SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA COMMUNITY OF THE LOWER MAINLAND OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

By

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A GRADUATING ESSAY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

In

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

October 22, 2013

Accepted as conforming to the standard required for the degree of Master of Social Work

[Signature]
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Abstract

The sexual abuse of women and girls is a major public health and human rights concern that affects women worldwide and cross-culturally. This research paper specifically examines sexual abuse and violence against women and girls within the South Asian community, focusing on the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, Canada. In my discussion of reflexivity, I specifically examine my social location and personal experiences in regards to sexual abuse in the South Asian community. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical concepts that inform my analysis of the key issues explored in this paper. From there, I offer a reflection on the current debate over whether or not culture may indeed be said to inform sexual violence against women and girls within South Asian communities. Having analyzed how culture may be relevant to the treatment of women and girls, I then critically examine my own experiences of growing up within a number of South Asian communities throughout BC. I note that the lessons I learned from my own mother and other members of the South Asian community emphasized both the importance of keeping silent in the face of sexual abuse to protect the reputation of one’s family and the importance of being a “good girl”. This reflection leads into a discussion of the particular social and cultural concepts, such as shame and honour, which may inform understandings of sexual violence against women and girls in South Asian diaspora communities within Western countries. I then examine current research on South Asian women who resist problematic cultural discourses in an effort to resist abusive situations and the therapeutic challenges Western service providers may come up against when working with such women. Following, I examine
research on the experiences of front line workers in the Province of British Columbia who have worked with South Asian male perpetrators of intimate partner violence, including sexual violence. I then outline the current frameworks for service delivery for South Asian victims of sexual abuse in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. I offer a number of recommendations to help service providers in the Lower Mainland offer more appropriate support and services to South Asian survivors of sexual abuse. Finally, I discuss what the South Asian community itself can do to address sexual abuse and violence against women and girls.
Introduction

The sexual abuse of women and girls is a major public health and human rights concern that affects women worldwide and cross-culturally. As reported by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), the abuse of women “crosses every social and economic class, every religion, race and ethnicity” (ICRW, 2012, para. 1). Human rights groups such as Amnesty International, bolstered by the feminist movement, are now raising major concerns about the prevalence of all forms of violence against women and girls, which they rightly maintain undermine the human rights of women (Amnesty International, 2013, para. 2). Within professional organizations, there is also a growing awareness of violence against women and victims’ rights. Service providers, including nurses, doctors, teachers, social workers, law enforcement professionals, and therapists, are increasingly educated about the causes of sexual abuse and the signs to look for, yet many professionals often feel powerless in the face of cultural differences when trying to assist women or children from different socio cultural backgrounds who have suffered sexual abuse.

Within many Western countries, including Canada, there is a growing call to address the problem of violence and sexual abuse in burgeoning South Asian communities (Papp, 2011: Papp, 2010, Gupta, 2013; Hundal, 2013a). In this research, therefore, I undertake an
examination of the political and social structures and arrangements which may inform attitudes and opinions around sexual abuse and sexual violence within the South Asian community with a view to developing a greater understanding of the practice implications for those who work with South Asian sexual abuse victims. In addition, I make recommendations which could assist service providers who offer support to South Asian victims of sexual abuse. Ultimately, I offer a culturally informed framework to support those who work with South Asian survivors of sexual abuse. It is my hope that greater understanding and cultural awareness will lead to improvements in services for victims. I also hope that, as a South Asian woman who lives in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, I may use the information in this paper and the critical spirit my studies have engendered to raise awareness within my local community about the devastating impact sexual abuse can have on the lives of women and girls, and to bring about a positive change in people’s attitudes.

As this paper will demonstrate, sexual assault and abuse in diaspora South Asian communities is often embedded in a political socio-cultural paradigm that has its roots in South Asian societies. For that reason, it can reflect attitudes and opinions that may be different from the attitudes and opinions held by individuals from Western societies, including Westerners who have perpetrated or suffered from sexual abuse. As a result, service providers may lack cultural sensitivity and awareness when confronted with evidence of violence or abuse among the South Asian community, or they may revert to a confused form of cultural relativism that manifests itself in a reluctance to help individuals from ethnic minorities and see sexual abuse as simply a product of a culture that is different from and inferior to theirs. In this paper, I challenge both of these attitudes and argue that, though the immediate cultural context may be different from that
in which sexual abuse occurs in Western communities, sexual abuse in the South Asian community should not be viewed as inevitable. Similarly, while sexual abuse in the South Asian community is embedded in a specific political socio-cultural paradigm (as it is in Western communities) it should not be dismissed as simply a product of that cultural paradigm nor should South Asian victims of sexual violence be treated as less worthy of support than Westerners who experience sexual abuse. I argue that greater awareness of and sensitivity to South Asian culture can facilitate the recognition of abuse and help formulate a response that is effective at both the individual and community level.

For the purposes of this paper, the terms “sexual abuse,” “sexual violence,” and “sexual assault” will be used interchangeably within the context of sexual violence against South Asian women. The terms encompass any and all unwanted, non-consensual, sexual activity including sexual attacks and sexual touching (“Sexual Assault in Canada,” 2008). Research highlights that sexual abuse is a serious problem and its effects are wide ranging varying from survivor to survivor. Sexual abuse itself can range from sexual contact, fondling to intercourse. Reavey, Ahmed and Majumdar (2005) note that “sexual abuse” refers to “any form of sexual contact involving any unwanted touching” (p. 172). This definition acknowledges that not all forms of abuse include violence (‘violent’ in the way it is played out e.g. verbal abuse ensuring ‘compliancy’) and “sexual abuse” is an act where power is abused (Reavey, Ahmed, and Majumdar, 2005, p. 172). Research also indicates that the long term effects of sexual abuse can include but are not limited to: anxiety, depression, guilt, shame, sleep and eating disturbances, substance abuse, repetition of abusive relationships, inhibited sexual desire, difficulties with
intimacy, dissociation, low self-esteem, impaired concentration and intrusive thoughts and suicide (Best, 1995, p. 12).

Yet, despite the tremendous psychological toll that sexual abuse can take on girls and women, victims from varied backgrounds are reluctant to talk about their experiences. In her critical review of the empirical research on the impact of child sexual abuse’s disclosures, Ullman (2003) found that non-disclosure can lead to a worsening of symptoms for the victim. Despite the severe effects of child sexual abuse, victims often do one of two things: (1) fail to disclose the abuse, (2) delay telling others about it for years (Smith et al, 2000 as cited in Ullman, 2003). Ullman (2003) also found that “extant studies suggest that non-disclosure may be due to survivors’ fear of receiving negative reactions from others such as rejection or being blamed (p. 90).” Some of the reasons why victims do not disclose include, “negative reactions, embarrassment/shame, wanting to protect others, fear of negative consequences (e.g. losing one’s family) and threats from the abuser” (Ullman, 2003, p. 97).

While both child sexual abuse and sexual abuse in general, as well as non-disclosure, are a problem that crosses boundaries of culture, race, gender and economic status, Ullman (2003) also notes “that cultural familial and religious barriers identified in qualitative studies may also affect the likelihood of disclosure, but need further attention in larger-scale empirical studies” (p. 97). My primary objective in this research paper, therefore, is to examine how such barriers may arise in the South Asian community as a result of cultural attitudes and opinions around sexuality and gender and then investigate how such barriers may be overcome. Specifically, I will examine how sexual abuse is perceived and constructed within South Asian communities in Western nations, with a particular emphasis on the United Kingdom and Canada. This is an
important topic since, as highlighted by Best (1995), Asians: “represent one racial/ethnic group (whether abroad or in North America) whose experience of child sexual abuse and related counselling needs have been specifically identified as being little assessed” (pg.2). My specific focus is on considering the impact of cultural perceptions and constructs of sexual abuse in the South Asian community on women and girls within that community. I made the choice to focus specifically on female victims not out of any preference; rather my choice was ultimately dictated by a lack of available research on male South Asian victims of sexual abuse and by the fact that I have more personal familiarity with the experiences of South Asian women.

**Reflexivity**

The purpose of this section on reflexivity is to identify my personal connection to the topic my research focuses on, in order to examine my social location and expose my personal standpoint, as well as to consider the knowledge I might have in regards to the phenomenon of sexual abuse in the South Asian community. This process is important in social science research and reflexivity is a crucial tool with which to identify prejudices that may inform how one approaches and understands a given phenomenon. In this sense, reflexivity helps researchers uncover and remain attentive to their own biases and presuppositions. McGraw, Zvonkovic, and Walker (2000) noted that reflexivity is a process that allows “researchers to place themselves and their practices under scrutiny, acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process and impinge on the creation of knowledge” (p. 68).

My concern with sexual abuse and sexual assault within the South Asian community is informed by the fact of my being a woman of South Asian descent and an active member of the South Asian community in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Over the course of my
life, I have encountered many South Asian women who shared with me their stories of having been the victims of sexual abuse and violence. As a professional social worker, I have also had considerable experience working with victims of sexual abuse and violence. Specifically, I have worked as an intake and assessment child protection worker with the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) for the past eleven years. While much of my work-related experience has been with the Aboriginal community, I have had contact with South Asian clients. Prior to working with the MCFD, I worked at various transitions houses throughout the Lower Mainland. In these settings, in particular, I gained experience working with women who were fleeing abusive relationships and intimate partner violence.

In the case of my engagement with the research topic, I acknowledge that while my experience as a South Asian woman and a professional social worker provide me with personal knowledge and insight into the issue of sexual abuse within my community, I cannot assume that the reality of my life or the lives of other women I have encountered is the same reality that all South Asian women have experienced. Thus, while own experiences are valid and important sources of information which I can bring to bear on understanding my research topic, I need to be careful not to prejudge the experiences of other South Asian women based on those experiences. Likewise, I need to be careful not to make assumptions based purely on my professional experiences.
Theoretical Framework

While my interest in my research topic stems from personal experiences as a second-generation South Asian woman who has grown up in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, my approach to examining the issue is informed by a feminist and social constructivist understanding of how categories concerning gender and sexuality are socially constructed (Mikkola, 2008). This perspective accords well with a reading of sexual abuse within South Asian culture as being informed by cultural values that define women and men in very different ways, and that place extreme importance on the female body as repository of male honour. As my research demonstrates, South Asian women are socialized into gender roles that not only construct them as subordinate and inferior to men, but also place their bodies under the control of their male kin and marriage partners. Both cultural beliefs and patrilineal family structures reinforce these patterns of female subordination and male domination (Agrawal, n.d.). Ultimately, the control of women is focused on the regulation of their sexuality. Discussing how gendered views of the men and women situate women in inferior positions within patrilineal societies such as India Agrawal (n.d.) argues that:

Such societies are usually among those that are most unfavorable to women as they tend to markedly differentiate between the sexes. In a patrilineal system, descent is reckoned in the male line and usually women move to their husband’s home after marriage …. In such a system, there is a high value placed on the male offspring and men largely inherit property. Women are treated as temporary members of their natal household and their incorporation into their husband’s
household is always fraught with uncertainties…. Patrilineal societies are also the most likely to place a high premium on female chastity which leads to strict vigilance of female sexuality. Seclusion of women is also a part of the complex of institutions which are geared towards control of female sexuality. In deeply stratified and heterogeneous societies such as found in India, this can result in strict curtailment of individual choice in matters such as marriage and employment.

**Racism in Canada and Critical Race Theory**

When discussing the South Asian community within Canada, it is important to note that historically South Asians were openly discriminated against and subject to state-sanctioned racists’ policies. The most well known example of racist legislation against South Asian immigrants is the 1914 incident in which 376 Indians were detained on the steamer, the Komagata Maru, for two months until they were eventually denied entry into Canada (Johnston, 1984, as cited in Roy, Canadian Race Relations Foundation). As well, South Asians were denied the franchise, were unable to enter professional occupations, had restricted property rights, and were subjected to discrimination in housing (Johnston, 1984, as cited in Roy, Canadian Race Relations Foundation).

Undoubtedly, the situation for South Asians within Canada has dramatically improved in the last 100 years. South Asians are now able to participate as full members of Canadian society. They have full rights of citizenship and they also occupy positions of political power and influence. Moreover in terms of socio-economic statics, at the time of the 2001 national census
first generation South Asians did lag behind the Canadian national average in terms of employment and income (“The South Asian Community,” 2007).

Despite the fact that, on the whole, Canadians of South Asian descent seems to appear to be relatively well positioned within broader Canadian society, South Asian communities are not free from criticism from mainstream society. Badruddoja (2006) argues that for some South Asians the history of racial discrimination against past generations impacts how current and even future generations construct their relationship with the “host country”. Specifically, he notes that South Asians have been made to feel that were given entry into Canada only “for their labour and not to create their lives” (Badruddoja, 2006, p. 5). For their part, critical race theorists argue that South Asians continue to be subject to more subtle forms of systemic racism and cultural bias, which are manifest, for example, in popular representations of South Asians put forward by mainstream media outlets (Aujla, 2000; Olwan, 2013).

Aujla (2000) argues that “racist and colonial discourse of the past continues to influence dominant discourses and perceptions of South Asian Canadian women today” (p.41). She describes in detail the role of the Canadian media in making the South Asian community feel excluded from “national belonging”. This occurs in repeated media messages that paint the South Asian community as “barbaric and backwards, as clashing and conflicting with civilized and modern Canadian society” (p.42). She notes, for example, that The Vancouver Sun headlines “Close watch on City Sikhs” and “Sikh Militancy Grows”, which express concern over Sikh terrorism and militancy, are not that far off from openly racist cries of “Hindu Invasions” (p.42). Picking on the same theme as Badruddoja (2006), Arjuna (2000) argues that South Asian Canadians, even those whose families have been in Canada for several generations, continue to
be seen as “foreigners” despite being born and raised in Canada. The “us and them boundary” and the accompanying myths and stereotypes of South Asians as “others” have been historically “constructed by the dominant culture and imposed on others regardless of their consent” (p.42). Aujla (2000) notes the relations between “colonizer and colonized,” remain true as today as they did in the past. She insists that even in multicultural Canada, skin color and ethnicity continue to act as markers of one’s place of origin, markers which are used to ascertain traits and behavior which are associated with certain races (Aujla, 2000, p. 43).

Reflecting on the phenomenon of members of the South Asian community coalescing in specific areas of Canadian cities, Barnnerji (1999) argues that this tendency is the result the South Asian community’s attempt to protect itself from racism and to ensure its cultural survival, thus making them more than just a “natural process”. Barnnerji’s (1999) view when the South Asian community forms neighbourhoods it is the result of result of discriminatory and exclusionary practices deliberately meant to physically isolate South Asian people from mainstream Canadian society. Similar exclusionary practices occur in the socio-economic realm: “we have by and large uncritically inhabited the socio-economic zones, grids, or boxes created by us by Manpower and Immigration or Employment and Immigration Canada” (Bannerji, 1999, p. 266). Bannerji (1999) highlights that in seeing the formation of the South Asian community within Canada not as natural process, but rather as a cultural and political practice, “it becomes possible for us to develop a critique of the social organization, social relationships, and moral regulations which go into the making of it” (p. 154). She further notes that, “in the ideological discourse of the community it was made to appear that when people migrated, they did so as communities, not as a response to national and international political economy” (p.157).
Turning to the experience of South Asian women, Bannerji (1999) emphasizes that their experience cannot be deconstructed in isolation from her political, social, economical, and cultural social location: “the pre existence of colonial/racist/Orientation perception and stereotypes of South Asian women, embedded in official and everyday structural and cultural practices and meanings, have been powerful sources of distortion and misrepresentation of our subjectivities and politics” (p. 156). Through dominant discourse of mainstream Canadian society and media, South Asian women are held to be subjected to what Jiwani (1999) refers to as a “double dose of patriarchy” (p.179). To illustrated this point, Jiwani (1999) examines how the Canadian media constructed the murder of a young South Asian woman, 14 year old Reena Virk. She highlights how marginalized youth and women experience patriarchal oppression in the host society in which “their own culture is devalued and constructed as inferior” and “cultural scripts in both worlds encode patriarchal values these girls face tremendous struggle in trying to fit” (p.179). She draws attention to the media coverage of Reena Virks death and absence of critical race analysis in the media accounts “as a form of violence communicated by exclusion, scapegoating, and targeting of “other”, and underpinned by the inferiorization of difference as well as it’s framing as deviance” (p.178). She argues media’s account of Reena Virk’s death as “girl on girl violence” denies that racism is a phenomenon that exists in Canada” (p. 178-179). She notes, “these issues are central to highlighting the particular way in racism and sexism interact in shaping the lives of racialized girls and contributing to their marginalization and vulnerability to violence-both as girls and as racialized other (p.182).”
A very recent examination of Canadian media representations of South Asians undertaken by Olwan (2013) has specifically considered how depictions of honour-based violence, and so-called honour crimes may be used to perpetuate a racist view of South Asians as barbaric and backward. Owan (2013) focuses on a number of texts that she believes exemplifies the process of othering South Asians through lurid, simplistic, and politicized depictions of honour crimes. She identifies an article published in The Globe and Mail by Meriel Beattie on the killing of Samia Imran, a Pakistani woman, as an example a discursive style and politicized retelling of events of that create a false impression of South Asian culture as uniformly oppressive towards women. She notes, for example, that Beattie left, “unexplored the contexts of resistance to this example of gendered violence, readers are left to assume that violence against women remains largely accepted and unchallenged in Muslim majority states” (p. 4)

In exploring her theme of how violence against women is framed as a largely immigrant and South Asian problem, Olwan (2013) also takes issue with the work of “partisan expert” Arjua Papp, a survivor of an abusive forced marriage and counsellor who has worked with South Asian women for many years (p. 12). She argues that while Papp’s work may seem compelling, it ultimately “ends up denying the contextual specificities necessary to better understand and combat gendered violence” (p. 12). In my discussion of Papp’s work below, I highlight that Papp (2011; 2010) provides considerable insight into the socio-cultural and religious discourse in which sexual violence against occurs within the Canadian South Asian community.
Nonetheless, it is important to examine the “larger contexts” in which gendered and sexual violence occur (p. 14) as just focusing on culture fails to capture the structural forces of oppression that shape the lives of women of color living in Canada.

**Challenging Patriarchy and Political Correctness**

While the theorists above have highlighted what they argue are the distorted perceptions of South Asians propagated by discursive practices in the mainstream media, the focus of my research is on sexual violence against women within the South Asian community, as opposed to how the South Asian community and South Asian culture are viewed by broader Canadian society. In discussing the concepts of “honour,” “shame” and female “purity,” as they are used to define South Asian women, I focus on these concepts in terms of how they are used and understood within the South Asian community itself. It may be that this aspect of South Asian culture is used by some Canadians to perpetuate a racist stereotype of South Asians as barbaric others, and that is an issue that needs to be handled sensitively by the media, governments at all levels, and the South Asian community itself. In the recommendations section, I specifically discuss the fine line that service providers of other cultural backgrounds must walk between being cognizant of cultural concepts but not assuming that South Asian women are victims themselves of these concepts and options made available to South Asian clients should not be limited to those available to women of other cultural backgrounds. The greatest danger, I argue, is to assume that women themselves want to continue to be defined by these concepts. Refusing to speak openly and honestly about these ideas prevents the South Asian community from coming to terms with a set of beliefs and practices that are harmful to women and girls.
My decision to explore the issue of the sexual abuse of South Asian women and girls is one that arises from concerns that are deeply embedded in my life as a South Asian woman who was born and raised in Canada. Over the years, it has become clear to me that there are intense cultural forces that push South Asian women into remaining silent about the pain in our lives despite the severity of problems many of us struggle with. While the idea that a community and even a whole socio cultural group can be mired in practices which are oppressive and harmful to women and girls may not accord well with some politically sensibilities, it is nevertheless a conclusion that I have come to about my own community.

All cultures, including South Asian culture, are open to change and flux and host a plurality and at time diverging practices but for the abuse of women and girls to end, the patriarchal ideology that pervades South Asian societies must be challenged. I feel particularly passionate about this because my own personal experience as a South Asian woman has taught me to remain quiet about problems in my community and pretend as though they do not exist. The oppression of women in South Asian communities is real. The fact that it exists within a political, social and patriarchal culture that devalues women and girls is also real.

Yet, many South Asian authors and activists, whose work I examine in this paper, themselves speak quite openly and forcefully about the subordination of women in South Asian communities and political, cultural, economical and social factors that contribute and reinforce that subordination. My own experience is that the South Asian community I grew up in seemed more conservative, more rigid, and more patriarchal than that of mainstream Canadian culture. I also felt that South Asian culture was at odds with the values of women’s emancipation and sexual freedom that Canadian women from Western backgrounds seemed to enjoy. I know
first-hand that female obedience and family honour matter to my community and what I have encountered in the academic literature resonates powerfully with my own experience. I also know that however resourceful women may be at finding ways to manoeuver within the small spaces that South Asian culture has left open for us, the socially imposed principles, nevertheless denies us our full humanity by excessively idealizing female sexual purity and chastity and often by enforcing these ideals through violence. Myself, my friends and many other South Asian women feel the weight of these cultural constructs like a yoke around necks – for us, they are all too real.

To speak frankly and honestly about how social problems may be rooted in certain socio-cultural traditions is not racist. In fact, denying the role that culture plays in informing violence and sexual abuse against women does a disservice to victims and plays into the hands of the social and cultural forces that are resisting change. Canadian South Asian feminist activist and survivor of an abusive forced marriage, Aruna Papp (2011), also believes that what is needed is an unflinching and honest acknowledgment of the harmful ideas and practices that persist among South Asian communities within Canada. She writes that:

The South Asian community must own up to the reality of harmful cultural practices involving young females and confront the difficulties experienced by both second- and third-generation young women. To this community belongs the greatest of challenges to reform itself and the harmful cultural practices imported to Canada. However, I would like to challenge non South Asian Canadians to take a principled stand on these issues and not be afraid to start a wide discussion
about the importance of cultural frameworks in mental health and in patterns of abuse against women in Canada. (p. 12)

For Papp (2010; 2011) the inherent moral relativism of multi-culturalist ideology is unacceptable in the face of the violence and abuse experienced by real women. Papp (2010) notes that “well-meaning advocates for female equality” are mistaken in their attempts to avoid discussing the long-standing and well-established cultural traditions that inform violence against women in the South Asian community. Moreover, Papp (2011) stresses that, in relation to the discussion of violence against South Asian women, the concern with perpetuating stereotypes about the South Asian community is a false one and should give way to open and honest debate:

As South Asians we need to accept the reality of what is happening to our young women and to confront the difficulties experienced by both first- and second-generation South Asians rather than worry about perpetuating stereotypes and wanting to be viewed as a model immigrant community. Only then can we move forward as a country. (p. 13)

Like Papp, my concern is about challenging the political, socio-cultural factors that impact South Asian communities rather than protecting South Asian communities from the embarrassment or the shame that certain members might feel when the violence and abuse in their midst is exposed. Refusing to link the violence women experience to culture ultimately plays into the hands of those who want the oppression of women to continue since it shifts the blame away from oppressive cultural constructs such as obedience, shame, and family honour to vague processes and abstract forces that are disconnected from the reality of people’s lived experience.
However, culture alone fails to capture the other hierarchies that shape lives of women of color and the complex interaction of these hierarchies has to be included in the understanding of abuse. As Jiwani (1999) highlights above in her article examining death of Reena Virk, “the contextual factors shaping women’s lives need to be examined in structural terms (i.e.) as emanating from the subordinate position of the cultural group in relation to the dominant society, and the construction of racialized immigrant communities as deviant others (p.179).” Failure to do so will result in generalizations of the experiences of women of color and denial of woman of color at different locations. Recognizing that sexual abuse is rampant in every culture and how hierarchies and interaction of gender, race, sexism shape women’s experience of abuse in South Asian communities will lead to more compassionate and effective care of women from diverse cultural backgrounds.

**Defining “South Asian” and “South Asian Culture”**

For the purpose of this paper the term “South Asian” refers to people from the Indian subcontinent, including India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Abraham, 2000). The term “South Asian” also refers to people whose parents, grandparents or roots are from the above countries. In British Columbia, as in other jurisdictions in North America, “South Asians” comprise a complex heterogeneous population, distinguished by separate and cross cutting characteristics of birth place, language, religion, caste, class, customs, and upbringing, as well as age, gender, and personal interests (Dusenbery, 1981). Nonetheless these differences between South Asian populations are often overlooked. In their review of the
literature, Puwar and Raghuram (2003) found that the heterogeneity of the South Asian community in the West is often ignored. Nodwell (1993) raises the same point, noting that in the academic literature, assumptions are made that South Asians are a homogenous group. This causes significant gaps in the research as well as policy problems when it comes to actual public service implementation. Similarly, my research revealed that the term “South Asian” was used loosely and was rarely defined, allowing readers to make assumptions and overlook differences.

Bhattacharjee (1997) examines the term “South Asian” further and maintains that the term is also used for the “purpose of self-identity and used by people who would like to align themselves politically with any of the above countries and are working towards social change” within their community (cited in Bhattacharjee, 1997, p. 338). She draws attention to why this definition is possibly preferred for some groups, as it is “less rigid, has little institutional authority (such as flag or embassy), less solidified cultural homogeneity and way to amass numbers” (p.338). However, despite its appeal, “South Asian” is not a term that people within the contexts of their community will use to define themselves as it has too broad an application to be used as an identifier (Nodwell, 1993). To take my family as an example, my parents would identify themselves as “Indian”, “Punjabi”, or “Sikh” but not “South Asian” as they state it does not reflect the fact that they are from North India and refers to people from only “South India”.

In an example of how diverse South Asian identities can be within the South Asian mosaic and the greater Asian continent, Nodwell (1993) examines second generation Indo-Canadians and the meaning of “Indian community.” Nodwell’s research shows how different groups in Vancouver locate themselves socially when it comes to their Indian identity. Second generation Indians often differentiate themselves based on specific origins of caste,
religion, language, and country. However, the most significant marker for self-identity within the South Asian community is religion. She further states that despite the commonalities, relations between South Asian groups can be strained. For example, she spoke to Sikh and Hindu individuals in Vancouver and they indicated that their relations have been strained since the 1984 attacks on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India and the resulting assassination of Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India at the hands of Sikh militants. As one of the Hindu participants said: “When this Indira Gandhi assassination came up, their attitudes were quite different...so for a while they (relationship with Sikhs) were strained” (Nodwell, 1993, p.103).

Diversity aside, South Asians do have common shared experiences and cultural attitudes due to the fact that they originate from the same region of Asia and due to similar cultural values. In fact, the differences between Asian ethnic and cultural groups are far less apparent than the differences between Asian culture as a whole and Western culture (Crites, 1991). Further, Abraham (2000) points out that South Asian ideas of family are distinct from those in North America, insofar as South Asian families are seen as single units in which individuals represent the family unit as a whole. Moreover, South Asians place significant emphasis on the need to maintain the equilibrium and reputation of the family and to avoid any actions that would adversely affect the family or the community at large (Abraham, 2000).

Maiter (2003) describes South Asian culture as collectivist as opposed to individualistic. In a collectivist culture, family comes before the individual, collective honour is more important than individual suffering, obedience is valued over independence, and conformity is more important than competition or achievement (Maiter, 2003). Within family groups, individuals are
expected to fulfil established roles and considerable importance is placed on loyalty to the paternal side of the extended family (Papp, 2010). Papp (2010) emphasizes that an essential feature of South Asian culture is rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal family structures which sanction the domination of female members by male members. For example, in an extended family, it is the eldest male who wields the most authority and who dominates both females and younger males (Papp, 2010). Family members, especially female family members, are expected to yield to the will of the family patriarch and to demonstrate absolute obedience to him (Papp, 2010).

While the predominant religious faiths within the region -- Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam -- have widely diverging belief systems, and they all support a patriarchal gender system which is grounded in concepts of male honour and female purity and in which “honour” killings represent the most extreme expression of this ethos (Chelser & Bloom, 2012). As Chelser and Bloom (2012) demonstrate in their study, honour killings are not rare or isolated incidents and the practice and the beliefs that support the practice can accompany immigrants into their adopted countries. Similarly, social constructs such as “izzat” (honour) and “sharm” (shame) cross religious boundaries and have a transcendent social reality that is just as applicable in a Pakistani Muslim British community as they are in Canadian Sikh and Hindu communities (Thandi & Lloyd, 2011).

The importance of the family and its reputation are significant factors which inform attitudes towards the sexual abuse of women and girls. While violence and sexual abuse against women and girls is a worldwide problem (Khan, 2000) and is not restricted to any one particular
culture or country. The key argument here is that, within South Asian communities, violence against women is informed by codes that are embedded within societal and religious discourse. In terms of sexual abuse in South Asian communities, codes around honour and shame are especially significant, as a woman can bring shame upon her family even through forced sexual contact. In fact, within South Asian communities regulated by these discourses, sexual violence is seen not necessarily understood as violation against a woman’s autonomy and person but a violation of her male family’s property (Harris, 2013). Victims, as Harris (2013) points, are often persuaded or forced to marry their abusers and this is considered a satisfactory outcome, at least from the point of view of male honour.

Given the importance of socially sanctioned gender arrangements informing how women and girls are viewed and treated, it is worthwhile to examine not just core precepts such as honour and shame, but also key religious beliefs and mythic stories that give expression to those precepts within South Asian communities. Within Judeo-Christian traditions, for example, the Biblical myth of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib has been used as a rationale for the subordination of women (Gaylor, 2004). Likewise, the myth of Eve falling into temptation and introducing sin into the world has been historically used to deny women opportunities to participate in education and public life (Gaylor, 2004). Within South Asian traditions, perhaps the most disturbing and literal illustration of the link between religious beliefs which inform culture and actual practice is the myth of Sita which is linked to the practice sati.

Sita, a mythic figure who endured and survived an ordeal by fire to prove that her “virtue” remained intact, is held up as the model for sati, which involves a widow either self-immolating herself on her husband’s funeral pyre or being forced on to it. While sati is
banned in India, the practice still occurs occasionally and the idea of a “sati” continues to have powerful appeal. As an Indian legal scholar points out, “Today, the status of women in India can be gauged quite closely from the fact that a practice such as sati is still possible, and publicly supported and glorified” (Ahmad, 2009, para. 4). Hundal (2013b) emphasizes that contemporary misogynistic practices in India are still closely linked with ancient religious mythology such as the myth of Sita and its connection to ideas about female purity and honour:

It is also indisputable that cultural and religious practices are used as justification to control women under the guise of ‘honour’ and ‘purity’. The model of a pure and traditional Sita who is willing to fulfil her role as a daughter and wife still looms large.

Growing up South Asian in the West: Personal Reflections

I have chosen to examine the topic of sexual abuse within the South Asian community because of my unique perspective as a South Asian woman and because of the importance of studying the sexual abuse of women and girls within South Asian communities in Canada. Currently, there is little research on the topic. For example, a Google Scholar search for the terms “sexual abuse; South Asian women; Canada” identified zero studies covering the topic of sexual abuse specifically. The particular culture that I am most familiar with is the Punjabi South Asian diaspora community within British Columbia that I grew up in. Punjabi immigrants began immigrating to British Columbia in the early twentieth century and, within the Lower Mainland of BC, they now make up the largest non-Christian group (Nayar, 2012). According to Asian Pacific Post, “Abbotsford has the highest proportion of South Asians in Canada, at 16.3 per cent
of the total population, while Surrey accounts for almost half of the 200,000-plus South Asians living in the Metro Vancouver area” (“Minority report,” 2008).

I was born in Terrace BC, but during my childhood and adolescence my family moved around extensively and, as I matured, I began to notice common themes in the experiences of my South Asian friends in relation sexual abuse. The example of my friend K. exemplifies the experiences of many other South Asian girls I knew. When we were both 14, K. disclosed to me that during a recent trip to India she had been sexually abused by one of her male cousins. Sometime later, she also revealed that a neighbour who was South Asian and a close friend of her family had sexually molested her. One day, as we were walking to the corner store, she showed me her wrist that had cuts on it. She said that she was in pain and that she wanted to express that pain by screaming but that she could not, so she cut herself instead.

I went home feeling distressed. While my mom was cooking dinner, I approached her and told her about my friend cutting herself but I intentionally did not mention anything about the sexual abuse. Even to this day I remember my mother’s words very clearly: “I don’t know why you kids try to kill yourself over little things… I don’t want her mom to know that you know all this. She would be very embarrassed… Apne lokh ke sochu gai (What would our people think?)”

To many non-South Asians it may be surprising that my mother seemed to have little concern with the fact that my friend was self-harming but yet was very concerned with the potential shame that K.’s mother might feel at knowing that others knew about her daughter’s behaviour. To me, however, my mother’s reaction was more or less what I expected. Having
grown up in a community that places extreme importance on what others in that community think about one and one’s family, I understood the power of shame and the importance of “what our people think”. My mother and I never spoke about that day again. The message that I received from her was crystal clear: to keep quiet and not to get involved. Other South Asian women growing up in Western countries have also received similar messages.

While growing up, I heard many stories of abuse from friends who also chose to remain silent, except to friends, and never reveal the abuse they suffered, not even to close female family members. Recently, I was discussing my research proposal with a South Asian friend who is also a colleague. She confided that she was also sexually abused as a child by a South Asian elder in her community who was a close family friend and had never spoken about this incident except to her husband and some of her close female friends. She never told her parents and was troubled by why she continued to keep silent. She felt in her heart that her parents would support her unconditionally but she also felt a desire to protect them from any potential shame and embarrassment. She was also conscious of the fact this experience played a significant role in her life, impacting her emotionally, mentally and physically from that day forward. She suffered eating disorders, had poor self-esteem, and experienced intimacy problems with her husband.

Thinking about the experience of my friends, their reluctance to speak openly about their abuse suggests to me that they taught themselves to find comfort in silence in order to cope with the abuse and its effects. However difficult hiding the effects of sexual abuse may be, South Asian women often prefer to live in silence and anguish rather than upset the patriarchal system that supplies their communities with the cohesion which is necessary for their survival as a socio-cultural group (Singh, 2009). I also observed my friends’ determination to protect the
reputation of their family and community by acting in ways that were expected (e.g. going to the
temple on the weekends and making the honour roll at schools). The messages I received from
my family and community were that what matters the most is that daughters are seen as “good
girls”. While I grew up in Canada, Hundal (2013b) notes that the same social and family
pressures are exerted on South Asian women in their home countries:

From the moment they have children, parents worry so much about ‘losing face’
in the community that while boys have all the freedom they want, girls are
advised to avoid doing anything that would supposedly bring shame. It also
means that when they disobey, women can end up paying a terrible price.”

Within the South Asian communities I encountered in British Columbia, the importance
of being a “good girl” was reinforced by negative community gossip and the general disapproval
of “bad girls” (e.g. girls found dating prior to marriage, drinking in bars, or not wearing modest
clothing) and their families. By the time I was in high school I quickly became aware of how
social constructs of the “good girl” and “the bad girl” that I had grown up with had been
embedded deep within my psyche. I also became aware of how much I feared the disapproval of
my parents and of the South Asian community, if ever I engaged in “bad” behaviour such as
drinking alcohol or going out with boys. From my perspective, my anxieties appeared much
more pronounced than that of my white friends as I felt my white friends were allowed to date,
and at worst, feared being grounded if their parents discovered they had consumed alcohol.

While I came from a loving family, the experience of Jasvinder Sanghera, a British South
Asian woman from the Sikh community, is familiar to me as it would be to many of my friends:
“I was groomed to understand the rules. It was an environment of fear - there were such contradictions between the independence and hope I learned at school and the conditions at home” (Seal & Wiseman, 2009). Like Ms Sanghera, we too experienced troubling contradictions between our strict upbringings and the liberal values of Canadian society we were exposed to at school. As a teenager, if I engaged in “bad” behaviour, I could bring shame upon my entire family and embarrass us in front our whole community. Growing up, the words of my mother: “What would our people think?” were always in the back of my mind.

The Sexual Abuse of South Asian Women in the West

While the sexual abuse of South Asian women needs to be understood within the context of South Asian political and socio cultural structures, the particular nature of the sexual abuse that South Asian immigrant women experience is also influenced by the political and socio cultural currents of the Western countries in which they live in. In fact, Abraham (1999) emphasizes that the sexual abuse and sexual self-identification of South Asian immigrant women must be analyzed within the context of the bicultural environment they reside in.

The context of sexual abuse that South Asian women experience is further reflected in the experiences of their children who are born and raised in West but who continue to be subject to the same cultural constructs and strict gender roles as South Asians living in their home countries. Researchers have just recently started to look at how South Asian women raised outside of South Asia may perceive or construct sexual abuse in relation to their identity and acculturation level. Agarwal (1991) noted, for example, that although South Asian immigrant women in the United States felt that they had achieved a degree of liberation and independence
from the institutional oppression they experienced in India, “the second generation Indian woman feels that old-world gender roles are still rigidly being upheld for her” (as cited in Das Dasgupta, 1998, p. 957).

Whether first, second, or third generation immigrants, South Asian women living in the West who are the victims of sexual abuse and violence, often not only have to deal with the psychological trauma caused by the abuse, but also the additional pressure to keep silent to protect the reputation of their family and community. In fact, while recent and not recent South Asian immigrant women living in North America may have different backgrounds, they often have to deal with the same social constructs such as “honour,” “chastity,” and “virginity”. As noted above, the pressure to conform to ideals of pure and chaste womanhood and to protect male honour, may lead to reluctance on the part of female victims to come forward and report sexual abuse whether at the hands of their intimate partners, family members, members of the South Asian communities, or members of the community at large. As also noted, these constructs are a product of political and social forces in South Asian societies that often migrate with immigrants and they also play a role in influencing how children that are born to immigrant families think about issues such as sexuality and sexual violence. While there is a great deal of similarity within various South Asian societies and communities when it comes to ideas of honour and shame, that similarity is also manifested in the reluctance of South Asian women, whatever their particular ethno-cultural background, to reports sexual abuse (Abraham, 1999; Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Milarsky, Venkataramani-Kothari & Plante, 2006; Okazaki, 2002; Purkayastha, 2000; Lee, Pomeroy, Yoo, & Rheinboldt, 2005). This reluctance often leads to situations where law enforcement professionals come up against a wall of silence when trying to
investigate such allegations. Words such as “rape” often shock victims into silence because they equate such words with shame, losing face, and dishonouring the family (Abraham, 1999; Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Ahmed, Reavey, & Majumdar, 2009).

Himani Bannerji (1999), examines silence and how can be “highly telling-it can mean anything from complicity to resistance” and how it speaks “volumes” about South Asian women’s social location as women of color (p.153). Escoffier (1991) writes that “one major limitation of identity politics and its representation in multiculturalism is that we are born within a web of overlapping identities and group affiliations, but we are forced to disconnect those ties to focus on only one (as cited in Badruddoja, 2006, p.34). For women of color, “we are in a situation of double jeopardy, since speaking and not speaking both entails problems (Bannerji, 1999, p. 153). Ultimately, such silence around sexual abuse, as I discovered as a teenager, is harmful both to individuals and to the South Asian community as a whole. The silence surrounding sex and sexuality was also identified by a community member in the Lower Mainland in a CBC report (“Sikh community stunned,” 2007) when three Sikh priests were charged with sexually assaulting a child during the 1990’s. When the victim came forward to the police at the age of 25, a member of the South Asian community stated, “We are still in shock...first of all, we just don’t talk about sexuality” (“Sikh community stunned,” 2007).

While the silence surrounding sex and sexuality has also been identified as a problem which affects South Asian communities living in the West, these problems are also widespread in their countries of origin. For example, a major empirical study on child abuse undertaken for the Ministry of Women and Child Development conducted in India found that:
In India child sexual abuse or sexuality are concepts that are never discussed, to the extent that parents do not discuss physical and emotional changes in children’s bodies related to puberty….Very often children do not even realize that they are being abused...Some deep seated fear has always moved Indian families to keep their girls and their 'virginity' safe and many kinds of social and cultural practices have been built around ensuring this (Kacker, Varadan, & Kumar, 2007, p. 73).

As noted in the above study, perhaps the most significant factor in preventing an open and honest dialogue about sexual abuse has to do with the extreme importance that is placed on women’s sexual purity and chastity. The study also highlighted the fact that:

Some deep seated fear has always moved Indian families to keep their girls and their 'virginity' safe and many kinds of social and cultural practices have been built around ensuring this (Kacker, Varadan, & Kumar, 2007, p. 73).

South Asian dominant societal and religious discourses place enormous emphasis on female virginity and purity is a highly cherished part of a woman’s sexuality. Moreover, the sexuality of women is heavily tied to family honour and is thought to reflect back on their relatives, including those of their fathers and brothers. It is for this reason that the abuse of children, especially young girls is often kept under wraps.

In South Asian dominant societal and religious discourses, girl’s virginity is something that should be protected by her family, including both her male and female relatives, at all costs. Even in the case of rape or forced sexual contact, the girl or woman is thought to be contaminated by such contact and the family’s standing in the community can suffer as a result (Chelser & Bloom, 2012). For that reason, the deeply ingrained obsession with preserving
female sexual purity and family honour can manifest itself as silence in the face of sexual abuse. This does not mean that South Asian parents or families do not care about their children. The difference is that South Asians often see no point in bringing cases of abuse to the attention of authorities because they feel that they will have an unwelcome spotlight shone on them without any real benefit to the victim. This also occurs in a broader context of systemic racism and Islamophobia that brings other fears and distrusts.

Research by Gilligan and Akhtar (2006) further supports the fact that patriarchal values and beliefs regarding sex and sexuality have, to a large extent, followed South Asian immigrants to their new homes in Canada and United Kingdom. Although in Canada and United Kingdom there is a high degree of public awareness about sexual violence against women and girls, both continue to be patriarchal, racist and sexist societies. In their research Gilligan and Akhtar (2006) explored why there was under-reporting of child sexual abuse in South Asian communities in Britain and found that although South Asian women acknowledge that sexual abuse exists and needs to be addressed, they feared repercussions from their cultural community and judgment from the Western community. While South Asian women in general might be worried that the discussion of sexual abuse could open up their community to criticism and by doing so reinforce cultural stereotypes, it is unlikely that concerns over community stereotypes are uppermost in the mind of a woman who has been sexual abused. A much more immediate and real concern would most likely be her fear of personal censure or even reprisal and punishment as a result of having been a victim. The concern over personal censure or reprisal is certainly the dominant theme in both literature uncovered in my research and in my personal experiences interacting with South Asian victims of sexual abuse. From the research I
have examined, as well as from my own personal experience, one of the key issues facing South Asian women is the reluctance to talk about sexual abuse for fear of being blamed for it (Gilligan & Akhtar, 2006; Gupta, 2013).

Writing about what she calls “India’s rape culture,” feminist activist and women’s rights campaigner Rurchira Gupta (2013) explains that, within South Asia, it is the victims themselves who are often blamed for their plight and treated as outcasts. Within India, women also have very little confidence that the authorities or legal system will often them any protection (Gupta, 2013). Gupta (2013) reports that many believe that if they come forward as victims, the police might even subject them to further violence and abuse. Given the legacy of the disturbing and deeply misogynistic “rape culture” that Gupta describes and the burden of maintaining family honour, it is not surprising that even South Asian women who grow up in Western countries with active public campaigns against rape and violence against women, are still reluctant to come forward as victims. In South Asian societies, a young girl or woman is not simply an individual; she carries with herself and within herself the honour of her whole family. Her ability to care for her husband to make him happy, or her ability to avoid situations where she may be sexually abused often revolve around her family’s honour. This is a terrible burden to bear.

Unfortunately, specific studies that deal with sexual abuse and violence against South Asian women in North America are limited (Thandi & Lloyd, 2012; Abraham, 1999; Mutta and Kaur, 2010). Research on intimate partner violence (IPV) does point to the fact that South Asian communities experience more IPV than other ethnic groups (Raj and Silverman, 2002; Papp, 2010), but the research on sexual abuse is lacking. While there is a serious shortage of research on the scope of sexual abuse of South Asian women in North America (Ahmed, Reavey, &
Majumdar, 2009; Reavey, Ahmed, & Majumdar, 2006), the data that is available points to very low levels of reporting amongst these communities. Researchers are not sure if this is due to actual low rates of sexual abuse or low reporting or a combination thereof (Milarsky, Venkataramani-Kothari & Plante, 2006; Okazaki, 2002; Rozee & Koss, 2001). The major barriers which might prevent South Asian women from reporting sexual abuse include a “lack of disclosure due to mistrust of police,” “language barriers,” and “differences in defining rape” (Pomeroy, Yoo, & Rheinboldt, 2005, p. 178).

The relatively small amount of research on South Asian women and sexual abuse is a problem even in countries such as the UK, where South Asian immigrants and their children have lived for three and sometimes four generations. So strong is the sway of the religious and social dominant discourses within South Asian communities in the West that even South Asian children whose parents were born and raised in the UK are beholden to these ideas concerning rape and sexual abuse of women (Ahmed, Reavey, & Majumdar, 2009). For example, values that they hold are about maintaining family honor and not making suffering public. British researchers report having a hard time gathering any kind of significant data on South Asian women in British society because of the reluctance to report sexual violence or speak about it (Ahmed, Reavey, & Majumdar, 2009).

The sexual abuse of South Asian immigrant women is often complicated by accepted societal constructs that are based on views of women that are culturally entrenched (Abraham, 1999; Dobash & Dobash, 1992). Focusing on IPV, the research of Milarsky, Venkataramani-Kothari and Plante (2006) reveals that deeply entrenched ideas about the value and importance of family can have a major impact on South Asian women’s perspectives on the
relationship between an abusive husband and her children. They argue that South Asian women attach great significance to the fact their abusive husbands are the fathers of their children. The motivation to prevent their children from having to see their fathers arrested and to protect their children’s reputation and by extension the family’s reputation is often a prime cause of not reporting abuse to the relevant authorities (Milarsky, Venkataramani-Kothari & Plante, 2006).

My own experience supports that of the research examined here. I personally observed that such concerns with family reputation are also relevant when it comes to revealing sexual abuse.

When sexual abuse occurs within the family unit, the situation may be even more complex. The literature reviewed points to the dominance of a set of attitudes and norms among South Asian communities, chief among them the concern with family reputation and female obedience, that binds sexually abused women to their families and conflates the victim and the aggressor as members of one single family unit. As such, the family’s reputation is doubly under threat since both the victimizer and the victim could bring shame upon it.

South Asian women and girls who have experienced sexual abuse are also vulnerable because they are expected to conform to societal notions of women as dutiful, passive, submissive and obedient (Hundal, 2013a). This attitude influences how women’s sexuality and gender roles are defined, even in diaspora settings such as the United States and Canada (Abraham, 1999). South Asian women living in foreign countries are often hesitant to go outside for help because cultural concerns with family honour encourage victims of abuse to remain silent and “keep it within the family.” Their problems are exacerbated by linguistic and cultural barriers and a lack of familiarity with and adaptation to Western society (Thandi & Lloyd, 2012; Thandi, 2012; Ahmad, Driver, McNally, Stewart, 2009). A striking illustration of this is
recounted in Abraham’s (2000) article. A newly arrived immigrant who was abused in the U.S attracted attention of her neighbours with her screams. They called the police. When the police arrived, the woman did not realize that they were law enforcement and instead thought they were local security. Her husband and his friend convinced her to tell the police officers that she was fine. She was told that if she complained to the officers her husband would be deported. She agreed and the officers left (Abraham, 2000). Feminist’s such as Grace Poore, stressed the importance of applying an intersectional analysis of oppression to such scenario. In June 22, 2004, Grace Poore, presented at the Jane Doe Conference on Dynamics of Diversity in DVSA Work in United States of America. She stated, “If we adopt a single-sided rather than a multi-dimensional understanding of violence against women, we will not only miss the manifestations of other interlocking oppressions but we will tend not to look for them” (p. 2). Therefore, when we are deconstructing violence against women, we need to acknowledge that “this violence involves the confluences of sexism, racism, economic discrimination, and homophobia and able-body elitism” (Poore, 2004, pp. 2). She questions in her presentation the motives of a South Asian mother who attempted to murder herself and her daughter because she walked in on her husband sexually abusing their daughter. The incident she focuses on occurred in Clinton, Massachusetts in 2004. She explores the social, political and cultural dynamics, which impacted this South Asian mother decision to attempt murder suicide of herself and her daughter. Grace Poore (2004) asks,

Was this an act of self-preservation and self defense? Was there domestic violence going on besides incestuous child abuse? Did she fear retaliation after
calling the police? Could she turn to relatives in this country for help? Did they respond in ways that made her feel the only way out was death? (p. 4).

Even women who are seemingly well-integrated into the Western host societies they settle in and who have good jobs, can remain under the control and domination of their families. This element of control is manifest not just in the husband-wife and father-daughter relationships, but also in brother-sister relationships as well. In South Asian dominant family structures, the brother is seen as a supervisor and protector of his sister and this role may lead to violence against any man who may be in a relationship with his sister or even the sister herself (Purkayastha, 2000).

The practice of fathers, brothers and other male family members exercising control over and supervising women in their family to protect family “honour” is well-established in the South Asian community (Papp, 2011; Brandon & Hafez, 2008). Writing about South Asian family dynamics, Papp (2011) notes that “where honour/shame codes are rife (and even when legally proscribed), men are found to exercise rigid control over women” (p. 5). Thus, South Asian women who have grown up in Western countries also face the perils of South Asian gender constructs if they attempt to start dating men (Purkayastha, 2000; Seale & Weisman, 2009; Brandon & Hafez, 2008). In an interview with The Guardian, Zarghuna Kargar an Afghan refugee living in Britain describes how she was compelled to have an arranged marriage by her family. Even though she was financially independent and her family was liberal by Afghani standards, she remained under enormous pressure to conform to the cultural expectation that she would be a good, meaning obedient daughter:
I had to either be a good Afghan girl, who accepted whatever decision was made for me, or be a bad girl and leave. Breaking an engagement was a big thing and I got scared. So I decided, I'm a good Afghan girl, I'm going to do it the Afghan way. And we got married. The whole time it was a horrible feeling. (Rustin, 2011)

Women, like Ms. Kargar who have been coerced into marriage are often cut off from their immediate families and when abuse happens, the abuser is bold in his aggression because the patriarchal nature of the society often prevents any interference by the wife’s family in a husband’s absolute right over his wife (Abraham, 2000; Seal & Wiseman, 2009).

In fact, South Asian women who are abused, whether physically or sexually in marriage, are often forced by their own families to return to their abusive husbands. In recounting the domestic violence experienced by her sisters within their arranged marriages, Jasvinder Sanghera who is British but of South Asian descent, explains that her parents insisted that their duty was to be compliant and obedient wives and that leaving their abusive husbands would bring shame and dishonour upon their family (Seal & Wiseman, 2009). One of her sisters became so desperate to escape her plight that she committed suicide: “She’d doused herself in paraffin and set herself on fire. She knew that because of izzat, or shame, that suicide was the only way out of her marriage” (Seal & Wiseman, 2009, p. 7). Given the power of the myth of Sati within South Asian culture and the practice of suttee discussed above, it is perhaps telling that the form of suicide that Ms. Sanghera’s sister chose was self-immolation.

Sadly, as was the case with Ms. Sanghera’s desperately unhappy sister, suicide may be the only option some South Asian women feel is available to them. For example, in Britain,
which has a large South Asian minority population, the suicide rate for South Asian women is two to three times above the average (Seal & Wiseman, 2009). Given the enormous political and socio cultural pressures placed on South Asian women and the very real ways in which their lives may be limited and constrained, it is important to consider the possibility these factors may contribute to the high suicide rate among them. South Asian feminist activist, Patta (2011), herself a survivor of an abusive forced marriage, emphasizes that the particular political socio cultural issues (e.g. patriarchal families, a lack of personal autonomy, intense scrutiny and pressure to be “good”) affecting young South Asian women need to be given attention in future research:

Although increased conflict during adolescence is a relevant concern across Canada, issues affecting young South Asian women in particular need to be explored, as there is limited research regarding problems among them. Girls in this demographic group face many more difficulties in their adaptation process than do boys because of the patriarchal nature of South Asian families. They often experience the full pressure in the conflict of values between home and school in the domain of personal autonomy, relationships with boys and the pursuit of their vocational aspirations. Some girls cannot cope with the psychological tension and have suffered from psychosomatic illnesses such as bulimia and anorexia, and they have attempted suicide. (p. 5)

When South Asian Women Resist
While awareness of cultural constructions and traditions that may inform violence and abuse are important for service providers to understand, the research of Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar (2009) on the experience of South Asian victims of sexual violence indicates it is problematic to assume that South Asian women do not challenge the social regulations and oppressive discourses of their community. Undertaking an in-depth discourse analysis of the accounts of eight participants who had fled or were trying to flee situations of sexual abuse, the authors show that while their participants “reproduced a dominant discourse of ‘culture as problematic and unchangeable’ to make sense of their experiences” they also showed resistance to this discourse by demonstrating “disappointment and ambivalence” towards their community and their families (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009, p. 23). Furthermore, they demonstrated resistance to ideas regarding “their roles as daughters who embody responsibility for family honour” (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009 p. 23).

What is less credible in the researchers’ analysis is their instance that the women survivors they interviewed “demonstrated resistance to ‘culture is to blame’” attitudes (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009 p. 21). It is difficult to square the idea that the participants resisted “culture is to blame” when, in fact, they also resisted the South Asian cultural constructs they felt were problematic. In the transcripts reproduced in the text, there is no evidence of the participants’ resistance to “culture is to blame.” In contrast, however, the transcripts reproduced in the text offer ample evidence that many of the women felt that culture was to blame. Specifically, the women interviewed indicated that South Asian cultural constructs, in particular those of family honour and shame, complicated their situations and were used by their families to
pressure them into staying in abusive relationships. For example, abuse-survivor five made the following statement:

‘Like with my mum she’s more like oh know you should stay with it stay with it, family name, family name, you’re going to put your dad’s name in the ground and look at the high izzat he brought up and stuff like that….’ (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009 p. 18)

Clearly, this participant’s mother used the powerful weight of the family’s reputation to try and pressure her daughter into not leaving her abuser. This statement does not, therefore, demonstrate resistance to blaming South Asian culture for perpetuating abuse, but rather clearly implicates South Asian culture as a factor which may prevent women from fleeing abuse.

Survivor four was similarly critical of South Asian cultural constructs:

‘I think it’s all about your honour you know that they say I need to kill because of the honour, the izzat, the respect because they think that – we’re respectful people, why do our daughters do this? They should get married to whoever we say and spend the rest of their lives with that person….’ (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009 p. 18)

While some of the participants may have ultimately fled their abusers, part of the process involved them rejecting the social norms and discourses that would keep other South Asian women trapped in these relationships. As survivor five went on to say about the “it just doesn’t work. Not with me anyway . . . .” (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009 p. 18).
Despite their problematic analysis of results, the research of Ahmed, Reavey and Majumdar (2009) supports the claim that cultural constructs around honour and shame can be a significant barrier to the resolution of sexual abuse amongst South Asian women; they do not produce blind, unquestioning subservience. They stress, however, that their research was conducted with English-speaking women who were born or brought up in the United Kingdom. Additionally, such questioning does not necessarily precede breaking away from social regulations in an effective manner. This is a very important and significant difference and needs to be underlined. Women may be aware of the negative implications of cultural constructs that affect their situation, but rejecting such constructs and breaking away from them are not easy, since that are heavily embedded in their lives. The difficulty often manifests itself in the form of a “gendered colonization of power relations by older women” in the form of pressure exerted by a woman’s mother or mother-in-law to uphold male honour (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009, p. 17). Thus the difficulty that South Asian women face when it comes to abuse, even in Western societies, becomes clear: they not only have to break away from the abuser, but traditional cultural discourse that informs their experience. Moreover, they often have to get away from their own parents and brothers who impose notions of “family” “honour” “chastity” on them and pressure them into trying to “work out” things with an abusive partner. As survivor number five pointed out about her husband and her mother when it comes to the sexual abuse she suffered at his hand: “‘Even to this day he doesn’t see that he’s done anything wrong and with my mum she’s a bit backwards thinking as well so she doesn’t see it either’” (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009, p. 16). The fact that she acknowledges that her mom is a “bit backwards” is an indication of her awareness that the cultural beliefs imposed on her are wrong.
The Therapeutic Challenges of Working with South Asian Women

As Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar’s (2009) research demonstrates, South Asian women can and do resist problematic cultural discourses and may flee from abusive situations. Yet, as their research also demonstrates, the response of South Asian women, even women who have grown up in the West, to abuse is complicated by deeply engrained cultural values and often the resistance of their own families. Given that, the researchers caution that Western service providers working with South Asian victims of abuse need to be careful about adopting therapeutic models that are grounded in “western ideas about the self” (p. 22). They stress that, for the South Asian community, “selfhood is always already relational and embedded within relationships with families and communities” (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009, p. 22). Accordingly, when dealing with South Asian survivors of abuse, service providers should be attentive to the importance of family, community, and culture (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009). They note that an appropriate therapeutic model might enable women to understand how cultural discourse works and how they can “re-align themselves within it” while also addressing issues surrounding family and community responses to violence and abuse towards women (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009, p. 22).

The research of Reavey, Ahmed, and Majumdar (2006) highlights the problems that Western service providers may face when working with South Asian women who have experienced sexual abuse. Their qualitative study of service providers in the UK included individuals working in “psychological services, specialist psycho-sexual clinics, victim support,
rape crisis, family counselling centres, women run voluntary organisations” (Reavey, Ahmed, and Majumdar, 2006, p. 176). From in-depth interviews, the researchers identified a number of crucial themes in professionals’ discourse surrounding their beliefs as to the factors that prevented South Asian women from identifying the abuse they have experienced:

These include the familial and community barriers that exist to prevent awareness of sexual abuse, the problem in naming sexual encounters as abusive due to factors such as ‘shame’, ‘honour’ and blame and the lack of fit between South Asian experiences of selfhood and the individualised premise of some talking therapies. (Reavey, Ahmed, and Majumdar, 2006, p. 185)

For service providers, these barriers often complicated the delivery of support and compromised the therapeutic relationship. For example, service providers recounted problems surrounding a disconnect between the socially and legally accepted definition of rape in the UK and their South Asian clients’ understanding of the term. Specifically, clients did not appear to make a connection between the forced sex they experienced with their husbands and rape.

In one extract from participant interviews, a counselor discusses a South Asian client whose husband had forced sex upon her but who refused to use the word “rape” in court testimony because she could not conceptualize a husband raping a wife. To the South Asian client, it is a wife’s duty to care for her husband (sexual needs included) and if there was an incident of forced sex it could not be classified as rape and to acknowledge it as such would be to present herself as “bad wife” (Reavey, Ahmed, & Majumdar, 2006, p. 177). What this suggests
is that some South Asian women may see sex as a duty within marriage that they are unable to refuse. Moreover, within marriage, South Asian men may see sex as their right and prerogative. Abraham (2000) notes that “within the context of traditional South Asian patriarchal marriages, men initiate the sexual act, define its nature, and determine when it ends, while women rarely have any say in the matter” (p. 95).

The idea that a man has sexual rights over his wife is in line with traditional views on male authority and female submission within marriage. A large survey conducted in the late 1990s, polled almost 2000 women from two ethnically distinct areas of India on their attitudes towards violence against women. The results indicated that almost 60% of both Muslim and Hindu respondents believed that a man had the right to beat his wife if she was disobedient (Jejeebhoy, 1998, p. 10). Reavey, Ahmed, and Majumdar (2006) report that Western service providers employed a number of strategies in order to create space for their South Asian clients to talk about sexual abuse. While these attempts were born out of a well-meaning impulse, the researchers noted that some of the strategies were problematic. One strategy they found particularly concerning involved professionals resorting to diagnosing a client with a “disorder” in an effort to provide a “less value-laden illness label that will provide the safety to begin therapeutic work” (Reavey, Ahmed, and Majumdar, 2006, p. 185). The researchers emphasized that this was problematic since it effectively pathologized the victim instead of focusing on the “familial” nature of the problems, while mitigating the abuser’s responsibility (Reavey, Ahmed, and Majumdar, 2006, p. 185).

Ending Abuse by Challenging Culture and Societal Norms
In their study, Reavey, Ahmed, and Majumdar (2006) emphasize the importance of addressing familial and cultural issues as part of offering support. One participant in their study, a couple’s therapist who has a South Asian background, and who works with South Asian clients, stressed that in “‘our [South Asian] culture is not individualistic, it’s a very family oriented . . . when a person comes in with a problem, it’s not about them, it’s about how other people are affecting them and their problem’” (p. 186). In fact, the importance of family to South Asian culture is attested to throughout the literature examined here.

The research of Reavey, Ahmed, and Majumdar’s (2006) was conducted with a variety of service providers who offer support to South Asian women within the UK. Research highlight how some of their service-provider participants felt that it was pointless to begin therapy with a South Asian woman without addressing cultural issues, which can contextualize the client’s emotions and distress (p. 185). In Canada, the research of Thandi and Lloyd (2011) focuses on the experiences 17 “front line practitioners,” all of them South Asian, in the Province of British Columbia who, between them, “had over 200 years of experience working with South Asian men who perpetrated IPV” (p. 1).

While Thandi and Lloyd (2011) focus on the broad category of IPV, sexual abuse is one dimension within that broader spectrum. As they note, “IPV is defined as direct or indirect physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, psychological or economic threats, power, or control perpetrated on a woman by her male spouse or extended kin” (Thandi and Lloyd, 2011, p. 74). Indeed, Thandi and Lloyd (2011) are clear that gender expectations which require South Asian men to hold positions of domination, power, and control, over their wives, are often linked to sexual domination and violence. They recount a men’s counselor discussing how older men in
the community might instruct younger men to “be sexually very aggressive that day [the wedding day]” in order to “show your wife that you are her boss” and to ensure that “‘she will be scared of you for all her life’” (Thandi and Lloyd, 2011, p. 14). Given the entrenched attitudes towards male domination and the pressure that is put on men to fulfill gender expectations by being dominant, it is clear that requiring men to change is an important part of the process of ending all forms of IPV, including sexual abuse.

Another significant finding of Thandi and Lloyd’s (2011) research was that Punjabi men living in BC who engaged in IPV did not necessarily fit the profile of habitual domestic violence perpetrators since they were more likely to “be married to, have shared assets with, and have children with the victim compared to their Caucasian counterparts” (p. 28). First generation offenders were under enormous stress because they had to meet the demands of South Asian culture that sees men as the providers of not just their wives and children but extended families as well (Thandi and Lloyd, 2011). Dealing with language barriers, unemployment, discrimination, and homesickness were thought to have led to some men engaging in violent behaviour, especially those who also engaged in alcohol abuse. The researchers make it clear that this does not in any way absolve abusive behaviour, but they note that many men actively participated in counseling and expressed a desire to change in order to end the terrible toll that IPV was having on their families. The willingness to change is especially significant since South Asian women are more likely to stay with their husbands in spite of abuse (Thandi & Lloyd, 2012).

South Asian men involved typically bring to their intimate relationships not only their individual experiences and perspectives but also the weight of their families’ expectations, as
well as the involvement of their extended families (Thandi & Lloyd, 2012). One reason for this is that, in South Asian communities, marriage is typically viewed not just as a union of two individuals but also of two families. In fact, arranged marriages are the norm in South Asian countries (Gurumurthy, 2013) and this practice continues in diaspora communities (Gurumurthy, 2013). UNICEF even claims that across the countries that make up South Asia, up to 48% of girls are “forced” into marriage before the age of 18 (Thomas, 2009). In some instances, girls are married to much older men (Thomas, 2009). Given the widespread and almost ubiquitous practice of arranged marriage, it should be noted that in South Asian communities little emphasis is placed on romantic love and mutual attraction as the foundation of marriage (Pillay, 2004 as cited in Thandi, 2012). As a result, there is also less emphasis on the dynamic that occurs between the two individuals and more emphasis on the union between two families and the extension of family lineage. The pressure to produce (male) heirs for the family legacy is considerable.

The collectivist dynamics of South Asian families can be problematic when violence and abuse is dealt with standard Canadian law enforcement approaches. For example, when police come across a domestic abuse case, one condition of an offender’s release often involves the condition that he does not try to contact his wife and does not come close to the residence (Thandi, 2012). This is an almost impossible requirement for a husband who has regular contact not just with his wife but his extended family as well. His wife might even be living with her husband’s family, further complicating matters. The knowledge that such demands are likely to be made, might deter victims from reporting IPV to the police.
Service providers may feel overwhelmed and helpless to challenge cultural constructs, which they may perceive as inflexible and immutable (Thandi & Lloyd, 2012; Reavey, Ahmed, & Majumdar, 2006). However, cultural constructs are fluid and can change with external intervention. The service providers interviewed in Thandi and Lloyd’s (2012) research indicated that their Punjabi clients often expressed remorse for their behaviour and a willingness to change. This is particularly significant since they had grown up with socially legitimized ideas of honour which reinforced ideas of masculinity and male social roles as superior. Interventions by police with appropriate counseling often did bring about a change in behaviour (Thandi & Lloyd, 2012). All 17 participants in Thandi’s (2012) study noted that South Asian partners were eager to reconcile in the aftermath of domestic abuse, though it is important to note that this conclusion is based on the opinions and impressions of service providers, as opposed to statistics on rates of re-offending or successful reconciliations. Despite the limitations of their research, Thandi (2012) and Thandi and Lloyd (2012) present a strong case for an approach to sexual abuse within the South Asian community that does not avoid cultural issues and that holds men accountable for their behaviour.

General Recommendations for Service Providers

Cultural Awareness for Service Providers

As the South Asian population continues to grow in the Lower Mainland there will be an increase in people seeking access to supports and services. Therefore professionals need to develop a better understanding of the cultural norms which may influence behaviour in the South Asian community (Gilligan & Akhtar, 2006). Cultural awareness is an important component of effective interactions with the South Asian community (Ahmed, Reavey, & Majumdar, 2009).
Service providers such as counselors, doctors, judicial officials, law enforcement officials and other members of the public service spectrum must understand that the values and traditions of South Asian communities are informed by social expectations and cultural constructions that are different to those that inform Western communities. As a result, South Asian men and women’s responses to sexual violence and IPV may be different to the responses of individuals from other cultural backgrounds.

Despite cultural differences, culturally aware service providers should be able and willing to deal with sensitive issues such as sexual abuse in South Asian communities. An understanding of South Asian culture and empathy for victims are both essential. Such an empathy, appreciation and understanding of South Asian culture is not merely “political correctness.” It is an important perspective that offers service providers a look at a social and cultural paradigm that is different to, not inferior to theirs.

As with Western victims of sexual violence and abuse, South Asian victims of sexual abuse will have a range of needs and personal resources to draw upon. Therefore, service providers must tread a fine line between being culturally aware but also attentive to the fact that culture is not an impenetrable fortress that makes the resolution of problems for individual women impossible or that makes their status as helpless and abused victims inevitable. The victim, though embedded in cultural and familial contexts which afford her very little space for personal autonomy, may actually have enormous resources of personal strength to draw upon and a determination to manoeuvre within the constraints of South Asian culture. Alternatively, she may have different ideas entirely, that put her completely at odds with her family and community. She may want to escape an unhappy marriage or an abusive home. A range of
options must, therefore, be available to South Asian women as they would be to women of other cultural backgrounds.

As established in this research, family honour, female purity, and community standing are highly significant factors in South Asian communities. Consequently, an understanding of these concerns and how they influence responses to sexual abuse on the part of both victims and perpetrators should be part of a service provider’s skill sets. Likewise, an understanding of the dynamics of South Asian marriages, a large number of which are arranged, is also an essential component of understanding the possible needs and the difficulties facing South Asian victims. The prerogatives of male power in South Asian culture may result in a husband feeling that he has certain rights over his wife’s body. A South Asian woman may not necessarily see the concept of marital rape as a criminal offence. Additionally, South Asian women are often dependent on their husband and extended families in very complex ways (Abraham, 2000). For a married South Asian woman, her husband is not simply a man that she has married. Her husband represents an important cog in a larger social network that is directly connected to her in complicated and overlapping ways that are also linked to kinship responsibilities (Maiter, 2004). As a result, both her family and her husband’s family may have significant vested interests in preventing the breakup of the couple. Since it is common for married South Asian couples to live with extended family, especially the husband’s family, a man who has a restraining order placed on him because of domestic violence may have greater difficulty adhering to the restrictions since his parents and possibly his siblings may live in the same home as his wife, while the husband’s family may be putting pressure on the wife to reconcile.
Since family and community play such a role in South Asian cultures, both, when appropriate, can also be recruited to help support males offenders to change. In fact, as Thandi and Lloyds (2011) research makes clear, offenders often show a willingness to reconcile and the support of authoritative figures within the family or community can help the reconciliation process. Thus, service providers can do well to recruit elders in the process. Mothers, fathers, grandfathers, religious leaders, and other should be included in the process of reconciliation and rehabilitation if it is the situation warrants it and service providers feel assured that the victim’s interests are fully being considered and her safety ensured.

While dominant social norms and discourses within South Asian communities and families can legitimate certain forms of violence and sexual abuse against wives and female family members, conversely the concepts of honour and family, which are of such great importance, can also be harnessed to effect change. Women are not the only ones who feel shame at the prospect of separation. Men too fear separation because it shows that they are not capable of caring for their family and keeping their family unit together. Violence rarely extends to their children whose well-being is given the utmost importance and their welfare is a strong incentive for both partners to reconcile and change the situation. Thandi and Lloyd (2011) report an offender as saying “I want my family back. I want my wife back.... How do I do this? ....What course do I need to take so that the courts are satisfied that I can go back home?” (p. 27). As their research suggests, when it becomes clear to South Asian men that violence and abuse towards their wives may lead to a family breakup, they are often eager to reconcile and motivated to change (Thandi & Lloyd, 2011). In fact, South Asian men may work on changing their behaviors and exploring values and emotions that reinforce his acts of sexual violence.
reconcile even though they may not feel much emotional connection to their wives. For many South Asians “love,” “happiness,” and “self-satisfaction,” are not essential elements of marriage and so they have a greater motivation to achieve harmony and reconciliation at the expense of their personal fulfilment.

Despite the willingness of many South Asian men to modify their behaviour, this should not be taken to mean that police intervention is not a good option when it comes to sexual violence against their wives. On the contrary, Thandi and Lloyd (2011) found that police intervention is a catalyst for change of behavior amongst South Asian perpetrators of IPV. The problems that result from having a police record are often deterrents in themselves. Thus, service providers can effectively work in concert with law enforcement to achieve positive results. What is crucial here is that police perceive their role as supporters and facilitator of counselors and other non-police service providers. If police see counselors as barriers to their “investigation,” or if they feel that counselors and others do not have the authority and stature to engage them effectively, this can badly damage any attempts at reconciliation.

South Asian men enrolled in programs that teach anger management and the legal ramification of IPV and sexual violence may not love their wives, but many will do whatever it takes to preserve their family and stay involved in their children’s lives. This means that there is a greater chance for behaviour modification among South Asian men if cultural dynamics are leveraged in an appropriate manner. While the idea of staying in an incompatible marriage that has been plagued by unhappiness and abuse may seem an undesirable outcome from the point of view of many Western couples, for some South Asian couples such a reconciliation may, indeed, represent a good outcome. That said, for others, particularly South Asian women who have
suffered severe abuse, such an outcome may not be either desirable or safe. These distinctions may be difficult for service providers to navigate. Therefore, while having knowledge of the norms of South Asian culture is important, service providers must be very careful about assuming that a “culturally appropriate” solution is either what their client wants or needs. Service providers must offer their clients a range of options and help them determine which options are ultimately best for them.

**Explaining Professional Roles and Assuring Clients of Confidentiality**

Culturally aware service providers working with South Asian clients need to be very clear to their clients about who they are and what their role is. Assuming things are understood must be avoided. Part of attaining greater competence as a service provider is to hire and consult with South Asian support personnel who have experience working with members of the communities that are being served. South Asian immigrant women, especially those who are not fully fluent in English, may not be fully aware of the legal options available to them and may not understand the dynamics of Canadian law enforcement. Certified interpreters are an important tool that all service providers should take advantage of. Relying on family members who may have a vested interest in a possible outcome is not the best way to communicate with potential victims of sexual abuse.

Providing support in first languages through qualified interpreters increases women's confidence levels, decreases isolation, and increases their ability to maneuver through the system. Clients need to be made aware of supports available in their community in their first language and to receive written information in their first language because, even though resources are available, they might not be aware that agencies such as child protection services,
the children's help line, and safe shelters exist. This is particularly the case for first generation immigrants, since in their home communities such agencies may not exist.

Being very clear about the nature of confidentiality is also essential when working with South Asian clients. In my professional life, I worked with a South Asian client who was fleeing a violent relationship. As I am not fluent in Hindi, I sought the help of an interpreter but when the interpreter joined us, my client withdrew by putting her head down and stopped communicating with me. I could see that my client had become reluctant to speak in front of another member of the South Asian community. I informed my client that the interpreter’s sole role was to translate what she was saying to me and that I did not want to miss out anything she shared with me as it was important. She was still not convinced and I reviewed with the interpreter her rights to confidentiality and assured her that her safety, privacy, and anonymity would be protected at all times. As well, I assured her that the interpreter was also bound by strict rules around confidentiality and she was willing to talk. As my experience demonstrated, it is not only important for clients to receive assistance in their first language, but the rules and regulations surrounding confidentiality must also be made clear.

The right to confidentiality on the part of victims is also an important factor in responding to fears over losing face and standing in the community. South Asian cultural and societal bonds dictate that silence is better in cases of sexual abuse of minors. This does not mean that sexual abuse is condoned within South Asian communities (Mtezuka, 1989). Since there may be concern with protecting family honour and status, explaining to victims, offenders and the extended family the role of service providers is first and foremost to protect the victim and prevent further abuse is essential. Service workers can address the shame associated with
sexual abuse and violence by pointing out that the identity and privacy of victims is protected by law ("Sexual Assault," n.d.)

Another consideration when working with South Asian victims of sexual abuse is the perceptions that South Asian immigrant women, in particular, may have of law enforcement and government officials. The realities of police and judicial corruption in many South Asian countries mean that South Asians, even those who have moved to the West, may have a fear of law enforcement and government authority (Abraham, 2000). The problem within South Asia is particularly acute for women who, when they come forward with accusations of sexual violence or harassment, can be further abused by the police themselves or even turned over to their abusers (Harris, 2013). As a result, service providers should make additional efforts to establish trust by emphasizing their legitimacy and by making it clear to victims what their rights are and what they can expect from the legal and support tools available to them. Additionally, concerns over immigration status may make victims and their families reluctant to seek help. When investigating cases of sexual abuse and violence, law enforcement officials should make it clear that their purpose is not to check immigration status.

Maintaining Professional Boundaries

While Western service providers must strive to offer culturally sensitive support to South Asian women, those of South Asian backgrounds may face different and equally complex challenges in maintaining professional boundaries. I note this concern as a result of my own personal experience working with South Asian clients during which I have found sometimes difficult to avoid personalizing their concerns and interacting with them in a way that would be considered overly familiar by mainstream professional standards in Canada. For example, when
working with a South Asian client who was fleeing an abusive marriage and who had left her children in the family home with her husband, I found it difficult to maintain professional boundaries. For example, when she was in the transition house she was applying for income assistance and she called me to ask if she should declare the gold and extra money that she had in her deposit box as she was worried about not qualifying for income assistance. My heart wanted to tell her not to declare this because I also had the same fears; instead I ended up referring her to an advocacy group to get better guidance. This same client also appealed to me as though I was in a position of authority that gave me control over the situation. Since I was a South Asian operating in a Canadian context, the fact that we shared the same cultural background, I believe, created a personal link in her mind and she often referred to me as “*pan-ji,*” or sister. I received daily tearful phone calls from her and found myself comforting her and referring to her as “*aunta-yi,*” which is a term of affection and familiarity and one could argue not appropriate to use in a professional context. Based on this experience, I believe it is important for service workers of South Asian backgrounds to make it clear to clients what their professional roles and responsibilities are and the limits of their powers. The system is designed to offer support, assistance, and protection to victims, while the role of the service worker is to help individuals navigate that system and to make a range of services available to them. Ultimately, my client was happily reunited with her children, because the system itself worked on her behalf.

**Cultural Competence for Social Workers**
For understanding how cultural competency can be reflected in the interactions of social workers with their clients, it is important to turn to the guidelines of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), which offer standards that social workers should adhere to across countries and cultures. The NASW mandates that social workers function in accord with the values, ethics, and standards of the profession (NASW, 2001). This requires that social workers be aware of their own personal cultural beliefs and biases. Social workers are responsible for developing “specialized knowledge and understanding about the history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions of major client groups that they serve” (NASW, 2001, Standard 3). For South Asian victims of sexual or domestic violence, this involves being aware of typical family structures and traditions that were outlined earlier in this paper. In addition, it requires an understanding of the dichotomy between the individualist majority culture and the collectivist culture that surrounds the South Asian community.

With this knowledge, social workers are expected to use “appropriate methodological approaches, skills, and techniques that reflect the worker’s understanding of the role of culture in the helping process” (NASW, 2001, Standard 4). This standard requires that social workers use culturally appropriate interventions with South Asian victims. Social workers are responsible for not imposing Western-based values on the South Asian victim and instead they must work within the framework of the victim’s own culture. This may involve, for example, acknowledging the victim’s sense of responsibility to her family and the importance of family honour. The social worker must not impose values, such as saying, “If your family loves you they won’t want you to stay in this abusive relationship” when in fact, the client’s cultural values may indeed encourage the victim to remain with her abuser despite sexual or domestic violence. Further, many South
Asian victims who were raised in Western society may be facing a conflict between wanting to please their family and recognizing that they do not want nor deserve the abuse.

It is also important for social workers to be aware of the services that are available for diverse populations within the community and to refer clients to those services as appropriate (NASW, 2001). Social workers are also in a unique position to advocate for diverse clients and should be aware of the effect of social policies and programs on diverse client populations (NASW, 2001). For South Asian victims, this may mean understanding how local domestic violence laws may be interpreted by the South Asian community and individual family members of a family unit. This changes how the social worker may assist the victim because the victim may not be able to participate in activities such as support groups if her family is not supportive of seeking help from others. In addition, these women may feel especially isolated from their family because they are speaking out and may in fact be ostracized.

It is also expected that social workers “support and advocate for recruitment, admissions and hiring, and retention efforts in social work programs and agencies that ensure diversity within the profession” (NASW, 2001, Standard 7). This also provides the opportunity to have an on-staff social worker who is South Asian and may have the unique ability to fully understand the issues affecting a South Asian victim, in addition to being more comfortable for the South Asian victim to talk to, especially about culturally-related issues.

Social workers should advocate that information, referrals and services for South Asian victims across all these domains be offered in the native languages spoken by South Asian women. Finally, social workers are in the position to provide leadership in communicating
information about diverse client groups to other professionals (NASW, 2001). This may include other mental health professionals, health professionals, law enforcement, and legal aid, in addition to any other service provider for South Asian victims of sexual and domestic violence. Together, these standards provide for the culturally competent treatment of South Asian victims of sexual and domestic violence.

**Culturally Appropriate Counseling for South Asian Victims**

Much of psychotherapy practice has been developed with Western principles in mind (Reavey, Ahmed, and Majumdar, 2006), although there is growing acknowledgement of the need for the culturally competent treatment of diverse clients, partly due to the changing composition of countries such as Canada (Capuzzi & Gross, 2007). Most importantly, counselors must see themselves and their clients within a broader political, socio-cultural context.

Sue and Sue (2003) describe multicultural counseling as a helping process that depends both on universal and culture-specific techniques that are used to meet goals consistent with client values that recognizes the individual, group and universal dimensions of client identity. The client’s worldview is integrated into the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of the client and client system (Sue & Sue, 2003). Capuzzi and Gross (2007) explain that culturally appropriate interactions are the result of counselor “awareness and knowledge of self and diverse clients” (p. 60). The client’s communication style, values and beliefs, and life experiences must be used to create a functional counseling relationship with the attainment of appropriate goals.

Traditional interventions may be adapted for diverse clients by incorporating cultural variations (Capuzzi & Gross, 2007). For example, the common counseling skill of “reflection of feeling,” where the counselor restates her impression of what the client is feeling, can be used
with a diverse client. In some cases, when the client is verbally expressive of feelings, the skill may be used without much explanation or adaptation. If the client responds to the reflection with agreeing, correcting, or expanding, this technique is likely effective. However, some clients from culturally diverse backgrounds, particularly South Asian women, may not be comfortable challenging the counselor, so the counselor should monitor verbal and nonverbal behaviour for signs of shutting down or discomfort with the reflections.

If a negative outcome is anticipated with reflection of feeling, this skill may be adapted (Capuzzi & Gross, 2007). For instance, in the case of South Asian women they may be uncomfortable discussing feelings within an individualistic framing context versus a family or community context. In this case, Cheatham et al. (2002) suggest rewording the reflection statement to give it a collectivist context, for example, instead of “That situation makes you anxious” the counselor may say “You feel anxious in relation to your family”. Alternatively, non-verbal forms of communication may be considered, or even alternative healing methods such as the Asian practice of reiki, quigong, and pranic healing (Sue & Sue, 2003).

Since culture has a role to play in how sexual abuse and violence is perceived within the South Asian community, Ahmed and colleagues (2009) suggest that counseling professionals working with South Asian women to speak directly to them about issues related to culture and how cultural discourse may impact their experience. Addressing the issue of culture head on will assist in talking about issues related to family, community and their impact on personal well being, as “the complex set of locations that inform women's understandings inevitably has implications for how women may be helped to manage and negotiate their emotions and their agency” (Reavey and Brown, 2006, 2007 as cited in Ahmed et al, 2009, p. 22).
The research of Kanukollu and Mahalingam (2011) critically examines the role of social marginality in construction of South Asian immigrant identities in relation to child sexual abuse. They emphasize the importance of therapists specifically addressing the role of culture in how victims perceive their identity and understand abuse. Such an understanding can be an important therapeutic tool which can enable clients to: 1) examine their beliefs about themselves, their experiences of child sexual abuse, and child sexual abuse in general, 2) explore the cultural underpinnings of their thought process, 3) analyze information about the cross cultural nature of child sexual abuse 4) examine the power dynamics at play in all forms of abuse 5) and assure them that their experience neither defines them nor negates their cultural identity or “precludes their membership in their cultural community” (Kanukollu & Mahalingam, 2011, p.20).

Singh (2008) argues that because of the collectivist nature of the South Asian culture, group counseling is an appropriate modality of treatment for this group. Additionally, because of the sociopolitical environment that allows the abuse, feminist counseling is an appropriate theoretical orientation. The principle tenet of feminist counseling is to acknowledge the “impact of structural violence on the individual as well as the influence of gender roles and cultural identity on clients” (Singh, 2008, p. 85). Although feminist counseling has its roots in individualistic Western culture, recently, feminists have acknowledged contextual factors such as heterosexism, classism, and racism. Exploring these contextual factors has been used with ethnic minorities as a way to create a “space of empowerment that externalizes individual problems and links them with systemic oppressions” (Singh, 2008, p. 85).

For South Asian victims of IPV, of which sexual abuse can be a component, feminist group counseling involves the use of culturally relevant techniques throughout all stages of
counseling and involves acknowledging the sociopolitical context of the abuse while developing empowerment skills (Singh, 2008). Singh (2008) documented a case study of feminist group counseling for South Asian victims of IPV over a two-year period. The group followed the typical developmental stages identified by Gladding (2008) of forming, storming, norming, working, and termination. During each stage, culturally relevant principles were applied.

The forming stage typically involves trust-building activities to build group cohesiveness and establish a therapeutic environment. For the group of South Asian women, this involved leaders providing South Asian food and chai at the beginning of each group session. Check-ins and ice-breakers also involved a cultural focus, with questions such as “What do you appreciate about yourself as a South Asian woman?” (Singh, 2008, p. 91). Egalitarian relationships were emphasized through having women reflect on the immigration and acculturation process by using colours, symbols, and words to describe barriers and opportunities on their journey.

During the storming stage, feminist group work focuses on establishing safety for female trauma survivors. Due to the cultural socialization of South Asian women which emphasizes maintaining harmony and minimizing tension in interpersonal relationships, the group leaders at this stage educated the women about group process and conflict and encouraged the women to discuss potential conflict and growth. Check-ins and discussions at this stage included questions such as “How were you taught by South Asian society to deal with conflict as a South Asian woman?” (Singh, 2008, p. 92). Safety was ensured during the storming phase of group counseling through a culturally specific assertiveness training activity. *Raksha* is the Hindi word for “protection” or “safety” and *Raksha training* was used to “create space in which members...
could resolve conflict with one another, and to promote the development of assertiveness skills they could use as they encountered discrimination and cultural barriers” (Singh, 2008, p. 92).

In the norming stage, the group becomes a distinct entity from the individual members that comprise it (Gladding, 2008). Group members are encouraged to communicate how this new group identity feels to them and to explore their commitment level to the group. Adequate expression and development at this stage is critical to the successful transition to the working stage. During this stage group norms and expectations are established that will be used throughout the group process.

The norming stage sets the stage for the working phase of the group, where progress is made with the individual and group goals of exploring the details of IPV (Singh, 2008). The use of self-disclosure is important at this stage to promulgate the feminist principle of egalitarian relationships within the South Asian cultural context. Because one of the group leaders was South Asian herself, she was able to make statements such as “As a South Asian woman, it continues to be a challenge to balance family and my own needs” and “You may look to us as leaders for solutions to problems, and we see ourselves as ‘consultants’ who recognize that you have your own expertise on your life” (Singh, 2008, p. 94). Bibliotherapy is also a useful tool at this stage. Movies and books both inside and outside of the group setting can be used to discuss cultural and experiential concepts in a nonthreatening manner.

The last stage of the group process is termination. This stage is often difficult for both leaders and group members because of the relationships that were formed during the group process. As in any group setting, the termination stage should be prepared well in advance. Leaders and group members must discuss collaboratively how and when to end the group and
interested individuals should be provided with referrals (Singh, 2008). Again, cultural considerations are used, with discussions such as, “How do South Asian women say good-bye?” (Singh, 2008, p. 96).

Feminist group work is seen as an appropriate and effective method of delivering counseling for South Asian victims of IPV and sexual abuse because of the “influence of intersectionality of their gender and cultural identity” of how South Asian victims cope with their abuse, in addition to the collectivist nature of the South Asian culture (Singh, 2008, p. 97). Group counseling may be especially appropriate for these women because many South Asian women who have endured IPV and/or sexual abuse were “treated as outcasts” and excluded from social events with previous friends and family after they have spoken out about their abuse. In this way, group counseling provides a unique opportunity for these women to find belonging in a group with women who have had similar experiences.

In summary, the counselor working with South Asian victims of IPV and/or sexual abuse must be culturally sensitive to the collectivist nature of the culture in the way she interacts with her client/s and in the specific techniques that are used. General multicultural counseling principles of being culturally aware of oneself and the culture of the client apply as well as specific cultural considerations for the South Asian culture. Feminist group counseling has a unique adaptations that has certain advantages for South Asian women.

**Challenging Culture for Change**

**Community Outreach**
Reaching out to women and men within the South Asian community to bring them information about the support services that are available to them is crucial. As a social worker with many years of experience, I know that it is unlikely that women in need of support will make a visit to a government office or police station to find out what their options are. For that reason, information regarding services needs to be accessible to women in public settings such as community temples, schools, airports, libraries, and women's washroom. Online information should be offered in many languages beyond English and French.

Working with victims and offenders is really only a band-aid solution. To really change South Asian context it is necessary to change the attitudes of women as well as men, particularly men of influence in the community such as religious and business leaders. When concerns regarding domestic violence in South Asian Canadian communities started to arise in 2007 in the media, Wally Oppal, B.C.’s Attorney-General at the time, called it a “cancer” in the province’s Indo-Canadian community. While he was speaking about domestic violence, the same could be said about all forms of abuse against women and girls. He noted the reluctance of the community to tackle this issue head-on (“Sidhu,” 2008).

I was heartened and impressed by Mr. Oppal’s honesty. It is very important that woman and men work together for positive change. Because of the central role that religious worship plays in the social and cultural lives of British Columbia’s South Asian community, religious leaders could play a valuable role in addressing the issue of all forms of violence against women and the sexual abuse of children. Sadly, in my personal experience, I have never heard priests in Sikh temples speak up about violence against children and women. As part of my research for this paper, I did an exhaustive search on the role of Sikh priests in providing mentorship to men
engaged in violence and abuse. I could identify no such examples. This is especially
disheartening since religious leaders play a very important role in the Sikh community and the
justifications often used to support misogynistic cultural practices and concepts are based on a
false view of the Sikh religion. In fact, a fundamental tenant of the Sikh religion is the equality
of women and men. Similarly, Hinduism contains many positive representations of female
figures.

**Activism within the Community**

The cultural attitudes that uphold women’s bodies as sites of family and cultural purity
must change. The concern must shift to rights of victims and to speaking openly and honestly
about all forms of sexual abuse and violence within the South Asian community. Slowly, and no
doubt as a result of high profile cases such as that involving Jyoti Singh, the tragic rape victim
who eventually died after a brutal gang rape in New Delhi, the attitudes towards sexual violence
within the South Asian community as a whole seem to be shifting. In the case of Jyoti Singh, her
father specifically requested that her identity be made public so that she could serve as an
inspiration to other victims of sexual assault (“Castle,” 2013) and activists have held her up as a
heroic figure, whose tragic death needs to be a catalyst for change. In the United Kingdom,
members of the Sikh community have also begun to challenge the culture of shaming victims
into silence. Community leaders such as Mohan Singh, founder of the Sikh Awareness Society,
have praised victims for their bravery in coming forward and revealing the abuse they have
experience. In an interview with the BBC, Mr. Singh notes that while shame may prevent many
families whose daughters have been victims from coming forward, this denies their daughters
the justice that they deserve (“Interview with Mohan Singh,” 2013). It interesting that Mr.
Singh emphasizes that it is Sikhs who are second and third generation immigrants who are coming forward. It is important that the momentum of younger generations challenging entrenched attitudes continues into the future, and that activist efforts of organizations like the Sikh Awareness Society continue to flourish.

**Conclusion**

As a South Asian woman and a mother, this research has allowed me to explore aspects of my culture and community that I find deeply troubling. I have considered the misogynistic beliefs that define South Asian women as the property of men and their bodies as repositories of male family honour. I have also examined the dynamics of arranged and forced marriages and how these arrangements may affect both women and men. I have explored the viewpoints of activists and academics, many of them South Asian, about these same beliefs and practices. Like me, these individuals hold that these beliefs and practices are implicated in how sexual abuse and violence is viewed within the South Asian community. These attitudes ultimately result in shaming of women and the covering up of violence and abuse. A woman who is sexually abused by her husband is often given no assistance because the preservation of the marriage and the betterment of the children as well as the honour of the family are seen as paramount. A lot is tolerated and ignored for the sake of these culturally significant realities. Yet when challenged, the importance of honour and family are so important that South Asian men may be receptive to change.

It is clear that attitudes and beliefs within the South Asian community need to change. However it is also important not to examine this issue in isolation from political, economical, socio cultural factors that may influence the South Asian communities in maintaining their
silence about sexual abuse. Feminist activists and writers, such as Jiwani and Bannerji, stress the importance of applying an intersectional understanding in examining women of color’s experience, highlighting particularly how racism and sexism shape lives of woman of color. As the South Asian community in the Lower Mainland continues to grow, the likelihood that social workers and counselors will work with the South Asian people will increase. Better training, not only about political and social cultural constructs, but how to deal with the constructs and utilize them for possible solutions is needed. Hiring a greater number of South Asian service providers can help make this task easier but such service workers need to be careful about becoming overtly engaged on a personal level with South Asian clients. They need to maintain their objectivity and professionalism.

Ultimately, culturally relevant interventions and supports are important as they go beyond an individual’s physical being and psychological needs by acknowledging different realities and experiences that exist. For social workers and counselors working with South Asian sexual abuse victims, it is important to acknowledge the impact of culture and gender on the shaping of their lives and experiences. It is also important to give women a full range of options and not limit their options to those options perceived to be “acceptable” within their families and communities. While much more needs to be done to improve the lives of South Asian women and end all forms of violence and abuse against them, I am optimistic that attitudes will change and that the next generation of women will have more options and choices available to them and greater freedom to live their lives as free and fully equal members of the South Asian community.
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