

What women want

While the Indian woman is expected to grow into independence, most times she realises she has no voice of her own. That, despite her privileged schooling and many degrees, neither her body nor her spirit is free.

Made of honour

The restrains on a woman's right to choose who to have a relationship with, and marry — or not — is apparent in many ways. In a society where a family's reputation is considered paramount, brothers slit the throats of sisters who dare to bring 'dishonour' to the family; khap panchayats decree that violators be ostracised, or worse — murdered. We speak to activists who say that when it comes to honour killings, there is a Plimsoll line below which no society should be permitted to go.

Empower women

As a Kurdish woman, I felt an urgent need to found an organisation that addresses atrocities against women in large swathes of West and South Asia. Forced marriages, female genital mutilation, stoning and honour killings abound among Asian communities — even among the rich and the educated settled in the U.K. Growing incidences of honour killings and brutal intimidation of runaway couples is prevalent among Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian communities, followed closely by Turkish, Kurdish and Afghan societies. Providing safe shelters, confidential addresses, solicitors for those wishing to fight it out in court, and ensuring that victims get their benefits and police protection are some of our thrust areas. Controlling women's sexuality is a fallout of patriarchy, and the culture of the community is the culture of the groups in power. Empowering women is the only way to end this.

DIANA NAMMI



Founder, International Campaign Against Honour Killings, and

Director, Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation, London

Obliterate caste

Honour killings are a manifestation of the resentment of a challenge to the traditional power structure — be it caste supremacy, code of family honour, or patriarchal controls. Society has always tried to control female sexuality, either through a dress code, a behaviour code or restriction of movement. An honour killing has now become a crude way to tell the woman that it is others who will pronounce how and where she can marry, especially so in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan, where power, property, resources and status rest on the male lineage. Education will give women access to resources and awareness of legal rights. Caste should be obliterated from the Indian context itself, but that requires a political will, which the politics of the vote bank will never allow, at least, not for now.

DIANA KHAMBATTA

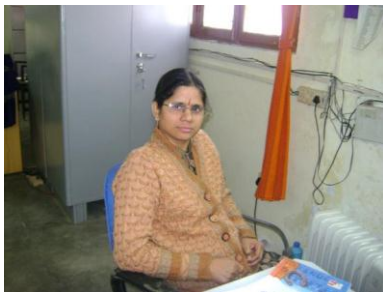
Honorary executive vice-chairperson,

Guild of Service, New Delhi

Protecting rights in the Bill

At the Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiatives (AALI), we have seen an increase both in honour crimes and killings, over the last decade, in the badlands of Uttar Pradesh, especially in Barabanki and Hardoi districts. Our research on Article 16 of CEDAW (The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) that requires countries to ensure that women and men have equal rights in the freedom to choose a spouse and enter into marriage, has revealed that while intervention is difficult, changing the mindset of people on caste / creed equations remains next to impossible. Sometimes, even marrying within the sub-caste is considered a crime. When the proposed bill against honour killings is introduced, it should include the inherent rights of Article 21 of the Constitution (Right to life and personal liberty). It should also define the right to marry or not, who should marry, how and when, and for how long.

RENU MISHRA



Advocate and casework coordinator,

AAI, Lucknow

Multi-dimensional interventions

Evidence's Women Witness programmes monitor and intervene in cases of atrocities committed against Dalit and tribal women. Most of these women are beyond the ambit of taking any independent decisions, much less on who they marry. We need a law to end heinous crimes, but it should have more provisions for suo moto action, strict implementation and monitoring. There should also be more roles for women, social and human rights activists, rather than the law being confined to law enforcement agencies and the judiciary. There should be multi-dimensional interventions — legal measures to protect the rights of young adults to decide their future, irrespective of gender, caste and religion; sensitisation measures against deep-rooted traditions, based on patriarchal, caste and religious systems; and promotional measures for the socio, political and economic empowerment of women, based on constitutional guarantees. But, this is possible only if there is strong political will.

R. THILAGAM



Programme director,

Evidence, Madurai