

The hidden plight of Asian women

By Naresh Puri

BBC News

Kulwant suffered violence at the hands of her husband

The BBC's Domestic Violence Day aims to raise awareness about abuse in the home. It is a problem that also affects Britain's Asian community.

Kulwant, aged 20, was starved and beaten by her husband. She hides her face because she fears for her safety.

She regularly visits the offices of a women's rights organisation - her support group and her only friends.

Kulwant left India to join her British-born husband after an arranged marriage.

"I was very excited about coming to England," she said. "I thought I would have a great married life and he was from a good family. I was so happy."

Suicidal thoughts

But within weeks of her arrival, Kulwant's life changed. Her husband became violent, she was forced to sleep on the kitchen floor and the family refused to feed her.

"I was never allowed to leave the house," she said. "My husband had mistresses and he would take all my wages and leave me with nothing."

"My husband hit me with a chair. He was violent. I wanted to commit suicide. I couldn't go back to India because I would be an outcast."

One Sikh community is taking steps to tackle abuse

Married to an abuser

Many British-born men go back to South Asia searching for a traditional wife.

Many of the relationships are successful, but some are violent.

Meena Patel, of the west London-based Southall Black sisters, who provide help and support to black and Asian women, said: "When they go abroad they are looking for a wife that will be passive and submissive to their demands - someone who is not going to make too many demands on them and who is not too liberated."

"When they bring them here they may subject them to domestic violence and use violence to control their lives."

Open discussions

But some Asian communities are beginning to tackle the hidden issue of violence at home.

At a Sikh temple in Hounslow, west London, community elders and members of the congregation meet women who work with the victims of domestic abuse to discuss the problem.

"A lot of families collude and they deliberately keep it within the family network and won't allow - whether it is your sister, your aunt or your sister-in-law - to go and get help," one woman told the group.

The main fear for victims is that if they walk out of abusive relationships, they could be forced to leave the country.

Many women have to suffer in silence.

The National Domestic Violence Helpline (run by Women's Aid and Refuge) can be contacted on 0808 2000 247.

