

The Hum Podcast

Episode 35: "You Are Not Dictated By What Happens To Your Vagina"

[Theme music fades in]

Jeeti: I found out that all of us sisters were abused when I was 22 years old, and that was my darkest day. Moving forward from that, we didn't tell. You know your place. You know you're not going to be believed. You know you're going to be punished because obedience and submissiveness is something that's taught to girls, so you know that if you speak up, you're going to be told, "Shut up and sit down."

[Music increases in volume]

Gilad: You're listening to The Hum.

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Gilad: Years ago, three Punjabi Canadian sisters were repeatedly sexually assaulted as children by their cousin in the small town of Williams Lake, British Columbia. For years, all three sisters kept this experience to themselves fearing they would be punished if they opened up to their parents about what had happened to them. It wasn't until later on in life where as adults, all three sisters realized that they had the same dark secret in common. After some years, the sisters took their cousin to criminal court, where he was eventually found guilty in 2018 on four of six charges for sexual assault. Baljit Sangra recently made a film that took a closer look at this whole situation and also explored the role that their family dynamic played in all of this. The film titled *Because We Are Girls* recently had its world premiere at Hot Docs here in Toronto. We're joined here today by Baljit Sangra and one of the sisters, Jeeti Pooni.

Simona: Baljit, this film tackles an incredibly sensitive subject, sexual violence in a family. But in your documentary, it's done by intersecting the subjects Punjabi background as well. What was it like trying to tell a story from this perspective?

Baljit: Well, it's a complex story. I really wanted to give it context. So there's a lot of layers to the film. We explore their childhood, coming as immigrants, living in a small town, the racism and the bullying that they experienced, sort of like elements that would impact them for, that would make them quiet, not feeling safe to come forward. So they were having a hard time in the outside of their home, like school, racism, bullying, and then if there's issues inside their home, I just wanted to give context and layers.

Baljit: Then to have an understanding of the parents' experience. You know, their parents were quite young. The father came really young to Canada, started working in the mills, and then when you got more established he brought the family over from India. They all came as really young children. The youngest being like two. The mom was working in a motel in a kitchen, working really long, hard hours. So I thought it was kind of important to give some empathy to the parents. That's a big, big burden in a way where you have, you're a new immigrant and then they had to start sponsoring all their family. So now their family grew and grew. There was like 16 people in the house at one point. So I wanted those kind of layers, like an onion and then you get a better understanding why these girls would have a hard time breaking their silence or speaking out.

Baljit: And then in the film we also explore Bollywood films, because that was her favorite thing in childhood. Yeah, I asked all of them and that was like their favorite thing because of the fantasy element, escapism, things kind of work out. You can look out your window and you're dancing in the hills or trees, or somebody's going to come save you. I think it impacted their notions of romantic love too. But then also Bollywood reinforced the role of women and what the heroine had to be like. Very pure, virginal. Even if there was a little bit of misunderstanding or that would sully her reputation, she couldn't really say anything. She would beg for forgiveness. It didn't work out. And often in those movies they were so tragic because the heroine would, if something happened to her, if she was raped or even a misunderstanding, we see in the clips she would be shunned. There was one clip where the heroine jumps into the river.

Gilad: Off a bridge, yeah.

Baljit: Off a bridge. So if you're a little kid watching this and going, you know, your character is being questioned or you're seeing now something's gone wrong or you're a bad girl, no, this is what happens. So I thought that was another important element to put in. So the film kind of weaves all these in and sort of starts out very slowly, and then it sort of goes up, turns of emotion and impact, yeah.

Simona: I know as a West Indian woman of color, we do have some shared similarities in our upbringing. And I think one of the things I grew up with was that you keep family business private. So my question to you is, to Jeeti, how did you find out along with your sisters that you were all being abused at the same time? Then what was it like moving forward to tell your family about the abuse?

Jeeti: I found out that all of us sisters were abused when I was 22 years old, and that was my darkest day. Moving forward from that, we didn't tell. It was around '92 that my sister Kira, she wanted to tell. So there was this conversation with mom

and mom just shut it down. And she's like, "Your dad's going to hear you. Be quiet." And she turned around and looked at me and I was in love with my now husband, and basically the message was, "He's not going to marry you. There's going to be no wedding for you." And she walked out of the washroom, and us sisters were just left there looking at each other. "Okay, now what?" So she used that, that whole aspect of having to look out for myself and my sisters in the sense of, "You guys are going to be considered as spoiled."

Simona: Like your social capital will go down.

Jeeti: Yes. So not marriage material, so just shut up basically.

Gilad: It's so interesting just listening to this, because I didn't grow up obviously from like India or the West Indies, but I came here as an immigrant as well from an Israeli family. My sister growing up the whole time is like, "You never know how mom looks at you. She just admires you." And so it was interesting watching the film because even when you're talking to your brother, you're saying you don't see it. And I don't see it. I mean I don't see it until my sister brings it up. What's incredibly obvious in the film is that girls and women are perceived to be valued as less than their male counterparts, especially in communities of color. How did this contribute to you keeping your abuse secret from your parents and family in any way? And how does this contribute, do you think, to victims in general not coming forward?

Jeeti: Well, you're a second class citizen, right? I think one of the things that I mentioned in the film too was that I was a byproduct of my parents wanting a son. So, and that's what us girls were. I'm sure that's in many homes. So you know your place, you know you're not going to be believed, you know you're going to be punished because obedience and submissiveness is something that's taught to girls right when you come out of that birth canal. So you know that if you speak up, you're going to be told, "Shut up and sit down. Don't look me in the eyes."

Jeeti: When our brother was born, the whole energy, the environment changed in our house. It became more joyous. Dad was smiling, and there weren't as many punishments as we had experienced prior to him being born. We knew he was special. We just knew that, that that was the language in the house. Boy, boy, boy, boy, boy. So, and also he never got punished. So you're watching him grow up and be rambunctious and do all these things that was only a minute amount that we had done. Running around in the living room, right? But we're punished for it. So you see that difference right away and then it carries through your whole life.

Simona: I want to, you know what I found really interesting is that the Punjabi culture came out so clearly in the documentary. Because if you even didn't really understand Punjabi culture, you got that out from the doc. But you're also, you know, growing up in small town Canada, and those are two very polarizing kind of cultures. So I want to ask, what was it like navigating justice, one, in your own communities? It's not just, I think the family is not just kind of contained, you're part of this bigger Punjabi community. But what was it like navigating justice in that system as well as then trying to navigate justice in the Canadian legal system?

Jeeti: Well, initially when we first broke our silence and told our parents in 2006, we were told by my father, "There will be a sit down." So in the Punjabi culture, it's the elders that sit down and then the perpetrator, the one who's committed the harm, he would be sat down. Really my father would ask him, "What the bleep," right?

Simona: You can say what the fuck.

Jeeti: Yeah. "What the fuck? So how could you do this to my daughters? Look what I've done for you. Is this what I brought you here for?," type thing. That never happened.

Simona: Why not?

Jeeti: Well, many reasons. One of the main reasons was I believe that this was a family member, and there's intermarriages within the family. So everyone around our rapist started protecting him and started pointing the fingers at us because everyone is trying to keep their own secrets. So just because we've come out, right, there's daughters in our extended families that have to be married and so on and so forth, so the voice is quashed. So they figured that if they don't do anything about it, I feel they thought we'd be silent and it'll just go away. Little did they know that I didn't just break my silence and risk my marriage and risk losing my daughter just to stay quiet. So four months later I started therapy right away. Four months later, I decided I'm ready for the police, and my sisters and I, that's what we did.

Jeeti: Our parents aren't going to do anything about it. Our extended family members are busy pointing fingers at us and cutting us out of their lives. So here we are ready to go to the police. And we did that. Now going to the police, that was a separate journey on its own, this whole justice system. So not only are we shamed and blamed in our own family, and then you approach a system. Like I thought that's what you do. And from there everything would move fast forward and this person would be, I don't know, taken away and put in jail or something,

because we had to stop him from doing what he was doing. And that's what fueled for us to come out.

Jeeti: We witnessed something that made us believe that this guy still active. Because you think what happened to you 30 years ago, that that's it. But when he's still active, then one has to do something about it because you don't want other girls harmed, other family members harmed, my daughters harmed, because he was there everywhere we went at every function. Yeah, so the justice system was another, the whole journey was so traumatizing that there it was. It was the unworthiness, the feelings of unworthiness, the shame, the types of questions you're asked. Your whole life is basically pulled apart. Sexual activity before you are 11 is talked about. Sexual activity after you're 11, 12, 15, whatever. Your whole life you have privacy, and then fast forward 12 years later. Here we sit today and the court case is yet to wrap up.

Simona: Wow.

Gilad: I can't imagine how hard that must be. I mean we've had a couple of other victims of violence who've been on this on this podcast. And even when you look at the news, it's usually the victims who are made to feel like the perpetrators when the trial happens. You're asked to share very intimate, very sometimes traumatizing, triggering things and relive them. And also in excruciating detail from years ago. Someone asked me like, "What did you eat for lunch yesterday?" I can't remember. You know, and how are you expected to remember something that happened so long ago? It must be so hard. I want to jump over to you, Baljit. In terms of this film, did you find yourself having to justify your involvement at all to your own community in helping these women share their story? Because you know, you do come from a similar background. I'm curious to know about that.

Baljit: Yeah, no that wasn't a factor. Yeah. No I never really thought about that. Because I'm from the same community as Jeeti, so much I already understood. We were already kind of starting from a shared framework. I didn't have to ask her so many questions, like I get it. I get why you kept it secret. I get why, you know, the whole ... The number one priority for parents if they have daughters is getting them married. So a lot of it we already kind of started at a higher level, like a higher plateau. I didn't have to go dig into all these things because I get it. That's how I was raised. We have the same social cultural values.

Gilad: I'm curious, because you mentioned you were raised in the same way. Did you see a lot of your family in the way that Jeeti's family was being portrayed? Like, was this a reminder, did it feel like looking in a mirror at all with some of the challenges?

Baljit: Well, there was some similarities in the sense, like my parents also sponsored my ... My father was born in Canada, but my mom's from India, so she sponsored her entire family. When they came they also lived with us, and we just had like a two bedroom. I look back, I'm like how the heck did we all live there? I saw this space. But I grew up in Vancouver, so I think it was a bit more diverse. There was a lot more people of color from different backgrounds and bigger community. So I think that was helpful. I'm the only daughter of two brothers, but I get it. I also had a huge extended family, and they all lived within five kilometers of each other. So it's always like, oh, if somebody saw something like, "Oh, I saw her with a boy," the aunts would get on the phone and start calling and try to squeeze that in. Or, "So and so, I think she was at a nightclub." Or, "So-and-so, I think she smokes." They would go through this whole phone tree. So you always felt like you're always being watched. They were like the FBI. Like how did you find out these things?

Gilad: Is this something that immigrants, I remember when I got a tattoo, I kept it secret. My family in Toronto finds out, they're calling family in Florida. Family in Florida is notifying family in Israel. And now I'm getting calls from cousins in Israel who are like, "You got a tattoo?" And I'm like, "What is this?"

Simona: Like within a 30 minute span from like you got the tattoo to when Israel was online to give you a call.

Gilad: Yeah. Notify the whole world.

Baljit: Yeah. So knowing how fast things came and how the gossip was happening. So as a kid you're going, "You have to be pretty careful because you're going to get in trouble. They're going to find out and they're going to ... Yeah." And I think my mom kind of, we watched the Bollywood too. And just sort of, she didn't talk to me about sex, but she's kind of like, "This is what a good girl is like." Yeah, and even when we would go out, and I'm sure Jeeti is like just how we had to dress, like very modest or very little makeup or no makeup. You have to be always conscious of that, people are going to talk, you just kind of grow up with all these things, so I get it.

Baljit: You're watched and you're a reflection of your family. Especially, you know, being the only daughter. That whole thing that you read about and we all know about, like so much of the family honor is placed on the head of the daughter. And we see honor killings and things like that you read about. But I mean we're Punjabi, we come from that sort of wider culture.

Gilad: Yeah. It's still like the-

- Baljit: It's not that extreme, but we relate to our sisters. You know, if you're in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, like everything, we get it.
- Gilad: You see that though everywhere.
- Baljit: Everywhere.
- Gilad: I'm reminded about my story. When I was 18, I moved out of the house. I sought my independence right away and my family was always okay with me dating and bringing my girlfriends home. That was always fine, but my sister who's like three years younger than me, is very much more conservative. That comes from the upbringing that she had. You know, she was expected to be different, to not go out on as many dates, to not bring boyfriends home. She had to be more pure, or my parent's version of whatever that pure was and it's ...
- Simona: Well it's like walking the line, right? Because you do have this Canadian culture that bombards you every day and you want to be a part of it. You want to listen to the music, you want to do what your non-brown friends are doing, because it's fun and way better than going to a family party every Sunday for like six and a half hours. But I can understand why that challenge happens. One thing I was, you know, the fact that you went public, like you stayed with the course of action. You went to the police, you wanted this to go to trial. Was there ever a point where your family was like, "We all know. It's okay. You have justice, we know. You don't need to go to trial. You don't need to keep kind of playing this out. Can we just move on?"
- Jeeti: Well initially when we went to the police, we didn't tell our parents. They didn't know for about three and a half years. It's when the police finally looked into the case, and that's when they wanted to interview them. So then I went over to mom and dad's and said, "By the way, we gave our police reports three and a half years ago and they're going to come interview you guys." So there's certain ways that you know how your parents are. So, to keep them from putting any more pressure on us, it was best just not to tell. And then no, there's nothing that my dad or my mom said, because the ship had already sailed. They had all that time, three years to sit this guy down and to have that sit down. So they knew. They knew that once we had gone to the police, that was it. At no time did they put any sort of extra pressure on us as to keep it silent still please, no.
- Simona: Were they angry when they found out you went to the police without telling them?
- Jeeti: No. No. They were surprised. They were shocked. But we also knew how important it was to keep it hush hush, because we didn't want our perpetrator to flee. And even with the filming, the making of the documentary, the parents

didn't know about it until it was getting close to time to actually film them. Sometimes I feel ... Everybody knows their own family. So for me and my sisters, it was best just to not involve anyone extra until it's that time. I knew my parents would, they'd be a part of the film. I knew my sisters would be a part of the film, and Baljit did an amazing job in not just, she had gained my trust long time ago. Yeah, she's a friend, but also sitting down with my parents beforehand and answering any concerns or questions they may have had, and really not judging them or blaming them, and going in with an understanding that it's okay for you to have your opinion and I value that.

Jeeti: Same for my sisters. She was able to gain their trust even further by just accepting them and embracing them, instead of questioning their journey in any way, right? So that really actually played a huge role, that she was able to connect with them in that way for the film to be presented in the way it is today.

Gilad: I'm curious to know about the verdict and the fallout with the verdict. We mentioned earlier that your cousin was charged on four of six counts. First, I'm curious to know was there any fallout with the verdict on the family? And secondly, what's happened since? Has your cousin been sentenced? Is there an appeal? Where's the legal process at right now?

Jeeti: Well, it's still in court. Right after verdict, he filed his section 11B charter of rights application, claiming that his rights were breached because the trial took too long. So yes, it's called the Jordan application, and he immediately filed that, and the courts just finished hearing that application. So a judgment on that application is coming down June 10th, and then we will know if this guy will be sentenced or is the case going to be stayed, meaning the guilty verdict stands, but that's it. There's no further-

Gilad: No sentencing.

Jeeti: No sentencing. Yeah. Well, that would mean that the court agreed that his rights were violated, and in turn my sisters and I are like, "Hello, what about our rights and 12 years of going through this?" So that goes back into feelings of I don't matter, the unworthiness, I don't deserve it. Like don't I deserve my rights? What is the system trying to reinforce when it comes to victims? How supportive is the system? And where I was standing and feeling, it's not. So we need a system that's more trauma informed, more of a trauma informed approach and more survivor centric. So where we have all the judges, the lawyers, everyone involved from victim support services to policing, everyone involved that is highly specialized in how to handle sexual abuse cases. Moving forward with that, we actually need a separate court on its own that deals with these kinds of crimes, because rape is so much different than somebody breaking into your house and stealing your, I don't know, 24 karat gold ring or something, right?

Simona: This question is to both of you. You know, we are in the time of the Me Too movement, where victims now feel more empowered because there is a network out there publicly that is looking for them and encouraging to come forward. What we're still seeing is that women of color are still not. The numbers are just not even comparative into them feeling empowered enough to speak up. So, I guess my question is, how do we break that cycle of silent violence really, that allows this to continue to happen? What did you wish you had in terms of support that would have made it easier for you to share your story?

Jeeti: Hmm. Do you want to start off by answering ...

Baljit: You're right. For racialized women, it is harder to break your silence. There's that big power imbalance, right? So when the Me Too movement gained momentum and all Hollywood and powerful women were coming forward, you know, they could. They could, I mean they were wealthy and they were powerful. Right? And just imagine like a domestic worker or nanny or working in a labor job and poverty and all of that. How much room do you have to come forward and say anything? Because it's so much more challenging. So definitely I recognize that, but I do see we're talking about it more. There is some momentum. Even when we were just putting it out there about our film, so many people were messaging me, private messaging me saying, "Thank you for putting this film out there. I too was a victim." Or, "Me and my sisters, me and my brother."

Baljit: People want to talk about it because it's somewhere in your body and you just got to get it out. Even if it's just your friends or, I don't know, it's important. I've gone to a couple events now in Vancouver organized by the South Asian community on sexual violence. One was to a pretty progressive crowd, like a young kind of, people want to make change crowd. But people got on the mic and they were sharing stories, survivor stories of sexual abuse, sexual violence. So that was like, "Wow, this is great." Now we have this film and we're going to hopefully have some community screenings. There's a lot of South Asians now working in mental health, psychologists. There's groups of women who are like putting themselves out there, like health professionals. "Reach out to us." We're letting people know about 24 hour crisis counseling.

Baljit: When Jeeti and me got together and I'm kind of now part of this journey, in 2015, and she was really stressing out, we reached out to Vancouver Rape Relief. The executive director's a South Asian woman. She was there, and her partner Hila, every step of the way. Every time she was stressed out, what do I do, how do I navigate the legal system, we would call them. We'd sit on the couch and talk about it. So there's supports out there. So I encourage women to, because of the Me Too movement, there is a network. You could mobilize a sisterhood, just reach out and you don't have to explain all the details. You just say, "This

happened to me." People should believe you and step behind you and support you. And I'm seeing that.

Baljit: Back to that event that I went to, the very last speaker, he was like a traditional Sikh gentleman, elderly, I don't know, he was maybe 70 maybe. Late 60s. And he goes like, "I'm a psychologist." And I'm like, "Okay, he's going to talk about it from a clinical point of view, what happens to kids." So he starts telling this story about this young six year old boy, describes him, and then he talks about this child being sexually abused. Then at eight, again, sexually abused, and then later he's like, "That was me."

Simona: Wow.

Baljit: But I'm thinking he's talking about from his work. He was sharing his own experiences. Just recently Jagmeet Singh came out in his book that he was sexually abused. So we're talking about it. It's causing some momentum. I think it's really great. And the more we talk about it, we chip away at the stigma, taboo.

Gilad: It's why I love film so much, you know? And a lot of times filmmakers won't even take into consideration the impact it might have on the people in the room who are watching it. Just a simple thing of seeing yourself or seeing some of the trauma that you've experienced through somebody else might empower you to open up about it, right? That's not something that we often think of when we watch film. I think it's honestly one of the most powerful tools we can use to share these human rights stories.

Jeeti: I think also when it comes to women of color not coming forward, it's that whole silencing the victim and shaming the victim. So it's not just the men that are involved in this. First of all, it's a lot of men that carry out these crimes to harm girls, boys, and women. But it's also the women too that are involved in shaming and blaming and keeping it all quiet. So not only is the woman economically dependent upon the male, but also in terms of the females around, there's that pressure. It was put on us by our mom. She, it seemed like, could care less that this had happened to us. So, just quashing that voice. It comes from both the men and the women. And as soon as women stop suppressing other women, and like Baljit said, just believe them and stand behind them and support them, and all you have to do is just hear what the traumatized person has to say. That's it. That's support.

Baljit: I just wanted to add too, like in the movie, they talk about when they were older and the mom shutting it down and feeling the shame or blame. But they also tell us how young they were when this happened. So you have to go back to those little children, not look at these grown women and say, "Oh, you could have

done something." Like what, seven, eight, nine, ten year old kid. So it's not their secret to keep, right? And why did they have to keep it secret for so long? We have to look at that. They're innocent children. It's not their secret to keep, and I think that's super important.

Simona: No one really, we don't really talk about that part of the conversation around, you know, why victims don't come forward as much as they can, because we look at it like what is the community saying? Like what are the men in the community, those in power, but we don't talk about, it's kind of if you got to speak up about your trauma, think about the women who have been experiencing it, who never felt that they could. So they just continue with that system of silence. And do you now see, maybe not your immediate family, but other people in your family kind of starting to talk more in depth about maybe their own experiences? Because do you think this has actually made some change maybe in your family about how you guys talk about things with one another?

Jeeti: Well, first, our film has only been ... It's been what, two months. Six weeks since the announcement came from the festivals that, "Oh, this film is going to play." Since then, just the response that's been coming from, like Baljit said, people that are sharing their stories. I don't know them, but I'm getting messages from them and praise and encouragement and basically, "Thank you for standing up for us." How it's changed within our family, I personally feel that my parents weren't able to do anything then when we were little girls. So going along this journey with us, whether they approved of it or not, it actually helps uplift them. And because they see us, oh, they're not standing out there all shamed in with their heads bowed, it helps them lift up their heads and start peeling layers of the shame that they need to peel off of themselves. Because it's not their shame to carry, it's not my shame. It's not my dad's shame.

Jeeti: It's the culture. It's the humanity's shame. We have to change our attitudes and beliefs in our homes, so that we can start changing what's happening in our culture. Why are girls being harmed? So the questions have to be asked, and I think, like Baljit said, questions are starting to be asked. This is just the beginning. So it's kind of fascinating how you can move from being a victim, traumatized, anger, resentment, all those emotional feelings to, "Okay, let's dig in deep culturally."

Simona: Let's unpack.

Jeeti: Yeah, like what are we missing here or we're not doing here? And that's where we have to start as to how we raise our girls and boys.

Simona: I thought that was really one of the most powerful things I have to say about the documentary, is that you didn't focus on the abuser. You only looked at the impacts of his abuse. You didn't give him a name, you didn't give him a picture, which is something I've seen in other documentaries as well, which I have a, it's a bit challenging. Was that a conscious choice?

Baljit: Definitely. He's taken enough space in their lives, you know, and he's taking years. They have to focus on their relationship to him in court. That's what's being talked about. So we didn't need to. It's about their sisterhood. It's about family. It's about the impact of secrets and lies. It's about all of that. Not about him.

Gilad: I loved it too because the film in a way was also a celebration of your resilience and your bravery. And by excluding that big part out of the story, it entirely focused the lens on you guys. So that resilience and that bravery could come out and shine, and it really did. It really did. I'm curious with the film, what sort of larger conversations do you hope that this could lead to? What sort of change do you hope that this can contribute to? We mentioned a little bit earlier about how this is starting to chip away at some things.

Baljit: Again, just conversation. We want impact, a call to action. Somebody asked at the Q and A, you know, what can we do like in terms of the justice system. You could say like, "Reach out to your MP." But we want to also ... You see the resilience, like you said, and courage of these women and the sisterhood. They had a really hard time. We just keep like reinforcing that sisterhood. You know, if you don't have three sisters to stand behind you, mobilize a sisterhood. We're here. Reach out. And when somebody comes forward and says this happened, believe them. We're learning from this film just by our kind of allies we've been making around the justice system. With this Jordan application, it'll be even harder for cases to go forward because the crown wants a conviction, right?

Baljit: They want a success. Knowing that it could get thrown out, they're going to be even, it's going to be even more harder for what cases are they going to take, right? They took their case because it was, four people came forward, three sisters, one cousin. He did confess, but that got thrown out. This looks pretty-

Gilad: Damning.

Baljit: Damning. We're going to you know, they have to look at that because they're the state. But if you have things like Jordan application, and them having to tell the story so many times up until the Supreme Court, to two cops, two different investigators, preliminary. So now you have all of these testimonies, statements that they have given that the defense is going through and trying to find little inconsistencies and like, "Oh you said it was a Monday," or this or that.

Baljit: Or like little weird things, not the real story. So we need to look at those kind of things. So, I mean, number one, take the shame, blame off of it. Let's talk. Let's talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. Just makes it so much easier for people to come out and get support. Believe people when they come forward. You see resilience and courage in this film, and sisterhood. It's there. We need to put that out there amongst our circle of friends and everybody, like that loving kind of vibe that we're here for you no matter what.

Jeeti: I think also I wanted to add, yes, I have been raped. I have been violated. All these horrible crimes have been committed against me. I was groomed from such a young age. And of course I made decisions based on what my mental capacity was and the psychology was throughout my life. What one has to remember is their own innocence. People don't see Jeeti as that little 11 year old little girl. People see me as this voluptuous woman. So as a person who's been through this, I really want to hammer it home that it is you, yourself, that has to accept yourself and everything that's happened to you. You don't have to go on a loud mic and announce it. Self-love, self-worth.

Jeeti: You deserve it all. You can have it all and be it all. No matter how you've been violated, you are not dictated by what happens to your vagina. That's not who you are. So there's more to you than just the body. So yes, you go through physical harm and psychological trauma, but deep inside we have our own light. And to remember to shine in that light whether you're believed or not, that light is yours. So dig into that, accept yourself. Love yourself, no matter if anyone believes you or not.

Baljit: I just wanted to add just in terms of also what you can do. You see in the film, they share their childhood and how hard it was. So that's why they kind of stuck together. You know, when their parents are so preoccupied with all the people who are coming and all of that. Anyways, cut to X amount of years later, we see Jeeti with her daughters, and we see the sisters with the next generation. They've changed that culture. You know what I mean? They're not passing on some of the stuff that didn't work that they didn't like. You could change it for the next generation. I was around their family a lot, filmed family scenes, and there's so much love and open communication and a bond amongst all the sisters and the nieces, you know? Yeah. That's what you could do. You know, there's so many amazing things in our culture and there's so much shit too. We don't need to keep passing this shit forward.

Simona: Break the cycle.

Baljit: Break the cycle, you know? Take the best and leave the rest. Like, done. And you see that. They've drawn a line under whatever they went through, and they pass on ... They've made a conscious dedication to having a different relationship with

the next generation. So I think that's what you could do. That's how you change things. Exactly.

Gilad: Thank you so much for joining us. You know, these conversations on this podcast really do make a difference. I hope to whoever's listening, if you see yourself in this, speak to others as well. Thank you.

Jeeti: Thank you.

Baljit: Thank you.

Jeeti: I have one thing I want to add if that's okay.

Simona: Yeah.

Jeeti: Have the dialogue in your homes with your children, and sit down father to son, mother to daughter. Yes, some of these conversations are uncomfortable, but start the dialogue with your child so that your child feels safe. The child can lean into you when that need, if it ever comes. We didn't have that with our parents. Trauma is passed on from generation to generation to generation. So as Baljit mentioned, yes, it's our duty to make sure we don't pass this trauma down to our kids. And all I can say is have the conversations in your home, community. Let's sit down and let's start this dialogue on this rampant issue.

[Theme music fades in]

Simona: Awesome. Thank you.

Jeeti: Thank you.

Gilad: My name's Gilad Cohen.

Simona: And I'm Simona Ramkisson.

Gilad: This podcast is edited and produced by Brandon Fragomeni and Alex Castellani. Our associate producer is Ron Ma.

Simona: This is an initiative of JAYU, a charity that shares human rights stories through the arts.

[Music fades out]

Gilad: If you enjoyed this podcast, help us make more of them by donating whatever you can. Visit us online at jayu.ca/donate.