

Practice Tips: Representing African Survivors of Domestic Violence

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In sharing their stories of trauma, recovery and healing, the women of the African Women's Empowerment Group (AWEG) at the Montgomery County Abused Persons Program offer the following guidelines for lawyers who work with African survivors of domestic violence:

- 1. Understand the demographics and cultural values of African immigrants.** Many African women brought to the U.S. as spouses and fiancés are educated, working women from professional families. Many other victims arrived as students or joined relatives with the goal of pursuing higher education. Finding themselves in financial need, asking for assistance from community agencies, and being forced to depend on others causes shame and humiliation. Many AWEG members have traveled throughout Africa and Europe, studied abroad, and owned businesses or held high-level positions in their countries. They place a high value on family and education.
- 2. Be aware of possible language barriers, despite the appearance of fluency.** Many African immigrants have studied English or other European languages, and may appear fluent when engaged in conversation. However, they may require assistance in preparing written documents, and may not fully understand legal terms or technicalities.
- 3. Offer assistance in writing or documenting the abuse story for a personal affidavit.** Abuse perpetrated against immigrant women often includes subjugation, manipulation, isolation, threats, and sexual violence. The process of sharing the abuse story may be traumatizing. African women report significant difficulty in sharing the abuse story out loud, particularly with men, and are often overcome by painful emotions while attempting to document their stories in writing.
- 4. Be aware of the cultural and emotional implications of seeking help.** African women are humbled by the need to apply for services and assistance. AWEG members have referred to the process as “begging,” and are particularly vulnerable to behavior, vocal tones, and language that appear disrespectful or patronizing. Taking a few moments to acknowledge these feelings, to inquire about past achievements or lifestyle, and to ask questions about the client's country or background will help her to feel worthy and accepted.
- 5. Provide information, contact, and feedback on a regular basis.** African women are highly grateful for the services they receive, and fearful of becoming a burden on the professionals who assist them. They may be hesitant to call too often, ask too many questions, or ask for clarification when they do not fully understand an issue. Maintaining regular contact, updating clients on the status of their case, and consistently reviewing the process with

them will alleviate their anxiety and empower them to advocate for themselves and feel more in control of complex and lengthy legal processes.