



EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN WHO APPLIED FOR VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT (VAWA) SELF-PETITION: ANALYSIS OF LEGAL AFFIDAVITS

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Background: Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant human rights and public health issue, especially for immigrant victims who often have difficulties accessing helpful resources. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) allows spouse-sponsored immigrant women, who are abused by their spouse to self-petition for legal status without assistance from their abusive partner.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of immigrant women who were abused by their US citizen or permanent resident spouse, and also to know how they came to apply for VAWA self-petition to ensure legal immigration status. This study is significant because little is known about the experiences of these women in detail and so it will contribute to improving the safety of the abused women, as well as ensure safer communities.

Method: For my research, I analyzed 75 affidavits that came from the victims' legal process to self-petition for legal immigration status.

Results: Most of the women come from Latin America, with many receiving information from, for example, the police, shelters, church organizations etc. While these community organizations are providing aid to these women to get out of abusive situations, some of these same organizations are helping to keep these women in their abusive relationships by incorrectly handling the woman's situation. For example, one woman commented on her experience with the police: "I was never able to call law enforcement because the only time I did call, they never did anything to him. He had threatened me with a gun and they had said that I was a wet back, and that he was the owner of the home and that he had papers and I didn't and so they never did anything to him, not even a write a report." Many of these women have children with their spouse and as a result, many of their children witness their mothers' physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse. Through all stages of the abusive behavior, the women generally want to leave the situation but their spouse often uses threats to take away their children and contact immigration to coerce their wives into being obedient.

Conclusion: Although many immigrant victims of IPV face numerous challenges to leave abusive relationships, the women who applied for VAWA self-petition received help from resources such as the police, shelters and church organizations. But due to the women's struggles with various resources, there are needs for more education among agencies to identify these immigrant women in abusive relationships. Access to help resources has significant impacts on whether these women can leave an abusive relationship or not. The agencies need to be better able to help these women by recognizing these abusive relationships and getting the women out of them. But in order to better serve these women, it is important for the community to promote resources that help immigrant, and non-immigrant women alike, who experience IPV to increase safety in the community.

