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# Abuse Often Follows Afghans to America



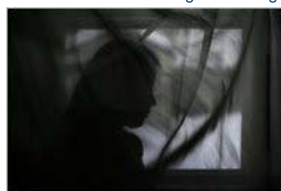
Béatrice de Géa for The New York Times

Nicole DiMarco taught an English class for Women for Afghan Women — a decade-old advocacy organization based in Fresh Meadows, Queens.

By KIRK SEMPLE  
Published: February 27, 2011

When she arrived in New York from Afghanistan last year to join her husband, an Afghan-American she had married in Kabul, Nadia K. was thrilled at the prospect of a new American life.

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Béatrice de Géa for The New York Times  
Nadia K., 22, became a victim of domestic violence after joining her husband in New York from Afghanistan.

But soon after she moved in with him and his family in Flushing, Queens, she said, they started treating her like a servant. Her husband revealed that he loved another woman. When Nadia complained, her sister-in-law beat her, with the consent of the husband, who often looked on, smiling.

“I can’t even remember how many times I got black eyes,” said Nadia, 22, who is so fearful that she asked that her last name not be published. “I didn’t know I could call the

police.”

She had thought this kind of abuse was a part of Afghan life she had left behind.

In Afghanistan, a decade after the overthrow of the Taliban and the rise of an influential women’s rights movement, the violent subjugation of women remains broadly accepted. In recent weeks, the Afghan government has sharply criticized the country’s shelters for battered women and moved to take control of them.

But much more quietly, a culture of domestic violence — not only by husbands but also by husbands’ families — has followed Afghan immigrants to destinations like New York, where women’s advocates say they are now discovering just how widespread the problem is.

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Naheed Bahram, the chief case manager at [Women for Afghan Women](#) — a decade-old advocacy organization based in Fresh Meadows, Queens, where many Afghans have settled — said that as recently as five years ago, the center knew of only two cases of domestic abuse. As the community’s trust in the group has grown, that number has risen: about 35 battered women sought help last year.

Ms. Bahram said she suspected that most of the 300 or so women the center serves with classes and counseling had suffered domestic violence but were still afraid to report it. “We’ve had clients who have been living like that for 16 to 17 years,” said Ms. Bahram, an Afghan immigrant herself.

In some ways, the United States can be worse than Afghanistan for abused women, advocates say. Many find themselves isolated in their new country, far from their families, unable to speak English and entirely dependent on husbands and in-laws. Most are unaware of their legal rights or fearful of the authorities.

And many Afghans in the diaspora, resistant to full assimilation, hold on to traditional practices even tighter than they would in their home country — even in families that immigrated decades ago.

“All my relatives in the United States are more conservative, religiously and culturally, than my relatives in Afghanistan,” said Manizha Naderi, executive director of the Queens group, which runs a network of women’s shelters in Afghanistan.

Domestic abuse is common in many cultures, and the belief that women are their husbands’ property is an age-old convention of Afghanistan’s rigidly patriarchal, tribal society.

In the United States — where about 79,000 people of Afghan descent live, 11 percent of them in New York, according to census figures — the law provides many more protections for abuse victims. But these measures may not feel like enough to Afghan women, for whom turning against one’s in-laws, particularly families long established in America, can be terrifying. Of five abuse victims who agreed to be interviewed for this article, all but Nadia asked to have their names withheld from publication because they feared retribution from families and a stigma in Afghan society.

Growing up in a working-class family in Kabul, Nadia was aware of domestic violence; her father once rescued a woman from an abusive husband and brought her to live with them. But Nadia said she never imagined such things could happen in the United States. She had envisioned a quiet life raising children and perhaps continuing the education she had ended in middle school.

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When the abuse began, she felt trapped. She knew nobody else in the country, and was reluctant to tell her parents in Afghanistan and fly home, because, she said, she did not want to bring shame to herself and to them. Afghan women say the presumption of guilt in a failed relationship usually falls on the woman.

"If I went back to Afghanistan," Nadia said, "everybody would blame me. They'll say I was a bad girl."

While most Afghan victims of domestic violence are brutalized by their husbands, advocates say, other family members sometimes join in or, as with Nadia, serve as the husband's proxy.

After one particularly brutal beating by her sister-in-law, Nadia was hospitalized with head and abdominal injuries. She said the family intimidated her into lying to hospital officials about the cause of her injuries; she told them she had fallen down the stairs.

After another attack, last August, Nadia sought refuge in a neighborhood park. There, a stranger approached her and put her in touch with an Afghan taxi driver who connected her with the women's center. The center gave her shelter in its network of safe houses and helped her get an order of protection against the family. She also found part-time work as a baby sitter, enrolled in English classes and filed for divorce.

But her nightmare was not over. In December, under a police escort, she returned home to pick up her belongings and, in front of the officers, her husband berated and threatened her, she said. He was arrested and charged with obstructing governmental administration, a spokeswoman for the Queens district attorney's office said.

While many of the center's clients have sought recourse in the court system, its staff members — nearly all of Afghan descent — say that a Western, one-size-fits-all approach does not always work, so they have been amenable to alternatives that hew to Afghan traditions.

In Afghanistan, family problems have historically been resolved through the mediation of religious and tribal leaders, sometimes in the form of an ad hoc council, or jirga.

Mohammed Sherzad, an Afghan imam at Hazrat-I-Abubakr Sadiq mosque in Flushing, said that in the past few years he had counseled about 15 couples with domestic violence problems. "We have to sit with them," he said. "We have to try to solve the problem before going to the police or the court."

The women's center has also sought his help with two clients who wanted to resolve disputes through a jirga. "I always tell people, 'I don't want to disrespect the religion and culture that we have,'" Ms. Bahram said.

One woman said she sought a jirga because, despite the abuse, she still loved her husband

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and had faith that he could change. A former flight attendant for Kam Air, an Afghan airline, she arrived in the United States in 2009; she had become engaged to her Afghan-American husband in Kabul, where he had helped run his family's businesses. But when she moved into his home in Suffolk County, on Long Island, she soon learned that he was having an affair.

Whenever she accused him, he verbally abused her, said the woman, who is now 21. He forbade her to socialize with others. After he failed to file an application for her green card, as he had promised, she decided to file the paperwork on her own behalf. When he discovered that she had begun the process, she said, he beat her so severely that she was hospitalized.

Though the police charged him with assault and a court issued an order of protection, she decided to remain with him. "I didn't have any friends," she said. "I couldn't do anything without him."

The beatings continued, she said, until an Afghan woman she met in an English class told her about Women for Afghan Women. Ms. Bahram and an Afghan imam who frequently works with the center met with the abused woman and advised her to seek a divorce, but she refused.

"We were telling her to leave him, but we had to respect her feelings," Ms. Bahram said.

Ms. Bahram organized a meeting between the imam and the couple that lasted six hours. A week later, several of the husband's relatives joined them. Finally, the imam met alone with the husband, who promised to change his behavior.

Since the jirga, the woman said, her husband has treated her "better than before." She added: "No beatings." They have moved to a new home in Nassau County, and she has received her green card.

While her situation is far from ideal, she said, it is better than living alone or returning to Afghanistan, where she feared she would be ridiculed for being a divorcee. "I had no other choice but to live with him," she said.

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