



## Family Violence: Core Concepts for Refugee and Newcomer Serving Organizations

This guide reviews the basics of family violence within refugee and newcomer families, including core concepts for survivor-centered service provision.

### What is Family Violence?

**Family violence** refers to any form of harm or abuse that occurs between family members or persons living within the same household. Despite some variations in definition, family violence is often used interchangeably with domestic violence (DV) or intimate partner violence (IPV). Abusers may use behaviors that frighten, manipulate, hurt, blame, humiliate, or injure the survivor, resulting in physical, sexual, emotional, economic, psychological, or spiritual harm.

Family violence results from imbalances in power and control within relationships. When family members share *power with* one another, equal and supportive partnerships emerge. Likewise,

when they demonstrate their *power to* the outside world, they assert their ability to make decisions, express opinions, and act in ways that affirm their personhood.

Family violence, however, involves one or more family members exerting *power over* another. This **abuse of power** is characterized by controlling behaviors that devalue others and limit their freedom. Examples of abuses of power applied to newcomer families include:

- **Intimidation:** hiding or destroying important documents or identifications (e.g., passports)

- **Emotional abuse:** lying about someone's immigration status, or intentionally deceiving or misleading another person
- **Isolation:** limiting someone's social interaction or preventing them from learning English
- **Using children:** threatening to separate the family by calling Social Services or Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)

## Understanding Types of Family Violence

**Domestic violence (DV)** refers to violence that takes place within a household. It can happen between any two people who live together.

**Intimate partner violence (IPV)** refers to violence between romantic partners who may or may not be living together in the same household.

***Note:** The term **marital conflict** does not usually refer to violence. This term typically refers to disagreements between two partners in their efforts to negotiate, compromise, or share power.*

## Family Violence: Causes and Contributing Factors

Resettlement and integration provide a unique opportunity to disrupt the cycle of violence. However, before supporting a survivor, the direct service provider must understand the difference between the root causes of and contributing factors to family violence.

**Root causes** are underlying conditions that allow violence to occur. Root causes include:

- Inequality
- Abuse of power

- Social norms that perpetuate discrimination and inherent power imbalances

**Contributing or risk factors**, on the other hand, influence or exacerbate the problem. In their absence, family violence may decrease but can still exist. Contributing factors include:

- Stress
- Poverty
- Anger
- Alcohol/substance use
- Forced displacement

## Common Misconceptions about Family Violence

Myths and misconceptions about family violence perpetuate misunderstandings, prevent the abusing partner from taking accountability, and impede support and intervention for survivors. For example, **victim blaming** is the act of attributing partial or full responsibility for violence onto survivor, rather than the perpetrator.

**Minimization** is another frequent challenge. When disclosing violence, survivors may minimize or justify the situation to avoid identifying themselves as victims, or their partners as perpetrators of violence. Family members or others close to the survivor may also attempt to minimize abuse by invalidating the survivor's experience.

## Why Do Survivors Stay?

The **cycle of family violence** is a recurring pattern of behaviors comprised of four phases: tension building, the incident, reconciliation, and a period of calm. When the abusive partner creates tension, the stress levels in the relationship or household escalate. When the pressure reaches its peak, the abusive partner responds with acts of violence to regain or maintain control. Once the stress levels decrease, the parties enter the reconciliation or honeymoon phase, where the abusive partner attempts to justify their behavior, apologize, or pretend the incident did not happen. The period of calm is characterized by promises of change and acts of kindness that can confuse the survivor or give them hope that violence will stop.

Unfortunately, as stress intensifies, the cycle continues.

Many refugees have **backgrounds that stigmatize** any discussion of family violence. For the majority of the world (and much of the U.S.), these matters are considered private interpersonal conflicts, which can make it difficult to seek help or even recognize that violence is unacceptable.

Survivors often stay with abusive partners for a complex mix of **emotional and situational reasons**. Emotionally, they may believe that the abuser will change, or feel driven to maintain the relationship for their families or children. In other situations, the survivor may feel personally responsible for the abuse, causing feelings of hopelessness, despair, or fear of further harm.

Situationally, many refugee and newcomer survivors **lack safe alternatives** that align with their preferences and needs. Financial dependence, social pressures, underdeveloped skillsets (e.g., language, employment), and fear of law or immigration enforcement can further reinforce their decision to stay.

## Responding to Disclosures of Violence

Responding to disclosures of family violence requires a sensitive, non-judgmental, and well-informed approach to promote the safety and well-being of all involved parties. The most effective responses use empathy and compassion to support and empower survivors. It is important to approach survivors with sensitivity and respect. Avoid seeking out survivors, or speculatively identifying adults who might be experiencing violence within their relationships, as this can cause further harm and risk. Instead, service providers can create the conditions in which survivors feel safe to disclose by providing information about family violence and available services while reaffirming confidentiality.

### Role of the Caseworker

Responding to a disclosure of violence requires a thoughtful and trauma-informed approach. The following steps outline how a caseworker can provide immediate support and ensure the

physical and emotional well-being of the client and any children involved.

- **Put safety first:** discussions about violence and abuse can occur at unexpected moments and in unexpected ways. It's essential to make sure the conversation happens in a safe, confidential, and comfortable setting.
- **Practice empathy:** survivors may express mixed emotions when discussing their experiences with violence. Follow the client's lead, respect their boundaries, validate their feelings, and listen without judgment.
- **Reaffirm confidentiality:** assure the survivor that the information they share is confidential and will not be disclosed to other family or community members. In cases where both the survivor and the abusive partner are involved, consult with supervisors to establish a clear division of responsibilities. Confidentiality must be upheld in all case note documentation, and survivors should be made aware of any exceptions, such as situations that call for mandated reporting.
- **Explore needs and options:** survivors' complex needs should be explored collaboratively, with survivors guiding the decision-making process. Keep in mind that leaving a relationship may not always be the survivor's preference—focus on exploring various options: emergency housing, financial assistance, legal advocacy, immigration services, medical and/or mental health services, and religious or community groups.
- **Collaborate to create a survivor-centered plan:** when developing an action plan, prioritize the survivor's needs according to their preferences. Keep in mind that the process of creating and following through with the plan can be emotionally difficult, and the survivor may have moments of doubt or reconsider their decisions and change their mind. Continue to provide

support by focusing on their strengths and utilizing available resources. Reinforce the client's role as the decision-maker in their case by being flexible and revisiting options.

- **Facilitate warm referrals:** if a referral is necessary, try to facilitate it *with* the survivor. Thoroughly assess the referral organization's available services, and clearly delineate the roles and responsibilities of each provider.
- **Conduct regular check-ins:** since survivors' needs may shift over time, it is important to maintain regular contact to assess their safety, well-being, and ongoing need for support.

## Survivor-Centered Approach

Survivor-centered approaches maintain that people have the right to live a life free from violence. Service provider should assume that survivors:

- Are not responsible for the violence
- Speak the truth about their experiences
- Have full autonomy over their lives
- Should not be stigmatized or shamed
- Should not be forced to disclose anything
- Can recover, heal, and build resilience from their history and past experiences

## Healing Statements

- *I believe you.*
- *I'm glad you told me.*
- *I am sorry this happened/is happening.*
- *This is not your fault.*
- *You are very brave to talk with me.*
- *You are not alone.*
- *This is a very difficult situation and must be hard for you. We are here when you are ready.*

## Safety Planning

Safety planning is a proactive and personalized process designed to help survivors stay safe in dangerous situations. Safety plans identify both immediate and long-term action items to protect the survivor and other family members from potential harm. They should always be collaborative, realistic, practical, easy to remember, and reflective of the survivor's voice and choice.

Effective safety plans assess the overall risk of the situation and identify safety-related warning signs, coping strategies, resources, contacts, and emergency phone numbers. They should be written in the survivor's native language and utilize graphics in the event of pre-literacy.

For more information on how to create a safety plan, refer to Switchboard's [Introduction to Safety Planning](#), [Safety Planning for Family Violence](#), and [Family Violence Safety Planning tool](#).

## Recognizing Elevated Risk

Women are killed by intimate partners more often than by any other category of offender—it's the seventh leading cause of premature death for U.S. women overall. It is therefore critical for service providers to know the signs of escalation and to educate survivors about risk factors so they can be well-prepared. The risk to the survivor is considered elevated if the abusive partner:

- Engages in stalking or monitoring behaviors
- Has threatened to kill the survivor
- Has access to weapons and has threatened to use them against the survivor
- Is extremely controlling, jealous, and/or possessive
- Has sexually assaulted the survivor
- Has threatened or attempted suicide
- Has abused the survivor during pregnancy
- Regularly uses substances

## What if No Support is Wanted?

When a survivor declines help, it is crucial to approach the situation with empathy and respect for their autonomy, recognizing that leaving an abusive situation can provoke fear or shame. Offering a safe, non-judgmental space reduces isolation and enhances protective factors, supporting the survivor without adding pressure.

Caseworkers should also be self-aware and seek [case consultation](#) with their supervisor to manage their own emotions.

## Conclusion

Family violence is a pervasive issue that affects all communities, and refugee and newcomer families often experience additional vulnerabilities due to unique challenges related to displacement and social adjustment. By understanding the core concepts of family violence, service providers are better equipped to provide safe, empathetic, empowering, and effective case management to their clients experiencing abuse.

## Resources

[Safety Planning for Family Violence Guide](#)—this Switchboard resource covers how safety planning with newcomers can help them stay safe from family violence.

[Family Violence Safety Plan Template](#)—this Switchboard template can be adapted for use with clients experiencing or at risk of family violence.

[Meeting Newcomers' Protection Needs Part II: A Collection of Resources on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence](#)—this Switchboard blog shares guidance on topics related to violence with adult and youth clients.

[What Works to Prevent and Respond to Intimate Partner Violence Among Refugees?](#)—this Switchboard evidence summary summarizes the available research on interventions to prevent or respond to refugee family violence.

[Fundamentals of Gender-Based Violence \(GBV\) for Refugee Service Providers: The What, Why, and](#)

[How Safety Planning](#)—this webinar provides introductory information for management and frontline staff on developing safety plans for survivors of family violence.

[Gender-Based Violence](#)—this informational guide provides information about different forms of family violence, including how to identify violence and provide basic support to survivors.

[Refugee Children Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence: Doubly Vulnerable](#)—this Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS) webinar covers unique challenges for refugee children witnessing family violence.

[Child Witnesses to Domestic Violence](#)—this publication from Child Welfare Information Gateway discusses the legal protections extended to children who witness acts of domestic violence.

*The IRC received competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90RB0053. The project is 100% financed by federal funds. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.*