



*Protecting Immigrant
Women and Girls
Fleeing Violence*

STORIES OF SURVIVAL: THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT

Congress has long recognized that immigrant survivors of violence face unique vulnerabilities and barriers to escape. For this reason, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) allows immigrant survivors to apply for immigration status without the involvement of their abusers.

The Tahirih Justice Center, a national, nonpartisan advocacy and direct services organization helping immigrant women fleeing from violence, has served thousands of women over more than twenty years, many of whom have qualified for the protections VAWA provides. Below are a few of their stories.

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Norma* was only 15 years old when she was abducted, raped, and forced into marriage by a violent older man who threatened to kill her family if she refused. At 20, Norma fled to the U.S., and began a new life. Years later, she fell in love and married a U.S. citizen who was smart, charismatic, and handsome. But it didn't take long for him to start beating and raping Norma. When she finally built up the courage to leave, Norma's husband used her and her children's undocumented status to exploit, intimidate, and threaten her. He promised to have them deported if they called the police, and he destroyed Norma's personal documents to prevent her from filing for immigration relief on her own. He removed her name from their shared bank accounts, canceled her credit card, and eventually forged her signature on a document transferring full ownership of their house to his name. He showed Norma that he could take everything from her, and made her fear reaching out for help as much as she feared him. Norma's voice got smaller and smaller.

Just when Norma started to give up, a member of her church congregation noticed that she needed help and offered her a place to stay for nothing in return. She connected Norma to a domestic violence support group at the Houston Area Women's Center, where she was referred to Tahirih. Norma's neighbor lifted her up, community resources connected her to a path forward, and Tahirih helped her access protection under VAWA. Norma gives back to her community by joining the fight to end violence against women. She tells her story to other survivors, church groups, radio shows, and in women's prisons as evidence that fear can be overcome, survivors are never alone, and there is always a path forward.

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From the start of their relationship, **Sandra's*** husband was verbally abusive, severely damaging her self-esteem. After the birth of their son, who has special needs, this escalated to regular beatings and attacks, particularly after he drank and when he was feeling insecure about his ability to find work and support his family. He never hesitated to abuse Sandra in front of their son, once pushing her down onto the floor when she was holding her baby in her arms. Once, while he was driving, her husband got angry with Sandra and intentionally swerved the car off the road, intentionally threatening their lives. When she came to Tahirih, she downplayed much of the extreme abuse she was experiencing because she had grown so accustomed to it.

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Her husband told Sandra that he would sponsor her application for U.S. residency, but continually delayed the process to keep her afraid and under control. Sandra discovered he was hiding important immigration notices from her, impacting her chances of becoming a legal resident. By obtaining status under VAWA, Sandra was able to safely leave her abusive husband and pursue legal residence so that she could build a life of safety, stability, and independence for herself and her son.

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Faith* came to the United States to study at a university, and fell in love. Everything changed after her wedding. As a U.S. citizen, Faith's husband exploited Faith's undocumented status and violently abused her. He destroyed Faith's phone and threatened to kill her. He also threatened to have her deported and separated from their daughter if she called the police. Unwilling to raise her daughter in an abusive home, Faith risked her life and escaped. She then found legal help at Tahirih and won legal protection for her daughter and herself.

Faith reflects, "When every door seemed to be closing on me Tahirih came to me as a second wave in my life. Their immense support and empathy not only gave me a voice but also a whole new confidence to live my life without fear."

* * *

Adriana*, who was born in Nicaragua, suffered years of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of her U.S. citizen partner and spouse. He began to court her soon after their first introduction, and Adriana fell deeply in love. When Adriana was seven months pregnant, her husband landed in jail for alleged involvement in an assault. Shortly after he was released, he became extremely abusive. The abuse continued for years: he drank daily, yelled slurs at Adriana, physically assaulted her in front of their children, and sexually abused her. He also became controlling and manipulative. He drew the blinds of their windows and prevented her from leaving their house, forbidding her from going to church or even from going to the pharmacy to retrieve medicine when their children were ill. Adriana's fear deepened as he repeatedly made threats about killing their entire family, even himself.

After enduring years of his abuse, Adriana decided to leave the house with her children. When the shelter she contacted was full, Adriana filed a police report against and moved in with her sister. Two days after she moved in, however, her husband found her and threatened her with a tire iron. She called the police, who arrested him only to release him again. She moved from place to place to avoid him, but he stalked her until he finally managed to corner her and put a gun to her head. Luckily, with police intervention, she was escorted to a confidential shelter and her life was saved.

Adriana was connected to Tahirih attorneys who helped file Adriana's petition for a U visa. In addition to assistance in navigating the lengthy and complicated legal process, Tahirih staff has also helped her with safety planning and mental health care in the aftermath of her extreme trauma. Her U visa application is still pending approval.

*Names have been changed to protect client safety and privacy.