

No excuse!

An interview by
Ma. Victoria Carbrera-Balleza

**In 1992 alone,
almost four
million American
women were
physically abused
by their husbands
or boyfriends.
Forty-two percent
of women who
were murdered
were killed by
their intimate
male partners.**

In the United States, a woman is physically abused every nine seconds. Two-thirds of attacks on women are committed by someone the victim knows often the husband or boyfriend. Leni Marin, senior program specialist of the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPPF), discusses more of the issue of domestic violence in the American context and what women are doing to counter the problem.

Q.: Tell me about the Family Violence Prevention Fund what kind of an organization is it and what does it do?

A: The Fund (FVPPF) is a national organization with its base in San Francisco. It's a policy and education institute. We look at public policy so that we can improve responses to domestic violence. For example, with battered immigrant women, our work toward public policy reform requires our looking at the immigration laws of the United States because in their particular case, the law actually fosters domestic violence. A lot of US citizens or "green card holders" (permanent legal residents) married to immigrant women are able to exert power and control over their wives because they are the ones with the legal right to petition them. Only then when the woman is petitioned does she attain legal status. So, unless the law is changed, what you're basically doing is increasing the abuser's power and control over an immigrant woman.

In communities of colors, African-American or Asian, calling the police is not necessarily something they look forward to doing. For many immigrant women, calling the police poses some risks they might ask for her green card, or they might deport her. In African-American communities, because of prejudices in this country in treating minorities, the penal system has not always been even-handed. The message "call the police" does not really work that well for certain communities.

The Fund has also worked hard on the Violence Against Women's Act, a major piece of legislation that was passed last year. The law mandates the government's allocation of resources for the training of police and judges as well as funds for shelters. We're hoping that through the Act, there will be more concerted effort to respond to violence against women.

So, our job is to take the government to task and to tell them, you need to deal with this issue. At the same time, we're also telling them to improve the laws.

Q.: Does the Fund have other strategies aside from public policy reform?

A: One of the most exciting things that we have embarked on in the past year was our public education and media campaign. We conducted a major poll to determine what the American public really thinks about domestic violence and if people know anyone who has been a victim of domestic violence.

Majority of the respondents said that yes, they know someone; that the issue is not a mystery anymore. We realized that people are aware of the extent of the problem. They know a cousin, a sister, a mother, a



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neighbor, you can go on and on. The question for most of them was what to do about it, how to intervene. And this is a valid concern. Sometimes, it's very dangerous being a bystander when a person gets violent. You could also get involved and that's part of the public cost of domestic violence. Sometimes the batterer goes into the office with a gun and just starts shooting. What we're working for is to modify social behavior so that domestic violence is no longer tolerated. Twenty-five years ago, if someone obviously drunk goes inside the car and drives this, nobody thought too much about it. But because of the work of the group called Mothers Against Drunk Driving or MADD, this is no longer socially tolerated.

That's our objective—for people to refuse to tolerate abusive behavior. Our ad brochure says, if it were loud music from your neighbor's house, you would call the police or you would tell your neighbors to shut it down, but if it's a woman getting beaten, you think it's not your business and you don't do anything. Even among men themselves such as golfing buddies, those who batter their wives should be exposed so that they get ostracized in public by their own peers. In effect, the men would be saying, "I don't know how I can play golf with you when you're such an abuser."

We have a toll-free number that people can call so we can send them our community action kit which gives examples on how they could organize their community to act on the violence, similar to the "Crime Watch" that people concerned about the rise of crime in their neighborhood have been organizing. This time, people could organize a Neighborhood Watch so that when they hear of [a man abusing his wife], they could show their support for the woman. Somehow, the man then gets the message that the neighbors are concerned. There's some social pressure applied. Also, through such an action, the message is again sent that we don't think domestic violence is okay. That's the preventative portion of the work that we are doing now.

In the long term, we have a lot of work to do in convincing the people that domestic violence is not a private matter, that it's society's concern. Otherwise, we can train and train people, judges and police, and build jails, put everyone in jail, but the problem will stay with us.

Q.: Many organizations will be interested in knowing how the Fund conducts the public education and media campaign you mentioned. Can you share some more details? How massive a campaign is it?

A: We launched the campaign last year, and we are fortunate that here, there's an organization called Ad Council, a big non-profit organization funded by major corporations. As you know, commercials are big-time money-making business. The Ad Council pools resources from those who are able to sell through their ads, then looks for social causes and awards deserving groups such as those which promote education or those campaigning against drug abuse. Last year, the Council selected the issue of domestic violence as a campaign it wants to do for three years and awarded the Fund. This means we get free airtime on all the major channels and

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cable TV for three years, equivalent to millions of dollars. What we have to do is to produce the spots. For example, two months ago, after a tele-drama on the O.J. Simpson case I don't want to review this show but anyway, at the end of it, our spot was aired.

Q.: How has the media responded to your group's efforts?

A.: We work closely with opinion makers in different fields. The media will respond well if you have mainstream opinion makers taking a stance on domestic violence. When we launched our "There's No Excuse for Domestic Violence Campaign", we had the president of the American Medical Association saying that domestic violence is a major health problem, an epidemic, and that we have to stop it. If you have the Attorney-General saying that domestic violence is a crime and we have to do something to stop it, then they listen.

Q.: The O.J.-Nicole Simpson case has been sensational, even outside the United States. The trials are aired on TV, people listen to the radio and read the papers specifically for developments on the case. How has the Simpson case affected the general American public's consciousness of domestic violence?

A.: It has become a national teach-in on the whole dynamics of domestic violence. The good thing about it is that people are now aware that domestic violence is a major problem in our society. They know now that domestic violence can be lethal. The case is complicated though because O.J. Simpson is African-American and as I told you earlier, the criminal justice system does not bode well for a lot of African-Americans, especially for the men. Part of what the defense is claiming is that that there was racism in the way that the evidence has been collected. There's a suggestion of a frame-up. I don't disagree that there's racism in this country. There

might have been some messy way of collecting evidence, but that's always happening. Our point is that should be united with battered women in ensuring justice for them at the same time that we are also united with the African-American community in ensuring justice for them all. So the process is very tedious and as you say, sensationalized in many ways. But overall, I think it's been, for lack of a better word, good for the issue in terms of people becoming more aware of the problem of domestic violence. Phone calls to shelters and other crisis lines have increased by 150 percent since the O.J. Simpson case blew up. More reporters have been calling us as well to ask about domestic violence.

Frightening Facts

In India, eight of 10 women are victims of violence by their husbands.

Forty-nine percent of women polled in San Jose, Costa Rica say they were being beaten even when they were pregnant.

Q.: How do you assess the efficiency of the American government in implementing the Violence Against Women Act?

A.: There's bureaucracy here. The good thing about the Act is that it was passed after three years of hard work. It was major victory for the women's groups. Right now, the control over this Act is under the US State Department of Justice which has actually formed a Violence Against Women Act Office to administer the grants for shelters and other domestic violence programs, including rape crisis shelters, and for the training of personnel in law enforcement and the judiciary. We coordinate extensively with this office to ensure that the types of programs that are funded are the ones that will really help.

Q.: I heard that you have been active in the preparatory meetings for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. How do you weigh the Beijing conference in terms of calling attention to the issue of violence against women?

A.: Beijing is going to be crazy. It's going to be a big but terrifying prospect, a wonderful and great opportunity, and a very powerful experience. The Fund is commenting on the VAW (Violence Against Women) section of the Platform for Action, and one of our main points of emphasis is for long-term prevention and community-based sanctions for the international community to look beyond the criminal-justice system and the crisis-oriented individual. For the NGO Forum, I'm organizing a workshop which will study the policies of the G-7 countries on migrant women—the countries where the feminization of migration has taken place over the last five years. The growing trend of anti-migrant sentiments and xenophobia is getting to be [pervasive]. There's a gender-based edge to such sentiments. The other question is, how are women's rights organizations within those G-7 countries taking up the issue of migrant women? There's an easy tendency for women's rights organizations to see it as an immigration problem. But it's not, it's a women's rights problem. The workshop I'm designing will bring together women working on the issues of migrant women and women's rights from the G-7 countries.

Q.: How has your work with The Fund or your exposure with battered women affected you as a person?

A.: The bulk of my work is on policy reform, organizing, coalition building, developing materials and resources to improve services. We're not a shelter. We provide counseling to Filipino women, but not on a day-to-day basis. I think the key is the variety of work I do. If it were a constant, day in and day out, just hearing the stories and figuring out every single day how I can help an individual woman would be very draining. But I know that pursuing policy work is helping a lot of women whom I will never see, and for me, that is very rewarding. I also feel challenged in challenging women's rights organizations to take up the issue of immigrant women, in challenging whatever stereotypes they may have of non-white women.

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