

## Hard case highlights complexity of abuse

By Tillie Fong, Rocky Mountain News  
August 22, 2005

Advocates for domestic violence victims say the case of Karen Rodriguez, a battered woman convicted last week of helping her husband sexually assault their children, is rare, but troubling.

"These are extreme cases," said Jeneen Klippel-Worden, director of development for Gateway Battered Women's Services in Arapahoe County.

"Most women are fiercely protective of their children. Most of them say, 'The reason I left was he was finally violent with my kids.' That's why this makes the news, when there are millions of other women who are battered (who don't do this). It's just so unbelievably violent and unreal."

Rodriguez, 40, of Denver, was convicted Aug. 15 of 24 counts of aggravated incest and sexual assault charges for helping her 60-year-old husband, Edward Rodriguez, rape her son and their daughter over a 10-year span.

Supporters of battered women have mixed feelings about whether Rodriguez, a victim of domestic violence, should have been prosecuted.

"There is nothing easy about it," said Trish Thibodo, executive director of the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

"We want to protect kids, and to have a mother who appears to be a willing participant - it's a hard thing. How do you hold someone accountable but also take into account the abuse and coercion (that she suffered)? There is no simple yes or no answer."

Jennifer Walker, executive director of the Women's Crisis and Family Outreach Center in Douglas County, said the Rodriguez case also reveals how little society understands the dynamics of domestic violence.

"The average person out there, even intelligent, is not going to understand the complexity of this," she said. "Judgments are made based on what we would have done in those situations, and we don't really dive into it and look at it from this bigger societal (perspective)."

In many cases, victims of domestic violence are in what Walker calls "survival" mode.

"When you're thinking of surviving, you're not thinking about escaping," she said. "You're thinking, 'Will I live today or will I die today?' For whatever reason, this woman, she was in survival mode. She did not see a way out because of the threats."

Walker added that Karen Rodriguez also may come to believe that she was protecting her children.

"She wasn't really helping him," she said. "She was surviving and she was trying to help her children to survive. She was trying to protect her children by going along with what he wanted, so at least the kids wouldn't be (killed). She was picking the lesser of two evils. It was horrible, sick and wrong, but how do you create accountability in that?"

Thibodo agreed.

"Victims are trying many different ways to protect their children in a crazy situation," she said. "It may not make sense to us on the outside."

But Klippel-Worden said Karen Rodriguez should be held accountable for her actions.

"The struggle to survive every day and to live every day in that situation - it can be beyond stressful," she said. "But it is hard to see it going to that extreme."

"It's hard to justify any abuse done to any living thing. It's incredibly sad when children are involved in domestic situations. They don't have options. They can't get out and move. They have to rely on their parents to protect them."

Others say that, ultimately, the blame for what happened should be placed on Edward Rodriguez. He is scheduled to be sentenced Aug. 29.

"There's the myth that (a woman) can manage this, that's she's the one who provoked him, and that's not true at all," said Walker.

Be ready to leave

**Things to set aside, preferably in a safe deposit box, if you're planning to leave an abusive relationship:**

- Birth certificates
- Social Security cards for you, your spouse and kids
- Bank account information
- Cash
- Vital medicines
- Copies of police reports
- Copies of house and car keys
- School and immunization records for your children and a toy or blanket to comfort them.

[fongt@RockyMountainNews.com](mailto:fongt@RockyMountainNews.com) or 303-892-5489

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