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Korean American Women and Domestic Violence



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National Korean American Service & Education Consortium

NAKASEC

Quite plainly,

**violence against women is the most base
and widespread human rights issue**

yet it is also the least challenged.

Women perform 2/3 of the world's work hours yet they earn 1/10 of the world's income and own less than 1/100th of the world properties. This economic inequality is echoed in every other realm and present on a global scale. Subordination of women assumes many forms; the most pervasive and apparent form is violence against women. Quite plainly, violence against women is the most base and widespread human rights issue yet it is also the least challenged. The parameters for examining violence against women are broad. Women face violence in the economic, social, domestic, physical, and sexual realms. This Issue Paper will focus on domestic violence within the Korean American context. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the growing body of works that examine the root causes of violence against women.

HOW PREVALENT AND SERIOUS IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

The high rate of underreporting renders statistics inadequate (1); they are inadequate for measuring the range or level of violent acts committed against women. However, they do serve as an indicator of the level of community awareness and responsiveness to domestic violence. For example, Korean American Women In Need (KAN-WIN), a domestic violence crisis line serving abused women and children in the greater Chicago area, has seen the number of calls to their hotline increase three-fold in the past five years. In this case, the growing number of cases are more of an indication that the level of community awareness and aversion to domestic violence has increased.

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by their husbands at least once during their married lives.**

In the United States, the following are some of the most commonly understood facts about domestic violence and sexual assault. (2)

Every 15 seconds a woman is beaten.

It is estimated that 4 million women are assaulted each year.

Every day 4 women die as a result of domestic violence.

Battering is the single major cause for injury to women in this country: more women are injured by domestic violence than by rapes, muggings and auto accidents combined.

60% of all American wives are beaten by their husbands at least once during their married lives.

26% of the women murdered in this country are killed by their husbands, ex-husbands or partners.

25% of all reported victims of domestic violence are pregnant women.

More than 53% of male abusers also abuse their children.

THE KOREAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

There is a popular belief that Koreans have a propensity for violence. Sociologists studying domestic violence have written about how Asian women are more susceptible to domestic violence because they are small-boned, fragile-looking and willing subservients to their partners. They add that Korean men are more violent; an aggression spawned from a militaristic culture. In truth, Korean culture is a culture that breeds violence but this is true for every other community. To be fair, we must say that violence against women is condoned on a global level. With this in mind, let us carry out a more thorough examination of some of the preconditions for domestic violence in the Korean American community.

According to the Center for Multiethnic and Transnational Studies at USC, the Korean American community in the United States is now estimated at 1.6 million as of 1995. Excluding the early 1900s when Koreans immigrated to the U.S. primarily as laborers for the sugar plantation, Korean women have outnumbered Korean men by a slight margin of 3%. (3)

An estimated 78% of Korean Americans are recent immigrants who arrived in the U.S. after 1980. (4) As a result, many face great stress from their relocation experience. In addition, they are greatly isolated. Isolation inhibits women from seeking ways out of violent relationships. Rather, many are forced into positions of dependency vis a vis their abusers.

In most cases, Korean American women find their social contacts are limited to the Korean American community. Generally, communities in exile from their home base must grapple with a conservatism that is a common by-product of any effort to preserve culture and identity. In the case of the Korean American community, there is a great effort to retain patriarchal concepts of family. And for the sake of preserving the family, women are discouraged from confronting and leaving their abusers. These ideas are further reinforced by most Korean American organizations and associations which are modeled on similar patriarchal structures.

For many Korean Americans, small businesses are the most viable economic option because of language barriers, cultural differences, ethnic discrimination, and un-transferable professional credits. This has produced a North American phenomenon of Korean owned small businesses. Available statistics indicate that at least 25% of Korean Americans are engaged in small business enterprises. (5) However, there is a prevailing belief that this figure is higher than actual numbers.

The rise in Korean American entrepreneurship has spawned the myth of Korean Americans as the model and successful minority. Such ideas need to be dispelled. Most Korean American proprietors find that their financial stability is dependent on the labor power of both partners as well as the assistance of their children. Families labor long hours. This engenders great levels of stress and child neglect, taxes the health of family members, and doubles the workload of the women. Moreover, the overlapping of business and family interactions exacerbate the strain of family members giving rise to frustration and setting the conditions for domestic violence.

WOMEN WHO CALL

Based on the women who call KAN-WIN, they range in age from their teens to their sixties; some are just dating and some have been married for over 30 years. About half are employed which is a higher number than in other communities and most are the primary caregivers for their children. In other words, there is no typical victim. But certain women are more likely to seek the services of KAN-WIN and they are those who are more socially isolated and have little or no other options.

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BARRIERS WOMEN FACE

The violence women are subjected to ranges in form and severity. Historically and in general, Korean American women have been conditioned to bear a lot of pain and hardships. More often, they seek help from domestic violence crisis lines as a last resort. It is after they have enlisted the aid of their mothers, their friends, and their ministers. They call when the violence has escalated to a state where they find themselves fearful for their lives, or when their abuser begins to abuse their children. Women who call have been brutally beaten with every object imaginable, verbally humiliated, forced to perform sexually degrading acts at gunpoint, etc. Why do they stay? There are many reasons.

Fear.

Women generally fear that the violence will become worse if they leave. The abuser has reduced the woman to a state of extreme vulnerability wherein she is no longer certain of who she is nor how strong she can be.

Children.

Many women stay for the sake of the children. Women believe that in spite of the violence, the children need to grow up in a household that remains intact and with a father figure. In one case, a sixty-year old woman sought assistance after enduring twenty years of abuse. She had been repeatedly hospitalized for broken bones but only recently made the decision to leave him. She explained that she had wanted to leave for a long time but wanted to wait until her children had left home for college.

Economic Stability.

Few women have the economic autonomy or resources to leave their abuser. As the primary caregivers of their children, women know that they must juggle childcare concerns with the need to secure decent-paying employment in order to leave.

Community Censure.

Women are encouraged by their mothers, their children and by the church to stay in the marriage. The community tends to view violence as a normative expression of male aggression that should be endured. Sadly, the woman is usually blamed for inciting the abuser to acts of violence and is advised to be more careful and sensitive to the abusers' moods and whims.

Language Barriers.

Limited English language skills impinge on their ability to seek assistance from those outside of the Korean American community.

Immigration Status.

A great number of Korean American women immigrated to the United States through sponsorship visas. Many others are undocumented. For both these women, the fear of possible deportation prevents them from seeking help.

Divorce Stigma.

Many Korean American women were raised to believe that marital bonds must never be broken. Those who leave and file for divorce remain stigmatized by the community around them.

Social Alienation.

As more Korean American women are tied socially and often economically to the Korean American community, they fear they will be ostracized if they leave their abusers.

Ethnocentrism.

Korean American women are less likely to press charges against the abuser if he is also Korean because they are part of the same community.

Fatalism (pal-cha).

Mistrust of the law: Korea's modern history is one of colonialism, war and police states. Many Korean Americans grew up witnessing the military and police brutalize and terrorize civilians. These homeland memories coupled with the poor record of discrimination and abuse wielded by American law enforcement officers against minorities deter Korean Americans from seeking assistance from the police.

Humiliation.

The women feel shame and believe that they will also bring shame onto their family if they were to talk about their private matters with outsiders.

Lack of Adequate Resource.

Existing services for domestic violence victims are scarce. There are three times as many animal shelters as there are shelters for abused women and children. (6)

There are many reasons, but one reason that is rarely spoken of is that they are staying for love. It would be simple to assume that love is the main factor preventing women from leaving. Yet, one must not confuse domestic violence as an expression of love. At the same time, the choices that abused women must make are not easy. And the emotional attachment a woman holds to her abuser only makes the decisions she must make to protect herself and her children all the more painful.

THE NEED FOR CULTURALLY SENSITIVE SERVICES

Of the services that do exist, they are ill equipped to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of Korean American women. Few battered women's services and programs provide Korean language services and staff are often unaware of the cultural needs of abused Korean American women and children. For example, there have been cases when shelters have refused to accept a Korean American woman because she could not speak English. In other cases, shelters have prohibited the women from eating Korean food.

Violence is about power in all of its forms.

UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Many have sought to rationalize violence. To the abuser, there are rational reasons why the violence occurred. Yet how can we explain why it is consistently men who abuse women? For example, the U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 95% of assaults on spouses or ex-spouses are committed by men against women. (7) Violence is about power in all of its forms. And it is the most insidious and common way that men exercise their dominance over women. Men abuse women because they know they can; they are in positions of power and there are no checks to their abuses of power. And as long as we eroticize the submission of women, it will remain socially acceptable.

Yet this concept is easier to grasp when it involves a violent crime committed by the 'other'. Looking back in Korean history, for example, over 200,000 Korean 'comfort women' were forcibly recruited to provide sexual services to Japanese soldiers from 1937-1944. In this case, the power dynamics at play are clear. The subordination of Korean women is a stark illustration of the subordination of South Korea as a nation to another foreign nation. Yet it is not easy to see similar political, social and economic forces at play when a Korean man abuses his wife. In this instance, it becomes a private matter.

STRATEGIES AND SOLUTIONS

In recent years, women have begun to address violence against women on an international scale. This includes the creation of shelters, hotline services and pro-active organizing campaigns. The movement to end violence against women is still in its nascent stage of development and constant revisions are needed. For example, shelters alone are not a sufficient bridge to help women leave their abusers and start an independent life. Women are permitted to stay an average of one to two months and that is never enough time. For this reason, domestic violence prevention advocates must push for long-term strategies that enhance and improve the quality of life in general. This means a push for affordable permanent housing, free childcare, job training, gainful employment and so on.

Domestic violence occurs in pandemic levels yet as with every other social problem, there is no clear consensus on what are effective programs for abusers. Generally, two options exist – incarceration or counseling. Yet, past studies demonstrate that counseling, particularly when ordered by the courts, does not work. For example, more than half of all men ordered to receive counseling rarely attend all the sessions and, of those that do, few are able to stop abusing their partners for long periods of time. For this reason, there are a greater number of proponents for more severe sentencing. However, men incarcerated are more resentful and retaliatory when they are released. Clearly, the community must take an active role in developing programs that incorporate education with counseling for batterers.

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PRIORITY AREAS

Education

Education and outreach on domestic violence must involve all sectors of the Korean American community, social service agencies, the media, the churches, schools, alumni associations, business associations and so on. Community leaders and organizations have a responsibility and role in guiding and shaping the views of the community. Unfortunately, they have historically neglected to address the issue seriously and responsibly.

Research

Research and resources including the production and wide distribution of bilingual resources and services; increased studies on the extent of domestic violence within the Korean American community; evaluations of current programs for abused women and children; and increased studies on the impact of violence on children.

Improved Services

Provision of bilingual staff and/or interpreters at more social agencies and increased funding for domestic violence programs. Cultural sensitivity training for social service providers, medical practitioners, law enforcement personnel and others who come into direct contact with abused women and children.

Funding

There is a continued need for greater funding for existing as well as new services and programs.

CONCLUSION

This Issue Paper is designed to inform the community that violence is cyclical and prevention can only occur through a radical restructuring of our concepts of women, violence and power. We also hope that it would help readers to become more empathetic to the conditions in which Korean women live in and understand that, while it is certainly critical for the violence to end, it is also very hard for them to just leave their abusers. For this reason, it is contingent on all members of the Korean American community to assume a role in ending violence against women.

Sources

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4. U.S. Census Bureau
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6. National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
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Asian Women's Shelter

3543 18th Street, Box 19
San Francisco, CA 94110
Crisisline (415)751-0880

Korean American Women in Need

PO Box 59133
Chicago, IL 60659
Hotline (773)583-0880

Korean Family Service Center

PO Box 20202
New York, NY 10001
Hotline (212) 465-0664

New York Asian Women's Center

39 Bowery, Box 375
New York, NY 10002
24-hr Multi-lingual Hotline (212) 732-5230
24-hr Toll Free Hotline 1-888-888-7702
(Access limited to callers from the
New York City area and some parts
of New Jersey)

Korean American Family Service Center

3938 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 200
Los Angeles, CA 90010
Counseling services (213) 389-6755

Center for Pacific-Asian Family

543 N. Fairfax Ave. Room 108
Los Angeles, CA 90036
24-hr Hotline (213) 653-4042
24-hr Toll Free Hotline 1-800-339-3940

National Korean American Service & Education Consortium

NAKASEC

The National Korean American Service & Education Consortium, Inc. (NAKASEC) is a non-profit organization founded by Korean American community organizations located in five major cities across the United States. NAKASEC seeks to educate and empower Korean Americans nationwide. The organization's on-going educational programs include the publication of Issue Papers on issues of concern to Korean Americans.

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