Addressing Domestic Violence Among South Asians in the United States

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Today domestic violence in the United States is clearly perceived as a social problem by scientists, policy-makers, social workers. In the last three decades there has been considerable research conducted on domestic violence in mainstream communities but relatively little on ethnic minorities, particularly for an ethnic minority such as South Asians. Inadequate attention prevents a comprehensive understanding of domestic violence for South Asians and has enormous consequences for abused women in this underserved community. It precludes the effective identification, intervention, and prevention of the forms of abuse perpetrated against them. It also prevents an understanding of the systemic ways factors such legal status, gender, ethnicity and race influence the institutional response and impact on victims/survivors’ experiences of domestic violence.

Drawn from my previous study on domestic violence among South Asian immigrants in the U.S. and my current research interest in the justice response to domestic violence in the South Asian community, this short article provides a brief overview of the changing dynamics of South Asian community in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. It addresses the complexity of organizing against domestic violence in a community that has been labeled a “model minority” and discusses the emergence of South Asian women’s organizations that challenged this model minority image through their work around domestic violence. Finally, this article outlines three of the major goals and objectives of my new research on the justice system and its response to domestic violence in the South Asian community.

An Overview of the South Asian Community and the ‘Model Minority’ Image

Approximately two million South Asians live in the United States (U.S. Census 2000). Until the 1990s, this community was viewed almost uniformly as a model minority – one whose members adhered to the valued principles of economic success in the public sphere while retaining strong cultural values in the private sphere. Not only did the dominant group in the U.S. refer to the South Asian community as a model minority, but segments within the South Asian community identified and represented themselves as such. The tendency to highlight South Asians’ economic success, especially among Indians who came to the United States prior to 1980s, can be seen in the works of various writers such as Nathan Glazer, Harry Kitano and Parmatama Saran (Kitano and Daniels, 1995). For many members of the South Asian community, who immigrated to the United States as professionals in the 1960s, the model

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minority image was to be promoted and sustained. It was perceived as good for business and a way for South Asians to distance themselves from other, lower status minorities with whom they did not want to identify, lest such identification decrease the status of their own ethnic group in the U.S. social hierarchy.

In the 1980s and 1990s, “chain migration” – the immigration of sponsored relatives of South Asian residents – changed the demographic composition of the South Asian community. It brought considerable variation within the community along dimensions such as education, occupation, class, and gender experiences and on such axes such as language, religion, region, and class. Despite this diversity, the South Asian community continued to be represented within the United States by a small number of businesspeople and wealthy professionals, who defined the image, activities, and interests of the community. Often, their politics and the articulation of community variations based on politics in the countries of origin have also created complex divisions and alliances within the South Asian community in the United States.

Today a class system comprising at least three major tiers exists. An upper socio-economic class, made up of wealthy businessmen (many who made their money in technology industry) and certain professionals, including doctors, lawyers and computer technologists; a middle class comprised of college students and midrange professionals; and a lower class that includes blue-collar workers, low wage earners, and, in some cases, undocumented workers. In addition, national and regional differences based on the politics in the country of origin have also added complex intersections and divergences within the South Asian community in the United States.

Domestic Violence and the South Asian Context

Until the late eighties and early nineties, acknowledging the problem of domestic violence within the South Asian family was extremely problematic because it challenged the very concept of “good family values and strong family ties,” or what Linda Gordon (1989) calls “the myths of harmony of the normative family.” The public image of the South Asian community in the United States had been primarily male-defined with women as the cultural transmitters. The South Asian women in the U.S. became responsible not only for family honor but also for the honor of segments of the “model minority community.”

Domestic patriarchy was assumed by the mainstream immigrant community and was not an issue for public discussion. In this social environment, domestic violence was not to be addressed, as it did not fit into the concept of the “model minority” or the happy harmonious South Asian home. It would then appear that in the immigrant context, although South Asian women were to be economic contributors, they were to be increasingly constructed in cultural terms with the immigrant home as the site for defining gender relations and ensuring traditional patriarchy. At the same time, immigrant women and men were struggling against the ethnic/gender image that frequently placed them as targets for ethnic, class, and race discrimination in American society.

Often as a reaction to the dominant American society's racism and cultural imperialism, South Asians avoided looking at their own community self-critically. They became so invested in portraying the community in positive ways that they oppressed some segments of the community, including women, by, for example, denying the violence perpetrated against them. This had a serious impact on abused South Asian women's lives. Not only were abused South Asian women silenced within their community but there was a serious paucity in the provision of services and their utilization in addressing domestic violence in this community (Dasgupta 1995; Abraham 1995, 2000; Khandelwal 1998, 1996). It was with this backdrop that South Asian women's organizations emerged challenging the model minority image by publicly addressing the problem of domestic violence in United States.

Addressing Domestic Violence: the Role of South Asian Women's Organizations

The late 1980s witnessed the rise of South Asian women's organizations in the United States. In a short span of 17 years, many South Asian community-based organizations have been established as a part of a growing social movement to address the problem of violence against women in their community. An important goal of these organizations, albeit to varying degrees, is to address the problem of domestic violence among South Asians in the U.S. at the macro and micro level. At the macro level, the strategy of some of these organizations is through advocacy on issues affecting South Asian women's rights, particularly domestic violence and immigrant women's rights. They attempt to bring about legislative reform and cultural sensitization in law enforcement and medical care systems. Some of these community-based organizations have been involved with other organizations to sensitize policy makers to develop policies that protect the rights of ethnic minorities, especially immigrant women. In addition, South Asian women's organizations have devoted considerable time to community outreach, community organizing and community education on a range of issues around pertinent to the lives of South Asian women and men (Abraham 2002). More recently organizations such as Sakhi played a critical role in addressing the problem of ethnic and racial prejudice against Arab Americans and South Asians that followed in the wake of the September 11th tragedy. In public forums Sakhi discussed the role of civil rights, international and domestic terrorism and implications of such ethnic or racial profiling on the lives of ethic minorities and immigrants, including survivors of domestic violence (Shah 2002).

A considerable amount has also been achieved by South Asian women's organizations at the micro level, that is in terms of the organization's direct interaction with and services to individual women. Domestic violence
experienced by South Asian women in the United States include isolation, physical abuse, sexual abuse, economic deprivation, and intimidation through the “green card” factor for victims who are dependent on the spouse for their green card (Dasgupta and Warrier 1996; Abraham 1998; Krishnan et al. 1998, Raj and Silverman 2002). Many abused South Asian women, particularly recent immigrants experience an “invisible wall of isolation” stemming from multiple factors. These include the power tactics used by abusers aware of the cultural and language barriers that their spouse may encounter in a new environment; the lack of geographic mobility, friendship networks, social contacts, and emotional support that abused women receive from members within their own community (Dasgupta and Warrier 1996; Abraham 1998; Mehrrotra 1999). Cultural factors, structural barriers, lack of resources, as well as lack of information about services result in the underutilization or avoidance of services and the justice system by South Asians. South Asian women's organizations have worked to address these problems and to empower South Asian women. 

By the late 1990s the number of women approaching these organizations increased substantially. For example, over a 12 year period, Sakhi for South Asian Women has worked with more than 2,500 survivors of violence. Some of these organizations also provide support groups where abused women meet, discuss their problems, support each other, provide solidarity, and help each other in the process of ending the violence perpetrated against them. These community based organizations create a space for South Asian women to discuss issues that are pertinent to them as women and as South Asians in the United States. They provide tangible support and services for South Asian abused women through predominantly voluntary work (Abraham 1995; Priesser 1999, Purkayastha, B et al., 1997). They have shown how domestic violence cannot be seen in isolation but that issues such as poverty, health, sexuality, immigrant rights, social welfare and the role of the state must all be included in dealing with the social problem of domestic violence. It would appear that these organizations have and continue to play an important role in the South Asian community in the United States.

**Areas For Further Research: The Justice Response**

Today, as we see, there is research being conducted on the causal factors and the manifestations of domestic violence among South Asians. However, no serious attention has been given to the justice response to domestic violence in this ethnic population. This is an extremely important area for future research. The justice response can shape, to a large degree, the outcomes of survivor's experiences of domestic violence. While we don't have data specifically for the South Asian community, previous research on the justice system and domestic violence indicates that battering is rarely reported (e.g., Dutton 1988; Kantor and Straus 1987; Straus and Gelles 1990). Some have suggested, in fact, that spousal assaults are reported at lower than 10 percent of all offenses (Buzawa and Buzawa 1996) and that the ineffectiveness of police responses, when they do occur, clearly contributes to the low level of reporting (see Davis and Taylor 1997).

Past research also suggests that various situational factors influence the decision to arrest (Feder 1997; Buzawa and Buzawa 1990). Negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities by police may influence an immigrant woman's decision to seek further assistance. Class and race appear to affect police reactions to battering calls. Some investigators have found that the economically disadvantaged and racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to be arrested for a domestic violence complaint (Bachman and Coker 1995; Belknap 1995; Buzawa and Austin 1993; Jones and Belknap 1999.) Ferraro (1989) has suggested that a very important variable may be the officer's perception that battering in certain non-white populations is merely reflective of a general family pathology. That is, officers may differentiate between “normal” citizens, like themselves, and “deviant” sub-groups, who may not speak fluent English or who may exhibit other cultural differences that appear to limit an officer's ability to effectively intervene (Buzawa and Buzawa, 1996). More recent laws involving “mandatory arrests,” “dual arrests,” and “primary aggressor” also have negative implications for ethnic minorities, particularly recent immigrants.

With reference to the courts, previous research indicates that the court's ability to respond to domestic violence is significantly intertwined with victim/survivor reluctance to cooperate with justice officials due to distrust and fear of reprisals. Research has also found that victims are less likely to follow through with prosecution if they find that most cases result in dismissal or a sentence of probation (Belknap 1995; Hart 1993; Ferraro 1990; Ferraro and Boychuk 1992). Buzawa and Buzawa (1996) argue that domestic violence cases rarely “go the distance” in court partly because of the large number of extra-legal variables that prosecutors use to screen battering cases (Ellis 1984; Schmidt and Steury 1989; Stanko 1985). These influential factors include: victim motivation to prosecute, victim/survivor's continued relationship with the offender, offender characteristics, and organizational factors (Buzawa and Buzawa, 1996). Specifically, researchers have found that prosecution is less likely if the victim/survivor is seen as unlikely to continue cooperation, if the victim/survivor and offender continue to cohabitate (Schmidt and Steury 1989), if the offender is seen as relatively unlikely to recidivate (Schmidt and Steury 1989), and if the charge is police-initiated rather than victim-initiated(Cole1984). If victims/survivors' experiences and the public's perception is that the courts are prejudiced, that cases will be long and drawn out, that the possibility for conviction and for justice is minimal, then there is less incentive to seek legal recourse.

Although the last few years have brought about an increasing trend toward sensitizing the police and the
courts, the general official treatment of ethnic minority abused immigrant women is still a barrier to ending domestic violence. Financial constraints, procedural delays, ethnic and gender stereotyping, language barriers, are all a part of the South Asian experience of abuse as noted by South Asian women and South Asian domestic violence organizations. To date there are primarily anecdotal observations of the court responses. Hence, an examination of the systemic response is necessary if we are to provide a composite picture of domestic violence in the South Asian community.

For the purposes of my preliminary research on the justice response, it is then important to explore whether domestic violence victims/survivors in the South Asian community experience the police response and courts in patterned ways. This is particularly important given that the last decade has seen the increasing criminalization of domestic violence and allocation of money by Congress under VAWA to improve the justice system’s response to addressing domestic violence. Hence, any comprehensive response to domestic violence particularly, in an ethnic minority community such as South Asians must include:

1. Identifying the factors that significantly influence decisions by abused South Asian women to utilize community-based organizations, police and the judicial system.
2. Assessing the responses provided by community-based organizations to victims of abuse and these organizations’ experiences with law enforcement and court systems (family court, criminal court, and Immigration and Naturalization Courts) in addressing domestic violence-related cases in the South Asian community.
3. Assessing the responses of law enforcement and the courts (family court, criminal court, and Immigration and Naturalization Courts) to domestic violence cases in the South Asian community.

This type of information concerning the justice response to domestic violence in the South Asian community has never been collected or documented. Such research will contribute into developing a comprehensive community coordinated response to domestic violence in the South Asian community. It will lead to a better understanding of the cultural and structural factors that reduce or increase domestic violence in the South Asian community in the United States. It will also help us better understand how the intersection of race, class, gender and legal status influence and shape the justice response to domestic violence. Most importantly, it will develop empirically driven policy recommendations and help establish better law enforcement practices. Such research will also help us alleviate some of the difficulties abused South Asian women encounter thereby enhancing the overall quality of their lives and that of the South Asian community in the United States.

End Notes
1. South Asians have been in the United States since the late 19th century, but the major influx of South Asian immigrants occurred only after the immigration Act of 1965 (Kitano and Daniels 1995).
2. Today these include Sakhi for South Asian Women; Awake; Pragati and Islamic Center of Long Island in New York; Manavi in New Jersey; SEWAA (Service and Education for Women Against Abuse) in Philadelphia; Apna Ghar in Chicago; Sneha in Connecticut; Maitri and Narika in California; Asha in Washington D.C.; Chaya in Seattle; Raksha in Atlanta; Saheli in Austin, Texas; Sawera in Oregon; and many more in different parts of the United States. These organizations vary in terms of organizational goals, organizational structure, organizational ideology and sources of funding.
3. For example, Congress passed the VAWA in 1994 and VAWA 2000 as a reaction to the millions of women in the United States whose lives are affected by domestic violence including battered immigrant women.
4. I would like to thank Tom Vander Ven for his valuable input to this section in writing the research proposal.

References


Margaret Abraham has been involved in research and activism in the field of domestic violence in the South Asian immigrant community for more than a decade. Her dedication to this field has been recognized by various regional and national organizations.

Specifically, in 1999 the Sakhi for South Asian Women organization honored her for her work in this field, in November 2000 the Indian American Cultural and Civic Center presented her with an award for outstanding accomplishment in the social sciences, and in March 2001 she was honored by Nassau County’s Office of the Executive during Women’s History Month in recognition of her work on domestic violence in the South Asian immigrant community.

Professor Abraham’s book, Speaking the Unspeakable: Marital Violence Among South Asian Immigrants in the United States (Rutgers University Press, 2000), earned her the American Sociological Association: Section on Asia and Asian American Outstanding Book Award in 2002 and was nominated for the Association for Asian American Studies Book Award in 2001.

Professor Abraham earned a B.A. and an M.A. in sociology from Delhi University and a Ph.D. in sociology from Syracuse University. Her research interests include domestic violence, violence against women, ethnicity, gender, migration and South Asian diaspora. Professor Abraham has presented papers in numerous conferences and published in various journals including Gender & Society, Violence Against Women, and the Indian Journal of Gender Studies.

She was a board member of the Sakhi for South Asian Women organization and a national advisory board member for the National Evaluation of the Arrest Policies Program under the Violence Against Woman Act Project of the National Institute for Law and Justice. Professor Abraham’s work has been featured in The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, India Abroad, Malayalam Pathram, India Today, Indiathink.com and Rip Rap: The Academic Book Program. SK