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SWAMAAN SE JIYO:

Ending the Violence and Empowering Women

Part II

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What does it say about the status of women in the south asian culture when even in the 21st century an estimated 500,000 female children are aborted each year precisely because they are females and a newspaper advertisement obnoxiously “guarantees” that “due to great demands and inquiries”, home kits are available to those who want to determine the sex of their child before its birth? Or, when matrimonial advertisements listing prospective south asian brides tout that they are almost all “fair” and “well-educated”, but “homely” and “sober”? Or when the parents of young women are still coerced into paying a dowry or expected to “support” and give “gifts” to the bridegroom

and his family?

According to Jaslin Chopra, the founder and a Board Member of the Asian Women’s Alliance for Kinship & Equality, “South asian men are generally given entitlement. Men are still seen as lord and master of their homes and their needs must be served by the women. In some homes, this attitude has carried into the 21st century. While women are touted as being an “ardhangini” or “laxmi”, they are still not treated as equals.”

Traditionally, the south asian culture has viewed men as being the main income earners, and therefore education is encouraged for young boys. Also, men are traditionally given the responsibility to care for their aging parents and carry on the family name. On the other hand, women are expected not to be the principal earner, but to carry out household duties, regardless of their education. Further, south asian women are expected to marry and move away into the husband’s home, and assume the husband’s family name.

All of these factors, combined with the system of dowry or expectation of “gifts” to the bridegroom, make a deadly recipe that continues to reduce the value of a woman in south asian culture, and helps fuel the cycle of domestic violence.

The end result is a society where a man is valued more than a woman and individuals are socially conditioned to measure a woman’s value and status by who her father or husband is, or her marital status. Thus, there is tremendous social pressure to either be married or to have single daughters married. This results in an undercurrent where a woman’s own individual value is negated or trivialized. Since an “unattached” woman is generally viewed as being a powerful individual, she is

threatening to the traditional social structure. Therefore, a single or divorced woman is looked upon as being “less” or subject to some level of social embarrassment or stigma, regardless of her circumstances.

This may be one of the reasons why women who are victims of domestic violence tend to stay in their relationships. The thought process of these women may be that it is better to hold the status of being married at a cost, rather than leaving the abuser and being subject to a superficial loss of social status or stigma.

Thankfully, some social progress has been made and slowly but surely women are achieving a place and value of their own in the social structure. As south asian society becomes more aware of the cruelty and consequences of domestic violence, women are not judged by the fact that they have left a violent relationship, but are supported for their strength to leave and an attempt to make a better life for themselves as individuals and mothers of their children.

Dr. Raman Kaul, President of the Asian Women’s Alliance for Kinship & Equality, advises that “in south asian culture, domestic violence has many prongs. A woman is not only controlled and abused by her husband, but also by his extended family members. The basic solution to stop this cycle of abuse is to have mass societal change where society takes responsibility for its actions and to empower women.” Organizations such as the Asian Women’s Alliance for Kinship & Equality offer women financial and emotional support to help women build up their lives, and offer seminars on healthy relationships so that social attitudes can change through awareness and education.

It is important to remember that all societal changes have to come from within each individual. Women should not be seen as objects or possessions that only have value by who their owner is, but as individuals in their own right who have a right to live their life happily and without fear. Asra Nomani, upon discovering her own value and power as a woman, described it best in her book “Tantrika”: “I felt beautiful. I felt my own power, and I loved it. Choice, strength of will, personal expression, following one’s own dream, self-knowledge. I felt free.”

The next article will examine the financial and emotional dependency between the abuser and the abused that fosters 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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