

The Impact of COVID-19 on Immigrant Survivors of Gender-Based Violence

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As daily activities ground to a halt in the United States to slow the spread of COVID-19, Americans have been confronted with a range of practical, financial, emotional, and mental health impacts. For immigrant survivors of gender-based violence, many of whom are living with the effects of trauma or coping with ongoing abuse, this is an especially difficult time.

LOSS OF EMPLOYMENT

Immigrants are suffering from loss of employment like many other Americans. Not only are businesses laying off employees, but there is a dramatic reduction in demand for those who provide services in homes, such as childcare or house cleaning. For those whose employers could continue to employ them, it may be impossible to go to work because of children now out of school.

Without an income, survivors of violence become all the more dependent on abusive partners to provide shelter, food, and access to health care. The power dynamics of abuse are therefore exacerbated: if an abuser held power over his victim before, the current situation can be exploited to increase his power. Threats to kick a victim out of the home, deny access to health care, or restrict financial resources will be much more potent if the victim has no access to work. For immigrant survivors who struggle to find work without employment documents, these dynamics are especially harmful.

LACK OF ACCESS TO HEALTH INSURANCE AND OTHER PUBLIC BENEFITS

Immigrants who are undocumented – even many who qualify for relief and have applications pending – are not eligible to enroll in Medicare or Medicaid, or to purchase insurance through the Affordable Care Act. They are also not eligible for other forms of public relief, such as unemployment benefits. The inability to access supportive benefits, especially after the loss of employment, leaves immigrant survivors at an increased risk for homelessness and hunger, and makes obtaining gloves, sanitizers, soap, and other health-critical goods impossible.

Impact in Focus

Almost all the immigrant survivors we work with in our Greater DC office are employed in the service industry, and many are facing the threat of unemployment. For one client, her paperwork was just processed to bring her children to the U.S. after being separated for 14 years. The children do not have work permits yet, and with immigration offices closing, we have no idea when they will be able to get them. Their entire income for a family of five is then dependent on the client, whose income could disappear any day because of her employment in the service industry.

INCREASE IN VIOLENCE IN THE HOME

Under circumstances of unusual stress, violence in homes tends to increase. In war-stricken areas, for example, inability to cope with stress, anxiety, fear, and anger have been shown to lead to increased violence against women. This can be true during the aftermath of a natural disaster, and also during a health crisis such as a pandemic.

As unemployment rises, societal anxiety and stress increase, and resources become scarce, those living with abusers may face increased threats and violence. Many victims work extremely hard to care for their abusers emotionally and walk on eggshells in order to avoid triggering a violent episode. That emotional work increases dramatically when abusers are home, unemployed, and coping with stress. Alcohol abuse can worsen, and weapons are viewed as necessary in case of emergencies. In these scenarios, victims are much more likely to suffer escalations in violence that can be life-threatening.

ISOLATION

A well-known tactic of abuse is isolation—keeping a victim from being able to connect with others who have her best interest in mind. Abusers may be overt in their use of isolation, such as taking away a cell phone, restricting time away from the home, or cutting off family members. Often abusers are more subtle, however, and demonstrate their dislike for certain family members or friends, become highly inquisitive, or insist on providing for her so she does not have to work. This can put a victim in the position of choosing between cutting off her support network and coping with her abuser’s outbursts.

In the current state of emergency, isolation is a requirement. This is difficult practically and emotionally for most people, but for victims of abuse, including immigrants, it increases the likelihood of violence and can even be life-threatening. Victims are being told to stay home with their abusers, including partners, parents, stepparents, and extended family. Now, abusers know their victims are almost completely cut off from friends and family. There is little likelihood that a concerned individual – such as a teacher or school counselor – will be able to provide support or notice signs of abuse or escalation. Survivors are less likely to meet and support one another at work, playgrounds, hair salons, grocery stores, or restaurants. For immigrant survivors of violence, who may live far from extended family and rely on social interactions in public spaces for support and help, isolation can be extremely dangerous.

INABILITY TO ESCAPE A VIOLENT SITUATION

During this period of social distancing, or sheltering in homes, victims are less able to break free from violence. Victims sometimes take weeks or months to plan their departure, packing things, slowly moving essentials to friends’ homes, or speaking with case workers and counselors to execute their plan to leave. With an abuser in the home around the clock, the opportunities to organize a departure or meet with helping professionals are all-but eliminated. This compounds immigrants’ fears of calling 911 for assistance in violent situations, which have increased since the 2016 presidential election and numerous restrictionist policies put in place by this administration.

Impact in Focus

Before the current health crisis, our team in the San Francisco Bay Area had been meeting with an immigrant who is applying for immigration status but is currently living with her abuser. Given social distancing measures, we continue to have phone meetings with her to offer critical support. If her abuser is laid off or begins working from home, this lifeline may be cut off. Remote meetings with a therapist to cope with symptoms of severe trauma would also be cut off. Meanwhile, we do not know when her immigration hearing might take place with court closures and delays, meaning she could remain undocumented indefinitely. She is just one of thousands facing these challenges.

SHELTER INSTABILITY, FEAR OF DISEASE

Domestic violence shelters are often the only option for immigrants fleeing abuse. Given the possibilities of lack of employment and social distancing, a victim living with violence may have nowhere to turn now but a shelter if she must escape. At the same time, group living situations are dangerous during a pandemic, and

victims may be wary of exposing themselves to the virus by living in close quarters in a shelter. Furthermore, for survivors who are coping with the physical and emotional impacts of trauma, immune resistance to viruses can be compromised. With these factors in mind, immigrant victims may be less likely to see shelter as an option, and therefore may be forced to stay in their homes with their abusers.

LACK OF SERVICES

While some nonprofits are continuing to provide services such as case management, counseling, food distribution, and legal representation to clients, not all are able to do so as they avoid the spread of the virus. In these times of social distancing, nonprofits that are still operating are grappling with new protocols on how to best provide support and maintain confidentiality in remote work settings.

Even if doors are open, immigrant survivors may not feel comfortable approaching offices for assistance due to health reasons. With the lack of availability of nonprofit and government agency support and benefits, survivors of violence are all the more isolated and unable to seek assistance as they consider leaving violent situations.

Impact in Focus

In our Houston office, the team is working as nimbly as possible to respond to the local needs there during this public health crisis. Many of our clients can work with us over the phone, and we are putting protocols in place to work with clients in-person if the case or situation mandates it. We are tracking the availability of community health clinics, food distribution, and domestic housing for our clients. We are engaging in coalition action to educate the county and city governments on the barriers that immigrant survivors face in these unprecedented times, as well as making policy suggestions on how officials can respond to the needs of immigrant survivors.

HALTED IMMIGRATION ADJUDICATIONS

Immigrant survivors of violence are eligible for certain forms of immigration status that help them end reliance on others – including their abusers. With immigration adjudications grinding to a halt, an already extreme backlog of cases will now grow exponentially. Immigrant survivors in the backlogs may not be able to access education, work permits, health care, housing subsidies, food stamps, or other public benefits that could create opportunities for freedom from violence. This strengthens the grip abusers have on their immigrant victims and makes it much harder for immigrant survivors to get the help they and their children need to break free from violence.

CONTINUED ICE OPERATIONS

The threat of ICE arrests will especially keep immigrant survivors in the shadows. Before the current public health crisis, there already existed a growing climate of fear, in which threats of deportation and policy changes make survivors afraid to contact the police for help or pursue legal action against their abusers. During a pandemic, survivors may be even more fearful to seek medical attention at large or related to the virus, making all communities less safe.

CONDITIONS OF DETENTION

Thousands of immigrants are currently being held in detention centers, which are mass incarceration sites with substandard conditions and poor health care access. These detention centers have always been mentally and physically harmful to the health of individual detainees, with especially harmful impacts on survivors of torture, sexual assault, domestic violence, and other trauma. During a pandemic, these

detention centers become especially dangerous for immigrants who are exposed to the virus from the guards, workers, and staff of the facilities, including for-profit prison company workers and government agents.

BORDER CLOSING

A predictable result of the declaration of a national emergency and public health crisis is the closing of U.S. borders. This leads to families traveling to be together being forced to remain apart, refugees who need protection being left out in the cold, and many families being left in Mexico to struggle in unsafe and unhealthy conditions such as tent cities and makeshift camps. Others may have no choice but to return to their homes to face persecution, including domestic and sexual violence that could escalate in the face of the crisis. Closing our borders could amount to a death sentence for many refugees and survivors of violence who need protection and safety right now.

The health crisis precipitated by COVID-19 has pushed Americans into an unprecedented state of isolation, unemployment, and stress. Immigrant survivors of violence are especially at risk, as the impact of the pandemic places them in danger of increased levels of violence and a greater likelihood that they and their children will have to remain in abusive situations for longer. The overwhelming gaps in the immigration, health care, and public benefits systems work together to make immigrant survivors more vulnerable to abuse in the current environment.