

## **Domestic Violence in the South Asian Muslim Immigrant Population in the United States**

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*This paper describes the phenomenon of domestic violence in the South Asian Muslim population living in the United States. Religion, culture, and family play significant and positive roles in the lives of South Asian women. This paper highlights some of the problematic areas in which these institutions are not responding to the needs of women. These findings are based upon the author's work in a committee for the prevention of domestic violence in the Muslim community and upon personal experience of the South Asian culture.*

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**KEY WORDS:** domestic violence; Muslim women; South Asian immigrants.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The extent of domestic violence in the South Asian community is a subject of increasing concern to professionals involved in the evaluation and treatment of this phenomenon. To understand the issue more fully, one must look at the basic characteristics of this community, immigration issues, religious and cultural factors, and their impact on the domestic violence phenomenon.

Since 1965, with changes in the U.S. immigration laws, the number of Muslim immigrants from South Asia has been steadily increasing. The Muslim immigrants from South Asia bring with them very strong cultural and religious beliefs. Islam plays a very important and positive role in the lives of South Asian Muslim immigrants. Numerous Islamic Centers have been established in America. These centers act as religious and community centers to meet the growing community's needs (Haddad, 1986).

One subgroup of the Muslim population whose needs have not been adequately met are the victims of domestic violence. The definition of domestic

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violence does not identify physical battering alone but various forms of abuse, whereby one partner systematically persecutes the other (Berry, 1996). Studies indicate one out of two women will be battered at some time in her life by a man who also loves her (Walker, 1984). Most South Asians prefer to see themselves as a model minority devoid of any problems such as domestic violence (DasGupta, 1998). To them, domestic violence is a problem of the modern American women. However, surveys conducted in the immigrant South Asian population show one in four women reporting the occurrence of domestic violence in her home (Ayyub, 1998). Despite strong denial within the South Asian community, if 25% of women are reporting violence in their homes, one may surmise that the actual number of women experiencing violence is even higher. Violence in the home hurts the entire family; if left untreated, it can continue down to the next generations.

Muslim women faced with domestic violence turn to their religion and families for help and support. The religion, culture, and families expect women to fit certain prescribed roles of wife, daughter, or mother. For those women who fit the prescribed role, the system offers certain benefits like status and respect. However, for a woman faced with domestic violence and who needs help in leaving an abusive marriage, the system offers resistance. This paper highlights some of the obstacles South Asian women face from their religious community, culture, and families in overcoming domestic violence. Many of these women are educated and working. However, their religious community, culture, and their families still demand that they play the role of the traditional wife and be willing to make any and all sacrifices necessary to continue the marriage.

My findings are based upon my work as a psychotherapist with South Asian women. I am a member of a committee for the prevention of domestic violence for South Asian Muslim women in a large metropolitan area in the United States. I am a public speaker on the topic of domestic violence. My findings also derive from my own experience of the South Asian culture. I grew up in Pakistan, hearing stories of my grandma's marriage at age 12 to my grandfather who was 40 and taking on a third wife. I witnessed my aunt being beaten by my uncle. I saw friends being forced into marriages. In America, I continue to see female friends from South Asia experience violence in their homes.

This paper is an attempt to show some of the problems South Asian Muslim women face so that work toward resolution can begin. Finally, the paper offers some suggestions toward achieving that goal.

## **SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES**

South Asia includes the countries of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan. Seventy-five percent of all South Asian people live in India, 10% in Pakistan, 11% in Bangladesh, and the remaining 3% in the countries of Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Jacobs, 1999).

People from the South Asian countries have been immigrating to the United States since 1875. In the earlier years their numbers were small, they came in search of better financial conditions. Most were laborers and uneducated and unskilled workers. In 1965, the U.S. immigration laws were changed to accommodate the needs of the market and the immigrants ability to suit the job market. This change in the immigration laws led to an increase in the number of South Asian immigrants to the United States. The new immigrants were mostly educated and fluent in English. They came not just to make money and return to their countries, but also to establish themselves in America and to participate in the American dream (Galen, Sheets, & Young, 1995).

The majority of South Asians from Pakistan and Bangladesh follow the Islam religion. Immigrants from India, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Nepal, on the other hand, follow Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam (Levinson & Emler, 1997). Most of my work among South Asian families has been with people following the Islamic faith. In attempting to understand the violence in the lives of these women, the role of the religion will be explored.

### **THE ROLE OF RELIGION**

Fourteen hundred years ago, the religion Islam was revealed to Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, Saudi Arabia (Siddique, 1983). The first person with whom he shared his revelation was his wife, Hazrat Khadija, thereby acknowledging the status and value of women. The Muslim religion offered women rights they had never had before, like the right to choose their marriage partner, the right to divorce, and the right to inheritance (Mernissi, 1987). Over the years, however, through cultural distortions, the religion itself has been used to suppress and oppress women. Today, in Muslim religious centers across America, debates continue around the justification for a husband to hit his wife, the status of women as less than men, and the roles women are expected to limit themselves to.

The concept of Islamic Feminism is propagated as a form of feminism, appropriate for Muslim women. Islamic Feminism refers to demanding certain rights within the confines of the family and the community only (Fernea, 1998). Historically, Muslim women in South Asian countries have tried many different routes to emancipation. Many of them have returned to the traditional Muslim role of women because of their disappointments with the alternatives. Although the extended family system fails to meet all of the growing needs of women, lack of state-sponsored resources and services for women in these South Asian countries has forced many women into accommodating to the patriarchal system (Sabbagh, 1996). Muslim women in America look for and find limited help in government-sponsored programs like shelters for battered women, support groups, and legal and social services. However, they face strong opposition from their religious and cultural institutions in utilizing these services. Women also face certain

difficulties that are unique to Muslims because of their particular system of marriage and divorce.

An Islamic marriage takes place by the performance of the *Nikah* by the Imam (religious guide). *Nikah* is an agreement to enter into marriage by the bride and groom with an agreed upon sum of money (*Haq Mahar*) to be given by the groom to the bride. In addition to the religious ceremony, Muslims in America also enter into civil marriages by having their marriages registered.

Like the marriage, divorce happens at two different levels—the religious divorce called *Talaq* and the civil divorce obtained through civil courts. The religious divorce, or *Talaq*, is given by the husband to the wife in the presence witnesses and ends the marriage at a religious level. Divorce, even though permitted in Islam, is frowned upon. The laws in some countries, like Iran and Egypt, only accept divorce if given by Islamic rules by the husband to his wife. Many Muslim men in America divorce their wives in civil courts and then refuse to grant them a religious divorce. Following a civil divorce, men find it easy to remarry because the lack of having a religious divorce cannot stop them from remarriage. Islam allows them four marriages. Women cannot remarry unless they have the religious divorce. Women who have a civil divorce, but not a religious divorce, face difficulty when traveling back to their countries where they are still registered as the wives of the men who have left them. Muslim women in America are using the civil courts to obtain a divorce. Some Muslim religious institutions now accept a civil divorce as a final divorce, ending the marriage at both legal and religious level. However, a majority of the religious institutions still require a religious divorce. This confusion has caused many Muslim women much distress and calls for the implementation of a standard law recognized by all institutions.

Women in early Islam were encouraged to marry after a divorce and were able to find partners to remarry. The Holy Prophet Muhammad himself married both divorced and widowed women as an example to encourage other men to accept divorced and widowed women in marriage. Over the years, the mix of culture and religion has created a bias against divorced women. They are seen as damaged goods. The divorce is seen as their fault; it is assumed something is wrong with them. They are also seen as carriers of bad luck and are to be avoided on any auspicious occasions. In Pakistan and India, it is a common practice not to allow a divorced woman near a bride while the wedding ceremony is going on for fear of her bringing bad luck to the bride. These cultural beliefs make it hard for women to find a new partner if they wish to marry again.

Islam allows a Muslim man to marry up to four times. This right was given to the man under very limited circumstances and with very strict guidelines. In times of war, which led to many deaths and a large number of widows, Islam encouraged men to marry widows as a means of protecting them and their orphaned children. The guidelines were very clear for the husbands to provide equal treatment to all wives. The husband was required not only to provide equal financial support to

each wife but also to share his time equally among all wives regardless of his interest. The Quran further emphasizes the difficulty in implementing such equal behavior, thereby recommending one marriage only. Many immigrant Muslim men in America have abused this right of multiple marriages by having a first wife to whom they are married in civil courts and by Islamic law; then they marry other women by just performing the Islamic Nikah without having a civil registered marriage. This situation creates problems such as jealousy, rivalry, neglect, and financial distress for the women while they are married. These problems get magnified in the event the marriage does not work out and the women try to seek a fair legal settlement in America, because the marriage is not legal or registered. Some Islamic centers are trying to correct this problem by refusing to perform the religious marriage unless proof of a civil marriage is first presented. Such efforts need to be supported.

Many Muslim countries have traditions whereby new sets of laws have been implemented that go beyond what is allowed in Islam. Slavery was allowed in Islam but all Muslim countries have unanimously taken a stand against it, and it has been legally banned. One wonders if a similar position could be taken for multiple marriages.

Segregation of women and the use of *Hijab* are taking place. “Chador and Char Diwar” (the veil and the four walls of the house) is the recommendation made to women as their protection. *Hijab*, the traditional head covering of Muslim women is making a comeback and is gaining in popularity among the younger Muslim women in America (Bullock, 1998). Facing an alien American culture with its open mixing of the sexes, can be frightening to one not used to it. Women look for and find safety and security in the *Hijab*. Going out in *Hijab* frees them from the objections of the family members who might otherwise limit their movements.

Women face resistance from the religious community in their careers. Limited work opportunities for women outside the home are allowed, provided the work does not involve too much contact with men and poses no conflict for the spouse or the father. The possibility of a woman working is under the control and approval of the man of the house. For example Mrs. H, while studying for her advanced doctoral exam, was told by her spouse that the studies were leading to her neglecting the household; therefore, she should quit. The couple decided to take their case to a local Islamic Center. The religious leader at the Center told Mrs. H that because of her hard efforts and commitment he would allow her to sit for the exam, which was in a month’s time. However, after the exam she would have to quit her job because as a Muslim woman her first duty is to her spouse. With the help of a women’s support group, Mrs. H was able to continue working. There are many others who have had to sacrifice their careers and life goals in the interest of the family.

The Islamic religion takes a very strong position on violence against women and condemns it. However, a verse in Quran (verse 4:34) talks about the use of

admonition to women, and a man's right to beat his wife if he fears willfulness from her. Some people interpret the verse as allowing a symbolic beating of a wife if she disobeys. Others cling to a more literal meaning. This selective preference of one verse from the Quran over many other verses that talk about kindness and justice toward women has created an atmosphere that tolerates and allows violence toward women (Siddique, 1983).

Women who experience violence in their lives are told to be patient and to give in. No clear stand is taken against a man who is violent. Violence in marriage is generally condemned but when it does happen the religious community gives no clear consequences for the violent behavior. Furthermore, the religious community condemns any woman who seeks legal protection from an abusive spouse. Rather, her actions are considered as disloyal to the husband and the family. In addition, the Islamic Centers themselves fail to impart any information on domestic violence protection and prevention programs available in the community, seeing them as too radical. The services provided by the centers often fail to deal with social issues such as domestic violence. A recent survey showed 158 Islamic Centers in the State of New York alone, with only a handful of them providing any services for women (Ayyub, 1998). The message given to women is to be patient and accept. A religion meant to bring about peace in the lives of all mankind is then involved in a limited way in preventing violence toward women.

## **ROLE OF SOUTH ASIAN CULTURES**

South Asia comprises many different cultural and ethnic groups, each with its own unique background, history, language, customs, and traditions. Variations exist within the same group across different social class lines. Times are changing, and with the advent of satellite television, Internet, and so forth, the old systems are feeling the vibrations of change.

Most South Asian cultures are traditional and patriarchal. At the head of the system is invariably the father figure followed by his brothers, other male relatives, sons, and older women. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the women of the household.

In such a system, the power positions of members are very clearly and rigidly maintained. An individual's desires and needs are put aside in the interest of the group. What is in the interest of the group is based upon the judgment of the head of the family. Members of the extended family are expected to have faith and believe that any decision the head of the family makes is in their best interest and to accept it. The roles that traditional, patriarchal values have played in engendering violence toward women in the past must be examined in the context of a new immigrant population in the United States.

Traditional South Asian cultures resist the development of a strong sense of individual identity. Individuals are socialized to define themselves as part of

a larger familial group. A person's identity is described in terms of the family he/she belongs to and the relationships the person has in the family. Thus, the South Asian Indian woman's identity is more specifically based upon her role as mother, daughter, niece, sister, and so on. Identities outside of these relationships may seem inconceivable to her (Jayakar, 1983). The system respects and supports women who can fit into these prescribed roles. However, respect and support is not often given to those women who do not fit traditional roles (e.g., single women, battered women, lesbians, and divorced women). Roland, in his analysis of the Indian self, describes the three components of the Indian self. A large familial self that derives its identity from the family, a spiritual self, and a very small individual self that tries to have its needs met within the context of the family (Roland, 1988).

The family tries to meet the needs of all members of the family within its rigid and strict rules. Few allowances are made for individual needs or differences. Maintenance of the order of hierarchy is important; women at the bottom of this hierarchy face the most rigid controls. In addition, the burden of maintaining the system also falls on them. The system is sustained through the magnification of concepts of honor and shame. Women bring honor to the family if they comply and maintain their prescribed role; any deviation by them not only brings dishonor to them but also shame to the entire family system.

Women are encouraged to maintain the traditional role of wife and mother. They are supposed to be protected only by their husbands, brothers or their fathers. A single woman is seen as someone at risk of being abused. Such beliefs fail to take into account the statistics that indicate most women face violence not from strangers but at the hands of men they love and who are supposed to be their protectors (Walker, 1984).

This focus on marriage and belittling of most other roles for women has a tremendous impact on the socialization process of women. Many young women are pressured by their parents to marry. Parents themselves feel the stress of messages ingrained in them that requires them to marry off their daughters as soon as possible. Many women delay marriage in pursuit of higher education. Many drop out in the middle of their studies because of pressure from parents. Those who stay on and complete their studies face an escalation in pressure to marry. There is very little tolerance of a grown woman who is working, independent, and single. The Muslim family system perceives a single woman as leading to *fitna* or social disorder (Mernissi, 1987). Women are encouraged to be in passive dependent roles.

Once married, the message ingrained in women by parents, friends, and clergy is that the marriage be maintained. No price the women will pay would be greater than the shame they would bring on the family if they chose to end their marriage. Therefore, many women, even in the face of extreme domestic violence, continue to stay in the marriage because leaving would bring shame to their family.

Such beliefs are so strongly embedded in the cultures and the minds of the people, that its abusiveness almost becomes invisible. A parent pressuring a woman to stay in a violent marriage is not seen as abusive to her, but as trying to help her

and stop her from taking an impulsive decision based on her interest alone. The interest of the group has to be remembered above all. If anyone has to be sacrificed for the maintenance of the family system, it is the woman. She is expected to sacrifice herself willingly and without complaints. She is reminded of the rewards that will follow her after death for being a patient and tolerant wife.

The definition of domestic violence includes physical battering and various forms of abuse. Abuse is defined, as “any behavior that is intended to control and subjugate another human being through the use of fear, humiliation, and verbal and physical assaults . . . it is the systematic persecution of one partner by another” (Berry, 1996). The oppression of women occurs on a continuum, ranging from extreme physical abuse to more subtle negation and put down of women. It takes many forms. I have seen South Asian parents take teenage daughters who act independent or are starting to act out on vacation trips to their home countries and force them into arranged marriages. Oppression also continues in the more subtle forms of encouraging women to be passive, give in, and contain and control themselves. A traditional view of a decent and virtuous girl was one who walks slowly, never runs, never laughs out loud, and never ever takes care of her needs before that of the family.

The 1960s brought a wave of educated single males from South Asian countries (Jayakar, 1985). Most of them went back to their home countries in search of a bride. Because they were educated, they choose women who were educated as their wives. As they settled in to married lives with wives and children, there was a very clear effort to recreate the old family system in America.

Life in America, which looked very attractive from their home countries, created stresses. The freedom in the American culture that had first attracted them now scared them. Men accustomed to a patriarchal family system now found it difficult to share power with their wives. As their children grew, concern about the impact of the American culture on them grew. Accustomed to total submission and compliance towards their own parents growing up, these immigrants were totally unprepared for their children questioning them. Freedom of expression, open sexuality, and 50% divorce rate in American society became their biggest fears.

Faced with stress, many people turn to what is familiar and attempt to recreate the old family system to escape from the problems of today. The old system worked well in its time. When women lacked any awareness of their rights, when they lacked any skills to survive on their own, and when they lacked any sense of self outside of the family, the family was their only means to survival. Given an option, women are choosing to stand on their own feet and make their own decisions.

In working with South Asian families on domestic violence issues, I have found that only about 20% of the cases involve a second marriage or a second women in the picture. An even smaller percentage of problems revolve around alcoholism or substance abuse. A majority of the cases have issues of power sharing and control. The men demand total power and control for themselves over their family. Men expect their wives not only to submit to their control but also to

the control of their mothers and other family members. Even in situations where the wife works, the husband has deciding power over how and where she spends her money. Efforts are made by the man to recreate the patriarchal system and to resist sharing decision-making with his wife. Although no statistics are available, my general observation has been that even in families where both parents are working professionals, they are choosing to marry their daughters at a young age.

Another common reaction is a return to religion as an answer. More and more religious centers are being opened in response to this growing need for safety and security of the immigrant. *Hijab* is making a comeback among the Muslim youth. Most of my colleagues and friends whose daughters are now wearing *Hijab* had never worn it in their own countries. A Muslim girl in America was denied the right to wear *Hijab* as part of her clothing at work. The girl, an employee of an Office Depot store, was placed on administrative leave for showing up at work in a head scarf. Numerous Muslim organizations rallied to the girl's support and helped her to win the legal battle and to get reinstated at her job (CAIR, 1998). One wonders if these organizations would rally if a woman was battered or abused by her spouse.

### ROLE OF FAMILY OF ORIGIN

My work in the field of domestic violence has led me to work with urban middle-class women from South Asian countries. Women who have experienced domestic violence tend to idealize their family of origin in general and their fathers in particular. Whether it is the exaggerated way in which the father is described as a generous and loving parent, or the mother is described as indulged and respected by the father, the overlying theme is always how wonderful things were in the parental home before the marriage. It is perplexing to observe women coming from supportive and nurturing environments with good educational opportunities, who find it very difficult to protect themselves when faced with the experience of domestic violence.

Most of these women describe an awareness of the harshness and cruelty toward women in their culture. They were aware that in Asian society the place of the women was a few steps behind the man. They had grown up hearing stories of other women being abused by husbands, by in-laws, or others, and who had no options to escape. They describe themselves as lucky that they did not have to face the suppression of women, and invariably they owed it to their family's generosity.

Thus, they felt protected from the unfairness of the society, not by their own strength, but by the strength of the parent and the family. Therefore, the self that emerged was a self, dependent upon an authority figure for rights and grants.

The women were allowed to pursue education and career because it made the parents look good. It also had the added benefit of enabling the parents to find a better match for them. An educational degree could offset mediocre looks and a

not-so-hefty dowry. The goal of the education was to attract a marriage partner.

In the history of education of women in South Asian countries, one finds centuries of exclusion of women from the field of knowledge. The only knowledge considered right for them was religious education. Sir Sayyed Ahmad Khan, a prominent Indian Muslim philosopher, was totally opposed to women's education outside the home (Jalal, 1991). The trend toward educating women is recent and is a response to "growing desire of educated Muslims to find educated wives" (Jalal, 1991). For further discussion about this rapid trend toward educating women in most Muslim countries, refer to Mernissi (1987).

However, the degree to which a girl is allowed an education or job opportunities is influenced more by the family rules than by her individual interests and desires. Women's education is to enhance the reputation, first, of her original family and, then, the position, honor and material well being of her in-laws.

Although not totally responsive to a growing girls needs, the traditional system has changed to allow the female child education. Motivated by different reasons, the change nevertheless is there. Girls are stepping out of the home to go to schools. Parents are allowing their daughters to travel to schools.

The relationship system that is resisting change is that of husband and wife. Upon marriage, the girl is considered fortunate if her husband indulges her. For those facing conflict or violence in the marriage, parents expect the young women to tolerate and totally submit to the authority of the spouse and his family. They are encouraged to accept it as their *kismet* (fate). After having invested money and family resources in raising and then marrying their daughters, the parents are often the most resistant in letting even a bad marriage come to an end. The young women themselves report strong feelings of obligations toward the family and suffer from guilt on letting down their parents who had been good providers.

Many women live with the abuse. To the outside world they appear educated and like professional women; independent minded and strong. Inside themselves they carry remnants of their culture that demands women to maintain a marriage at all costs.

Some Muslim women are able to find and utilize support services and do take a stand toward living a violence-free life. One is greatly impressed by their strength and the enormous strides they make in their lives.

## CONCLUSION

Awareness of the presence of domestic violence in the South Asian community is slowly increasing. Different cultural groups that may never have dealt with the case of domestic violence in their home countries are springing up and trying to help their own populations. Women are utilizing these resources. They are finding strength to break the cycle of violence and oppression. They are questioning the

wisdom of saving a marriage at all costs. The 50% divorce rate in America does not appeal to them but neither does the continuation of 25% of marriages with ongoing violence as reported in surveys on South Asian communities (Ayyub, 1998).

Domestic violence hurts the whole family. It hurts the victim at the physical, emotional, and psychological level. It causes pain and suffering to the victim. It also hurts the perpetrator of the violence by creating distance between him and his family and by destroying any possibility of close comforting relations. However, most of all, domestic violence hurts the children by taking away a sense of safety and security that children need while growing up. Being a witness to violence in the home also teaches our children to resort to violence themselves. Studies show that boys growing up in violent homes are more likely to resort to violence as they grow up (Berry, 1995).

For life to be fulfilling and satisfying to all family members, this cycle of violence has to stop. Women have always depended on their families and religion for support. Even now, when facing domestic violence women turn to their religion and families for answers. For a woman trying to overcome domestic violence, it is very comforting to know that her religion supports her. By the same token when religious leaders, family, and friends discourage such a woman, it adds to the oppression in her life. The question arises what can be done to help such a woman? How can these same institutions be utilized to help the women?

The first step toward resolution of any problem is acceptance of the problem. South Asian Muslims have tended to deny the existence of the problem of domestic violence. Involving resources at various levels can increase awareness of domestic violence. Community leaders, religious leaders, and professionals mental health field all need to get together to tackle this problem.

Mental health professionals need to educate the community about the damage caused by domestic violence, not just to the woman but the whole family. Information on resources and supportive services need to be made easily accessible to women, while religious rules and regulation surrounding marriage, divorce, separation, and custody need to be further clarified. Women who utilize these resources need to be supported and encouraged. Religious and community leaders need to express a clear stand against violence toward women.

One recent trend that offers a very hopeful sign is the work by scholars like Fatima Mernissi and Kaukab Siddique, who are trying to remove the cultural distortions from the religion and trying to help women reestablish equality, dignity, and respect in their lives.

There is need to change our parenting styles in order to enable our next generation to face the next millennium with a strong sense of self and to have an awareness of who they are, what they desire, and their goals. Our children need to learn to survive on their own and to become aware of their own strength for survival. Children have to be allowed to make choices, to learn from their mistakes, and grow from their life experiences. Such child-rearing behavior is difficult for most

South Asian parents, who feel they have to be overprotective. In addition, girls and boys are raised differently as there continues to be extra pressure on daughters to behave in socially prescribed ways. Such beliefs will have to change if we want our children to develop into strong independent human beings and experience life free of violence.

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