All stalking victims face complex questions when deciding whether to report the crime. They want to know, “Should I report it?” “How do I file a report?” “Will anyone believe me?” “Will anyone help me?” “What will happen if the stalker is someone I love?” “Will reporting the crime put me in even greater danger?”

These questions are even more daunting when the victim is an immigrant woman living in the United States, married to her stalker, and unfamiliar with the language, laws, legal system, or culture. These victims may ask, “Is this really a crime? “If I report this problem to the police, will I lose my legal immigration status?” “Will the report bring shame on my family?” “Doesn’t my husband have the right to treat me like this?” Victim service providers, law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and civil attorneys who serve stalking victims in immigrant communities must understand both the cultural and legal barriers that make it difficult for immigrant women to report stalking and gain access to services.

Stalking in immigrant communities is both similar to—and different from—stalking in non-immigrant communities. Certain stalking behaviors, such as observing the victim’s movements, monitoring their communications, following the victim, threatening the victim, are not unique to any particular group of stalking victims. However, when used against an immigrant victim, these tactics are usually understood in a different cultural context, particularly if the victim does not speak English and is extremely isolated from other members of her community.

Victim service providers may also find that the perspective on stalking varies significantly in different cultural communities. Service providers serving immigrant communities may encounter victims being stalked by their own family members, their in-laws, or partners who have advanced technological skills. Victim service providers may also discover that, depending on the laws of the victim’s native countries and their culture’s roles—particularly for women—different societies may view stalking as neither criminal nor unusual. Such cultural contexts may present formidable barriers for immigrant women who wish to report their stalking victimization.

Anyone who supports immigrant victims should become familiar with the most common obstacles that prevent immigrant victims of stalking from reporting the crime or seeking services when they are being stalked, keeping in mind that not all of these factors affect immigrants from every culture.

**Cultural Barriers**

**Fears about Immigration Status**

One of the main instruments of control that stalkers use against immigrant victims is threatening victims’ immigration status\(^1\) by exploiting their fears of being deported.\(^2\) Immigrant women may be legally present in the United States under a variety of different immigration laws or rules. The immigration status of women married to stalkers may be tied to the status of their husbands. These women may be reliant on their husbands for their legal right to stay in the United States or to petition for their own residency status,\(^3\) and their children’s immigration status may also be related to the stalker’s status. If a victim is in the United States on a temporary visa that is tied to her stalker’s visa, the stalker’s threats of deportation and return to the home country are both credible and frightening for the victim. Stalking victims in this country on visas that require the stalker’s sponsorship may fear the withdrawal of that sponsorship.

**Isolation**

Immigrant stalking victims are often particularly susceptible to isolation tactics of stalkers. Some women may have no extended family network in the United States and no one to confide in. Stalkers may also limit their contact with their families, both in the United States and abroad,\(^4\) and prevent the women from learning English.
Immigrant women victims may also be isolated from American neighbors and community members. By preventing the victims from learning English or wearing “American” clothes, stalkers may limit victims’ ability to function and find support in the United States. With no access to informal support networks, the victims find it difficult to find the help they need.

Stalkers also use tactics to isolate their victims from families abroad. In addition to limiting victims’ contact with their families, stalkers may use technology to send inaccurate information abroad. An advocate working within the South Asian community described a stalking case in which the victim’s husband stole her e-mail password and sent messages, purportedly from the victim, telling her family that everything was going very well in the United States and describing her husband as a loving husband and father. The stalker then told the victim that because of these e-mails, no one would ever believe her if she decided to report the stalking.

Stalkers may also prevent their victims from reporting stalking by implicating their victims in crimes. In one community, a technologically savvy stalker stole the victim’s e-mail password and created fake e-mails indicating that she had participated in certain crimes. He then threatened to turn these e-mails over to the police if she did not continue the relationship. The victim feared that reporting the stalking would jeopardize her safety and her immigration status.

**Stigma and Shame**

Compounding the isolation of many immigrant victims of stalking is their fear that reporting the crime would expose them, their husbands, and their families to shame before their own and their new U.S. communities. Because many cultures view intimate partner stalking as merely a “family issue,” victims may hesitate to “dishonor” their families by exposing the problem. Even when they seek support from within their communities, victims may be encouraged to stay in the relationship. Such advice is likely to make the victim feel trapped and more fearful.

Stalkers use this concept of dishonor and shame to terrorize their victims. In one case, as reported by an advocate, a stalker stole intimate personal items from the victim and then placed those items on her car in full view of the entire community. Knowing that this community places a high value on sexual modesty, the stalker exploited his victim’s fear of being shamed before her community and exposed her to physical harm from community members who might punish her for immodesty. These actions also showed the victim that her stalker had access to her belongings and wielded considerable control over her image and place in the community.

**Legal Status of Stalking in Home Countries**

Immigrants who come from communities or countries that do not criminalize stalking may not understand that in the United States, stalking is a crime (though a relatively new one). It usually does not occur to victims from countries without stalking laws to call the police and report being stalked. And even if the victim knows that stalking is a crime in the United States, she may not be aware of the resources available to support her in seeking help (e.g., social, legal, and health services).

**Economic Factors**

Finally, economic factors may affect a victim’s response to stalking. Immigrant victims of stalking may lack access to work, money, and the language skills needed to operate in American society. The stalker may control all the family’s resources. Economically vulnerable stalking victims may fear that reporting their victimization will jeopardize their ability to take care of their families or to send resources to their families abroad. They may fear that an interruption in the flow of such resources would alert their extended families to the stalking.
occurring within their marriages. These factors can greatly influence the woman’s decision to make an official report.

**Mobilizing to Serve Immigrant Victims**

Victim service providers must understand and be sensitive to the cultural barriers that may prevent immigrant women from reporting their victimization. Service providers must also understand that members of different cultural communities may describe types of stalking that providers might not immediately recognize. For example, some immigrants are stalked by their own family members because they have chosen to marry someone they love instead of someone pre-selected by their family. In such situations, families may follow the victim and monitor her movements, lock her in a certain location to prevent her from meeting the person she wishes to marry, threaten to harm her or her intended spouse if they do not end their relationship, and even kill her to prevent her from marrying.

Advocates, law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and legal services attorneys need training to understand the different populations they are serving and the cultural prism through which immigrant communities view the issue of stalking. Victim service providers should develop alliances with and learn from the culturally specific service agencies and community leaders who serve those communities. Partnering with such agencies may increase the resources available to the victims they seek to serve. These agencies can provide translators and increase service providers’ understanding of the factors influencing the stalking victim’s decisions. Such collaboration will lead to better and more culturally competent services for victims of stalking and perhaps encourage them to seek help and protect their rights.

Victim service providers should apply the stalking and domestic violence expertise they already possess to the cultures represented by the victims of stalking in their communities. They should mobilize the resources and knowledge of their police departments, prosecutor’s offices, and advocates to support victims in these new communities.

Finally, victim service providers should familiarize themselves with the formidable legal barriers faced by immigrant stalking victims. These numerous and confusing legal barriers can affect victims’ immigration status, should they choose to report the crimes committed against them.

More information about these legal barriers is available at [www.ncvc.org/src](http://www.ncvc.org/src). Further assistance is also available from the Stalking Resource Center staff at 202-467-8700 or src@ncvc.org.

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4 Id. at 377.
5 Id. at 380.
6 Id. at 384.
7 Id.
9 Raj & Silverman at 381.