

# An Analysis of the Health Equity Gap for Arabic Speaking Victims of Domestic Violence in Connecticut



The MILLA Project is a non-profit, non-sectarian human rights/social service agency dedicated to helping our Arabic and Persian speaking community. The MILLA Project's mission is to abolish all forms of gender based violence.

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## Abstract:

In the past decade, Connecticut has experienced a significant increase in its North African and Middle Eastern populations. With this influx of immigration has come the important challenge of addressing cultural differences. This report will focus specifically on the cultural differences in respect to gender-based violence and how these cultural differences prohibit migrated victims from seeking services. In addition, this report will discuss Connecticut's domestic violence centers and shelters and their current ability to provide services and programs to Arabic speaking women and the need for culturally competent organizations and services for Arabic speaking individuals in Connecticut.

## Introduction:

When speaking about the Middle East and North Africa, the two are collectively referred to as the MENA Region. The MENA region is referred to as such, because these countries have a predominant Arab population. The countries included in the MENA region may include any variation of the following depending on the source since there is no definitive list for the countries that are included in the MENA region (UNICEF, n.d); (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.):

- ❖ Algeria
- ❖ Bahrain
- ❖ Djibouti
- ❖ Egypt
- ❖ Jordan
- ❖ Kuwait
- ❖ Lebanon
- ❖ Libya
- ❖ Morocco
- ❖ Oman
- ❖ Qatar
- ❖ Saudi Arabia
- ❖ The State of Palestine
- ❖ Israel
- ❖ Sudan
- ❖ Syrian
- ❖ Tunisia
- ❖ United Arab Emirates
- ❖ Yemen

The most applicable and basic definition for the term Arab is “a member of an Arabic-speaking people” (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, n.d.). This definition is the most applicable because it is the one characteristic that unites all Arabs aside from their culture. A common misunderstanding is that all Arabic people are Muslims. While the vast majority of Arabs are Muslims, a significant population consists of Christians, Jews and other religious minorities. This variation in particular is one of the issues that contributes to the health equity gap here in Connecticut, which will be explained more thoroughly later in the report.

As mentioned earlier, Arab people share a culture and traditional beliefs and practices. Some of these practices assist in perpetuating gender based violence against women. Women are severely underrepresented in the political, economical and private sectors of society. Although some countries are making advances, in many of these countries women lack basic fundamental rights.

Women lack access to fair, equal and safe legal support and/or protection and legal services. Even when services are available, widespread societal, cultural and traditional practices prevent Arabic-speaking women from seeking and/or receiving help. Widespread beliefs also lead to society blaming the woman for the violence she experienced rather than holding the perpetrator accountable. Social stigmas also prevent an Arabic-speaking woman from reporting that she is or was a victim of violence.

For example, a married woman may deal with domestic violence because she doesn't want to face the stigma of being a divorced woman. Also it is possible that the woman knows she may be killed for dishonoring her family so she endures the violence. The social stigmas are enough to make a woman avoid reporting any violence she has experienced. These experiences and beliefs are brought with these women and their families when they leave their country and enter Connecticut.

These experiences and beliefs, in addition to their language, are barriers that prevent women from seeking help once here.

### *Domestic Violence As Gender Based Violence:*

Gender based violence is defined as “violence that is directed against a person on the basis of gender. It constitutes a breach of the fundamental right to life, liberty, security, dignity, equality between women and men, non-discrimination and physical and mental integrity”(European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), n.d.). Countries that are on the verge of being or are already destabilized, can find an increase in violence against women. Iraq and

Syria are examples of countries that are experiencing increased violence against women because of the unstable conditions within the country.

In the United Arab Emirates, the law allows for men to physically abuse their wives as long as no physical marks are left from the violence (Human Rights Watch, 2010); (Human Rights Watch, 2013). While Libya has made twenty the minimum age required to get legally married (unless a court makes an exception), the lack of education, poverty and intimidation and harassment from extremists and militias are a concern for women (Karrie Kehoe, Reuters, 2013). It is important to note that women, who reside in larger cities like Tripoli, have access to education and post-secondary education.

In April of 2013, Saudi Arabia launched its first anti-domestic violence awareness campaign. By August 2013, the Saudi Arabian cabinet approved a ban on all types of physical and sexual abuse in the workplace and at home. The penalties included up to a year in prison and \$13,000 in fines. The law also intends to provide shelter for victims of domestic violence, an important stride. It is important to note though that despite these efforts, in Saudi Arabia, they must change society's idea that physical and sexual abuse is a private issue. It needs to be viewed as a public community issue. With the violence against women ban passed, they face the issue of consistent implementation and reporting protocols (Daisy Carrington, CNN, 2013); (Sebastian Usher, BBC News, 2013).

It is important to realize that the social attitudes and problems mentioned above that prevent assisting victims of domestic violence are not issues confined to Arabic speaking countries. In Connecticut, during 2013 (January-December), the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) assisted 56,178 victims of domestic violence. Currently, agencies are unable to document the amount of Arabic women serviced because there is no category for documenting women of Arabic descent. However, during this same time period they received 1,998 calls to the Language Line. Out of those 1,998 calls, 205 calls were received from Arabic-speaking women. These statistics do not fully represent the amount of Arabic-speaking women who are suffering from domestic violence statewide.

The statistics above do not represent the amount of Arabic-speaking women abused across America. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, one out of every four women here in the United States will be a victim of domestic violence (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, n.d.).

This information shows that not only is gender based violence widespread in the MENA region, but throughout the world. Each country faces different challenges when it comes to addressing and preventing violence against women. Research done by the World Health Organization estimated that one in every three women will experience physical or sexual violence worldwide (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005). It is important to

know that domestic violence can be physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, economic or spiritual(Dado, 2011).

### *Domestic Violence Cases in the Arabic-Speaking Community:*

As mentioned before, there are cultural and social factors that contribute significantly to the under-reporting of domestic abuse in the Arabic-speaking community. To illustrate and convey these factors are cases below where women were victims of domestic violence at the hands of their partners, and also their husband's family members. It is important to note that domestic violence does not only come from the husband, it can come from the woman's family or her husband's family.

Reported in Baghdad, Iraq, Salma Jassim's story illustrates how a woman can experience domestic abuse from different people at the same time along with the complex emotions she goes through as a survivor of the abuse. After her husband became wealthy, Salma said his family began to become ashamed of her because she comes from a humble background. Her husband's sisters beat her so badly in one incident that she was unable breast feed her newborn. They kicked her out of the house and eventually accused her of stealing money from the family which led to her husband divorcing her. After going through this, Salma returned to her family home with her baby to face her brothers blaming her for the entire situation. They held her at gunpoint and threatened to kill her, and refused to let her leave the house. At the age of 22, Salma was kicked out with her newborn daughter and abandoned by her husband. The shame she felt from being divorced was felt by her family too, worrying her about her safety. There are no options for Salma. She was quoted as saying, "I accept insult, degradation and abuse rather than the hellish condition I am living in now".

With cultural traditions and society blaming woman for the abuse she suffers, along with the fact that there are not many shelters or places for these women to go, it is understandable why they are "forced" to stay and withstand the abuse (Juhi, 2011).

In Dearborn, Michigan, Nadia Hamade spoke about the domestic violence she endured. She graduated from Wayne State University Law School and is an attorney who owns her own private practice. She credited her three daughters as the reason for why she left because she was afraid of them ending up in her situation. She said she knew the best way to prevent them from ending up in her situation would be to be an example for them and to leave the situation. She acknowledges that this wasn't an easy choice, one of her concerns being raising her children alone and making ends meet as a single mother. She said she remembers feeling embarrassed and that what she was feeling was a real struggle for her. She says leaving

regained the strength she felt was stolen from her in the relationship(Dado, Arab American domestic violence survivors: You're not alone, 2013).

Socio-economic status and educated women aren't exempt from experiencing domestic violence(Dado, 2011).

Throughout this report it is important to remember that culture is passed from generation to generation. It wasn't mentioned whether or not Nadia Hamade was born here in America, but even if she was, it is very likely that she was raised and influenced by Arab culture and some of the generalized socio-cultural beliefs about domestic violence that we are discussing as being a very important why women choose not to look for help.Keeping this in mind, the intention of publishing this report is to realize that addressing these socio-cultural beliefs is necessary when trying to help Arabic women who are victims or may be victims of domestic violence.

### *Research on the Domestic Violence Health Equity Gap in the Arabic-Speaking Community in Connecticut:*

With the intentions of making this report statistically significant, the MILLA Project did research within Connecticut with the hopes of discovering factors that prevented or may prevent Arabic-speaking women from reaching out for and/or receiving domestic violence services. In identifying these factors, the MILLA Project hoped to ultimately use the factors as guidelines for the creation of culturally competent organizations geared towards assisting Arabic women. There were 2 stages in this research project.

The first stage of this research project involved contacting 17 of the 18 member agencies under the umbrella of the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV). The CCADV was also one of the agencies contacted. The first aspect focused on documentation. When contacted, each agency was asked whether or not they knew how many women they had serviced of Middle Eastern and/or North African descent within a one year period.

The second aspect of the first stage focused on advocacy for possible Arabic speaking clients. Each agency was asked whether or not they had an Arabic-speaking counselor and/or advocate available. Out of the 17 agencies contacted, 12 responded, 4 did not, and one partially responded. Each agency was contacted a minimum of three times to be included in the data collected. Out of the 12 agencies that responded, 1 had an Arabic-speaking advocate available and the other 11 noted using the Language Line service when it was needed. The Language Line service typically provides the domestic service agency and the client with a translator, and the call then functions as a three-way call to assist the client. 9 out of the 12 agencies contacted

followed federal guidelines when it came to documenting the clients serviced. The CCADV and its member agencies were able to document 1,998 calls to Language Line in the year of 2013. Out of those 1,998 calls, 205 were received from Arabic-speaking victims. Over the year of 2013, 5,196 minutes were spent helping these Arabic-speaking victims through Language Line. In addition, no agency has domestic violence information available in Arabic.

The second stage of research included an Arabic community survey initiated by The MILLA Project. The survey questioned them in various ways that all together indicated and inquired about factors that may prevent Arabic women from seeking domestic violence services and men referring women to agencies providing services. The MILLA Project surveyed men and women throughout Connecticut.

The first stage of the research demonstrated two factors that prevented and/or may prevent Arabic women from seeking domestic violence services. The first factor that may be a hindrance to women seeking services is the Language Line service. It is useful during emergencies but unhelpful during therapeutic services. It feels impersonal in the discussion of a very personal situation. This interpretation is further supported in the second stage of this research project.

Another factor illustrated in this part of the research was the gap created by not documenting the Arabic victims serviced. Federal guidelines require five minimum categories for data on race since the revision for the 2000 Census. The five minimum categories are American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White. There are two categories for ethnicity being either "Hispanic or Latino" or "Not Hispanic or Latino" (Office of Management and Budget, 1997). This classification system leaves a huge gap in the documentation of Arabic women being serviced by domestic violence service providers. Arabic women can be classified as "White", "Black", or "Asian" depending on their physical characteristics or the country they originate from. One of the agencies contacted said that they could be documented as "Other" occasionally also. This factor creates the idea that Arabic women aren't seeking services, a problem that helps to perpetuate the violence against them indirectly since they are not being acknowledged as a group that needs assistance.

This is parallel to the focus shifted onto the Hispanic or Latina community in recent years. Federal guidelines support the documentation of the Hispanics and/or Latinas receiving domestic violence services. In other words, there is no gap in documenting the members of this community receiving aid from domestic violence agencies. In addition to that, most domestic violence agencies have Spanish-speaking counselors and/or advocates available versus using the Language Line service. More and more agencies are taking steps towards creating culturally



competent agencies geared towards the Hispanic community. This approach and focus on the Hispanic community is something that needs to be applied to the Arabic community as well.

The second stage of this research project involved a survey made available to Arabic men and women in both Arabic and English. The survey questioned them in various ways that all together indicated and inquired about factors that may prevent Arabic women from seeking domestic violence services and men referring women to agencies providing services. The MILLA Project requested other organizations focusing on assisting immigrants to distribute the survey. While some agreed to assist, others refused.

The MILLA Project surveyed Arabic speaking individuals between the ages of 18-64. Over 40% of respondents are between the ages of 18-24. Sixty-four percent surveyed are women and 34% are men. Ninety-eight percent of the respondents understand what constitutes domestic violence. Ninety-nine percent of those surveyed believe that agencies should speak to clients in their native language, understand the cultural differences, understand the religious differences, and offer programs that are culturally appropriate. Eighty-five percent stated they would not seek services from an agency if the agency could not speak to them in their native language, understand the cultural or religious differences, and did not provide programs that were culturally appropriate. Forty-six percent of those surveyed stated they would be concerned about their immigration status if they were to seek services. All survey participants reside in Connecticut.

### *Guidelines to Creating A Culturally Competent Organization:*

Advice given on how to create a culturally competent organization has been made when addressing different communities. The guidelines in this report were based on research done by Lynet Uttal from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It is a report that examined the challenges and methods to creating culturally responsive and competent organizations and programs. This report provided a case study of the Latino Family Childcare Project (LFCP), which is a family childcare provider certification program delivered in Spanish that was trying to become culturally competent and responsive in reaching out to the Latino community.

Uttal defines a culturally responsive organization as “one that is relevant to participants of diverse cultural backgrounds and respectful of their beliefs, practices, and values” and the ability to respond as requiring “cultural knowledge, skills and values at all levels, from individual staff, to programs, organizations and systems”(Uttal, 2011). Uttal explained the three common levels of cultural responsiveness as being translation (the lowest level), culturally adapted programs (CAP) and culturally specific organizations (CSO-where organizations should aim for). The level of translation encompasses just translating the material appropriately to reach out to

the community you are targeting. Culturally adapted programs focus on modifying activities to fit the norms of the targeted community and to create examples that are more relevant to the community members. Culturally competent staff are in CAP, but these CAP are fundamentally different from culturally specific organizations in that they expect the community to adapt to the organization's culture and values versus the organization. With culturally specific organizations (CSO), program implementation, program philosophy, and the organization's beliefs and practices change in a way that integrates the worldview of the community members and their bicultural staff members.

Uttal, as mentioned earlier, used the LFCP to represent an organization's transformation into a culturally specific organization and examined some of the challenges faced. Some of these challenges will be discussed in the following paragraphs. They will be discussed in the context of creating a culturally specific organization for an Arabic-speaking community.

When it comes to translation, it most basically means translating the material into the language of the community being targeted. As mentioned earlier though, translation also means translating the material you are trying to spread throughout the targeted community in a way that reflects and connects to its community members. Their values, beliefs, and culture need to be reflected in the material being translated. Sometimes this may require making the material in the language it is meant to be translated to, in this case Arabic, versus translating it from English to Arabic. Doing this sometimes provides the most reliable way of creating material that truly is specific to the targeted community. It is important that the program coordinator understands entirely the values, beliefs, and culture of the community. It can be additionally beneficial if they are bilingual but it is not required.

A challenge that needs to be addressed when creating a culturally adapted program is the ability and/or willingness to recognize the differences between the values and needs of the clients being serviced by an English-based program and those being serviced by an Arabic-based program. The needs, values, beliefs and so forth from the English-speaking community will be significantly different from the needs, values, and beliefs of the Arabic-speaking community.

Uttal examined these differences with the report's case study and explained how the program coordinator witnessed that the Latino community members expected different things from the program and needed more help with certain tasks and understanding things than the English community members did. The Latino community needed a program that was more community-centered versus client-centered. The Latino/Hispanic community also faced different circumstances than the English community which were important to understand when creating a program geared towards the Latino/Hispanic culture. This challenge is going to be faced and needs to be addressed when creating a CAP for any community, including of course the Arabic community.

Uttal pointed out questions to ask and address when determining how culturally adapted your program is. Asking these questions and working to improve the organization with these questions in mind can help significantly in the eventual transformation of a CAP to a CSO. These important questions include:

✚ “Are program staff culturally competent?”

If unable to hire bilingual or bicultural staff, make sure current staff receives cultural training to better understand the community members being serviced. In terms of the Arabic-speaking community and servicing women who are victims of domestic violence, it is important that staff understand that in the Arabic culture, women are often blamed rather than the perpetrators being held accountable. It is also important to understand that social stigma is such an important factor into why women stay in abusive situations.

✚ “Are there barriers preventing community members from participating?”

If there are barriers, the agency should work to remove these barriers. For example, if the Arabic-speaking domestic violence victims are afraid of leaving their husbands or whoever their abuser(s) is/are because of economic reasons, the organization should work to either provide workshops on how to get a job or by referring the women to employment opportunities. There are many other barriers to be faced when helping Arabic-speaking DV victims, or any DV victims for that matter, and it is important to recognize that addressing these barriers are integral to creating an effective CSO.

✚ “Do participants need assistance in other aspects of their lives to make the program more effective for them?”

This aspect is similar to the above question but can include issues of healthcare, discrimination, and more. It is important to ask about the life situations of the community members seeking assistance along with how other areas of their lives can affect their ability to truly seek and receive help from the organization/program.

According to Uttal, when addressing these questions and beginning to improve where the program is lacking, agencies are then on the road to creating a culturally adapted program. Having a truly culturally adapted program is the first step to making it into a culturally specific organization. As mentioned earlier, what truly differentiates a culturally adapted program from a culturally specific one is once the philosophy and values of the organization integrates the worldview and beliefs of the bicultural staff members and the community members being serviced. Keeping this in mind is what truly helps a CAP to become a CSO. The following questions guide a program towards becoming more culturally responsive:

- ✚ “What practices do agencies have in place to learn about the worldview and expectations of community members?”

This can include anything from having a bilingual program coordinator, or someone who truly understands the culture of the targeted community and reflects their needs, values, culture and beliefs in charge of the program, to collecting feedback from the bicultural staff.

- ✚ “Are bicultural program staff members given the authority to make program adjustments?”

The purpose of having bicultural staff members is to be able to bridge the gap between the community members and the organization’s leadership. Allowing these staff members to have authority to make necessary adjustments to the program is important since they understand the community the most in terms of culture. They know what is best for the community members, therefore knowing the right ways to make the program more culturally specific and responsive. An Arabic advocate for example would know how to expand the program or change it in a way that would benefit the Arabic-speaking community.

- ✚ “How do participants identify themselves in relation to the social context? How can the program take this into consideration?”

America focuses more on the individual when addressing issues of domestic violence. As a country we focus more on assisting the individual, which is important to an extent. This approach is reflective of the individualistic culture of America. On the other hand, Arabic culture, along with other cultures in the world, focus more on the whole group than the individual. The community and family are important, which explains significantly why social stigma is such a stronger factor in how women respond to domestic violence. The stigma of being divorced is more intimidating sometimes than the abuse being endured. These kinds of details are important to take into consideration when creating a culturally specific organization. An organization needs to change its goals, values, beliefs, and so forth to benefit the community the way they expect and the way that it is needed. To truly create culturally specific organizations geared towards Arabic-speaking domestic violence victims, the organization needs to take into account the individual’s connection to their community and society along with their culture, beliefs and values. The organization needs to learn to *reflect* these values along with their own if they truly want to assist members of the community.

## *Summary*

The Arabic-speaking community is a diverse one. The one thing shared amongst all its members are their cultural beliefs and values, along with their traditional and social norms and customs. Traditional and social norms and customs are responsible for helping to perpetuate violence against women. The way Arabic society responds to victims of domestic violence places women between a rock and a hard place where they usually deal with the abuse because it is better than the social stigmatization they will face. These beliefs, values, norms and customs are brought with women and their families when they come to America. The immigration of Arabic speaking people will likely continue to increase as a result of the escalating instability of countries like Iraq and Syria.

With this increased immigration comes the need to create culturally specific organizations for the Arabic-speaking community. The only way to reduce domestic violence in the community and change the way society responds to victims of domestic violence is through culturally appropriate programs and agencies. In order for this to begin, documentation of Arabic women seeking help for domestic violence is absolutely necessary. The gap in documentation prevents agencies from seeing that domestic violence is a prevalent issue in the Arabic speaking community.

After the issue of documentation is addressed, then agencies need to focus on providing Arabic-speaking advocates for their community members. Every agency should be able to have someone who speaks Arabic available at all times. The Language Line, although helpful in emergency situations, becomes impersonal for women talking about a very sensitive, personal and even taboo subject. Relationship building is essential for women to feel that they can trust who they are speaking to, and this is better provided through advocates who understand the Arabic culture.

After this, agencies can begin to follow Uttal's guidelines for creating culturally specific organizations. It is a long road, but one that is absolutely necessary. This is supported by the fact that the majority of Arabic speaking individuals surveyed wouldn't go to a program that wasn't sensitive to their values and beliefs as well as culturally appropriate. All in all, an approach like the one taken to address the Hispanic community in regards to domestic violence needs to be adapted to addressing the Arabic community. It is a community that represents a significant amount of our population, and that needs just as much assistance- if not more because of the cultural and societal factors- in regards to domestic violence.

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