

Immigrant wife abuse often a hidden shame: Immigration issues form a daunting backdrop

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The first time her screams brought police to the house in Lakewood, Ohio, the woman lied to authorities. She told the officers that her husband did not strike her.

She was thinking of her Muslim immigrant community and the role she was expected to play: faithful wife, submissive mother. Mostly she was thinking of her children and how she would support them without an income.

The night the police came back, she did not have to weigh what to say. She heard her enraged husband admit that, yes, he smacked his wife. He owned her. He could hit her.

“No, you cannot,” she recalls the officer answering, and he led her husband out of the house and out of her life.

The woman asked that her identity be protected because she fears that she might further anger her husband or his family. She is a Palestinian Muslim who last year took a step almost unheard-of in her community—she declared herself a victim of domestic violence, secured an order of protection against her husband and filed for divorce.

Advocates for immigrant women hope that more battered wives and girlfriends will follow this woman’s path, even though they understand why many see her steps as daring, even impossible.

Recently an unprecedented coalition of women has come together in the Cleveland area to confront domestic violence in their immigrant communities. They hope to throw a lifeline to victims—even to those reluctant to be rescued.

It requires courage for any woman to leave an abusive household and seek help from strangers, but immigrant women often must summon a special valor. They are more likely to live in seclusion, far from friends or family. Often they do not speak English, work or drive a car. Frequently they see themselves as at the mercy of the man who brought them here. And they may belong to a subculture slow to acknowledge their troubles.

“It’s a devastating problem for every victim,” said Mira Kramarovsky, a family-violence specialist for the Jewish Family Service Association of Cleveland. “But when you don’t know the language, and you’re afraid of everything—even your partner—it’s even worse.”

The Jewish community was among the first to address domestic violence within the region’s insular immigrant groups. It saw the problem flare up with the influx of Russian Jews in the 1990s and the later infusion of mail-order brides, many of them Russian women who met local men over the Internet.

Immigrants are no more likely to suffer abuse than other American women, experts say, but are less likely to see a way out. They tend to be isolated, unsure and perhaps reliant on their husband for their visa. “It’s harder for immigrant women to get safe,” said Cathleen Alexander, executive director of the Domestic Violence Center, which runs Cuyahoga County’s domestic-violence program.

Often the problem gets aired only when someone makes headlines.

Julia Shearson, an activist in the local Muslim community, resolved to learn more about household abuse after championing the cause of Amina Silmi, a Palestinian mother deported to Venezuela in 2004.

Silmi had entered the country legally, but her husband never sponsored her application for permanent residency. Shearson believes that he used Silmi's fragile immigration status to trap her in an abusive home.

Last November, the husband and mother-in-law of Sejal Patel of Twinsburg, Ohio, were convicted of strangling her—a crime motivated in part by her family's refusal to pay a larger dowry. "Domestic violence happens in every culture," said Vijaya Emani, an immigrant from India. "With us, it gets a little bit complicated."

Emani, herself a survivor of domestic violence, advises the frightened young wives who call her to go to school, where they can meet counselors. She and other advocates for battered immigrant women say education is the key to breaking down barriers to help. But it's a quest fraught with sensitive issues.

The Palestinian mother from Lakewood, like Emani, long resisted calling her violent husband abusive. She said she believes that the Qur'an allows her husband to strike her. She simply thinks he went too far. That view alarms advocates like Shearson, who is pushing a more progressive interpretation of the Muslim holy book.

Emani said when she finally reported her husband to the police, many in her community shunned her. So she understands, she said, why women suffer silently.

Immigration issues often form a daunting backdrop. Domestic violence is a deportable offense. "We tell our women, 'The first time that you call the police is probably the last time that you'll see your husband,'" said Veronica Dahlberg, who counsels Mexican immigrant women. Still, she said, "I always tell them to call." —
Robert L. Smith, Religion News Service