

# **Accessibility of Domestic Violence Services in Canada for South Asian Immigrant Women**

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### **Abstract**

Despite South Asians currently making up the biggest immigrant population in Canada, there are few organizations that are accessible to them and adhere to their unique cultural needs. South Asian immigrant women are highly vulnerable to domestic violence and face a number of challenges when trying to navigate life in a new country, and victim services are rarely culturally sensitive. This exploratory research project first examines the emerging body of literature surrounding domestic violence in the South Asian community through an intersectional and ethno-gender lens to understand the barriers to accessing help. Through the use of a resource inventory, available domestic violence organizations that cater to both the mainstream population and specifically to the South Asian population were analyzed in cities with the highest South Asian populations to see if the cultural, linguistic, immigration, and settlement needs of South Asian immigrant women were met. This project finds that although South Asian domestic violence organizations were more accessible in terms of providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services, they were lacking in availability in each of the cities examined and provided fewer services such as shelters, transitional housing and legal services. South Asian organizations were also not specifically focused on domestic violence services compared to mainstream domestic violence organizations that had a targeted objective to cater to domestic violence victims. Recommendations on how both South Asian organizations and mainstream organizations can bridge the gaps in services are discussed.

### **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this research project to all of the resilient South Asian women who are facing abuse behind closed doors or have faced it previously. As a South Asian woman myself, I wanted to bring awareness around this topic and although I was not able to capture the first-hand experiences of the women, I hope that this project will get the conversation going surrounding topics of domestic violence within both the South Asian community and Canadian society.

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## **Accessibility of Domestic Violence Services in Canada for South Asian Immigrant Women**

Domestic violence is a serious and prevalent issue in Canadian society. Domestic violence, according to the World Health Organization, refers to abuse that can come in the forms of emotional, physical, sexual, or controlling behaviour (World Health Organization, n.d). Every individual, no matter the gender or racial group, can be a victim of domestic violence. However, women are disproportionately represented when it comes to being victims of domestic violence. According to the latest available data from Statistics Canada, rates of intimate partner violence in 2019 were more than 3.5 times higher among women than among men (536 versus 149 per 100,000 population, respectively) (Conroy, 2021). Furthermore, different groups experience domestic violence in different ways and racial minorities have intersecting identities that extend their vulnerability to domestic violence. Immigrant women are especially at risk of being victims, due to the unique barriers they face while adjusting to life in a completely different country. There is a constant struggle among immigrants to adapt to a new culture while still maintaining traditional beliefs and practices. In Canada, 29% of visible minority women reported experiencing some form of domestic violence in 2021 (Cotter, 2021). Although this number is lower compared to the 47% of non-visible minority women that have experienced domestic violence, visible minority women are more likely to feel anxious or shameful about reporting incidents of domestic violence (Cotter, 2021). It also must be noted that community-based studies have shown that intimate partner violence is higher among immigrant communities while in population-based studies the rate is lower (Tabibi et al., 2018). Community-based research involves studies where the community and research participants are actively involved in each stage and work together to address certain challenges and needs (Boyd, 2014). Population-based research is studies that are generalizable to the entire population, and not just the individuals in

the study (Lieb, 2013). The inconsistencies could be due to measurement methods or access (Tabibi et al., 2018) but may also be because community-based research is more personal and is reflective of each individual's experiences.

Domestic violence can loosely be defined as a pattern in a relationship that is used to demonstrate power and control over an individual (United Nations, n.d). Domestic violence can come mainly in the forms of physical and emotional. Physical abuse involves hurting or attempting to hurt someone by doing things such as hitting, punching, throwing objects or forcing sexual acts. Emotional or verbal abuse includes continuous criticism, name-calling or other verbal abuse, damaging a partner's relationship with their kids, or isolating a partner from friends and family (United Nations, n.d). Domestic violence is not limited to these definitions and can also take other forms. Although domestic violence is mentioned as intimate partner violence in most of the literature and research, this project will use the term domestic violence. This is due to the fact that domestic violence encompasses abuse faced by any family member and not just an intimate partner. More importantly, South Asian families are collective and it is common for parents, in-laws, and siblings to live in one household. There can be a cycle of abuse in the family that can be initiated by people other than the victim's partner.

Due to the lack of conversation surrounding the South Asian population despite them making up the largest immigrant group in Canada, this research project focuses specifically on domestic violence faced by South Asian immigrant women. South Asia is both a geographical and ethnocultural region and is composed of the countries Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. South Asians currently make up the largest ethnic minority group in Canada, with roughly 2.6 million people (Statistics Canada, 2022a). According to Statistics Canada, the immigrant population coming into Canada has been 62%



Asian between 2016 and 2021, and the number one birthplace of immigrants was India (Statistics Canada, 2022b). It is important to acknowledge that South Asia is made up of countries that have a vast number of different cultures, languages, and traditions spanning across the region and it is not the purpose of this project to identify them as one whole ethnic group. Furthermore, the aim is not to show that South Asian women face domestic violence more frequently than non-South Asians, but rather to highlight their barriers through an intersectional and ethno-gender lens and how organizations can cater to victims more specifically. Intersectionality and ethno-gender theories are both important when looking at domestic violence in immigrant communities. They both examine intersecting identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, and immigration status and how they increase vulnerability to domestic violence. Understanding the multi-dimensional and complex circumstances of an individual help to respond to and resolve the issue at hand better (Baker, Barreto & Etherington, 2015).

### **Research Objectives**

There is currently a dark figure of crime surrounding the South Asian population as domestic violence is a taboo subject in the South Asian community, and there are widely held patriarchal beliefs and oppressive views that further increase the vulnerability of women and make reporting difficult. Although South Asians make up the largest immigrant population in Canada, there is a lack of community services in this country that meet their needs. South Asian immigrant women who face domestic violence are rarely able to access victim services that are culturally sensitive and are aware of their unique barriers. These barriers include patriarchal and traditional, linguistic, financial, immigration/settlement and lack of access to formal support (Ahmad et al., 2009; Aujla, 2013; Chaze & Medhekar, 2017; Chan, 2020; Choudry, 2001; Dasgupta, 2000). These women also have to carry the burden of facing multiple oppressions

from both the South Asian community and being a racialized minority group in Canada (Chaze & Medhekar, 2017). There is not an abundance of existing research on the South Asian population in Canada, especially South Asian domestic violence victims. They are more likely to turn to general multicultural services rather than women's shelters or victim services because of the stigma and fear they face. A literature review and a comparative analysis between South Asian organizations and mainstream organizations using a resource inventory were incorporated to collect data. The aim is to determine if there are any inconsistencies in regard to the organizations' accessibility based on cultural, immigration and linguistic needs. The main research question that this project will focus on is: **To what extent are victim services in Canada addressing the needs of South Asian immigrant women facing domestic violence?**

### **Methodology**

The objective of this research project was to determine the accessibility of domestic violence services in Canada for South Asian immigrant women and if inconsistencies exist between South Asian organizations and mainstream organizations. This project incorporates the use of an exploratory research design as there has not been much existing research done on South Asians and South Asian victim services in Canada. In the policy arena or applied to practice, exploratory studies can also help establish research priorities and where resources should be allocated (Streb, 2010). This exploratory research project incorporates multiple methods of data collection, relying on an extensive literature review and the utilization of a resource inventory.

The existing literature on the topic identified cultural, linguistic, financial and immigration needs as common themes. The Mount Royal University library database as well as Google Scholar was used to thoroughly examine various scholarly articles to conduct preliminary research in order to understand the prevalence of the issue. The main keywords used

were: “domestic abuse/violence”, “immigrant women in Canada”, “South Asian immigrant women”, “victim services for South Asian women”, “domestic violence services in Canada”, “intersectionality and domestic violence” and “ethno-gender perspective”.

Previous research about South Asian domestic violence victims focused mainly on the experiences of the women and what kind of support they looked for. However, past research only minimally addressed what kind of services are actually offered in Canada and how to bridge the gap between South Asian domestic violence organizations and mainstream domestic violence organizations. In the literature review conducted, there was also a lack of information on South Asian organizations. Using a resource inventory, domestic violence organizations were compiled and compared based on programs, services, languages, and cultural awareness. Using Google search, two types of organizations were looked at, organizations that specifically catered to South Asian women who are victims of domestic violence and organizations that catered to victims of domestic violence in general. The resource inventory was compiled by thoroughly searching through the websites of the organizations and looking at any agency reports, statistics and brochures. The organizations chosen (see Appendix) were from Calgary, Vancouver, Toronto, Edmonton and Montreal due to the larger South Asian population in these areas. South Asians currently make up 1,182,485 of the population in Toronto, 369,295 in Vancouver, 153,200 in Calgary, 123,200 in Edmonton, and 121,260 in Montreal (Statistics Canada, 2022d). The objective of this data collection was to determine how accessible each type of organization is to South Asian immigrant women. Accessibility was determined by seeing if the delivery of the programs and services met cultural and linguistic needs.

### **Limitations**

There were a few limitations in this research project that are important to address. This research project relied solely on the use of secondary sources for data collection and was not able to capture the first-hand experiences of South Asian immigrant women in this research due to the limited scope of this undergraduate research project. Using the major metropolitan cities also limits the ability to look at services available in smaller and more rural cities, and does not account for the immigrants that live in those areas as increasing shares of recent immigrants are settling out of Canada's largest urban centres (Statistics Canada, 2022b). It was also limited in that the organizations' websites may not provide all available information on programs and services, as well as cultural training and awareness, and there was no ability to determine that as it would have required contacting the organizations directly. Lastly, since the resource inventory was compiled using Google search, the ability to find all available organizations was limited. Many domestic violence organizations may not be available online due to operating discretely or locally as a support group because of limited resources.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Intersectionality Theory**

Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw and describes how hierarchies of power and social systems based on race, ethnicity, gender, as well as immigration status, intersect to create multiple oppressions for women (Erez & Harper, 2018). The theory of intersectionality has been widely applied to the experiences of visible minority groups and challenges the systems and institutions dominated by a white, upper-class perspective (Chan, 2020). An intersectional approach is useful when addressing gender-based violence in order to see how race and gender intersect with the hardships and burdens of immigration. It is able to capture the way interlocking and intersecting oppressions move through immigrant communities to create particular

vulnerabilities (Chan, 2020). Furthermore, immigrants are more likely to face racism and discrimination, which adds another layer of oppression. Current discourses surrounding domestic violence and immigrants tend to culturalize violence, meaning that it is seen as a cultural conflict and not structural inequality (Tabibi et al., 2018). This further drives immigrant women from seeking help and contributes to the intersecting forms of violence that they face (Tabibi et al., 2018). Much of the literature has identified the barriers that South Asian immigrant women face, but not how they intersect or create multiple oppressions. Most domestic violence victims face similar traumas and oppressions, but South Asian immigrant women have the added factors of being a woman of colour and a newcomer. Furthermore, the risk of domestic violence is further increased because of the oppression that South Asian women get from both the South Asian community and Canadian society. Due to domestic violence being a taboo subject and the widely held patriarchal beliefs in the community, women can face disgrace from other South Asians (Tonsing & Barn, 2017). On the other hand, women may face discrimination when they seek help from non-South Asian organizations or from non-South Asian individuals due to cultural blaming and stereotyping (Ahmadzai, 2015). Many mainstream domestic violence organizations clump immigrant women together irrespective of their cultural differences and assume they have similar needs. However, it is important to acknowledge that immigrant women are made up of several ethnic groups that have different lived experiences.

### **Ethno-Gender Approach**

The ethno-gender approach is very closely related to intersectionality theory but is more specific in that it is based on the intersection of ethnicity and gender as a significant analytical category in the discourse of domestic violence (Abraham, 1995). Developed in Abraham's study on domestic violence in the South Asian community in the United States, it aims to

conceptualize a framework for analysis in an immigration and cultural context through two dimensions. The first dimension is gender, which is described by Abraham as a social construct that defines an individual's roles and expected behaviour patterns based on their biological sex. The approach asserts how gender relations are socially constructed and cultural concerns are framed at the individual, organizational, community and societal levels. Meanwhile, ethnicity has two dimensions: one, as a cultural differentiation based on race, origin, history, and language as well as distinct religious practices, particularized customs, beliefs and values and two, as a social construct that is dynamic and manipulated in social interaction in situational contexts. Abraham emphasizes that although those who face violence confront different oppressions based on sexual, cultural, legal and economic grounds, the intersection of ethnicity and gender is specifically focused on because these form an important basis for the social construction of national culture in foreign places. Immigrant women have to cope with gender roles based on patriarchal norms, which immigrant men don't have to face and thus ethnicity is the most important marker that is tied to gender in the fabric of an immigrant women's social identity. Therefore, this approach is very important when looking at South Asian immigrant women facing domestic violence, because they face oppression through multiple dimensions (Abraham, 1995).

The two approaches are important to analyze when addressing domestic violence in an ethnic, gender, and immigration context. Although intersectionality is similar in that it examines multiple layers of oppression, the ethno-gender approach goes deeper in examining how gender and ethnicity intersect within the immigration context and how that plays a role in domestic violence. It does not ignore or preclude other factors such as class but rather emphasizes the importance of ethnicity and gender in addressing domestic violence (Abraham, 1995). Moreover,

the ethno-gender perspective was developed in Abraham's (1995) study and discussed in other research papers (Merchant, 2000) in specific regard to domestic violence within the South Asian community. This research project examines if the intersections of oppression are addressed by mainstream domestic violence organizations. Courses of action and strategies can be developed only if domestic violence organizations understand and address women's positions based on their gender, ethnicity and immigration status (Abraham, 1995).

### **Literature Review**

A dark figure of crime surrounds existing literature on domestic violence within the South Asian community. Domestic violence in general is highly unreported, with only 1 in 5 (19%) cases being reported to the police (Statistics Canada, 2022c). Due to challenges in seeking help, there is little statistical evidence on incidences of domestic violence in the South Asian community (Dasgupta, 2000). This also contributes to a lack of research on this topic and further contributes to the silence in the South Asian community (Dasgupta, 2000). As family or marital violence is considered private and personal, the dark figure is further increased. The exact magnitude of the issue of domestic violence in the South Asian community is therefore unknown. The emergence of South Asian women's centres is also relatively new in research and there is limited information on them, especially in Canada (Aujla, 2013). The literature review conducted can help to shed light in more detail on why research is lacking on the South Asian population and why women are hesitant to seek help. The literature review can be grouped into two main themes: the barriers that prevent South Asian immigrant women from seeking help and the current gaps in domestic violence services.

#### **Barriers to Seeking Help**

Immigrant women experience difficulties in navigating an individualistic world with their religious and cultural identities, and domestic violence adds another layer of challenges (Chan, 2020). There is no one factor that prevents South Asian women from seeking help for domestic violence, but rather a combination of the barriers identified below interacting that makes it more complex (Dasgupta, 2000). The main themes in the literature of barriers that prevent South Asian immigrant women from seeking help are discussed below.

### ***Prevalence of Domestic Violence***

In order to better understand the specific barriers that South Asian immigrant women go through, it is first important to understand the role of South Asian women in their communities and gain insight into how the cycle of domestic violence is able to continue. There are many causes of domestic violence, but in South Asian communities the major concern is the system of patriarchy (Papp, 2010). Due to the existence of a hierarchical system of male domination, South Asian family and marriage dynamics are rooted in patriarchy (Aujla, 2013). This hierarchy places more importance on men in the household and results in the creation of gender roles and patriarchal norms (Chaze & Medhekar, 2017; Ahmad et al., 2009). The men in the household are typically the breadwinners, with the women in more traditional roles. Women are socialized to be obedient and uphold respect for their husbands and in-laws (Choudry, 2001). This allows the women to be controlled and creates an imbalance of power within the structure of the patriarchal family (Aujla, 2013). This imbalance is further increased when immigrating to a new country. Controlling the woman is much easier when she is left completely isolated and without the support of her own family and friends.

South Asian families are predominantly collective so it is common for a married couple to live with parents or in-laws. In South Asian culture, it is respectable and honourable to care



for one's parents (Choudry, 2001). When the married couple moves in with the husband's parents, the bride is expected to adhere to the expectations and customs of her in-laws (Choudry, 2001). Furthermore, her place in the familial hierarchy is determined by her husband's family and oftentimes it can be at the very bottom. There can be added stressors when the parents or siblings of the husband reinforce his behaviours and contribute to the chain of abuse. It can even be common for other women in the family to encourage abuse toward the bride or participate in it (Agnew, 1998). However, this is mainly due to the fact that the woman exercising power and control over the bride has likely faced abuse herself (Aujla, 2013). This then leads to further discouragement in seeking help from abuse, as it is something that women should just accept. The patriarchal norms and family dynamics adopted in South Asian culture have become normalized and have made it harder for South Asian women to break out of these beliefs. Furthermore, immigration does not enhance a woman's social status within her family and has not influenced the South Asian community to rethink traditional gender norms. In fact, trying to preserve culture and heritage while adapting to a new country complicates the dynamics of abuse and further encourages the South Asian community to recreate traditional gender relations (Dasgupta, 2000). Research has shown that traditional patriarchal power imbalances are maintained more in South Asian immigrant families to ensure cultural continuity (Papp, 2010). Honour and respect are important concepts in South Asian culture. There is pressure to "maintain" the family name and keep the unity and sanctity of the family. Family disputes are also kept within the family and rarely discussed with non-family members (Tonsing & Barn, 2017). The pressure to "save face", however, usually falls on the women and it becomes their responsibility to keep up the family's honour. Seeking help when being abused becomes increasingly difficult due to the belief that it will taint the family image. In a study conducted by

Ahmad et al. (2009) on South Asian women's help-seeking behaviours, several women reported that going to victim services was shameful and one even compared reporting incidents of domestic violence to be worse than having a disease.

It is important to note that while understanding cultural differences helps to explain domestic violence in South Asian communities to some extent, it is not the factor that actually perpetuates violence. Domestic violence within South Asian communities is thought to be the product of male domination and some research has indicated that patriarchy and culture are two distinct concepts (George & Rashidi, 2014). The cultural explanation of violence assumes that cultures are static and that minority groups are more sexist (Volpp, 2003). This culturalization of violence fails to recognize the societal context of the violence that women face.

### ***Immigration and Settlement Issues***

Since this project is focused on South Asian immigrant women, it is important to discuss how immigration can further increase the vulnerability of domestic violence and make reporting a harder task. Immigration increases the risk of domestic violence because of the challenges and acculturation stress that come along with it (Aujla, 2013; Chan, 2020; Chaze & Medhekar, 2017). The need to adjust to a different cultural climate would no doubt increase tensions in the family and create stress between a married couple. Furthermore, women that have immigrated to Canada are legally and financially dependent on their husbands or a man in their families, and this makes it more difficult to seek help. In 2013, 54.1% of women entering Canada were under the economic class as a spouse or dependant, and 34.3% were under the family class (Hudon, 2015). Women often become trapped because they risk their legal status, deportation, or losing custody of their children (Erez & Harper, 2018). Immigrant women often do not know their rights while living in Canada. Men can threaten and instil fear in women by threatening to have

them deported or revoking sponsorship and permanent residency (Chan, 2020). It becomes even more complicated when there are children involved because men can threaten to gain custody and deport the mother back to their home country.

Women also have less of a chance to adapt to a new country than men (Ahmad et al., 2009). South Asian women are more accustomed to staying at home, decreasing the chance to socialize, learn English as well as about supports available (Ahmad et al., 2009). Lack of knowledge about formal support and community services becomes increasingly limited, and even further so when there is a lack of language-specific services. A high proportion of immigrant women come to Canada without basic knowledge of English or French, especially under sponsorship and family class (Hrick, 2012). A lack of language skills can multiply the fear and isolation of women in Canada, as well as the ability to access social and community support (Hrick, 2012). The feeling of dislocation and being away from family and friends can also lead to stress and a higher risk of violence (Shankar, Das, & Atwal, 2013, as cited by Chan, 2020). South Asian women lose their informal support when they immigrate here, and it further prevents them from seeking help because of shame and unfamiliarity with new formal supports (Garuge & Humphrey, 2009).

The findings discussed above help to shed light on the dark figure of domestic violence in the South Asian community and why women are so reluctant to seek help. A study by Sultana et al (2021) has demonstrated that the barriers to seeking help significantly outweigh the facilitators to seeking help. To summarize, the key barriers to seeking help are identified as patriarchal and cultural issues, fear of shame and dishonour, financial and economic dependency, language barriers, immigration and deportation issues, and isolation. These must be understood because as a result of these barriers, South Asian women develop certain and specific needs when seeking

help. Those needs, in turn, can help to address the research objective of seeing what domestic violence organizations are delivering services to the women.

### **Gaps in Victim Services**

The literature review that was conducted divided victim services into two categories: mainstream organizations and South Asian women's organizations (Abraham, 19995; Agnew, 1998; Aujla, 2013; Dasgupta, 2000; Merchant, 2000).

#### ***Mainstream Organizations***

Mainstream organizations are for women in general while South Asian women's organizations cater specifically to the needs of South Asian women. Garuge and Humphrey (2009) indicated that more support programs are required to address the inadequacies of current gaps in services so that it encourages more women to report their abuse. The existing literature has identified several gaps in mainstream organizations when it comes to South Asian immigrant women. It is already difficult for South Asian women to take the steps necessary to seek help, but victim services are rarely able to meet their needs. Firstly, as discussed previously, there is a lack of knowledge about available services. Domestic violence organizations use mainstream forms of advertisement (Ahmadzai, 2015) that South Asian women may have difficulty understanding. Furthermore, there is a lack of translation and language services, which not only prevents South Asian women from seeking help but also makes it difficult to communicate with workers within the organizations. Knowledge of traditions and customs, family and marriage dynamics, and class and caste systems are not understood by most organizations that help victims of domestic violence (Agnew, 1998). Although mainstream organizations may be accessible, they do not specifically meet South Asian women's needs and are not culturally appropriate (Raj & Silverman, 2007). Many of the models and frameworks developed by mainstream organizations

do not acknowledge that women may have multiple oppressions or capture the complexity of immigrant women's lives (Garuge & Humphrey, 2009). When South Asian immigrant women do seek help, there is a risk of the workers developing harmful stereotypes. Many workers of domestic violence services make assumptions about certain cultures which can often result in "culture blaming" (Ahmadzai, 2015). Depicting domestic violence as a product of culture is very harmful and overlooks other possibilities of violence. Staff are often not trained in intercultural awareness and cultural sensitivity (Chan, 2020).

### ***South Asian Women's Organizations***

Due to these gaps, many women are unlikely to seek formal help support such as medical and legal assistance, as well as shelters and crisis lines (Aujla, 2013). Instead, they turn to multicultural services or organizations dedicated to serving South Asians. South Asian Women's organizations emerged to provide services where South Asian culture is understood. Based on Abraham's (1995) findings, although each organization was developed to support South Asian women, the ideologies of the organizations can be divided into three categories. The first is value-oriented ideology, which is when the organization has core values that are explicit and specifically focus on ending violence against women. Diffused ideology is when the organization has values that are more loosely dispersed and one central value does not determine the goals of the organization. The last is unspecified ideology, which has an unstructured set of values and no specific goal (Abraham, 1995). When South Asian organizations provided services that meet the ethnic, cultural and language needs of South Asian women, they found that there was an increase in the number of clients that were served (Merchant, 2000). However, South Asian organizations face their own share of challenges. Most SAWO's have started as grassroots/volunteer-driven organizations and are nonprofit (Dasgupta, 2000, Merchant, 2000). Not only do they lack

funding, but they are forced to work away from their own communities because of their controversial missions (Dasgupta, 2000). As a result, workers from these organizations may not have the resources to “update their knowledge about various aspects of domestic violence, contemporary intervention methods, laws that affect immigrant women, advancements in research and available resources that help them and their families” (Dasgupta, 2000, p. 11). Dasgupta (2000) also notes that the seclusion and lack of training, funding and resources eventually evolve into an uneven quality of services. In Merchant’s (2000) study, many service providers of South Asian women’s organizations acknowledged that they were working with limited resources and funding, which makes it difficult to offer comprehensive services and accommodate the growing number of immigrant women.

It is clear that each type of organization has its limitations when providing services to South Asian immigrant women. The literature review conducted on both types of organizations helps to establish the research objectives. Acknowledging and knowing the gaps in each type of organization can assist in providing a basis for the findings of this research project, as the aim is to find out if there are inconsistencies in the current delivery of domestic violence services for South Asian immigrant women in Canada.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The aim of this research project was to determine the accessibility of victim services for South Asian immigrant women who are facing domestic violence. Upon initial comparison of the resource inventory between South Asian women’s organizations and mainstream domestic violence organizations, this study finds that each type of organization has a different objective and targets different populations when it comes to assisting victims of domestic violence. Mainstream organizations were found to be targeted specifically at victims of domestic violence

while South Asian organizations were composed of multicultural services that were for women in general. The original plan of the study was to focus more on the accessibility of services, but it was also found that there are limited organizations for South Asian immigrant women despite the fact that this project focused on cities with the largest South Asian populations. Furthermore, most South Asian women's organizations were located in Ontario and some cities in the province had multiple South Asian organizations. The four other major metropolitan cities that were included in this study each only had one South Asian women's organization available online that had services dedicated to assisting domestic violence victims. It should also be noted that most South Asian women's organizations in Vancouver did not have formal websites and only had Facebook pages, which made it difficult to sift through and find what services the organizations offered. Thus, mainstream organizations are more available for domestic violence victims than South Asian organizations. The findings of each organization's programs, services and objectives are discussed below.

### **Overview of Mainstream Service Organizations**

The mainstream organizations that were researched generally had a larger goal when it came to assisting domestic violence victims. Mainstream organizations had specific programming to help women in escaping their abusive situations and had transitional housing/shelters connected directly to the organizations. Most of them also offered legal aid within the organization and did not need referrals to outside legal sources. This is helpful in that it can more easily and quickly assist women whose immigration status is threatened or at risk. Their targeted audiences are specifically domestic violence victims and this is evident in their purpose statements. Purpose statements highlight and summarize the aims, goals and missions of

an organization. For example, the websites of Family Service Toronto and Battered Women's Support Services in Vancouver state:

*".. to promote non-violence and to work towards the elimination of violence against women"*

-Family Service Toronto (n.d)

*"Provides education, advocacy, and support services to assist all victims and survivors in our aim to work towards the elimination of gender-based violence and to work from a feminist perspective that promotes gender equity"*

-Battered Women's Support Services (n.d)

Out of all of the mainstream organizations examined, only one had extensive information on how they address domestic violence through an intersectional approach. Most of them had only briefly addressed it in their purpose statements or annual reports. Battered Women's Support Services heavily emphasized the importance of intersectionality and understanding that not all women face domestic violence the same way. They have an educative program called the Gender Equity Learning and Knowledge Exchange that seeks to "mobilize community-based experiences and evidence-informed resources from an intersectional, anti-oppressive, feminist and critical race theory, analysis and practice" (Battered Women's Support Services, n.d). They hold multiple volunteer training sessions for those interested in obtaining the necessary skills to end gender-based violence (Battered Women's Support Services, n.d).

Despite aiming to be inclusive of all victims of domestic violence, mainstream organizations were not found to be culturally appropriate or accessible for South Asian



immigrant women. Very few of the organizations had additional support or programming for immigrant women in general and of each mainstream organization that was looked at, only one of them had a separate program for South Asians that were facing family and partner violence. Victim Services of Peel in Brampton has a program called The South Asian Family Enrichment, which targets members of South Asian families who are caught in the cycle of family violence (Victim Services of Peel, n.d). They collaborate with multicultural services within ethno-specific communities to help end violence within families (Victim Services of Peel, n.d). Some organizations did not have the languages they had for translation and interpretation services listed on their websites or brochures so it was difficult to determine which languages they had available. The organizations that did have them listed did not encompass all South Asian languages and interpreters and translators were available, but not readily. Chan (2020) notes that this is common for many mainstream organizations because of funding arrangements, which leave immigrant women to turn to informal support or multicultural organizations. Another finding was that most domestic violence organizations did not have support groups that could help women find a sense of belonging or community. They solely focused on the violence that women faced and how they could overcome it, but not what comes after. Since isolation is one of the biggest barriers to seeking help from domestic violence, community and group support is important.

The findings above suggest that mainstream organizations are not fully accessible to South Asian immigrant women. Many of the organizations did not have separate programming for immigrants, and only one organization had separate programming for South Asian victims of violence. As Agnew (1998) noted, knowledge of South Asian traditions and customs as well as family dynamics are not understood by mainstream organizations. This is why having separate

programming for South Asians is important. They also have minimal translation and interpretation services which can turn South Asian women away from seeking help and communicating effectively with caseworkers. This is particularly harmful because most immigrant women do not have basic knowledge of English or French (Hrick, 2012). Moreover, the websites had a lack of information on how they train their staff on cultural sensitivity and awareness. The accessibility and diversity of services for South Asian immigrant women are marginal at best.

### **Overview of South Asian Women's Organizations**

As described in Abraham's (1995) studies, there exist three ideologies when it comes to an organization's goals and objectives. One of the ideologies was described as diffused ideologies as defined in the literature review, where an organization has more dispersed values and one central value does not describe the entire organization. The South Asian organizations in Canada that were examined for this research project can best be described to fall within this ideology. It was found that despite having specific programming for domestic violence victims, South Asian women's organizations in Canada are more targeted toward the general South Asian women and are known for providing multicultural services. Unlike mainstream organizations, most South Asian organizations did not specifically target victims of domestic violence but rather offer a wide range of services that are able to encompass all South Asian women and not just victims. A few of them also offer their services to men that are both victims and perpetrators of domestic violence as well as families and children. One of the main observations from this finding is that due to the stigma and shame surrounding the taboo subject of domestic violence, many South Asian organizations opt to focus on providing multicultural services instead of just focusing on domestic violence services. Each organization that was looked at did not use the

word violence or battered in their names and few used it in their purpose statements. The purpose statements of South Asian organizations from the South Asian Women's Centre in Toronto and South Asian Women's Community Centre in Montreal are provided below:

*“To increase self-awareness of South Asian Women and to empower women to develop their social and cultural potential. The Centre is a place where South Asian Women of all backgrounds and ages can access a variety of programs and services. We strive to provide an environment where women can work together to promote their well-being.”*

-South Asian Women's Centre (n.d)

*“We offer a wide range of services, such as settlement programs for refugees and new immigrants, language classes, education on individual rights, support for survivors and victims of violence, and high school programs”*

-South Asian Women's Community Centre (n.d)

Despite targeting a more general audience, the South Asian organizations that were analyzed offered services for issues that are specific to the South Asian community. They were more culturally aware and had knowledge of South Asian cultural aspects and concepts such as honour killings, dowries, and forced marriages. Each organization was found to have caseworkers of South Asian heritage, which would make it easier for them to connect with clients who are similar to them. This supports Dasgupta's (2000) study, in which she reported that South Asian women feel as if South Asian organizations are informal supports and like “insiders”, which makes them feel safer to disclose abuse, and the culturally familiar feeling of

the agency is able to outweigh any discomfort. After analysis of agency reports, the organizations also had more of an idea of how violence is perpetuated in the South Asian community and the dynamics of South Asian marriages and families. Something that stood out while searching through the website of the South Asian Women's Centre in Toronto was that they had a training toolkit for staff and clients as well as the general public aimed at educating people on honour-based violence and violence perpetuated in the South Asian community. The toolkit emphasized raising awareness of gender-based violence as well as the fact that the root of violence is in power, control and patriarchy and not a byproduct of culture (South Asian Women's Centre, 2016, p. 8). The organizations also emphasized the importance of intersectionality in their work. As described in the South Asian Women's Centre training toolkit, "survivors' experience with violence is influenced by their positionality and intersectionality, which can lie within certain cultural and socioeconomic parameters" (South Asian Women's Centre, 2016, p. 8). The South Asian organizations were seen to be raising awareness within the community and focusing on a culturally-centred approach to prevent violence. For example, the Indo-Canadian Womens Association holds regular workshops to awareness of certain topics surrounding the South Asian community. One of the main goals of the South Asian organizations was to provide a sense of community and belonging for South Asian immigrant women. Almost all of the organizations emphasized mental health and well-being, as well as how to prevent isolation and loneliness. They had support and counselling groups as well as activities such as the sewing program at the South Asian Women's Centre.

Due to a lack of funding and resources, the organizations depended largely on referrals to help women leave their abusive situations. None of the organizations that were included in the resource inventory had transitional housing or shelters. This poses an issue because South Asian

women may not feel comfortable staying at housing or a shelter that does not have the same cultural environment where they first got help. A participant in Ahmadzai's (2015) study noted that "they (other women) look at them weird, especially if they are wearing their ethnic dress, or if they cook things differently, they don't eat certain things". They also did not have direct legal aid, which deters the ability to provide information about immigration rights, status or laws quickly, as well as help to press charges or leave the abusive relationship. This suggests that there is still a lack of funding and resources allocated to South Asian Women's organizations, as explained in Dasgupta's (2000) study.

### **Recommendations**

While South Asian organizations are more accessible for South Asian immigrant women based on culture, language, and sense of community, they are lacking in availability in terms of the number of organizations. Furthermore, they do not have direct housing/shelters or legal aid and depend more on referrals to mainstream domestic violence organizations. Based on the findings discussed above, a true collaboration between mainstream domestic violence organizations and South Asian organizations must exist. Mainstream organizations have become more culturally diverse and sensitive but they still present barriers to South Asian immigrant women. On the other hand, South Asian organizations lack the funding and resources to fully assist domestic violence victims. If there is to be genuine, systematic change, there must first be micro-level changes within both organizations (Ahmadzai, 2015). Micro-level changes are immediate interventions that would make the experiences of women facing domestic violence easier (Ahmadzai, 2015). Some of the key findings and recommendations from the literature review and resource inventory analysis are:

- Communication between mainstream organizations and South Asian organizations to ensure that mainstream organizations are taught South Asian concepts and practices, as well as increasing language capacity so that they can be more culturally competent (Aujla, 2013). On the other hand, South Asian organizations can benefit from mainstream organizations by having a bigger audience to raise awareness and educate on domestic violence in the South Asian community.
- Development of more support groups and culturally and linguistically appropriate counselling services to help women find a sense of belonging and community. This means creating a safe space where women can express themselves and build relationships with other women who have faced violence.
- Hiring more South Asian workers in mainstream organizations so that clients can feel connected and comfortable about disclosing abuse.
- Development of more South Asian Women's centres in Canadian cities where the South Asian population is more widely dispersed.
- Development of transitional housing/shelters specifically for immigrant and South Asian women, and for mainstream housing and shelters to be cooperative of cultural and religious accommodations.
- Availability of legal services and clinics within South Asian organizations for more immediate access to information regarding immigration issues or criminal matters. Legal services should be provided in a language that the women feel comfortable in.
- Comprehensive training to understand the underlying factors of abuse for staff working in mainstream organizations to alleviate cultural blaming and discrimination.

- Access to South Asian translators and interpreters in mainstream organizations.

Interpreters should also be trained in intersectionality and ethno-gender perspective because although women are getting support does not mean they are getting appropriate information.

- Advertising for domestic violence organizations that are available in South Asian languages to ensure that women know how exactly to access support and determine the types of services available to them.
- Mandatory training for South Asian immigrants in cultural centres or multicultural organizations to learn about their immigration rights and Canadian laws so that they are informed about what to do if they need to leave an abusive situation.
- Empowering and educating South Asian women in both types of organizations to speak up about their violence through the use of media and campaigns, in areas where South Asians mostly reside. Education should also target men and elders in the community who perpetuate violence.

### **Conclusion**

Although South Asians make up the largest visible minority group in Canada, they continue to be invisible in domestic violence discourse. As more South Asian immigrants settle in Canada, it is incredibly important to understand and analyze the issues that they face. This research project explored the accessibility of domestic violence services for South Asian immigrant women through an intersectional and ethno-gender perspective. Through the literature review, the main barriers to seeking help were identified as patriarchal and traditional beliefs, linguistic barriers, shame and stigma surrounding domestic violence, fear of loss of immigration status, and lack of support and isolation. The South Asian community still holds beliefs that

domestic violence is considered a very private matter, and something that should be kept within the family. The pressure to maintain these traditional beliefs while settling down in a new country in combination with the other factors makes it extremely difficult for immigrant women to report instances of violence and causes them to stay in abusive relationships for longer periods of time (Chan, 2020).

If South Asian women do get the courage to report instances of abuse, their needs are not met through current domestic violence services. Through the use of a resource inventory, it was found that although mainstream organizations are more available, they lack accessibility in terms of providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services. This lack of care and support hinders South Asian women's ability to seek help (Aujla, 2020). South Asian organizations provide better support to their clients because of their knowledge of South Asian culture and the ability to create a more comfortable environment. However, South Asian organizations are not adequately equipped to support South Asian immigrant women due to a lack of formal resources and funding. With barriers to seeking help and current gaps in services, South Asian immigrant women face multi-faceted layers of oppression that are at the institutional and societal levels. In order to fill in the gaps in each type of organization, collaboration and communication between them should exist.

Although focusing on the responses and actions taken to combat domestic violence is necessary, awareness and advocacy of this topic are equally as important both within the South Asian community and Canadian society. Within the South Asian population, a cycle of abuse and trauma can be easy to uphold if the individuals within the community don't raise their voices and receive education on the harmful effects of hierarchical and patriarchal belief systems. Cultural and religious leaders, as well as those who run South Asian organizations, should work together



to erase the stigma surrounding domestic violence (George & Rashidi, 2014; Ahmad et al. 2009). For example, an initiative called PARIVAAR was developed in 2010 in Edmonton for collaboration between service providers, and religious and community leaders to change the way domestic violence is perceived in the South Asian community (Aujla, 2020). These initiatives can allow for collaboration and partnerships between mainstream organizations and South Asian organizations to continue providing community knowledge and safety for South Asian immigrant women (Aujla, 2020). On the other hand, mainstream organizations need to make sure they are educating themselves on the intersectional challenges that immigrant women go through and moving away from discriminatory attitudes and practices such as cultural blaming. There should be a shift in the subject of domestic violence being a byproduct of culture to that of greater societal factors, and recognizing this is a necessity when assisting victims of domestic violence. This would encourage more women to come forward with their experiences of violence and ensure that they feel comfortable and safe when approaching domestic violence support and resources. Domestic violence is an everyday, lived experience of many South Asian immigrant women and the first step in eliminating it is breaking down the intersectional, multi-layer barriers to seeking help.

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## Appendix

### *Organizations included in Resource Inventory*

<b>Mainstream Organizations</b>	<b>South Asian Organizations</b>
Family Service Toronto, Toronto	South Asian Women's Centre, Toronto
Victim Services of Peel, Brampton	South Asian Community Health Services, Brampton
Sagesse, Calgary	Canadian Pakistani Support Group Association, Calgary
The Today's Centre, Edmonton	Indo Canadian Women's Association, Edmonton
Women's Centre of Montreal, Montreal	South Asian Women's Community Centre, Montreal
Battered Women's Support Services, Vancouver	India Mahila Association, Vancouver