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• **NEWSWEEK**



U.S. NEWS

Domestic Violence Among the Wealthy Hides Behind ‘Veil of Silence’

by Eliza Shapiro Feb 28, 2013 4:45 AM EST

Domestic violence has ticked up since September 2008—and not only among the financially strained. Eliza Shapiro reports on the hurdles rich abused women face, from disbelief by peers to ‘legal dream teams.’

A common image of domestic violence: a woman on the brink of homelessness, taking refuge from her abusive spouse in a shelter because she has nowhere else to go.



Roy Morsch/Corbis

But recent domestic violence cases in the news, from South African Olympian Oscar Pistorius allegedly murdering his girlfriend to CBS New York anchor Rob Morrison accused of choking his wife, are revealing what domestic abuse experts say has been the dirty little secret of the wealthy for too long.

From Stamford, Conn., to Beverly Hills, Calif., domestic violence in upscale communities has long had a unique stigma, the industry's few experts say. "Higher-income people hide behind what I call a veil of silence," says Dr. Susan Weitzman, founder of the Weitzman Center, an advocacy organization that raises awareness about what she calls upscale abuse. "They believe it's only happening to them. No one can hear you scream on a 3-acre lot."

Recent research on the relationship between domestic violence and the economy has focused on the effects of the 2008 recession and found that abuse is three times as likely to occur when couples are under financial strain. According to the **National Network to End Domestic Violence**, three of four domestic violence shelters reported increases in women seeking help after September 2008.

But Weitzman and her peers say there's no comparable research for wealthy couples, reinforcing the public's ignorance of the problem and the culture of silence surrounding upscale abuse.

“The woman may be living in an affluent household, but she often has as much access to finances as someone with no money at all.”

Frequent cycles of violence can characterize upscale domestic abuse, Weitzman says. Most abusive relationships include a so-called honeymoon period, in which the abuser tries to apologize with gifts and promises to change. But the wealthy clients Weitzman has worked with usually don't experience a honeymoon period. The violence can be unrelenting, she says.

After the violence, the first unique obstacle wealthy women face in getting out of abusive relationships is admitting the abuse itself, an already harrowing task complicated by the fear—and often the reality—of not being believed by peers.

“The woman is often disbelieved when she comes out,” Weitzman says. “People will say, ‘Look at your husband, look at your lifestyle.’” Weitzman says she remembers one client whose abusive spouse poured a glass of water on her during a marriage counseling session.

“All the therapist did was offer the woman a Kleenex,” she says.

Linda Bollea, ex-wife of wrestler Hulk Hogan, says she knows the fear of coming clean about abuse all too well. In her memoir *Wrestling the Hulk: My Life Against the Ropes*, she alleges that her ex-husband

emotionally and physically abused her. (He has filed a lawsuit against her for defamation.)

Bollea recalls the anxiety that “the empire would collapse after ‘outing’ the abusive spouse. It makes it scary and difficult to ask for help. Once the abusive spouse realizes their partner’s unhappiness, it gets much more because now there is no fixing it.”

That problem is only compounded in the courtroom, where high-income husbands can assemble what Weitzman calls “legal dream teams.” She says she recently worked with a woman whose abusive husband hired six attorneys, each at \$500 an hour, to fight for custody of his children.

Even when the abusers are subject to legal proceedings, they are adept at manipulating the system. During one court battle, Weitzman says, a husband accused of abuse was asked to have his car appraised by forensics experts. When the experts got to the garage, they found the car disassembled into thousands of pieces.

That campaign often involves stripping the abused woman of all her financial resources, says Jan Edgar Langbein, executive director of the Genesis Women’s Shelter in Dallas.

“The woman may be living in an affluent household, but she often has as much access to finances as someone with no money at all,” she says.

Expensive, painful custody battles are typical in cases of upscale domestic abuse, Langbein and Weitzman say.

“The abuser will try to hurt you in the way it hurts most, by getting custody of the kids,” Langbein says. According to data from the American Judges’ Association, 70 percent of contested custody cases involving domestic violence eventually grant joint or sole custody to the abuser.

Langbein says she is seeing more and more affluent women seeking help from Genesis’s non-residential programs, part of the overall

growth in domestic violence around the nation in the last five years. But Weitzman says there is some good news: the highest-profile cases, from Chris Brown to Pistorius, are raising awareness about the pervasiveness of upscale violence.

And some women's shelters are developing specific programs for wealthy women. In 2007, a shelter in Naples, Fla., developed a "Women of Means" program. Similar programs have sprung up around the country, though Langbein says a nearby Dallas shelter with a separate program for affluent women has earned the disparaging moniker "the Prada group."

David Hopkins, partner at Schiller DuCanto & Fleck, a family law firm based in Chicago, has been working for more than a decade to level the playing field for abused women facing expensive legal battles when their abusers sue for defamation or custody.

He says he's worked with many clients with wealthy abusers. "In the most extreme cases, the abusive party is able to recoup irrespective of the cost," he says. "The goal is to financially destroy the victim."

To combat what he calls the "sheer vindictiveness" of unnecessary litigation against abuse victims, Hopkins helped pass statutory reforms to Illinois's Marriage and Dissolution of Marriage Act so that victims would have equal access to finances to pay for legal fees.

Despite advancements in treatment for wealthy domestic violence victims and legal developments to help victims fight back, there's much more work to be done to de-stigmatize upscale abuse, experts tell The Daily Beast.

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