

'Unworthy creatures'

Aruna Papp, Special to the National Post

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Given the media commentary in recent years about certain high-profile alleged "honour killings" in this country, Canadians might have the impression that such hideous crimes are confined to the Muslim community. That is not the case. Unchallenged violence against women, including honour killing, is also a distressing feature of Sikh, Hindu and South Asian Christian communities.

I know. I am ethnically Indian, raised as a Christian. I arrived in Canada at the age of 21, married, with two little girls of my own. In my father's house, I was the eldest of six daughters. From an early age, I, like millions of other females, knew that girls were dispensable. We suffered from what Post columnist Barbara Kay has called "ideological terrorism," a brutal brainwashing technique that internalizes the idea in both men and women that women are unworthy creatures.

My grandmother's and mother's complicity in perpetuating the myth of family honour was typical of the honour/ shame culture. Victims themselves -- my mother was abused by her in-laws -- they reflexively punished their daughters for what they had been taught was the misfortune of being female.

My father's mother, for example, never missed an opportunity to voice her disapproval of the females born to her beloved son. Pointing at her granddaughters, she would say for all to hear, "Look at those ugly creatures, eating my son out of his home and house. What choice do I have but to drop them in the well one by one?"

Sympathetic neighbours would nod understandingly. Our indoctrinated mother often dealt with her helplessness by thrashing us, she and father begging us to plead with God to give us a brother.

Traumatizing reminders of female worthlessness were everywhere. Once, fetching milk for the family morning tea, I saw a baby girl thrown by the roadside with her umbilical cord attached.

I was 11 when I witnessed 19-year-old Kiran set ablaze by her two brothers because she had a boyfriend and had "dishonoured" her family. No one tried to save her. Everyone just stood and watched. Later, the neighbours danced at one of the brother's wedding celebrations.

The terror is continual and all-consuming. Women and young girls quickly learn that the smallest deviations from purity, such as lifting your eye lashes and looking up at the wrong time at the wrong person, can have horrible results --as they did for Kiran.

Eventually, one starts to believe that family honour and the necessity for self-sacrifice to avoid family shame are normal. The brainwashing begins at birth, and is reinforced through music on the radio, cinema, stories, legends, folktales and neighbourhood gossip. It begins in the old country, yes, but it does not remain there.

Once in Canada, some of us dare to think we can reach out and grab a little bit of self worth -- we dare to feel loved or wanted. After all, we now live in a culture where female empowerment is the theoretical norm: Women's worth is all around us, in music, movies, magazines, books, even self-esteem-building classes.

But in many cases this culture of freedom is no match for the culture of origin. I know many women who tried to disengage from the past. They were sent back to the old country to be married off to men they had never met. In my own case, the older man my father forced me to marry in India abused me for many years here before I finally divorced him and got on with my true Canadian life of equality and autonomy.

Others who rebel are not as lucky. Some are killed in the name of honour. It only has to happen to one girl or woman. The rest get the picture and fall into line. Some even start to sermonize themselves. The threat is renewed. The reality is reaffirmed.

For the past 27 years, I have been working with these fellow victims of culturally approved violence: women who have been threatened, beaten, strangled, locked away in dark basements, taken to the old country and abandoned or married off to strangers in the name of family honour, family shame and saving face.

A report by the United Nations Population Fund states that "at least 60 million girls" who should be alive are "missing from various populations, mostly in Asia." The acceptance of the scapegoating of women is a problem for the honour/ shame societies themselves. The failure to acknowledge the plight, and come to the rescue, of the victims among us is a problem for all Canadians.

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