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Documentary explores bride-seeking regions in India

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Photo: Roohi Ahmed (left), Geeta Thakur, Reena Kukreja, filmmaker for Tied in a Knot, Malti Keserwani, Penny Bertrand and Manju Anand

Penny Bertrand

“Do they think girls will fall from the trees?”

It is a question that resonated throughout the documentary *Tied in a Knot*, directed and produced by filmmaker and academic, Reena Kukreja.

Kukreja, who divides her time between India and Canada while filming and researching, presented her new film and led a discussion on the issue of bride-seeking regions of India at Ashbury College on March 9.

Sponsored by the India Canada Friendship Circle as a special International Women's Day event, the film explores the plight of cross border brides brought to villages in Haryana in Northern India. Due to years of sex selection in Northern India, it has resulted in a serious deficit of girls. With fewer local women for men to marry, families have begun seeking brides from other regions of the country.

Kukreja explained to the 60 audience members that at first she thought she was investigating human trafficking, which she did find instances of. However, as she delved further into her research, visiting over 200 villages and interviewing hundreds of people, she discovered that it was more complicated.

As the film very poignantly demonstrated, women themselves have few choices. Too poor to pay dowry in their own communities, the offer to be married without bankrupting their families is compelling. The men they marry tend to be those too poor or old to attract the now scarce women in Haryana.

However, once the brides arrive in their new homes they are expected to carry very heavy workloads and are often subjected to discrimination and abuse because they are from a different caste, speak a different language, and have different customs. The ironies of this situation were actively explored in the discussion with Kukreja following the film.

Several audience members were struck by the complicity and the hypocrisy of the village leaders who aid and abet the acquisition of non-local brides, but then decry the presence of these out-of-caste women and their children. Local women, steeped in rigid beliefs about ethnicity and caste, seem unsympathetic as well.

Kukreja reminded the audience that sex selection is by no means restricted to India and that gender-based violence is an international phenomenon.

"Here in Canada there is a shameful crisis for aboriginal women who are far more likely to be subjected to gender based violence," said Kukreja, who also teaches in the department of film & media studies, and gender studies at Queens University in Kingston, Ont.

"Is there hope for change?" was the final question posed by Kukreja, and one she does believe in. Her documentaries are often used as tools for grassroots activism and she explained that Tied in a Knot has been shown in the very villages where she conducted her interviews and research. While she agreed that public education is crucial, she also pointed out that it will not stop sex selection because statistically the most educated and affluent families are the biggest users of prenatal screening and subsequent elimination of girl fetuses.

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