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Desire, Happiness and the Global Economy: Transnational Marriage Abandonment in India

She was crazy about England, she wanted to go so badly. The whole family was crazy. So her father sold his land to pay for her marriage, and now look what's happened to her. She's ruined. Such a beautiful girl.

A politician in Bathinda, Punjab

You will never see me step out of the gate of my house alone ... what if the neighbours think I am talking to a strange man?... they will say it was my fault. No. Everyone needs to know it was something wrong with my husband, not with me. I will keep my honour, I will never step out alone.

A woman in Ludhiana, Punjab

There is a crisis in India of women being abandoned after having a transnational marriage. These quotes are from interviews conducted in 2014-15 for a research project, Transnational Marriage Abandonment: A New Form of Violence against Women. The project documented the stories of Indian women who were abandoned after marrying Non-Resident Indian (NRI) men who lived in countries in the West. We examined such cases of transnational marriage abandonment as a form of gender based violence, which placed affected women at risk of poverty, destitution and domestic abuse from their natal and marital families. Further, we looked at how abandonment prevents women from accessing their legal rights, which was compounded by having to contend with citizenship, visa and legal regimes of two different countries. With their remarriage prospects being virtually non-existent in the context of India, and their families bankrupted by high dowries and wedding costs, these women are forced to live precariously with their families or depend on relatives for their subsistence.

The issue of abandonment has received considerable attention from the international media as well as from Indian state agencies. Women are variously written about as 'holiday brides' or 'abandoned brides,' and the issue is often termed 'fraudulent NRI marriage' in India. Though the number of women abandoned in India continues to rise and nearly every state has women affected by abandonment (Rudra & Dasgupta 2009), transnational marriages remain desirable because of positive representations of life in the West, relative poverty, lack of security, and long-standing cultures of migration, among other factors. We spoke to 57 women and 21 practitioners—lawyers, police personnel and social workers—for this study. We found that abandonment can take three forms: (a) women who migrated to their husbands' country of residence in the West

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are ousted or flee after a period of abuse; (b) women who migrated with their husbands after marriage are deceived into returning to India for a vacation and abandoned there, while their husbands return and revoke their wives' visas; (c) women are left behind with their in-laws in India after marriage and are eventually ousted or leave because of domestic violence. The majority of the women reported that they had experienced physical violence perpetrated by their husband, in-laws or both. All the women were subjected to coercive control, isolation and financial abuse.

However, our research showed that transnational marriage abandonment itself is a category of violence, requiring us to understand how, in a globalized world, gender intersects with other axes of disadvantages including class, age and nationality/immigration status. When asked about why the phenomenon of transnational marriage continues, legal practitioners often replied that there was a blind 'craze' to go abroad amongst the 'youth', thus blaming the violence on young women's desire to seek outward and upward mobility. Such a formulation ignores transnational migration histories and strategies where marriage is positioned as a negotiation of citizenship boundaries in the West, particularly through family reunification policies.

The violence of abandonment is further enabled by 'gender-blind' transnational formal legal frameworks, which construct abandoned women as subordinate citizens and make them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. As women become the sites that enable future immigration of extended family and kin networks, they come under increasing pressure to bear oppressive conditions within their marriages. When women speak up and/or report this violence to judicial authorities, the shame and stigma of a broken marriage intensifies as the chain of potential immigration and participation in the global economy is broken.

Works Cited:

Rudra, Urjasi and Shamita Das Dasgupta. (2009). Transnational abandonment of South Asian women: A new face of violence against women. *Manavi Occasional Paper*, (6)

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