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Abuse in the Land of Promise; For Immigrant Women Caught in Violent Relationships, Escape is Especially Difficult

By Sandhya Somashekhar, Washington Post Staff Writer

The beatings started the day they returned from their honeymoon.

He choked her until his hands made purple impressions on her throat, she said. He punched and kicked her, and slammed her head against the car door, sometimes smiling all the while. Once, she said, he flew into a rage and ravaged their apartment, pulling her clothes out of the closet and smearing them with soybean paste from the refrigerator.

She told herself: This is my life. I must tolerate it.

“Even his mom and dad were aware of the abuse,” the 30-year-old Korean immigrant said through an interpreter, the rims of her wide eyes red with tears. “They said, ‘Endure it, endure it, you need to just swallow it. You don’t know what goes on in the United States. You don’t know anything.’”

With help from the Korean Community Service Center of Greater Washington, a social services organization based in Annandale that has taken a lead role in the region in assisting Korean women suffering from domestic violence, she was able to divorce her husband, get a job as a waitress and move into her own apartment. She is learning English and hopes to go to college.

The experiences of the Fairfax County woman, who asked that her name and hometown be withheld so her ex-husband can’t find her, are in many ways typical of the estimated 1 million to 4 million women in the United States who fall victim to domestic violence every year.

In other ways, though, the Fairfax woman exemplifies some of the particular difficulties faced by immigrant women, domestic violence experts say.

Because she came to this country on a fiancée visa, her immigrant status was dependent on her husband’s. She didn’t speak English and was thousands of miles from her friends and family, furthering the isolation typically experienced by victims. And she was completely unfamiliar with her new country, not knowing how to ask for help or to even open her own checking account.

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In addition, women from Korea and elsewhere also struggle with cultural norms that favor male dominance and consider domestic violence a taboo topic, said Esther Park, executive director of the Korean Community Service Center.

“We are not raised to express any distress at home or in family matters,” Park said. “When violence occurs, women simply do not say anything. They think, if I do better, then some day he will not hit me again.”

Last year, more than 1,600 people in Fairfax County were arrested on charges of domestic assault, a broad classification that includes violence against spouses, children and other relatives. Fairfax County police did not have specific numbers for partner abuse.

While research shows that domestic violence is prevalent in all communities regardless of race and class, some studies show startling conditions within the Korean American community.

In a 1986 study involving face-to-face interviews with 150 Korean women living in Chicago, 60 percent reported experiencing physical abuse by an intimate partner at some time in their lives.

A 2000 study by the Boston-based Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence found that 29 percent of Korean respondents said a woman being abused should not tell anyone about the abuse, and that only 27 percent supported a battered woman calling police for help.

That study also found that 80 percent of Koreans reported that they were hit regularly by their parents as children, and almost one-third regularly witnessed their fathers hitting their mothers.

“We come from a very, very patriarchal society,” said Tae In Lee, program director for the Korean Community Service Center. “Like in other Asian communities, men are the authoritative persons in the house, and they can do whatever they want.”

Every year, about 50 domestic violence victims find their way to the center, which provides them with translation, legal and immigration services and helps them apply for public assistance. The organization also has a support group for survivors of domestic violence and does outreach through Korean churches in the area.

The center has won praise for its grass-roots work. Over the past two years, the McLean-based Freddie Mac Foundation has awarded \$100,000 in grants to the organization to combat the stigma associated with domestic violence within the Washington area’s Korean community.

The problem of domestic violence reaches every corner of society, experts say, playing out in strikingly similar patterns from community to community and relationship to relationship. Often, it is kept locked away as a secret family problem.

In the vast majority of domestic violence cases, the victims are women and the perpetrators are their husbands or boyfriends, who lash out to gain control or power. The abuse is cyclical, with a

tension-building phase, a violent outburst and a “honeymoon” period when the abuser apologizes and promises never to abuse again.

Often, the circumstances that lead to domestic violence are heightened within immigrant communities, said Susan Folwell, manager of domestic violence grants for the Women’s Center, a Vienna-based nonprofit organization. Families can be isolated from the rest of society because of language barriers and cultural differences, she said, and abusers can take advantage of their victims’ unfamiliarity with American customs and exploit fears of deportation.

Also, “there is a huge sense of shame to abuse for any victim of domestic violence, but it’s magnified in small immigrant communities,” Folwell said. “She has that shame of feeling like she can’t make it in this land full of promise.”

Among Koreans, there is the added stigma associated with seeking help from mainstream programs, which are perceived to be focused only on divorce, Lee said. Among traditional Koreans and other ethnic groups, divorce is unthinkable, seen as the ultimate failure of a relationship and destructive for the children, she said.

That’s why the organization and domestic violence specialists with Fairfax County repackage their messages for the Korean community as promoting “healthy families” or “peaceful families.”

In other words, the dedication to the family is tapped to prevent violence in the home, said Janet Hubbell of the county’s human services agency.

“We realized that the family structure, holding the family together, was a priority for these groups, whereas from a mainstream perspective, the sense was, ‘Let’s get the woman in the shelter, let’s get protection, let’s do the enforcement piece,’” she said. “We realized there’s inherent strength in these families, and we needed to use that strength as kind of an inoculation against this type of violence.”

For example, the agency offers classes that teach people how to resolve conflicts in a peaceful and healthy way, without violence.

The county began taking a closer look at domestic violence within immigrant communities a decade ago, after a coalition of ethnic leaders approached the Board of Supervisors on the subject, Hubbell said. Officials needed to examine their programs because women in their communities were not using mainstream domestic violence services, the coalition members told the supervisors.

Hubbell and others began developing partnerships with community groups, as well as hiring foreign language speakers and producing literature in a variety of languages. Today, between law enforcement and human services, the county has resources in Arabic, Farsi, Korean, Vietnamese, Urdu and Spanish, among other languages.

Another way activists are hoping to make inroads in the Korean community is through churches.

An estimated 75 percent of Koreans in this country are affiliated with a Christian church, and pastors hold a great deal of sway over their congregations, said Hyepin Im, president of Korean Churches for Community Development, a consortium of some 3,400 Korean churches in the United States.

In addition, she said, Koreans are among the most linguistically isolated, a U.S. Census Bureau category that covers those who live in households in which everyone 14 or older speaks a non-English language and none is proficient in English. As a result, the church becomes the primary source of information, services and social interaction, Im said.

But pastors have yet to embrace the domestic violence message, she said.

“The pastors who come out of seminary are really not trained or educated about what domestic violence is,” Im said. “It’s not true for all pastors, but many pastors say, ‘Pray to be a better wife.’ The message the pastors give is a message of sacrifice, like Christ suffered on the cross.”

The Korean Community Service Center also is hoping to reach out to perpetrators in addition to victims, which they say is essential if families want to stay together. Next year, Lee said, she hopes to offer a family camp to promote healthy conflict resolution.

Park, the organization’s executive director, said she also hopes to work toward establishing an Asian shelter in Fairfax County, where women can be assisted in a linguistically and culturally comfortable setting.

The focus, said Lee, will stay on the victim – keeping her safe, giving her options and helping her dig deep and find her voice again.

For the 30-year-old Fairfax County woman just getting back on her feet, it has been a long time since she felt like herself.

She is a contemporary woman, her black hair trimmed into a short bob that frames her pale face, her slim frame stylishly outfitted. As she told her story to a reporter, she occasionally wept but often laughed at the way her life spun out of control in just a few months.

She was a carefree college student in Korea when she met her husband, a man of Korean descent who was raised in the Washington area. They dated for a while, carried on an e-mail relationship when he returned to the United States and eventually got engaged. “He was so romantic, and looked very family-oriented,” she recalled. “He seemed like a warm-hearted person.”

Upon arriving, though, she discovered that he had lied about having a good job and money in the bank.

He took all her money, exchanging it for a credit card that didn’t work, she said. And his temper, which he kept at bay while they dated, flared almost immediately after the wedding.

The year-long marriage is a blur – she has trouble remembering which beatings happened on what day, the things that triggered his rage, or the moment at which she decided to leave him. She does, however, remember doubting herself, wondering if the abuse was somehow her fault.

When she finally left him with the help of the Korean Community Service Center, she was placed in a shelter where she was the only Korean. There, the staff couldn't speak to her because of the language barrier, and she hated the shelter's exhaustive list of rules. Still, the staff made every attempt to make her feel at home, even bringing her kimchi, a favorite Korean side dish, she said.

Slowly, she said, she is beginning to feel like herself again.

“In Korea, I was independent. I was driving and everything,” she said. “I just try to think that I stepped [in a mess], like it was a bad dream and I just woke up.”

Freelance writer Matthew Levine contributed to this report.

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