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Many years ago, I had an encounter with an extremely bright, hard-working lady (who happened to be South Asian) in my company. She came into my office with a fearful expression on her face, telling me that she needed to work part-time at home, because she had some urgent personal issues she had to deal with. As her manager, I obviously wanted to help, but didn't want to venture into her personal affairs. So, I told her to work at home part-time if she needed to and asked her if there was something I could do to help her. She burst into tears. She assumed my answer was going to be No, and that her job was in jeopardy. Her husband beat her regularly, she said. She could tolerate that, but what she couldn't tolerate was that he also beat her 5 year old son. She needed to be at home in the afternoons to make sure that her son was protected from her husband. Even as she told me the horrifying details of her personal life, she was coming up with excuses for her husband: "When he's not beating me or my son up, he's actually a nice guy." I probably looked incredulous, so she hastily added – "It's not entirely his fault. He has anger management problems, and he needs therapy. He doesn't really mean to hurt me or my son." Prior to that encounter, I didn't know enough about abuse to understand that this is a classic pattern. The spouse gets abused (invariably, the husband abuses the wife of course), and the wife lives in mortal fear of her husband but is either scared to leave him because of societal pressures, family pressures, and financial pressures or, manages to convince herself that her husband actually means well, and he can't help having the occasional bad day. It's a form of "gaslighting" oneself, into believing that the problem may not be the husband, and that the problem may to some extent be herself, the wife!

I did what I could in that situation to help my employee, of course. As her manager, I gave her the flexibility that she needed. And I pointed her to some company resources (the employee hotline) where she could confidentially seek employee assistance, because she wasn't aware that those resources were available to her. But I couldn't help feeling that that wasn't enough, and wishing that there was more I could do. At the time, I didn't even know to point her to a resource outside the company (like Maitri), so she could get the confidence that she sorely needed, and which she was clearly lacking.

There's a lot of education that's needed on so many fronts. Educating young men so they don't objectify women, certainly. Educating young women so they know what not to tolerate from men, and how to seek help. Educating battered spouses so they know that they have options, and don't have to be stuck in an abusive relationship. And what I learned from my personal experience many years ago is that people, including managers, have to recognize these signs at work and do what they can to help. It's not just about allowing someone to work part-time. I don't quite know what made me ask her the question: "Is there anything I can do to help?" but my asking her that question caused the floodgates to open, and caused her to share some personal details that I otherwise would not have been aware of. Sometimes it's OK to not keep it "strictly business", and to respectfully ask that solicitous extra question to ensure your employee's well-being.