

Mother struggles to regain children

Wants government intervention

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When politicians present "family cases" to the House of Commons, it is clear that more than a domestic dispute is involved. Many claim that Usha Ahlawat's case is a prime example of the government attempting to trivialize issues involving women and children, dismissing them as "family cases".

York student Usha Ahlawat's two sons have been kidnapped by their father, Kapur Ahlawat, in Irbid, Jordan. In 1978, Kapur, converted from Hindu to Islam, and thereby arranged to have the Jordanian government seize his son's Canadian passports. In Canada, Mrs. Ahlawat obtained legal custody of her children, but when she approached the Jordanian Embassy in Ottawa for help, Ahlawat was told "it's a personal affair".

Without legal or political intervention, Ahlawat is helpless to rectify the injustice that she feels the Jordanian government has incurred. Her sons, Risha and Muni, have committed no criminal offense, although they continue to be held captive by a foreign bureaucracy which refuses to answer Ahlawat's inquiries.

On March 3rd, Spadina MP Dan Heap presented the issue in the House of Commons Debates. Heap argued that "The Government has a duty to defend their (Rishi and Muni's) rights under Section 6(I) of the Charter to re-enter Canada." He added, "These are Canadian citizens with the right under the Charter to return to Canada to a Canadian court which gave custody to the mother."

Meanwhile, over 2,000 Canadians have voiced their concern for Ahlawat and her children, via a petition addressed to Allan MacEachen, Minister of External Affairs. The CYSF and each College Council of York will make the petition accessible to Ahlawat's fellow students and faculty as soon as possible. "If democracy means anything, 2,000 voices must have some significance--or else, what kind of government is this?" Ahlawat asked.

Letters from friends of Ahlawat have been addressed to MacEachen personally. Hedi Bouraoui, Master of York's Stong College, writes, "From a humanitarian point of view, the only resource is for our government to help find a diplomatic solution to this traumatic experi-

ence and explore what channels exist for negotiation with the Jordanian government to alleviate this Canadian citizen's suffering."

It is possible that the Canadian government is powerless to affect Ahlawat's plight. Yet for two years, the government barely acknowledged Ahlawat's repeated letters and phone calls. The only political response was an attempt by the Jordanian Embassy in Ottawa to send the divorce papers to Jordan through a diplomatic pouch. Apparently, no one in Jordan was willing to serve the papers on Kapur Ahlawat. King Hussein of Jordan and Allan MacEachen remain silent, although not ignorant of the Ahlawat case.

Fifteen years ago, the marriage of Kapur and Usha Ahlawat was pre-arranged in India. They immigrated to Canada, where Rishi and Muni were born. At that time, Kapur allegedly attacked his wife violently. When asked why she remained passive, Ahlawat said, "You can call me stupid, you can call me naive, but I didn't realize what was happening. I thought that since we were in a foreign country, etc., this was why he was so violent. I thought that it would be resolved through time."

That was not the case. Ahlawat's husband became an assistant professor at Yarmouk University in Irbid, Jordan. When Usha Ahlawat (accompanied by her sister, brother-in-law and son Muni) visited him there, he "kept weird hours and was out from 7 a.m. to 1 a.m., often disappearing for days at a time."

Students commented to Ahlawat about her husband's peculiar life, and involvement with young men. Ahlawat did not tell her parents, who are both lawyers, about Kapur, since she felt "the violence was a sense of failure. I didn't want to disappoint them." She says of her husband, "He was academically brilliant, but also had a deep sense of insecurity."

Ahlawat accepted his homosexuality, but could not cope with his violence or lifestyle. "Kapur had expensive tastes. I had to work, raise the children, and go to school all at the same time." Although Ahlawat feels that her husband intentionally "tied her down", she felt that she was intruding upon his personal life.

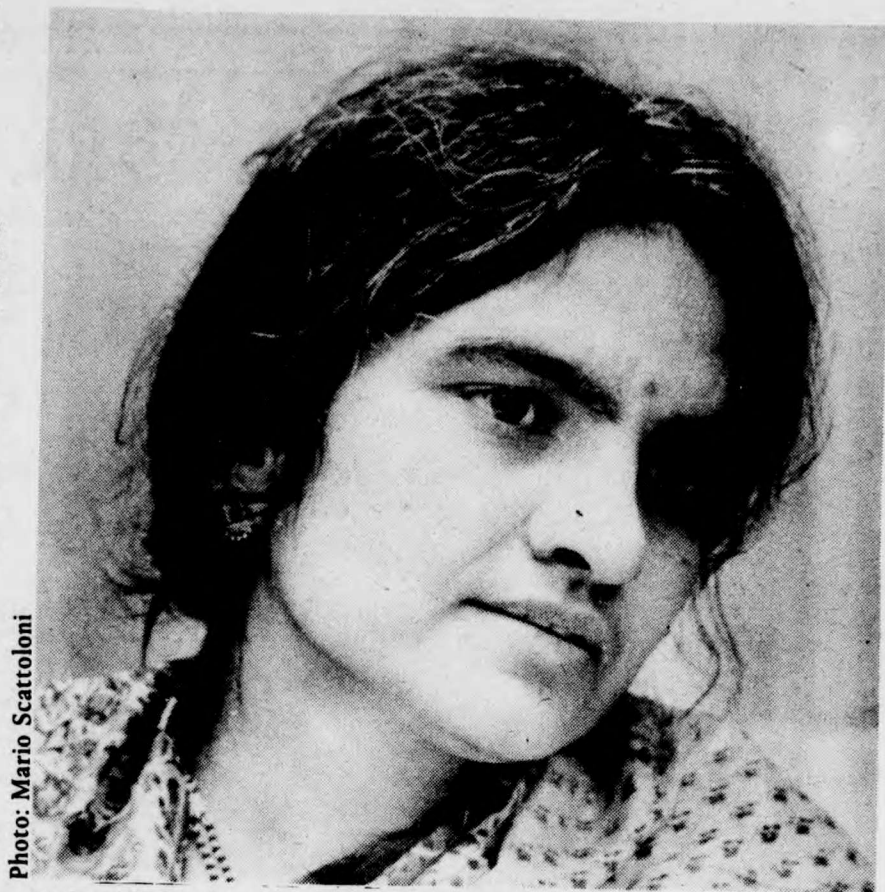


Photo: Mario Scattoloni

Usha Ahlawat is receiving support from some York members

She says "the most painful part was that he would not accept help from me. I was willing to do anything to make the marriage work." Ahlawat adds, "I was too protective of Kapur --it was like self-assassination."

In retrospect, Usha Ahlawat says "even though it was a shock (the results of Kapur moving to Jordan) I think it may have been the best thing for me; it saved my life." At first, Ahlawat was reluctant to talk of her personal problems with her professors. Now she feels, "It's a burden off my chest. I'm not hiding anything and people are supporting me. I have no regrets that I've searched for public support." Ahlawat is optimistic, "Nothing is really lost. It's all experience and part of learning."

Ahlawat's greatest concern is for her children, and "not just my children, but children period." She fears that Rishi and Muni may think she has abandoned them.

Dr. Virginia Rock, Director of the graduate English programme at York, initiated the petition as "a last resort" for Ahlawat. Dr. Rock has come to realize that "it is difficult for many women in Western society, but Usha's situation dramatizes how much more difficult it is in a society where the women have less opportunity."

Judith Santos, Director of the CYSF Women's Commission at York, is concerned about "solidarity with women worldwide" and says that "people are unsympathetic towards women. Moreover, she (Usha) is from another culture and people don't want to become involved." But public support for Ahlawat is mounting. Dr. Rock "would like to be assured that the York community of students and faculty have done all they can to help a fellow student."

MP Heap concluded in his appeal, "I ask that the Government negotiate with Jordan to ensure the return of the children and the father so that the matter of custody can be resolved in a court of the country of Canada, of which they are citizens". The battle has only begun and Ahlawat says, "I think I need my strength more than my tears."

They met working economists

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to get them to work for you. You have to be able to communicate and sell your ideas."

The seminar was organized by Linda Grant, a 3rd-year economics student and a member of the Economics Student Association who "felt that it would be valuable to students to talk to people in the business world who could give the personal career histories and advice to the students on courses of areas of study that they found useful."

"I gave students a chance to compare their own personalities with those of economists working in the business world, and perhaps to come to some conclusions about what direction to take in their studies," she added.

Although the ESA has organized speakers for similar purposes in the past, the five-member panel was first for the career seminar. Grant hopes the seminar will become an annual event, with new panel members invited each year. Students attending the seminar felt it was "rewarding and helpful."

Other activities of the Economics Student Association include course evaluations, sitting in on department committees, and organizing departmental parties.

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Coordinator, Sexual Harassment Education and Complaint Centre

Following upon the recommendation in the Report of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Sexual Harassment, York University will establish a Sexual Harassment Education and Complaint Centre, to be run by a part-time Coordinator, with clerical assistance, and backed up by an Advisory Board. As outlined in the Report, the Sexual Harassment Education and Complaint Centre has two major responsibilities: 1) to educate the University community about sexual harassment; and 2) to provide information about procedures for dealing with allegations.

Applicants for the position of Coordinator must be affiliated with York University. If an employee of York University, the Coordinator will receive 1/3 release time, and if a non-employee, remuneration. The position commences in July 1983 and is a two-year term.

Applicants should familiarize themselves with the Report of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Sexual Harassment. Letters, detailing interest and experience, should be sent to:

Search Committee, Sexual Harassment Education and Complaint Centre, c/o Prof. A.B. Shteir, Chair, Room 706, Atkinson College.

Enquiries may be directed to Professor Shteir at 667-3172. Deadline for applications is **March 31, 1983**.

The position of Coordinator, Sexual Harassment Education and Complaint Centre was initially advertised in June 1982, specifying a requirement that candidates be female. The requirement resulted in a complaint of violation of the Ontario Human Rights Code. The complaint has now been settled and the position is being readvertised.

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