrant workers or Irish/EU citizens) and undocumented migrants. One particular challenge is if a woman's independent status from her abuser partner limits her social welfare entitlements. This, in turn, affects her refuge access. Although most refuges will try to help a woman, regardless of her access to employment or independent accommodation, asylum-seekers cannot work and, largely, cannot move accommodation.

Services provided to African Women

Women's Refuges

All women's refuges that took part in this study stated that they do provide accommodation for African women and their children. One in particular stated, *'We provide a safe space for women and children, as well as emotional support.'* The other stated, *'We provide emergency accommodation for women fleeing domestic abuse.'*

In general, refuge accommodation is available to all women in the Republic of Ireland, regardless of race or country of origin. One refuge manager stated that they accept referrals from other counties in Ireland, and have realised that some women prefer to access refuge accommodation far away from their homes or communities, and that this is important for their safety, privacy and emotional well-being.

Additional services include outreach, one-to-one support, confidential referrals to relevant agencies/support services, and information on rights and entitlements, such as access to private-rented accommodation and court services. Emergency food supplies and toiletries are supplied to women who need them. A support helpline and three refuges stated that they also provide an on-site playroom with qualified childcare workers who, according to a worker at one of the refuges, *'work therapeutically with resident children around their experiences'*. For African women, the on-site provision of childcare is important because most of these women raise children with very little or no extended-family support, and have acknowledged this fact to support workers within refuges.

One of the refuges has a medical card that can be used by women who need medical attention upon arriving at the refuge. It enables them to have access to free medical assistance, and a female medical doctor is available. This is very helpful for the most vulnerable African women, who may face social welfare payment restrictions or have no access to social welfare allowances, depending on their residency status. One of the refuges stated that, particularly in relation to African women, information is given on access to court and barring orders. Reference letters, confirming that the women accessed refuge accommodation, are also given to them upon request.

Helpline Services

Unlike women's refuges, helpline services in the Republic of Ireland do not extend to accommodation. In general, services provided by telephone helplines include confidential support and information, outreach services and one-to-one support. One of the helplines that took part in this survey stated that it also provides awareness-raising on domestic violence to secondary schools and stress-management courses for women. Helpline services are also there for women who need emotional support or who just need to talk to someone. Services are available to women 24 hours a day, to listen or talk. The Gardai and general practitioners refer some women to helpline and drop-in services.

Database of Service Users and Statistics for African Women Accessing Services

All service providers in this survey mentioned that they keep a database of all women who access or use their services, whether as refuge residents or through a helpline, drop-in service or outreach programme. However, statistics of African women are not available, as some service providers record a client's data under the generic title 'migrant woman', which can include a variety of women, including those from the EU. One service provider mentioned that,

so far in 2008, the refuge has offered support to 25 African women. Another stated that, since its opening in 2006, 20 out of 150 families were those of African women. Some stated that, as a rule, they forward data on service users to the National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services (NNWRSS) in Ireland. Consequently, complete statistics for this survey were not readily available. Availability of NNWRSS data-collection would have aided AkiDwA's work, and would better inform where some services are having diverse population needs and where additional funding is necessary. Also, a cultural approach and perspective would be helpful for organisations from which African women are increasingly accessing services.

Increase in Service Uptake

All service providers confirmed that there is an increase in uptake of their services by African women. Some of it may be due to an increase in African women receiving residency status through the IBC/05 Scheme after 2005 [1]. It appears that, while women were awaiting status, that was their priority focus. Once receiving status, they felt more secure to face challenges brought on by a domestic violence situation. Women seeking asylum, as previously stated, have fewer realistic options with which to deal with domestic violence situations while in direct provision, and the dispersal also means they are more isolated and may not have information on services they can obtain. This is also a fact that is realised by AkiDwA in its work on domestic and other gender-based violence-related work. Therefore, this fact confirms that there is a need to integrate culturally appropriate services into existing services in Ireland.

Challenges in providing services to African Women

All service providers taking part in this survey acknowledged challenges in providing support to African women. These challenges were mainly due to the restriction to social welfare allowances, which is directly related to a woman's immigration status in Ireland. Other challenges are language barriers (for non-English speakers), influences from cultural and community backgrounds, a sometimes subtle racism between Traveller and African women, as well as discrimination amongst African women themselves – based on culture, country of origin and class. Moreover, uptake by African women comes at a time where women's support services already lack adequate funding. Also worth noting is that, due to a diversity of backgrounds among migrant women, a 'one size fits all' cultural approach may not be effective. Working together, targeting populations accessing services, and holding consultations with migrant women in need of services seems a good way forward.

Social Welfare Restrictions

The inability to access social welfare allowances and other State services, such as free legal aid and medical cards, is a huge challenge for any woman seeking support or trying to flee an abusive relationship. Women's refuges responding to this survey have found this particular challenge, to some extent, hinders them from providing the necessary supports and services needed by a migrant woman.

One member of refuge staff in this survey stated that refuge accommodation is only an emergency measure, and after a period of time in the refuge, women have to move to more permanent, private-rented accommodation. This can be problematic for women who cannot access social welfare benefits or who may be bound by accommodation procedures in direct provision.

From the house rules and procedures document given to asylum-seekers, in the section entitled 'Transfers from Accommodation Centres', 'You are expected to stay at your centre until a decision has been made on your asylum application. Within the system of direct provision, no resident has an entitlement to be moved to another accommodation centre of his or her choosing. The Reception and Integration Agency will only consider an application for a transfer to another centre within direct provision on a discretionary basis, on its merits, and only in very exceptional circumstances, e.g. where medical needs cannot be catered for at your present centre [2].'

This leaves a woman with very little choice and, as a respondent stated, means that '*she might have to involuntarily go back to the abuser*'. Two women's refuge workers in this survey stated that they do not want to deny support to women in this category in any instance, but that the restrictions result in a strain on their budgets, as they need additional funds to make this possible.

There is a need for specific support for women who are affected by social welfare restrictions and for women housed in accommodation centres.

Women in this category include:

- asylum-seekers
- undocumented migrants
- trafficked women
- spouses of migrant workers or Irish/EU citizens, who are holders of Stamp 3 or who are waiting to change over to Stamp 4; these women would be financially dependent on their spouses and do not have the right to enter into gainful employment.

Racism and Discrimination

One women's refuge support worker raised the issue of racism between Traveller and African women. Racism in this case would be very difficult to challenge, as it is subtle and would have been going on for some time before staff members began to notice it. In this case, it was brought to the attention of staff after children residing in the refuge fought and their mothers subsequently reacted negatively towards each other. Discrimination based on country of origin amongst African women living in a refuge was also mentioned.

Language Barriers

Some service providers expressed concern about the difficulty in communicating with women who do not speak English. Some would use translation services (many of which are private, resulting in additional costs for the refuge). However, one refuge manager stated that it was a challenge to even obtain interpreters at times, due to the fact that the client could be French, Portuguese or from a country like Ethiopia or Somalia, where neither French nor English is spoken.

The scarcity of country-specific translators can mean that it is likely the interpreter engaged to translate the sensitive details of a domestic violence situation is known to the client. This may result in a breach of confidentiality, which would further discourage the most isolated and vulnerable African or migrant women from seeking support. However, an option to use interpreters from outside Ireland exists, but this requires additional financial resources.

Belief in Witchcraft

Three service providers surveyed were concerned about how to reassure and offer support to African women who, despite having gathered the courage to leave their abusive partners, fear that the partner/husband, or his family back home in Africa, *'will cast a spell on them through witchcraft'*. A professional woman, while knowledgeable about many of her options in escaping a domestic violence situation, may have culturally taken on a fear of witchcraft from her country of origin, and this could influence her choices in moving on from a violent relationship.

Irish service providers may never, in their personal and professional lives, have dealt with cases that include fears of witchcraft. Consultation with African/migrant women on an effective approach to combat this, combined with a cultural understanding of the seriousness with which witchcraft is accorded in some communities, may ease some of these fears.

Emerging Issues

Emerging issues such as influence/intervention from extended families living abroad, influence from community/religious leaders and belief in witchcraft are influenced by the particular cultural background from which a woman comes within her country of origin.

Culture, according to Singleh, cited in Guru, 'is a system that perpetuates itself, is both conditioning and conditional ... through its institutions, rituals, socialization practices, and patterning of interactions, provides guidance and rewards that systematically shape individuals' social recognition' [3].

Based on this definition of culture, it is possible, as a service provider, to understand why and how African women could firmly fear witchcraft and have concerns of how the community back home in Africa will view her and her family, depending on what action she takes. Although she may be now living in Ireland, many countries of origin have the belief that a woman should be subservient to a man in all things, thereby perpetuating unequal power relations within a marriage. These cultural attitudes do continue to influence an African woman's decision-making process.

Service providers and refuges indicated that some women accessing their services were trafficked into Ireland, with some of these women referred by hospitals and general practitioners. These women can present diverse and challenging issues. For example, some women were trafficked into Ireland under the guise of work as au pairs, only to find themselves in a situation of exploitation and/or abuse.

One of the service providers expressed a serious concern about the lack of information provided to front-line staff (from refuges, support services or hospitals) on how to proceed or support a victim who has been trafficked into Ireland, such as dealing with the Gardai and accessing social welfare and State services. One refuge manager stated that they have good rapport with the local Gardai inspector, and he is very approachable in dealing with victims of trafficking. As a result, this particular refuge has gained knowledge in dealing with trafficked women and can provide better guidance to them. This could be used as a good-practice model for other localities.

Extended-Family Influence and Patriarchal Societies

Although service providers give support to all women experiencing domestic violence in Ireland, the response to the needs of some African and other migrant women can be subject to external factors. A few survey respondents stated that some African women were worried about being called traitors and being held responsible for Gardai and other authorities '*breaking into*' their homes and '*disrupting*' their communities.

Fear and stigma are attached to the status of divorced women in some African communities. This, again, is an issue of concern for some staff members who are trying to understand why some African women may seem unduly worried about community response to their actions. For some African women, decisions are influenced by the cultural attitudes of the countries and communities from which they come. In these cases, a woman may not feel it is an individual decision she can make. An African woman caring for children on her own after leaving her partner may not have the necessary community supports to build a new life because of a particular cultural perspective of her actions and/or her new single or divorced status within the community.

Influence from Religious Leaders

Almost all service providers surveyed indicated that some African women seeking their services were hugely influenced by their pastors in making decisions about a domestic violence situation. In some cases, African women worried far more about what their pastors would think about their leaving the matrimonial home, rather than attending to their immediate needs for safety. Moreover, women also expressed very real fears of potential repercussions from both church and community if they ignored advice from their pastors. In a majority of the cases that came to light in this survey where this was an issue, pastors asked the women to go back to their husbands, despite their vulnerability and fears of safety while staying in a violent relationship. In these cases, it appeared that a woman's opinion on what she wants to do, or needs to do, was rarely taken into account. Based on this anecdotal evidence, it would appear that influence from church pastors can, and does, have an influence on a woman's decision-making process in a domestic violence situation.

Conclusion

Drawing from this baseline survey, it is very evident that there is an increase in the uptake of State and other statutory and community services for domestic violence situations by African and other migrant women, and this brings about some challenges for providers of these services. African women come from diverse cultural backgrounds, and their needs and potential interventions and responses in relation to domestic violence are influenced by their diverse cultural values.

Service providers in Ireland are now potentially confronted with a service-delivery response influenced by external factors across Irish borders. There is a need for service providers to come together in an open forum to address these challenges, and share learnings and experiences in order to come up with culturally appropriate responses for African women experiencing domestic violence. Above all, service providers themselves need funding, support and proper information on how to deal with some of the complex, culturally related issues outlined in this survey, which arise from the needs of an increasingly diverse client base.

African Women's Groups Participating in the Survey

An Afterword by Nobuhle Ncube, Women's Development Officer, AkiDWA

Six African women's groups took part in this baseline survey as participants in focus-group discussions. Group participants were women from Nigeria, South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Somalia, Angola, Ivory Coast and Ethiopia. Feedback from individual focus-group discussions was very similar, despite diverse countries of origin in Africa and varied cultural backgrounds. As the facilitator of these discussions, I found it very challenging at times to keep the discussion limited to the specific survey question, due to the fact that some participants were reactive to other participant contributions and that talk elicited discussion on other arising issues. Issues related to domestic violence but somewhat off-topic were brought into the discussion. I responded to these arising issues, and as a result, there was follow-up in consecutive workshops or additional meetings.

This survey was intended to ascertain a baseline level of African women's understanding and perception(s) of domestic violence. It became more evident through the discussions that some African women only recognise domestic violence as physical/beating and are thus not as aware of, or do not acknowledge, other forms of domestic abuse and the effects of domestic violence situations on children in the family. To address this concern, focus-group discussions were followed by awareness-raising workshops, which included modules on the forms that domestic violence can take and what a woman can do in Ireland to secure her safety.

Understanding of Domestic Violence

Overall, all participants identified beating as a form of domestic violence. There was huge debate in some of the focus-group discussions about other forms of abuse. Some participants debated whether a slap on the face could be justified as a beating, particularly if it only happened once or twice. To these participants, it wasn't a major issue.

Some participants related that they thought verbal, mental and emotional abuse was something naturally occurring within a marriage. Therefore, they did not initially view this as a type of abuse. However, a female participant stated that insults and derogatory terms, such as being called '*useless and stupid*' by her former husband, were painful, gave her many sleepless nights and reduced her self-esteem. She related that she would have preferred a slap on the face, as then she may only have had an identifiable physical pain, and not have had to question and feel bad about herself because of more hidden abuse.

A follow-up to this discussion elicited more response, with another woman commenting that being shouted at and ordered to behave in a certain manner by her husband is culturally accepted in her home country because '*a good woman listened to her husband and attended to his needs*'. Some focus-group participants did say that they did identify emotional and verbal abuse as a form of domestic violence. Emotional and verbal abuse because of infidelity within a marriage was also identified as a form of domestic abuse. This was supported by the majority of participant responses in all discussion groups that one of the common causes of abuse in a relationship is due to a '*husband being unfaithful or having a girlfriend outside the home*'.

Some participants related a perception that some women provoke their husbands, are then beaten as a result, and, therefore, deserve to be beaten. This statement was mentioned in three of the six focus-group discussions, and it provoked a profound discussion on the causes of domestic violence and whether or not there is justification for abusive behaviour within a relationship or marriage. Based on the aforementioned participant comments, it is reasonable to assume that this kind of mindset – that a woman can be beaten by her husband if she provokes him – is influenced by societal, and sometimes cultural, backgrounds.

Women coming from patriarchal communities and cultural backgrounds are brought up in a culture that supports subservience to men, therefore reinforcing unequal power relations between men and women. The United Nations Secretary General's study on violence against women lends support to this perspective, stating that socially constructed roles of men and women have a hierarchy [4]. When men exercise power and control over women, patriarchy can be ingrained within social and cultural norms.

Child Abuse

Child-beating, which is used as a form of disciplining children, was also highlighted as a form of domestic violence in a focus-group discussion. This brought a mixed response, as a few participants, particularly from a cultural perspective, were of the view that some forms of beating a potentially misbehaving child is a form of discipline and should, therefore, not be seen as domestic violence.

As a facilitator, I addressed this, both within the session and more in depth in subsequent sessions. This particular round of focus-group discussions ended with the presentation of a definition of domestic violence, drawn from the 1993 United Nations Assembly document cited in population reports, which states that violence against women is *'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life'* [5].

This report states that a definition of violence against women should include spousal battering, sexual abuse of female children, dowry-related violence, rape (including marital rape) and traditional practices harmful to women, such as female genital mutilation. This definition is holistic and inclusive of universal forms of violence against women and children. However, it should be noted that some focus-group participants did not understand the concept of marital rape, and one woman stated that there was no word for it in her native language. Other participants stated that they believed a married woman cannot be raped by her husband. Once again, this was a hotly debated topic, and views came from the perspectives of different cultural and social backgrounds.

Conclusion

It is clear from these focus-group discussions that issues related to, and the understanding of, domestic violence can be influenced and shaped by social and cultural backgrounds. Most participants did acknowledge physical abuse as a form of domestic abuse, and questions were raised about at what level shouting or screaming becomes verbal abuse. It should also be noted that, in discussions, some participants related that they would review their concepts of domestic violence with regard to some situations that may be considered culturally acceptable in their communities in their countries of origin (such as disciplinary actions from a partner or to a child).

The kinds of issues raised were carefully considered and debated by participants, and a new level of understanding and empowerment to improve their situations resulted. This was also informed by the security and confidentiality needs of a woman fleeing a situation of violence. The added pressures of close-quarter, cramped communal living in accommodation centres (faced by asylum-seekers attending the sessions) was also brought home, with careful parameters on the confidentiality of proceedings established at the beginning. This was agreed to by participants, and potentially allowed for more in-depth discussions.



Recommendations for AkiDwA and other service providers

- Staff members in all domestic violence support services should be trained in handling cases of clients coming from different cultural backgrounds. This includes services that have not yet been accessed, but could potentially be accessed by African women.
- AkiDwA should create further networking opportunities with other providers of domestic violence services, so as to share learnings and experiences in dealing with African women.
- There is a need to lobby for inclusion in pending legislation and policy and practice reforms, so that adequate support is provided for the most vulnerable groups, such as spouses of Irish/EU citizens and Stamp 3 spouses of migrant workers, who may be experiencing domestic violence.
- All immigration legislation policies and practices should incorporate a gender perspective and follow gender guidelines.
- Service providers should network more and have support to coordinate across agencies, address arising issues, share information and strategically approach current challenges that their increasing diverse clients and they themselves face.
- Service providers should be equipped with up-to-date information on dealing with complex issues, e.g. trafficked women and women who may have limited options due to the denial of some rights and entitlements because of their legal residency status (and implications that this status may have on their access to accommodation).
- Service providers within Ireland should benefit from increased inter-agency collaboration, with a longer period of time in dealing with African/migrant women and with greater experience in creating structural supports.
- There is a need for AkiDwA to network more with Traveller organisations on the issue of domestic violence.
- Awareness-raising workshops on domestic violence and follow-on work should continue, such as consultations with community and religious leaders, work with perpetrators from a cultural perspective, and train-the-trainer to provide outreach to especially vulnerable women, e.g. isolated women in accommodation centres.

Appendix 1:

Survey Questionnaire (Service Providers)

What services do you offer to support women experiencing domestic violence?

Do you keep a database on service users that access domestic violence/information services?

If so, do you have a breakdown or percentages of African women accessing your services?

If not, can you provide an estimate?

Have you experienced an increase of African women accessing your services in recent years?

Appendix 2:

Focus-Group Discussion (African Women's Groups)

As focus-group discussions also included a brainstorming session, participants were asked the following questions:

What is your understanding of domestic violence?

What comes into your mind when you hear the words 'domestic violence'?

References

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