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Where Do You Go When It's 40 Below? Domestic Violence Among Rural Alaska Native Women

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Although domestic violence is now recognized as a serious social problem in American society, little information is available on this problem in rural indigenous communities. This article, which is derived from in-depth interviews with 9 rural Alaska Native women who have been in abusive relationships, explores the environmental and cultural context of domestic violence in a remote Alaska Native community and the adaptations that such a context requires for the provision of culturally appropriate services.

Domestic violence is a leading cause of injury and death for women throughout the United States. Browne (cited in Stout & McPhail, 1998), who reviewed studies on the prevalence of domestic violence in 1993, found "that between 21% and 34% of women in the US will be battered by a male partner" (p. 213). Furthermore, Harlow (1991, cited in Stout & McPhail, 1998, p. 213) indicated that women are 6 times more likely than men to be victimized by their partners or ex-partners.

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Few studies have been undertaken on the context of, or response to, domestic violence in indigenous rural populations. As Norton and Manson (1997), who studied a domestic violence intervention program in a western, urban, American Indian health center, noted, "Despite the increasing recognition of domestic violence in American Indian communities, the literature on domestic violence interventions in this special population is almost non-existent" (p. 331). Similarly, there have been only a few studies on the occurrence of or interventions for domestic violence in rural areas.

Isolation; few, if any, law enforcement officials; the lack of transportation; and severe climate, as well as extended family networks, generational ties to the land, cultural history, and language barriers, are important considerations in understanding domestic violence in this context and in developing appropriate intervention strategies. In addition, the loss of traditional culture in indigenous populations in the United States because of historic and current state and national policies has had an impact on the domestic violence problem. In many indigenous American cultures, the alarming rise in social problems, such as alcoholism, suicide, child abuse, and domestic violence, has coincided with the loss of traditional culture, including the loss of land, language, customs, and traditional roles (Napoleon, 1991).

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN ALASKA NATIVE COMMUNITIES

The statistics on the incidence of domestic violence in Alaska, in general, and in the Alaska Native population, in particular, are disturbing. According to the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (1997),

> Women in Alaska face a much higher rate of homicide than women nationwide. Non-Native Alaskan women are killed 1.5 times more often (6.2 per 100,000) than the average U.S. woman (4.2 per 100,000) according to the University of Alaska

> Anchorage's Institute of Social and Economic Research. Native women are killed 4.5 times more often (19.1 per 100,000). Native Alaskans in small communities see more violent deaths than in other Alaskan communities, and at rates as much as six times the national average. In 1990, 50% of female murder victims in Alaska were killed by their husbands or boyfriends. In 1995, 80% of homicides in Alaska were domestic violence related. In 1996, 4 of the 16 domestic violence related deaths in Alaska were children. (p. 5)

In addition, Shinkwin (1983, p. 86) noted that domestic violence that resulted in severe injury or death was 4 to 10 times higher in the three rural Yupik villages in Alaska that she studied than in the general population.

Domestic violence is not commonly believed to have been a part of traditional Alaska Native culture. The saying "domestic violence is not traditional" is commonly heard in Alaskan villages, and Shinkwin (1983) concluded that "claims by older people in the region that domestic violence was exceedingly rare in their youth are easily believed" (p. 94). The onset of domestic violence and other social problems, such as suicide, alcohol abuse, and child abuse, in Alaska Native villages is believed to have occurred after Native communities in Alaska experienced massive social upheaval, including innumerable deaths from disease, the removal of children by child protection workers, forced assimilation through social institutions and boarding schools, and the introduction of alcohol and other drugs. An example of an event that resulted in social upheaval and cultural change was the "Great Death" (smallpox, measles, chicken pox, and flu-cold epidemics), which resulted in the deaths of 60% of the Alaska Native population in the early 1900s (Napoleon, 1991). In addition, from the 1930s to the 1970s, many Alaska Native children were sent to boarding schools in the lower 48 states or in urban areas in Alaska that were far from their home villages because of the policy of assimilation that was prevalent at that time. These schools were known for their harsh discipline and for forbidding students to speak their Native language or practice Native cultural activities. In a study of the boarding school experience of Alaska

Native children at three high schools in the early 1970s, Kleinfeld (1973) concluded,

> When I began this study three years ago, it was not my intention to show that boarding home programs and regional high schools were helping to destroy a generation of village children. . . . But as I saw what actually happened to the 1971-72 class of village students who entered representative high school programs, I was compelled to give up these initial views. In all of these programs, the majority of village children were developing serious social and emotional problems as a result of their high school experiences. Our follow-up study of graduates from these school programs suggested that in many cases, the school experience had left these students with a set of self defeating ways of dealing with the world. . . . The damage is done [to village children] primarily through a total system which separates children from their families at a critical developmental period and places them in unhealthy environments for growing up. (pp. vii-viii)

One 46-year-old woman who was interviewed for my study on domestic violence recounted the treatment of students in her village elementary school: "I spoke Inupiaq as a child. At school they wouldn't let kids speak Inupiaq. They slapped us. I don't know Inupiaq anymore." Another woman spoke of her boarding school experience this way:

> I went to boarding school when I was 14 in Oregon and stayed nine months. Then I was sent to boarding school in Nome. I stayed there two years. I was by myself. It was exciting at first, lonely later. There were Natives from the lower 48 there. . . . Before I left, I could speak Inupiaq, cut up seal and fish. When I came back, I didn't remember those things.

Also, prior to the enactment of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1971, many Alaska Native children were removed from their families and villages by child protection workers and placed in foster homes or adoptive homes with non-Native families in Alaska or in the lower 48 states. Most of these children were lost to their villages and were never reunited with their families.

This recent history of loss and trauma in Alaska Native culture is thus important in understanding current social problems in Alaskan villages. In regard to the history of domestic violence in Alaska Native communities, Shinkwin (1983) noted,

> The growth of the custom of beating one's wife is more properly associated with the introduction of western institutions that disrupted the traditional structure of relationships between men and women as well as traditional mechanisms of social control. Review of the history of institutions relating to marriage, the family and male-female interactions highlight the association of western beliefs and social arrangements with abuse of women in a domestic setting. (p. 94)

THE REGION

It is important to note that rurality in Alaska differs from other states in that many villages are not on a road system and are accessible only by plane, boat, snow machine, or dog sled. There are more than 626,000 people in the state (more than half of whom reside in one urban center) (L. Walters, Alaska Department of Community and Economic Development, personal communication, June 21, 2001), dispersed over a land mass of 656,424 square miles (*World Almanac*, 1996). Of the state's 119,241 Alaska Natives, 63,674 live in rural areas and are widely scattered among 256 rural communities. Of the 322 communities in Alaska, 217 are not connected by roads, and approximately 40% of them lack water and sewer systems (L. Walters, personal communication, June 21, 2001). In the villages, subsistence activities, such as hunting, fishing, and gathering of plants, remain an important part of life.

The regional center in which this exploratory study took place is an Arctic community of more than 3,000 people that serves as a hub for 11 Alaska Native villages. The populations of the villages in this region range from 80 to 750, and the total population of the region is about 6,000 people. The regional center is approximately 80% Alaska Native. The surrounding small villages are Alaska Native communities. Subsistence

activities in the area include fishing; hunting of bearded seal, caribou, moose, and other fur-bearing mammals; and whaling in the northwest corner. The sharing of food among individuals and villages is customary. The physical environment in this region is considered harsh by many because winter temperatures can drop to 60° below 0 and the winter months are characterized by little daylight.

METHOD

I conducted this exploratory study on domestic violence in 1997-1998. At that time, I visited and stayed at a shelter for battered women in a rural regional center on several occasions and conducted in-depth qualitative interviews during two of these visits with 9 staff members or clients of the shelter regarding their experiences with and feelings about domestic violence in their community.

This study was initiated after I visited the shelter for battered women and met with its coordinator. After this visit, I discussed my research interests with the shelter coordinator, who helped me develop a research proposal and format. The coordinator, however, made it clear that I was to stay at the shelter, not with local professionals, during visits and to stay a long time or come several times if the study was to be of any value. On the evening of my first stay at the shelter, the coordinator held a potluck dinner for the shelter staff during which I was introduced and the research was explained. The staff members were also told that they could use time during their shifts at the shelter to participate in the interviews. During this first visit, I stayed 6 days and interviewed 7 individuals. I also visited a safe-home provider in a small village, helped with staff training, reviewed case files and policy notebooks, and assisted the shelter coordinator and staff in daily activities. Since the first visit, I have returned to this region on several occasions, always staying at or visiting the shelter and assisting staff in whatever ways possible.

During the second stay at the shelter, I interviewed 2 other women (only one of the interviews was included in the study because the other woman did not have personal experience with domestic violence) and reviewed documents at the shelter. Because this shelter had virtually no staff turnover during the 4 years of my continuing involvement, my relationships with the staff are ongoing. I conducted one additional interview in my office in Fairbanks with an individual from the region who felt more comfortable in that setting.

The interviews with the staff and clients used a semistructured format and lasted approximately 1 to 2 hours. All the women who were asked to participate agreed to do so, and almost all stated that they would be happy to participate if the results would help other battered women. Before they were interviewed, the women read and signed consent forms and were informed that they could choose not to answer any question, to stop the interview at any time, and to decide at any point not to be included in the study. In addition, the women were asked if their interviews could be tape-recorded. Five women consented to taping and four did not. During both the taped and untaped interviews, I took notes, asked demographic and clarifying questions, and listened to the stories the women told of their experiences. Four of the interviews took place at the shelter, three in the offices of social service agencies, one at the home of the safe-home provider, and one in my office. The taped interviews were later transcribed, and my notes from the taped and untaped interviews were reviewed for common themes regarding domestic violence. Suggestions for organizing the article were made by the shelter coordinator.

All nine women who were interviewed were Alaska Native women who were residing in the region. The shelter where the interviews took place is unique in that all staff except relief counselors are Alaska Native women, and thus it provided an ideal setting for learning both about domestic violence from an Alaska Native perspective and about culturally appropriate interventions. Of the nine women, eight were in their late 30s to

40s, and one was older than 70. Five of the women were shelter staff who had personally experienced domestic violence in the past, and four were past or present clients of the shelter. Of the nine women, seven had three to seven children each. At the time of the interviews, six of the women were in nonabusive relationships, and three had recently left abusive relationships. Furthermore, of the nine women, only three had come from families where they had witnessed domestic violence as children; however, all but one said that the male partners who had abused them had witnessed their fathers beating their mothers. None of the women had bachelor's degrees, and all but one were either employed at the shelter or in other social service agencies as aides or counselors at the time of their interviews.

It is important to note that even though this study took place in a predominantly Alaska Native community and the women who were interviewed were all Alaska Natives who were residing in the region, the men who abused the women included non-Native men living in the region currently or in the past and Native men from this and other regions. If this study had been conducted in an Alaska Native village instead of a regional center, the backgrounds of the abusers might not have been so diverse, but because the focus of this study was on the nature of domestic violence that Alaska Native women face in a remote region, the diversity of the abusers' backgrounds was not significant.

When I undertook this study, my goal was to learn about domestic violence in rural Alaska. However, as the women told their stories, it became apparent that they were providing information not only about domestic violence today but about the past context of domestic violence and about the strengths of women who left horrendous situations when few supports were available. Almost all the women were currently in nonabusive relationships and were working in jobs where they now assisted other battered women or members of the community.

FINDINGS

The following description of the environmental and cultural context of domestic violence in this Arctic region is based on the information provided by the women who were interviewed.

Environmental Context

Women who experience domestic violence in rural Alaskan villages face many of the same obstacles when seeking help or trying to escape their abusive situations as do rural women in other areas of the United States, except that the obstacles to assistance are more formidable because many villages are not on a road system and because the weather in the Arctic is generally severe in the winter. As one shelter worker noted, "When it's 40° below 0 and dark and you have several kids, what are you going to do? Where are you going to go?"

The main environmental factors that affected living in and leaving abusive situations were as follows:

1. the isolation of communities;
2. severe weather;
3. the lack of adequate law enforcement;
4. the prevalence of alcohol and other drugs;
5. the prevalence of weapons;
6. the absence of many basic public services, such as low-income housing and transportation;
7. the lack of jobs and dependence on public assistance; and
8. infrequent visits by mental health professionals and the lack of treatment programs for abusers.

These conditions are comparable with those described by Websdale (1998) in his study of rural battered women in Kentucky:

> From battered women's perspective, a mosaic of problems exist when it comes to the state's delivering various services to rural women. Some of the difficulties stem from the remoteness of the region and the sociopolitical and physical isolation of women.

> Other problems emerge because of the lack of privacy in rural areas and the interconnections between those who provide services and those who consume them. Still more problems arise from the generalized dearth of state services in rural communities brought about by a combination of factors including the inability of the state to infiltrate or access rural communities. (p. xxx)

One of the biggest environmental constraints in this region for domestic violence assistance is the isolation of the villages. As one woman put it, "Often it's 90 miles by air, and you have to call for the troopers and wait for help to come. A lot can happen in the time it takes for a plane to come." Although the homes in the villages are often close together, the villages themselves are long distances from each other and the regional center. Thus, a woman who wants to leave a dangerous situation has to telephone the troopers, hide out until the troopers arrive, and then hurry to the plane with her children in tow. In most villages, planes come once a day if the weather conditions are good. A woman who plans to leave prior to a crisis involving troopers incurs considerable expenses because the round-trip airfare from a village to the regional center costs about $120 and from a village to an urban center, $500 to $600. If the woman takes her children with her, this cost is multiplied. One woman in a small village described her escape this way:

> I didn't go to the clinic because I didn't want to cause trouble. He knew I wanted out. If I left for good, I knew I'd get the beating of all beatings. I could watch him working on his boat. I called the state troopers. How I got the courage to call was I could watch him on his boat. The troopers had a whole plan. Go to a safe home; we'll call her, you wait there.

This woman had to run to a safe-home provider and hide out with her children until the state troopers flew in from the regional center and arrested her abuser. Often, the abuser is also in hiding, and the troopers cannot find him because almost everyone in the village knows when planes are coming and most people know when the troopers are searching for someone.

Inclement weather can also compound the difficulty of leaving an abusive situation. Here is one woman's poignant account of trying to escape with her four young children:

> They were like little ducklings following right behind me. One time he was drunk, and when he doesn't hit me and passes out, then we will sneak out because I know he will wake up in a bad mood and start drinking again. We would crawl through a bathroom window. I would run out first, when we were fighting. I would try to find some way to get out. I knew he would fight me. After he would pass out, I would come back to the house because I couldn't leave the kids there . . . because he already locked the door and jammed it, and the kids couldn't open it. So I would say, "Go to the window." And I'd pull [them] through the bathroom window. Let them step on the honey bucket [a bucket kept in the house for bathroom use and later emptied] and go out through the window. Get them out and get to the women's shelter. About 2 or 3 in the morning. It was cold, stormy sometimes. We all stuck together.

The isolation of the villages is compounded by the lack of law enforcement officers. In the villages, there are no police or state troopers, only village public safety officers (VPSOs), local residents who are trained to monitor safety in the village but do not carry guns. Unfortunately, this position is poorly paid and often not highly respected in the villages (because it means monitoring and reporting on friends and relatives), and so the turnover is high. At the time I visited this region, 3 of the 11 villages had no VPSO, which means no local law enforcement at all. One woman described the VPSOs this way: "They are more like security guards. They walk around town at night. Make sure stores are locked. They don't know how to handle a major crime. If we do get a good VPSO, they get burned out and quit." One woman noted how difficult it was for her to get help in the regional center in the past.

> See my husband abused me. My face was all bloody and everything. And he hit me. He wouldn't let me out the door and, you know, tore all my clothes off. I was scared because he was pounding my face. So I got away from him somehow, and I

grabbed a sheet hanging up around the honey bucket. I tore the sheet off and ran out, and I ran into the preacher's house across the street. And I just ran in his house, I didn't even knock. I [said], "Can you help me?" I was all bloody and everything. Then [the preacher] called the police. Then they said we can't do anything because nobody saw. . . . So then the police just took me home. And I says I've had enough. Because I took 15 years of being knifed, hammered, shot at, hit in the head with hammers, I was scared of him, and I knew he would get away with it because the town is small, and he keeps saying this is his town. Every time I [called] the police when I [had] a restraining order, he would be at the door, and he would break in. And I would be scared of him. And he [said], "If you tell the police anything, I'll kill you." And I felt that he would.

Another criticism of law enforcement was leveled at the practice of "third partying," by which a perpetrator is released by the police into the custody of a friend who is supposed to watch the perpetrator at all times. One woman described this practice as follows:

At the time when he would get in trouble, and he would end up in jail . . . you know, they would automatically bail him out, but they had to be in ear range. . . . [They had to be able to] see him or hear him at all times. But that never happened because nobody could enforce that. Families do that all the time. They will do a third party, and then you will see the guy driving around drunk a few weeks later. . . . When I got shot at, within hours his parents third partied him.

One woman said how it was hard in the past in her village to stay at someone's house because others were afraid of her husband. She described her abuser's past this way:

When he was young, he saw . . . his dad beat up his mom. Things like his mom crawling out the window and running. Or his mom hiding, you know, at the neighbor's house. He saw that. In the village . . . it is expected that wives run and hide from their husbands now and then. And people just take it as a matter of fact. "Oh where is she? Oh, she's hiding from her husband. How's the weather? Oh, pretty nice."

She then said that sometimes friends would not let her in when she ran to their houses.

> Some are afraid of their husbands and boyfriends and say no you can't come in. You might come here with a gun. Because most of the time when I lived in—there was no VPSO or law. I mean anyone, anywhere, at anytime, could kick in your door. And that's true today in many villages.

Complicating the absence or inadequacy of law enforcement in many villages is the preponderance of weapons. Because almost all families in this region subsistence hunt and fish, guns, knives, and other weapons are commonplace. Unfortunately, for a woman in an abusive situation, the abuser's easy access to weapons can make a violent episode lethal, and many women carry scars from their past abuse. One woman noted that a lot of abusers get third partied to relatives even when weapons are involved. She stated, "I had a lot of weapons, a lot of knives, a lot of things thrown at me. A lot of guns." When asked if weapons were commonly used in her village during domestic violence episodes, she responded,

> Oh yeah, everybody is dragging a gun or knife or going to get a gun or knife. "I'm gonna go get a gun, gee whiz!" They would shoot around, and you would get a bullet hole coming through your wall. Oh, better lay low, and who you gonna call. You could call —, and it would take a couple of hours for him to get down there. By then [the abuser] is probably passed out.

Although all the villages in this area are dry (no alcohol is allowed to be brought into the villages) and the regional center is damp (alcohol can be purchased only for personal consumption), bootleggers bring alcohol and drugs in, and inhalants are available. The combination of the prevalence of alcohol and weapons, the lack of law enforcement, and isolation puts women in abusive relationships in dangerous situations and likely accounts for both the severity of wife abuse and the high death rate of Native rural women from abuse.

Alcohol is seen as a major factor in much of the family violence in the region, though not necessarily a causative factor. As one woman stated,

> All our families have been touched by alcohol abuse. Some of the families healed the best they could. I see a lot of healing now. See all ages healing. During a certain decade, there was so much drinking here. Whole families had to flee in the middle of the night and go to relatives' houses.

In her study of three Yupik villages, Shinkwin (1983) noted, "In this study, 95% of abusers are problem drinkers and respondents insist that wife beating incidents are alcohol related. We found a strong statistical association of male problem drinking in couples with spouse abuse" (p. 90). Although the women in my study discussed alcohol abuse often, most said that their husbands or boyfriends also abused them when they were not drunk. In addition, the women recounted the effects on their children of witnessing the abuse, waiting for the abuser to fall asleep, or lying awake listening to the abuser who had been drinking rant and rave. One woman recalled how her children learned to deal with their father's drinking and abuse:

> They'd get scared [when he was drinking]. They'd . . . find someone to spend the night with when they got a little older—sleep over at their house. Sometimes they would hide with me. I'd be hiding too. . . . When I got to know him better, and I knew if he had the first drink, I'd take the kids and go to the women's shelter.

The other similarity that rural village Alaska has with other areas of rural America is the lack of many basic services and an inadequate housing stock. In most villages, housing is at a premium, with many family members crowded into small houses. To build housing in this region, building materials must be transported by barge during the summer months, and all construction must be done during that time; thus, only a few houses, if any, are added to the housing stock each year. It is not uncommon in some regional villages to have 13 or 14 people

living in one small house. One woman who was a shelter employee had this to say about the availability of affordable housing:

> I'll probably never own my own house in my whole life. It must be nice not having to keep your kids quiet and being able to have a pet. I can't get ahead no matter how hard I try. I'm in a rut.

Also, many houses do not have indoor plumbing. In some villages, people obtain water from a community spigot or chop and melt ice for a water source. Honey buckets are used in many homes, both in the regional center and in the villages, and at the shelter, many staff members take showers and do laundry at work because of the availability of water. As one person stated, "Water is a pure luxury, especially in the winter." This lack of basic services can make life hard and stressful for those who are living close to or below the poverty level, with crowded housing only adding to family stress.

In this region, jobs are few and the reliance on public assistance is common. According to the Alaska Census Region Labor Market Information (Fried, 1994),

> Finding a wage or salary job in rural Alaska is often a daunting task. Only 66% of rural adults participate in the labor force, versus 75.8% in the rest of the state. . . . In some areas, labor force participation rates barely exceed 50%. (p. 1)

The Arctic borough under study had an unemployment rate of 20.3% in the 1990 census, which was the highest in the state. In 1994, 18.5% of the population of this borough were living in poverty. As one woman in the regional center stated, "Sure we have a technical school, training, but there are no jobs. Some part-time work, but to get a job you have to wait till someone retires. The only jobs are busboys, waitresses, and taxi drivers."

Furthermore, many managerial and professional jobs in the health and education fields are filled by imported labor.

> Statewide 11% of the labor force are Alaska Natives; they account for 7% of the managerial and professional occupations. . . . In the

> Nome census area 60% of the labor pool are Alaska Natives but they hold only 39% of the managerial and professional jobs. (Fried, 1994, p. 2)

In the regional center at the time of this study, all the medical personnel at the hospital, all but one of the counselors at the mental health center, all but two of the teachers in the schools, all but one of the teachers at the extended college campus, and all the lawyers and judges were non-Natives who had moved to the area, thus creating a distinct dichotomy between the non-Native professional class and the local Native population. The women who were interviewed noted the difference between the local Native and non-Native perceptions of problems and social circles and voiced frustration with the non-Native professionals who move temporarily into their community, drawing high salaries and staying only for a brief period. As one woman from a village stated,

> White professionals try to help, but it's like they do it with a 10-foot pole. There is a real difference in how they see the problems and how Natives see it. A real difference in where they live and who they associate with.

This dichotomy between non-Native professionals and the local Native population was further commented on by one shelter employee, who stated, "They have the best houses but still you hear them in the grocery store complaining about how hard it is to live here."

The lack of social services and treatment for abusers is also a problem. In the regional center, a residential alcohol treatment program and an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) group are available, but in the surrounding villages, mental health counselors visit villages for a few days a month or every 2 months, and there are no AA support groups. An anger management class is periodically offered in the regional center that some abusers are court mandated to attend, but such services are not available in the villages. The absence of programs for batterers was noted by one shelter employee, who stated,

> Perpetrators don't get help. The court might appoint them to go to counseling. No one goes. No one checks up on them. Perpetrators are still drinking. The courts will appoint it and write it on a piece of paper, but perpetrators think it's funny. . . . There's no follow-up on what perpetrators are ordered to do.

Shinkwin (1983) noted a similar problem:

> The study demonstrates that victims have the primary responsibility for "managing" their abuse. Their primary response is to run away. This action protects the wife but it obviously has little effect on the husband since many of these women have been beaten for years. . . . Village women are embarrassed to run constantly to relatives and relatives tire of housing victims. At the same time, relatives seem reluctant to directly intervene in domestic violence. (p. 104)

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Every culture has its own values, norms, and traditions that must be incorporated into social services if they are to be accepted and utilized. In the Inupiat culture, the value of respect and cooperation are important. Inupiat values are listed on the business cards of all shelter employees. These cards state,

> Every Inupiat is responsible to all other Inupiat for the survival of our cultural spirit, and the values and traditions through which it survives. Through our extended family we retain, teach and live our Inupiat way. With guidance and support from Elders, we must teach our children Inupiat values—Knowledge of Language, Respect for Culture, Cooperation, Respect for Elders, Love for Children, Hard Work, Knowledge of Family Tree, Avoidance of Conflict, Respect for Nature, Spirituality, Humor, Family Roles, Hunter Success, Domestic Skills, Humility, Responsibility to Tribe. Our Understanding of our universe and our place in it is a belief in God and a respect for His creations.

This statement underscores the importance of family, community, tradition, and respect in the Inupiat culture.

The strong value placed on family, however, can make it difficult for abused women to seek help. Often, women do not want to see their partners go to jail or to anger their abusers' parents, siblings, or friends. Also, a VPSO or police officer is likely to be related to or a friend of the abuser. As one interviewee noted, "I was afraid to call 'cause I knew they wouldn't do anything and it would only make him madder. They all said he was such a nice, funny guy." Another woman stated, "There's a norm against causing trouble. People say [you're] a troublemaker when you put someone in jail. Women are very conscious of their options. They try to resolve things without pressing charges." A village health aide said, "We don't see many battered women at the clinic because health aides have to report to the state troopers, and they will come and arrest the man, even if the woman doesn't press charges."

A woman's ability to obtain services is further hampered if she and her husband are residing in the husband's village, which increases what Gelles and Loseke (1993) called gender inequality. Because it is his village with his relatives, the woman's confidence in getting help is minimized. As one woman recalled, "He was always saying it was his village and I should leave. He said he'll go to the village council and get them to give me a blue card so I could never return to the village." In addition, children are highly valued, and many families are large, which sometimes makes fleeing and finding shelter a difficult task.

For many Alaska Native women, drawing attention to themselves and causing conflict are the last things they want to do. By reporting an incident of domestic violence, they believe, they will start a family quarrel, and they are at the center of the controversy. As one woman stated, "I would never want to send my boyfriend to jail. I just want him to stop beating me. I think that's why a lot of women don't want to call for help." Another woman said, "His father beat his mom, but no one ever talks about it out of respect."

Of course, family has also provided a source of strength and help for battered women in Alaska Native villages. Shinkwin (1983) found that women always fled to the homes of other

women when being abused, and one woman who was interviewed, who was not originally from the village where she was abused, said that other women stood up for her when she had her boyfriend arrested. There is also a strong tradition of taking others in and helping out, so when women flee, they usually find a relative or friend who will give them shelter. Every village has at least one safe-home provider to whom a woman who is being abused can go with her children and stay for a short time until it is safe to return home or until she must leave for another area. As one woman stated, "People here care; if someone is battered or drinking or in trouble, they would never just leave them alone. When I was living in Anchorage, people would avoid a person. Here people are concerned; they try to help."

Another significant factor in seeking assistance for domestic violence in villages is that battered women often do not want to leave their home villages, even if their relationships are dangerous. Traveling to the regional center or to an urban area with a shelter may be not only overwhelming and costly but undesirable. A village is the home of family, friends, and traditions. Also, for many older Alaska Native women, English is not their first language, so they have difficulty communicating when they travel to other regions, and if shelter employees in other areas do not understand and respect their cultural values, it is unlikely that the women would stay for a significant time.

DISCUSSION

Limitations

The main limitations of this exploratory study were the small sample size and the uniqueness of the region under study. It is important to note, however, that many of the environmental obstacles noted by Alaska Native women are similar to those faced by the women in Websdale's study (1998) of domestic violence in rural Kentucky and thus are likely to be experienced by women in other rural regions of the country as well. This study

thus underscores the need for future research on the occurrence of and interventions for domestic violence in rural areas and with Native American and other minority populations.

Implications

It is apparent that domestic violence is a serious issue in rural Alaska, one that is compounded by the obstacles present in many rural environments. The absence of an adequate number of law enforcement officials; the isolation of villages; the lack of many social services; and the widespread availability of weapons, alcohol, and drugs all add to the lethal nature of domestic violence in the region.

On the basis of the comments of the women who were interviewed, three main areas for intervention for and research on domestic violence are apparent, all of which are premised on the societal need to acknowledge the severity and importance of this problem.

First, the safety of women in abusive situations must be ensured. To do so requires funding for an adequate number of law enforcement officials in rural areas and specific training in the area of family violence for these officers, as well as money for women and children to travel to get out of dangerous situations and unhealthy environments. In addition, support for locally based and culturally appropriate safe houses and shelters where women feel comfortable staying temporarily is crucial. As was noted previously, the importance of family, community, and culture makes it unlikely that a battered woman would choose to leave her home community or region to escape an abusive situation. The shelter visited for this study provided an excellent example of a culturally appropriate model. All the permanent staff members were Native women; traditional foods were provided to the residents, and one employee's job description included subsistence hunting and fishing for the shelter; the shelter outreach worker spoke the Native language; a fish camp was built for the residents to spend time at in the summer; safe-home providers were usually elders whom the community members respected; and cultural healing and

strengthening of families was an underlying philosophy of the shelter. The shelter coordinator had this to say about the addition of a fish camp:

> We got a fish camp because we had to. We needed it for the kids. If women have something to do, it's healing. Natives know there are other ways to heal than just to talk in an office. Cleaning fish and talking and just spending time together is healing. In the old days, people could take long walks on the tundra.

In terms of the shelter philosophy, she stated, "We need our hunters. We don't want to divide. If we divide our families, it will be one more part of cultural breakdown. We all need to heal."

Such locally based and culturally appropriate services are crucial if services are to be supported by the community and used by local women for temporary safety and support. In addition, governmental funding for low-income housing and job training programs is necessary for women who choose to leave their abusive situations. Without housing and employment opportunities, women's ability to leave unhealthy situations is limited.

Second, more social services in villages and rural areas are needed, especially services for batterers. Mandated anger management classes that include a component on basic belief systems regarding male-female relationships are important, as are access to alcohol and drug treatment programs and follow-up and general family counseling to strengthen families. Providing such services in rural and remote regions is, of course, extremely difficult because of the vast distances and considerable cost. Therefore, educational programs in the social services delivered through distance education and other innovative means that give site-bound students in rural regions access to mental health training should be strongly encouraged. Such programs could increase the number of culturally sensitive practitioners in rural regions.

Finally, educational programs in schools and communities are needed in such areas as healthy relationships, sexual

respect, and the effects of alcohol and drugs on families and communities. These programs should also include historical information on the treatment of indigenous people in the United States and the onset of current social problems. As Klein, Campbell, Soler, and Ghez (1997), who studied domestic violence in minority communities, noted, "Effective strategies in all communities of color must address the values in transition in these communities—historical perspectives, the impact of racism . . . and develop strategies that include leadership from within the communities themselves" (p. 64).

One shelter employee who was asked what she thought would help decrease domestic violence in the region stated,

> One thing—and it's just one thing—the bringing back of the cultural beliefs would help a lot. Because it's not traditional, it's not part of the culture, it's not part of the ancient culture to be violent in the family. You know, you really try to stay together, work together. It was an economic support. You talk to little old ladies, and there is no word for domestic violence or wife beating. It's just not there. Just like Levi's. There is just no word for Levi's. So bringing back the culture would help. People would be ashamed and wouldn't want to do it.

The strengths model, as defined by Saleeby (1996), which emphasizes resilience and membership, fits this rural Native community well. Resilience is the belief that individuals and communities can rebound and recover from devastating events in the past. As Dossey (cited in Saleeby, 1996) stated, "To believe in the naturally selected hardiness and wisdom of the body is to believe in the possibility of any individual or group surmounting difficulty" (p. 301). Similarly, the theme of membership fits with Alaska Native communities that have struggled over the years to overcome cultural upheaval. According to Saleeby,

> As people begin to realize and use their assets and abilities, collectively and individually, as they begin to discover the pride in having survived and overcome their difficulties, more and more of their capacities come into the work and play of daily life. These build on each other exponentially, reflecting a kind of synergy. The same synergetic phenomenon seems true of

> communities and groups as well. In both instances, one might suggest that there are no known limits to individual and collective capacities. (p. 299)

Thus, as was noted by the women who were interviewed, domestic violence interventions should include both a consideration of the constraints and specific needs present in a remote environment and an acknowledgment of the importance of individual and communal efforts to strengthen families and communities.

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