

Immigrant Muslim Women

by Salma Abugideiri

Farah got married at the age of 16 in her native Afghanistan. The beatings began two months later. Although her family was opposed to the violence, she knew that once she was married, she had to stay. After her first son was born, they immigrated to the US. She knew little English, had no family here, and was busy with her growing family. The beatings continued. Now they were interspersed with threats of divorce, until the day she decided she had had enough. She gathered her courage, and at the age of 41, told the imam she was sure Allah (God) would not accept what her husband was doing to her. Her neighbor directed her to a women's shelter where she was encouraged to seek a protective order. Her family testified against her in court, believing that if the father were in jail there would be no one to support the children. She was given visitation rights to her youngest sons, still minors, and lost everything else.

When she was asked how she endured the years of abuse, she quickly answered, "It was my faith. Allah (God) helped me through it." When she was asked why she endured the abuse for 25 years, she paused. "It is my culture. It is too bad to be divorced. Too much shame for my family. And my children needed their father." With pain etched all over her face, she wondered, "Why? Why did my husband do that to me? My Islam does not teach this."

Like many other immigrant Muslim women, Farah was about to learn that she was not alone, and that many Muslim batterers justify their behavior with religious teachings. She was learning that although there are many services for battered women, the cost of leaving her home was very high. She had lost the battle in court, so she received no alimony. She lost her children. She lost her home. She was suffering from PTSD and depression and was unable to hold a job. She felt overwhelmed by the myriad of county agencies and court services.

She said the victim's advocate in court had been very kind and tried to be helpful. "But she did not understand my culture. She does not understand the shame of being a divorced woman who has lost her children. She thinks this happened to me because of my religion. But it is my religion that gave me the freedom I have now from the abuse."

Farah was more fortunate than many other immigrant Muslim women. She had learned English. She could drive. And she was resourceful. She discovered Americans love garage sales, so she collected items that others did not want, cleaned them well, and sold them each week out of her friend's garage. She laughed. "Americans are so kind. And they love to shop. Even for used items. But my children are ashamed. They want me to get a real job. They don't understand that I cannot concentrate."

But Farah did not have her green card. Her husband had not filed the papers for her despite the promise he had made to her father when he brought her from Afghanistan. Now Farah was trying to benefit from VAWA. But how would she get the proof she needed to file her application? The lawyer was free, and very nice, but it was hard to understand her. And the papers were so hard to read. Her friend Mona did not always have time to interpret for her. Out of frustration, Mona told her perhaps she made a mistake to leave her husband. "Maybe I don't need the green card. Maybe immigration will not find me."

Working with Muslim immigrant women can be challenging due to the additional layers that add complexity to their case. They may be caught between the cultural norms of their native culture, American societal expectations, and their religious beliefs. They often face language barriers, and difficulty accessing existing services. Family support may or may not be available. It is important for advocates to familiarize themselves with the cultural issues, overcome any biases they may have, and reach out to Muslim community leaders who may be an additional resource.