

The Social Roots of Wife Battering

An Examination of the Phenomenon in Mediterranean Immigrant Communities

By Daniela Szado

While much has been written about the adaptation process of immigrants, little research has been conducted into the mental health of immigrant women. Documentation on wife beating is even more scarce, perhaps because the issue is particularly sensitive in societies in which great value is placed upon the concept of family honour — as is the case in Mediterranean Europe. It is important to examine both the social context of the immigrants' country of origin and the situation in which they found themselves subsequent to their arrival in Canada, in attempting to reach a fuller understanding of the complexities of this phenomenon.

In Canada, immigrants of Mediterranean origin are concentrated mainly in Toronto. Most of them arrived in the 1950s, 60s and 70s from the rural area of Southern Italy, the Azore Islands of Portugal, and the southern and northern parts of mainland Greece and its islands. Their low education, propensity for hard work, and strong desire for economic success led most immigrant men to well-paid, but physically exhausting construction work; others found jobs in services and small business. Most women found employment in the garment industry, services and material handling in light manufacturing. To lessen the anxiety of living in a foreign, much more permissive society, they focused on their families and homes — which symbolized a united family — and their jobs, which made personal and family success possible.

The children of these immigrants, who were educated in Canada, established

links with the mainstream society and now function with ease in both communities. But for the first generation of Mediterranean immigrants, integration remains problematic. They hold on to the values which they brought with them, as time-tested and sanctioned by the Church, values which may have lost their hold "back home," but in Canada still shape the lives of most first and second-generation Mediterranean immigrants.

The central belief in this value system is respect for family and the conviction that men and women are different. The family is seen as the vehicle that carries the family traditions, and marriage as a state allowing both sexes to fulfill their calling in life. The man derives his sense of personal worth from being a good family provider and for being able to control his wife, daughters, and sisters so that they do not bring dishonour upon the family through inappropriate behaviour. The woman receives recognition for bearing the children, caring for the family, maintaining the household, contributing to it economically and being submissive to her husband.

While the influence of women (especially Italian mothers) on family matters may be quite significant, outside the home women must remain subservient to their husbands and fathers. In cases of wife misbehaviour, the husband has the right to resort to physical violence in order to reassert his authority. This right is validated by the kinship system, which plays a very important role in the Mediterranean countries. The degree of loyalty to the extended family is boundless; the rights and duties are wide-ranging.

Marriage is used to tie two extended families together for the betterment of both, and to create a base for a new nuclear family. Dowry and property are important bargaining tools in the prenuptial negotiations, at which time both families aim to bring increased honour to their sides. The bride's premarital virginity is mandatory, whereas ownership of land or business marks the man as a good provider.

The Southern Italian man is proud of his manhood and suspicious of everything outside of his family. He is easily threatened by the possibility that someone may encroach upon his honour. His ego gets hurt if he becomes unemployed, his wife starts acting up, or his daughter loses her good reputation. He may use force to assert his control over the most important facets of his life. In an ideal Italian family the father provides; the wife stays home to cook, clean and raise the children; the son studies to become a respected professional; the daughter learns household skills and a trade that will allow her to save for marriage; and the grandparents help to maintain the household and garden. Life may be harsher in a real Italian family: the husband works too hard and often falls asleep with a glass of wine after supper; the wife works outside and tries to run the home as if that were her only job; the children resent the oppressive controls exercised over them by their parents; the grandfather plays cards in a club; and the grandmother keeps busy in the home and church.

The children, who see their friends having more freedom, may associate their parents' values with being Italian, and reject their heritage and mother tongue. If

the parents do not speak English and the children do not maintain their Italian, communication breaks down and crises soon develop. Because it is the mother's duty to instill in the children respect for their parents, she is blamed for the family problems. She may resort to covering for the children.

The submissive role of women in the family often is even more pronounced in the Portuguese family. Portuguese immigrants come from a society in which both an oppressive government and church instilled in the landless class respect for hard labour and conformity to tradition, and prevented the development of appreciation for cultural pursuits. The Portuguese man is a loyal and hard worker outside of his house. At home he expects uncontested obedience from his wife and children. The wife is expected to run the household and look after the children. If she works outside, she gives her wages to the husband. Both parents sacrifice for the children. They, in turn, must respect their parents, obey them without questioning and start to contribute to the family finances at an early age.

Buying and paying up the house is the family's main goal. The education of children is not so highly valued as it is in the Italian family. Bank tellering or secretarial jobs for girls and construction work for boys are the most popular occupations for second-generation Portuguese immigrants. The father feels justified in withdrawing the children from school as soon as the law permits, so they can go to work and augment the family's income.

The sexual double standard is perhaps even more pronounced in the Portuguese family than it is in the Italian family. The man is considered to be the provider. He keeps the money that both he and other family members earn. Having money, he can afford to buy sex and usually does not consider this to be sinful; but he is restrictive of his wife and daughters. While the husband meets people through work, the wife — who stays home to look after the children — may leave the house only when, accompanied by her husband, she goes to church, shopping or to visit family or relatives. Unaccompanied women do not go out in the evening. The daughter is not allowed to participate in any after-school activities, unless chaperoned by her brothers or relatives. She is introduced to work early. At home she cooks, cleans, makes her brothers' beds, and looks after the younger children. When she starts working outside, she gives her wages to the father to keep for her dowry. She lives at home until she marries.

In the Portuguese family problems may start early, particularly if the man immigrates first, and later on brings his family, who are by then estranged because of the long separation; or two families may share a house and opportunities for infidelity develop when husbands and wives work different shifts. Incompatibility may develop when the man and woman adapt at different paces, or when the woman who works outside the home demands the right to spend money or to have more freedom than her husband allows. In addition, many Portuguese men make wine: alcohol abuse plays a major role in undermining the stability of Portuguese Canadian families.

The role of women in the Greek family, as in Italian and Portuguese families, is to become a wife and a mother, fulfill the duties of homemaker, and contribute to the family finances. But first and foremost, it is to bring honour to her husband and family. A traditional Greek family is patriarchal and authoritarian. The Church, which is credited with maintaining the national culture through four centuries of Turkish occupation, has been a major source of social control in Greece. The second major influence on family relationships is the kinship system. Perhaps even more than in Southern Italy, in Greece the extended family members — including the persons accepted into the family for being sponsors in the Church's sacraments — have strong moral obligations to help each other economically and to display solidarity to the outside world. Family honour is the primary social value. The man derives his honour from his wife's and daughters' modest behaviour. For centuries premarital relationships have been avenged by killing the male seducer and by severe ostracism, to the point of suicide, of the female offender.

In Canada, Greek immigrants place great emphasis upon respect for their elders, obedience to parents and teachers, and economic success. Like many Italians and Portuguese, due to their strong attachment to traditional values and historical experience, they did not integrate well into Canadian society.

Through the few support groups for battered women (organized by the immigrant aid agencies of these communities), occasional calls to the police domestic unit, and infrequent use of the women's shelters, a glimpse can be had of wife battering in the Mediterranean immigrant communities. The professionals involved in helping the battered immigrant women agree that immigration is detrimental to the wife who has an authoritarian hus-

band. Many husbands who never beat their wives back home, do it here.

If the man, who was used to having his wife safe at home, and dependent upon him for support and recognition, does not get accustomed to her working outside and having a degree of independence, he may try to assert himself by resorting to coercion. The husband of a wife who stays at home may take out on his wife the injustices he must accept at work, and the stress he experiences living in a strange society.

The woman has few options. Back home, she could rely upon her own family for protection; here she is on her own. If she does not learn English, she is deprived of information about her rights and available support services. She may believe that the husband can deport her, get custody of the children, or cut her off from ownership of the family house. She may not know about welfare, counselling, shelters and police support, or that wife battering is now considered a crime, and a beaten wife, a victim. Trained to believe that she must protect and obey her husband, having no financial resources, family, friends or a language in which to communicate outside her home, and fearing the unknown, in most cases the women will put up with her lot in life. She may turn to religion for strength, or to psychosomatic illness to validate her need for help. Much more work remains to be done in helping her to achieve greater independence and a life free of abuse.

Woman from Cambodia

seven years my husband hid
underground
beneath his parents' house
in Phnom Penh
everyone wanted him to fight
in the war
but he would not

the Catholic Church paid for us
to come here
when he is not working my husband
is a person in the corner
he keeps his money to himself

I am a helper in a store
full-time
our children have what I make
four-twenty-five an hour

Elizabeth Philips