

Afshan Azad in London on July 3, 2007.

Barbara Kay, National Post · Wednesday, Jul. 7, 2010

U.K. Actress Afshan Azad (best known as Hogwarts student "Padma" in the Harry Potter film series) escaped death in May when her brother, in collusion with his father, allegedly attempted to murder her in her Manchester home. Still- cryptic reports suggest an attempted honour killing motivated by the young woman's relationship with an "unnamed man."

Most troubling was the incidental note that "both [Azad's] parents were born and educated in the U.K." They did not fit the category of unassimilated immigrants, which we typically associate with honour killings in the West.

Anyone raised in the West fully comprehends our democratic commitment to equality of worth, and a daughter's right to plot her life course according to individual conscience. Yet the clear message that girls and women may not be treated as chattel has yet to penetrate the cultural armour of many immigrant communities -- particularly South Asian immigrant communities -- even into the third generation.

Honour killings are few in number so far in Canada -- only about a dozen cases in recent years, in which the killers identified honour as their motive (other suspected cases are recorded as accidents or suicides). But killings are only the extreme end of a spectrum of culturally-driven misogynistic behaviours. Muslim men perpetrate the majority of honour killings, but the obsessive focus on family honour and shame that suffuses traditional Islamic immigrant cultures is common to most South Asian religious communities -- including Sikhs and Christians.

What is to be done? In a June 18 National Post column, "We just need to try harder," Chris Selley prescribed education: alert girls and women to their rights and direct them to available resources.

But teenager Aqsa Parvez, killed by her father and brother after a lifetime of indignity under the tyranny of a crowded household, was eager to integrate, knew her rights and sought help from all available resources.

That is, the system "worked," but it couldn't trump cultural obsessions.

For a deeper appreciation of attitudes prevalent in homes such as those of Aqsa Parvez, Amandeep Singh Atwal (a Kitimat, B.C., girl stabbed to death by her father in 2003 for dating a non-Sikh boy) and Amandeep Kaur Dhillion (killed by her father-in-law in a Toronto-area grocery store last year), Canadians should read a forthcoming Frontier Centre for Public Policy report, scheduled for release July 12, Culturally Driven Violence Against Women: A Growing Problem in Canada's Immigrant Communities.

The paper's author, Aruna Papp, is ethnically Indian -- she was born in the Punjab and emigrated to Canada as a young mother -- and Christian by upbringing. For 30 years, Papp has been counselling Canadian men and women of South Asian extraction who are trapped in cultures that extol honour and shame.

Papp's stated purposes in writing the paper are to urge government policies that would "blunt the effect of these detrimental and destructive cultural traditions" and to "encourage a systemic acceleration of Canadianization with regard to values of gender equality."

One useful component of the paper is a discussion of hierarchies in traditional South Asian families -- roles count, not

individuals -- and the pecking order of inheritance and power rights. Papp writes that in such cultures, the socialization of children into rigid gender roles begins at birth and continues through constant "brainwashing." For example, ritual community celebrations greet the birth of a son, but only "solicitous empathy" marks the birth of a girl. She points to the high incidence of "forced" second-trimester abortion as proof of a community-wide contempt for the female sex.

Papp believes Westernization on gender issues is long overdue. The paper does not pander to notions of multicultural entitlement. She forthrightly scolds South Asian community leaders who encourage a widespread conspiracy of silence around girl and woman abuse, and who "consciously exploit multiculturalism-inspired fears amongst mainstream Canadians of appearing racist or of perpetuating cultural stereotypes."

Political correctness amongst influential heritage Canadians is equally to blame, though. In order not to "racialize" honour killings, for example, law enforcement and media unhelpfully describe them as "domestic violence" or "domestic homicide," which is a different social and cultural phenomenon from an honour killing. At the other extreme, Papp heaps scorn on judges who favour soft sentencing for heinous crimes executed in a "cultural context."

Statistically, women such as Afshan Azad, who have acculturated and become financially independent, are most at risk of punishment, Papp says, because their social and economic parity with men "often destabilizes the traditional dynamic of authoritative male and submissive female."

Papp is one such independent woman, so knows whereof she speaks. When she divorced her abusive husband (an arranged marriage), she was denounced by her family and for years ostracized by her community for speaking out on the wider issues her experience implied.

Community shunning is keenly wounding. Papp well understands why many women she counsels prefer abuse and cultural security to liberation and cultural exile, a choice few Western women are forced to make.

Papp feels the government must introduce policies that override negative cultural imperatives, or the cycle of domestic tyranny will continue unabated. She ends her report with 14 reasonable and feasible recommendations. I hope the powers that be will heed them and act upon them.

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