



“This is a man’s problem”

Strategies for working with South Asian male perpetrators of intimate partner violence

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This research presents the perspective of 17 front-line practitioners who, together, have more than 200 years of direct experience working with South Asian male perpetrators of intimate partner violence or their families. All the research participants – psychologists, program managers and counsellors, police and probation officers – are members of South Asian communities in the Lower Mainland. They emphasize that men are responsible for the violence they perpetrate. No one excuses them – their choice to perpetrate violence has resulted in significant physical, emotional and psychological harm not only to their wives but also to their children, their extended family and their communities.

At the same time, the frontline practitioners told the researcher that the majority of assaultive men do not set out to hurt their wives or their families. Most of the men, having learned cultural male privilege, struggle with gender role expectations that may be far beyond their ability to meet now that they are in Canada. When they drink alcohol – a major contributor to intimate partner violence in South Asian communities – they lose control over their strong emotions.

This research does not address instances of intimate partner homicide or attempted homicide. It focuses on men who are mandated by the courts to participate in community-based programs offered in the Punjabi language. Most of the offenders, therefore, have not served time in jail. Most of them are also first generation in Canada. The research participants make it clear that men born in Canada – second generation South Asian men – while different from their fathers are often raised with many of the same cultural patterns of behavior and belief.

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Perhaps the thematic analysis of this research can be best summed up by the statement of one of the participants: “This is a man’s problem.” South Asian men need to take responsibility not only for their individual behaviour, but also for the family, community and cultural patterns that support violent behaviour. “Marriage is not just about the two of them,” said another participant. It involves extended families often connected across two continents and embedded in community and religious values that foster a belief in the social structures of patriarchy, the sanctity of marriage, the stigma of divorce and the importance of reputation and honour. Every man can make the commitment to actively support the movement toward violence-free lives for their daughters, granddaughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and grandmothers. By doing so, they support violence-free lives for their sons, grandsons, brothers, partners, fathers, and grandfathers as well.

The couple relationships are often complicated by the immigration sponsorship of not only the husband or wife but other family members. Husbands and wives, working to meet obligations both at home and abroad, may also be experiencing the stress of a new relationship in a new country with very different cultural norms. Underemployment in new immigrant communities is high – especially for those who come with postsecondary education – and this can be compounded by experiences of racism, alienation and isolation.

Despite these difficulties, a key difference of South Asian families caught in the cycle of intimate partner violence is the significant desire for reconciliation by both partners. Although frontline practitioners emphasize the importance of the woman having a true choice about whether to return to their marriage, they acknowledge the importance of recognizing – and respecting – this difference.

The frontline practitioners also agree that police intervention is essential for the cycle to be broken. The length of time between the police intervention, court appearances, probation and completion of the counselling program result in hardships for everyone in the family.

An equally important role for the extended family members – as well as members of the community – involves the man and the woman before the marriage happens. Pre-marital counselling and an increased awareness of the importance of compatibility require that extended family and other community members involved in supporting the marriage see the couple both as individuals and as partners as well as members of a collective culture. This is an extremely important aspect of anti-violence community action. Prevention – from the very beginning – requires that the man and woman be encouraged to know enough about each other to make a strong commitment that sees beyond their respective families and communities. This does not require a shift to an individualistic world view but it does require the recognition that they need to be able to get through difficult times together.

The researcher also met with a focus group of South Asian men engaged in a court-mandated assaultive men’s group counselling program. Unlike the individual interviews with frontline practitioners, which were conducted in English, the two focus groups were conducted in Punjabi. The men raised the same issues as the practitioners. They explored why they became

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angry – and then violent. They believed they had changed – and that other men would change if only they knew what to do. They wanted to be free of “this kind of family trouble” – like everyone else, they want to have productive and happy lives. Perhaps most important, they didn’t want the violence to continue – not only the physical suffering, but also the emotional and psychological consequences that spread beyond the family and into the community.

There is very little research concerning intimate partner violence grounded in the experience of Punjabi Sikh and other South Asian men who are first generation Canadian immigrants. There is even less that includes experiences of marginalization and racism, differences based on sponsorship status, the influence of alcohol and the importance of initial police intervention. As a consequence, education and training programs for frontline practitioners – police officers, probation officers, social workers, counselors and psychologists – do not include the information they need when working with these communities. To help bridge this gap, the researcher created a composite case study – “The Singh Family” – based on this research. He analyzes the case study within the theoretical framework of intersectionality. Perhaps most important, he uses the literature and the research to outline what frontline counselors – and other frontline practitioners – require to deliver effective, culturally appropriate services to those, like the Singh family, who come to their offices and programs.

The recommendations put forward in this report focus on very concrete actions. They include the development and delivery of:

- Culturally informed and culturally appropriate education, training and professional development for frontline practitioners working with intimate partner violence and/ or alcohol abuse in South Asian communities.
- South Asian community initiatives that focus on pre-marital education not only for couples but also for extended family members.
- South Asian community initiatives that focus on concrete suggestions for how extended family members, community members, friends and colleagues can skillfully intervene to prevent violence from developing or escalating.
- A domestic violence court similar to the drug court designed to meet the needs of families and communities.
- A provincial commitment to fund group counselling opportunities immediately accessible to men charged with intimate partner violence.
- A provincial commitment to fund sufficient mandated programs for those convicted of intimate partner violence as a way to avoid wait times that act against the principals of supporting appropriate family reconciliation and reducing the possibility of further violence.
- A provincial commitment to fund parallel programs for women whose partners have been convicted of intimate partner violence.

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- Community-based programs that address the challenges of the immigration and acculturation process including underemployment and discrimination, issues of Canadian family law and laws concerning violence, cultural norms concerning relationships (including marriage and parenting).
- Community-based programs focused on the strengths of fathers and grandfathers that includes material on the consequences of alcohol abuse and its relationship to intimate partner violence and the destruction of families.

As the research participants made clear over and over, “this is a man’s problem.” Women in South Asian communities have supported their sisters, daughters, mothers, friends and neighbours for many years and in many different ways. They have done an incredible amount of work to both stop the violence before it begins and help pick up the pieces after it has occurred. Now, the men in their communities, in their families and in their relationships must get involved – especially the elders. Community anti-violence action must focus on changing the environment in which violence occurs – not just the environments close to home but the program and policy environments that require culturally sensitive intervention and prevention initiatives.

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