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SWAMAAN SE JIYO:

Ending the Violence and Empowering Women

Part I

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Sacred manuscripts in Sanskrit declare “Ethra naryasthu pujoyantho, ramanthethatra devata” (God exists where women are respected). Islamic texts proudly reiterate the stories of Hajar, who is abandoned by her husband Abraham but courageously raises her son Ishmael, Kadijah who pursued women’s rights, and Aisha, Islam’s first female theologian. The Bible encourages women to “be strong and courageous – do not be afraid, for the Lord will be with you.”

So why is it that in the twenty-first century, one out of three women around the world report of being abused by a husband or partner at some point in their lives? And what qualifies as “abuse” at the hands of a spouse or partner? Despite significant developments made in the protection of women and children, what social, cultural, and economic factors still foster the continuing cycle of domestic violence against women and children? How can a “victim” of domestic violence become a “survivor” instead?

In a series of articles, these and other issues concerning domestic violence will be addressed, alongwith information on organizations and programs available to help the south Asian community end domestic violence and empower its women so that the next generation does not have to suffer in silence.

According to the Asian Women’s Alliance for Kinship & Equality (www.awakealliance.org), domestic violence is generally characterized as a pattern of behavior in an intimate relationship that an individual uses to get and maintain power and control over the other individual. Domestic violence includes the use of physical, verbal, emotional, financial, sexual, and system abuse to influence the vulnerable partner. It is important to understand that domestic violence not only consists of isolated acts by an abuser, but includes an extensive system of abusive tactics that the abuser uses to exercise control. For example, an abuser may use physical violence in private, but may use a threatening or intimidating glare in public. The tactics may seem to be random and confusing to the woman, but are actually a deliberate set of behaviors that the abuser uses to establish power in a relationship. The following are brief descriptions of the types of abusive behavior that are common in domestic violence situations.

Physical abuse involves but is not limited to slapping, punching, shoving, choking, driving recklessly, and using weapons against the woman. In many cases, physical abuse commences some time after verbal or emotional abuse tactics have been previously utilized.

It may begin with name calling, but verbal abuse includes humiliation in front of others, threatening to take children away from the woman (“if you tell anyone, I will take the children away”), saying the abuse did not happen or making light of the abuse, and acting jealous or possessive.

Due to nuances in intimate relationships, emotional abuse is more difficult to identify, but it can occur through shifting responsibility (“if you and your family knew how to treat me properly, then we would not have any problems”), making the woman afraid by using looks or gestures, and isolating the woman from family and friends by preventing her from meeting them.

Traditionally, south Asian households encourage a patriarchal family where the man is the “breadwinner”. Therefore, financial abuse can be another tactic used by an abuser but can go undetected due to traditional gender roles. Examples of financial abuse are not allowing the woman to work, not giving the woman money, or squandering away money.

Sexual abuse stems from viewing women as objects and involves the abuser forcing the woman to perform sexual acts, as well as raping the woman. Since 1993, marital rape has been deemed a criminal offense in every state.

System abuse occurs when the woman takes steps to stop the abuse through the police or the legal system and the abuser violates restraining orders, violates child custody agreements, or makes false allegations against the woman in court or to the police.

These are the some of the types of abuses that women suffer at the hands of their abusers. Although official statistics do not include women who suffer in silence, it is estimated that between two to four million women in the US are abused each year by their partners. One third of all the women’s injuries brought in the emergency rooms are due to acts of domestic violence. Medical expenses from domestic violence cost the US a staggering four billion dollars every year. Studies have shown that children who grow up in violent homes have a 74% higher likelihood of committing crimes later. Domestic violence is a crime that is too costly for our society, a crime that must be eradicated through increased awareness of the problem, and assistance to those in need.

The next article will examine the social and cultural elements of the south Asian community that foster an environment that facilitates domestic violence situations.

If you or someone you know is in an abusive relationship, the following organizations may be contacted for immediate help: National Domestic Violence Hotline (800) 799-SAFE; Asian Women’s Alliance for Kinship & Equality (845) 368-2011.

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