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A Gulf Apart

V Radhika (MEETING ENDS)

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Emigrating to Canada is popular for Gulf families, but with the husband often having to stay in the Middle East, it's a split life for the wife and kids

Valentine's Day. For Rashmi Lamba, the celebration of a day for love has an added ring: it's her wedding anniversary. A floral bouquet, sent by her husband from the Gulf, arrives at her Toronto home, instantly warming up the frigid morning.

A broad smile plays on her lips as she reads the accompanying note and she hopes her package has sojournd to her husband. A few minutes later, the laptop screen lights up with the news that it has. Smiles, laughter and chatter ensue.

Soon, sombre hues shade this picture perfect romantic mood as reality resolutely raises its head. It is the fourth year running that the couple has heralded their anniversary with mail-order bouquets and laptop screens. They promise to celebrate their next one, the 30th, together. Rashmi, a filmmaker, moved to Canada four years ago and is currently waiting to join the ranks of Canadian citizens, after which she can join her husband in Abu Dhabi.

She attends a party later that evening and joins a group of women currently playing audience to Tahira Khan, who is yet to recover from the pleasant shock of receiving flowers from her Dubai-based husband Irshad — for the first time ever in their decades-old marital journey — that very morning. "I was sure there was a mistake and almost turned the delivery man away," she exclaims. The motley group of women break into giggles, some of them peppering the conversation with similar anecdotes about uncharacteristic displays of affection by their husbands and others nod in understanding. Sometimes they complete each other's sentences and at others they are sharing notes, experiences and advice. While the room often rings with laughter, it is hard to miss the quiet moments and distant looks that often creep in. Walking hand in hand with laughter is the pain of extended separation from the life partner who lives thousands of kilometres away.

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BEHIND THE SCENES: Rashmi detailed the challenges of going it alone in Canada in her documentary Begumpura, The Wives' Colony which aired on Canada's OMNI channel recently

Every year, Canada attracts many families from the Gulf, holding out the promise of a better education for children and its much-coveted citizenship. "The day I landed here, I felt for the first time in many years like a first-class citizen. I really appreciate that Canada welcomed us," says Tahira. But the remote possibility of equalling their current professional turf in Canada leads many men to stay back while their wives and children build a new life elsewhere.

The move and the challenges it entails are the subject of a documentary *Begumpura, The Wives' Colony* that aired on Canada's OMNI channel recently. Directed by Rashmi Lamba — herself part of this cohort — the film examines the impact of this fragmentation on families that include forced single parenting, changing marital relationships and the emergence of newfound independence and self worth among many women who step out of their husband's shadow. Most women, avers Rashmi, have used their time well to better both their professional and personal skills.



CANADA'S TORONTO: The goal is to gain Canadian citizenship, but whilst the immigration system into Canada is fairly open, finding work in North America, at the same level as work undertaken in the Gulf, is difficult for newcomers

The film derives its name from the cluster of such families in Mississauga (a city that forms part of the Greater Toronto Area), but Toronto's landscape holds many mini-Begumpuras. The picture is not limited to Canadian shores as Rashmi's canvas includes stories of the Gulf-based other half, providing a holistic narrative.

One of the men Rashmi turns her lens on is husband Anil, who spends most of his spare time either Skyping

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(talking online) with his Toronto-based family, recording music for his wife or culling recipes he plans to cook for her.

While work consumes most of the week, he says, "Loneliness comes on Thursday evening. I want to step out and then I say, 'What am I going to be doing... sitting in a bar/listening to music... alone?'"

Sujay could not bear going into his kids' room. "I did not realise how tough it would be for us. I missed being with my son," he says when his family finally rejoined him after his wife Sanjeevani procured her Canadian citizenship. She paid a price for it, though. A pathologist with years of experience in India and the Gulf, she could not get her foot in the door in Canada, even after upgrading her skills. Being away from her husband coupled with loneliness and professional limbo despaired her. "Often I used to cry but stopped after realising it was affecting the kids," she says, adding that it was support from the Begumpura sorority that pulled her through.



Deepika Sudhir (not featured in the film) echoes the comment. Deepika moved to Canada in 2001 with her two school-going children and moved into a Toronto apartment complex which had a few 'Gulfies' and the women were always a source of strength and support for each other. In fact, many of their kids went to the same school. Every Saturday, Deepika would either meet up with her Toronto friends or those living in Mississauga. According to her, "This was a great stress buster. We would share notes, vent out our frustrations and whatever transpired stayed within the group. Looking back on her Canadian years, Deepika says, "I am glad I stayed in that area where there were other women and will never forget my friend Kiran's words: 'I am there for you'. That gave me the courage to say it to others."

Among the women she befriended there and continues to be in touch with even after moving back to the Gulf last year is Tahira Khan, who shares her experiences in *Begumpura*. Like everyone else from the Gulf, Tahira too was stranded without household help, and experienced loneliness. The bone-numbing cold and mounds of snow contributed their share. Singing was her stress-buster and she learnt things the hard way. As she schleps the laundry bag in her townhouse she recounts her initial befuddlement at using the coin-operating machine in her first apartment, and sheer exhaustion at the endless cleaning and cooking and managing her finances. "I messed up my credit history due to sheer ignorance," she rolls her eyes in disbelief.



Better financial planning is what Swapna Prashant Sankhe wished she had done too. This Indian management graduate, who served in the top corporate echelons in Dubai, wishes she had invested in property after landing here in 2008. "I came with a lot of money but went about spending it without realising that there wasn't enough money coming in to replenish the depleting savings," she says. That she could not find her professional footing was another blow. But the mother of two, has got down to navigating the Canadian system and apart from finding an internship position at a government programme (which she found out on her own), she's now pursuing CMA (Certified Management Accounting). In these years, she has made friends, been almost immobilised by a slipped disc and moved house twice.

Though their children went to one of the most expensive schools in Dubai, the Sankhes wanted more. "The world is shrinking and our kids were exposed to India and the Middle East and now needed other exposure," she says. This came at a price and while the women experienced loneliness and professional dissatisfaction, they had to double-up on their parental duties and keep the long-distance communication channel going between father and children.

Deepika took her lesson from an office boy in her Gulf office whose family was back in India, who told her: "My wife constantly tells my children about me and that is how they will know me," she says, adding, "It is essentially up to us mothers to keep the absent dad among us," and others echo the argument.

A pet peeve of the Begumpura cohort, however, is how the father becomes a darling because of the time he spends visiting or vice-versa, saying "He is Mr Congenial".

Challenges notwithstanding, the women say the experience has resulted in greater bonding with their children and both have rediscovered each other. Canada provided Rashmi more time to be with her daughter who was hitherto at Indian boarding school and went to an American university. Tahira says she got to know her youngest daughter much better because they were together more. And as Swapna discovered, kids effortlessly switch roles when the need arises; her young daughters took charge when she was confined to bed with a back ailment. Stories like these echo throughout the Begumpura clusters in Toronto and the children recognise and value the sacrifices their parents have made for them.

The most common narrative however is how Canada has made these women rediscover themselves. Canada, the women aver, provided them the space, opportunity and time to rediscover themselves. "I had totally lost myself in several roles, but after coming here, for once, I had the time to think about my likes and dislikes," says Tahira, while Deepika's tagline is: "I bloomed as a woman in Canada".

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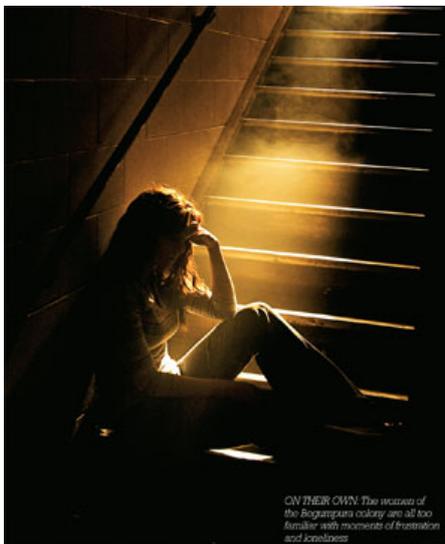
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The growing confidence and independence tends to rock the marital boat and as one woman quipped, "It would be very unnatural for a husband not to get a bit insecure to see this transformation." The transformation, however, hasn't been tipping boats altogether. Many vouch that it has brought a positive vibe to the marriage as the men have also evolved differently. "They too are more independent, sensitive and do not take their wives for granted," says a *Begum*.

Do families that stay apart lose out on bonding? Anil's take is: "I don't think families that stay together are more bonded than those living apart. It is your attitude and how you value each other that matters."

Touché.

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