

The secret violence that challenges Britain's Asians

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This conspiracy of silence over immigrant brides must end Sunny Hundal.

Last week a young bride was living in fear of her life after managing to escape from a violent husband and his family in Manchester. She had suffered six months of domestic violence and verbal abuse. She said that "family honour" made it difficult for women in similar circumstances to admit to domestic problems and feared that her escape would bring shame on her own family.

"This is happening to many other Asian girls - our lives are being destroyed. Something needs to be done," she told the Manchester Evening News.

It is indeed happening to many other Asians girls around the country. Today I will present a documentary for the BBC Asian Network radio station highlighting domestic violence against women. It focuses on brides who have come over from South Asia and their particularly difficult position.

In 2005 the Government recorded just over 10,000 women coming from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as part of a marriage. There is a discussion to be had on why so many British Asian men feel the need to marry someone from where their parents were born. Being fairly libertarian in my outlook, I'm not all that concerned about who people choose to marry or from where. I don't have anything against such transnational marriages. After all, my brother found his bride while travelling around India and I happily attended his wedding in New Delhi.

But I am concerned about the attitudes that underpin some of these marriages and the consequences for the brides. The view of most British Asian women we interviewed was that these men simply wanted someone who was submissive and willing to do their bidding. We even found men

who openly admitted such attitudes.

The more pressing problem is that women who come here as brides are very vulnerable to the whims of their husbands. What happens if the marriage fails? What if she is beaten by her husband or in-laws? One in four British women is a victim of domestic violence within her lifetime but at least most of them will have someone to turn to. Overseas brides face problems unique to their circumstances that make them more vulnerable.

First, there are legal issues. These women are usually unsure of their nationality because they have to rely on their husbands to apply for citizenship. They frequently don't run away because they fear deportation. They may even be unwilling to contact the authorities, believing the police may be as unsympathetic to their plight as those in South Asia.

Then there are communication problems. Transnational brides usually have nobody to turn to for support; many don't speak English or know much about British society; some are even prevented by their husbands from meeting outsiders.

One campaigner at a leading ethnic minority women's group admitted that brides from South Asia were overrepresented in cases referred to them. This doesn't take into account those women who are too afraid to run away. Unfortunately not enough is said or done about gender-related violence, while terrorism or racism continue to dominate the news.

In many cases where ethnic minorities are involved, social ills such as forced marriage, so-called honour killings, domestic violence and even rape are framed by self-appointed "community leaders" and even by the Government as problems of culture or religion. But the problem here isn't culture or religion - it is the sexist attitudes towards women that some people hold.

This Government, instead of making small noises about deploring violence against women and not tolerating so-called honour killings, needs to take firm steps in fully supporting such women if they face domestic abuse. At present most victims face not only difficulty getting access to social support but also have to go to extraordinary lengths to prove they are genuine victims.

The legislation also needs to change to put the

naturalisation process into women's hands, rather than that of their partners. One activist described the Government's attitude as racist because it discriminated against these victims on the basis of their nationality.

Labour has also failed to take meaningful action against forced marriages, which is part of the broader problem.

There is also a need to ensure these women become active British citizens. Last week the Commission for Integration and Cohesion said that new entrants to the UK should learn English. But teaching English is not just about integration. More important is that it is empowering.

Most campaigners I spoke to agreed that language was a key barrier in learning more about British society and getting help. Translation services are part of this problem - taking away the woman's incentive to learn English, whether or not her husband lets her. Rather than funding these services the Government should phase them out while expanding ESOL (English for speakers of foreign languages) classes, which have miserably failed to keep up with demand.

In addition, we need greater self-reflection of the attitudes of many Asians who not only use culture or religion as a cover for controlling women, but also invoke "family honour" as a means to hide abuse underneath their very noses.

Activists who challenge these attitudes usually invite howls of protest from some government-appointed community leader or accusations of being "a traitor" for airing dirty laundry in public.

But highlighting such social problems is not about tarring everyone with the same brush. It is about highlighting misogynistic attitudes that lead to many vulnerable women being abused or abandoned every year.

Progressive voices from within the British Asian community and outside need to help and empower these brides as women, not simply ignore them as unfortunate victims of cultural attitudes.

P.S.

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