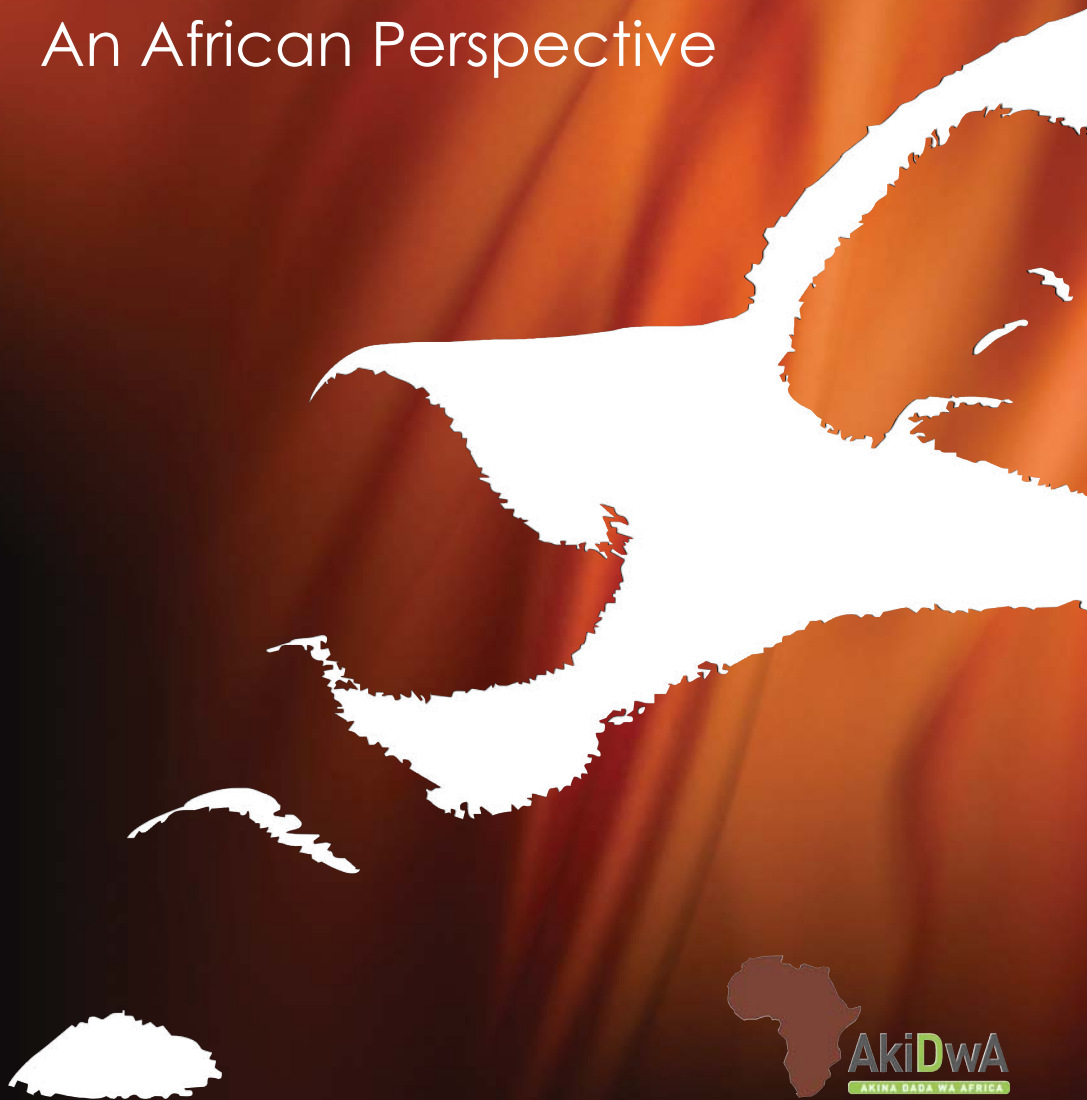


Understanding Gender-Based Violence

An African Perspective





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The views expressed herein are those of AkiDWA and can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of Irish Aid.

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AkiDwA also acknowledges continued support from various organisations including Dublin Inner-City Partnership, Dublin City Council, Community Technical Aid, Integrating Ireland, Africa Centre, European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland, and both the AkiDwA management and advisory board.

Why tackling gender-based violence is important to AkiDwA

THE issue of gender-based violence, and the support of survivors and those living in violent situations, has been of critical importance to AkiDwA since its foundation. Over the years that AkiDwA has existed, the organisation has sought to increase consciousness of this subject and, in turn, become a positive force for transformation through educating the wider public and advocating for positive change.

AkiDwA was established in 2001 by seven African women living in Ireland who felt a need to come together, to network, to share and to bring other women together in a larger network. In those early days, AkiDwA quickly became aware of the fact that some of its founding members were living in violent domestic situations. The perpetrators of this violence quickly became fearful of AkiDwA and the empowering effect that it was having, as our colleagues found their voices and strength.

In my own experience as a development worker with asylum seekers living in the second largest 'reception centre' in Ireland, I encountered many incidents of women living with the trauma of past violence, both domestic and cultural, and the aftermath of war or conflict. Depression levels were high among the survivors, but the necessary supports for recovery were lacking. During this time, we took a leading role in opposing gender-based violence and highlighted the effects of female genital mutilation and other forms of violence against women. We have lobbied for culturally appropriate service provision, and advocated for the unique experiences of women to be taken into account in the asylum process.

This publication is a further extension of AkiDwA's work to date. It has set out to document the voices of African women, religious leaders and other service providers. This has been achieved through surveys, focus group discussions and interviews. A section on tips and recommendations from an African woman's perspective is included. Further work is on the way. With support from the Department of Integration, through integration funds, and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, AkiDwA has implemented two projects to progress work on gender-based violence. This interface with cultural and religious leaders is intended to help spread the message that violence against women is wrong and no cultural or religious basis exists for its perpetration.

This publication is aimed at educating and raising awareness – not only to service providers, but also to anyone who has an interest in the area of gender-based violence and the changing client profile of women who wish to, and need to, access services in Ireland today.

Salome Mbugua
National Director, AkiDwA

Background to this resource

This resource is based on a larger research document by Juliet Amamure, commissioned by AkiDwA. The full text, including references, can be found on AkiDwA's website (www.akidwa.ie).

Abbreviations

AkiDwA	Akina Dada Wa Africa (Sisterhood of Africa)
DV	domestic violence
FGD	focus group discussion
FGM	female genital mutilation
GBV	gender-based violence

Definitions

African woman/women

In these guidelines, the term refers to any migrant African woman or women, irrespective of residential status in Ireland. This encompasses refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers, visitors and students from Africa.

Ireland has become a multicultural society. This transition has brought both opportunities and challenges. Although globally recognised in scope and significance, gender-based violence has continued to thrive, due to its complexity, embedded in social, cultural, economic and political power structures. It can be acknowledged that changing these power structures requires time and concerted efforts from different societal sectors. However, steps taken by individuals, families, government and the international community give women hope that they will be able to live in a just and safe society.

In the Irish context, a lack of understanding of GBV from an African perspective is still a challenge, contributing to a low uptake of services by women. In response, these recommendations have a twofold benefit. Firstly, they provide information that can enrich the service providers on issues pertaining to domestic violence and female genital mutilation. Secondly, they act as a basis for developing good practices in delivering services to African women.

African women still believe that their lives and sexuality are controlled by the men with whom they live and the society in which they live. These beliefs can manifest themselves in the women's attitudes and a reluctance to seek the necessary supports. Many African women left their countries of origin due to gender-related problems, such as FGM and rape during war, and some may also be HIV-positive.

Furthermore, an African woman's dependency on her partner for economic and residential reasons can escalate her vulnerability, causing her to suffer in silence, or

face impoverishment and the very real possibility of being forced to return to a harsh situation in her country of origin. Even with the existing services provided by Irish organisations, many African women remain fearful of accessing these services, as the appearance of defiance towards their partners becomes a greater risk than that of pursuing resolution to a violent situation. The compilation of these recommendations also reveals that even the religious leaders to whom African women refer may not have the necessary information and skills to handle such situations. They often rely on common-sense solutions, but may not necessarily take into account the full range of practical problems that African women may face when trying to resolve or remove themselves from violent situations, both in legal and economic terms.

In this regard, it is recommended that service providers respond to a changing, multicultural Irish society with services that are:

- proactive
- mediation-led, rather than interventional, unless required for safety reasons
- confidential
- non-judgemental
- respectful of cultural values and norms.

There is a need for collective action with different stakeholders, including HSE-funded women's support and refuge services, to lobby government to introduce best-practice guidelines in the provision of support, to enforce the law, and also to provide the necessary support and structures to prevent GBV. Recruitment for this work, both with service providers and policy makers, should be tailored in both job advertisements and descriptions to encourage African women to apply in order to positively inform the planning and development of services and supports. In addition, African women with knowledge in the area of GBV should be recruited for the boards of directors, management and steering committees of organisations working in this area.

AkiDwA's Work on Domestic Violence

AkiDwA has worked with over 2,250 African women in 20 locations in Ireland to date. The women in these facilitated groups have called for increased information and support in the area of domestic violence. The ability of a woman to access this information and support is fundamental to AkiDwA's work, and underpins the organisation's founding principles that women's rights are human rights. An African woman, just like every woman in the world, has a right to live, free from personal, social and political abuse. An African woman should be able to live free from violence, especially within her most intimate of relationships.

AkiDwA realises that confronting GBV is both complicated and very sensitive. Therefore, the response to women on domestic violence should be delivered carefully, with non-judgemental attitudes, respect and an understanding of the cultural differences that exist within (and outside) women's countries of origin. This is particularly important because African women may have experienced forms of violence against women in their countries of origin, such as FGM or rape in the war-torn zones of Africa, which are not experienced by Irish women in Ireland.

Research findings:

African women's experiences of domestic violence in Ireland

AkiDwa conducted a number of focus group discussions with approximately sixty African women. Face-to-face interviews were held with four church/religious leaders, and round-table discussions were also held. Different methodologies were used in the FGDs, including role-play, brainstorming and case study discussions.

The objectives of the FGDs were to:

1. assess the women's knowledge and awareness of domestic violence
2. discover the women's experiences and views on the causes of domestic violence while in Ireland
3. identify challenges in seeking support
4. formulate recommendations on domestic violence for service providers.

1. Assessment of African Women's Knowledge and Awareness of Domestic Violence

The women had good knowledge of the term 'domestic violence' and an understanding of all its manifestations; physical, sexual, emotion, psychological and financial abuse. They described it as "any kind of abuse subjected to [a] woman by [her] husband/sexual partner within the household. This can be in form of beating, pushing one out of the door, the use of abusive language, a negative attitude such as poor communication, the woman cooking food and [the] husband does not eat and the husband coming back home late. Domestic violence can also be emotional because all women's work is not appreciated; a woman is always in the wrong." Traditionally, the husband listens to his parents-in-law more than his wife, also causing emotional stress on the woman.

Others said that "domestic violence occurs when [the] male partner does not leave money for food, even with the knowledge that [the] woman has no source of income." In the FGDs, the women also mentioned that domestic violence can be in the form of denial of rights, where they are not allowed to seek employment, and men believe that a woman should stay at home and do domestic chores. "It is woman's job."

2. Causes of Domestic Violence While in Ireland: African Women's Experiences and Views

Many of the women to whom AkiDwA has spoken have a history of torture and trauma. These women have the double-bind of insecure status, especially amongst refugees and women seeking asylum, and delays in obtaining legal immigration status, which only serves to increase the duration of their mental and emotional strain. The women cited the following as the main triggers of domestic violence in their experiences.

(a) Poverty and Poor Standards of Living

Lack of financial resources and a reduction in the standards of living is always a threat to family stability. When both partners are unemployed and are not able to work, there can be increased financial problems. The partners tend to irritate each other and get on each other's nerves. This issue is even more severe for couples in direct provision, as people seeking asylum in Ireland do not have the right to work.

(b) Competition for and Control of Resources

African women in Ireland often provide for themselves without financial support from their husbands. Some men can feel inferior, thinking that women are competing with them. The husband could want to be the boss, controlling all the resources in the house, including financial resources from the woman's own paid work.

(c) Culture and the Power Held by Men, Perpetuating Inequality

The FGDs revealed that some cultures fuel domestic violence within Africa. The women feared reporting incidences of domestic violence to the relevant authorities. They felt intimidated because it is African cultural tradition not to talk publicly about anything concerning domestic issues. A woman could feel stigmatised and rejected by her friends and the community if it were public knowledge that poor relations existed within her marriage. This, in turn, can lead to low self-esteem.

Most women in Africa, irrespective of their marital status or educational levels, are often dependent on men to access resources such as labour, land and financial credit. They may also preserve their marital relationships for the sakes of their children and families.

The women in the FGDs argued the following points:

- Women tend to love men more than themselves – they believe in being with men all the time and not with women.
- As a result, women develop feelings of inferiority to men. Thus, it was important that women encouraged one another to join community-led groups to develop their senses of self-worth.
- Women tend to keep incidences of violence to themselves, even educated women, but when their situations get out of hand, for instance, when they feel belittled and degraded, they finally speak out and/or leave the relationships.

- When a woman does not know her rights, she will believe that everything that the man does is correct. The women in the group viewed this as self-denial. This often happens in instances where an educational difference exists between male and female partners.

3. Challenges in Seeking Support in Ireland

In an effort to help African women who have experienced domestic violence, AkiDwA has made referrals to the appropriate organisations. Follow-up on queries made, however, seemed to indicate that the majority of the women with whom AkiDwA consulted did not avail of services. The reasons are primarily one of the following.

(a) Fear of Alienation from Family and Community

It can be discerned that African women are not willing to seek their families', friends' or the State's support for fear of being stigmatised and alienated from their communities. Women are made to believe they cannot speak about domestic issues in public, as people who know them would contact their countries of origin, informing people back home what has happened in Ireland.

In the FGDs, it was reported that leaving a marriage does not always appear to offer a solution for a woman within a violent relationship. Some women want the option to reconcile, which is why they prefer reporting the violence to their religious leaders in the hopes of having them intervene. But if the situation worsens, then the next line of action is contacting An Garda Síochána.

(b) Residency-Status-Dependence on Partners

African women whose residency in Ireland is dependent on their husbands'/spouses' residency status face specific difficulty in accessing services on domestic violence. This may put their residency status in jeopardy, or the women may be concerned of betraying their husbands/partners, whose residency might also have temporary status. Similarly, women in the asylum process who live with their husbands/partners in accommodation centres may find it difficult to access services for fear of disclosure and how this might affect both of their applications. They may be afraid to involve the Gardai because, without the support of extended family, they worry about being left alone to support their children.

(c) Legal System in Ireland Perceived as Non-stringent

African women perceive the Irish laws on domestic violence and violence against women as not being very strong. The attrition level of rape cases and the low conviction rate in Ireland supports this opinion.

(d) Services do not Meet African Women's Needs

Many women reported that services do not meet their needs. They reported racism and discriminatory responses. These kinds of experiences are likely to discourage women from seeking help.

The religious leaders to whom African women consult felt that their studies in theology and pastoral care were devoid of any guidance on this very sensitive issue. The religious leaders reported that they often used common sense, counselling the couple and, at times, informing them of the law. The leaders suggested that they would benefit from guidance in this area.

Many African women need mediation to address their domestic problems, and yet they go to great lengths to protect the perpetrator, to the detriment of their own safety. A barring order against a partner is often not what they feel they need, as this may lead to marital breakdown. The women feel that leaving the marriage is not a solution because they fear that their next relationship may not go well and they will end up alone.

(e) Forms of Domestic Violence Experienced by African Women

Many African women experience forms of sexual violence such as:

- female genital mutilation (FGM)
- marital rape – this can be very common with women who have undergone FGM, which makes lovemaking a painful process because of scars that make the vaginal surface very hard, and the loss of sexual drive resulting from the procedure; sometimes husbands force their wives to have sex simply because they are married and it is seen as a woman's duty to satisfy her husband
- men engaging in extramarital sex, as they might not derive sexual pleasure from wives who have experienced FGM; this betrayal can cause the wives further psychological trauma
- sexual exploitation, sometimes resulting from women being trafficked
- physical violence
- verbal abuse.

Additionally, most women hesitate to end violent relationships due to the fear of raising children without their husbands' support.

(f) Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

FGM, or female genital cutting (FGC) or female circumcision, is one of the most devastating forms of GBV. It comprises any procedure that involves partial or complete removal of any part of female genitalia. It is a reality in the lives of over 140 million women worldwide, and approximately 3 million girls undergo the procedure every year.

According to the World Health Organization (2007), there are four types of FGM:

TYPE I:

Partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce (clitoridectomy).

TYPE II:

Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia minora (excision).

TYPE III:

Narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and appositioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris (infibulation).

TYPE IV:

All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, e.g. pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterisation.

Reasons Given for the Practice of FGM

Family honour, cleanliness, the assurance of virginity/marital fidelity, or simply terrorising women out of sex, are some of the many reasons given for the practice of FGM. Additionally, in many cultures, a girl who is not circumcised is considered 'unclean' and, therefore, unfit for marriage. Girls often undergo this rite as part of an initiation into womanhood. FGM is practised mainly in 28 African countries, as well as Yemen, Oman, Malaysia and Indonesia. However, there is evidence that FGM is also carried out in countries to which African women migrate, for example, France, the UK and the USA.

Many risks are involved with the practice of FGM, including:

- haemorrhage
- surgical mishap
- shock from severe pain and bleeding
- infection and failure of the wound to heal
- injury or trauma to adjoining areas, such as the urethra and anus
- possible transmission of HIV and other viruses
- death.

The long-term complications of FGM can include:

- scarring and hardening of the vaginal tissue, causing constant pain around the genital area
- incontinence and difficulty urinating and passing menstrual blood
- decrease or loss of sexual sensation
- painful intercourse
- difficult and painful childbirth
- infertility.

4. Recommendations on responding to domestic violence amongst African women

The response needed for victims of violence who seek help is a system providing support and assistance tailored towards the needs of the woman at any point of time. A continuum of services is needed, ranging from those that offer immediate safety from violence to practical advice and support to lead a life free from violence, including counselling.

Categories of African Women Experiencing Domestic Violence

Based on the information gathered through AkiDWA's research, there are three major categories of African women experiencing domestic violence in Ireland:

- (a) those who remain silent
- (b) those who seek out services
- (c) those who want to remain anonymous and conceal their identities by only making telephone calls to services and community elders.

(a) African Women Experiencing Domestic Violence who Remain Silent

Some African women reportedly suffer in silence due to a cultural belief that talking about domestic issues in public is like washing their dirty linen in public.

In order to identify women in this category and highlight services available to them, it is good practice to:

- let the community know of confidential services and contact addresses
- produce leaflets in languages often spoken by Africans, such as English, French, Kiswahili, Portuguese, Lingala and Arabic
- disseminate information to relevant organisations in the community; some information can be delivered to individual households within a catchment area, although some discretion may be necessary, so as not to put women in danger of their partners intercepting the information at home
- be strategic and use social events to deliver a clear, strong message on the unacceptability of domestic violence to all members of the community, male and female alike
- recognise that isolation is the biggest barrier to seeking help; there is a need to empower women to break that barrier and encourage them to seek help
- realise that, while social groups can be stepping-stones for some women, others suffering domestic violence might still be excluded; therefore, there is a need to put social networks and information into places where women are permitted by their spouses to go, for example, school drop-in centres, churches and GPs' surgeries

- ensure that social activities target both men and women, and find a strategy to inject domestic violence issues into broader discussions of violence
- discourage women to speak about problems in front of their partners, as this can place them in a dangerous position; because of this risk, they might be reluctant to reveal information in such a setting
- encourage men to address domestic violence with other men, for example, pastors and church leaders
- hold domestic violence seminars targeting both men and women, and involve the whole family; this is essential because potential key informants can highlight women who need help and information.

Key informants of a domestic violence situation can be, amongst others, the following:

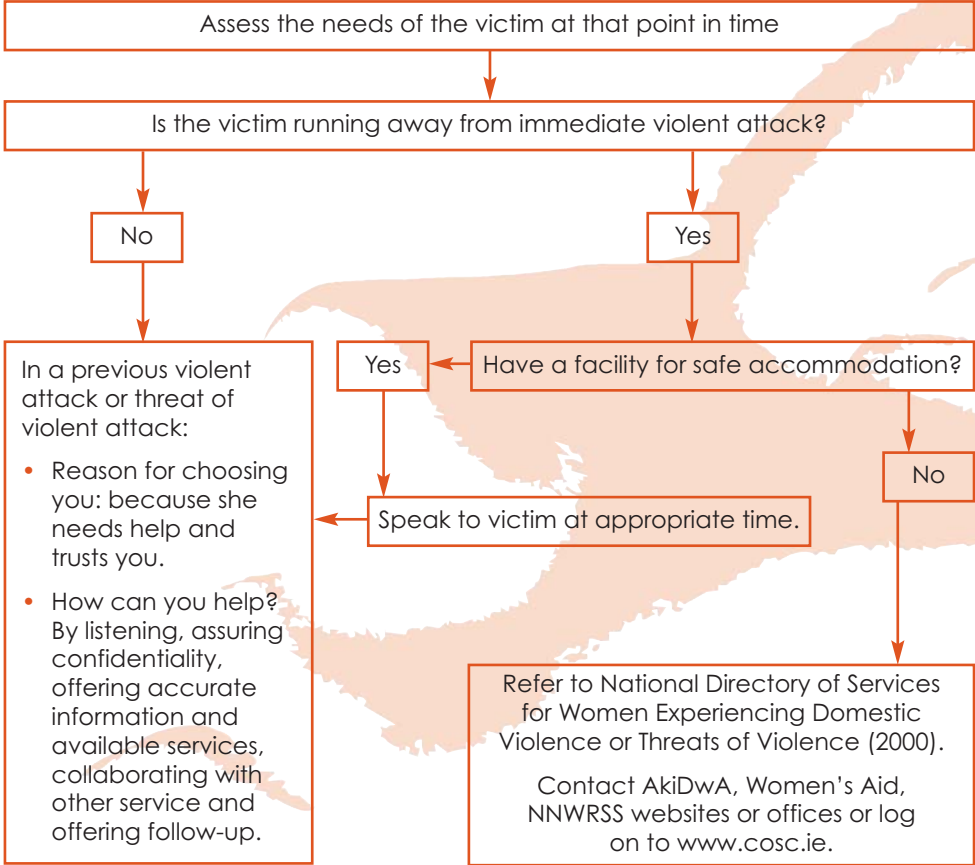
- grown-up children within household
- neighbours
- doctors and medical personnel
- social workers
- an Garda Síochána
- friends.

(b) African Women Experiencing Domestic Violence who Break through Barriers and Seek Services

From an African cultural point of view, it was reported that choosing to disclose a violent situation to you, the service provider, means that the woman has already gone through much of the traumatic effects that come with violence. Thus, she may:

- be confused and unable to decide on best way forward
- have decided to break the silence because she cannot take it any more or accumulate any more stress or pain
- want to continue with the relationship for the sake of her dignity and the safety of her children
- want to leave the relationship but fears to do so, as she is financially, legally (i.e. residentially), or emotionally dependent on her partner
- come to you to seek a solution to the problem.

You may not make a decision for the woman, but there are other ways to help (refer to the following diagram).



(c) African Women Experiencing Domestic Violence who Attempt to Hide their Identities

It was reported that some women would prefer contacting you by phone, due to the stigma attached to reporting a domestic problem in person. Sometimes women hide because of shame and guilt. The way you approach an African woman accessing your service for the first time will determine if she accesses it again. It may also determine if women from her community access your service, too.

It is good practice to:

- respect her confidentiality
- give accurate information
- respect her culture and beliefs
- respect any decisions she makes regarding legal action
- listen to her
- be patient
- give telephone follow-up.

In this way, you show that you care and you accept and understand her situation.

Making Services Culturally Appropriate for African Women

The African women consulted indicated that, on most occasions, they would be more likely to access a service that employed Africans.

It is good practice for the service providers to:

- ensure job descriptions, contracts and job advertisements are culturally appropriate and developed in consultation with African women's organisations in order to encourage employee diversity
- recognise and value particular relevant skills of African women within GBV services
- advertise positions in media, such as Activelink's website, Metro Eireann, The African Voice and other ethnic newspapers, and in African-based organisations
- ensure African women are represented in the recruitment selection panel process.

It must be emphasised that African women are much more likely to apply for positions when the organisation has a reputation of being culturally aware and supportive of the African community. This may call for a review of service policies.

Staff Training

As a matter of policy, it is good practice to review and provide comprehensive training for both African and non-African staff members in delivering services on domestic violence and on cross-cultural and indigenous African issues. This is an essential component in overcoming the barriers of seeking support, which African women repeatedly identified in our research.

An understanding of an African culture includes issues such as:

- the meaning of culturally appropriate services
- a knowledge of country-of-origin backgrounds, such as FGM or rape during war
- family, kinship and community.

It is good practice to consult the African women in your community and relevant organisations to consider ways of best meeting the needs of those experiencing or escaping domestic violence.

Improving Accessibility of Domestic Violence Services to African Women

Improved access begins from a change in policy and practices, and from having a sincere attitude of acceptance to making African women feel welcome and supported.

Therefore, it is necessary to:

- provide information to African women and communities about domestic violence, rights and how to access services
- let African women know of the information and services you offer
- ensure information is accurate and up to date
- ask African women in local community and African organisations to speak at community meetings; this gives them opportunity to get to know influential elders within their community
- ensure service providers acknowledge the ways in which inadequate services can contribute to increased levels of domestic violence and work on improving them
- keep updated contacts of local community African women leaders and African-led organisations and networks and make available to all staff members.

Tips for Good Practice

- Provide a comprehensive range of services.
- Provide accurate information that is readily available.
- Adopt good practices and undertake specialised training in addressing the needs of marginalised women, with regard to policy and practice.
- Collaborate with other service providers.
- Recognise the need for appropriate response from judicial system.
- Be patient with clients.
- Observe strict confidentiality and provide safe places for provision of information that women can access.
- Develop an understanding of cultural diversity.
- Develop good listening skills.
- Approach women with a non-judgemental attitude.
- Be open and welcoming.
- Show empathy.

Useful contact details

AkiDwA

29 Gardiner Place
Dublin 1
Tel: 01 814 8582
Web: www.akidwa.ie

Cosc

The National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence
Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
2nd Floor, Montague Court
Montague Street
Dublin 2
Tel: 01 476 8680
Web: www.cosc.ie

National Network of Women's Refuges & Support Services (NNWRSS)

27 Church Street
Athlone
Co. Westmeath
Tel: 090 647 9078
Web: www.nnwrss.ie

Women's Aid

Everton House
47 Old Cabra Road
Dublin 7
Helpline: 1800 341 900
Tel: 01 868 4721
Web: www.womensaid.ie



29 Gardiner Place, Dublin 1
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