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Raveena Aulakh

Ilmana Fasih was at a wedding in Mississauga when she suffered an emotional meltdown.

She remembers loud, lively music, table upon table of mouth-watering food and people chatting, cracking jokes. "I just started crying," Fasih says. "I was feeling terrible that my husband wasn't there . . .

"There were all these families while I felt so incomplete."

That moment a year ago marked a new low in her life, concedes the 44-year-old, her voice breaking.

Fasih, who trained as a gynecologist in her native India, lives in Mississauga with her two teenaged children while her husband, Syed, works in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

They have been apart for more than two years, communicating mainly by phone and reuniting just twice a year.

"My husband is lonely and frustrated . . . (and) so am I," Fasih says. "It's a pretty bad situation we are in.

"Yes, I am one of the *Begumpura* types," she notes wryly.

*Begumpura* is an Urdu expression (literally, "where women live") used for the GTA's "colony of wives" — some half-dozen neighbourhoods in Mississauga where hundreds, perhaps thousands, of South Asian women, most of Pakistani origin, live with their kids while their husbands work in the Middle East.

Many immigrate to Canada as families, but the men, unable to find work in their professions, eventually move to the Middle East. Others, already living in the Persian Gulf region, where the men hold high-paying positions, move to Canada to give their children a more promising future.

In most Gulf countries, children of foreign workers aren't eligible for citizenship and there are few opportunities after Grade 12.

Mississauga's colony of wives is dispersed among highrises near Square One and the Sheridan Mall. Some women work while others get regular remittances from their husbands.

They all struggle with the challenges of loneliness, single-parenting, long-distance marriage and the fear of spousal infidelity, a foreign bureaucracy and a new culture.

This unique situation was captured in *Begumpura: The Wives Colony*, a film produced and directed by Rashmi Lamba that aired on OMNI TV last fall.

"Making the documentary was quite therapeutic," says Lamba, whose husband has lived in Dubai for the past five years. "It was good to know and understand how other women handle the stress and the pressure."

But Lamba's film also explores the wives' empowerment.

"I wanted to be able to highlight the positive aspects too," says the mother of two grown-up children.

The GTA's colony of wives is a fallout of modern-day immigration and globalization, says Samina Talat, founder and CEO of Aurat Health Services, a Mississauga-based agency that caters to South Asian women.



Midhah Irfan, Zoha Irfan, Refah Huda, Mifrah Huda and Ifrah Huda pose for a photo with mothers Tehreem Irfan and Sabah Huda.

CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR

“Very few people really understand how big (the phenomenon) is and what it means,” adds Talat, who notes that women who live alone often suffer from anxiety and depression. “The stress of being on your own takes a mental and physical toll. You know, some of these women have never done banking or paid bills.”

It’s one of the South Asian community’s worst-kept secrets, yet few people want to talk about it, says Talat.

“It’s almost as if it’s not there.”

**It’s not clear** how Mississauga got the moniker Begumpura, but earlier immigrants say it was initially used to describe a highrise near Square One where wives of Pakistani pilots who flew for Middle Eastern airlines in the 1990s chose to stick together in their new homeland.

That group moved on long ago, but the term has endured. Even now, when women of Pakistani and Indian origin who are new to the GTA scout out a place to live without their husbands, Begumpura neighbourhoods are usually their first choice.

On any given afternoon, parks and plazas around Square One and the Sheridan Mall are teeming with children and their Begumpura mothers. Some push large strollers while others sit on benches and chat while keeping an eye on their offspring.

On a recent Sunday, a group of women sat on a grassy slope next to a parking lot quizzing each other about Canada — two were up soon for a citizenship test. Nearby, their children played with building blocks.

The anguish of these husband-less women is the glue that binds them: it’s what they talk about on their daily trips to the park, what they see in each other’s faces, and what they try to make sense of together.

“There’s a lot of camaraderie,” says Mona Ashraf, 33, who lives in a highrise at Webb Dr. and Duke of York Blvd., south of Square One. There are more than half a dozen apartment buildings in the neighbourhood, and Ashraf, who has lived there for four years, believes at least 50 per cent of residents are women living with their kids.

Ashraf, a petite, soft-spoken woman, has three children, two girls and a boy, all under age 7. Her civil engineer husband, Sadiq, works in Bahrain.

The family immigrated to the GTA from Lahore, Pakistan, in 2007. For about six months, her husband scoured around for jobs. He was advised by relatives and others to get a driver’s licence and drive a cab.

“We thought about it but . . . then we decided he would go and work in the Middle East and I would raise the kids here,” says Ashraf.

Before he left, the couple searched for an apartment and settled on a three-bedroom on Webb Dr.

“Only those who are living our lives can understand the loneliness and the pain of fragmented families,” says Ashraf, who has made dozens of friends in the same situation.

“I felt so handicapped initially, I wouldn’t have been able to survive on my own.”

Ashraf is well-educated, with a master’s in public health from back home, but comes from a culture where women still live with extended families, and where the men work and typically take on all chores outside of the home, from banking to attending parent-teacher meetings.

In Canada, where most women take on an equal or greater responsibility in managing a household, some might not understand why these women have a hard time dealing with the outside world and being in charge of their lives.

Not only are these women starting life in a new country, but they are also doing it alone, points out Asma Khan, operations manager with Punjabi Community Health Services, an agency in Brampton.

“It is a double whammy.”

**These women are** single parents, but not in the traditional sense of the term: they are still married, and their husbands support them and continue to shoulder the burden of parenting from thousands of miles away.

Sabah Huda knew raising three girls alone would be tough, but realized just how tough within weeks of landing from Pakistan in 2008. “It was middle of the night and my oldest daughter had fever, high fever,” says Huda, 33, who lives on Fowler Dr. near the Sheridan Mall. “I didn’t know how to drive, I didn’t know too many people, and I was terrified of taking her to a doctor in a cab.”

As Ifrah, now 8, tossed and turned all night, Huda sat by the bedside holding the girl's hand. "It was awful," says Huda. "I really wanted my husband to be there."

Her husband, Mohammad, 43, works for Pakistan International Airlines and lives in Pakistan — he was based in Jeddah until recently. Huda and the girls moved to Canada three years ago for the kids' education, and Mohammad — a Canadian citizen — hopes to join them next year.

In the meantime, Huda is the girls' mother, father and friend.

"We talk on the phone with (Mohammed) at least a couple of times every day and take most decisions together," Huda says, quickly adding that it's not the same as having him here.

Mohammad visits at least twice a year and was in Mississauga during the kids' March break. The girls were thrilled, says Huda. A few days after he left, youngest daughter Mefrah, 4, who is very close to her dad, woke up in the middle of the night and, half asleep, wandered around the house looking for him.

A couple of weeks ago, Mefrah told her father over the phone that "she would only tell him how much she loved him when he came back to Canada," recalls Huda. "It broke my heart and I had tears in my eyes."

Explaining things to the children is also an issue for Saba Khatoon, 36, who lives near the Sheridan Mall with her two boys, aged 6 and 8. Her husband works in Qatar.

Khatoon says her sons, especially the younger one, ask her at least once every week whether she and her husband are getting divorced.

"The kids worry a lot," says Khatoon, who has lived in Mississauga since June 2010. "My husband and I have tried to explain to them that he's there because we need money, and they are fine for a bit before asking the same question."

She thinks it will get better as the boys grow older and understand why the family is living apart.

Khatoon can handle questions from her children, but she finds it more difficult taking queries from other adults.

She says she has been confronted by people who say she and her family are here for Canadian passports and will leave once they have them.

It's something that Khan of Punjabi Community Health Services hears all the time.

"It might be true for some," she says, "but for a majority temporary separation is the tough truth of life."

In a sense, the story of these women is the opposite of the age-old immigrant story — instead of sending remittances back home to support family left behind in poorer countries, these new Canadians rely on cash sent to them from other parts of the world to maintain a middle-class lifestyle here.

Documentary maker Lamba says she believes the aim for most is to make Canada home and establish roots.

She points out that many families pay taxes and rent. "Many of us buy houses, cars. We contribute to the economy and bring global experience to Canada. No one is taking any advantage."

Lamba says making her documentary "was quite therapeutic. It was good to know and understand how other women handle the stress and the pressure."

**The Begumpura women** feel bereft. They fight stress and depression. But some also find a new person in themselves.

Tehreem Irfan, 31, who grew up in a suburb of Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, never learned to pay bills, drive a car or play sports.

Today, she does it all. She has also become a leader of sorts in Mississauga's Sheridan Mall area.

A petite, hijab-wearing woman with a big laugh, Irfan calls it her new-found independence, the one positive offshoot of living without her husband.

"Who knew I would be able to do so much on my own," she says, adding that in Saudi Arabia, by law she needed her spouse's permission to even open a bank account.

The 31-year-old lives with her two daughters, Zoha, 7, and Midha, 6, in a two-bedroom apartment in a highrise near the mall.

Her story is much the same as others': she and her family emigrated from Riyadh in 2006, and the couple, both physicians, wrote their medical licensing exams. When that didn't work out they decided to move back to Saudi Arabia after a year.

Both landed jobs in their own fields but realized they could never really be anything more than expats in that country. "And if we lost our jobs, we would have to leave within days," says Irfan.

Irfan and the girls opted to move back to Toronto while Mohammed, her husband, stayed back in Riyadh to work for a pharmaceutical company.

She misses Mohammed but says she has also discovered more about herself.

"When the girls started their swimming lessons, I decided I should also learn," says Irfan. Then she began playing soccer and is now the coach for an under-8 girls' team in a Mississauga league.

She also volunteers at Oakridge Public School, where the girls study. A couple of Sundays ago, she organized a picnic for women to the nearby Bradley Museum.

And, she is now preparing for another go at her medical licensing exam and applying to do a master's in public health at the University of Toronto.

Not surprisingly, this kind of female empowerment can sometimes create strained relations when the couple is reunited. In one case, the woman got used to making her own decisions for so long that the couple separated upon the husband's return.

Irfan doesn't see that happening to her.

"Sometimes it surprises me how I manage to do all this on my own," she says.

"Being alone has made me stronger . . . but I don't want to do this for too long."