

Citizenship, culture, and violence against women

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What you need to know

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. Within Toronto's diverse South Asian communities, patterns of VAW can be complex, occurring at multiple levels of family, community, society, and state. Mainstream approaches to service provision often assume dominant cultural understandings of freedom from violence that do not always "fit" South Asian women's needs. Likewise, terms like "honour killing" can also be damaging when used in culturally stigmatizing ways.

What is this research about?

Violence against women in South Asian communities has often been publicly understood through highly problematic ideas about culture. For example, at times as producing a 'backward' civilization in which women have little value other than as the containers of their family's "honour." Media representations of the murders of Aqsa Parvez in 2007, and the Shafia sisters and their aunt in 2009, have often further racialized and stigmatized these women's communities rather than digging deeper into the complexities of the extreme violence they experienced. Such uses of culture impede women's ability to access social, civil, and human rights. Some 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.



Some service providers have developed tools and culturally sensitive approaches to measure risk and improve safety planning for immigrant women facing violence.

Rather than abandon culture altogether, this research asks whether culture can be understood not as a uniform, deterministic force, but as a process that gives meaning to practices, including practices of violence.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers sought to understand how the dynamics of culture and race impact the work of front-line organizations responding to violence in women's lives. They interviewed 15 professionals with a longstanding engagement in addressing VAW in the diverse South Asian communities of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

What did the researchers find?

The research uncovered a general mismatch between professionals' experiences on the ground and the existing organization of social service provision. Findings from this research show:

RESEARCH SUMMARY

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- The patterns of violence that professionals encounter among South Asian communities of the GTA did not fit neatly into existing models of VAW service provision. Whereas current models privilege forms of violence such as domestic partner abuse or sexual assault (already complicated issues), many women from South Asian communities navigate a complex web of violence perpetrated by families, communities, society and the state. At the same time, families and communities can also provide important spaces for collective healing and resiliency for South Asian women experiencing or at risk of experiencing violence.
- Service providers confronted with complex patterns of violence struggled to find ways to act on their observations within a system organized around very narrow and culturally dominant definitions of violence.
- The complex patterns of violence that South Asian women confront are obscured by terms that exoticize violence, like "honour killing." Yet, these terms elicit quite divergent responses from professionals, ranging from a strategic use of such terms to gain access to resources, to an outright rejection of these terms in favour of generic designators of violence.
- Efforts to address observed patterns of violence on the ground led some service providers to develop innovative tools and approaches, including culturally-sensitive risk assessment and safety planning tools. Yet, some participants were critical of 'cultural competency' models that put too much of a focus on deterministic understandings of culture.
- When women's needs are understood as highly complex and 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.

Dominant discourses of "culture" (especially as it relates to VAW) make violence in South Asian communities seem "unusual," "extreme," or somehow significantly "different." In terms of service provision, this at best translates into adding special programming to the existing institutional structure of VAW service provision (without

changing the foundational assumptions of the current service provision model). However, if the complexities of culture are taken into account (including a recognition that all women's experiences are interpreted culturally), people would rethink violence against women in general. In other words, this research argues that the complexities of VAW in South Asian communities are not unique to these communities but confront all women faced with violence.

How can you use this research?

This research provides insights into the complexities of addressing VAW in South Asian communities and encourages people to critically re-think service provision targeting VAW in general. Improvements to service delivery can come through a deeper appreciation of the ways in which violence is expressed and experienced, through education, raising awareness, and an understanding of how everyone's own standpoint, which is also culturally determined, affects one's response to VAW.

About the researchers

Project title: *Citizenship and Social Services: Violence Against Women in South Asian communities of the GTA*

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<http://j.mp/genderviolence>

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citizenship, culture, violence, women, service provision, South Asian, Toronto



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