



Cleveland program helps Hispanic women, children escape domestic violence

Published: Thursday, January 05, 2012, 5:20 AM Updated: Thursday, January 05, 2012, 8:29 AM



By **Regina Garcia Cano, The Plain Dealer**

Una versión en español aquí.

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Alicia Carrizo knew how she was going to die. Her husband often told her. She would drown in a remote offshore area in Lake Erie. He would push her off the family boat. Their five daughters would watch her body slip beneath the water. And nobody would report her missing.

Her husband's chilling words resonated every day. His threats and physical assaults had escalated over time. Carrizo feared for her life. She feared for her daughters' lives. Still, Carrizo, an immigrant from Argentina, could not bring herself to leave his side. She felt trapped in her marriage -- and in this country.

Domestic violence is a common tale among many immigrant women. It is particularly prevalent in the Hispanic community, according to domestic violence victims' advocates. They say that among women who are undocumented, the situation occurs even more often. Unaware of this country's laws and scared of law enforcement for fear of deportation, many women silently endure living with an abusive man.

But some in Northeast Ohio, like Carrizo, have broken free with help from a program for Hispanic women and children.

The support is provided by the Latina Domestic Violence Project, which offers safety and stability programs regardless of immigration status. Services are offered in English and Spanish.



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Lonnie Timmons III, The Plain Dealer

Alicia Carrizo, an immigrant from Argentina, was helped by the Latina Domestic Violence Project, which offers safety and stability programs for victims of domestic violence regardless of immigration status.

Since the Domestic Violence and Child Advocacy Center of Greater Cleveland started the Latina Project in 2006, it has helped more than 600 Hispanic women, including 155 in the first half of this year. The unique needs of Hispanic immigrants led the center to open a shelter last month to assist this community.

Nearly one in four Hispanic women in the United States will experience domestic violence during her lifetime, and one in 20 has experienced it in the last 12 months, according to research compiled by Casa de Esperanza, a national nonprofit that works to end violence among Hispanic families.

Still, strong family values, religious beliefs and strict gender roles stop many women from trying to escape their situation. For many women, challenging the authority of a man means violating ethnic or religious taboos.

"In the Latino community there's this idea that what happens in the family, stays in the family," said Vanessa Rivera, coordinator of the Latina Project. "Domestic violence becomes a don't-air-your-dirty-linen-in-public type of situation. Women don't want to share what's happening to them. That's what they've been taught to do."

But Carrizo was different. She sought help and was able to get a restraining order to keep her husband away from her and her daughters, said another Legal Aid lawyer and Rivera.

Carrizo's husband, also Argentinean, alienated her from the moment they got to the United States in 2000. She said she wanted to walk away when verbal and physical fights became commonplace. But she felt helpless. He forbid her to contact her family. And she did not know enough English to interact with others in this country.

"He made me believe that I was useless," Carrizo, 38, said recently in Spanish. "He threatened to take the girls away if I called the police. He said he would take them to Mexico, and I wouldn't see them again."

Research shows that Hispanic women are only half as likely to report abuse to authorities as victims from any other ethnic or racial group. According to Casa de Esperanza, a 2005 study among Hispanic immigrants found that fewer than three in 10 women had heard about domestic violence protective orders and not many knew about local agencies that help victims.

Latina Project staff members drop off bilingual literature at churches, hospitals and welfare agencies to promote their services. They sponsor workshops at schools and health fairs.

The staff provides women and their children with emotional support, interpreting services and assistance in developing a safety plan to leave the abuser. The project hosts a weekly Spanish-speaking support group. Staff members give victims general information about court proceedings, referrals to legal assistance to obtain protection orders and initiate the process to gain lawful immigration status for the women and children.

Rivera said men often use their victims' immigration status as a control mechanism. If the victims are undocumented, the men threaten to call immigration authorities.

Deportation can be a worry for immigrant women. But the federal government allows battered immigrant women to seek a number of remedies to avoid deportation, secure a work authorization permit, and eventually, lawful permanent residency -- commonly known as having a "green card."

Few immigrant women know that domestic violence is a punishable crime in this country. And even fewer know that they have some rights as victims of a crime, Rivera said.

Immigrants married to an abusive U.S. citizen or permanent resident, and their children can apply for immigration relief without the offender's knowledge under provisions of the Violence Against Women Act of 1994, said attorney Megan Sprecher of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, which handles referrals from the Latina Project.

Undocumented immigrants who are either unmarried or married to an undocumented person and have suffered substantial physical or mental abuse resulting from a range of deeds -- including domestic violence -- can receive a permit known as a U Visa to stay in the country. But to obtain this relief, a detective or prosecutor must certify that the victim is cooperating in the investigation.

"They [women] can't fake the crime," said Cleveland Police Detective Patricia Castillo, who has certified the collaboration of immigrant women in these investigations.

Castillo said the possibility of obtaining legal immigration status encourages some immigrant women to speak up and report crimes.

"When I first meet with the victims, I ask them if they don't want to report the crime because they're not legal residents," Castillo said. "I tell them that we can help with that as well."

Carrizo, her husband and four of their daughters entered the United States with visitor visas. She was eight months pregnant. Her husband wanted the baby to be born in America. On a cold November evening, the family landed in Newark, N.J., where they lived until 2004, when they moved to Cleveland in search of work.

The physical and mental abuse Carrizo and her daughters had suffered in Argentina worsened when they settled in this country. Soon, they were allowed to leave their home only for school and work. Visits to movie theaters, malls and neighbors were forbidden. The daughters -- now 21, 19, 16, 14 and 10 -- spent school snow days in their garage cleaning their father's tools or doing mechanical repairs on cars. The father was a mechanic.

"He would get upset if we didn't clean the tools correctly or messed up something," Carrizo said. "The girls would wear three or four pants at the same time to avoid feeling his punches."

The abuse escalated to death threats shortly after they got to Cleveland.

The turning point came in 2006, when Carrizo got a note from an acquaintance that contained the Latina Project's phone number. Carrizo and the project's staff developed a plan for Carrizo and her daughters to move to a shelter. They lived there for five months. Carrizo cooperated with the investigation of her husband, and eventually she and her daughters received U visas. Her husband, whom she divorced, was eventually deported on unrelated charges to the domestic violence case.

Now, she said, she finally feels alive.

"The girls probably miss him Father's Day and Christmas," Carrizo said. "They will always have the hope that he'll change. But they also see that we're much better without him. We regained our identity, our self-esteem."

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