Research Paper

Role of media in highlighting the plight of Punjabi girls deserted by their NRI husbands.

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KEYWORDS

Indian culture has a very significant place for marriage; it is regarded as a sacred union of two souls. A girl has several aspirations in this regard and dreams of a happy married life. The practice of arranged marriages is generally followed in India. This means that the girl's family selects a suitable groom for her to marry. But, unfortunately some Punjabi girls have been deserted by their NRI grooms shortly after marriage. Several cases of runaway grooms have been highlighted by the media time and again. These girls are a victim of a social crime committed against them. The media can play a vital role in ensuring that these innocent girls are given their due rights and justice is delivered.

On October 16, 2005 The Province, a newspaper based in Vancouver, Canada published a newsreport titled "Abandoned brides". This newsreport was published in five parts. The report investigated the plight of those women who were abandoned by their NRI husbands. These victims of fraudulent marriages were languishing in the dark and were forced to lead a life full of sorrows and grief. The newsreport was written by Fabian Dawson, deputy editor-in-chief of the newspaper. He along with his team blew the lid off these sham marriages. In 2008 the GOI Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs, Vayalar Ravi stated that in Punjab alone at least 20,000 legal cases were pending against erring NRI grooms. In the year 2009 the chairperson of National Commission for Women (NCW), Girija Vyas made a shocking revelation that out of 10 NRI marriages, 2 result in the wife being abandoned after the honeymoon.

As a result, the NCW established an NRI cell on September 24, 2009. This cell deals with the complaints received from India and abroad resulting from cross country marriages wherein there is any deprivation of women's rights or any issue involving grave injustice to women.

According to a community newspaper in Canada there may be as many as 10,000 runaway grooms in the country. The present study, Role of media in highlighting the plight of Punjabi girls deserted by their NRI husbands, was done with the following objectives.

To analyse the role of media in highlighting the issue of abandoned brides in Punjab.

To examine the role of media in establishing a communication linkage between the victims and the government or the concerned authorities.

To identify the role of media in generating awareness regarding the issue among the general public so as to avoid similar frauds.

To suggest the suitable role that media can play in dealing with the menace of fraudulent marriages involving NRI grooms.

Important definition

NRI stands for Non Resident Indian; it has been used as an umbrella term to include PIO (people of Indian origin) as well. An NRI is an Indian citizen who stays for employment/ carrying on business or vocation outside India or stays abroad under circumstances indicating an intension for an uncertain duration of stay abroad. A PIO is a person who was or whose ancestors were born in India but now he/she is not a citizen of India and is the citizen of another country.(*As defined in http://www.welcome-nri.com*)

Methodology

At this point it becomes quintessential to understand the expanse of the term media. In order to gather information related to the objectives of this research problem; Role of media in highlighting the plight of Punjabi girls deserted by their NRI husbands, the researcher is required to scan the various media options that are used for communication to gather information about the kind of news reports that were being published to highlight this social crime against women. The researcher as classified the various typed of media into three broad categories and these categories have further been divided into sub-categories listed as follows.

Print Media

National Dailies (in English)
Vernacular Newspaper (in Punjabi)
Community Newspapers (for Punjabi Diaspora)
Information Booklets (official)

Electronic Media

TV
Radio
Films (especially Punjabi language)

New Media

News-based websites
Blogs
Institutional Websites (NCW, NRHM, Punjab Government)

Results and findings

The problem of Punjabi girls being abandoned by their NRI grooms is rising at an alarming rate. In Punjab, the Doaba region has the most number of such fraud marriages. According to the NCW nearly, 15,000 victims are believed to be present in Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur and Kapurthala districts alone. The exact number of such victims is expected to be much higher. Several girls prefer to grieve in isolation, since they feel it is a social stigma to speak about their sorrows. They fear that they would become a laughing stock for the society and their families would be disgraced. Hence, they suffer in silence. Initially only a few girls come forward with their stories and shared them with the media. As a result of the positive role played by the media, more girls came forward and shared their shocking stories of deceit at the hands of their NRI husbands who had promised them a luxurious life abroad.Most of these marriages were lavish and the girls' families were forced to provide expensive gifts to the NRI grooms and their relatives. The media has provided the much needed platform to the victims. The society has been forced to take notice and these girls now do not have to suffer in silence.

The persistent efforts by the media have forced the government to take concrete measures. The government was shaken from its slumber and it was forced to spring into action. In the year 2005-06 the NCW (National Commission for Women) took up the issue of NRI marriages as a priority area. This decision was followed up with the organisation of two intense workshops in the year 2006.these workshops were conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs. The first workshop was held in Chandigarh in June 2006 and later on the second workshop was held in Trivandrum in September 2006. The workshops included extensive discussion sessions. The victims came forward, the lawmakers, legal practitioners and the media persons provided a holistic view of this social crime against women. After concluding the workshops the NCW released a booklet named The "Nowhere" BRIDES.

On July 7, 2008, during the 14th Lok Sabha the Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women made strong recommendations under the heading "Plight of Indian Women Deserted by NRI Husbands", there was a need to evolve a well- defined and co-ordinated mechanism to deal with the issue. The External Affairs, the Law and Justice, Women and Child Development, NCW and National Human Rights Commission need to work in a co-ordinated manner. As a result on September 24, 2009 the NRI Cell of NCW was established. The victims could file a formal complaint and seek legal help to get justice. According to the figure 515 cases were registered till December 31, 2010. The 14th clause of the mandate of NRI Cell states, "To carry out awareness campaigns for the masses on the issue, all the available media services would be utilised by the cell". Further the media has been expected to adopt a two-fold goal as follows:

- building awareness
- showcasing specific interventions

In February 2012, the Ministry of External Aff airs initiated Women's Grievances Cell. It enables a girl married to an NRI to file a formal complaint against her husband who has duped her. The complainant must provide Marriage Certificate, FIR and her husband's name, DOB and address. This complaint is then forwarded to the concerned Regional Passport Office (RPO). The RPO can impound the passport under Passport Act, 1967 section 10 (3). The Jalandhar RPO has so far confiscated 48 passports of errant husbands.

Punjab Compulsory Registration of Marriages Act, 2012;The Punjab government assured to enact a law to check the menace. The law is expected to ensure compulsory registration of all such marriages and help the girl's family to verify the credentials of the prospective NRI grooms with the help of the Indian Consulate located in the country from where the NRI claims to have come.

The matrimonial in the newspapers are itself an indication of the preference for the NRI grooms. Special headings like NRIgroom, Green card holder, set in attractive boxes to lure the readers. Recently a disturbing trend of Barter Marriage through matrimonial is becoming a regular feature in the classified columns. A disclaimer is not enough. The newspapers earn handsome revenue from such matrimonial advertisements. They also have a moral responsibility towards their readers.

The role of vernacular press and the native language radio and TV channels can be of real significance. They are more effective in building awareness regarding this shameful behaviour of the NRI grooms and their families. The regional language has the power to penetrate to the grassroots level. The media should also make efforts to trace the NRI families abroad and quote their version as well.

Bride Beware campaign was launched in the year 2010 to generate awareness regarding this serious problem. This campaign was a joint effort of the Ministry of Overseas Affairs and the Ministry for Public Information and Broadcasting. It included the extensive use of the regional TV and Radio channels. In such advertisement is as stated below:

The parents of a young girl of marriageable age visit a Pandit. They request him to suggest an auspicious date for the marriage of their beloved daughter with an NRI groom. The Pandit says that the Kundali of the groom is not enough and suggests that a proper scrutiny of his passport, SIN card, Green card, Visa documents is also very critical to ensure a bright future for their daughter.

TV show Baani- Ishq da Kalmapremiered on March 18, 2013. The show is centred around the desertion of brides by NRI grooms, this practice is prevalent in various regions of Punjab. Baani is the story of young and spirited girl whose mother dreams to marry her to an NRI.

Reasons for the preference for NRI groom

During the study it was found that NRI match for one's daughter meant an elevation in the social stature of the girl's family. An NRI groom is considered to be a priced catch. As a result the girl's family is ready to solemnise the marriage in haste and without even bothering to verify the credentials of the prospective groom. The news reports also revealed an astonishing fact that the Punjabi girls were often more educated and qualified then their NRI husbands.

- It was found that the parents solicited NRI grooms for enhancing their social status.
- There is a race among the relatives to be the first to get the NRI match for their daughter.
- Most of the parents admitted that they marry their daughter with a hidden agenda that through an NRI alliance, they will be able to send abroad the other members of the family.
- In some of the cases, the parents do not involve their relatives while finalising the marriage, fearing that they may impede or steal the NRI groom for their own daughter.
- The pretentious behaviour of the NRI family is very common reason for the girl's parent to fall into the trap.
- Many of the parents confessed that they lacked resources and awareness as to whom to contact in the short time available.

The role of the community newspapers that are based abroad is an avenue that has not been used effectively. These community newspapers are generally read by the IndianDiaspora as they provide them a sense of belonging in the foreign land. When these community newspapers report the wrong doings of the NRIs then the culprit and his family members are disgraced. They are forced to answer the upsetting questions of their social group not only in India but also abroad. This would ensure that the social crime committed in India do not go unnoticed in the country of their residence. This fear of the social stigma can act as a deterrent and discourage people from committing similar acts. Another important contribution of these community newspapers can be in the form ofa platform for the Punjabi girl who has been cheated by her NRI husband who has snapped all ties with her and she fears that he might file for ex-parte divorce. Such a victim should be encouraged to spill the beans.Some of the popular Punjabi community newspapers are as follow.

- Punjab Infoline
- Khulisoch
- Ajit Weekly
- Sanjh Savera
- Quami Ekta
- Sikh Times
- Sikh Shahadat
- Mehram Publication
- Sahitkar.com
- Hamdard Weekly

- Deshvidesh Times
- Sher-e-Punjab
- The Punjabi Star
- Punjab Mail
- Wichaar
- Media Punjab
- Europe Samachar
- Europe Vich Punjabi
- Daily Khushboo Sabhyachar Di
- Punjab Di Awaaz
- Indo-Canadian Times

The role of films

Most of the people who select an NRI groom for their daughter have themselves never travelled to countries like Canada, America and Australia. All that they perceive about these developed countries is largely based on the inputs provided by the various media platforms. Hence, the media has contributed in forming ageneral perception that in the developed countries life is a bed of roses. The developed countries are the lands were the rags to riches stories are very common. And if you want to hit jackpot, get rid of your miseries and lead a luxurious life then you must migrate. As a result, when people find an opportunity (NRI match for their daughter) to migrate to the foreign lands, it turns into a temptation only a few can resist. Through our films the media has largely portrayed NRIs as rich, affluent and cultured people. The readers are also swept off their feet when they read about the grand and lavish weddings of the NRIs. It is the duty of the media to write about not only what the people want to know but also write about the people should know.

Important websites to look out for

The internet is a storehouse of a lot of information related to the problem. The victims and their families should explore this avenue in their fight for justice.

- wcd.nic.in/dowryprohibitionact.htm
- ncw.nic.in/PDFFiles/NRIDoDont.pdf
- India.gov.in/allannouncements/16029.pdf
- passport.gov.in/passport_act.pdf

Conclusion

In the light of the various findings of the study we may summarise that media can play a significant role in highlighting the plight of the Punjabi girls abandoned by their NRI husbands. The media can create awareness regarding the issue. The news reports should go beyond just stating the facts, it should be descriptive and analytical in nature. To ensure that the initial news report does not lose its sting and a public opinion is formed, the news should be supported with follow-up stories. This would sensitise the public and the victims would not be ridiculed by the society. The showcasing of specific intervention by the government and delivering of justice to the victims can kindle hope in the girls who are suffering for no fault of their own. The regional media has an edge over the English media as the regional media communicates in the language that a majority of the people understand.The previous efforts to use the media have generated positive results. This has created an environment for the prevention of this crime and provided a ray of hope for the victims and their families. Now that the society has started to take notice and speak up about this sensitive issue the future does not appear gloomy.

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