

South Asian women's experience of family abuse: The role of the husband's mother



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Author and acknowledgements

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For more in-depth discussion of these findings, please refer to:

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Key points

- South Asian women's experiences of family abuse are rooted in complicated family structures and relationships. This is different from more mainstream understandings of domestic abuse which typically consist of an abused woman and a male perpetrator.
- Service providers and policymakers need to be sensitive to the possibility of the family as a potential source within which women can experience multiple forms of abuse by multiple perpetrators.
- The findings of this study show that the husband's mother can be a key player in women's experiences of family abuse. Little is known, however, about the nature of this relationship, and when and how it can turn abusive.
- In order for Stark's (2013) coercive control model to be utilised effectively in understanding abuse by the mother-in-law, it needs to be more inclusive of the specificity of South Asian women's experiences of family abuse; namely, extended family structures and relationships.
- The interviewees' experiences suggest that abuse can take a variety of forms; from more subtle, indirect acts such as being overworked, control of marital relations and constant 'ear-filling'; to those characterised by overt, direct acts such as physical and verbal abuse, and isolation.
- Factors such as immigration status (and all the factors associated with it) can intensify, and facilitate, abuse by the mother-in-law.

This briefing explores South Asian women's experiences of family abuse¹, particularly the role of the husband's mother in these experiences. The author's PhD looked at abuse more generally in families and found that as well as partner abuse, abuse by the husband's mother was also a huge issue. However, this is a dimension of South Asian women's experiences of abuse that is overlooked, with much work on domestic abuse focusing on abuse between partners (Scottish Executive, 2003). Little is known about the nature of the mother- and daughter-in-law relationship, why and how it can become violent, and how it can add to women's abuse and oppression in a family abuse context. In exploring these issues, this briefing, drawing on the author's PhD research, makes a significant contribution to what we know about the role of female family members in the abuse of other women. The findings outlined in this briefing paper also highlight that in order to achieve sensitive policy and practice for all abused women, the family must not be overlooked as a potential source within which some women can experience abuse.

The study

This PhD study involved 11 in-depth, one-off interviews with Pakistani Muslim women in Scotland. The participants were recruited on the basis of having experienced family abuse.

The sample consisted of six Pakistan-born interviewees and five UK-born interviewees. The research focused on Pakistani women specifically as this is the largest category within the South Asian population in Scotland. The sample of women varied according to:

- Birth-country of interviewee (Pakistan-born or UK-born)
- Birth-country of husband (Pakistan-born or UK-born)

The women interviewed were accessed via voluntary sector organisations which work with women from ethnic minorities who have experienced domestic abuse, and snowball sampling. Although the sample is small and the interviews were one-off, the strength and uniqueness of this study lies in being able to show, through women's own words, how particular factors such as immigration status can feed into an abusive power dynamic in a domestic setting. However, it is crucial to steer clear of generalisations, as these findings do not represent all South Asian women's experiences.

Findings

Five out of the six Pakistan-born interviewees, and three out of the five UK-born interviewees, experienced abuse from mothers-in-law. The findings show that South Asian women can be subjected to simultaneous physical abuse and threats from both their mothers-in-law and spouses, highlighting the intensity of abuse South Asian women can

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¹The term 'family abuse' encapsulates the complexity and diversity of South Asian women's experiences of abuse, such as the role of female affinal kin. For the purpose of the author's research and this particular briefing paper, the term 'family' includes those who reside within the marital home i.e. the husband's parents and siblings.

experience within an extended family structure. There were striking contrasts and distinctions between the UK-born and Pakistan-born interviewees in their experiences of abuse and the involvement of mothers-in-law. The distinction lies in the Pakistan-born interviewees' immigration status (and all the factors associated with it), which positions them in a relatively powerless and vulnerable position in terms of financial dependence, education, non-English proficiency and distance of family, exemplified in the following case study.

Meryam² arrived to the UK from Pakistan on a spousal visa. She has no family in the UK, and she cannot speak English very well. Her marital home consisted of: husband, mother-in-law, father-in-law, husband's brother's wife and husband's sister. Meryam's experience of abuse was not immediate but developed gradually in severity. Meryam was only allowed to leave the house for doctors' appointments or to work (unpaid) in the family shop. She was always chaperoned by her husband or mother-in-law. She did not have the resources to contact her family back home (i.e. phone, money to buy a phone card), and she was prohibited contact with them by her husband and mother-in-law. Meryam has three children. Meryam experienced physical and verbal spousal abuse in front of other members of the family, particularly her mother-in-law. Meryam felt her mother-in-law goaded her husband to hit her, and she also physically, verbally and financially abused Meryam. Meryam's mother-in-law told her: 'if you leave or contact the police you will be deported back to Pakistan, and your children will be taken away from you'. Unaware of her rights and having no family and friends close by, these threats coerced Meryam to stay in the abusive relationship.

Those who migrate to marry or live with spouses settled in the UK are subject to a five-year probationary period. If a woman can 'prove' marital breakdown because of abuse, she can apply for indefinite leave to remain in the UK which grants her access to public resources for three months. Research explains the ways in which these immigration policies are utilised by perpetrators to strengthen and intensify existing domination and control over women, but can also make it harder for women to leave abusive relationships.

The exploration of the interviewees' experiences of abuse by the mother-in-law has been termed and organised as 'indirect involvement' and 'direct involvement'.

1. Indirect involvement in abuse by the mother-in-law

Indirect involvement is characterised by subtle tactics that control and regulate certain aspects of a daughter-in-law's life. The interviewees explained that their mothers-in-law intended to control and dominate them as a means to maintain the joint household, and to sustain their exploitation (economic and domestic labour). The subtlety and specificity of these tactics makes it difficult to recognise and identify them as abusive (by service providers and by the women experiencing it). These tactics consisted of:

Domestic despotism

Domestic despotism is one of the most common forms of abuse perpetrated by the interviewees' mothers-in-law. This included the daughters-in-law feeling constant pressure to cook and clean for everyone in the household, and being forced to cook and clean:

It was shocking for me, suddenly all at once, so much. 'These clothes you put in like this ... You have to wash all of these. This is the cooker, put it on like this. We make food like this. You have to clean the washroom, you have to Hoover' ... And she would also say, 'Come down for 7am and you cannot go upstairs to your room before 2am'. (Fatima Pakistan-born)

Control of marital relations

The interviewees recount attempts to prevent marital relations and limit the time spent with their husbands:

So he wouldn't come near me [for sex], she [mother-in-law] would make him sleep in the same room as her, or she would make him sleep in another room saying 'the baby will keep you awake and you have to go to work in the morning'. (Fatima Pakistan-born)

Constant ear filling

The interviewees refer to this as the mother-in-law's incitement of spousal abuse by making complaints about a daughter-in-law:

They [husband and husband's mother] would sit together, I could hear them, as she would say to him, 'she doesn't cook properly, [and] she is rude'. I could hear it in his voice, he would get angry. (Naseem UK-born)

As a result of these tactics, the interviewees felt 'low self-worth', 'depression', 'physical and mental exhaustion' and 'anxiety'. It also contributed to marital discord for example, when a mother-in-law overwhelms her daughter-in-law with housework so that she is too physically exhausted to spend time with her husband this can, as perceived by the interviewees, become a cause of marital discord.

2. Direct involvement in abuse by the mother-in-law

Direct involvement is when the mother-in-law carried out abuse against her daughter-in-law herself; this could be in front of, or in isolation from, other family members. It included the following:

Physical abuse

The Pakistan-born interviewees recount their mother-in-law either attempting to, or actually, physically abusing them:

My mother-in-law pushed me because I phoned [phoned] my parents ... Everyone was sitting there, her daughters too, they were laughing ... She came near me to hit me. I moved back. (Aliyah Pakistan-born)

Verbal abuse

This entailed the mother-in-law exerting control over the daughter-in-law's clothes and appearance by belittling her; verbally abusing her and belittling her family; and questioning her character and her contributions to the family and household:

She [mother-in-law] was always saying to me, 'you're so fat', saying things like that all the time, giving me a complex. (Meryam Pakistan-born)

The interviewees also endured regular taunts from their mothers-in-law about their family, which they explained were the most difficult to endure:

My mum discovered she had cancer. She spent two years dying, literally, in the hospital. The whole time ...she [mother-in-law] would curse her [mother] [saying], 'when is her mum going to die? Why isn't she hurrying up and dying? I pray to God she dies'. (Naseem UK-born)

Isolation

The interviewees explained controlling contact with their family as the most effective form of isolation:

She [mother-in-law] said that, 'well you won't be speaking to your family as much we take it, we are like your family now'. (Khadija UK-born)

The Pakistan-born interviewees' experiences of this, due to factors specific to them (immigration status), were more distinct and intense:

They [husband and mother-in-law] wouldn't give me a [phone] card. The one time they gave me a card, they never gave me one for another six months and that card was only for thirty minutes. If I said, 'I need another phone card' they would say, 'we gave you one, why do you need one again?' (Aliyah Pakistan-born)

Conclusion

South Asian women's experiences of family abuse, which stems from kinship structures and relationships, are largely not represented in the wider literature on domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is typically understood through a feminist perspective which holds gender inequality as its root cause, demonstrating the manner in which men use control in intimate relationships. This gendered perspective has greatly informed this research, providing an opportunity to highlight the similarities between women's experiences of abuse based on their gender.

Researchers such as Gangoli et al. (2011) critique this perspective of domestic abuse in two ways:

- it confines women's experience to intimate relationships and nuclear households; and
- it relies on an undifferentiated category of 'women' that assumes that to share female gender means a shared female experience (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002).

“A powerful illustration of how traditional gender stereotypes are used to control women and compound their experiences of domestic abuse. This research demonstrates why it is important to consider the broader familial and cultural context within which domestic abuse is perpetrated.”

Dr Marsha Scott, Chief Executive, Scottish Women's Aid.

The specificity and differentiation of South Asian women's experiences of family abuse, which the aforementioned perspective fails to represent, is the role of the mother-in-law in the instigation and perpetration of family abuse against the daughter-in-law. Additionally, due to the nature of this relationship, and the extended family structures and relationships within which women are rooted, the power dynamics are far more complex with abuse by the mother-in-law. Rew, Gangoli and Gill (2013) argue that abuse by the mother-in-law must be explored and understood within Stark's (2013) 'coercive control model'. They argue that many of Stark's (2013) findings and arguments on domestic abuse - that the structural roots of women's inequality and their vulnerability to abuse needs to be taken into account - hold true regarding women's violence against other women. Stark's model was developed to explore 'women's entrapment' by men within an intimate relationship from a feminist perspective of gender inequality. In order for this model to be representative of South Asian women's experiences of family abuse, it needs to be developed to include family structures and relationships.

Recommendations for policy and practice

- To understand South Asian women's experiences of family abuse, the family must be recognised as a potential source within which women can experience multiple forms of abuse by multiple perpetrators.
- Service providers and policymakers must explore the reality that women, such as the mother-in-law, can be actively complicit in the violence and oppression of other women.
- Service providers and policymakers must take note of the specificities and complexities inherent in women's experiences of abuse, such as those explored in this briefing paper.
- Training and education for service providers and policymakers is crucial to offering support that is tailored to women's needs and constraints. Services must understand the complex nature of kinship structures, and how and why women can be constrained and abused by them. However, it is crucial not to stereotype and to assume that, for example, all mothers-in-laws are abusive. Rather, South Asian women's experiences need to be incorporated within services and within Safer Lives: Changed Lives, the government's overarching framework for tackling violence against women.

²pseudonyms are used throughout