

“Faces of Domestic Violence” – Research Artist Collaboration

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Background

“**Faces of Domestic Violence**” is a collaborative art-based project between a Doctoral Candidate in sociology, Wendy Aujla, and a local artist Heidi Erisman. The goal is to further disseminate the findings of Wendy’s Master’s Thesis Project titled “*Voicing Challenges: South Asian Immigrant Women Speak Out about their Experiences of Domestic Violence and Access to Services*” and to empower women to seek help and encourage the South Asian community to be supportive.

In the qualitative study, Wendy interviewed South Asian immigrant women about their experiences of domestic violence, their views on reporting and access to informal or formal sources of supports were explored. Heidi, then read the thesis to listen for the details provided by each woman such as the type of abuse, the abuser(s), the fears or challenges in reporting to informal or formal sources, and the socio-demographics of each participant.

Heidi also met with Wendy, on several occasions, to discuss the commonalities and differences in the women’s experiences and to share reflections that would help to produce seven representations. The paintings are done with water colour on Arches water colour paper.

For ethical reasons, to protect the identity of the women, pseudonyms were used in the research and the paintings are not the real portraits of the women.

IMAGE - Harjot: She found her strength through prayer. Her name is a pseudonym and the painting is an artistic rendering in order to protect her identity.

IMAGE - Face of Domestic Violence

Details about the Study

There is little written about the actual experiences of South Asian immigrant women experiencing domestic violence in Canada from their perspective and their perception of barriers with informal and formal supports (Ahmad, Barata, Riaz, & Stewart, 2004; Chokshi, Desai, Adamali, 2010; Shirdwadkar, 2004). The rationale for a qualitative study like this is that it is not about how often the abuse happens, but allowing the stories to be told and heard from the women’s perspective. The paintings serve as a visual to capture the various emotions the participant’s felt such as a sense of loss, shame, anger, pain, isolation, mistrust, revictimization, and grief.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with seven South Asian immigrant women in Edmonton, Alberta, from 2010 to 2011. Participants were selected based on a specific criteria requiring that each woman be over the age of 18, immigrated to Canada from either India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka and was part of the South Asian community in Edmonton, and is a victim or survivor of domestic violence.

Research Question

- What are some of the challenges for South Asian immigrant women in reporting domestic violence?

- What kinds of support would South Asian immigrant women like to have available that might facilitate reporting?
- What type of services and resources are required for South Asian immigrant women?

IMAGE - Preet

Financial Abuse/Physical Assaults

“My daughter-in-law hit me...when they wanted money. She was causing the fighting. Everyone in my family would be saying things to my son, like...why doesn't he leave her?”

IMAGE - Jaseena

Shame-Based Secrets

“One day he hit me because his mom was talking; Two days before he hit me and he sent me...he forced me.... I never told anyone but my friends saw the bruises.”

Findings

A grounded theory methodology (GTM) was used to describe and conceptualize the women's experiences with open coding/recurring themes being identified (Bryant & Charmaz 2007, Glaser, 1992). The seven participants disclosed not only how abuse was experienced, but also their challenges in reporting and gaining access to services. The data that emerged from GTM identified a number of different themes, all of which are interconnected yet fall into three unique categories: 1. Individual Barriers and Vulnerabilities, 2. Structural and Institutional, and 3. Societal and Cultural Pressures in the South Asian community. A visual representation was then created to aid understanding of the research findings and to demonstrate the relationship between the categories and factors that influence the core theme: power imbalance.

IMAGE – Figure 5-1 Power Imbalance

Innermost circle – Power & Control (Husband, in-laws, Daughter-in-laws & other extended family members) Various forms of abuse

Second circle – Powerless South Asian Immigrant women

Third circle – Individual Barriers & Vulnerabilities

1. Social Isolation & Patriarchy;
2. A lack of Community Support leads to Self Blame & other Coping Mechanisms;
3. Language Barriers;
4. Inaccessibility to Social Services;
5. Economic Constraints.

Fourth circle – Structural & Institutional

1. Unfamiliarity with Rights & Social Services
2. Immigration and Legal Related Issues

Fifth circle – Societal & Cultural Pressures

1. Struggling to save marriage because of Cultural Stigmas
2. Societal pressures exerted from Family & Community

Outermost Circle – Revictimization & Marginalization

The figure captures the women's experiences and how they are trapped in a cycle of power inequality. The centre circle ("Power and Control") represents family members using power and control tactics against the women who are represented in the second level ("Powerless South Asian Immigrant Women"). The participants held little power or authority and some were struggling for equal opportunity. The concepts within the other three circles ("Individual Barriers and Vulnerabilities, Structural and Institutional, and Societal and Cultural Practices") may overlap as they are the external forces or barriers preventing the women from reporting abuse. The remaining outer layer of this figure ("Revictimization and Marginalization") represents how power situated in this cycle continues even after the women reach out to service providers. The participants thus seem trapped in an endless power cycle that makes them vulnerable to becoming mistreated again. This figure should be explored further to make reliable conclusions about how to reduce vulnerabilities and empower immigrant women from the South Asian community to seek help.

Conclusions

The paintings reflect the overarching power imbalance theory which provides insight into the participants' lived experiences of domestic violence. To further disseminate the findings from the research study, the paintings have been displayed at various events in Edmonton since 2014. This art-based project has undertaken an action to break the silence of domestic violence in a community where the subject is very taboo and remains largely unspoken about.

IMAGE - Neha

18 years Tortured

"Almost 18 years, the same problem. He beat me and rip off my clothes. My mother-in-law sometimes came when he beat me. She said it's OK when he is mad so forget it. One day he punched me. My daughters say, "Mom, see your face." I see it is purple like my pants are purple.

IMAGE – Khwaab

A tribute work in memory of those immigrant women to Canada who have been murdered.

Acknowledgments

The women's narratives are at the heart of this work. Without the seven South Asian immigrant women courageously willing to share their story the research and this art-based project would have never been possible.

References

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