

# Des Moines Register (IA)

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## **Silent, scared prisoners; Immigrant women, caught in abusive relationships by men who use their vulnerabilities against them, become . . .**

By Bill Reiter

She's in line next to you at the store. She's your bank teller, your neighbor, your co-worker, the woman who sells you lunch. Like many victims of domestic violence, she hides her bruises. She fears the man she loves and wants to believe he can change. But this victim also is unusual. She came to this country to find a better life. Instead, she found herself trapped. Hers is one of hundreds of stories of domestic violence that advocates believe play out every day across Iowa.

Veronica Camacho has done what she can to make her apartment a shelter from the past.

She keeps the location a secret and refuses to have her address listed. That way, she hopes, her former boyfriend can never find her again.

The place is meticulously organized. Spices in her cupboard are arranged with obsessive devotion. No spot of dirt touches the white futon or the light gray carpet. The CDs are arranged just the way she wants them, the music at the volume she chooses.

It has become a small, shining space that seems out of place in the dingy building.

But, try as she might, she can't escape her past. Nightmares of her former boyfriend haunt her in which she sees him pushing her, biting her, kicking her.

The order she forces on the small apartment she shares with her 3-year-old daughter is a consequence of what happened to her. Only someone who has lost control over her life, as Veronica did, would so intensely relish choosing where the chile pasilla and garlic salt are stored, or what CD she plays after work.

The 33-year-old was a strong, independent woman before she left Mexico and came to America on a tourist visa, hoping to learn English. Before she met Ryan Barton.

In an interview, Barton acknowledged that he abused Veronica "innumerable" times during their relationship.

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“Believe me, I feel an overwhelming compunction for what happened,” he said. “I’m extremely sorry for what happened. . . . I regret very much that I hurt her emotionally and physically on numerous occasions.”

He insists he never threatened to have Veronica deported if she called the police, though he said he did contact immigration authorities to report suspicions he said he had about her.

Veronica claims violence was never a part of her life before meeting Ryan.

“In my family, we never had abuse. Never,” Veronica said. “When I moved here, and I met him, he was nice, charming, smart. You never would have guessed.”

Now, she is a stranger to the person she used to be. Veronica struggles to reconcile who she was with who she has become – a victim of domestic violence. Her uncertain immigration status, lack of English and isolation in America have made her vulnerable to a relationship that damaged her life.

She’s not the only one.

The promise of something better draws thousands like Veronica to this country. Without legal residence status, many have found themselves preyed on by men who hold them prisoner in relationships from which they cannot escape, say immigrant women, advocates and law enforcement officials.

The result has been a disturbing trend that has emerged over the past 20 years – immigrant women trapped in abusive relationships by men who may use their vulnerabilities against them. Those who track the problem say it is difficult to know how many women are victimized because of their immigration status.

What they do know, they say, is that many cases are unreported and more women are in need than they can help.

Veronica was once a part of this unseen group. She was scared, alone, unsure where to turn. Even today, after escaping the abuse, she believes she has lost a part of herself and will never get it back.

But it is better than it could be. She has escaped, and she swears she’ll never again be a vulnerable victim.

To make certain, she hangs a list on her refrigerator of 10 things she hopes for in her next relationship, if she can ever trust again. In her careful handwriting, the list reads: 1) Love/passion; 2) Respect; 3) Freedom/emotional support; 4) Independence; 5) Respect my time with (daughter) Ailene; 6) Trust my partner; 7) Confidence; 8) Communication; 9) Privacy; and 10) Friendship.

On the door, near the list, is a picture of St. Jude, the patron saint of hopeless causes.

Hope and hopelessness define her story, and the stories of those others like her.

In 1997, Veronica Camacho was 26 and living in Cuernavaca Morelos, Mexico. She was highly educated, independent and funny. She cherished family above everything.

She wanted to learn English for a master's degree that required the language, so she decided to move to America. Iowa, she'd heard, was a good place: safe, affordable, filled with kind people.

But there was a dark side to being an immigrant that Veronica did not know about.

“Immigrant women are more at risk because there are more ways to take advantage of them,” said Karen Reinecke, who works as a case manager at La Clinica de la Esperanza, which provides medical services to Polk County's Spanish-speakers. Many of their patients, perhaps dozens each year, are believed to be victims of domestic abuse.

In Iowa, these women often end up with men who threaten them with deportation, withhold information about their rights and take advantage of the isolation that comes with being alone in a strange country and unable to speak the language, say victims, advocates and law enforcement officials.

Among them:

- A Mexican woman in her early 40s who moved to Iowa with her Mexican husband. Over a 13-year period, he beat her and threatened to have her deported if she turned him in. He had legal status, officials say, and she did not. She was beaten, raped and stabbed before leaving him. He is now in prison. She is struggling to support their three children and waiting for legal status to remain in the country.
- A Mexican woman in central Iowa who lost her unborn baby when her abuser threw her from a moving car. The Mexican man was deported, but officials say he has since returned to Iowa.
- More than 40 Asian mail-order brides in Sioux City who were brought here by Asian-American men who are U.S. citizens. Officials say almost all found themselves in abusive relationships. The life of Tom LoVan, an area pastor and Asian outreach worker, was threatened after he tried to help the women, according to officials. LoVan declined to comment for this story.
- A 40-year-old woman from Monterey, Mexico, who moved to a small Iowa town. She met and married an American man who forbade her to contact her family, talk to others, leave the house or learn English. Officials say he hit her and cut her with razor blades. She eventually ran away. Terrified of him and of living here, she returned to Mexico.

In response to cases such as these, the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence began a program in 2000 for immigrant women and children. Initially, they served 160 victims. By 2002, that number had jumped to 268.

The program's director, Sonia Parras Konrad, helped victims while a student at Drake Law School from 1997 to 2000. Her caseload, she said, doubled each of those years.

"We have had cases of women being thrown out the window," Parras Konrad said. "These cases can be really brutal."

Officials believe the number of reported cases of domestic violence against immigrant women barely scratches the surface. With an estimated 25,000 immigrants coming to Iowa between 2001 and 2003, according to U.S. census data, officials believe these cases are becoming more frequent.

"The problem is the ones you don't see," said Jim Benzoni, a Des Moines immigration lawyer. "The problem is absolutely mind-boggling."

Within some segments of society, Veronica would draw little sympathy. She was at times in the country illegally. But U.S. laws against assault and abuse are not reserved for U.S. citizens.

If anything, advocates point out, immigrant women represent an outstanding example of the basic vulnerabilities that perpetuate domestic abuse, whether the victims are citizens or noncitizens.

None of this crossed Veronica's mind when she came to America in 1997 on a tourist visa.

"I thought I could learn English here," she said. "I had so much hope. I had a plan."

Life was an adventure -getting lost while driving, seeing new things, meeting new people, slowly learning English.

She enrolled in classes at Des Moines Area Community College and, needing money for school, went downtown and applied for a student visa that would allow her to work in the country.

Her request was rejected, she said, but she found jobs as a waitress and in health care. She said she didn't want to leave America, believing it would provide her a better life than Mexico could. Working long hours, saving money, trying to master the language, she moved forward with her life.

By 2000, she had a roommate, a steady job and friends.

Then she met Ryan Barton.

He was tall and handsome, she remembers. He wore glasses and had chiseled features that framed dark, lively eyes, she said.

Since coming to the United States three years earlier, Veronica said, she had not dated once.

Suddenly in May 2000, she said, this man kept calling. He was charming, kind, interesting. And he was interested in her. One evening, they went to Papa's Planet, with Veronica driving herself and Ryan catching a ride with a buddy. They wound up outside Veronica's studio apartment and, a bit abruptly, she closed the door.

In the morning, she opened her front door. There he was, standing outside with coffee and flowers.

Baby carnations.

Pink.

"He broke my heart," she said. Ryan confirmed these details about the beginning of their relationship.

She began to care for him. She began to trust him.

She told him a secret.

To stay in the country, Veronica explained, she had worked under a different name.

She shared with Ryan all the blemishes on her immigration record, and the difficulties that come with being in a strange land where nothing is certain, both said.

"He said, 'Don't worry, I'm not going to tell anyone. I'll take care of you,'" she remembers.

For a while, Ryan did take care of her, and in November 2000, they moved in together.

"I thought she was a really wonderful woman," Ryan said. "To me (the fact she was an immigrant) was one of the most interesting things about her because . . . I've always been interested in people in general from different cultures around the world. . . . She was just bringing a different world with her to Des Moines."

As time went by, Veronica said, she noticed a temper that would spring up unexpectedly in Ryan, often prompted by what she saw as a jealous streak.

But the bouts of anger didn't seem worrisome. Within a year they rented an apartment near Drake University. Ryan acknowledged that he had trouble controlling his emotions. On Jan. 20, 2001, with Veronica feeling sick nearly every morning and sapped of her strength nearly every night, Ryan began to worry.

He got into her car, drove to a pharmacy and picked up a pregnancy test.

"I said, 'Ryan, I'm not pregnant. I take birth control,'" she recalls.

He insisted she take the test, she said.

She walked into the bathroom while he waited outside.

Then . . . pink.

“Oh, God. . . ,” she thought.

“He was mad,” she remembered. “I started crying. I was expecting something different (from him).”

He accused her of getting pregnant intentionally, she said, adding that he became angry and said things she never expected. Then he left, she said. Ryan insists he did not grow angry when he found out she was pregnant, and he believes that Veronica became pregnant on purpose.

That night, Veronica couldn’t stop crying. She felt lost and alone.

Things weren’t the same after that, Veronica said.

Ryan seemed angry more often and controlling, she said, and he said things to her, about her, that she said she couldn’t believe.

About three weeks after learning she was pregnant, Veronica locked the front door, thinking Ryan had left with his keys.

Suddenly he was pounding on the door, yelling, screaming for her to let him in.

She opened the door.

“He screamed, ‘Why did you lock me out?’ and he pushed me. I fell on the table and my shoulder and face,” Veronica said.

Though afraid of deportation, Veronica said, she called the police. They arrived, Ryan was arrested, and Veronica sought and received a no-contact order.

Police say they want people to report incidents of domestic abuse or other alleged crimes. As a result, police say, they don’t routinely question immigrants about their status when responding to such reports.

The incident was a warning of what was ahead. Experts say abusive relationships, whether physical, sexual, emotional or financial, are about control.

For immigrant women, “the likelihood of physical and sexual abuse is eight times higher in a relationship when there are threats of deportation or immigration-related abuse,” said Leslye Orloff, who helped craft federal laws protecting immigrant women and serves as director of the Immigrant Women Program at Legal Momentum, a national women’s rights organization in Washington, D.C.

Immigrant women “are more vulnerable to more severe abuse because their avenues out are locked,” Orloff said.

Court documents show that Ryan later admitted that he “pushed Veronica Camacho on 2/11/2001 in our apartment.”

He pleaded guilty of domestic abuse assault and was ordered to participate in a 26-week batterer’s education program. He was put on probation and received a deferred judgment.

Asked about the incident, Ryan said, “I didn’t realize that there was such a problem with domestic abuse in central Iowa and the United States until I went through those classes,” he said. “Needless to say, I didn’t realize I had a problem.”

Moving out and leaving Ryan was the sensible thing to do, Veronica thought.

Wasn’t it?

She began to have doubts. Pangs of guilt for calling the police. Maybe, just maybe, it had been an isolated event.

“What am I going to do?” Veronica said she asked herself. “I’m going to have a baby, and the baby will need a father.”

In March, Veronica fainted at work. She was taken to a hospital. Ryan’s name was still listed as Veronica’s emergency contact, so he was called. Shortly afterward, he called Veronica on her cell phone.

He said he loved her and, a few days later, tracked her down at work, Veronica would later claim. She said he violated the no-contact order. Ryan said that they violated the no-contact order on several occasions and that Veronica initiated at least one of the violations.

She said Ryan told her what she wanted to hear, that he loved her, he would take care of her, and everything would be OK.

She wanted to believe, but it was hard. She reminded him she had a no-contact order. She told him she could call the police.

Ryan had an answer for that, too, she said.

He warned her not to call the police, saying he would call the authorities and have her deported because she was in the country on an expired tourist visa, Veronica said.

It was a threat that would continue to frighten Veronica, according to a document from the Polk County attorney’s office obtained by The Des Moines Register.

Ryan said he never threatened to have Veronica deported. He did acknowledge that he later reported her to immigration authorities, though he said he could not remember whom he spoke to or when he spoke to them.

“It wasn’t a reaction to being arrested,” Ryan said. “No, no, it wasn’t.”

Veronica wanted to believe Ryan when he said he loved her, and she said she feared for her unborn child, believing that raising a child in Mexico would not offer the kind of life she wanted to provide. She also said she was intimidated by Ryan’s threats.

Going home, she decided, was no longer an option.

A short time later, Veronica canceled the no-contact order. In June, they rented another apartment together.

From the beginning, she said, it was clear things were all wrong.

“In a short time, he began to treat me badly,” she would later say in a report written for her attorneys.

Veronica began to live in fear, terrified of both Ryan and deportation. A child-protection worker wrote that Ryan “had been abusive to her on several occasions. He went to Tae-Kwon-Do classes and after the classes he would come home and use these Tae-Kwon-Do moves on her, causing her great pain,” according to the document from the Polk County attorney’s office.

Asked about whether he practiced the moves on Veronica, Ryan said he should have walked away from any violent domestic abuse situations. He acknowledged abusing Veronica, physically and emotionally, for an extended period.

“Until you lessen the fear of being turned in, they will suffer their faces being broken and . . . being brutalized because going back to where they came from is so much worse,” said Benzoni, the immigration attorney.

Between May and mid-July, Veronica later claimed in government records, she chose to suffer physical and emotional abuse rather than risk deportation.

One night in late July, a few weeks before their daughter was born, Ryan grew agitated with Veronica over her relationship with a casual acquaintance and attacked her brutally, she said.

Then Veronica passed out, she claims.

When she awoke, she was lying in her bed. Ryan was lying next to her, she claims, holding her, stroking her arm, caressing her body.

Asked whether Veronica’s account of the incident sounded familiar, Ryan said, “Well, no, it doesn’t.” He declined to comment further.

The first time Veronica looked in the mirror after he hit her, the person who stared back was someone she didn't know: A scratch lined her face from ear to chin. Bruises throbbed on her shoulder, arm and leg. Her ear bled.

This person was helpless.

Veronica Camacho wasn't supposed to be helpless. She had been a tough woman. Her English had improved. She'd found a job. She'd chased the American Dream.

Yet here she was, trapped.

She had to get out.

That's all she could think of. Nine months pregnant, covered in bruises, Veronica knew she was in danger.

She went to La Clinica de la Esperanza the next day to be sure the baby was OK.

"She came in and had a cockamamie story about falling down the stairs with a Popsicle in her mouth," Reinecke said. "But at the time, we took her word for it. Looking back, after she later came in and told us of the abuse, we should have suspected."

According to a medical report from La Clinica de la Esperanza dated July 31, 2001, Veronica had numerous injuries, including to her head, lower back, upper arms and mouth. The report was provided with Veronica's consent. A short time later, Veronica called the Family Violence Center, an organization that she'd heard helps women like her.

She began to plan to leave Ryan, a process she said would take months. According to an affidavit prepared by an outreach coordinator with the Family Violence Center, Veronica would visit the center 24 times before trying to leave Ryan.

Counselors told Veronica about the Violence Against Women Act and the Battered Immigrant Protection Act, federal laws that had been enacted to protect women like her. She was told that she had legal rights, regardless of her immigration status.

Three weeks after going to La Clinica, and after first contacting the Family Violence Center, Ailene Rebecca Barton was born. It was Aug. 17, 2001.

Veronica's mother came from Mexico to help care for the baby. Veronica said she was certain Ryan wouldn't hurt her with her mother there.

That would give her six months, she hoped, to get out of the relationship.

In the days leading up to and after the birth, Veronica said, Ryan acted as if nothing had happened. He was sweet when Veronica's mother was around, then suddenly vicious when he and Veronica were alone, she said.

"When she was gone," Veronica said, ". . . he was scary. . . . I knew I had to escape him."

As the months ticked by, she and a counselor honed a secret escape plan: Veronica would save money, be careful and wait for a night when Ryan was gone.

She was afraid, but her counselors tried to guide her, explaining the Violence Against Women Act and how it protected her.

Still, she was uncertain.

"(Ryan said) if I left him he would call (immigration authorities) and report me as an illegal alien working in this country. He said I would be deported and the baby would stay here because she was an American citizen," she would later write in the report for her attorneys.

Ryan said he never threatened to have Veronica deported.

Veronica didn't believe anything could protect her and her baby from Ryan.

Then one night, Veronica snapped.

Her mother had gone back to Mexico, and Veronica, sad, frightened and tired, walked into her apartment late on March 28, 2002. She decided she'd had enough.

She packed up Ryan's things and waited for him to come home. She would tell him it was over. She would not take no for an answer.

He returned about 1:30 a.m.

She told him they were finished.

He told her to put his things back.

When she refused, Veronica remembers, he pushed her down while she held the baby. She remembers him kicking her in the stomach after picking up the 6-month-old.

She said he pulled her up by the hair and dragged her to his packed suitcases, screaming, "Put this stuff away!"

Sobbing, she told him no. She broke away and ran into the bedroom. She heard him behind her.

According to police reports, court documents and state government records, Ryan threw her to the floor. He crawled on top of her, put his knee on her neck and choked her, Veronica said.

Ryan said that “the police reports are accurate,” but that Veronica was not holding Ailene when he attacked her, which she claims.

As Veronica gasped for air, her body bruised and hurting, a thought occurred to her: I’m going to die.

“You’re not leaving me!” Veronica said he yelled. “If you try to leave me, you’ll be deported! And the baby will stay with me! She’s a U.S. citizen, I’m a U.S. citizen and you’ll be deported!”

He got off her and took her into the bedroom. Then he left to go into the bathroom. Seizing her moment, she picked up the phone and called 911. She heard the line ringing and then he was back, grabbing the phone from her, hanging it up.

Now, she said, he was really angry.

The call had gone through.

The Des Moines Police Department’s dispatch office took it about 2:20 a.m. The dispatcher answered, and the line went dead. The police called back. There was no answer.

Two officers were sent to the house. They knocked loudly on the door, Veronica said, and announced, “Police!”

She remembers that Ryan froze and she felt only a numb relief as she answered the door.

Ryan declined to comment on the specifics of the incident. Asked whether some details of that night sounded correct – the date, whether she had packed his bags – Ryan said they were.

The officers could see she had been crying hysterically. According to the police report, she had bite marks, scratches and bruises across her body. Even when the police later handcuffed Ryan, led him outside and drove him away, Veronica had trouble believing it was real.

With one phone call, she was free.

“I realized, obviously, that I had lost my entire family that night,” Ryan said. He said that he loved Veronica and their daughter, and that he regretted hurting Veronica that night and on other occasions. He said he regretted losing a woman he loved.

Shortly after the attack, Veronica entered a domestic violence shelter. She was told again about the laws that protect her, a reminder that if she could prove she and her daughter had been victimized, they could both remain in the country.

A short time later, at a McDonald’s in Clive, Veronica met with the outreach coordinator from the Family Violence Center.

Veronica “suffered extensive emotional harm as a result of this assault,” the outreach worker would write in an affidavit.

During this time, the outreach worker wrote, “Veronica completely isolated herself . . . was unable to eat or sleep during those first few nights at the shelter. . . . Veronica also described fears that (Ryan) may come to (Ailene’s) daycare and attempt to take or hurt her daughter . . . (and prayed) that this would not be her last day because of his actions.

“Veronica is afraid to be alone in the company of men,” the outreach worker wrote. “Veronica still lives with the fear that he will find her new apartment. Veronica says that every time she hears or sees a car that looks or sounds like his she is almost paralyzed with fear.”

This time, Veronica did not go back to Ryan.

In July 2002, Ryan pleaded guilty of assault causing injury, a serious misdemeanor, and child endangerment, an aggravated misdemeanor, in the criminal case, and he was ordered to stay away from Veronica. He later signed no-contact orders for Veronica and Ailene that remain in place. In a civil case, he agreed to have his parental rights severed, according to documents.

He now lives outside the country.

“On March 29, 2002, I assaulted Veronica Lopez-Camacho in our apartment,” he said in his guilty plea. “Veronica was holding the baby during part of the assault, and this put Ailene at risk.”

The letters that followed were formal and businesslike.

One was from Nancy Robertson, an attorney at the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence who wrote a year later to a district director of what was then known as the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The letter requested a work visa for Veronica under terms of the Violence Against Women Act.

“The enclosed materials comprise the application for U visa interim relief of Veronica Lopez-Camacho, a citizen of Mexico who entered the United States under a tourist visa and was subsequently the victim of violent crime in the state of Iowa.

“As the materials indicate, Ms. Lopez-Camacho was a victim of domestic violence in February 2001. Additionally, she was a victim of further domestic violence and a witness to child endangerment in March of 2002. . . . As the INS has stated, noncitizens ‘identified as possible victims . . . should not be removed from the United States until they have had the opportunity to avail themselves of the provisions of the (law). . . .’”

The INS decision came later that year. Veronica was given a one-year, renewable work visa.

She could stay in America.

Veronica has seen Ryan once since the last time they stood in the same courtroom two years ago, when she spotted him near her apartment later that year, she said.

Today, Ryan says, he is in control of his emotions and interpersonal relationships. “Yes, I am,” he said. “I’m taking all the techniques I learned” in domestic abuse classes.

This is Veronica’s life now: She does not date. She changes apartments at least once a year. She will not put her name on anything that can be tracked through public records. She trusts few, if any, men. She gets her mail through a post office box. She stays in the United States because she doesn’t want her daughter to live in Mexico.

Other than work, Veronica’s connection to the outside world is a bulky gray phone that sits on the bottom of her entertainment system.

She carries the phone with her everywhere she goes.

“The Family Violence Center gave it to me,” she said matter-of-factly. It goes straight to the police department.

She is now in the country legally. She has a good job. And her daughter, she said, is safe.

“I want to stay here for my daughter, not for me,” she said. “It’s dangerous in Mexico. There’s drugs, starving people and the government is bad. I’m not going to put into risk Ailene. I miss my family. . . . I feel like I don’t have life.” Bright, dark-eyed Ailene runs through their small apartment, speaking in English and Spanish, insisting on watching animated movies, unaware of the life she and her mother have escaped.

It’s nearly dark in her apartment on a recent night, and Veronica goes to tuck in her daughter for a nap. Over her CD player, Louis Armstrong begins to sing “What a Wonderful World,” his words filling up the living room.

. . . I see skies of blue and clouds of white, the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night . . .  
Veronica walks into the empty room and listens to the music. And I think to myself what a wonderful world. . . .

Surrounded by Armstrong’s voice, the music soothing in the dark, it almost seems true.

What the law says – The Violence Against Women Act of 1994 and 2000 provides several ways that noncitizen victims of domestic violence, sexual assault or trafficking can attain access to legal immigration status without the cooperation or knowledge of their abusers.

### Whom to Call

STATEWIDE HOT LINE: (800) 942-0333

LUNA: The organization assists Latinas who have been victims of domestic violence or sexual assault. Latinas unidas por un nuevo amanecer. (515) 271-5060

### More Help Online

For a county-by-county list of domestic violence projects, go to: [DesMoinesRegister.com/health](http://DesMoinesRegister.com/health)

### Risk Factors

Factors that make immigrant women more susceptible to domestic violence:

#### \* THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

Unable to speak English, many feel uncomfortable or are unable to contact the police or seek help from others.

#### \* FEAR OF DEPORTATION

Abusers often threaten to call immigration officials, threaten to withhold filing papers to make their wives permanent residents, or insist victims will lose their children if they contact law enforcement.

#### \* ISOLATION

Abusers will take away telephone privileges, prevent the women from learning English or driving, even lock them in their homes -anything, officials say, to cut them off from the world.

#### \* CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Many people who immigrate to the United States come from countries where domestic abuse does not carry the same stigma as it does here, where men traditionally have power over their women and local laws lack protections for victims.

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