

# *Women's eNews*

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## **Asian Pacific Women Find New Refuges From Abuse**

**By Pamela Burke, WeNews Correspondent**

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (WOMENSENEWS) – The one-story house blends into the community as all the others do that face this street in Sacramento, one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the United States. The calm on the outside masks the terror that the women living inside have faced in their own homes. Locks are changed often here.

Some of the residents had husbands who beat them. Others were forbidden to leave their own houses. One woman managed to escape, but without any changes of clothing or crucial papers or money. Several were warned by husbands that if they tried to end their marriages, they would be deported. Some of those with children were told they would have to leave the country without them.

This is a temporary home known as My Sister's House, one of the few shelters in California that focuses specifically on battered Asian and Pacific Islander women and their children. Its goals are to provide a safe haven and to eliminate domestic violence in California's Central Valley, an area two-fifths the size of the state with a population that is one-fifth Asian and Pacific Islander. Heightened community awareness of this abuse and the proliferation of Internet marriages have increased the need for services and shelters here. The Asian Women's Shelter in nearby San Francisco turns away as many as 80 percent of the battered women who call for shelter because of lack of space.

"Asian leaders saw that women were staying in their abusive situations rather than getting help," says Nilda Valmores, executive director of the shelter. The women would describe abusive incidents as "people are fighting" because their languages lacked the words for "domestic violence." The shelter was named My Sister's House because that concept can be readily translated into the more than 20 Asian Pacific Island languages spoken here.

Founders rented a property in 2003 where six women and their children could live up to 90 days. In less than three years of operation, the shelter has provided almost 4,000 bed nights for these survivors of domestic abuse. During the last fiscal year, it assisted almost 300 callers on its emergency help line and helped more than 130 women to find work in such fields as education, government and the housing business.

“We don’t have enough resources to give a room to everyone who wants it,” says Gloria Ochoa, a lawyer and board member of My Sister’s House. “We’re basically full every night of the year.”

### **Foreign Women on the Market**

Some of the Asian women who wind up seeking a safe haven found their abusive mates over the Internet, through international marriage brokers. More than 400 U.S.-based Web sites market foreign women looking for husbands. It’s estimated that between 9,500 and 14,000 men find foreign wives using these outfits.

A federal law that took effect March 6 is designed to curb the abuse that women in such marriages often encounter. The International Marriage Broker Regulation Act enables foreign women to learn about the marital and criminal history of prospective husbands and details the rights and resources available to domestic violence victims in the United States.

“The law provides lifesaving information to women who can then make informed choices,” says Layli Miller-Muro, executive director of The Tahirih Justice Center, a legal services organization for immigrant women in Falls Church, Va., that drafted the legislation. “Asian women were the original women solicited by these international marriage brokers and they still are a large portion of the marriage broker industry. I see women who are extremely fearful and very battered who could have been helped by this new law.”

### **New Law Criticized by Brokers**

Some marriage brokers call the law unconstitutional, claiming it takes away the privacy rights of U.S. men, few of whom are either criminals or abusive.

Miller-Muro says the new legislation doesn’t prevent marriage. “Men seeking foreign brides seem to fear women getting to know them,” she says. “These are supposed to be relationships for the purpose of marriage. It should not be easier to find a wife than to rent an apartment.”

While the Violence Against Women Act says abused immigrants can be eligible for legal resident status, Tammi Wong, a lawyer for Legal Services of Northern California in Sacramento, says few women understand their rights unless they seek counsel. For many women, meanwhile, filing for legal status is daunting, lengthy and expensive. Wong says some of her clients started filing in 2004 and – while approved under the law’s provisions – are still waiting to receive cards. “The hardest part is the waiting,” she says. “These women are in limbo and every day they are trying to feed their children and survive on their own.”

### **High Rates of Abuse**

Statistics vary on the prevalence of domestic violence against Asian Pacific women, as they do for all U.S. women, but some studies suggest it is much higher than the overall rate for U.S. women.

While the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence estimates that 25 percent of all U.S. women are victims of domestic violence at some time during their adulthoods, research compiled by the Asian and Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence in San Francisco estimates that same figure at between 41 percent and 60 percent for Asian women.

At 29, Betty – who goes by an assumed name because she fears her husband will locate her – was once a successful businesswoman in China.

But Betty felt a cultural pressure to find a husband. She advertised on a Web site that offered matchmaking services. Eighteen months later she was married to an American man and living in the United States without a job or money of her own.

“For two months he told me I couldn’t go outside, that I would get shot,” she says. “He forced sex on me every night and told me I would be deported if I left.”

Betty escaped to My Sister’s House after being threatened both physically and mentally. She is still so terrified that she won’t go out at night and sobs when talking about her situation. Now she shares an apartment, manages her own money and is a student.

“I feel there are many people that will help me now,” she says. “I’m still scared he will find me but I don’t have to live with his lies thanks to the shelter.”

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For more information:

“New Law Puts Brakes on International Bride Brokers”  
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2659/>

My Sister’s House: <http://www.my-sisters-house.org>

The Asian and Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence:  
<http://www.apiahf.org/apidvinstitute/>

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