



This resource packet was prepared for the  
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The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence serves as  
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***Understanding Domestic Violence*** is the first in a series of 5 related Guides developed for relationship and marriage educators and program administrators to help them understand and respond to domestic violence issues that may arise within their programs. The full Resource Packet consists of the following Guides:

- ◆ ***Understanding Domestic Violence: Definitions, Scope, Impact and Response***
- ◆ Building Effective Partnerships with Domestic Violence Programs
- ◆ Protocol Development and Implementation: Identifying and Responding to Domestic Violence Issues
- ◆ Screening and Assessment for Domestic Violence: Attending to Safety and Culture
- ◆ After Disclosure: Responding to Domestic Violence

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# Understanding Domestic Violence

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Healthy marriage and relationship (HMR) programs funded by the federal government are required to consult with local domestic violence programs and all, regardless of funding source, have been encouraged to think carefully about how domestic violence issues will be identified and addressed within these programs. This Guide, the first of five that comprise a Resource Packet designed for relationship and marriage educators and program administrators, provides a working definition of domestic violence and an introduction to the network of domestic violence services that has been built in the United States over the last 30 years. An overview of key research findings related to the scope of domestic violence and its impact on adults, teens and children is also included. As in any field, domestic violence advocates and researchers are engaged in clarifying and refining basic definitions and terms to reflect emerging concerns, new realities, and increasingly diverse communities, and these will be identified here as well. A list of key domestic violence resources appears at the end of the Guide.

## What is domestic violence?

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It is sometimes confusing for healthy marriage and relationship practitioners to sort through the broad range of terms used to describe violence and abuse within intimate relationships. Domestic or family violence, battering, spouse abuse, intimate partner violence, and intimate terrorism are all in common use, sometimes interchangeably but often ascribed different meanings. Some of these terms are defined in federal and state statutes, which of course vary across jurisdiction; others are more commonly used in research settings or within the social service field, with varying degrees of precision as to the types of behaviors or characteristics they encompass.

Domestic violence, the term we'll use here, is most usefully understood as a pattern of abusive behaviors – including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks as well as economic coercion – that adults and adolescents use against an intimate partner. It is characterized by one partner's need to control the other, and the intentional and instrumental use of a range of tactics to secure and maintain that control.<sup>1</sup> Domestic violence includes behaviors that frighten, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, often injure, and sometime kill a current or former

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intimate partner. This is the type of intimate violence most often reported to authorities, and domestic violence victims are more likely to seek social and health services as well as legal protections. Domestic violence, defined in this way, is highly gendered, nearly always perpetrated by a man against his female partner.

Some scholars have distinguished domestic violence from what has been termed “situational couple violence”<sup>2</sup> and what lay people might refer to as “fights that get out of control.” This is when a disagreement between a couple turns into an angry, nasty, two-way argument that then can escalate into physical violence – e.g. hitting, shoving, biting or worse. Or when intimate partners use violence against each other to express anger, disapproval, or to reach an objective, such as stopping a partner from drinking or being unfaithful. Situational couple violence, based on the research of Johnson and others, is as likely to be perpetrated by women as men, although women are more likely to sustain injury.<sup>3</sup> In situational couple violence, one or both partners appear to have poor ability to manage their conflicts and/or poor control of their anger.<sup>4</sup> These fights often involve the use of verbal abuse – cursing, yelling, and name-calling – and can involve high levels of jealousy, including accusations of infidelity. However, the violence and emotional abuse of situational couple violence are not accompanied by a chronic pattern of controlling, intimidating, or stalking behaviors and fear of one’s partner is typically absent.<sup>5</sup>

As should be obvious to all readers, both what is labeled situational couple violence and domestic violence are problematic and have no place in healthy relationships. However the latter is far more likely to result in injury or death and raises the most serious concerns about participation in relationship and marriage education programs.

Those providing HMR education should never underestimate the potential seriousness of all forms of abuse and violence between intimate partners. While situational couple violence appears less likely to escalate over time than violence characterized by coercive control, and sometimes stops altogether on its own or with intervention, some couples have a recurring pattern of such violence that is extremely dangerous.<sup>6</sup> Intimate partner violence should never be viewed as a natural consequence of conflict. Most people respond to interpersonal conflict in non-violent and non-abusive ways. In contrast, partners who batter a partner use violence and abuse to resolve relationship conflicts and maintain control. They tend to be carriers of this behavior from one relationship to the next. These distinctions, always critical, have taken on particular significance in the context of relationship and marriage education.

A key challenge for those working in the relationship and marriage education field is to understand how to recognize and respond to domestic violence and also, whenever possible, work to prevent it. (For a fuller discussion, see *Building Bridges Between Healthy Marriage, Responsible Fatherhood, and Domestic Violence Programs: A Preliminary Guide*, found at [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org).)

## What does the data tell us?

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Experts in the field acknowledge that violence between intimate partners is virtually impossible to capture with absolute precision, although published statistics are unquestionably alarming. The prevalence and incidence of abuse between intimate partners is difficult to measure as it often occurs in private and victims are reluctant to disclose such abuse to anyone because of shame or fear of reprisal. Most intimate partner victimizations are not reported to the police. In one study, only one-fifth of all rapes, only one quarter of all physical assaults, and only one-half of all stalking perpetrated against female respondents by intimates were reported to the police.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the social stigma that inhibits victims from disclosing their abuse, varying definitions of abuse used from study to study make measurement challenging.

## How big is the problem and who does it affect?

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To further understanding of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and stalking, the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention jointly sponsored the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS). This national survey was conducted from November 1995 to May 1996, involved a sample of 8,000 women and 8,000 men, and collected data on women's and men's experiences with violent victimization. Key findings from the NVAWS include:<sup>8</sup>

- ◆ Women experience more intimate partner violence than do men: 22% of surveyed women, compared with 7.4% of surveyed men, reported that they were physically assaulted by a current or former spouse, cohabiting partner, boyfriend or girlfriend, or date in their lifetime; 1.3% of surveyed women and 0.9 % of surveyed men reported experiencing such violence in the previous 12 months. In this study, physical assault was defined as “behaviors that threaten, attempt, or actually inflict physical harm. The definition includes a wide range of behaviors, from slapping, pushing and shoving, to using a gun.”
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- ◆ An estimated 1.3 million women are victims of physical assault by an intimate partner each year, and an estimated 4.5 million intimate partner violence physical assaults occur annually.
- ◆ Nearly 25% of women have been raped and/or physically assaulted by an intimate partner at some point in their lives, and more than 40% of the women who experience partner rapes and physical assaults sustain a physical injury.
- ◆ Approximately 1 million women and 371,000 men are stalked annually in the United States, and 87% of stalkers are men. Over 80% of women stalked by a current or former intimate partner are also physically assaulted by that partner.

**The National Domestic Violence Hotline**, has received over 1.8 million calls for assistance since February 1996, when it opened its phone lines. The Hotline currently averages over 17,000 calls a month, and even that number spikes when there is a highly publicized domestic homicide or trial or following a public awareness campaign providing information about the Hotline.

What else should HRM educators understand about domestic violence?

- ◆ Domestic violence in all its forms, including sexual assault and homicide, occurs across all relationship structures – dating, cohabiting, and marital relationships, with the highest rates between separated and divorced couples.<sup>9</sup> False allegations of domestic violence occur infrequently, and there is significant *underreporting* of domestic violence.<sup>10</sup>
- ◆ Domestic violence occurs in all racial and ethnic groups, although reported rates vary significantly. Asian/Pacific Islander women and men tend to report lower rates of intimate partner violence than do women and men from other racial and ethnic backgrounds, and African-American and American Indian/Alaska Native women and men report higher rates. These variations in reported rates, which diminish when other socio-demographic and relationship variables are controlled, may reflect differences in respondent's willingness to disclose intimate partner violence as well as social, demographic, and environmental factors.<sup>11</sup>
- ◆ For women of color, high rates of poverty, poor education, limited job resources, language barriers, and fear of deportation increase their difficulty finding help and support services.<sup>12</sup>
- ◆ Each year over 300,000 pregnant women in the U.S. are battered by the men in their lives, often the father of their child.<sup>13</sup>
- ◆ Compared to a man, a woman is far more likely to be killed by her spouse, an intimate acquaintance, or a family member than by a stranger. In 2005, more than 12 times as many females were murdered by a male they knew (1,574 victims) than were killed by male strangers (129 victims) in single victim/single offender incidents in 2005. Of victims who knew their offenders, 62 percent (976 out of 1,574) were wives, common-law wives, ex-wives, or girlfriends of the offenders.<sup>14</sup>

- ◆ Victims in violent relationships often have trouble gaining access to services, taking part in public life, and receiving emotional support from friends and relatives.<sup>15</sup>
- ◆ The cost of intimate partner violence against women in the United States in 1995, including all types of services estimated and all types of victimizations, totaled \$5.8 billion. Updating these estimates to 2003 dollars, costs would be over \$8.3 billion. This includes \$460 million for rape, \$6.2 billion for physical assault, \$461 million for stalking, and \$1.2 billion in the value of lost lives.<sup>16</sup>

### **How does domestic violence impact children?**

- ◆ Slightly more than half of female victims of intimate violence live in households with children under age 12.<sup>17</sup> Conservatively, at least 10% to 20% of children are estimated to be exposed to intimate partner violence yearly, with as many as one third exposed at some point during childhood or adolescence (3.3 million to 17.8 million youth).<sup>18</sup>
- ◆ Absent intervention and support, many of these children are at greater risk of developing psychiatric disorders, developmental problems, school failure, violence against others, and low self-esteem. They are also more likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, run away from home, engage in teenage prostitution, and commit sexual assault crimes.<sup>19</sup>
- ◆ However, many children appear to survive such exposure and show no greater problems than non-exposed children. The resilience literature suggests that as assets in the child's environment increase, problems he or she experiences may actually decrease. Protective adults, including the child's mother, relatives, neighbors and teachers, older siblings, and friends may all play protective roles in a child's life, as does the child's larger social environment (extended family, church, sports, social clubs) if it acts to provide support or aid to the child during stressful times.<sup>20</sup>

A primary target of federally supported marriage promotion efforts is single mothers living in poverty. We know from research and experience that poverty and domestic violence are interwoven. Significant numbers of low-income women are battered, and the violence they experience often makes the climb out of poverty impossible. Poverty, in turn, makes it more difficult to end domestic violence and heal from its affects. Many domestic violence victims use welfare and child support as the economic bridge out of a violent relationship – as many as 30% of women receiving welfare report abuse in a current relationship.<sup>21</sup>

Domestic and sexual violence, as children and/or as adults, is not a theoretical possibility here, but a reality for too many impoverished women, and particularly those targeted by federally-funded healthy marriage initiatives. Recent research by Edin and Kefalas<sup>22</sup> and Cherlin, Burton et al.<sup>23</sup> sheds new light on this reality and suggests that there may be even more direct – and complex – relationships between the victimization of girls and women and their relationship decisions.

### **What about violence in teen dating relationships?**

- ◆ Twenty-five percent of eighth and ninth graders in one study indicated that they had been victims of dating violence, including eight percent who disclosed being sexually abused<sup>24</sup> In another study, among female students between the ages of 15 and 20 who reported at least one violent act during a dating relationship, 24 percent reported experiencing extremely violent incidents such as rape or the use of weapons against them.<sup>25</sup>
- ◆ In a study of 724 adolescents between the ages of 12 – 18, one in every eight pregnant girls reported having been physically assaulted by the father of their baby during the preceding 12 months. Of these, 40 percent also reported experiencing violence at the hands of a family member or relative.<sup>26</sup>

Taken individually or as a whole, these data reflect the scope and impact of intimate partner violence in the U.S. and underscore the importance of those working with families and children to understand its impact and support intervention and prevention efforts.

## **Building the advocacy and services network**

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Services for battered women, their children, and other abuse victims are a critical component of a community's response to domestic violence. Over the last three decades, a sea change has occurred in the public's recognition of domestic violence as a serious societal issue. In the 1970s and early 1980s, grassroots activists identified three urgent tasks: securing shelter and support services for abused women and their children; enhancing protections and safety, often by improving laws and the police and court response to domestic violence; and changing community attitudes and responses. These advocates organized the first shelters and safe homes for battered women and their children, and worked hard to put basic legal protections in place, train police and health care providers, and increase public awareness.

In 1981, Congress established the Family Violence Prevention and Services (FVPSA) Program, the first federal funding stream to provide much needed financial support for core services throughout the country. In 2007, FVPSA provided approximately \$100 million to over 1,500 community-based domestic violence programs through formula grants to States and Tribes. Many community-based domestic violence programs also receive support from the federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) program, and from state and local sources. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), passed in 1994, was the first federal legislation to acknowledge domestic violence and sexual assault as crimes and continues to provide federal resources to encourage coordinated approaches to combating intimate violence.

Community-based domestic violence programs typically provide 24-hour crisis hotlines, individual and group counseling, support groups for victims and their children, legal and medical advocacy programs, and a full range of children's services. Over 1,200 of the 2,000 domestic violence programs in the U.S. also have shelter facilities providing emergency shelter to family members not safe in their own homes. These programs guide abuse victims to protection and service options available under domestic violence laws. They also help victims develop safety plans for themselves and their children. Practitioners working with families and couples can provide vital support by helping victims to safely access these resources.

### **Expanding the Network**

In addition to local direct service programs, State, Tribal, and Territorial coalitions have been established; comprehensive training and technical assistance networks have been developed; and collaborative efforts to enhance health care, criminal justice, social services, and community responses to domestic violence have been initiated. These programs and services are funded through many different state, federal, and private foundation funding sources.

In September 2007, 1,346 out of these 2,000 domestic violence programs participated in the second National Census of Domestic Violence Services (NCDVS), conducted by the National Network to End Domestic Violence. This Census collected an unduplicated, non-invasive count of adults and children who received services from local domestic violence programs during the 24-hour survey period. Since approximately 69% of local domestic violence programs in the U.S. participated, this Census provides a powerful glimpse but remains an undercount of the actual number of victims reaching out for services on this day.

During the survey period, 53,204 adults and children requested and received services from the 1,346 local domestic violence programs that were able to participate in the Census. Participating programs reported that over 7,707 requests for services from adults and children went unmet because the programs did not have the resources to fully respond – e.g., not enough emergency shelter beds to accommodate the person calling in, or no advocate to accompany someone to court or to the hospital. On the survey day, participating programs answered over 20,500 hotline calls from victims and their loved ones, and provided education sessions to almost 30,000 members of the community. (A copy of the *2007 National Census of Domestic Violence Services* can be found at [www.nnedv.org](http://www.nnedv.org).)

## Domestic violence services: Key issues to consider

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Since many HMR programs may be unfamiliar with the nature and scope of the services provided by domestic violence programs, this section of *Understanding Domestic Violence* identifies key issues that are important to domestic violence victims, some of which are explored in more detail in other Guides that are part of this Resource Packet. This section also provides a more detailed description of the community-based domestic violence services that have been developed over the past 30 years.

- ◆ **Victims are often reluctant to disclose domestic violence incidents.** They fear that their complaints will not be taken seriously, that they will be blamed for their partners' violence, that they will lose custody of their children, that their source of family economic support will be jeopardized, or that this information will be shared with their abusive partner. In light of these reasonable fears, it is critical to make victim safety issues a high priority.
- ◆ **Many abuse victims are unaware of the legal options, services, and support systems available.** Abusers often isolate victims and control the information they need to become financially independent and physically safe. Do not assume that someone else has already provided information about the local domestic violence hotline or support group, or the option to have an abuser arrested or obtain a civil protection order from the court. This information can be life saving for some victims and their children.

◆ **Domestic violence service delivery and advocacy are rooted in confidentiality and privacy, which are crucial to victims seeking safety from abusive partners.**

The confidentiality of a victim's conversations with a domestic violence advocate may be protected by state statute, and federal funding for domestic violence services requires programs to safeguard the privacy of records and information about those to whom they have provided shelter and other services. Domestic violence programs take confidentiality very seriously.

### **Safety planning**

Safety planning must be understood as a process. Simply stated, a safety plan is each victim's unique strategy to reduce the risks generated by a partner's abuse and control.

A victim's safety plans might include strategies for staying as well as for leaving, and may have short and long-term timeframes. A short-term plan might be to feed the children early so their partner won't hit them during dinner. A longer term plan might be to save \$10 a week from the food money that is doled out to them until they can save enough to get a bus ticket to their mother's house in the next state over. Or they might plan to leave their abusive partner after the kids are through high school and out of the house or after they get their GED.

Of necessity, these safety plans change – as the abusive tactics change, so must their safety plan change. Many aspects of a victim/survivor's safety plan may remain hidden, even from advocates, and certainly from others with whom they have not yet built a trusting relationship.

Domestic violence programs are first and foremost crisis intervention agencies, responding to emergency situations that might be quite dangerous to the women, men and children involved, as well as to the advocates themselves. Crises occur daily, whether on the hotline or in the shelter, in court or the emergency room of the local hospital, and these must take precedence over other issues of a less urgent nature. The work of domestic violence programs is difficult and exhausting, with demand for services far outstripping resources. While many domestic violence programs have secured strong community support and have diversified and stable funding, many others operate on a shoe string and scramble to cover essential costs.

- ◆ **Core services of most domestic violence programs include a 24-hour confidential crisis hotline.** These hotlines provide callers with information about legal options and referrals to a full range of community services. Most importantly, hotlines provide the caller with a safe place to talk about the abuse they are experiencing, while also supplying them with the support and information to help develop immediate and long-term safety plans. Calls to crisis hotlines can be made anonymously if necessary, although confidentiality is typically guaranteed.
- ◆ **Due to the great danger that is often present in domestic violence cases, 24-hour access to secure, temporary, emergency shelters is critical for women and children not safe in their own homes.** While the vast majority of domestic violence victims will neither need nor seek shelter, access to safe shelter is a matter of life and death for many battered women and children. Emergency shelter for male victims of domestic violence is usually provided through hotels, host homes, or other types of shelter. In addition to beds and cribs, domestic violence shelters also typically provide bedding, food, and the day-to-day necessities needed by families who have fled a violent home.

It is important to become familiar with the screening and intake procedures for shelter programs in your area. These procedures are designed to secure the safety and confidentiality of all shelter residents. Be aware that due to limited funding, domestic violence shelters are often full to capacity.

- ◆ **Most domestic violence programs maintain a full set of community referrals.** These typically include listings of legal, medical, mental health and other professionals willing and able to provide assistance to victims of abuse on a *pro bono* or reduced rate basis.
- ◆ **An increasing number of domestic violence programs are culturally-specific in their approach.** These programs are typically organized by and for a particular racial or ethnic community and provide a new range of culturally-relevant services to African American, Latino, and Asian-Pacific Islander survivors. They often arise from a critique that traditional interventions and services are not responding well to marginalized community and new approaches are necessary.

- ◆ **As funding permits, most programs also provide other services and supports for domestic violence victims and their families.** Additional services may also include regular support groups for battered women, their children, and other victims of domestic violence; court accompaniment; medical and social services advocacy; transportation to advocacy appointments; assistance with children's education and other issues; and community education and training. An extensive network of batterers intervention programs has been developed over the past 15 years as well, most commonly providing specialized groups for abusers within a coordinated community response and serving as a referral option for the courts.
- ◆ **Increasingly, domestic violence programs have developed comprehensive follow-up services for sheltered and non-sheltered victims of abuse.** These include second-stage or transitional housing programs offering a full range of job training, educational, childcare and supported living services. In some communities, specialized services have been designed for older survivors, abuse victims exposed to HIV/AIDS, victims of abuse within gay and lesbian relationships, immigrant victims, and children witnessing domestic violence.
- ◆ **Overall funding for domestic violence programs remains limited in the face of the need.** While some states have at least one domestic violence program in every county, there are still too many areas, particularly in rural, low population states, where a victim must travel more than 150 miles to reach the nearest domestic violence shelter or support group or advocacy services. The lack of programs is particularly acute for Native American women and within migrant and immigrant communities, and access to services remains limited for women and children with disabilities and older women in abusive relationships.

## Current trends in intervention and prevention efforts

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There are several areas in which current efforts are particularly focused. They present additional opportunities for broader community collaboration and partnership among domestic violence programs, healthy marriage and relationship programs, and fatherhood programs, as well as others who are concerned about the health and safety of families and communities.



- ◆ The growing recognition of the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse is underscoring the need for enhanced collaboration between domestic violence, child abuse services, the courts, and the community to protect children and their non-abusing parent.
  - ◆ Community and corporate leaders – both men and women – are putting energy and resources behind efforts to engage boys and men in violence prevention activities.
  - ◆ There is increased attention being paid to the development of innovative, multi-faceted prevention strategies to reduce the incidence of family violence, including expanded work with schools, runaway and homeless youth programs, and other youth serving agencies.
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## Endnotes

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<sup>11</sup> Tjaden, P. & Thoennes, N. (2000) at 8.

<sup>12</sup> Women's Institute for Leadership Development for Human Rights, "*The Treatment of Women of Color Under U.S. Law: Violence*". Available at: <http://www.wildforhumanrights.org/publications/treatmentwomen/p4.html>.

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<sup>14</sup> Violence Policy Center. (2007). "*When Men Murder Women: An Analysis of 2005 Homicide Data*", Washington, D.C. Available at <http://www.vpc.org/studies/wmmw2007.pdf>.

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## General domestic violence resources

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**NOTE:** For a listing of state domestic violence coalitions, and other public and private organizations involved in domestic violence intervention and prevention activities, go to [www.vawnet.org](http://www.vawnet.org), and click on “Organizational Links” on the top toolbar.

### **NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE**

**800-799-SAFE**

**800-787-3224 (TTY)**

[www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org)

The National Hotline provides support to victims in crisis and those trying to assist them, and is a particularly important resource for victims living in areas in which there are no local services or for victims exploring relocation. Assistance is available in English and Spanish with access to more than 140 languages through interpreter services.

### **NATIONAL TEEN DATING ABUSE HELPLINE**

**866-331-9474**

**866-331-8453 (TTY)**

<http://loveisrespect.org>

The Helpline and [loveisrespect.org](http://loveisrespect.org) offer real-time one-on-one support from trained Peer Advocates who offer support, information and advocacy to those involved in dating abuse relationships, as well as concerned parents, teachers, clergy, law enforcement and service providers.

**Both the NDVH and the Teen Dating Abuse Helpline are operated by the Texas Council on Family Violence.**

#### **National Resource Center on Domestic Violence**

6400 Flank Drive, Suite 1300  
Harrisburg, PA 17112  
800-537-2238  
TTY: 800-553-2508  
[www.vawnet.org](http://www.vawnet.org)

#### **Family Violence Prevention Fund**

383 Rhode Island Street, Suite 304  
San Francisco, CA 94103-5133  
415-252-8900  
TTY: 800-595-4889  
[www.endabuse.org](http://www.endabuse.org)

## Culturally-specific domestic violence resources

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### **Asian and Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence**

450 Sutter Street, Suite 600  
San Francisco, CA 94108  
415-954-9988, ext. 315  
[apidvinstitute@apiahf.org](mailto:apidvinstitute@apiahf.org)

### **Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community**

290 Peters Hall  
1404 Gortner Ave.  
St. Paul, MN 55108  
877-643-8222 (877-NIDVAAC)  
[www.dvinstitute.org](http://www.dvinstitute.org)

### **National Latino Alliance for the Elimination of Domestic Violence (ALIANZA)**

P.O. Box 672, Triborough Station  
New York, NY 10035  
800-342-9908  
[www.dvalianza.org](http://www.dvalianza.org)

### **Sacred Circle**

National Resource Center to End Violence Against Native Women  
722 Saint Joseph St.  
Rapid City, SD 57701  
877-733-7623  
[www.sacred-circle.com](http://www.sacred-circle.com)

### **Women of Color Network**

6400 Flank Drive, Suite 1300  
Harrisburg, PA 17112  
800-537-2238  
TTY: 800-553-2508  
<http://womenofcolornetwork.org>