



Economic Downturn Fuels Up Tick in Domestic Violence

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Editor's Note: As the economy worsens, more women are accessing services geared to domestic violence, and many money-strapped shelters have been forced to turn women away, report NAM editors Viji Sundaram and Carolyn Goossen.

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Her eyes fill with tears as she tells her tale, and her hands tremble as she wipes them away. A pretty woman with almond-shaped eyes and shoulder-length hair, Alejandra Leon, 36, remembers how her boyfriend would erupt at the slightest excuse, even when he was dating her seven years ago. Her two young children from a previous marriage would watch in fear as he bullied, threatened and taunted her.

The abuse intensified after her boyfriend lost his bluecollar job last May, and his drinking binges became more frequent. So, Leon, an undocumented immigrant, decided she would leave him. She left with her children even though she had no job to fall back on, or a work permit that would make it easier for her to snag one.

Leon's story is not unique. In California and across the country, women's service groups are reporting a rise in domestic violence as the economy deteriorates and puts pressure on family life. "A bad economy makes a tragic situation at home even worse," said Karen Oehme, director of the Institute for Family Violence Studies at Florida State University's School of Social Work.

Tara Shabazz, executive director of California Partnership to End Domestic Violence, a 200-member organization, said that more women were accessing services geared to domestic violence. "We are seeing an increase in requests for hotlines, legal services, transitional services, and services for children," she said.

At the Bay Area Asian Women's Shelter, executive director Beckie Masaki said more women are calling the crisis hotline. "In the last year, it's gone up by 15 percent," Masaki said.

The Oakland-based chapter of Mujeres Unidas, a support group for Hispanic women that Leon regularly accesses, is seeing the same upward trend.

"Before the economic crisis, 45 percent of the calls we received were from women facing domestic violence," said program director Maria Jimenez said. "Now it's gone up to 70 percent."

Last week, four out of five women who participated in the support group meeting at Mujeres Unidas were victims of domestic violence, Jimenez said. "And the violence has been pretty severe in some of the cases."

Erika Munez, 31, of Oakland, a mother of three young children all under 10, said she has been relying more and more on handouts from local churches and food banks ever since her husband lost his job as a painter last November.

"The environment in my house has turned ugly," said Munez. "My husband verbally and emotionally abuses me. He tells me, 'Get a job or go back to Mexico.' But where am I to find a job?"

The problem isn't only in urban areas. In Mendota, a mostly farming community in the Central Valley, where residents are facing a double whammy from the drought and the economy, there has been a significant spike in domestic violence, according to Mayor Robert Silva. "There are very few jobs here now, and that's leading to family problems," said Silva. "Men are getting frustrated and taking to drinking and abusing their wives."

The increase in domestic violence is straining the resources of service providers, many of which are also struggling in a down economy. Many women turn to shelters when they leave abusive situations, but shelters, too, have become victims of the recession, even though the need for them clearly appears to be growing.

"There are programs that have been cut at the state level," said Shabazz. "There are 94 domestic violence programs funded by the Department of Public Health, and they face a 10 percent decrease in the last state budget. This impacts their ability to provide services."

Even in better financial times, the donations-dependent shelters are filled to capacity. Now, with skimpier staff, many have been forced to turn away clients, or put them on their waiting list, said Atashi Chakravarty, executive director of the Berkeley-based support group for South Asian women, Narika.

For undocumented women like Leon, domestic violence is compounded by their immigration status. Unskilled and ignorant of American legal protections, Leon said she was scared of leaving her abusive boyfriend. He refused to marry her so he could use the threat of deportation to control her. She wanted to find a job so she could contribute toward the upkeep of her children, two from a previous marriage and a third born from her new relationship. He said no.

"He made sure I was totally dependent on him," Leon said at the Mujeres Unidas support group. "But he would never lose an opportunity to remind me that it was he who was supporting the children."

Keeping family members "economically enslaved" is not uncommon among abusers, said Oehme. "There is a dynamic of domestic violence through financial control abusers use," she said.

After leaving her boyfriend, Leon managed to find a job at a waste management recycling center in the East Bay. But the center laid her off recently.

"I don't want to break any laws, but what can I do?" she said, as she tried to fight back her tears. "I have to feed my children."

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