

# Mission Loc@l

## Immigrants Most Vulnerable to Partner Violence



By: [Vanessa Carr](#) October 3, 2009 – 12:44 am

Immigrant women are especially vulnerable if being abused by a partner because language and cultural differences make it difficult for them to seek help, according to social workers.

“They may believe that they will be deported or that their kids will be taken away—especially if they don’t speak English,” said Walesa Kanarek of [La Casa de las Madres](#), an organization with offices in the Mission that fields 6,000 calls per year.

“[Latinas] are supposed to be following men’s guidelines,” [Riley Center](#) Director Mari Alaniz said of cultural expectations. In cases where a woman’s immigration status is dependent on her husband’s, “there is a lot of power and control.”

Women with undocumented husbands are right to worry that they can be referred to Immigration and Customs Enforcement ([ICE](#)) when arrested on domestic violence charges, said Quizan Malouf, misdemeanor managing attorney at the [Public Defender’s Office](#).

“We’ve had both documented and undocumented batterers make that threat. You can make an anonymous tip,” said Emberly Cross of the [Cooperative Restraining Order Clinic](#). “It’s just one more thing a victim has to worry about when she is considering leaving.”

What many abused undocumented women may not realize is that their immigration status can be protected, or actually elevated, under the [Violence Against Women Act](#). It allows abused women to self-petition for permanent resident status instead of relying on her abuser’s immigration status.

Another remedy for an abused undocumented woman is a [U-Visa](#), which she’s eligible for if she cooperates with authorities in the prosecution of the domestic violence case.

**[Bay Area Legal Aid](#) won 200 U-Visa applications for clients last year between their two offices, the vast majority of which were for Latinas, according to Ken Theisen the communications director.**

There are currently 13,000 U-Visa applications pending nationwide, half of which are due to administrative backlog that’s left thousands of women waiting, according to the [Associated Press](#). Though a woman stuck in this limbo cannot get a job or apply for benefits, she can’t be deported either, said Theisen.

Cross said that San Francisco is very lucky to have a cooperative police department with someone designated to sign off on U-Visa applications.

“We do see a lot of our clients being able to take advantage of those resources,” she said.

“Every crisis creates opportunities, that’s how we’re looking at this,” said Shawna Virago of Community United Against Violence. “We are focusing our energies on money that doesn’t rely on the state...We can’t rely on the state to always support us.”

Virago thinks that domestic violence has been unfairly marginalized as a “women’s issue” and has been shocked by the lack of public outrage over such drastic cuts in California.

“It’s not like the population of people experiencing are not going to step forward out of safety issues,” she said.

“We are angry, sad, frustrated and uncertain of how to continue,” said Jill Zawisza of WOMAN Inc. “But we will forge ahead.”

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