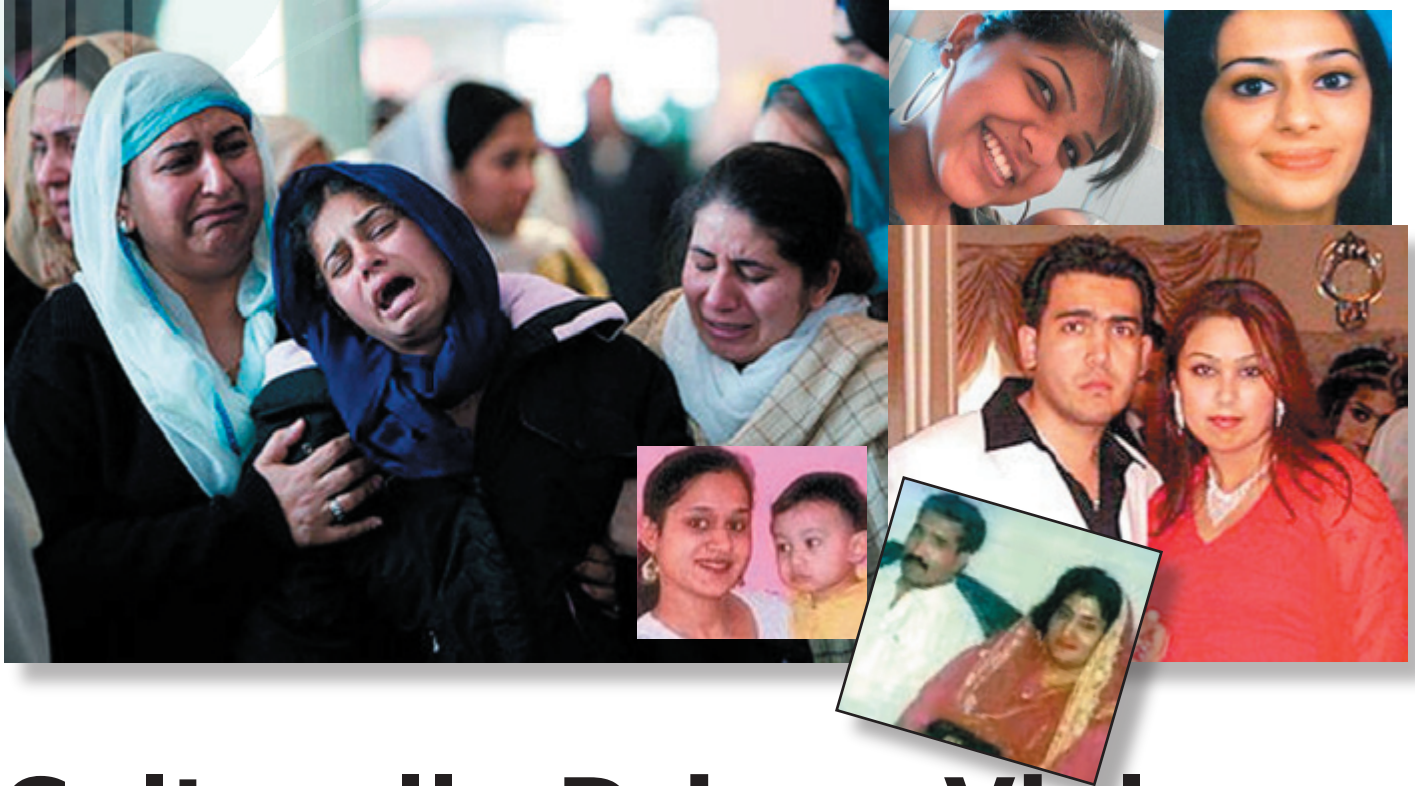


# POLICY SERIES



## Culturally Driven Violence Against Women

**A Growing Problem in Canada's  
Immigrant Communities**

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**By Aruna Papp**



Amandeep Kaur Dhillon funeral. Pawandeep Benipal, centre, is supported as she leaves the funeral service for her slain sister, Amandeep Kaur Dhillon, 22, inset. Tara Walton/*Toronto Star*, Jan. 11, 2009



Aqsa Parvezi, 16.



Amandeep Singh Atwal, 17.



Feroz Mangal, 23, and Khatera Sadiqi, 20.



Muhammad Arsal Khan and Kaneez Fatima, guilty of murdering their five-year-old daughter Farah.

### About the Author

## Aruna Papp

For the past 30 years, Aruna Papp, M.A., A.D.R., M.Ed., has worked as a social worker and counsels with families who deal with domestic violence. She holds two Masters degrees, in Adult Education and Counselling and has volunteered on a numerous boards and committees including the Board of Governors of Centennial College and the Centenary Hospital in Toronto. She has a private practice in York Region, conducts cultural competency workshops, and her clients include the York Regional Police, area hospitals and school boards as well as several non-profit agencies.

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# Culturally Driven Violence Against Women

## A Growing Problem in Canada's Immigrant Communities

By Aruna Papp, M.A., A.D.R., M.Ed.

### Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Executive Summary  | 4  |
| Introduction   | 6  |
| A primer on the traditions and values of selected immigrant communities        | 10 |
| The purpose of this paper  | 10 |
| Who are the South Asian immigrants?  | 11 |
| What is "honour killing"?  | 11 |
| The scope of the problem   | 12 |
| Strong traditional patriarchy in a cultural context                            | 12 |
| Patriarchal power is more intense at home than abroad                          | 13 |
| An additional problem: The pecking order and immigrant women-on-women violence | 15 |
| Crimes of "honour" in immigrant communities                                    | 16 |
| Policy recommendations   | 17 |
| Endnotes   | 19 |

## Executive summary

In a 1999 national survey of Canadian women's experience of domestic violence, several disturbing patterns came to light; they included the fact that the highest prevalence of domestic violence against women was found in the homes of immigrants from developing countries.

Problematically, the ideology of multiculturalism, even amongst the most well-meaning advocates for female equality, tends to preclude any discussion of cultural values and traditions that project a "colonialist" mentality or that may lead to a perceived "racialization" of an entire ethnic community. This is a mistake for the following reasons:

- "Honour killings" are carried out in order to cleanse the family name and restore the family honour. Unlike Western domestic violence, typically perpetrated bilaterally by one intimate partner on another, honour violence is perpetrated unilaterally within the family: against girls and women by male relatives—such as fathers, fathers-in-law, brothers, brothers-in-law, husbands and occasionally sons—often with the complicity of older females.
- "Honour killing" is an ancient cultural practice in which men murder female relatives in the name of family "honour" for forced or suspected sexual activity outside the marriage, even when the woman were victims of rape. Yotam Feldner, a researcher at the Middle East Media Research Institute describes an honour killing as one in which a man who refrains from "washing shame with blood is a coward who is not worth living, much less a man."
- For example, in 1999, Farah Khan, five, was killed by her father and stepmother after the father claimed the child was not his, claiming this was deeply shaming and the killing was necessary to redeem his honour. In 2003, Amandeep Singh Atwal, 17, was stabbed to death by her father, because she wanted to date a non-Sikh classmate. In 2006, Khatera Sadiqi and her 23-year-old boyfriend, Feroz Mangal, were killed by her brother. In 2009, Amandeep Kaur Dhillion, who was driven by her father-in-law to and from the family-owned and run grocery store, where she worked long hours, was killed by him when she threatened to leave his son.
- Since 2002, the murders of 12 women were identified as honour killings; three other murders identified as domestic violence also have the hallmarks of an honour killing.
- While violence against women is deplored in general in Canada, few researchers appreciate the many distinctions between historically observed Western patterns of abuse of women by men (and abuse of men by women) and newer, *culturally* driven abuse of girls and women by both men and women (with virtually no abuse of men by women in such culturally induced situations).
- Amongst other differences, Western abuse is statistically infrequent, stems from psychological dysfunction around intimate relations between individual adults and is considered a cultural aberration by kinship groups and society in

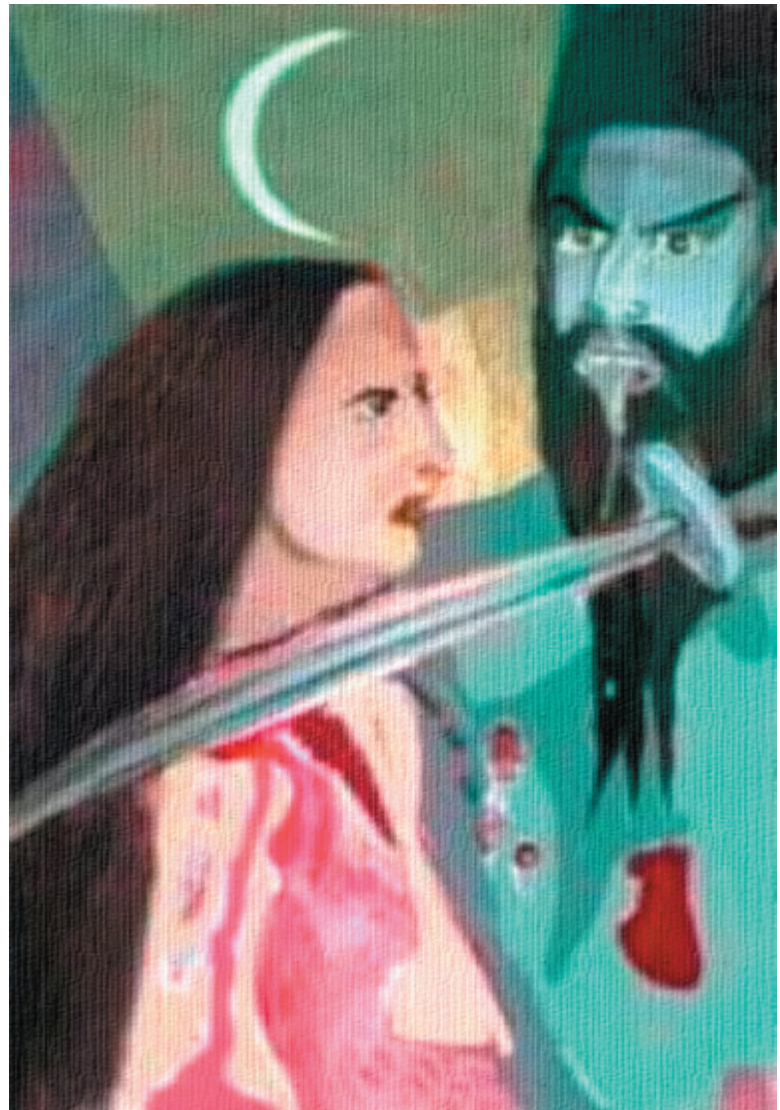


general. In contrast, culturally driven violence is statistically frequent, stems from culturally approved codes around collective family honour and shame, is condoned and even facilitated by kinship groups and the community.

For example, Aqsa Parvez, 16, recently in headlines and who was killed in 2007 by her father and her brother (convicted of the crime in June this year), lived in a Mississauga household with 12 adults and who all condoned the abuse of this girl. In fact, the mother is quoted as saying she thought the father would only break her arms and legs, not kill her. In another example, in 2006, Ottawa's Khatera Sadiqi and her boyfriend, Feroz Mangal, 23, were killed by her brother.

A growing body of research confirms that in patriarchal societies that are comprised of the self-appointed and more "authentic" non-Westernized bulk of the South Asian community, where honour/shame codes are rife (and even when legally proscribed), men are found to exercise rigid control over women. The result is a higher incidence of violence against women as compared with the mainstream Western host communities.

Many immigrants chose Canada *because the foundation of this country is built on values of security, freedom and respect for all*. Yet, there are thousands of women in Canada whose rights are not respected, who are neither free nor secure, because they dare not challenge their oppressors. For them, Section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees men and women equal rights to life, liberty and security of the person, are mere words on a page in a book that remains closed to them.



***...there are thousands of women in Canada whose rights are not respected, who are neither free nor secure, because they dare not challenge their oppressors.***

# Introduction

Abuse of women, both physical and psychological, is a prevalent and well-documented social problem in Canada and around the world. The phenomenon crosses all cultural, economic and social strata. However, immigrant, refugee and non-status immigrant women in Canada are more vulnerable to violence from both men and women (of which more later), because they have less control over their lives than Canadian women whose ancestors came to Canada long ago or who come from European backgrounds. Immigrant women who arrived more recently are often kept socially isolated and consequently have limited or inaccurate information regarding their rights. In turn, their ignorance and insecurity create a reluctance to seek assistance from outsiders, such as the police, as they fear such an action may result in their deportation or the arrest of their sponsor. They also fear that their families in their country of origin may be threatened as punishment for challenging their husband's authority. In addition, there may be intimidating systemic and linguistic barriers to overcome. In short, these women are usually too dependent on their abuser to challenge them through nominally available channels.<sup>1</sup>

For example, The *Toronto Star* stated that Amandeep Kaur Dhillon, 22 years old, was driven to and from the grocery store each morning by her father-in-law, who killed her when she threatened to leave his son.<sup>2</sup> (Her young son had been removed and sent to India.) In 1999, Farah Khan, 5, was killed by her father and stepmother, because the father claimed this child was not his and that it was a matter of shame and his honour.

Over the past 10 years, Canada has accepted approximately 230,000 new immigrants annually. Women comprise a little over half of all the people who emigrate to Canada. Female immigrants represent 18 per cent of all women living in Canada.<sup>3</sup> This paper will deal mainly with women from South Asia who have come here from the Indian subcontinent: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, and those women of Indian provenance who immigrated to South Africa and the West Indies.

Having worked on the frontlines for the past 30 years with South Asian men and women who represent the entire constellation of kinship roles, this author thinks Canadians must critically examine the cultural and traditional practices regarding the abuse of girls and women within this community. Our media and governments must evaluate the social, cultural and economic impact of abuse of immigrant women in our society and, most importantly, must take responsibility for the second and third generation of women who now seek refuge from violence that occurs in their homes.

Immigrant women are not a homogenous group. Within the South Asian community there is great ethnic and cultural diversity. The experience of South Asian women depends on many factors such as their country of origin, length of stay in Canada, education, socio-economic status, language expertise and knowledge of the host country. When immigrant women become victims of domestic violence, all the above-mentioned variables have an impact.

In a 1999 national survey of Canadian women's experience of domestic violence, several disturbing patterns came to light. The highest prevalence of domestic violence against women was in the homes of immigrants from developing countries.<sup>4</sup> A number of contributing factors emerged, singling out for greater odds of domestic violence women who had achieved some measure of personal validation and confidence through education; or through their role as family breadwinner; or through exposure to women-empowering values. These women were more likely to seek greater control over their lives. Domestic violence was therefore found to be more prevalent amongst women who, for example, had been in Canada the longest and had become acculturated; those who had emigrated at an older age; those who were employed; those with higher education; and those whose partners were unemployed.

Amongst South Asians, a woman's financial and professional success often destabilizes the traditional dynamic of authoritative male and submissive female. The natural tendency of such women to assert their rights as equal partners is deeply threatening to men from the patriarchal community; they perceive equality between the sexes as a threat to their masculinity.<sup>5</sup>

While violence against women is deplored in general in Canada, few researchers appreciate the many distinctions between historically observed Western patterns of abuse of women by men (and abuse of men by women) and newer, *culturally* driven abuse of girls and women by both men and women (with virtually no abuse of men by women in such culturally induced situations). Amongst other differences, Western abuse is statistically infrequent, stems from psychological dysfunction around intimate relations between individual adults and is considered a cultural

aberration by kinship groups and society in general. In contrast, culturally driven violence is statistically frequent, stems from culturally approved codes around collective family honour and shame, is condoned and even facilitated by kinship groups and the community.<sup>6</sup>

The same basic *leitmotif* runs through all honour killings: A girl or woman refuses to abide by strictures laid down by the family patriarch or defies him in her choice of partner; he understands himself to be shamed in the eyes of his community by her defiance; her punishment at the hands of the patriarch and/or her brothers is then regarded as necessary, a fate set in motion by the victim herself. Meanwhile, other members of the family may be saddened by the outcome, but they do not interfere. They act as something like a Greek chorus, somberly witnessing actions that are neither good nor bad, but simply fated.

For example, in 2007, Aqsa Parvez, 16, was brutally strangled by her father and brother for refusing to wear a hijab and for balking at an arranged marriage. The 12 adults living in the house condoned the abuse of this girl. In fact, the mother is quoted as saying she thought the father would only break her arms and legs, not kill her. After killing her, the father told his wife, "My community will say you have not been able to control your daughter. This is my insult. She is making me naked."<sup>7</sup> Other Canadian tragedies involving girls sacrificed on the altar of their fathers' or brothers' honour follow a similar narrative trajectory.

Under the rubric of "culturally driven abuse," there are contributing values that are specific to the South Asian community.<sup>8</sup> For example, South Asian culture glorifies self-sacrifice in girls and women and puts a premium on their chastity. In addition, tensions around dowry expectations,



the idolization of males and arranged or forced marriages—traditions that run directly counter to Canadian values—all play a role in creating a favourable climate for the abuse of girls and women.

Clearly, not every South Asian immigrant woman is abused in her home. Perhaps, it is appropriate to point out that there is generally a cultural gulf between the lives of those South Asian immigrant women who are abused and those women who have grown up in major urban centres. The latter group represent perhaps 15 per cent of the South Asian population. Wealthy urban families, sophisticated, with an international outlook, consider education in western or westernized institutions to be good social capital for their daughters. These women have expectations and ambitions, and conduct their lives and relationships along gender-equal lines familiar to us in the West.

However, a growing body of research confirms that in patriarchal societies that comprise the more “authentic” non-Westernized bulk of the South Asian community, where honour/shame codes are rife, men exercise rigid control over women. The result is a higher incidence of violence against women as compared with their mainstream Western host communities.<sup>9</sup>

Amongst representative South Asian immigrants, women are held to a tightly scripted role of submission to a hierarchy of family authority. In addition, they face the most insurmountable obstacle of all: a community-wide conspiracy of silence regarding the abuse of girls and women. Community leaders point to cultural traditions, religious values and norms in defending their way of life. Thus, they consciously exploit multiculturalism-inspired fears amongst mainstream Canadians of appearing racist or of perpetuating cultural stereotypes.

Indeed, there are more than a few cases in Canada of crimes committed in the name of cultural values where judges imposed lesser penalties on the perpetrator in deference to his cultural motivation. In February 24, 1999, *The Toronto Star* reported that Court of Quebec Judge Monique Dubreuil sentenced two men convicted of sexual assault to 18-month conditional sentences and 100 hours of community service each, stating “The absence of regret of the two accused seems to be related more to the cultural context, particularly with regards to relations with women, than a veritable problem of a sexual nature.” Thus, abused women are forced to remain silent while the abuses continue even into the second and the third generation.<sup>10</sup>

Abuse of women in Western countries was not acknowledged in a serious way until the 1970s. Then, following research into the health and social consequences of gender-based violence, pioneering feminists raised public awareness of the necessity for the creation of laws that would protect women. Today, appropriately, the focus is on freedom from fear of abuse as a human right.

Over the years, diverse legislation has furthered such freedom from violence and this ideal. Many new shelters have been built (albeit often staffed by women informed by Western interpretations of domestic violence rather than educated in the unique approaches necessary in dealing with culturally driven abuse), dozens of research papers and articles have been published and conferences and workshops have been conducted. They all testify to the need for a deeper analysis of the phenomenon of the abuse of girls and women in immigrant communities.



However, most advocates and activists for female victims of abuse shy away from challenging the immigrant communities to examine their own traditions and cultural values in explaining the violence in their homes. The ideology of multiculturalism, even amongst the most well-meaning advocates for female equality, tends to preclude any discussion of cultural values and traditions that project a “colonialist” mentality or that may lead to a perceived “racialization” of an entire ethnic community. The reasoning appears to be that to suggest violence against girls and women arises from specific cultural values implies some cultures are better than others where treatment of women is concerned—an uncomfortable admission. It is much safer to blame the abuse of women on the “global phenomenon” of women abuse or on settlement issues or on discrimination or racism in the host society while comfortably ignoring values that need to be challenged within the community.

The patriarchy, however, is not a monolithic phenomenon. Although Western culture was in a generic sense also “patriarchal” before women’s accession to the vote and other markers of complete legal and political equality, physical violence against daughters and wives was never a sanctioned practice here or in any Western country.<sup>11</sup> Of course, many wives suffered varying forms of abuse and still do, but the killing of female relatives was, and remains, a shocking aberration in Western society. Although sometimes winked at in certain communities or justified by scripture or culture by some individual abusers, in the West, kinfolk or community members have overwhelmingly considered violence against women reprehensible and unacceptable behaviour.<sup>12</sup>

There has never been, for example, a Western equivalent of burning widows on funeral pyres, as was the case in India; or foot binding, as was the case in China; or honour killing, as is culturally prevalent in Pakistan. Canadians must face up to the reality of violence against women in immigrant communities and, just as importantly, the unique reasons for such violence, if it is to be successfully countered.

**“...to suggest violence against girls and women arises from specific cultural values implies some cultures are better than others where treatment of women is concerned—an uncomfortable admission. It is much safer to blame the abuse of women on the “global phenomenon” of women abuse...”**

# A primer on the traditions and values of selected immigrant communities

What are the traditions and values in South Asian immigrant communities that are most in need of public exposure and discussion? They include:

- Demands for dowries, sometimes called “gifts to the bride”;
- A marked preference for sons over daughters;
- Arranged and forced marriages;
- And most importantly, “honour” crimes—physical assaults against girls and women, up to and including murder, crimes whose numbers are proliferating without regard to Canada’s criminal code or Canadians’ deep cultural revulsion from the very concept.

Such a public discussion would include a challenge to the leaders of those communities who too often remain silent—and even to the politicians who represent ridings populated by critical masses of South Asian immigrants and who cannot be ignorant of these problems—who effectively enable these horrible crimes against women in the name of family honour and shame.

**“...we chose Canada to be our new home... because it promised an abundance of wealth for all...”**

## The purpose of this paper

The threefold purpose of this paper is, first, to examine some of the cultural factors that cause, promote and propagate the abuse of girls and women within South Asian immigrant households in Canada, and second, to recommend to the federal government policy options that would serve to blunt the effect of these detrimental and destructive cultural traditions. The third more-general goal is to encourage a systemic acceleration of Canadianization with regard to values of gender equality.

It is hoped that this paper will also support the establishment of guidelines and resources to help new immigrant families integrate more easily into Canadian society. As immigrants (this author was one in the 1970s,) we chose Canada to be our new home, not just because Canada has been identified as the best country in the world in which to live, or because it promised an abundance of wealth for all. Many immigrants chose Canada *because the foundation of this country is built on values of security, freedom and respect for all*. Yet, there are thousands of women in Canada whose rights are not respected, who are neither free nor secure, because they dare not challenge their oppressors. For them, Section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees men and women equal rights to life, liberty and security of the person, are mere words on a page in a book that remains closed to them.

## Who are the South Asian immigrants?

This paper deals mainly with women from South Asia, in large measure because that is this author's expertise, having worked on the frontlines with South Asian men and women for the past 30 years.

As most readers may know, Canada is dependent on continued immigration for its economic and population growth. Since the mid 1980s, the number of immigrants to Canada has steadily increased. It is estimated that by 2017, Canada's immigrant population will have increased by 24 to 65 per cent from 2001 levels, with the fastest growth being among the Chinese and the South Asians.<sup>13</sup>

South Asians immigrants are a diverse group. They come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. They include South Asians whose ancestors immigrated to Africa, the West Indies and other parts of the world with significant populations with Indian ancestry. The major religions include Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity.<sup>14</sup> There are many ethnic groups among South Asians, each with its own unique history, castes, languages, customs and traditions. Variation can exist within the same group as well due to social class, caste structure, education, acculturation and length of stay in Canada. However, the common element found in the South Asian households where women are victims of abuse is the patriarchal family structure.<sup>15</sup>

## What is honour killing?

Honour killing is an ancient cultural practice in which men murder female relatives in the name of family "honour" for forced or suspected sexual activity outside the marriage, even when the women have been victims of rape.<sup>16</sup> Yotam Feldner, a researcher at the Middle East Media Research Institute, describes an honour killing as one in which a man who refrains from "washing shame with blood is a coward who is not worth living, much less a man." Amandeep Singh Atwal, 17, of British Columbia, was murdered in 2003 by her father, because she wanted to date a non-Sikh classmate. Since 2002, 12 murders of women were identified as honour killings; three other murders that were identified as domestic violence also have the hallmarks of an honour killing.

Each year, male family members murder thousands of girls and women across the globe in the name of family honour and shame. In Canada, honour killings have been carried out for staying out late, wearing makeup, wearing Western clothes, wanting to leave an abusive husband, refusing an arranged marriage, dating, socializing with someone outside the community, etc.

**“Since 2002, 12 murders of women were identified as honour killings...”**

## The scope of the problem in Canada

When a man murders his wife or daughter in Canada, law enforcement representatives—the police and prosecutors—often describe it as domestic violence or a domestic homicide. They deliberately avoid cultural finger-pointing: For law enforcement, murder is murder. Honour killings, however, are distinct from domestic violence or child abuse. An analysis of more than 50 reported honour killings indicates that they are significantly different from domestic violence. The report suggests that when women are killed due to reasons of honour and family shame, the women were threatened over such issues as refusing to cover their heads, wearing makeup, wearing Western clothes, dating, going to parties, choosing friends the family disapproved of, refusing to marry a man chosen by the family, seeking a divorce from a violent husband and marrying against the families' wishes.

For example, in 1999, Farah Khan, five, was killed by her father and stepmother after the father claimed the child was not his, claiming this was deeply shaming and the killing was necessary to redeem his honour. In 2003, Amandeep Singh Atwal, 17, was stabbed to death by her father, because she wanted to date a non-Sikh classmate. In 2006, Khatera Sadiqi and her 23-year-old boyfriend, Feroz Mangal, were killed by her brother. In 2009, Amandeep Kaur Dhillon, who was driven by her father-in-law to and from the family-owned and run grocery store, where she worked long hours, was killed by him when she threatened to leave his son.

## Strong traditional patriarchy in a cultural context

As with other patriarchal systems, the South Asian family structure sanctions this domination of women through the socialization of children from an early age, instilling in them cultural norms, values, traditions and religious precepts that are then transported to Canada. In Canada, these values are reinforced in young children through extracurricular religious schools, which thousands of children attend, as well as in their homes.

In the South Asian patriarchal family structure, the eldest male in the family has the authority to control and dominate all women and the younger men.<sup>17</sup> Each family member is viewed as a contributing part to a collective whole. Failure to fulfill the expected role creates family instability, and for that reason, personal independence is discouraged. Emphasis is placed on loyalty to the extended family, in particular to the relatives of the male patriarch.<sup>18</sup>

The logic behind the South Asian family structure can be best understood by briefly examining its historical and geographical roots. The basic pattern of hierarchy within this family structure consists of a man at the summit, followed by his sons and grandsons, then their wives and unmarried daughters. However, only the males have rights to inheritance and so remain lifelong family members. When a son marries, the wife is expected to leave her natal home, take her dowry and join the husband's family, transferring her goods, her loyalty and her total commitment to this new family.



## Patriarchal power is more intense at home than abroad

For historical reasons of survival and security, families existed as co-operatives, either working as farmers, in business or in a home industry. These families resided together as well. Within these collectives, the obligation to the group came before individual self-interest. Individual freedom was not encouraged; rather, mutual interdependence was valued. As a family, the group had a permanent existence over time and was not dependent on a single individual. When the father died, the eldest son became the new patriarch. Under this system, the eldest male was expected to manage the affairs of the family, which would benefit everyone.<sup>19</sup>

As agricultural family co-operatives and businesses began to disappear, families started to educate their sons, sending them to larger cities or developed countries such as Canada. When these sons were ready for marriage, the families arranged their marriages, and in return for all the expenses relating to the education of their sons, families demanded large dowries. This practice continues in Canada today, with men returning to their countries of origin, sometimes marrying three or four times, then abandoning the women and returning to Canada with the dowries.<sup>20</sup>

Research suggests that traditional patriarchal power imbalances are even more strongly maintained in the South Asian immigrant communities in the hope of ensuring cultural continuity.<sup>21</sup> Like other patriarchal systems, the South Asian culture is characterized by deep-rooted inequalities in male-female roles and legitimized by social and cultural norms that place men in controlling positions over the lives of women.<sup>22</sup> The socialization of children into their gender roles, both male and female, begins as soon as they are born. There are great celebrations upon the birth of a son, but solicitous empathy is offered when a daughter is born. South Asian community members, men and women, often say, "Raising a daughter is like watering someone else's garden." More recently, ultrasound technology, which can identify the sex of a fetus in the second trimester, has been exploited to force women in the community to abort healthy female fetuses.<sup>23</sup>

Children learn from an early age that boys are more valued than girls are. Boys are given more freedom both inside and outside the house, and they are encouraged to participate in decision-making, while girls are responsible for household chores, and their activities out of the home are restricted. Boys have inherent value. The only way for girls to attain value is through their relationships to men, mainly as wives and mothers of sons.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, it is important for them to be educated but not too ambitious. Girls' primary function is to marry well; bound by duty, they are to be self-sacrificing wives, providing services and producing sons for their husbands. The transfer of a woman, like property, from her father's control to her husband's, combined with

the belief that her destiny is duty to her husband, normalizes the occurrence of rape and other forms of violence in a marriage and makes it more difficult for women to reveal abuse.<sup>25</sup>

In the South Asian immigrant community, girls are raised with strict rules regarding behaviour, dress and socialization, not to mention career ambitions. Any gossip or rumours about their “bad” behaviour will be detrimental to their marriage prospects. Girls are expected to remain chaste. Because material rewards and punishments to the whole family are contingent on a daughter’s behaviour, her movements are strictly monitored. (In the case of Aqsa Parvez, she had no door to her room, and even a part of a wall of her room was cut down, so she could be visible to her relatives at all times.<sup>26</sup>)

The South Asian patriarchal structure controls female sexuality not only in a physical manner but also in a psychological one, by making explicit the link between family honour and the sexual purity of the women within the family.

A girl is expected to protect her virginity before marriage as well as protecting her reputation from gossip and rumours after she is married. Research conducted with South Asians immigrants suggests that a good reputation is maintained through the segregation of the sexes.<sup>27</sup> For if a wife’s behaviour with a male invites any breath of suspicion, however innocent the encounter, she brings dishonour and disgrace to the husband and his entire family,<sup>16</sup> and she can expect to be punished<sup>28</sup> even if, as in the case of rape, it is not her fault.

When a woman is timid and passive in marital sexual activity, a natural result of such conditioning, it implies her shyness and inexperience and this is valued in South Asian culture. This passive behaviour of the women allows the husband to regard himself as the teacher and “legitimizes” his right to force himself upon his wife.<sup>29</sup>

***Because material rewards and punishments to the whole family are contingent on a daughter’s behaviour, her movements are strictly monitored. (In the case of Aqsa Parvez, she had no door to her room, and even a part of a wall of her room was cut down, so she could be visible to her relatives at all times.)***

## An additional cultural problem: The pecking order and immigrant women-on-women violence

The newest bride in the family is the weakest member of the family. She is constantly at the disposal of her mother-in-law, whose aim is to establish her control over the newcomer. Unlike in mainstream Western society, physical abuse of girls and women, occasionally severe, by older females of status, in particular the mother-in-law, is sanctioned by cultural codes and submitted to without protest by younger women of lesser stature. Only after producing a son will the new bride have some rights.<sup>30</sup>

The complexity of gender domination is much more apparent in the concepts of honour—*Izzat*—and shame. Honour killings, as noted, are carried out in order to cleanse the family name and to restore the family honour.<sup>31</sup> Unlike Western domestic violence, typically perpetrated bilaterally by one intimate partner on another, honour violence is perpetrated unilaterally within the family: against girls and women by male relatives—such as fathers, fathers-in-law, brothers, brothers-in-law, husbands and occasionally sons—often with the complicity of older females. (This is a phenomenon virtually unheard of in the West: Physical abuse perpetrated on women and children by a female accomplice of a violent male elicits special horror in Western society, as embodied in the reaction to Paul Bernardo's and Karla Homolka's rapes and murders of female teenagers.) Killing is not the only crime committed in the name of honour, simply the most violent.

When honour killings occur, the media is not generally very helpful in identifying the problem. The events are filtered through a reflexive, multiculturalism-inspired reluctance to "racialize" the crime. All too often, the killing becomes subsumed under the heading of domestic violence or the global problem of patriarchy. This does a disservice both to the South Asian immigrant community and to Canadian society in that the media wilfully ignores a cultural problem in dire need of acknowledgement and reform, while indicting Canadian men for attitudes the overwhelming majority of them do not hold.

***Killing is not the only crime committed in the name of honour, simply the most violent...***

## Crimes of “honour” in immigrant communities

South Asians who are determined to maintain the oppression of women and reject assimilation into the host society use religious and cultural values as a pretext to control female chastity. This effectively places the maintenance of traditional values and family honour on the woman alone.<sup>32</sup> Sons are rarely punished for their lack of chastity. Because the stakes are so high, punishments for perceived rejection or disobedience of the cultural code can be severe. The “reasons” for carrying out honour killings—usually offered by those perpetrating the crimes—are diverse: wearing makeup, socializing with unacceptable friends, wearing unacceptable clothes, staying out late, dating, lack of sex in the marriage, extramarital sex, gossip or challenging the authority of the dominant male in the family.

As vital as legal and human rights policies are, more individuals and agencies that provide services to abused women are starting to identify the magnitude of the problem by recognizing the brainwashing of children in the service of maintaining male power over females and by understanding how respect for culture and religion is being exploited to sustain this control. While legal sanctions are needed, third parties cannot establish the conditions for reform. Leaders of the South Asian immigrant communities must take responsibility for breaking the silence, to borrow a much-used locution from campaigns against Western paradigms of domestic violence. They must challenge the deep-rooted cultural thinking and traditional structures that lie at the root of women abuse in South Asian homes.

Community mobilization and outreach programs are an important part of generating dialogue within this community and of developing strong partnerships and networks. While there are legal options for supporting women and providing safety for them, it is imperative that we generate an open dialogue that is not threatening within the community in order to guarantee the security of all immigrant women and to ensure their right to live without fear of violence from those who, according to Canadian values, should be their most trustworthy companions and protectors.

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# Policy recommendations

- 1.** Sponsored women should attend a training session in their country of origin. The session would be administered and staffed by Canadian citizens. The goal of this training would be to educate women about their rights and Canadian culture and values. Gender equality would be stressed. Information regarding resources and help centres in various regions in Canada would also be provided.
- 2.** Mandatory orientation should be required for male sponsors to educate them regarding sponsorship rules and regulations. Men, too, should be educated on the values and laws regarding gender equality.
- 3.** Culturally appropriate assessment procedures for relationship history and/or marriage authenticity need to be developed.
- 4.** Immigration officers are often men, and these officers are often untrained in cultural competencies and are unable to analyze stories. Cultural competency training for frontline personnel would ease the process for immigrants.
- 5.** If the sponsorship dissolves and the new spouse is not able to support herself, a spousal allowance should be withdrawn from the income of the sponsoring spouse to guarantee financial support of the sponsored spouse.
- 6.** Men making applications to sponsor a wife need to be investigated to check how many times they have been married, examine their pattern of sponsorship and document how the previous spouse is being financially supported.
- 7.** Men should also be checked for any criminal record in Canada and in their country of origin, i.e., violence against someone in their past.
- 8.** Some women are sponsored as a spouse, quickly divorced and then forced into marrying the first husband's relative. Women in these situations should be identified and informed of their rights.
- 9.** Civil servants are often afraid of being deemed racist or bigoted, so they avoid asking important questions. They need training that will give them the confidence to ask the pertinent questions.
- 10.** The government needs to pay more attention to the Canadian South Asian media, where unregulated "ghost" consultants advertise services related to immigration, sponsorship and marriage. This has become a lucrative business that with luck will be corrected in the current reassessment and reorganization of the Canadian immigration consultants' regulatory body.

- 11.** There needs to be government-funded programs on local and national television and radio in various languages that give women correct information. The programs could also be used to remind abusers that there will be consequences for abusing women.
- 12.** There needs to be shelters for women abused by extended family members. To date, a woman must be abused by her spouse in order to find shelter in the majority of these agencies.
- 13.** Men who are arrested for domestic violence should be ordered by the court to attend a counselling program. At present, only a few of these programs are offered in Canada, as well, the curriculum is not culturally appropriate.
- 14.** Leaders in South Asian communities—imams, pundits, pastors and other respected authority figures—carry great influence. They must be encouraged—pressured, really—to speak out frequently and sincerely against the practice of abusing girls and women. Those who remain silent must expect to be urged by social service agencies, law enforcement and political leaders to take a public stand. Community leaders should not be granted the luxury of passivity, in effect enabling the practice, when members of their community commit crimes against girls and women.

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## Further Reading



February 2010

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Joseph Quesnel

<http://www.fcpp.org/publication.php/3171>

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Joseph Quesnel

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