

Food Security and Violence Against Women

Meanings of food and experiences of food insecurity among survivors accessing violence against women services during the COVID-19 pandemic



Power dynamics as barriers to food and achieving a sense of independence

The restriction and monitoring of food is used to abuse women.

- During pregnancy and early childhood, food was used to control survivors, with mothers feeling solely responsible for feeding their children.
- Survivors with precarious immigration status reported abusers restricting access to food to control them.
- Survivors viewed food choices as a sign of their independence and autonomy.



"She [my mother-in-law] used to hide food. What [can I] eat this time? Because I couldn't eat specific things in my pregnancy so. . . daily, I was crying, crying, crying, and nobody was there to listen to me...He said that you have to ignore my mother and now you have to live because you—I invited you here so you should live on my conditions here." -Survivor

Food supply, access, and quality greatly impacted perceptions of stays in VAW and homelessness shelters.

Lack of culturally relevant food creates barriers to support and can deter survivors from seeking services.



"For the food, they were not helping me because I'm vegan. They are not thinking about my health and that how it will impact my health that for 40 years I'm eating something else in my life." -Survivor

The transition out of shelters was marked by economic insecurity, with survivors facing systemic barriers to food access that undermined their independence and autonomy.



"So I can see that with my friend. She now has her house. But she's receiving some money from the government for the house, to pay the house, [. . .] for her basic needs and [. . .] for the children. And I am not going to have that help, right? So, so like I'm not going to have food. Because, you know, in the shelter I have food. I'm not going to have food. I'm not going to have a, like, an income, right?" -Survivor

Intersection between motherhood and food insecurity

Survivor participants who were mothers described how food and food insecurity during the pandemic impacted their ability to take on the role of provider for their children.



"Lunch, I had to figure out what lunch is and then I'm like, oh my God. Like, my kids are picky eaters. Almost every other day we're eating pizza or pasta. And I'm like [. . .] I can't even cook a different food for them because I have no stove." -Survivor



Reclaiming food independence and power after abusive situations.

Food independence was closely tied to positive experiences of empowerment in the shelter and during the transition.



"My daughter and I took a program where they fed us [. . .] We would take home bags of groceries and we would get a hot meal. And that was such a turning point that I want to share for you, because that helped to normalize the situation that we were in, because we were meeting other families. And it was really helpful because my daughter felt safe, because for her, food and smiles and hugs and no men meant safety. So that was a big step in our healing journey." -Survivor

Food programming was expressed as a connection to the community by VAW survivors.



"Food is such a glue or a conductor. People come, and whenever there's programming, there's food, people come...Food programming within VAW organizations also facilitated opportunities for survivors to create community with each other." -Staff



Recommendations

- VAW organizations need adequate funding to offer clients more autonomy in food preparation and provide culturally appropriate options.
- Increase emergency preparedness funding for VAW and cross-sector organizations to offer diverse food options and allow client autonomy in food prep during public health emergencies.
- Adopt gender-transformative policies in education, labor, and childcare to prevent VAW and food insecurity, especially for survivors.
- Social services providing food, clothing, and shelter are crucial after survivors leave abusive situations, with a focus on food autonomy.
- Social protection should be accessible to survivors, regardless of residential status, to reduce VAW and food insecurity risks.
- Ensure sustainable funding for VAW organizations to offer ongoing food programs, like food banks and cooking classes, during emergencies.

