

**How can services for South Asian women in Wake County who have experienced intimate partner violence be improved: Can Faith-Based Organizations be a Solution?**  
*Offering Recommendations to Improve the Status of Gender Equity in North Carolina*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Imagine getting murdered by your ex-husband after receiving no support from your community while going through a divorce. Sania Khan was a Pakistani woman, a social worker, and an advocate for low-income families. She became a flight attendant to support her photography career. Khan was also a staunch advocate for women's rights and had worked to remove the stigma of divorce in South Asian communities predominately through social media platforms, such as TikTok. Through this platform, Khan explained the shame and stigma she faced as a divorced South Asian woman. Simultaneously, when she pursued the divorce, she was exiled by some of her family members for her actions. On July 18th, 2022, she was shot dead by her ex-husband Raheel Ahmad. The news of Khan's death shocked the South Asian diaspora and the community created through her TikTok. These events ignited conversations surrounding the stigma of divorce and domestic violence in the culture (Sahay, 2022). This illustrates the unnecessary judgment South Asian women receive for wanting to leave a toxic or abusive relationship. Khan's death resulted in a community-wide introspection, forcing us to consider how South Asian communities have failed women in abusive relationships and divorced women.

## **METHODS**

Literature on domestic violence in the South Asian community was collected in July 2022 via the North Carolina State University (NCSU) Summon database, which pulls from all academic databases that NCSU can access. Keyword identification was refined and combined with the phrase 'South Asian domestic violence.' Key Words included 'South Asian,' 'violence,' 'domestic violence,' 'intimate partner violence,' and 'United States.' Sources met the following criteria to be eligible: (1) peer-reviewed; (2) full-text online; (3) included 'South Asian' and at least one other keyword as listed above; (4) published in the last 3 years; (5) pertained to

domestic violence in the South Asian community in the United States. If a source met all the criteria and was relevant to the topic of study, then it was included in the review. Most sources were from the databases SAGE Journals and Wiley Online Library. Additional sources from NC governmental websites and websites of nonprofits dedicated to diminishing domestic violence were used to understand current statistics regarding the rate of domestic violence cases in North Carolina and, more specifically, Wake County, NC. Further informational interviews were conducted with domestic violence prevention organizations such as Kiran of Wake County, NC, and Daya of Houston, TX to understand how these organizations work to prevent and end domestic violence in their community and to assist me in obtaining additional sources of relevant information. The findings from the literature review and informational interviews were then used to create a content analysis and discovery of the prevalence of domestic violence in the South Asian community and how to best help this community to mitigate this issue.

## **RESULTS**

The general population may view domestic violence or intimate partner violence (IPV) as an issue that needs to be dealt with behind closed doors. This is a dangerous myth and misunderstanding that still persists today while intimate partner violence occurs daily in multiple households. It is an issue that affects people of all ages, socioeconomic statuses, and racial backgrounds. The South Asian community is one group that consistently grapples with this issue due to the cultural norms and expectations embedded within the community. Prevalence rates suggest that 18–40% of South Asians experience some form of domestic violence, but community-based organizations believe the actual prevalence is higher than existing empirical evidence indicates (Rai, 2020, p. 1984). In North Carolina, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (2021) reports that 35.2% of North Carolina women experience intimate

partner physical and sexual violence and stalking in their lifetimes. Additionally, in a 24-hour survey period in 2020 in North Carolina, local and state hotlines answered 540 calls, averaging more than twenty-three hotline calls every hour exhibiting the prevalence of domestic violence crises in North Carolina. In 2022 alone, there were forty-two domestic violence homicides in the state (North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence [NCCADV], n.d.). The NC Council for Women and Youth Involvement requires each state-funded domestic violence and sexual assault grantee to report semi-annually on client service provision. The most recent report reveals 75,556 clients received in-person or report services in North Carolina from July 2021 to June 2022, and 676 of those clients served are Asian or Pacific Islanders (North Carolina Department of Administration [NCDOA], n.d.). Whether any of the clients are South Asian was not specified. It is unfortunate that data on domestic violence in Wake County, especially among the South Asian community, is not available.

InterAct of Wake County is a nonprofit that assists victims or survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. InterAct is dedicated to ending the cycle of domestic and sexual violence in Wake County, and its mission is to save and rebuild lives and secure safer futures for victims and survivors along with their families (InterAct, n.d.). In 2020, the organization was serving about thirty individuals a day in immediate crisis (Chapman, 2020). In 2021, the high-risk crisis hotline at InterAct experienced a 30% increase in callers (Fordham, 2021). More specifically, the most recent report detailing the number of clients InterAct had from Wake County discloses that the nonprofit served 5,739 clients from July 2020 to June 2021 and eight-five of those clients were Asian (NCDOA, n.d.). Once again, the specific ethnicity of the clients was not specified. As for South Asian victims or survivors, Kiran is the only organization in Wake County that provides services and assistance for South Asian women. Kiran's mission is to

break the cycle of abuse by providing culturally focused services and extensive economic, social, and community resources to serve South Asians who are victims or survivors of domestic violence in North Carolina. Kiran means “ray of light” in Hindi, implying that the nonprofit intends to guide and foster hope for South Asian victims or survivors of domestic violence. Furthermore, the organization educates the South Asian community on how to respond to and support victims or survivors of domestic violence by helping members understand diversity, violence prevention, healthy and non-violent relationships, engagement in social change, professionalism, and equity (Kiran, n.d.). Kiran has significant outreach with the entity serving 367 clients from Wake County in 2020 and 541 in 2021 (J. Charles, personal communication, September 01, 2022). Despite this effort, with about 45,801 South Asians living in Wake County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), Kiran’s outreach might be improved if they had greater resources. Additionally, not many statistics exist regarding the rate of domestic violence cases in the South Asian community in Wake County as can be seen in the reports the NC Council for Women and Youth Involvement requires. It is difficult to fully understand the prevalence of this issue, and this is problematic when considering the large South Asian population that exists in Wake County.

This research paper aims to explore how can services for South Asian women in Wake County who have experienced intimate partner violence be improved. Research for this study was conducted through literature reviews and informational interviews with different domestic violence prevention organizations. Following the literature review and presentation of information gathered from interviews, I offer recommendations that have the potential to improve the services provided to South Asian victims or survivors of IPV.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON ACCEPTING VIOLENCE**

It is essential to consider the cultural barriers and expectations that exist for South Asians and especially South Asian women. Recent studies and emerging research focused on domestic violence experienced by adult South Asian immigrant women found that South Asian women suffered various barriers including abuse from other family members, stigma or shame, isolation, fear of divorce, language barriers, and dowry-related abuse. Dowry-related abuse occurs when in-laws mistreat their sons' brides to obtain more money or valuables from the bride's family or indicate disapproval of the dowry provided by the bride's family. Moreover, South Asian culture is considered patriarchal, adhering to traditional gender roles in which men are seen as the primary decision-makers and may have much greater power than women (Ragavan et al., 2021, NP4338-4339). This portrays the various struggles South Asian women endure, and with South Asian culture holding a severe patriarchal mindset, IPV becomes prevalent and difficult to overcome. Consistent with this, South Asians tend to value public opinions or judgment within the community more than individual well-being. This collectivity principle that dominates South Asian culture guides ethical values and religious norms in many religious and ethnic communities in South Asia. In collectivist cultures, individuals are seen as embedded in group identities, and the notion of an independent, autonomous self is suppressed. As a result, women may be reluctant to disclose violence because they tend to prioritize the reputation of their family and community over their own needs (Tripathi & Azhar, 2022, p. 524) Furthermore, collectivist traditions embedded in South Asian culture increases the involvement of the woman's in-laws in the relationship which leads to control and abuse by them. According to Rai and Choi's study (2021), findings exhibit a higher prevalence of abuse initiated by in-laws, with rates of in-law abuse being highest among Asian women compared with other ethnic groups. The patrilocal nature of South Asian marriages often requires a woman to live with her husband's family (pp.

22-23). The common phrase most South Asian women grow up hearing and then imbibe is “what will people say?” This combined with the controlling nature of in-laws makes it increasingly difficult for South Asian women trapped in abusive relationships to leave due to fear of societal scorn. Consequentially, there needs to be increasing support and validation from one’s own community for women to feel empowered and safe enough to leave their relationship and receive help. According to the unique attributes that plague South Asian culture that makes it grueling for victims or survivors of IPV to receive help, it is worth discovering how services for South Asian victims or survivors can be better tailored for them.

## **LIMITED EDUCATION AND AWARENESS OF RESOURCES**

### *The Impact of Technology and How to Spread Awareness*

When discussing Kiran’s impact with its outreach coordinator Julia Charles, she explained that many of Kiran’s clients had wished they had heard about the organization sooner (personal communication, September 01, 2022). This illustrates a need to consider how to better expose South Asian victims or survivors as well as bystanders to helpful resources that they may not be aware of. Mahapatra and Rai’s study (2019) found that most participants stressed the importance of using technology, as it greatly expands social networks and allows them to seek outside help. Participants used a variety of modes including landline, mobile, desktop, laptop, web/internet, email, and social networking sites such as Skype and Facebook. They go on to say “the use of technology opened several avenues of accessing informal and formal means of seeking help to participants in this study. It was also indirectly helpful in providing some sort of minimal safety to the women and later even led them to leave the abusive relationship” (pp. 1179-1180). This shows the impact technology holds, and it is something that should be taken advantage of more when helping victims or survivors of IPV. Mahapatra and Rai (2019) suggest

that DV service providers promote the safe use of technology for victims or survivors of abuse and increase their ability to assist themselves and their children with information technology. Technology has served as a great advantage for many of the participants in their study which makes a need for technology safety education for the victims or survivors of IPV pertinent to protect themselves and their children from abuse and reconnect with their support systems. The authors further recommend that South Asian community-based organizations expand their outreach by “placing information about them in local newspapers and radio, universities and schools, at various social functions and celebrations, online social media groups, places of worship, and popular South Asian and mainstream restaurants, grocery stores, and theaters that are frequently visited by members of the group” (Mahapatra & Rai, 2019, p. 1191). This social marketing can also enhance bystander intervention and encourage bystanders to be more responsible for their community members if they are made aware of these resources as well.

#### *Awareness of Rights in a Foreign Country*

At the same time, South Asian immigrants need to be more informed of their rights in a foreign country. For instance, Rai and Choi (2021) point toward improved accessibility and awareness of the Violence Against Women Act which will allow immigrant women to benefit from the Act and offer them legal assistance and support (p. 29). According to the American Immigration Council (2019), “the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 included provisions to allow noncitizen victims or survivors of domestic violence to obtain immigration relief independent of their abusive spouse or parent through a process called ‘self-petitioning.’” Additionally, The Battered Immigrant Women Protection Act of 2000 created new forms of immigration relief for noncitizen victims or survivors of violent crime known as ‘U’ visas, and victims or survivors of sexual assault or trafficking known as ‘T’ visas. Overall, the VAWA

results in various benefits for immigrant victims or survivors of IPV, and it is something they need to be made more aware of.

### *Helping Teens and Young Adults*

It is worth considering how to educate teens and young adults about healthy relationships as well to prevent IPV in their future relationships. A study about teen dating violence in the South Asian community reveals that the majority of participants explained South Asian parents disapprove of dating, and this taboo made it difficult for youth to speak to their parents about relationships which forced them to date secretly (Ragavan et al., 2021, p. NP4344). This need to stay silent about relationships can carry on into adulthood which makes it challenging for those who may experience unhealthy relationships to leave and obtain help. This stigma needs to be removed, and there should be no discomfort from the start when discussing relationships. Some participants in the aforementioned study suggested specific programs to engage parent-adolescent dyads in conversations about healthy relationships, and South Asian adolescent men should receive education about healthy relationships (Ragavan et al., 2021, p. NP4347). Moreover, “participants described a variety of ways to provide culturally specific programs including highlighting the positive aspects of South Asian culture, using South Asian facilitators, including discussion of barriers specific to South Asian youth, and partnering with South Asian organizations” (Ragavan et al., 2021, p. NP4351). Education about resources and access to resources available to South Asian immigrant victims or survivors of IPV and South Asian youth remains essential in preventing domestic violence in the community. It is unmistakable that this can be accomplished with more involvement from the South Asian community.

### *Impact of Religious Organizations*

Religious organizations can play a pivotal role in helping South Asian victims or survivors as well. Academics have encouraged religious groups that have long-standing relationships with communities in South Asia to participate in domestic violence prevention efforts. Despite this pressure from scholars, religious groups continue to be perceived as unhelpful by community members. In addition, religion and religious values can act as a barrier to helping victims or survivors of abusive relationships (Rai, 2021, p. 1997). Tripathi and Azhar's study (2022) discovered that the effectiveness of interventions seems to be greatly dependent on the setting or location of the intervention delivery. Multiple studies detail that religious spaces were found to be the most effective for individual counseling or group advocacy compared to settings like social service agencies, police stations, or family courts (p. 530). This allows consideration for how many feel connected to religion and find comfort in religious spaces. Victims or survivors of IPV should feel comfortable approaching these spaces for help and access to resources, and with how involved religious organizations are with the community, it is important to include them in the conversation to address IPV prevention in the South Asian community.

#### **AN ANALYSIS OF A SUCCESSFUL MODEL OF A RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION PROVIDING ASSISTANCE TO VICTIMS OR SURVIVORS OF IPV**

Daya is a South Asian-specific domestic violence prevention organization in Houston, Texas. Their work centers around empowering South Asian survivors of domestic and sexual violence through culturally specific services and educating the community to end the cycle of abuse. I spoke with the director of outreach and education of Daya, Tishya Bedi, and she explained that Daya hosted a faith and family violence panel. With that, her organization urged faith leaders to learn about domestic violence and sexual assault. More prominently, Daya hosts

trainings with faith leaders who are motivated to be an agent of change in their community because many victims or survivors of IPV do confide in them about what they are going through. She further emphasizes that many of the survivors Daya helps express that their faith was the only thing that got them out of the situation they were in which highlights the need for supportive religious leaders. Bedi shared two resources that focus on supporting faith leaders to prevent sexual and domestic violence. These include the FaithTrust Institute and a domestic violence guidebook, created for faith leaders from New York's Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Governor's Office of Faith-Based Community Development Services (Personal Communication, November 22, 2022).

#### *The FaithTrust Institute*

The FaithTrust Institute based in Seattle, Washington is a national, multifaith, multicultural training and education organization with global reach working to end sexual and domestic violence. The organization offers a diverse range of services and resources, and it provides communities and advocates with the tools and knowledge they need to address religious and cultural issues related to abuse (FaithTrust Institute, n.d.). One article titled "Advocating for South Asian Women" by Dr. Sudha Shreeniwas from the FaithTrust Institute (2010) explains that although all South Asian religions communicate their respect for women, in practice religious groups have not made the effort to address violence against women systematically. Shreeniwas goes on to say that women's groups have emerged in the South Asian diaspora to build cultural bridges between migrant women and mainstream domestic violence relief organizations. Collaboration has well advanced, but misinformation and stereotypes about immigrant culture and religion persist. Immigrant religious and cultural groups often view women's groups as divisive and antitraditional and offer little systematic support to survivors of

violence. As a result, immigrant women often feel obligated to choose between culture and personal safety exhibiting a significant gap. Therefore, a great opportunity exists for dialogue and program development among South Asian women's groups and religious organizations. Another article from the FaithTrust Institute titled "Immigrant Muslim Women" by Salma Abugideiri (2010) details the story of Farah who got married at the age of sixteen in Afghanistan. She was being abused by her husband, and she reached out to her imam which is a Muslim faith leader. When she was asked how she endured years of abuse, she explained that her faith helped her through it. She further clarified that she endured the abuse for twenty-five years because it would bring shame to her family if she decided to divorce her husband, and her children needed their father. What is notable about this story is that Farah explained that the victim's advocate in court had been very kind and tried to be helpful. However, this person did not understand her culture. She did not understand the shame of being a divorced woman who has lost her children. The victim's advocate thought this happened to her because of her religion, but for Farah, her religion gave her the freedom she now has from the abuse. It is apparent that religion can have a remarkable influence when it comes to helping victims or survivors, and religious organizations can be even more influential through the implementation of prevention services and working with local domestic violence and South Asian women's organizations.

One of the FaithTrust Institute's educational materials is an article titled "What a Faith Community Can do to Respond to Domestic Violence" (2014). One of the suggestions the organization offers is making one's church, temple, mosque, or synagogue a safe place where victims or survivors of domestic violence can come for help. This can look like displaying brochures and posters which include the telephone number of the domestic violence and sexual assault programs in the area. An environment of awareness should also be created which

involves sponsoring educational events in one's congregation on domestic and sexual violence. This can initiate bystanders into action and inform them of the proper ways to help victims or survivors of IPV. The article further suggests partnering with existing resources that include the local domestic violence and sexual assault program to push forth donations and community service projects. More effectively, faith communities should offer space to local client agencies as a safe meeting location to meet with a survivor and lead educational seminars or weekly support groups. These propositions the FaithTrust Institute proposes can greatly improve the services for South Asian victims or survivors of IPV as they will uplift existing organizations that assist South Asian victims or survivors of IPV and encourage bystanders to help those in their community. Concurrently, they will provide South Asian victims or survivors of IPV another outlet for help besides police and hospitals which many victims or survivors may not feel comfortable with due to cultural barriers.

#### *Domestic Violence Guidebook for Faith Leaders*

Another resource that exists aside from the FaithTrust Institute includes a domestic violence guidebook for faith leaders from New York's Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Governor's Office of Faith-Based Community Development Services (2016). This document is intended to help religious leaders respond to domestic violence in their communities by providing guidelines and information for working with abused individuals and by encouraging them to raise awareness of the problem in their communities. The document explains that followers of particular faith traditions will often seek these leaders for spiritual or moral guidance. Religious leaders play an important role not only as guides and confidants but also as voices of moral authority in supporting victims or survivors of domestic violence and ensuring they seek help. Furthermore, they can hold violators accountable for their abuse, and

they can play an important role in society at large by advocating public policies that address domestic violence and securing public and private resources to provide support. The resource offers many of the same solutions to faith leaders similar to the FaithTrust Institute such as providing information on domestic violence in bulletins and other communication materials, meeting with local domestic violence providers and bringing domestic violence advocates into the community to provide workshops and presentations to the faith community, speaking out about domestic violence during meetings and sermons, working with the local domestic violence program to provide training to members of the faith community about how to affirmatively challenge beliefs and attitudes that condone abuse or support an environment where abuse can thrive, and so much more. The document further clarifies that domestic violence seminars and trainings for the wider faith community can be a useful preventative opportunity to engage in an in-depth conversation about domestic violence and make an impression on others. They can communicate to victims or survivors and abusers that their faith or their community does not tolerate such behavior. They can also let people know about available resources and support, so that if they need help, they know who to turn to and that others will support and assist them. Religion offers a sense of comfort and support for many, and various victims or survivors of IPV may turn to religion for assistance. These places need to be involved to greatly improve the services available to South Asian victims or survivors of IPV. All in all, religious organizations and places of worship can behave as significant pillars in the South Asian community when assisting South Asian victims or survivors of IPV due to the cultural similarity and the connection many have to religion.

## **KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

After analyzing various research and resources, this study can conclude the following:

- Current services available to South Asian victims or survivors of IPV can be improved through more bystander preventative measures.
- More involvement from the South Asian community is needed to better help victims or survivors of IPV and to mitigate the rate at which abuse occurs.
- Improved support systems can have a great amount of impact.

In light of these findings, I offer two recommendations that could be beneficial:

- Encourage religious organizations in Wake County to host educational events focused on domestic violence and sexual assault, healthy relationship dynamics, and bystander training
- Request local South Asian-owned, women-run, salons to share information about community resources with their clientele (primarily, South Asian women).

Hosting educational events through religious organizations would improve the services available to South Asian victims or survivors of IPV because many feel a strong connection to religion and find comfort in it as well. Moreover, an effective educational event informing others about domestic violence and what a healthy relationship looks like is an efficient preventative opportunity to encourage bystanders to look for signs of a potentially abusive relationship and understand how to properly help those who may be suffering at the hands of an unhealthy relationship. Concomitantly, the event will make victims or survivors of IPV aware of the resources available to them as well as their rights in a foreign country as many victims or survivors may be immigrants. It is also worth noting that it will consist of and be led by people of similar culture and language to South Asian victims or survivors of IPV. This further increases the comfort of the victims or survivors which should be made a priority when considering how to better assist these people. These educational events can be done in conjunction with the

involvement of local South Asian-owned beauty parlors or threading salons. These salons create a friendly and intimate atmosphere for their customers, and many South Asian women visit these salons for South Asian-specific beauty treatments and eyebrow threading. Therefore, it would be beneficial to South Asian victims or survivors of IPV for these salons to display brochures or flyers with the resources available to them. Furthermore, many of these salons deal with one-on-one consultations and treatments with their customers which would make South Asian women more comfortable confiding in those who are initiating the services. These salons can inform people of the educational events in their community along with other ways to receive help. This is another bystander preventative measure that is needed as a lack of support in the South Asian community for victims or survivors is a major issue that needs to be tackled.

Ultimately, combining preventative tactics such as educational events about domestic violence and sexual assault, and the involvement of South Asian businesses such as beauty salons, can effectively improve the services available to South Asian victims or survivors of IPV and work towards reducing the rate at which abuse occurs. Improvement can be made with the right support system and education of resources available.

## **CONCLUSION**

The improvement of services available to South Asian victims or survivors of IPV in Wake County can be initiated with more community support, and this can be accomplished with religious organizations and South Asian-specific businesses, such as beauty and threading salons. Research has discovered that more South Asians need to be made more aware of the resources available to them such as domestic violence victim advocacy organizations in their community, and the rights they possess in a foreign country if they are an immigrant. With the connection many South Asians have to religion, faith leaders must go the extra mile to help victims or

survivors of IPV through partnerships with domestic violence prevention and South Asian-centered organizations and presentations to educate their faith community about domestic and sexual violence. Pushing forth bystander intervention and prevention methods will garner greater comfort and support for South Asian victims or survivors of IPV, giving them the courage to leave an abusive relationship. With the large South Asian population that exists in Wake County, it is not enough to be complacent. Future research should be centered on dividing up data to incorporate different ethnicities. This will further distinguish communities to create culturally specific services to prevent domestic violence because not every victim is the same. People from different racial backgrounds exist under more strenuous circumstances than others which can be seen in the South Asian community alone. Not many statistics exist regarding the rate of and the number of reports of domestic violence in the South Asian community in Wake County, so future studies and data collection should be dedicated to resolving this to fully understand the extent of this issue.

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