

# Violence Against Immigrant and Refugee Women in NC

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## **Prologue:**

*Imagine this: You are a 20 year old woman from Afghanistan who has just become married to a man who lives in Durham, North Carolina. Even though this is an arranged marriage and you have never met the man before your wedding day, you are very excited because of the prospect of going to America where women are treated equally and have lots of rights. You can't wait to get to North Carolina to begin your new life. Your new husband has promised your family that you can continue your education and you can work outside the home. Fast forward to one year after your arrival in the United States. The 45 year old man who is your husband has changed his mind about all of the promises he made to your family. You are not permitted to work outside the home and consequently have no friends or support system. The man tells your family that you are a "bad" girl. He does not assist you with becoming legal in this country. The man is abusive both physically and sexually and you feel utterly hopeless because you are thousands of miles away from home with no friends or family to support you and you think you have nowhere to turn...*

## **Introduction**

It is no secret that women are the victims of violence throughout the world. According to The United Nations Development Fund for Women, at least one of every three women globally will be beaten, raped or otherwise abused during her lifetime. Such violence against women can take many forms. The most obvious is domestic violence—violence committed by a spouse or other family member and includes both physical and emotional violence. However, women are often the subjects of violence in the workplace and in the world at large, including refugee camps. Defining and solving the issue of violence against women is one of the most complex issues facing the world today. All women who are victims of violence face issues surrounding power, control, education, culture and fear among others. Immigrant and refugee women face these problems too. But they also face unique issues surrounding language, fear of deportation, lack of familial or other support groups and lack of knowledge regarding the legal system of their adopted country. In a sense, these women may be deemed to be facing super complex issues—

both the issues surrounding violence and the issues that arise because they face this violence in a new country. This paper attempts to define the components of the problems immigrant and refugee women face and provides examples of two organizations in NC who have successfully managed to address these issues.

### **Definitions and Scope**

Immigrant and refugee women have a good deal in common. Both of these groups of women enter a new country with less power and control than women who are native to the country. According to the USA for UNHCR, a refugee is defined as “someone who has fled his or her country because of war or due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion.” An immigrant, on the other hand, “generally comes to the U.S. to join family members who already live in this country or they are “economic immigrants” seeking work and a better life for themselves and their families.”

The number of immigrants and refugees in the world today is astounding. Angelina Jolie who is a special envoy to the United Nations for refugees stated last year at refugee day that 43 million people had been displaced. Women make up a large percentage of those numbers. According to the Immigration Information Source website, immigrant and refugee women made up approximately 12 percent of all women in the United States in 2008. “With approximately 19 million immigrant women and girls in the United States, nearly half of the foreign-born population is female.” The United States government estimates that “11.5 million people currently live in the U.S. without authorization and about 47 percent, or 5.4 million, are women.” (Rhoad).

According to the Immigration Policy Center, immigrant and refugee women are more likely than other women to be victims of violence. Immigrant and refugee women reported “to work in the informal labor market as domestic workers and caretakers and are less able to assert their rights or to be protected under current laws. Immigrant women workers are also vulnerable to rape, sexual abuse and harassment, or other gender-motivated exploitation in the workplace.” There are some immigrant and refugee women who are brought to the United States through human trafficking networks. These women are forced to work under difficult conditions and face both physical harms and deportation threats. It is very difficult to find statistics for immigrant and refugee women since most immigrant and refugee women do not report instances of violence due to fear of deportation, language and cultural issues as discussed below. The fact that the number of immigrant and refugee women is increasing combined with the increased risk that these women face for being victims creates a problem for host countries to understand and address the issues that these women face in their adopted country.

### **Violence in Home Country and En Route to Adopted Country**

Immigrant and refugee women often leave their home countries due to violence. Even though they leave this violence, the violence does not always leave them. Instead, they continue to live with it on the way to their last destination, in refugee camps and in their destination country. Any discussion of the problems of violence against women immigrants and refugee must first examine the “inferior” status of these women. By the very nature of their status as immigrants and refugees, these women are often behind the curve before they step foot on foreign soil. Before entering their adopted country, many immigrant and refugee women face problems both on the way and in refugee camps. According to the United Nations, women who

come from conflict zones are more affected by rape and sexual violence at the refugee camps. Refugee Council did a project in 2009 called *The Vulnerable Women's Project: Refugee and Asylum Seeking Women Affected by Rape or Sexual Violence*. According to the report of this project,

About three quarters of the project's clients have been raped; a similar number experience trauma-related psychological distress and about one in five have gynecological problems. 15% of the women have become pregnant as a consequence of being raped and 5% have had a child. Half the project's clients have been Sri Lankan Tamils, with Eritreans, Congolese, Ivorians and Somalis the next biggest groups. Some clients are in situations where they are exploited and in perpetual fear of sexual or other forms of physical abuse; many consider suicide.

In order to get to European countries, immigrant and refugee women have to go through some other countries such as Turkey and Greece. These immigrant and refugee women are not welcomed to these countries and they face many types of violence. The living condition of immigrant and refugee women is not good both inside and outside of the refugee camps. Sometimes immigrant and refugee women who applied for asylum have to wait years until their host country makes the decision for them. In the article, *The jungle of Athens: The housing problem for migrants and the fascist attack*, explains about the situation of immigrants and refugee families in Greece. Many immigrant and refugee families have to sleep on the streets, parks, under bridges, in barracks or in construction sites. This article says about "a case of an Afghan family sleeping outside during 2010, their homelessness ended up in the sexual abuse of their 7 year old child. ... A young African women fell victim to a rapist, who attacked her in the middle of the night while she was sleeping alone on a square in the center of Athens.

### **Violence in the Destination Country and Cultural Issues**

Women who are new to a country face not only new laws, but also a new culture. These women are often at the heart of a great cultural divide between their husbands or male family members who want to retain the traditional patriarchal culture and the women who want to embrace the new progressive culture. There are some families who came to the United States from traditional societies where men play a big role and women are supposed to obey them. In traditional societies once women get married they become part of their husband's family and their rights become even more limited. Many of these women sacrifice themselves to their families and traditional roles and do not report their abusive husband to the police. Rawan Online is an online website by Dr. Darman who is an Afghan psychologist. Dr. Darman wrote an article called "Afghan Couples, the West, and a Shift in Status." According to Dr. Darman,

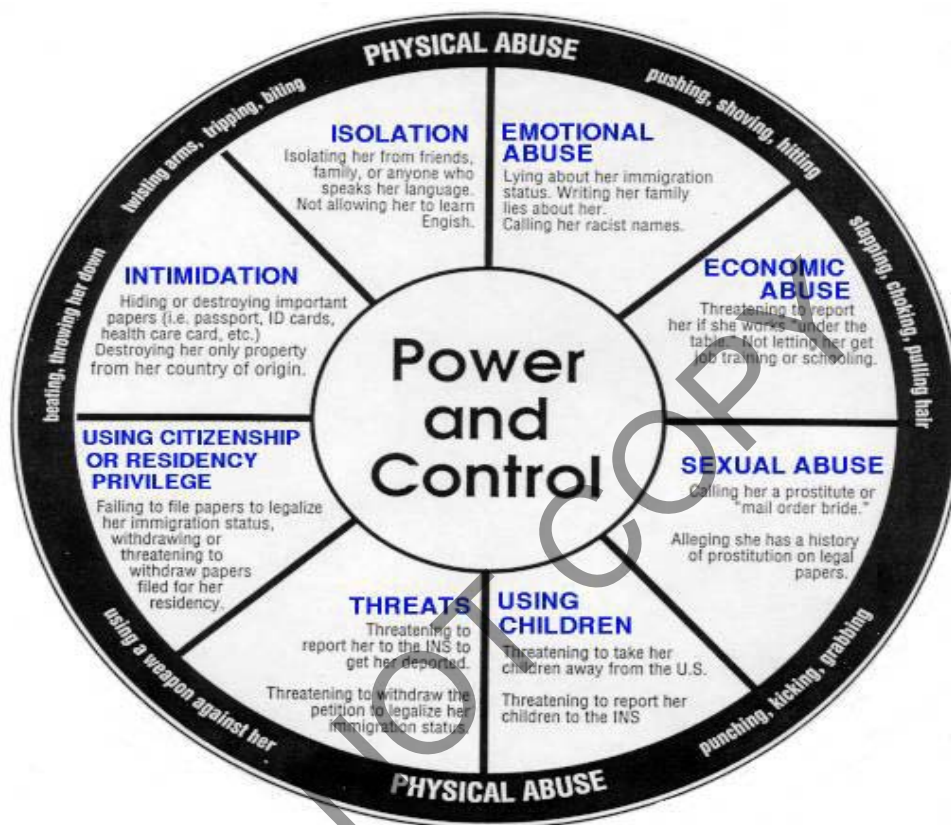
Afghans have a patriarchal society. Particularly those who are brought up in Afghanistan, or among families that hold a stronger traditional value system, men get better education and employment opportunities. Therefore, they have a stronger and upper social status. Women, however, are usually expected and encouraged to bring up children. These traditional roles are of course changing, but the process is very sluggish. Once these couples immigrate to the West, their status may obviously change. Usually husbands can no longer get equal opportunities they used to have in Afghanistan. That can be discouraging. It can also make them increasingly inflexible, leading to a growing disappointment at the system.

Many immigrant and refugee women are in danger of being killed by their own family members if they dishonor their families by marrying whom they love, asking for a divorce and becoming westernized. There is documentary on Youtube called *Murder in the Family: Honor Killing in America*. This documentary is made by CNN and there are stories about some families who killed their daughter and wives in the name of "honor killings." One of these stories is about Sandeela Kanwal who went to Pakistan for an arranged marriage to her cousin who was twice her age. Sandeela was not happy about this marriage and she had lived in the United States apart from her husband who was still in Pakistan. When Sandeela's husband joined her in the US,

Sandeela still did not want to live with him. Six years after their marriage, Sandeela died and police arrested her father Chaudhry Rashid as the suspect for what some have called an "honor killing." Sandeela's husband Kanwal filed for divorce, a prospect her father, a 52-year-old immigrant from Pakistan, would not entertain. Investigators say that after an argument on the night of July 5, 2008, he strangled Kanwal with a bungee cord. He could not accept the "disgrace" a divorce or affair would bring on his family, according to police. According to Fox News, the United Nations estimates that as many as 5,000 women are murdered in such honor killings each year for offenses like immodesty or refusing an arranged marriage. These types of killings may be on the rise in the U.S.

Families and husbands also use the fear of deportation to intimidate immigrant and refugee women to keep them quiet about being abused. In fact many of the domestic abuse that these women face are by their own families and husbands. According to the "Power and Control" Wheel, the power and control tactics used against immigrant and refugee women include: emotional abuse such as telling her family lies about her, calling her racist names, belittling and embarrassing her in front of family and friends, lying about his ability to have the immigration status of his lawful permanent resident abuse victims changed. Economic abuse, such as forcing her to work "illegally" when she does not have a work permit, threatening to report her to INS if she works "under the table," not letting her get job training or schooling and forcing her to sign papers in English that she does not understand -- court papers, IRS forms, immigration papers, calling her a prostitute or a "mail order bride," threatening to remove her children from the United States, taking the money she was to send to support her children in her home country. Isolating her from friends, or family members, isolating her from persons who speak her

language, not allowing her to learn English or not allowing her to communicate in a language she is fluent in.



### Language/Communication Issues

Not being a native to the country, in turn, adds another set of problems for these women. Often those women do not speak the same language as that spoken in the adopted country, thereby inhibiting their ability to communicate their needs or report incidence of violence. In fact the inability to communicate is one of the primary factors limiting immigrant and refugee women's ability to seek help for themselves, "Language barriers make gaining access to information, resources and services difficult." (Shetty & Kaguyutan)



### **Awareness of Legal Rights**

When entering a new country, women are not aware of the rights and protection available to them. Some of these women are often leaving countries where women had no rights at all and they may not be aware that violence against women is illegal, let alone something for which they could seek help. In some societies like Afghanistan and Pakistan women are not aware of their rights and they are less likely to have access to their rights. Because of their gender roles and positions in the society, those immigrant and refugee women even cannot ask for justice. When those women leave their countries, men scare them with the law.

Immigrant and refugee women face a lot of similar problems all over the world. There are many international and national organizations that are helping immigrant and refugee women who are victims of domestic violence, rape/sexual assaults.

### **Solutions: National**

The Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (VAWA) is a United States federal law. VAWA provides help and protection for women who are victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking and the professionals who serve these women. VAWA also helps immigrant and refugee women who face cultural, economic, practical and legal barriers to seek and receiving assistance and get justice. VAWA helps immigrant and refugee women about their rights and helps “victims of trafficking, rape, sexual assault in the workplace and nannies who are held hostage.” to get Crime Victim Visas (U Visas).

VAWA’s reauthorization that happened at the end of February 2013, will help all women including immigrant and refugee women who face many kinds of violence in the United States.

The Senate version includes \$659 million in assistance over five years, a number actually down 17% from the last time the bill was reauthorized in 2005. According to SCTIMES, this version of the law also would give more attention to sexual assault prevention, help reduce a backlog in processing rape kits, includes provisions on targeting human trafficking, and ensures child victims of sex trafficking are eligible for grant assistance.

Obama's new policy or dream act will also help immigrant and refugee women who are facing violence.

### **Solutions: Local**

InterAct and KIRAN are two organizations in NC that attempted to address the issues immigrant and refugee women face in NC. For example, Interact is an organization and one stop shop for all women including immigrant and refugee women to seek help.

InterAct is a private, nonprofit United Way agency that provides safety, support, and awareness to victims and survivors of domestic violence and rape/sexual assault which also includes immigrant and refugee women. From 2011-12, InterAct helped 8,350 clients which included %27 white, %34 African American, %9 Hispanic, %1 Asian, and %1 South Asian. In 2009, InterAct opened its new headquarters, Family Safety & Empowerment Center in Raleigh, which brings together nine other community agencies to provide wraparound services for victims and survivors of violence and abuse. KIRAN, which is one of the InterAct's collaborators, assists South Asian victims of domestic violence. InterAct and KIRAN, with the collaboration of Legal Aid of NC, SAFEchild and ALPES, did a three year project called "Immigrant Seeking

Safety.” This project provided specific services and education to South Asian and Hispanic immigrants impacted by domestic violence.

According to InterAct, about 12% of the residences in Wake County do not speak English as their primary language at home. Nearly 13% of residences in Wake County do not speak English as their primary language. Wake County has one of the fastest growing Latino populations in the country. In 2006 Wake County Assessment cited the need to increase the county’s capacity to serve domestic violence victims, especially among immigrants and refugees.

Both KIRAN and InterAct help with the very important issue of legal status of immigrant and refugee women. According to InterAct and Kiran’s report, many immigrant and refugee women have less knowledge of the legal system of that country and therefore are less likely to be aware of the rights in that country. When facing abused and violence, many undocumented immigrant and refugee women are afraid to call the police or ask for help. They think that the police will deport them if they find out that they are undocumented. One part of the InterAct and KIRAN’s project called “Immigration Law Education.” According to InterAct, “many of the deportation fears that battered immigrants experience are due to a lack of awareness of legal remedies. In particular, they are often unaware that they are eligible to adjust their immigration status if they can prove that they were abused at the hands of a U.S. citizen or permanent resident.” (Bhyuan, 2008; Mahapatra, 2008). While working on their project for immigrant and refugee women, InterAct and KIRAN suggested some specific needs that can help combat the lack of awareness between immigrant and refugee women:

- Immigration law and legal service education (Lee and Hadeed, 2009)
- IPV agencies willing to assist with obtaining visas (Denham et. al, 2007)

- Assistance filing reports and provision of legal representation (Whitaker and Reese, 2007)

In order to decrease fears of deportation among immigrant and refugee women, InterAct and KIRAN not only suggested the followings but they also helped immigrant and refugee women to reach some of these goals:

- ✓ Make legal aid services available to address immigration concerns
- ✓ Make classes and information regarding immigration law, legal rights, legal services and legal aid readily available
- ✓ Make service providers aware of legal remedies for immigrant clients
- ✓ Be aware that immigrants may distrust the legal system and may not want to access it because of unjust treatment of women in the courts of their native countries
- ✓ Provide client assistance with obtaining Visas
- ✓ Create a dialogue with immigration officials to build trust and dispel rumors
- ✓ Help non-citizens prepare to meet with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Citizenship and Immigration Status (CIS) or Customs and Border Patrol (CBP)
- ✓ Develop relationships with immigration advocates with backgrounds in domestic Violence

The communication barriers that immigrant and refugee women face are addressed by both InterAct and KIRAN. One of the InterAct and KIRANs' goal is to educate immigrant and refugee women and their families about violence against women and where they can go if they face it. InterAct provides crisis intervention through two 24-hour crisis lines for domestic violence and rape/sexual assault, as well as walk-in bilingual counseling for individuals and support groups. KIRAN provides crisis counseling for South Asian immigrants on a 24-hour hotline. Both InterAct and Kiran provide bilingual and culturally specific case management, as well as referrals for physical and mental health service providers. Legal Aid of NC helps InterAct and Kiran with providing immigration assistance for victims of domestic violence. SAFEchild's program provides a blend of parent information, support, and family advocacy for Spanish-speaking families. InterAct, SAFEchild, Kiran and ALPSE recruit and train bilingual

and bicultural volunteers to assist with client services and translation. The partner agencies recruit and train Advisory Board members, including individuals from the local Hispanic and South Asian communities.

Either program would not be successful without each other's collaboration and community outreaches. Both InterAct and KIRAN accomplish most of their goals throughout faith community leaders in target populations as well as community outreach events such as the Festivals, Outreach at the Consulate of Mexico and Club Choice outreach to Hispanic women for Wake County. They also used language- specific resources such as Tee-shirts, water bottles, brochures and pens.

Immigrant and refugee women face unique issues surrounding language, fear of deportation, lack supports and lack of knowledge regarding the legal system of their adopted country. InterAct and Kiran are two organizations in NC that successfully managed to address these issues. As individuals, we are all responsible to help each other. We all can make the world a better place for ourselves as well as immigrant and refugee women through finding solutions to these issues by starting to volunteer with any of these organizations.

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