

Immigrant victims of violence face extra set of hardships

by Carly Bruski



Happy Valley conjures images of a quaint football-loving town nestled between the mountains and inhabited by a close-knit community. But for immigrant victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, this community can seem extremely dangerous and profoundly isolating.

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, a reminder of the reality that intimate partner violence and sexual assault remain serious problems around the world. According to a report by Amnesty International from 2004, domestic violence and sexual assault are crimes that cut across class and race, resulting in one out of every three women globally victimized by abuse. In 2000, a study on the world's women conducted by the United Nations determined that a woman is battered in the United States every 15 seconds. Given these staggering statistics and the challenges that accompany living in a rural environment, victims from diverse international cultures living in Centre County may face even more extreme problems. In many international communities, these types of violence are often taboo and rarely reported.

Veronica*, a sexual assault survivor from Kazakhstan, said that women often do not speak up about these issues because they fear it will bring shame and embarrassment to them and their families.

"A woman is responsible for keeping quiet because if she doesn't it would seem like she didn't try hard enough to save peace in her family and make her husband happy," Veronica said. "Men support men, and women support women, so a victim wouldn't report violence because no one would protect her from a perpetrator." Ruth Canagarajah, a volunteer for the Centre County Women's Resource Center (CCWRC) from South Asia, said that the value her culture places upon the purity of

women makes it less likely for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault to report those crimes.

"While the prospects of arranged marriage are slowly disappearing, the value of virginity is important in marriage," Canagarajah said. "Victims may not want to address that one of their prized possessions is gone, especially in a culture as strict as ours." International women face both the need to navigate their culture's gender roles and additional expectations placed on them by having access to education.

Amy Wilson, director of Mid-State Literacy Council (MSLC), said that international victims of domestic violence and sexual assault are often inhibited by their expectations of life in America. "People come here for a better life," Wilson explained. "They have their hopes and dreams and things they want to accomplish. They don't typically want to discuss [these crimes]. It would take an enormous amount of trust to express that they're in trouble."

According to immigrant victims and the would be more damaging to speak to the police, and sometimes women think what happened is natural or that nothing wrong has happened."

Faulkner of the CCWRC said that for international victims of violence, there can be a lack of knowledge about available resources. "They may have been told by their abuser that services do not exist or that because they are not from America they may not legally access them," she said.

She also explained that an immigrant victim may remember law enforcement agencies from his or her home country that were

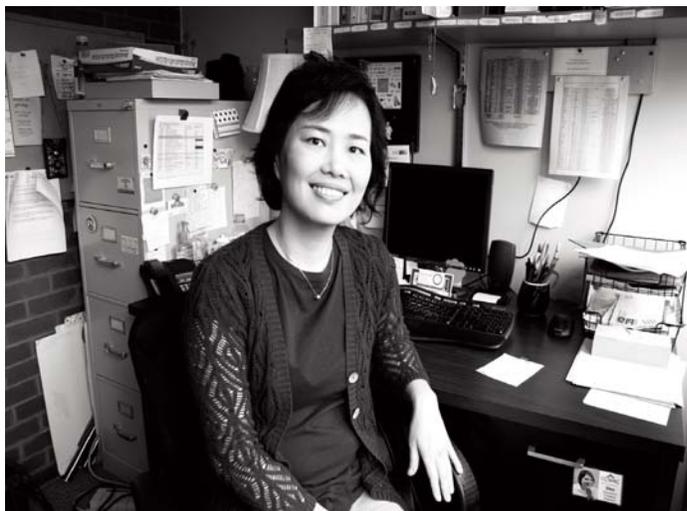
violent or corrupt, and under these circumstances, it may never occur to them to contact the police for assistance or they may actively fear their involvement.

Wilson, from MSLC, commented on another unique barrier for non-English speakers: confusion and fear around healthcare. According to her experience working with immigrants, Wilson said that victims with limited English comprehension may be unable to articulate their medical issue or unable to understand the directions on medication and the proper dosage. These gaps in communication could play a large role in the already difficult process of reporting a violent incident.

“Patients will rely on their spouse to translate, and that can be a concern in terms of domestic violence or sexual assault,” said Jill Buchanan, Registered Nurse at University Health Services, adding that drawing in this type of “family support” may be based in a culture where women are disempowered.

In Center County, the CCWRC is working to help immigrant victims in State College overcome these barriers to accessing services by working to educate the international community about the safe, confidential and free services available. The organization provides translated materials in conjunction with a full range of services geared toward immigrant victims. For those who may know or suspect someone is a victim, Mary Faulkner suggests, “[People] can call their local victim services provider to get more information on safe ways to intervene. We encourage people to intervene in ways that empower the victim. This leaves the door open for the victim to approach you when it is safe for them to do so.”

Carly Bruski works as the International Specialist and Legal Assistant at the Centre County Women’s Resource Center. She is currently working toward expanding the network of community resources and legal services available to immigrant victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.



Seung-Sook Han, a volunteer from Korea, sits in her office at the Centre County Woman’s Resource Center.

* Names have been changed to protect the victims of these crimes.