

# Domestic violence in immigrant communities

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## Marital domestic violence and the overseas-born: New book

Safia, a migrant in Australia, had her marriage arranged to a man she had never met. The marriage lasted 10 years. During that decade she was a prisoner - never leaving the house without her husband. Each morning he placed a small stone behind the security door as he left for work. If the stone had fallen when he returned, he would know she had been out. He gave her no money (in case she ran away), no access to a phone and she was not allowed to open the door.

He beat her often. 'He thought it was OK to beat me because I'm not a human. I'm just a woman. My husband believed that God created women for men's pleasure.' One day Safia left, with her young child.

For leaving her husband she was shunned by her family and community - and forced to suffer the guilt of having lessened her sisters' marriage prospects. 'It is a very big decision for a woman from my country to leave her husband', she says. She realised the extent of her isolation after leaving and finding she had no idea of the cost of a loaf of bread.

Safia is one of many women whose stories are told in a powerful book, Shattered Dreams - Marital Violence Against Overseas-born Women in Australia, written by Dr Patricia Easteal, a criminologist with the Faculty of Law at the Australian National University. Shattered Dreams was published by the BIMPR in March.

The book gives voice to 21 women survivors of

domestic violence and analyses survey data collected from police, workers in Legal Aid, women's refuges, ethnic welfare agencies and over 800 survivors. It covers people from around the world, including France, the Pacific Islands, Turkey, Chile, Italy, Greece, South America, Croatia, China, Malta and Fiji.

Shattered Dreams does not provide evidence that domestic violence is more prevalent in immigrant communities, but it shows that aspects of ethnicity or the migration experience can contribute to abuse in the home: wife abuse in the country of origin, isolation and lack of support, difficulty in speaking English, lack of knowledge of services, family privacy and shame for a woman who does not remain married. Two groups of women are particularly vulnerable, the study says. Those who have been sponsored by non-Asian men 'may have very little idea of what their rights are and their violent husbands use the lack of knowledge... by threats and false information designed to control the wife's behaviour and stop her from leaving'.

Brides in arranged marriages - women who have been brought to Australia to wed someone from their culture are also very vulnerable, especially to problems of isolation. 'The woman's parents, back in the homeland, had entrusted the care of their daughter to the parents of the groom who, in turn, violated that trust either by overt abuse themselves or the complicity of maintaining silence.'

In cases covered by the study, there were often high incidences of physical abuse, sexual abuse, economic deprivation and violence towards children. The book found that alcohol abuse by the offender and his unemployment were present in numerous cases. For many, the violence developed slowly, often beginning with emotional abuse.

'*Shattered Dreams* describes, through women's voices, what happens when a woman is victimised in her own home. It helps people to understand why women stay and how it can all happen so slowly', according to Dr Eastal. She makes recommendations about how to improve the plight of women suffering from domestic violence, which include changing community attitudes about domestic violence, jealousy and alcohol abuse. The book also includes recommendations about isolation, lack of knowledge and availability of services.

## **Domestic Violence in immigrant communities**

**by Dr Patricia Eastal**

Violence against women is about control and secrecy. Policies and practices that are constructed without an understanding of what it means to be both a migrant and a battered woman collude in the victimisation of these women. Given this covert nature of violence against women, and quite possibly even greater secrecy within migrant communities, how do we gather such knowledge?

My book, *Shattered Dreams - Marital Violence Against Overseas-born Women in Australia*, represents part of the answer. Its principal objectives are to enable more understanding about 'domestic' violence in general, to highlight the unique experiences of the overseas-born and to provide suggestions that will facilitate better service provision. Over 800 victim surveys were completed by Legal Aid staff for domestic violence clients throughout Australia and by refuge residents in five States. Three other surveys gathered the views of nearly 400 Legal Aid practitioners, ethnic welfare agency staff and refuge workers. Information on a total of 3061 'domestic' calls was collected from police in all States except Western Australia and Queensland. Twenty-one survivors provided life histories through in-depth interviews.

## **The violence**

The hands that inflict the abuse may be those of a partner who accompanied the abused woman, a member of her ethnic group that she has met in Australia, an Australia-born male or an immigrant from another country. The violence starts with emotional abuse, seemingly innocuous incidents that often involve jealousy. It culminates in treatment both as a possession and as a hostage, as in Victoria's experience:

He was a lot more confident about his possession of me. There was no longer any doubt in his mind that I was not a separate entity in my own right; I was now one of his possessions.

Emotional violence is frequently followed and accompanied by physical assault. The following excerpt from Malaysian immigrant Noraika's story dramatically depicts this coupling of physical hurt and insult. She was isolated in the bush with her Australia-born husband:

We were on a property once and an Italian woman taught me how to make spaghetti bolognaise. I thought this was great and so I made it one night when it was very cold and he came home from the pub... Anyway, he came home and I served him the meal and he looked at it blurry-eyed and said, 'What is this wog food?' He got up and it was all kept hot - I waited up for him, the children were all in bed - he picked up the plate - I'll never forget it - and walked towards me and I thought he was going to throw it out and he tipped the whole lot on my head. I had very long hair and we didn't have housing with hot water and we had to boil the copper outside, carry the water inside. I was washing my hair until about twelve and drying it until about one in the morning and cleaning the kitchen while he went off to sleep.

Two-thirds of the Legal Aid cases and three-quarters of refuge cases involved physical injuries. For many survivors, one specific physical act of violence experienced was rape. Some women didn't define or see the sexual acts perpetrated by their partner without their consent as sexual assault, while others minimised the impact.

In addition to other expressions of power, some husbands took total control of the finances. This economic violence may be more common among immigrants, especially in cases where the women lack knowledge about their rights to Family Allowance or Social Security payments. Rosa, sponsored from the Philippines:

He said, 'No, if you want, I can give you \$15 as your allowance for the fortnight. That's your budget for yourself.' I'm like a robot. He said to me, 'If you cook, don't cook one kilo of chicken wings. Cook only just a half a kilo of chicken wings.'... And he is eating ice cream in front of my children. He doesn't want to give them ice cream.

## **Outcome of the abuse**

Safia migrated from Turkey as a child; her marriage was arranged with another Turkish immigrant. She describes one of the main outcomes of violence - the low self-esteem:

And after a while, you will be looking into the mirror and you will not recognise who you are. The person you see reflected in the mirror is not you and you don't even know how this has happened because it is such a slow process. And then you just can't get out of it. You realise you're stuck. He has done it to you so slowly from the beginning.

Shame and isolation are intrinsic aspects of domestic violence, both in Anglo-Australian culture and in many immigrants' cultures of origin. They act to maintain the secrecy for many of the survivors. Even if the women understand English and the legal and social service systems, they still become emotionally cut off from friends and family. Some are virtually imprisoned in their homes. Safia's description of going to a shop after she moved away from her husband provides a dramatic insight into how total the captivity may be:

I went to a milk bar and bought a packet of bread and I gave them one dollar. The shopkeeper kept on staring at me. He didn't put the money in the money thing and he kept looking at me. He said to me, 'Where is the rest of the money?' I said, 'How much is the bread?' He said, 'Where have you been,

lady? It's \$1.75.'

The isolation for NESB women and other immigrants can be exacerbated by a number of variables. A substantial number had no one to tell, since they had no family in Australia.

Those who were brought to Australia to wed someone from their culture who was already resident here seemed to experience particular isolation. The women's parents, back in the homeland, entrusted the care of their daughter to the parents of the groom, who in turn violated that trust, either by overt abuse themselves or by the complicity of maintaining silence. Ruziye, whose marriage was arranged in Turkey, describes how it happened to her:

They became very violent and kept me in total isolation. I wasn't allowed to go anywhere. Each time he came home, he would beat me up over little reasons. He used to kick me out of the bed. I stopped going to my mother-in-law's house. We were reconciled a couple of times but then he became violent again and started bashing me up every day again.

Ethnic welfare, Legal Aid and refuge workers concurred that isolation and lack of support are particularly acute among Asian women sponsored by non-Asian men. The potential for extreme isolation is perhaps more evident in these stories of sponsored brides. Violent husbands can then translate these women's lack of knowledge into threats based on false information.

Some immigrant survivors didn't know that refuges existed until directed there by police. Others had heard about them but had been given a negative image. Once they attempted to get help, there wasn't always adequate availability of space. In addition, many women experienced difficulties relating to cultural differences and loneliness.

A further impediment to escape can be difficulties in contacting the police. Women from Pacific, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American cultural backgrounds were more likely

to state that they had such difficulties - some could not speak English.

Some women didn't know that in Australia police are supposed to play an interventionist role, or the women were concerned about the perceived prejudice of the police and in at least two cases the survivor's previous experience with the police, within the context of the violence, contributed to her reluctance to contact them again:

I felt uneasy at times because I felt I wasn't believed sometimes. As if they thought I may have provoked it somehow.

Lack of knowledge and access to services can exacerbate the isolation that all battered women experience and make leaving more problematic, with death as the ultimate outcome in some cases. There are certainly many indications that NESB women are less likely to escape the violent situation than are the Australia-born.

This may help us understand the finding that a disproportionate number of women killed by partners are immigrants. If we believe that domestic violence occurs on a continuum, beginning with emotional and verbal abuse and ending with murder, the earlier a woman has access to help, the less likely she is to end up dead.

Violence can breed in isolation without any external check or balance. The means of escape may be invisible.

Those interviewed for *Shattered Dreams* did eventually find a way out, but one wonders how many do not.

### ***Causative factors***

Among those for whom information was available, more than half of the offenders who came in contact with either the police or Legal Aid during the research period were alcohol-affected. Almost 40 per cent of refuge residents thought that alcohol had contributed to their partner's violent acts.

Of the police calls where information on the offender's employment status was available, almost three-quarters of offenders were unemployed, more than a third of these long-term. The Legal Aid data showed a higher proportion of offenders employed - 45 per cent. The refuge respondents' information about employment was similar, with 42 per cent of the violent partners employed full-time. Among the latter sample, one-third of the partners were in a professional occupation, self-employed or in businesses.

Many survivors and people who work with immigrant women expressed the view that variables associated with being an immigrant contribute to abuse by the immigrant husband.

Normative wife abuse within the culture of origin, belief in family privacy, changes in gender roles in Australia, isolation, lack of support, lack of kin, language difficulties, having expectations that might not be met and downward shifts in employment status were a few of the factors reiterated.

### ***Solutions***

Despite some improvements in attitudes, legislation and immigration policies, the research done for *Shattered Dreams* shows that there is an urgent need for further action to be taken.

First, in the area of violence against women in general, the following areas require ongoing (government) commitment to change:

- attitudes about domestic violence;
- attitudes about jealousy;
- attitudes about alcohol abuse; and
- the mainstream criminal justice system's response.

Domestic violence must be treated as part of mainstream criminal law, and its perpetrators dealt with in the same way as those who commit non-domestic assault.

In order to resolve or ameliorate the plight of immigrant women:

- Further modification of the immigration laws as they affect battered women is needed. It is important that policy-makers and professionals recognise that physical violence is only one end of a wide spectrum of abuse. There is also a need for more flexibility by DIMA. As proposed by the Law Reform Commission, provisions should apply to women who are sponsored as fiancées in cases where the engagement is broken because of the sponsor's violence.
- Migrant women's access to information about their rights and available services must be improved. The principal problem is communication. While sponsored women experience particular difficulties, many other immigrant women are equally at risk of violence, and seem to be just as isolated and as unaware of the services that are available. These women also need to receive information about rights and services.

Shattered Dreams includes many suggestions by workers for ways of ameliorating this problem. Here are just a few:

- Immigration offices overseas need to implement an information session for all prospective migrants, including sponsorees, that covers their legal rights and relevant laws. Where a husband and wife are migrating together, attendance should be mandatory for both parties. Written information is not sufficient, as the woman may be illiterate, or the male may keep her from seeing it.
- Ethnic welfare agencies can play a more important role in transmitting such information to clients if they have more information about current legislation and resources. They also need to have pamphlets available in their clients' languages. Perhaps the agencies can play more of a role in community education than in working with survivors, because of confidentiality issues when dealing with members of their own communities.
- DIMA could play an important role in the

provision of information before migration by employing bilingual counsellors at overseas posts and in providing information at the time of immigrants' arrival in Australia.

- DIMA should conduct full investigations of the histories of men who sponsor women to Australia. The Government should not only reconsider its refusal to assemble a database on serial sponsors, but should implement a system that would check on the domestic violence histories of *all men* who have applied to sponsor women.
- Simply targeting serial sponsors is not enough. Unless information is available about men who have assaulted previous partners - sponsored or not - sponsored wives will be at risk without warning. While it is easier to highlight the smaller population of serial sponsors, we must remember that the sponsored women whose stories are told in Shattered Dreams were all the first wives that their violent partners had brought to Australia.
- Improvements to refuges are needed, as is more assistance for women trying to leave the violence. There is a critical need both for more refuge accommodation and for the refuges to tackle issues of cultural difference, either by modifying existing practices in refuges catering for people of many cultures, or by establishing ethno-specific refuges. At the very least, there is a need for more bilingual workers and a greater appreciation of different customs and values.

If some of these suggestions were implemented, then perhaps both the numbers of women imprisoned in their homes like Safia would diminish and the Australian Government would no longer be guilty of collusion in the violation of these women's basic human rights. The first step must be breaking the silence for the individual survivor by enabling her to access assistance and breaking the silence for our society as a whole through forums such as these.