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## Undocumented Latinas at Forefront of Domestic Abuse

By Daniel González, The Arizona Republic

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Shortly after the couple's marriage, he began calling her ugly, degrading names. The abuse escalated into constant accusations of infidelity and jail-like isolation from family and friends. There also was sexual abuse.

For eight years, the 36-year-old woman stayed with her husband, the father of her two children. Cultural, religious, economic and language barriers kept her from seeking help or leaving.

But her biggest fear was that as an undocumented immigrant, her husband, a naturalized U.S. citizen, would have her deported.

"He would threaten me," the woman recalled. "If you leave me, I'm going to call *la migra* (immigration) so they can kick you and all of your relatives out of the country. You'll never see the children again."

While domestic violence affects all segments of society, experts say immigrant women, especially those who are undocumented, are among the most vulnerable because their immigration status often is tied to their abusers, which discourages them from seeking help. The abusers are often U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents who refuse to apply for legal status for their spouses to keep them isolated.

In 1994, Congress recognized the problem when it approved the Violence Against Women Act. The law included provisions that granted battered undocumented immigrants married to U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents the right to apply for legal residency on their own rather than depending on their husbands to petition for them.

In 2000, Congress extended access to special visas to battered undocumented immigrant women, regardless of their relationship to their offender. And later this year, Congress is expected to vote whether to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act for five more years. The law has overwhelming bipartisan support.

Experts say the domestic violence issue among immigrant women has become a growing concern as the nation's undocumented population has swollen to 8 million to 10 million people.

## **Higher rates**

One in four women is a victim of domestic violence sometime during adulthood, according to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. But the incidence is higher for immigrant women, especially those who are undocumented.

They often experience an increase in domestic violence after coming to this country. The abuse can be triggered or exacerbated by the pressures of living with instability in an unfamiliar country and working in low-wage jobs, said Leni Marin, managing director of the Family Violence Prevention Fund, a national organization based in San Francisco.

Immigrant women also tend to stay in abusive relationships longer than other abused women because they feel trapped in an unfamiliar country where they may not know the language or where to go for help.

“The violence may escalate to another level because they are not able to get help early,” Marin said.

## **Biggest fear**

Crucita Nuanez-Ochoa, director of the De Colores domestic violence shelter in Phoenix, said Hispanic immigrants, who make up the vast majority of immigrants in the Southwest, often do not trust the legal system in the country they came from, so they are less likely to call police in the United States.

Raised in a macho culture, many Latinas also are taught to believe domestic violence is acceptable, Nuanez-Ochoa said.

Their parents may tell them, “He is your husband, the father of your children. He has a right to hit you,” Nuanez-Ochoa said. Or, Latina immigrants “have this really strong perception that marriage is forever. That they have to stay married.”

But the biggest reason many immigrant women stay in abusive relations is because they are undocumented and are afraid of being deported, experts say.

“Their husbands will say, ‘Pick up the phone and I’ll have you deported and you will never see your U.S. children again,’” said Leslye Orloff, director of the Immigrant Women Program at Legal Momentum in Washington, D.C., a non-profit advocacy organization.

Besides fearing deportation, the 36-year-old woman, whose husband began abusing her two months after their marriage, said her husband kept her isolated in their Phoenix home. He cut off the telephone service and kept many guns in the house, which made her fear for her life if she left.

She said her husband petitioned for her to get her legal residency, or a green card, but would threaten to cancel the paperwork if she tried to leave. He also refused to pay the \$1,500 fine required as part of the petition since she had entered the country illegally.

Her brother eventually paid, and she got a green card. And last November, after enduring eight years of abuse, the woman finally left her husband, and sought refuge at De Colores.

## **Federal help**

The federal government awarded more than \$739 million to states last year to provide help for crime victims and to fight domestic violence and sexual assault.

Through the Violence Against Women Act, the Southern Arizona Battered Immigrant Women's Project received more than \$900,000, said Pati Urias, a spokeswoman for Gov. Janet Napolitano. The money will be used over the next two years to train workers at domestic violence shelters in border communities to help serve the needs of immigrant women and assist battered immigrant women to apply for legal residency under the law, she said.

Advocates for victims of domestic violence are pushing Congress to expand the law in several ways, including allowing battered immigrant women who petition for legal residency to receive work permits right away. Granting immigrant women immediate work permits would make it easier for them to leave their abusers, advocates say.

Currently, they cannot work while their petition is pending and the process can take a year or longer.

Advocates also want Congress to add a provision that would give immigrant parents who are victims of abuse the right to apply for legal residency.

"Immigrant parents who come to the United States are often elderly people who don't speak English and can't work. Their only connection to the outside world is through their son or daughter and many times they are literally locked up in their houses," said Joanne Lin, a senior staff attorney at Legal Momentum.

Advocates are pushing Congress to include provisions that would stop the detention or deportation of immigrant women who have suffered domestic violence.

Also this year, advocates hope to reintroduce the Women Immigrants Safe Harbor Act.

Originally introduced in Congress in 2001, the bill would allow legal immigrant women who have suffered domestic abuse, including those who have petitioned for legal status under the Violence Against Women Act, to qualify for welfare benefits, including food stamps and Medicaid.

Backers say the bill is intended to provide a safety net to help immigrant women get out of an abusive environment and get back on their feet.

*Reporter Sergio Bustos contributed to this article.*

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