

[Bold Forum Exposes Spectre of Wife Abuse](#)

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Bold Forum Exposes Spectre of Wife Abuse

On a sunny California afternoon, January 5th, 30 Bay Area citizens gathered in a rented hotel conference room to explore a dark side of Indian family life - domestic violence. It's not a friendly subject and didn't attract a Saturday crowd. Nevertheless, the Mountain View "Open Forum on Domestic Violence" made history, breaking a social taboo which says "Never talk about wife abuse publicly." It unmuzzled the shame-shrouded issue, freeing it into a new era of compassion, understanding and help. "It gave us legal, social permission to talk about it," assessed Nandini Verma, a clinical psychologist and panel speaker at the forum.

She and three other forcefully articulate women and one man framed the panel: Cornelia Bagg, event organizer and founder of Indian Community Outreach; Miss Lannie Liu, an experienced battered Asian women's counselor; Dr. Vasanta Giri, a psychiatrist and Livermore Temple headman Mr. Nagaraja Rao. The distinguished presence and opening remarks by Mrs. Nilima Lambah, wife of the San Francisco Consul General S.K. Lambah, discreetly sanctioned publicizing the sensitive issue.

Cornelia Bagg studied Indian domestic violence in the Bay Area for four months. Though never herself abused and not Indian, she was married to a Sikh for 15 years and became a member of the Indian community. Her findings broke publicly in India Currents in December. "The problem is rampant," she told HINDUISM TODAY. "I never knew it was so severe." Compassion moved her to expose the problem and inform the Indian community about the many services battered women's programs provide - support groups, legal counseling, job placement, housing services and professional counseling for women, men and children.

Is it really rampant? Authoritative figures don't exist, but Nandini Verma, Hayward Unified School District psychologist, shared with HINDUISM TODAY, "Of 100 Indian families I know, it's prevalent in at least 20 of them." If that's accurate, it's double the 10% US frequency. If child abuse is any barometer, the problem is confirmed - "in my 20 years of working with abused children, among the worst cases I've seen

were from the Indian community," said a California social worker.

"People at the January 5th meeting couldn't comprehend the magnitude," added Nandini Verma. "It was a shock. I always knew there was a need [to serve in this area], but I never knew the Indian community would open up. And by "open up" I mean, women admitting 'Yes, I am an abused woman; I will not put up with this. I will become independent. I will move out.' And when we say "abuse" we mean pure physical - assaulting, hitting, biting, pushing, shoving, pulling, slapping, etc. We're not even talking about emotional abuse.

"But I felt encouraged by the meeting," Mrs. Verma said. "Somebody [Cornelia Bagg] had finally taken the initiative to get people doing something in this direction. I had always wanted to do it, but felt, 'What would people think [if I got involved.]' I'm not supposed to feel that way, but I did." That social pride is gone. Today she is an on-call volunteer, offering counsel wisdom from years as a family psychologist. "Many battered women just come to see me at my school office and get a little understanding of why the abuse happens and what they can do."

Forum speaker Dr. Vasant Giri explained that a Hindu woman endures chronic abuse because she "looks at leaving her spouse as giving up one pain for another - the social one," referring to the stigma attached to a wife separated from her husband. Mr. Rao reminded everyone that the temple spiritually strengthens people, making them less prone to base behavior.

Ms. Yiu told the group: "By the time the Indian woman comes to us, it's probably the end of the rope for her. An American woman would leave the batterer a lot sooner."

The Bigger Picture

The Mountain View meeting, though an icebreaker, reflects a greater groundswell of support for women's efforts nationwide to educate Hindu communities about domestic violence. Dozens of sensitive reports have appeared for several years in the US Indian papers - some including gory details of horrific abuse (e.g., a young

Chicago woman who recently lost her eye from a husband's punch). Collectively, they paint a new picture of the abused wife. She is no longer an incorrigibly antagonistic, masochistic, culpable husband tormentor. The real abused wife showing up at Asian shelters is the typical submissive Hindu wife - the one quietly buying rice and lentils at the Indian grocery store or taking tirtham each week at the temple. She is smiling on the outside, but crying in pain on the inside. She is a victim, scared and hurt. Imprisoned by shame, she feels she can tell no one because no one will listen and those that do, may shy away from her, compounding her sense of helplessness.

This truer and more sympathetic image of the abused woman is triggering a compassionate response - from women and men. Throwing away the "It's really not that bad" and "They deserve it" mentality, some men are now coughing up dollars to help out. "I haven't run across any Indian men who felt threatened that women are speaking out on the issue, Cornelia Bagg told HINDUISM TODAY. "In fact, I got US\$ 2,000 dollars from the Federation of Indian Americans, which is a mostly male organization. I had been talking to one of the headmen for only five minutes on the phone, when he said - and he had never met me - 'We've been waiting for someone like you to come along and start some work in this area. I will give you funding!'" And Apna Ghar, Chicago's well-staffed Indian womens' shelter, recently won a US\$ 150,000 state grant to expand facilities.

Why do Men Abuse?

Wife abuse is not Indian, nor Asian. Its human, or more correctly, the inhumane side of humanness. It's also not simple. Nevertheless, researchers agree that ingrained Indian attitudes toward women as "inferior" or that she is a husband's "property," sanction, in a warped way, the option to mistreat them. Also dowry dealing, by trading women like commodities, further defines them as objects, increasing their vulnerability to abuse. According to Nandini Verma, "Abusive behavior may be learned behavior. The Indian male child has watched his father abuse. He learns that it's OK to slap women around. It's not a big deal. And girls also learn it's OK to be bullied, figuring it 'must be my role, bad luck or fate in life.'" Another reason she cites is: "If a boy has been abused by his mother, he may later retaliate."

Elizabeth Ramadorai, who has assisted a battered women's program and consoled many abused Indian wives, examines other subtleties: "An abuser can use the

gentle, shy modesty in an Indian woman and transform it into a condition of worthless dependency." This was tragically expressed in this letter appearing in India Abroad: "I am here for two years from Uttar Pradesh. I came to join my husband in Queens, N.Y. I have been living like a captive. He locks me up in my small room and I have to stay all day, until he returns. I can't even go to the bathroom sometimes because he puts me in the bedroom. I hate him.

I am pregnant. I am so sick. All I have to do is watch television and read this paper. He beats me often because I am becoming too spoiled here in the U.S. I tried writing to my mother but my father got the letter. I wrote how he beats me and hardly lets me eat or ever go anywhere. My father called my husband and asked him, 'How is my daughter behaving?' My husband told him he expects me to be a little out of hand because women here all get shameless. My father told him he should see to it I be 'straightened out.' I saw my mother beaten so many times too. I had no choice. My marriage was arranged. I am so unhappy. If I even beg him to stop beating, he beats me harder because I cry. I pray my child is a boy."

"Yet," contends Mrs. Ramadorai, "it is far more likely that abuse in Hindu homes is more verbal and emotional than physical. It leaves no visible scars, goes unreported but creates a far more subtle, enveloping sphere of suffering."

Help Centers

From the heroic efforts of a handful of courageous women, more than a dozen US services are now available for abused Indian women (four are listed below). Though each is unique, Mrs. Verma offers a glimpse of their message and approach: "We say to an abused woman, 'You are a victim, he is an aggressor; how can we help you?' We teach her she is a human being. One doesn't even physically violate animals or pets! We say seek community help in terms of the religious temple, friends and counseling. We provide them a free, safe, nurturing place for a few days or weeks until they can get back up on their own feet." How do counselors handle the Hindu belief in the sanctity of marriage? With admitted difficulty. But they do allege it is the husband who breaks the sanctity by his abuse, not by the wife retreating from it. "It's not easy for me to say this, Hindu myself," Nandini Verma told HINDUISM TODAY, "but I do feel if my husband physically abused me I would say I am not willing to be the target. Marry someone else? No. Most Hindu women won't. From my experience there is the desire to get back together with all of them. But leaving the husband [temporarily] says, 'I care about you, but this

abuse is unacceptable."

Sakhi, P.O. Box 1428, Cathedral Station, N.Y., N.Y. 10025 Tel: (212) 866-6591

Indian Community Outreach Tel: (415) 741-8278 (San Francisco)

Apna Ghar 4753 N. Broadway, #606, Chicago, Illinois 60640 Tel: (312) 334-0173

Manavi, P.O. Box 614, Bloomfield New Jersey 07003 Tel: 201-748-7968

Everyone thought we were a beautiful couple.

Nobody believed me when I said I was being abused. One friend [who did believe me] told me that since I had lived with it so long, just continue.

I think abused women should seek help. If they don't, they are going to suffer more and more and not come out. In India there is no support for them, but in American society there is. We always want to hide the problem. It is a very painful subject. But very important to expose. Otherwise, it will continue and the children will do the same thing.

Ladies coming from India have no support, no shoulder to cry on. If they get separated, it is very difficult for them because the society generally favors men - even if there is abuse. I feel women should be well-educated and financially independent before and during marriage. This will help because many women continue to take abuse for fear of being out on their own.

Many things make a man abuse. In the childhood they were usually abused. They

saw their fathers abuse their mothers. They think that's the way to treat women. They don't have good role models. Husbands think the wife is their property.

There's a lot of frustration in couples coming from India, leaving their families. Sometimes the men want the woman to be completely like an Indian wife in the home but like an American woman when they go out. The ladies feel frustrated.

Even in our cultural history there is abuse. Women are always looked down upon, looked at as property. There are even instances of wife abuse in the great epics. In Ramayana, Sita was suspected of being unfaithful, but Rama was not, even though he had been roaming in the forest for years. In the Mahabharata, when Draupadi was being disrobed, nobody came to her aid. Krishna finally did, but everybody else just sat there and watched.

My marriage lasted 22 years. I finally separated in January, 1981. My husband didn't want to go for professional help, nor wish me to go. We divorced in September, 1982. I feel it is better for one's children and oneself to come out from real abuse. It's not good for anyone. I am much, much happier now and have more peace. Abused wives may write or call me 2683 Raven Circle, Corona, CA 91720. Tel: (714) 735-3043.

Spiritual Leaders on wife abuse

SISTER CHANDRU: (Brahma Kumaris)

Society and tradition praise women who are totally dedicated to their husbands. A young girl is taught self-sacrifice and to mold herself to the needs of her husband as great virtues and necessities. Women who face violence from their husbands must have the courage, detachment and knowledge to leave that situation. By cultivating spiritual values and adopting celibacy the woman will be able to restore her self-respect and dignity.

SWAMI RADHA: (Yasodhara Ashram)

For the male in Hindu society, it must create a tremendous sense of guilt and failure to demand of his wife that she worship him as her God. Because how can any man, any human being, be a God. That sense of guilt eventually develops into violent behaviour. An abused wife should make herself emotionally and financially independent...because economic independence is essential if she wants to become emotionally independent.

SWAMI BASHYANANDA: (Vivekananda Monastery)

The solution is to not fight. Abused Hindu women should unite together and create a strength! Unity is strength.

GURUDEVI SAVITRIPRIYASWAMI: (Institute for New Life)

Social rules such as, "A good wife stays with her husband no matter what he does or how badly he mistreats her" were written by men and engraved into the minds of women. Women should no longer consent to follow these absurdities. If you are being mistreated, go to your guru, a brahmacharini or sannyasini; and if that doesn't help, go to any hospital, police station or any other public office and ask for help. It is not selfish or unreasonable to leave a violent situation.

SWAMI JYOTIRMAYANANDA: (Yoga Research Foundation)

If a wife allows herself to be constantly harassed in the name of dharma, it is not dharma at all. In the process of harmonizing there are certain limits. If she allows her dignity to be degraded, that is not dharma at all. She should not permit a person who is a brute [to abuse her]. She should do everything possible to get out of that relationship.

SWAMI OMKARANANDA: (Badarikashrama)

Nobody should tolerate abuse. Neither family nor community. If it is not tolerable or compromisable, they should seek what is best for their lives independently - the wife her freedom of life and husband also. I wouldn't tell them to divorce, but say to see [in their] hearts what to do - a personal choice, not imposed by someone else. Scripture and society, these two are ideals, but [should] not be imposed.

From the Heart

Sant Keshavadas:

No Hindu husband should purposefully bring pain to his wife even though karmically or due to the environment certain things may [tend] to happen.

Gandhi once pushed his own wife out. Kasturbai asked him, "Where should I go?" He corrected himself and never thereafter beat her. I am sure that feeling in the Hindu blood in men of respecting the wife will come back. But in cases of severe beating, of course, the wife has to take resort to staying with friends and in-laws. Because many Hindu wives in the US are working, there is a great emotional gap between husband and wife. Coming together to talk about their children or love is given little importance. Due to this emotional stress, families are falling apart and getting divorces. If money comes in the way of dharma, if it destroys the family what is the use of it? The wife should daily or weekly arrange for pujas in the home with husband and children.

Rama Mata:

A wife has to pray when a husband makes mistakes or brings pain to her. She can, by her love, bring him back to her by her love and he will obey her. She has to think about the children and the husband and make him happy.

Youth on wife abuse

US-born Hindus inherited little tolerance for wife abuse. They see it through American eyes which publicly hold little sympathy for wifebeaters. Arthur Pais, writer for New York's India Abroad, attended a Telegu youth/adult conference where the subject of wife abuse came up. An older woman was arguing that a wife's devotion to her husband should absorb abuse. A teenage boy in the audience jumped up and exploded: "If Hinduism stands for wife abuse, then we want no part of that religion!" Indira Somani, age 20, of Knoxville College, Illinois collected these comments from her peers and added her own indictment: "I can't think of one Indian movie I've seen where a woman is not slapped around at least once."

In Hinduism, the wives of the Gods have subordinate roles. This implies male dominance. For example, Lakshmi is at Vishnu's feet. In India man is at the center of society and women are the property of the men. Domestic violence is a result of men venting their frustrations. In situations where the wife also works, the husband may have a feeling of helplessness because he has been brought up to think of himself as the sole breadwinner. Wife beating occurs on a regular basis in 50% of Hindu homes in India. - Hardika shah, 19, Bombay

One reason for wife abuse may be because both husband and wife are learning to assimilate in the white culture, creating increased tension. Men might take their frustration out and beat their wives. Also, if wives are becoming more Americanized and changing to reassert their roles, and the husband is not willing to accept this, it might lead to beating. - Girija Gullapalli, 21, Illinois

In Indian society man earns the cash which brings power. The beating of women in India has occurred since the 17th century because, since Independence, inflation has not coincided with wages, creating constant frustration for better economic stature. This instigates in the man's psyche taking out these frustrations and beating his wife, I estimate regular wife-beating in India exists in 60% of the homes. - Deepak Mathur, 21, New Delhi

Hinduism is male-dominated in terms of who controls the practice, but not in terms of beliefs. For instance, Sita is called Rama's "better half." In US households, wife-beating is due to frustrations experienced by being foreigners in a socially and

economically competitive environment. Wife-beating on a regular basis exists in about 15-20% of US Indian homes. - Sreedhar Yedavalli, 19, Chicago.

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