

About Women

By JANICE MALL

Help for Pacific-Asian Women

Help for women who have been raped or battered was not a concept that went over easily in Los Angeles' growing Pacific-Asian communities.

The ubiquitous American hot line didn't reach out and touch women victims, many of them refugees and recent immigrants, who are not accustomed to telephones and are culturally disinclined to complain—or even speak of—male abuse. A counselor who does reach such a victim is likely to be accused of being a homewrecker. And the image of Asians, as gentle, courteous, family-oriented people made it difficult to persuade funding agencies of a need for domestic violence services.

Showpiece Achievement

None of that deterred Nilda Rimonte who, as executive director of the Center for the Pacific Asian Family, has been working for more than a year to turn the center toward programs that deal with some unpopular realities. The showpiece achievement is the first shelter for Pacific-Asian battered women that will open April 28 in Hawthorne.

The center, run and financed mainly by the Philippine community, "had never been into issues like this," said Rimonte. Her first project was a survey of needs that revealed that rape and battering is high in occurrence and low in profile in the Asian community.

"We got high statistics but people didn't want to talk about it," she said. "The issue of concealment and denial is huge. People told me not to use the word rape (for the center's rape hot line) because women wouldn't use it. I refused because I thought this was colluding with the community in hiding the issue. I thought it was time to bring it out, and it paid off."

Existing rape hot lines that cover the county would

not work for Asian women, said Rimonte. "The profile of a rape victim is a non-assertive person. The Pacific Asian woman is raised to be non-assertive. We're raised to think we are inferior to men. This is true of other cultures, too, but it's institutionalized in ours. There's a totem pole. The top is the senior male; the bottom is the children. Close to the bottom are the women.

A Family Crisis

"You have to understand the values. Rape is a crisis for the whole family: the grandfather, uncle, boyfriend and so on. Some rape victims are beaten by their male relatives or disowned by their families. The usual hot line procedure doesn't apply to our victims."

An obvious need is for counseling in their own languages, and the hot line and the new shelter will offer counselors who speak Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai and Philippine dialects.

Less obvious needs are cultural. Asian women have not adopted the American habit of speaking of intimate problems to strangers over the telephone. "Many come from places where there are no telephones," said Rimonte. They use the hotline to call to say they'll come over. "Even when they can speak English, when it comes to emotional problems, they use their own language," she said. Their languages and culture include

using kinship terms such as auntie or sister and talking face to face rather than over the phone.

"We were able to prove to funding sources that Pacific-Asian women have special needs, and if I've accomplished anything, it's that," said Rimonte. "There are a good number of Philippine millionaires here. My main aim is to part them from some of their money."

The attitude she often met with was, "You people are mild-mannered. You don't beat up your wives or children."

"That's just not true," Rimonte said. A part of the impetus for the shelter was the finding that more than two-thirds of the women who called the rape hot line were battered women.

Classes and Counseling

The shelter will accommodate about seven women and three children at a time. "We hope to establish English language classes, job counseling and to put together a business that will employ women. We're very ambitious," Rimonte said.

"We have to try to find housing and assist them in getting on welfare," she said. This, she added, is a temporary measure. "We want to avoid taking women out of their homes and putting them on welfare. Welfare is drying up, and for Asians, with the exception of new re-

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fugees, welfare is not palatable. They don't stay on it if they can help it."

Once begun, counseling may be extensive. "It's not unusual for us to work with a woman for 10 months. Her problems are things like deciding how to break the news to her mother and father that she's leaving her husband." Among the shelter's difficulties is that "we are seen as breaker-uppers of families," she said.

"We need to do a lot of community education. We have barely scratched the surface."

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A Center With a Difference

The Center for the Pacific-Asian Family is a shelter for battered women and their children, but it is a center with a difference. The women who arrive on its Hollywood doorstep frequently speak little or no English, they do not know that wife-beating is a crime, and they may be undergoing a difficult cultural adjustment to a new country quite apart from the violence inflicted on them.

The center began as a rape-hotline service but, as executive director Nilda Rimonte explained, the staff quickly realized that the needs of Los Angeles' growing Asian community were much broader. For example, she said, many Asian women were unaccustomed to the telephone, and certainly to discussing rape on the telephone with strangers. Women who were referred to existing shelters found no one who spoke their language or understood their culture, and the food was different. "These are basic needs; if you can't eat and you can't communicate, where are you?" Rimonte asked.

The Hollywood center can house 13 families at one time. In addition to providing a secure haven for the women, the staff works to help them understand their victimization and make decisions

for themselves. For half the women, Rimonte said, battering started in their native country, where it was considered acceptable to discipline one's wife. Once a couple moved to this country, the man might be forced to take a lower-status job. His wife might work, too, and these changes added to existing tensions.

Rimonte said the center also encounters unique problems in trying to help place the women in jobs, because programs helping Asians here are geared toward men, who have been the traditional providers. The women often are afraid to go to training programs anyway because they may run into their husbands, who are also seeking work.

The center opened last year, and faces the same financial problems of other social-service agencies. The program has a \$75,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, but the money may be cut off in June. While the ARCO Foundation and the National Council of Jewish Women have provided grants, Rimonte is constantly on the lookout for an "angel" to help with fund-raising, especially if the federal money dries up.

It is a sad story, heard all too often in 1982.