INVESTIGATION

Revealed: the agony of women brought to

Gabriel Pogrund reveals the scandal of Asian w
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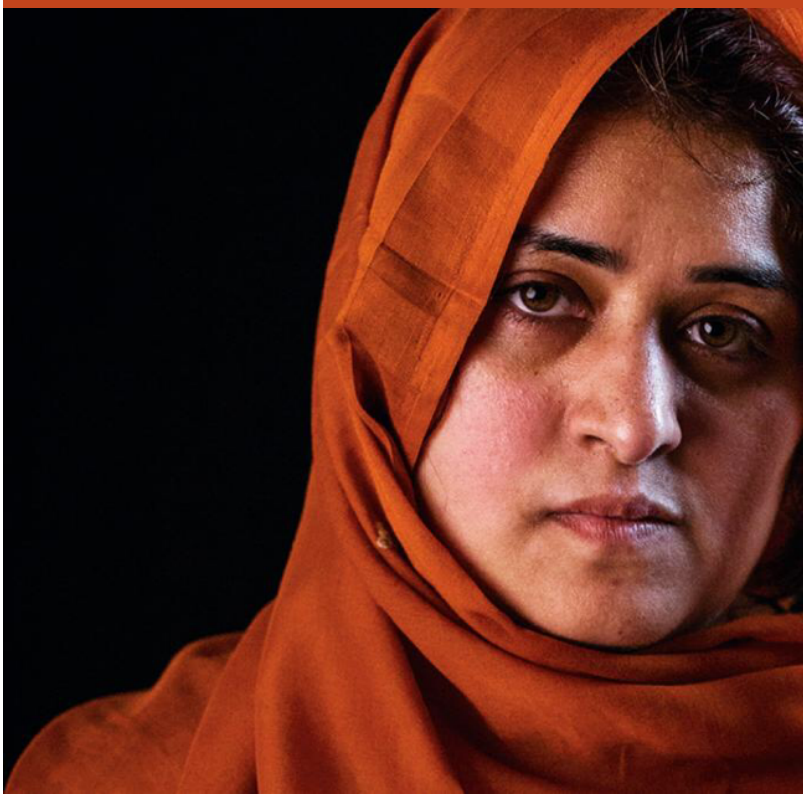

Saba, an economics graduate, began a new life in London after marryi
her three children and unable to r

ASIM HAFEEZ FOR THE SUNDAY TI

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Nadia reaches under her bed and digs out a stack of letters intended for her three sons, whom she has seen only once in 12 years. Each was carefully handwritten by her, then given a kiss and posted to Britain. She unfolds a note, written just before Christmas, and reads it out loud, holding back the tears.

“Dear children, how are you my darlings? It must be getting cold in England. I hope you’re keeping warm. Please look after each other. I miss you and love you so much and pray every day that God will end this separation. I am OK. It’s cold these days in Pakistan too. Every day I think of you. Love, Mummy.”

Sitting cross-legged on her bed in a small and dimly lit room in a slum in Rawalpindi, near Islamabad, Nadia spreads out dozens of letters, some yellowed with age. The boys have not read any of them. Mournfully, she explains: “They are all sent back. My husband doesn’t let me talk to them. He says Mummy is crazy, Mummy is mad and Mummy doesn’t love you, so they don’t want to talk to me either. But I still write to them. Every week.” She sighs. “Hopelessness is a sin, so I always keep hope alive in my heart.”

Hope is the reason Nadia, 37, agreed to meet me. She is one of an untold number of abandoned mothers, mostly south Asian brides, who were brought to Britain to become wives and raise children — before being divorced and cruelly discarded by their husbands in their home countries, including Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, where some face destitution, never to see their children again. Today, several victims have come forward to tell their stories for the first time. For legal reasons, some of their faces have been obscured.

Like thousands of women, Nadia was brought to the UK after an arranged marriage, which for her was in Pakistan aged 16. Her husband, a British citizen, was a relative. She expected a good life with him in the Midlands. Instead, she

stepped into a nightmare. She says her mother-in-law treated her as a slave and her husband ignored her, that she was banned from leaving the house and forced to clean all day. Her only other function was to have children. She says she was treated like a womb-for-rent, not as a human being.

“My mother-in-law was vicious to me,” Nadia says. “She would beat me and slap me and make me do chores all day. Even when my first child was born, they snatched the child away and made me do cleaning. I had a caesarean, but they made me work so hard and get down on the floor and clean. It meant the stitches came undone. I had a medical emergency. There was so much bleeding I went to the hospital. My husband didn’t care.”

Nadia was abandoned by her British husband in Pakistan. She writes letters to her three sons in England, but they are sent back unread. She has seen them once in 12 years

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Once Nadia had given birth to her third child, she feels she had served her purpose. Her husband took her back to Pakistan, claiming her dad was ill and

could die any day. Her father was fine. She was simply being abandoned. One afternoon, she says her husband disappeared with their children before boarding a flight back to Britain and cutting off contact. A short time later, in September 2007, she received an Islamic divorce certificate in the post, signed by an imam at the Luton Central Mosque. The document freed her husband from marital responsibility and signed off with the words: “May Allah gift both of them his blessings in their future lives!”

The imam who sanctioned the divorce cannot remember the case. Nadia’s ex-husband and mother-in-law did not respond to requests for comment.

Nadia has seen her children just once since. It was last summer, when they came back to Islamabad for a wedding and she managed to fix a meeting. “They are teenagers, with hair on their faces and big arms and legs. The second I saw them, I burst into tears,” she recalls. What she tells me next almost brings me to tears too. “None of them would look me in the eye. They said I wasn’t their mother. Their hearts had been filled with hatred.”

Nadia is far from a lone case. Abuse like this has been happening under the radar ever since south Asian migrants began arriving in British cities in significant numbers in the 1950s — although it has also been identified among Afghan, Iranian and Iraqi migrants, as well as Thai and Russian brides brought to Britain by white men. In 2015 it got a name: transnational marriage abandonment.

The husbands have many motives. Some are no longer attracted to their wives. Others never were. They are often young men caught between cultures who resent the idea of a loveless arranged marriage, but are under pressure from their parents to produce grandchildren brought up within their faith. So they agree to marry a “traditional girl” on the understanding that she will be more of a domestic servant under the mother-in-law’s supervision than a modern wife. Once there are children, or the relationship has broken down, she can be disposed of. In exile, mothers spend years yearning for their kids. Many will never see or speak to them again. Even if they do, the children are often turned against them and told their mother is “evil”. Some are even told she is dead.

There is no easy way for the mothers to get back into Britain. Most of them originally came to the country on spousal visas. Once they have been abandoned, their husbands can confiscate their documents and contact the Home Office to say the marriage has been annulled, thereby voiding their visa. Others had managed to settle in Britain only by overstaying a visa, meaning they have no right to re-enter anyway. Women can apply to come back to fight for their children, but it costs thousands of pounds and the Home Office can, and often does, say no. There is no helpline or dedicated charity for these women either, meaning individual lawyers are often the only hope.

No figures exist on the number of women affected. Many victims are illiterate and do not go to the authorities once they are abandoned. Yet my recent trip to Jhelum, a city in the Punjab known to be a hotspot, illustrated the extent of the problem.

Just two days ahead of my visit, Tariq Hussain, a British solicitor from Bradford, puts the word out through some local contacts via WhatsApp that we will be coming. We arrive at a local hall at 7pm, expecting one or two to turn up. Instead, a line of about 20 people — maybe 10 abandoned mothers, some accompanied by friends, relatives and children — has formed outside. Several have travelled for hours from their home towns to see us. Some have been abandoned alone; others dumped with their children. Hopeful eyes follow us around the room. One woman tells me how she was abandoned at Islamabad airport before receiving a text from her British husband hours later that read “Talaq, talaq, talaq”. The so-called triple talaq, the Arabic word for divorce, is used by men as a way of ending a marriage via SMS or email. The woman says she had no idea what to do, so she handed herself into airport police and spent a night in jail before being sent home to her parents. She has never seen her husband again.

In cities including Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi, I hear similar stories. I even hear about one woman who died recently, at the age of 55, having not seen her daughters for a decade. She lived at the Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Centre for Women, a state-run shelter in Islamabad, so I go there to speak to staff members to find out what happened. The woman, Aisha, came to Britain as a teenager in

an arranged marriage, but after having two daughters was abused and dumped back home in a village near Mirpur, a city in Kashmir.

Aisha's birth family could not take her back — they had no money — so she made her way to the shelter and spent years living there. "She had a job volunteering with kids, it was her way of connecting with her own children," says one staff member. "She would always remember her children, always. She even carried around a picture of them." Eventually, Aisha made contact with her daughters, by then grown up in their twenties in the UK. But they had been told that she was crazy and had no interest in them. The heartache proved impossible to recover from. She gave up hope of returning to Britain and her health deteriorated. She died of a respiratory condition in 2017. It is not known whether her daughters were informed of her death.

After being abandoned by her husband seven years ago, Sara, a Christian nurse, says her eldest son has been traumatised by the separation; her youngest barely remembers her

ASIM HAFEEZ

Saba, 36, fears she could be heading for a similar fate. Sitting at her father's home in Lahore, she takes me through her old belongings from her time in Britain: an Oyster card, a Tesco Clubcard, three Sure Start library cards for her son and two

daughters. She left Pakistan for a new life in east London with her British husband in 2005, but upon arrival things started to go wrong. The youngest of nine and her father's favourite, Saba had an economics degree and hoped to study or work in the UK. Instead, she says, her-mother-in-law told her to cook and clean. She was also forbidden from contacting her family.

"My mum-in-law would send me to the shops and make me carry 10 bags, big plastic bags of rice and 20 kilograms of shopping, all on my own, at the same time as pushing the pram with the two babies. I'd be in floods of tears and in pain, but even if I was a little late she would say I was up to no good. She always said, 'Don't make friends, don't make friends.'"

Saba also learnt that her husband had hidden a past life from her. An electrical engineer 10 years her senior, he had been married before, but his ex-wife and child mysteriously lived abroad. "I didn't know what to think," Saba says. "There were kids who would come for holidays. I loved them like my own, but I couldn't understand why he hadn't mentioned it. He said the ex-wife was crazy and drank a lot, but I didn't believe it."

Eventually, she says, he became abusive. During her third pregnancy, Saba alleges, he started telling her that she too was mentally ill, and one day he punched her in the stomach. He denies abusing her. Saba says she fled to Barking and Dagenham social services. But a booking error meant that emergency accommodation was never arranged, so she had to return home. In 2013, the family went back to Lahore. Saba and her husband have different explanations. His version, told to me by a friend of his, is that it was because Saba asked to go back to see her sick father — and that they decided to stay so their son could study the Koran. She insists that her father was not ill and that she was never given a full reason. Neither denies that, during their time in Pakistan, the relationship broke down. By 2017, they were almost estranged and her husband was living part-time in Britain, part-time in Pakistan. Then, one day, he told Saba he was taking the little ones for fried chicken and chips — a special treat — and would be back soon. Instead, he took them on a flight back to Heathrow.

That was the last time Saba saw her son and two daughters, Abdi, Aliyah and Aysha — all under 15. “I look at my watch all day, thinking, ‘What time is it in London? Are they at school, are they awake, are they asleep?’” she says, tears in her eyes. “I just want to see them, to touch their faces and tell them, ‘Mummy loves you, Mummy will make everything OK. Mummy will be with you for ever.”

Despite her pain, Saba is resilient — and being literate, unlike many of the women, she has started legal proceedings in both Britain and Pakistan to gain access to her children. It could be a losing battle. Last year, a Lahore family court refused her custody of the children. The judge cited the fact that “according to Imam Abu Hanifa [a revered 8th-century Sunni theologian], the mother’s right of custody of the child gets transferred to the father when the child begins eating, cleaning, bathing and washing all by himself”.

Saba has also repeatedly tried to re-enter the UK, but the Home Office has rejected every application. “I have tried to tell them I was abandoned, I was deceived into leaving Britain, but they won’t believe me,” she explains. “Every time they reject it.” She shows me a letter from the Home Office, which says: “You state that you have never elected to voluntary [sic] depart the UK. However I am satisfied that you are withholding information and that you voluntarily departed the UK . . . Your application has therefore been refused.” It is unclear what information the Home Office believes she is withholding.

One victory Saba has secured, via a Pakistani court, is the right to speak to her children regularly. She says her husband has complied with this on a few occasions, including earlier this month. But even then, the details of the phone conversations are heartbreaking. “Once, Aliyah said, ‘Why have you left us, Mummy? Why are you so mean to Daddy?’ I told her it’s not right, I haven’t tried to be mean to Daddy. I told her I loved her, but she looked confused and started crying. So my husband snatched the phone and ended the call.”

Her husband refused to comment on the record. However, a friend of his denied any allegation of physical abuse and claimed that, in fact, Saba had physically abused him — allegations that, in turn, she denies. The friend went on to say that

Saba had mistreated her husband, her children and her mother-in-law and was a "mad" and "dangerous lady", had behaved in an "evil way" and had even had an extramarital affair with the children's Koran tutor. "Her actions are totally against the teachings of Islam and the moral values of the society," the friend said. Saba also denies these allegations.

Claims of infidelity and psychological illness are often made against these women by husbands accused of abandonment. But the friend did not dispute the underlying claim that Saba's husband had left her in Pakistan. A Pakistani court ruling from last September also confirms that the man spontaneously left the country and removed the children in a "deceitful manner". It stated: "He left Pakistan without prior permission of the court."

The profile of women who have faced this situation is diverse and not all of those I meet are Muslim. A half-hour drive away, I meet Sara, a 33-year-old Pakistani-Christian nurse who has also felt the loving presence of her children slip through her fingers. She was abandoned seven years ago and has not seen her boys, Adam and Matthew, since they were infants. She tells of how the separation has emotionally broken her boys, who remain in London under the supervision of their father and mother-in-law (both of whom have been approached for comment but did not reply).

"I get to Skype Adam once a week. He used to wake up in the middle of the night asking for Mummy to return. But Jesus doesn't answer his prayers. I feel it has affected him terribly. He asks me constantly, 'When are you coming?' Sometimes he understands. But if I ever bring up memories of the past, he tears up and says, 'I don't wanna talk about it.' "

Sara, weeping, takes out her phone and scrolls through the Skype messages between them.

Adam, 15.42: "Mama, I'm angry."

Adam, 15.43: "Mama, now I'm sad."

Sidra was abandoned in Pakistan in 2013, but eventually got legal help in Britain

KATE PETERS FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Sara, 15.55: “I love my boy so much. How are you?”

Adam, 15.55: “Mumma, I’m not gonna be your son unless you come on Skype.”

The fact he remains so distraught by Sara’s absence gives her hope. In comparison, her younger son, Matthew, barely knows who she is. “At school, he had to make me a Mother’s Day card, but he doesn’t have a real sense of who I am. He says he wants a real mum, not a computer mum. He doesn’t have any memories of the times we spent together. I am not a real mum to him, just an imaginary thing.”

Sara fears the father would simply move her children to another European country if she launches legal action. She is also under pressure from her own family to move on. So she has spent the past seven years in stasis. Not all cases are so hopeless, and some women make it back. In order to do this, they need a lawyer. Sulema Jahangir, a British-Pakistani lawyer and human rights activist at the London firm Dawson Cornwell, has been helping victims for years, often through legal aid or simply pro bono. She says the main barrier to women getting back into the UK, as well as not knowing their own rights, is the Home Office.

“A lot of their husbands, even though their wives have been in the UK for years and years, deliberately don’t renew the spousal visa or let them expire so they can threaten them with deportation and keep them in the house,” she says. “Then one day they will abandon their wife and write to the Home Office saying the marriage has broken down. The Home Office accepts it and her visa gets cancelled.”

There is no established pathway for women in these circumstances. They are left to apply to re-enter the country on either a standard visitor visa or, if they have a lawyer with Home Office contacts or expertise in these cases, a three-month “outside the rules” visa, explicitly to begin legal action against their husband. But with standard visitor visas, the Home Office often says that if the child is in the UK, the mother will not want to come back to Pakistan. So they deny the visa. With “outside the rules” visas, women are often expected to show that they can support themselves financially, and have accommodation, while in the UK for three months. But often they cannot.

“What about DV [domestic violence] rules?” was how one friend, who works in a women’s refuge, responded when I tried to describe the legal contours of abandonment. This refers to the Home Office rule that any victim of domestic violence in the UK, who is the spouse of a British citizen, has the right to live here, even if they have overstayed a visa. Since 2017, family courts have recognised the act of transnational marriage abandonment as a form of domestic abuse. This should give victims a clear case to live in the UK. There is a legal loophole, however, that one lawyer describes to me as “Kafkaesque at best and evil at worst”. The Home Office’s Immigration Rules state that in order to apply for the exemption, “the applicant must be in the UK”.

The Home Office has also limited legal aid and bans people from applying for UK residency from abroad. Once in the UK, they are charged £2,389 to apply for residency. “All a husband needs to do is remove his wife from Britain, and the special rights she has as a domestic violence victim vanish,” Jahangir says.

Some women manage to jump through these loops. Sidra, 33, is one of them. She had the means to hire a lawyer and use the European Convention on Human Rights to get back to Britain — and get custody of her children. Raised in a middle-class home in Rawalpindi, she was planning a university education when she was suddenly married off at the age of 21. She had never met her husband, a family friend a decade her senior from Croydon, south London. “It wasn’t what I was expecting,” she recalls. “I was looking forward to studying fashion at university. Still, I was the youngest, so when my parents said it’s time to get married, I had to respect it.”

Even before the marriage, Sidra recognised the mismatch between her level of religious observance and her husband’s. “I had a proper luxurious upbringing, I used to play tennis and squash, I didn’t wear a hijab. Dad always said I didn’t need to prove to anyone how pure I was. When we met for the first time, he didn’t even look at me in the eye.” He was, she says using sarcastic air quotes, a “religious” man. Upon moving to London, he told her to wear a niqab (face veil) and to forget studying or fashion. Now liberated from the marriage, she is glowing, articulate and stylishly dressed. Being told to “forget” those things must have felt akin to

being told to forget her whole self. But she accepted the veil. What she did not accept, nor anticipate, was a life as her mother-in-law's servant.

"From the first day, it was like I was married to his mum, not him," she explains. "She'd put me down all the time. 'She's a Pakistani girl, she doesn't know what style is, she doesn't know what this or that is.' She wanted me under her thumb."

Did she ever get to do any sightseeing in London? I asked every victim this question, as a gentle way of determining their level of personal freedom while in the UK. Like everyone else, Sidra's answer is no. She never saw Big Ben, London Zoo. No one offered to take her and if she had asked, the answer would have been no. Almost all of the time, she was holed up indoors and told to do chores.

After she had her two children — Mohammad Ibrahim, now 10, and Sappa, 9 — her mother-in-law's behaviour grew more controlling. "One day, I made a friend at the park. I said, 'Mumma, I made a friend. She's Pakistani, she was nice.' In response, she just said, 'Stay away from other people.' I'd try to take the kids outside. I thought, 'I'm not doing this for myself, I'm doing it for my kids.' But I had to finish the cleaning first. Then I had to watch TV with her."

She says her husband, who denies any wrongdoing, became more abusive. "He didn't work, he was at the gym all day. Sometimes he'd come home, his mum would complain [about me] and he used to push me and be very physical. He used to use the f-word a lot." One evening, an argument with her mother-in-law and husband was so bad that Sidra rushed to her room and made what she calls a mistake. She rolls up her sleeve to reveal a milky-white scar that snakes down her forearm. "I was depressed," she says. "I thought my life would be really good, we'd go out like a husband and wife. I was, like, 'Am I really married?' I'm just giving birth to my kids and that's it." But her husband dismissed the cry for help. "I said, 'I did it because I want you to listen to me.' He told me I've got mental problems and that I'm crazy."

Matters came to a head after Sidra returned home on her own to Pakistan in October 2013 to visit her dying father. Over the weeks that followed, her husband

became more and more absent and sent texts only when texted.

Sidra returned to win custody of her children, Mohammad Ibrahim and Sappa

KATE PETERS

“How are the kids?”

“Fine.”

“How are you?”

“Fine.”

Sidra suspected something was up. Even after her father died, she says, her husband did not text. It turned out he had never filed her application for UK residency, meaning she had unintentionally overstayed on a single-entry visa — and now that she had left the country, she had no way of returning without his help. Eventually, he put his cards on the table. “He said on the phone, ‘I don’t

want you to come back.' I said, 'Will you give me the kids back?' He said, 'No, they're fine here.' I was begging him, begging him, please don't do that. But he hung up."

A short time later, he sent Sidra a voice note via WhatsApp: "Talaq, talaq, talaq." " 'What is this?' I thought," Sidra says. "I said, 'You can't do this to me.' But he wouldn't answer the phone or text me back."

Sidra spent the next 18 months marooned in Pakistan, living with her family. She did not know if she would ever see her children again. Her husband occasionally used to let her call them on Skype, but they were toddlers at the time. "I was just waving ... 'Did you go to school?' 'Did you eat?' We weren't having proper conversations, I felt myself becoming less close to them. I just spent my days crying."

She eventually summoned the strength to contact a local judge, who in turn put her in touch with Sulema Jahangir in London. "Sulema said, 'Are you ready? Once you begin, there's no way back. Once you're in, you're in. You have to be strong.' I was just thinking about my kids, I said yes."

Jahangir got Sidra back into Britain after a year by citing article eight of the European Convention on Human Rights, the right to respect for one's family life. Such a strategy is available only to mothers who have children in the UK. Upon arrival, Sidra began family court proceedings and, after a year, won the right to see her children, then have full custody.

The first time she saw them was at a family courts' dedicated creche in London, more than two years after she had last seen them. At the time, she was on the cusp of being given her kids, but officials wanted to see how they would react to seeing her.

Reflecting on this moment, Sidra beams. "My daughter was like, '*Mummy!!*' I had tears in my eyes, she had tears in her eyes. I stayed there for one hour, she was playing with me, talking with me ... She said to the official, 'Can I stay with Mum?'

I don't want to stay with Daddy. My son was the same." I spent an evening with Sidra and her delightful children at their flat in Birmingham. The three are now a unit: Sidra is working as a manager at McDonald's; Mohammad Ibrahim is a cheeky chap with a passion for his PlayStation and Sonic the Hedgehog; Sappa is cherubic and her mum's best friend. When I arrive, both are keen to take me for tandoori chicken pizza at the local pizzeria, which we do while Sidra has her picture taken.

Sidra's husband denies any wrongdoing. He says that he became more of a "carer" than a "husband" and argues that their relationship broke down because of her poor mental health. He says that his mother is an "old lady" who was herself mistreated by Sidra. And he alleges that the courts, who gave Sidra custody of the children, are misled by lawyers who deliberately find women in Pakistan and brainwash them into believing they are victims of abandonment. "At court I saw a man in Bolton and this had happened to him too, it's just a form of brainwashing as a way to victimise men," he says. Sidra denies these allegations.

Is she bitter? Her response is surprising. "Actually, I let the kids see their dad every two weeks. He's an outstanding dad, despite what he did to me. I tell my kids whatever happens with us, that's me and him, not you and him."

She continues: "When my ex-husband found out I'm working at McDonald's, he didn't like it. But I feel proud of myself. I'm working, my kids are making excellent progress at school and they've always got their school uniform, clothes, shelter, food, everything. I had these years taken away from me. I'm not wasting any more time.".

For help in the UK with issues surrounding transnational marriage abandonment, visit southallblacksisters.org.uk, or in Pakistan, visit aghslaw.net

To protect the identities of children, some names and details have been changed. Gabriel Pogrund was young journalist of the year at the 2017 Press Awards. His prize money from the Cecil King Memorial Foundation funded this story

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