

**Citizenship, Culture, and Violence Against Women: Social Service Provision in the South
Asian Communities of the GTA¹**

CERIS Research Report

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Abstract

Violence against women (VAW) is a citizenship issue that fundamentally affects a woman's bodily integrity and personhood, as well as her right to dignity, security and freedom from discrimination. In all communities, VAW is shaped by cultural processes that give meaning to acts of violence and condition responses to this violence. Within Toronto's diverse South Asian communities, patterns of VAW are complex, occurring at multiple levels of family, community, society, and state. We conducted interviews with 15 professionals with a longstanding engagement in addressing VAW in the diverse South Asian communities of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). These professionals argue that mainstream approaches to service provision are often based on dominant cultural understandings of freedom from violence that do not always "fit" South Asian women's needs. Likewise, terms like "honour killing" can perform their own type of violence when used in culturally stigmatizing ways. We conclude that a more nuanced conceptualization of culture as giving meaning to all forms of violence combined with a structural conceptualization of violence as, what we call, multi-scalar, enables a re-thinking of violence against women in all communities and a deepening of our understanding of women's full citizenship.

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Introduction

Violence against women in South Asian communities³ has often been publicly understood through highly problematic ideas about culture. Media representations of the murders of Aqsa Parvez in 2007, and the Shafia sisters and their aunt in 2009, furthered the racialization and stigmatization of these women's communities rather than digging deeper into the complexities of the extreme violence they experienced (Korteweg 2012). Such popular discussions position "culture" as producing a "backward" civilization in which women have little value other than as the containers of their family's "honour" (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009, 2010; Razack 2004, 2007, 2008). These uses of culture impede women's ability to access social, civil, and human rights: research shows that when inequality combines with cultural stigmatization, immigrant women and girls experiencing violence may fail to seek help, risk having their needs misunderstood, face overt and covert discrimination from service providers, or fear being ostracized by their own communities when they try to access services (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2010; Berman et al 2009; Moffat et al 2009; Dustin and Phillips 2008; Shirwadkar 2004; Raj and Silverman 2002; Jiwani 2005).

To understand how the dynamics of culture and race impact the work of front-line organizations in responding to violence in South Asian women's lives, we interviewed 15 professionals with a longstanding engagement in addressing VAW in the diverse South Asian communities of the GTA. These professionals suggest that women from South Asian communities navigate a web of violence perpetrated by families, communities, society, the economy, and the state. At the same time, these professionals confront a system that rewards

³ The South Asian communities in the GTA are relatively well established but continue to grow in the GTA, almost tripling in size since 1991 to 684,070 in 2006 (Census 2006). They are culturally and linguistically diverse and represent a range of settlement patterns (from newcomers to first, second and third generation immigrants); include a number of religious communities such as Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Christian faiths, among others; and include a wide range of socio-economic statuses (SALCO: 2013).

very narrow definitions of violence in which needs are compartmentalized in problematic ways.⁴ As a result, professionals working to address VAW in South Asian communities in the GTA struggle with finding a way to act on broad-based conceptualizations of violence that women from these communities encounter. In brief, while the need to be free from violence is largely uncontested, our data suggests extensive contestation over the interpretation of needs, to the point where the satisfaction of the needs is jeopardized.

As we analyzed these findings, we argue that instead of abandoning the idea of culture altogether, culture can usefully be understood not as a uniform, deterministic force, but as a process that gives meaning to practices, including practices of violence. Ultimately, this nuanced conceptualization of culture combined with a conceptualization of violence as structured by forces of the family, society, economy, and the state, or what we call multi-scalar violence, enables a re-thinking of violence against women in all communities. To make this argument, we first discuss our theoretical and analytical framework, which draws from the literature on citizenship and culture. We then provide contextual information about the development of the VAW service sector in Canada and give an overview of our methodology. Our findings are presented in two sections, first illustrating how VAW in the GTA's South Asian communities is understood as multi-scalar in ways that generates a mismatch with existing service provision. We then outline the structural and cultural obstacles to remedying this mismatch. Finally, we discuss the policy implications of multi-scalar approaches to addressing VAW, paying attention to the

⁴ As Nancy Fraser (1987) famously argued, welfare states and welfare programs do not satisfy pre-existing needs; they define needs in the process of addressing them. Although violence against women has been defined as a legitimate political concern with very few political actors denying this (Htun and Weldon 2010), this is a “thin” beginning point of the conversation about how to interpret and satisfy the needs generated by violence. Our aim then is to show how a diverse group of people working to address violence against women engage in this politics of needs interpretation.

innovative tools and resources being developed at the grassroots level by the participants in our study.

Theoretical Framework: Citizenship, Culture and Violence against Women

Being free from violence is a right of citizenship. We define citizenship broadly, linking legal status and rights to a capacity to fully participate in the public sphere and enact a sense of belonging at local, national, and transnational levels. Violence against women fundamentally affects a woman's bodily integrity and personhood, as well as her right to dignity, security and freedom from discrimination – in short, it is an issue of civil rights (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009 2010; Menjívar 2011; United Nations 1979). At the same time, there is a social rights component to violence against women, where social rights are defined as ranging from “the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to life the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in society” (Marshall 1950 p.95). States, particularly welfare states, as well as international governing bodies, have taken the stance that they have an obligation to address violence against women as part of ensuring citizens' well-being, a pre-condition to full citizenship (Htun and Weldon 2010). As a result, not only police and the judiciary but also state-funded social services become part of the networks of agencies charged with ensuring women's well-being that is rooted in a freedom from violence approach.

While violence against women is often understood as a private form of violence that occurs within the context of intimate or familial relationships, our findings suggest the need for a far more structural analysis. Given that the “private” is shaped in its relationship to the “public,” (Pateman 1988) we need to take into account state responses to violence as well as violence

perpetrated directly by the state, particularly in the context of migration policies. In addition, structural forces producing poverty and inequalities in attaining education and labour market participation also play a role in how women experience violence at the hands of intimates.

In addition, we pay attention to culture. We argue that monolithic uses of culture perform their own form of violence as they stigmatize and racialize communities (Abu-Lughod 2011; Razack 2004, 2007, 2008). However, we argue that there is a place for a complex understanding of culture in addressing violence against women. Our starting point is to take culture not as a monolithic, deterministic force, but rather to understand culture as processes of meaning-making, in order to clarify that culture informs all forms of violence in all groups that make up society. In short, culture gives meaning to practices, including practices of violence. Furthermore, as a process of meaning-making, culture conditions both the experiences of as well as the responses to violence, not only on the part of individual women and girls, men, and boys, but also on the part of institutions at the community and state level, including social service agencies, activist and advocacy organizations, state bureaucracies, legislatures, and legal institutions (Korteweg 2012). We illustrate how this works by showing that culturally produced understandings of violence against women as intimate partner violence and domestic violence shape current services in the VAW field. We then turn to our findings from the interviews with professionals working to address VAW in South Asian communities of the GTA.

Context

In Canada, as elsewhere, the issue of violence against women came onto the political agenda with the second wave feminist movement in the 1970s. Initially violence against women was labelled “wife assault”, then “women abuse”, which then became “intimate partner

violence” and “domestic violence”, in an attempt to include other forms of violence. Using this terminology, feminist activists advocated for shelters, sexual assault services police training, and general awareness raising that violence was gendered and that women had the right to be free from all forms of male violence. Their understanding of violence against women was highly political, rooted in a framework that connected individual experiences with larger social issues (i.e. “the personal is political”). The efforts of these early feminists to establish grassroots, activist organizations, by women for women, that would operate from a radically different model than traditional services created the foundation for today’s VAW social service sector.

While these early activists did tremendously important work, putting this issue on the political agenda and creating multiple organizations to respond to women's needs, they fostered a narrow conceptualization of violence, based predominantly on a norm of white heterosexual, female, Canadian citizen. Efforts to help women in VAW situations came to focus on removing the victim from the situation, providing counselling and temporary shelter, with the ultimate goal of permanent independence from the abuser. This framework for understanding the incidence of violence and appropriate responses to violence failed to recognize the issues that women of colour faced. Intense struggles around issues of racism and the incorporation of antiracist practice within women's services ensued (San Martin and Barnoff 2004; Barnoff 2001). Ultimately these struggles lead to a recognition that women have differing needs and that racial, ethnic, and sexual diversity (among others) affects the experience of violence and requires different responses. However, the outcome of these struggles did not inform a radical transformation of social service provision as a whole. The structure of service provision changed somewhat, as agencies “tinkered” with their practices, but ultimately the foundational aspects of

service provision models continued to reflect the original analysis and framework of “women abuse” rooted in a white, heterosexual norm (San Martin and Barnoff 2004).

In addition, the social service system is set up such that very separate and distinct “sectors” of practice exist. As such, the VAW sector is separated structurally from other social service silos such as immigration/settlement agencies, the disability sector, the trauma, mental health and health sector, education, etc. Despite localized efforts to integrate various services through partnerships and network building, the structure of the entire social service system creates a chronic lack of coordination and collaboration across sectors, and an inability of any individual agency or even sector of practice, to deal with complex situations involving multiple needs and issues. Furthermore, the neo-liberalization of the welfare state that depleted social services in the 1990s continues to inform competition for scarce resources rather than encouraging collaboration and cooperation.

Finally, as feminist organizations evolved over time, and as they became more reliant on government funding, they moved away from their activist roots and more toward service delivery (Agnew 1998; 2009). As agencies became more “professionalized” they began to adopt more mainstream social service type of approaches such as “cultural competency”. The shift from discourses of “women abuse” and patriarchy towards the gender-neutral terminology of “intimate partner violence” and “domestic violence” also signals the de-politicization of the VAW field (Roggeband 2012). The existing literature on anti-violence movements in North America shows that the establishment of shelters and anti-violence NGOs informed a professionalization that went hand-in-hand with this de-politicization (Smith 2004 2006; Luxton 2001). This professionalization did not protect VAW organizations against significant de-

funding through neo-liberal restructuring, nor has it proven a barrier to state surveillance through immigration and bordering practices (Bhuyan 2010 2011; Landolt and Goldring 2008).

Methodology

For our research, we interviewed 15 professionals with a long-standing engagement in providing violence against women services in the South Asian communities of the GTA (please see the Appendix for background on the research team). Fourteen of our respondents were women, one was a man. All of them self-identified as members of one of the GTA's South Asian communities. Almost all had worked in the sector for over a decade, with some three decades or longer. We decided to approach these professionals not as representatives of their particular organizations, but as people who have been participating in the field of service provision over time. This way our conversations could focus on their analysis of service provision in general, rather than the specifics of the agency or organization in which they might have been employed at the time of our interview. The professionals represented a range of positions in the field. Two of them worked for the police, while the rest had longstanding engagements with a variety of social service agencies and in activist roles. We interviewed people in the three municipal regions that make up the Greater Toronto Area: York, Toronto, and Peel.

The interviews we conducted were semi-structured, and open-ended, with a focus on having a dialogue with service providers. In particular, we did not want to make assumptions about how they defined violence, what types of patterns of violence they were seeing, or the types of gaps and innovations in service delivery they were encountering.

The interviews took between one-and-a-half and three hours each. We started each interview with an invitation to tell us the story of how they became involved in the field, what

that involvement has looked like, and the types of broad shifts or changes they had witnessed over time. Then, as their stories unfolded in the interview, we looked for cues or moments to ask prompting questions to dig deeper. In particular, we made sure to ask participants to define for us how they understand VAW in general. At points when they described patterns of violence among South Asian communities, we again asked them to define this violence. We also made note of any gaps or innovations in service provision that participants brought up when describing their involvement in the field. The people we spoke with included gaps in terms of shelters, schools, children's aid society (CAS), community health care centres and other health related institutions, media, policy, funders, legal/criminal, and religious and faith based institutions. So even though not every respondent discussed every one of these areas, taken as a whole the picture of the field that emerged from our conversations with service providers is quite broad.

We recruited interviewees through our networks and through our participation in a number of conferences that have taken place in the GTA on this issue, including the Social Services Network conference on Family Violence in 2011 and 2012, and the SALCO Conference on Forced Marriage in 2012. We aimed for a mix of experiences in the sector, ranging from engagement with issue specific organizations, such as sexual assault centres, that target multiple communities, to community-specific social service organizations, which might or might not focus solely on the issue of violence. In addition, since the police is an important actor in the field, we interviewed two professionals working for the police in different capacities. For both, their involvement focused (in part) on domestic violence issues in the South Asian communities. While our sample is by no means comprehensive, we managed to tap into a cluster of people recognized within this community of service providers as key actors in the field.

ANALYSIS

Multi-Scalar Patterns of Violence

Perhaps unsurprisingly, all of the service providers we spoke to saw violence against women (VAW) as a legitimate political concern affecting a woman's bodily integrity and personhood. A common refrain among interviewees was that VAW is, in the words of one interviewee, an issue of "power and control over women's bodies and women's choices" and that this can involve physical, emotional, sexual, psychological, and/or financial abuse. Likewise, the people we interviewed identified domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and sexual violence as forms of VAW that are generally recognized within the field.

In a number of cases, interviewees linked questions of power and control to broader issues of patriarchal and/or hetero-patriarchal gender relations. Isha, a VAW counsellor and scholar trained in social work, for example, explains how by definition all women experience violence in patriarchal societies. In the two decades that Isha has been counselling women, she has come to believe that women endure an "incredible" amount of normalized violence in their daily lives, and only come forward when they reach a point where they just "can't handle this kind of patriarchy anymore" or where "it's become dangerous for them or for their children". Likewise, when we asked Hansa, a forty-year veteran in the field, how she first became involved, she paused and countered by asserting that "it's very difficult to say when a woman gets involved with these issues" given that women are "born into unequal status" and most women are impacted by violence at some point in their lives.

A critical mismatch between women's needs and available services emerged, however, when participants described specific patterns of violence and responses to violence among South Asian communities of the GTA. Whereas current service provision models privilege forms of

violence such as domestic partner abuse or sexual assault (already complex issues) many women from South Asian communities navigate a complex web of violence perpetrated by families, communities, society, and state. Zaina, a VAW counsellor and activist with over 15 years of experience took issue with the limited “core” definition of VAW used by funders, compared to the “spectrum” of violence she observed in the field. Describing her work within a broad-based VAW agency that focused on multiple racial, ethnic communities, Zaina stated that “we can only provide counselling to women who experience incest, child sexual abuse, partner abuse, and rape”, which for her excludes key forms of violence such as “physical violence, stalking, criminal harassment, elder abuse... and forced marriage.” Furthermore, Zaina insisted that a narrow focus on individual forms of violence obscures the structural conditions that inform VAW. As she explains:

I look at poverty as violence, I look at immigration as violence ... I look at racism as violence and that healing from that is just as important, and how you do that healing too. (Zaina)

Similarly, Diya, an advocate with policy-level and grassroots experience in the US and Canada, sees violence as something that happens “over the life time” and is structured by social conditions and a multiplicity of power relations. As she explains:

Having worked with women who are coming from immigrant communities and experiencing poverty or homelessness, you start to see that race, class, immigration status, sexual orientation – all of those play a role. (Diya)

This understanding of VAW illustrates what we call “multi-scalar” violence, or violence that occurs on multiple and intersecting levels. The idea that violence is not solely something that happens at the individual level or within an intimate relationship framed almost all of our conversations.

As service providers situated within the VAW sector, our interviewees struggled to find ways to act on this multi-scalar understanding of violence in their dealings with funders, state agencies, colleagues, and clients. We identified two major obstacles encountered by our participants as they sought to address the multi-scalar patterns of VAW observed in the field. The first involved structural obstacles, where providers encountered a system organized around very narrow, culturally dominant definitions of perpetrators and victims of violence. Moreover, mainstream approaches to service provision often assumed dominant cultural understandings of freedom from violence that did not always “fit” South Asian women’s needs.

A second major obstacle encountered by service providers involved the idea of culture, where VAW among South Asian communities in particular was taken up in culturally stigmatizing ways by funders, state agencies, colleagues, as well as popular media. For our respondents, problematic conceptions of “South Asian culture” as monolithic, static, and pre-modern performed their own type of violence. This led some participants to call for alternative service provision models that put the client at the centre rather than putting culture at the centre.

Structural Obstacles to addressing Multi-Scalar VAW

Service providers confronted with complex patterns of violence struggled to find ways to act on their observations within a system organized around very narrow, culturally dominant

definitions of violence. To illustrate the argument, here we draw on the example of forced marriage, defined as marriage practices that are enforced without the free consent of one or both of the individuals getting married⁵, as a frequent case example discussed by participants in our study.

In their descriptions of forced marriage cases encountered in the field, our participants challenged dominant cultural assumptions about perpetrators and victims that privilege individualistic approaches to VAW. Conventional understandings of domestic partner violence assume one perpetrator, usually male, enacting violence in the context of a 1:1 relationship with the victim, usually female. However, in forced marriage cases, perpetrators may be multiple including parents, extended family members, community members and/or community leaders.

For example, Sayeeda, an advocate who immigrated to Canada 10 years ago and provides leadership in a VAW shelter, cites a “growing” number of cases of young women aged 17-24 being taken abroad or “smuggled” by their parents for the purposes of forced marriage, often involving extended family and/or community members in the process. Manvir, a long-time advocate with over 30 years of experience in the field, describes how perpetrators in these cases can also be female members of the family, particularly in their roles as mother, mother-in-law, and grandmother. Muneera, a lawyer who immigrated to Canada over 10 years ago, also points to the pre-meditated nature of these cases, where months of planning among multiple parties are often required to carry out such acts. Muneera expressed her frustration with trying to keep up with what she saw as the increasing sophistication of perpetrators. She cited a recent case where the parents “played the system” by agreeing to participate in VAW programming and being

⁵ Forced marriages are not synonymous with arranged marriages. In arranged marriages, the match is arranged by families but the individuals getting married have a *choice* of whether or not to marry. In forced marriages, the individuals getting married are not given the choice to marry. Force may include emotional, mental, or physical forms of coercion (SALCO 2013). The issue of forced marriage received significant attention within the community of professionals we spoke with.

“very nice” to their daughter over an extended period, but in fact had planned all along to take their daughter overseas during the winter holiday break when they knew service providers would be less available.

Acts of forced marriage perpetrated by families and/or communities intersect in complex ways with structural forms of violence, which may intensify the risk of violence or prevent women from accessing social supports that meet their needs. In some cases, young women being smuggled abroad encountered structural violence through state immigration policies. Sayeeda notes how in cases of forced marriage abroad the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAIT) may be called in to intervene. However, if the young woman in question is a permanent resident, temporary migrant, or non-status person, her immigration status or fear of losing her status may prevent her from qualifying for or accessing support.

Interventions in these cases require safety planning that takes seriously risks posed by multiple perpetrators. A young woman travelling from the airport to the VAW shelter can be put at further risk of abduction if members of her extended family or community intercept her at the airport; sometimes even the taxi cab driver may be complicit. Zaina notes how she will negotiate with DFAIT for a separate waiting area and separate entry as part of the safety planning for young women in these cases. Sayeeda notes how her agency has developed a reputation with DFAIT as one of the few agencies that are willing to personally go to the airport to “make sure [the client] is safe [and] bring her back... Other agencies are not willing to do this.”

The capacity of service providers to develop innovative safety planning strategies is significantly restricted, however, by funding models that privilege individualistic, quantitative approaches. Sayeeda explains how fee-for-service funding models put pressure on agencies to increase the *quantity* of individual women served rather than on quality measures, for example

on hours of direct service provided. As a result, it becomes difficult to justify engaging in the practice of sending front-line staff to the airport to ensure safe passage for young women. As she explained:

[It's] our willingness as an agency to take that step further... we don't have [front-line] staff available to go pick these women up from the airport, [instead] managers have gone because of safety...

[Funders] don't care about the hours of direct service anymore but what they care about is how many women have gone through the system... and that doesn't work for us because... you've only seen one woman that day but you don't count the eight hours you spent with the woman, so it's becoming really tough in that way.

(Sayeeda)

Despite the willingness of service providers to navigate around funding models in their anti-violence work, without sufficient institutional or structural support from funders this work ultimately amounted to “piecemeal” efforts.

Sayeeda also pointed to the critical lack of VAW shelters that are willing and capable of handling forced marriage cases in a timely and culturally sensitive manner. She attributed this, in part, to the funding pressures VAW shelters experience, which makes taking on more complex or less familiar cases an added stress. Here she noted the shortage of shelter beds in her jurisdiction, which have not increased in number even though the population (including South Asian and immigrant families) has significantly increased in the past decade.

New policies of the Canadian government enact another form of state violence that service providers discussed. As Muneera described, these new policies hang like “a dark cloud overhead” for immigrant and racialized communities. A number of participants discussed the legislation on fraudulent marriages that the federal Conservative government introduced in October 2012 as a form of state violence that intensified risks of VAW rather than protecting women. Hansa described how efforts by her and her colleagues to educate mainstream media about forced marriage in essence backfired, when this information was used by the state to enact new restrictions on sponsoring spouses:

The issue of forced marriage came about because media was constantly referring to South Asian marriages as arranged marriages and so there needed to be an understanding that there is a difference between an arranged marriage and a marriage that is for the purposes of coercion, seduction and deception...

[Now] I am concerned because I know the government has been misusing all of this information... So instead of saying forced marriage – they come out with the term fraud marriage.... which is a very serious concern for us, so we have *have* to be very *very* careful about how we are going to shape the conversation so that the women, the very women that we are trying to help, are not women impacted by any negative reprises through the new legislative reforms. (Hansa)

For Hansa, speaking out about patterns of VAW within South Asian communities becomes a risky act within a context of structural violence, where, in this case, acts of violence are used to

criminalize and restrict immigration of racialized communities rather than addressing women's needs.

At the same time that participants challenged too narrow conceptualizations of perpetrators, instead showing how violence is enacted through families, communities, society and state, their observations also challenged overly narrow conceptualizations of *victims* of violence. The participants we spoke to not only called for more intersectional understandings of who counts as a victim of violence, but also offered more nuanced conceptions of families and communities as spaces of healing and resiliency. Multi-scalar conceptualizations of the impacts of violence ultimately challenged dominant assumptions about what freedom from violence looks like.

For instance, the participants we spoke to generally advocated for more intersectional understandings of gender and violence in the VAW field. In cases of forced marriage, Yasmin, an advocate with 10-years of experience in police services, noted how young men are also subject to violence perpetrated by families. Bipasha, an advocate with policy-level and grassroots experience, noted how sexuality can also play a factor in forced marriage cases. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-gender, trans-sexual, and queer identified individuals may be forced into hetero-normative marriages in attempts to assert power and control over their sexuality. Bipasha argued that efforts to address forced marriage that fail to unpack the universalizing category of “woman” perform their own violence by silencing the experiences of marginalized groups. Recalling her own frustration when attending a family violence conference in Toronto, Bipasha stated:

There are so many trans women in our community, right, South Asian trans women. You know, and are they even in this conversation? Can they stand at that conference and have a space? (Bipasha)

Again, the notion of VAW as a form of intimate partner or domestic violence made it necessary for our interviewees to spend time pointing out the diversity not only in forms of violence but in the women (and men) who experienced these varied, complex forms of violence.

When talking about victims, participants also advocated for recognition of the *collective* impacts of violence on families and communities. Some of these discussions both identified how a failure to see this collective impact becomes an obstacle to fully addressing violence and offered solutions that incorporated a more collective understanding. Jamila, an advocate with counselling and program development experience, articulated how service providers at times dis-embed women from community through a singular focus on sexual or domestic violence.

I think that we sometimes forget the collective impact of violence. So how does that impact the family, the community, you know? Sometimes we think ‘well she is experiencing domestic violence, she is experiencing abuse by her partner’ – we forget about all of the other variables that surround her, you know her children, her own immediate family... A lot of services have been funded to be very focused on sexual violence, domestic violence... more from the individualistic kind of perspective. (Jamila)

Jamila problematized the individualistic approach that many of her clients encountered. She argued that it focused so narrowly on the individual woman's experiences to the exclusion of the contexts in which she was embedded, that women ultimately turned away from accessing support from agencies altogether.

Dominant cultural understandings of VAW and of what freedom from violence should look like can act as a barrier for women embedded in communities. Participants spoke about this as a problem with mainstream service provision models. The result is what Jamila called the "me, me, me" model of service provision. She recounted:

And so when a woman – we heard this in some of the work that I did with the sexual assault centre, when they were focusing especially on South Asian women, women talking about "when I go in, when I finally get in front of a counsellor, because someone told me this is a good idea, and all they are talking about is 'me me me' ...and all of the things they are saying that I need to do, you lose me, I am not coming back." (Jamila)

Such accounts suggest that the failure to understand that women might have different reference points for what liberty, freedom, or the good life mean results in an approach that has no resonance for women who live by alternate guiding principles.

From the above examples, we can see how patterns of violence among South Asian communities are multi-scalar and complex. South Asian women may encounter forms of familial and community violence that do not fit dominant definitions of VAW. When they seek support, they may be confronted with structural forms of violence such as precarious immigration status

that limit their access to supports, or they may experience re-victimization when accessing a system that mis-recognizes their specific needs and ignores the relationships that bind them to family and community. Current funding models further undermine those service providers who have a more complex analysis of women's needs and a willingness to engage in alternate practices. Overall, service providers struggled to engage authentically in responding to their women's needs, even from their location within the VAW sector.

The Role of Culture in addressing Multi-Scalar VAW

Politicized uses of culture are another obstacle in addressing VAW in South Asian communities of the GTA as a complex, multi-scalar issue. Our interviewees challenged politicized uses of culture as leading to racism and stigmatization, something women should not have to fear when approaching social service providers. Many of our participants, however, struggled with how to understand culture in their work, in particular with the link between power and culture. On the one hand, in the media and at public events “culture” is often presented as something that South Asian communities suffered from. The people we interviewed rejected such notions wholesale – in the process often rejecting the idea that culture had any impact on women's encounters with violence. On the other hand, they also witnessed how culture, as what we call meaning-making practice, structured the everyday lives of the women using their services. Interviewees struggled with the apparent contradiction between these politicized/mediatized and everyday uses of culture. To avoid the association between culture and racialization/stigmatization, they would often use the term “community” to capture what we as researchers would label cultural meaning-making practices or cultural specificities.

This conflict between various meanings of culture came to the fore in discussions of mediatized violence. Media reporting on “honour killing” and “honour-based violence” in South Asian communities became an orienting point for many of our interviewees. After the murder of Aqsa Parvez in 2007 and then the Shafia sisters and their aunt in 2009, violence against women in South Asian communities was increasingly labelled as a problem of culture. We conducted the interviews at a time when there was again heightened media attention on issues of “honour-based” violence as a result of the Shafia trial. All of the respondents expressed concern (although to varying degrees) about the use of terms such as “honour killing” and “honour-based violence”.

The different ways in which interviewees treated the term “honour killing” indicates how they try to resolve the struggle over how to understand culture. For example, although Tara insists on using the term and identifies as a “survivor” of honour-based violence, she frequently qualified her use of the term, stating that “the question becomes who gets to define it” and whether people understand that this is about the “sexual control of women” and also “racism, colonialism, imperialism” and “power relations” rather than solely about “culture”. At the other end of the spectrum, Amira, who runs a South Asian multi-service agency, had the strongest response against the term, describing it as “repulsive” because “there is no justification... murder is murder”.

At stake in these discussions is whether and how to use the label “honour” to describe certain types of violence. Research on media representations shows that the terms “honour killing” and “honour-based violence” stigmatizes and racializes immigrant communities (Korteweg 2012; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009 2010; Razack 2004, 2007, 2008) and interviewees clearly suggested that discussions of the kinds of violence South Asian women face are taking place in an environment that does not allow for a “stigma-free” discussion of women’s

needs and the satisfaction of their needs (Fraser 1989). Rather, the culturalization of the debate becomes itself a potential form of violence and an obstacle to engaging in culturally appropriate practices.

A memoir of one South Asian woman's experience of violence provided an illustration of how portraying certain forms of violence as cultural became an obstacle to addressing violence. Aruna Papp, a community activist trained as a social worker, published a policy report and book on honour-related violence while we were conducting our research (2010, 2012). Some interviewees talked about Papp's work to illustrate the difficulties of addressing VAW in a climate of stigmatization and racialization.

Papp uses the term "honour motivated violence" and argues that this is a product of ancient cultural traditions that persist among South Asian immigrants in Canada, thus reinforcing the monolithic understanding of culture that dominates in public debate of VAW in South Asian communities. Bipasha highlighted how this made it more rather than less difficult to address community-specific forms of violence:

When you challenge that kind of thinking [promoted by Papp] the dilemma is you don't want to create a divisiveness within the community. And this goes back to our earlier conversation about [how] you want to support your peers, you want to support women who are doing good work. And by challenging them somehow it seems to fall back to this very base conversation [whether] this is destructive.

(Bipasha)

Bipasha felt that the fear of not presenting a united front within the South Asian communities prevented a discussion of the “real” issues at stake and she showed how this led to a struggle amongst social service providers who are trying to negotiate these complexities of culture:

If we are going to pander to those sensibilities – then we can’t have real conversations – do you know what I am saying – we can’t have real conversations about, about the authentic needs of women. (Bipasha)

Similarly, Zaina recounted her experience attending one of the community wide conferences on violence in South Asian communities that took place in the spring of 2011, with an audience of over 500 people (which we also attended). Arguing that these conferences evidenced “a spike of people ... seeing “honour killing” as a sexy topic”, she discussed the racialization and stigmatization that takes place, including that performed by members of the communities themselves. In this case, one long-time South Asian activist argued that “honour killing” reflected “tribalism,” which many of the attendees interpreted as a reference to particularly the poorer segment of South Asian communities. Zaina was particularly frustrated that such portrayals prevented real, meaningful discussion of the structural factors that shape VAW in the South Asian communities, arguing:

I was like all these South Asian people in the room – our community is under so much attack – we need to talk about this subject – we need to talk about violence against women but how we talk in a manner that actually moves things forward – that doesn’t vilify the community? (Zaina)

Thus, both Zaina and Bipasha struggled to put forth a nuanced, multi-faceted understanding of violence and felt that these discussions of “culture” only got in the way of addressing VAW.⁶

The notion that “violence is violence is violence” was a refrain that many respondents used to counter uses of culture that portrayed particular instances of VAW as a South Asian and/or Muslim and/or immigrant issue to the point of stigmatizing all of these communities. For example, Hansa took care to explain to us that “I am not judging any form of violence because I think violence is violence and must be condemned in all forms.” Hansa stated her position in response to our questions about the specificities of violence encountered by South Asian women. Similarly, when we asked Komal, an advocate with 15-years of experience working in police services, about violence among South Asian communities, she stated that violence happens in all communities regardless of ethnicity or cultural background. Diya used a “violence is violence” approach in response to what she saw as the exoticizing of violence against South Asian women in mainstream society. In her response, Diya grounded the notion of “violence is violence” in the law:

A murder is a murder, right. Sexual assault is a sexual assault under the criminal code... is it any different in South Asian communities than it is in mainstream communities or in other communities? ... The notion of control and power in that context is still applicable. (Diya)

⁶ Some of the women we interviewed were quite critical of any kind of research into these issues. Muneera argued that Western academics want to contain what she saw as messy and pervasive violence into a “neat little parcel” so that they do not have to deal with their own “complicity” and “silences” around the spectrum of violence that racialized and immigrant communities encounter. Bipasha similarly felt that reports by academics like Papp led to pressure on service providers to “cater to this very academic community and what it wants to hear from us,” including us among the “academics”.

Both Hansa and Diya argued VAW should be treated as a universal problem and addressing it cannot imply singling out specific communities for condemnation. Here, our interviewees implicitly drew on a human rights framework reflecting a political agreement that addressing VAW is a shared need across the population.

Other interviewees suggested that there was nevertheless a need for understanding specificities of culture. The idea that culture needs to be included in service provision models is not new. Indeed, in health care delivery, the cultural competency model intends to make health practitioners aware of the impact of their clients' ethnicity on the clients' understanding of health and illness. However, the model has been critiqued for treating culture as fixed and coherent within large racial-ethnic groups and thus producing its own racism (Lee and Farrell 2006; Kleinman and Benson 2006). Similarly, in social work practice a cultural competencies model that was supposed to sensitize service providers to the needs of women facing violence is criticized for its racist understanding of culture (Pon 2009; Yee and Dumbrill 2003). Zaina described direct experiences of this, saying, "I am so tired of people talking about 'let me teach you about South Asians' – NO – I don't need to tell you how biryani tastes good or samosas." For Zaina, this facile understanding of culture prevented addressing the multi-scalar nature of violence.

A number of our interviewees suggested that the application of a cultural competencies model in providing services to South Asian women led to gaps in service provision rather than filling them. According to Bipasha, when social service providers did focus on culture, they drew on the same kind of monolithic understandings as those that informed media discussions. These interviewees argued that while clients' experiences were of course shaped by their cultural

backgrounds, there needed to be a “very mindful” approach to culture. In particular, Bipasha advocated for placing the “service user at the centre of it all – not culture at the centre of it all”.

Indeed, Isha took the approach to argue that culture could be a useful concept in understanding the needs of women facing violence, but only if understood in a nuanced way:

Culture is everywhere. We are walking beings going from one culture to the next. There is a culture in this room. There is a culture outside in the hallway. There is one in the Starbucks across the street, it’s everywhere. I think that the way patriarchy functions, is it gives certain tools for violence to be enacted on women. The tools that [my community] have had at their disposal or the tools which they are using to enact violence or to demonstrate power has looked a particular way.

(Isha)

Isha tried to disrupt the idea that only South Asian communities have culture by arguing that culture is everywhere. This approach to culture opens up the possibility of seeing culture as meaning-making processes that are always at play, whether in understanding what coffee to order or how to interpret power and patriarchy. Isha argued that to understand the latter necessitated locating such forces in specific communities because patriarchy and power took on different meanings and were expressed through different practices in different community contexts.

The price of failing to treat culture in complex, mindful ways is high. The lack of recognition of cultural specificities by mainstream VAW agencies can lead to a form of, what Sayeeda labels “re-victimization,” where shelters are ill-equipped to handle women’s needs:

Over the last 10 years I have worked with a lot of South Asian women... [who] ... have termed their experience with those agencies as being violent, if you like, violent in the sense of being oppressed, or of not being given information that could have helped them in a different way... So for [them] it was better to have lived with the abuser than to be – in [their] terms – to be abused by these other agencies. (Sayeeda)

Sayeeda's concerns around re-victimization point to the critical need for more nuanced approaches to culture in anti-violence work. Such approaches must take seriously the epistemic and systemic violence that categories such as "honour killing" and "honour-based violence" perform, without rejecting recognition of cultural specificities of violence altogether.

Discussion and Conclusion: Policy Implications

Although the service providers we spoke to encountered significant structural and cultural obstacles in performing their anti-violence work, they were nevertheless engaged in efforts to develop alternatives at the ground level. While these efforts were at times contested and in the words of Isha "far from perfect," they nevertheless were identified as holding great promise.

Most concretely, providers discussed the need for risk assessment tools and safety planning guidelines that take seriously multiple perpetrators at the family and community level, while also recognizing that the structural and state violence women encounter in their daily lives can act as obstacles to seeking out or receiving support. Here for example, a number of interviewees discussed the importance of providing service regardless of immigration status as a

key component of safety. Likewise, providers stressed the importance of collaborative service provision as an alternative to the existing silo approach, which privileges individualistic understandings of VAW and incites competition among agencies, hence preventing meaningful collaborations. Such inter-organizational connections not only require “authentic engagement” among and between community insiders and allies, they also require access to resources like “bricks and mortar” to house or locate physical spaces for collaborative work, such as community hubs housing multiple services, or meeting spaces for joint case management and program planning across agencies and sectors.

Integrating the voices, experiences and insights of survivors of violence was also discussed as a concrete strategy for addressing the mis-match between VAW service delivery and South Asian women’s needs. However, providers cautioned against tokenistic or stigmatizing use of survivor stories. Isha argued against asking women to speak their stories of abuse and then having professionals give their own interpretation of the needs that flow from these stories. Instead, she advocated for legitimizing survivors’ strategies of survival as important sources of knowledge and healing in and of themselves. An intersectional approach also recognizes the multiplicity of voices and experiences, rather than privileging personal voices as speaking for the collective. Referencing Papp’s memoir, Bipasha described what she saw as “the danger of that single story” or the notion that “there is only one valid story and that’s mine because it’s my lived experience.” One participant described a DVD collection she and her colleagues were putting together that offered a multiplicity of narratives from survivors that consciously focused on their strategies of self-care and community care rather than a “confessional” of the details of their abuse. Instead of approaching survivors’ voices in tokenistic or stigmatizing ways, then, these interviewees sought out approaches that could both

recognize the life histories of survivors as important sources of knowledge and healing, as well as embed those narratives and perspectives within their larger social and political contexts.

What links these above examples together is an underlying commitment toward more fundamental change: instead of simply “adding” special programming for South Asian women to the existing institutional structure of VAW service provision, these approaches encouraged a challenging of the more foundational assumptions of current models and a re-thinking of VAW more broadly as it affects all communities. As Zaina explained:

How we look at these models... that are western based... are [we] only going to do a little tweak and then they will be fine for the other communities? Well no.

We need to look at what work is being done in South Asia, we need to be looking at work that's being done actually in other parts of the world that also maybe have radical ways of doing violence against women work. And maybe it's not just violence against women work – maybe it's looking at community healing again because we have communities that are dealing with mass amounts of violence.

(Zaina)

The push for more radical approaches led Zaina and others to approach service provision as a multi-scalar endeavour. This involved recognizing families and communities as complex sites of individual and collective trauma as well as spaces of healing and resiliency. We highlight three examples of implications of such an approach for the shelter system, for cross-agency collaborations within the VAW sector, and cross-sectoral partnerships in the social services sector as a whole.

First, a common example discussed by our participants involved alternatives to or variations on the current shelter system. Because of the multi-scalar nature of violence that many women experienced, the idea that the solution lies in leaving family or community obscured the multiple sites of violence encountered by racialized and immigrant women. The model of removing women from an abusive relationship as a remedy is also problematic in that it is based on the premise that larger structural forces, involving housing, poverty, or immigration law, are not an issue for women. A number of our interviewees suggest the need for models that could welcome and provide a space for temporary relief or reprieve from multi-scalar violence, something that women were not finding in the mainstream shelter system. Jamila described how a contextual, family and community-based understanding of women's needs led to alternative options:

Women talked about that “we don't want to leave these situations, we want the violence to stop”. This is nothing new, we've heard this before. But “what we need is places to go where it's safe, where we can be with other women, and we can have sort of a break...” So women, some women talked about going to the temple and cooking with other women there and even, like, with different *poojas* [religious or cultural rituals] that were happening, they could stay there the night, it will be acceptable by the family, it would be a break from that environment and it would recharge their batteries. (Jamila)

The idea is to develop approaches that combine self-care with community care in ways that are culturally acceptable so that women can negotiate these spaces without having to leave their

families and communities. Zaina echoed this when she discussed a need to move beyond “this one-on-one counselling piece” to incorporate art or classical dance as forms of collective healing.

She continued:

Maybe it’s doing a shelter that’s not called a shelter but, like, it’s called a safehouse where women can use it as a negotiation space – just come and take a moment to breath and kinda re-group and go back out there. (Zaina)

What would make this new proposed shelter model different, is that it begins from the premise that shelter is a temporary reprieve, rather than the current model’s assumption that shelters provide a way out and that women who go back have somehow failed. In other words, such an approach recognizes that women are not necessarily going to leave family or community because family and community may provide important sources of support from other aspects of racism and oppression. These approaches suggest that when women’s needs are understood as highly complex and violence is understood as occurring at multiple levels in society, service delivery models that aim to address just one limited aspect of experience (out of context of the whole big picture) are destined to fall short.

Second, a desire to fully address the multi-scalar complexities of VAW in South Asian communities also informed multiple suggestions for cross-organizational collaboration within the VAW sector both within South Asian communities as well as across communities. Jamila discussed a regional partnership that focused on ending abuse in multiple communities as a model:

We realized that ... you couldn't do this program on your own, you needed to work in collaboration with others, you needed to be very strategic with the collaborations. So we had to really think about what organizations are the ones that touch families the most, that have that contact, that trust with families.

(Jamila)

Jamila argued that many of the organizations that have close contact with families are grassroots with very limited resources and therefore could benefit from alliances with mainstream organizations. However, she continued by cautioning that mainstream organizations also need to have a particular attitude towards these collaborations:

I think that what is very important in this work is... for mainstream organizations to authentically do that type of partnership, but not in the way that “we are coming in to save the day, we are coming in to teach you grassroots organizations what to do.” (Jamila)

Rather than trying to "take over" the work of these grassroots South Asian organizations, mainstream organizations need to find ways to connect with, support, and promote the work these smaller organizations are already doing. There needs to be a recognition that the expertise lies in the smaller organizations.

Third, our interviewees suggest a need to move into cross-sectoral collaboration in the social service sector as a whole. Diya, for example, described a project that involved multiple agencies. This project attempted to move beyond the “traditional women’s shelter” model that

still sets “the parameters around what appropriate services looks like”, arguing that there “is a great need for collaboration” across “multiple sectors”. Diya identified issues like “ability status,” “gender identity” and “the type of violence that women are experiencing” as differences that need to be addressed. In addition, some women might engage with social service agencies that do not focus specifically on VAW, that do counselling and outreach but that still need to understand how to address VAW. Therefore, she worked on a project to:

Bring together those partners that haven’t necessarily always traditionally worked together and in fact have worked very separately in their own mandates, ... make them a bit more flexible so they are not so rigid in what is it that they do, because often that’s structures, that’s institutions. And primarily looking at justice, mental health, and addictions, looking at employment support, by looking at housing, will give us the really critical places where there needs to be a lot more intervention that’s specific to culture/community but also specific to client needs.

(Diya)

The model of a multi-service centre, or “one stop shop” housing multiple stakeholders was implemented in 2011 in Peel region, called the Safe Centre of Peel, and is part of a network of Family Justice Centres across the United States and globally. For Diya and her colleagues, such an approach offers great promise for addressing multi-scalar violence. Diya continued to describe what might be accomplished through such collaborations, including “networking,” “cross-training, “having “a lot of rich conversations” that would eventually lead to taking:

that leap to what would it be like if we [were] to really do joint case management, right, that if we were to actually share information, share information on the database that everybody has access to, based on client consent, and then what would it mean if we were actually all sitting around the table, planning on that person's safety. Not looking at our agency but talking about what would we do so this client gets what she needs and she is safe and her children are safe and wherever she is in the community, she has support. (Diya)

Clearly, this would require a radically different approach to service provision. Bipasha even spoke of the need for a "little revolution".

Bipasha brought the discussion full-circle to the needs of service providers themselves. Service providers risk burning out and are not well-served by practices of "self-care" that might let them take one day off work, but do nothing to address the structural shortcomings that make their daily work so frustrating. Having a complex analysis of violence as multi-scalar, and working within a system that can only ever respond to one small piece of women's needs, takes a toll on these workers. If front-line workers are to avoid burnout, they need:

[To] build resiliency we need to really look at sustainable models of working together and moving beyond silos. Really having those difficult conversations about what can we do, do we have access to information, you know, what you are doing what I am doing and really, I think it requires a little revolution to be quite honest. Like re-thinking the way we do our work and a real amount of solidarity that needs to happen. (Bipasha)

Bipasha did not see this happening (yet) – rather she felt that “I don’t see a lot of new thought coming out of the work that we do – I think we are surviving but we really need to thrive”.

To conclude, our research provides insights into the complexities of addressing VAW in South Asian communities but encourages people to critically re-think service provision targeting VAW in general. The improvements to service delivery that our participants suggest apply beyond the South Asian communities that were the focus of this research project. Two of the major issues our research brought to the fore were a failure to understand the complexities of violence and the damage that monolithic understandings of culture can do. The response to these issues requires a) addressing the multiple, complex forms of violence that impact women’s capacity to address abuse that is still too often understood as “private”, and b) an understanding of how everyone’s standpoint, which is also always culturally determined, affects responses to VAW. Restructuring social service provision based on the idea that violence is always multi-scalar, with both experiences of and responses to violence always being shaped by partners, families, the economy, society, and the state, and recognizing that culture always plays a role in experiencing and responding to violence would benefit all communities including women.

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Appendix A: The Research Team

Anna C. Korteweg (PhD Sociology, University of California, Berkeley) is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto and the Principal Investigator on this research project. Dr. Korteweg's interest in the area of violence against women and girls in minority communities comes out of her ongoing research on gender inequality, marginalization, and social policy development, and her work on gender, Islam, and the integration of Muslim immigrants in the European context. Her United Nations Research Institute for Social Development study comparing media and policy debates in the area of honour-related violence and forced marriage in four immigrant-receiving countries, Canada, Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands made clear that Canada lags in this area, in part, because of a sense of trepidation to stigmatize specific communities (UNRISD 2012, with Gökçe Yurdakul). Dr. Korteweg has published in various journals, including *Theory & Society*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, *Social Politics*, *Gender & Society*, *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, and *Canadian Criminal Law Review*. *Debating Sharia: Islam, Gender and Family Law Arbitration*, a book she edited with Jennifer Selby, was published by UTP in May 2012. A book, tentatively titled *The Headscarf Debate: Conflicts of Belonging in National Narratives*, co-authored with Gökçe Yurdakul, is scheduled for publication with Stanford University Press in spring 2014. Dr. Korteweg has held a number of major research grants, including a SSHRC, and grants from Connaught and the DAAD. In addition, Dr. Korteweg is involved at the community level, as a member of SALCO forced marriages project advisory board, and through public appearances.

Salina Abji is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on efforts to address violence against women with precarious immigration statuses in Toronto, Canada, and how these efforts are re-shaping the meanings and locations of citizenship in the contemporary immigration context. She has published research in *Citizenship Studies* on *Post-nationalism re-considered: a case study of the No One Is Illegal movement in Canada* and is a member of the Rights of Non-Status Women's Network (RNSWN). Salina also brings over six years of experience developing and delivering transitional employment programs for marginalized communities in Toronto. She holds a Masters degree in Women's Studies from Oxford University and completed her BA at York University in Toronto.

Dr. Lisa Barnoff is the Director of the School of Social Work at Ryerson University. She began her social work practice working in VAW services ' in the early 1990s and spent a number of years working in front-line and management capacities in this sector. Her scholarly work is rooted in these practice experiences, in particular, in the struggles she observed in women's service agencies as they attempted to introduce anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice models. Lisa's primary research program has focused on the implementation of anti-oppressive practices within community-based social services agencies. She has engaged in various studies and has authored multiple publications on this topic. Most recently she was PI on a SSHRC funded study which explored anti-oppressive practices as they are implemented within community agencies in five cities across Ontario. Lisa was a research collaborator (PI Dr. Christina Sinding) in the Lesbians and Breast Cancer Project, a study that explored lesbians' experience with cancer and cancer care in Ontario. Currently Lisa is a co-applicant on a SSHRC funded study exploring the impact of New Managerialism on social work education in five Schools of Social Work

across Canada (PI Dr. Ken Moffatt, Co-Applicants Dr. Sarah Todd, Dr. Henry Parada, Dr. Melanie Panitch). Lisa teaches courses in diverse areas including: social work theory, social work practices, anti-oppression theory and practices, violence against women, family violence and sexual diversity. Currently, Lisa serves as an executive member of the Canadian Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work.

Deepa Mattoo is a lawyer by profession. Deepa is currently working at the South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario. She graduated from Leeds Business School in Leeds, England with an MBA in Corporate Social Responsibility in 2004. She graduated from Humber College in Post – graduate certification of Fundraising and Volunteer Management in 2007. She has over 12 years of experience of providing direct services to victims of violence, as well as providing public education and advocacy. Deepa is also an alumnus of Leaders for Change program by Maytree Foundation that offers leadership development for social justice activists who are committed to making change through action-based poverty reduction initiatives. Deepa has been involved with issues related to domestic violence at the international level and has been one of the leading advocates on the issue of forced marriages.