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ISSUES IN GOOD PRACTICE

Multicultural identity and working across cultures in responding to violence

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Practitioners communicate numerous concerns to us in relation to cross-cultural practice in working with women from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB¹) who have experienced violence. Of most concern are the confusions many practitioners hold in relation to being responsive to the issues of violence that women may be experiencing, and maintaining cultural sensitivity at the same time.

The seemingly overwhelming difference between our own and another culture may lead to 'professional paralysis' and feelings of cultural inadequacy in many practitioners, particularly in mainstream domestic violence services. Some may attempt to resolve this discomfort by refusing to take responsibility for the provision of services to women from NESB - apart from referring them to a multicultural and/or other specific agency. Others may provide a service but dismiss cultural discomfort and apply practice and understandings based on a western analysis alone.

It is important to understand that the very cultural discomfort we are trying to avoid holds the potential for our expanded awareness. Following its direction will not only enrich our own self-understanding but also will allow us to perceive others on a deeper level, where human communication and connection replaces cross-cultural fears.

The issue of us and them – challenging false separations

In giving some thought to the implicit messages of some cross-cultural confusion, it is clear that many of us are confused as to the nature of our own community and the nature of 'culture' itself.

As a multicultural community Australia has diverse cultures, backgrounds, languages, spiritual beliefs, values and world views. It is critical to recognise that those differences of opinion, practices and perspectives on life are essential in building our social unity.

The premise of Australian multiculturalism is in acknowledgement that every individual contributes to the wholeness of our community. Consequently each individual has the right to be heard and have his/her opinion respected, considered and included in all community endeavours.

When we assert that we work with our community and yet we continue to consider elements of the Australian community as outside of our ability to engage, two implications are evident. Either we are not ready to recognise ourselves or 'others' as belonging to this diversity, or we are not able to work with what is humane. Of course, most Australian community workers would reject such an insinuation; however it is not the English language but our everyday actions that need to communicate our intention to work with diversity and our courage to engage.

The flip-side of this contradiction is that it makes us feel inadequate whenever we are faced with the same aspects of diversity again. Moreover, the people whom we secretly 'disown' from the community sense this separation and then add to the distance by maintaining close connection only with those from similar culture. Often NESB women comment to Immigrant Women's Support Service (IWSS) on their sense of isolation, which arises when they are supported by workers who never ask directly about the meaning of a woman's culture and/or experience, while alluding to their own feelings of inadequacy and cross-cultural fear. It is no coincidence that whenever IWSS consults with new communities as to their needs during settlement, it is the need for acceptance above all that is expressed over and over again.

Disturbingly, this imaginary division between 'us' and 'them' can, and frequently has, become a very fertile ground for those in our community who seek power and control over others. At IWSS, we see too often the consequences of induced isolation and the strength that the sense of community belonging brings. Therefore, we need to be even more vigilant in responding to the voices of those who profess that it is within their cultural heritage to deny or abuse other people's human rights. In working with domestic violence, this is particularly vital.

Violence and culture – challenging cultural relativism

It appears that we are comfortable to name violence when it comes to our own culture but shrink from naming it when it is perpetrated by and to those whom we identify as 'other'. This act alone suggests that still on some level we are inclined to believe that there are people for whom the ability to recognise violence and understanding of human rights do not apply.

We often hear practitioners refer to women from NESB in the following ways: "they are so different"; "their culture is more violent and oppressive"; or "they do not recognise the law in Australia". Whilst we acknowledge the many differences that exist between cultures, we also must acknowledge that violence against women is recognised by all cultures.

It is crucial to understand clearly the nature of violence and to recognise it clearly without depending on identifying its cultural form or shape. The forms that violence takes are as diverse as humanity itself and though violence might appear in many different forms, some not easily perceived, its function is always the same. It does not always matter as much how things were done to the one who has experienced violence but it always matters what consequences it has had and what toll it takes.

Violence does not hold its identity in culture. However, culture might be incorporated or employed in justification, understanding and responding to violence. It is this continuous justification that shifts the focus away from the toll violence takes and makes some types of violence invisible and socially/culturally sanctioned or accepted. It is valuable if workers in mainstream services become aware of this and of the impact it has on their work with women and children who bear the consequences of violence.

Many forms of violence in our community are considered normal and culturally appropriate. Cultural appropriateness for women can embrace working 24 hours a day, adopting masculine, often aggressive, ways, and being objectified, sexually. It is 'normal' for us to claim we have 'freedom' of choice while the options of choice are non-existent or scarce. It is only when looking through a lens different from our own cultural perspective that we may get the clarity needed to identify violence in its many forms. Embracing diversity is certainly one way of increasing our perceptivity.

Fear of engagement with diversity – challenging ourselves professionally

To respond to the needs of our diverse community we must embrace its diversity and recognise it as our own. This recognition alone can lend us the thirst for knowing the true meaning of multiculturalism and of our own role within the community we wish to serve. There are no shortcuts when it comes to working with another human being. Either we work on the common level that touches us all, or we are not truly communicating.

Cross-cultural practice does not depend on emphasising differences. The knowledge and adherence to the infinite diversity of cultural practices and world views are important tools but do not constitute the essence of the practice itself. Cross-cultural practice acknowledges the diversity as an inherent characteristic of our community and seeks to answer to its community needs on a platform that is respectful to the whole of humanity and therefore embraces all cultures. This respect includes engaging with women's need for safety and understanding and not avoiding this by off-loading through referrals to specialist NESB community organisations.

The essence of integrating our own diversity is not about allowing some outside culture into our united system but it is about introspection and the courage to look deeply into our own identity where the old preconceptions, stereotypes and cognitive constructs built on the fear of difference still have their place.

Of course, such an approach has its own requirements and can only be maintained by continuous self-reflection and refinement of our own individual cultural views. However much discomfort as we might meet, this path will lead the way towards honouring and supporting the real application of multiculturalism in Australia.

About the Immigrant Women's Support Service

IWSS is the only service of its kind in Queensland that provides culturally and linguistically sensitive services for women from NESB and their children who are victims of domestic and / or sexual violence. The service provides information and referral, crisis support and counselling, advocacy, court support and ongoing practical and emotional support.