

South Asian Women in the U.S. and their Experience of Domestic Violence

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Abstract This study examined the extent of domestic violence and sociocultural factors (isolation, social support, acculturation, and patriarchy) associated with domestic violence among a community sample of 215 women of South Asian origin in the U.S. The sample is the largest to date in a study of domestic violence among South Asian women. Both paper and Web surveys were used. Of the sample, 38 % experienced some form of abuse in the past year. Isolation from spouse/partner and perceived social support predicted abuse. This information is vital in developing effective and culturally appropriate intervention methods for South Asian women victims of domestic violence.

Keywords Social support · Isolation · Partner abuse · Psychological maltreatment · Intimate partner violence

South Asian communities in the U.S. include immigrants from countries including Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, with the majority being from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Barnes and Bennett 2002; Rudrappa 2004; Sheehan et al. 2000). These communities have their own sociocultural expressions of violence against women, such as high degrees of secretiveness or emphasis on close family ties that discourage women

from disclosing abuse, or self-blame due to karma or one's actions in previous lives (Kallivayalil 2010).

Various factors are associated with domestic violence among South Asian women in the U.S. Some experiences that perpetuate domestic violence against South Asian women are also common in other communities (e.g., isolation and economic control by male partners). In spite of the commonalities, the context in which domestic violence takes place may differ due to the culture, societal norms, and history of the community. The patriarchal nature of South Asian culture is evident, and is very much influenced by religious beliefs (Ayyub 2000). Ahmad et al. (2004) studied the relationship between South Asian immigrant women's patriarchal beliefs and their perception of abuse ($N=47$) using a vignette. More than half the women in the sample (52.6 %) endorsed patriarchal beliefs and did not believe the woman in the vignette was a domestic violence victim, even though the vignette clearly indicated it. Patriarchy can result in large differences in gender roles and power relationships (MacKinnon 1983) and can serve to sanction male domination over women, including domestic violence in many societies such as South Asian cultures (Adam and Schewe 2007; Ahmad et al. 2004). Patriarchal beliefs these immigrant women may hold are, however, are being challenged as they are exposed to an environment that is more egalitarian and provides them with resources and laws that could protect them from their abusive partner (Adam and Schewe 2007).

Social support systems are important for abused immigrant women, as they greatly depend on them for various kinds of help—including emotional and other forms of support—in crises. Social support may minimize the experience of abuse for abused women (Yoshioka et al. 2003). Social support has also been found to reduce depression and general distress, depending on the quality of social support

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received (Adkins and Kamp Dush 2010; Campbell et al. 1995). Studies indicate that social support can help abused women identify coping strategies (Thoits 1986) and help women understand that the abuse is not their fault (Arias et al. 1997; Goodman and Smyth 2010); thus helping them to leave an abusive relationship (El-Khoury et al. as cited in Jacinto et al. 2010). In her study of immigrant women, Lynam (1985) described the need and importance of feelings of belonging to a new place by the women. Without personal support, women—especially immigrant women in abusive relationships—may experience further abuse by their partner and fail to stop the abuse.

Acculturation can also be a factor in abuse (Liao 2006). Acculturation is negatively related to attitudes that sanction domestic violence against immigrant women (Ganguly 1998). Acculturation, or adapting to the cultural norms of the country of immigration, may allow women to better deal with spouse or partner abuse since they may become more cognizant of their situation and less likely to adhere to traditional roles that perpetuate violence against them (Bui 2003; Liao 2006; Shiu-Thornton et al. 2005). Dasgupta and Warrier (1996) found that childhood socialization and adherence to cultural norms and traditions continued to influence South Asian women in their new environment. Simultaneously, the process of acculturation—in terms of becoming familiar with a new language and culture and exposure to the media and a less traditional society—may allow South Asian women to understand their condition better and take action to end violence against them.

Isolation from kin members and lack of contact with the mainstream culture also may promote domestic violence and prevent South Asian women from reporting violence against them (Mehrotra 1999). A woman's emotional dependence on her spouse or partner is more apparent when she lacks family and other support systems and finds herself lonely in an unfamiliar country. These situations give men increased power and control over women that may escalate to abuse. Men who attempt to isolate their spouse or partner, neglect them by disregarding their wishes, and decline to communicate with them may also be more likely to abuse them (Abraham 2000b; Mehrotra 1999). Women who lack instrumental support are less likely to be able to protect themselves from stress and trauma resulting from abuse (Natarajan 2002). South Asian women can be isolated from the larger community due to domestic and work obligations leaving them little time for socialization or engagement in community activities. They may also experience discrimination by mainstream groups in society. These conditions add to isolation and may restrict abused women from ending the violence to which they have been subjected (Abraham 2000b).

National surveys including the National Violence Against Women Survey and the National Crime Victimization Survey

(using nationally representative samples) provide data on the extent of domestic violence in the U.S., but neither specifies country of origin for Asian participants, and they lump both South Asians with all other Asians. The National Crime Victimization Survey reported that in 1998, 7.7 per 1,000 women experienced intimate partner violence (Rennison and Welchans 2000). For Asian women, the numbers were low compared to other racial groups. The rates of intimate partner victimization were 23 American Indians per 1,000 persons aged 12 or older, compared to 11 for blacks, 8 for whites, and 2 for Asians. The National Violence Against Women Survey (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000) also reported a lower rate of intimate partner violence among Asian/Pacific Islander women compared to other racial groups. Perhaps the methodology used in these studies, which included phone interviews (using random digit dialing to households in the U.S.), discouraged some women within the Asian population from disclosing abuse, since studies done specifically with South Asian women (albeit with non-random samples) indicate that they experience domestic violence rates similar to or higher than women in the general population (Adam 2000; Adam and Schewe 2007; Raj and Silverman 2002, 2007). National studies using probability samples may greatly underestimate the problem among South Asians due to issues such as underrepresentation, underreporting, or lumping South Asians with other Asian groups (Natarajan 2002). In the case of South Asians, underreporting may be especially high. In other cases, standardized measures commonly used to identify the extent of domestic violence in the U.S. may not be culturally appropriate for South Asian women.

The few studies on South Asian women are not consistent in the rates of abuse they have found. Adam (2000) found a lifetime occurrence of domestic violence at 77 % among Indian and Pakistani immigrants using a convenience (non-probability) sample of 114 women. Raj and Silverman (2002) found that 41 % of a convenience sample of 160 South Asian women immigrants in Boston experienced either physical or sexual abuse during their lifetimes by an intimate partner. The majority (74.3 %) of victims was married, and 84 % had a South Asian partner. Another recent study by Raj and Silverman (2007) with a convenience sample of 44 battered South Asian women residing in the greater Boston area of the U.S. found that 93 % of women had experienced sexual domestic violence, 55 % physical abuse, and 30 % of the women reported injury to themselves or needed medical services. Though differences in sampling techniques and definitions of abuse could account for at least some of the variation between these studies, the grossly different figures raise questions about the prevalence of intimate partner violence in the South Asian immigrant community.

Earlier studies have focused on either the prevalence of intimate partner violence in South Asian communities in the

U.S. or “help-seeking” among those in “clinical” samples (e.g., women in shelters (Yoshioka et al. 2003)). Most have used small community samples, primarily of South Asian women residing in one particular geographical area. A few researchers have explored domestic violence among South Asian women utilizing a qualitative methodology and descriptive analysis (Abraham 1999, 2000a; Dasgupta 2000; Dasgupta and Warriar 1996; Kallivayalil 2010; Mehrotra 1999). Fewer domestic violence studies of South Asian women have utilized quantitative methodologies (Adam 2000; Ahmad et al. 2004; Raj and Silverman 2002, 2003, 2007; Rianon and Shelton 2003; Yoshioka et al. 2003).

The current study investigated domestic violence prevalence *and* help-seeking among community-dwelling South Asian women from across the U.S. This study sought to reach a larger, more heterogeneous group of South Asian women than are represented in existing studies using a survey methodology and multivariate statistical analyses to shed light on sociocultural factors that may be associated with South Asian women’s experiences of domestic violence. Such research will be vital in developing effective intervention methods and treatment programs for women in South Asian communities. The research questions for the study were: (a) What is the extent of domestic violence among a sample of South Asian women residing in the U.S., (b) What sociocultural factors (specifically, isolation, social support, acculturation, and perceptions of patriarchy) are associated with the likelihood of experiencing domestic violence among this sample of women, and (c) What personal strategies do South Asian women use to address domestic violence?

Method

Procedure

Major cities in the U.S. with the largest South Asian populations were used for sampling. The cities targeted for recruitment were New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Houston because these regions have the largest South Asian populations in the U.S. In addition, Austin and Dallas, Texas, were used for data collection because of their close proximity to the researcher. Other geographical areas were included through use of emails and personal contacts. Participation was restricted to South Asian women aged 18 or older who were currently in heterosexual relationships or had been in a heterosexual relationship in the past year.

Since there seemed to be no single method that allowed for recruiting a diverse group of South Asian women participants while simultaneously protecting their safety (e.g., preventing family members from learning about participation), multiple recruitment and participation methods were

used. Sampling and recruitment strategies included community outreach via flyers, women contacts in the community (known to the researcher), women’s groups, grocery stores, beauty salons, and emails to members of South Asian cultural associations, groups, or organizations. South Asian community social events especially women-only events or events with large numbers of women attendees were targeted for survey distribution. South Asian associations located in the selected cities also distributed surveys. Use of the World Wide Web to identify various Asian American and South Asian organizations, websites, and internet blogs and email further facilitated recruitment and participation. Use of all these methods allowed the researcher to (a) reach women who have and have not been abused so that the two groups could be compared, and (b) among those who have been abused, to compare those who have sought informal help (through their personal networks of family, friends, and acquaintances), or formal help (from an agency or organization) with those who have not sought help and to identify the help-seeking methods used.

Survey data were collected anonymously in written (paper and electronic/online) form. Paper questionnaires were available in English and Hindi. Other languages were not used due to resource limitations. The electronic version was available only in English. The survey materials included information about and telephone numbers of the National Domestic Violence Hotline, local South Asian women’s organizations, and local shelters that participants (or others they know) could call for help if needed. In appreciation of their time, participants were offered an opportunity to enter a drawing to win one of five \$50 Amazon gift certificates. Those who wished to enter the drawing were asked to provide contact information separately to protect their identity.

Measures

Efforts were made to select measures that have been used in previous studies of domestic violence, especially those used in samples of South Asian women that had demonstrated sufficient validity and reliability. The following measures of abuse, perceived social support, patriarchal beliefs, acculturation, and isolation were used.

Dependent Variable The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus et al. 1996) was used to measure the dependent variable, domestic violence or partner abuse. The 32 items on the CTS2 (used for measuring domestic violence (abuse) in this study involved 19 items related to severe abuse, such as being burned on purpose, punched, slammed against the door, threatened to be hit by the partner, or physically forced to have sex by the partner. Thirteen items related to minor forms of abuse, such as being insulted, an

arm being twisted, face being slapped, being pushed by the partner, or being forced to have sex. The internal consistency reliability of the CTS2 scales ranges from 0.79 to 0.95 (Straus et al. 1996). Only the physical assault, psychological aggression, sexual coercion, and injury scales were used (the negotiation scale was not). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for all the scales combined was 0.93. Those who answered *yes* to at least one item were classified as abused, and those who answered *no* to all questions were classified as not abused. This provided a dichotomous dependent variable (*abused* or *not abused*) that was used as the dependent variable in a binary logistic regression model to test the effects of the independent (predictor) variables.

Independent Variables *Social support* was measured with the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al. 1988). This 12-item scale measures the level of support an individual perceives from family, friends, and significant others. It is measured with a 7-point Likert-type scale. Higher scores indicate more social support. In the current study, a 5-point Likert-type scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) was used instead of a 7-point scale to make the number of response options briefer while still providing sufficient variation. Internal consistency reliability was reported at 0.91 for the total scale and 0.90 to 0.95 for the family, friends, and significant others subscales. In the current study, the total score was used. Cronbach's alpha was 0.93.

Patriarchy was measured using the revised Husband's Patriarchal Beliefs Scale (Smith 1990). This scale contains five items measuring patriarchal beliefs on a 5-point Likert-type scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate stronger patriarchal beliefs. Smith (1990) reported an alpha coefficient of 0.79, indicating adequate internal reliability. In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.85.

Acculturation was measured with the short version of the Marin and Marin Acculturation Scale (Marin et al. 1987). The scale is used to measure the "level of acculturation" using 12 close-ended questions measured by a 5-point Likert-type scale. Questions relate to language preferences for reading, speaking, media, and ethnicity of friends. Scores ranged from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating the highest degree of acculturation. Earlier studies with immigrant women including South Asian women that adapted the scale have reported at least satisfactory reliability with a coefficient alpha of 0.92 and 0.78, respectively (Gupta and Yick 2001; Yoshioka et al. 2003). The overall Cronbach's alpha for all scales combined was 0.91 for the current study.

Isolation was measured using a revised version of a scale measuring social isolation developed by Stets (1991). Isolation was operationalized through three layers of integration or ties to: groups and organizations, family and friends, and

one's spouse or partner. Ties to groups and organizations were measured by asking respondents how often they participated in various types of organizations including social South Asian associations as a member, local South Asian non-profit organizations as a volunteer, other social or cultural groups, sports groups/clubs, professional/academic societies, religious groups, and other groups. Ties to family and friends were measured by asking how often the respondent spent time with relatives/extended family, close friends, and other friends (from workplace, school/college/university, or neighborhood).

In the current study, the items related to family and friends and groups and organizations were combined into one subscale, as they all represent social connections to those other than the woman's intimate partner. Responses ranged from 0 to 4, with 0 indicating *no participation* and 5 indicating *several times a week*. Higher scores indicate greater social ties or participation or being less isolated from social networks. Cronbach's alpha for these items was 0.74.

Ties to one's spouse or partner subscale was measured separately by asking respondents how they rate their relationship with their spouse in terms of (a) their feelings of warmth, intimacy, and acceptance in the relationship; (b) time spent with their spouse/partner; (c) participation with their partner in important decision-making in the household; (d) participation with their partner in decision-making regarding children; (e) financial independence, and (f) freedom of movement outside the house. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate greater social ties to spouse or partner and therefore being less isolated from them. Cronbach's alpha for ties with spouse or partner subscale was 0.90.

Demographic Variables Demographic variables included age, marital status, education, ethnic identity, education, employment status, number of children, and number of years in the U.S. Information about number of years with intimate partner, income, and living status was also collected.

Data Analyses

The SPSS version 18.0 software package was used to analyze the quantitative data.

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, etc.) were used to describe the participant's demographic characteristics and the test variables of isolation, social support, patriarchy, acculturation, severity of abuse, and help-seeking. Bivariate logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine whether the independent (predictor) variables were associated with whether or not a participant was abused. Given

correlations between the demographic variables of employment status and whether a participant was born in the U.S. or South Asia, and the test or predictor variables, these demographic variables were controlled in testing the multivariate model.

Results

Sample

In total, 268 women returned the survey. Of the 268 surveys, 264 were returned through the Web (online) survey, which was available only in English, and only four paper surveys were returned via mail (two were in English and two were in Hindi). Of the 268 returned surveys, 53 were eliminated from the analyses because the participant failed to complete a preponderance of the questions or the participant was not of South Asian origin. Therefore, 215 surveys were included in the analyses. Participants were from 33 states across the U.S. They were recruited using both paper and electronic/online surveys from major cities in the U.S. with large South Asian populations and through online surveys from other geographical areas.

Participants

Participants ranged from age 20 to 65, with a mean age of 30 ($SD=7.1$). Approximately 82 % were born in South Asia and 18 % in the U.S. Seventy-eight percent were married, 15 % were single, 3 % were cohabiting (not married, but living with a partner), 2 % were separated, and 2 % were divorced. In all, 77 % identified themselves as South Asians (born in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, or Burma); 7 % as South Asian American, but South Asian first; 4 % South Asian American, but American first; 11 % as a blend of both American and South Asian; and 1 % as American. Approximately 55 % of the participants were currently living with their male partner only, 21 % were living with their partner and children, 11 % were living alone, and 13 % had other arrangements, such as living with a friend or roommate.

A high percentage (67 %) of the participants had a degree equivalent to a master’s or above; 30 % had a bachelor’s degree; and 3 % had some college education or less. The largest group of participants (45 %) was employed full-time; 26 % were not working/unemployed; 21 % were volunteers, students, or retired; and 8 % were employed part-time. Sixty-four percent reported a family income for the past year above \$70,000; 17 % between \$40,000 and \$69,999; 8 % between \$20,000 and \$39,999; 3 % below \$20,000; and 8 % did not know their family income. Twenty-three percent of the participants reported their individual income at above

\$70,000 for the past year; 17 % between \$40,000 and \$69,999; 16 % between \$20,000 and \$39,999; 11 % below \$20,000; and 33 % did not have an individual income. Regarding participants’ immigration status, 53 % were visa holders, 15 % were permanent U.S. residents, and 32 % were U.S. citizens.

Extent of Abuse

Eighty-two (38 %) of the 215 participants reported they experienced one or more forms of domestic violence (abuse) toward them by their intimate partner in the past year. Seventy-seven reported psychological abuse, 27 reported sexual abuse, 22 reported physical abuse, and 9 reported injury (see Table 1). The types of abuse the women reported are further described in Table 2. The largest group (52 %) reported psychological abuse only, while the next largest group (16 %) reported both psychological and sexual abuse. Participants who reported domestic violence (abuse) were also classified as to whether they experienced severe or minor forms of abuse. Fifty-three participants (65 %) reported only minor forms of abuse (most often being insulted or sworn at, pushed, shouted or yelled at, humiliated and offended by their partner, or made to have sex without their consent). Twenty-eight participants (34 %) reported both minor and severe forms of abuse (such as being threatened to be hit, being choked, being forced to have sex, or kicked by their intimate partner), and one woman reported only severe abuse (see Table 3).

Sociocultural Factors Associated with the Experiences of Domestic Violence

The binary logistic regression analysis showed that two variables in the model predicted whether a woman was abused or not abused: the isolation subscale measuring ties with a spouse/partner and social support (see Table 4). Women who were more closely tied to (less isolated from) their spouse/partner (e.g., spent quality time with him and felt a sense of warmth and intimacy in their relationship) were less likely to report domestic violence (abuse). Survey

Table 1 Types of domestic violence (Abuse) women experienced in the past year ($N=82$)

Type of Abuse	<i>N</i>	%
Physical abuse	22	27 %
Psychological abuse	77	94 %
Sexual abuse	27	33 %
Injury	9	11 %

Note. Numbers do not total 82 and percentages do not total 100 because some participants indicated more than one type of abuse

Table 2 Combinations of domestic violence (Abuse) types women experienced in the past year ($N=82$)

Type of domestic violence (Abuse)	<i>N</i>	%
Psychological abuse only	43	52 %
Psychological & physical abuse only	9	11 %
Sexual abuse only	4	5 %
Psychological & sexual abuse only	13	16 %
Physical & sexual abuse only	1	1 %
Physical, psychological, & sexual abuse only	3	4 %
Physical, psychological, & injury abuse only	3	4 %
Physical, psychological, sexual, & injury abuse	6	7 %

participants who had more social support were also less likely to be abused by their partner.

Personal Strategies Domestic Violence Victims Used with their Partner in the Past Year

Information on use of personal strategies by domestic violence (abuse) victims with their partner in the past year was also collected. Of the 82 women who reported domestic violence in the past year, 55 indicated using at least one personal strategy to deal with the abuse by their partner. The majority (80 %) of these 55 women reported that they maintained silence, at least at times, while 71 % talked back to their partners/abusers to deal with the situation (e.g., questioned his behavior, screamed at him, or told him to stop). Fifty-eight percent avoided their abuser, by, for example, leaving the room or the house. Others (47 %) attempted to calm or please their abusers, by, for example, doing what their partner wanted, wearing clothes he liked, apologizing to him, or cooking what he preferred. Twenty percent thought about taking their own lives to cope with the situation. A smaller number (15 %) reported challenging their partner about his control over money, for example, by thinking or talking about opening their own independent bank account or accumulating their own money, and 11 % moved out of the home to avoid threatening situations. Fewer participants (6 %) reported having hit their partners. Only 2 % reported leaving their partner permanently. Most

Table 3 Severity of domestic violence (Abuse) reported by women in the past year ($N=82$)

Type of abuse by severe & minor items in CTS2	<i>N</i>	%
Minor abuse only	53	65 %
Both severe & minor abuse	28	34 %
Severe abuse only	1	1 %

Note. CTS2=Revised Conflict Tactics Scale

of the women reported using multiple strategies, with the largest group (29 %) reporting using four strategies.

Discussion

Extent of Abuse

The women of South Asian origin living in the U.S. that participated in this study are at considerable risk for domestic violence, with 38 % reporting some form of spousal or partner abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, or injury) in the past year. Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) surveyed a nationally representative sample of 8,000 women in the U.S. and reported a 1-year prevalence rate of intimate partner abuse—defined as rape, physical assault, and threats of harm—of 1.5 %. In the current study, South Asian women reported a much higher 1-year prevalence rate of abuse (18 %) when abuse was defined as physical, sexual, and injury, but excluded threats of harm. Though the sample is not representative of all South Asian women residing in the U.S., using this more conservative definition of domestic violence, participants reported a much higher 1-year prevalence rate.

In addition, even among this highly educated sample of South Asian women, the incidence of abuse was higher than among the general U.S. population, where only 29 % of women aged 25 and older have at least a college degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). Previous researchers (Adam 2000; Raj and Silverman 2002) have also found that South Asian women in the U.S. have a higher incidence of intimate partner violence compared with women in the general population. Adam (2000) reported that 54 % of her study sample of South Asian women was college graduates. Raj and Silverman (2002) did not report the education of their study participants, but most were of higher socioeconomic status (similar to the current study).

Methodological research on sensitive topics indicates that even in anonymous surveys, people tend to underreport behavior that is stigmatizing or embarrassing (Tourangeau and Yan 2007). This may be especially true for populations in which experiences such as domestic violence carry even more shame and stigma than they might among the mainstream population. Thus, the 38 % of South Asian women who reported some type of abuse in the current study may be an underestimate.

Weitzman (2000), in her book *Not to People Like Us*, based on interviews with 14 women aged 24 to 62 from Chicago (mainly Caucasian with one African American and one Asian Indian), elaborates on continued episodes of emotional (psychological) and/or physical abuse among well-educated and upper-income couples. These abused affluent women's experiences may have similarities to abused South Asian women in the current study who also share

Table 4 Logistic regression analysis for predictors of domestic violence ($N=215$)

Variables	B	SE B	Exp(B)
Whether born in the United States or in South Asia	0.71	0.483	2.035
No employment vs. full-time employment	0.001	0.412	1.001
No employment vs. part-time employment	0.063	0.645	1.065
No employment vs. other	-0.136	0.513	0.873
Isolation (ties with family, friends, groups, & organizations)	0.192	0.318	1.211
Isolation (ties with spouse/partner)	-0.373*	0.185	0.689
Social support	-0.48*	0.256	0.619
Acculturation	-0.472	0.284	0.624
Patriarchy	0.142	0.261	1.153
Constant	3.806	1.522	44.966

Note. * $p < .05$ (significant)

higher levels of education and socioeconomic status. Weitzman's interviewees experienced a sense of isolation due to fear of not being believed; thus, they refrained from disclosing their abuse. Many South Asian women also keep their experiences of abuse a secret because others may believe that those who have a comfortable life simply are not abused. Shame and embarrassment, especially in South Asian communities, may also inhibit women from disclosing abuse to others (Ayyub 2000). Fear of rejection by the community can also take a toll and social isolation is one of the factors associated with self-harm among South Asian women (Ahmed et al. 2007). South Asian communities have a tendency to ostracize women who try to separate from their spouse/partner or are open about domestic violence perpetrated by their spouse/partner. Fear of change in social status can be another factor that stops women from seeking help and escaping the abusive relationship. Twenty-seven percent of women in the current study who reported abuse in the past year have children, and they may stay with their abuser because separation can have negative economic (and perhaps emotional) repercussions for their children. Wietzman found that the affluent abused women she interviewed seemed not to acknowledge their own strengths and capabilities and did not use their education, achievements, and accomplishments to get help and take action. She noted that there is no clear explanation as to why these women feel trapped, given the resources available to them. In the current study, culture may be the main force that causes women to stay with the abuser even if they have the economic means to leave.

Psychological Abuse

In the current study, psychological abuse of South Asian women was more prevalent than other forms of abuse (52 % of abused participants reported psychological abuse). These results coincide with Adam (2000), who reported a higher percentage of psychological abuse compared to other forms of abuse within the past year in a sample of South Asian

women, and with Thapa-Oli et al. (2009) who reported that 54 % of the women in their more recent study of Nepali immigrant women in the U.S. suffered psychological abuse.

Psychological abuse varies from male control over family decision-making (Bui and Morash 1999) to verbal abuse and insults to women, especially in front of others, leading to humiliation, and ridiculing of their looks, cooking ability, and other qualities (Supriya 1995; Raj and Silverman 2002). These manifestations were also found among the women in the current study who reported psychological abuse in the past year. The frequency of being insulted/sworn at, shouted/yelled at, and humiliated/offended by their partner was also greater than other forms of psychological abuse such as threats by the spouse or partner to destroy something that belonged to the woman. Immigrant women, such as South Asian women, face additional forms of psychological abuse that may be culturally related or exaggerated such as being berated for adopting or not adopting Western norms (Raj and Silverman 2002).

The extent of psychological abuse reported in the current study is particularly concerning for several reasons. One is that psychological abuse has severe consequences, since an abused woman's well-being usually deteriorates over time, often leading to loss of self-esteem and identity (Midlarsky et al. 2006) and suppressed anger, depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress syndrome (Midlarsky et al.; Swan and Snow 2003). Secondly, psychological abuse can also lead to other somatic problems such as sleep disturbances; fatigue; headaches; pains in chest, limbs, and back; respiratory problems; and menstrual difficulties (Blasco-Ros et al. 2010; Sutherland et al. 2001; Svavarsdottir and Orlygsdottir 2009). Blasco-Ros et al. (2010) also found that women who were exposed to psychological abuse needed more time to escape from the abuse and were less likely to recover their mental health. Third, psychological abuse often escalates to physical abuse (Smith and Segal 2011). Fourth, the community may downplay psychological abuse as something that is not severe. Lastly, South Asian women may not see their experiences as abuse due to the patriarchal nature of the society that condones male control over women.

Culturally relevant education is needed to help South Asian women and the larger community recognize psychological maltreatment as a form of abuse. Universal prevention campaigns can reach large groups of people. More targeted services are needed to reach women who have already been damaged by psychological abuse. Various mechanisms such as public service announcements in various media, including South Asian media, and forums to discuss the effects of various forms of domestic violence and their effects can also be used to propagate information about services provided by social workers, family therapists, and counselors who can help women address psychological abuse.

Other Forms of Abuse

Other forms of abuse are equally important to address as they also have serious effects. Some women in the sample reported sexual coercion. Studies with South Asian women (Abraham 1999) have shown that sexual abuse is viewed as a male right to control sexual and reproductive decision-making, which can be detrimental to women's health. In the current study, some women also reported physical abuse and injury in the past year, indicating its occurrence in this group. Additionally, in this study of women who reported some form of abuse in the past year and used at least one strategy to address it, the majority (80 %) reported that they maintained silence, at least at times. Abraham (2000b) also reported that South Asian women have a propensity to remain silent about their intimate relationships or problems. Additionally, women tend to minimize and deny abuse such as emotional abuse or conflict within intimate relationships to survive, and because these forms of abuse are more difficult to recognize and are more often condoned, at least tacitly, by society. Moreover, as Paradkar (2000) explains, "most of these women don't know they needn't suffer abuse silently" (as also cited in Ahmad et al. 2004, p. 278).

An important strength of South Asian cultural groups is family cohesiveness. Programs and services should build upon this strength and also target the network of people who provide instrumental support to these women. Domestic violence services providers should focus on developing family support interventions to help these members understand what domestic violence is so families can offer better support to victims. Aggressive outreach is also needed to draw the attention of all members of the community, including gatekeepers, religious leaders, women, youth, and others. Messages about the different forms of domestic violence and their repercussions, therefore, should be directed to all community members to raise awareness about these problems. Community action groups comprised of various segments of the community (e.g., gatekeepers, women), and particularly male members of the community, can be formed

to meet regularly and run campaigns to spread information about the impact of domestic violence on families, women, and children. Such actions may lead to open discussions on gender issues, value differences, and domestic violence among male and female members of the community. This can be a step toward making social changes through raising consciousness and reinforcing ideologies that do not support violence against anyone including women, men, and children.

Isolation and Abuse

Also central to this study's findings is that South Asian women who were more isolated from their partners were more likely to be abused. However, even abused South Asian women in the sample reported relatively close ties with their partners, and most women who were abused in the past year were currently living with their spouse/partner. Immigrant women rely heavily on their spouse/partner and have high expectations of them regarding their ability to provide financially and in other aspects of their roles as husbands and fathers. Holding their partner in high regard may help reduce some of their anxiety, especially for those making the transition from their home country to a foreign land in the absence of immediate family. This could be true for most abused women in the study sample, as 80 % were born in South Asia, and this may explain why those who were abused also reported close ties with their spouse/partner. In addition, these women may believe that their relationship with their spouse/partner is good even in the face of some forms of abuse, which they may believe are normative in intimate relationships.

Social Support and Abuse

The greater the social support women in the current study reported, the less likely they were to be abused. These findings coincide with earlier literature indicating that social support plays an important role in the lives of immigrant women, including those in an abusive relationship (Goodman and Epstein 2005; Lynam 1985; Tan et al. 1995). For example, Yoshioka et al. (2003) found social support to be an important factor in disclosing abuse and seeking help among South Asian women experiencing partner abuse in the U.S. Social support may have helped them make decisions to ask for help from both informal and formal sources to alleviate their situation. Rose et al. (2000), in their study of 31 abused women of different ethnic backgrounds, also emphasized the importance of social support in successful resolution of the abuse.

Limitations

Since random sampling was not used in the current study, biases may be present. Although limited demographic data are available for South Asians by gender in the U.S., the

U.S. Census Bureau (2007) reports that “68 % of Asian Indians [men and women, who comprise the vast majority of the South Asian population in the U.S.] 25 and older had a bachelor’s degree or more education, and 36 % had a graduate degree or professional degree” (para. 8). Women are 35 % of all South Asians who have a graduate degree (South Asian American Policy and Research Institute 2000). In the current study, 96 % of South Asian women had at least a bachelor’s degree and 66 % had a graduate degree. Thus, it may be inferred that South Asian women in the current study had substantially higher levels of education than South Asian women in the U.S. population.

Nearly all participants were well-versed in English; nearly all chose to complete the survey in English, though the paper survey was also available in Hindi; and nearly all completed the survey on the Web rather than in paper format. Therefore, study results may not be generalizable to the broader population of women of South Asian origin in the U.S. or to certain segments of South Asian women. The previous quantitative studies on the extent of domestic violence among South Asian women also did not use random sampling and encountered sampling biases similar to those in the current study (Adam 2000; Raj and Silverman 2002, 2007). Limitations also include reliance on some measures (e.g., the revised Husband’s Patriarchal Beliefs Scale, Smith 1990) not previously validated with South Asians and reliance on self-reports (though these instruments demonstrated at least adequate internal consistency reliability in the current study).

There are also several strengths of this study. Though not randomly selected, the sample is the largest ever recruited to study domestic violence among South Asian women. It is also the broadest-based geographically. Women from 33 states participated, compared to other studies that also used community samples but were confined to a single city such as Boston or a few major U.S. cities (Adam 2000; Raj and Silverman 2002). The current study included mostly Asian Indian women (91 %), compared to other ethnic groups (e.g., Pakistanis or Bangladeshis) in the South Asian population, which is similar to the general South Asian population in the U.S. comprised of 89 % Asian Indians (both men and women; the 2000 U.S. census does not report a breakdown by gender for South Asians; Barnes and Bennett 2002). Future research would benefit from obtaining representative samples large enough to describe the extent of abuse among women from each South Asian country. The current study also investigated psychological, physical, sexual, and injury abuse, while some previous studies of South Asian women in the U.S. did not include psychological abuse (Raj and Silverman 2002; Yoshioka et al. 2003). It is also the first study to utilize an online survey with women of South Asian origin on the subject of domestic violence.

Efforts are needed to increase social support and reduce isolation as ways of preventing or intervening in abuse,

which is condemned in any humane society. There also is a tremendous need to understand the sociocultural context in which domestic violence takes place in the South Asian community so that better prevention and intervention strategies can be developed. Evaluation research on the effectiveness of domestic violence programs with South Asian women and on alliances of mainstream agencies with culturally specific organizations are also necessary to improve the provision of appropriate services to South Asian victims of domestic violence.

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