

No more bruises

A mother and daughter use their histories of domestic abuse as motivation to seek a future of safety and freedom for young women in a rural village.

by ZACH WALKER

Geeta pours gray water from a metal bowl after washing her family's clothes in the brick area outside the rooms of their home in Gohran.



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Shimla Devi works as a servant in the house of an upper-caste man in Gohran, a rural village in the wheat fields of Haryana, but because she is paid by a man other than her husband, the village men think she does not bear a good moral character.

After work, she walks home past men smoking hookahs alongside piles of garbage speckled with hungry feral dogs.

When she gets home close to 3 p.m., her alcoholic husband is two hours away from his first drink. He'll be drunk by 6 p.m.

Inside the house, her daughter Geeta Rani boils masala chai tea over a clay stove and hangs clothes on a string suspended between two brick walls without a ceiling. She cares for her 2-year-old daughter and 1-year-old son whom she had with a husband who didn't have a conversation with her until one year after their wedding but had a child with her after six months.

After moving in with her mother after months of verbal abuse from her husband, Geeta spends her days with Shimla inside a two-room brick house or outside working to feed her father who uses all of his earnings to buy alcohol at 120 rupees, or \$1.69

Above: Geeta sits with a group of Gohran women in the house of Reena Devi, Shimla's childhood best friend. Geeta wishes she could divorce her husband, who has verbally abused her for years, and feels more comfortable in a group of women. "We wouldn't have to feed our husbands," Geeta said. "Nobody would oppress us."



Shimla stirs potatoes in a pot of boiling water over a fire of sticks and water buffalo manure. While her husband, Ramkaran, sleeps or drinks, she handles the housework with Geeta. "I do everything for the home," Shimla said. "But I'm still the one who gets the hate from the community."

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a bottle. But when the two women are together, they smile and laugh and talk about how they will never let Geeta's daughter, Shivangi, go through the same abuse they've suffered.

"We'll get our freedom when all of us come together," Shimla said. "I don't want women to be afraid to get out."

According to the 2018 National Family Health Survey, one in every three Indian women beyond age 15 have experienced domestic abuse. The U.S. statistics are also bleak: one in every four American women experience the same abuse.

Shimla and Geeta represent a trend of domestic abuse against women in rural India that is propelled by traditional gender roles and female silencing that begins at childhood. But they also represent a budding future for Indian women that promotes education over tradition and freedom over barriers.

The two women are working for young girls like Shivangi to reach a future not defined by male preference. Suffering is routine for Shimla and Geeta, but they hope it doesn't have to be for the next generation.



Geeta lifts a pair of pants toward the clothesline to dry. Before hanging clothes, she washes them and beats the water out with a heavy wooden plank.



Shimla pounds vegetables with a wooden rod to make chutney while her son, Sachin, holds Geeta's son, Ayush.

To begin that routine, Shimla and Geeta wake up at 5 a.m. to walk to the village water tap. There, they are met by a line of women waiting to fill buckets with the only usable water in Gohran.

They need water to bathe in a six-by-four-foot brick bathroom. Holes in the wall where bricks have been removed hold three bars of soap, a washcloth and a plastic packet of shampoo. A two-compartment shower caddy hangs by one rusted nail to support tubes of toothpaste and face wash.

They boil the water in a charred steel bowl over a fire fueled by twigs and discs of water buffalo manure.

After steam rises from the bowl, they cook for Ramkaran, Shimla's husband, who wakes up an hour earlier than the women or whenever the previous night's alcohol wears off.

"It doesn't matter if I come back drunk or sober," Ramkaran said. "[Shimla] is always going to take care of me."

The house among the brick pathways of the village usually houses only Shimla, Ramkaran, Geeta's 19-year-old sister, Beeta and young sons Sachin

"We'll get our freedom when all of us come together."

-Shimla, 46

and Anmol. But ever since Geeta's husband accused her of being attracted to his brother, Geeta and her two children call the end of the alley home.

Now, Geeta can't hear her husband's screaming. And after helping her mother fight off her father, she doesn't worry that Ramkaran will take on the role of abuser, that shadow that has followed her mother since she was a girl.

The shadow twisted Shimla's childhood into a series of bruises and scrapes.

Shimla remembers the wounds on her arms after following her mom up the staircase and tumbling back down at the age of three. She remembers the bruises down the side of her body after a snorting pig who wanted the two rotis she was holding dragged her 1,600 feet through the village by her hand.

Her fondest memory is playing a game with her friends where they would hide a rupee coin in a pile of water buffalo manure and race to dig it out. Whoever found it first got to keep the manure and sell it at one rupee (or less than one cent) per bucket to buy ice cream.

Her father was the man everybody feared. He killed a wolf by striking its neck with a stick, the same weapon he used against her when she was 10 and went to a friend's house to watch the Indian war drama "Mahabharat," her favorite television show, without telling him.

The fear continued when she met her husband for the first time after the ceremony of their arranged marriage. She was 13, and he was a 17-year-old who was bigger than her.

"We didn't talk and whenever he came to my house, I used to hide," Shimla said. "I didn't know what he would do."

But he made jokes. And he talked with her and helped her cook. She would even laugh when he would splash her with a bucket of water.

He always drank alcohol, but he balanced it with food. As he aged, he started to eat less and drink more. To work less and sleep more. He would often fall over after a night of drinking, which he said hurt

Ramkaran sits on a wooden cot and poses in one of the two bedrooms of his house in Gohran. He spends most of his time sleeping or drinking and refuses to allow his daughters to have a life outside of the village. "That man ruined my life," Geeta said.

more than any manual work ever did.

The jokes turned to curse words. And the conversations to fights.

He once wanted to eat a meal with his wife off the same plate, but she wanted her own. He screamed and threw a glass alcohol bottle at her. Most nights, he would beat his wife and daughter with wooden blocks he cut the week before.

Like her father, Geeta's husband was nice for the first three months. They met on the wedding night, when she was 15 and he was 19, and exchanged occasional pleasantries for the months it took for him to get jealous.

She once forgot to veil her face in front of her new brother-in-law, a tradition in rural Haryana that requires a woman to hide her face from any man older than her husband. Her husband, Pradeep, accused her of having romantic feelings for his brother.

Shimla says Geeta would blend in with Americans because she is so fair, a quality that her husband wanted to hide from everyone but himself.

Pradeep started using every instance of other men being present around his wife as ammunition against her. Like the time

Geeta says she and her friends danced at a wedding after the other guests had left but didn't notice an old man sitting in the corner.

"You should run away with him," Pradeep said to her.

Or when a man from the village spoke to Geeta, and Pradeep responded by breaking the man's leg. Pradeep accused her of putting sleeping pills in his food so she could sneak away to see the man. After she refused to testify against the man to the police, Pradeep stopped buying milk and medicine for his children.

She stopped applying makeup because her husband thought it attracted other men too much. And she only wears dull colors around him instead of the bright, shiny Punjabi clothing she favors because he thinks the purples and pinks will attract other men.

"He [doesn't] want anyone looking at me other than him," Geeta said.

Both men stay away now. Shimla's husband lies on a cot and stares at a 10-inch television while his wife and daughters cook meals and wash dishes. And Geeta's husband lives at home without his wife.

But the women had to act to escape. Shimla and her children had to punch

"It doesn't matter if I come back drunk or sober, [Shimla] is always going to take care of me."

-Ramkaran, 51



and kick Ramkaran in a locked room before he stopped beating them. And Geeta had to move back in with her parents to get away from her husband's verbal torment.

Their actions also saved Shimla's childhood best friend, Reena, who lives in their village.

Reena Devi's husband died after years of alcoholism, so she says she doesn't have to worry about him beating her or spending the family's money on alcohol.

But she does have to worry about feeding herself and her three children with an income of 48,000 rupees a year, or \$685. She can barely use the left side of her body after surviving a stroke four years ago

“It doesn't matter how bad a man is, he will always be respected.”

-Reena, 40

and relies on her teenage daughter, as well as her two sons who once dropped her in the middle of the road and ran away laughing during the year when she couldn't walk.

And she has to worry about the men in the village calling her vulgar names like they did when she wore only a pajami, a legging-like pair of pants that is traditionally worn only under a dress, to her job as a school bus conductor at a school in the nearby city of Kaithal after waking up late and not having time to change.

When her husband poured gasoline over her and her young son while they slept and lit a match only to be stopped by a neighbor, police locked him in jail for three hours before releasing him with no charges.

The abuse continued until Shimla and Geeta stepped in. After helping Reena return the bruises to her husband in a locked room like they did to Ramkaran, the violence faded.

But, unlike Reena, he could still work in his family's tire shop



alone without being heckled by customers. And he could wear jeans or sweatpants or whatever was comfortable.

“It doesn't matter how bad a man is,” Reena said. “He will always be respected.”

At Shimla and Geeta's house, though he spends all of his truck-driving wages on alcohol and says being drunk is harder than farming because it hurts when he falls down, Ramkaran is respected.

He can order a crowd of children away from his front gate with a few words and a wave of his arm and laughs with other men on the side of a pea field while his youngest daughter, Beeta, 19, hunches over and harvests the pods with other village women.

The other men in the village don't call him names like they do to his wife and daughters. He can be confident nobody will touch him on his midnight walks down the alley after a night of drinking. And he can venture outside the village without permission.

But he doesn't want his daughters doing the same.

When the leader of a dance academy saw an online video of Geeta dancing, he came to Gohran to re-

Ramkaran flips through television channels while his grandchildren nap on a cot behind him. Despite Shimla's and Geeta's remarks, he believes he is a supportive husband and father. “Some ups and downs come in any family's house,” Ramkaran said. “But my family is happy.”

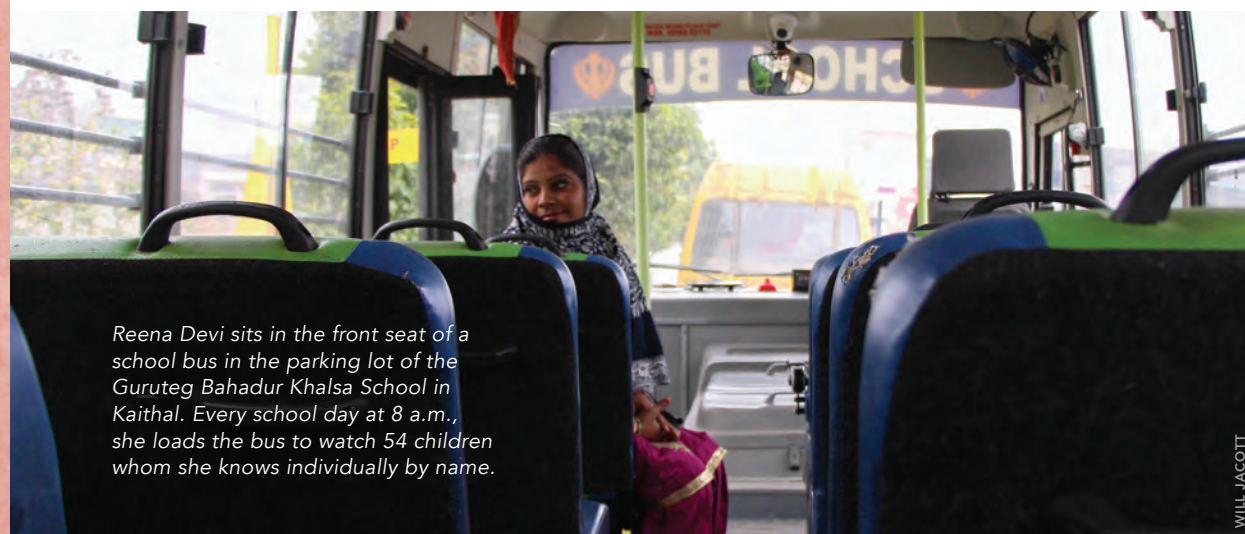
cruit her to attend his classes, but Ramkaran refused to let her leave the house, the same answer he gave when she was interested in college.

“If you give your children freedom for even a month, that is bad,” Ramkaran said. “Why would I let my children go somewhere where I can't go for three years?”

Geeta's sister, Beeta, says she wouldn't do anything other than her current job of planting and harvesting crops in the fields a mile outside her family's home because it gives her a chance to get outside the brick walls. She remembers her father as a man who was always drunk and fighting with her mother.

“[They're] going to listen to what I say,” Ramkaran said. “That's how it's going to be.”

Geeta wants to make sure her daughter will be the first to evade the kind of abusive future so familiar to the women in Gohran.



Reena Devi sits in the front seat of a school bus in the parking lot of the Guruteg Bahadur Khalsa School in Kaithal. Every school day at 8 a.m., she loads the bus to watch 54 children whom she knows individually by name.

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At two years old, Shivangi spends her time clinging to Geeta's pinky to follow her into the fields or sleeping in a cot next to her little brother while Ramkaran watches television.

But Geeta wants her daughter to escape Gohran and be the first in the family to attend college. She wants her to be at least 22 when she gets married and the husband to be someone she loves rather than a boy from another village who her daughter won't see until he lifts her veil on their wedding night.

A divorce from Pradeep would allow Geeta to have control over her daughter's future, but she knows that if she signed the papers, men in the village would say she had an affair.

For now, she plans to stay at her mother's house, although her father claims her fight with her husband will blow over in a cou-

ple days. Seven people cram into the house at the end of the alley, but that's where she feels safe.

"I feel the most free at my mother's house," Geeta said.

Shimla doesn't plan to move out or divorce Ramkaran or do much outside of the normal routine. She'll continue waking at 5 a.m. to walk to the temple and fetch water from the tap. But until her daughter moves back in with her husband, at least she'll have a companion.

On Jan. 15, two days after the celebration of *Lohri*, a Punjabi holiday that marks the end of winter in northern India, Geeta sang in the family bedroom lit by a single LED bulb.

Wearing a bright purple dress split into two pieces called a *kurta* and *salwar* and a gold shawl called a *sunni* with blue and red flowers embroidered onto the fabric, she

Beeta, Geeta's younger sister, picks peas in a field outside her village while a group of men stand on the dirt path above and watch. She says her relationship with her mother is bland, her father is always drunk and she likes working in the fields because it gets her out of the house. "I wouldn't want to do anything else," Beeta said. "The women all work together. So, that's good."

sang several verses from a Punjabi song titled "Filhall" by BPraak.

As the melody was absorbed by the chipped brick walls and the patterned cloth of the bed comforter, Shimla's eyes welled with tears.

Translated into English, a verse reads: "There is no reason that you can't love again."

After Geeta sang the final note, both women smiled. Then, they left the room to boil potatoes.

Ramkaran took their place on the bed. ❄

"There is no reason that you can't love again."

-Sung by Geeta, 20

Geeta holds her son and poses in front of her home's closed wooden gate. She hopes that her children will not suffer as much oppression and abuse as she has. "Under no circumstances will I ever take my [children] out of education," Geeta said.

