

An Underdeveloped World

within the Developed World*

By Claudia Hasanbegovic

For a Latin American woman who used to live in a society without a Welfare State it is shocking to note that London cannot be different than one of our underdeveloped countries when it refers to immigrant women. I want to underline here some striking situations I have been observing through my work as domestic violence adviser at a Latin American woman's organisation.

It is well known that domestic violence is a problem, which recognises complex causes, and has many natures. Domestic violence is a human rights violation, a crime, a health issue, a social and family problem. Yet, Immigration laws many times constitute concrete barriers to immigrant women who suffer abuse in their intimate relationships in this city. As immigrant women we many times experience language barriers and this facilitates social isolation and lost of job opportunities. The majority of immigrants arrive to a country where they do not have relatives, friends and neighbours. This deprives them from crucial support networks and the possibility to have alternative accommodation and child care in case they need them.

When educated, immigrant's degrees were not obtained in the receiving country, and this also contributes to keep many qualified immigrants working in low paid job.

Until this point I have been describing the situation of immigrants who have a right to work. Yet, many immigrants who are asylum seekers, or whose applications before the Home Office have been rejected and are in the process of appeal might find all the mentioned factors worsen. Due to the time immigration proceedings can last, many immigrants can spend several years living in a constant insecure situation, without knowing whether next week they will be still living in the UK or send back to their country of origin.

All the mentioned factors collude in making immigrant people vulnerable to poverty, social exclusion and I will add, these make immigrant women vulnerable to domestic violence.

Domestic violence is constituted by all those actions or omissions a partner does to exert power over and control his partner. The abuse can be physical, emotional, sexual, financial, social, and in all cases, lowers self-esteem and make women feel unsafe and vulnerable: easy to control. In domestic violence situations the mentioned social isolation, emotional and economic vulnerability increased. The abusive partner always acts to make his wife dependent on him in all possible ways. For immigrant women, the context of lacking social support networks and language barriers is aggravated by the immigration requirements for her to stay in this country.

If her status depends on her being married to her abusive partner, fear of deportation many times might prevent women from seeking legal protection and press charges against their assaulters.

the latter is in a very vulnerable situation. An abusive intimate relationship is characterised by abuse of power to control and subjugate another person. The vulnerabilities created by immigration, and immigration laws in particular, increase the abuser's power.

In a next article I would address a pattern I have been observing amongst Latin American women experiencing domestic violence in London which I want to address next, includes: a) the husband's manipulation of immigration law requirements; b) the types of violence; c) the options women have to flee an abusive relationship.

By now, I want to close these thoughts with hope. There is always one exit to any problem, and although immigrant women who experience domestic violence face more barriers than non immigrant women, creativity and advocacy by their own community women's groups can help them to stop the violence in their lives.

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