

Survivor Voices Inclusion Project and MMP Workshop Brief Report

Migrant Mothers Project, University of Toronto
October 7, 2012

On August, 29, 2012, the Survivor Voices Inclusion Project (from OAITH) partnered with the Migrant Mothers Project to co-sponsor a workshop for migrant women and violence against women service providers. The workshop included 22 women and was comprised of a mixture of survivors of violence, violence against women service providers, researchers and students from the University of Toronto. Spanish interpretation and childcare were provided.

Description of Partners

Survivor Voices Inclusions Project – SVIP is a two year funded project of OAITH (Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses), which aims to discover new ways to involve and engage survivors of violence in women's centres in Ontario. www.oaithsvip.com

Migrant Mothers Project – MMP is a three year funded participatory action research project led by Rupaleem Bhuyan at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. MMP examines the way women with precarious immigration status who are also survivors of violence access social services and find safety and belonging in Canada. www.migrantmothersproject.com

Objectives and Format

The SVIP and MMP organizers sought to hold a workshop that focussed on the challenges that women who have precarious immigration status face when seeking shelter or other support services related to domestic violence. The workshop aimed to provide survivors with precarious status and service providers working with immigrant women an opportunity to engage with and impact VAW resources that they access/ed.

Participants were asked to define their goals for the workshop:

- define/classify different types of abuse,
- learn where to access a variety of resources,
- learn from each other,
- look at strategies to support women accessing “the system”, ie. Shelters, courts, etc.
- learn more about MMP and SVIP and service providers can support each other in our work

The two workshop facilitators from OAITH then asked participants to come up with ways that they would like to be included in VAW organizations. A long list of ideas were generated, from

which participants were asked to select the top five topics to explore in more detail in the workshop.

Suggested ways for survivors to be included

- survivors need to be able to make changes in government policies
- pay attention to all forms of violence, not just interpersonal
- public education about women's issues, violence, sexual assault and abuse
- give women without status access to ways/programs to learn English
- involve survivors when making changes in women's agencies
- have survivors create and lead VAW agencies
- create networks so that women without identification (or immigration status) can engage (with the VAW sector) in a safe way
- have survivors in positions of power and on boards and committees
- get more funding for survivor causes
- treat survivors as the experts of their experience and recognize different kinds of experience
- advocate for safe, quality spaces for women victims of violence
- consider using people in the community to reach out to older, Spanish-speaking women who may be experiencing violence
- be aware of and sensitive to mental health issues
- support survivors to become leaders and change policy
- advocate for survivors of all kinds
- create services for mothers and children together
- allow survivors to make changes in shelters and treat women there with dignity

The workshop was designed to focus on the perspectives of 'survivors' of violence. However, during the discussion it was unclear what represents survival. Migrant women in the workshop had a broad definition of what they had survived, including political violence and repression, displacement, immigration, resettlement, and socioeconomic inequality. Service providers were more familiar with talking about survivors with regard to interpersonal violence or domestic violence. Lively conversations took place which explored the definition of survivor to include these multiple forms.

Types of violence that migrant women in Canada face

- violence faced as political prisoners in their home countries
- being penalized for protesting; (e.g. one woman was taken to jail for participating in G20 protests in Toronto)
- disproportionately being affected by privatization and cuts to social services
- Recognition that indigenous people lack rights
- Isolation due to language barriers
- Lack of rights to continue education
- Underfunding women's agencies

- Violence experienced in shelters, revictimization when accessing services or seeking justice

There discussion included several examples about types of violence that occurs within women's shelters. While some women saw shelters as safe enough, depending on the particular shelter, women in the workshop shared that they had experienced or witnessed violence in shelters. Violence could occur between two residents, but also from a shelter worker directed at a resident. Women expressed that children in shelters faced violence within those shelters as well. It was also agreed that safe spaces need to be enforced as safe. Some women talked about the attitudes they encountered by workers in shelters, feeling like they were seen as asking for handouts. Another point of discussion was that many women, not just survivors of domestic violence, need housing and that this lack of housing access can be seen as another form of violence.

Following this portion of the workshop, survivors were asked to generate a list of barriers to survivor inclusion.

Barriers to inclusion, expressed by survivors

- safety concerns
- self-esteem, impact of violence
- fear of not being believed
- fear of repercussions
- community reactions
- "It's better in Canada, so you can't complain." Expectations, perceptions, deceptions.
- Policy language too complex, difficult to understand, inaccessible
 - Also true for legal language and other systems that survivors must access
- Lack of funding
- Lack of learned skills or experience
- Re-victimization by services
- Lack of opportunity to participate in policy-making

After this portion, the workshop was concluded for the evening. However, there are some final points that came up during discussions that are worth noting.

- There is a lack of common knowledge about VAW and a need for education
- Survivors have experience and knowledge
 - Life experience is as valuable as a degree
- Survivors experience multiple forms of violence, from interpersonal to structural
- There is a need for political action and involvement
- Participants had a lot of creative ideas about how to be included
- Survivors need support to put the ideas into practice, due to systemic barriers
- Survivors want inclusion and respect