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Further Factors In Spousal Abuse

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The alarming rate of increase of spousal abuse in the U.S. Indian community is a matter of utmost concern. The abuse is largely emotional and in some cases, physical, and is at the root of the several derivative problems such as divorce, relationships with elderly parents and suicide attempts, to name only a few. To this day, if anything goes wrong in a marriage, invariably the wife suffers more than the husband. I recently read in 'HINDUISM TODAY' that this is more due to the 'I' factor - individualism - rather than anything else. I beg to differ.

More than the 'I' factor, it is due to the demands placed on the wife. She has had to take on roles that are totally new in an alien environment. The husband not only expects the wife to be a breadwinner and put up with all the trials and tribulations of the workplace, but also adhere to elaborate traditions which are no longer in vogue back home. Consider the matter of entertaining relatives and guests. Many women have remarked that, especially during the summer, attending to the flow of guests during weekends is so draining that they look forward to going back to work on Monday because it provides them with the best form of relaxation they ever had. Is it relaxation or escape from an unpleasant situation? The silent coping of the wife with the demands of the home and the stresses of the workplace finally becomes unbearable.

Yet again, many of the cases of abuse arise out of the lack of financial freedom felt by the wife. The problems become acute when the wife earns more than her husband. While the joint earnings are supposed to enrich the family's financial pot, invariably the wife finds that she has no control over it. Even in the matter of purchasing a trivial item at the grocery store, many wives have been seen to seek the permission of their spouses. In the marriages that end in divorce, especially where the wife has substantial earnings, this has been a common story. After years of emotional turmoil, the wife decides to leave and sometimes has to face serious

cash-flow problems because she never had control over her earnings during the duration of her marriage.

One of the first steps necessary among South Asian women is to acknowledge that spousal abuse exists. One of the objectives of our women's support group here is to be a compassionate listening post. Most of us find that we do not have the kind of support mechanisms provided by the extended family network that we had back home. We need to build strong, non-judgmental support networks in each country so that if someone feels that she must pick up the phone and wants to speak to someone in confidence, she has that facility available. It is very important to set up prenuptial counseling for to-be married couples so that they enter into a marriage with mutual respect and reasonable expectations. In the past, our mother told us that "no matter what you are, you are going to your husband's house - remember to be submissive." It is my hope that we can tell our daughters and our sons that "you are both equal partners in this relationship - while you should be guided by the principles of dharma." Spousal abuse - emotional and physical - is very traumatic to those going through it. Let us not pretend these problems do not exist or will somehow go away.

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