

‘I got involved in a small local community group. It boosted my morale and sense of belonging. Through making contact with people in the same situation, I was learning about needs and rights and I found a positive out of what could have been a negative’

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Breaking the Silence

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In the 16 years since it was set up, Apna Ghar has provided a lifeline for Asian women in East London suffering from domestic violence

There is a popular saying in Asian culture. It goes: 'A woman leaves her father's house in a wedding carriage; she leaves her husband's house in a coffin.' It is repeated so often that people barely register what they are saying any more. Yet when Sudarshan Bhuihi hears the phrase, she feels sick to her stomach. She would be happy if she never heard it again.

A gentle, chic woman in her early forties, Sudarshan runs Apna Ghar (which translates as Our Home), one of the few support groups in Britain for Asian women who have suffered domestic violence. She knows that the 'wedding carriage' proverb is more than a harmless ditty: it signifies just how little power Asian women have within their marriages. And it is a chilling indication of what can happen to a woman if she does show any independence.

Four new cases arrive on Apna Ghar's books every day. There are the wives whose husbands keep them under lock and key, 24 hours a day; the women who are hit by their husbands (and often their mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law too); and the young women who call from Heathrow airport just minutes before they are due to be forced on to a flight to Pakistan for an arranged marriage. Unofficial figures indicate that as many as 60 per cent of women in Asian households experience abuse, be it physical, sexual or emotional.

Domestic violence is a complex issue in any culture. In Asian culture it is especially so. Violence is often exacted for reasons of 'honour'. For instance, if a woman is seen to rebel against a forced marriage, her family may use verbal or physical abuse to keep her in line for fear that the rest of the community

will find out. ‘Many, many Asian women don’t realise they’re being abused because they think it’s “normal”,’ says Sudarshan, a mother of four who is now in a happy second marriage. ‘Or they’ll blame the violence on their karma. “It’s a Karmic thing,” they’ll say. “I must have done something in my previous lives and now I’m paying for it. If I don’t pay for it now I will have to go through it again, so I might as well pay for it now to have a better life in my next reincarnation.” ’

The problem is that the abuse tends to come from several quarters, not just from a woman’s husband. As Sudarshan explains: ‘The wife is traditionally caught between the demands of her husband’s family, her own family and her children. Everyone, including her mother-in-law, has power over her. In fact, the mother-in-law may have been abused herself, but it makes no difference. In Asian families prestige comes with age, the older you are the more respect you command. For the first time in her life, a mother-in-law will feel powerful, in control. She thinks, “I was abused and now it’s someone else’s turn. All my life I have done what other people have told me. Finally other people are doing what I say.” ’

Women from all parts of society are affected. ‘It’s just as bad for the middle classes,’ explains Sudarshan. ‘Often women who have good careers – solicitors, teachers – don’t dare tell anyone that they are abused. It’s as if, because they come from a well-known family, they are even more ashamed of what is going on behind closed doors.’

Apna Ghar was set up in 1984, and has provided a lifeline for thousands of women since. All the more remarkable, then, that it started almost by accident. Sixteen years ago Sudarshan was a 27-year-old secretary working on the reception desk at Community Links. At 10 o’clock in the morning a Pakistani woman with two children, aged around eight and nine, came running

through the door and started beating her hands on the desk.

Quickly, the woman's story came tumbling out. She'd been in a violent relationship for a long time – punching, hitting, abusive language. Because she was so scared that she'd say the wrong thing, she barely spoke to her husband. But the day before, she said, he had started to attack her while she cooked samosas. He had picked up the frying-pan, full of boiling oil, and had been on the brink of throwing it at her. 'And then I knew that one day he would kill me,' she told Sudarshan. 'I knew we had to get out.'

She had fled with her children to her sister's house but it had not been difficult for her husband to track her down. Now he was threatening to take the children. 'To tell you the truth,' says Sudarshan, looking back, 'I didn't know what to do. All I knew was that this woman had seen my face – the face of an Asian woman – and thought I'd be able to help. I got on to the phone to the local solicitors and demanded that we get help. By two in the afternoon we had travelled across London by bus and tube and reached the High Court. By 2.30 p.m, her children were made wards of court. The *difference* those hours made to her life after all those years of marriage. She suddenly felt that she could do anything. Finally she realised that her husband couldn't hurt her.'

Sudarshan never heard from the woman again. But word went round the local Asian community. The next week another woman came up to reception and whispered that she had problems in her marriage. As more and more women began to turn up, it became obvious that there was a need for a more formal support network. So Sudarshan set up a Tuesday morning drop-in group.

To begin with, the true role of Apna Ghar (the name was chosen by the women who attended those original Tuesday morning sessions) was kept secret. The sessions were billed as sewing classes and English lessons so that wives and daughters had a safe alibi for turning up. 'Back then I didn't have a clue

what I was doing,' remembers Sudarshan. 'All I knew was that these women needed each other and this was providing a way for them to meet. In two months there were 40 women attending regularly.'

Today Apna Ghar is no longer in hiding. Most people in the Asian community know what its role is – even if they disapprove. Besides Sudarshan, there are two full-time members of staff, two part-time ones and three group workers, as well as various volunteers. They run a help line, a drop-in service and a home-visiting scheme (for which they have no funding). They also liaise with courts and solicitors when women need help with legal proceedings. And there is an after-school group for young girls, a single mothers' group and a special help group for Asian women over 55.

Research shows that many women, regardless of their cultural background, stay in violent relationships because, after years and years of abuse, they lose the ability to make decisions for themselves. For Asian women the situation is even more difficult. Raised in a culture where family and home mean everything, they simply do not have the experience to cope with life outside. For many of them, just paying the gas bill or the television licence on their own is an achievement after years of subservience. Living independently takes a huge amount of courage.

Education is the key to progress, says Sudarshan. Teaching the perpetrators that violence is not the long-term solution to problems. Teaching women that being hit or punched or ignored is not acceptable. 'Often I will ask women if they have been abused and they will reply "no". Then, when I go through the list, it's a different story. "Did he threaten you?" "Yes." "Did he kick you?" "Yes." "Did he push you around?" "Yes." "Did he have sex with you against your will?" "Yes."'

Sometimes a woman will realise that violence is wrong but she

won't understand that mental abuse is just as debilitating. Sudarshan tells the story of one woman who rang early one morning, just as she had entered the office. "The police have given me your telephone number," said the voice at the end of the line. "I have to get to you. I can't talk." When the woman arrived, she had two little children with her. You could feel the distress she was suffering and tell, from the way the children were crying and the clothes they wore, that perhaps they hadn't been at home the night before.'

Later, seated in the quiet room that Apna Ghar keeps for one-to-one consultations, Sudarshan carefully persuaded the woman that she could now talk without fear of recrimination. The woman told her of how she'd been married in Pakistan and was now living in Newham. And how, ever since her arrival in Britain, her husband had kept her under lock and key. She lived with her husband, mother-in-law, sister-in-law and brother-in-law. There was a lock on both sides of the front door. If the family left her, they would lock the door on the outside. She was effectively imprisoned. But for a long time, because she was not allowed to speak to anyone outside the family, she had thought her life was normal. That this was how women lived in Britain.

For three years she had simply moved from room to room, cooking and cleaning. Any letters to her parents were checked; any letters she received were kept. Her parents never knew what she was suffering. Nor did she want to tell them what was going on because she had younger sisters who were themselves approaching the marrying age. If she had had to leave to go back to Pakistan, she would have let her own family down.

'Then, a breakthrough,' says Sudarshan, 'the day before she called me at Community Links, she had come downstairs and realised that her mother-in-law had forgotten to take the key out

of the lock on the inside. In a split second, she grabbed the children, opened the door and ran. She made her way to the local police station and the authorities did what they often do now: they called Apna Ghar.'

Not surprisingly, many of the more traditional members of the Asian community feel threatened by the work that Apna Ghar does. Fund-raising is not easy. When Sudarshan stands with her collection box in East Ham High Street, people often come up to harangue her. 'We'd help you if it was the local hospital,' they say. 'But not this. Why are you washing our dirty clothes in public? This has been going on for centuries. Why do something now?'

Sudarshan, however, is an optimist. She believes that the cycle of abuse in Asian culture can be broken by persuasion and negotiation. Apna Ghar does not have the resources to house everyone that it would like to. But at least now Asian women in East London know that there is a place where they can go to get help if they need it. Sudarshan sees the future of Apna Ghar as empowering Asian women in general. 'If we can help women feel powerful, their children will feel powerful too. Boys will grow up respecting women and knowing that violence is wrong. Girls will grow up understanding their rights.'

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