

**WHEN MARRIAGE BECOMES A PRISON**  
**The role of honor based mechanisms in cases of partner violence among**  
**Surinamese Hindustani in the Netherlands**

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3966 words

**Abstract**

This study deals with the question whether and how honour based mechanisms influence partner violence among Surinamese Hindustani in the Netherlands. Three research methods are used: literature study, interviews with key informants and secondary analyses of interviews with mothers who have been victims of partner violence.

The results shows that the partner selection is generally directed towards a skew power relationship in favour of men. The gender related upbringing, the internalized expectations in the male-female relationship and the expected honour damage for women and their families in case of divorces contribute to marital captivity, also in situations of partner violence. A divorce is the most effective measure to stop partner violence, but also causes the most honour damage. The greatest damage occurs for the women and their families of origin, who therefor are best served by preservation of the marriage.

We find a solution in stimulating higher educational achievements of women, to provide them with financial independence and a more equal position in their marital relationships.

## **Introduction**

The Netherlands has made large steps on the field of domestic violence since the founding of the first private women shelter in 1974. In 1978 the central government acknowledged the women shelters as a necessary part of the social infrastructure and started providing structural finances (Tjen-A-Tak & Van den Broek, 2014). The next large step was in 2002, when domestic violence officially became part of government policy (Prive Geweld Publieke Zaak, 2002). For the first time in Dutch history, domestic violence was acknowledged as a public matter. It was broadly defined as violence (assault, threats, sexual violence, isolation, homicide) in the domestic context, both against adults and children (see also World Health Organisation, 2009). A national infrastructure was built within a few years with attention for prevention, protection and criminal prosecution (Brenninkmeijer et al., 2009).

Honour based violence as a manifestation of domestic violence is defined as any form of mental or physical violence as a reaction to (expected) honour damage, of an individual and his/her family, that the outside world is or may become aware of. The motive is prevention of honour damage or purification of honour and the violence is set in the wider context of the family or community (Vitoshka, 2010; Ferweda & Leiden, 2005). Knowledge on honour based violence is growing. However policy makers need more information on honour based mechanisms and marital captivity in different ethnic groups. This study concentrates on Surinamese Hindustani in the Netherlands.

## **Honour based violence**

The concept 'honour based violence' includes a variety of violent acts as a result of deep connections to community perceptions of honour (Dustin & Philips, 2008; Brandon & Hafez, 2008). Honour is gender related: the demands for women and girls are different from those for men and boys (Araji, 2000; Coomaraswamy, 2005). Women and girls are expected to show obedience and caution, especially regarding their sexuality. Their virginity till marriage is essential for the 'traditional' family honour (ibid). Men and boys have more freedom, although

they too are bound by rules of honour and are restricted in their sexuality, for example when it comes to homosexuality (Nanhoe & Omlo, 2017).

Honour and marriage are related concepts. Marriage can be a means to maximize honour (Brenninkmeijer et al., 2009). How a marriage is entered may vary from forced marriages to the own initiative of the spouses and all the shades in between (Storms & Bartels 2008). Honour is negotiable and the same applies to marriages. Someone with more authority and status, has more space for individual choices (Nanhoe & Omlo, 2017). The sense of honour and honour based violence not only differs *between* ethnic groups, but also *within* ethnic groups (Thiara & Gill, 2010).

Teaching, monitoring and protecting the honour goes through standardization, the social code of honour (Smartt, 2006), but also through various forms of coercion and violence, varying from isolation, psychological pressure to physical violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). Reactions to honour damage also vary from psychological violence and outcasting to even murder. People can also be pushed towards suicide (Nanhoe et al., 2016). The relationship between honour and violence is complex and there is variation in the dynamics in honour beliefs (Faqir, 2001). A grey area exists between free choice and coercion. There may be dissatisfaction, while conflicts are avoided. Furthermore habits suggests freedom of action and choice, but in fact there may be of acquiescence and lack of consensus (Komter, 1985).

### **Research question**

This study is limited to the Surinamese Hindustani in the Netherlands (hereinafter briefly: Hindustani). The number of first and second generation Surinamese Hindustani in the Netherlands is not registered, but estimated at approximately 125,600 (36% of the Surinamese in the Netherlands).

While prevalence research reports forced marriages among Hindustani in the Netherlands (Smits van Waesberghe et al., 2014) knowledge on honour and partner violence in Hindustani families is scarce.

Brenninkmeijer et al. (2009) studied honour based violence in Moroccan, Turkish, Kurdish and Hindustani communities. They found that abuse and rejection occurs among all groups, while honour based conflicts among Hindustani often end in suicide. Moreover Hindustani more often speak of forced marriages (in recent times) compared to Turkish and Moroccan Dutch. So we have some insight on honour based mechanisms before marriage. This study aims to provide insight in mechanisms after marriage in cases of partner violence. The research question of this study is:

**Do honour based mechanisms influence partner violence among Surinamese Hindustani in the Netherlands? If so, how?**

### **Methodology**

This survey consists of a literature study, interviews with key informants and secondary analysis of interviews with Hindustani mothers who experienced partner violence. The literature study focused on the upbringing, gender differences in the upbringing and the ways of match making.

The 6 key informants all have work experience with honour based habits and forced marriages among Hindustani. Interviews with key informants provided additional information on the broader context of the upbringing, developments regarding partner selection, honour based habits and partner violence. Their information also helped making a categories system for the secondary analysis of the interviews with the mothers.

The third method is the secondary analysis of interviews from the research 'Parenting after partner violence' (Pels et al., 2011). This research provides insight in the problem of partner violence among families in the Netherlands. Among the 184 respondents were 15 Hindustani mothers.

The Hindustani mothers have ages varying from 23 to 50 years. Most mothers enjoyed an elementary school education or at maximum a secondary education. One had a college degree and one had a university education. The duration of their marriage was between one year and 23 years. During the marriage four

women had a (part-time) job. One woman worked in her husband's shop. And two women had voluntary work.

We made a code list based on the literature study and the interviews with key informants to code the 15 transcripts. The analysis subsequently was held inductively.

### **Literature on honour in the upbringing in Hindustani families**

#### *The upbringing*

The family is the first upbringing context and the main source for the transfer of honour based habits (Gill, 2009). Hindustani traditionally form a society with patriarchal extended families. In the Netherlands, they still know the patriarchal family structure and close involvement of relatives. As a result, the extended family still has a role in the upbringing (Nanhoe et al., 2016; Majumder, 2010). Their culture can be characterized by a mobility aspiration that resulted in a rat race within the Hindustani community. Educational qualifications, jobs, entrepreneurship and material progress are subjects of a competition for honour and status. The success accumulation within the family contributes to the honourable position within the broader Hindustani community (ibid).

Most Hindustani children in the Netherlands are raised according to the traditional upbringing goals. Boys are raised to perform their future tasks as breadwinner and girls to perform their tasks as a housewife and mother (Nanhoe et al., 2016).

While boys get more space and freedom as they grow up, girls are more limited in their freedom, because of the family honour (ibid). Women's chastity is an important value as it is related to the honour of the family. Though honour is not lost by a specific act until that act becomes public knowledge. Even gossip and speculation can cause honour damage (Brandon & Hafez, 2008; De Koning & Bartels, 2005).

#### *Towards a marriage*

Getting married and keeping a marriage intact is not just a task for the children, but also for parents (Nanhoe et al., 2016). Parents and other relatives therefore anticipate on the marriageable age, for example by match making (or approval of matches) and in arranging marriages. When girls approach the age of 18 and boys the age of 25 relatives start anticipating on a marriage or think of acceptable reasons for a delay (De Koning & Bartels, 2005). The marital status of children increases the parents' honour, the divorced status damages their honour.

In the last thirty years we see a shift in the thinking about match making. Among the first generation Hindustani in the Netherlands are many who had an arranged marriage in which the suitors had limited or no opportunity to get to know each other prior to marriage (De Koning & Bartels, 2005). Nowadays we see a wider range in ways of match making, but the marriage remains a family matter. Youngsters are allowed to start a relationship. But while boys are allowed to experiment, girls are supposed to introduce their boyfriend to the parents, so parents can formalize the relationship (Nanhoe et al., 2016). The consent of parents remains an important condition (De Koning & Bartels, 2005)

When relatives look for potential suitors they select on various criteria. Important criteria are the same ethnicity and religion (De Koning & Bartels, 2005), the financial position and the social prestige of the family. The presence of divorced siblings can be evaluated as an indication of a lower valuation of the family system and a higher risk of divorce for younger children (ibid). The educational level is an important individual criterion. The educational achievements of the boy are preferably (slightly) higher than those of the girl. For girls the chastity principle is an important selection criterion. Domesticity, obedience, respect for the man in his superior position and cooking skills are also highly valued (Nanhoe et al, 2016; De Koning & Bartels, 2005).

These selection criteria give an ideal image, but in reality the criteria are applied in different ways, depending on the (subjective) characteristics of the own candidate (Nanhoe et al., 2016; De Koning & Bartels, 2005).

## **Mothers and key informants on honour and partner violence**

### *The matchmaking process, according to key informants*

According to the key informants, in both the traditional and the current upbringing, marriage is a very important, if not the most important goal. They mention that the expected role division after marriage – men as breadwinners and women as wives and mothers – results in an upbringing in which girls are not brought up for an independent life: “*We Hindustani women are not brought up to survive on our own, without a husband.*”

The key informants talk about a huge diversity in match making and family mediation. More and more youngsters are allowed to select their own partner, yet the approval of parents and the matchmaking, still focuses on the traditional role division. Nowadays educated women are more popular matches, provided that their educational level is somewhat lower than that of the man. Women are more often allowed to have a carrier, and respected for having one, provided that they don't neglect their primary responsibilities.

The key informants mention that the marital status is of greater importance for women, as their identification takes place along the male line. After marriage their status is directly connected to the status of their husband.

### *Mothers about their experiences with partner violence*

The 15 mothers in this study experienced partner violence. Thirteen women, spoke of various forms of physical violence. Weapons were also used, especially knives and sometimes cleavers, to threaten or to actually stab with. Four women were beaten during pregnancy, causing complications or a miscarriage. Three women spoke of sexual violence. One woman was subjected to human trafficking. Psychological violence occurred in all cases, in the sense of humiliation, threatening, financial exploitation and isolation.

The problems the women associated with the violence are their husbands alcohol and/or drug use and for some of them psychiatric problems. They also mentioned their insufficient obedience as a cause. Adultery of the husband caused friction

and resulted into violence in 8 cases. Four women describe situations in which they themselves used physical violence as a reaction to violence.

Respondent: “I got beaten every time. (...) One evening, I just lost it. For twenty years I’ve never beaten him, I was the one that got beaten. That night, after twenty years, I took a knife, cut his penis and threw hot oil on him. After that I got arrested by the police.” (Mother, 38 years)

This woman never imagined divorce as an option and her attempts to seek help had proven unsuccessful. Ten other women also felt compelled to cope with strategies that would not lead to a divorce. Some of them tried to end the relationship, but often without success. They were talked or otherwise brought back into the relationship by their relatives.

The women continued their marriage as they expected to lose respect in their community after a divorce. They implicitly and explicitly learned that they need a married status to be respected. In addition they feared to be outcasted after a divorce, leaving them on their own for the first time. Some women explicitly said that they felt trapped in their marriage.

#### *Seeking help from family*

The close relatives were aware of the partner violence in all cases as when women undertook efforts to stop the violence, they first turned to relatives. The reactions of in laws varied from talking to the husband to ignoring the situation or even approving the violence. Some in laws justified the violence or encouraged it as an instrument to enforce the wife’s obedience. Two women were advised by their mother in law to “sit out” the adultery on the grounds that it ends when the husband gets old enough to develop potency problems.

Respondent: “She told me to stay with my husband. She gave me the warranty as a mother in law that he would change. She experienced it herself that her husband stopped having affairs. (...) So when my father in law aged and started having potency problems, she had a good live

with him. And she advised me to sit it out the way she did.” (Mother, 38 years)

The women also turned to their family of origin for mediation or to support a divorce. The support they received was mostly focuses on a return to the husband, sometimes after mediation, with the assignment to make the best of the relationship.

According to the key informants a divorced daughter damages the family honour what decreases the marriage chances of other daughters. Parents therefore put much effort in preventing a divorce. They use pressure, coercion and even blackmail to prevent a divorce. Permission was mostly given when parents had married their daughters. But the family pressure can also last for a life time. A key informant explains it as follows:

Key informant: “When you’re subjected to honour damage, you’ll lose respect in the community and your family. If you lose respect people will treat you disrespectfully. Then you’ll no longer be invited for important festivities, for occasions in the family. So in case of a marriage that threatens to end in a divorce, parents will do everything, even the mother, to prevent a divorce.”

One woman started her efforts to leave her husband newlywed, as the violence started the day after her marriage. She was repeatedly pressurized by her parents to return to her husband. During 15 years of marriage she had three children, who grew up in the abusive family life.

Respondent: “I tried to run away several times during those 15 years. I ran away before I even had children. But I heard my father say to my mother that I had to go back. Otherwise he would leave my mother. The next day I cried and packed my things as I told her I was leaving. I did not want him to put my mother on the streets during her old days. Sometimes I thought I should have gone away from home. It would spare me all the misery. But

now I think it's a good thing I didn't. You never know how life goes when you're outcasted. I could be outcasted for life." (Mother, 50 years)

After 15 years this woman's parents gave her permission to divorce. This is one of the 11 cases in which women were pressurized to keep the marriage intact.

### *Effective measures to stop the violence*

In one case the violence stopped after two years. Relevant factors were the financial independence of the woman, her autonomy and her inner strength. Her husband saw a serious risk for a divorce and therefore stopped the violence. In the 14 other cases the violence stopped after a divorce, and even then only after entering a safe house or after a period of stalking and harassment. A complicating factor among the Hindu<sup>1</sup> women is that Hinduism has no divorce ritual. Even after a legal divorce, some women were still regarded as wedded by their families. Some women also regarded themselves as still wedded. Their husbands kept a saying in their lives, until these women started a new relationship.

All women experienced a high reluctance to a divorce. Factors that added to a divorce are actual life-threatening situations and support from parents and other relatives.

Respondent: "There are many things that make you stay: our children, I was financially dependent, shame, family. My parents were so ashamed, about divorces. But at a certain moment my father said: "You'll never go back to him!" When he said that, I felt strong. Because now he gave me permission, to divorce. Before that each time he told me to go back and try again." (Mother, 43 years)

This woman received permission to divorce after her siblings were wedded. In total nine women divorced after permission from their parents, other relatives or their grown up children. The cases of the younger women in this study show a

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<sup>1</sup> All 15 women in this study adhere to Hinduism.

time change. Their parents tried to mediate time and again. But eventually they supported a divorce, even before other daughters were wedded.

Three women experienced such a high threshold, that they never initiated a divorce. Their husband did. Two other women divorced after severe intervention of the police and the Youth Care Office. One woman was arrested and sentenced for a year after her resistive outburst against her husband. After her release she had a restraining order. These measures helped her to start a life on her own. The other woman was pressurized by the Youth Care Office to choose between her children and her husband.

Respondent: "I have no contact with him, because I'm under the supervision of the Youth Care Agency. The police were daily at our door. At one point they really woke me up. It had to stop or they'd take away our children. This baby was three months old when she was in a foster home. It became this bad between us." (Mother, 33 years)

#### *Negative consequences of a divorce*

Although a divorce is an effective measure to stop the violence, it has many negative consequences for women. The mothers told us about their material and financial deterioration, loss of contact with most in laws, many own relatives and other loved ones. Some mothers were regarded as easy targets for sexual intercourse. For that reason they're avoided by married women, who fear their husband might be sexually interested. The key informants add that unmarried women don't wish to be associated with the divorced women, as it would harm their image. This all results in a marginalized position of divorced women. The key informants mention that a divorce means the loss of a part of the woman's identification. The identification of Hindustani women takes place along the line of their husband. Women with higher educational qualifications and/or jobs can rely on their own performances for their identification. Still a divorce means the loss of a part of their identity.

Some mothers also told that their divorce resulted in a less respectful treatment within the Hindustani community and a strong decrease of mediation opportunities to a second marriage, especially for those divorced without support of relatives. Their strength scares off potential suitors. Some parents publicly took full responsibility for the divorce in order to increase marriage opportunities. According to the key informants, the probability of a second marriage however is much smaller, especially among Hindus as Hinduism has no divorce ritual and allows women to marry only once.

### **Discussion**

This study shows how deep honour based mechanisms are internalized in everyday life within the Hindustani community: the gender related upbringing, the match making, the (internalized) expectations in the male-female relationship, the family pressure to uphold a marriage and the negative consequences of a divorce. These mechanisms place women in a vulnerable position and make them feel trapped in their marriage in cases of partner violence and adultery.

Women first turn to their family circle for help. The request for help within the family often leads to actions that again position women in the same skew power relation, often skewer than before. But we can also see a time change in the coping of relatives. The parents of the younger women gave permission for a divorce at an earlier stage than the parents of the elder women.

Another time change is that more and more parents postpone a marriage so their daughters can achieve educational qualifications to guarantee her financial independence in case their future son-in-law divorces her (see also Nanhoe, 2012). These qualifications also have a preventive effect as the power relations in the marriage are less skew and men fear a divorce when women are financially independent. But not all Hindustani men are capable to live with an independent wife. Research of Nanhoe (2012) shows that some Hindustani women divorce after obtaining academic qualifications. Others choose for Hindustani men with a similar or higher qualification and some women choose for a non-Hindustani partner. The time changes we see give important information for policy makers.

Investment in the financial independence of women is a major concern when it comes to partner violence.

While a divorce seems to be the most effective way to stop the partner violence, this also causes severe honour damage, mostly for women and their families of origin. Women generally don't apply for a divorce without the permission of their parents. They are not prepared for an independent life and fear to be outcasted after a divorce. So the women and their families are strongly motivated to uphold the marriage. Only thorough interventions from professionals (police and Youth Care Agency) were effective, for example when a woman was imprisoned or when outplacement of children was at stake.

#### *Limitations*

The respondents in this research were all victims of partner violence. As such the findings cannot be generalized to all Hindustani.

A second limitation is that this study gives no insight into the position of marriage migrants, who formally (residence permit) and financially depend on their partner. Research on the motives, selection criteria, gender roles and the (mal)functioning of the power relations in families with marriage migrants is necessary.

A third limitation is that the view of fathers involved in the partner violence is lacking in this study. Nevertheless the findings give sufficient information to stimulate discussion, dialogue and awareness among Hindustani.

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