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SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN IN CANADA:
EXPERIENCES OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

By
Sandeep Hunjan
M.A. University of Windsor, 1997

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Through the Department of Psychology
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada
2003

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ABSTRACT

Recent recognition of the scope and consequences of intimate partner violence in North America has inspired research in the area. However, research and service have focussed on white dominant group women. Since Canada is increasingly multicultural, it is important to look at this social problem in non-dominant ethnocultural groups. The South Asian community, like other communities of colour, has been given little research and service attention. Thus the purpose of the present study was to examine the experience, interpretation, and reaction to violence of South Asian women living in Canada, using a qualitative approach to describe the central themes and patterns that emerge from their lived experience. Thirteen women of South Asian descent who have experienced violence in their intimate partner relationships were recruited from urban centres across Southern Ontario, Canada. Respondents participated in semi-structured interviews. Qualitative analysis of these interviews revealed seven major themes: gender inequality, marriage as a family affair, make the relationship work, maintain social face, reactions to violent relationship, services, and changes in women’s lives. These themes and associated subthemes reveal that these participants share experiences that are common among women who experience partner violence regardless of cultural membership (e.g., issues of power, isolation, emotional consequences of violence, lack of effective services). However, some of these issues are exacerbated when combined with factors associated with immigration (e.g., language difficulties, lack of culturally appropriate assistance programs). Respondents also revealed aspects of their experiences that may be unique to the South Asian culture, or that are at least amplified by cultural factors related to patriarchal beliefs (e.g., role of family honour, rigid gender norms, woman's value through marriage, role of extended family in abuse, societal policing of women's sexuality, stigma of ending a marriage). Participants offered suggestions that provide important information with which to directly inform prevention programs, service provision, and the clinical practice of health and mental health practitioners who work with immigrant and culturally diverse populations. Therefore, this research not only provides information regarding intimate partner violence, but also supports and extends our knowledge of ethnicity, gender, and appropriate service provision within this cultural group.
DEDICATION

To all of the powerful women whose spirits have helped to create, nurture, and guide my own.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am humbled and awed by the many people who have helped to make this project possible, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank as many of them as space permits. First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents, Sewa and Kulwant Hunjan, without whom this adventure would not have been possible. To my sister Reena and my brother Gurtej, your love and encouragement helped me to survive and kept me dancing. To Sita and Sebastian, you have both kept the light in my life and a smile on my face, when nothing else could. To Philip, you have seen me in all my states of discombobulation and have stood by me through it all. I am grateful for your love, tenacity, artistic prowess, computer knowledge, and last but not least the “scholarship fund.” To Babaji and Bebeji, your very lives provided me with a model of strength, perseverance, and generosity that I continue to strive for. To Bhajan Hunjan you have been a role model and inspiration to me for longer than I can remember, and I am grateful for your love and continued support in my life.

I would also like to thank all of my committee members. In particular, I wish to thank Dr. Shelagh Towson for her support in my research. To Dr. Charlene Senn, your knowledge has inspired me, your library has fed me, and your words have challenged me to become a better woman, researcher, and feminist. In addition to her academic assistance, I wish to thank Dr. Glynis George for her gentleness, words of recognition, and guidance. I would also like to thank Dr. Sandra Paivio for her encouragement and support. To Dr. Dasgupta, your research has helped to inspire and enrich my own. I hope that I can continue to learn from your example and I look forward to contributing to the field in which you are a pioneer. Thank you for joining me in this journey.

I am especially grateful to all of the women who shared their stories and made this project possible. I am honoured to have shared your lives for a short time and to have recorded your voices. I am deeply indebted to each of you.

Last but not least I would like to thank all of my friends, some of whom started this journey with me, others who walked with me for a time, and those who stuck by me when even I longed for escape. I hope I have told you all how much I appreciate you, as there is not near enough room to begin listing you all. A special thanks goes out to Karen Holowaty, whose friendship, extensive knowledge of astrology, and prowess with tarot
made the most difficult part of my journey feel less lonely. I hope that our little Libra’s
will continue to dance, eat ice cream, rail at injustice, and play together for a very long
time.
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INTRODUCTION

In order to do justice to the women that I would like to learn more about through this research, I think that it is important for me to introduce this investigation by revealing my own perspective and the struggles I have faced upon embarking on this exploration. I am a South Asian woman who was born in Kenya, Africa and who has been raised in Southern Ontario, Canada. Throughout my life, and especially during my years in university, I have searched for voices that represent my experience and places where I could share my own voice with confidence. Unfortunately, I have often been confronted by people who find it difficult to understand or accept me, by literature that does not represent my experience, by groups of my peers in which I feel like an outsider, and by fora where I have felt that my voice is important largely because I am the token woman of colour. My own sense of isolation has been reflected for me in the voices of my friends and colleagues of colour. This isolation is most obvious in the women I have spoken to who are survivors of violence by family members and intimate partners. I have come to believe that these women are silenced in multiple ways within their own cultural context and also in the North American societies in which they live.

Growing up I was always told that certain things were not to be discussed outside of the family. The predominant message was that if my sister or I did something wrong we would not be the ones blamed, but rather it would be my father, whom we represented, who would be dishonoured. The most taboo wrongdoings involved relationships with men and being seen in places where ‘good girls’ would not go, such as bars and clubs. The understanding was that we would remain chaste and pure so that my parents would be able to find us a good match in marriage. Marriage was the goal and one of the incentives was that after marriage we would be free to do things we were not allowed to before (e.g., cut our hair, stay out late, go out to clubs).

We were taught that after marriage it was our responsibility to ensure that the relationship went smoothly and that learning how to compromise would be the best way to do this. However, I always sensed that what compromising seemed to mean was letting my potential groom have his way. Growing up with these messages was difficult given that neither my brother nor my largely white group of friends seemed to have the many limitations on their behaviour that I had on mine. I also saw that many of my
South Asian women friends were being sexually victimized by men in positions of trust (e.g., uncles, friends of the family, partners), but were sentenced to silence because of fears that they would be blamed and/or would dishonour their families. My experiences began to raise some of the following questions: why were the rules so different for boys and girls, what role did culture play in the life experiences of women, and what was happening to the women I was meeting as they tried to cope with their victimization?

My questions found some answers within the feminist literature (e.g., Himani Bannerji, 1993, 1995), and feminism helped me to feel connected to a commonality of experience based on my gender. However, I was struck by the limited analysis of women of colour in feminist literature and found that my experience was not often represented in the views I read about. The need to learn more about the role of South Asian culture led to my master’s thesis on the relationship between cultural factors and attitudes toward love and relationships. I now felt that I was ready for the next step, which was to look at culture and unhealthy or violent relationships. My strong identification as a feminist combined with my own rebellion against certain aspects of my culture underlined the need for awareness regarding my own biases as I reviewed the literature. These biases I will address later in this paper.

Despite my awareness, my study of the literature led me to struggle with many of the issues that make cultural research so difficult. Because there is not a lot of literature on culture and violence, I had to review seemingly separate areas of research and then try to combine them in a manner that was not repetitive. Most of the research has been conducted by researchers in North America, with the violence literature reflecting a relatively Western feminist viewpoint. However, having grown up and been educated in the West, it is this same research on which many of my own attitudes and beliefs are based. So how was I to write about my South Asian culture, a culture I had been raised in, but which in many respects I had learned about through my review? This review taught me things about my culture that I wanted to embrace as well as others I wanted to rail against. Furthermore, trying to weave my own voice into my work while still presenting the literature in an accurate manner proved difficult because I had no experience writing in such a personal way. This attempt to place myself within my research has also revealed how risky it can feel to share what is in one’s heart with others.
regardless of how safe and confident one feels. I hope that this knowledge has helped me to be more sensitive to the experiences of my participants.

For this project, my aim was to provide a forum in which South Asian women with different perspectives could feel safe and empowered to talk about their experiences of violence. This information is important not only in that it may be a step toward safety and healing, but also because women should be able to help inform the services and support they require while adding their own voices to a body of literature that will truly reflect their experience.

South Asian Women in Canada: Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence

The oppression of women has occurred around the world, throughout time, and in many forms. One of the most vivid and insidious of these is violence toward women by their family members and intimate partners (Mehrotra, 1999). Violence is manifested in different ways including physical abuse and neglect, infanticide, initiation ceremonies, sexual abuse and assault, psychological abuse, spiritual abuse, and femicide (Kazarian & Kazarian, 1998). Within the last few decades, since violence against women has been labeled a social problem in North America (Mehrotra, 1999), researchers have been inspired to explore violence, its impact, and methods of intervention and prevention. This research has started to reveal the extent to which “our society abounds with social norms that support violence and oppression against women, children, and all those who are marginalized due to differences of race, class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and ability” (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999, p. 666).

Activism by women’s groups at the grass roots level has propelled the human rights issue of violence against women onto the world stage (Heise, Raikes, Watts & Zwi, 1994), with the women’s movement a driving force in our growing awareness regarding the reality of women’s lives (McHugh, Frieze, & Brown, 1993). In North America, activism combined with research has resulted in many changes to our understanding of women’s life experiences, and their policy and service needs. For instance, the grassroots women’s movement initiated the establishment of rape crisis centres, and women’s support groups at battered women’s shelters (Walker, 1981). Women are now encouraged to speak up, to take advantage of the support offered by various social service agencies, and to leave the relationship if necessary. In many other cultures, however,
cultural rules and norms continue to silence those who have experienced domestic violence.

Violence exists in most societies; however, contextual factors act to shape its manifestation, experience, and impact (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). Some of the most powerful contextual variables involved in this filtering process are cultural factors. The role of culture has not been emphasized enough in the violence literature and has led to the neglect of experiences in immigrant and racialized communities. While violence against women appears to cross all boundaries of race, culture, class, orientation, ability level, and age, much of the research in the area has focused on majority group (i.e., Caucasian) women, with research regarding nondominant cultural groups in North America remaining relatively scarce (Sorenson, 1996). Given the large numbers of women who are victims of intimate partner violence (Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993; National Crime Victimization Survey Report, 1994), North America’s growing cultural diversity, and the mounting realization that cultural factors play an integral part in women's experience of violence, it is clear that there is a need to learn more about the experience of violence for nondominant ethnocultural groups in Canada.

Researchers are beginning to acknowledge the importance of cultural diversity and socio-cultural context in the area of violence against women (e.g., Fine, 1993; Landrine, 1995; Mehrotra, 1999; Ofei-oaboagye, 1994; Padayachee & Singh, 1998; Perilla, Bakeman, & Norris, 1994). This new awareness has been reinforced through the work of women of colour and immigrant women themselves. Some researchers have started to investigate violence against women with a focus on different ethnocultural groups (e.g., Abraham, 1999; Hine, 1989; Mehrotra, 1999; Ofei-Aboagye, 1994; Perilla et al., 1994; Scott, Lefley, & Hicks, 1993), but there has been little systematic investigation of the experience and impact of violence on immigrant women of colour in Canada.

Purpose

Victims of violence who are members of non-dominant ethnocultural groups living in Canada are dealing with a multitude of factors in addition to their immigrant and/or minority status. This is not to say that violence is more prevalent in these groups when compared to the dominant ethnocultural group in Canada. The Canadian Panel on
Violence against Women (1993) has concluded that there is no statistical support for the notion that violence is more acceptable or prevalent in non-Western immigrant communities. However, there is still a need to investigate the experiences of people in these groups in order to gain a better understanding of how the multiple and overlapping aspects of their lives influence their experience of violence. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the experience, interpretation, and reaction to violence of South Asian women living in Canada, using a qualitative approach to describe the central themes and patterns that emerge from their lived experience. As cultural factors play a major role in belief systems and social structure, analysis of the findings included a focus on culture to learn more about how membership in a particular group may influence a woman’s experience of violence.

For the purposes of this investigation, South Asians are people who trace their families back to the Indian subcontinent (i.e., India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Nepal) and who have immigrated from India or from other countries including parts of Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean (Abraham, 1995; Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). The term South Asian is somewhat problematic as it encompasses different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and national groups. However, the label “South Asian” is a racialized, geographically situated marker that conveys, however generalized, a common experience of colonization, immigration, and racialization of women in relation to a white norm. Furthermore, the literature (e.g., Abraham, 1995; Agnew, 1998; Bannerji, 1995; Brah, 1978; Dua, 1992; Kanuha, 1987) regarding people from these countries tends to group them using the term “South Asian” more often than other terms such as “Asian Indian,” (e.g., Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996; Mehrotra, 1999) or Indian (e.g., Hogg, Abrams, & Patel, 1987). Thus this term was used for this investigation while also keeping in mind the unique and varied contexts of the participants.

Violence against South Asian women in Canada is embedded in the context of cultural, historical, and economic relationships, where society, family, immigration, and economic factors play a major role (Preisser, 1999). The remainder of this chapter will attempt to provide a framework to help address these factors in the analysis of women’s narratives to follow. I will begin this discussion with a definition of culture, a brief
description of the ideology that guided this investigation, and a rationale for focusing on South Asian women in this study. I will then discuss the importance of naming and providing a language for violence. This will be followed by a brief overview of the theoretical approaches in the area and the perspective guiding this investigation. Finally, a discussion of South Asian women’s life experiences will be followed by an overview of the literature on violence against women, conclusions, and a summary of the research project.

**Systems of Shared Experience**

The term culture has been conceptualized in many different ways. Older definitions of culture emphasized the notion that culture is represented by patterns of behaviour with associated values that are transmitted through symbols and artifacts (Veroff & Goldberger, 1995). As definitions of culture have evolved, culture has come to be conceptualized as a process through which people understand or give meanings to their experience. Rohner (1984) defines culture as a system of shared meanings held by a particular group of people. These systems of meaning are in a very general sense defined by the structure of a culture (Jahoda, 1984). Culture is also complex and dynamic, such that members of a particular cultural group have experiences that are interpreted in different ways depending on factors such as gender, social class, race, ethnicity, life cycle, sexuality, religious beliefs and personality (Hoodfar, 1994). The fluidity of culture reflects its learned nature, a characteristic which allows for change over time depending on such things as place, politics, and historical time (Abu-Lughod, 1991).

My focus on immigrant women, who come from different South Asian contexts and who are making lives within Canadian society, takes into account that their experience is shaped by multiple and overlapping fields of culture, which are framed by processes of immigration and settlement in a complex and heterogeneous ethnic society. Nonetheless, their ethnic and racialized location as South Asian women provides points of commonality, which are an important anchor for my investigation of violence in relation to these broader processes.

Thus, given that different factors will influence people from the same ethnic group, I wanted to learn more about what it means for a South Asian woman to be a member of this ethnic group living in Canada, and how this might influence her experience of
violence. I was not looking for the “truth” of her experiences, but instead for a reflection of the meanings she gave to her experiences over time. This type of investigation allows survivors of violence, who are experts in their own right, to construct their experience of and responses to violence through their stories, instead of relying on clinical definitions from distant “experts” (Bergen, 1995).

One danger of a focus on culture is that cultural explanations tend to be offered more readily when looking at problems within communities of colour than similar problems within the dominant group (Narayan, 1997). Uma Narayan (1997), in her commentary on violence against women in the U.S. and India, discusses her concern about the ways in which culture is used to explain violence against third world women, while it is not invoked in a similar way when looking at forms of violence that affect women in the West. She argues that the use of “cultural explanations” for violence against third world women portrays them as “victims of their culture” in a way that is markedly different from the way victimization of mainstream Western women is portrayed (Narayan, 1997, p. 85). Therefore, the recognition of the importance of culture in the present study is not meant as cultural justification of abuse, or to target one group over another, but instead to help provide a context for women’s experiences within abusive relationships (Abraham, 1999).

Centring Women in the Research Process

My interest in this area is guided by feminist ideology, which emphasizes that women should be at the centre of inquiry and analysis, research must benefit women, and research should be oriented to overcoming the exploitation and oppression of women, while promoting empowerment of women and social change (Agnew, 1998; Lempert, 1996; Mies, 1991; Reinharz, 1992; Unger, 1996). Implementing a feminist perspective means using women’s experience and needs to guide the topic and to select methods that are not oppressive or exploitive (Acker et al., 1983; Greaves, Wylie, et al., 1995; Lykes & Stewart, 1986). Feminist ideology reflects the work of feminist scholars who are dedicated to making sure the lives of women are represented in descriptions of society and how society works. This ideology also encourages researchers to be particularly sensitive to the effects of the research and to how findings may be used and interpreted by others (Fonow & Cook, 1991).
My feminist views make it difficult for me to remain impartial when I read about women’s experiences of violence. Thus I have struggled with how to write about the reality of violence, keeping true to both my feminist and South Asian values, in a manner that does not come across as judgmental. This is even more confusing in that my personal South Asian upbringing often comes into direct conflict with my feminist values. However, feminism has also been very important in that it has taught me to question my world and myself in a manner that has helped me take fewer things for granted.

**Personal Reflections on the Research Process**

An effort to be aware of my own presence within this study has resulted in the identification of a variety of factors that have influenced the process of this investigation. For instance, my own status as a South Asian woman living in Canada was a contributing factor to the choice of this group as a starting point in this program of research. Undoubtedly, my own experiences informed what I wrote about and the methods I chose. This perspective combined with my clinical therapy experience and my work with women who are survivors of violence helped to inform this investigation. Furthermore, my participants’ perceptions regarding the commonality in our experiences may have helped to create an atmosphere of safety and comfort for women who were asked to talk about sensitive and taboo topics.

However, my membership in this ethnic group also placed me in the paradoxical position of being both an insider and an outsider. I am an insider in that I have been raised with certain norms and expectations within a South Asian family. However, I am an outsider because I am an educated and acculturated woman with strong feminist values. This dual status made working with this group more precarious in terms of my own biases. For instance, my insider status may have increased the risk of assuming that I shared experiences with my participants when in fact their experiences may have been very different. Keeping in mind both my insider and outsider status meant that my ethnicity and my position might have made it more difficult for women to share their experiences with me. Some women may have felt that their confidentiality was jeopardized, as I am a member of their community who might know the people they are speaking about and who may, even unwittingly, betray their confidence. I am strongly
committed to maintaining the confidentiality of the women I interviewed and to portraying their views as accurately as possible. Therefore, I tried to communicate a sense of security, trust, and intimacy such that my participants felt as safe as possible discussing their experiences.

I am also aware of my position of privilege and power as the investigator who helped to guide this investigation through her questions, analysis, interpretation, and reporting. On the other hand, there are certain factors that placed me in a position of less power than my participants. In particular, I am an unmarried South Asian woman. Given that marriage signals entry into adulthood for many South Asians, older, married women may have considered me young and naive.

I hope that an active awareness of my own blind spots and the reality of my lived experience helped me to be more aware of the effects my participants and I had on each other. This awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of my own perspective and ideology helped me to better appreciate the complexity of factors that have impinged on the research process. Knowledge regarding the variety of roles that women assume also helped me to be more sensitive to stories that conflicted with my own beliefs about empowerment and ending oppression. Having given a brief overview of my perspective and interest in the area, I will now discuss the women who were the focus of this investigation.

**Focusing on South Asian Women**

I first became aware of the issue of violence within the South Asian community as a child when I would hear my mother speaking in hushed tones with my father about an “aunt” (the terms “aunt” and “uncle” may refer to close family friends as well as blood relatives) who was being beaten by her husband. As I grew older, I became aware of many such stories of abuse and of others involving sexual molestation and assault. Sometimes these stories would be discussed as if they were common life experiences and at other times it was clear that this behaviour was not acceptable to the victim or our community. However, the message that always accompanied these stories was that they must be kept secret, for what would people say about the family if they found out. The fear of being blamed or bringing dishonour to one’s family kept many women I knew
silent and afraid. Even writing this paper has required careful wording to ensure that I maintain the anonymity of the people I speak about regardless of who reads it.

Apart from my personal interest in the area, South Asian-Canadian women were selected as the focus of this investigation because South Asian communities, like other communities of colour, have been inadequately studied and served in the area of domestic violence (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). Mainstream society may not see domestic violence as an issue for South Asians as many South Asian women do not make official complaints through institutional channels and because the dominant culture tends to view South Asians as the ‘model minority’ (Dasgupta, 1999; Huisman, 1996; Preisser, 1999). For instance, Preisser (1999) discusses how interactions between the Washington based, Asian Women’s Self-Help Association (ASHA) and non-South Asian service providers indicated that service providers view South Asians as “achievement-oriented models of propriety and patience who value and respect family life” (p. 686). This stereotype precludes the recognition that the South Asian cultural system may be one in which violence is tacitly sanctioned, even though it also provides safety, stability, and interdependence for its members (Preisser, 1999). In fact, the literature suggests that in South Asian culture various norms (e.g., systems of male dominance, importance of maintaining family honour) may serve to sustain violence against women as well as to silence women who experience violence (e.g., Abraham, 1999; Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999; Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996). Other factors may also influence the lack of community exposure to South Asian women who are experiencing violence. For instance, members of stigmatized groups may fear that disclosing their difficulties to the majority group will reinforce stereotypes held by the dominant society and/or will be interpreted as another sign of the inferiority of their culture (Agnew, 1998).

Therefore, by exploring the experiences of South Asian women in a culturally sensitive manner I hope to contribute information that may ultimately inform prevention programs, service provision, public policy, and the clinical practice of health and mental health practitioners who work with immigrant and culturally diverse populations. For instance, practitioners guided by dominant theories who treat survivors of domestic violence often misunderstand the impact of contextual factors (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999) and may be better able to serve their clients by understanding the
overlapping features of their lives (e.g., cultural norms regarding gender, immigration related factors) (Preissler, 1999). The most direct and accurate source of information regarding women’s experience of violence is those who are affected. Thus the beliefs, values, and actions that contribute to violence may be best described by the women who are abused, and researchers have found that women tend to share their experiences of violence when given a safe opportunity to do so (Abraham, 1999; Heise, 1993).

**Naming Violence**

Prior to discussing themes that are relevant to South Asian women or reviewing the literature on violence against women, I believe it is important to look at the importance of language and naming in finding meaning within our experience. Speech has been defined as a central locus of power, where talking about an event helps us to give meaning to our experience and in essence creates our reality. Thus the “act of speaking out in and of itself transforms power relations and subjectivities, or the very way in which we experience and define ourselves” (Foucault, 1978; cited in Alcoff & Gray, 1993, p. 260). Different experiences have been labelled in different ways in different societies and some that are labeled as violence in North America may not always be identified in this way among different cultural groups.

As culture is about shared meanings, different ethnic groups may also have different meaning systems that will influence the definition and naming of violence. The ways in which women’s experience of violence is named, identified, defined, and revealed has a profound impact on how women may understand and react to the event (Bergen, 1995; McHugh et al., 1993). Mehrotra (1999) quotes a woman who said, “It took me many, many years to even figure out that something was wrong…. I mean, I knew that something was wrong, but I didn’t have a name [for it]” (p.628). Although words for violence may exist in many languages, women may not be familiar with them. Without a vocabulary for violence, women can be silenced and their experiences made invisible (Horne, 1999; McHugh et al., 1993; Mehrotra, 1999). For instance, wife rape is a relatively new term (coined in the West) that identifies nonconsensual sex in a marital relationship as a crime. Historically, one’s husband is the person to whom a woman has given unconditional sexual access (Alcoff & Gray, 1993). Thus, prior to the naming of this act, women who were forced to live with sexual assaults from their husbands were
relatively invisible. Now there is awareness and acceptance, within some cultural groups, that marriage does not give someone the right to force another person to have sexual intercourse.

Sometimes societal norms also maintain the invisibility of violence from investigators, by prohibiting members from speaking about an incident or by normalizing the experience through childhood socialization (Horne, 1999; Ofei-Aboagye, 1994). A prime example of this is the labelling of a certain degree of wife battering as “discipline” in Ghana. When Ghanaian women were asked if “beating” is the norm, few of them responded in the affirmative, providing some support for the popular belief that battering is uncommon in Ghana. However, when asked about their experience in descriptive terms, it becomes clear that not only does battering exist (as it is defined in the West), it is a large component of what these women define as “disciplining.” This concept of discipline is normalized for children through bedtime stories that are used to teach them a variety of life lessons (Ofei-Aboagye, 1994). Since a vocabulary for experience may not exist in the same way across cultures, it is necessary to be aware that commonly used terms and instruments may not be applicable when conducting research with groups other than the dominant group in Canada. By using women’s own conceptualization of violence instead of imposing labels upon them we are in a better position to recognize their experience, identify culturally specific terms, and most appropriately meet their needs (Chester, Robin, Koss, Lopez, & Goldman, 1994; McHugh et al., 1993; Sorenson, 1996; Walker, 1999).

**Guiding Perspectives**

Given the pervasiveness of violence against women, researchers have tried to generate explanations regarding its etiology and persistence. A number of different theoretical approaches have been suggested, including the family systems perspective, feminist perspective, ethnogender approach, conflict theory, exchange theory, resource theory, social learning theory, and sociobiological theory. Most of these theories take an intrapersonal approach, focusing on the individual or family directly involved in the violence, but the feminist perspective and the ethnogender approach also take into account interpersonal variables such as the larger social system in which the individual
resides. Furthermore, these two approaches best describe my own perspective, which emphasizes the interaction between gender and ethnicity within a feminist ideology.

The feminist perspective represents a major contributor in the critical re-thinking of gender, power, the family, and society. This perspective takes the abused woman as the unit of analysis and considers violence to be global and pervasive, instead of limiting the causes of violence to psychological and micro sociological factors. Violence against women is viewed as a reflection of gender inequality and patriarchal social norms where power is distributed unequally between men and women on a global level, such that women are defined as inferior, and dominance, aggression, and control are emphasized for men. According to this view, violence is intrinsic in male-female relationships and may be manifested in sexuality, and in social and political institutions (Abraham, 1995; Bograd, 1984; Brownmiller, 1975; Heise et al., 1994; Mehrotra, 1999; Natarajan, 1995; Walker, 1999).

Proponents of the feminist perspective argue that violence against women is rooted both structurally and ideologically in male dominance (Coomaraswamy, 1995; Levinson, 1989; McHugh et al., 1993) and is about the systematic control, ownership, power and authority exerted by men over women (Thakur, 1992). This male dominance occurs at a societal and an individual level with patriarchal societies defined as ones in which power is held by male heads of households, with gender arrangements based on patrilocal residence and patrilineal descent. In the public sphere, power is shared among men, with women rarely holding positions of power. In the private sphere, family and honour are of primary importance with men holding positions of authority in a large family system (Moghadam, 1992). According to Moghadam (1992) the “patriarchal extended family gives the senior man authority over everyone else, including younger men, and entails forms of control and subordination of women which cut across cultural and religious boundaries” (p. 37). Patriarchal customs or patterns of male dominance vary across cultural groups with some groups having more extreme discrepancies in power between the sexes than others, but male power within the family remains the defining characteristic (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999; Brabant, 1988). Patriarchal control over women can include extremely restrictive codes of behaviour for women, rigid
gender segregation, and an ideology that links family honour to female virtue (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999).

Feminist scholars agree that violence and its threat are gendered social acts that establish and maintain control over others, and are embedded in the institutional and structural fabric of most societies (Lempert, 1996). This results in the definition of violence as both a personal (e.g., perpetrated by intimate partners) and social issue (e.g., reflection of economic, social, and political discrimination against women) (Lempert, 1996). Thus violence against women is only one aspect of the general violence found in normative social structures (e.g., class, caste, religion, and ethnicity) and forms of control that are exercised through patriarchal and hierarchical relationships in society (Abraham, 1995; Coomaraswamy, 1995).

There appears to be some support for the contention that societies with patterns of male dominance may leave women at greater risk for violence. Levinson's (1989) review of 90 societies around the globe revealed that in fifteen societies (e.g., Iroquois, Javanese, Central Thai), family violence was rare or was not present at all. These societies treat women with respect, and a great deal of prestige is attached to female roles (e.g., reproduction). This respect for the contributions women make helps to place men and women in relatively balanced spheres of power (Levinson, 1989; Sanday, 1981). Social organizations and customs within these societies minimize interpersonal violence and teach men how to control aggression and behave in nonaggressive ways (Sanday, 1981). In contrast, in societies where violence is prevalent there is economic inequality between the genders, male authority exists in the home, physical violence is generally accepted and encouraged for conflict resolution, strict restrictions are placed on divorce with different access rules for men and women, and gender roles are rigid with definitions of masculinity linked to dominance (Abraham, 1995; Levinson, 1989; Sanday, 1981). This suggests that hierarchical gender relations communicated through gender socialization and perpetuated by socioeconomic inequality are strongly related to violence against women (Heise et al., 1994; Sanday, 1981).

However, a focus on gender alone does not capture the other factors, including ethnicity, class, age, and immigration status, that influence women's lives. Furthermore, even though the feminist perspective identifies the global nature of patriarchy and
violence, it has focused predominantly on issues in the West, and often reflects views that seem to be more representative of white, middle class women than those from other cultures and classes (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Bannerji, 1995; Dua, 1992; Kohli, 1995). In fact, this problem of “difference” or not representing that which is different from white middle class heterosexual women has been identified as the “crisis in feminist theory” (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 140).

South Asian feminists have argued that socialist feminist analyses have an underlying racist stereotype of South Asian women as passive victims of family practices that are oppressive (Dua, 1992). In contrast, South Asian feminist analysis defines racist oppression as more important than patriarchy in the lives of South Asian women. However, trying to prioritize either racist oppression or gender oppression in the family does not fully explain the reality faced by South Asian women. Both of these views fail to recognize that the family can be both a source of oppression for women in terms of patriarchal practices and a refuge from the racism women experience (Dua, 1992). Furthermore, neither South Asian nor North American socialist feminists have examined the relationship between ethnicity, gender, and societal factors in the lives of South Asian women living in Canada (Dua, 1992).

The ethno gender approach proposed by Abraham (1995) appears to take into account the role of gender and the role of others within a woman’s life, and goes one step further to include the role of ethnicity and difference in the experience of violence. Abraham (1995) acknowledges that women who are victims of violence are oppressed on multiple fronts including oppression based on sexual, ethnic, cultural, legal, and economic grounds. However, she believes that an emphasis on gender and ethnicity is warranted in that “cultural differences form an important basis for the social construction of a national culture in a foreign land” (p. 452). This approach considers the role of gender within different cultural groups, while also examining the role of culture in defining gender norms. Gender and ethnicity are conceptualized as two dimensions. Gender is considered a social construction that defines and evaluates expected roles and patterns of behaviour based on one’s biological sex. Ethnicity is considered to be a dynamic social construct, such that a person’s situation directs the interaction (Abraham, 1995). However, ethnicity also involves differentiation based on some defining characteristic
(e.g., race, origin, or history) in combination with culturally specific characteristics (e.g., distinct beliefs, customs, language). The intersection of gender and ethnicity is considered to be important as ethnicity identifies people as a distinct group when they immigrate to a new country and is the most visible marker of difference, while subordination based on patriarchal gender norms cuts across cultural/geographic borders (Abraham, 1995; Sorenson, 1996). This framework also allows for the probability that the salience of ethnicity and gender will vary based on other contextual factors (Abraham, 1995).

The importance of both gender and culture indicates that a traditionally feminist approach that emphasizes gender inequality and patriarchal social norms may be inadequate when studying South Asian women, while the ethnogender perspective emphasizes ethnicity and gender with less attention given to other factors. I believe that South Asian women’s experiences are best described through an examination of ethnicity and gender, while keeping in mind other contextual factors including issues related to immigration and social structures. Therefore, this investigation was guided by a perspective that focused on learning more about the “total” experience of South Asian women living in Canada, in order to more comprehensively inform services and prevention programs (Agnew, 1998; Mehrotra, 1999; Walker, 1999). My methodology emphasized an inductive approach whereby themes of gender and ethnicity were explored (among others) when analyzing the patterns of women’s experience. The next section of this paper will begin this process with a description of some of the salient themes that emerge in a general examination of South Asian women’s lives.

**South Asian Women’s Life Experiences**

“Any statement generalizing about the experience of the Indian woman will immediately call for a serious modification to include the exceptional and the particular” (Kumar, 1991, p. 143)

The experiences of South Asian women are varied and complex, but some common themes emerge. Themes of duty, destiny, and sacrifice seem to permeate their lives and appear to be strongly connected to the religious views held by many South Asians. Religion, as a central and integral part of South Asian culture, has a strong influence on many aspects of a woman’s life, including her roles within the family and her
relationships with others (Hennink, Diamond, & Cooper, 1999). Attending services at churches, temples, or mosques, as well as including religion and meditation in the daily routine of their lives, is a common theme for many South Asian women. Hennink et al. (1999), in their study of South Asian women in Britain, concluded that “[y]oung Asian women are influenced by three main factors in their experience of relationships; religion, culture, and community expectations” (p. 871) with the influence of religion and cultural traditions highly intertwined.

Even though a multitude of religions co-exist in the countries of South Asia (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Islam, Buddhism), Hindu beliefs are pervasive and are intertwined with many aspects of South Asian culture, especially in India. These tenets appear to influence the belief systems of people in many parts of South Asia regardless of their religious background (Almeida & Dolan Delvecchio, 1999). Central to Hinduism, and the major characteristic that distinguishes it from the other major religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) is the belief in reincarnation. In Christianity, some form of incorporeal afterlife follows mortal death. In Hinduism, in contrast, mortal death is followed by the soul’s rebirth in another mortal body, a cycle that repeats itself through hundreds of rebirths before attaining the afterlife, Nirvana. For Christians, the “good news” is that one has only one life to live before going on to something else. The bad news is that if one has led an immoral life, and does not sincerely repent before death, the afterlife will be eternally unpleasant. For Hindus the good news is that Nirvana is paradise for everyone. The bad news is that one’s station in life, including gender and caste, is taken as a good indication of relative merit. If one lives this life in an exemplary way, the next rebirth will be better. However, there are no guarantees that this life is one’s last.

Three of the concepts central to Hinduism, that provide instruction on how to live one’s life, are dharma, karma, and moksha. Dharma refers to ideas regarding one’s duty or life tasks and may be interpreted as including the practical duties of taking care of one’s family or seeing that children are married to suitable spouses. It also refers to more spiritual duties of living morally, remembering God’s name, and going to the temple, mosque, or church. Karma or kismet refers to one’s destiny or time and is often used to explain life events, including those that are surprising or difficult. For instance, an
unexpected death might be explained through references to the idea that it was his/her kismet or time to die. Moksha is a little more complex and encompasses ideas of salvation and self-realization (Kumar, 1991). In this context, salvation refers to one’s fate or consequence in the next life. Therefore, if one completes the duties that he/she is responsible for in this life in a sincere and pious manner, his/her next life should reflect this in a positive way. By the same token, if one’s duties are not completed or if one lives in an immoral way, then the next life will reflect this in a negative manner. The three principles of dharma, karma, and moksha structure the social system in parts of South Asia and help to guide people throughout their lives (Kumar, 1991).

The pervasiveness of Hinduism and its central tenets can be seen in many countries in South Asia where a social hierarchy based on the Hindu caste system exists. This social hierarchy is based on beliefs regarding purity and pollution, with upper castes representing purity and lower castes embodying pollution (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). One’s caste and/or life circumstances are attributed to one’s fate or karma such that there is little room for upward caste mobility in this life. However, fulfillment of one’s duties and earning the reward to move on to the next life can help one evolve through multiple lives on the journey to reach Nirvana (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999).

Like one’s caste, one’s gender also works within these principles. The secondary status of South Asian women compared to men, whereby a woman is expected to subjugate her needs to those of others, such as parents, husband, in-laws, and children, is more accurately understood when interpreted through the notion of her karma or destiny. The Hindu belief is that it was her destiny, based on her previous life, which resulted in her birth as a woman. My understanding is that since women are less powerful and less respected in many ways when compared to men, this means that being born a woman is not as positive as being born a man. However, as her current life is one that she is predestined to live, a woman must accept her subservient position within her family and her society. There is also the hope that through the pious and sincere fulfillment of her duties in this life she has the opportunity to earn her salvation (moksha) for her next life (Kumar, 1991). In my understanding this might mean a less difficult life. While growing up I was never given any specific examples of what salvation would be, only that I would
be ensuring the forward movement of my soul on its path to Nirvana or becoming one with God.

One route by which these concepts are communicated is that of religious mythology. For example, the model of the “ideal” Indian woman as a combination of service, sacrifice, and devotion is embodied in the form of the Hindu heroine, Sita, from the Sanskrit epic the Ramayana (Kumar, 1991; Sen & Seth, 1995). Sita, the wife of King Rama, dutifully follows her husband into the forest after he is exiled from his kingdom. While in the forest, Sita is abducted by Ravana, the demon king of Lanka. With the help of the monkey king and his general, Hunuman, Rama and his brother Laksmana find Sita in Lanka, rescue her, and return to the kingdom. When doubts are cast regarding Sita’s chastity while captive, she asserts her purity and seeks to prove it by successfully surviving an ordeal by fire. However, Rama bends to the will of his subjects and insists on banishing her to the forest, where Sita remains devoted to him and raises his two sons. Sita’s acts of loyalty and sacrifice set the ideal for wifely love and devotion and thus play a central role in defining what is expected from a South Asian woman (http://britannica.com; Kumar, 1991). Thus the valourization of suffering and self-sacrifice exists as an ideology (e.g., ideal wife) and as a principle organizing theme of the self for South Asian women (Waters, 1999).

Given the central role of cultural beliefs and structures in the definition and teaching of gender roles, it is not surprising that the themes of duty and service are reflected in the gender roles expected for South Asian women (Sethi & Allen, 1984). Sethi and Allen (1984) compared sex-role stereotypes in Northern India and the United States and found that sex-role traits rated as desirable for Indian women by college students in India included interpersonal warmth and sensitivity to the needs of others. Those traits deemed desirable for men included leadership qualities, aggression, and ambition. Interestingly, this study found that, in India, traits that were deemed desirable for both men and women included being assertive, family oriented and defending one’s own beliefs. In contrast the American sample emphasized assertiveness for men more than for women. This emphasis on assertiveness for both genders in India is especially interesting given that Indian women tend to be seen as having a submissive rather than an assertive manner (Sethi & Allen, 1984). However, the use of college students in this sample gives us a
selective point of view, as women who are actively pursuing higher education in India may not be representative of the larger population.

This study does help to make an important point, in that although she may be dutiful and devoted, a woman can also be quite powerful within her relationships. For instance, women can be powerful agents of cultural transmission by playing a central role in “carrying” the teachings of their culture to their children. These contradictory associations reflect the multiple facets of a South Asian woman, which allow her to be both an active and passive force in her life (Sethi & Allen, 1984). This is illustrated by popular images of South Asian women as passive, docile, chaste, and self-sacrificing on the one hand, and as the powerful, creative, life-giving force whose mystical powers are often feared on the other (Bannerji, 1993; Kumar, 1991).

South Asian women have often been seen in terms of these opposites: strong/weak, beautiful/treacherous, frugal/spendthrift, and assertive/submissive. These contrasting sex-role stereotypes reflect the variability and inconsistency present within a gender ideology. This is an important realization, as gender-related norms tend to appear stable and consistent from a distance (Schlegel, 1990). In most cases, the awareness and display of gender-related norms is a dynamic process that shifts with circumstance and age. This process allows women to experience themselves in a multitude of ways depending on the situation they find themselves in. For instance, women may display the behaviour they know is expected of them in certain situations (e.g., when in public) or at different points in their lives (e.g., norms may be adhered to more strongly before marriage than after children are grown) without internalizing these stereotypes into their sense of self (Kumar, 1991). Thus women may act subserviently, not because they see themselves as submissive or lacking in assertiveness, but because that is the role that is called for in that situation (Kumar, 1991).

This tendency to act differently depending on the context and what others need has been associated with an interdependent conceptualization of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This interdependent sense of self is related to collectivist cultural systems where group harmony and needs are of paramount importance (see Appendix A). This is in contrast to the independent conception of self (related to individualist cultural systems) which emphasizes freedom and self-determination as primary goals. Thus an
interdependent person is less likely to act in a consistent manner across situations than an independent person (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The conception of the self in India has been described as relational or interdependent and tends to develop through experiences with the hierarchical relationships within a joint family system. These relationships promote emotional interdependence, mutual caring, support, intimacy, sensitivity, obedience, and conformity to the needs of others within one’s family structure (Dion & Dion, 1993). Kumar (1991) suggests that although the definition of self in terms of one’s relationship with others is applicable to both men and women in collectivist cultures, this self-construal is emphasized more for women than men and may result in a stronger identification of interdependence for women.

This use of relationships to define one’s self is reflected in my own experiences while growing up and in the stories of women I have spoken with. South Asian women often identify their relationships with significant others as the most important and defining aspect of their lives. Significant relationships with others can be organized in terms of the chronological life stages and events that women experience (Kumar, 1991). The life stages that appear to be significant for many South Asian women include their experiences as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother, and a mother-in-law.

The South Asian family system “is an elaborate network of male-centered relationships” (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999, p. 662). Families consist of parents, male siblings and their families, and any unmarried sisters, including those of the father. As in other Asian cultures, sons return to the parental home with their wives and children to provide their families with economic support (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999; Kozu, 1999). Power is determined by age and gender hierarchies, with the eldest male wielding the most power, followed by the oldest female, who has the biggest influence over matters of the home, care of the children, and decisions regarding matrimonial alliances. The age and status of a woman — mother, wife of eldest brother, married daughters in family, unmarried daughters — determines her place in the hierarchy (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999; Kumar, 1991; Moghadam, 1992).
Daughter

“A girl never forgets or is allowed to forget that she is a girl and her place is second to her brother” (Kumar, 1991, p. 147).

Depending on the number of children in the family and especially the number of boys, the birth of a daughter is often not met with the joy and exultation seen at the birth of a son, unless she is the firstborn in her family or is the only daughter with many brothers (Kumar, 1991). If she is one of many daughters, she is most likely perceived as an economic liability for she is not likely to bring money into the family, and in fact may cost the family money in funds for her dowry (Kumar, 1991). She is also expected to leave her natal family upon marriage and thus will not be around to care for her parents in their old age.

These factors often result in discrimination against girl children, with this discrimination ranging from unhappiness at the birth of a daughter to female infanticide (Sen & Seth, 1995). One measure of gender discrimination is the low ratio of girls to boys (due to infanticide, abortion, malnutrition, and femalecide) in most parts of South Asia including India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. For instance, sex ratios have declined to 929 females per 1000 males in India in 1991 with parts of India going as low as 879:1000 (i.e., Harayana) (Sen & Seth, 1995). Financial limitations combined with high female mortality in parts of South Asia places the reality of female neglect and infanticide in an economic context where limited financial resources force parents to place a higher value on their male than their female children (Kumar, 1991; Sen & Seth, 1995). Safeguarding the health of male children results in preferential treatment of the male in terms of health care and nutrition, whereby even little girls learn to sacrifice the bigger and better share of food (e.g., butter, milk, eggs) for their brothers (Kumar, 1991; Sen & Seth, 1995). Other customs are also in place to draw attention to safeguarding the health of boys. For instance, in many Sikh and Hindu families with one son, daughters are not allowed to wash their hair on Tuesdays as this is considered bad luck for their brother.

Despite a daughter's status and often less than preferential treatment, there are many indications that most mothers and daughters have a warm and affectionate bond (Sen & Seth, 1995). Folksongs often depict the memory of a mother’s affection for her daughter
and the self-esteem this helped to generate (Sen & Seth, 1995). There are also customs and rituals that help a girl feel close to her family members. For example, the oiling and massaging of a girl’s hair is one way in which a mother can show affection for her daughter and provide her with close contact (Kumar, 1991). There is also the annual rakhi ceremony during which custom advises that a girl tie a colourful string on the wrists of all of her ‘brothers’ (including cousins) and they will, in return, give her money or gifts. This exchange symbolizes that they are linked in a strong relationship in which the girl promises to love and respect her “brother,” and he in turn accepts the responsibility for caring for her.

(A) Sexuality.

In traditional South Asian cultures, control of female sexuality is an important value related to the construction of gender roles, and these values are maintained by social, economic, political, and legal institutions (Abraham, 1999). A discussion about sexuality or a South Asian woman’s presumed asexuality prior to marriage seems to fit within this discussion of her experiences as a daughter, since marriage serves as the border between childhood and adulthood, and between asexuality and sexuality. A South Asian woman’s primary identity is that of daughter until she is wed, after which she is a wife. Thus, traditionally, if a woman never marries it is generally assumed she will remain a virgin and will reside in her natal home.

A high value is placed on premarital virginity for the South Asian girl, with her virginity serving as a measure of her family’s honour or izzat. Izzat is very important in the South Asian family, and girls are the “repository of the izzat” (Wakil, Siddique, & Wakil, 1981, p. 937). A woman’s premarital virginity ensures her family’s honour through family alliances secured through marriage, the legitimacy of heirs, and the maintenance of caste purity. These alliances act to increase the strength of the family through extended family ties. Thus general modesty is encouraged, a woman’s sexuality is controlled, and her interactions with the opposite sex are discouraged (Abraham, 1999; Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999; Hennink et al., 1999; Wakil et al., 1981).

Ensuring a daughter’s chastity benefits the entire family (Abraham, 1999; Coomaraswamy, 1995). This means that all members of the family influence their “daughters” to be dutiful and to act in accordance with community expectations (Hennink
et al., 1999). Social norms that communicate the shame and social ostracism that will accompany the loss of virginity prior to marriage help to ensure that girls will think twice before engaging in premarital relationships (Abraham, 1999; Hennink et al., 1999). The social stigma against any kind of premarital sexuality is so strong that any assumed promiscuity, even in the case of rape, results in the victim being held responsible (Prasad, 1999).

As sexual activity is forbidden, a young woman’s understanding of her sexuality is largely based on popular stereotypes represented in the media, and through experiences of interaction or coercion by a family friend or relative (Abraham, 1999). The media reinforce gender stereotypes that glorify motherhood and subservient wifehood, and make it difficult for girls to think and act in ways outside their prescribed roles. In terms of sexuality, media images (e.g., South Asian films) reinforce cultural attitudes regarding female chastity through the depiction of punitive outcomes, both personal and societal, for experimentation with sexuality (Abraham, 1999).

With access to women controlled, men’s attitudes regarding women and sex prior to marriage are often drawn from pornography and movies (Abraham, 1999; Derne, 1999). In his study investigating the role of movies in violence against women in India, Derne (1999) noted that Indian films often eroticize and legitimize violence against women by encouraging male viewers to identify with villains, and with heroes who show substantial force in legitimate loving relationships (Derne, 1999). Women are portrayed as the sexually exploitable other (based on their class status or perceived morality) with rape scenes a common part of the script (Abraham, 1999; Derne, 1999).

Although expected to be asexual before marriage, the woman, prior to her wedding night, may be given cursory instruction regarding her wifely responsibility to satisfy her husband’s sexual needs (Abraham, 1999). The movie Kamasutra depicts a scene after the princess marries the king, where her mother-in-law sits with her and talks to her about what will be expected of her on her wedding night. The princess is told to put down a towel to absorb the blood (something she is aware of) and she is reassured that the pain (something she is not aware of) will be fleeting. Nonparticipation by the woman after marriage implies shyness due to lack of sexual experience, which is expected because of gender role socialization, and which must be overcome, even with force, by her husband.
(Abraham, 1999). An example of this is also depicted in Kamasutra: when the king and princess begin lovemaking she responds fearfully and pulls away. He becomes angry and asks her if she is aware of what is expected of her and then takes her by force. Sex, defined as being for men’s pleasure and gratification within marriage, and cultural prescriptions that expect premarital sexual purity for women can increase the risk of sexual violence for South Asian women (Abraham, 1999). Furthermore, the transfer, through marriage, of a woman as property from father to husband combined with beliefs regarding a woman’s destiny and duty to her husband may normalize the occurrence of rape in marriage and may make it more difficult for women to reveal their abuse (Abraham, 1999; Coomaraswamy, 1995).

Marriage

“Marriage is perhaps the only elaborate ritual for a girl during her life” (Kumar, 1991, p. 151).

South Asian cultures view marriage as an ideal, a duty, a social responsibility, and a sacrament where religion, caste, and regional affiliations help to guide mate selection. A daughter is prepared for marriage and motherhood from an early age through instruction and modelling. She is tutored in household tasks (e.g., cooking, cleaning, and needlework), how to interact with others, and in the importance of remaining virtuous and chaste prior to marriage (Kumar, 1991). A family’s izzat is maintained or enhanced when women remain chaste and marry into families of equal or higher status. It has been said that the main goal of marriage is to establish a family, have children, and further the family’s economic and social position (Gupta, 1976).

Marriages are traditionally arranged by parents and are a contract between families rather than the individuals. Arranged marriage practices are reinforced by strong beliefs in destiny, including the idea that one’s mate and fate are preordained by ‘supreme’ forces within the universe (Gupta, 1976). According to the Hindu belief, this means that one is destined to marry the same person throughout one’s many lives, and thus premarital relationships are discouraged in favour of a predestined marital relationship (Gupta, 1976). Dating and ‘love’ marriages are discouraged, based on the belief that “true” love develops gradually, after rather than before marriage (Ballard, 1978; Brah, 1978; Hogg et al., 1987). However, romantic love both within and outside of marriage is
well represented in literature (e.g., Kamasutra), scriptures, and sacred books (Gupta, 1976). Bollywood movies also show young couples falling in love and fighting against external forces (e.g., parents and society) that attempt to separate them.

In general, women are socialized to accept the preeminence of marriage and childbirth (Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996; Natarajan, 1995). There are a lot of positive things that are associated with marriage for a South Asian woman and the thought of becoming married is usually greeted with enthusiasm (Kumar, 1991). For instance, many, like me, receive the message that those things that were not allowed in the natal home might be allowed after marriage (e.g., getting one’s haircut, going out to clubs). A woman’s status rises once she becomes married and in many ways this rite of passage signals her entry into adulthood. The customs and rituals surrounding the wedding itself also create an atmosphere of attention and caring (Kumar, 1991). For instance, in the week prior to a Hindu or Sikh wedding, the bride is kept at home and is not allowed to do work involving knives or other sources of danger in an effort to ensure her safety prior to her wedding. This means that she is given a chance to rest and becomes the centre of attention, possibly for the first and only time in her life. Marriage also offers protection for the girl, both in terms of family alliances and physical protection by her husband and in-laws. Large joint families provide social and economic security for the elderly and ill in countries where old age pensions, disability benefits, and medical insurance are nonexistent or inadequate (Gupta, 1976).

Throughout a girl’s life she learns that it is her duty to align herself with another family and that her natal family ties are temporary (Kumar, 1991). This means that a girl’s “real” family is considered to be the one she marries into, and so she is answerable to her in-laws in a way that is very different than in the West. In fact, the Western saying, “A son’s a son ‘til he takes a wife, A daughter’s a daughter all of her life” is exactly reversed in South Asian society. The woman becomes a part of her husband’s family and in essence is expected to switch her loyalties from her natal family overnight. Once she is married, not only are her rights subordinated to those of her new “real” family, but her birth parents’ rights to her become more limited, and she will shame her family if she returns home to them. Since she is now being supported by her husband’s
family, to whom she is expected to be loyal and obliging, she must do as they wish and adjust to them with little accommodation made for her (Natarajan, 1995).

This new family has a major role in crucial decisions and is supposed to provide the woman with emotional and physical support. Interpersonal conflicts are supposed to be handled by elders, and the new wife’s roles and responsibilities are clearly defined (Gupta, 1976). Marital problems become problems for the whole family, whereby family members are expected to provide advice and counselling to improve the couple’s relationship. The family has a major role in resolving conflict and preventing divorce, although this is not always the case (Gupta, 1976). This joint family system, in which married women are expected to live with their in-laws, can also introduce the risk for violence. There is often rivalry between a wife, her mother-in-law, and sisters-in-law. Fear that the wife can fragment the family by taking her husband out of the joint family system can result in joint family members targeting her for abuse (e.g., mother-in-law verbally and physically abusive) (Agnew, 1998; Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). Power dynamics within the household can result in abuse by men in an attempt to dominate their wives or by other women trying to assert their authority within the home. This can occur through overt violence or through threats of violence (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999).

There is also a relatively new type of violence found within this joint family system, which is related to a woman’s dowry. The dowry, usually in the form of gifts or cash, was historically meant to represent the woman’s property after marriage and was her share of her birth family’s inheritance. A number of factors determine the amount of the dowry, including education, family background, the bride’s physical appearance, and the eligibility of the groom (Abraham, 2000b). Dowries, although illegal in India since the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, have now been reclassified as voluntary gifts to the bride from her family. They are a means to achieve nonwage earning power, with many families using dowry as a way to improve their own status. The dowry is used as a symbol of the groom’s prestige and ability to command such wealth from the bride’s family. The bride’s parents continue to provide a dowry for fear that otherwise they will be unable to marry their daughter, and with hopes that she will be treated well after marriage (Abraham, 2000b).
Dowry related violence has become an issue in India within the last three decades. Abuse (e.g., humiliation, physical violence, and murder) may begin because of some perceived inadequacy with a woman’s dowry, and this abuse can become severe if her parents do not satisfy the demands made by the spouse and his family. Comments about the inadequacy of dowry can constitute emotional abuse, where the intent is to ensure subordination and compliance after the couple has married (Agnew, 1998; Natarajan, 1995). Unmet dowry demands can result in a ‘kitchen death,’ which is the suspicious ‘accidental’ death of a young woman in which the husband and his family are prime suspects. A common method is to use kerosene (commonly used for cooking) and pour it on the woman in order to set her on fire (Natarajan, 1995). Each year, thousands of women who have survived childhood to become young brides may be severely abused by husbands and in-laws whose dowry-related demands for money and goods are not met (Heise et al., 1994; Singh & Unnithan, 1999).

As marriage is a cultural marker of women’s identity and social status in South Asian cultures, many women must preserve their marriages in order to maintain their status, regardless of the cost (Abraham, 1999; Singh & Unnithan, 1999). Thus not only are women economically dependent on their husband’s family, but there is also a social cost to leaving this family (Agnew, 1998). Dasgupta and Warrier (1996) found that the majority of Asian Indian women in their sample indicated a fear of losing social status if their marriages dissolved and implicitly chose gender subordination in exchange for class privilege. These cultural norms regarding a woman’s position and duty to her husband make it difficult for women to challenge the hierarchies of gender, age, and status, and may prevent intervention by family and friends in the case of violence (Agnew, 1998). If a woman openly challenges these patriarchal norms she may lose her status and shame her natal family. This can result in the perpetuation of violence through social practices accompanied by reluctance by South Asian communities to confront the violence (Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996; Kanuha, 1987; Prasad, 1999).

Motherhood

The archetypal mother image of the South Asian/Indian woman has helped women, at least in theory, achieve some status. Motherhood (of a son) symbolizes that a woman has completed her destiny (Kumar, 1991). Kinship and religious values, especially in Hindu
scriptures, stress the need for a male heir and the mother-son relationship is given a place of importance by most South Asians (Kumar, 1991). Much emotional support and physical closeness is derived from a mother’s relationship with her children, especially her sons (Kumar, 1991). Taking care of and sacrificing for her children is often the centre point to a woman’s life, and she shoulders much of the responsibility for teaching her children about the culture’s social mores and rules. For instance, it is often women who tell the stories that communicate social rules and expectations to their children (Ofei-Aboagye, 1994).

Children may also act as a point of commonality for a couple whose match was probably based more on family considerations than on things the couple had in common. Concern for their children may help a husband and wife attain another level of intimacy. Children may also help their mother by acting as a buffer between her and her husband’s family (Kumar, 1991). Focusing on her children’s needs has been identified as one way that women cope with the difficulties in their lives. Speaking with South Asian mothers reveals that their happiness is often defined as having their families together or as doing things with their children. I remember when I was younger, suggesting to my own parents that they go out for dinner or a movie, with the invariable response being “it will be more fun if we all do something together.”

Middle Age

Middle age appears to represent a more relaxed time of life for South Asian women and is a time when women appear to be more comfortable acting in an assertive and independent manner. By this time women tend to have more power within their household as other people now depend on them (Kumar, 1991). This increase in power around the house may help equalize the power balance between the woman and her mother-in-law. Kumar (1991) reports that women may also feel more self-confident after having proven themselves within their families and social groups. A woman from my own community once mentioned to me her growing sense of security and relaxation as she aged. This became very apparent for her in her sleep habits. She reported that when newly married she was afraid to sleep because she worried that her husband and in-laws would get mad at her. In fact, there were times when she recalls being woken roughly by her husband with questions as to why she was still sleeping. She now feels freer to nap
and sleep in, and has noticed that her husband makes sure the grandchildren do not disturb her when she is sleeping.

Immigration

Women often immigrate in order to get married oversees or if married, when their husbands decide the family must emigrate. Although there are many positive aspects of the immigrant experience (e.g., better educational and job opportunities), women readily point out some of the difficulties they have had. A woman I know said to me, “we are nowhere, we are Canadian citizens, we are Indians, but we are nowhere.” In many cases, people regret their decision to immigrate because they lose connections with family and experience unexpected changes with their children. For instance, they find that their children are drifting away from cultural traditions, such as arranged marriages, or are forgetting their native languages. Parents are often unprepared for some of these attitudinal and behavioural changes that occur after immigration. Thus for many South Asians currently living in Canada, issues related to the immigrant experience are identified as quite stressful.

Acculturation, or the cultural and psychological changes that occur when there is close contact between two different cultural groups, occurs when people immigrate to a new country with different cultural norms (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936) (see Appendix B). Changes due to acculturation include physical changes (e.g., geography), biological changes (e.g., new diseases), political changes, economic changes, and psychological changes (e.g., attitudes, identity, and stress related pathology) (Berry, 1990).

Acculturation, like immigration, can be a stressful process. Factors that help to determine whether acculturation will be stressful include demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, religious affiliation, education level, social class, marital status), the circumstances prior to emigration (e.g., trauma, prior cultural knowledge of dominant culture), and experiences following migration (e.g., hostile reception by host population, isolation from members of one’s own cultural group, language fluency, social support, recency of immigration, economic well-being) (Berry, 1990; Berry & Kim, 1988; Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a; Winter & Young, 1998). According to Berry and Kim (1988), the new immigrant
faces physical, biological, social, cultural and psychological difficulties associated with acculturation.

Acculturative stress has been defined as "a reduction in health status (including psychological, somatic and social aspects) of individuals who are undergoing acculturation, and for which there is evidence that these health phenomena are related systematically to acculturation phenomena" (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1990, p. 362). The degree of acculturative stress will depend on the host culture (e.g., assimilationist versus multiculturalist), the acculturating group (e.g., refugees, immigrants, sojourners), modes of acculturation (e.g., integration, assimilation), and the demographic (e.g., language, education), social, and psychological characteristics of the individual (Berry & Kim, 1988, Berry et al., 1990; Krishnan & Berry, 1992).

Factors such as language fluency, social isolation, and racism have been described as major sources of difficulty related to immigration. Lack of fluency in English and/or French can affect many aspects of the immigrant woman's experience and may make it difficult for her to adapt in her new country. For instance, women who cannot speak, read, or write the language may not be able to cope with resettlement stresses and may find it difficult to find the kind of jobs they need (Carlin, 1990). Learning English may be much more difficult for women who do not work outside of the home and thus are not in a position to learn and use the language. This reinforces their dependency on male relatives and prevents awareness of and instruction in their rights and in the use of services if they need help (e.g., shelters, police, social workers, and judicial officers). For instance, lack of knowledge regarding the dominant language will mean that a woman will not understand public service announcements against wife abuse broadcast through the media. This lack of language fluency may increase her dependence on her children who may take on the role of interpreter for her. It may also increase her isolation even with respect to her own children who may choose not to speak in their native language (Abraham, 1995; Agnew, 1998; Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988b; Mehrotra, 1999; Winter & Young, 1998).

Social isolation has been identified as a source of difficulty for immigrant women who are often separated from relatives and social networks (Agnew, 1998; Carlin, 1990). The influence and support of the family is reduced, with friends taking the place of relatives.
Women who are used to having an extended family to support them through crises may find it difficult to cope without their family present (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a). These changes in support systems may require the immigrant woman to become more reliant on her husband for her practical and companionate needs (Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996; Mehrotra, 1999; Preisser, 1999; Winter & Young, 1998).

A factor related to the immigrant experience but not dependent upon it is the experience of racism and discrimination. South Asian women, like other visible minorities, are a cultural minority about whom many members of the dominant majority have relatively strong negative feelings (Berry & Kalin, 1995). This confrontation with a hostile majority group may result in the strengthening of cultural traditions (including oppressive practices) in an effort to preserve group identity in an ‘alien’ setting (Abraham, 1999; Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999; Cerroni-Long, 1984; Singh & Unnithan, 1999; Stopes-Roe & Cochrane, 1988; Tajfel, 1978). For instance, the close-knit nature of South Asian communities in Britain has been found to reinforce the continuing presence of strong traditions and restrictions on young South Asian women (Hennink et al., 1999). Given that racism is so systemic and that it exists in often subtle ways, it is something that most South Asian women in Canada are exposed to at some time or another. My own earliest and clearest memory after moving to Canada was of sitting alone on a swing-set in front of our apartment building (at the age of four). I remember a man (although he was probably a boy) coming up to me and saying something like “you *%@#! Paki” in a loud and angry voice. I remember being frightened and confused as I could not understand English, but was sure I must have done something horrible to deserve his wrath. Unfortunately, this is an experience I have relived many times, although often in ways more subtle and insidious. Many immigrants combat this type of racism and discrimination by resettling in communities where they are among members of their own cultural group and can maintain customs and beliefs and receive support from friends (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a).

Given the host of factors that immigrant women are faced with, it is not surprising that many suffer from mental health difficulties such as depression and anxiety. For many
women depression can be masked by somatic complaints (Winter & Young, 1998). Women may not identify what they feel as depression or anxiety as these are concepts that may be new to them. For example, some South Asian women have described depression and anxiety as things they had never heard of prior to coming to Canada.

Education

“Participation of the girl child in educational pursuits…has been consistently low in the South Asian region” (Sen & Seth, 1995, p. 59).

Education is another area that appears to be important for South Asian women. In South Asia, factors such as poverty, high costs, and concerns regarding chastity combined with a curriculum that fosters gender-role stereotyping results in less education for many girls and/or a focus on vocational pursuits that are a reflection of stereotyped gender roles (e.g., teaching, nursery, and home-sciences) (Sen & Seth, 1995). Many South Asian families in parts of South Asia and in North America are beginning to recognize the need for education for both their sons and their daughters. Education for daughters is becoming a way to increase their marketability as brides, but too much education is discouraged as this may make it more difficult to find her a “suitable” match (Kumar, 1991). I have often heard it said that I ‘talk too much’ or that ‘girls shouldn’t talk so much’ with the underlying message being that book learning should be used only when necessary. However, education does appear to be one way by which women can gain some independence and empowerment. In fact, in North America, many immigrant women have attained some degree of freedom by becoming educated and supporting themselves (Espin, 1995). Education is also becoming a way by which marriage can be postponed, as there is less pressure on the girl to agree to a “match” while she is completing her studies. However, this postponement cannot last too long for fear that the girl will become too old to be competitive within the marriage market.

Working Outside the Home

Working outside of the home has become more of a necessity for South Asian women. Child labour practices flourish in India because it is so cheap, and girls work extremely hard both within and outside of the home. In fact it has been estimated that by the time she is 18 years old, a girl child will have contributed at least $1300 US dollars worth of assistance to her family, most of which goes unrecognized (Sen & Seth, 1995). She not
only helps with cooking, cleaning, child-care and farming, but she may be forced to work in unskilled, manual and low paid jobs where she may be economically and sexually exploited (Sen & Seth, 1995).

However, employment outside the home may be a positive experience for some women, both in parts of South Asia and abroad. Prior to marriage, work outside of the home can help supplement the natal family’s income, increase the woman’s status, and provide her with feelings of independence, self-esteem, self-expression and a sense of identity (Kumar, 1991). In her book, Of Woman Caste, Bagwe (1995) describes how a young woman in the village of Masure in Southern India working as a teacher becomes an economic asset to her family while also enhancing her status within her family, her village, and within the marriage market:

The job has earned Kala great admiration from the village community. It has considerably enhanced her status as a woman with a mind of her own, with talents of service to her natal family. It has also served to enhance her status in the marriage market... The job has overseen her rite of passage from a girl free of too many cares in the world to a full contributing adult member of her household.” (p.165)

Although a job can improve a woman’s status prior to marriage, a profession, which requires further education, may be discouraged until after she is married. However, once married, the woman has much more security and more social acceptance for further education. After marriage a working woman may also have more leverage in her husband’s home and may experience boosts in her self-esteem (Kumar, 1991)

Within the immigrant context, work can have both positive and negative meanings. Work can help the immigrant woman supplement her family’s income. However, lower education levels and limited job skills, compounded by the fact that some South Asian women have their mobility restricted and are not allowed outside of the house unaccompanied, makes it more difficult for these women to find jobs (Carlin, 1990). If an immigrant woman finds work, her income is usually lower and her working conditions poorer than those of immigrant men or Canadian-born women (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988b; Espiritu, 1997; Thakur, 1992). Women who do not work may not have access to money while many women who
do hold jobs may be exploited for their income (Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996). Economic
dependence may act to disempower women, leaving them more susceptible to violence
and less able to fight against violence (Coomaraswamy, 1995).

These age and status related areas of experience illustrate the many commonalities that
are woven throughout the lives of South Asian women. This type of discussion about
relationships and life experiences can be used as a social map of gender roles, cultural
patterns, and internal processes that may inform women's narratives and their experience
of violence. I will now turn to a more general discussion of violence against women.
This literature is quite separate, both in style and content, to that which has been
discussed previously and has been written with the predominant focus on majority
women. Thus the information found hereinafter does not necessarily speak directly to the
experience of a South Asian sample as a lot of necessary information is missing for this
ethnic group. Nevertheless, there are common aspects of violence, regardless of who is
experiencing it, that can help provide a basis with which to evaluate South Asian
women's experiences of violence.

Violence against Women

The literature base on violence against women has been growing steadily ever since
the women's movement brought the issue of violence against women and children to the
political forefront. Gender-based violence against women has been found to cut across
religious, cultural, and geographic boundaries (Reichert, 1998). In 1989 the WorldWatch
Institute declared that violence against women was the most common crime worldwide
(Wolf, 1991; cited in Reichert, 1998; Levinson, 1989). Women activists at the grass
roots level have helped to increase awareness and fuel research regarding these
violations.

One example of this increased awareness was the United Nations (UN) Fourth World
Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. Reichert (1998) reports that the
"strongest most urgent international statement about women's rights" emerged from this
conference. This event has been described as "the largest gathering of women in the
history of the world (Sears, 1996, p. 179; Prigoff, 1996). UN delegates attending the
conference unanimously agreed that the rights of women and girls are an essential part of
human rights through the Platform for Action announced at the conference (Reichert, 1998).

This section provides an overview of the literature in the area of violence against women focusing on the prevalence of violence around the world, the forms that violence against women takes, the impact of violence, and the responses women have toward the violence in their lives. Definitions of violence depend on the context in which classifications are made, as well as on the people who are making the classifications. Much of the research in this area has been conducted by feminist researchers or by people providing services to victims of violence and thus represents a situated point of view.

Much of the literature on violence against women has emphasized women’s victimization (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997). The portrayal of women as victims is not surprising given that an emphasis on victimization has helped to expose the reality and prevalence of violence in women’s lives and has initiated needed change. A focus on the ways in which women have been victimized also helps to reveal the types of services they may require in order to improve their safety and quality of life. For instance, feminist efforts have played a large role in bringing the issue of violence against women to the political forefront. These efforts have included challenging the policing and legal attitudes regarding domestic violence (Narayan, 1997). Thus it is not surprising that in an effort to make the public aware of this usually private abuse much of the associated literature focuses on the forms of violence that exist and the negative consequences that follow.

The research reviewed in this section reflects these viewpoints and may appear to be emphasizing women’s victimization. However, it is also true that women are active agents of the culture that may oppress and victimize them (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Ofei-Aboagye, 1994). Thus women’s agency also needs to be acknowledged and investigated for the clues it can give us regarding women’s resiliency and strength. This knowledge can then be used to provide options for other women who may not be coping successfully with the pressures of violence and oppression.

Much of the research that will be discussed has been conducted in North America with predominantly Caucasian samples, so that the findings may not be reflective of other cultures and areas of the world. An effort has been made to include research with other
cultural groups and to illustrate that women are also active agents in their lives despite,
and at times because of, the violence and oppression they experience. Although the
current investigation focuses on violence in intimate relationships, the following review
of the literature focuses upon violence against women more generally. Awareness of the
variety and consequences of violence is necessary as women may experience multiple
forms of violence during their lives.

There is a growing realization that violence against women is a stark reality that is
prevalent around the world. It can take many forms and occurs across a woman’s life
span, resulting in a range of consequences. Violence against women by their intimate
partners and family members accounts for a large proportion of the violence in women’s
lives. It is estimated that across cultures and socioeconomic classes, millions of women
are assaulted by their partners. Levinson (1989), in his cross-cultural review of violence,
reports that “[w]ife beating is the most common form of family violence around the
world” (p.31). It has been said that wife battering has a greater impact on women’s
overall health than cancer, traffic deaths, and heart disease, areas which have received
more attention (Thurston, 1998).

Researchers around the globe have helped to reveal the pervasiveness of violence (see
Table 1). Official reports citing the incidence and prevalence of male-partner violence
against women worldwide are limited, but the United Nations reports that between 17 and
38 percent of the world’s women have been physically assaulted by an intimate partner,
and it may be as high as 60 percent in many areas of the developing world (UN, 1995;
cited in Horne, 1999). Studies in other countries, using different methods and definitions,
found the following rates of abuse: Barbados—30-50 %, Zambia—40 %, and India—22
percent (Heise et al., 1994). Koss, Goodman, Browne, Fitzgerald, Keita, and Russo
(1994; cited in Kazarian & Kazarian, 1998) reported that based on a review of 17 years of
empirical research on physical aggression in the United States, one in three women will
be assaulted physically at least once by an intimate partner during adulthood. The
executive summary/national action plan of the Canadian Panel on Violence Against
Women (1993) reported that more than half (54 percent) of the 420 women (ages 18 to
64) who were interviewed had experienced some sort of “unwanted or intrusive sexual
experience” before the age of 16 (p.11). Fifty-one percent had been the victims of rape or
Table 1
Prevalence of Wife Abuse around the World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antigua (Handwerker, 1993)</td>
<td>97 women (20-45yrs.)</td>
<td>30% of women battered as adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbados (Handwerker, 1991)</td>
<td>264 women, 243 men (20-45yrs.)</td>
<td>30% of women battered as adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile (Larrain, 1993)</td>
<td>1000 women (22-55 years) in</td>
<td>60% abused by male intimate,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>relationship of &gt; 2 years</td>
<td>26% physically abused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia (Profamilia, 1992)</td>
<td>3272 urban women, 2118 rural women</td>
<td>20% physically abused; 33% psychologically abused;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10% raped by husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica (Chacon et al.,</td>
<td>1388 women</td>
<td>50% physically abused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador (CEPLAES, 1992)</td>
<td>200 low income women</td>
<td>60% “beaten” by partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala (Coy, 1990)</td>
<td>1000 women</td>
<td>49% abused; 74% by intimate male partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya (Raikes, 1990)</td>
<td>733 women</td>
<td>40% “beaten regularly”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia (Raj-Hashim, 1993)</td>
<td>713 women and 508 men over 15</td>
<td>39% women “physically beaten”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico (Jalisco) (Ramirez &amp;</td>
<td>1163 rural women and 427 urban men</td>
<td>57% urban and 44% rural women reported physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vasquez, 1993)</td>
<td></td>
<td>abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico (Valdez, Santiago, &amp;</td>
<td>342 women</td>
<td>33% had lived in a “violent relationship”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cox, 1990)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>New Zealand (Mullen, Romans-</td>
<td>2000 women</td>
<td>3.5% reported sexual abuse since age sixteen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarkson, Walton, &amp; Herbison,</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.2% reported physical abuse as adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand (Mullen et al.,</td>
<td>349 women</td>
<td>20% ‘hit and physically abused” by male partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua (Ellsberg, Cladera,</td>
<td>488 women</td>
<td>52% “ever-married” women reported violence by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herrera, Winkvist, &amp; Kullgren,</td>
<td></td>
<td>intimate partner at least once</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway (Schei &amp; Bakketeig,</td>
<td>150 women (20-49 years)</td>
<td>25% physically or sexually abused by a male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989)</td>
<td></td>
<td>partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papua New Guinea (Toft, 1987)</td>
<td>Rural: 736 men and 715 women;</td>
<td>60% rural women “beaten”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban low income: 368 men and</td>
<td>56% urban low income women “beaten”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>298 women; Urban high income:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>178 men and 99 women</td>
<td>62% urban elite women “beaten”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country (Source)</td>
<td>Sample Size</td>
<td>Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States (Strauss &amp; Gelles, 1986)</td>
<td>2143 married or cohabiting couples</td>
<td>report at least one episode of physical violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States (Grant, Preda &amp; Martin, 1991)</td>
<td>6000 women from Texas</td>
<td>abused by male partner after age 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States (Teske &amp; Parker, 1983)</td>
<td>3000 rural women in Texas</td>
<td>abused after age 18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Heise, 1993)

attempted rape, 27 percent had experienced a physical assault in an intimate relationship, and 50 percent of the women who had experienced physical assault also experienced sexual assault in the same relationship (Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, 1993). The 1993 Statistics Canada Violence Against Women Survey revealed that 27 percent of the respondents reported at least one physically aggressive event committed by a partner or former partner, eight percent reported forced sexual activity by husbands, and one fifth reported emotional abuse (Ratner, 1998). These statistics may be underestimates given that the universal stigma related to intimate partner violence results in significant underreporting. However, they do help to illustrate the global prevalence of violence against women and the different ways in which violence is perpetrated (Heise et al., 1994).

**Cycle of Violence**

Researchers have attempted to describe typical causes and phases of violence. Some investigators have focused on an analysis of the patriarchal roots of wife beating and consider violence to be embedded in a general pattern of control tactics (e.g., Pence & Paymar, 1993; cited in Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Regardless of the precipitator of violence, it gives the perpetrator some measure of control. This control may be specific to a particular situation, or may be more broad, involving a general level of control over another person (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). One depiction of control is the “power and control wheel” suggested by Pence and Paymar (1993; cited in Johnson & Ferraro, 2000), and it is a central concept in the Duluth educational model for interventions with batterers. This model, drawn from the experiences of women seeking help from shelters describes a number of methods that men use to obtain power and control in a given
situation. These include the use of coercion and threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, minimizing, denying, and blaming, using male privilege, and using economic abuse (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, 2003).

Walker (1979; cited in Mitchell & Hodson, 1983) has proposed a cycle theory of battering whereby battering is reinforced by behaviours that occur in a predictable cycle. There is an initial tension-building phase that precedes specific battering incidents. During this phase, women may experience increased fear as they try a variety of strategies to appease their partner and avoid another incident. The second phase is the acute battering incident. This is followed by a third phase where the man demonstrates loving and attentive behaviours that act as a reinforcer for the woman to stay in the relationship in the hopes that his meanness is fleeting and not reflective of his real personality. As women continue to stay in the relationship, the severity and frequency of the physical and psychological abuse is likely to increase (Walker, 1981). Walker (1981) also discusses how the inability to deal with stress may be an antecedent to the frustration that can lead to a violent response. Gender norms may then teach men to express this violence at their wives. Since men have historically been sanctioned to discipline their wives, the line between discipline and acting out frustration may become invisible (Walker 1981).

The learned helplessness theory, originally proposed by Seligman (1975; cited in Walker, 1989), indicates that people who are unable to control negative events may present with apathy and listlessness. This model provides an explanation for the psychological changes in battered women that help account for their staying in abusive relationships (Walker, 1989). The notion of learned helplessness is based on a social-learning paradigm that predicts that if voluntary responses do not result in expected outcomes, certain behavioral, cognitive, and emotional deficits will occur. Learned helplessness is presumed to involve three deficits. First is a motivational deficit characterized by an inability to initiate responses that could help the person leave the situation. This is compounded by the lack of incentive to emit different future responses due to the belief that responses will not determine outcomes. Second, there is a cognitive deficit characterized by the inability to learn that if the situation changes the responses and outcome may change as well. This deficit is an example of proactive interference
whereby past experiences make it more difficult to learn new contingencies. Finally, there is an affective deficit characterized by depression. These three deficits create a self-perpetuating cycle involving the belief that the woman’s responses will have no impact on what happens to her, and thus she is less likely to try new responses or recognize the effect of new responses if she does initiate them (Strube, 1988). Thus if people perceive they have no control over events they will stop responding to them. This perception may lead to the psychological paralysis battered women report in being unable to escape from and terminate the violent relationship (Walker, 1977-1978; cited in Walker, 1981).

However, others believe that this theory is another example of victim blaming, with the common representation of the battered woman as passive, self-deprecating, helpless, and depressed presenting an image which is misleading (McHugh et al., 1993; Thurston, 1998). Research has shown that when faced with an increase in violence, battered women increase their help seeking rather than decrease their help seeking. It is also clear that women do seek help from family and social service agencies (McHugh et al., 1993). Therefore, some researchers believe that not only is the learned helplessness theory inaccurate, but it also acts to obscure the strength and courage required to survive prolonged abuse (Thurston, 1998)

Forms of Violence

Violence against women has been defined as physical, emotional, or sexual behaviour used by an individual to exercise power and control over another (Abraham, 1999). In a broader reading, beyond its definition as criminal use of physical or verbal force, violence can include coercion or life-threatening deprivation that causes physical or psychological harm, humiliation, or that perpetuates female subordination through exploitation, discrimination, and unequal economic and social structures (Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Coomaraswamy, 1995; Heise et al., 1994). These definitions encompass a broad range of behaviours that fall along a continuum of violence. This continuum includes acts that may or may not always be labelled violent, depending on a variety of factors (e.g., place, context, historical time, cultural norms). For instance, there are some behaviours on this continuum that are indisputably violent (e.g., murder) while others may be defined as violent only by some and at certain times (e.g., yelling at one’s partner). Often the consequences of the behaviour will help to define whether it is violent
or not. For example, an act that results in physical harm is much easier to define as violence than an act that does not result in physical harm.

Violence against women has been classified in different ways, but in a very general sense can be categorized in terms of the relationships women have to men and society. Women are at risk for certain types of violence just by being female (e.g., sexual assault, female genital mutilation, female infanticide and malnourishment, forced prostitution), by having relationships with men (e.g., domestic violence and dowry murders), or by belonging to a specific social group (e.g., brutality during war to humiliate the group a woman belongs to) (Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Coomaraswamy, 1995; Walker, 1999). Violence can include: physical violence, sexual violence, cultural practices which are harmful to women (e.g., dowry-related violence, female genital mutilation), non-spousal violence, and violence relating to exploitation (e.g. intimidation, trafficking, and forced prostitution, threats) (Agnew, 1998; Browne, 1993; Coomaraswamy, 1995; Heise et al., 1994; Levinson, 1989). According to Mehrotra (1999), violence can include anything that keeps women in a subjugated position and maintains the power held by men.

Violence against women and its impact can be discussed in terms of three main types of violence: physical, sexual and psychological. Physical violence is usually obvious and can include all types of violent actions including being slapped, hit, punched, having things thrown at you, having property confiscated and/or destroyed (e.g., destruction of pictures, letters etc.), being pushed, grabbed, shoved, kicked, bitten, choked, assaulted with a knife or a gun, and/or murdered. These physical violations have the potential for injury and harm both physically and psychologically (Browne, 1993; Koss, 1990; McHugh et al., 1993; Ratner, 1998). Although the range of violent behaviour and its physical and psychological consequences may be similar across cultures, the manifestations of violence may vary in different settings and across ethnic groups (Ellsberg et al., 1999; Gartner, Dawson, & Crawford, 1998; Heise et al., 1994; Koss, Heise, & Russo, 1994; Kozu, 1999; Perilla et al., 1994; Resick, 1993; Scott et al., 1993; Sorenson, 1996; Walker, 1999). For instance, “acid throwing” is an increasingly common and particularly brutal form of physical violence found in India and Bangladesh. This abuse involves throwing corrosive liquid at women in an effort to scar and disfigure.
It is often perpetrated by partners, family members, and/or rejected suitors, and results in injuries such as permanent disfigurement and death (Heise et al., 1994).

Research indicates that it is important to distinguish between types or contexts of violence, levels of violence and its direct and indirect effects (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Vitanza, Vogel, & Marshall, 1995). Sexual violence has been separated into different forms: sexual assault and rape; sexual control and manipulation of reproductive rights; and sexual control through threats or actual sexual infidelity (Abraham, 1999). Sexual assault can range from sexual threats or harassment to forced sexual acts and rape (Browne, 1993; McHugh et al., 1993). Forced sex can be rough or painful, can include the performance of particular sexual acts, and/or sex with objects. There may also be threatened or actual violence if sexual demands are not met (Browne, 1993; Campbell & Soeken, 1999). The research reveals that almost half of all battered women are forced to have sex by their male partners and that forced sex or rape may be associated with more severe physical violence (Campbell & Soeken, 1999).

Rape can take many forms (e.g., gang rape, incest, rape while in police custody, marital rape, rape as revenge, political rape). Some forms of rape, such as marital rape, have become more visible; however, other contexts maintain the invisibility of rape. Mass rape during war is commonly used to humiliate, degrade, and dilute the opponent group and has been documented in a number of countries (Heise et al., 1994; Walker, 1999). In contrast, the plight of a woman forced into an unwanted marriage or the case of child brides are instances where women and children may go through a lifetime of rape without it being recognized as such (Jahangir, 1992). Acts related to sexuality can also be implicitly coercive. For example, men refusing to wear condoms, becoming emotionally abusive or threatening when discussing safe sex, having unprotected sex with other women, or being demeaning or emotionally abusive in terms of sex can also have dire consequences for women (Campbell & Soeken, 1999).

Sexual abuse by controlling women’s reproductive rights involves controlling a woman’s choice and access to contraception, or controlling her decision to have or abort a child. Control of reproduction is viewed by many cultures as the right of men in the position of husband and patriarch. Sexual control through impregnation emphasizes the cultural belief that to have children is a woman’s natural desire and determines a
woman’s relationship as oriented toward motherhood rather than sexual desire and gratification (Abraham, 1999). Sexual abuse by threatening to have a relationship with another woman can make a woman feel scared, inadequate, or humiliated and can result in a loss of self-esteem (Abraham, 1999; Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990). Sexual violence can also be perpetrated by significant others such as a woman’s extended family members and can occur through the sexualization of women’s bodies, sexualized gaze, language, and action because of the perpetrator’s belief that he is economically, socially, and emotionally more powerful (Abraham, 1999).

Psychological or emotional abuse is one of the broadest and most pervasive types of violence toward women. However, it may also be the hardest to define and the easiest to conceal, in part because different cultures may define emotional abuse and its consequences differently. Psychological abuse can include threats of violence, or divorce/abandonment, jealousy/possessiveness, mental degradation, verbal attacks, enforcing isolation and controlling freedom of movement, deliberate misinformation by spouses of wives regarding their legal rights (e.g., information regarding immigration or custody of children) and denial of support (Abraham, 1995; Agnew, 1998; Follingstad et al., 1990; Heise et al., 1994; Huisman, 1996; Jiwani & Buhagiar, 1997; McHugh et al., 1993; Mehrotra, 1999). A central component in emotional or psychological violence is coercive control (e.g., threats of severe physical harm), which has serious psychological consequences (Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Follingstad et al., 1990).

Previous examination of violence in women’s lives has focused upon one type of violence at a time (e.g., rape, battering, or psychological abuse) (Sorenson, 1996). However, victims of domestic violence report multiple forms of abuse from their intimate partners, each of which is difficult to examine in isolation (Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Ellsberg et al., 1999; Follingstad et al., 1990; Sorenson, 1996; Thurston, 1998; Walker, 1999). For instance, in their study assessing the relationship between emotional and physical abuse for a sample of American women, Follingstad et al. (1990) found that most of the women they questioned (72 %) had experienced multiple types of abuse by their male partners. In fact, 229 of the 234 women in their study who had some history of physical abuse also reported at least one incident of emotional abuse. Campbell and Soeken (1999), in their study of a community sample of African American women, found
that 46% of their participants had been physically as well as sexually abused. When investigating the impact of violence, studies do not usually take into account the cumulative impact of these multiple traumas (Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002; Koss et al., 1994). For instance, verbal abuse, especially in combination with physical abuse, can serve to control women by making them believe they are worthless (Follingstad et al., 1990).

**Impact of Violence**

As can be seen from the brief discussion above, the impact of violence, regardless of the form of that violence, is far-reaching, profound, and complex. I will now spend some time talking specifically about the impact of violence and the different consequences that arise. Often, it is the impact and consequences of violence rather than the violence itself that lead people to seek help. Many of the effects of violence have been identified worldwide (see Table 2), occur on various levels including psychological, physical, and social, and may continue for years after the event (Browne, 1993; Koss et al., 1994; Heise et al., 1994; Thurston, 1998). As the frequency of abuse increases, the risk of developing some type of psychological sequelae also increases (Ratner, 1998).

The psychological impact of violence appears to be one of the most pervasive and enduring consequences of violence. The psychological impact can be more debilitating than the physical consequences, and women often consider emotional abuse, humiliation, and the ever-present threat of violence more devastating than physical assault (Heise et al., 1994). Psychological reactions to the experience of violence, especially rape, are complex and include shock, fear and anxiety, posttraumatic stress reactions, depression, decreased self-esteem, social maladjustment, sexual dysfunction, and poor body image (Bergen, 1995; Browne, 1993; Gleason, 1993; Resick, 1993; Thurston, 1998). Some of these reactions are acute and occur immediately while others are chronic and continue for years after the violence (Browne, 1993; Koss, 1990; Mullen et al., 1988; Resick, 1993). In the 1993 Statistics Canada Violence Against Women Survey, almost one third of the sample reported some type of psychological sequelae, such as feeling shame or guilt, lowered self-esteem, problems relating to men, and lingering anger (Ratner, 1998).

Fear regarding vulnerability to violence at work, home, and school can lead women (both victimized and nonvictimized) to change and restrict their behaviour to avoid
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s) and year of publication</th>
<th>Sample size and type$^a$</th>
<th>Findings$^b$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gleason, 1993</td>
<td>30 battered women (20C, 3AA, 1H, 1A) from a shelter; 32 battered women (27C, 3AA, 1H, 1A) living at home; random sample of U.S. women in the epidemiological study</td>
<td>Number of disorders found for battered women: MDD, PTSD, GAD, OCD, alcohol abuse, and psychosexual functioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campbell, Kub, Belknap, &amp; Templin, 1997</td>
<td>164 battered women (77%AA, 6% AnA, 8.5% EA, .6%A, .6%A, .6%A, 5.5%O) from a major midwestern city in the U.S.</td>
<td>39% exhibited major depression, which was less than that found by Gleason, 1993.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellisberg et al., 1999</td>
<td>Representative sample of 488 women in the US</td>
<td>Women reporting abuse were six times more likely to experience emotional distress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astin, Lawrence, &amp; Foy, 1993</td>
<td>53 battered women (57%C, 19%B, 17%H, 4%A, 4%NA) from three Los Angeles area shelters</td>
<td>The PTSD rate for these women was 33%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arata &amp; Burkhardt, 1996</td>
<td>316 college women who reported coercive sexual experiences</td>
<td>One third of women who reported coercive sexual experiences display significant levels of PTSD symptoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitanza, Vogel, &amp; Marshall, 1995</td>
<td>93 women in bad or stressful relationships from Dallas-Fort Worth Area (89%C)</td>
<td>56% of the women suffered from PTSD.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $^a$C – Caucasian, AA – African American, A – Asian, AnA – Anglo American, ArA – Arab American, B – Black, EA – European American, MA – Mexican American, NA – Native American, O – Other, H – Hispanic

$^b$MDD – Major Depressive Disorder, PTSD – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, GAD – Generalized Anxiety Disorder, OCD – Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

victimization (Coomaraswamy, 1995; Derne, 1999; Koss, 1990). Victimization can destroy a person’s sense of trust, and can result in enduring feelings of inequality, loss,
and helplessness, through the gradual erosion of assumptions about a woman's self and her world (McHugh et al., 1993; Vitanza et al., 1995). This overwhelming sense of fear that can accompany severe violence may get in the way of the protective strategies (e.g., enforcing use of birth control) that women use (Abraham, 1999; Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Koss et al., 1994; McHugh et al., 1993; Ratner, 1998; Resick, 1993; Vitanza et al., 1995).

Survivors of violence may also experience mental health disorders such as high levels of depression, anxiety, insomnia, obsessive-compulsive disorder and post traumatic stress disorder, with these disorders becoming more likely with repeated victimization (Browne, 1993; Gleason, 1993; Heise et al., 1994; Koss, 1990; Koss et al., 1994; McHugh et al., 1993; Mullen et al., 1988; Ratner, 1998; Resick, 1993; Thurston, 1998). Depression appears to be the most prevalent psychological response to battering in an intimate relationship, with battered women experiencing depression at a rate four to five times higher than women who have not been battered (Campbell, Kub, Belknap, & Templin, 1997; Gleason, 1993). In their study of the impact of violence on women’s health in New Zealand, Mullen et al. (1988) reported that 75 percent of the diagnostic classifications in their sample were depressive disorders with the remainder being phobic and anxiety conditions. Campbell and colleagues (1997) in their research with battered women in a major Midwestern U.S. city found that depression was significantly related to the frequency and severity of physical abuse and concluded that physical abuse in intimate relationships is a component in the etiology of depression for these women.

Another common consequence of assault is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 4th edition, 1994). For most survivors of violence, a postvictimization stress response can become chronic with features of fear/avoidance, re-experiencing symptoms, hypervigilance, affective restriction, disturbances of self-concept/self-efficacy, and sexual dysfunction (Arata & Burkhart, 1996; Browne, 1993; Koss, 1990). Women in battering relationships experience not only the stress of discrete battering incidents, but also the strain associated with the anticipation of future battering. The psychological reactions of women to specific battering incidents have been likened to those more generally displayed by victims of trauma (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983). Thus PTSD has been used to
conceptualize many of the psychological effects of violence including intrusive memories, avoiding reminders of the trauma, depression, and anxiety (Astin, Lawrence, & Foy, 1993; Browne, 1993; Vitanza et al., 1995).

PTSD has been identified in many women who have experienced violence, whether or not they go to shelters and community clinics for help. Houskamp and Foy (1991; cited in Vitanza et al., 1995), in their assessment of PTSD symptoms in women from domestic violence clinics in a U.S. city, found that 45% of their sample exhibited PTSD and that the severity of violence was positively correlated with diagnoses of PTSD. Thus the more intense the violence experienced, the greater the level of PTSD (Astin et al., 1993). Vitanza et al. (1995) examined emotional distress and PTSD symptoms in a sample of community women in the U.S. who were seriously psychologically abused by their partners. They found that PTSD and severe symptoms of emotional distress are not limited to women who experience physical violence or to those who seek help from shelters or other services. Arata and Burkhart (1996) confirmed that victims of sexual assault by an acquaintance also displayed significant levels of PTSD symptoms.

The magnitude of these psychological consequences can vary depending on factors such as the frequency of abuse, degree of emotional abuse, isolation from friends and relatives, and other life events (Ratner, 1998). Other variables may also act to moderate the impact of violence and affect recovery. These include pre-assault variables (e.g., prior psychological functioning, life stressors, and cognitive evaluation), assault variables (e.g., relationship to assailant, level of violence, and subjective distress of victim during crime), and post-assault variables (e.g., initial reaction to assault, participation in the criminal justice system, social support, and cognitive appraisals of the assault) (Resick, 1993). Interviews with survivors and non-victims confirm the notion that cognitive appraisals by victims (e.g., internal versus external attribution of blame) and not the event (e.g., type of assault) tend to mediate the degree of emotional distress (Arata & Burkhart, 1996). Astin et al. (1993) found that social support and positive life events were correlated with a lower intensity of PTSD while negative life events and developmental family stressors correlated with higher levels of PTSD. Furthermore, violence against women may be more complex than other types of trauma because women may be traumatized repeatedly over long periods of time, they may be intimately involved with
the perpetrator, and the violence may involve significant emotional abuse and betrayal (Astin et al., 1993). Thus, understanding the psychological responses to violence requires that we look at both the trauma and the recovery from the women’s point of view (Koss et al., 1994).

Most women who are survivors of violence report multiple physical consequences ranging from superficial bruises, cuts, burns, sprains, and scratches to multiple fractures, internal injuries, loss of consciousness, miscarriages, permanent injuries (e.g., damage to joints), partial loss of hearing or vision, physical disfigurement from burns, bites, and knife wounds, and at the extreme -- death (Browne, 1993; Ratner, 1998). In the 1993 Statistics Canada Violence Against Women Survey, 45 % of the physically or sexually abused wives reported physical injury with bruises being the most common injury (Ratner, 1998). Severity of abuse strongly determines the severity of the physical injury and is the best predictor of emotional distress (Ellsberg et al., 1999; Ratner, 1998). A higher incidence of illnesses and somatic complaints -- chronic headaches, abdominal pains, muscle aches, arthritis, recurrent vaginal infections, sleep and eating disorders, and gastrointestinal problems -- have been found to occur for women who have experienced violence in their lives (Heise et al., 1994; Ratner, 1998; Thurston, 1998). Recent research suggests an association between domestic violence and delayed physical effects, particularly arthritis, hypertension, and heart disease (Council on Scientific Affairs, American Medical Association, 1992).

Although the physical and mental health consequences of violence are extensive, some countries may have consequences that are unique to the types of violence perpetrated within their borders. For instance, in areas of Africa where female circumcision or genital mutilation is practiced, common sequelae for circumcised women may include shock, trauma to adjacent structures, infection, chronic pelvic infections, dyspareunia, infertility, and psychic trauma (Calder, Brown, & Rae, 1993; Lightfoot-Klein, 1989). The extent of all forms of sequelae has major implications within the health care sector not only in terms of health care costs, but also in the need for culturally sensitive care.

Violence against women has been conceptualized as a women’s health issue with long-term physical, somatic, psychological, and social health consequences. These
consequences to health have major implications for promotion of women’s health and health care costs. For instance, Ratner (1998) discussed how, in general, the health of abused wives is much poorer than that of wives who have not experienced violence. Abused women are more likely to rate their health as fair or poor than women who have not been abused (Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Ratner, 1998). The experience and fear of violence can rob women of their health and energy, depriving society of women’s contributions to the world and resulting in hidden economic and social costs (Heise, 1993; Thurston, 1998; Walker, 1999).

Women who experience intimate partner violence may lose social, psychological, and physical resources for maintaining their well being (Thurston, 1998). The detrimental effects of violence against women on health are evidenced by the enormous cost of health care and healthy years of life lost because of violence. In fact, it is estimated that violence against women accounts for almost one in every five years of healthy life lost to women between the ages 15 and 44 (Heise et al., 1994; Koss et al., 1994). A study by the Centre for Research and Violence Against Women and Children (1995) examined the costs for violence against women, and estimated that 4.2 billion dollars are spent annually in Canada on the four policy areas of social services/education, health/medicine, criminal justice, and labour/employment.

Femicide

Suicide.

Violence and psychological distress may also increase the risk for suicide in women (Koss, 1990; Thurston, 1998). Female suicide may be one way for women to respond to their life circumstances and/or oppression (Heise et al., 1994). In India, even though there is a higher incidence of suicide for men than women, it is women’s suicides that figure prominently in the media, community, and the family. For a South Asian woman, the dominant context for suicide is the family into which she marries (Waters, 1999). A number of studies from India indicate that ill-treatment by husband and/or in-laws was the most common precipitating factor for suicide, with the peak ages of suicide for women being 15 to 24 years (Heise et al., 1994). For the most part, the public blames a woman more than a man and will condemn her even if it was a man’s actions that caused the problem that led to her suicide (Tousignant, Seshadri, & Raj, 1998). If the suicide
appears related to a dowry death (i.e., the death of a married woman whose family is unable to pay the dowry demands made by the husband and his family), then the public may be angry with the in-laws (Tousignant et al., 1998). However, even for women who are burnt alive by husbands or members of their husband’s family, the blame is often placed on the women and deaths are labelled as suicides or as accidents (Singh & Unnithan, 1999). In fact, the instigation of suicide by others in India is considered so pervasive that social activists have claimed “every suicide is a murder” (Waters, 1999, p. 526).

Gender appears to play a large role in culturally sanctioned suicides in India. Female suicide symbolizes the theme of sacrifice and the role of women as martyrs of their society and it may be tolerated if, for example, death was chosen over having to resort to prostitution or in response to sexual assault. A key component in the incitement to suicide in India is suffering. As suffering exists as part of the ideology of the ideal South Asian women, it is accepted as a part of life. More specifically, suffering in this life is understood to be the punishment or atonement for misdeeds in a past life, or to pave the way for less suffering in a future life. However, whether women are compelled by others to take their own lives or are murdered, the reality of femicide is devastating.

Homicide.

Most of the women murdered in a number of countries are murdered by their partners (Heise et al., 1994). In some cases the goal of violence may be death, or murder may result when violence escalates from less severe forms to forms that have a greater potential for injury and death (Mercy & Saltzman, 1989). In Canada, between 1983 and 1992, an average of 116 women a year were killed by family members, primarily husbands or common-law partners (Statistics Canada, 1995; cited in Thurston, 1998).

It has been stated that the link between homicide and violence against women is especially strong in India. The abuse and murder of women in India extends across the life span and family constellations (Heise et al., 1994). In childhood, female infanticide or malnutrition is common due to the importance placed on male children. This is not to say that infanticide is taken lightly; it is in fact committed with great pain and anguish by mothers who see no other choice and who prefer to have their infant daughters die than live lives stricken with poverty, unhappiness, and danger (Levinson, 1989).
Interplay of violence and culture

Having presented a brief review of the literature regarding the areas of both culture and violence against women, I believe it is important to discuss the interplay between these two areas. As described above it is clear that the violence and oppression faced by women is a global phenomenon existing across cultures that results in a variety of emotional and physical consequences. However, there is a great deal of cultural variation in patterns and manifestations of domestic violence (Ellsberg et al., 1999; Gartner et al., 1998; Heise et al., 1994; Koss et al., 1994; Perilla et al., 1994; Resick, 1993; Scott et al., 1993; Sorenson, 1996; Vandello & Cohen, 2003; Walker, 1999). Triggers for violence and the appropriate responses to these events may differ across cultural groups (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). The consequences of violence may also be unique to the types of violence perpetrated in different parts of the world (e.g., genital mutilation). Thus although these areas have been discussed separately, in reality they are difficult to disentangle when trying to understand the lived experience of women.

Systemic factors unique to different parts of the world may provide additional issues that women must deal with. For instance, violence against women in Russia is strongly impacted by forced dependence on men due to employment discrimination and the emphasis on traditional family roles advocated by a resurgent Russian Orthodox Church. This leaves many women fearful that they will be unable to support their families if they leave their abuser (Horne, 1999). Even if a woman decides to leave her abuser she may be forced to live with him for years due to the severe housing shortage in Russia. This shortage means that millions of people share “communal apartments” whereby ex-spouses must continue to live together as they both retain legal right to the apartment due to residential permit laws. Women may be not be able to move in with their relatives either as Russian extended families often live together. Real estate prices may also be too high for people to leave state-subsidized housing (Horne, 1999).

Not only may violence manifest differently in different parts of the world, factors related to immigration, minority status, and hostility from the majority community will impact an immigrant woman’s general levels of stress and ability to cope. Factors related to culture may influence how women respond to violence, and the types of aid they require. It is clear that domestic violence is the product of many forces. Some of these
may reside within the abusive male, but culture also plays a causal role by providing the scripts for the ways in which males and females are to behave (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). In the ensuing discussion regarding issues of disclosure and responses to violence, the influence of culture on women's experience is more explicitly discussed in order to reveal how the interaction of ethnicity, gender, and other factors impact on South Asian women's lives.

Silencing of Violence

On a global level, the private nature of abuse, the lack of definitional consensus regarding types of violence, the methodological limitations in research, and the reluctance of women to report these crimes often keeps the enormity of violence hidden (Kazarian & Kazarian, 1998; Koss et al., 1994). This reluctance may be exacerbated by social norms against discussing sexual and private matters, distrust of authorities or fellow citizens, and the desire to maintain privacy in small communities (Koss et al., 1994). Furthermore, the historical tradition that has condoned violence within the family has created an emphasis on secrecy that prevents disclosure of violence into the public record (Koss, 1990). Cultural norms and labels also act to maintain the invisibility of violence against women. Across cultures, the belief that the family is sacred and that what happens within the home is private has helped to keep the crime of violence within the home hidden (Abraham, 1995; Padayachee & Singh, 1998; Winter & Young, 1998). In South Asian communities problems of marital violence are kept hidden because they reflect badly on the community. This, when combined with the relative isolation of immigrant women, renders the silence around violence pervasive in South Asian communities in North America (Abraham, 1999).

Regardless of culture or crime, when people are identified as victims, some degree of devaluation occurs (Koss, 1990). In a caste-based, collectivist society like India in which family honour overrides personal freedom and the group takes precedence over the individual, it is common for women to remain silent to save their family honour (Prasad, 1999; Winter & Young, 1998). Women are afraid to speak up because they fear losing their children or losing face, and they do not want to reflect badly on their community (Huisman, 1996). Shame as a societal control mechanism has a powerful impact on the acknowledgment and reporting of violence (especially sexual assault) and on proposed
intervention strategies. For instance, women who do report violence are often isolated and ridiculed within their communities, and may be intimidated into dropping legal charges (Prasad, 1999). The stigma of public humiliation is an important tool that prevents families and communities from discussing “personal problems” (Kanuha, 1987). Thus women may not report violence because of shame, negative social stigma, and the fear of inquisition by police and physicians.

Deeply entrenched beliefs about their place in the social order may also prevent South Asian women from seeing themselves as abused (Huisman, 1996). For example, if one’s life is predestined then anything that one experiences must be preordained. Thus a violent husband may be something a woman accepts as her fate and she may not identify her experience as abuse. Even after deciding to report the abuse or seek help, the power and constant vigilance of a South Asian woman’s spouse and family may mean that she is constantly watched, making it difficult for her to communicate with service providers. Something as simple as receiving a phone call could pose a danger to the woman if her partner or family members become suspicious that she is seeking help (Agnew, 1998; Huisman, 1996). Language, culture, and socialization may also act as barriers for accessing services. There is not a lot of community, family, and/or financial support for South Asian women who want to leave their husbands due to the stigma associated with being abused and/or divorced (Agnew, 1998).

There is also a lack of police protection for women in certain groups. Research has noted that aboriginal women, immigrant, and refugee women, women of colour, sex trade workers and other marginalized women are discriminated against by the police, where police often fail to respond to calls for immediate intervention. Thus stereotyping by police, inadequate training for officers, and officers’ reluctance to arrest abusers become major obstacles for women (Abraham, 1995; Ferraro, 1989). Furthermore, survivors of violence who are members of stigmatized communities may not feel safe in calling the police or pressing charges for fear that they will encounter gender, ethnic, and class discrimination or even violence within the criminal justice system (Abraham, 1999; Jiwani & Buhagiar, 1997). One issue specific to immigrant women is the fear that if they leave an abusive relationship, they will be stranded in Canada with no means of support or deported to their country of origin. Woman may be apprehensive about involving the
police because they fear their abusers; the ensuing backlash from their communities; the impact of their actions on their children and families; the resultant economic reality; and the thought of dealing with a largely unknown criminal justice system (Jiwani & Buhagiar, 1997). Women from countries such as India, where violence against women remains a common form of dominance and control despite public awareness campaigns, laws, and antiviolence demonstrations, and where the policing of violence is inconsistent or ineffective, may carry fears of the police and legal system from their country of origin to the country they emigrate to (Prasad, 1999).

Responses to Violence

The literature review thus far reveals the complexity of factors that are present for victims of violence. In the case of South Asian women in Canada, not only do they have to deal with their own cultural context for violence, but also the many aspects of immigration and acculturation they face daily. Despite different combinations of these factors, women manage to resist and to cope with the violence in their lives and thus the term “survivor” seems to better represent their active attempts to survive than the term “victim.” Even when women are born into cultures that do not offer them a lot of room to maneuver and do not give them the choice to define their own terms, they are still able to work within the system to get their needs met. For instance, Bedouin women simultaneously support the traditional system of dominance by elder males (e.g., through veiling) while they subvert and resist it by covering for each other when they make secret trips to visit relatives or smoke (Abu-Lughod, 1990).

Resistance

Women survive violence in their lives by developing adaptive strategies of resistance and strength (Lempert, 1996). Methods of resistance act to promote survival and are an essential part of the process of empowerment, wherein women have an active part in ensuring their own survival (Mehrotra, 1999). In the past, battered women in the West have often been represented as powerless, passive victims. This representation is both disempowering and misleading as many studies show that oppressed individuals can be active agents in their own resistance (Bergen, 1995; Lempert, 1996; McHugh et al., 1993; Mehrotra, 1999).
Resistance strategies are shaped by the culture and context in which they are expressed (Mehrotra, 1999). People from different cultures have a variety of strategies they might use, with many commonalities across cultural groups; however, there are also some strategies particular to the culture in which they are manifested. For instance, Mehrotra (1999) describes how the traditional division of labour in the family worked to shape the resistance strategies chosen by the Asian Indian women in her study. She found that resistance in the domestic sphere often involved the refusal to complete housework. This refusal may be expressed through somatic complaints and illness resulting in the inability to complete work. In the interpersonal context, the limited access Asian Indian women have to money and their often-limited freedom of movement also lead to some innovative strategies for resistance. Mehrotra (1999) describes how one woman whose husband would not allow her to have spending money would take small sums of money out of her partner’s wallet whenever she had the chance, or another woman who kept important documents in the car so they were inaccessible to her partner. In the personal context, Mehrotra (1999) discussed how women would resist their abuser by regaining control over their bodies. For instance, they might refuse sex if their partners were refusing access to children or refuse to speak to partners who ignored them. Women have also gone outside the relationship to seek help and advocacy from family members or friends whom the partner respects, or by going to the police or court system (Mehrotra, 1999).

Methods of resistance can be overt and obvious, but covert acts of resistance can also be empowering and may hold some cultural significance. For instance, in the South Asian context (as in many other cultures), bodily fluids are considered unsanitary and polluting. Thus spitting into her husband’s food would be a very strong act of resistance and rebellion by a South Asian woman who is trying to survive (Mehrotra, 1999). It has been said that “the Indian woman, like many who have played the subordinate role, learns to manipulate the more powerful man in a manner that is subtle and frequently not observed by those who are being manipulated” (Kumar, 1991, p. 153). Thus, the use of covert acts of resistance illustrates the different ways in which women have learned to get their needs met when a more overt act might result in further danger (Mehrotra, 1999).
Women may try to physically resist their partners or retaliate; however, many learn not to resist in this way so as to minimize their injuries. Browne (1993) states that women who are being assaulted may "offer little or no resistance in an attempt to minimize the threat of injury or renewed aggression" (p. 1080). For some, the most successful strategy is avoidance or placating their partner (e.g., not seeing friends, quitting jobs, distancing from families, keeping children quiet) (Bergen, 1995; Browne, 1993). Lempert (1996) reports that in her research, passivity was used as a strategy for survival and that "passive resistance was a strategic mode of action undertaken in preservation of self" (p. 281). For example, survival often was contingent on restraining overt expressions of self. This passive resistance is used strategically, whereby even when women appeared to acquiesce to their abuser, they in fact continued to work on alternatives (Lempert, 1996).

**Coping/Resilience.**

While resistance refers to practical strategies for survival, coping refers more to psychological adjustments. Coping with trauma involves minimizing the threats to our basic assumptions about the world and searching for meaning (Vitanza et al., 1995). Coping may involve the use of cognitive strategies that help to redefine the situation, and problem solving behaviours that help to reduce anxiety and distress in order to aid survival (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). Problem solving strategies often focus on managing the violence and include rationalization, minimizing the significance of the violence to both oneself and others, and self-blame. These processes may occur simultaneously, may overlap and be circular, and may be used separately or in combination (Lempert, 1996). Educating and empowering women to believe in and take care of themselves (e.g., through knowledge, motivation, and/or experience in decision making), may also help to improve and maintain their psychological health (Campbell et al., 1997). A focus on their own welfare in spite of abuse has been found to keep more women resistant to depression (Campbell et al., 1997). Empowerment is considered to decrease depression and trauma by teaching survivors of violence to identify and attack self-defeating cognitions and combine action with skill building (Gleason, 1993). Unfortunately, despite active attempts to manage the violence there may not be a
significant change in the woman’s environment, even though women may experience themselves differently (Lempert, 1996).

Methods of interpretation and coping with violence may change as the relationship changes and progresses (Bergen, 1995). For victims of haphazard crimes, treating the incident as a single occurrence may help them to cope. However, women in violent relationships have to either develop other strategies to help them cope or end the relationship (Bergen, 1995). Two common coping strategies -- forgetting and minimizing -- help to explain why battered women, especially those who have been victimized over long periods of time, tend to underestimate the frequency and severity of the violence they experience (McHugh et al., 1993; Heise et al., 1994).

Coping can be aided by increased activity outside of the house, through the use of various cognitive strategies, and by perceived social support (Santello & Leitenberg, 1993). Some battered women also seek help from shelters and police. Shelters are an important source of community aid and have been linked with less depression and more hopefulness (McHugh et al., 1993). They provide physical protection and self-help groups so that women can share common experiences, receive encouragement, and have a basis of social comparison. However, isolation imposed by violent partners can result in a diminished support network. This may be further exacerbated when friends experience burnout and reduce their contact with women after they perceive repeated failures to help (Thurston, 1998).

Promotion and maintenance of psychological and physical health can also be influenced by a culture’s belief system. For instance, the interdependent and collectivist nature of South Asian culture may help a woman cope, as she may be able to seek help from a relative or friends. Women can also find empowerment through their positions within their family, such as mothering and caring for their children in the domestic sphere where they still have some power (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). Other indigenous strategies within the South Asian culture include the use of social regulation, where fear that others will find out and dishonour will result can act to police the abuser’s behavior and frighten or shame him into stopping the abuse (Preisser, 1999).

Coping strategies may also be negatively influenced by cultural factors for some people in some cultural groups. Women in many cultures are socialized to accept a
certain degree of physical and emotional violence as part of the husband’s marital perogative, making them less likely to self-identify as abused (Heise et al., 1994; Ofei-Aboagye, 1994). Some women may feel pressured to remain in the situation or to keep their experiences hidden by cultural values that emphasize close group ties, tolerance, order, harmony, and family. This is compounded by the profound social stigma of admitting domestic violence, regardless of which cultural group one belongs to (Heise et al., 1994; Preisser, 1999). These factors in combination with laws specific to certain countries (e.g., Pakistan law, which defines any extramarital sex, including rape, as adultery) may result in a reluctance to use social services or report the crime (Fawcett, Heise, Isita-Espejel, & Pick, 1999; Heise et al., 1994; Ho, 1990; Horne, 1999; Jahangir, 1992; Koss, et al., 1994; Kozu, 1999; Natarajan, 1995; Preisser, 1999; Sorenson, 1996; Thakur, 1992; Walker, 1999).

Despite the many ways that coping can help women deal with their abuse, the process of coping does not always result in psychological health. In their study on methods of coping and later psychological adjustment after experiencing sexual aggression by an acquaintance, Santello and Leitenberg (1993) found that disengagement methods of coping (e.g., minimizing, forgetting, social withdrawal, and self-medication with alcohol and drugs) were used more often than engagement methods of coping (e.g., social support, emotional expression, problem-solving, and cognitive restructuring). Unfortunately, disengagement methods were related to subsequent psychological problems beyond that predicted by the assault itself. When women are in violent situations or are suffering from physiological and/or psychological problems that they cannot cope with on their own, then seeking help from available service delivery systems (e.g., shelters, mental health professionals) provides another alternative.

**Treatment.**

The health sector has played a limited role in the area of violence against women, especially in terms of its mental health implications (Koss, 1990; Thurston, 1998). It has been commented on in some studies (e.g., Preisser, 1999) that there are only a few cases where an abused woman needs a therapist for mental health problems. When battering stops and the victim is removed, practical issues (e.g., education, employment, helping children cope) are most important to women, with few seeking mental health counselling
(Dasgupta, 1999; Preisser, 1999). However, as previously reviewed, the literature shows that the psychological impact of trauma and violence can be extensive and enduring. Women who have been raped and/or tortured may be at risk for mental disorders, but they can be difficult to assess because of their feelings of shame or fear of reprisal (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a). Thus the need for mental health care may be underestimated.

Knowledge of cultural context is important for accurate assessment as well as for provision of culturally sensitive care. When culture is considered in treatment, additional information is provided with which a practitioner can determine how to approach a client from a nondominant ethnocultural group (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). Misdiagnosis, non-implementation, and premature termination result when cultural context is not taken into consideration (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a). Assessment may be further complicated by different cultural views toward authority, whereby people from certain cultural groups may appear readily agreeable and polite in order to please the counsellor rather than expressing their true feelings (Winter & Young, 1998). Cultural concepts and the associated stigma of emotional problems can lead to acceptance, concealment and/or somatization of mental health problems, and less frequent use of mental health services by immigrants (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a; Winter & Young, 1998). Thus measurements of mental health status based on service use rates may confuse occurrence of the disorder with patterns of healthcare seeking behaviour (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a).

Linguistic and cultural differences can also get in the way of assessment and treatment when migrants do use mental health services (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a). For instance, languages differ in form, style, vocabulary, metaphors, and nonverbal signals, resulting in a barrier between client and practitioner (Winter & Young, 1998). Furthermore, people within a cultural group may use different languages and dialects, making it difficult for shelters and services to accommodate them (Huisman, 1996). Familiarity with the culture and with
the meaning of the disorder and symptoms for the client will help in developing an individualized and culturally appropriate assessment and treatment plan.

There is a need for more specialized training in assessment and treatment of violence with different cultural groups as health professionals may overlook or fail to recognize abuse without proper training, ongoing monitoring, and formal policies (Thurston, 1998). This training should include professional policy that challenges health professionals to question their beliefs and attitudes regarding violence (Thurston, 1998; Walker, 1981). Mental health practitioners who are themselves immigrants may be at a great advantage because they can act as well-trained interpreters and culturally informed practitioners when assessing clients from their own cultures (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a).

Exploration of South Asian family patterns reveals the need to generate options for women that go beyond those traditionally used: shelter, separation, divorce (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). Separation and divorce are less prevalent among South Asians (Kumar, 1991). Western models of therapy and counselling may be problematic for many South Asian women. These models are often seen as intrusive and incompatible with a non-Western approach, which relies on openness and interdependence between the service provider, the woman, and the community (Preisser, 1999).

Knowledge regarding cultural differences in perceptions of mental health disorders and methods of treatment can help in the creation of strategies for intervention and provide education and guidance for service providers (Preisser, 1999). Intervention methods that use a woman’s value system may be more affective in influencing change. For instance, images of femininity from within the South Asian culture may be useful to educate women about their power and control. The use of positive models of strength associated with nurturing, caring, and support can be used to inspire real-life liberation for women.

There are many representations of respected powerful women within Indian mythology, which can be used to provide women with hope and inspiration. The following is a list of important women found in some of the religions of South Asia. In Hindu mythology, Shakti is the female deity that commands the most respect as she is the goddess of wisdom, life and death, the perfect wife, and a deadly warrior (in her many
incarnations as Devi, Parvati, Kali, Sita, and Durga) (Katz, 1995). In Sikhism, Mata Sahib Kaur, wife of Guru Gobind Singh (tenth guru of Sikhism), is said to have symbolically added humility and sweetness to the martial order of the Khalsa by adding sugar puffs to the Amrit (Holy water) used for the Sikh Baptism Ceremony. She also guided the affairs of the Khalsa after Guru Gobind’s death and compiled his writings into the Dasam Granth (Association of Women of India in Canada [AWIC], 1999). Bibi Khadija was the Holy Prophet Muhammad’s wife. She was the first woman to believe in Muhammad and accept Islam. She symbolizes faith, and her piety and generosity are legendary (AWIC, 1999). In Buddhism, Goddess Tara is known as a saviour of divine compassion. In Judaism, Esther is symbolic of spiritual commitment that transcends danger to oneself (AWIC, 1999). In Christianity, Mary, mother of Jesus, is known for her devotion and is said to stand for inner truth on a symbolic level (AWIC, 1999).

These types of representations can help women use powerful images of womanhood to help empower themselves.

Awareness of the role of the family and the community is an essential component in the provision of services to South Asian women (Preisser, 1999). Treatment providers need to be aware of differences between Canadian and South Asian cultural notions, especially in terms of relational patterns. For example, South Asian cultures emphasize the bond between the husband, his mother, and his extended family of origin (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). Women are taught to be interdependent and to find intimacy within relationships with male children and later their families (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). This is different from North American culture, which encourages men to focus on work and to expect emotional support and family maintenance from female partners (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999).

Traditional treatment interventions with abusive men and their families tend to minimize cultural differences by relying on dominant, White-centric theories and service delivery systems. This may lead treatment providers to misinterpret cultural differences that may increase the danger of violence for marginalized groups (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). Therefore, determining the factors associated with greater mental health risk for immigrants, and learning more about a person’s cultural context can help in more effective planning and execution of prevention and intervention strategies.
(Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a).

Social Policy and Reform

In the United Status, there have been a number of steps taken to address problems related to violence against women. For instance, Biden (1993) reviewed some of the important legislation addressing problems related to violence against women. In the 1970’s Congress reformed the federal rape laws to focus on the defendant’s conduct instead of the victim’s past sexual history. In the mid-1980’s Congress began to fund battered women’s shelters and created a special fund to compensate crime victims out of the fines paid by criminals. In 1990 Biden (1993) introduced the Violence Against Women Act in order to identify the “more general problem shared by women victimized by violent behaviors-- whether it be beating in the home, rape by a neighbor, or an assault on the street” (p. 1060). He states that giving this violence a common name, regardless of a particular act, emphasizes the fact that violence is a problem, shared by all women in America (Biden, 1993).

In Canada the Department of Justice Canada is one agency that has helped to put the issue of violence against women and children on the international agenda. The Department has helped to develop international protocols and has participated in international conferences on violence against women and children (http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/intact.html). These international protocols include the Resolution on the Elimination of Violence Against Women adopted by U.S. congress in 1995. A resolution concerning "Crime prevention and criminal justice measures to eliminate violence against women" was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1997. The resolution containing the "Model Strategies and Practical Measures on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice" (SPM), was adopted by the U.N. Crime Commission. (http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/intact.html).

Although the Canadian Criminal Code does not have a specific "family violence offence," family violence is against the law. Abusers can be charged with applicable offences including assault, assault causing bodily harm, sexual assault, sexual assault causing bodily harm, sexual assault with a weapon, criminal harassment (i.e., "stalking"),
uttering threats, mischief, intimidation, forcible confinement, attempted murder, and murder. A number of Criminal Code amendments have been put in place to improve the legal framework for addressing family violence. On a provincial level four provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Prince Edward Island) and one territory (Yukon) have proclaimed specific legislation on family violence (http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/legis.html).

Conclusion

In order to understand the climate of violence that South Asian women live in and the ways in which they respond to the violence, we must look at their entire experience and the social context in which it occurs. Contextual factors such as culture play a significant role in how people experience and define their experiences. The preceding discussion has outlined some of the major issues (e.g., theory, South Asian culture, types and consequences of violence), that come into play when women, especially nondominant ethnic group women, experience intimate partner violence in their relationships. However, these are by no means exhaustive and an in-depth discussion of literature related to other issues that may influence the experience of violence for the women in this study (e.g., class, historical time, and age) was not possible given time and space constraints.

The areas of culture, gender, and violence have been emphasized in this investigation in an attempt to clarify how these factors play out within the South Asian context. Although the South Asian community has similarities with both the dominant Canadian culture and other Asian communities, there are cultural norms and expectations that may result in the presence of unique issues. Furthermore, given that culture is a dynamic process of understanding experience and is influenced by contextual factors, the process of immigration to Canada plays a part in the experience of South Asians living in Canada.

Awareness of the complexity of factors involved in South Asian women’s experience of violence can help provide more accurate information about their experience, and will help to inform public attitudes, incidence rates, and subsequent public policy and legal decisions (Fine, 1993; McHugh et al., 1993; Sorenson, 1996). Racial and ethnic stereotypes and lack of information regarding ethnicity may affect services when victims of violence do seek help. For instance, evidence of shelters ignoring the unique needs of
specific ethnic groups can lead some women to avoid such services (Sorenson, 1996). Introduction of ethnic organizations designed to help women can serve to protect and empower women and include them in the larger movement to end violence against women (Abraham, 1995). We need to find out from women themselves what they need. This means respecting the unique needs and experiences of women, and directing our study and service to individual women, keeping in mind their socio-cultural and personal context. Using this approach we can begin to discover more accurate information with which to inform prevention and intervention services that are most appropriate for the women who will be using them.

**Project Summary and Research Question**

The goal of this project was to investigate the experience of violence for South Asian women living in Canada. This inquiry used open-ended interviews with survivors of violence in an effort to reveal how women understand and respond to violence in their lives. The research reported here has dealt with culture and violence, but it is important to remember that relatively few studies (e.g., Abraham, 1999; Agnew, 1998; Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999; Dasgupta, 2000; Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996; Mazumdar, 1998; Mehrotra, 1999; Preisser, 1999; Thakur, 1992) have looked at the intersection of these two areas and only one (e.g., Agnew, 1998) has looked at the experience of South Asian women in the Canadian cultural context. Due to the exploratory nature of this investigation the interview questions were focused, but also open to the discovery of new variables and relationships. Thus as information was gathered, the interview questions were revised and extended. A general research question was used to provide a framework and focus for the investigation instead of using precise directional hypotheses: How do South Asian-Canadian women experience, understand, react to, and seek help for violence in their lives?
METHOD

Choice of Methodology

Traditionally, psychology has used a positivist approach, which assumes the existence of universal truths and causal relations that can be discovered through objective methods (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Lykes & Stewart, 1986; Nicolson, 1997; Sherif, 1992; Unger, 1996; Walker, 1995; Wittig, 1992). Positivist research has typically employed quantitative methods, which use highly structured, impersonal formats, large samples, and predefined categories. Traditional psychology reduces analysis to a few clearly observable behaviours and categories, and attempts to exclude social context and structural/power relations in order to reduce bias and increase objectivity (Nicolson, 1997; Sherif, 1992). These categories, which are constructed to be blind to social, personal, and cultural meanings and are defined for participants, may increase objectivity and reduce bias, but they also help to maintain the invisibility of marginalized groups, such as women of colour (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991; Maynard, 1994; O’Neill, 1995; Unger, 1992). Chodorow (1996) suggests that by imposing categories or a vocabulary on women that does not necessarily reflect their experience or needs, researchers are assuming, incorrectly, that they have access to “truth,” resulting in a failure to honour women’s experience and perspectives. By allowing women to define their own experience, researchers may be able to enrich the area of study by making new and often serendipitous discoveries.

In past cross-cultural research, efforts have been made to translate research terms into other languages, and re-standardize them with other populations. The validity of quantitative measures with different cultures depends on the degree to which symptoms, feelings, and experiences are attended to, understood, and reported by different cultural groups. However, seemingly common phenomena can differ across cultures, influencing the validity of quantitative instruments (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a, Ofie-Aboagye, 1994). For example, the term ‘discipline’ in Ghana refers to what others would define as marital violence. In a study of attitudes toward relationships among Asian Indians in Canada, Western measures of love were used and were found to be inadequate and nonrepresentative with this cultural group (Hunjan, 1997). As little is known about the experiences of South Asian women in
general, and their experience of violence in particular, using measures created with and for other groups may reproduce their marginality.

A general rejection of positivism's claim of objectivity and concern that methodologies were unfair to minorities has resulted in some researchers turning to more qualitative approaches. Qualitative methods tend to be nonlinear and support the notion that each individual's experience, especially her social reality, is shaped by social context: culture, historical time, and position (Bohan, 1992; Jayartne & Stewart, 1991; Landrine, 1995; Lott, 1985; Lykes & Stewart, 1986; Senn, 1996; Sherif, 1992; Shields & Crowley, 1996; Stephenson, Kippax & Crawford, 1996; Taylor, Gilligan, Sullivan, 1996; Unger, 1992; Unger, 1996; Walker, 1995; Weisstein, 1992). These methods allow for the recognition that we cannot impose our definition of reality on those we want to learn more about as this would go against the very goal of wanting to know more about another's experience of reality. By using qualitative methods to discover a person's experience and how s/he understands this experience taking into account contextual factors (i.e., culture, position, and time), researchers may get a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Thus qualitative research methods may complement quantitative methods by capitalizing on the strengths of both of these approaches: identifying issues relevant to people of different groups using methods that take into account contextual factors and examining these issues further through the use of more structured and objective techniques.

Researchers investigating different cultural groups recommend that before quantitative assessments of issues are attempted, qualitative assessments using open-ended interviews and detailed phenomenological descriptions should be used (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a). These methods allow for the expression of different systems of meaning (Chester et al., 1994). The use of more qualitative research approaches that allow researchers to learn more about how women and other marginalized groups experience and understand their lives has been an important aspect of revealing experience and reducing discrimination (Sorenson, 1996).

Qualitative methods such as interviews and participant observation allow for the development of a closer relationship between the researcher and the participant by creating a more intimate exchange of information. This type of mutual sharing may help
to sensitize the researcher to the rights and vulnerabilities of the participant (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995). In fact, qualitative researchers view the interrelationship between the subjectivities of both the researcher and her participants as critical and necessary variables in the research process (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995). Interviews also offer access to ideas, thoughts, and words that are the participant’s own rather than the researcher’s. This is particularly important when studying women, especially women of colour, as it acts as an “antidote” for centuries of invisibility when women were ignored or men spoke for them (Reinharz, 1992).

Qualitative approaches are also recommended for topics that are complex (Rennie, Phillips & Quartararo, 1988) as the “approach yields access to aspects of human experience which are difficult, if not impossible, to address with traditional approaches to psychological research” (Rennie et al., 1988, p. 146). Qualitative approaches are also appropriate for work that is exploratory in nature as they emphasize an inductive rather than deductive focus for obtaining knowledge and thus do not presuppose the existence of certain variables (Cresswell, 1994). Qualitative work seems ideal when working with different cultural groups, as it allows participants to organize their own stories instead of providing them with prestructured categories or questions that are often loaded with Western European North American norms that may not accurately represent their experience.

Thus, given the complexity of factors that can impact on a woman’s experience, the exploratory nature of this study, and the focus on South Asian participants, a qualitative interview-based approach was determined to be most appropriate for this investigation. This approach enabled me to explore women’s experiences of violence in a more personal, holistic way, and allowed women to define their own experiences instead of trying to fit them into pre-established categories. This type of approach indicates a respect for the validity of a woman’s subjective experience (Chodorow, 1996) and hopefully has helped this study more accurately represent my participants’ reality.

Preliminary Interviews

Given the sensitivity of this topic and the lack of literature on South Asian women in Canada I conducted preliminary semi-structured interviews with four South Asian women. I hoped that these interviews would help me to create a responsive interview
protocol. I asked these women if I could talk with them in order to learn more about their experiences as South Asian women. I did not purposely approach women who were in violent relationships, because I wanted to get more general information about the experiences of South Asian-Canadian women. However, two of the women I spoke with were in relationships that were abusive. All four women were married, and they ranged in age from early thirties to late sixties. I met with each woman in a location comfortable to her and I began my interview with the open-ended request: tell me about yourself.

These women shared stories regarding their childhood, married life, immigration, settlement, and other life events. I used these stories along with my own experiences as a South Asian woman to identify themes and patterns that were salient and common across my respondents. Certain categories of experience were identified through these pilot interviews as important in the experience of South Asian women: cultural norms and socialization regarding gender, relationships with others (e.g., parents, partners, and children), sexuality, marriage (e.g., cultural norms regarding relationship with husband and in-laws, options when in a stressful or abusive relationship, norms regarding disclosure), immigration, education, and work outside of the home. The literature also seems to support the themes of duty, destiny, and sacrifice identified through these interviews. These themes appear to permeate the lives of South Asians and are interwoven into their religious views, mythology, gender-role norms, relationships, and responses to violence. I used this information to help organize my introduction and literature review on South Asian women’s experiences, and to guide the development of my general research question and prompts during the interview process itself.

My interactions with these women helped me to finalize my methodology by revealing aspects of the qualitative method I had only read about. For example, three of the four women I spoke with were uncomfortable with my general request, “tell me about yourself.” In some ways this initial open-ended inquiry revealed the tension between an open-ended approach that allows the participant to create a context in which to answer the question, and more specific questions that in many ways set the context for the participant. Most of the women I spoke to had not thought about their lives in this very general way and they wanted me to ask them more specific questions. It appeared to provide a context for these women when I explained that little is known about South
Asian women in terms of research literature and popular culture and that they could approach the question by thinking about what they would want others to know about them. As all four women had immigrated to Canada, a general question, “When did you come to Canada?” also helped to start discussion.

These preliminary interviews also revealed that three of the four women I spoke with were uncomfortable being tape-recorded and so I agreed to take notes during our conversations. However, I discovered that I was unable to direct my full attention to each woman, as I was busily writing down what she had just said. When I began to generate themes from these interviews, my notes, although adequate for this stage of the research, were limited. As a result, I concluded that audiotaping would be required for my study so as not to lose the richness of the women’s narratives.

**Participants in Current Investigation**

**Selection Criteria**

In the last four decades there has been a significant increase in the number of South Asian immigrants to Canada, with South Asians accounting for .4 percent of the immigrant population before 1961 and for 13.5 percent in 1991-96 (Statistics Canada, 1998). According to 1996 demographic data, South Asians account for 2 percent of the population in Canada with over half residing in Ontario, making Southern Ontario a good location for this type of investigation. Participants for this study were recruited from a special population, namely those heterosexual women of South Asian descent living in Ontario who have experienced some type of violence by intimate others (i.e., spouses, partners). Although violence can occur in same-sex intimate relationships, this investigation was limited to heterosexual women, regardless of marital status. Thus heterosexual South Asian women who were once in or are currently in ‘stressful’ or ‘bad’ relationships were recruited for this study. It was anticipated that descriptive statements such as ‘stressful’ would allow women to define their own experience instead of responding to predefined labels such as “violent” or “abusive.”

Open-ended interviews were carried out with twenty-one women in various locations in Southwestern Ontario including Windsor, Whitby, Mississauga, Toronto, and Richmond Hill. Eight of these twenty-one interviews involved family related stressors, abuse, incest, and emotional neglect by partners but contained no evidence of intimate
partner violence. Thus these results will not be discussed in this paper but may be used in later research. The remaining 13 interviews involved intimate partner violence and the stories of these 13 participants will be the primary focus of this investigation.

Participants ranged in age from 20 to 53 years, with a mean age of 33.7 years and a median age of 32 years (see Table 3). Twelve women had emigrated from other countries, four were born in India, four were born in Pakistan, one was from Afghanistan, two were from England, and one was from Kenya. One woman was born in Canada, one woman had immigrated to Canada before the age of ten, one immigrated at the age of fifteen, and the remaining ten immigrated after the age of twenty. Five of the women had lived in Canada for over twenty years. When asked about religious affiliation seven reported that they were Sikh, two were Hindu, and four were Muslim.

In terms of educational background, one participant reported that she had been home schooled, four had not completed high school, two had attended college, four had attended university, one woman had done post-graduate work, and one woman’s educational background was unknown. For several of these participants their education was completed in their countries of origin, and now they were facing difficulty trying to get their educational achievement recognized in Canada.

Participants were asked about their current occupation and they provided a variety of responses. Seven women reported that they were not employed outside the home and were on social assistance, while one woman was a full-time student. The remaining five women worked as: health professional, childcare worker, medical technician, social service worker, and counsellor with young mothers. Regardless of occupation, participants were asked to identify their economic class at present, with eight women claiming that their current status was lower class; three women were working class, and two were middle class.

Participants were asked to describe their current relationship status. At the time of the interviews, one participant had broken her engagement, one was engaged to be married, two women were married, five women were separated and four were divorced. The age at which the women had married ranged from 16 to 39 with 20 being the mean age of marriage. Those women who were currently or had previously been married were also asked to identify the type of marriage they had been in, with all twelve identifying an
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Table 3
arranged marriage. Six of the participants had no children, two had one child, two had two children, two had three children, and one had four children. Two women reported that they were currently living with their husband and children, three women were living alone, three women were living in shelters, one woman was living with her parents, and four women were living with their children. Twelve of the women interviewed had experienced violence in their marital relationship, while one woman reported violence in a dating relationship. The violence these women experienced ranged from emotional neglect, threats, and financial control to beatings, sexual assault and attempted murder.

Recruitment Procedures

Nonrandom snowball sampling, which involved asking personal contacts to solicit research participants and/or asking each respondent to suggest other women they knew of who might be interested in responding to this study, played a major role in participant recruitment. Word of mouth recommendations were also emphasized during recruitment as I tried to access both my personal and professional contacts in order to find women who were interested in sharing their stories. Posters in public places were used to locate potential participants and read as follows: “South Asian Women! Have you ever been involved in a bad or stressful relationship? Tell us your story so we can learn how to help others. Confidential university based research in psychology. Women will receive $20 for participating in this study.” A radio interview with a South Asian radio show based in Toronto was also used to make people in the surrounding South Asian community aware of the study and how to contact the researcher. The interview contained information about the researcher, the ongoing research project, and how to volunteer for participation.

Counsellors at shelters and support groups and other service providers proved to be valuable resources in the search for participants. Community-based organizations catering to South Asians, where women have already started the process of seeking help from outside sources, were also accessed. I attempted to meet as many contacts working within these types of organizations as possible. I provided them with information regarding this investigation, and answered any questions they thought were important to the safety and confidentiality of their organization and the people who accessed their services. These service providers were then able to provide potential participants with appropriate information about the study, reassurance, and contact information. It was
hoped that an attempt to access multiple sources would help to increase the number of potential respondents to my study. Referrals from service agencies accounted for seven women, one woman responded to a poster add, and the remaining five women came from personal contacts and word of mouth recommendations.

**Procedure**

The major sources of data used in this study were in-depth, open-ended, face to face interviews with participants. Qualitative analytic techniques were used to guide data collection and analysis. After initial contact was made, participants were asked to meet for an interview, which would last approximately two hours, and to provide a safe time for a reminder call if they wished for one. Respondents were offered $20 to compensate them for child-care, transportation, and their time. Each participant was interviewed individually in a setting that was convenient and comfortable for her, although attempts were made to choose safe and quiet locations. I met with six women at the service agency that had referred them, one woman was interviewed in the shelter she was residing in, I met with one woman in a community library, four women were interviewed in their homes, and I met with one woman at the home of a friend of hers. Personal, open-ended interviews provided the opportunity to follow up on participants’ responses in order to get more detailed and at times unanticipated information (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983). Prior to the interview, time was taken to establish rapport with participants to alleviate as much discomfort as possible during the sometimes-painful interview process. This time included a brief introduction by the researcher, a more detailed description of the procedure and nature of the project, and an expression of interest in learning more about the participant’s experience of her stressful relationship (see Appendix C). Participants were informed that most interviews would last approximately two hours. However, even when participants wanted to extend the interview, interviews were limited to a maximum of three hours, as experience during the preliminary interviews indicated that participants seemed to get tired after about two-and-a-half hours of conversation. All interviews were tape recorded with the participant’s consent, and participants were informed that all names and identifying information would be removed from transcripts. Audiotaping of the interviews was required for participation in the study. Participants were informed that this requirement was to ensure
that the interviewer could fully attend to each woman during the interview process instead of becoming distracted by note taking, and to provide more accurate transcripts for analysis. Participants were informed that all tapes would be stored in a locked cabinet, with all identifying information removed, and would be erased once the project has been completed. Participants were asked for permission to use excerpts from their interviews for the purposes of this and future research.

Informed consent was discussed with the participants, and both the investigator and the participant kept a copy of the consent form (see Appendix D). For those participants who had difficulty reading English, a verbal translation of the consent form was discussed with them. Participants were reminded of confidentiality in terms of the research process and were given the opportunity to select a pseudonym. An explanation of the participant’s right to refuse a question or stop the interview at any time without any consequences was also discussed. Respondents were also informed about the researcher’s duty to warn the Children’s Aid Society if any current cases of child abuse were disclosed. Once this information had been covered the formal interview began.

While I was obviously aware of the theories previously discussed (e.g., feminist, family systems), interviews were deliberately designed to be as open-ended as possible, using an inductive approach in order to discover the many aspects of a South Asian woman’s experience of violence. A relatively unstructured interview format was used so that women could provide their own definitions and express themselves in a comfortable and informal manner (Mehrotra, 1999). As most women had some information about this project from the recruitment process and had consented to the study both verbally and in writing, the interview itself began with a very general question asking each woman to tell me about the relationship she had in mind (see Appendix C). Interviews were facilitated through the use of general prompts, both pre-identified (see Appendix C) and spontaneous (e.g., “can you say more about that,” “what was that like for you”) as needed. Other, more specific prompts were also used if participants had difficulties with open-ended questions as was indicated by the preliminary interviews (e.g., “What do you want me to know about your relationship?” “How did your relationship begin”). Thus although a very general question was used to start the interview process, more structured prompts were used if women were uncomfortable with the open-ended process. The
interview outline did not force the order or wording of questions in advance, so that a conversational style could be established where questions and prompts were worded spontaneously based on the dynamic between interviewer and participant.

As the interview continued, prompts based on the categories of experience that pilot respondents identified as important for South Asian women (e.g., cultural and gender norms, relationships with others, experience of sexuality, norms regarding disclosure, immigration, education, and work outside of the home) were used to gain additional information about the woman’s experience and understanding of her relationship (see Appendix C). The second phase of questioning was aimed at the more positive aspects of the narrative, such as coping, strategies for resistance and support, treatment (e.g., services used, service requirements), and future plans for the woman and her children (if applicable). The third and final phase of questioning focused on obtaining demographic information (e.g., age, educational level, and years in Canada) in order to gain more general information about the women being interviewed.

Once the formal interview was completed I offered to answer any personal questions participants might have. When more personal questions about me arose during the course of the interview, respondents were asked to wait until completion of the interview so as not to influence their narratives. However, there were times when I shared certain points of view to facilitate the interview process, offer the woman support, and/or allow for self-reflexivity. This reciprocity meant that I played an active part in the interview itself, engaging in self-disclosure and commentary where it seemed relevant to the participant’s story-telling process.

Upon completion of the interview, each participant was given the opportunity to discuss whatever was on her mind. Each woman was asked to share her experience of the interview and provide any suggestions for change. Any concerns, questions, or negative feelings were discussed in order to ensure that participants left the interview feeling comfortable. Participants were given a feedback sheet including the researcher’s contact information (see Appendix E), and a list of community resources based upon their city of residence. For women in Windsor, community resources included a list provided by The Sexual Assault Treatment Centre Hotel-Dieu Grace Hospital, while women in the Toronto area received a list of services distributed by the Metro Action Committee on
Violence Against Women and Children in Toronto. Both lists included emergency and nonemergency numbers for women and children who are victims of abuse. This information was contained within an inconspicuous container, a lipstick case, so as to facilitate participant safety. One of these containers had been obtained during a workshop on violence against women provided by CAW Local 440 in Windsor. A member of The Sexual Assault Treatment Centre Hotel-Dieu Grace Hospital, Grace Site, donated the containers. Respondents were encouraged to access these services if they had any concerns or wished to talk about their experiences further.

Respondents were also given the choice to review a summary of the interview results after the data had been analyzed for feedback (see Appendix F). This process allows the participant to be involved in different phases of the research process and ensures that women have been heard accurately (Acker et al., 1983). Contact information was obtained from those women who wanted to be part of this review process. Six out of the thirteen women who participated had indicated an interest in reviewing the initial findings. However, given that as long as two years passed between the interviews and the completion of the data analysis for some of the women interviewed, I was only able to contact two of these women. Each woman was sent a copy of a summary of her interview, a list of her demographic information, and the initial outline of the major themes revealed through analysis. Respondents were asked to review this information, make any corrections, and make comments that might be relevant to the accuracy of their story and/or organization of categories. Participants were also reminded that since the themes emerged from an analysis of all thirteen interviews, specific aspects of their own story might not be apparent.

A possible risk during the interview process was the assumption that some of my experiences were similar to those of the participants given our common ethnic background, despite contextual differences. Hurd and McIntyre (1996) write about some of the risks in doing research where the researcher and the participant are more similar than different. They discuss how this feeling of similarity may distance the researcher from countering assumptions, whereby the “pull of sameness” can blur one’s vision (p. 87). This may contribute to a failure to challenge participant views and beliefs and may increase the risk of aligning the researcher’s experience with that of the participant’s
"lived, but critically unexamined, life experiences" (Hurd & McIntyre, 1996). I believe that part of my role as a feminist researcher was to critically examine the stories of my participants by honestly (but diplomatically) reacting to their discussion regarding issues of violence and oppression, and by presenting them with other perspectives (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997).

**Data Analysis**

As soon as possible after each interview, I made notes about the interview, including my impressions and reactions regarding the interview, any important behavioural observations, ideas regarding alteration of the research protocol, and preliminary notations of themes. Each interview was transcribed verbatim with an effort made to note apparent speech markers such as pauses and non-word vocalizations. Many of the women interviewed used English as their second language and attempts were made to follow the participant's own grammatical style during transcription.

Three of the thirteen interviews were with women who could not speak English. One of these interviews was conducted in Punjabi, one in Hindi, and one in Hindi with a counsellor at the referral agency acting as an English translator. For the two interviews that were not in English, transcription was not done verbatim, but a translation of the interview adhering as closely to the woman's meaning as possible was created. The interview in Punjabi was translated by the researcher and back translated by a colleague fluent in Punjabi, while a colleague fluent in Hindi translated the second interview. The third interview, which was completed with the help of a translator, was transcribed verbatim based on the English translation provided by the translator, but was verified independently by a colleague fluent in Hindi.

Kvale (1996) states that interviews should be conducted to the point of saturation of themes, "where further interviews yield little knew knowledge" (p. 102). He suggests that 15 ± 10 interviews usually allow for limited time and resources while still providing a reasonable likelihood for saturation. Time limitations and difficulty accessing women resulted in usable interviews with thirteen women. Given the difficulty with participant recruitment and the time intensive process of transcription, formal analysis of the data was conducted once all of the interviews were completed. However, attempts were made to modify successive interviews based on information received from preceding interviews.
through the use of memos and theme identification. Thus a modification of the constant comparative method advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used informally during data collection and then more explicitly during data analysis, whereby new information emerging from data processing informed data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using multiple sources for participant recruitment also facilitated diversity of findings.

Interview transcripts provided vast amounts of information, and immersion in the material was vital to the research process in order to situate the researcher in each participant’s experience. Thus each transcript was read and reread multiple times in order to foster clarity of thought and to gain familiarity with each woman’s story. Once I felt comfortably familiar with each story, marginal notes were made identifying emerging units of meanings, inconsistencies, and transitions from one area of thought to the next. Each story was then read for references to the participant’s relationship with significant people who impacted on her experience. During these readings the four major areas of the research question were kept in mind: How do South Asian-Canadian women: 1) experience, 2) understand, 3) react to, and 4) seek help for violence in their lives? Once each interview had been reviewed several times, a summary of each woman’s story was reproduced, identifying major points of transition initiated by the participant or by the interviewer (through questions). Quotes from the interview were used to provide descriptive evidence.

With the help of computer software, QSR NUDIST Vivo (NVivo, 1999), each transcript was reviewed with an intent toward categorization of research data. Qualitative researchers recommend that transcripts should be reviewed for concepts that appear meaningful for the participant, keeping in mind the phenomenon of interest (Rennie et al., 1988). Thus using NVivo, incidents that appeared to be meaningful for the participant were extracted and placed into working categories. Using this software, categories could be organized and reviewed for content across participants. Category titles were descriptive in nature and attempts were made to use participants’ own words (e.g., “parents know best,” “I had nobody,” and “all man is bad”). During this process, meaningful sections of the interview were assigned to multiple categories in order to preserve the richness of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Units with shared meaning were grouped together. As new transcripts were reviewed, new meaning units were assigned
to existing categories or new categories and/or subcategories were created. At this point, identification of incidents and construction of categories was based on obviously related chunks of meaning, and/or those content areas emphasized by the participant in terms of time taken during the interview, numbers of women representing themes, and unique points of view. Categories grew as related information from the interviews was added to them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

After these stages of analysis had been completed for each interview the numerous categories were reviewed. Clearly irrelevant categories were deleted and overlapping categories integrated in an effort to keep categories internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During this process, categories were labelled in as descriptive a manner as possible, with women's words often adopted as titles for larger categories. For instance, the previously descriptive category entitled "I had nobody" was subsumed under the more general heading of isolation, while "virginity is everything" was used as the descriptive title for the larger category regarding women's sexuality. Throughout this process, thoughts about categories and their relationships were recorded with the help of memos. Memos included ideas about patterns in the data analysis as well as the researcher's impressions and struggles with the data gathering and analysis process.

As data analysis progressed, less new information emerged, indicating category saturation. At this point analysis focussed on the relationship between categories. Categories that seemed to have few relationships with others were collapsed or dropped, keeping in mind patterns and themes that were apparent in the interviews. These categories were then organized into a description that appeared to fit most closely with the major themes contained within the interviews (Cresswell, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Discussions with a South Asian colleague were used to assist with this organization of categories.

Validity

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that issues of trustworthiness within naturalistic inquiry can be operationalized using five strategies. The first focuses on increasing the probability that credible findings will be produced through the use of prolonged engagement (investment of sufficient time to learn the culture, test for misinformation
and build trust), persistent observation (taking into account the possibility of both personal and participant distortions) and triangulation (use of multiple sources, methods and theories). The second strategy involves external checks on the inquiry process. The third activity aims to refine hypotheses as more information is gathered. The fourth activity involves checking preliminary findings against “raw data” (p. 301). The fifth strategy involves returning findings to participants so that they can report on their accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In terms of this investigation, attempts at prolonged engagement included an extensive review of the literature on South Asian culture, personal experience as the researcher was raised within a South Asian context, and preliminary interviews with South Asian women in order to identify and verify themes that might be relevant to the South Asian context. Attempts to identify personal biases and beliefs were attended to throughout the research process. In terms of triangulation, multiple data sources in the form of “multiple copies of one type of source (such as interview respondents)” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 305) were used. Multiple theoretical sources were also accessed as illustrated by the review of the theoretical literature presented earlier in this paper. Discussing the inquiry and analytical process with colleagues and consulting with dissertation committee members provided external checks. The analytic process itself helped to refine themes and categories as new information was gathered, while constant reference back to interview transcripts helped to check preliminary findings against the women’s stories. Finally, findings were returned to participants for comment and feedback.

The aim of this study was to get a detailed understanding of how some South Asian women experience abuse within their families, community, and the larger social institutions of society rather than to make generalizations across women or ethnic groups. Generalizability is limited in this study as participants have been self-selected as those who not only are involved in a “stressful” or “bad” relationship, but who are willing to talk about their experience. However, some of my findings and the categories and themes that arise may be common to South Asians living in Canada and may represent a way to begin to address some of the unique needs of this ethnic group.
Researcher’s experiences during the research process

Looking back upon my experiences during this investigation reminds me of the adventures faced by Frodo Baggins and his friends in Tolkien’s novel, *The Lord of the Rings*. In many ways this process felt like a perilous journey with moments of fascination, joy, frustration, horror and sorrow. Although a detailed review of the relevant literature had, I thought, prepared me for some of the tasks I would face in conducting qualitative research, the experience itself proved to be far more illuminating than learning from someone else’s words.

My journey into the experiential world of the qualitative realm began with the recruitment of my participants. Although I had anticipated that recruitment would be difficult given the sensitivity of my research topic and issues related to the cultural group I was attempting to access, I was unprepared for how arduous and time intensive this stage of the research process would be. Despite being a South Asian woman myself and having numerous personal and professional contacts in the community, issues such as limited numbers, location, confidentiality, and gate keeping by service providers presented major obstacles during this process. As the South Asian population in Windsor is relatively small, I tried to recruit in larger cities such as Metropolitan Toronto. However, the distance between Windsor and these other cities made it difficult to spend extended amounts of time in service agencies getting to know staff and clients in order to facilitate the referral process. Confidentiality proved to be an added obstacle in this process since I could not contact women whom I knew were in violent relationships, but had to wait for women to contact me. Gate keeping by service workers was understandable but frustrating as their concern regarding the well being of their clients made access to certain women more difficult.

Research in the area of intimate violence is difficult because of ethical and practical considerations (e.g., asking people to relive distressing experiences, selective samples, high attrition, retrospective nature of research) as well as embarrassment, fear, and the perception of violence as a private problem by members of immigrant groups (Agnew, 1998; Strube, 1988). Women who have been abused need time to build trust and confidence in service providers before they will reveal their experiences of violence (Agnew, 1998). Other researchers (e.g., Abraham, 2000b) have been able to get detailed
and often intimate information from their participants after spending extended amounts of informal time with them. This factor underlines the importance of allowing women time to build trust and confidence in potential researchers so they feel more comfortable about revealing their experiences. Once again, membership in the South Asian community is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, participants’ concern that their confidentiality was at risk because I was a member of the community may have contributed to my difficulty in accessing some participants, while for others my common cultural background may have helped them to feel more at ease with me.

Concern regarding my own safety during the interview process itself was an issue I had not considered explicitly prior to conducting this research. I often met with women in their homes or communities and I had to ensure that settings were safe. However, despite these obstacles I was at times overwhelmed by the strength and resilience displayed by all of my participants in their goals to live, not just survive, after their experiences. Many of these women were tackling larger issues such as working with other survivors in order to help other women who were in similar situations while living with financial difficulties, raising children alone, and/or acculturating to a new culture, language, and justice system.

The most arduous task in this research process was that of transcription. Not only was this a long, tedious, and mind numbing process, I was unprepared for the level of vicarious traumatization I experienced while transcribing. During the interview process itself, my clinical skills and knowledge that I would be hearing difficult and often painful experiences helped to prepare me for hearing stories of violence. However, sitting in an informal setting such as my home office, having to listen to interview segments, often numerous times in order to get an accurate transcription, left me quite unprepared for the impact on my own spirit, motivation, and mood.

The analytic procedure was interesting but difficult, as I did not follow an established model in my process of analysis. Furthermore, although the literature on qualitative research had sensitized me to some of the issues I experienced, it was difficult to prepare for or anticipate some of the difficulties that I have reviewed above. However, I believe that these challenges introduced a whole new facet to the research process and were an important part of my learning experience. Some issues such as safety, inaccessibility, the
frustration of much work with little reward also provided some insight into the experience of these brave participants who met with me, a virtual stranger, in some cases traveled long distances, to share some of the most intimate details of their lives. I am honoured that they allowed me to share and record their stories.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women’s Stories

A qualitative analysis was conducted in order to identify recurrent themes emerging from participants’ experience of “bad” or “stressful” intimate relationships. Feedback from participants was used to supplement the analysis conducted by the researcher. The themes that emerged (see Table 4) were organized in a manner that appeared to encompass as many of the important elements of each woman’s story as possible. These themes will be discussed in a descriptive manner, using women’s own words to illustrate identified patterns and areas of importance. Thus the reader can judge for him/herself whether the identified themes are reflected in the woman’s own words.

Introductions

Prior to beginning a discussion of the themes that emerged through this investigation, a brief introduction of each of the participants who contributed their time and stories is appropriate.

Amar

Amar is a 20 year-old Sikh woman who immigrated to Canada from India five years ago with her natal family. Amar’s story, which was conducted in Punjabi and then translated, focuses on her physically, emotionally, and sexually abusive marriage with a man from India. Amar’s marriage was arranged, with family pressure, at the age of 18. Amar sponsored her husband for immigration to Canada when she turned nineteen. Upon his arrival in Canada he started to beat her daily and told her repeatedly that he had only married her to come to Canada. Amar describes her life as difficult, living in the basement of her sister’s house, working long hours at a factory job with most of her limited income sent to India by her husband. She described a limited support system at this time, continued interference by her aunt, and her husband’s attempts to control her contact with family and friends.

After approximately eleven months of this treatment and a particularly severe beating she feared that she had miscarried and decided to leave her husband. However, when she revealed her experience of abuse to her parents they told her to return to him, claiming that they did not “have any place” for her. She refused, went to the police, and then stayed in several shelters. When she returned home with shelter workers to get her
| **Theme** | **Participant** | **Anm Amal||Dslbah, Bddyy Fozan, Miic, Miicann, Paas, Plham, Shamsa, Shamsa Suna, Zangura** |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Gender Inequality | |}

| **Theme** | **Participant** | **Anm Amal||Dslbah, Bddyy Fozan, Miic, Miicann, Paas, Plham, Shamsa, Shamsa Suna, Zangura** |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2. Marriage as a Family Affair | |}

| **Theme** | **Participant** | **Anm Amal||Dslbah, Bddyy Fozan, Miic, Miicann, Paas, Plham, Shamsa, Shamsa Suna, Zangura** |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3. Physical Influences on Violence | |}

| **Theme** | **Participant** | **Anm Amal||Dslbah, Bddyy Fozan, Miic, Miicann, Paas, Plham, Shamsa, Shamsa Suna, Zangura** |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4. Where is the "True" House? | |}

| **Theme** | **Participant** | **Anm Amal||Dslbah, Bddyy Fozan, Miic, Miicann, Paas, Plham, Shamsa, Shamsa Suna, Zangura** |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5. Virginia is Overtaking | |}

| **Theme** | **Participant** | **Anm Amal||Dslbah, Bddyy Fozan, Miic, Miicann, Paas, Plham, Shamsa, Shamsa Suna, Zangura** |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6. Women's Place is in the Home | |}

| **Theme** | **Participant** | **Anm Amal||Dslbah, Bddyy Fozan, Miic, Miicann, Paas, Plham, Shamsa, Shamsa Suna, Zangura** |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 7. You're Nothing Without a Husband | |}

| **Theme** | **Participant** | **Anm Amal||Dslbah, Bddyy Fozan, Miic, Miicann, Paas, Plham, Shamsa, Shamsa Suna, Zangura** |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 8. Virginity is Overwhelming | |}

| **Theme** | **Participant** | **Anm Amal||Dslbah, Bddyy Fozan, Miic, Miicann, Paas, Plham, Shamsa, Shamsa Suna, Zangura** |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9. No Respect for Women | |}

| **Theme** | **Participant** | **Anm Amal||Dslbah, Bddyy Fozan, Miic, Miicann, Paas, Plham, Shamsa, Shamsa Suna, Zangura** |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 10. Gender Inequality | |}

| **Theme** | **Participant** | **Anm Amal||Dslbah, Bddyy Fozan, Miic, Miicann, Paas, Plham, Shamsa, Shamsa Suna, Zangura** |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 11. List of Themes and Participant endosser | |}

<p>| <strong>Theme</strong> | <strong>Participant</strong> | <strong>Anm Amal||Dslbah, Bddyy Fozan, Miic, Miicann, Paas, Plham, Shamsa, Shamsa Suna, Zangura</strong> |
|-----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 12. | |</p>
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belongings, she found that most of her property had disappeared. Her parents have since tried to get her to return home, but she has refused, given their earlier rejection. Amar reports that she feels “good” since leaving her husband, has started to receive financial aid, and is looking for housing. Unfortunately, even with a restraining order against her husband, she remains afraid for herself and her parents.

Asha

Asha is an unmarried 30-year-old Sikh woman who immigrated to Canada from England with her natal family when she was three years old. Asha’s story focuses on a long-term relationship she had with an abusive boyfriend. Asha described her boyfriend’s angry, jealous and abusive behaviour during the five years that they were together. The most difficult aspect of their relationship was Asha’s suspicion that her partner was having an affair with another woman, something he continued to deny throughout their relationship. Her attempts to deal with her suspicions of his infidelity, and his continued denial, led her to seek counselling. However, she felt that counselling was unhelpful, and that nobody understood her stress of believing something and having it continuously denied.

Asha finally ended her relationship after an abusive episode, but her ex continued to try and contact her. These attempts to contact her culminated in an episode where he tried to force his way into her house. Her brother, who was home at the time, intervened. She called the police in an attempt to find out her rights regarding her ex’s abusive and harassing behaviour, but she was told that until he did something to her the police could do nothing about his behaviour. She is now engaged to another man, but feels that the fallout from this previous relationship has made her a more negative and angry person. A lot of her anger is directed toward the woman she believes her ex was seeing during their relationship. She continues to berate herself for not acting on her intuition and confronting her ex. However, she believes that her experiences in this abusive relationship have helped her to become a stronger person who is more aware of and open about her feelings.

Belinda

Belinda is a 52-year-old Sikh woman who was born in Kenya. She described how her arranged marriage at the age of sixteen was like “searching for a better place to live” after
growing up with an alcoholic and abusive father. However, her husband began to beat her on the second day of their marriage, in what she believes was an effort to prove his power to his family. She had two sons and a daughter with her husband, but reports that she does not know “what it is like to be in love because, how can you love somebody when, you have that fear inside you.” She did not tell her parents about the abuse for fear that her father would take it out on her mother. The abuse continued after Belinda, her husband, and children immigrated to England and although she tried to leave her husband multiple times, she reports that her natal family would intervene on his behalf. The abuse continued after the family immigrated to Canada and she became very depressed. After a particularly severe beating, where Belinda was injured and hospitalized, her husband was arrested and then imprisoned for a short while. Although she spent some time in a shelter after this beating, she returned to him after he promised to change his behaviour. She states that after this imprisonment her husband did not hit her again, but remained emotionally abusive, unfaithful, and neglectful. He also began to gamble, incurring huge debts that she was initially unaware of. Her anger and feelings of neglect led her to have an affair, which her husband discovered and physically punished her for.

She became so frustrated and upset at his infidelity and treatment of her that she turned to God for strength and decided to leave the relationship. After living alone for a year she returned to the relationship at her husband’s request. The emotional abuse continued and she finally left him for good, but had to cover the family’s financial debts. She describes the difficulty she had coping with the negative opinions others held of her and the lack of support she received from many people. Since leaving this relationship she described her search for love and reports that she has since been in a relationship where she has been “in love.” This relationship was also emotionally abusive and after it ended she was devastated. She described this relationship as more painful than her physically abusive marriage because of her love for this man.

**Bubbly**

Bubbly is a 41-year-old Sikh woman who was born in England. She immigrated to Canada at the age of six with her natal family (parents, two sisters, and two brothers). Her interview focuses on her abusive, alcoholic husband. She has three children: two sons and a daughter. Bubbly described how she had hoped to learn more about her
culture by marrying a man of South Asian ethnicity, as her parents had provided her and her siblings with little information about their cultural background and language. However, instead of enriching her life, their cultural differences were a source of tension as her husband used the cultural norms he had learned as a way to control her in their marriage. In addition to their cultural differences, Bubbly described how her husband’s alcoholism has contributed to his abusive behaviour. She remains silent about his abuse as she fears that he will become violent towards those she seeks help from. In addition to contributing her income to her family she feels that she is completely responsible for the children, the house, and keeping her husband happy.

She relies on a number of coping strategies including friends, work, exercise, and most importantly her children. Her relationship with her children is especially important to her as she describes her relationship with her own mother as distant. In addition to his alcohol use she attributes her husband’s violent behaviour to stress at work and his own abusive childhood. She describes feeling lost at times and attributes this to her lack of cultural identity. She worries about her children and their reactions to the abusive behaviour they are constantly exposed to. Although she would like to leave the relationship, she remains for fear that her husband will attempt to kill her and/or her children if she does.

Enza

Enza is a 47-year-old Hindu woman who was born and raised in India. She immigrated to Canada to join her husband after her wedding at the age of 39. She described her sense that something was not right with the marriage even before her husband sponsored her to come to Canada. She states that their telephone conversations were distant, impersonal, and strained. Enza describes being afraid to tell her parents about her misgivings, because she had married later in life and did not want to risk the marriage. Due to her husband’s consistent correspondence others thought that all was well in their relationship. When she arrived in Canada she discovered that her husband was not working. She attributed his continued neglect, fluctuating mood and anger to his possible feeling of insecurity, as she had been very successful professionally and financially in India prior to her wedding. Soon after her immigration to Canada her suspicions regarding her husband’s infidelity were confirmed. In fact, her husband
insisted on keeping this woman in his life and wanted to include her in their social circle, something that Enza found very humiliating. When she tried to resist this he became angry and verbally abusive. Enza describes how many of their fights occurred after her husband had been drinking heavily, and he blamed her for provoking the abuse as well as his heavy drinking. Enza was discouraged from going outside the home and was allowed little contact with others on the phone, but her husband required that she play hostess to his friends whenever they came over.

During this stressful relationship, Enza attempted to retain her strong sense of self and achievement, and continued to try and save her marriage. However, her husband did little to contribute financially and forced her to leave their home several times. Enza initially tried staying with her husband’s friends as she had no friends of her own, no information about social services, and was afraid to trust anyone including the police. However, after obtaining information from a coworker she finally accessed a shelter. During this time her husband had taken her passport and other documents so that she could not return to India. Enza found herself becoming depressed and physically ill in response to her situation. In addition, although her husband continually told her to leave he would often ask her to return to maintain his social face. Enza described her fear of her husband and how devastated she was when he kept some of her most sentimental possessions from her.

After finally leaving her husband for good Enza began to see a psychiatrist. However, during one of her therapy sessions her psychiatrist revealed information she had not shared with him, but denied any wrongdoing when confronted. Enza left the session and did not return for further treatment. Her general experience with the services she received from the police, shelter services, and medical personnel was a lack of support and/or information of the kind she needed, but she continues to persevere.

Fari

Fari is a twenty-eight-year-old Muslim woman from Pakistan. Her interview focuses on her stressful and abusive marriage to a Pakistani man who had lived in Canada for over ten years before his marriage to her. She has one son from her marriage. Fari’s marriage was arranged by her parents, a process she fully consented to as she felt this reduced the pressure on her if anything were to go wrong with the marriage in the future.
Fari describes how although a wedding ceremony was conducted, another ceremony that signifies that a husband and wife can now live together was not completed until her husband returned to Pakistan ten months after their wedding. Fari reports that once she and her husband started living together he became emotionally and physically abusive toward her. Fari’s biggest complaint was that in addition to his verbally and physically abusive behaviour, her husband did not provide her with the standard of living that she had worked so hard to obtain by going to medical school. He provided little in terms of jewelry and money at their wedding ceremony, citing financial difficulties. He continued to be very frugal with her, but would spend money extravagantly on his other family members.

Fari reported that she became pregnant two months after she and her husband started living together, but both her husband and in-laws refused to take her to the doctor, stating that she was a doctor and could treat herself. Her mother-in-law continued to exacerbate the situation by giving her no respect or privacy, and her husband continually sided with his mother. Whenever Fari would attempt to talk to him about her feelings, he would report her complaints to his mother. She describes how she attributes the brain tumour she has since been diagnosed with to the stresses she endured during her marriage. However, she indicates that separating from her husband was not an option because of cultural expectations and the stigma associated with ending a marriage.

Ultimately she did separate from her husband, and continues to deal with hurtful comments by people in her South Asian community. Fari describes how her parents have now told her that, although they knew the difficulties she was facing, they had refused to interfere in the hopes of keeping the marriage intact. Her ex-husband’s neglectful behaviour towards her son is a concern for her, and she worries that she will have to remain single, as her son is her first priority.

**Meena**

Meena is a twenty-nine-year-old Hindu woman who was born and raised in India. Her story focuses on the abuse she experienced in India at the hands of her in-laws and husband in an arranged marriage at age nineteen. Although she did not feel ready for marriage, pressure from her family forced her to terminate her BA studies and get married. Immediately following her wedding day she began to be mistreated by her in-
laws. She was made to sleep on the floor and was expected to complete all of the
housework, beginning with the dishes from the wedding party.

In addition to the mistreatment by her in-laws, her husband was neglectful and would
only come to her when he wanted sex. During this time she did not complain because she
did not want to be disrespectful to her elders. Meena reports that her honeymoon went
well, but during their journey home her husband became angry with her for some
unknown reason, and upon their return home he and her in-laws beat her until she lost
consciousness.

The beatings continued daily and her in-laws began to complain that her dowry was
insufficient. During this time her in-laws did not allow her to see her family and when
her parents came to visit, her in-laws would treat her well for their benefit. She continued
to do all that was asked of her in the hopes that since it was only the twelfth day of her
marriage things would improve. Finally, during a rare visit home she was able to tell her
parents what was happening. Although her mother pleaded with her not to return she did
so out of fear that her in-laws would follow through on their threats to kill her family
members. After she returned from this visit she was prohibited from contacting her natal
family again. During this time her husband would beat her every day, have sex with her
every night without protection and then kick her in the stomach to prevent a pregnancy.
She felt very isolated and alone as she had no one to talk to, and the neighbours were also
afraid of her in-laws

Meena attempted to continue her studies by correspondence, but needed to return
home to retrieve her past education certificates. Upon return home that day on March 8,
International Woman’s Day, she remembers that she was severely beaten because she had
returned to her husband fifteen minutes late. It was the thirty-fourth day of her marriage,
and she decided that she would try to run away.

During one of his visits her brother had managed to give her a neighbor’s phone
number, which she had hidden on the back of her bindi package with an eyeliner pencil.
On the morning of March 9 she managed to leave the house under the guise of getting
milk and tried to find a phone. After several shop owners refused, a customer in a store
offered to let her use her phone. After calling her father to come and get her, she returned
home and continued her morning routine so that no one would suspect what she had
done. When her father and brother had arrived her in-laws were very angry and denied any wrongdoing. After approximately five hours of arguing she left the house taking only her educational certificates.

After leaving the house, her father saw the battered state that she was in. However, her in-laws were able to convince her brother to bring her back into the house so that she could say goodbye to her father-in-law. During their climb up four flights of stairs to the apartment, Meena continued to plead that she did not want to return. Upon reaching the apartment, she was pulled in and the door locked, leaving her brother on the outside. After locking her into the apartment her in-laws began to beat her and then took her to the balcony, where they threw her over. During this event Meena describes her fear and regret at not listening to her intuition, and she responded by closing her eyes and waiting for death.

Meena miraculously survived her fall, but remained unconscious for two days, awakening on her birthday, March 10. Her husband was apprehended soon after but his family continued to insist that Meena had attempted to commit suicide. With the help of women’s organizations in India, Meena was able to get a job once she had begun to recuperate, and complete her BA. However, her husband began to follow and harass her until one day when he followed her to her father’s place of work. She reported that her father’s colleagues, building security, and later the police beat him severely. She continued to live in fear of her husband for the next eight years, during which time she struggled with a “corrupt” legal system which did not grant her a divorce for four years. Four years after that, after having given up on any hope of legal restitution for her attempted murder she read a newspaper article reporting that her husband and brother-in-law had finally been sentenced to five years in jail.

Her husband’s threat that he would kill her upon his release led to Meena’s decision to seek asylum in Canada. She is now living in Canada waiting for immigration status, a process she describes as very slow. She has also tried unsuccessfully to find a job; barriers include the fact that English is her second language, and that her years of experience in India are not recognized in Canada. She attributes her survival and continued strength to God and her own decision to change. Although she does consider remarriage as she would like to have children someday, she has lost her trust in men.
Muskaan

Muskaan is a twenty-six year old Sikh woman who was born in India. She had an arranged marriage to a man from Canada at the age of seventeen. On the first day of their marriage she discovered that he drank, smoked, and did drugs, things that she hated. She found herself turned off from that point. A week later when she returned home she shared her concerns with her mother, who was also shocked but insisted that she not tell anyone for fear that it would lead to embarrassment for the family. On the third day of the marriage her husband became emotionally and physically abusive toward her. She kept the abuse a secret out of fear for her parents and her belief that some abuse was to be expected in marriage. When her parents discovered the situation, they attempted to intervene, but Muskaan’s in-laws convinced them to stay quiet so that her husband’s relationship with his father would not be damaged.

After staying in India for a month and a half her husband returned to Canada. Upon his return she realized she was pregnant, but her husband refused to believe the child was his and insisted she abort the baby. Although she initially considered this option, she and her parents realized that an abortion would serve as confirmation that the baby was not his and so she had the baby. Her husband’s abusive behaviour continued after he left India with his emotional abuse, threats, and controlling behaviour taking place by phone.

Pressure from her father-in-law forced her husband to sponsor Muskaan. After her arrival in Canada at the age of twenty her husband continued his abuse until one day he tried to kill her and ended up injuring his brother. The police were summoned, she was sent to a shelter (where she had a miscarriage), and he was jailed for three months. She returned home after his release from jail, attempted to leave the home several times after that, but inevitably returned until her brothers sent her to India. By this time her father-in-law knew of the situation. His knowledge was confirmed by her son who was now two and reported to his grandfather that his father hit his mother, and called her a bitch. She stayed in India for four months until the gossip persuaded her parents to send her back to Canada to stay with an uncle in a different part of the country. However, a recent highly publicized murder of a woman’s entire family by an angry South Asian man led to his refusal to let her stay with him. Upon her return she went back to school, got custody of her son, got a job, and got her own place. During this time her husband continued
harassing her (e.g., wanting joint custody, refusing the divorce, stealing her child support cheques) until he was deported because of his long history with the police. She was then able to bring her son back to Canada, but he has continued to suffer the emotional consequences of her husband’s behaviour. She regrets having not challenged her husband, but is happy with her hard won independence and ability to take care of herself and her son.

**Palvsha**

Palvsha is a 25-year-old Muslim woman from Pakistan whose interview was conducted in Punjabi, Hindi and whatever English she could manage. Palvsha has four sisters and two brothers, her father has passed away and her mother still resides in Pakistan. She was married at the age of eighteen, by phone to a man in Canada, whom her family had never seen. She had no contact with her in-laws or husband for the next two years, and her mother refused to challenge them for fear that it would negatively affect their relationship with Palvsha. Her in-laws began the sponsorship process after two years following pressure by Palvsha’s family and her in-laws’ refusal to grant her a divorce. The sponsorship process took an additional three years, such that she saw her husband for the first time when she arrived in Canada five years after her wedding.

Upon seeing him she realized that her husband was disabled, but she could not identify what was wrong with him. At this point she asked if she could return to Pakistan, but her in-laws threatened her to keep her quiet. Although she was frightened into staying she did not allow a sexual relationship with her husband until her mother-in-law threatening to lie and tell her parents that she was seeing another man.

During this time Palvsha was responsible for caring for her sick husband who beat her. Her in-laws were also verbally and psychologically abusive toward her. She was expected to complete all of the housework and her mother-in-law would continuously scold her, find fault with her work, and accuse her of indecent deeds with her father-in-law. These accusations were especially difficult for her, as she had been taught to treat her in-laws with the same respect she gave her own parents. During this time Palvsha was unable to tell her mother how she was being treated as her mother-in-law would lie to her mother and monitor her telephone conversations.
Palvsha reports that a short time after her arrival her mother-in-law began to take her to doctors, as she had not yet conceived a child. She attributes her mother-in-law's desire for her to conceive as another tactic to ensure that she would be bound to her son. Palvsha endured this abuse for some time, but ultimately attempted suicide by taking an overdose of pills. She was found by her mother-in-law and taken to the doctor. When she returned to the doctor for a follow-up appointment, she decided that she would not return to her in-laws. After her appointment she left by the back door, and took a taxi to a shelter. She reported her experiences to the police while at the shelter, but was told they could not charge her in-laws because they had not harmed her physically. After her escape, her mother-in-law informed her mother that she had run away with another man. Initially her mother believed this story and it was with great difficulty that Palvsha convinced her mother otherwise. She is currently living in metro housing, has applied for legal aid, and is trying to get a divorce. However, she continues to have run-ins with her in-laws who threaten to harm her if she does not return to them. Palvsha reports that she would like to learn English, perhaps become a nurse or a counsellor, and make a life for herself with her mother. She remains deeply hurt by her experience but reports that counselling has helped her to become more independent and feel less afraid.

**Shameem**

Shameem is a 40-year-old Muslim woman who is the eldest of four brothers and three sisters in her natal family. She has four children, two daughters (ages 12 and 16) and two sons (ages 18 and 19). She recently immigrated to Canada at the request of her husband who has been living here with his brother and sister-in-law for the past ten years. Within a few days of their arrival her husband started mistreating them, in what Shameem believes were efforts to force her to leave him so that he could continue a relationship with his sister-in-law. She describes how her children chose to stay with her rather than remain with her husband, a decision that she reports has provided her with a lot of support.

Shameem reports that the first ten years of her marriage were uneventful. However, fifteen days after the birth of her youngest daughter her husband left Pakistan for Canada and did not return or make contact for ten years. After his return to Pakistan, Shameem and her children came to Canada with her husband, but the family continued to live in the
basement apartment of her brother-in-law’s home. Her husband became physically and emotionally abusive toward her and her distress was compounded by her isolation and lack of familiarity with English. Soon after, her husband returned to Pakistan to remarry and divorced Shameem while he was there.

Attributing her experience to Kismet, she described how upset and unhappy she and her children were with their situation. Despite her husband’s attempts to gain custody of the children, they have chosen to stay with her, and continue to be a major source of support for her. Her fear and lack of familiarity with services in Canada initially made her consider returning to Pakistan. However, she has now gained some independence, and has access to formal assistance programs, factors that have improved her situation greatly.

Simran

Simran is a 26-year-old Sikh woman who was born in Vancouver. Her marriage to her husband was arranged while she was on vacation in India visiting her grandparents. She met her husband for approximately twenty minutes before agreeing to marry him. She decided that spending more time together was unhelpful as her meeting with another candidate had shown her that instead of honestly getting to know each other, they were both presenting themselves in the best possible light. The man she did agree to marry was well known by her family and she used this information to help her make her decision. She describes herself as quite innocent and naïve in terms of her relationships with men, and had never dated. She was unprepared for the cultural differences that might arise from marrying someone from India, but thought that a man from India might share similar religious values with her. She returned to Canada after her engagement and the whole family traveled to India the following year for the wedding.

Simran describes her wedding as happy, but reports that her father-in-law pulled her aside at the reception and told her about her husband’s “psychological” problems since his mother’s death two years before. Simran also described her fear regarding the wedding night, as she had never been intimate with a man before. Even though the wedding was a relatively happy affair, Simran describes her disappointment with the lack of attention shown to her by her husband. He would often leave her alone with her in-laws to go and be with his friends.
Upon her return to Canada, Simran sponsored her husband and encouraged him to go to university to get his equivalency. However, after he came to Canada he remained depressed and would "take his frustrations out on" her. She then sponsored her father-in-law hoping that this would please her husband. However, her husband remained unemployed and became emotionally abusive toward her.

In 1991 they had their first child, a son, and Simran describes that although her husband and father-in-law were happy with the baby, she continued to feel emotionally neglected. After her husband hit her for the first time after an argument, Simran told her parents, and reported that her father encouraged her to leave him if she was unhappy. She did not follow her father's advice at that time and the emotional neglect and abuse continued for several years until her husband was accepted into a university in another province. Her husband's abusive behaviour continued over the phone and she was left with all of the responsibility for their home and children. While he was away Simran went to a counsellor and tried to keep busy, but comments made by the Indian community were difficult for her. She became upset and went into a "depression." After some time her husband found a well paying job, but refused to send for her until she moved in with him despite his refusals.

She went on to describe the distant relationship with her husband and her repeated attempts to improve their communication and intimacy. She was very unhappy but did not want to end the relationship for fear of the stigma attached to being divorced in the Indian community. After some time her husband insisted they have a second child and refused to be responsible for birth control. Once she became pregnant she had to stop using antidepressants, and his behaviour continued to be neglectful and abusive. His behavior escalated to the point where he threatened her life and she had to sleep with her baby behind locked doors. She continues to live with him, but has returned to university.

**Sonia**

Sonia is a thirty-two year-old Sikh woman from Afghanistan, who illegally immigrated to Canada seeking refugee status with her husband and two daughters (ages twelve and thirteen). The Taliban killed Sonia's father for refusing to convert to Islam and the continued threat by this group in Afghanistan forced Sonia and her family to flee the country. Sonia completed her interview in Hindi.
Sonia’s marriage was arranged to a man from India when she was seventeen, and she states that she was largely unprepared for marriage at this young age. Soon after their engagement her parents expressed their doubts regarding the match, but Sonia went through with the wedding to protect her father’s honour. Given their concerns about her husband, her parents’ one stipulation for this marriage was that instead of Sonia living with her husband in India, she and her husband would remain in Afghanistan.

Sonia describes how her husband did not attempt to initiate a sexual relationship with her for one month after their marriage. After one or two sexual relations Sonia became pregnant and because of complications their sexual relationship became limited. After three years of marriage and the birth of their two children her husband returned to India. Their relationship was never a close one, but she kept her doubts about their relationship to herself, as she did not want to worry her parents. However, after her father’s death her husband’s family started to pressure her to come to India, and began to ask for large sums of money from Sonia’s wealthy family.

Fears for her daughters’ safety, a traumatic experience when she was injured by the Taliban, and insistence from her husband led to the decision that Sonia, her husband and their children would immigrate to Canada. The process of seeking asylum as refugees was long and difficult, and upon their arrival in Canada they had no one to turn to, and were given very little assistance or information by the immigration officers in Toronto. They were able to find their way to a Gurudwara (Sikh temple) where they were given permission to stay only one night. A stranger who was in the Gurudwara befriended them and allowed them to stay with him.

After a short while they were able to get their own house, but her husband refused to work, and squandered their limited funds on alcohol and gambling. The family was in such difficult financial straits that they were forced to survive on tea for the last few days of each month. After an abusive argument during which Sonia refused to give her husband the money that had been allotted for food, her husband threatened her and then left her and her children. Sonia has not heard from him in two years. After her husband left, Sonia became very ill for two weeks. Her one ally has been the man who befriended her family at the Gurudwara, and she is very angry about the rumours and lack of support she has received from the Indian community. Sonia’s biggest source of support
and concern continues to be her daughters, and she is reluctant to consider remarriage. Sonia continues to struggle financially, while her health problems and lack of English prevent her from finding a job. However, she has strong beliefs that women are “as good as” men and that life should not be lived in fear of what others will say about your decisions.

Zharguna

Zharguna is a 35-year-old Muslim woman from a tribal area in Pakistan. She has five sisters and one brother. Zharguna was engaged to be married at the age of eighteen to a wealthy man her parents had chosen for her. A week prior to their wedding, Zharguna and her family discovered that her fiancée was already married with children. Zharguna, being from an educated family, was strongly opposed to usurping the rights of the first wife and wanted to marry someone who was single.

Zharguna with the support of her family attempted to break the engagement through the tribal system. When the tribal route failed after three years, she and her family went through the formal court system, where her case was repeatedly passed on to the next level for the next ten years. During this period of her time her family endured long hours in the courts, and a lack of support from extended family members. This period was even more difficult after her father’s death. A decision was finally reached in her favour at the level of the Supreme Court. Zharguna describes how the corrupt legal process in Pakistan was used by her wealthy fiancée to postpone a legal decision. During the legal process and after a decision had been rendered her fiancée continuously threatened her and her family, and at one point attacked her brother.

Soon after this decision, Zharguna’s new fiancée cancelled their upcoming wedding following threats by her ex. At this point Zharguna left her home and her job with the United Nations to move to another city where she might be safer. However, her ex continued to threaten her and she decided to seek asylum in Canada. She reports that her job as a development worker fighting for women’s rights helped her to fight for her own rights.

Zharguna reported mixed experiences with immigration personnel, but generally feels that she has received support since coming to this country. However, she now must prove her case to the Canadian courts and cannot find employment despite a Master’s
degree, as she has no Canadian experience. She is currently volunteering at a woman’s organization in order to gain some Canadian experience. Zharguna sometimes regrets her decision to fight her engagement as she feels that she has lost sixteen years of her life, and that the stress of her situation contributed to her father’s death. However, her family and God have been strong sources of support. Despite the difficulties she has endured, Zharguna hopes to find a job, and eventually help other women like her.

South Asian Women’s Experience of Violence

The introductions above illustrate my realization in the brief period of time that I shared with these women that the complexity of their realities was not going to fit into neat and tidy categories. Certain themes permeate women’s lives and emerged time and time again in different categories (e.g., family honour), illustrating the complex and nonlinear aspects of experience, and the ways in which context acts to shape social norms and expectations. By examining the patterns that emerged from their stories of courage and perseverance, we can begin to examine the diverse issues that influence women’s experiences of intimate partner violence. Many of the themes that emerged are consistent with the literature that has been reviewed earlier, as many issues are common among women who have experienced violence regardless of the cultural group they belong to. However, themes that are unique to the South Asian context are also apparent. The following discussion outlines themes common across women and geography, those that are unique for these South Asian women, and/or those that are influenced by factors such as immigration that are shared by some but not all women in violent relationships. These themes are derived from an amalgamation of thirteen different experiences, but my goal is to tell a story that still allows the reader to hear each woman’s voice.

The women interviewed were Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim. These religions have both similarities and differences, which are beyond the scope of this paper to deal with in detail. As mentioned previously, South Asian cultural norms that emphasize Hindu customs are practiced throughout South Asia. At times, when appropriate, attempts will be made to provide relevant details about specific religious differences. However, more generally this paper focuses on these women as members of the South Asian Diaspora, keeping in mind that although cultural aspects will be emphasized, this work is a presentation of general themes, and does not support cultural justification for violence
against South Asian women. Nor is this work meant to imply that the issues discussed are necessarily confined to this cultural group.

Although many of the women interviewed have lived in Canada for many years, English remains a second language for several of them. More recent immigrants such as Amar, Shameem, Palvsha, Muskaan, and Meena either had their interviews conducted in other languages and then translated into English, or attempted to speak in English to the best of their ability. This lack of fluency in English has meant that when quoting women's stories, grammatical markers such as commas have been used to denote pauses unique to each woman's speech pattern, and do not necessarily represent correct English grammar. Quotes are presented as they were transcribed, but some attempt has been made to make them easier to understand by removing single letter sounds such as "s" and "m," and idiosyncratic phrases such as "uhm," "like," and "you know."

The discussion of themes presented in the following section of this paper has been organized around women's quotes, such that the themes, subthemes, and quotes were organized first, and then the story was built around them. Once a general outline was prepared in this manner, references to literature relevant to South Asian women were added to illustrate where the findings were supported or contradicted by other research in the area. In presenting the findings, both my interpretation of what women said and each woman's words have been presented, providing another opportunity to interpret each woman's story.

When participants were asked to talk about their experiences of intimate partner violence, seven major themes emerged, with each of these consisting of several subthemes. The major themes include messages regarding: 1) men's value compared to women, 2) the lack of decision making power held by women (as reflected in the traditional arranged marriage process), 3) the stigma attached to leaving the relationship, 4) the importance of maintaining social face, 5) women's reactions to violence, 6) issues regarding social services, and 7) factors associated with personal changes that women identify.

A discussion of these themes reveals that many of the issues faced by these thirteen women are consistent with those of women from other cultural groups and geographic locations, while others appear to be more unique to factors related to the South Asian
cultural context. Given that ethnicity and gender in addition to a host of other factors appear to contribute to the experiences of these women, the ethnogender approach (Abraham, 1995), with its emphasis on the role of gender, the role of others within a woman’s life, and the role of ethnicity and difference in the experience of violence appears to be a valid model to use when describing the themes to follow.

1) Gender Inequality

"It is said that when women get together miracles can happen. Why else are we divided by patriarchy?" (Kohli, 1995).

Traditionally, in most South Asian families group needs are considered more important than individual needs, with individuals feeling a strong sense of responsibility to the family and community. Group cooperation is encouraged while individual competition is discouraged, with the family playing a critical role in any decisions that are made (Ramisetty-Mikler, 1993). Within the family itself males are valued more than females, children are encouraged to be docile and obedient, and high levels of dependency are fostered in the family such that women are expected to be dependent on their father, husband, and eldest son (Segal, 1991). These attitudes regarding women’s subordinate status to men constitutes a predominant theme that permeated the experiences of participants and this will be the focus of the first section of this discussion.

A focus on gender from the ethnogender approach (Abraham, 1995) reveals that violence against women is rooted globally in beliefs in male dominance over women. Patriarchal control over women includes restrictive codes of behaviour for women, gender segregation, and an ideology that links family honour to female virtue (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). Like other patriarchal systems, the South Asian cultural context is characterized by inequalities in male-female roles that are legitimized by societal norms which institutionalize these inequalities, placing men in a dominant position in the lives of women (Fernandez, 1997). These inequalities are so ingrained within the South Asian mentality that the lives of girls and women are governed by unassailable rules regarding their behaviour. These traditional patriarchal power imbalances may be even more strongly maintained or emphasized in the immigrant community in the hopes of ensuring cultural continuity (Abraham, 1999; Almeida &

Thus a major aspect of the South Asian cultural context in the lives of the women interviewed is that of gender inequality, whereby men are more valued than women, and virtually the only way that women can attain value is through their relationships with men, primarily as wife and mother. A woman is raised with strict rules regarding behavioural norms, is dependent on the men in her life, is expected to be asexual prior to marriage, and her value is defined as being married. Consistent with a patriarchal family structure, women are responsible for domestic life, and uphold a family’s virtue by maintaining their own until they are married into a family that can maintain or raise their familial status.

No respect for women.

Given the patriarchal structure of South Asian culture it is not surprising that all of the participants reported receiving messages at one time or another that men were more valued than women were. Not only are women subordinate to men, but their status in a family is defined in terms of their relationships to other males – father, husband, and son (Abraham, 2000b; Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999; Kumar, 1991; Moghadam, 1992). Aspects of a man’s value come from the fact that he is the head of the household and tends to be the primary wage earner, decision-maker, and disciplinarian. In contrast, women serve as caretakers, and are expected to move into their husband’s home and contribute to the well being of his family after marriage (Segal, 1991). Meena summarizes this patriarchal view:

Okay, first thing, think that, in India there is a man dominated society. They don’t have a respect for women. (Meena)

For Zharguna, who grew up in Pakistan, the strength of one’s family was actually measured by the number of men within it. Thus for her, having only one younger brother, and five sisters reduced her family’s power:

In our tribal society, men is like, the number of men is considered as, power. If there are too many men in a family, they are a strong family, so I had, in my case I had only one younger brother with me. (Zharguna)
The message is that since men are more powerful, they will be responsible for taking care of women. For Belinda the message was that in return for doing everything for a man, he will love you:

I was brought up like, man is everything, you do, you please the man, and you do everything for a man and a man loves you. (Belinda)

A common message relayed to women is to be submissive and sacrificing, putting the needs of the family before their own, regardless of the situation. Within the hierarchical South Asian system this means men and higher status women. Others in the family also work to justify and indulge male behaviour. Simran recounts her mother’s response when she described her husband’s temper tantrums to her:

He would have these temper tantrums over, he would, he was very insecure, and, I just thought that it’ll get better once he has a decent job. Oh, he’s unhappy because of this, this, always justifying, and my mom told me, oh Indian men they’re like that. You have to, you have to give them, their way, so that their ego is satisfied, this is just the way it is, just don’t talk back to him, because they’re not used to that and all this, and, so try to, try to please him and things like that. So I, I was a very submissive woman in the beginning. (Simran)

This message of male superiority is translated into married life so that women are supposed to look up to their husbands as the person who defines them. Muskaan put it clearly when she said that the reason she kept returning to her husband despite his extremely violent and threatening behaviour was the notion that “your husband is your God, without him you’re nothing.” Meena takes this one step further when she describes what she thought was expected of her after her marriage:

I should wear the bindi [decorational dot worn on forehead], I should wear the tikka [jewelry worn in the hair to indicate that woman is married], and I have a izzat with the gar [home], like this home and they are my parents, my husband is my, God. I should pray my husband what he’s saying I never refused him. This is in my mind, that marriage is the word, like, to, always keep your mouth shut and follow the rules. I, this is in my mind, because I thought only this marriage is a compromise, you, women should do the compromise, men is saying this, you should do the compromise. (Meena)
This devaluation of daughters and their needs may also be justified by others as daughters do not fulfill any significant ritual role within a woman’s natal family, and may be looked upon as a drain on a family resources (Kumar, 1991). This message that men are more important than women not only diminishes the social value of women, but in many senses leaves them more socially vulnerable.

Participants who had encountered the legal system in South Asia describe how this vulnerability reflects itself in a corrupt justice system. For some women this meant involvement with police officers who instead of enforcing justice actually contributed to their oppression. For instance, Meena’s brother-in-law, a police officer, was one of the people who used to batter her. Meena described her disillusionment with the legal system in India:

I got the divorce in 1996 and I was married in ’92. Then, I, after, I lost my faith in the court, because the police is corrupted, court, magistrate is corrupted, every, everything is corrupted in India. I was, I told my father I don’t want to, because I’m too much depression... sometime I feel so bad, that the Indian government is always taking the care of the man, they never listen to the women, what is the happening with the women and their law is more for the man not for the women.
(Meena)

Thus the devaluation of women is seen not only in the messages they receive regarding their subordinate status, but also more systemically in the legal system that should be helping them.

Most of the women who had immigrated here reported that they felt that women’s rights were better recognized in Canada than in their countries of origin. Zharguna’s decision to flee to Canada as a refugee was made after discovering that women’s rights were recognized here:

I’m not very familiar with the system, but what I found here it’s good. Women have the right to say something at least, there you don’t have rights. People maybe don’t even listen you. I am an example, this is, you cannot find a worst example then me. I’m one of the example, like they don’t listen to you, but here at least, right now what I found that when you, say something to a, it’s worth, like people
listen, to you...why I select Canada...because they said, Canada is more open for refugees, and for women rights... (Zharguna)

Women's place is in the home.

Many cultures place a high value on honour defined as virtuous behaviour, good moral character, integrity, and altruism, with these ideals expected for men and women. This code dictates precedence and toughness for males, while norms for females stress modesty, shame, and the avoidance of behaviours that might threaten the good name of the family (e.g., adultery or sexual immodesty) (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). These gender roles imply a more active role for men and a passive role for women. However, females can be both powerful and active in these cultures, and may play a major role in determining the reputation of a family. In fact, "it is often said that in such cultures, the honor of the family goes through the female" (Vandello & Cohen, 2003, p. 998). This appears to be consistent with the notion that despite the devaluation of South Asian women, they are also considered a symbol of cultural continuity. External and internal messages work to uphold and preserve the culture in specific ways, and these include learning and adhering to culturally prescribed gender roles (Abraham, 2000b), which inherently privilege men (Dasgupta, 2000).

according to my culture, girls not speak to anybody, you just listen, and follow up what they are saying, because they're your elders. (Meena)

All of the women interviewed described how traditional gender norms supported men's role in the public sphere and women's role in the domestic sphere. In general this meant that boys were given more freedom inside and outside of the home, while girls were responsible for household chores, and their activities outside of the home were restricted. Zharguna recounts the characteristics of a "good girl,"

like for a good girl the criteria in the beginning they will tell us talk slow, softly, wear your dupata [head scarf] all the time, be a good girl, don't talk, like ask too many things this is like for a good girl, if you talk a lot, if you want to go it's not acceptable...even my own family like I'm not allowed to go at late hours. I don't make noise when men are around if they men, boys are doing okay, for them it's acceptable. If I want to play something, I'm not allowed. (Zharguna)
Amar recalls how her brother was allowed more freedom while she was relegated to her home:

he allowed to do, he can go out with any one but not me. I have to finish my school and come back home and I have to do house work and everything…

(Amar)

Some participants saw these gender norms as somehow different from the North American norm. Bubbly contrasts her “Canadian” upbringing with the restrictions placed on her, her sisters and her mother:

we were just really brought up as Canadian kids, but we were taught to stay home, the women are supposed to stay home. The boys always have that extra priority, where they can do what they want and the women are supposed to stay home, like that was, with my mom and dad. She wasn’t allowed to do anything that she really wanted to do. She was just sort of put in her place, and then my dad, whatever he said, whether it was right or wrong…that was the way. (Bubbly)

Unfortunately, females from many cultures are socialized to adopt roles that encourage their dependence on men, and require them to be compliant, nurturing, and passive (Walker, 1981). Males are also socialized into roles encouraging their dependence upon women and aggression towards them (Walker, 1981). They are taught to be intelligent, rational, and strong, and are expected to be the economic providers for their family.

In general, women described gender-related messages that emphasized their domestic, subservient, and passive role in the family. For many, the underlying message was that if they fulfilled their duties and sacrificed their needs for others in this lifetime, they would reap the benefits in the next life. This is consistent with the Hindu concept of Moksha discussed previously, whereby the consequences of one’s behaviour in this life are realized in the next. As Simran related, “I was always told how Indian woman always sacrifices… and then you reap the benefits later.” Not only do these types of attitudes maintain women’s subordinate status within the family, they also promote the value of male children who need less supervision and ultimately will increase a family’s economic viability.

Women’s status in South Asian culture is somewhat paradoxical in that, while they are given subordinate status and strictly controlled, they are also central to the family status
and cultural continuity. This paradox position may be better understood by examining what comprises South Asian ideas about masculinity and femininity. Interestingly, South Asian views of femininity include ideas of both submissiveness and power, with female power associated with female sexuality (Abraham, 2000b; Bannerji, 1993; Kumar, 1991; Mazumdar, 1998). Women are considered to have greater sexual power than men and thus are feared and restricted (Wadley, 1994; cited in Abraham, 2000b). Therefore, although femininity is often depicted as submissive, inferior, sacrificing, socially dependent and chaste (Abraham, 2000b), “the concept of ‘Shakti,’ femininity in control of her own sexuality, and its real life translation, ‘Virangana’ (warrior woman)” is also part of the feminine image in South Asian society (Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996, p. 255). This notion of female sexuality as powerful and needing to be controlled is also seen in other cultures.

*Virginity is everything.*

The patriarchal belief that a woman’s power is located within her sexuality has led to various methods of controlling this power in economic, social, and sexual realms. The emphasis in the sexual realm is on female virginity and purity, with images of the “goddess” as the chaste and life-giving mother who supports the dominant social order often contrasted with those of the “whore” who has the power to destroy men with her powerful sexuality (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1998).

The added link of a South Asian family’s honour with the purity of its women also means that a woman must protect her virginity before marriage and her virtue afterward, and protect her family from rumour and scandal (Hasnat, 1998; Vandello & Cohen, 2003). The only legitimate space for a woman’s sexuality is through marriage and the creation of a family (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1998). Prior to marriage, restrictions used to harness women’s sexuality include controlling their access to and interactions with nonrelated members of the opposite sex. This control over a woman’s sexuality is implemented both outside of the home with strong rules prescribing appropriate contacts and behaviour, and inside the home in terms of lack of information regarding sex.

For South Asian immigrants who may be invested in maintaining cultural continuity, these cultural prescriptions have been magnified by a stronger adherence to cultural values. This results in even more restrictions being placed on daughters (DasGupta &
Dasgupta, 1998) with the emphasis on premarital virginity. Women in this study support this idea through their descriptions of the gender specificity of the messages they grew up with regarding sexuality. Participants described how sexuality was a relatively open topic for men, where boys were often given information about how to protect themselves, with the underlying assumption being that they may be having sex. On the other hand, for girls, the subject of sex was taboo. Perhaps the underlying fear is that if a woman is given any information or freedom regarding sexuality, her virginity, which Palvsha describes as "everything" for a woman, would be at risk.

Before coming to Canada I didn’t know what sort of relationship a husband and a wife has...I didn’t know any thing, it is just by the grace of God that I didn’t have a child. (Palvsha)

The possible repercussions of risking one’s virtue and thus putting the family’s honour at stake can be severe:

we always went to schools with our cousins, we came back with them. We went to the same school we weren’t even allowed to, talk to any guys like in the even in the class, even to ask for a book or anything. So, that was like, no, no, no you’ll be killed if we see you anywhere near a guy... (Muskaan)

Gender messages regarding what constituted a "good girl" also included having nothing to do with boys or dating:

I guess I was very innocent, I had never dated before, I’d never had a relationship with a man before. I only had girlfriends, that’s the way I was brought up, because I knew, I knew dating was a no no and I just tried to be the good girl that didn’t do anything like that... (Simran)

These messages regarding appropriate gender-related behaviours are so pervasive that women may not even be aware of explicit messages they are receiving.

in my childhood, first thing that we can’t talk with like a boy, we can’t like love with a boy, we should do the work in a kitchen, and, this is too much difference, even though you are, somebody’s not saying to you...I’m from the Indian, from a typical Indian family, even though, they not told me, but I have, when I, start growing, then it’s coming automatically in my mind... (Meena)
These findings corroborate other research conducted with South Asian immigrants in the West in terms of parental restrictions on daughters regarding socializing with the opposite sex, promotion of asexuality, and access to sex education (e.g., Hennink et al., 1999; Segal, 1991; Wakil et al., 1981). In fact, Dasgupta and Dasgupta (1998) report that issues surrounding sex and sexuality are the primary area of intergenerational conflict within the Asian-Indian community, whereby the sexual behaviour of daughters is seen as potentially disruptive to group integrity. Women are strictly policed and encouraged to accept traditional arranged marriage practices in an effort to preserve the culture, with the search for independence presenting a choice between “personal liberation and cultural loyalty” (p. 113). This control of female sexuality in order to ensure male honour may differentiate patriarchy in Asian cultures from that in Western culture (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999; Moghadam, 1992). Thus sex proscribed for men’s pleasure within marriage, and cultural prescriptions to maintain virginity before marriage place South Asian women at further risk for sexual violence (Abraham, 1999).

Interestingly, it was while asking women about their experience of sexuality that I was struck by my own reactions during the interview. As I talked with women about issues related to sexuality, I became aware of how many of these messages I had internalized. One of the strongest messages that I can identify receiving about sexuality is that prior to marriage sex is taboo and any conversations about or knowledge of sex-related material is prohibited. Although I was aware of some discomfort when asking women about sexually related topics, it became clear to me during the transcription process that this had translated into my own reticence about broaching issues of sexuality with each woman. What I initially identified as my attempts to be respectful about intimate sexual information was also confounded with my status as an unmarried women asking other women about their experiences and attitudes regarding sexuality. If I am completely honest, there was also the fear that participants would ask me about my own knowledge/experience or lack thereof.

My own reaction highlights the pervasiveness and strength of these taboos against sex. The question this raises then is what are the effects of these messages on women’s experience of the sexual aspects of their adult relationships? Most of the participants who were married had gone through the arranged marriage process whereby they had
very little if any time to get to know their new partners. Now, after a lifetime of being
told to stay away from boys these women were expected to be intimate with their
husbands soon after marriage. Not surprising then was the fear, discomfort, and guilt
described by women who were given little education and exposure to issues regarding
sexuality, and who now faced physical intimacy with virtual strangers. Simran describes
her fear and uncertainty regarding what she should do on her wedding night:

I thought, okay we’d get married, we would fall in love later. Which is the whole,
once you get to know each other (laughs). However, I was still very, I was very
scared of, your first night and everything. I was thinking, oh my God, I don’t even
know this person, now what am I supposed to say? Can I say no? I discussed it
with my girlfriends before I left (laughs) and, they were laughing, they were
saying, oh my God, well you can, make sure you, they bought me all this nice
lingerie. Make sure you wear one of these. I said, I’m not wearing one of those.
I’ll just wear my nice, pajamas or something (laughs). So anyways, I was very,
actually, that’s what I was really scared of, because I had never had a relationship,
and, when you don’t know somebody and you’re expected to share yourself
physically, with someone you don’t even know, was a very uncomfortably, sort of
thing to expect. (Simran)

Other women described how their husbands were distant and inattentive, except when
they wanted sex, but the messages regarding a wife’s duties meant that they did not or
could not refuse. Meena describes the following:

slowly my husband talk with me, because of, of course he want the sex with me,
so he talk with me and, but he, he come only with, my at the night time with me,
he want the sex only, then in the morning he is like the strange person to me…I’m
like a stranger in their house, just your, room is in the kitchen…like the servant,
the working in the home…and then they beat me daily. Then when I was feeling
hurt, I have a pain, and then he want with me sex, but I, I never say no…I’m
totally like the typical Indian women. I should say, I never refused. (Meena)

Sexual restrictions for women and sexual access for men are supported by legal,
religious, and social definitions of women as male property, and sex as part of the
obligation for exchange of goods (Abraham, 1999). Thus the limited experience women
have prior to marriage may make them more vulnerable as sex often becomes a means through which men can appropriate power. These taboos regarding sexuality are not limited to South Asian cultures, but are seen in other Asian cultures as well. Kozu (1999) describes the strong prohibitions regarding speaking about sex in Japan. For women, sexual acts are often associated with shame. Since rape and sexual abuse are considered sexual acts, these prohibitions keep women from speaking out and prosecuting their perpetrators. This means that violence such as marital rape often goes unrecognized (Abraham, 2000b; Mazumdar, 1998).

A woman’s virginity is everything for her and mine was snatched from me by him. I don’t have a life now but I will show them that I can take care of my self.

But this painful emotion will stay with me for the rest of life. (Palvsha)

Women, who are at the bottom of the hierarchy, face the strictest controls in an effort to maintain the hierarchical system. However, they also have the burden of maintaining this system. The system is sustained through the concepts of honour and shame, with women bringing honour to their family if they comply with their prescribed roles, and dishonour and shame if they deviate from them (Ayyub, 2000). This means that women must maintain purity and chastity while performing their duties, which ultimately include getting married and producing male heirs.

By linking the burdens of sexual chastity and cultural traditions, and placing both on the Indian-American daughter’s shoulders, the Indian immigrant community protects itself from mainstream threats of assimilation. Indeed, the control of the daughter’s sexuality becomes the community’s main antiracist resistance. In line with the Indian construction of woman as potentially “polluting”, Indian-American women carry the heavy burden of being potential polluters and diluters of the immigrant hegemony. (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1998, p. 125).

You’re nothing without a husband.

In a society where marriage is more than an expected life event, women’s subordinate status in other areas was in sharp contrast to the clear message that a woman’s value was represented through marriage. Most of the messages that participants received while growing up were in preparation for the eventuality of marriage, with marriage and motherhood providing women with their primary identities (Dasgupta, 2000). Only a few
of the participants described encouragement in terms of education, career or other future life events. Amar's comment that "they think husband is everything for a girl" illustrates the emphasis on this life path as the only one that women should really pursue. The stigma associated with remaining unmarried puts considerable pressure on women to marry (Abraham, 2000b). Even when women wanted to study or pursue other options, the message regarding their future usually focussed upon the importance of marriage. Women who pursue higher education are often pressured by their parents to drop out, while those who remain single face an escalation in pressure to marry (Ayyub, 2000):

"when I was married, I was not ready for this marriage, because I was very young, I want to do my study. I want to do my study complete, and, I have my dreams, I want to become the nurse, I want to become the teacher or something. There is in my mind, but, this, only the marriage is the biggest part of the life, the society, you should, girls should be the married..." (Meena)

Thus for women who were pursuing other avenues, the message that one's worth comes through marriage was a compelling one. This relationship between value and marriage is especially powerful given that, in the South Asian social system described by these participants, the predominant message was a woman's lack of value:

"It's the same concept, your husband is your God, without him you're nothing..." (Muskaan)

This equation of marriage with value makes it very difficult to consider leaving even a bad relationship, because then what would you be valued for?

Thus, traditional cultural ideals for South Asian women appear to reinforce a feminine identity that serves familial and social ends (Guzder & Krishna, 1991). Women are "given" to men through marriage. They gain respect and power through their sons and later through their position as mothers-in-law (Moghadam, 1992). Furthermore, a culture that legitimizes male dominance and female subordination silences women by teaching them that they are less important than men and need a man's protection. This helps to ensure that they keep quiet about their oppression (Abraham, 1999). The message that most of the participants appear to be given was that it is their duty to look after others, especially men, and that the most important thing to aspire to is marriage. However, if women are second class citizens, who need to be protected, and their virginity saved for
marriage, then of course they cannot be held responsible for such a huge decision as who to marry and how to find him. This means that not only are others in charge of dictating the day to day behaviour of women, but they are also in charge of the decision of when and whom to marry.

2) Marriage as a Family Affair
a) Others make our decisions

In traditional South Asian culture, age, gender, and generational status help to determine one's behaviour and role relationships. Self-identity is inhibited while interdependence is encouraged (Segal, 1991). This emphasis on the group helps to strengthen group identity and family stability, while discouraging individual autonomy (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). As age is a determining factor in status, an autocratic parent-child relationship continues to persist even after adolescence when children would be considered independent in the West (Segal, 1991). Thus age and gender play an important role in decision making, with independent decisions frowned upon or identified as cultural contamination (Segal, 1991). Decisions both large and small tend to be made by higher-ranking family members, with strong rules regarding appropriate behaviour helping to reduce the necessity for independent decision making. This lack of decision making power often translates into a "waiting game" where women simply must wait to see what the "powers that be" determine is the best course for their lives. Muskaan described how this lack of decision making power over their own lives leaves women ill prepared to deal with decisions when they are forced to make them:

for your whole life other people had made decisions for you, so you don’t even know how to make a decision. So, and all of a sudden, they’re out there and they have to make a decision and they can’t, because they never made one. So, how you expect them to make one for them because then you’re always scared if I make the wrong one... So then you go back, to those people again to let them make again it for you. That’s one reason too because, you never made one so, somebody will make made it for you again and then you will end up going back probably again, and live there until you die... (Muskaan)

Muskaan’s words show us the lack of autonomy given to women. A woman is seen as property and her needs are identified in terms of other people. As a result of this lack of
autonomy, women do not learn necessary skills regarding decision making and independence and so they return to the “safety” of having another do this for them.

Parents know better.

In most South Asian communities, parents and the natal extended family play a very important role in the decision-making process of a woman’s life. The hierarchical nature of the family places unmarried women on the lowest rung of the status ladder, and from an early age most decisions are made by older males in the family with input from higher status females. These decisions tend to support the interests of those in power, with the most consistent goals being that of family unity and family harmony (Abraham, 2000b). This process is apparent in the area of marriage, which is typically arranged by the girl’s parents who are in charge of finding a suitable match for their daughter. The idea is that parents know best and will make choices that are in their daughter’s best interest. As mentioned earlier, within the South Asian context marriage is an alliance between two families rather than an alliance based on the notion of romantic love. It is assumed that this type of an alliance will allow for greater long-term security for families, as a spouse is chosen using rational criteria, such as economic worth, social status, education, appearance, and family background (Abraham, 2000b). Thus if larger family issues are covered, love will develop as the couple develops their relationship after the wedding (Abraham, 2000b). This means that in the area of marriage the old adage “father knows best” takes on a whole new meaning.

Most of the participants in this study who were married went through the arranged system and had little choice regarding when or whom they would marry:

He was of my parents’ choice. In our culture it’s the parents’ choice and parents for their son or daughter and look for a good person and wish for us a good life. They thought he would work and earn, we’d have children, our house, meaning we’d have our own separate life and live a comfortable life. (Shameem)

Some women, like Fari, were happy with a process that gave parents the responsibility for this large life decision:

It was a totally arranged marriage and arranged by my parents and but not like this I was not forced I told you I’m well educated from there, no question it was, it was, I mean with my, very hundred percent verify okay and personally I like the
marriages from, I mean arranged personally because the pressure of the, if it get worse in future the mental pressure is not on you, oh I choosed and it is wrong. I anytime (she chuckles) if you get problems you can show oh, this is because of my parents this way. (Fari)

For other women, this lack of decision making power was frustrating. Muskaan describes her sense that this decision is made based on others’ happiness rather than hers:

Yeah, but their needs are, what will make them happy it’s not based on what will make you happy. It’s just, what’s their happiness, what’s the society’s happiness, what, okay if you do this then the people won’t say this. It’s not that like you, it’s like for the whole society they are thinking, rather than you. Like they don’t want your happiness, but they want, the rest of the world happy. To keep those values of the society ... You still can’t decide for yourself, we are going to decide for you. (Muskaan)

In Palvsha’s case, not only had she never seen her husband-to-be, but her marriage ceremony was performed over the phone as a priest sat with her in Pakistan. First they asked her and then him and both said yes. When Palvsha was asked whether she had said yes voluntarily, her response was,

One doesn’t have much choice. You have to say yes, to what the parents have arranged. (Palvsha)

Other women such as Sonia revealed their awareness regarding their inexperience in decision making and how this influenced who they married:

my father asked me, that we want you to get married, and I said yes. What else can I do, although in our people, this is not usually asked at that time. I told my father, I said, you are older, this decision is not one that I am equipped to make, you have thought about it, and so you must have properly for me. (Sonia)

In addition to the emphasis on marriage and family in both Canada and South Asian countries, there are also pressures to get married at a culturally defined appropriate age (Abraham, 2000b). Traditionally, South Asian culture does not recognize an “adolescent” life cycle stage (Segal, 1991). Historically, girls could be promised at birth and married even before puberty, but were not sent to their husband’s home until they were older. The actual age at which women were sent to live with their husbands might
depend on a variety of factors including family resources or the beginning of menstruation (i.e., capability for child bearing). This stage is usually symbolized with a religious or cultural custom (K. K. Hunjan, personal communication, June 4, 2003).

In today’s world, the average age for women to get married in areas of South Asia is usually younger than in the West. Mulatti (1995) writes that the mean age for marriage for both men and women has been increasing in India over the last forty years with people in urban areas marrying at later ages than in rural ones (i.e., boys marry between 25 and 35 years and girls between 20 and 30 years of age). Age appears to be increasing in Southern Indian states along with literacy rates, while age at marriage in North India continues to be low along with lower literacy rates (Mulatti, 1995).

Getting one’s daughter married is considered the parents’ prime responsibility to their daughter. Before marriage, daughters use the family’s resources but are not seen to contribute in a meaningful way. Furthermore, youth, beauty, and desirability go hand in hand. Therefore, the earlier a woman is married the better it is for her family. Palvsha, married at 18, stated,

In my family a grown up girl is not kept home for too long. A girl is married at a young age. (Palvsha)

Sonia’s description of marriage at 17 illustrates how unprepared many women feel regarding this process:

Up till then, my age was not such that I thought about getting married. I was 17 years old, and I had never thought of such things before...It was an arranged marriage and you don’t get much say. There was no time to think about what I should do and the like. (Sonia)

For Belinda, marriage at age 16 was less about wanting to get married and more about escaping her abusive natal family:

So, we were not allowed to complain, we were not allowed to say anything, and when I got married, it was like running away. Searching, searching for, a better place to live. Searching for, it was nothing to do that I wanta get married and I want to, have a, have a family. I was too young. I was sixteen... (Belinda)

Messages regarding the appropriate age range for marriage are clear. The more youthful you are the easier it is to find a match. Also, parents fear that if given the time,
girls may find their own partner. As Muskaan said, "fear of either that they might end up
dating somebody else and deciding for themselves." The parental fear appears to be that
the out-group marriage of their children will lead to "cultural dilution" and increased
likelihood of sexual activity given Western attitudes toward sex (DasGupta & Dasgupta,
1998, p. 123; Segal, 1991). Thus as a woman gets older the societal pressure to marry
becomes stronger while her eligibility decreases. Single women are encouraged to marry
and stigmatized if they remain single for long, with the underlying message that
something must be wrong with the woman if she is still single (Abraham, 2000b):

Once a woman reaches her twenty-sixth year she is considered over the hill as
potential husbands are looking for young brides. In Meena's case her parents had already
started to worry about her at age 19, while she indicates that she still felt too young to be
married:

  when I was only 19-years-old and when I finished my twelfth class in a, I'm, I'm
from India, my parents was worried about for my marriage, because I was,
according to the culture this girl is becoming elder, they are worried about...I
don't want to marry, because I was so young, I was 19-year-old but due to the
pressure of my family they found a match for me and they married me. I, I'm
even, that time I was so young I have, do not know what is the relation is the
marriage. (Meena)

Enza reinforces the impact of one's age on the decision to marry. She describes how she
kept silent despite her strong feelings that something was wrong in her marriage. She
explains that her late age of marriage (i.e., 39) made it more difficult to tell her parents
about her doubts:

  I knew that something was wrong, but, I was not very sure what, I'm thinking is
just the right my judgement is right or it's wrong, but my intuition was so very
strong, that I knew, but I did not want to admit, right there also and otherwise also
because I just got married and if I tell my parents, how are they gonna feel about
it. So I didn't I'd had the strength, I did not have the courage... When you, get
married at a very late stage, so many things happen so many things go through
your mind. We are not as young and cannot take the risk... (Enza)
For many families in South Asia and Canada the arranged marriage process is becoming more of an “introductory” marriage process. Instead of this being a decision exclusively made by parents, the prospective couple is given a chance to meet each other and talk before making a decision (Wakil et al., 1981). However, for many, this decision making process is difficult given the sheltered lives they have lived and the lack of decision making experience they have. Thus in many cases the woman is ill prepared to evaluate a potential partner in terms of her own needs and desires. In Simran’s case she had already rejected one match and had agreed to meet the second person based on family referrals. However, in the actual meeting she was not sure what to do:

we met for twenty minutes... he was very shy, I’m the one that asked question, and basically it was just, so what did you do at school, and what do you do at your work, and what kind of, what do you, what are your hobbies? He asked me the same, and that’s the, that’s as personal as we went. That’s about it, then we couldn’t, we didn’t know what else to ask and I mean, if, if it was today, it would be a lot different (laughs), there would be a lot more questions, but I guess, it was my age, very naïve. I didn’t know any better back then. (Simran)

Even after meeting with a potential partner, the final decision is often made based on superficial characteristics such as appearance:

So, the final decision became at my depth, we’ll see the guy tomorrow if we like him, we’ll say yes, otherwise they’ll have to go back. So he came, everybody, appearance, that’s what they were going to look. They aren’t going to look ask, and he stayed there quiet, said nothing no word at all and they asked if you want to ask her any questions he said no, that’s it, and the engagement was done.

(Muskaan)

Even when women are explicitly asked to make a decision, it is often at the last minute when a refusal might jeopardize the family’s honour:

After that they did my engagement and at that time they had some doubts, that there are some weaknesses in this boy. They did some asking around. Then they said to me, dear this boy does not seem right to us. So I said, there were only ten days before my marriage, and I said to them, no, what ever happens now is my
kismet. Everything has been done, what will people say, for my father’s sake, for his honour’s sake I stayed quiet and I said okay... (Sonia)

Meena describes how the lack of exposure and experience with decision making makes it all the more difficult when a woman finds herself in a situation where she does need to make a decision:

Before marriage I was, totally dependent on my parents. I never walk outside, I just, did my study come home. I didn’t know. But when I suffered I did everything. So first thing that, they should give that, some independence, to women. She can do anything, if she is independent, if, if they gave me the independence, maybe I can take the strong step before this happen with me.

When they, when he gave me the first time beating, I can stop them, but I never stop him, and they beat me, they beat me, because due to my culture, I never, I never learn to say no. (Meena)

Muskaan describes how this tendency for others to decide what is best for you feels as if one does not own her own life:

you don’t have a life. Either your life is, for them or for your child...for your husband or first for parents then for husband and then for child, and then for everybody’s reputation, pride, what other people will say...Sometimes I really feel like telling them, it’s because of you this happened to me but, then, is think, what good it’s gonna do...It’s because really feel like sometimes, when they tell me now, oh no, no you should come back and we’ll arrange your marriage this and that I really sometimes feel like telling them, it’s because of you I’ve ruined eight years of my life I’m not doing another one (she laughs). (Muskaan)

The integration of values from the East and the West have resulted in changes in the arranged marriage system (i.e., introductory marriages) and allow young South Asians to feel more in control of this major life decision. However, many men continue to be raised with the idealized conception of an “Eastern woman” who is submissive and not very demanding (Wakil et al., 1981), while they also expect their wives to be modern in some areas outside of the home in order to increase the household income (Abraham, 2000b). Eastern women are also beginning to struggle for self-expression, individualism, and socioeconomic equality. They may insist that their spouses have more experience
with Western liberalism and accept them as equals (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999; Wakil et al., 1981), while simultaneously experiencing pressure to conform to ideals of obedience (Abraham, 2000b). These changes in gender expectations may involve positive culture changes in terms of women’s independence; however, they may also foster conditions of conflict, confusion and frustration that may result in violence.

*An acceptable match is important.*

Within the arranged marriage process various criteria are used to evaluate the worth of the man and the woman and their respective families. Although each family evaluates the other, the process is “inherently unequal since the position of dominance lies primarily with the prospective groom’s family” (Abraham, 2000b, p. 21). In South Asian families as in many other cultures, certain characteristics are coveted in a potential mate. These usually include educational status, family background, and staying true to one’s own cultural or religious group. “Marriage to ‘our own’ is perceived both by South Asians and by the larger South Asian community as an important mechanism in maintaining ‘our values, beliefs, and practices’” (Abraham, 2000b, p. 23). The message to marry within one’s own community reflects the notion of a difference in values and attitudes regarding marriage and the family compared to North American norms.

That’s weird, I mean I always, I always thought I would marry somebody Indian. It was always in me that I, I mean, I had, I had friends, Canadian boy friends, but nothing was there, there was nothing bonding, but then I always felt, whenever I, (deep breath) saw Indian, Indian families, that that’s where I want to be, ‘cause that’s what I, I never got. And I had that, that pull to that direction, somehow, and that’s why I let my mom and dad, basically decide that I would have an arranged marriage. (Bubbly)

This lack of cultural knowledge can be very difficult for immigrant women, who would like to feel a sense of belonging with their cultural roots. Bubbly, who was born in England and raised in Canada, recounts how her lack of cultural knowledge has left her feeling lost and without a sense of direction:

I wish that my parents would have given us our language. My mom and dad know so many languages, but they didn’t give us one of them. If they had, that would have been fantastic, I would have had a direction, I would have known, who I
was, what I am, what I stand for, but I (sigh) I thought I would get that after being married to an Indian man. I thought I would get that, somehow, but I, I still haven’t and I’m still, I still feel lost. I haven’t got a direction. (Bubbly)

Growing up in Canada places an additional stressor on immigrants who immigrate young as they attempt to negotiate between their culture of origin and the dominant culture in their new country. Researchers have found that it is not uncommon for immigrants to experience an identity crisis resulting in feelings of isolation and alienation from aspects of both cultures (Segal, 1991). Many immigrants find themselves caught between the cultural values of their home country and the country they relocate to, a conflict that is particularly apparent in the area of marriage (Abraham, 2000b). Thus marrying within one’s group can help to maintain cultural identity and ensure cultural continuity (Abraham, 2000b).

Some immigrants deal with the conflict between the cultural values they immigrated with and those of their host country by returning to South Asia to get married (Abraham, 2000b). For some, like Simran, the hope is that by marrying someone from South Asia they may find someone with more traditional attitudes:

I was, a religious person, so I thought if I married in India, that they would know more about the Sikh faith, and would be more into it because I didn’t see anybody like that among our family friends in Canada, people, they were all, the young guys were into drinking and going to the clubs... (Simran)

Although many international marriages may be successful, marrying someone from a distant land can make the process of investigating the match and the family more difficult. Furthermore, visits to South Asia are usually short, with the matchmaking process occurring very quickly. Thus there is little time for the couple to get to know one another before making a decision regarding marriage. Time and other factors mean that little information regarding the bride or groom is transmitted. Usually, referrals come from people who may not be well known to the family looking for a match. This makes it more difficult to verify the information that families are given, and background information may be very limited. Inadequate or false information regarding the match may contribute to intimate violence after marriage (Abraham, 2000b):
sometimes yeah I think maybe if I was there or if I had married somebody over there, it could have worked, because the people, they must have known the guy at least, what his family’s like. If a guy goes from here, you’re just going by their word, you don’t know, if the parents have nobody here you don’t know what the guy does if he works if he doesn’t work, you’re just going by their word. So that’s, the thing people lie … (Muskaan)

Once married, communication is conducted over the phone and by mail while completing the sponsorship process. A long distance relationship is difficult in any situation, but for a new couple that has had little time to get acquainted, this can create more distress:

He’s calling from Canada it’s expensive but he’s talking on one thing, for twenty minutes, and there’s nothing personal about it and there’s nothing (very angry sounding) that you, you’re trying to know each other better, you’re trying to understand each other better, or you’re talking some nice things. Be whatever age I think every woman every girl everybody, man or woman they want to hear sometimes the good things nice, good nothings also that’s part of. But with him it was very very different… (Enza)

Abraham (2000) notes that the complexity of transnational arranged marriages and immigration factors may increase the complexity of intimate violence for South Asian immigrants.

Another characteristic valued in many South Asian communities is a fair complexion. Abraham (2000) writes, “In South Asia, the racial component – expressed in terms of the color of the woman’s skin – plays a major role in mate selection (p. 27). Women with a darker complexion must deal with a society that uses color as a symbol of class, beauty, prestige, and femininity. “The notion of fair as beautiful and dark as unattractive or evil takes on importance not only in judging physical appearance but also in terms of economic value related to the dowry.” (Abraham, 2000b, p. 28). Marriage customs may also reflect the importance of a fair complexion. For instance, the day before the wedding in Sikh families, the bride and groom are “washed” with turmeric mixed into a paste with flour. The idea is that this ritual will “clean” and purify them, and help to
make their complexion fairer. In Bubbly’s case, she felt that she was negatively evaluated by her in-laws because of her darker complexion:

I guess with (husband’s) family, the thing about being fair, I always had that...feeling that I, I wasn’t good enough because I wasn’t fair...I mean we’re all Indian, I mean we should all be treated the same, but because of that, there was a little, there was a level of already difference, between me and his family, because they were fair and my family was on the dark side. (Bubbly)

Muskaan describes how a darker complexion, which is associated with being less attractive may actually be used as an explanation for mistreatment:

everybody loves the fair colour there, then you have to take more, if you are not that pretty then it, puts you more down...He had a fair skin and I didn’t so, then that, worked against too maybe then they’ll say oh that’s why he’s doing because she is, black! (Muskaan)

This emphasis on fairness may come through years of colonization during which caste and skin colour became linked with lower castes being of darker skin and upper castes of lighter skin. These beliefs combined with religious beliefs regarding forces of light and dark have resulted in the relationship between “goodness” and “fairness” (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). For immigrants in Canada these beliefs are exacerbated by the white beauty standard that is upheld in the West, reinforcing the cultural concept that only fair-skinned women are beautiful and thus marriageable (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1998).

Although marriage practices are gradually changing, most marriages continue to be within the larger South Asian community, and generally follow some form of arranged or “introductory” process for most first-generation South Asian immigrants (Abraham, 2000b). Marriages are usually initiated through proposals, usually through a “matchmaker” or third party who might be a relative or friend. Characteristics of the family as well as a detailed description of the woman’s appearance, height, educational status, and other traits of value are provided. While many of these arranged marriages are successful, the basic assumptions that are involved regarding compulsory heterosexuality, and the importance of the husband’s family (as this is the family the woman is expected to join) often make them oppressive to women. Furthermore, the
very process of selecting a partner reveals women's subordinate role in society, not only objectifying women but also perpetuating their subordinate position as a group in South Asian society (Abraham, 2000b).

Need to investigate partner.

A basic assumption within the arranged marriage process is that older family members, potentially with the help of a "matchmaker," will investigate potential marriage partners for their suitability in relation to the family. This research usually occurs informally by talking to people who know the family of interest. However, in many cases, as illustrated in the stories of several of the participants, parents may not do a lot of research about the partner's family, they may receive incorrect information, or issues related to overseas marriages may make research more difficult:

Some families yeah, lot of families do more research, I guess they just went with the word of him, they didn't had time... (Muskaan)

Many of the participants found that they had been lied to about certain characteristics such as education, occupation, or reason for marriage:

first the lie they told to us that, he's an engineer here, he is car salesman... (Fari)

Muskaan recalls her feelings when she discovered her in-laws had lied to her family:

So it was an arranged marriage and my husband was from here and he went back and it was within two weeks, kind of thing, usually that's what happens, if the guy is from here and my family didn't knew his family or anything... We didn't meet each other until we got married. So and so the first day, I found out the most thing I hated in my whole life was the alcohol and that's the only first thing I found on the first he drank and he took drugs and he smoke... but my in-laws had told them that he doesn't drink or does anything... (Muskaan)

Five participants found out after the marriage that not only had they been lied to but that in some cases their in-laws were holding them to a contract based on lies:

So I was engaged in, when in 1984, with a person, so he was very rich and, so it was engagement, just like according to Islam, we call it Dhua, like Nikka, but not on paper, only verbally according to Islamic law... and after one week we found that the person is married, and he having children. So we tried, we tried to convince them that because you people lied, and you didn't tell us in the
beginning that he is married... and then when my father asked him, that why you lied, when you were, willing to be second marry, you should tell me in the beginning. He said, if I said this you will never give me your daughters, so he said I’m not giving you now. But he said, no, according to, in Pashtu (unsure of this word) tradition, when you say once yes, then it’s very difficult to say no...

(Zharguna)

Muskaan recalls how a police officer confronted members of her husband’s family about the family’s decision to allow their son to marry her despite his lengthy police record in Canada:

As soon as the Indian officer came he looked at the picture and the first thing out of his mouth was, who arranged this guy’s marriage. And, I looked at his uncle and he said, didn’t you guys know your son like? And then I told he’s oh, and he saw it and he even has a child. He said you guys were nuts, because he had a big criminal record so all the officers knew him. He goes when he saw the picture he said, who arranged his marriage, who gave him the daughter? (Muskaan)

Palvsha, who feels that she wasted five years waiting for her husband, describes the importance of investigating a potential husband:

our parents are our benefactors and before they find a match for the daughters they should do a thorough investigation of the family of the boy, the boy himself. They should see the person before they marry their daughter. The way I was married, my father, my uncles did not see anything and they married me. Then for five years I stayed there and they still did not try to find out why my in laws had taken so long to call for me. They just assumed that these people were busy, they worked and studied, but what did they know! They did not try to probe about what the reality was; although if they wanted they could have even come to Canada to find out. But they did not try. They thought if they took such a action it would just create a problem for their daughter, for if the boy was normal and these people were indeed busy, they will be mean to their daughter saying why the parents came to investigate. But they did not realize that even if they did not do these actions their daughter will still be mistreated. However if you choose a
match a thorough investigation should be done and no detail should be left uninvestigated. (Palvsha)

Where is the "real" home!?

While growing up girls are given the message that their natal home is their "temporary" home or that they are guests in their natal home. Their real home then is that of their in-laws. South Asian extended family systems are organized so that once a woman is married, she goes and lives with her husband’s family and is expected to switch her loyalties overnight. Once in her marital home she is considered to be part of their family such that her rights are subordinated for her in-laws and she becomes responsible for her in-laws and their home (Natarajan, 1995). Mazumdar (1998) describes this aspect of marriage as “the transfer of a burden (the woman) from the parents (former owner) to the groom (present owner). By virtue of this transfer, the groom is entitled to every right over the bride, as the former owner surrenders all rights and retains no obligations” (p. 134). In fact, if she returns home to her parents it will be a source of shame. In some religions, such as Sikhism and Islam, a custom actually signifies this transfer from a woman’s natal home to her marital home. A song from the movie “Monsoon Wedding” describes this journey from a daughter’s point of view,

As I leave for my father-in-law’s house, I will take your dreams with me. The gift of bracelets binds me in marriage. My father, I leave the palace of your love to become a stranger to you forever. (subtitles, Monsoon Wedding, 2002)

The general notion is that once married, women should only return to their natal home on happy occasions. Bubbly described this new relationship with one’s natal family in this way:

When you get married in the Indian family, you basically, give your priority to the husband’s family, and then your family is sort of left behind. (Bubbly)

Zharguna describes how a woman is treated like chattel within a marriage, such that if her husband should die, she is then transferred to his male relative:

It’s happened with tribal families. If a person died, the woman have no right to go back or to marry again with another person. It’s a like a property if her husband died, the second, the brother of her husband will marry her, if he is younger than her or if he is older. I can give you an example, there are many, 60
years old men married with women 14 like 20 years old women, because her, husband died and she, she is like property. Why, how could she go back, to her family she is, she is in our home and she’s our property and she has to live in the, she has no choice. (Zharguna)

Given that men are considered more powerful than women, the message is that a man will take care of the woman, both in terms of familial and marital relationships. Thus with marriage, a woman’s responsibility is transferred from her father to her husband. This may be seen as an act that needs a show of gratitude and becomes reflected in how the woman’s family treats her husband after marriage. Not only does the marital rite of passage signify that you are to start a new phase of your life with a new, often unfamiliar, person, but the supports of your family may technically not be there for you anymore. Even when there is knowledge that the relationship is abusive, this cultural rule that the daughter is now a member of her in-laws’ family may keep the natal family bound.

Muskaan went to India to escape her abusive husband, but when she arrived at her natal home, her father took her to her in-laws’ house:

So I said, oh I’m not coming back, that’s it. Went there then stayed there and, when we went my son was two, almost two years old then and we went to my in-laws’ place my father took me there, still (she laughs). After all that he said, it’s not their fault, they were not see this, an so on. So straight away he took me there. (Muskaan)

Amar recalls how her parents insisted she live with her abusive husband as they no longer had a “place” for her:

I went to my parents’ house and told them everything. They told me no I had to live with him… They said I had to live with him and that they don’t have any place for me. (Amar)

Amar’s experience illustrates that if a woman’s family is unable to provide for her or take her in due to economic difficulties they may ignore signs of the violence (Agnew, 1998). Parents are often resistant about letting even a bad marriage end as they have invested money and resources in raising and marrying their daughters (Ayub, 2000). The patriarchal control over a woman that begins within her natal family continues with her marital family and as Abraham (2000) states, “it is within the institution of marriage that
patriarchal control over a woman is most manifest, through her multiple subordinate statuses as wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, and mother.” (p.3)

Anticipation of one’s wedding day.

The excitement, hoopla, and anticipation of one’s wedding and wedding day are built over the course of a woman’s life. The marriage ceremony involves highly ritualized ceremonies and festivities that are role oriented (i.e., contributing to long and prosperous life for the groom) rather than person oriented (i.e., vows directed to person in love) (Gupta, 1976). Marriage customs and practices vary in different parts of South Asia. For instance, Muslims in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh may marry a cousin, while among many Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs, the general practice is not to marry within one’s own kin networks especially from the patrilineal side. However, despite variations, marriage is an essential institution within the South Asian context and is used to define the social status of a woman (Abraham, 2000b). Preparation for weddings is years in the making, with many customs occurring prior to the wedding day. This is a time during which girls are made to feel like princesses and in many cases given a reprieve from housework and other responsibilities. For many immigrant families, weddings represent a time to reconnect with extended family members and friends, and for some a chance to vacation. Simran’s description of her wedding depicts the attention and relaxation she experienced during this time:

a year later, we all went back for my wedding, and my brothers went, my parents went, and we had a big wedding with all of the relatives at my grandparents’ house. And, then I was happy, I thought okay, things are, this is what I’m supposed to do and I’m going to have this ideal marriage (laughs)… I was happy for the first, I was only there for three weeks, and, it was sort of, I guess, you’re, given a lot of attention by relatives… I guess that while I was there it was like a vacation for me. (Simran)

Other women had a very different experience of their wedding day. Muskaan describes her experience in response to a question regarding whether her wedding day was as she’d imagined it would be:

No, no because I wasn’t happy, if you’re happy then everything is okay maybe, I know they did the best like my parents but I wasn’t happy so it wasn’t the, what I
wanted to, because I didn’t want to be there. So it was just, sit there, nobody ask, I didn’t even go shopping, I didn’t even selected anything for my wedding, even my for my shoes they took my old pair of shoes to take the size. (Muskaan)

Ghar ki Rani [Princess of the house].

When women were asked about their expectations regarding marriage and married life, there were a variety of responses. Most women expected that their husbands would care for them, they would have a family, and lead happy lives. However, in the case of most of my participants, this is not the reality they saw:

When I was single I think married life is good life. I will get married and I saw so many families, husband and wife they are happy with each other, but I never know that that is going to happen to me. When I dream, my dream is that my husband is going to be some good and we are going to enjoy our lives, but nothing happened. (Amar)

Enza describes both the practical and romantic hopes she had for marriage:

I was very practical in that case, I always expected, no life is so very smooth, because you see in the, family, in the house, your brothers, sisters, everybody they have arguments, discussions and, sometimes it gets, kind of unpleasant also, but that does not mean that it’s, end of the world and we just, break it and things, that, no. The thing was, I was conscious of my age that I’m getting married very late, but I ah still expected, that kay je say gur may uger hey tho [in a house you would have] family with kids and husband and talking to you nicely, having trust with each other. Nothing matters, what kind, whatever kind of problem you have, but if you sit and talk, it can be, worked out. Money was never, ever a criteria for me that way never, but yes, pleasantness and, of course, if you go the other side of it this is a very practical life of, kind of a dream thing, everybody wants that. But, otherwise of course, everybody needs some romance, and some things, a those are things are there. Everybody looks for it. (Enza)

Another factor that women mentioned was the idea of “love” and getting love from their new partner. Although love was not mentioned by all of the participants, it was a concept that some expected in marriage, even if it developed after the wedding day. Meena
describes how she hoped that the love she had not received from anyone else would come from her husband:

husband means that you, you will get lots of love, you never get the love from anybody but husband is the first one to give you the love, too much love. I have a only, but I never receive that love. (Meena)

Simran’s words support the notion of love in the arranged marriage process, whereby love develops after the couple is married and begins to grow together:

Ideal marriage to me was to share everything, and grow together. Even back then. I really, I thought if I, if, if I do all the right things, that nothing would go wrong...okay we’d get married, we would fall in love later. Which is the whole, once you get to know each other (laughs). (Simran)

This section regarding marriage outlines the importance of marriage for South Asian women and the power that parents exert throughout the socialization and marital process. These factors, combined with other culturally specific aspects of South Asian culture, create a system in which women’s subordination and dependency is ensured, and their oppression condoned. One culturally specific factor is the principles from the Manu Samhita or The Treatise of Manu (written by an eighth century social theorist and codifier of laws). The three principles include: “1. Of the eight forms of marriages, demonic (rakshasha) form is one. Rakshasha marriage involves raping a woman, thereby making her one’s own. 2. Women are properties of fathers, husbands, and sons at different stages of their lives. 3. Wives are primarily to bear sons.” (Mazumdar, 1998, p. 134-135). These principles in combination with the belief that marriage is a contract between husband and father, imply that by giving her to her husband, a woman’s father guarantees “the new owner” that he can do with her what he wishes. This denial of a woman’s personhood through her transfer from father to husband formalizes her status as property (Mazumdar, 1998). Although South Asians today do not necessarily live by the legal code of Manu, these principles still exert their influence and give men rights over their wives. Furthermore, it is considered the parents’ responsibility to make sure that women understand their position by socializing them to follow these values and norms (Mazumdar, 1998). Women are further taught that if they follow and promote these accepted roles, they will be venerated in life and beyond (Mazumdar, 1998). It is not
surprising then that marriage is not always the safe, secure, loving place women expect it to be.

b) Life After the Wedding

Negative reality of married life.

For most of the participants in this study, the hopes and dreams they had regarding life after marriage were never realized. The reality of married life was often in stark contrast to the expectations they identified. Many of the participants described how their lives changed drastically after their wedding. For some, this meant that they were made responsible for all household responsibilities upon their arrival:

To me it was...I'm in a prison. They gave me all the responsibilities of the house, everything, they wanted me to do everything, clean the house, clean the floors, wash the clothes, cook for them. I was not allowed to talk to anybody, I was not allowed to go to the store alone...I questioned myself, that time, even though I was sixteen that, is this what marriage is all about? Is this what they call marriage? (Belinda)

Bubbly describes her realization that she may not have the life she had hoped for after marriage:

I thought, when I, when I was going to get married into this whole new culture, this world, I would have everything. I would have my language, I would have everything, I would have another family to teach me all of what I didn't get from my family, but, there's (sigh), there was problems there too. Where my husband, I mean he didn't, he didn't even want to really bother teaching me the language. (Bubbly)

Muskaan indicates that despite her unhappiness after getting married, she saw no choice but to accept her new life:

Think by the time, after the marriage day it became a prison, just take whatever it is, I had this attitude. I remembered not being happy at all, just take it, whatever it is, doesn't matter what you want... (Muskaan)

For many women, trying to fit into their so-called “real” home was often very difficult. Not only were they living in a new place, surrounded by new people, but they were also being evaluated by their new family. Bubbly faced a new struggle in her
marital family, where her lack of fluency in the language made it difficult for others to accept her, despite how much she tried to involve herself in activities within her home and South Asian community:

I mean a lot of the, families from his side, they, even though I’m a good person, they still feel that I’m a bad person ‘cause I didn’t learn the language, and because I don’t know much about the culture, but yet I’m always there to help out, and I, I’m willing to go to the Gurudawara and I’m willing to do this and do that. I mean I’ve learned to cook, I’ve learned a lot about the culture, but still, it’s not good enough. (Bubbly)

**Abused by my in-laws.**

A woman’s natal home is her “temporary” home; she is initiated into her “real” home through marriage and the tradition of living with her husband and his parents. Young girls are often told that they can take part in certain activities and wear certain clothes once they get married and go to their *sohraj* (in-laws). Adulthood or at least a new stage in life is signified by getting married and moving out of their natal home. Thus in most households, part of a mother’s responsibility is preparing her daughter for the responsibilities she will face after marriage, and girls are given messages regarding proper etiquette and behaviour in their new home. The implicit message is to treat your in-laws with the same if not more respect than you would your parents. Furthermore, elderly people in general are highly respected within the South Asian culture and are obeyed by the family and community (Mullatti, 1995). Several participants noted the strong messages they received from their parents regarding their duty toward their in-laws and the importance of showing respect and deference to their in-laws after marriage:

My mother gave me the same advice. She said, at my in-laws’ house I was to regard my mother-in-law and my father-in-law just as my own parents. Don’t give them any trouble. If you respect them and take care of them, you are bound to lead a good life...I promised my mom that I would definitely do as she asked. I will never give them a chance to complain. (Palvsha)

The extended family system, which is usually composed of a son, his wife, his mother, his father, and any brothers and unmarried sisters means that for many women their experiences of violence may involve their husband’s family. This is in contrast to a
typical intimate violence situation in the West involving a man battering a woman (Fernandez, 1997). In the South Asian context extended kin can contribute to “marital violence” through their silence and/or active involvement in the abusive situation (Abraham, 2000b, p. 3). Belinda describes how her in-laws would instigate and support her husband’s abuse:

it was a very sneaky family, they, they won’t abuse me, but they will make, my husband abuse me, they will talk to him and he, they will let him, abuse me… (Belinda)

As mentioned before, women are subordinate not only to men, but also to other women who have a higher status in the family hierarchy. Different combinations of a woman’s location in multiple hierarchies will influence her experience of oppression. Age or life cycle stages can bring differences in levels of oppression such that younger women who are victims as daughters-in-law can play a role in the battering when they become mothers-in-law. Thus mothers-in-law may align against younger women in the family (Fernandez, 1997). The abuse by other family members can range from physical and verbal abuse to more indirect forms. For instance, in Meena’s case her abuse began upon arrival to her marital home with poor living conditions and responsibility for all the housework:

after my marriage and, soon as I reach my, my home, matrimonial home…from first they treat me very bad, they gave, they didn’t give me the bed, they, they gave me the floor to sleep and, they gave me the, lots of work in the from the first day. They gave me the full kitchen, which is the, the sink is full with the all the relatives of the marriage parties, and they told me wash it, from the first day, and I was in a, heavy clothes, in a make-up, nobody asked me even the tea. I do not know what is happening with me…(Meena)

Palvsha describes how her mother-in-law used threats, physical labour, and other tactics in her attempts to control her:

I do all the housework the whole time and on top of that my mom-in-law scolds me all the time and finds faults with my work. If she calls me and I don’t respond immediately, she swears at me, my mom and my dad. I, silently listen to all of this. I can never answer her back. My father is dead, why does she badmouths my
dad? I still give her all the due respect and never talk back, but she is going beyond limits...there is so much work to do in the kitchen, it doesn’t finish the whole day. She wants that I finish all the work within an hour or so, but there is so much to cook, a lot to clean, therefore I am unable to finish it quickly. I try my best to work quickly to complete everything in a hurry, however she has started having indecent thoughts about me. Still I say to her that as soon as one job finished I’d start with the next. I do two or three things at the same time, work in the kitchen, clean the house, do laundry and take care of the baby making sure she doesn’t cry...She suspected that I had a relationship with my father in law, but I thought of him as my own father. I addressed him as father or as a paternal uncle, I regarded them same as my parents (Palvsha)

Mothers-in-law traditionally hold power over their daughters-in-law through their position as the husband’s mother (Abraham, 2000b) and eldest female in the family:

My mother-in-law is a very vicious woman. Nobody else really said too much to me but my mother-in-law kept threatening me all the time. She kept on insisting that I stayed with her son...I stayed, but I would not let her son come near me nor did I go near him. But that woman, by force, got my life ruined by him and I became silent. She told me that if did not have a relationship with her son, she would send me back to Pakistan under the taboo that I had a relationship with another man; and since they did not like this, that is why they sent me back. I was afraid of this threat. (Palvsha)

These types of threats work as intimidation by threatening the ruin of a woman’s reputation. Given the status of woman as the receptacle of the family’s honour, damage to her reputation can have a tremendous impact, including the possibility of her murder by her natal family (Khoury, 2003).

Two of the participants mentioned harassment by their in-laws involving demands for more dowry from the woman’s family. As mentioned earlier, a dowry in the form of gifts or cash is expected by the groom’s family and can be seen as compensation for transfer of a woman’s burden from one family to another (Fernandez, 1997). Illegal in India since the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, dowries have now been reclassified as gifts to the bride from her natal family. Many families use dowry to improve their own status, while
parents continue to provide a dowry to facilitate the marriageability and safety of their daughters (Abraham, 2000b). Dowry related disagreements between the family are often taken out on a young bride with discord ranging from harassment to dowry related deaths. Thus women not only determine the status of a family, but are also held responsible if that status is jeopardized (Fernandez, 1997):

there is not a single day when they don’t beat me, and they, they have a, a complaining about a dowry, which I’m not received. They, my father and parents not give properly. They, they asking more and more money for, my parents…but my parents give lots of dowry, all the furniture, all the jewelry, but they, they were not satisfied. My mother-in-law’s very bad, very bad, so now they’re starting, that my, why my parents not give the motorcycle to them. They want motorcycle. I can’t say to the my parents because I know what is the my parents’ condition. And my father is only earning for us, and we have a three childrens. I know he can’t afford, the motorcycle and $50,000 to give me so I, they are, then he start beating me, beating me again… (Meena)

Abraham (2000) describes the dowry transaction as one “that disinherits women and compels them to depend on men” (p. 33) such that women become not only property but the vehicles of property transmission. As property then, the so-called “owners” of that property can do with it what they may. The most horrific example of this involves the decision to control when that property is “discarded.” Meena describes her in-laws reaction when she tried to escape her abusive marital home with the help of her father and brother:

They grabbed me my husband, my brother-in-law, and my mother-in-law, now then they say, if she want to go, why you not allow, let her to go, if she don’t want stay us, uh let her to go…then, they, they took me, they, they grabbed me like this on the floor and they took me another room, like there is another room, and there is a one balcony. The balcony, open the balcony, and they took me there, and I was, I have, I, I do not know what’s happening with them. Become a so scareded, and my, now my heart is saying, now you can’t do anything, my heart is saying, you can’t do, I told you go, run away, why you come, my heart is saying. And I’m thinking like this, now I’m going to die, something is happening with me, they
will, I say oh, I just close my eyes, I say, I don’t know, my inner is saying you did bad, why you come back? They grab me, from here (under her arms), they took me from the balcony, my husband, my mother-in-law and my brother-in-law, my husband say, nobody can do anything for us, my brother is in the police. You, why you took this step, you don’t know what is going to happen with you (her voice went higher as she said this). Now you will, get the dessert of this, what you did then he, then he took me, I, I like, I’m like, I have no idea what they’re doing, I just close my eye, and they took me in the balcony, my husband, and my brother-in-law and my mother push me. They put, they got me from here in my shoulder they say, look, this is your way, you can go from here if you want to go. I just like my eyes is, I’m, I’m, almost I’m, like I’m died. I have no, I have nothing in my, mind what is happening with me. I was so scared and my mind is saying, why you come back? And they took me from here and they, there is a balcony and I when, when, this my shoulder is like this, one is here and one is there, they, put in the balcony down to me, then said, this is your way. I once, my eyes is closed, once I opened my eye, I saw this is the fourth floor of the building, and this is the big, way, and I’m thinking like this, I’m on the ride I’m going to fall long, I just, I say, oh close your eyes! Within a one minute they dropped me [she was thrown off the fourth floor balcony]... when they dropped me, they opened the door for my brother, and they told my brother, she did suicide.

(Meena)

The focus on partners or men in general as perpetrators of violence against women may obscure the reality that other members of the family may also play a major role in the abuse. This is especially true for other women who are socialized to identify with the interests of men, and who may be perpetrators in oppression when their status in other hierarchies (class, generation, ethnicity) increases (Fernandez, 1997). Women thus can perpetuate the oppression of other women in return for family status, and the economic, physical, and emotional protection that patriarchy theoretically offers women (Fernandez, 1997). This situation is complex as the men in their families often place women in supervisory positions over other women. Abuse by in-laws takes on new dimensions of betrayal as this new family is now in charge of crucial decisions regarding the woman,
and is responsible for supporting her emotionally and financially (Gupta, 1976). The role of in-laws and extended kin in abuse is one of the cultural factors that distinguish domestic violence within the South Asian community from other groups (Sheehan, Javier, & Thanjan, 2000). This means that for women who have abusive partners, as is the case for these participants, their options for social support become even more limited.

**Abused by my partner.**

Participants were recruited for this study through requests to discuss “bad” or “stressful” relationships in an effort not to redefine their experiences for them. As can be seen from their diverse experiences, it is clear that women interpreted this request in different ways. For some women, intimate violence was the emotional neglect or psychological warfare they experienced from their partners, while for others the abuse was physical and overt. Ill treatment also included emotional and verbal abuse, as well as keeping or stealing property, lying, confiscating travel documents, issues of child custody, not providing financial support, and sexual abuse. For most participants assaultive episodes involved a combination of different types of abuse (Browne, 1993). Unfortunately, the types of abuse described by these women are consistent with those experienced by women from other parts of the world (Browne, 1993; Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Coomaraswamy, 1995; Heise et al., 1994). In all cases, partners used violence as a method to dominate and control women’s lives (Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Follingstad et al., 1990). Although a detailed examination of the types of abuse women experienced is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief description of women’s experiences is necessary.

All of the participants described some type of emotional abuse or neglect. In Enza’s case, her husband was both emotionally and physically abusive, with his emotional abuse consisting partially of demeaning and insulting comments regardless of what Enza did:

> There was nothing, nothing, nothing, that I did right. I did not know how to talk to people. I did not know how to, entertain them at home, when they if I called them, I did not know how to dress up, I did not know how to make my hair, I did not know how to keep my house clean, I did not know how to cook, I did not know anything, you name it, and I’m wrong. You name it and I’m wrong. (Enza)
For Simran it was the emotional neglect she felt from her husband that was especially difficult for her. In Simran’s case, the emotional abuse also included threats of murder and prompts to kill herself:

so emotionally I felt very, neglected. And, because he would not even acknowledge, my, if I, if I talked to him, he would just shut the door and just walk out, wouldn’t even listen to what I had to say. If I’m crying, he goes you can cry all you want, I don’t want to hear this bullshit again, and just walks out...I was telling him things are really wrong. And he said well why don’t you go jump off the bridge. (Simran)

Women experienced a range of threats from their partners, with a common threat being that of divorce. Muskaan’s husband started to threaten her with divorce even before her sponsorship to Canada had been completed:

He will call me and tell me things like I’m going to send you divorce papers so be ready for them, I’m gonna mail them this and that... (Muskaan)

Threats and emotional abuse can be insidious and hidden leaving women disoriented and uncertain about whom they can trust. Belinda describes how she came to realize that her husband was stalking her and playing mind games with her:

When I wake up in the morning, I will feel that somebody’s chasing me. He cut the wires on my car... and he was making his friends call me when I picked the phone, they will hang up on me, and he would, if, if you love me, you’re my husband you’d say who the hell is that, I’m gonna find out. He wouldn’t care, he would just sit there like, doesn’t know anything. So I said, I started suspected him I said it’s this man he’s making me go crazy... (Belinda)

For many immigrant women who are dependent (i.e., socially, economically, and emotionally) on their spouses, isolation in their new country of residence can be a painful form of intimate violence. In this context, “isolation refers to the individual’s experience, both in perception and in reality, of being emotionally and socially alone, economically confined, and culturally disconnected” (Abraham, 2000b, p. 69). Knowing no one and having no one to talk to can be one of the loneliest experiences for recent immigrant women. This isolation is made even more difficult when, her husband, often a stranger and yet the only person a woman can depend on for social interaction, isolates and abuses
her (Abraham, 2000a). Abraham (2000a) notes that isolation tactics may be deliberately used by the husband to increase the power and control he has over his wife. This isolation also contributes to the invisibility of intimate violence in immigrant communities (Abraham, 2000a). Enza describes her feelings of isolation after a fight with her husband:

I had a fight. It was a big fight, and, he did not talk to me for so, I think the wholmost the whole day, and I was so new I did not know where to go, what to do and he was the one he used to tell me no, you, you, don’t have to go there, don’t go there, this is not good because you don’t know Canada. So don’t do this and don’t do that and don’t go there and don’t talk to so and so don’t do this...I was so scared. That I don’t know anybody, I have no money, if I go out what am I gonna survive, how can I, how am I gonna do it? (Enza)

In Enza’s case one can see how isolation techniques are used by her husband to control her, as he is one of the few people she knows in a country that is new to her, and she is forced to rely on him. Enza’s experience reveals some of the factors that contribute to the isolation that immigrant women feel including power tactics by her abuser, lack of geographic mobility, financial dependence, and lack of social support (Abraham, 2000a). Most immigrant women are dependent solely on their husbands and his kin or friends. Furthermore, the culturally related consequences of leaving an abusive partner and the South Asian community’s hostility toward women who reveal their experience may keep women from seeking help and contribute to feelings of isolation (Abraham, 2000a; Dasgupta, 2000).

Abraham (2000) notes that although there is considerable evidence in the literature that social isolation is a factor in intimate violence, little attention has been paid to how it functions for immigrants from nondominant ethnic groups. Social isolation has been identified as a source of difficulty for immigrant women (Agnew, 1998; Carlin, 1990). The support traditionally offered by family and culture is often lost when women move to a new country (Abraham, 2000a) making it more difficult for many women to cope (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a). These changes in support systems may require immigrant women to become even more reliant on their husbands (Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996; Mehrotra, 1999;
Preisser, 1999; Winter & Young, 1998). The collective orientation of South Asian culture makes social interaction with friends and family even more important (Abraham, 2000a). Thus, a husband’s deliberate use of isolation tactics to increase his power and control over the wife, the privatization of the home, a lack of social interaction and community support, and hostility toward minorities by dominant group members create a space within marriage where men can abuse and silence women without being held responsible (Abraham, 2000a).

Financial control was another method used by men to dominate their partners and included refusing to work, confiscating money from their partners, and not providing enough money for groceries. The isolation and powerlessness that abused immigrant women face becomes exacerbated by conditions of economic deprivation. By giving a woman no money, no access to bank accounts, and limiting her assets, an abusive husband restricts her contact with the outside world (Abraham, 2000a). Belinda describes her reaction when she found that her husband had incurred large debts from gambling, debts that she had been paying unknowingly:

    when I found out that he’s gambling, it just hit me, so hard, because before that there were times that, he didn’t pay property taxes for three years, and I end up paying eleven thousand dollar I was doing nanny job, I was a baby sitter…(Belinda)

Muskaan, Shameem, and Sonia all reported that their husbands, although the only member of the family earning, would not ensure that there was enough food in the house to supply their needs. Muskaan would go to other family members in an attempt to feed her son:

    We never had any grocery at home, so the child will cry so sometimes I will call his aunt, I had no milk at home. I was breast feeding him, but like still like a year and a half child has more needs…(Muskaan)

Sonia described how she would ensure that her children would get fed on the limited money they had, but that often she and her husband would survive on a diet of tea:

    The last few days of every month the same problem would start where we had to survive on tea. I had enough food that I could feed my children but in front of my
husband I would act that we are both going hungry. I mean, I wasn’t eating either and I was telling him also, so that he would become aware of the problem. (Sonia)

Enza describes how her husband controlled all of the finances, including claiming expenses on her return so that he would get more money back. Then after receiving the return he attempted to force her to sign the cheque over to him. When she refused to comply he beat her:

he filed the tax, and the return which came, the money that you get back for some reason, like, for me it was only five hundred dollars, because he put all expenses, now I know that, he put all expenses on his, this thing, so he get like more than a thousand or maybe fifteen hundred, something like that. For me it was only five hundred…he says you’re gonna sign it and give me the money. I said I’m not gonna give you that money, for sure I’m not gonna give you the money, he says no, you are gonna give it to me. He literally pulled me, from the kitchen…dragged me, brought me, he put on the clothes on me, and he says you’re gonna, I kicked him, literally, I kicked him, I say I’m not gonna do it, and that’s the time he hit me… (Enza)

Men may use financial control to “ensure that immigrant women remain isolated and abused due to a perceived, and often real, inability to leave owing to their lack of viable alternative options as dependent immigrants” (Abraham, 2000b, p. 80). The inability to seek financial support from their own families who are still living in their country of origin exacerbates a woman’s isolation and increases her dependency on her husband (Abraham, 2000a). Since the absence of economic hardship has been found to help buffer women from the stressful effects of abuse (Carlson et al., 2002), the financial component of abuse may make it even harder for women who are facing abuse on multiple levels.

Ten out of the 13 women (77 %) interviewed reported experiencing physical abuse, which ranged from battering to attempted murder. For many of these women, the abuse started days after the wedding (54 %) and, as mentioned earlier, was instigated by other family members (40 %). Belinda describes a range of different types of physical and emotional abuse she experienced at the hands of her husband:
He would hit me, if my sister-in-laws would say something, my mother-in-law would say something like, every third day I used to get beaten up. And when I say beaten up, he would kick me, he will throw me out of the bed, he will lock me outside. I would be sitting outside, and there were times he would kick me out in the middle of the night in the winter and I would be running on the streets, looking for, and I would see these, drunken people coming out of the bars looking at me and there were times when he would say to me that, I want you to kill yourself. like you don’t kill yourself I’ll kill myself. (Belinda)

For other women like Enza, emotional abuse would escalate into physical abuse when they attempted to resist their husband’s demands:

He was, a mostly he was very, very emotional abusive, very much so, too much, physically it got only when I just stick to my, words, like, I will not sign that thing. I will not give him the money, that time, those were the times when, when he doesn’t know like what to do with him, then he’ll hit, he’ll pull me, pull my hair, hit me or, drag me or, like men are stronger whatever they are. (Enza)

Women also reported experiencing different forms of sexual abuse including rape, attempts at reproductive control, and using the threat of another woman to demean and humiliate. However, regardless of what they experienced, women were most reticent about talking about this type of abuse. Meena spoke about how her sexual assaults were mixed in with physical assaults on a daily basis:

He, he raped me always, whole night, because he beat me, before that. Every day they beat, beat me at evening, four to five they have always the time they were. (Meena)

Even when women did talk about their sexual abuse, they would not often label it as “rape.” Meena was an exception in placing this label on the nonconsensual sex she experienced in her marriage. For many South Asian women, marital vows signal a husband’s right to have full sexual access to their wife’s body, making the issue of rape in marriage an often invisible one (Dasgupta, 2000). This has been the case for women in other cultural groups as well, as traditionally marriage has signified full access over a woman and her body.
Other women described their sexual abuse in terms of their partner’s attempts to control their reproductive rights. In Muskaan’s case, the month following her wedding at age seventeen was the only sexual contact she had with her husband before he returned to Canada. After his departure, a positive pregnancy test led to the accusation that the child was not his and that she should get an abortion, which ultimately she decided not to have:

I got pregnant. Like we did the test once here, like he was there almost one month and half so, but the test came negative so he said oh you’re not pregnant so, we did the second test it came as positive while he was here…then the second thing started that oh it’s not even my child, because the test, test were negative before…

(Muskaan)

For other women like Simran, their husbands refused to use adequate birth control and then would encourage and at times force the woman to have an abortion:

he, was irresponsible not using his condom and stuff. Even when I asked him to, and then at the end what does he do? He tells me to get an abortion after, and I said, no I’m not getting that, but I, I’ll try to make the best of this now… (Simran)

In Meena’s case her husband would use physical abuse as a form of birth control:

My husband beat me every day in my stomach, he kicked me that he don’t want to become me…pregnant. Every day he, he did the sex with me, and every, next day he’d kick me. (Meena)

A few of the women interviewed reported how their husbands used the idea of being with another women to control, humiliate, or neglect them. This form of sexual abuse has been labelled use of the “sexual other” by Abraham (2000). Enza, Asha, Belinda, and Shameem all described ways in which their husbands used other women to demean them. Enza describes how her husband’s desire for her to be friends with his mistress affected her:

he wanted me to be friends with her. He wanted both of us like, she can come in any time when she wants to at home. I said look, you want to be friends with her, you want to be with her, I will not say anything, I’ll just be at home, let me be here you go you do whatever you do, don’t come and tell me. And, I don’t want to make her, a part of our social life. Like if I went to a function and she’s also tagging along, I, don’t want that. You want to go, you go and do whatever…and
on top, I just always got this I’m, very narrow minded, I’m a very close minded
person...(Enza)

For Asha her boyfriend’s continued denial of his infidelity was extremely painful and
reinforced her feelings of self-doubt:

I said look, just tell me one thing, like did you ever cheat on me and, and he still
denied it. And how you have just that, women’s intuition, but he wouldn’t admit
it, and I know he did, like I’m confident, hundred percent, sure that I know he
did...(Asha)

All of these examples of men’s abuse of power illustrate that violence against women
falls on a continuum whereby men abuse power (e.g., physical strength, economic
resources) over women who have less power. Physical abuse lies on one end of this
continuum, while coercion and control enforce this physical threat. Further along the
continuum lie acts that compel compliance through the implicit threat of violence or
threaten the loss of something of value (e.g., children) (Goodman, Koss, Fitzgerald,
Russo, & Keita, 1993).

Physical injuries from violence.

Intimate violence is often a cause of chronic physical health problems (Heise et al.,
1994; Ratner, 1998; Thurston, 1998). The women in this study reported a number of
physical consequences they feel were related to their experience of violence. Meena
reported some of the most severe injuries sustained by a participant, after she was thrown
off the fourth floor balcony of her in-laws’ apartment. She describes the injuries that
were identified after she was rushed to the hospital:

I was under coma, I, I don’t know what is happening with me. Doctor, doctor treat
me, I’m, my blood pressure come only one...they tried to find my naze [veins]
there is my, they didn’t found my naze for the blood...my all the bones broken
inside, all the bones. On my, all the blood cells broken, but I’m not like any cut in
my, any part...I hurt from inside but, any, not anything from outside, even not a
one single drop of blood come out. (Meena)

Belinda also reported several injuries that she sustained over the years with her abusive
husband. However, it was the injuries sustained in the following episode that involved
the police and resulted in her husband’s arrest and incarceration:
So when I came home after the Christmas party he was waiting for me, and, he beat me up, he took the keys away from me and he beat me up so much that I had a hole, here, this hole here (she indicated an old injury). He made a hole here and he made a hole in my head... That the whole kitchen was full of blood, and then he went to sleep. And I put my hand on my, on my head and I said, and my head, my hand was full of blood... (Belinda)

Participants also reported somatic sequelae they associated with their experience of violence. These symptoms may be more culturally acceptable than symptoms of depression and/or anxiety, and result in women presenting at medical clinics rather than for psychological help (Segal, 1991). Asha describes experiencing chronic headaches, which she attributes to the psychological burden she was under:

it was such a psychological, burden. It was just, it, I mean I literally had headaches every day, because it was something that was on my mind constantly and that I had to try and deal with. (Asha)

Fari, a doctor by education, attributes the brain tumour she was recently diagnosed with to the stress and tension she experienced with her husband:

I will not say, I’m an educated person, specially I’m a doctor, I won’t say that brain tumour is developed only, only because of my husband, but, why I got brain tumour stress, and stress from inside I can’t tell you... (Fari)

Thus women identified many of the chronic health problems associated with intimate partner violence, including actual physical traumas and injuries, and a variety of chronic, stress-related disorders including headaches, blood pressure, and gastric distress.

3) Make the relationship work

Once a couple is married the overriding message is to keep the relationship together, and attempts are made to keep public knowledge of problems within the family to a minimum. “No price the woman will pay would be greater than the shame they would bring on the family if they chose to end their marriage” (Ayyub, 2000, p. 243). A woman’s identity and status are culturally linked with being married, so the marriage must be preserved at all costs (Abraham, 1999; Singh & Unnithan, 1999). In a Canadian context, this message is reinforced by the notion of maintaining an image of the South Asian “model minority” whereby family problems are kept hidden and seeking outside
help is shunned. In terms of larger cultural messages regarding purity, separation and divorce may represent an inability to re-establish the image of the pure woman that is depicted in myths of “Sita” the so-called “ideal” South Asian woman.

As marriage and the creation of male heirs is the ultimate goal in South Asian culture, married women are given more respect than single women. Women may be perceived as failing in their role if they cannot maintain their marriage and provide their children with a father, regardless of his conduct (Dasgupta, 2000). Divorced women are often stigmatized as they symbolize independence from men. These women are seen as damaged goods. The assumption is that there is something wrong with them or they are carriers of bad luck as the separation must be their fault. These factors make it very difficult to get remarried (Ayyub, 2000; Fernandez, 1997; Mullati, 1995). South Asian cultures also exalt women who sacrifice and suffer for the sake of their families (Dasgupta, 2000). South Asian women who do leave the relationship are often labeled as “loose,” “immoral,” and “unlucky” and are socially ostracized (Abraham, 2000b). This exclusionary response by the community can lead to social and psychological isolation for women (Abraham, 2000b). This social ostracism can extend to the family whereby marriage eligibility of unmarried sisters can be affected (Abraham, 2000b). Thus women tend to be sacrificed for the wellbeing of the family system, and they are expected to sacrifice willingly and without complaint as their rewards will come after death (Ayyub, 2000).

**Stigma of leaving the relationship.**

The emphasis on family unity and patriarchal control of women has led to the cultural message that regardless of what is going on in the relationship it is the woman’s responsibility to make it work, and if it does not work then it is the woman’s fault:

> I’ve also brought up with, been brought with the fact that, Indian culture you stay in a relationship and make it work. Like we don’t believe in divorce... you have problems, you work it out and, and that was always my, my solution to it. I was like, okay, we’re gonna work it out... (Asha)

Many women report that they received messages both implicit and explicit from other women, especially their mothers, regarding the importance of making the relationship work:
Like they won’t say straight, but you will see your mothers or other cousins like… just take whatever your husband or in-laws tell you. Don’t say anything back, even your mothers will tell like when you’re even getting married, oh no, no, no, don’t come back from your in-laws’ place, come happily. Don’t come back if your had a fight with them or something you don’t have a place after that here. So, your husband’s place is everything. What people will say, oh if you come back people will think, something is wrong with. If, all the guys drink, it’s normal like everybody drinks so what’s the big deal, why you ruining that… just take it for, maybe you’ll change when you grow older… when I had a son, he said oh now you have a baby you don’t have to worry about him you focus on your child, who cares, he will come around whenever he wants to. (Muskaan)

The stigma associated with separation or divorce is a major incentive to stay with the marriage and try to make it work:

a lot of women would say, I know, if, if, even if you leave the marriage, who knows, you might get somebody worse, then how it is, for the Indian woman. It, it’s not easy once you get divorced, you’re a second hand person and nobody even wants to consider it. (Simran)

The loss of face associated with divorce would be especially bad for the family’s honour:

you’re not still considered that respectful like in the society like, like in Punjabi terms they call you shadi hoi ya [the one who’s been left] like it’s not a good term for you to take you…it’s more that like, parents’ izzat, father-in-law’s izz, like then they be like oh, okay try it one more time too maybe he’ll change. So it’s like the same thing like you’re not allowed to make your own decisions like, whatever you decide it was, their decisions, like you’re just doing it… (Muskaan)

Thus for South Asian women and women from other Asian cultures, a tradition of family secrecy and shame, especially surrounding deviant incidents such as violence and divorce, keeps women silent and stuck in relationships in order to maintain cultural norms (Kozu, 1999).
All the husbands beat their wives.

Until recently, gender role conditioning in South Asian families and ideas regarding the home as a private institution have allowed violence in the home to remain hidden and unaddressed (Abraham, 2000b). Abuse of one’s wife is a common method by which men assert dominance, with both the man and society viewing abuse as a manifestation of power and control over the woman (Abraham, 2000b). Traditionally there was the belief that beating those of lower status was acceptable (e.g., teachers beating students, parents beating children, husbands beating wives) (Dasgupta, 2000). Muskaan describes this cultural and social norm:

I didn’t want to hurt them I thought, it might change. Probably it won’t get to a point where I have to tell them. Quikay (because) there’s norm like all the husbands beat their wives...like not in my family, but I’ve seen the other neighbours and stuff doing it. (Muskaan)

Some societies even go so far as to ignore or go easy on men who kill female relatives in the name of family honour (Dasgupta, 2000; Khouri, 2003)

in our society, honour killing, a man can kill his wife and there’s laws who protect men... (Zharguna)

Meena, whose sexual abuse began on the first day of their marriage, thought this was a normal part of marriage:

First day, almost he raped me. The first day when, first day when he meet me I have no idea. He almost raped me, and I’m crying, illiterate, crying and, just he finished his work and I’m, I’m so, I felt so bad, but I think, this is the thing. I, I think like, this is supposed to happen... (Meena)

He will change.

Participants often mentioned how the idea that their partner would change kept them in the relationship and/or contributed to their repeated returns after attempts to leave the relationship. Some of these women, such as Enza and Belinda, went to shelters or attempted to live alone, while others (e.g., Sonia) stayed in the relationship or returned to their natal home (e.g., Muskaan). Belinda describes how her husband’s promises that the violence would stop persuaded her to return to him:
They arrested him and they took him to prison, and I was in the hospital and after the hospital I went to the shelter home, and after the shelter home I moved into apartment. (short pause). I moved into apartment and then again he started begging, begging to all the friends...that he will never hit me again and he will never hit me again and, so I went back to him again. (Belinda)

Muskaan also agreed to return due to her in-laws’ pressure and her husband’s promises to change:

his family was like no, no, no, no just give another chance because he started crying and, and doing that, I won’t do this again, I learned my lesson. So I said okay, like he’s really begging now, let him but, give it another try. So he’ll call and he’d be like oh no I won’t ever do anything like this, I learned my lesson now, why did I do that? (Muskaan)

Several women thought that they would be able to change or “fix” their partners.

everyone has their, their bad traits, and, I mean, that’s just one thing that he was brought up with and that’s the only way he knew how to express it. And I mean I felt badly for that, and I, and I tried to change that, and I know that I can’t at this point and I, I knew it near the end, that I couldn’t change him. (Asha)

Unfortunately, many battered women believe that if they can find a way to help their partners, their meanness might disappear (Walker, 1989). This belief in the capacity for change appears to be quite common, with women remaining in the relationship and attempting to make it work despite their partners’ behaviour. This is common across cultures as women are often made responsible for maintaining relationships, and are blamed for not trying hard enough if the relationship fails (Strube, 1988). Furthermore, even with no change, women often choose to live with known danger and hope for improvement instead of facing the possibly lethal consequences of leaving (Browne, 1993)

My relationship is my destiny.

Many South Asian women believe in the concept of “karma” or predestination. Thus many women may feel that their abusive relationship is their destiny or penance for past deeds (Dasgupta, 2000; Krishnan, Baig-Amin, Gilbert, El-Bassel, & Waters, 1998). The ability to contextualize intimate violence in terms of bad fate may help participants to
tolerate and cope with their situation (Krishnan et al., 1998). For the participants in this investigation, the notion of destiny or kismet was a recurrent theme throughout their stories. This concept was often used to understand or accept difficult situations that arose in their relationships. At the base of this concept is the idea that since one’s life is predestined, and as Belinda put it “whoever we marry is our husband, our life, our soul mate” then whatever trial one is faced with is one that was meant to be. Palvsha describes the bizarre behaviour of her husband and how she attributed it to her fate:

he would just get sick, vomit, start screaming and become unconscious, it was a strange sickness. I just kept quiet and accepted my fate that perhaps I am being punished for my bad deeds. (Palvsha)

Several women spoke of the concepts of destiny and karma interchangeably, whereby their destiny was determined by their past deeds. These concepts provided some explanation for their situation when none other was available:

when you have no answer like, then you just consider it’s your kismet, maybe that’s what God’s destined you for to take it, maybe you had done something in your past wrong such as or prob previous life. (Muskaan)

For women like Simran, ideas of karma helped her to endure her current situation in the hopes that she would reap the benefits later:

So it’s like I was trying to make the best of it, and plus, being on a, like I was always religious minded so I was, always questioning, is it against our faith to divorce? Is it, am I, is it my fate to help? I always wanted to help people out (chuckles) maybe I should help my own husband out...I was very...altruistic, very sacrificed, I was always told how Indian woman always sacrifices, and it, and then you reap the benefits later. So don’t go for short term...people would tell me, oh...you are such a good person, you do so much for your family, you’re going to reap benefits later... (Simran)

Issues such as the belief in reincarnation and paying dues for past lives, belief in fate and destiny, and the belief that suffering is virtuous can serve to justify abuse and keep women from seeking help (Huisman, 1996).
4) Maintain Social Face

Another major theme within South Asian cultural context was that of maintaining social face or ensuring that one’s family is well thought of by members of the community. South Asians place a strong emphasis on social obligation (Ramisetty-Mikler, 1993) as family honour is paramount, and fulfilling one’s responsibilities to the community and maintaining one’s status allows for the maintenance of social face. As mentioned before, the concept of Izzat or honour is very important in the South Asian family. Girls are the embodiment of a family’s honour and are expected to conform to community expectations (Hennink et al., 1999; Wakil et al., 1981). The group-oriented view within South Asian culture regards the individual as the ambassador who represents the family. Shame and guilt attain a different meaning whereby the failures of the individual result in the “loss of face” for the entire family. Therefore, there is “considerable pressure to maintain harmony and minimize any actions that would potentially jeopardize the family and community” (Abraham, 2000b, p. 19).

_Dasi na_ [Don’t tell].

Since the family is given more value than the individual in South Asian culture, prohibitions against exposing private information are strong. Family matters are kept within the family and if at all possible kept from outsiders. If someone should “break” this code, s/he may be considered a traitor and sanctioned. The stigma of revealing problems within the family and fear of losing face in front of one’s community, as well as the sense of failing her marital commitments may keep a woman silent about her victimization (Dasgupta, 2000). Bubbly stated in her interview:

> it’s really hard to let other people know (last few words said softly) what’s going on in your life. And you don’t want them to know, you want to cover up.

This quote reflects the desire many women have to keep negative information within the family, regardless of cultural background. For other women like Muskaan, their family encouraged them to keep potentially damaging information about their husbands or family lives secret to prevent embarrassment for them. This silencing of women is even more complex when women are socialized to expect some violence in their relationships. Muskaan’s situation illustrates the interaction of some of these variables in keeping women silent:
I said but he drinks, but my in-laws had told them that he doesn’t drink or does anything. So they were in a shock too, that what happened, I said like he drinks, he smokes, he takes drugs so, but then they said, oh don’t tell anyone then it will be embarrassment for us… that was first shock like at the wedding day and he first started hitting me on the third day after the marriage, but, I didn’t tell my parents that, because you feel embarrassed that too, it’s too early, you have grown up with that thinking that, that’s what husband is supposed to do. (Muskaan)

In addition to the fear of shaming one’s family, many women are afraid to talk about their situations for a variety of other reasons. For several women, fear for their families, especially their parents, kept them silent. In Belinda’s case, she remained silent because she feared that if she told her parents, her father would take his anger out on her mother:

So, it continued all my life, he wasn’t there when I was, my son was born. He was abusing me, by writing letters to me and he went to England he went to England to work there and I was left, behind home and he never wrote me any letter and, the only couple of letters he wrote me he would say to me that I’m gonna divorce you and, I was very afraid of my father and, I couldn’t go and tell my mom or dad that, I’d been abused so much, because I was afraid he will hit my mom. So I never ever, used to go and tell them how what I’m going through. (Belinda)

Muskaan worried that her parents would feel guilty about putting their daughter in this situation:

More was like that they’d be hurt too, they will be hurt knowing that, like I knew that it’s their decision that they’d be feeling guilt about it, that our daughter’s going through this… (Muskaan)

Even for women like Sonia who had a very open relationship with their parents prior to getting married, after marriage these women stayed silent for fear of worrying their parents or making them feel guilty:

whenever there was a main problem I would tell my mother and father about it first. Yes, this situation was separate when I got married, the problems with my father-in-law, I couldn’t tell my mother and father because I was worried that they would feel bad. Or that they would say that because of us our daughter is suffering. (Sonia)
For several women like Bubbly, they feared that they would put their parents in physical danger:

Well I haven’t really told too many people, even his family. They don’t know what’s going on. My family they don’t know what’s going on, at all. I don’t want to get them involved, only because, if I do, then he thinks they’re all on my side, and, and then he’s going to hurt them too. So I don’t want to do that to them.
(Bubbly)

Not only do women silence themselves to maintain family honour, but they are often pressured by others to keep their abuse a secret. In Muskaan’s case, the women in her marital family convinced her and her parents to keep silent about the violence in order to protect the relationship between her husband and his father:

So they send my mom and dad and my dad he’s a really nice guy. He came and my father-in-law he wasn’t home and my mother mother-in-law and my grandma, they were at home so they ended up pleading my dad. Don’t tell his father he be upset with him, let it go, he won’t do it again this and that. So my father ended up agreeing with them. (Muskaan)

Women were also kept silent through the use of threats by others. Palvsha described how her in-laws kept her in her violent relationship by threatening to report her to the police:

just by looking at him you could see he was not normal. His body was shaking as if he had some sickness. I cried and said I wanted to go back to Pakistan. But they did not listen to me. They kept me here under the fear of police. They told me that the government here gave a lot of assistance to people like my husband. If I did not accept him, they will accuse me something and turn me in to police, and I would be put into jail. Since he has a disability, he will be helped but I will be put in jail. I became frightened and thought this could indeed happen to me, since in Pakistan everybody listens to the man, nobody ever listens to the woman
(Palvsha)

As immigrant women usually have little information regarding their rights in their new country, and in South Asian countries laws often support men, women often feel as if they have little choice but to endure their circumstances. In other cases, women have
been so let down by everyone that they feel unable to trust that someone will actually help them:

he’s still here, and, but ‘till them I did not tell them anything, because I had no trust in nobody! And I said, blood is always thicker than the water. So I said I’m not gonna, no, nothing, I’m not gonna talk to him. I’m not gonna risk it, I’m not gonna tell them, nothing. (Enza)

Women may also stay silent for fear of being alone or unsafe if they reveal their secret. Given that most women never live alone and are seldom allowed to make their own decisions, telling someone or leaving the marriage would leave a woman quite vulnerable (Dasgupta, 2000). These findings are consistent with other literature on violence against women, which indicates that the historical acceptance of violence within the family creates strong forces toward secrecy about these types of experiences (Koss, 1990)

*Lohk ki kahengay [What will people say?]*

Another related theme in the area of maintaining social face and an impetus to keep the relationship intact is the idea of “what will people say” if they find out that a woman is having trouble in her relationship. As was mentioned before, women are the ones blamed for the situation they find themselves in. Muskaan described her fear that people would blame her for the violence when she said “people will say oh something probably wrong with her that’s why it’s fighting.” Enza also kept to herself as she worried what others would think about the problems in her marriage:

So many times I just kept to myself, oh, like if I talk to somebody what would they think? We husband and wife are not getting along (Enza)

The notion of being viewed as a failure by others in the community also kept women like Belinda quiet:

I went in a shock. I just went into a shock and I said, I, I was just shaking, I was shaking like, I couldn’t believe it, that, a man who acts, everybody in the society thought it’s Belinda. Belinda is the one who flirts, Belinda is the one who’s got a big mouth, Belinda is the one who is always talking to guys and all that, but that’s my personality because I came from a family, where we were allowed, my dad used to work in the country and we lived with mom and brother sisters and we lived with people, we live in apartments, and we used to laugh and joke and run
around, go to the movies...So in everybody’s eyes, it was, (husband’s name) is a
good person, our own society, our own friends. (Belinda)

Muskaan’s words illustrate how the emphasis on how people will judge you really
translates into living your life for the needs of others and not yourself:
your husband’s place is everything what people will say, oh if you come back
people will think, something is wrong with you...So, it’s like, your life you don’t
have a life. (Muskaan)

Muskaan goes on to describe how societal happiness supercedes individual happiness:
what’s the society’s happiness, what, okay if you do this then the people won’t
say this. It’s not that like you, it’s like for the whole society they are thinking,
rather than you. Like they don’t want your happiness, but they want, the rest of
the world happy. To keep those values of the society... (Muskaan)

This emphasis on presenting a certain image to one’s community is very powerful. The
risk of social ostracism of the family can increase a woman’s vulnerability within her
marital home as there are more and more reasons to stay (Abraham, 2000b). Women
then are responsible for their family’s honour, but have no say in what that honour should
be (Thakur, 1992). Furthermore, a charming presentation to others by an abuser can
maintain the invisibility of physical violence and add to the emotional burden that women
carry (Mehrotra, 1999).

he says kay well, she’s ready to go, not that he’s kicking me out, but she’s ready
to go, she has to go, and she has no other place so I don’t know what to do with
her like it’s not good where is she gonna go then. Like, he’s being very good and
nice...(Enza)

Kozu (1999) describes how this avoidance of conflict for the sake of maintaining
harmony and social face is also seen in Japanese culture. Since traditional, hierarchical
family structures, like those seen in South Asian and Asian families, can lead to conflict,
the suppression of feelings can have dangerous effects. One consequence of this secrecy
in Japanese culture is filial violence, where deep-seated resentment can result in a
reactive rage where children become physically violent toward their parents (Kozu, 1999).

**Uncertain familial support.**

Women who are in violent relationships often turn to friends or family for help and advice (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Several participants described how their parents tried to help them after learning of their abuse by encouraging them to leave, helping them to leave their abusive environment, and helping them through a too often lengthy legal process. The first time that Simran’s husband hit her she went to her parents, and her father encouraged her to leave if she was unhappy:

I talked to my, dad, and I had been married, I mean this is before I had my son…and my dad said, I don’t know things are not, going very well, and he, and he shouldn’t have done that to you, so if you want to, you don’t have, if you really, we see that you are very unhappy, and your marriage done is done, but, you don’t have to live this way if you don’t want to. (Simran)

Zharguna identified her parent’s support as the factor that helped her to continue battling for her rights:

Women, in tribal like, I had got the support from my family, because we were educated, like my family. My father was supportive, my brother supported me, that’s why I came here, otherwise it was never be possible to survive, to struggle for a long period so. I cannot say that because it was me, I tried and I struggled so I went to the supreme court, it was just all my family support to with me. Otherwise for tribal women, on all, even for women, without any family support it’s not, possible, that she should go to the court, or try for this. It was my family support that I came to the supreme court and got decision. (Zharguna)

However, even though some parents did try to support their daughters, others continued their attempts to diffuse the situation or acquiesced to others’ attempts to diffuse the situation. In Muskaan’s situation, even though her parents knew about the abuse and tried to remove her from the situation multiple times, the urging of other family members regarding the good of the family meant that they ultimately left their daughter behind when they left her in-laws’ house. Many women are forced into silence because they expect little support from their family and community. Zharguna describes
her uncle’s open reproach for her decision not to marry a husband who already had a wife:

my uncle said, that you are creating problems for yourself, for your father, and for your family, you are stupid, and you will find nothing, there will be no way, if your father died there will be no security for you, and somehow, the, in that circumstances he was right. (Zharguna)

In other cases, family members may fear for their own safety and thus refuse to help the woman. For example, after escaping to India, Muskaan’s parents sent her back to Canada because they felt the gossip being spread was becoming detrimental to her. The plan was that she would stay with a relative in another province. However, because of a recent news story about a South Asian man killing his wife’s family in response to her attempts to leave him, the family member refused and she was forced to go to a shelter:

And, the one, uncle over here my father’s cousin’s husband, when we called that I’m coming he refused to take me back. He said, because probably I don’t know if you remember there was this incident happened in Vancouver where a guy killed the whole family. It was just a week after I was coming. So they said, he said, I don’t want to deal with that guy, like if he finds out and he’s upset, I don’t want to deal with it. So he refused. (Muskaan)

A major reason for the lack of familial support for women in violent situations is, again, fear for the family’s honour and their loss of status in society. Although family and friends may provide support during stressful, but expected life events, such as illness, they may be less likely to respond in situations which are uncomfortable, especially given the strong stigma associated with admitting to relationship difficulties. Thus cultural norms often force women to suffer through the abuse or keep silent in an effort to protect both marital status and a family’s social face (Fernandez, 1997). The importance of the family in South Asian culture means that a lack of familial support makes women even more vulnerable and isolated, especially within the immigrant context.

Community response of denial

One of the most significant struggles for women is dealing with the South Asian community’s denial of intimate violence. People in the community and representatives of religious institutions may refuse to acknowledge violence in the community and fail in
their responsibility to help women in abusive relationships (Dasgupta, 2000). Women may find it difficult to reach out to organizations within their community in fear for their own safety, fear of ostracism from their community, and fear of sullying their family’s name (Sheehan et al., 2000). In fact, instead of getting aid, the stigma of revealing problems in the relationship leads women to be ostracized. Belinda was the only woman who stated that part of this ostracism may be related to fear regarding a woman’s newly single status. However, Belinda’s experience of feeling like an outcast in the community was a notion that other women mentioned as well:

I find, when you leave your husband your friends are afraid, the, they run away from you. They are very few friends who will stick with you and they want to be with you, and they would understand you, and they will help you, but most of your friends, they don’t want to know you, you’re outcast. (Belinda)

This fear appears to be that a newly single woman might tempt their husbands and put their own relationships in jeopardy. Another fear identified by participants was that by intervening, members of the community might feel as if they are endangering themselves. For instance, fear of harassment by Meena’s brother-in-law, a member of the police force, kept others from intervening when they learned of her abuse:

Everywhere I have a, blood, and this, this within this 35 day, the neighbor saying yeah we know everything, but we are also scared with these people they are very bad people. The brother is in police so we can’t say anything, we, the, yeah, we know everything…(Meena)

However, despite the general lack of support by South Asian community members, some women did identify some specific instances of support by others in the community. Muskaan described how her husband’s aunt confronted him about his abusive behaviour:

He [she] said what the hell is wrong with you, why the hell you beat her up like that? What’s wrong with you, like he [she] said, we explained to you a day before she was coming that, we are not gonna accept this even, my brother-in-law and aunt’s son, they explained like, you’ve gotta forget about, you wanta fight with people outside do outside but you’re not gonna hit her at home. You’re not gonna abuse here, and they said like we’re not gonna take it and she said what the hell was wrong with you? (Muskaan)
Belinda also mentions that friends of the family tried to intervene when the abuse became especially bad:

The few times when he really did hit me, my friends they were willing to get into it, and help but, they were also afraid, they don’t want to feel that they’re interfering. And, there were few friends who told him, that this is not right what you’re doing and he would say, mind your own business. (Belinda)

However, these attempts at intervention were not very successful at reducing the violence. Furthermore, fear regarding intervening in private family matters kept this type of support at a minimum. Perhaps this may also be related to the fact that South Asian immigrant women and men, brought up to think of the family as sacred, feel compelled to stay within the cultural parameters regarding family privacy and honour. This socialization not only shapes their relationships within the family and community but may extend to the immigrant worldview (Abraham, 2000b).

Furthermore, immigrants may not suffer the social disapproval for shirking their responsibility as they would in their country of origin (e.g., if sisters and daughters need help and they do not provide it) (Espiritu, 1997). Women who have experienced violence may also remain silent to maintain their family support in other areas of life (e.g., racial, ethnic, and class discrimination in a new country). In fact, the struggle between the gender discrimination in their own community and the racism of the dominant culture can further act to silence women and maintain abusive situations (Abraham, 1999; Agnew, 1998). A question this discussion raises for me is whether people are actually afraid of what others will say or is policing by the South Asian community done in order that the message “what will people say” will hold more weight.

5) Reactions to violent relationship

Participants described a variety of intrapersonal reactions to the stress in their relationships. These included emotional responses to the violence, strategies they used to cope with their situations, and strategies for resistance. Not surprisingly, women experienced a range of emotional responses to the violence.

Emotional responses to violence.

In addition to the chronic health problems associated with intimate violence, the women interviewed also described a variety of psychological responses to their situation
including symptoms of fear, anger, lowered self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and self-blame. Fear was a universal response to the situation these women found themselves in. Enza stated “I was very scared of him, because earlier also like, I had seen him, he, he, he’s a very, very revengeful person, very angry, and revengeful person.” For most of the respondents fear was a constant in their lives as they did not know when the next episode of violence would come. Muskaan describes how her husband’s dramatic and unpredictable anger filled her with such fear that she could not even be in the same room with him without trembling:

He loved this green chili, like even if I missed one day or I couldn’t find it, it will be, all back. He would never ask, the whole thing will be on you… once he started controlling I got so scared, I couldn’t even say anything back like, why. I stopped even asking the questions why, why you doing…I was too scared of him, even, I couldn’t, came to, when I came to Canada I was even at a point like even in back from India, I couldn’t even serve him food, myself. I’ll just put the food on table before he come, because if as soon as I see him my hands will start shaking, then I can’t even hold a glass of water so I be shaking. (Muskaan)

For several women, the fear they felt was related to thoughts of being unable to survive without their husbands. For instance, Belinda felt so dependent on her husband, that she felt she would be unable to survive without him:

he made me feel like, he’s the most intelligent, well educated man, and, I was just an ordinary person, with no career and, life will, they will, I won’t be able to survive, I won’t be able to do anything in my life without him. So my life was him like I, actually I depended on him… (Belinda)

For other women, the fear of leaving was associated with what might happen to their loved ones if they left. Meena not only feared for her own life given the daily violence she was experiencing, but she was also afraid that harm would come to her parents if she did not return to her in-laws:

then one day they allow me to meet my, parents, my, I went my parents house, then I told everything, this is happening with me…I told my mother this, why, where you put me? Where, what made is you did, I cry. So my mother told me don’t go back now, it is this, if you, this is terrible. I said, no I can’t, they will kill
you, because my, my brother-in-law he showed me the revolver, if you, if something is happened bad, I will kill you brother, I will kill you, your father, I will kill your mother. So I'm so scared about my parent I don't want to give them trouble. (Meena)

In Bubbly's case her fear that her husband would kill her or her children was the only reason she was still in the relationship. Unfortunately this is a common fear for women, not only because many women try to leave when abuse becomes intense, but also because many women are killed at the point of leaving their relationship (Strube, 1988):

I know if, (deep breath and short pause) I decide to leave (husband), he's gonna go off on the deep end, he's gonna do something bad...He'll kill me, he'll kill the kids or he'll kill me, he or he might kill all the kids, and leave me, like I don't know. I mean in our, in our Indian culture that's what happens sometimes. (Bubbly)

Fear and worry about their children was a universal concern for the seven women in this study who had children. Sonia described how her worry that her children were going hungry and were being exposed to potentially dangerous people was a major source of anxiety for her:

Then one night he said to me, give me money. Welfare money had come in, and I said, I won't give you that. Whatever, pocket money you want, I'll give to you, but the rest I will keep with me, because for three of four days my children remain hungry, and feeding my children is the most important. I cannot see them go hungry. So he said, fine you won't give me, and I said no, that I cannot give you. Today you see a young, young person, we are not Canadian, our culture is different, my daughters were getting older, every day he was bringing some man or the other home and I did not want my children to be exposed to this. I mean, the people were all fine, but you can't tell what time will bring. (Sonia)

Both Bubbly and Muskaan mentioned their concerns regarding the effect of their situation on their children. Bubbly worried about her children's constant exposure to the violence in their home:

the bad part about all of this is that the kids know what's going on. The kids know everything, they know everything and, they don't know what to do about it. They
try and block it from their mind, I know, but it’s there all the time... the verbal abuse, they see it all the time. They know that, dad hits me. I mean they, they see it, they see everything. I mean, we, he doesn’t hide it... (Bubbly)

Muskaan described some of the reactions shown by her son:

he’d [husband] call he’d tell him, oh I’m not coming [for the promised visit]. So it started affecting him too, like he will be like, so why doesn’t daddy come, why is he always angry, he doesn’t love us, he hates us. So he started going through psychologically with that so, that’s when I took him back to India and just left him there with my parents... (Muskaan)

Children are often the indirect victims of family violence when they suffer the consequences of observing abuse. In Canada, children in approximately half a million households have seen or heard one parent being assaulted by the other (http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/intact.html).

Despite strong feelings of fear and anxiety, several women described their struggle with trusting their intuition. Asha describes her realization that she had not trusted her implicit knowledge that her boyfriend was having an affair:

I look back and think how stupid could I be, for not, clueing in to it or, or knowing, or not trusting my intuition. Like when I knew something was going on, but never, I didn’t let myself believe it. (Asha)

Enza describes how despite her strong intuitive sense that something was wrong in her relationship, she chose to ignore it in case she was wrong:

Like after two or three days not even two three days I think very first day first you, after two days or so, this is a blunder this is a, this was a mistake, big mistake... I knew that something was wrong, but, I was not very sure what. I’m thinking is just the right my judgement is right or it’s wrong, but my intuition was so very strong, that I knew, but I did not want to admit, right there also and otherwise also because I just got married and if I tell my parents, how are they gonna feel about it. So I didn’t I’d had the strength, I did not have the courage, and I said no, maybe with the time maybe I’m wrong... (Enza)

On the other hand, it was Meena’s strong sense that something was going to happen that helped her to call her parents to come get her from her in-laws’ home. Unfortunately, she
was impelled to return to the apartment where she was subsequently thrown off the fourth floor balcony:

from my inside, my inner, the, this, saying that's go, run away from, you are going in trouble, my, my, my soul is saying don't stay here. It's coming from through my the heart and I'm so scared to listen this, like something me, we heard our, our voice from here and this is coming here, don't stay here, don't stay here, go, run, run. I'm listening as I, I'm not listening anybody. (Meena)

Given the types of experiences these participants describe, it is not surprising that anger was another common response for women who found themselves in violent situations over which they had little control. Asha describes how her violent relationship connected her with an experience of anger that was entirely unfamiliar to her:

it's a type of anger that I'd never felt before until that point. Like I'd never been so angry in my life...like, I would get hot. Like my blood would boil, like I would literally want to strangle this person and I would just imagine like, beating her to death, like I would just, I would picture my myself just killing her. Like that's how angry I was at, at this person and, more angry at him at the fact that he wouldn't admit anything. So I mean the anger is towards both of them... (Asha)

Interestingly, Asha's anger is centred around the woman her boyfriend was with, instead of her partner, who was the person putting her in this position in the first place. Belinda's anger began to grow when she started to realize how much she was contributing to the marriage, and how little she was getting in return:

And I had that little anger inside me and, I said how come I have to walk home at three four, three o'clock, two o'clock from work, when I make so much money and he can't even buy me a car that would cost two thousand dollars...I started getting this ang, I had so much anger inside me and I started, getting angry and angry and angry and I was, angry about these things, I was angry about myself that, (says this in a sort of hiccup laugh) I want to be loved. (Belinda)

Gender role socialization makes it difficult for women who are experiencing intimate violence to recognize and express their feelings of anger. Women are usually taught to suppress their anger. However, it is the direct expression of legitimate anger that has been found to help women begin to develop adequate escape skills (Walker, 1981).
Many women described the changes they experienced to their sense of self or personality through their experiences of violence. Battered women in general have been found to display low self-esteem (Walker, 1981). For most of these women, it was as if their very essence had somehow undergone a transformation in their loss of self. For instance, Asha describes how her experiences felt as if they resulted in a loss of innocence and forced her to connect with her negative feelings:

I honestly think, that I’ve changed a lot, like my personality has changed a lot, being through that. It’s almost like, you take an innocent child and you put them in, a bad situation and they’re no longer innocent and happy…I feel like, I got into that relationship really naive, and really open and giving and, I feel that that was taken away from me…I feel like I, I can’t, be as open again…I’m just not that same person…I think I’m a harder person to get along with now (she laughs) actually. I’m more in tune with my negative feelings, then I used to be. I think I used to be a happier person before I was with him, and I think all that negativity stored up inside of me, for so many years has made me more of a negative person and I really try not to be that way (Asha)

The general message was that the changes that occurred were not ones the woman would have wished for herself, and involved a loss of self-esteem and increased self-doubt.

if I would say well it’s really important, I really needed to talk to you. OKAY, hurry up, you have 30 seconds, say it, what do you need to say? It’s like, well I’m sitting, I’m here and you’re there and if we can’t even talk on the phone, then what do we do? I don’t have time to waste. What do you want to say? I felt so devalued, it’s almost like, I had no, I had no value! (Simran)

Belinda’s change was exacerbated by the messages she received from people around her. However, in her case she was somehow able to reframe the negative views others held about her through the knowledge that they did not really know who she was:

So in everybody’s eyes, it was, (husband’s name) is a excellent guy, and it’s, it’s Belinda who’s not, the right person, it’s Belinda who’s a flirt, and I, I took that inside me too…I knew people feel that, don’t think very much about me. I carried that guilt in me, I felt that way, because, I felt I’m not perfect, I felt people don’t think I’m a good person our own society, our own friends. I always felt, I always
carried that, inside me that, they don’t think I’m a good person, but they didn’t know, who, I am only I know who I am… (Belinda)

A common emotional response to the trauma of violence is depression. Self-doubt and negative views about themselves led many participants to experience periods of depression. Simran describes how vulnerable she became in her depression and her fear that the depression would return:

you start self-doubting yourself and I went through that for years, and that’s why I had to read so many books. And I started helping myself, because I actually got, I was very vulnerable during my depression. It really scared me, because I went from this very independent person into a very vulnerable, a very, dependent where I, I was, afraid to take control…but I did everything possible to get out of this depression, and I managed to do it, and I, I, I do everything possible never to go into that again (Simran)

Some women were depressed but did not realize it, taking medication that also gave them other side effects to deal with:

I used to be very depressed, but I didn’t know that time that I’m depressed. I, I felt I’m, I was sad. I used to be, I wasn’t myself but, but I didn’t know that I was depressed and I’m in pain and all that and, I was on a medication, I was on a medication and I was taking kind of tranquilizers and they were making me very sleepy… (Belinda)

Enza describes how she would cry all the time and felt very isolated and helpless as the only person she knew in Canada was her abuser:

I mean when I was going through the bad period also since morning I’ll start crying, until night I was crying…I was so scared. That I don’t know anybody, I have no money, if I go out what am I gonna survive, how can I, how am I gonna do it? (Enza)

Sometimes the experience of depression led women to contemplate suicide. Although only one woman interviewed described actually attempting suicide, a few women mentioned how their helplessness made them feel as if they had no other options:

I went through different phase of depression, depression medicines and stuff, became suicidal couple of times (Muskaan)
Isolation was another experience that many women mentioned. For some the experience of isolation was related to the lack of social support that is available for South Asian women in difficult relationships. With all of the restrictions about revealing family problems to others and the worry that women felt about their families, many women felt very alone and isolated in their experience:

I was stuck, I had to pay in the end, I had to listen to him in the end (said softly), and since I have no friends of my own, no friends to say even take a name...Because I used to get so depressed and I started to, kind of, by health wise I was not keeping well. Wherever I had to go, I did not know the ways and things like that. One way he would say, you’re not supposed to go anywhere, because don’t ask, don’t talk, don’t do this, don’t do that and another point of view, another, side of it was that if I had to go somewhere like for the doctor and all he’ll never take me! I have to find my own way. (Enza)

With limited familial support many immigrant women are left even more isolated when in violent relationships:

I thought inside that I was far away from mother, from my brothers and sisters, and the very person we had come to had put us through all these difficulties.

(Shameem)

Meena’s description of her isolation from friends and neighbours reveals the depths of loneliness that women can experience when cut off from social support within abusive environments:

Every time they treating me so badly. They not allow me to way, wear good clothes, they don’t allow me to talk with anybody, neighbours, nobody no neighbour is talking with them, and when I’m going outside to buy grocery, everybody is scared to talk with me. Sometime I want to talk with the neighbor and because I, I’m so suffocated from inside I have no, nobody is there, no friend, and my parent is not coming there. (Meena)

For immigrant women, isolation takes place not only through their intimate relationship, but also because friends and family are often left back “home” (Abraham, 2000a, p. 231). Back in their country of origin, the stress of a husband’s isolation tactics
may be buffered by social interactions with a woman’s friends and family (Abraham, 2000a)

Thus in addition to the physical consequences of abuse, the literature (e.g., Browne, 1993) indicates that women also exhibit common cognitive and emotional consequences. These consequences may vary depending on the individual, social context, and type of violence (Goodman et al., 1993). In Koss’s (1990) review of the literature on the mental health implications of violence, she reports that even years after an assault, victims of violence were more likely to qualify for psychiatric diagnoses including major depression, substance use/dependence, and stress-related disorders. Depression and anxiety symptoms have been highly associated with all types of abuse (Carlson et al., 2002). In general, women who are survivors of violence have been found to respond over the long-term with a chronic, yet heterogeneous symptoms pattern, with core features including fear, expressions of denial and avoidance, constricted affect, numbing, anxiety and hypervigilance, and disturbances of self-concept (Browne, 1993, Koss. 1990). Many of the same aftereffects are seen in people who have survived other types of traumatic events.

Browne (1993) suggests that these cognitive, physical, and behavioural responses are consistent with the criteria for PostTraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) a diagnostic category that may be appropriate for victims of violence. This diagnosis, although it does not take into account all of the symptoms manifested by survivors of violence, does have some advantages as a label for these experiences, as it differentiates them from other disorders (Goodmen et al., 1993). It identifies the psychological sequelae of violence as “normal responses to abnormal events, thereby depathologizing the victim’s responses” (Goodmen et al., 1993, p. 1056). It also allows professionals to borrow from a rich body of literature on psychological trauma. Thus many of the psychological consequences of violence may be better understood using a PTSD diagnosis. These types of psychological responses to trauma may affect a woman’s ability to make decisions that will help her to take effective action to improve her situation. Even for women who are able to think clearly, social and cultural realities may engender a sense of entrapment and helplessness (Browne, 1993).
Coping strategies.

Participants described a number of strategies they used to help redefine their situation and reduce their distress (e.g., social support, emotional expression, problem-solving, and cognitive restructuring). As mentioned before, problem solving strategies often focus on managing the violence and include rationalization, minimizing the significance of the violence to both oneself and others, and self-blame. A focus on their own welfare in spite of abuse has also been found to keep more women resistant to depression (Campbell et al., 1997). Coping can be aided by increased activity outside of the house, through the use of various cognitive strategies, and by perceived social support (Santello & Leitenberg, 1993). However, isolation imposed by violent partners can result in a diminished support network.

Many of the women interviewed attempted to cope with and understand their situations by identifying possible reasons for the violence they endured. For women like Amar, the first instance of abuse was accompanied by words regarding her utility to her husband. She then revealed her understanding of her role as a wife in order to remain with him:

the first time he hit me, he said he married me because he wanted to come to Canada that is all. And then I said he is my husband I have to remain with him.

(Amar)

Several women identified issues related to their partners’ mental health that might offer a rationale for their behaviour. It appears that this offered an excuse that took the responsibility away from the partner and in some ways made the abuse easier to bear. Bubbly describes how her husband’s attempts to cope with his abusive childhood have contributed to his violent behaviour.

(husband) was not happy with himself, I didn’t know that until after I thought that he had, didn’t have any problems, that he was happy go lucky, that he loved his culture, that he was a family person, because his family was there for him, but I didn’t know all the hidden doors behind him. All the cruelty he went through when he was brought up. I mean his sister-in-law used to throw him in the cellar because he was bad, and that’s like cold cellar, that’s like just dungeon almost. I mean that’s the way he was brought up, every time he was bad, throw him down
the cellar. He was beat up, tormented by his, all his other brothers. I didn’t know
that, and that’s what I’m dealing with today, is that he can’t, he can’t let go and he
takes it out on me and takes it out on the kids. He tries to make our world,
miserable, and I don’t think he means it, but he doesn’t realize what he’s doing.
(Bubbly)

A partner’s unhappiness or depression was often used as an explanation for his
behaviour:

I guess, when he came, everything was a shock to him and even the marriage, I
really wonder, like, whether, it’s almost like he wasn’t into anything. So, he was
quite homesick and everything. Very sad, and, and, so I tried to, I, I tried to
understand his position, and I tried to do everything I could. (Simran)

Alcohol or substance abuse was another explanation mentioned by several women as they
attempted to understand the abuse they experienced. For Muskaan, the substance abuse
somehow normalized her husband’s violent behaviour:

maybe it’s just normal like maybe he gets drunks that’s why he beats me. He’s on
drug or he can’t smoke properly so it triggers it...(Muskaan)

For Bubbly alcohol offered an explanation when combined with an abusive childhood:

I guess most of this, all of this has basically stemmed down to his drinking, and
his upbringing, family life, he’s got really nobody who he can count on...
(Bubbly)

For someone like Enza, her husband’s substance use became a way to predict when abuse
was more likely. However, it also became part of the abuse itself as Enza was blamed for
her husband’s drinking and by extension his abusive behaviour towards her:

You hear the t.v. get switched, there he goes makes a drink and brings it. And,
from six o’clock, initially like whatever, whatever has happened but by, the all the
fights, every time, started, after eleven o’clock. He’s been drinking all that time.
He would, like drink, at least half a bottle a day. And then again because, again
that was my fault...I don’t do the things the way he wants. That’s why he’s not
happy, and that’s why he’s drinking...So that was also again my fault. (Enza)

In Simran’s attempts to understand her situation, the messages from others regarding her
husband’s feelings of inadequacy offered her an avenue to justify his treatment of her:
I always hoped for change, I always justified, oh, it’s because his career’s not good, he’s unhappy. It’s because I’m the one that’s earning and supporting the family, this is what I was told by other relatives. He’s intimidated by you, because you’re the one that is earning. And, you’re independent, and you’re very, social, and he’s intimidated by all that, or people would tell me...he’s a very nice guy, just your personalities are very different. (Simran)

For women like Belinda, the role of the extended family played a role in her rationale: my husband, he started hitting him right, the second or the third day. And he was, a very jealous, very possessive, and I feel that, he wasn’t loved. He wasn’t loved, he was, trying, he always was trying to please his family by hitting me. And he wanted to show them that he is, not like his other brothers sisters, like his other brothers, who would listen to their wives and they won’t hit and, they always thought that, they have been abused by the daughter-in-laws because they were strong, and to prove to the family that he’s different, he’s not afraid of me so no matter, what I do is right or wrong he will just slap me, hit me, beat me all the time. (Belinda)

Since battered women, like other victims of trauma, feel a loss of control when they are beaten (Walker, 1981), these types of explanation often help women to gain a sense of control (albeit false) over their situation. More specifically, as long as they can offer an explanation regarding their partner’s behaviour then there is a possibility they can change it in the future. For women who could not provide a rationale for their abuse, this sense of control was lost:

as soon as my brother went from the home, they beat me first time. I have no idea why, why they beat me, there was no reason, there was no mistake of me. They beat me, they beat me, they beat me so literally that I was, like a unconscious. (Meena)

Thus if the woman cannot identify what has led to the abuse she experiences she is often left feeling even more helpless and overwhelmed than before.

Many of the women discussed the role of spirituality or God in their attempts to cope. When specifically asked about coping strategies, Muskaan identified prayer and going to the temple as major sources of comfort to her:
the only thing that I did was like a *patdh* [prayer] we went to Gurudawara like even when I’m stressed now I just go to Gurudawara and even if I stay there for fifteen minutes, I’m just okay yeah I feel better. (Muskaan)

Zharguna also described God in a general way when asked how she survived her ordeal:

It’s sometime I scared, but still like now I think sometime, I think that I have survived for this long period and now I’m, so it will, like God will help me maybe, God is with me all the way like otherwise when I go, in that tribal area, from that being a woman, talking about her rights, it’s impossible, it’s like looking at stars or something, (Zharguna)

Belinda identified a specific moment when she felt that God came to her aid:

once he, he hit me so much, and I couldn’t turn to anybody, and I just cried and cried and cried in front of Baba Guruji’s picture. And I, I was like fighting with God, I was saying to God give me strength, give me strength not to cry again. Give me strength to move on, give me strength to leave this man, and honestly, God heard me. When I stopped crying, I got up and I felt some kind of, spirit in myself. I felt strong, and I said this is it and, I was very strong after that. (Belinda)

Work was another factor that many women identified as helping them to cope. For most of these women work helped them to feel more confident about themselves. For Bubbly work provided her with friends for support and a sense of accomplishment:

through work, I mean, I mean I’ve, had a lot of different jobs, but I’ve made a lot of good friends through work, and my present job. I mean everybody is so nice, my boss, like she’s always coming over, just making sure everything’s going okay. They threw me in, into all the mess, with, I guess restructuring. And I’ve managed to, organize myself. So she’s really happy that everything’s working. So it makes me feel that I’m doing something good, for them, and makes me happy. (Bubbly)

Amar describes how her job became a place of escape from her abuse:

when I was working in evening time I have to go home, right my work is finished and that time I says no I want to do more work, I don’t want to go home, and some time I said to my supervisor I don’t want to go home. He’d say why not why don’t you want to go home and I says no I don’t want to go home, I want to work
more. And sometimes he gave me like overtime and I work for over time like in a week, sometimes I left my work 7 days a week, and that I was so upset and I did for one month seven days a week... (Amar)

In Zharguna’s case it was the work that she was doing supporting other women, which actually helped her to continue the fight for her own rights:

And then where I come into the development and working for women, then I, this, like feeling support, me look I’m working for the fallen women and I am telling them, bringing like, bringing awareness among them, you guys should do this, and you should have a like, I was working as a social... I’m talking to like about them to bring awareness among them and talking about different issues, so why should, so why I should first of all, I’m facing a problem being a Muslim, why should I become a second wife. I should, first of all I should get my own right, so this inspired me, the working in development this inspiration give me support...

(Zharguna)

Work and the possibility of some independent economic resources, even if limited, may increase self-esteem and provide a woman with a sense of identity (Kumar, 1991).

Another major source of support for women was their children. Sonia stated that her children were a large part of her survival. Bubbly described how her close relationship with her children, a relationship she did not have with her own mother, helps her to cope and feel better about herself.

My mom, she never spent time with all of us. She never worked, she stayed home, she was, the homemaker, but she didn’t spend any time with us. And I never really had my mom there for me. It’s more like she’s there now for me now, but she’s so far away... but I, find that spending time with my kids, helps me a lot too, ‘cause, they confide in me about a lot of things they don’t tell their dad. I try and give them good advice, we try and work things out together, and that’s the best part, and, they, they’re close to me, my kids are. (Bubbly)

The decision by Shameem’s children to stay with her rather than their father is what she attributes her success to:

He was doing everything for the property back home. In our home country and in our culture we have property and he wanted all the property back home. He
planned that they’d keep the children, throw me out, therefore they’d get the property as well as the children. But kids supported me and said that they wanted to live with their mother, and because of this I have been successful in settling in this country. (Shameem)

Another major source of support that participants identified was being able to turn to their friends. Bubbly describes how her friends have always been there for her:

I have, most of our friends are all my friends, so I have really good friends. They’ve been there since day one, and I haven’t lost any friends. They’ve always been there for me… (Bubbly)

Asha describes the importance of having a friend just listen to her:

other than to just, talk to myself, ‘cause I didn’t have any close friends there that I could talk to and, I mean I would call (best friend) all the time just crying to her on the phone, and she was a great support. Like she had never, she would never say anything bad about him and she would never, say, break up with him, she would never tell me what to do. She would always just be supportive and say like, you’re basically, you’re gonna do what you’re gonna do, whenever you’re ready, like basically that’s what she said. (Asha)

Research indicates that social support may promote psychological health by helping women to maintain valued social identities while also providing emotional and material support during times of stress (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983). This means that for women who have limited social networks due to immigration, ostracism from their communities upon disclosure of violence, and/or reduced natal and extended family support, the stress and isolation within their intimate relationship may become even more difficult to cope with. Furthermore, even when friends are available, women may find it especially difficult to seek support regarding problems in their intimate relationship due to fear and embarrassment (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983).

Another factor that appeared to help women was education. Although women did not explicitly identify this as a source of coping, several women described how education played a role in their empowerment. Meena’s story includes a description of her attempts to complete her education while she was in her abusive relationship. She goes on to
recount how her certificate for completing a course of study was the only possession she took when she attempted to leave her husband’s home:

So, then I, the certificate which I last night brought from my mother house I picked that only, I take that only with me, because that’s my property, my education is my property (Meena)

For other women like Sonia, returning to school and learning more about her rights helped her to feel more independent and confident:

I started school and started to take courses and I learned that here you can’t do this sort of thing to women. That women can take care of themselves, that this isn’t that sort of country that if you study a little and I had this going for me that I had taken such a good beautician’s course that if not now, then next year, or in a year and a half I have enough confidence to know that I will do something, I can do something. (Sonia)

Zharguna identifies education as the major reason she was able to fight for her rights in the first place. She describes how being educated helped her to identify that being a second wife was something she should rail against:

from the beginning I was educated so I was aware that that should not be a second wife. This, this difference, like if I was not educated maybe I will never even think, what is that okay, a married person, you will get cloths, you will get jewelry everything, this make a big difference, and I convinced my father, although in the beginning he said that it will be difficult for you. You will lose...he was telling and he was right, like, nobody will be there to marry. I said no problem. This, there the education comes, if I was not education, I will never in the beginning, I will never even think about that, I am going to become a second. (Zharguna)

Other active coping strategies that women used included exercise, journalling, and reading self help books. For Asha, going to the gym helped to reduce her stress:

Well I know a big part of it for me, I mean, being fitness and stuff, I think that, always helped. I, I would take it out just by going to the gym and working out like, and that was a big part of it for me. I would feel just so much better after, going to the gym. That was my way out and, I mean even now like if I’m a little
bit stress or, I’m edgy about something or whatever, like I go to the gym, come out, I’m like hundred percent better. (Asha)

Simran described how a combination of exercise and reading self-help books helped her to cope while she was pregnant and unable to take antidepressants:

So I used to go for a mile walk, twice a day, because that’s supposed to be a natural, I tried to stay really happy, tried not to think about our relationship…you start self-doubting yourself and I went through that for years, and that’s why I had to read so many books, and I started helping myself…(Simran)

Some participants described how the stress of their relationship led to an emotional disconnection from themselves and the world around them. Battering may not only influence adjustment directly, but may also have indirect effects through its impact upon coping responses and the availability of social support. Women dealing with escalating levels of violence may find it more difficult to maintain ties with friends, and to take effective steps to change their situation. This is consistent with studies of community residents in which individuals experiencing greater numbers of negative life events were more likely to use avoidance coping, and less likely to perceive themselves as supported. Avoidance coping skills such as passivity are often seen in intimate violence situations (Hamby & Gray-Little, 1997). Muskaan describes her experience of becoming an “emotionless person” who did not know what to do or what to say.

It really scared me, because I went from this very independent person into a very vulnerable, a very dependent where I, I was, afraid to take control. I froze, actually I just froze…(Simran)

Minimizing their experience or presenting a happy front to the world were other methods of disengagement identified by some women. Although this response may be related to the issue of maintaining social face, it also may be one way in which women can regain control over at least one aspect of their world: what people see. Enza described her tendency to keep her depression hidden from others:

this is my habit too like I, how so ever sad depressed and, down I am, but I’m always smiling. Nobody can make out, from my, until unless I let them know nobody can make out, how and what I’m going through nobody can. (Enza)
However, this response not only forces the woman to use emotional resources to hide her distress, but it also makes it more difficult for others to recognize her distress and possibly help her. Research also indicates that disengagement or avoidance methods of coping (e.g., minimizing, forgetting, and social withdrawal) may not be helpful in promoting psychological health and may be related to subsequent psychological problems (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Santello & Leitenberg, 1993). Other literature indicates that cognitive distortions such as minimization and denial may help women get through the acute battering incidents. Women tend to react in ways that increase the probability of minimizing pain and enhancing survival rather than risking more serious harm (Walker, 1989). “Often this behaviour is misinterpreted as passivity, when, in fact, battered women have highly developed sets of coping skills that increase their probability of survival” (Walker, 1989, p. 698).

In some cultures, more “active” strategies may be discouraged. For example, leaving the relationship, confronting their partners, or seeking outside assistance may not be possible for some women due to cultural or religious prohibitions. If they do leave the relationship, women may face familial or societal consequences. A pressure to acquiesce, placing collective needs above their own, and the need to save social face is stronger in some cultures than in others. Thus, women may appear more passive due to their cultural prescriptions. (Yoshihama, 2002). For example, Yoshihama (2002) found significant differences in the choice and perceived effectiveness of coping strategies between US-born and Japan-born respondents who had experienced violence with US-born more likely to seek help from friends and/or confront the partner than those from Japan. US-born respondents were also significantly less likely to minimize the seriousness of the situation than were those born in Japan. In fact, Japanese born respondents experienced more psychological distress, the higher the effectiveness of “active” strategies. The use of active coping strategies, such as confronting and divorce, may be detrimental to the psychological well being of women born in Japan as these strategies are culturally incongruent. The use of these strategies may be discouraged by community members resulting in less social support, which in turn may be associated with decreased psychological well being. Yoshihama (2002) concluded that the perceived effectiveness of “passive” strategies may actually serve as a psychologically
protective factor for women born in Japan. Therefore, encouraging women to use active coping strategies may not necessarily alleviate their distress. The perceived effectiveness of coping strategies needs to be interpreted in their sociocultural context, with culturally congruent coping styles often acting as a source of strength.

Nurius, Furrey, and Berliner (1992) note that factors such as multiple significant life events that occur concurrently with abuse may make it more difficult for women who have been victims of intimate violence to mobilize their coping resources and responses. Even when life changes may appear to be positive (e.g., immigrating) they may also contribute to increasing stress and abuse, especially if the woman finds herself without social supports. Social isolation and a strained family environment may also increase self-doubt and inhibit decisive action. Limited education, inadequate income, and work history may also prevent life changes that provide opportunities for independence, hopefulness, and skill acquisition (Nurius, et al., 1992). This may leave immigrant women in a situation where they experience a great deal of stress in their lives, and prevent them from accessing their coping resources.

Resistance.

As discussed earlier, resistance refers to practical strategies that women may use to aid their survival in terms of challenging power dynamics and controlling or preventing abuse (Abraham, 2000b). This research, like other research in the area of South Asian women and violence (e.g., Abraham, 2000b), reveals that despite gender role norms that encourage women to be submissive and passive, a lack of resources, and little community support, women in this study used a variety of strategies of resistance. These strategies “cannot be reduced to specific incidents but must be understood in the context of the multiple strategies most women use in a relationship” (Abraham, 2000b, p. 132). In general, like other victims, women who are experiencing intimate violence focus primarily on self-protection and survival (Browne, 1993). Although specific strategies are determined by the resources and opportunities that women have available to them, most of the women I interviewed used creative ways to survive their relationships.

Some of these strategies were more covert and included minimizing the risk of violence, placating or avoiding their partner, remaining passive, or submitting to their partner. For many these more covert acts of resistance helped to reduce the incidence of
violence. Browne (1993) writes that “during - and even after - an assault, a victim may offer little or no resistance in an attempt to minimize the threat of injury or renewed aggression. Thus women may act passively, not because they see themselves as submissive or lacking in assertiveness, but because this is the behaviour that keeps them safest in this situation (Kumar, 1991). Muskaan describes that after more overt types of resistance resulted in an escalation of violence, she would remain silent so that her husband would not get as upset:

I remember only one time I told him, stop! Don’t hit me it hurts! And I ended up getting hittin more so after that it was just like just take a little better than if I say something it, might beat me more so, just take it, so he doesn’t get upset more and that other people don’t hear it so just take, whatever it is for now. (Muskaan)

Bubbly described how she has learned to keep her husband’s abuse on a verbal level by recognizing his limits:

I’ve found that through our relationship, if I try and go my way and he’s over there trying to tell me that he wants it his way, and then he’s yelling at me, I can’t, I can’t make my own decision. I have to, follow his decision...Right, sometimes I guess what I’ll do is I’ll just (sighs) if I get, I just can’t understand his reasoning, I’ll still do it my way, but I’ll still get in trouble for it...he can get physical. And that’s happened quite a few times in our marriage, but more of the verbal abuse, because I know when he’s to that limit I just back away. I’ll only go as far as I can go and then that’s it. (Bubbly)

For these and other participants even though they were using less overt strategies of resistance, they were continually trying to decrease the risk for violence. Other women used covert strategies to gather information that might prove useful later. In Meena’s situation, she was able to hide a neighbour’s telephone number that her brother gave her by writing it on the back of a piece of cardboard that had her bindis [decorations for forehead] on it with an eyeliner pencil. This was a safe place to write a very dangerous piece of information:

my brother came to meet me...he gave me the phone number of my, one of my neighbour, and then at that time I have a, even though no pen, and no pencil, but for, only for one minute he come in my bedroom, my brother-in-law, he gave me,
this is the phone number just write down anywhere, if you are in trouble. So that’s phone number, the my khajal pencil, I the like me khajal pencil, that’s one on my dressing table, and my bindi patha, I write, I wrote down my, I wrote down with my, that number on my, with my pence, khajal pencil on bidi patha, behind, so nobody can see that... I had that bindi patha, nobody can check that’s bindi patha and then this is the number (this said in an excited proud tone of voice). (Meena)

Other women described how despite their partner’s demands, they made the decisions that worked best for them. Muskaan recalls that even after they had separated, her husband refused to allow her to send her son to stay with his grandparents. She responded by sending him anyway:

I was, deciding to go to college same year he said, I want to send my son back because, I had no money to pay baby sitting and stuff. So he said no, you can’t send him. So, I just took him (she laughs) back to India, I didn’t tell anyone because he had the supervision rights under them, and they said, just take him we won’t let him see. So I took him back and, then I told his father the rest and my parents told his father he said, tell your son now not to bother her, because if he does now, we’ll deal with him that way. So they kind of threatened back. So that’s when he got the message, not to, say anything to... (Muskaan)

These strategic responses to fearful consequences may also be a socialized norm in the South Asian culture where women are taught to use indirect means of confrontation and persuasion to ward off a less desirable consequence inspired by a direct confrontation (Mehrotra, 1999). Furthermore, these more indirect or covert strategies are not signs that a woman is giving in to the abuse, but rather illustrate a type of resistance that women use when trying to negotiate a situation where they are isolated, dependent on their partners, and may have limited options for safety (Abraham, 2000b). In fact, behaviours that others may interpret as helplessness, may “simply be accurate evaluations of the assailant’s potential for violent responses and others’ inability to intervene in time to guarantee safety (Browne, 1993, p. 1080).

In addition to these covert strategies, women also used more overt strategies such as threats, confrontation, talking back, hitting back, challenging their partner’s financial control, and getting needs met elsewhere, in their efforts to resist their abuse. Several
participants described how they resisted by talking back, which included questioning and/or confronting the abuser’s behaviour, telling him to stop the abuse, or verbally retaliating. Asha recalls that after initially trying to placate her boyfriend, she later began to get angry in return:

whenever he would get angry, I would get angry back. Like why are you yelling at me, like this isn’t normal for me to hear this... I mean, in the beginning I used to try and calm him down and say look let’s talk, but when it started getting to a point where he started really hurting my feelings I, wanted to hurt him back (Asha)

Other women responded to their partner’s violent behaviour by refusing to show them fear. Sonia recalls:

So he said, I mean, I will kill you. I said that time has passed when you could raise your hand to me, I have survived so many injuries that what do I have to fear from what you can do. (Sonia)

Only three women described incidents where they physically retaliated against their abuser. Meena describes how she was able to run to her father’s office building when she found her husband following her one day. The security guards and personnel from the office then started beating her husband:

He follow me, he say I will kill you, in a bus, then luckily I, dropped one place where is my father’s office? Then I, I can’t run very, properly, but I run...and went in my father’s office and he’s standing near to the outside, say he will be back. Then I told my father he is, following me...So my father say don’t worry, now he can’t, don’t, don’t worry about it, he can’t do anything. Then my father send the security guard he caught, he got the call the security guard in a dress like, not in the uniform. He sent the security, and now that security got called, he, he, all the people, bring him the office, then everybody, then I was so angry with him, then everybody start beating him he, everybody beat him with belt and shoes, and then he saying, don’t beat me, I feel hurt. I say, why! Why don’t beat you?! When you beat me, same thing I told you, don’t beat me I am feel hurt. Did you stop me! In this whole month! How you feel now you should realize, how you, how
your whole family beat me and there was no reason. I said, no people, beat him, beat him! (Meena)

In Zharguna’s case she responded to her fiancé’s attempts to threaten her by asking her family permission to carry a gun for self-defense. She recounts:

he was threatening on the phone, and then he calls once at my office and he said I’m coming to your office and I will, I said come, if you want to come okay, and then in those times I was putting a small gun, because I told my brother look, I’m keeping this and it was with the permission of my family. If this person there was no option for me, I told them, I will kill myself or him. I don’t know whatever the situation will be worse. But I was keeping this, because if I’m, if he came and he attacks me or something happen there, at least there should be something with me, who, and protect I self or if the situation become worst at least like, if he is going to kidnap me, it’s better to kill yourself, giving yourself to his hand and whatever he wants to do with me. (Zharguna)

When other tactics fail some women described contemplating or threatening suicide. A few of the women interviewed reported contemplating suicide, with only one woman reporting that she actually attempted it. However, Enza described an incident where she had become so frustrated that she threatened that she would commit suicide and leave a note with her husband’s name on it:

I said, I don’t know, what’s gonna happen, how people gonna take it, but I’m gonna do one thing with you, and that is, because otherwise I don’t know the laws, I said I’m gonna commit suicide, take a paper with me, and write your name on it. So that at least in the end you pay! For what, something like that in the very much, I was very angry and I told him that. (Enza)

Koss (1990) reports that there is consistent evidence for a strong relationship between a history of violent victimization and suicidal ideation or attempts at self-harm. Women do not usually contemplate this extreme strategy unless they feel that they have no other way to end their abuse (Abraham, 2000b).

Another form of resistance, used by two women, was having an affair. Belinda describes how she felt so empty in her relationship with her husband that when the opportunity presented itself, she began to see another man:
I was so empty, I was so empty and then I met somebody in my life. And, I met somebody in my life and that was the first man, I felt somebody is paying attention to me and I was married and, it was like, he was searching for love too right. I was forty years old and he was twenty-eight. (Belinda)

Zharguna resisted her marriage to a man who had hidden the fact that he was already married, and fought for thirteen years to have her engagement dissolved. She stated that she did this not only to maintain her own rights, but also to fight for the rights of the first wife, a woman she had never even met:

if you...be a second wife, it's not only, what I feel, like I said, okay I will be married with this person, I will get everything what I want to, because I am educated and that woman who is the first wife, she is not educated, but I was thinking...always about that woman, how she will feel about it, it's not like, if I'm going to be a second wife, definitely I will get what I want, second wife sometime get most of the things, she is younger and she's, but I was feeling like, I'm taking her rights...if she is not as educated, this is not her fault... (Zharguna)

One of the most overt strategies for resistance used by women was to leave their relationship. Eleven of the 13 women (85 %) interviewed took the courageous step of ultimately leaving their abusive relationship. Although several of these women required multiple attempts before they were finally able to leave, they were able to challenge the normative order that ensures that a woman remains in the relationship regardless of the situation (Abraham, 2000b). Through his review of the literature regarding the decision to leave an abusive relationship, Strube (1988) reported that a substantial number of women continue to live with their assailants or return after trying to seek help. He concluded that about half of the women who seek aid for intimate violence can be expected to return to their partners.

The stories of these women testify to the struggles they have endured. Belinda describes how she finally decided to leave:

He says it's none of your business, and I said (husband's name) I said I wanta know, I wanta know who's Maria, and if you don't tell me, I'm gonna leave you right, and he said to me, you can go. Honestly Sandy when he said to me you can go, that was, like somebody took something away from you, because...because I
thought that he loved me so much and, I, I couldn’t believe that I am, I wake up six o’clock in the morning and I go to sleep two o’clock at night, and I give him all the money, and everything, and then he can just say to me you can go? So, I never, ever discussed anything with him, and I, filed a separation (Belinda)

Other women decided to leave when the fear for their safety or the safety of their children became too compelling. For Meena, the eighth of March, International Women’s Day, provided her with the courage she needed to make her decision to leave:

That night when he beat me, that was the eighth March, I remember, be, eighth March because I, I married on the second February 1992, and this was the eighth March 1992, this is the 34 day of the my marriage day and, I, after this when I come out this relationship, I know this the eighth March is the women’s day…and what they did with me, this is the women day, I, I suffered. I feel like this, because at that time, I have no idea. Then, but God gave me then, that day I decided, I don’t want to stay in this house, I decided very strongly on that day, I said if I stay here, I will become mad or something is going with, bad with me. (Meena)

Many women must wait for a possible escape route before they can leave their relationship. In Palvsha’s case, a forced visit to the doctor provided her with the opportunity she needed:

When I went in to the doctor a thought came to my mind that now that I am out I am not going back home, no matter what happens. I would rather jump under a car. Even when I was so sick I did all the housework and my mother did not even consider that I was sick, and why was she behaving so. On top of that, the kind of things she said, one would rather die. I wished the earth would split open and swallow me, the way she talks about me. I went in for the checkup and my father in law and my husband sat outside in the waiting room, after the check up I left by the back door and approached a taxi and requested the driver to take me some place where somebody would keep me, or take me to a shelter. (Palvsha)

Unfortunately research indicates that women are often reluctant to seek aid for their abuse and often wait until the abuse becomes life threatening. Furthermore, women who are economically dependent on their partners are more likely to stay in the relationship
(Strube, 1988). For instance, if after leaving her abusive partner, a woman lacks adequate financial resources and must live in an unsafe dwelling, she may have only changed the type of danger she is in (Browne, 1993, p. 1081). This information is especially disturbing when combined with the knowledge that immigrant women who may be more isolated and dependent on their partners, may be more likely to stay in violent relationships because they see no alternative.

For two of the participants interviewed, simply leaving the relationship was not enough to ensure their safety. After threats and fear for their lives became overwhelming, both Meena and Zharguna were forced to leave their home country in an effort to seek asylum in Canada. Meena recalls her decision to come to Canada:

> he say, I, I spend my time in the court, but I will kill. Okay, go ahead, God is with me, I say like this, but, after then he has told me like this, I feel, like there is threat, my life is still not safe in India. Because he is in jail, he almost complete his jail, two years. Two years is more, and if you walk, if you are good in a jail they will release you early. So, I'm, I'm, I'm too much worried about this, then, now he want to take the revenge with me...I know he will kill me again and I, I don't want that so, I'm, due to this women organization...and my boss, who gave me the job, she also told me, Meena your life is, not safe when he is in a jail, try to leave there, and this, Canada, is a good country for the women, and you can try, apply for the refugee status, you can get. (Meena)

Seeking refugee status presents new problems for immigrant women. Not only are they fleeing a dangerous situation, but now they must deal with service providers who are suspicious and a system in which they have few if any rights. Zharguna recalls:

> continuously this person was like chasing me...So what, why I took this decision to come another country, because, although my family was supportive, in the end, I became a liability for them...When I landed, in here, I was with a lawyer. It was already arranged and then...they took my finger print, everything, and then they, the lady was there and she asked me that, because before that I had applied for Canadian Visa and they refused. And she says that you asked for visit visa, I said, yeah, I asked for visit visa, and you had no intention for visit visa, you were coming in for refugee claim, I said, yeah. So she said you lied, I said yes, and now
you are thinking you are eligible for refugee claim, I said yeah, I had no option.

(Zharguna)

Even when women have achieved some independence by leaving their abuser, the financial strain of immigration remains high. Meena described her desire to find a job in Canada, so that she is not dependent on the welfare she is currently receiving:

I want to do any kind of job, even the strength, but I’m not getting that job also. I like do job in a factory, but I’m not getting job. I, everywhere is a layoff, layoff, so, I’m on welfare, I don’t want to stay on welfare, because I’m heard that if you are on welfare you have problem, to get immigration, because the government think that you, you are always on them. I don’t want to stay on welfare, because, I want to work, I’m not coming here to spend my life on welfare. I want to spend my life, happily, and, I want to work hard, like I, did work hard in India. (Meena)

Many immigrant women described the difficulties they faced when trying to find work in Canada. Some of their job search difficulties were related to lack of fluency in English, and for many their education in South Asia was not recognized in Canada. In fact, one of the biggest difficulties related to finding a job identified by participants was that they could not find a job without Canadian experience, even when they held degrees and years of work experience abroad. Meena told me:

Now I’m trying to find the job. I’m not getting any job. Because I’m new in this country my English is not so good according, like the in Canadian, and I have no Canadian experience, so no one, nobody is giving me the job, and I did good job in my country...I have a degree and I have a good computer experience...I have lots of experience about India, but here that’s, nobody is thinking about this. They just want the resume, and then resume you have a just Canadian experience...I mention all my Indians experience, but...here, I’m like, I’m dumb, I’m new, I’m illiterate. (Meena)

The experience of having to start at the bottom of the ladder was especially difficult for women who were well qualified in their home country. Zharguna describes:

I was had a good job, I was getting handsome salary, I had respect, but here I have to struggle and I have to start from scratch again and when I go for a job, they
won’t even, oh you are like, you don’t have Canadian experience, when you guys will not give it us, how, how can we get, Canadian experience. (Zharguna)

Individuals with greater personal resources, more supportive responses from formal and informal sources of help, and less avoidant-coping styles are more likely to show psychological health. Increased education, income, and job skills may make it easier for women to gain access to nonmarital social roles that provide opportunities for developing relationships outside of the marital relationship (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983). Personal resources (i.e., education, employment, job skills) may improve adjustment by increasing confidence in the decision to leave the relationship. In terms of social support, both negative and positive responses of friends have an impact on adjustment. Women’s sense of self-esteem and mastery are reduced when their help-seeking attempts are met with discomfort and avoidance (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983). This is exacerbated in the South Asian culture by the stigma associated with revealing marital problems, and the ostracism faced if they leave the relationship.

6) Services

Given the range of experiences and consequences that women described during this investigation, it is not surprising that many women sought help from both informal support systems such as family and friends, and more formal assistance programs at various times during and/or after their relationships. A variety of services do exist for women victims of intimate violence. Many of these have been created by grass roots or advocacy movements (Browne, 1993). The reliance of these agencies on provincial funding and/or charitable donations means that services are often in short supply and lack a coordinated and effective response system (Koss, 1990). These social services include shelters, organizations serving women and/or South Asians in general, and law enforcement. Some women also accessed treatment services from counsellors, psychiatrists and psychologists.

Shelters are an important source of community aid and have been linked with less depression and more hopefulness for survivors of violence (McHugh et al., 1993). They provide physical protection and self-help groups so that women can share common experiences, receive encouragement, and have a basis of social comparison. Police services may be accessed by women during their experiences or others in the community
may call in the police when they become aware of conflictual circumstances. For many women, law enforcement services may be the only or the first of many services they use to survive their situation. Women’s organizations such as Association of Women of India in Canada, India Rainbow, and Women’s Health in Women’s Hands all of which are located in Toronto, Ontario may be accessed for a variety of reasons such as language training, health related information, immigration related information, and/or employment assistance. Participants also reported accessing treatment services such as therapy and counselling through the medical system, academic institutions, or independent mental health services. These are by no means an exhaustive listing of the services available to women, but do provide a summary of those identified by the participants of this study.

One of the big areas that participants identified as an obstacle they faced was a lack of knowledge or information regarding the laws that applied to them and the services that were available for them. Other researchers have concluded that this lack of familiarity with formal institutional support may prove to be a major obstacle for some South Asian women who might otherwise leave their violent relationships by increasing their dependence on their abuser (Abraham, 2000b; Krishnan et al., 1998). Factors that often influenced their experience included the limited time they had been in Canada, past experiences with agencies in their home country, language barriers, and isolation. Enza describes how a lack of knowledge about her legal rights made her more vulnerable when her husband kept her passport from her:

I think his, well, according to the law, the thing is, the way he had kept his passport he has no right to do it. Now I know he doesn’t if I just go and call them, rather he’ll be in trouble not me, he cannot keep my documents with him, but that time I did not know. He, his idea, whole idea was that he was trying to control me (Enza)

Lack of knowledge combined with language difficulties left Muskaan feeling quite helpless when her husband injured her brother-in-law and he lay badly bleeding on the kitchen floor:

He didn’t even bother like his brother’s bleeding lets do something and, I was coming from India. I didn’t know any English, other than yes or no. I didn’t know what to do, it was, that was only six weeks I was here. So I didn’t know any
system, how to, call even ambulance. So his, aunt, she didn’t speak English either, she didn’t know anything either and we’re telling the brother-in-law what to do and he’s on the floor with all the blood. (Muskaan)

Muskaan found that not only was going to a shelter a life changing experience in itself, but her anxiety was increased because she had no way of communicating her needs without fluency in English:

I was in the shelter for six weeks, pregnant, with no English and the shelter everybody spoke, English. So I couldn’t even eat the food, because I never ate any Canadian food before in my life and I be like crying all the like what’s happening like, I never expected my life to be like that. (Muskaan)

Shameem also described how she felt that many of the services she wanted to access required fluency in English:

You called us here, made our lives miserable, we do not know the language, we do not know anybody. Granted there are facilities in this country but that is only for those who know the language, who have some support behind them.

(Shameem)

Many immigrant women who are used to the services or lack thereof in their home countries may be ambivalent about accessing formal assistance programs in Canada. Shameem recalls:

I did not know that this is such a good country, and that here you get help. I just knew about my country, where nobody assists you, nobody gives you anything, with the exception of mother and father no body keeps for you. So when the police came and asked us where we would want to go we said we want to go to Pakistan. They then explained to us and told us that this is a very good country, that here we will get all kinds of help and then we started getting welfare.

(Shameem)

Research indicates that battered women often find it difficult to get help from traditional institutions such as the criminal justice, legal, and mental health systems (Mitchell & Holdon, 1983). Many if not most of the services that cater to women are seriously underfunded and strain to deal with the number of women and children who need services (Browne, 1993). Although the political environment in Canada is
favourable to South Asian women in that they can benefit from programs that serve the
special needs of women in general, their special needs regarding language and food may
exclude them from some resources (Agnew, 1990).

Positive experiences.

Eleven of the thirteen women who participated in this study accessed some type of
formal assistance program in Canada. Many of these women described positive
experiences with services that provided them with much needed support. Shameem
explains:

The good thing is that the laws here are good. People who have no support here
get financial help. People who cannot work government gives financial help to them. Helps sick people, provides all kind of facilities. We are very happy for coming here. All these facilities have given us a lot of support. Here my children have been able to make a life for themselves. Had we been back in Pakistan, I don’t how many different quarrels and arguments we would have gone through, and I what else would have happened. God willing we have been blessed here.
(Shameem)

For some women, it was the positive experiences they had with service providers that
helped to reaffirm some of the difficult decisions they had made in response to the
violence in their lives. Zharguna describes how reassuring it was to have a good
relationship with her caseworker after the difficult process of seeking asylum in Canada:
the case worker, she was very such a nice, young lady...I will remember her always...you come to a other country another city and if a person smile to you and listen to you, for me it was a big courage. Maybe she was doing my job with a good way, but for me it was a big, big support. Because I had already this experience with that lady rude and when, if she was not the same maybe I will get another opinion about all Canadian, but she was totally different from that first person. And I said, no, I am on a right place, these are women who listen me look, like they gave me important and they believed me what I am telling to her, and then she support, she work with my resume and she was so nice...I thought so, I am in good place, people were right I should come this place earlier. (Zharguna)
Muskaan recalls how shelter workers not only helped her deal with her abusive relationship, but also helped to empower her to become more independent and self-sufficient:

And the shelter, the lady, the legal worker from the shelter she was really, and they started, empowering me and go back to school. You got to do something they started convincing and so, started going to school, and then they will baby sit…

(Muskaan)

For those participants who had contact with the police, all but one woman reported positive, supportive experiences:

the police officers they were really nice, I had a really good support, they were willing to even go, they were saying that we’ll go to the court with you don’t be scared. He is, he can’t do anything to you, but like you’re scared because, even if you get restraining order, they just piece of paper they don’t mean anything…

(Muskaan)

Women also identified positive experiences with mental health treatment providers. Palvsha recalls how her experience with counsellors has helped her to become more independent and less afraid in her day-to-day life:

Through speaking with the counselors, I have learnt a lot and heard a lot. I can now do a lot. Formerly, in the first year and half, I could not go out of the door alone. In the past six months I have learnt a lot. I can now travel alone and I am not scared any more. I used to be so afraid that leave alone opening the door, I did not dare touch the door. I was so terrified. Now I am not afraid any more.

(Palvsha)

Negative experiences.

Unfortunately, not all of the experiences with service providers that women reported were positive and supportive. Several participants described ways in which service providers contributed to their feelings of isolation and fear. Zharguna’s account of her experience with an immigration agent provides an example of how women may be revictimized by service providers and feel that they must justify their attempts to escape violent situations and increase safety in their lives:
When I landed...they took my finger print, everything, and then they, the lady
was there and she asked me that, because before that I had applied for Canadian
Visa and they refused. And she says that you asked for visit visa, I said, yeah, I
asked for visit visa, and you had no intention for visit visa, you were coming in
for refugee claim, I said, yeah. So she said you lied, I said yes, and now you are
thinking you are eligible for refugee claim, I said yeah, I had no option. When
your life is in risk, you can't think about these rules, believe me you, at that time
you would don't even think about rules and law...So when I was not safe in my
own country so I had to come, I had no option, yes I lied, I admit I lied...I don't
blame her, but she was very rude at that time. (Zharguna)

Shelter services were one area of service provision that women felt could be
improved. Issues such as lack of language services and appropriate food were identified
as examples of service-related factors that contributed to a more negative experience for
South Asian women who were trying to access these services. Amar describes how her
experiences with rigid shelter hours and unsuitable food choices in one shelter forced her
to move to another shelter:

At the second Muslim shelter they closed at 9 o'clock in the morning and reopen
at 5 o'clock in the evening and I couldn't handle that because I had no place to go.
If I went to the library I had only one hour on the computer, nothing else. I told
her my situation and told her that I could not handle that shelter...and they cook
all the time with beef in everything and I don't like to eat beef and chicken in
everything. I told her that I only eat muffins and everything. But I every time
muffins and everything I see that they have expired date. I told them so many
times that it has expired and you have to bring new ones, and they say that's all
they have. (Amar)

Muskaan's experience with shelters was made more difficult by a lack of translation
services and insensitivity to food choices for women of different cultural groups. These
factors exacerbated her feelings of helplessness and displacement at finding herself in
need of these services in the first place:

I was in the shelter for six weeks, pregnant, with no English and the shelter
everybody spoke, English. So I couldn't even eat the food, because I never ate
any Canadian food before in my life and I be like crying all the like what’s happening like, I never expected my life to be like that and…then my son wasn’t used to that either like, he wouldn’t sleep and he wouldn’t do anything. I was, living in a shelter, never imagine like, I’ll live in a shelter. (Muskaan)

Although the majority of women found their interaction with law enforcement to be positive, several women did identify ways in which they felt a lack of support from the police. Both Asha and Palvsha reported that when they contacted the police to report harassing or abusive situations that did not involve physical violence, they were both told that the police could not help them unless they had been physically injured. Asha recalls her experience:

I called the cops and I, and I said look, I mean, it’s an ex-boyfriend, he’s threatening me, and he’s harassing me, he won’t stop calling is there anything I can do? Basically I got, well no we can’t do anything until there’s evidence of it or something. I’m like great so until I get hurt or something happens you can’t do anything? And, they’re like basically yeah. I’m like thanks a lot (Asha)

Asha’s experience is consistent with other research, which found that even when women were very frightened, the situation they were in was not usually perceived as dangerous. Police often have divergent perceptions of danger compared to battered women, such that there is a minimal effort to intervene in situations that appear stable (Ferraro, 1989).

Palvsha’s experience involved verbal and emotional abuse by her in-laws, but since they had not been physically violent with her, she was told that the police could not intervene:

Then I stayed at this centre and they asked me to tell the police everything. Police taped the conversation I had with them and them one week later they came and informed me that they could not charge my in-laws since they have not hit me. I told the police that they have been so cruel to me that it has not any less than beating. The police did not agree and said that till they beat me they could not do anything…(Palvsha)

Other women reported how incidents with the police influenced their sense of helplessness and mistrust. Enza recounts how the police refused to allow her to get her belongings when they responded to a neighbour’s call and wanted her to leave her home for safety reasons. This decision by the police gave Enza’s husband the opportunity to
continue his controlling behaviour by going through her belongings and confiscating property he knew was important to her:

I did not even trust the cops, because two days before that it had happened the cops were there, and I told them I said, give me ten minutes, let me pack my things. I don’t have a suitcase, he’s not ready to give it to me, and I don’t want to come back here, give me ten minutes let me go to the mall...Let me bring the suitcase, put the things in the bag, and then I’ll go, they said no, we cannot wait, and you cannot be here. (Enza)

Ferraro’s (1989) review of the literature indicates that police are often women’s first resort in response to battering. However, they may not arrest men who battered their wives, even when women were in serious danger and asked officers to make an arrest (Ferraro, 1989). Mandatory arrest policies may give police more power to arrest, and limit the discretion of police officers to dismiss battering. These polices may also limit discretion of complainants in that they ignore the wishes of the woman involved (Ferraro, 1989).

Experiences with mental health treatment services were another area that appeared to be relatively positive for most women, but which others reported offered little relief from their distress. Asha describes her experience of seeing a counsellor through her university-counselling centre when the stress of her relationship began to affect her school performance:

I just felt that, after that one session, there was no invitation to come back and to continue. That’s how I felt, in both situations, I went, I talked about it, and there was no, comfort or caring, or, reason to come back...there was no connection and there wasn’t, there wasn’t that, like you want to come back and talk more, and, and, try to figure things out. It was more like okay, you’re left to yourself, and that’s how I felt in both situations. I just felt, like I came out of there and hadn’t, accomplished anything and that, it wasn’t, that it wasn’t taken seriously. In both situations I wasn’t taken seriously enough for me, for them to say okay well I want you to come back or I think we should discuss this more or nothing like that... (Asha)
Hearing the reports of this negative and unsupportive interactions with formal assistance programs is especially disheartening as these are the very services that are meant to provide support to women who have already suffered in so many ways.

**Suggestions for improvement.**

Given their exposure to services that are supposed to be in place to help women in their situation, participants were asked to provide suggestions for improvement. Enza suggests that in her case an overview of the services available to her and instructions on what she needed to do would have helped. She explains:

I wanted them at least, to tell me take from every point of view, and tell me and explain it to me explain in detail like, you are at this point here, you’re, you can stay here, for this much of time, or it can be extended up to this much of time. You can this kind of help, financially you can get this much of help. We can try and give you, as much, or, emotional support, but obviously that’s me, I have to go through that not them and for future what all I can do, how to go about it, what can be done... (Enza)

Muskaan described how she found that her husband was allowed to plea bargain or plead guilty to a lesser charge, such that he was able to get by with little consequence to his behaviour. Although she acknowledges that the system is changing, she suggests that the laws need to be modified so that men are held accountable for their actions:

now they’re taking it more seriously I’ve seen cases they’re taking it more seriously now because of what’s happening like in a pattern, but still I think the laws need to be a lot more modified and stuff because there are so many loop holes still in there, they can get away with. Like if you plead guilty they always drop the, bigger charge (Muskaan)

Zharguna suggested the need for more practical help in terms of looking for employment. She described finding little support even after all of the years that she had spent struggling to get to a better place. She stated:

What I lost? I lost my youth period, I lost my parent, I lost my, like birthplace, even my country, and now I’m in this country. I can’t see any support (crying)... So, like, what I’m saying, I’m not saying that okay, people do should money us, give us money, okay, being a victim, close organization who are
working for women, they should support me, they should give me, this will be a big, at that time, like this will be a big support for me, to find, they should help me for finding a job. Or offer me a job, if I’m not able to, that job, this is another person, but a small job. I had like master in history and I had ten-year experience... (Zharguna)

Women were also asked about practical suggestions that might improve the services offered by women’s shelters. Amar suggested that basic needs such as food should be provided as she had found that food options were limited for people with certain dietary needs:

in the shelter I want to say that if they have a good food, if the person is vegetarian, they have to be provided with food or anything else and the food not to be expired. (Amar)

Muskaan suggested better translation services or alternative communication options, as language had played a large role in the barriers she perceived:

I was the only Indian there and, they were mentioning they hadn’t had Indian like lady. So, the services are there but, demand is too much there too, if they could get the interpreters, they weren’t available that time, or maybe they weren’t able to access for some reason, because language is a big barrier like you can’t tell your story and, either you’re relying on other people whatever they will tell communicate, or not. (Muskaan)

Participants were also able to offer suggestions regarding mental health treatment with South Asian women. Muskaan pointed out that a more directive approach to therapy might prove helpful for many women as they may be overwhelmed with the situation they are in:

depending on each client some people, women have gone through they might be a little bit more stronger, so you might not have to direct them, but some are so weak you might have to direct them and, in sometimes directing, even, giving them two option to decide and making them learn how to decide, because they don’t know how to decide for themselves they never decided. (Muskaan)
This is especially important for South Asian women who have a lack of decision-making experience, and may find it difficult to be responsible for their own decisions after seeking help.

7) How the lives of these women have changed

Towards the end of each interview, participants were asked to identify whether they had experienced any changes to their spirit, or whether they could identify any positive effects of their experiences. Most of the women were able to report something positive, with the two most common changes being their feeling of increased strength and independence.

I'm stronger now.

Many women reported their sense of feeling stronger after having lived through their experiences. Asha describes how she feels stronger and more able to identify what she needs in an intimate partnership:

I did learn a lot from that relationship in terms of just being strong, about my health, and not letting people take advantage of me, which I'm very vulnerable to, because I'm too nice. (she chuckles). And, not only that but, knowing that I deserved better than that and getting out of that relationship, knowing that, what, I, I'm not gonna be happy in a relationship until I find someone that appreciates me, for who I am, and what I do and, takes me as I am and, I think it just made me a stronger person overall...I've also made myself aware, more of my feelings because of holding them in for so long before that now if I feel something I show it, and I'm more aware of that. (Asha)

Meena acknowledges her newfound strength despite her traditional natal family:

I change myself. I'm the, I'm like the from the family who is the fully cultured, but I changed me. I do not know from where I get the strength. Maybe from the eighth March women's (she laughs and then we both laugh) women's day I get the strength... (Meena)

Belinda also identifies herself as a much stronger person now:

I'm a very strong person now, and, I have lots of friends, even though, they're married, they have children, right they have same problems as me. So, I find sometimes, that I am more luckier than them, that I have a headache but, it's just
me, and I can deal with it instead of, still living in a relationship and getting hurt every day and try to work and work... (Belinda)

Muskaan’s response to the question of what has changed is very powerful. She indicates that she feels stronger, but more importantly she has discovered herself as a separate person with her own identity. She contrasts this new discovery with the life she might have led if her abuse had not become life threatening:

it did brought some changes probably in a good way, specially I became more stronger than after trust started trusting God and myself. It has more to do with, the support I got from other counsellors, I didn’t know the meaning of who I am, do I even exist. So, it’s just you never knew that you are a person too so, you got to know you are a human being too and, you can do what other people are doing so...like I never knew like I exist to like is there anybody like just Muskaan there but now I know that there is this person...where’s my happiness doesn’t this has my happiness, does this include me like so it gave the, got a person in me. That I do exist like there, like God has send me on this earth, it’s my life and, I have to live this life myself (she chuckles). It probably had brought some good things like even if, sometimes I think like maybe if he hadn’t hit me like second time he came back if he had became probably okay, probably the most what could I have done is like, just, go work come back give him the money just, probably lived under his control rest of my life and not known myself that I exist who had probably had two or three more kids and just that’s it but, now because of his abuse I got to know myself. So I can live my life now I don’t have to drag my life. (Muskaan)

I’m more independent.

Many participants identified the feeling of independence as an important outcome of their experience. The lack of autonomy encouraged by their parents was often placed in stark contrast to the independence that women had to exert in order to ensure their safety and that of their loved ones.

Like before when I was young and single, I had good a life, right, and after marriage I have very bad life. Now again I am single, now I feel so good. I can do whatever I want. (Amar)
Meena describes her newfound independence and the process by which she now makes her own decisions:

before my marriage, I was a totally doing the what just my family saying, which is, from my society, but when this happened with me, I was totally changed, my life is totally changed. I, I did whatever I want, I listen everybody, but I think, I decided what I want to do. (Meena)

Muskaan’s comment underlines the journey that many women identify, that at one time they might have been obligated to and answerable to others, but now they are trying to live their lives for their own happiness:

sometimes thinks maybe my parents had right over me but, even their right is gone now because, of what they were. They had given my life once away, now it’s God given life to me so I’m answerable to God only not to anyone else. So I’ll decide now like it’s my life, I have a seven-year-old it’s not like, I have nothing. So I’ll decide it not them… (Muskaan)

Parenting own children differently.

Another area of change that many participants identified was their ideas about parenting their own children. Some of these women already had children while others were thinking about the children they hoped to have in the future. Children appear to be an important factor in these South Asian women’s lives. Participants with children described how important their children were to them and the role their children have played in their strategies for coping and thoughts about the future:

The important thing in my life? My kids. I guess my kids. I can give up my house, I can give up my husband, and, even we’ve talked about this, even the kids. Like what if you and dad split? Well, we’ll just go into a smaller place and that’s it, we’ll do things on our own, ‘cause I’m used to doing things on my own. (Bubbly)

Asha describes the kinds of values she would like to pass on to her daughter, values that her own parents instilled in her:

I wouldn’t try to change her feelings, about anything, but I would try to, instill all the values that my parents, instilled in me, about being strong, and being independent, and making sure that she understand, understands that, no one
should be able to take advantage of her and, and that if she felt like that at any
point, then, this is not the relationship to be in, and to never be taken granted for
and to be strong about what she believes in. I would just make sure that she has
those values and is strong about those values, and never gets into a situation
where she feels that she's, being taken advantage of, or being put down in any
way. (Asha)

Bubbly contrasts her own experiences of being parented with what she would like to give
her children:

what my mom was doing was wrong 'cause it's not right, like, it's not fair, like
everybody should be helping out, we're, all of us make the mess so we should all
clean it up so that's what I'm telling my kids now, that it's your responsibility,
you guys all help out. If you made the mess there shouldn't have to be, a border,
where the boys do one thing and the girls do another, it's not right, like it
shouldn't be like that. So I'm trying to make them equal. Like when they grow up,
if when (eldest son) grows up, I don't want him to tell his wife, oh you have to do
this, and, and I'm just going to do this. Like they both have to share, they both
have to work their relationship out, otherwise it's going to be a lot of differences.
Especially the way we're brought up, Canadian and Indian and I want my kids to
still have a bit of Indian culture in them, so they can enjoy it, when they go out
with our own people. (Bubbly)

Sonia's message to her children reinforces the importance of living a life that pleases
them, rather than living a life for the sake of appearances:

I have had an arranged marriage for my family's sake and I have done this, but I
won't force my daughters to do this...I'm not saying that men are bad, that all
men are like this, no, this is wrong. Perhaps there are good ones, because many
people stay together so they must be good. Some people stay for appearances, in
our society, because we can't leave our husbands, what will people say, those
people are stupid. This life has been given to us, do you understand, these people
did not give it. If we die hungry, if we don't have any food, no one will come and
ask you if you need food, this time we have to endure. So for the sake of people,
why should we ruin our life our children’s life. We get this life only one time.
(Sonia)
Shameem emphasizes the importance of education for her children and the value of working hard:

I tell the children, that look I was not an educated person and I faced a lot of difficulties. Now that you have come to this country, this is a very good country. Live here, study, obtain good degrees, and get good jobs, so that you are not dependent on anybody. Since when you don’t study that person is completely useless. Remember when I left that place, I did not have even a penny, I did not know anything. So remember that you don’t know about kismet, you don’t know about your destiny, what has been pre-writ. Therefore, you study, be good, do your jobs and be self-sufficient. (Shameem)

Most women noted that they would parent their children somewhat differently than they had been parented. For many this meant more egalitarian gender role socialization for their sons and their daughters. This is one area where the dynamic nature of culture is illustrated by these women’s narratives. The changes they would like in their parenting style emphasize a changing attitude toward culturally prescribed gender-related norms. This provides support for the notion that gender roles for South Asian women do not exist in a static cultural code, but are constructed and reconstructed in the context of work, family, and social relationships (Agnew, 1990). Although it is difficult to know whether these women will actually change their parenting behaviour, it is clear that in addition to changes in their levels of independence, these women are also indicating changes in their beliefs regarding socializing their own children.

I don’t have faith in a man.

When asked about their thoughts regarding marrying again, women responded in many different ways. For some women, the ideal of marriage was one that they still wanted to experience, despite the experiences they had endured. Meena’s desire for children has left remarriage an option for her, but her experiences have affected her ability to put faith in men:

I want to marriage again, because I want, children, I want kids, I want a baby, I want to become mother. But when I think all these thing in my mind, this give
me, depression, because I, I'm very, this is bad, very bad experience with me. I'm thinking that all the man is like this. I don't faith on a man. I, I think like I'm talking with a man, then, then they are very good, but, during this eight year when I did the counselling with abused women, I found this all the man is bad. Even though they are very good in the society and the but you do not know... (Meena)

Other women also described this loss of trust in men and how this has contributed to fears regarding getting married in the future. Belinda goes so far as to say that she is afraid to marry again given her experiences:

How I envision my future? I vision my future that, I'm gonna get old on my own and, I'm not afraid to die. I don't have, any desires... I can, have a relationship, but, there's not gonna be anything like that that, I'm afraid, to be committed to anybody, I'm afraid to marry again. I don't want to get married again, and, I don't care if something happened to me. I've lived my life. (Belinda)

Zharguna also describes her loss of trust in men:

due to these experience I can't trust men. When I see, saw the other man, so I, I, for me it's not easy, but, I think if I found a right person, a nice guy. I feel it's natural... emotionally, like I think they destroy all my good feeling about men.

Although there were also men who supported me, my father, my brother, but? It affect me, I said, in the beginning I hate mans, especially in that relation, husband and wife relation... what women are doing all the time, they are compromising, they have to cook for them, they have to help their children to grown up, and all these are women, men are doing nothing. (Zharguna)

A few participants also identified concern for their children as an issue when thinking about marrying in the future. Fari reported her fear that no one would be a good father to her son, given that his own father could not be there for him:

I want to get married, I need a man in my life, I want to get relaxed, specially when I have been through this malignant tumour but because of my son. No, I, I, I'm dead sure nobody can be his father no. If his real father is not taking care, who can be his father, no. Even if somebody promises, personally maybe, I am, I am saying wrong, but I can't believe anyway, no. And I, I'm, I'm, I'm not stamping it dead, but most probably I will never get married, just because of my
son. I don’t, I know, because I can’t neglect him, I took this decision because of him. Now if I will get married, it means again I’m ignoring, no way, this is, he is my first and last priority...(Fari)

Sonia’s concern for her daughters prevents her from pursuing another relationship:

Because my thinking is so, people say that love does happen no, that doesn’t happen, because the world doesn’t run on love. You have to think about a lot of things and I am no longer a young girl that I should fall in love and get married. With me are two lives, which are my daughters and I have to think about their future first. Today, if I get in any relation with a man, my daughters today will watch me, and they will do the same thing. For this reason I don’t want to start the steps that will bring them to the point that they think it is okay to have relationships with men. Because they can bring this in front of me as well. That mom what did you do? That I don’t want to bring upon my family. (Sonia)

For Shameem, the thought of marrying again is something that she does not believe in:

I have children I have two sons and two daughters. Marriage happens only once. To marry again and again is not a nice thing. I have not even ever dreamed that I would marry again. I just pray to God that he bestows good health to the children and make them successful. That’s it, I have never even, ever thought of getting married. (Shameem)

Looking back on relationship.

The women who shared their stories are now at various points in their lives. Eleven of the participants are no longer in the relationships they described, while two remain married. Looking back at their journey most of these women described the things they have learned and the changes they have experienced, and although many are in a happier safer place, their comments are somewhat bittersweet at the thought of what they have lost through the battles they have endured. Zharguna describes her sense of regret over all that she feels she has lost during her struggles:

sometime I regret, why I did all this, believe me, sometime I regret. Like I did the struggle all for the, I create problem from myself, I created problem for my family. I lost like my parent was so stress all these period and they died, my father
died, what I got? Still, till now, I didn’t get any rights...If I’m successful, it’s mean the women, they can, the voices will come... (Zharguna)

Thoughts of retribution and wondering what her life might have been like if she had stayed in school, challenged her husband about the abuse, or told her father-in-law often cross Muskaan’s mind as she looks back upon her life:

my brother-in-laws they’ll ask me what do you want, sometimes you really, I really felt like saying, go kill that him, kill that man who did this to me, but then you, re-think, what’s the difference then like God’s watching, over everybody...Even like sometimes I get the urge like, he ruined my this life when I think, if it this hadn’t happened where I could be, I could have finished my degree and I could have been working like had a good job, this and that maybe happily married, but then you get upset like it’s eight years of life you’re gone like...But at least now I can make, decisions about myself, so, just try to look it in that way. It becomes depressing even now sometimes get upset even with my parents I got upset. Sometimes I really feel like telling them, it’s because of you I’m, this happened to me but, then is think, what good it’s gonna do? (Muskaan)

Bubbly and Simran are still in their abusive relationships and for them the fear continues. Bubbly describes her thoughts of leaving her husband and how much happier her life would be, however, her fear that he will hurt someone compels her to stay in the relationship:

if I could, I, I would divorce, I would just leave with the kids and go, leave the house, I don’t care I’ll start from scratch, but I know he’s going to come after me, he’s gonna do something, I know it. And if I go to my family, he’s going to hurt them, if I go to his family he’s gonna hurt them...I know it, I know that’s what he’s going to do. (deep breath) And I, and I know there’s, (short pause) like, I don’t love him anymore, what I mean, like I used to, I mean, I, I must hate him now, ‘cause everything I look at him I know there’s the (sharp in-drawn breath) anger in him, and, and he thinks that I have, I should love him, ‘cause he’s sorry that he’s done all those things to me, but I can’t love him, the way I used to love him, the first day that I met him. I can’t. (long pause) I mean I know if I left, I wouldn’t, I would be fine, I’d be much happier. (Bubbly)
When initially asked if anything positive had come out of the relationship they were describing, many women had to take a minute to consider a seemingly oxymoronic question. However, most of the participants were able to identify strength and independence as positive changes within their lives that have enabled them to become self-sufficient and autonomous in terms of meeting their own needs and the needs of their children. For many women, education either in an academic context or as knowledge gained through counselling and work with agencies, has played a powerful role in their process of change, often helping to provide them with a sense of accomplishment and independence.

The interviews themselves appeared to be a therapeutic and empowering experience for women as many of the participants mentioned how much they appreciated a safe forum to share their experiences. Participants also wanted to help other women by disclosing their own stories, so that others could learn from them. It is also important to note that the focus of this study was on the experience of violence and thus a lot of what emerged was viewed within this context, even though the women’s lives involved a larger view of identity, experience, resistance, and other issues.

Prior to concluding the interviews, all the participants were asked if they would like to convey a message to other women who might be in their position or to larger society. Their messages make up the final section of the results. It was my hope that women be given a voice through this study. Thus women’s messages seem to be a fitting final note in describing their stories:

**Amar**

I have advice that if a lady comes through like my situation. There is a lot of people they can help her, like I won’t have anybody to help me but I found there is so many people they can help me. Lady can’t say that she is alone there is a lot of people (Amar)

**Asha**

anyone who has been through something like this, needs to put some closure to it somehow, because I know how it’s affected me, and, if I had a better way of dealing with it, the way, the way things ended. If I had a better way of, of putting
that to an end, I think I would be better off now and I think it would be, a little more helpful for me to, go ahead and be open in my new relationship…(Asha)

**Belinda**

I would have never gotten married, so young. To me, when you get married at the age of sixteen you’re still a baby. And nobody should be, nobody should be allowed, to be abused, and, I think, when women go through, mental abuse, and physical abuse, they get so used to, getting that, they’re afraid, they are threatened and, they should, come out with it, they should talk to their friends. They should not be afraid to explore themself to other people, and let them know how they feel, because there is a help, there is help. (Belinda)

I was brought up like, man is everything, you do, you please the man, and you do everything for a man and a man loves you. But what I learned to, myself about myself, now, is that, you have to love yourself, to let somebody love you. If you can’t love yourself, you have to love yourself first, to go out and love somebody. (Belinda)

**Enza**

instead of just being with him only, in his circle, one should always try to maintain one’s own circle try to make some. So that, the more the people, the more you come in contact, the more you aware. (Enza)

I would just say that, whatever is, there’s nothing wrong in anything. Some so many times I just kept to myself, oh, like if I talk to somebody what would they think. Like we husband and wife are not getting along woah kya sochayga, woah kya sochayga, yay qua kayahga, woah istra say quay hoga, kistra say karungee may [what will they think, what will they think, what will happen, like this what will happen, how will I do it] one should not think like that. The thing is that life it is, whatever it is, I mean, talk to somebody…instead of just crying and sitting over there, I feel that one should open one’s mind, I know it’s very hard, I went through that, but the thing is that one should see it more, like in a different angle. Like why do you leave home, he should be leaving…(Enza)
Fari

shouldn’t make oversees marriages because they are, thinking differently, and we are thinking differently no oversees marriages. (Fari)

I have only one sister or if I would be have daughter. No, give, engage to make engagement and give it at least six months at least. See that be with that person as, as much as you can, and give it at least six months, because and make engagement don’t make Nikka for Muslim ladies especially, because then you can break it easily... And second thing don’t marry a person who’s not matched with you. I mean it was bluffed with us, but even if, if, a professional should marry a profession... (Fari)

Meena

So first thing that, they should give that, some independence, to women. Like she can do anything, if she is independent, like if they gave me the independence, maybe I can take the strong step before this happen with me. When they, when he gave me the first time beating, I can stop them, but I never stop him, and they beat me, they beat me, because due to my culture. I never learn to say no. So, first thing is that that they should our culture slowly, slowly. That women should become strong (Meena)

Shameem

what I would like to tell her is that if you are an educated person, study more so that you can be successful in this country. In this country, study, be successful so that if you have any problems you can face them easily. I have passed through very tough times. I did not know the language, I did not about education. I had a lot of problems. (Shameem)

Sonia

The very first thing is, that for those whose husbands have left them, or, they cry, or they are like this. If they were to sit with me one time, then I would wash their brain. That you are, men are beneath you, you are not beneath men. You give the food, you take care of the children, you clean the house, you work outside, that you are better than a man, a man is beneath you, men only work outside, that’s all.
Can they take care of the children, can they clean the house? Can they give birth to children? They can’t do anything, women are bigger, men are below. Only a woman can raise a man, a man is nothing else, what is a man? The one above has given the same things so, I’m saying that, if there is a woman who is in pain because her husband has left her, for fifteen days I also was sick, I stayed in the hospital, it was a big shock, a big shock. But if I had found someone to explain this to me, that maybe instead of the fifteen days I was sick, I would have only been for two days or three days, but there was no one to explain this to me (Sonia)

Zharguna

These all are experiences, like my story sharing with you, and sharing what women needs, one reason was there that people should know. Women here, working here, they should know what, what, what we were facing in our own country and maybe then, they realize they are much better. So one reason was with it, being a, what, what’s going on in this tribal area and situation in Afghanistan which will be much worse. You can, like, being educated family or support of women, my situation is that, there are worse cases than me, so one reason was, this like sharing with you was like, at the beginning I said, that if it help a women or it help your study because you are doing your study for a good cause…

Commentary

Consistent with a feminist political gender analysis, which reframes the problem of intimate violence against women as “one of misuse of power by men who have been socialized into believing they have the right to control the women in their lives, even through violent means” (Walker, 1989, p. 695), this investigation shows that the secondary status of women within South Asian patriarchal family hierarchies sets the stage for many of the issues that women identified as meaningful in terms of their experiences of violence. A woman’s subordinate position, regardless of culture, sets up a situation where others are given the rights and responsibilities over a woman’s life. However, a focus on ethnicity as advocated by the ethnogender approach, takes this analysis one step further and reveals certain factors that are specific to the South Asian cultural context of violence against women. One such factor is that within the South
Asian context, marriage is one route, perhaps the first step in the only route, through which women obtain value. Within this cultural group, the existence of rigid gender role norms and prohibitions regarding sexuality gives women the message that their day to day behaviour must be dictated by and for the needs of others. Through this behaviour, especially in terms of marriage, they will have the opportunity for a happy life. Even in the personal sphere, sexual identity is inhibited and women are expected to be the gatekeepers of the community honour. So even though women are given the responsibility of representing the South Asian community, they are allowed little if any decision making power over their own lives.

The assumption, within the South Asian context, is that women are less able to make important life decisions for themselves, with the decision of who and when to marry being the most important one. When people who are more wise and powerful make these decisions, women are given little choice but to go along with them. In situations where these decisions are well researched and both families have been honest about their needs and expectations, the hope is for a happy life. However, for many women within the South Asian context, this process may not have the promised happy ending. In fact, most of the community’s responsibility appears to be focused on raising the girl and getting her to her wedding day, at which time the responsibility for her life is handed over by her parents to her in-laws and husband, who in most cases are virtual strangers to her.

A woman’s treatment by the strangers in her “real” family is further complicated by the fact that her female in-laws are also bound within their own power struggle to rise through the family hierarchy based on their relationship to males and lower status females. Fernandez (1997) goes so far as to say “as a young daughter-in-law, a woman has no power within the family; she is everyone’s slave. It is only in her old age, when her sons have grown, that she finally achieves power and respect” (Fernandez, 1997, p. 451). This is an especially sad situation as norms for daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law are quite different and yet women often play both roles. Specifically, daughters-in-law may be mistreated when they are first married and then later go on to become mothers-in-law who abuse their own daughters-in-law. Perhaps attending to this contradictory situation creates a great deal of cognitive dissonance and thus this reality is ignored.
Who then is responsible for the health and welfare of the woman, and what ensures that the woman’s needs will be considered within this group oriented system? This situation obviously leaves lower status women, usually the daughters-in-law in a family, very vulnerable. However, as South Asian women are encouraged to maintain their relationships at all costs, and are taught that suffering and sacrifice are virtues they will be rewarded for in their next life, their struggles may remain silent. The invisibility of violence is maintained by a presentation of the relationship as harmonious, especially within the immigrant context, thus supporting men’s public faces (Lempert, 1996).

When women do encounter situations that are dangerous and overwhelming (i.e., abuse at the hands of those who are supposed to protect and love them), cultural norms in this community which stigmatize women who are not married or who leave their marriages provides additional pressure to keep their suffering a secret. Furthermore, the lack of training in decision making, and self-sufficiency, within a system that makes women’s rights unimportant, leaves many women with few options but to endure their oppressive situation.

Part of the implicit contract that states that a woman will allow other more wise people to direct her life is that her needs will be taken care of. However, family members and people in the community also live within this social system that defines rigid norms for behavioural conduct. Several of the women interviewed identified the lack of support they received from people within their family and community because of fear for their own safety, and/or fear that theirs or the community’s reputation would be tarnished.

Therefore, it appears that these South Asian women are being sold a bill of goods from birth that implicitly states that women are less important than men, but explicitly identifies women as so integral to maintaining the family’s honour that she must be protected, even from herself, at all costs. The collectivist system that promotes group needs and involves an often-large extended family network is expected to protect and serve those women that hold to the cultural standards of family unity. Women who do not adhere to cultural standards are blamed, stigmatized, and as Belinda put it made to feel like outcasts.

The image of the model minority further ensures the invisibility of violence as it obscures and denies the diversity found within immigrant communities, and encourages
more successful members of the community to dismiss those who do not fit the model. Those people who do not succeed according to the expectations of the greater community experience a sense of shame, deficiency and failure or have to cover up failures with events that reinforce a successful collective identity and community image (Abraham, 2000b). Within the immigrant context, the added stresses of racism, financial instability, and lack of extended family support mean that people who could potentially help women may avoid looking at their own community self-critically. Portraying the community in a positive way may become so important for members of immigrant groups that they may oppress some segments, including women, by, for example, denying the violence perpetrated against them. The social control of intimate violence also marks an intrusion into the private realm of the family, an arena controlled by "domestic patriarchy," another factor that maintains the invisibility of intimate violence (Abraham, 2000b, p. 14).

South Asian immigrants may also believe that the lack of overt discrimination against women in the West as compared to many South Asian countries (e.g., India) has led to a change in family and social structure that has eliminated domestic violence from their community. These community members may be skeptical about women’s organizations that identify violence against women as a problem (Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996). Class differences among South Asians may also influence attitudes toward violence. Just as many other cultural groups do, Indians associate wife abuse with lower classes, poor educational level, economic impoverishment, and women’s lack of autonomy. The image of South Asians in the West as highly educated and skilled may preclude the notion that intimate partner violence is a problem among members of this group. However, the reality illustrated in this study and others strongly contradicts these assumptions (Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996).

The reality of women’s lived experiences reveals the contradiction apparent between the messages that women are given and the reality these thirteen women have reported. So then what happens to women who are trained to have little autonomy when the system they are taught to rely on proves to be ineffective? The participants in this investigation confirm that women in intimate violent relationships experience both immediate and chronic consequences to their emotional and physical health. Immigration and acculturation factors and a woman’s interactions with formal assistance programs may
also influence the impact of these consequences. Given that there are thousands of women affected by violence every year, the experiences described in this paper provide us with critical information regarding the needs of women, and how they assess the services they accessed. This information provides a necessary first step in determining what to maintain and how to improve programs that serve immigrant women who are survivors of intimate violence.

This study also supports previous literature which has revealed that factors such as immigration status, language barriers, lack of knowledge about services and agencies, social and cultural barriers, fear and isolation, and concerns regarding safety influence the reactions women have to intimate violence, and the degree to which they use services (Krishnan et al., 1998). The participants in this study illustrate the need women have for support from the larger system that surrounds them, including supportive in-laws and parents, police who take into account cultural factors such as language, safe accessible places to go for refuge, and mental health services that are responsive.

A lack of understanding about the cultural and social factors that contribute to intimate violence, difficulties in reaching out to victims, and women’s continued silence and reluctance to seek help all contribute to perpetuating intimate violence in South Asian communities (Krishnan et al., 1998). Many participants described how the lack of cultural sensitivity, and knowledge about the issues immigrant women face contributed to their negative experiences with service institutions. Education and training in cultural sensitivity for service providers is important so that they are exposed to issues that are unique to immigrant women. This may help women feel more comfortable and more likely to use the services (Huisman, 1996). For instance, factors such as access to translation services, appropriate food, geographic accessibility, and tenancy length are factors that participants identified as lacking in their experience.

Mental health professionals also need to be sensitized to the fact that in many Eastern cultures counselling and therapy are often associated with severe mental illness. The practice of seeking professional help for everyday problems is minimal as this role is usually filled by elders in the community (Ramisetty-Mikler, 1993). Communication styles of different cultural groups may also result in complaints that may conceal psychological difficulties, such as citing somatic complaints, unemployment or money
problems instead of emotional difficulties (Winter & Young, 1998). Thus routine
screening for a history of violence is especially important as issues of privacy,
confidentiality, and safety for women may make it more difficult for them to
spontaneously reveal a history of intimate trauma. As many women are dependent on
spouses or family members for transportation and/or translation services, these questions
regarding physical or sexual violence should not be asked in the presence of potential
perpetrators including extended family members (Browne, 1993). Even if women do not
disclose violence, explanations about the potential for physical and sexual assault, their
sequelae, that these types of incidents are inappropriate and illegal, and that resources
exist for people experiencing these assaults should accompany assessments for
victimization (Browne, 1993).

The literature on violence against women also reveals the importance of safety
planning with survivors of intimate violence whether or not these women are separated
from their abusive partners. Even after separation, survivors are at risk of recontact and
reassault. Women may also experience difficulty assessing current relationships for
safety or may need assistance in enhancing their personal safety (Browne, 1993).

Counselling and therapy have developed in response to the majority cultures needs,
thus sensitivity to aspects of the South Asian culture are required when working with
members of this community (Segal, 1991). Ramisetty-Mikler (1993) states that
counsellors working with South Asians need to recognize and respect thinking and
attitudes that are culturally specific. Counsellors also need to determine where their
immigrant clients are within the acculturation process so that cultural confusion, conflict
and coping can be better dealt with. For instance, treatment that emphasizes family
cooperation and allows for flexibility in making decisions without jeopardizing family
structure may be more in line with South Asian cultural values. Being aware of the
individual’s role in the family and helping them in defining their wants and needs in
harmony with the family may help individuals to comply with the needs of the family
while also achieving personal goals (Ramisetty-Mikler, 1993).

However, Walker (1995) notes that family systems therapy is not recommended as an
initial form of treatment with victims of violence due to the underlying inequality of
power. Even in cases where violence has not escalated to lethal levels, people should not
be seen together, as battered women may be unable to perceive the neutrality necessary in family therapy. This means that when the therapist reflects the batterer’s position, the therapeutic alliance with the victim may be damaged (Walker, 1995). Furthermore, fear of retribution for exposing secrets may prevent women from honestly participating in the therapy. Walker (1995) suggests that family therapy may not be appropriate until after the batterer completes an offender treatment program. It is also important to note that battered women are able to relax and build a trusting relationship with a therapist who advocates for them. Thus the emphasis in family therapy of looking at each person’s perspective in the system at different times does not offer a setting that is particularly conducive to healing from trauma. Modifications to family systems therapy using a feminist approach that acknowledges power differences between men and women and uses as many therapists as necessary for participant advocacy may be more successful than traditional family therapy (Walker, 1989).

Koss (1990) notes that in the majority of treatment-related studies for violence victimization, the duration of therapy is quite brief (4 to 10 sessions). Brief therapy may be appropriate for relatively uncomplicated experiences of victimization for women who were previously functioning well, but for women who are chronically victimized, a greater number of sessions over a longer period of time may be necessary (Koss, 1990).

Several participants identified the need for a more directive approach when treating South Asian women given their lack of autonomy and exposure to decision making. Thus a structured directive approach that targets certain behaviours would be helpful to teach social and functional skills that may be new to women. This approach may reinforce appropriate behaviour, modify existing behaviour and skills, and teach new skills through the use of role-play and imitation of assertive skills that are needed for social contexts. This may be more effective than trying to change deeper belief systems, attitudes, or past experiences (Ramisetty-Mikler, 1993). The presentation of didactic material (e.g., books, video clips, books, articles, and songs that particularize the South Asian experience) may also help immigrant women to begin consciousness raising and resocialization around issues of gender, race, culture, and sexual orientation (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999). Developing support groups for battered women who share a
common cultural background may also facilitate collective validation of their culturally influenced coping styles as a strength (Yoshihama, 2002).

One way to reduce the isolation among immigrants is for communities to more actively support and integrate new immigrants into the host society (Abraham, 2000a). South Asian activists against intimate violence are one of the groups in this community who are working to support new immigrants while fighting against violence. These activists are faced with the formidable task of battling the policing by the South Asian community that silences women and denies their experience of violence, while empowering battered women within a racist society with restrictive immigration and welfare policies (Dasgupta, 1999). Despite these obstacles, South Asian service organizations, which originated in response to the unique needs of South Asian women, have been growing in numbers in the United States over the last decade (Dasgupta, 2000; Merchant, 2000). Like other community-based services that exist for women victims of violence these agencies tend to begin with concerned residents who provide support for women on a voluntary basis, with many professionals offering their services for free to victims and their families. These organizations may include peer counseling, initial legal information, emergency medical and shelter information, financial assistance in the form of loans, liaison to the formal service providing community, domestic violence prevention programs, multilingual/multicultural counseling, referrals, and links to other Asian organizations, support groups providing language and social transition skills and accompanying clients to court (Preisser, 1999). These agencies tend to be collectivist in nature, use nonhierarchical procedures and may initially be run from women's homes on limited budgets. These factors reflect the community sharing and informal help from community members, which are positive aspects of collectivist cultures.

Women from a common cultural background may feel more secure and comfortable disclosing abuse and accepting assistance from one another. Alternatively, women may seek out mainstream providers so that they can maintain privacy from members of their own ethnic community (Preisser, 1999). Ethnic agencies are influenced by the unique cultural needs and traditions of the people they serve such that behaviours that may not be understood by mainstream agencies are greeted with more understanding and acceptance (Merchant, 2000). In fact, while dominant community agencies report
difficulties attracting South Asian clients, South Asian domestic violence organizations indicate an increase in the numbers of women they assist. This increase may mean that South Asian battered women feel more comfortable disclosing their experiences to members of their own ethnic community (Dasgupta, 2000).

Many of these organizations work in isolation due to the controversy they face within their own community (Abraham, 2000b). These types of services, regardless of the groups they serve, tend to be underfunded and thus may be unable to meet the needs of women who seek assistance (Browne, 1993). Isolation from other organizations including those open to the general public is exacerbated by the lack of funds needed to travel and meet. Research investigating these organizations suggests that they need to systematize their work and establish infrastructure to build a cohesive coalition (Abraham, 2000b). Collaboration between these agencies and dominant community agencies appears to be a wonderful way for East to meet West, allowing service providers to learn from each other and complement the services that women need.

Conclusion

This investigation makes a number of contributions to the study of intimate partner violence in general, and more specifically to the study of intimate violence within the South Asian community. Most importantly, this study gives voice to the experience of South Asian women who have lived through abusive and violent experiences within their intimate relationships by including their stories within the study of domestic violence in Canada (Abraham, 2000b). This is especially important within this cultural group, where maintaining social face and continuing to present as the “model minority” has clearly kept many women silent and alone during this process. Furthermore, by providing women with a safe space in which they can discuss their experiences of survival, despair, and resilience, without presuming to predefine their experience, this work seeks to convey a respect for these and other women’s experiences.

Another major contribution of this investigation is that it provides support for the many themes that are common among women who experience intimate violence, but also reveals that the influence of contextual factors such as culture and immigrations status reveal culturally specific issues. For instance, issues of power and control, emotional consequences of violence, social isolation, and difficulty accessing services appear to be
common factors that women, regardless of culture, have to deal with. These issues may be exacerbated within the immigrant context where language difficulties and distance from family members and other support systems become additional obstacles for women. Issues that are more unique to the South Asian culture, as identified by these participants, include the role of family honour, the strong role of natal family in decision making, rigid gender norms, a woman’s value through marriage, the role of extended family in abuse, societal policing of women’s sexuality, and the societal ostracism associated with leaving a marriage. This information supports and extends our knowledge of ethnicity and gender within this cultural group.

This study also extends our knowledge of the tension between a woman’s home and new culture. This research provides support for the notion that the South Asian culture that immigrants try “desperately to cling to is neither monolithic nor fragile. Rather, it is an ancient, flexible, diverse tradition that has withstood and incorporated internationalism for centuries; the long parade of traders, invaders, and pilgrims to India is more than enough proof of this ability” (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 1998, p. 126). It is also important to separate the influence of religious tenets from cultural prescriptions (Hasnat, 1998). These women do not want to stop being South Asian and in fact, for many God and religion are a source of strength, but this study shows that they are attempting to redefine their cultural and religious beliefs in a more empowering way. This information implies that regardless of the factors that immigrants face in their new country, their culture will not die as they fear, but only change and reinvent itself.

This work also celebrates the ways in which these women show empowerment through coping and resistance strategies, which may not change the larger social picture, but does allow us to learn from their efforts. Clinically, the examination of women’s reactions and coping strategies within this cultural context may help individual women, and service providers working with this population, to adapt useful strategies. These women have also provided direct suggestions for change and improvement in the services that they encountered during their experiences. Incorporation of these suggestions into practical applications for service providers ensures that women’s voices are informing the services they use. This study also begins to reveal some of the ways that cultural factors, immigration experiences, and institutional systems impact on women’s experience and in
some ways “exacerbate vulnerabilities associated with gender, class, and ethnicity for immigrant women in the context of domestic violence” (Abraham, 2000b, p.3). Finally, this research reveals the need to institute what is learned in formal public policy and legislature. For if the norms and laws within communities continue to support a system where women are chattel for men, men will continue to control women and use violence to maintain that control if and when they deem necessary (Merchant, 2000).

Ultimately, the problem related to violence against women cannot be understood and solved by focusing exclusively on the individual, but by changing the cultural and social institutions that provide a framework for these problems. These larger social and cultural factors, including institutions that provide ineffective responses to protect women and children or promote traditional sociocultural norms that devalue women, maintain their oppression (Walker, 1989). In short, the problem of violence against women will not be solved until social scientists and policymakers work together to create change in the attitudes and institutions that perpetuate men’s violent acts against women.

**Critical Evaluation of the Study**

In terms of methodology, this research used an exploratory qualitative perspective. Much of the literature in this area (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rennie et al., 1988) indicates a particular relationship between data gathering and data analysis, in which data analysis guides future data gathering by informing the types of questions and issues that arise from the data. The interactive and reciprocal nature of this process reveals a shortfall of this investigation. Due to practical limitations it was not possible to transcribe and analyze interviews prior to subsequent interviews. It was also impossible to conduct multiple interviews with each research participant. In addition, only two of the six participants who had expressed interest in reviewing the findings, were located to complete the review. Comments from these two women were positive, but did not aid in further interpreting the findings. This may have been due to reticence regarding providing me, the so-called “expert” with critical feedback. Difficulty recontacting respondents is related to problems with conducting research over long time periods, whereby contact information changes for women, with attrition being a common problem with research on violence against women.
Another issue with the present research is the difficulty accessing women and achieving more diversity in the women interviewed. Given that this was an exploratory study, whose purpose was to give women a voice and begin to identify issues and areas of importance to this group, the need to access women was more important that ensuring variability in the sample. A number of attempts were made to access a greater diversity of participants, although these were not especially successful. Specifically attempts were made to recruit people through shelters and agencies that dealt with survivors of violence within the South Asian and larger community. Attempts were also made to contact women who might not have accessed these services through posters and a radio interview. An ad was also placed on a South Asian website, which targets younger and perhaps more acculturated women. Alternative recruiting strategies may have been useful such as spending more time volunteering in shelters or other service organizations catering to the South Asian community.

**Future Directions**

This research project is really about opening doors to future research. Every major theme that has been identified using this small group of women reveals directions for future research that will help us to gain a better understanding of South Asian women’s experience in general, and about their experience of intimate violence in particular.

The issue of gender inequality and how these attitudes are maintained and transmitted within this and other immigrant groups is an area that deserves much more attention in the future. While women both explicitly and implicitly indicated the role of the dominant status of males in South Asian culture, it remains to be explored how much this plays a role in the life experiences of South Asians in general and women in particular. Although participants were asked to identify gender role messages which reinforced patriarchal norms, they were not asked specifically about the impact that they feel this has had on their lives.

Continued attention should also be given to the issue of decision making. Especially since this project examines the experience of women after immigration to Canada, whether it be first, second or third generation, additional research should focus on the implications of lack of decision making power in the Western context where both men and women are required to be more independent. More research is also needed regarding
the unique issues related to arranged versus love marriages where in love marriages the woman may be held additionally responsible for bringing on her troubles as she has deviated from the norm by making decisions for herself.

Extended family relationships and the role they play in the immigrant context is another area that requires more attention in the literature. Relationships with in-laws and the role played by other family members take on new meaning for immigrants who may have few sources of social support, and whose kin networks have been left behind in their home country.

Another important area for consideration, which women did not speak explicitly about, was the role of racism. Hopefully, this means that most of the participants did not experience racism or it was subtle enough that they were not affected by it. However, racism is an insidious part of the minority group experience in a culture where dominant group members may have hostile reactions to people from diverse backgrounds. Thus within a more inclusive analysis, racism need to be addressed in addition to sexism (Abraham, 2000b; Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999).

Future work also needs to address the limits of sampling identified in this research. Are the issues identified by the 13 women in this investigation applicable to a greater variety of South Asian women, and perhaps to women from other Asian backgrounds? This is not to devalue what these participants offer, but rather to offer a greater exploration of the contextual factors that impact women of Asian origin, and especially those women who are in violent intimate relationships. For example, the role of children and their impact on a woman’s experience of intimate violence is an area that was less emphasized than suspected, perhaps due to the fact that only seven out of the thirteen participants had children. Abraham (2000) writes that “a woman’s fertility is central in defining her status and identity, as the birth of sons is essential in continuing the patrilineage. Lack of children, especially male children, is defined as a failure on the part of the woman to fulfill her primary role as reproducer” (p. 22). Different women may have provided us with additional information in this area. Thus research that helps us learn more about the role of children in the lives of South Asian women is necessary.

Research is also needed regarding the incidence and lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence against South Asian women in Canada. As has been noted before this
group is typically underrepresented in the research. Definitions of what is abusive and
the role of extended family in abuse must also be taken into account (Browne, 1993).
Given the difficulties of leaving their partner due to factors such as immigration related
stress and financial difficulties, lack of family in international marriages, and the stigma
of leaving the relationship, more research is also needed about patterns of reassault and
threat for women who do end up leaving. Research assessing risk of future violence as
well as alternatives that reduce the risk of harm and increase support from the larger
community are essential (Browne, 1993)

Literature on domestic violence in the United States discusses how legal status
compounds women's experience of violence as often women are dependent upon their
husbands for a “green card” (e.g., Abraham, 2000b; Merchant, 2000). This aspect of
immigration was not discussed by any of the women in this sample and may have to do
with differences in Canadian immigration policies. Future research needs to examine this
aspect of the immigrant woman's experience in Canada.

More information is also necessary in terms of the role played by South Asian
organizations and women's groups in Canada. These groups have been identified as
playing a pivotal role in bringing recognition and aid regarding intimate violence in the
United States (Abraham, 2000b; Krishnan et al., 1998). However, very little is known
about the presence or impact of these groups in Canada.

Furthermore, there is a need for more research assessing forms of violence, needs of
victims, and efficacy of interventions. Research in the future should also focus on these
issues from other vantage points including sexual orientation, biracial identity, and
multiracial relationships. Finally, the role of men within this research area also needs to
be considered for the South Asian culture context. Including men in this investigation
may help society to ultimately make changes on a larger more systemic level through
identification of abusers, and prevention and intervention strategies that target men
(Browne, 1993). Last but not least there is a profound need for information and
interventions for children and adolescents who have witnessed violence in their homes
(Browne, 1993).

This research reveals that we have much to learn about the role of violence in
women's lives. In the words of Audre Lorde “[t]he fact that we are here, and that I speak
these words is an attempt to break the silence and bridge some of the differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken” (Lorde, 1984, p. 44). I hope that by providing women with a forum through which to hear their voices, this investigation has helped to break the silence, at least for these women.
References


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Appendix A

Group Orientation

Individualism and collectivism are two poles on a continuum proposed by Hofstede (1980) to describe the relationships that exist between individuals and groups at the societal level. The cultural differences between South Asia (India in particular) and Canada may be conceptualized in terms of their relative positions on the dimension of individualism/collectivism. Individualistic societies are defined by loose ties between individuals, and are characterized by individualism, autonomy, and emotional independence (Bochner, 1994; Dion & Dion, 1993; Hui, 1988; Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibaci, Choi, & Yoon, 1994; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988).

At the other end of the continuum, collectivist societies encourage integration into cohesive in-groups which offer security in exchange for loyalty, and in which the distinction between the group and the individual becomes blurred. These groups emphasize the importance of a collective identity, emotional dependence, duties, obligations and sharing (Gupta, 1976; Kim et al., 1994; Triandis et al., 1988). In collectivist cultures, love, intimacy and the bond between partners as a foundation for marriage are not considered to be as important as the responsibility of the married couple to the man’s family (Dion & Dion, 1993). Thus, collectivist cultures often involve arranged marriages customs, which promote the marriage of families instead of individuals (Triandis, 1994). Family systems within collectivist cultures tend to consist of larger extended family groups in which members remain together even after marriage to help provide for the needs of the group.

In his study, Hofstede (1980) found that Australia, Britain, and the Netherlands scored the highest on individualism. Japan and India scored in the lower middle range on this construct, and Africa, Latin America, and Asia were the most collectivist. Canada had a relatively high individualism score, suggesting that, on average, Canadians tend to experience their culture as placing more emphasis on individual initiative than on family solidarity (Hofstede, 1980).

At the individual level, the corresponding continuum has been labeled idiocentrism and allocentrism (Kim et al., 1994; Triandis et al., 1988). People at the idiocentric end of the continuum have an independent view of the self, are egocentric and autonomous, and
primarily act to serve their own needs; allocentrics are interdependent and are interested in serving the needs and maintaining the relationships of the group before their own individual needs (Hsu, 1981; Kim et al., 1994; Sinha & Verma, 1994). Gender may influence an individual’s relative group orientation. Hui (1988) found that Caucasian women from the United States and Chinese women from Hong Kong tended to score higher on collectivism than did men from those countries. There is also some evidence that, in general, Western women tend to have a relatively more allocentric sense of self while men are more idiocentric (Josephs, Markus, & Tafarodi, 1992). However, it must be kept in mind that in certain situations a person who considers him or herself to be quite idiocentric may act in a manner that is quite group oriented and vice versa.

As discussed previously, Indian culture is considered to be relatively collectivist and thus, by definition, to include a majority of allocentric individuals. Sinha and Verma’s (1994) sample of Indian adults identified themselves as allocentric and reported that Indian people tend to behave collectively. However, it has been argued that East Indian collectivism does not extend beyond the level of the family (Mishra, 1994) and that the general collectivism (culture) includes a large number of relatively idiocentric individuals (social system) (Sinha & Tripathi, 1994). Therefore, when residing in an individualistic culture, Indians who are more allocentric may tend to be more traditional in their views, relying on their kinship groups to guide their life choices. People who are more idiocentric, on the other hand, may incorporate more of the individualistic practices of the West when they immigrate. Research has found a positive correlation between increased length of time living in Western countries, higher social class, less traditional gender role preferences and greater preference for individualistic versus collectivist norms (Almeida & Dolan-Delvecchio, 1999).
Appendix B

Immigration and Acculturation

Immigration

Migration of South Asians to Canada has occurred for at least a hundred years. However, since 1965 more flexible immigration regulations have contributed to a significant increase in the number of immigrants of South Asian descent coming to Canada, primarily from the Indian subcontinent and parts of Africa. Even with the increase in flexibility, immigration policies for years required that only affluent and technically trained people could enter the country (Dasgupta, 1999). This ensured a community that was relatively homogeneous in terms of education and class. The resulting economic and social successes of these immigrants led to their title as the "model minority." For some, this label has led to attempts to maintain a flawless image, such that there is a suppression of the problems that exist within this community (e.g., poverty, unemployment, sexual assault, child abuse, divorce, domestic violence, and intergenerational and community conflict) (Dasgupta, 1999; Huisman, 1996). The model minority label can thus contribute to an underestimation of the problems and injustices experienced by Asians and result in their exclusion from funding and social programs (Huisman, 1996). The experience of adapting to one's new country will be influenced by the host culture's views of other cultural groups (e.g., assimilationist versus multiculturalist), the acculturating group, and modes of acculturation.

Nature of the larger society

The host culture's responses to the following questions will determine the socio-political climate in which the nondominant group will find itself: (1) Is maintenance of cultural diversity desirable and (2) is maintenance of positive group relations desirable? If cultural diversity and positive group relations are desirable then there will most likely be an atmosphere of multiculturalism. When diversity is encouraged but positive relations are not, this indicates an assimilationist climate. When diversity is endorsed without positive relations, there is segregation. Lastly when neither diversity nor positive relations are encouraged, this creates the potential for ethnocide (Kim & Berry, 1986; cited in Antonio, 1996).
Type of acculturating group.

Variations in the degree of voluntariness, movement and permanence of contact of an acculturating group can affect acculturation and its results (e.g., health of acculturating group members) (Berry, 1990). People who are voluntarily involved in the acculturation process (immigrants and sojourners – foreign students) may evidence fewer detrimental effects than those who do not have as much of a choice (e.g., refugees and indigenous people). In the case of refugees, the "decision to migrate" is forced upon them due to often very traumatic conditions in their country of origin (e.g., the mass exodus from Uganda). This can result in poor physical and mental health, especially since refugees often come from cultures that are very different from the countries that they resettle in, making adaptation more difficult (Berry, 1990; Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Immigrants and Refugees, 1988a; Winter & Young, 1998).

Modes of acculturation.

Within culturally plural societies, migrating individuals and groups must also decide whether or not to maintain their cultural identity and whether or not a relationship with the larger society is of value. If the individual or group decides to relinquish their cultural identity and move into the larger society, the result is assimilation, with the absorption of the nondominant group into the dominant group. If there is maintenance of cultural identity while joining with the dominant group, integration can occur, and can result in a number of cultural groups working together in a larger system (e.g., multiculturalism). Mutual accommodation between the dominant and nondominant culture is required for integration to be attained (Berry, 1990; Berry, 1998). When ethnic identity is maintained without a significant relationship with the dominant group the result is segregation or separation. When the dominant group imposes the structure, segregation results (e.g., segregation of blacks by whites in South Africa). However, if this option is chosen by the acculturating group it is known as separation (e.g., French Canadians in Quebec). The remaining option, marginalization, is usually accompanied by confusion and stress. Marginalization occurs when groups lose contact with their traditional society as well as the dominant culture resulting in feelings of alienation, loss of identity, and acculturative stress (Berry, 1990).
Krishnan and Berry (1992) in their study investigating the relationship between acculturation experience and acculturative stress among a group of Asian Indian immigrants in the United States Midwest found the most preferred acculturation strategy to be integration. Women were found to show more stress than men and less education was related to higher amounts of stress. Marginalization, separation, and assimilation were associated with higher amounts of stress, while integration was negatively related to acculturative stress (Krishnan & Berry, 1992).
Appendix C

Interview Protocol

This interview protocol will not be used as a script, but instead as a guide to help in structuring the interviews.

Introduction:
My introduction will include the following information:
Thank you very much for agreeing to share your story with me. I am a graduate student at the University of Windsor, and today, I would like to learn about some of your experiences as a South Asian woman living in Canada. Specifically, I would like to learn about your experiences in a ‘stressful’ or ‘bad’ relationship. If, while we talk, anything upsets you, please let me know and we can talk about it. You can also choose not to answer any question that you might feel uncomfortable about.

General Questions:

1. A) The interview will begin with a general open-ended question. If the participant appears uncomfortable with this general question, other more specific questions will be used to begin the interview. Examples of questions are as follows: Could you tell me about yourself? Tell me about the relationship you were thinking about when you agreed to participate? What made that relationship bad or stressful? What would you like me to know about your experience? What has living in Canada been like for you?

1. B) While listening to a woman’s narrative, I will be attending to whether or not she has mentioned anything about some of the themes and categories of experience that were reviewed in my proposal. If she does not provide information spontaneously regarding various categories, I will ask her some more specific questions aimed at gathering information about the following areas depending on how they seem to fit with the rest of her narrative:
   a) Experience of gender norms (e.g., rules for boys versus girls, experience as a girl and woman within family and society at large)?
   b) Experience of relationships with others (e.g., Experience as a daughter, wife, mother-in-law)?
   c) Experience of sexuality (e.g., messages and information regarding sexuality while growing up)?
   d) Experience of marriage (e.g., when, how long, arranged versus love)?
   e) Experience of immigration (e.g., why, when, with whom, pros and cons)?
   f) Experience of education (e.g., how much, where, pros and cons to)?
   g) Experience of labour (e.g., whether employed, where, how long, likes and dislikes)?

I have not prepared specific questions because I would like to be able to ask more spontaneous questions instead of having to rely on those I have previously worded.
2. During this second phase of the interview, I would like to spend some time discussing some of the more positive aspects of the narrative. These may include some of the following areas:
   a) Response to negative relationship (e.g. resistance, coping, help seeking, disclosure, use of social services)? Social service needs and experience with? What did you need, and what might help other women in a similar situation to you? What do you wish were different?
   b) Plans for the future?

3. This final phase of questioning will focus on obtaining information about any as yet unknown demographics:
   - Age?
   - Number of children in birth family and birth order?
   - Educational level and specialization?
   - Place of birth, parental birth, age of immigration, length of time in Canada?
   - Religious Affiliation?
   - Self-identification – ethnicity.
   - Occupation, and income - socio-economic status (e.g., working class, middle class, upper class)?

Specific prompts for information:
   - Experience of growing up in South Asian families - What messages did you receive about what it meant to be a girl or a boy in your family while you were growing up and which ones would you or do you pass on to your children?
   - Were there certain rules that you had to follow because you were a girl? Were there any special things that you were told because you were a girl? – restrictions, privileges
   - What do you envision marriage to be? What is the wife’s role? What is the husband’s role? Have your views regarding these things changed over time?
   - Understanding of wife abuse
     - How did stress or abuse in relationship affect you – psychological or behavioural?
     - Any changes to sense of self, soul, spirit, mind, values, anger?
   - Coping/resistance
     - Use of alcohol or drugs?
     - Current health status?
   - Disclosure – what were/are fears of disclosure, who did they disclose to, what was that like for them, what are they doing post-disclosure?
   - What kinds of services needed, which accessed (peer counselling)?
   - Was family a support or a barrier?
   - What were cultural messages – supportive versus not?
   - Impact of counselling aimed at saving the marriage?
Closing Questions:
1. Is there anything else that you think it might be important for me to know?

2. If you were doing this type of research or were asked to participate in this type of research in the future, what would you have done differently? What would you encourage I do more of?

3. Do you know of any other women who have had experiences like or different to yours, whom you think might be willing to talk to me?

4. Would you like to be given the chance to review what I learn from you to ensure that your experience is accurately represented? If yes, this would mean sending you my results for review or meeting again to go over the results together. Would this be safe for you to do? How shall I contact you?
Appendix D

Informed consent

My name is Sandeep Hunjan and I am a Psychology graduate student from the University of Windsor. The purpose of this study is to discover what the experience of “bad” or “stressful” relationships is like for South Asian women living in Canada.

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to take part in a personal interview. The interview will take approximately an hour and a half of your time, but can last for as long as is comfortable for you. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may end the interview at any time without stating a reason. You have the right to not answer any question you do not want to or that you feel uncomfortable answering. At any point, if you have any questions regarding the study or my specific questions please feel free to ask me. If you have questions of a more personal nature for me, I would be happy to answer them towards the end of our interview.

Your identity and the information you provide in the interview will remain confidential at all times. I will be tape-recording the interview, so that I may listen carefully to you during the interview. The tapes will allow me to accurately record the information you provide. They will be transcribed with all identifying information taken out and the tapes will be erased at the end of this research project. The transcripts will be used for research and teaching purposes and excerpts used will not include any identifying information. I will not be using your real name when I discuss your interview, but instead will use a name that you or I can pick. Any documents with identifying information (such as this consent form, or addresses for feedback about this study) will be kept separate from the tapes and transcripts.

If it is convenient for you, I would like to go over the transcribed information with you to ensure that I have accurately conveyed your interview. If you do wish to do this please let me know how you would like me to contact you once I am ready. Once the study has been completed, you may receive a copy of the study results if you wish, by leaving your name and address on a sign-up sheet after completing the interview or by contacting me directly. If you have any questions after this interview is over, please contact me, Sandeep Hunjan at (519) 977-5741, or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Shelagh Towson at the Department of Psychology, University of Windsor, (519) 253-3000, Ext. 2215. If you have questions or concerns about this study you may contact the Chairperson of the Ethics committee, Dr. Stewart Page at the University of Windsor, Department of Psychology, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4 (519) 253-3000, Ext. 2243.

Thank you for your help and your story.

Please read the following paragraph:

I, __________________________ (name of participant), have read the description of the study and understand its purpose. I understand that my answers will be kept confidential and that my name will not be associated with my interview transcript. I voluntarily consent to participate.

Signature __________________________ Date __________________________
Appendix E
Feedback Sheet

Thank you for your participation!

When this study is completed, you will be contacted to review the findings and ensure that your views have been represented accurately. A summary of the final results will be mailed to you or we can meet and go over the information together. If you should have any questions or concerns in the meantime, please feel free to contact me, Sandeep Hunjan at (519).

If you know of any other South Asian women who have been through experiences such as yours related to their intimate relationships and who may be interested in participating in this study, please have them call me to find out more information about the study.

Sometimes people find that talking to someone about some of the things we talked about today brings things for them that they may need to talk about. Here is a list of agencies that have experience dealing with women who have experienced similar things.

(Phone numbers and information about violence against women will be placed in an inconspicuous container (e.g., lipstick container). Numbers will be based on which city the participant lives in).
Appendix F
Letter to Participants Accompanying Interview Transcript

Dear ____________________.

My name is Sandeep Hunjan. We spoke regarding your relationship experience. As we discussed, I am sending you a copy of the transcript of our interview to review. Your feedback and ideas are extremely important to me, as they will help me to ensure the accuracy and quality of my study. It is critical that I know that you feel you have been accurately reflected in the transcript. You do not need to make changes relating to grammar, spelling, or typing errors. You may write your comments directly on the transcript or on a separate sheet of paper. For your convenience, I have enclosed a pre-addressed and stamped envelope for you to return comments to me. I will require a response from you by "DATE." If I do not receive a response from you, I will assume you are satisfied with the content of the transcript.

I will be sending you my initial analyses based on all the interviews for your review in a short time. Thank you again for your participation in the interview. Your time and effort were greatly appreciated and without you this study could not have been a success.

Sincerely,

Sandeep Hunjan, M.A.
Department of Psychology
University of Windsor.
VITA AUCTORIS

Sandeep Hunjan was born to Sewa and Kulwant Hunjan on October 11th, 1971 in Nairobi, Kenya. She graduated from King City Secondary School in King City, Ontario in June of 1990. Sandeep then pursued her post secondary education at the University of Guelph where she graduated with a Bachelors of Arts (Specialized Honours) degree in Psychology in October 1994. In 1997, she received a Master’s of Arts Degree from the University of Windsor, with a specialization in Adult Clinical Psychology. Finally, in 2003, she obtained her Doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Windsor, with a specialization in Adult Clinical Psychology.