

## [Wife Abuse Part I](#)

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# Wife Abuse Part I

Once excused as a husband's right, now it's a crime

Shikha Malaviya, Washington D.C.

It starts with a glare, a harsh word here and there. Gradually, it escalates into a steady torrent of piercing words that makes the heart plummet. But, still, it's alright. You know he doesn't really mean it. He's your pati, the one whom marriage has made your "other half." So what do a few slaps matter? You reassure yourself it won't happen again and so does he. He brings you flowers and says he's sorry. You learn how to smile again. Everything is fine, until... the next slap in the face.

This is Smita's life for the past 25 years. She was 19 when she met Kushal, her husband, who was visiting his parents in Agra, India. Kushal, an engineer from Boston, was tall, intelligent, religious with a promising future in America. After a brief meeting, once, in front of relatives, Kushal's and Smita's fates were sealed. Within two weeks Smita was in America, without family and friends, looking forward to a new and exciting married life.

Smita and Kushal bought an upscale home in the suburbs and began furnishing it. Smita was one month pregnant when her mother-in-law arrived from India to "help." "That's when it all began," recounts Smita. What seemed like a sincere gesture on Kushal's mother's part turned out to be a rude stream of interference and abuse. "She would constantly tell me what to cook for her son and insist that her cooking was best," remembers Smita. "Every time Kushal and I discussed household matters, she would interrupt and rule my decisions out. Each day when Kushal returned from work, she would run to Kushal and complain about her day before I could even say hello."

Things worsened when Smita's mother-in-law became involved in the Hindu community. She organized charity shows, prayers and acted in public like a sweet, religious lady. "But at home," says Smita, "she called me a witch who had cast a spell on her dear son. When I tried to talk about the problem to my husband, he laughed and said I was crazy. He even said that my mother-in-law was a model example of how every Hindu woman should be."

Nevertheless, Kushal approached his mother to discuss the situation. But before he could say anything, his mother launched into a full attack on Smita-how she was becoming "modern" by watching TV and reading Western books. Kushal sided with his mother and went and picked up their TV and threw it down the basement stairs. He then grabbed Smita by her hair, dragged her in front of his mother and forced her to apologize and promise to never upset her in anyway. Six months pregnant and very scared, Smita managed to fly to India to talk to her parents. "I tried explain my situation to my father," Smita recounts. "But he was almost 65 and very sick. To him, family honor meant everything-even more than his daughter's happiness, I guess. I had no brothers to turn to. My relatives in turn told me all men are like this at times and that it is the duty of us women to patiently suffer and stick by them."

Today, Smita and her husband run the community center in their city and have two grown children. Her mother-in-law still lives with them and rules through intimidation. Abuse from Kushal continues, unabated. The cycle is chronic and predictable-first annoyed, then angry, then hitting, then saying he's sorry. Reflecting on whether she should have left her husband or not, Smita replies almost too quickly, "There was never really a choice."

Madhavi feels differently. "I waited so long to get married, because I thought I had a choice," she says. Five years ago, Madhavi was earning good money as an administrative assistant in New Delhi. She vehemently opposed any form of dowry. As a result, she was still single at 31. When her family met Deven, a successful businessman from Ohio, he seemed very nice and friendly. They got married within a week, and Deven flew back to the US ten days later. While waiting for her US visa, Madhavi lived with her in-laws. After Deven had been gone for a week, her in-laws started dropping hints. "My mother-in-law would smile and tell me that they 'expected a little more' from me," Madhavi remembers. "I misunderstood her. I thought she wanted me to help her more with the household chores. But she was referring to money and jewelry!" Madhavi had to constantly listen to how poor her family was and that how fortunate she was to be married to a wealthy man. She also had to hear about how rich and beautiful her sisters-in-law were. After two

years, Madhavi's visa was approved. She packed her bags with gifts for her husband and for sisters-in-law who lived in America, bid farewell to her taunting in-laws and looked forward to a happy new life with her husband.

A few days after Madhavi arrived, she sensed something was wrong. Her sister-in-law was mad that she hadn't brought her enough gifts. "My husband yelled at me in front of his sister," remembers Madhavi. "I had never felt so humiliated before. I realized my husband was totally governed by his family's greed." Fights raged for the next few days. Madhavi got so scared that she went to a neighbor and told her to please come help if she ever heard screams. Madhavi's husband didn't allow a phone in their house. "I was scared that if something ever happened, how could I call for help?" Madhavi confided. "On the other hand, even if I did have a phone, who could I have called? I had to rely on my neighbor, an absolute stranger to me and my problems."

Madhavi's fears became reality. Two weeks later her husband came home from work and, without any apparent provocation, threw a cooking pot at her head. She fled to her neighbor's house and stayed there until her husband agreed to talk about their problems. Madhavi told her husband that she would leave him unless he made an effort to change. Madhavi then sought the help of an Asian battered women's shelter in their city. With a new confidence in her voice Madhavi relates, "They really helped me put my life back together. They have given me a flood of moral support and advice. They have also given me a job to help me become financially independent so that if I do leave my husband, I won't be penniless."

Madhavi wants to reconcile with her husband and make things work out and give her marriage a second chance. But she has also decided never to have children. She says the risk of seeing her children abused by her husband is one she never wants to take.

### Why Do Men Abuse Their Wives?

There should never be a reason for physical or verbal abuse. But there are certain factors that cause it, contribute to it and condone it. In the case of Asian women, the origins of abuse often trace to a confused mix of stereotypes, traditional gender roles and socio-religious ideas about women. The notion of a man

as being superior/dominating and a woman as being inferior/subservient is deeply embedded in the Asian psyche and is probably the most potent factor in the wife abuse syndrome. But still, in itself-regardless how unenlightened and insensitive this thinking is-it does not make husbands hit their wives. It is like a hidden, simmering ember, but something else, something more circumstantial needs to ignite him. It could be anything from insufficient dowry, interfering in-laws, cooking, sexual frustrations, anything. Then the "you are inferior" mentality allows him to hit rather than dialogue.

Another contributing factor is created when Asians migrate to Westernized countries such as the US or England where society is very liberal and non-Indian. Some Asian men expect their wives to still adhere to all the strict social protocols for women observed in their homeland, even though they are in a new land. So they restrict them from the lifestyle and freedoms that are acceptable for women in the West-such as talking to the opposite sex (which he feels may lead to promiscuity), wearing Western clothes (which he feels reveals too much and may attract the opposite sex), listening to Western music (with lyrics that may excite sexual feelings) and watching Western movies (which may again give immoral ideas).

Rather than impose the same social constraints on themselves that they have imposed on their wives-and follow the virtuous paternal ways of their fathers-they allow themselves to indulge in the West's permissiveness. A wife naturally resents this double-standard hypocrisy and the distrustful, watchdog attitude toward her. On top of this, many couples anguish over what is healthy assimilation of Western ways and how much is adharmic. All these strains become powder kegs for pent-up frustration to spasmodically erupt into abuse.

Another more subtle factor contributing to wife abuse is the post-Vedic writings and attitudes which severely marginalized the value, opportunities and position of women in Hindu society. Even today, when Hindu women diverge from the molds these writings dictate, a certain strata condemns them, indirectly making them more vulnerable, and targets for abuse.

There are also the burdens of stereotypical expectations. Practices such as dowry and the expectation to bear a son put cruel pressures on Asian women. There are many cases in the US where Asian women have been brutally beaten just because they were infertile or only gave birth to girls. Many women are also forced to abort their child if they know it's going to be a girl-a cruel and tragic form of

abuse.

Probably the most traceable cause of abuse is a history of abuse in the husband's family. Men who abuse their partners are often a product of an abusive environment. In many cases they watched their fathers abuse their mothers, aunts and sisters and consider the ill-treatment of women as the norm, not the exception.

### The Problem is All of Ours, Not Just Her's

In order to break away from the vicious cycle of domestic violence, battered women must seek help. Calling a domestic violence shelter or crisis hotline is an effective step. Shelters such as \*Apna Ghar, "Your Home," \*Manavi, "Woman" and \*Sakhi, "Friend" (in USA), are inundated with help calls. Their mission is, as Apna Ghar states, "To provide Asian families in crisis with multi-lingual, multi-cultural support services." These services include a temporary shelter for women and children, a 24-hour crisis hotline, peer groups, legal advocacy, job counseling and job training. "Battered women first need to become strong morally and financially, if they want to break away from an abusive relationship," states Ranjana Bhargava, executive director of Apna Ghar, in Chicago.

But Asian communities do not make it easy for victims of abuse to expose their plight or get sympathy or support for her efforts to end the abuse. Because the sanctity of the home is so valued in Asian culture, most victims remain silent rather than reveal the presence of abuse, as desanctifying as it is. Even if victims do confide in family or friends, they are told to tolerate the circumstances for the children's sake or family honor.

Hindu communities outside India need to take more responsibility for wife abuse among women in their community. The large extended family of India that would absorb many of the strains that turn into abuse are nonexistent. Abused brides and mothers also have no family members to turn to. So, it is her Hindu friends and respected elders that need to come to her aid. How to handle her situation, what to advise, will be different for each couple. But until a victim's friends—who usually suspect abuse, but pretend they don't—take the initiative to give her at least a shoulder to cry on, or more extended help, she will invariably suffer in

silent misery, scared and scarred. Then the karma of not helping someone being hurt-which would fall on extended family members if in India-now falls on her Hindu community, usually too preoccupied to care.

\* Sakhi, USA: Tel: (212) 695-5447

\* Apna Ghar, USA: (312) 334-0173

\* Manavi, USA: (201) 748-7968

Malaysia Poll: 15% Say Wife Abuse is OK

By Pushparani, Kuala Lumpur

In 1990, following the steadily increasing number of reported cases of wife abuse, the Women's Aid Organization, a respected vocal lobby group, commissioned an explosive, nationwide, cross-ethnic survey to expose the prevalence of domestic violence and attitudes that perpetuate it. They found that 1.8 million, or 39%, of Malaysian women were regularly abused by their husbands. (Seven percent of the population is Hindu). The forms of battery ranged from kicking, punching and slapping, to clubbing.

Of the total adult population in Malaysia, 15% (men and women) said that it is "OK" for men to beat their wives. Of this 1.3 million who condone wife-beating, 72% said a man can beat a woman if she has an extra-marital affair; 58 percent said it could be done whenever she does not do as she is told. About 22% of Malays (who are Muslims), 6% of Chinese and 8% of Indians believe that it is okay to beat your wife.

Ten years ago, wife abuse was a domestic matter. And the law, to put it bluntly, could do little. In the absence of criminal prosecution and specific laws governing such abuse, the only recourse left for these women was divorce or separation. And this too was not easy, because most battered wives are emotionally spent with low

self-esteem and no confidence.

Under the Domestic Violence Bill, expected to be passed in parliament very soon, the National Unity and Social Development Ministry has proposed that a fine for first offenders be about US\$800. Under the Act, the court can, among many other stipulations, restrain the offender from harrassing the victim at his/her home, workplace or any place that the victim frequents and from writing or telephoning the victim. It can also order offenders to compensate the victim for medical fees.

The most unique feature of the proposed Domestic Violence Act is that, if passed, it would be a criminal law-thus making all Malaysians equal in its eyes. Currently, the Syariah Law has exclusive jurisdiction over Muslim families and wife battery is not a criminal offense under the Syariah law. However, it may be used by women for grounds for divorce.

Although the law is a significant step toward protecting abused women, many are apprehensive how well a male-dominated police force will enforce it. A lawyer involved in the domestic violence issue commented, "It is no more a private matter. As long as it is viewed as a private matter, any intervention to curb the act will not get support from law enforcement. No woman does anything to deserve to be physically, mentally, emotionally or sexually abused by her spouse. As long as men continue to feel that they have a right to discipline and reprimand their wives, battery and abuse will continue to prevail in our society."

The following is one of many cases of abuse documented by the Women's Aid Organization. Pretty and petite Radha (not her real name), a real estate agent, married Ravi, a civil engineer, in 1991. Soon he began severely berating, ridiculing and criticizing her. It got so intense, she hated going home. Then one day, in a fit of rage, he slapped her. "He took me by surprise. I didn't see it coming. I fell and hit a chair in the dining room. He had never raised his hand to me before. The next thing I remember, he was beside me, saying he was sorry and didn't mean to hit me. The next day, he surprised me with a lovely, meaningful card and flowers. For months I tried to put the incident out of my mind, telling myself that there was no reason to fear him. But I found it increasingly difficult. Even a little argument scared me. "I kept thinking, 'He hit me once, it could happen again.' "

In November that same year, Radha told her husband her fears and her decision to separate. "At first he said, I was being unreasonable and ridiculous and that he wasn't a beast. But the more we talked, the angrier he became. And finally I told him that he was frightening me."

It's been over a year since she left him. Neither have filed for a divorce. Says Ravi, "I shouldn't have hit her that day. I'm not a violent man. I don't know what made me do it. Fact is, I can't even remember what the argument was about. I really love my wife. And I know she loves me, too. I'm hoping and praying that we'll get back again. We're still friends. I want another chance with her. It'll take time but I'm willing to wait."

## Am I Abused?

No woman likes to believe she is being physically, emotionally or mentally abused. One of the hardest things for a battered woman is to admit is that her situation is abnormal and recognize her situation as "abuse." Here are a few telltale signs:

1. Uncommunicative: Victim is afraid to share their feelings with their partner, relatives or friends.

2. Violent Confrontation(s): Violence can be physical, verbal or a combination.

3. Denial: A victim totally blames themselves for all the abuse and excuses their partner's brutish behavior as her due.

4. Low self-esteem/Depression: Victims feel helpless, scared, depressed, worthless, unattractive, weak, imbalanced, with increased loss of appetite and insomnia.