FROM glamorous Bollywood blockbusters to the unimpressive epidemic of Star Plus serials, one insalubrious cultural notion has remained intact. It is the notion that happiness and success for women are natural consequences of a good marriage.

In South Asian culture, a good marriage is denoted by a partner of suitable economic and social status. Therefore, in the context of arranged marriage, a highly suitable partner is often one who lives and works abroad. It is pretty simple. In poverty-stricken Bangladesh, an ordinary man of limited education and capital can only get so far in life. What future can he possibly offer to his wife and children?

The same man, when in America, can have the same mundane job as a store clerk or a security guard, and yet, he neither lives in a slum nor perpetually struggles to make ends meet. The same man now has a shot at a fairly comfortable life because he has managed to cross the geographical confines of his indigence. Even those from higher income brackets are not without the assumption that a life abroad is a better life. Undeniably, the prospect of settling in the first world does come with some built-in boons such as better education, better-paying jobs, better medical care and more political freedom.

It is not unnatural that our vision of a better future should include social and economic betterment of our children. Unfortunately, we often try to accomplish these ends through means that are not necessarily uniform across the genders. While men are the go-getters of lofty goals, women are often encouraged to marry such ambitious men in order to reap the benefits. How many times have we heard someone say: "Sure, I want my daughter to go abroad for higher studies, but only if I can find a suitable boy who is well-settled over there."

A "foreign match" has now become the cherished target of an arranged marriage. If a woman receives a marriage proposal from a working man, settled in America or Europe, she is considered to have done even better than capturing that post-graduate scholarship for herself. Now, she can have all those good things in life (better education, better job, etc.), under the overarching and ultimate security of a "good marriage." What else is there to worry about? Well, plenty.

"The problem lies in accepting foreign marriage proposals without doing an initial background check about the individual. Due to pressure of time constraints, these marriages are often performed in a rush, and the bride arrives in the new country to find out that the groom is not what he or his family claimed him to be," says Margaret Abraham, Professor of Sociology at Hofstra University, New York, and former board member of Sakhi For South Asian Women, a New York based anti-violence organization that works to empower South Asian survivors of domestic violence.

Domestic violence is a term that



LARS MYHREN HOLAND

many of us loosely associate with dire economic circumstances in some dark corner of a low-income area. Yet, it happens everywhere, even on rich American soil under the bright glare of the American sun, and we need to be aware of this. Drawn directly from my own experiences as former Legal Advocate at Sakhi, here are some real-life scenarios (all names changed) which illustrate the seriousness of the issue.

Dilruba was sixteen when Hasan's mother spotted her in their Mymensingh neighbourhood, and decided that she would make a suitable bride for her son in New York. Although Hasan was 14 years older than her, Dilruba's father, an old factory worker, happily accepted the proposal. Given his meager income and incapacity to provide any dowry for the groom, he decided not to prolong the matter by raising further questions. Dilruba was afraid to marry a stranger, but her mother said: "C'mon Dilu, do it for your old father so he can die in peace."

As Dilruba's father bought his ticket to a peaceful death, Dilruba bought her own to a hellish life. Hasan slapped her hard on their wedding night because she would not readily lift her veil and go near him. Three months later, when she stood at his doorstep in the Bronx, she hoped that the wedding night episode was just a bad mistake, and everyone makes mistakes. But Hasan's cruelty was no mistake. By the end of her first month in America, Dilruba had two black eyes and a bruised, aching back from the hard punches rained on her. By the end of her second month, she was working at two jobs, at two different food chains, while Hasan quit his job.

When Dilruba returned home after fifteen hours of work, Hasan would open the door and drag her in by the hair. He would then repeatedly punch her face and kick her hard in the crotch, accusing her of having illicit love affairs. A year later, when Dilruba was seven months pregnant, Hasan's tortures had not ceased. He would even yank the daily meals away from her, and bang her head against the dining table. Dilruba begged him to stop, to let her go, or to tell her what her fault was. She soon realized, though, that the fault was not in her, it was in him.

She did not know anything about him, his family or his childhood, but she knew that he wanted to kill her. A week before she was due to give birth, he kicked her belly hard and tried to stab her. She somehow broke free of his grasp, and he ended up stabbing her arm. Dilruba had three miscarriages due to the brutal beatings. She also tried to commit suicide, and regretfully mused that she should have taken rat poison instead of a bottle of Tylenol.

Rumana was excelling in her third year at Dhaka University when her elder brother arranged her marriage with Raihan. Although he did not know much about Raihan or his family,