

# *Women's eNews*

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## **More Services Reach Abused Immigrant Women**

**By Juliette Terzieff, WeNews correspondent**

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WOMENSENEWS) – For years Mari, who still uses a pseudonym, cowered under the abusive tirades and beatings of her jealous husband.

Cut off from family and friends after the couple emigrated from Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, Mari worried whether she'd be able to complete her citizenship application and maintain custody of her two children if her marriage disintegrated. She could not speak English well and she worried about how she would provide for her children if the marriage ended. Mari had always turned over her housecleaning earnings to her husband and had no savings and little knowledge of balancing a household's check book.

“There was just too much to deal with,” Mari recalls. “Every time I thought about leaving, the dangers and the uncertainties would overwhelm me. It just seemed impossible.”

Three years ago a concerned co-worker encouraged Mari to seek outside help through the local branch of the Young Women's Christian Association. From there she was steered to legal and emotional counseling that helped her figure out how to leave her violent marriage.

Mari now works as an administrative assistant in a busy office and attends night classes at a Buffalo university. She is pursuing a business administration degree while juggling schedules for her children's extracurricular activities.

“It gets pretty crazy sometimes, but it's wonderful,” says the 36-year old.

### **Stories Multiplying**

Stories like Mari's are multiplying around the United States as immigrant women experiencing domestic violence have begun taking more steps to end their abuse, encouraged by a huge increase in the amount of help available to them. “Prior to 1993, there were no more than 50 organizations across the country providing help to immigrants, now there are more than 3,000,” says Leslye Orloff, the director of the Immigrant Women Program at Legal Momentum, a national legal advocacy group based

in New York City. “The real issue is immigrant women’s ability to get out of abusive relationships is more impaired, so they tend to be trapped longer.”

The first federal initiative to protect domestic violence victims – the \$1.6 billion Violence Against Women Act of 1994 – spurred many of the new programs now available, especially after 2000, when Congress amended the act to provide legal immigration options for abused women regardless of their abusers’ immigration status. Further expansion of the act is under consideration in congress and set to be voted on in September.

### **Similar Triggers**

Immigrant families face similar triggers for domestic violence – the impending birth of a child, a sudden loss of employment and abuse of alcohol or drugs – as any American family. But they also face linguistic, cultural and societal barriers that make them feel isolated as they struggle to make a new life.

“You’re talking about people who were doctors or lawyers in their home country, having to start at the beginning again, while women, who were previously dependent on their husbands may become independent and bread winners,” says May Shogan, client services coordinator at the domestic violence program of the International Institute of Buffalo, N.Y., Inc., which aids dozens of immigrant families each year by providing English language lessons, trained interpreters in 75 languages, counseling and other forms of assistance. “This can create a lot of tension, anger, and resentment within the family.”

“The entire family dynamic is altered,” Shogan continues. “Frustration rises and with the combination of all the logistical difficulties outside the home. The one thing the man can control is his family, even if that means doing so through violence.”

In cases of proven abuse, a woman married to a U.S. citizen can petition for citizenship under the anti-violence law. A women married to non-citizen may apply for a “U Visa,” that may provide her legal resident status and the potential for eventual citizenship, as long as she cooperates with authorities in the criminal and other investigations of the alleged violence.

### **Funding Access Questions**

Advocates for battered immigrant women have a shopping list of improvements they would like to see in the next version of the anti-violence law. Items include better training for law enforcement personnel, more counselors and interpreters and better services for job placement and housing.

English classes, job training, job retention and vocational education topped the list of services battered immigrant women use the most where available, according to a survey by the San Francisco-based Equal Rights Advocates. Twenty-five percent of the

respondents reported their lack of English was a barrier to receiving services and finding employment.

### **Reporting Gap Persists**

Abuse is a common problem to women of every race, with advocates saying studies consistently show that somewhere between 32 percent and 49 percent of all women experiencing abuse at some point during their lifetimes. The difference is in their willingness to publicly declare the abuse and seek official help.

While 55 percent of U.S. women who have experienced abuse will officially report the violence when it occurs, according to Department of Justice studies, that figure is just over 30 percent for immigrant women with legal U.S. status. Only 14 percent of illegal or undocumented women will officially report the abuse. (While the remaining undocumented women often seek help, it is through confidential assistance from aid organizations, family or friends, rather through official reporting channels.)

With population projections showing that by the year 2040, 27 percent of the American population will be immigrants or the children of immigrants, the problem haunts domestic violence workers

“Improvements have been made to deal with this issue,” says the International Institute’s Shogan. “As the numbers of immigrants grows, so does the need, and we’re going to have to fight hard to get, and stay, ahead of it.”

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### **For more information:**

USA Today – Domestic Abuse Rises Among Illegal Immigrants

[http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-03-01-abuse\\_x.htm?csp=36](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-03-01-abuse_x.htm?csp=36)

Western Criminology Review – Battered Immigrant Women and the Legal System

[Adobe PDF format] <http://wcr.sonoma.edu/v4n2/manuscripts/erezhartley.pdf>

New Violence Bill to Give Programs More Funds

<http://womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2393/>

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