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*“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”*

## **TOWARD THE EMPOWERMENT OF LATINA WOMEN: LIVING WITH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

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### Introduction

In this workshop I will share information about domestic violence drawn from two sources: social work literature and the life experience of two Mexican women. As part of the requirements for the MSW from Dominican University, I chose to do a research project. My interest in the Mexican immigrant woman and the Mexican population led me to investigate what keeps women going and growing while living in a situation of domestic violence. This talk is based on this research project.

To pull this together in the brief time we have I will begin with an understanding and definition of domestic violence and the effect it has on the family. Next I will focus on cultural values common in the variety of Latino cultures we encounter in the United States and the impact of immigration. I will comment on a social workers understanding of spirituality.

Finally, I will introduce you to two heroic women who agreed to share their story with me and opened their history, hopes, hurts and humiliations so I could do my research project. Because of my experience working with Mexicans I expected to detect religious practices in their

lives. However, I found spirituality as a continuous thread woven throughout all their experiences, both positive and negative that helped them make sense of it all. As social workers we have the opportunity to recognize in a person's life the strength of their spirituality and consciously encourage them to draw on its energy to construct meaning.

### General Information About Domestic Violence

Because violence is deeply embedded in the fabric of daily life it often is ignored, camouflaged or not recognized as violence. Society admits to certain traditions and beliefs about violence and about gender, race, class and culture/ethnicity that have endured through the centuries. Also there is a meaningful overlay of cultural or religious beliefs and family of origin practices to acknowledge and understand. Violence repeatedly occurs within households, between intimate partners and crosses boundaries of race, class, culture and gender. For some, violence is endured as a way of life or survival and is often labeled domestic as if to say, part of the household. Gender violence is a heinous crime against society, the family and human beings.

Gender violence has become a worldwide epidemic. Domestic violence is an abuse of human rights and the epitome of society's structural discrimination against women. There is a huge amount of literature and information available about domestic violence in general. Most research has been based on victims who seek services in shelters. There is not much written about the Mexican immigrant population effected by domestic violence and even less about Mexican women who develop coping strategies and remain in the situation.

### *Statistics*

In 1995 research found that one out of every six women were victims of violence (Gelles, 1997). The Bureau of Justice estimated that in 2003, 1,676,760 women were victims of domestic violence, a number representing only 49% of all crimes committed. In other words, 51% or

1,745,199 incidents of domestic violence were not reported. *End Abuse* statistics estimated that between 960,000 and 3 million incidents occurred in 2003 (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2003). Despite its characteristic secrecy, domestic violence is the social problem at the top of the priority list of 92% of the women living in America because it affects so many women, so many families and in turn all members of society.

### *Definition*

There are numerous definitions for domestic violence. A widely accepted definition of domestic violence is gender-based behavior that is specifically intentional physical or non-physical violence by an intimate male partner on a woman. It can be physical, emotional, sexual, and economic and is summarized as exerting power and control over another person.

### *Forms of Domestic Violence - expression of power and control*

- Physical abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Isolation

### Social Work and Spirituality

Social work values require that interventions be infused with cultural sensitivity, respect and care. Interventions must promote the survivor's self-determination, enhance her capacity, provide her with options, enable her to recognize her strengths, help her draw on a support system and offer her accompaniment. Developing an understanding of the role of spirituality in the life of a survivor of domestic violence is helpful to social work practice and has implications for social work research and education.

As Christian social workers we are called to understand and be in touch with our own spirituality in order to appreciate and relate to the spiritual values and experiences expressed by another. My definition of spirituality revolves around the words relationship and connectedness.

David Hodge (2001) postulates that spirituality has to do with fostering a sense of meaning, purpose and mission in life through a relationship with God or a Supreme Being relationship with God or whatever is held to be the Ultimate that fosters a sense of meaning, purpose and mission in life.

I believe that spirituality helps a person construct meaning out of seeming chaos and the randomness of life. It is a force that strengthens one's relatedness to oneself, to other people (including service) and to sources of meaning beyond self-interest -- God. This connectedness produces joy and vitality that sustains the capacity to care for others in unselfish ways. The research of Ellison and Anderson (2001) found that active participation in formal religion is a protective and preventive factor, which reduces rates and levels of partner violence

#### Spirituality, Religion and Domestic Violence

Religious beliefs can empower a battered woman or push her more deeply into a well of guilt, self-effacement and depression. Her response to the notion presented by the Christian gospels to "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39) or "Wives, be submissive to your husbands" (Colossians 3:18) may be motivated by guilt, hopelessness or defeat. The same texts may motivate a conscious decision to forge a new path grounded in strength and truth. Religion can provide spiritual comfort for one person or cause another to feel guilty. The Catholic bishops have published several documents on the theme of domestic violence. In their 2002 document they state: "We state clearly and strongly that violence against women, inside or outside the home, is never justified" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002, p.1). It mandates education of the clergy and encourages pastoral instruction on the cycle of violence in homilies. Often women living in violent relationships find a sympathetic listener in the clergy person they approach, but not always a knowledgeable one.

An assumption brought to this research is that spirituality is a source of resilience for battered Mexican women. It facilitates growth and unleashes in her the ability to clarify the meaning of her life and strengthens the woman's ability to persevere even in the presence of daunting obstacles. An awareness of the connections between her life, religious beliefs, and cultural traditions may enhance sense her hope and vision of a future latent with possibilities. Therefore, identifying and nurturing the faith and spirituality of an abused Mexican woman is empowering for her. It encourages her to achieve ownership of her life, enhances her psychological health, and provides her with a sense of hope for the future and a better life for her children. Through her faith, she finds satisfaction, meaning and purpose in raising her children well.

#### Mexican Cultural Values

An undocumented Mexican woman is likely to carry in her memory and spirit, hidden scars that frequently are the result of a hard life of poverty, a low level of education, and a limited experience of the larger world. She also carries deep within herself the marvel of her culture and the values it produces: strong family ties and a sense of connectedness with family and friends still in Mexico; a profound sense of spirituality and affiliation with the Catholic Church; an appreciation of life in all its forms - the earth, water, animals, plants; a sense of respect for other persons with which she is accustomed to extend hospitality special culinary arts and tastes common to her region of origin (Dahm, 2004). She possesses resiliency and the ability to imagine and reach out for a better life. This is demonstrated in her willingness to risk her life while crossing the border and in her hope for the future and a relationship with her partner if he is with her, or waiting for her in the United States. One can also imagine the trauma and fear connected with leaving home, traveling into the unknown and making a fresh start in a new and strange country.

Descriptions of Mexican culture consistently view the Mexican male as *machista* and that *machismo* is culturally acceptable and expected in male-female relationships. Family values are passed on from generation to generation. The experience of being family, gender roles and parent-child relationships are primarily learned through lived experience. For example, when a couple decides to cross the boarder illegally, they are in jeopardy of being caught, harmed, separated or deported. The man's role is to protect his partner who out of necessity is very dependent on him. Even when they cross the boarder safely, the life they have chosen is far from secure and stable. Barriers of unemployment, poverty, language, lack of housing and the insecurity of being undocumented contributes to an anxious and stressful atmosphere in which to live.

#### *Impact of Immigration*

There are other risks. For example, the woman may be joining her husband who has already established himself in the States and perhaps has a job and more security than if he had arrived with her. This creates a different context in which the couple takes up their life together. The Mexican woman in either case is on the short-end of the deal and is vulnerable to be taken advantage of by any man whose family experience was marked by a strong, powerful father figure and a docile, dependant and hard-working mother Besides her vulnerability set up by the barriers already mentioned she is vulnerable to be trapped in the dynamic of the cycle of domestic violence.

#### Characteristics of the victim

The battered Mexican woman experiences a combination of the following:

- low self esteem, confusion about gender roles and what is acceptable behavior
- traditionalist family values, gender roles/stereotypes and the acceptance of

- responsibility for the batterers' actions
- a sense of guilt and denial of feelings of anger and terror toward the partner
- severe stress reactions born out in psychophysical reactions or try to use sex as a way to develop intimacy and understanding in the relationship
- a sense of isolation and being alone and unique because her partner exerts his power to keep her from leaving the house, talking to other people
- no awareness of options
- keeping the terrible experience secret

#### Why Remain?

There is not a lot of research focused on Mexican women who stay in an abusive relationship. Even asking a battered woman why she is still living with a partner who abuses and batters her can be interpreted as a judgment on her for not leaving and she may feel that if she stays she will be labeled a moral failure. Some professions (medical, religious, social service personnel) unilaterally advocate that battered women should leave their husbands. When the women don't leave their abuser, some agencies consider them neglectful and to be placing their children at risk of physical/psychological harm.

Realistically, a battered immigrant woman may have no place to go and may have no alternative except to stay with the batterer. Women of color (Latino, African American, Asian) are more likely to stay in abusive relationships for cultural, social or economic reasons.

Cultural values that may influence a Mexican woman to stay in an abusive relationship are:

- the value of community over individualism
- family honor and pride
- the cultural acceptance of male domination encourages the battered woman *aguantar*

- (put up with it, endure it) the relationship.
- economic dependence on the abuser
  - her immigration status
  - the limited availability of bi-lingual social services and law enforcement and court services
  - weak extended family relationships,
  - lack of language skills, education and job training
  - a belief that it is better for the children if they have both parents together
  - fear that the abuser will retaliate and make good on his threats usually to harm the children or even commit suicide
  - feelings of gratitude toward her abuser for bringing her to this country and for supporting her and the children and she has no other place to go.

### Interviews

This exploratory study involved two Mexican women who responded to an invitation I placed at St. Pius V counseling center. My objective was to interview Mexican immigrant women who were mothers, undocumented, living in the U.S. for 15 years or less, living in an abusive situation and who are participating in domestic violence counseling and support groups at St. Pius. Several women initially expressed interest but two were able to come for three interviews. The interviews were conducted in the Spanish language.

### Presentation of the study participants

**Josefina**, a 40-year-old Mexican woman, currently lives in Chicago with her husband and six children (ages 20, 18, 17, 14, 11 & 9). She was born in Guerrero, Mexico, the third of eight children. The family lived in a rural area on a parcel of land called a *ranchito* (ranch). As a child,

(the second oldest daughter) she worked hard in the family's large garden and farm and assumed responsibility for the care of her younger siblings.

Josefina remembered her father as a compassionate and caring man. Josefina remembers her mother as a strong woman but an unfair and cold mother. At the age of 16, Josefina went to live with her maternal aunt/godmother in Cuernavaca. Her older sister had been living there for two years, helping her aunt. Josefina helped care for her aunt's children. In her spare time she worked other jobs. She also continued her education and prepared to receive her first Holy Communion.

Josefina suffered from a poor relationship with her mother. She always felt that her mother did not like her or trust her. Josefina decided that when she became a parent she would be more sensitive and nurturing with her children. She wanted an environment for them that demonstrated a mutually confident relationship.

Josefina was 20 years old when she met her husband, Arturo, and decided that her life would be better if she married him. She had visions of working, having money to buy what she needed and the mutual support of being married to a man who loved her. During their courtship, Josefina was aware that Arturo drank socially. Once he was also physically violent toward her. She stood up to him and threatened to leave if he ever hit her again.

Josefina was three months pregnant when they decided to move to the United States. Arturo crossed the boarder safely, but Josefina was caught and deported. Later she successfully crossed and joined Arturo. In the United States, Arturo's drinking gradually increased and he became verbally abusive. The abuse toward Josefina escalated daily and he was physically abusive with the children. Josefina never gave up and prayed that God would help her.

Josefina wanted to be supportive of Arturo and persistently encouraged him to stop drinking and join a support group. He refused. In order to keep her children clothed, fed and housed,

Josefina worked long hours at temporary, low paying jobs in fast food restaurants and cleaned houses

Finally, seven years after entering the U.S., Josefina found help for herself at the parish where she attended Mass on Sunday. She heard about the parish counseling program and decided to participate in a domestic violence support group. Josefina shared her story and found that she was taken seriously. Slowly she recognized that she could not make Arturo change. She said that she felt freer knowing this and focused on herself and her children.

**Irene** is 35 years old and is the mother of five children. She has four sons ages 12,11,10 and 8, and a daughter age 3. She was born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States about ten years ago. Irene cleans homes and relies on an inexpensive day-care to for her daughter. She works long hours. As a result, she experiences depression and tension. Her day begins at 4:30 am when she prepares breakfast for the children. She also prepares dinner before she leaves for work at 6 am.

Irene's childhood was difficult. The family lived on a ranch in Michoacán, México. She was the fifth of 14 children. Irene remembers her mother as a very strong willed woman without, a sense of how to emotionally nurture a family. The mother used physical beatings to discipline the children. Irene was not exempt from the beatings. Irene's father, a kind and understanding man, was a farmer who raised animals as well as crops. He didn't become angry when things went wrong and didn't drink.

When Irene was about seven years old she was sent to a border town to live with an American family. She helped with the younger children and took over various household chores. This family's willingness to send Irene to school and later to sponsor her legal immigration to the United States met with Irene's mother refusal to cooperate. Irene was happy living with this

family and grateful that she had a warm place to sleep in a corner on the kitchen floor. When she went home during each summer she brought clothes for her younger siblings and gave the money she earned to her mother.

Irene met José, her future husband, in Aguascalientes, México. Irene knew his family and thought well of them. She got along with José but admitted that she really didn't love him. Because she respected his family and believed he was a good person she agreed to marry him. She thought that anything would be better than living in poverty. Shortly after they were married José went to the United States and promised to send for her.

When Irene joined José she embarked on a journey of domestic violence. At first she did not recognize the violence as such. Because the marriage of Irene's parents was congenial and peaceful, she was confused and disillusioned by the violent and disrespectful behavior of Jose. She said, "I wasn't allowed to leave the house, he didn't give me money, he would come home drunk at any time in the early morning and I had to get up to take care of him." That day she took the children to eat and to church, we went to Mass. She told me that she felt at peace and tranquil. Sometimes when he was out of the house, and didn't return all night, Irene would go and sit on the church steps. There she felt very close to God.

When asked about how the counseling or support groups helped her, she replied that during their first years of marriage she was very afraid to express her feelings to her husband. When he screamed at her she hung her head and took it. She cried a lot in secret but not in front of him. Since Irene has been going regularly for counseling she feels better about herself and recognizes her own worth. Her self-esteem seems to be stronger. Irene commented, "I have learned very much through the counseling and from the women in the support group. As I talk now I'm making comparisons of my life before and what I know and am living now. Through the

counseling I learned how I could get an order of protection and that gave me courage. When I did get the order of protection, my husband could live in the house, but couldn't come home drunk or be violent. That was a relief for me. I learned how to help myself and how to look for help."

Irene feels that her inner strength increased through the counseling she received at St. Pius. She recognized that she had a great deal of inner strength before, but it seemed to weaken after she married and came to the United States. At one point she said, "my greatest help and strength is God because I know I am not doing everything alone. I believe that God is always with me. I talk to God like a person and this is the attitude I try to give my children

#### Summary of the Analysis of the Data

- Irene and Josefina came from dysfunctional families.
- Both women had a vision of what a good mother should be.
- They had secret/unspoken hopes and dreams for their life after marriage when their own husbands would improve the quality of their lives.
- The women were accustomed to hard work.
- They expected that their husbands would provide them with a home, children, and an opportunity to experience the happiness they were deprived of as members of their families of origin.
- Neither of the women married the first man to enter their lives.
- Neither was prepared for marriage beyond their experiences as members of their own families or as members of the families they worked for in childhood or adolescence.
- Both women married men who were physically, emotionally and sexually abusive to them and who were heavy drinkers of alcohol.

- Both were cut off from their families of origin emotionally and geographically and prime candidates for a lifetime of abuse.
- Both women experienced confusion over their marital situations.
- Both women talked about how hard they tried to do “things right.”
- Both women felt powerless to change their lives and felt “good for nothing” except to have babies.
- Both women spoke of a sense of being accompanied by God.
- Both women availed themselves of the counseling offered at the parish and became involved in the faith community through participation and service.
- Both women view differently the nightmares and insecurities they have experienced in their difficult lives. They are no longer fixated in the role of victim as women without power.

Acknowledging the problem of domestic violence has been a laborious process. In response to how these women survived, both women stated that it was their faith in God that helped them through their struggle to survive emotionally and gave them the courage to stay with their husbands. Prayer and belonging to a faith community took an irreplaceable role in their lives as they struggled name to the problem they were experiencing, learn how to deal with it and grow as persons.

Josefina and Irene realized that they were able to nurture their children and provide them with important parental guidance, without the help of their husbands. They became aware that they were strong women, alone in a marriage. Their self-esteem increased as they dared to enter the workplace to achieve a small degree of economic independence. With an enhanced sense of

power and self worth they found they could more easily recognize their husband's manipulation and behavior patterns. They learned to trust their own judgment.

### Conclusion

Josefina and Irene help to identify the realities of immigrant women living in abusive relationships. Their story provides a lens through which to observe the strategies and strengths that help immigrant Mexican women persevere in abusive relationships. It illuminates how counseling, through parish-based services, strengthens women and provides them with a window of hope and opportunities for change. Those strategies and strengths include the ability to live through their faith in God, reinterpret cultural values learned in their family of origin, share their experiences of abuse with other women, and seek help outside the family. It offers them the opportunity to learn to trust in a pro-active manner. A strength that emerged was the knowledge that God accompanies them everywhere and will show them the way for themselves and their children. Josefina and Irene learned to accept help, receive joy in serving others, and teaching their children Mexican traditions and customs. They also drew strength and joy from the knowledge that they were good enough mothers to nurture and raise their children alone, without the responsible involvement of their husbands.

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