

HIAS



Serving Haitian Newcomers

**A Practical Guide to Cultural and
Gender-Aware Considerations**

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HIAS supports women, girls, and LGBTQIA+ communities to access their full potential and live free from violence by supporting survivors, mitigating risks, and transforming beliefs that perpetuate gender-based violence.



Purpose of this Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to enhance service providers' understandings of gender awareness and specific cultural considerations when supporting **Haitian Newcomers**. It is intended to enhance the capacity to provide person-centered, trauma-informed services within the resettlement context. The information contained in this toolkit was generated from HIAS's cultural advisors who recommended areas of attention that service providers should bear in mind to ensure culturally and linguistically responsive services. The United States and Haiti share many commonalities and yet also have different social and cultural norms, along with differing gender dynamics, role expectations, and expectations of behavior.

Key Concepts

Culture is a set of shared values, beliefs, and norms in each society. Culture is dynamic and changes as societies adapt to new information, challenges, and circumstances. Although culture can form from group characteristics, even within the same cultures, individuals can have different social positions, ages, incomes, health statuses, class positions, and migration journeys.

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for girls, boys, women, and men.

Gender-sensitive describes an approach in which the unique needs, abilities, and opportunities of all individuals—regardless of their gender identity—are identified, considered and acknowledged.

Gender awareness is being conscious that men, women, boys, and girls have distinct roles, responsibilities, and needs and these have been socialized into our cultural worldviews.

Survivor-Centered Care

While this guide may be written to support our knowledge about working with individuals from **Haiti**, it is important to remember that **each survivor is unique and is the expert of their own life**.

We aim to provide empowering, survivor-centered services by truly listening to each survivor's desires, presenting options but not advice, allowing the survivor to make their own decisions and determine all courses of action and support.

Gender-Based Violence Programming Tips

How might you ensure that any GBV programming is culturally appropriate and responsive?

A comprehensive gender-based violence (GBV) intervention tailored for the Haitian community should encompass not only health and therapeutic support for survivors, but also an educational component targeting both survivors and the wider community, including men and women. The active involvement of men is crucial, considering the influence men have in decision making, homelife, and community life.

Recognizing the importance of community dynamics in Haitian culture, interventions should emphasize community-wide awareness campaigns, mobilization initiatives, security assessments, and the provision of dignity kits to women and girls in need, as suggested in the latest United Nations report on GBV in Haiti.¹ By engaging the entire community, including men, such interventions can effectively address the root causes of GBV and foster a culture of prevention and support.

What are important considerations when communicating about GBV to refugees, asylees, and immigrants?

The topic of GBV can be communicated effectively by sharing information and sending messages in an appropriate manner, through the facilitation of clear and timely exchanges within groups. Service providers should be mindful of the language used, providing key messaging, culturally relevant meanings, and specific examples alongside terminology. Providers should avoid stigmatization by promoting inclusivity, embracing diversity, challenging stereotypes, and treating others with empathy rather than judging them based on their differences.

How can you make GBV support inclusive to all?

Focus on behavior and harm: Frame discussions around GBV by emphasizing the harmful nature of the behavior and its impact on individuals and communities. This approach helps to shift the focus from stigmatizing individuals to addressing the problem itself.

Promote empathy and understanding: Foster empathy by emphasizing the importance of supporting survivors and creating a safe and inclusive environment. Encourage community members to recognize that anyone can be affected by GBV, and that support should be provided without judgment or blame.

Focus on systemic and cultural underpinnings: Highlight the underlying social, cultural, and systemic factors that contribute to GBV. By emphasizing that GBV is rooted in broader societal issues, the message becomes less targeted toward men individually and encourages collective responsibility.

Focus on behavior, not labeling individuals: Avoid labeling individuals as “bad people” or assigning blame. Instead, emphasize that certain behaviors are harmful and that everyone has a role to play in challenging and preventing those behaviors.



Frame the discussion around opportunities and challenges: Highlight the opportunities and challenges that arise in the new context, rather than focus solely on the perceived “shifts” in gender expectations. Discuss the advantages of both women and men contributing to the workforce, such as increased financial stability, shared responsibilities, and opportunities for personal growth and independence.

Acknowledge economic realities: Help community members understand the economic realities and costs of living in the United States. Discuss the rising costs of living, the need for education and skills to secure employment, and the changing dynamics of the labor market. Emphasize the importance of adapting to these realities for the well-being and stability of the family. Create workshops that teach financial literacy.

Address concerns and challenges: Provide a platform for community members to express their concerns, fears, or challenges related to shifts in gender expectations. Address their concerns openly and provide information or resources that can help alleviate their worries. Offer support and guidance in navigating the new cultural landscape while preserving their cultural values and identity.

Important Reminders

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) affects all people.

Gender-based violence is prevalent globally, in all societies in the world.

We must be led by the survivor's choices and consent as to who the survivor wants to know what is happening in the survivor's life.

We follow the GBV guiding principles of the survivor's right to confidentiality, safety, self-determination and respect and non-discrimination in all our actions.

Highlight benefits for men: Emphasize the benefits that men can experience when sharing household responsibilities and financial burdens. Discuss how this can lead to stronger family bonds, more time for personal pursuits, and reduced stress from being the sole provider, especially on minimum wage.²

Include scenarios and role models: Share success stories of individuals and families who have adapted to new gender expectations and found positive outcomes. Highlight role models who have challenged traditional gender norms and achieved success in various aspects of life.

Cultural Considerations

Culture is not static or universal—it is constantly changing over time. In many cultures, age and gender may influence an individual's power, status, or expected role and authority in society. Cultural factors, including attitudes and beliefs, can determine the type of support an individual can anticipate receiving from their family, community, and society when it comes to experiencing violence in the family, or community. The following aspects of culture influence how someone is expected

to think, behave, and act. These may influence how someone experiences GBV and their expectations of how persons may respond.³

Bear in Mind

Cultural adjustment: Refugees who recently arrived may face greater challenges in terms of language barriers, unfamiliarity with local systems, and limited social networks. They may require more assistance in navigating available services and understanding their rights. In contrast, refugees who have been in the country for a longer period may have had more opportunities for integration, language acquisition, and building social connections, which can influence their ability to seek and access support for GBV.

Language barriers may prohibit access: Language barriers can pose significant obstacles to Haitians seeking access to GBV services in the United States. Limited proficiency in English or French, the predominant languages of many service providers, can hinder effective communication and understanding of available resources and support systems. This challenge may particularly affect Haitian immigrants who primarily speak Haitian Creole. Language barriers contribute to disparities in accessing healthcare and social services among Haitian immigrants in the U.S., exacerbating their vulnerability to GBV and hindering their ability to seek help and support.

Language access and support: The use of an interpreter can be valuable for individuals who do not speak English. However, in many cases, Haitian parents prefer to have their children, when possible, accompany them and serve as translators during appointments.⁴

Common Haitian languages: Haiti's linguistic landscape is predominantly influenced by its colonial history, with Haitian Creole and French being the official languages. While French serves as the primary language of administration and education, Haitian Creole is widely spoken among the populace. Additionally, due to its proximity to the Dominican Republic,

particularly along the border regions, Spanish is also spoken by some Haitians. This linguistic diversity reflects the historical and geographical connections between the two nations.⁵

Educational background: The Haitian education system is characterized by a division between public and private institutions, with over 80% of primary schools being privately owned.⁶ This schism has led to a significant disparity in the quality of education provided across these different types of establishments. Public school students often face inadequate infrastructure, with classrooms sometimes being makeshift spaces in houses, outdoors, or within churches, or in some cases, no access to schooling at all in certain regions.

Despite a 57% enrollment rate in primary schools, only 20% of eligible-age students attend secondary schools. The literacy rate for Haitians aged 15-24 stands at 83%, but approximately half of the adult population remains illiterate.⁷ Notably, Haitian women exhibit a lower literacy rate of 57% compared to men, who range between 61-64%. Despite challenges, there has been progress, especially for girls and young women, with increased attendance rates in both urban and rural areas between 2012 and 2017.⁸

However, gender disparities persist, particularly in rural areas where women are more likely to have no education compared to men. Factors such as menstruation-related needs, balancing school with household chores, and the prevalence of sexual harassment contribute to these disparities, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address the unique challenges faced by girls and young women in Haiti's education system.

Learning and processing styles: Various methods such as storytelling, songs, and games are integral parts of the educational process. The influence of elders and community leaders also plays a significant role. Within the classroom, collaboration is emphasized, with students encouraged to learn from the teacher



and then engage in group activities to teach one another.

The concept of time: Traditionally, Haitian culture has not placed a strong emphasis on punctuality or adhering to schedules. Arriving late for appointments is not viewed as impolite, and there's a general acceptance that everyone and everything can wait. To cope with this lack of time orientation, people often adjust the timing of activities. For instance, invitations for events may list an earlier start time than intended, allowing for a more flexible arrival. However, in medical contexts, it's crucial to stress the importance of adhering to a clinic's schedule. Patients should be reminded to attend their appointments and complete their treatments fully, as there's a tendency to discontinue treatment once they start feeling better. This emphasis on timely medical care underscores the significance of maintaining



consistency in healthcare practices despite cultural norms surrounding time.⁹

Communication styles: Haitians often incorporate hand gestures to enhance their verbal communication, with gestures and tone of voice becoming more emphasized during conversation. Hand gestures primarily serve as supplements to spoken words, while touch and direct eye contact are also common elements in both informal and formal discussions. In Haitian culture, tactile interactions are interpreted as expressions of friendship and do not infringe upon personal boundaries. Similarly, direct eye contact is employed to command attention and demonstrate respect towards the interlocutor. These cultural practices mirror those found in the United States, where touch and eye contact similarly convey friendship and respect in conversation.¹⁰

Importance of relationships, family, and friends: Haitian culture prioritizes family, whether in Haiti or the United States, with common-law marriages often giving fathers freedom and mothers shouldering most family responsibilities. Families extend beyond the nuclear unit, resembling small communities, with godparents exerting influence. Rural or economically disadvantaged families often exhibit matriarchal tendencies, prioritizing

the needs of children and maintaining strong parental authority even as children reach adulthood. Children are regarded as reflections of the family, with their successes or failures perceived as directly impacting familial honor. Immigration may lead to temporary separations, underscoring family unity's importance. Single-parent households are prevalent among Haitian immigrants, who lack extended family support. Traditional Haitian parents influence their children's life choices. Sharing is ingrained in Haitian culture, with immigrants primarily socializing with fellow Haitians and maintaining loyalty to family back in Haiti. Maintaining ties with Haiti remains central, with legal immigrants often spending holidays there, while illegal immigrants face isolation, diverging from Haiti's emphasis on extended family and community closeness.¹¹

Interpersonal relationships: Haitians are renowned for their friendly nature, and it is culturally acceptable to engage in physical touch while conversing. Demonstrating affection through gestures like hugging or kissing is common and widely practiced among Haitians.¹² However, this practice may differ as a cultural norm in the United States. Consent and caution should be used when engaging in physical touch.

Gender Roles and Societal Expectations

Women and Girls

Women and girls serve as the cornerstone of both Haitian society and the local economy. Nearly half of households are led by women, who play indispensable roles in economic activities such as street vending and supporting agricultural supply chains. Despite their significant contributions, women and girls encounter enduring inequalities and are disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence.

While concrete data information about GBV is difficult to obtain, a study by the Universal

Provider Tip

Incorporating culturally relevant **socio-emotional learning components** can support women and girls in gaining valuable skills in advocating for themselves, gaining autonomy, and learning systems of managing stress and mental health issues. Do not assume that living in the United States shifts these notions of gender roles and expectations, as there are many gender role issues in institutions (church, governments, legal system etc.), media, and society at large in the U.S.

Periodic Review of Haiti, comprised of several non-governmental organizations, identified that about 70 percent of Haitian women and girls survived a form of gender-based violence.¹³

In Haiti, the most common form of gender-based violence is sexual violence, particularly against women and girls. This includes forced sex, rape, gang rape, and sexual assault. There has been a rise in gang violence and political instability in recent years, which has led to a surge in GBV, due to displacement and a collapse of local supportive services, such as health care. In particular, sexual violence has been used as a fear tactic for extortion, gaining of control, and punishment of local communities.¹⁴

Survivors of gender-based violence are often blamed and stigmatized, which renders their seeking of justice, medical, or legal supports limited.¹⁵ Survivors report experiencing intimidation about maintaining their silence about the abuse, in particular those who experienced gender-based violence by gang members or police officials.¹⁶

Daily life: Women in Haiti play a pivotal role in society. In addition to managing their households, women contribute to various sectors regardless of their educational background. They serve

as caregivers, “Madan Sara” (market women), educators, and healthcare professionals such as doctors and nurses, among other roles.¹⁷

It’s important to note that while Haiti faces economic challenges, not all women immigrants to the U.S. leave solely due to financial reasons. Many were accomplished professionals in their home country and migrated to the U.S. seeking security amidst instability back home.

Gender norms and expectations: Traditional gender roles in Haiti frequently undermine women’s rights, constraining their ability to make autonomous reproductive choices and participate in decision-making within intimate partnerships.¹⁸ Traditionally, women are assigned caregiving and household duties, while men are expected to be the primary earners. However, societal shifts are occurring as more women enter the workforce and gain independence. Despite these changes, perceptions persist that if a woman were to outearn her husband, it could disrupt family dynamics, potentially leading to conflicts as she assumes a position of authority and decision-making power.

Ideas and Expectations about Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE)

In Haiti, the LGBTQI+ community encounters significant prejudice, which detrimentally impacts various aspects of their lives. Discrimination casts a shadow over opportunities for education and employment, while accessing healthcare services becomes a challenging ordeal.¹⁹

Common perceptions: While same-sex relationships are legal in Haiti, many gaps remain in the protection of the LGBTQ+ community.²⁰ Administrators in the legal system sometimes deny the issuance of certain administrative documentation required by employment and educational institutions for individuals of the LGBTQI+ community.

Societally, the LBGQTQI+ individuals experience threats to their safety, discrimination, stigmatization, and moral condemnation in

the community.²¹ A local NGO supporting the rights of the LGBTQI+ community identified that the majority of LGBTQI+ individuals experience a negative perception and are often excluded from certain aspects of society.²² There is a belief that the lifestyle of gender and sexual minorities was “imported” from abroad to Haiti, and that it is a Western imposition on Haitian societal norms.²³ Certain terminology to stigmatize this community exists, such as Masisi, for a person not ascribing to the masculine gender norm, or Madvin, for a feminine individual engaging in homosexual relationships.²⁴ There is also stigma for men who have sex with men and who are HIV positive. While Haiti has the highest rate of HIV positive cases in the Caribbean, LGBTQI+ individuals are underserved in terms of HIV prevention and care.²⁵

Ideas about Reproduction and Decision Making, as well as Sexual and Reproductive Health

In Haiti, beliefs about reproduction, decision making, and sexual and reproductive health are deeply ingrained in cultural norms and societal expectations. Traditional gender roles often give men more authority in family planning decisions, creating barriers for women to access reproductive healthcare and make independent choices about their reproductive well-being. Moreover, discussions about sexual and reproductive health are often considered taboo, resulting in limited awareness and education on topics such as contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and menstrual health. However, ongoing efforts by organizations aim to address these challenges by increasing access to reproductive healthcare services and providing comprehensive sexual education.²⁶ These initiatives strive to empower individuals to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, ultimately promoting overall well-being in Haitian communities.

Help-Seeking Behavior

Haitians typically turn to their peers for support before considering professional help. While they may seek assistance for certain conditions,

Women and Girls with Disabilities

People with disabilities may face multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization based on their disability and other social identities.

Responses to GBV need to consider the unique needs and challenges experienced by individuals at this intersection. Services and support systems need to be accessible for people with disabilities, including physical accessibility, communication support, and accommodations for various disabilities.

Cultural beliefs and attitudes toward disability can influence how GBV is perceived and addressed. Negative stereotypes or infantilization of people with disabilities may lead to their experiences being trivialized or dismissed.

they often avoid seeking help for issues they associate with shame, which can affect both the individual and their family. Consequently, they may choose to ignore such issues rather than confront them openly.

Religious or Spiritual Beliefs

Christianity, predominantly Catholicism, holds sway in Haiti, stemming from European influences during the country’s settlement and population. While most Haitian Christians adhere to Catholicism, a smaller portion identifies as Protestant. However, alongside Christianity, the cultural practice of Voodoo also coexists in Haitian society.²⁷

Support systems within religious communities:

Faith communities often provide social support networks for their members. Religious institutions and leaders can play a crucial role in offering community, guidance, and support

services to survivors of GBV. It is always best to get a sense of how gender-based violence issues are perceived by any faith or trusted community leader.

If using religious leaders or faith-based organizations to support GBV survivors:

Faith-based organizations and churches play a crucial role in supporting gender-based violence survivors in Haiti. With their widespread presence and deep-rooted influence in communities, these organizations provide essential services such as counseling, shelter, and advocacy for survivors. They offer a safe space for individuals to seek refuge, share their experiences, and access resources for healing and recovery.²⁸

If religious leaders or faith-based organizations are used to support GBV survivors in this community, ensure there is a process that vets individuals and organizations to avoid perpetuating harmful practices or beliefs. In many cultures, beliefs regarding the cause of distress are related to one's explanatory belief system. Some people may hold beliefs related to mental health or disability as being caused by karma, an imbalance of energy, problems in the spirit realm, witchcraft, and more. What one believes may be causing harm may then dictate what one believes to be supportive for their health and wellbeing. Understanding the belief system of one's clients allows for tailored support that considers the needs and wellbeing of the whole person.

Role of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Haitian culture reflects resilience and community solidarity but also harbors a tendency to hold grudges, rooted in historical and cultural factors such as political instability and social injustices. The collective memory of colonialism and oppression has led individuals to harbor resentments toward perceived wrongdoers. Cultural values like honor exacerbate this trait, causing disputes to linger unresolved. Proverbs like “Bay kou, bliye; pote mak, sonje” (Give a blow, forget; leave marks, remember) and “Envite miyò pase mande padon” (Avoiding

a situation is better than asking forgiveness) underscore the cultural significance of holding grudges.²⁹

As GBV is widespread in Haiti, forgiveness and reconciliation towards perpetrators may be challenging for individuals who survived the violence.

Cultural Humility Model for Providers

Dr. Arthur Kleinman, psychiatrist, social anthropologist, and professor of medical anthropology, poses eight questions as a model designed for providers to better understand individuals and their needs.³⁰ This model can be used within the resettlement context as well. As with survivor-led care, Kleinman's approach centers the individual seeking support and encourages the provider to set aside assumptions and implicit biases while striving for cultural humility.

Dr. Arthur Kleinman's Eight Questions³¹

- What do you call your problem? What name do you give it?
- What do you think has caused it?
- Why did it start when it did?
- What does your sickness do to your body?
- How does it work inside you?
- How severe is it? Will it get better soon or take longer?
- What do you fear most about your sickness?
- What are the chief problems your sickness has caused for you (personally, family, work, etc.)?
- What kind of treatment do you think you should receive? What are the most important results you hope to receive from the treatment?

Resources

Sexual and reproductive health, 2021, UNFPA Haiti

Understanding the Journey of Cuban and Haitian Entrants

Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Haiti

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