

[Excuses for Wife Abuse Must End](#)

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Excuses for Wife Abuse Must End

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After my wedding, as I was tearfully leaving for my "new home," my aunt admonished me, "Don't cry, now you are going to your real home. Never, ever leave it. Good or bad, you have to stay with your in-laws, your husband." My grandmother gave me her blessings, "Never bring dishonor on our family by having your in laws speak ill of you." My mother was crying too hard to say anything specific, but I knew she echoed their sentiments.

Nothing they said was new to me. Most young brides have been taught since birth that it was the woman who carried the sacred responsibility of keeping the home intact - and that even when the husband or in-laws were unreasonable, unjust or abusive, we must be patient, forgiving and loving.

With passing time, I realized that it wasn't my aunt, mother, grandmother who had created these rules. These dictums came down from Manu himself. It was this ancient sage who declared: "In her childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons - a woman must never be independent;" "Him, to whom her father may give her, or her brother with the father's permission, she shall obey as long as she lives;" and, "She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband or sons - by leaving them, she would make both families contemptible." All of us have internalized these words well.

When bride burning in India became a media sensation, I was in my new country, America, and decided that the reasons why these poor, tortured women could not leave their husband or his family was purely economic. Only after I met battered women with M.D.'s and Ph.D.'s did I question my understanding. My work with

Manavi [see below] has put me in touch with women who have endured physical abuse, mental humiliation and torture for over 20 years. Most seek help from us only when they have come to the end of their ability to endure quietly, when they realize that the situation will not improve and that only an empty shell of a marriage exists for them. Most have tried the path of unfaltering love, only to be rejected again and again; the path of forgiveness, only to be violated repeatedly; and the path of steadfastly following Hindu social rules, only to see the rules continuously change on them to their disadvantage. Many women finally realize, after long years of abusive marriages, that no gold medal awaits them as a reward for their supreme tolerance and piety.

When I have tried to talk to intelligent, reasonable people about wife abuse in Indian communities, the resistance is powerful. The main argument is not so much an acceptance of abuse as of keeping family alliances intact. Even people who proudly claim the sharpest minds cannot seem to differentiate between love, patience, humility and acceptance of abuse. It is difficult for me to understand why demanding dignity and respect is regarded antithetical to family unity and strength. It is also difficult to understand why men are absolved of all responsibilities of keeping the family together.

Our society must stop finding excuses for men's abusing women, e.g: "He is under a lot of stress," "Her job makes him insecure," "He saw his mother being abused by his father" or "Deep down he's really a good man." Abuse of women, of anyone, is unacceptable. The challenge for all men is to wake up and take responsibility for their brothers' behavior if they truly want a loving, intact family.

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