

March 2011

**Towards Healthier, Violence-free South Asian families**

By GS Thandi, MSW RSW, Principal Investigator

**Little research exists on what intervention and prevention strategies hold promise in reducing** overall instances of domestic violence in our communities. South Asian community leaders recognized this lack of research literature, and spurred by recent murders in our communities (I use the term “communities” to reflect the diversity within our South Asian population), approached representatives from the Centre for the Prevention and Reduction of Violence, based at the Justice Institute of British Columbia in New Westminster. As a result of this consultation, a research project was initiated to study this issue and come up with some tangible intervention and prevention strategies.

As project researcher, I interviewed 17 front-line workers (counselors, social workers, probation officers, police officers, activists and elders) of South Asian background who have extensive experience working with South Asian assaultive men, their victims, and their children, and spoke to them about strategies they use in bringing about positive change in their clients’ lives. These 17 research participants were very respectful of the communities they both belonged to and served.

It quickly became apparent as the research progressed that the concept of culture itself needed to be considered carefully, as one’s perception of ‘South Asian culture’ isn’t necessarily the same as another’s. Culture changes constantly, and clearly there is no such thing as a monolithic South Asian culture. At the same time, however, there are enough similarities within South Asian communities around values and traditions – some of which are considerably different from ‘mainstream’ Caucasian communities (for which most intervention and prevention programs for domestic violence have been developed) – and these needed to be considered in greater detail. Failing to consider these values could result in intervention and prevention strategies that will have little effect on reducing marital conflicts in our communities. While all communities in Canada have a long way to go in addressing domestic violence, a culturally relevant model (one that also recognizes individual diversity) is needed for South Asian communities.

A framework that focuses on patriarchy/sexism, extended family influence, family obligations, immigration, and alcohol abuse are discussed below. For simplicity’s sake, they are discussed separately – however, it is through the way they intersect and add on to each other (which makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts) that we can truly understand their effects.

By incorporating these factors into intervention and prevention strategies, it is hoped that future instances of violence as well as overall violence within our communities can be reduced. Furthermore, because many couples within our community either reconcile after violence occurs,

or will eventually re-marry, such interventions and prevention strategies will ideally make relationships amongst family members stronger.

**Influence of sexism.** Sexism and patriarchy exists in all countries, cultures and societies. However, it may manifest itself in different ways in different communities. In a patriarchal South Asian Canadian home (this **does not** mean all South Asian homes are patriarchal – like Caucasian Canadian homes, they may range from egalitarian and open to patriarchal and closed) gender roles are clearly defined. Within these homes, any perceived violation of the rules may be met with swift sanctions – including but not limited to physical violence and threats. Patriarchal / sexist values can be ingrained in both males and females, and it is only through careful exploration of these values (and recognizing the harm caused by such values, as sexism limits what a person can do) that what was learned can become un-learned. Family members can speak out against sexism, given the harm it does. The more people that speak out against it, the quicker we can begin changing attitudes.

**Extended family / family interconnectedness.** Because families in South Asian communities are quite often interconnected and collective in nature (compared to Western values focusing more on individuality) and marriage is highly valued, there are often great concerns about what other people will say, and how family members will be affected if a marriage falls apart. This creates great pressure for a family to stay together, even when relationships have become toxic. Given extended family are often the first to find out if violence has occurred, how they will respond to it will have great influence on whether it will re-occur. Generally, extended family interconnectedness is a great thing and should be celebrated as part of our cultural heritage; however, the problem is when extended family members (both male and female) hold sexist attitudes, as they may be less willing to intervene to stop violence (or even justify the man's violence). It is important to note cultural practices such as family interconnectedness / an extended family living under one roof are not causes of violence – it is the attitudes that accept violence as a way to handle conflict that is problematic. Many South Asian families are able to live in harmony under one roof.

If extended families are creating great stress upon a couple, it is up to that couple to learn how to address these concerns by setting up healthy boundaries and learning how to respectfully communicate their concerns. Community members also need to realize that, while they are often well-meaning, they may be meddling and creating stress for a couple. A newly-married couple, especially, needs the time to get to know each other and family over-involvement can get in the way of that. At the same time, family members absolutely can intervene if they become aware of violence within a home. This can involve providing support to a victim, talking to the abuser if it's safe, and calling the police if the violence continues.

**Immigration / acculturation stress.** The effects of immigration can be felt not just on the immigrant, but his / her children and generations thereafter. An immigrant who came to Canada and had difficulty adjusting – or found work which did not match their skill level - may find their mental health affected. The effects of this may be depression (which can also lead to alcohol or drug use to cope) that affects not just the individual, but also their immediate and extended family. Immigration / acculturation-related stressors are in addition to the regular stressors of life all Canadians face (i.e. parenting, budgeting) and may increase conflict in the home. While

immigration / acculturation factors can lead to increased stress, it is not a risk factor for violence – as mentioned earlier, attitudes that see violence as an acceptable way to deal with things must be present. If someone is affected by their immigration experience, they should consider counseling (especially if it has resulted in a mood disorder like depression or a person is using alcohol or drugs to try and cope).

Governments as well have a long way to go to ensure immigrants are not faced with bureaucratic red tape that prevents them from obtaining work in the fields that they are qualified as well as ensuring they have the resources they need to adjust when they land in Canada.

**Stress of family obligations.** Amongst immigrant populations, there is often an obligation to family back in South Asia. This can include sending money or even pressures to sponsor family members and bring them to Canada. A couple needs to work extra hours in order to prove they are financially capable of sponsoring family members, creating significant work / life imbalances. Also, while arranged marriages in the past were often based on compatibility, more recent arrangements may have as a primary concern the desire to bring someone to Canada (I'm not referring to scam marriages – where one or both parties have no intention of remaining together – I'm referring to marriages where both parties have every intention of staying together, but they were not matched based on compatibility). This results in marriages where two people have little to nothing in common – which again places great stress upon that marriage (in essence, it's set up to fail). Our community needs to have a frank discussion about the stressors such family obligations place upon couples. Arranged marriages as a practice need not be devalued, but it should be noted that marriages that are not based on compatibility have a greater chance of creating unhappy and unhealthy families.

**Substance abuse.** Substance abuse, especially alcohol abuse, co-occurs frequently with domestic violence in all communities, and it's no different in South Asian communities. For South Asian men, in particular, use and even overuse may be socially accepted. Violent men often use alcohol with the belief that it gives them justification to act violently. Once again, the attitude that violence is an acceptable way to act is the problem – alcohol abuse is another separate, and equally serious, problem. At the same time, research participants noted South Asian women may be at great risk to over-abuse prescription medications such as painkillers, sleeping pills or anti-depressants. Perhaps some men are using alcohol and some women are using prescription medication (because alcohol abuse by South Asian women is often frowned upon) as a coping method (albeit a harmful one) for other underlying issues.

**Marginalization.** Whenever the media reports of a crime committed by a person of colour, discussions often centre around their 'culture' or ethnicity – this doesn't happen when a Caucasian Canadian commits a similar crime. The implication is often that the culture is somehow responsible for the violence. Furthermore, there is an expectation from mainstream society that immigrant communities act in a certain way – immigrant communities themselves put such high expectations on their community members (a term scholars call 'the model minority'). An immigrant may be especially at risk of marginalization, which can be a factor in his violence towards his partner i.e. he may be exploited or mistreated by his employer (who may be of the same ethnicity) and may come home and take his frustrations out on his family. Whether marginalization is coming from within a community or from outside of it, the

marginalizing of those who are in need of help (whether as victims or those committing abuse) makes seeking such help very difficult.

By considering all of the above factors, the intervention and prevention strategies geared towards South Asian communities, it is anticipated, will be strengthened. As noted before, domestic violence occurs in all communities, but scholars and practitioners increasingly recognize that a strategy developed for use with one cultural community will not necessarily work with another. In addition to increased awareness of the needs of South Asian families, it is hoped the research will be able to inform policy and serve as a starting point for uncovering what services are severely needed for our communities.

For more information about the research project, please visit the website at:

<http://www.jibc.ca/research/research-projects/office-applied-research>

### Project Recommendations

To date, the research participants have indicated the need for certain resources and/or initiatives. Some of these include:

- a greater need for translated resources and materials in all major languages for victims/survivors and perpetrators
- greater education around sponsorship issues / concerns. Sponsored women are often unaware that they can leave an abusive relationship without it affecting their immigration status
- greater funding for victim/survivor support and counseling programs, especially those that incorporate culturally responsive helping methods
- developing and implementing training on how to work with South Asian families where domestic violence has occurred for various agencies (such as child protection workers, probation officers)
- greater involvement of South Asian men who are not abusive in the anti-violence movement
- greater prevention efforts in schools, involving all students (given domestic violence effects students of all ethnicities, religions and social class)
- increased collaboration between sectors (police, criminal justice system, batterer intervention programs, victim services, shelters, health services, children and family ministry/services, etc.)
- more culturally-specific programs for assaultive South Asian men are needed – especially groups, as research suggests men need peer support in order to change abusive behaviour. As it is now, long court waits and waitlists for programs means families are not getting the help they need in a timely manner
- Programs for men who want to attend voluntarily are needed. Right now, almost all batterer programs in BC are for clients who are on a criminal court (probation) order. Interventions that can address stressors and conflicts before a situation becomes violent are virtually non-existent
- lack of interpreter training. Interpreters may not have the clinical language necessary to translate for victims, or may in some instances act unprofessionally and pass judgment on victims of violence (In my conversations with counsellors who work with immigrant and refugee women, observations have been made that their clients, out of concern that the interpreter may know a family member of theirs, will begin to minimize what they experienced. This is especially of concern when their ethnic community is small. This underscores the need for interpreters to explain their roles clearly and explain their confidentiality obligations)

- funding research and initiatives that address domestic violence and that are undertaken by immigrant and marginalized communities. Such research should then inform government policies

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### Why a South Asian Woman May Remain in an Abusive Relationship

Decades ago, feminist researchers began to take what had previously been considered a ‘private matter’ – domestic violence - and made it public. However, something significant was missing from that pioneering work - the experiences of women who were not of the majority – namely women of colour. In many instances, the violence these women faced was one of many types of victimization – they also experienced racism and other forms of discrimination. As a result, South Asian activists and other women of colour began to identify these multiple oppressions that they faced – oppressions that made it difficult to leave an abusive relationship.

There is no evidence that intimate partner violence in South Asian communities is greater than (or for that matter, less than) violence in other ethnic communities. What is clearer is that many South Asian women will stay in an abusive relationship longer than women from some other communities. There are several reasons (some that apply to all women who are abused, some that are more specific to South Asian women) for this:

- the fear of social stigma and perceived gossip within their community
- fear that leaving will bring shame (“sharam”) to her family and ruin her family’s reputation (“izzat”). “Sharam” and “izzat” concerns are disproportionately felt by women, as the two concepts are often applied to the family, and the expectation is on women to keep the family together at all costs
- concerns about the children (a belief that children are better off being raised in a two parent home)
- a high value placed on marriage
- love of her partner despite the violence
- she may have had a love marriage, while her parents wanted an arranged marriage. She may, therefore, be too ashamed to tell anyone about the abuse
- the belief that abuse is just a part of the marriage (perhaps reinforced by her having been exposed to it between her own parents)
- fear that she will be found by the abuser, and that she and her children will be harmed or killed
- if she is an immigrant, she may be so overwhelmed with immigration and acculturation – related stressors that the violence is deemed less pressing an issue
- the belief that being abused is her karma and therefore nothing can be done about it
- lack of awareness of services available
- a misperception of what the service agencies do. They aren’t there to break up families – the man’s violence is doing that
- social isolation (often the abuser intentionally isolates the victim so she won’t leave) that makes accessing help difficult

- for those who are not fluent in English, there may be barriers related to language unfamiliarity
- fear of potentially experiencing racism if she accessed mainstream services
- concern over finances i.e. how she will support herself and her children if she were to leave. He may, as part of the abuse, control the bank account
- lack of awareness of her rights
- if she is an immigrant, she may have a distrust of police and government agencies based on experiences from back home
- dependence on her partner if she is a sponsored immigrant, because of possible concerns over implications on sponsorship and immigration status

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### The Mother-in-Law versus the Daughter-in-Law

Whether you are an immigrant or were born and raised in the west, it is still a common custom for the daughter-in-law to live in the home of her husband and his family. The present day economic circumstances of families creates a situation where both spouses need to work, though the woman is often still expected to tend to the household and childcare duties in addition to working outside the home. A man's concept of marriage may be based on his parent's marriage, and the different socioeconomic environment between then and now is often not considered. In traditional homes where the daughter-in-law works and does not assume a large share of household chores, the mother-in-law, who expected to be relieved of these responsibilities once her son married, may be expected to continue with these duties. Such a circumstance can lead to greater conflict between daughters-in-laws and mothers-in-laws, with the former upset with the expectations placed on her by the latter, and the latter upset because she feels the former isn't fulfilling her expected role in the household. While this is happening, the men in the household can continue to enjoy the benefits of this patriarchal arrangement.

There are some instances where the violence is actively encouraged by mothers-in-law. While research participants felt that this does not happen as frequently as the media would have us believe, such violence only occurs because it is fully approved by the male head of the household. If the male did not approve of the violence, it would not happen. It is also important to point out that living in an extended household isn't a cause of violence – it is whether those within a home hold patriarchal values that lead to violence. In-laws who hold strong patriarchal values can be abusive even when a couple does not live with them.

In many ways mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law should be allies, given they both have experienced patriarchal customs that marginalize them. The sooner they can realize their commonalities – through trying to understand each other's experiences – the greater the satisfaction they will have in their relationship. A united mother-in-law and daughter-in-law will greatly increase the odds that a home will be violence-free.

## What to Do If You are Being Abused

If you are being abused – talk to someone who can help. If you tell someone who is more concerned about you staying with the abuser because of what people will say than with his changing his abusive behaviour, that person isn't there to help you. Find someone who is concerned about your well-being, and someone who will not excuse away his violence.

Find a counsellor. It's not a counsellor's job to tell you what to do – they are there to support whatever you want to do (if a counsellor feels your life is in danger, they will have to act, but they have to ensure whatever they do is in your best interest). Whether you choose to leave the relationship or not, a counsellor can help you develop a safety plan and help you work through the emotional impact of the abuse you may be experiencing.

Call the Police. Increasingly, women who do not want to leave the relationship will call police, in hopes that their spouse / boyfriend will learn there is a consequence to his actions, and that in going through the court process that he will be required to attend for counseling. In many instances, court-ordered counseling is the only counseling available for abusive men. Once the police are involved, they will provide you with victim assistance and support.

You have to be realistic: if he does not acknowledge the abuse or does not seek out help to address it, then it won't get better. He may feel bad afterwards and may even apologize (this is called the 'honeymoon phase') and be on his best behavior but it will continue. Also, don't stay in a relationship because of a fear of what people will say. Chances are those kinds of people will always find something to talk about, and if that's how they are, do you really need them in your life? And finally, don't stay in the relationship for the kids' sake. The harm being done to the kids (whether they see the violence or not, it's a guarantee they know what's going on) greatly outweighs any benefits you think there are in staying together. Research indicates a boy who witnessed violence is at greater risk of using violence in his relationships when he's older; a girl that witnessed it may learn that abuse is to be expected in relationship and may be less prone to get help if she is abused as an adult.

If he decides to get help, great – but don't let this be the reason to reconcile. He needs to prove through how he communicates with you – and how he acts when he's angry - (i.e. is he using skills he's learning in counseling?) that he's made a commitment to stop being violent. In addition, his being in counseling (especially if he is being ordered by a court to do it) doesn't mean the risk he poses to you has gone down. An abusive man can absolutely change, but he has to want to change. If he doesn't see any reason to change, then there's not much he's going to get out of counseling. If you do remain in that relationship, make sure you have a safety plan in place, in case he ever becomes aggressive or violent again.

If he insists that you need counseling too – then he is not taking responsibility for his behaviour. He needs to attend counseling to learn how to stop being violent. If you want counseling or are interested in couples' counseling after he has done some counseling to work on himself, then great – but don't be pressured by him to attend. His decision to be abusive was his own – he can't excuse it away or hold you responsible for it. However, if you have used violence yourself, then you should consider counseling. Violence, regardless of who does it, damages relationships.

### Finding the Right Counselor

Evidence suggests ethnic minority clients in counseling have much larger drop-out rates, frequently terminating counseling after the first session, compared to Caucasian clients. Such high drop-out rates may be attributable to factors such as services that are not culturally-responsive.

A culturally-responsive counselor / social worker:

- has a working knowledge of the client's heritage, cultural beliefs, traditions and values
- will take the time to understand the clients' current circumstances and consider and use interventions that respect that client's worldview and customs
- understands there are differences in cultural groups' help-seeking behaviours (i.e. some may turn to family, religious figures or texts, or elders before considering other options such as contacting police or accessing formal counseling)
- understand barriers that diverse clients may have in accessing services
- is able to ask questions in a respectful, non-judgmental and open-minded manner
- does not rely on preconceived concepts or stereotypes, instead sees the individual in front of them
- is sufficiently self-aware of her/his own values and beliefs and how they impact the counseling relationship

An effective counselor will be a great proponent for you – but the best proponent is ultimately you. To ensure the most effective counseling relationship, make sure you feel comfortable with your counselor, and feel that she is able to understand where you are coming from. While having someone from the same ethnicity and who speaks your primary language are generally positive traits, it doesn't necessarily make that counsellor culturally responsive. Find someone that can understand you, and doesn't judge you.

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### My Partner is Not Abusive. What Can He Do?

Within the domestic violence field, there is increasing recognition of the need for men who are not abusive to be involved in combatting domestic violence. A non-abusive South Asian male can speak out against violence, especially around challenging patriarchal attitudes that justify it. He can say that violence in relationships is not acceptable, and there is no justification for it. He can call it what it is – a crime. He can also challenge sexist comments and jokes made by others. Additionally, he can serve as a role model to younger generations of boys through his actions. If he is a father, he can model appropriate behavior to his children.

And, if it's safe to do so, he can intervene when he knows violence has occurred within his family or social circle. He can take a stand for a victim who may be unable to. If a victim leaves an abusive relationship, he can speak up and say it was the right thing to do – even if this means going against what his family members are saying. He can become educated about the harm caused by domestic violence and tell his male friends and family members who have been violent about how damaging such behavior is.

A non-abusive man (or a man who has been abusive but has since committed to being non-violent) can participate in anti-violence workshops or anti-violence campaigns in his community. These types of events do take place – it's just a matter of finding out when and where they're happening.

At a minimum, his anti-violence stance alone proves that stereotypical views of masculinity (that a 'real man' maintains power and control in a relationship) are backwards and really benefit no one in a relationship – not even a man (rarely, if ever, is an abusive man truly happy in his relationship).

## Elements of a Healthy Relationship

Some key qualities that make a relationship healthy include:

- Mutual respect
- Humour
- Trust
- Fun
- Intimacy
- Having an equal say in decision-making that affects both of you
- Letting your partner have their individuality. Spending time is important, but so too is spending time on your own or with your own friends and / or family.
- Sharing of duties / responsibilities. It is a misconception that everything the two of you do has to be 50/50. If one person enjoys cooking and the other likes yard work, then the former can cook most of the time, and the latter can do most of the yard work. The key point: the decisions are jointly-made (respectful) - the responsibilities aren't imposed on someone (abusive).

The relationship is free of violence. You can't have respect, trust, intimacy or any of the other factors mentioned above if there is violence in the relationship.

### **For further information:**

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Initial funding for the Centre for the Prevention & Reduction of Violence research projects  
provided by the R. Howard Webster Foundation  
with support from the former BC Institute Against Family Violence.