

'Culture of affluence' complicates women's help-seeking for domestic violence

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University of Illinois human development and family studies professor Jennifer Hardesty was a co-author on the paper, published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Credit: Photo by L. Brian Stauffer

Pressures to maintain a facade of a perfect family and other values

associated with the "culture of affluence" discourage some affluent women from leaving violent spouses or disclosing that they are being abused, a new study suggests.

The culture of affluence - which emphasizes materialism, perfectionism and [social status](#) - provides implicit and explicit expectations for how families are expected to present themselves in public, and complicates [women's](#) ability to seek help for domestic violence and other forms of abuse in their marriages, the researchers found.

Although affluent women are presumed to have the education, autonomy and financial resources to extricate themselves from abusive partners, pervasive financial abuse such as that experienced by the women in the study can make it nearly as difficult for women of means to leave and end their marriages as it can be for women with lower incomes, lead author Megan L. Haselschwerdt said.

Haselschwerdt interviewed 10 women who experienced [domestic violence](#) during their marriages and 17 social [service providers](#), all from the same prosperous U.S. suburb, which the authors refer to by the pseudonym "High Oak Township." The paper was published recently in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

Haselschwerdt, who conducted the research as part of her doctoral studies in [human development](#) and family studies at the University of Illinois, currently is a professor of human development and family studies at Auburn University.

Jennifer Hardesty, a professor of human development and family studies at Illinois, was Haselschwerdt's dissertation adviser and is a co-author on the paper.

All but one of the women in the study reported that their partners

engaged in frequent and moderate-to-severe physical violence that escalated over time. Abusive husbands reportedly exerted control over their wives and other family members through various forms of abuse, including threats and demands, verbal and psychological abuse, and surveillance - monitoring their movements through the odometer or GPS on their car.

Despite many of the women having successful careers, inherited wealth and joint marital incomes between \$80,000 and \$300,000, they often had little access to their financial resources, such as [bank accounts](#) and credit.

Their husbands wielded solitary control over the couple's money to ensure that their wives could not afford high-quality legal representation - while, paradoxically, the couple's wealth on paper precluded the wives from qualifying for pro bono legal services, Haselschwerdt said.

To prevent their wives from leaving, some husbands maxed out the women's credit cards, obtained sole access to the couple's mortgages and forged their wives' signatures on documents and bank accounts, the researchers found. Some men also engaged in professional abuse - attempting to sabotage their wives' careers so the women could not support themselves or their children without the husband's income.

As one private practitioner explained to Haselschwerdt, "My client may be driving a \$60,000 car, but she has \$20 in (her) wallet ... she may have the appearance of money, but in reality, she (has nothing)."

Women who "bought in to the culture of affluence" reported "enormous pressure" to maintain the appearance of a happy family - which prevented all but one of the wives from disclosing they were being abused. Beliefs that other couples in the suburb actually were leading perfect lives with harmonious marriages compounded the abused

women's feelings of shame, failure and isolation, Haselschwerdt said.

Nine of the women were divorced, and the researchers found that the women's processes of disclosing the violence in their homes and ultimately leaving their marriages were complex and differed depending on the woman's and her informal social network's adherence to High Oak's [cultural values](#) - and depending on how informal and formal providers responded to the women's requests for help.

"Women who opted out of the culture of affluence strategically selected confidants in High Oak whom they perceived as not affluent or as not buying in to the culture, as well as friends who lived outside their community," Haselschwerdt said. "These women's families supported their decisions to leave their husbands because these families had no investment in maintaining a social image. That support was crucial to these women's subsequently seeking formal help."

Despite years or even decades of secrecy, women who had previously adhered to the community's cultural values became very open about the abuse upon separation from their husbands, but became more selective and strategic over time when they received unsupportive responses from extended family members who prioritized their family's social status and reputation over the woman's safety, according to the study.

Accordingly, the women who bought in to their community's cultural values and whose husbands had high social status and influence experienced ongoing abuse when they separated from their spouses, Haselschwerdt said.

Some women encountered overtly unsupportive - as well as covertly supportive - responses from community members and formal service providers, making the disclosure process more complicated than the women had expected, according to the study. However, disclosure

ultimately facilitated the women's shift away from being concerned about social reputation toward empowerment and advocacy.

More information: Megan L. Haselschwerdt et al, Managing Secrecy and Disclosure of Domestic Violence in Affluent Communities, *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/jomf.12345](https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12345)

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