

Tea Ceremonies

FOR AFRICAN WOMEN



*A culturally appropriate outreach,
support and educational tool for
African immigrant communities*

Interviews with domestic violence experts

SEPTEMBER 2015

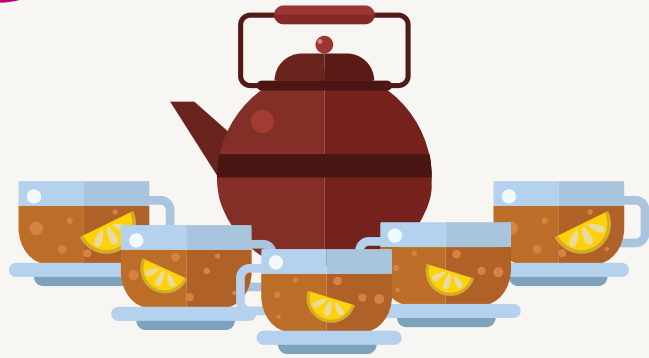


IDVAAC

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Institute on Domestic Violence In
The African American Community

Tea Ceremonies



FOR AFRICAN WOMEN



Specific members of the African Women's Roundtable who developed the tea ceremony. From right to left: Fatima Porgho, IDVAAC staff and coordinator of the African Women's Collaborative group, Farhiya Mohammed, Feruz Tewlede, IDVAAC Director Dr. Oliver J. Williams, Lul Abdulle and Annamore Matambanadzo.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A coalition of domestic violence experts from various African nations met in Minneapolis to determine whether activists should create self-styled “tea ceremonies” to establish safe spaces for women from African immigrant communities to meet and explore issues of gender-based violence, sexual assault and other related issues.

The overwhelming conclusion: The creation of “tea ceremonies” for African immigrant women would be a potentially potent outreach tool because it would create a supportive place for women to discuss and dissect a topic that is virtually unrecognized in most African cultures: domestic violence.

Immigrant women who are victims of domestic violence in the U.S. are burdened with many additional challenges that complicate and aggravate their situation, the experts concluded – challenges like an unfamiliar environment, culture, language and tradition. When aggravated by incidents of domestic abuse, these challenges can make victims feel even more isolated, depressed and alone, experts said.

The establishment of bi-weekly tea ceremonies for African immigrant women would create a network of women whose shared history, background, culture and experiences would help them feel less alone and more empowered to deal with their abuse and the topic of domestic violence, the experts agreed.

Patterned after traditional African tea ceremonies – ritual events that encourage women in Africa to convene, socialize and share experiences – these ceremonies would create a serene and supportive environment for immigrant women of similar cultures to communicate, express mutual support, and seek insights and counsel on how to effectively manage their families and communities in a strange new land, the experts concluded. The ceremonies also would educate African immigrant women about places they could go for assistance and help them confront and manage the various social, cultural and familial issues associated with domestic abuse and sexual assault in their homes and communities.

U.S.-born domestic violence activists also might attend, audit or facilitate these sessions, giving them a fuller understanding of the narrative, culture, tradition and experiences of African immigrant women, the experts said. Such insight would prove invaluable in helping domestic violence experts better serve African immigrant women who are victims of gender-based violence, the experts said.

Domestic violence activists who work with African immigrant communities were interviewed as part of the Minneapolis outreach initiative. Interviews were facilitated by Ms. Fatima Porgho, founder of the African Institute for Community Advancement (AICA), and Dr. Oliver Williams, executive director of the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community (IDVAAC).

Below is a list of interview participants, including their country of origin, service area and name of organization they represent. The interviewees represent organizations that serve immigrant women from several African nations, including: Somalia, Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Sudan, Mali, Guinea, Liberia, Morocco, and many other nations located in East, Central and West Africa.

| NAME | COUNTRY | SERVICE AREA | ORGANIZATION |
|------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---|
| Farhyia Mohamed | Somalia | Seattle, WA | Somali Family Safety Task Force |
| Annamore Matambanadzo | Zimbabwe | Pittsburgh, PA | Advance African Development (AAD) |
| Lul Abdulle | Somalia | Portland, OR | Somali Women Association |
| Fatima Porgho | Burkina Faso | Clarkston, GA | African Institute for Community Advancement (AICA) |
| Manna Teclmariam | Eritrea | San Jose, CA | African Community Health Institute (ACHI) |
| Fatima Kourouma | Ivory Coast | Harlem, NY | Nerlow Afriki |

RECOMMENDATION:

Culturally appropriate “tea ceremonies” for African immigrant women who are victims of domestic violence should be established because they would prove instructive and valuable as a contemplated outreach, education, prevention and advocacy initiative against gender-based violence in the communities served by domestic violence activists.

Having concluded that establishing “tea ceremonies” would help African immigrant women deal with issues of domestic violence, interviewees set out to determine: What those ceremonies should entail; who should facilitate them; how and where they should be performed; how frequently they should be held; how they should be facilitated; and how they could be financed:

1. WHY ESTABLISH A “TEA CEREMONY” VERSUS A TRADITIONAL SUPPORT GROUP?

Interviewees agreed that tea ceremonies would be particularly appealing to African immigrant women because of the longstanding tradition of such ceremonies in many African countries. African tea ceremonies (called *attayas*) date back hundreds of years in West Africa, where nearly 80 percent of all people drink tea – mostly mint tea – every day. In nations such as Gambia, Mauritania and Senegal, these ceremonies are much like social functions akin to informal wine-tasting sessions or rounds of toasts in the U.S.

Most African immigrant women in the U.S. are quite familiar with the customs and rituals of the *attaya*, which is intended to encourage women to communicate and socialize. Most know, for example, that each ceremony consists of three rounds of samplings, with each round being different in taste. The first, bitter round represents the beginning of life and the difficulties of growing up. The second round is sweeter but retains the strong mint flavor, symbolizing the sweetness and flavor of mid-life, love and marriage. The third and final round is mostly very weak tea with plenty of sugar, being symbolic of the final stages of life.

Open and candid speech is the guiding principle during an attaya session, where attendees are expected to express their opinion about the tea, saying whether they think it too strong, too weak or just right. Most of the socializing and communication takes place between rounds of drinking, rather than during.

West African attaya sessions, which often involve native foods, rituals and dance, sometimes take on a festive atmosphere, becoming spirited and free-wheeling affairs where just about any subject is fair game for discussion, and constructive debate is encouraged and valued.

While the soon-to-be-established ceremonies in the U.S. may not take on such festivities, the tradition of communal sharing, mutual comforting and candid communication likely will help encourage women to discuss challenges and issues they are facing, including those involving domestic violence, interviewees said.

Manny Teclerian said her group has held such sessions for years, with great success. “We’ve held both tea and coffee ceremonies. Coffee ceremonies last two to three hours,” she said. “Tea ceremonies held lasted about one hour. We call it ‘Tea Ceremony’ when there is only tea involved. If aromatherapy and incense are included, they are called coffee ceremonies, and they are more effective. Women actually won’t stop talking.”

The cultural and ritualistic traditions steeped within the attaya – many of which have been honored and revered in Africa for centuries – likely would be more inviting and comforting to African immigrant women, ultimately making those women more likely to discuss intimate issues such as intimate partner violence, the experts said.

2. WHO SHOULD FACILITATE THESE “TEA CEREMONIES”?

Effective facilitators are crucial to the success and viability of the tea ceremonies, interviewees said. Facilitators should have five key characteristics above all others: Compassion, empathy, effective communication skills, past experience in working with domestic violence victims, and an ability to engender trust and encourage confidentiality.

Farhyia Mohamed said while a master’s degree in psychology has helped in her work involving gender-based assault, such a degree is not mandatory in order to effectively facilitate a tea ceremony.

“Even if people don’t have a degree they could also facilitate, but they would have to learn how to work with domestic violence survivors,” and engender trust and ensure confidentiality, she said. “Building trust is always very important. If they don’t trust you, then they won’t come.”

Initially, trust can be built through socializing and by discussing familiar topics, Teclerian said. “Start out talking about topics that relate to their daily challenges and show them that you are available for them,” she said.

Lul Abdulle agreed, saying degrees don't matter, as long as the facilitator is resourceful and trustworthy and can manage group dynamics.

Annamore Matambanadzo said community lay people also would be ideal facilitators because they often are respected and “have a high level of cultural competency.”

Most interviewees preferred an unstructured approach, where attendees play a leading role in conducting the session. Teclerian said at least two people should facilitate, with one in charge of preparing the tea and maintaining the environment while attendees share stories. Ideally, a third person would take notes, she said.

Experts agreed that ensuring confidentiality would be vital to the success of the tea ceremonies. The issue of confidentiality should be introduced at the first session and discussed in each successive session, reminding attendees that personal or intimate issues shared within the group must stay within the group, experts said. Some facilitators might even consider requiring attendees to pledge that they will not discuss intimate or personal issues outside of the group.

3. SHOULD SESSIONS BE OPEN OR CLOSED?

Most interviewees recommended that ceremonies be close-ended, meaning that once a group begins, no new person can join. Allowing women to come in and out of the group could compromise the feeling of trust and confidentiality so vital to encouraging women to share their feelings, fears and experiences, they said.

Rather than turn new entrants away, however, women can be counseled on where to find specific help, directed to other traditional or non-traditional support groups, or added to a new group holding tea ceremonies.



4. HOW MANY SESSIONS SHOULD BE HELD BEFORE CREATING A NEW GROUP?

Interviewees agreed that organizers should set a finite number of group sessions in advance to help honor issues of confidentiality, trust and fairness. Organizers also should maintain a strict attendance policy, they said.

“Attendance should be consistent because you are creating a cohort of people who are building support,” Matambanadzo said.

Fatima Kourama agreed, adding that women should attend at least half of the sessions. “In my community, if you leave it open for women to come and go as they please, it would create a disaster,” she said, because it would undermine the feeling of intimacy and confidentiality so critical to getting women to open up about their personal and familial challenges and problems.

Abdulle recommended holding weekend sessions over three months. “People have time during the weekend and can get help with childcare and other household responsibilities,” she said. “These 12 sessions would cover all the basics and share resources. From there, we just have to make sure that we follow up individually with whoever needs help.”

Mohamed recommended having one session per week over the course of eight to 10 weeks. Matambanadzo suggested having monthly sessions for a year. Porgho said, “Ideally, we’d like to work with the same women for one year then open the sessions to new members.”

Some interviewees said anything more than monthly sessions could become a financial or scheduling burden for some women.

5. HOW MANY WOMEN SHOULD BE IN EACH GROUP?

Interviewees said groups should contain no fewer than 10 and no more than 20 participants, though most interviewees said 10-15 would be most ideal, giving participants time to savor the ambiance, share their sentiments, and get the desired support and counsel they need before transitioning to conversations about domestic abuse.

Keeping the number of participants small and manageable is critical to the success of the group, Matambanadzo said.

“There’s an African saying that talks of how the more people you have, the less productive you are,” she said.

6. WHERE SHOULD MEETINGS BE HELD?

The most important elements in choosing a meeting place are safety, comfort, cost and expediency, interviewees said.

“If the women all live in the same apartment complex, to avoid transportation issues, we can talk to the complex manager to ask them to help facilitate a place, a community room, which should be provided free for residents,” Abdulle said. Other choices would include a community room where a neighborhood association meets, she said.

When free space is not available (as it frequently is not), working with another non-profit that has available space, contacting a mosque or church for available space or securing a meeting room within a government building can keep costs down, interviewees said.

At the end of the day, however, organizers need to select a space that is easily accessible and where participants will feel safe and secure, interviewees said – even if that involves a publicly undisclosed location. Without a feeling of safety and security, all the academic preparation in the world won’t inspire women to open up, they said.

7. HOW WILL SESSIONS BE FINANCED?

Visioning, creating and facilitating effective tea ceremonies obviously will require financial resources to pay for meeting facilities, transportation, refreshments and other key elements. Organizers will need to be sure to draft financial budgets that are austere, of course, but still based in reality. For example, rental fees for meeting spaces are likely to be significantly higher in New York City than they would be in Jackson, Mississippi. Creating budgets that accurately account for diverse market characteristics and distinctions will be critical to ensuring that sufficient dollars are secured to implement the tea ceremony initiative.



Of course, tea ceremony organizers could help minimize related costs by securing temporary space, personnel or supplies from community-based organizations and religious institutions, interviewees said. But these donations frequently are temporary or insecure, and, therefore, are not reliable, they said.

For example, while a mosque might be able to donate space, that space may not be consistently available, interviewees said. Moreover, the mosque may not be the most comfortable meeting place for victims, especially if the abuser or the abuser’s friends or family members worship at that mosque.

Likewise, community-based organizations may be able to integrate the topic of domestic violence into programs addressing overlapping challenges – such as drug abuse, parenting or HIV-AIDS – but those programs frequently have restrictions on how dollars can be spent, potentially compromising the effectiveness of such a collaboration. The effectiveness of such partnerships also could be significantly undermined when differences in language, culture and tradition come into play, interviewees said.

Therefore, while program costs can be minimized through creative planning and visioning, securing adequate corporate or foundation dollars is key to the successful establishment, security and maintenance of tea ceremonies, interviewees said. And incoming grants must include detailed and realistic line items for:

TRANSPORTATION:

Many African immigrant women have scant financial resources and, therefore, don’t have personal transportation or excess money to pay for public transit. Grant dollars, therefore, must include line items for transportation, in the form of bus passes, train tokens, or arranged private transportation. “Otherwise, they won’t come,” Matambanadzo said.

MEETING SPACE:

Funding to pay for a consistent, secure and safe place for tea ceremonies also is key to the success of the tea ceremony and its mission, interviewees said. If such funding is not obtained, it is less likely that an accessible and safe location can be secured, interviewees said – thereby making it less likely that domestic violence victims will attend.

CHILDCARE:

Many African immigrant women have several young children to attend to and most don’t have the financial resources to consistently pay for childcare. Therefore, grant dollars would have to be secured to help cover childcare costs or subsidize childcare facilities at the meeting place. Without such a provision, interviewees said, women simply will not attend.

TEA/REFRESHMENTS:

Tea is used at the ceremony – almost in a spiritual, ritualistic way – to create an aromatic, peaceful and nurturing atmosphere that inspires women to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Without the custom and ceremony of preparing, tasting and critiquing the tea, the meeting is little more than a traditional support group.

8. HAVING ESTABLISHED A TEA CEREMONIES SUPPORT GROUP, HOW SHOULD THE TOPIC OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE BE INTRODUCED?

There is no term for “domestic violence” in many African languages, so some immigrant women have to be oriented or educated about DV and its meaning, interviewees said. Other women may consider it “shameful” or taboo to talk about domestic violence and sexual assault because they’ll be considered “traitors” to family and community if they do, Techlemarian added. African women are expected to endure all types of trauma, some interviewees said, because longstanding traditions of patriarchy and misogyny in many African cultures make the personal safety or fulfillment of women insignificant or secondary.

“This is why we create a very comfortable atmosphere and reassure them they are in a safe place,” Techlemarian said. “You have to build trust and create the proper atmosphere to work with them.” She said she starts by serving homemade bread to make the women feel comfortable. The aroma from spices in the tea helps conjure images of home, she said, creating a familial and comforting environment and helping to break the ice and encourage conversation before the session begins.

She then starts her sessions by explaining the importance of trust and confidentiality within the group. Without assurances of confidentiality, women will not feel comfortable sharing intimate details of their lives, she explains.

In Harlem, women socialize and discuss general topics or family issues before delving into domestic violence, Kourouma added. Matambanadzo said she’s also used dancing, singing, praying and storytelling as icebreakers for making women feel comfortable, welcome and secure.



When facilitating such a group session, relationship building comes before all else, Matambanadzo said. “Before you talk about domestic violence or issues affecting the women, you need to first build relationships, hold a few sessions about being together and talk about general things. And then have tea and socialize, and they will open up.”

Interviewees agreed that encouraging women to talk about general family topics or their personal life experiences are good icebreakers for group members. When discussing domestic violence, it should be introduced carefully and in a non-threatening way, Abdulle added.

“The talk should be about family empowerment, not domestic violence, because domestic violence comes under family empowerment,” she said.

Matambanadzo said the topic of domestic violence is easier to introduce to the group when specific case studies are reviewed and discussed. “This would be a great starting point that would encourage women to open up,” she said.

Women also could discuss safety while drinking tea, Kourouma said. The issues of safety and security are significant, she said, because some women may fear that their abuser might have them deported if they speak openly and honestly.

In her sessions, Fatima Porgho said she discusses gender roles first, and how women must adapt to working outside of the home while still being required to “meet their man’s expectations.” They also talk about challenges women are facing.

She starts by telling women the goal is to start a group “where women will support each other to better our lives.” She also recommends engaging in “tontyn” or “susu,” a popular activity in parts of Africa where women contribute a particular amount of money every month. And every month, one person in the group takes home all the money collected until every woman has collected.

Porgho said her sessions also include discussions about the role of Islam in family life and how some passages in the Qu’ran have been misinterpreted to justify domestic violence against women or rationalize female genital mutilation.

Kourouma agreed, adding: “We’re teaching them that domestic violence is not OK (and) that God doesn’t say that domestic violence is OK.”

Once women are comfortable revealing intimate details about their personal lives – details that include domestic violence – they will be less apprehensive about accepting referrals to agencies, shelters and organizations where they can get help, interviewees said. Such reluctance to utilize mainstream services must be overcome because many African immigrant and refugee women are uncomfortable sharing personal information with mainstream advocates who may not understand their values and customs, interviewees said.

Practitioners must learn to direct victims to programs that can provide comfort and security, but also understand the challenges to these women – including their reluctance to utilize mainstream services, interviewees said.

9. ULTIMATELY, WHAT COULD TEA CEREMONIES ACCOMPLISH?

At the end of the day, the ultimate objective of the tea ceremony is to create a secure, loving and nurturing environment for African immigrant women who've been beaten, sexually assaulted and otherwise abused to find support, security, personal fulfillment and peace, interviewees agreed.

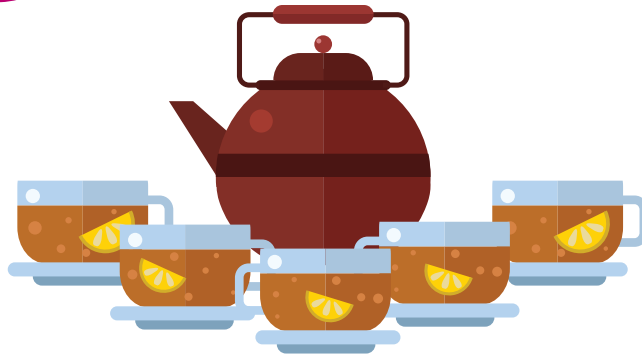
"We are not reinventing the wheel. We are just replicating a practice that was done back home," Matambanadzo said. "All we need is a reasonable budget to make it happen."

Mohamed agreed, adding that the personal crisis for many African immigrant women has reached epic proportions.

"The women we serve didn't come here for vacation," she said. "They came under difficult situations. Many come from war zones. Many were raped. Their husbands were killed. Their children were raped in front of them."

"Being a refugee is very hard, and many come with several traumas. They really need us," she added. "These tea ceremonies are not for socializing, but are really a way for these women to build back their lives."

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