

## **SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF FAMILY ABUSE: EXPLORING THE POLICE RESPONSE**

Nughmana Mirza, MSc (R), MSc (T), BA  
PhD Candidate  
School of Social and Political Science  
The University of Edinburgh  
E-mail: n.mirza@sms.ed.ac.uk

**Summary:** This briefing paper provides an overview of South Asian women's experiences of the police in a family abuse context. Through in-depth interviews with 11 South Asian Muslim women, together with research studies, this paper elucidates two key points: firstly, South Asian women's pathway to help-seeking, such as accessing police support, is shaped by a number of factors including lack of awareness of services, lack of English proficiency, structural barriers and economics; and, secondly, South Asian women's experiences of the police can be highly variable. On the one hand, it can be sensitive to women's needs, and on the other, the police response can reflect a failure to understand the complex issues which shape women's experiences of abuse and disclosure. In order to achieve holistic and sensitive police support, a nuanced understanding of the factors that constrain women and shape their experiences of abuse and exit is fundamental. This can be facilitated by a commitment to redress the gap in scholarship where little is known about South Asian women's experiences of family abuse and the police, and on-going specialist training for front-line workers.

### **BACKGROUND**

The findings in this briefing have been taken from the researchers ESRC/SG<sup>1</sup> funded doctoral research which examined in-depth a policy relevant aspect of Muslim women's experiences in Scotland, namely family abuse, with a focus on South Asian women. The key focus of the research was to show how women's experience of abuse at the micro-level, which is defined by women's individual positions at the intersection of kinship structures, marriage patterns, language and culture within the household, are affected by policymaking decisions and service-provision responses at the macro-level. The research argued that poor service provider responses are one of the factors that can consign women to an abusive relationship and can also create new forms of oppression at the macro-level. Through interviews with South Asian women, the police response to family abuse became a focal point of discussion and, thus, developed into a crucial part of the research, exploring:

- South Asian women's experiences of the police;
- the nature and adequacy of the police response (i.e. was it sensitive to women's needs and safety?);
- and the barriers to police support.

This paper will begin by firstly outlining the specificity and complexity of South Asian women's experiences of family abuse, which ultimately necessitates a tailored, nuanced and sensitive police response. Secondly, the interviewee's experiences of the police will be outlined, followed by recommendations on how this can be improved. Before doing so, the following must be noted: the experiences of abuse and the police are specific to the small sample of women interviewed for the doctoral research. It is crucial to steer clear of generalisations, as these findings do not represent all South Asian women's experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Economic and Social Research Council, and The Scottish Government

## CONTEXT

Family abuse<sup>2</sup> is a complex issue, which cannot be tackled by one profession or organisation in isolation. This growing realisation by researchers and policymakers (Rummary, 2013: 13) is reflected in the Scottish Government's multi-agency framework, which has become a potent means of addressing and supporting women experiencing abuse. The Scottish Government policy document 'Safer Lives' (2009: 14) gives a specific role to, and lays out the foundations for, multi-agency partnerships to prioritise and tackle 'violence against women', and it holds partners accountable through policy instrument such as the 'Gender Equality Duty'. The police is one of the key partners involved in this framework, and is integral in fulfilling the common goals of 'providing appropriate support' and ensuring 'protection and safety' for women and children affected by abuse. This is notable in the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), facilitated by Police Scotland's specialist Domestic Abuse Task Force. The Task Force actively targets the most persistent offenders whilst also providing protection and support for women through MARAC meetings. The purpose is to share information on the highest risk domestic abuse cases between the appropriate agencies. In an attempt to reach women from hard-to-reach communities such as South Asian, the police engage in ongoing work with specialist women's groups such as Amina-MWRC. Amina-MWRC facilitates dialogue and information days between the police and South Asian women in order to tackle issues such as institutional racism. It does so in order to dispel the stereotype that all police officers are racist in a bid to increase women's confidence to report crimes such as family abuse.

Violence against women is, however, under-reported by South Asian women (Izzidien, 2008); a concern raised in the policy document 'Safer Lives' (2009: 22). Research indicates that this can be due to cultural reasons such as stigma, fear of being ostracised by their families and community, and feelings of guilt and shame (Anitha, 2008). Although, it is essential to explore the barriers women face in disclosing abuse to service providers, the nature and adequacy of service provision itself also needs attention, for it can be highly variable and inconsistent in meeting the needs of South Asian women (Anitha, 2008). Seeking help is a complex, ongoing process for any women experiencing abuse. Gill and Thiara (2010: 240) argue that the 'quality, consistency and reliability' of service-provider responses that abused women receive have the greatest impact on whether or not effective outcomes for the women themselves and their families can be achieved. The South Asian community is an already marginalised population in the UK on the basis of race, religion and ethnicity, and is at risk of social exclusion on cultural and linguistic grounds. Additionally, there is a climate of distrust and hostility within the South Asian community towards the police due to controversies surrounding 'institutional racism', Islamophobia, 'stop and search' practices and racial stereotyping. So, for example, South Asian women may not have confidence in the police due to (perceived) racist and unfair police treatment of men in their families and communities. Consequently, South Asian women are not only at greater risk of specific forms of abuse such as isolation and control, but they also face considerable personal and social barriers to help-seeking. It is crucial to women's safety to critically evaluate police support and how it can be improved to reflect a nuanced understanding of the complexities of South Asian women's experiences of abuse. This cannot, however, be achieved without the inclusion of women's voices, needs and desires.

## THE SPECIFICITY OF FAMILY ABUSE

Researchers such as Thiara and Gill (2010) argue that while there are commonalities in women's experiences of abuse, all women do not have the same experience simply because they are women; there are differences between, and within, categories of women – for instance, between migrant and UK-born South Asian women. They, along with other researchers, point to the specificity of South Asian women's experiences both in the nature of abuse and the barriers to help-seeking, elucidating the following factors that make (migrant and UK-born) South Asian women's experiences of abuse distinct from other women's experiences (Rew et al., 2013; Gangoli et al., 2011; Anitha, 2008):

- Context: South Asian women can experience abuse within a joint, extended patrilocal<sup>3</sup> social unit where two or more generations of close relatives, who are affiliated by blood and/or relationship, live together (Wardak, 2000). These relationships include the husband's mother, the husband's sister and the husband's brother's wife.

<sup>2</sup> The term family abuse encapsulates abuse between husband and wife as well as abuse from the husband's family.

<sup>3</sup> Relating to a marriage pattern in which the couple lives with the husband's family.

- Perpetrators: South Asian women can experience abuse outwith intimate relationships, such as the mother-in-law, husband's sister and members of the wider community.
- Abuse: In addition to physical, sexual and emotional abuse, South Asian women can experience threats of deportation, extreme forms of isolation, gossip, being overworked within the home, and social and familial ostracism.

Additionally, there are intertwining and mutually reinforcing constraints at the micro- and macro-levels that do not only intensify experiences of abuse but compound and constrain South Asian women in complex and specific ways:

#### Micro-level (home) constraints:

- Complex kinship structures: i.e. father-in-law is also paternal uncle.
- Marriage patterns: i.e. transnational marriage which can create distance from family and friends.
- Pressure from family to stay in abusive marriage due to cultural concepts of honour and shame.
- Lack of English proficiency.
- No qualifications (or not recognised in the UK).
- No employment prospects.
- Unawareness of rights and services.
- Insecure immigration status.

#### Macro-level constraints:

- Pressure from members of the community to stay in an abusive marriage.
- Immigration policies (e.g. 'two year rule') that consign women to an abusive marriage and facilitate certain features of abuse such as control, isolation and threatening behavior.
- Racist, insensitive and misinformed service responses.

#### CASE STUDY

Meryam (pseudonym) was a respondent spoken to as part of the researchers doctoral project. Meryam arrived to the UK from Pakistan on a spousal visa. She has no family in the UK and cannot speak English very well. Her marital home consisted of: husband, mother-in-law, father-in-law, husband's brother, husband's brother's wife and husband's sister. Meryam's experience of abuse was immediate but developed gradually in severity. Meryam was only allowed to leave the house for doctors' appointments or to work (unpaid) in the family shop. She was always chaperoned by her husband or mother-in-law. She did not have the resources to contact her family back home (i.e. phone, money to buy a phone card), and she was prohibited contact with them by her husband and mother-in-law. Meryam has three children. Meryam experienced physical and verbal spousal abuse in front of other members of the family, particularly her mother-in-law. Meryam felt her mother-in-law goaded her husband to hit her, and she also physically, verbally and financially abused Meryam. Meryam's mother-in-law told her: *'if you leave or contact the police you will be deported back to Pakistan, and your children will be taken away from you.'* Unaware of her rights, these threats coerced Meryam to stay in the abusive home. Her daughter's nursery teacher intervened when she noticed the bruises on Meryam's arms and neck. She referred her to Shakti Women's Aid who supported her to leave the abusive marriage.

Meryam's experience elucidates how micro- and macro-level constraints can interact with, and shape, experiences of family abuse, making some South Asian women cautious when disclosing abuse or preventing some South Asian women from disclosing abuse at all.

#### SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWEE PROFILES

The research focused on Pakistani women specifically as this is the largest category within the South Asian population in Scotland and due to the researchers ease of access to the desired sample. The sample of women interviewed varied according to:

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

There were striking contrasts and distinctions between the UK-born and Pakistan-born interviewees in their experiences of abuse in relation to severity and barriers to service provision. In light of these distinctions, the material was organised in the research as Pakistan-born and UK-born.

Six Pakistan-born interviewees:

They recounted experiencing severe forms of physical abuse, isolation and economic dependency. Factors such as immigration policies, lack of English proficiency, economics and misinformation shaped the interviewees' experiences of abuse, but also if and how they accessed police support.

Five UK-born interviewees:

Similar to the Pakistan-born interviewees, the UK-born interviewees recounted experiencing isolation, economic dependency and physical abuse. However, due to the factors specific to them – immigration and language – the Pakistan-born interviewees experienced more extreme and regular levels of abuse. Factors such as fear, cultural pressure to stay in an abusive marriage and *'bad experience of services'* shaped the UK-born interviewees pathway to seeking help from the police.

## KEY FINDINGS:

### 1. CONTACTING THE POLICE

Four (3 Pakistan-born and 1 UK-born) of the interviewees did not contact the police for support. During the interview the women were asked the reasons for this, and what they felt the barriers to police support are for South Asian women more generally. They noted the following:

- **Unawareness:** The under- or non-use of services such as the police by migrant South Asian women may be because they have no means of knowing the law or the working of the police in their host country (Anitha, 2008). The findings from Southall Black Sisters casework identifies factors contributing to unawareness, highlighting that 'foreign-brides' lack western education and sometimes have no formal education at all. This, together with a lack of English proficiency and nature of family abuse experienced (i.e. isolation), can leave women unaware of services such as the police. Not knowing how to contact the police was raised as an issue by the Pakistan-born interviewees. For example, the isolation was so extreme for some of the interviewees that they did not know the number for the police, or that it was a free number: *'I wanted to get help and contact the police, but I didn't know the number for the police ... I didn't know how to contact them'* (Pakistan-born interviewee).
- **Misinformation:** Migrant South Asian women's lack of proficiency in English, which perpetrators tend to sustain by hindering women from learning English (Jones et al., 2013), can create a constant state of anxiety and dependency for women. This can result in women having very little access to relevant and appropriate information regarding the police, where perpetrators who sustain and exploit gaps in women's knowledge become their primary source of information. As a result, women tend to be misinformed about services such as the police; this was a reason also cited by the Pakistan-born interviewees for not contacting the police: *'My mother-in-law told me the police are bad. They rape our women and mentally torture. She also said that they would send me back to Pakistan if I told them [police] about the abuse'* (Pakistan-born interviewee).
- **Lack of understanding:** The (UK- and Pakistan-born) interviewees explained that the police lack understanding and appreciation of the specific issues – such as cultural factors and complex extended family structures – that shape their experiences of abuse, and if, when and how they exit. As a result, the interviewees felt the police would be unable to respond adequately to their needs: *'I didn't contact them [police] because they wouldn't have a clue what I'm going through and what I need; the cultural stuff, the abuse from my in-laws'* (UK-born interviewee).

### 2. THE POLICE RESPONSE

Seven (3 Pakistan-born 4 UK-born) of the interviewees contacted the police. The regularity of this varied, for instance, some of the interviewees contacted the police throughout the abusive marriage, *'whenever he would hit'* (UK-born interviewee); while others only contacted the police when they decided to exit the relationship.

Research studies indicate that South Asian women's experiences of services such as the police can be highly variable (Burman et al., 2004; Anitha, 2008; HMIC, 2014). This is apparent in the interviewees' experiences of the police:

- **Conflict of Interest:** All the interviewees who came into contact with the police raised 'conflict of interest' as a major issue. As noted earlier, multi-agency work is essential in achieving women's safety, but the well-intentioned strategy has overlooked the divergent and conflicting goals within agencies and between agencies (Rummery, 2013: 218). In practice, the best interests of vulnerable women may not be served, which may prevent women from seeking assistance, or which may expose them to different forms of oppression and constraints. The interviewees felt the police to be more concerned with arresting and prosecuting the offender, thereby overlooking the safety and needs of the abused woman: *'They [police] didn't seem like they actually cared. They wanted to do their job, which was to arrest him. But what about me and what I needed?'* (UK-born Interviewee).
- **Failing to Protect:** Three of the interviewees (1 Pakistan-born and 2 UK-born) described their experiences of the police as *'very bad'*. The interviewees felt judged by the police, who they describe as *'not understanding the issues and what I was going through'* (UK-born interviewee). Another interviewee explains feeling disempowered and disheartened by her interaction with the police: *'I also started calling the police. I don't know what the point was; they came in looking bored. I didn't want to call them again'* (UK-born interviewee). She goes on to explain that *'on a few occasions they threatened to arrest me because he [husband] was complaining about a scratch mark. I'm standing there black and blue [with bruises] and they gonna arrest me because I scratched him?'* Overall, the interviewees' accounts of the police represent a failure to understand the specificities and complexities of South Asian women's experiences of family abuse: *'I told them my mother-in-law is abusive. They didn't understand, didn't have a clue how to deal with it'* (UK-born interviewee). Together with a lack of empathy, vulnerable women are left, following a police response, feeling *'misunderstood'* (Pakistan-born interviewee) and *'judged'* (UK-born interviewee).
- **Safety and Sensitivity:** Four of the interviewees (2 Pakistan-born and 2 UK-born) described their experiences of the police as *'very good'* and *'okay'*. They spoke of their needs being met and receiving adequate support, such as being referred to the relevant support services: *'They helped me a lot whenever I phoned them, they came immediately and took him away. They made sure the kids and I were okay'* (Pakistan-born interviewee). One of the Pakistan-born interviewees was forced to leave her daughter when she escaped the family home, as a result feeling *'worried and guilty'*. The police, she explains, *'took her away from the home safely'* and referred her to Shakti Women's Aid, advising her, *'get your daughter through the courts'*. She received advice and support from the police that was adequate and sensitive to her needs.

## SUMMARY

The interviewees' experiences elucidate three crucial points:

1. The under- or non-use of police support by migrant South Asian women can be attributed to women not knowing how to contact the police, or being unaware of the services the police offer. Misinformation of the police – that they are racist and unhelpful – also plays a fundamental role in this trend. This raises the question: how can the police access severely isolated women in order to overcome barriers to support such as misinformation and unawareness?
2. All too often, the quality of service that a woman receives is entirely dependent on the empathy, understanding and commitment of the individual with whom they are faced. A good or bad service responses can shape women's future experiences of help-seeking. This 'lottery response', which leaves the competence and capability of the police officer almost entirely to chance (HMIC, 2014: 50), is not a suitable approach to dealing with any vulnerable women.
3. Police failure to meet the needs of South Asian women can be partly attributable to a lack of police understanding of the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of family abuse. In a family abuse incident, a police officer is required to recognise the hidden and coercive nature of abuse, the multiple perpetrators involved, the specific needs of the victim, while also being culturally and religiously sensitive – a difficult task for anyone.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- It is crucial for services such as the police to be willing to explore their personal beliefs in relation to the problem of family abuse in South Asian communities critically; 'to ensure that personal biases do not negatively influence their responses to women' (Gill and Thiara, 2010: 239), such as stereotypical assumptions of 'the South Asian community' as accepting of, and facilitating, gender discrimination and inequality. In this regard, a fundamental review of police **training** in order to equip police officers with the tools and confidence to deal with a range of complex issues is needed. Police training needs to provide a more **holistic viewpoint** with regard to the complexity of family abuse. An understanding, for example, of how cultural concepts of honour and shame, insecure immigration status, and socio-economic factors can make some South Asian women cautious and fearful of reporting an incident to the police; this will put women's actions in better perspective. The training must also aid police understanding of the contextualisation of family abuse within wider global and societal issues; for instance, the manner in which government policy and perceptions of police as racist can frame South Asian women's under- or non-use of police support. The researcher, subject to funding, is in the process of developing a project which aims to develop and implement police training on these complex issues.
- As a means of evaluating police performance, women's voices and perspectives need to be heard and explored. Thus, the gap in knowledge on South Asian women's experience of the police needs to be redressed; collaborative qualitative policing **research** by academics and police officers on family abuse is a means by which this can be achieved.
- The police need to be conscious of the reality that misinformation and unawareness are key barriers for migrant South Asian women to accessing police support. However, acknowledgement of this alone is insufficient; those responsible for **advertising and raising awareness** of police support need to take steps to ensure the message is reaching all women, particularly those like Meryam who are severely isolated and cannot speak English. For example, a Pakistan-born interviewee suggested: '*the government should give women that come from Pakistan information about their rights, immigration and services like the police*'. Undoubtedly reaching isolated women is a difficult task and requires further research to ascertain the avenues by which this can be achieved. For example, targeting places for advertisement (provided in multiple languages) where most women attend, such as GP surgeries, maternity and family care, nurseries, schools, and so forth. It is the role of the government to assist the police in developing conventional and unconventional approaches through which to reach isolated women. It is necessary to acknowledge that such approaches are not without obstacles, but to be committed nevertheless to manoeuvring around them.
- Even if the police attempt to improve policing practice through training and research, they, like most organisations, are restricted by scarcity of funds. In order to effect changes, the UK Government needs to direct more resources towards providing **financial security** to all service-providers working with vulnerable and marginalised women.

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