



Suicide Among Young Women of South Asian Origin

By Aruna Papp

About the author



Aruna Papp

Aruna is a survivor of Honour Based Violence and forced marriage. She arrived in Canada with a grade three education and lived in an abusive marriage for 18 years. For the past 30 years she has worked as a Counsellor/Therapist and at present she is with Family Services of York Region, Ontario. As a consultant she conducts workshops on cultural competency for Police Officers and frontline practitioners in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario. Aruna has founded three agencies that assist families dealing with domestic violence. She has written extensively on issues facing new immigrants and is a columnist for two magazines, *The Newcomer* and *Desi*. Aruna has volunteered on numerous boards and committees including the Board of Governors of Centennial College and Centenary Hospital. Her forthcoming book *Unworthy Creature: A Daughter's Memoir of Honour, Shame, and Love* is being published by McClelland & Stewart (Spring 2012). Aruna is the recipient of eleven prestigious awards including the "Women of Distinction Award," "The Commemorative Medal for the 125th Anniversary of the Confederation of Canada," and "Life Time Achievement Award" from the South Asian Community. Aruna Papp is author of *Culturally-Driven Violence Against Women*, published by the Frontier Centre.



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Introduction

Suicide rates in Canada are higher than are those in the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom...

Recently, I attended a memorial service for a 21-year-old South Asian woman who had committed suicide. A note addressed to her parents said, "I am unable to please you and be the kind of daughter you want me to be."

I left the memorial service determined to examine the hopelessness that drove this young person to kill herself. Since then, I have discovered that young South Asian women living in Western countries have the highest rate of suicides, attempted suicides, and other acts of self-harm compared with South Asian men and white women.¹

Adolescence is a time of dramatic change. The journey from child to adult can be complex and challenging. Young people often feel tremendous pressure to succeed at school, at home and in the society of their peers. Young South Asian immigrant women growing up in Canada face unique problems of social and educational adjustment because of their immersion in cultural paradigms that differ—and often conflict with—the social values and individual rights-based ideals that dominate Canada's educational and cultural landscape.

International expert on the impact of culture on mental health, Dr. Kwame McKenzie stated that "women from the South Asian's diaspora are at high risk of suicide—but are less likely to have the common warning signs—and so suicide prevention is more difficult."²

In Canada, suicide is the second-highest cause of death for youth aged 10 to 24. In a survey of 15,000 Grades 7 to 12 students in British Columbia:

- 34 per cent knew of someone who had attempted suicide or died by suicide;
- 16 per cent had seriously considered suicide;
- 14 per cent had made a suicide plan;
- 7 per cent had made an attempt; and,
- 2 per cent had required medical attention due to an attempt.³

These B.C. figures are not in isolation. Of 82 countries reporting suicide statistics, Canada ranks number 26, placing it in the top third of countries with the highest suicide rate for all age groups.⁴ Suicide rates in Canada are higher than are those in the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom and many other Western countries.⁵ Ontario Public Health report, November 2009, stated that the economic cost to Ontario related to suicide and self harm was \$842-million associated with 1,021 deaths and 7,052 hospitalizations.⁶

In Ontario, the Coalition for Children and Youth Mental Health (CCYMH), a network of 26 province-wide groups, was recently created. Its goal is to bring a sense of urgency and action to the "sleeping giant" of mental health issues among the province's children and youth. The coalition invited each of the political parties to create a plan and to mount strategies to cope with the problems as they are credibly identified and quantified.⁷

The CCYMH uncovered some troubling figures for the status of the mental health of Ontario children. Ten per cent of Ontario youth have admitted to having tried to kill themselves, and one in five children suffers from mental illness. However, 80 per cent of those afflicted do not receive treatment. Another troubling fact arises from a study conducted by the Ontario school boards in 2009. “[Ninety-six] per cent of [mental health professionals] reported that they were ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ concerned about mental health issues, especially anxiety, mood problems, low self-esteem and thoughts of suicide.”⁸

While a large number of those who attempt suicide do have mental illness, mental illness alone does not cause suicide. Other factors contribute to suicide: substance abuse, biological and neurobiological factors, socio-economic status and life events. Family background, environmental and cultural influences also have an impact on an individual’s decision to end his or her life.

Young South Asian women living in Canada have been identified as a demographic group marked by increased conflict with their parents due to cultural disagreements.⁹ Although increased conflict during adolescence is a relevant concern across Canada, issues affecting young South Asian women in particular need to be explored, as there is limited research regarding problems among them.¹⁰ Girls in this demographic group face many more difficulties in their adaptation process than do boys because of the patriarchal nature of South Asian families. They often experience the full pressure in the conflict of values between home and school in the domain of personal autonomy, relationships with boys and the pursuit of their vocational aspirations. Some girls cannot cope with the psychological tension and have suffered from psychosomatic illnesses such as bulimia and anorexia, and they have attempted suicide.¹¹

The purpose of this paper

The objective of this paper is threefold: illuminate the strong correlation between cultural imperatives and elevated suicide statistics among young South Asian women in Canada; shed light on persisting practices within South Asian culture that are quite retrograde and even barbaric in nature; and establish a benchmark for direction to further research, program, and policy development that will fully enfranchise young South Asian women as Canadians.

Who are South Asians?

Individuals of South Asian origin make up the second-largest non-European ethnic group in Canada. Thus, what plagues the South Asian community has significance for the larger Canadian population. In 2001, over one million people of South Asian origin lived in Canada, representing about 3 per cent of the population. A substantial majority of them were born outside of Canada. By 2017, at the current rate of immigration, this population could more than double from roughly 1.3-million in 2006 to between 3.2-million and 4.1-million. South Asians would represent 28 per cent of the population that belongs to visible minority groups, up from 25 per cent.

The term “South Asian” is used to describe people who trace their cultural origins to the Indian subcontinent. Their countries of origin consist primarily of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Fiji and Sri Lanka. South Asian people whose ancestors immigrated to Africa, the West Indies and other parts of the world with significant populations of Indian ancestry are included. Their major religions include Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity. Within the South Asian community there is a wide range of practices and customs; there are many ethnic groups, and each group has its own unique history, castes, languages and traditions. Variations also exist within a group due to social class, caste structure, education, acculturation and length of residence in Canada.¹²

However, despite variation in geographic origins, religion and languages, South Asians share values and attitudes toward family, community and social networks. Among all of them, great emphasis is placed on the preservation of ethnic customs, traditions and heritage language. The community takes great pride in its culture and has a strong sense of belonging to the homeland. Patriarchal family structure is common to all societies in the South Asian region. It predates the modern geographical borders of South Asia, and it has been in existence since about 7000 BC. In patriarchal family structure, the eldest male in the family retains the authority to dominate and control all the family’s women, as well as the younger men.¹³

Suicide among South Asian females

In South Asian culture, the family is viewed as a collective in which the group's needs are seen as more important than the needs and desires of the individual members.

A notable characteristic of such collectivist societies is their concern with maintaining a harmonious relationship within their clan or community. In order to maintain harmony, individuals are expected to abide by group decisions and conform to the will of the clan—which is the will of a male patriarch.¹⁴

Women in patriarchal societies are the property of the patriarch until they marry, at which time they will become the responsibility of their husbands. The collective negotiates their marriage. Women are to remain chaste before marriage and to protect their virtue after marriage.

Many South Asian girls growing up in Canada struggle to understand their place in Canadian society. On the one hand, they have to face racial discrimination, prejudice and other challenges to fit in with their Canadian peers, and on the other hand, they must deal with gender oppression within their own families and communities.¹⁵

Canada admits between 220,000 and 240,000 immigrants annually. Over 250,000 immigrants arrived in 2001 alone, and it is estimated that by 2017, Canada's immigrant population will increase by 24 per cent to 65 per cent from 2001 levels. Nearly 40 per cent of all Toronto residents are immigrants. Of these, over half are female, and yet there is very little Canadian research relating to their cultural integration experience and access to the labour market.¹⁶ We also have very little research to inform us about the mental health of people in this community, in particular, research related to depression and suicide among young women.

The area of intersection between culture and mental health is pertinent. Cross-cultural research has found that ethnic differences and cultural values influence suicide rates. Cultural conflicts are exacerbated in young people with the dual pressure to conform to both their heritage and the mainstream culture.¹⁷

Normally, a history of a suicide attempt, past or existing psychiatric symptoms, depression, drug and/or alcohol dependency and social factors such as social isolation and unemployment are cited as reasons for self-harm in the general population. However, we now have substantial evidence indicating that among the young South Asian women who harm themselves, major precipitating factors are related to conflict with parents and cultural conflict. Some of these precipitating factors are forced marriages, restrictions, marital problems, gender-control issues and low self-esteem.¹⁸

There is also compelling evidence to conclude that the magnitude of the problem is related to the cultural tradition of dowry, threats related to dowry demands, the abandonment of new brides and conflict between daughters-in-law and a husband's family.¹⁹ It may therefore not come as a surprise to learn that South Asians now hold the dubious distinction of having the highest rates of suicide, attempted suicide and self-harm among young women than any other ethnic group living in Western countries.²⁰

High rates of suicide in the South Asian population have been extensively studied in European countries where South Asian immigration patterns and historical context differ widely from those in North America, so some of the trends may not be appli-

cable to the South Asian population in Canada. There is very little research in Canada related to suicide in the South Asian immigrants. However, there is much in the experiences abroad that can provide insight into the mental health problems framed by cultural issues which have an impact on South Asian immigrant women.²¹

National data from England and Wales indicate that South Asian women born in the Indian subcontinent and East Africa have a 40 per cent higher suicide rate than women born in England and Wales.²² One study examined a sample of 4,790 females who had committed suicide between 1996 and 2000. All the women had been in touch with mental health services in the 12 months before their deaths. Of the total number, 2 per cent were young South Asian women and each one had informed the service providers that they were unable to deal with "family problems."²³ In similar data collected from the coroners' inquests, in which the cause of death was suicide between 1993 and 2003, out of the 1,438 deaths nearly 3 per cent were identified as South Asian women unable to deal with "family-related" problems.²⁴

Numerous studies exhibit the following trends in relation to suicide among young South Asian women:

- Suicide and suicide attempts are highest among young South Asian women between the ages of 15 and 19 years old;
- Suicide and suicide attempts among South Asian women aged 16 to 19 years were 17 times higher than those of South Asian men;²⁵
- A 1990 report suggested that the highest rates of suicide were among young South Asian women living in Britain, especially among those who were newly married;
- When compared to women of the same age from the general population, South Asian women aged 15 to 24 had a suicide rate that was 80 per cent higher.²⁶

Social scholars ignore young woman between the ages of 13 and 25, especially those living in traditional patriarchal families such as the South Asian communities. The experiences of young female immigrants are often examined as part of the "family unit."²⁷ However, South Asian immigrants are the fastest-growing immigrant group in Canada. Until recently, Canadian governmental multicultural policies prevented recognition of the distinct cultural conflict facing adolescent South Asian immigrant girls. The mounting phenomenon of honour killings in the last decade has forced the government to acknowledge that girls and women in South Asian communities are at a higher risk than those from other ethnic communities. Forced suicides or voluntary suicides in the shadow of cultural honour/shame codes have yet to be addressed at any official level.

Most South Asian communities maintain their traditional cultural identity, placing great importance on academic and economic success, the stigma attached to failure, the overriding authority of elders and an unquestioning compliance from the younger members. Such cultural attitudes burden young South Asian women with hard-to-meet expectations, leading to increased pressure and stress.²⁸ It is true that other immigrant groups, such as Chinese and Koreans, also make high demands on their children, especially with regard to education. However, in other cultural respects, these communities seem to adapt to Western life faster than South Asians do. In any case, the data is clear that as South Asian female adolescents grow older, the rate of self-harm among them increases; in particular, the rate of self-harm for South Asian females aged 18 to 24 is significantly higher than average. The research suggests that South Asian girls come under unique cultural stresses related to role expectations, pressure for arranged marriage, individualization and other gender-related arenas of cultural conflict that may precipitate attempts at self-harm.²⁹

The social implications

Although there have been a number of recent studies on the needs and settlement patterns of South Asian immigrant women, the experiences of the second and third generations of young South Asian women have not been directly examined at any length. In fact, researchers seem to either ignore young women who were born or raised in Canada or, as previously mentioned, they tend to deal indirectly with their life experiences by examining the issues facing the family as a whole.³⁰

While it is important to examine settlement patterns of new immigrants, it is also crucial to understand how second and third generation South Asian adolescent and young women fare and to explore the challenges that prevent them from fully identifying themselves as Canadian. Second-generation individuals who grow up in Canada are typically expected to make their own decisions regarding careers and occupations and to become active participants in the civic and political life of this country. The challenges they face during their early years will clearly have an impact on the future of the ethnic communities at large as well as on the entire country. The key to preventing negative culturally based outcomes in this group is to develop effective, culturally sensitive prevention strategies and to employ them at the right time. I believe now is the right time.

In essence, this study is important because it brings light to a problem of cultural and social control, the consequences of which are enormous for a generation of young Canadian women in particular but for all Canadians in general. This study is important because it underscores a subculture of oppression of young females that is incongruent with our self-

understanding in this country. We are the country that protects the weak and persecuted, and a land whose people uphold the fundamental rights of all its citizens and inhabitants, and whose son (John Humphrey) helped to develop the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

My central contention is that the culture of barbaric practices that leads young South Asian women in this country to commit suicide in significantly disproportionate numbers to their peers in the rest of the population is inconsistent with the values that most Canadians hold dear.

For example, honour killings have received increasing attention from the media, the police and politicians. This author, having worked on the front lines with the South Asian community for the past 30 years, agrees with Brian Brady, detectives investigating "honour crimes and forced marriages," who stated that official statistics are 'merely the tip of the iceberg' of this phenomenon.³¹

Children of immigrants, especially South Asian adolescent girls, are growing up on the edge of two overlapping but often conflicting worlds. For many of them, the boundaries are blurred, resulting in harsh censure, punishment and/or retribution from parents and the community.

Even educators who have been critical of standardized tests often recognize the inherent value of the data provided by these tests.

Girls, especially, are caught in between the demands and expectations of the two worlds. Their journey into adulthood and finding their place in Canadian society can be difficult, and, for some, life threatening.

To understand the reality of the second-generation South Asian, it is important to examine the context of their immigrant parents. When these individuals from an Eastern culture immigrate to Western countries, a large number of them retain strong attachments to their heritage norms, traditions, beliefs and practices, particularly those that relate to family.³² However, their children who grow up in the host country do not acquire their cultural knowledge and heritage with the same degree of direct experience; their primary access to this background is through the lens of their family and relatives for whom the heritage culture is often frozen in time at the moment of their migration from their homeland.

South Asian parents who attempt to maintain their culture want their children to adopt traditions and practices that often clash with those they encounter in the host country. For example, South Asian girls growing up in individualist cultures learn from their peers, teachers and media that they are expected to make important life choices for themselves. The new values they absorb clash with South Asian cultural values in which parents are expected to make all the important decisions for their children. Placing self-interest above the collective is not only disrespectful, but it is also viewed as shaming the elders. Elders expect complete obedience. This contradicts Western teachings that encourage the questioning of authority and, in fact, consider such challenging of authority to be quite healthy.³³

Girls learn in school that they are unique individuals and that they must prepare for competition in the labour market. They are

taught that they must excel and be “the best” in order to succeed. The emphasis in the West is to adapt one’s self to fit the demands of the social environment in the larger host society. Such values are in direct conflict with those of the South Asian patriarchal family structure. Within this collective, there is a great deal of interdependence expected of family members and a high regard for hierarchical power structures, conformity and control of social relationships. One’s position in the family is dependent upon age, gender and marital status. The expectation is to submit to elders in almost blind obedience, for this is what is respectful. Parental control over children is not only important in retaining their South Asian culture, but it is also how they perceive “success” as judged by their peers and the larger South Asian community. South Asians are extremely sensitive to the perceptions of their wider community. Those outside the home evaluate and determine social ranking and status.³⁴

Young South Asian women are expected to maintain the cultural tradition of being self-sacrificing, submissive, passive and obedient daughters who do not question parental decisions. Such attitudes and behaviours contradict the assertiveness encouraged at school and the potential success attached to these attitudes. Culturally based conflict thus forces the young women to believe that they are required to choose one of the two options. They feel caught, often trapped, between two sets of norms, between loyalty to the demands of the traditional culture and the emancipating values of modern Western society. When young women challenge the strict patriarchal rules, they are often punished. Challenging their parents is viewed as shaming the family. This perceived public embarrassment translates into feelings of humiliation for the elders.

It becomes a belief that the family's good name has been stained and dishonoured. The family's social status is at risk and the girl's virtue may become fodder for community gossip, an intolerable amplification of the dishonour to the family. The only course of action for redress of this perceived shame is punishment of the girl, a fate understood to have been set in motion by the victim herself, and such punishment may be as severe as the breaking of limbs or even murder.³⁵

The media brought the question of honour killing and honour-based violence to the fore in Canada last year when the father and older brother of Aqsa Parvez, 16, were convicted of her 2007 killing. Aqsa Parvez was brutally strangled by her father and brother for her refusal to wear a hijab and for balking at an arranged marriage. The 12 adults living in the house condoned her abuse. In fact, the mother has been quoted as saying that she thought the father would only break their daughter's arms and legs but would not kill her. After killing her, the father told his wife, "My community will say you have not been able to control your daughter."³⁶ The Executive Director of a youth shelter stated that while she was shocked by the level of violence in this situation, she was not surprised by its root cause. Parents who want their children to remain faithful to old world ways are often at odds with kids growing up in Western society.³⁷

The deep-rooted inequalities between male and female roles that characterize South Asian societies are legitimized by social and cultural norms that place men in controlling positions over the lives of women.³⁸ The socialization of children into hardened 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.³⁹ The reality of gender

domination is much more apparent in the concepts of honour and shame.

In the West, the successful journey through childhood and adolescence toward adulthood involves increasing mastery over one's environment and greater autonomy from parents. Adolescents are to use this time of development to experiment with changing vocational ambitions, to socialize with peer groups and to explore romantic relationships. In Canada, all of these activities are viewed as part of developing an identity. From a young age, children are taught to become independent, motivated, self-reliant, accountable for their own behaviour and to develop relationships with significant others.

Within South Asian culture, a person's identity is defined at the time of his or her birth through family identity and relationship obligations. In these communities, moving from child-hood to adulthood does not involve independence, autonomy or separation. Rather, maturation is about the perfection of one's roles and responsibilities and accepting one's status within the larger collective. Within South Asian culture, women are socialized from birth to understand their identity only through their roles as daughters, wives, mothers, sisters and housekeepers.⁴⁰

In the patriarchal family structure of South Asian culture, parents are supposed to prevent the child from making mistakes that can bring the family painful dishonour. In the recent past, Canada took a stand against forced marriages. Ontario Ministers Chris Bentley and Eric Hoskins recently highlighted the Ontario government's concern regarding the significant increase in crimes against women in cases of domestic violence, abuse by the in-laws and forced marriages where young women are confined in their homes until they are married off.⁴¹

Studies of the psychosocial origins of mental health difficulties have shown that contextual factors, vulnerability factors and life events often combine to trigger these difficulties. For example, researchers found that low self-esteem and lack of confidence are powerful vulnerability factors for depression that lead to suicide in women. There is now increasing evidence that depression is linked to subordination, feelings of entrapment and shame.⁴²

Cultural rules and values shape the dynamics of shame that is used against females in some cultures, forcing them into subordination and entrapment, which in turn lead to depression. Social groups define the characteristics that bring shame and stigma. What is shameful or unacceptable in one culture may not be in another. Moreover, the dynamic of shame and stigma is often linked with the determination of those in control to maintain their power. It is important not only to support the powerless but also to examine the power of those who control and define cultural values. What this research suggests is that previously believed somatic factors leading to mental health may, in fact, be influenced by social and cultural contexts. This being the case, therefore, cultural conditions in immigrant communities, the South Asian community in particular, beg the attention of policy-makers and political decision-makers.

Shame and stigma

Violence against women of all ages is a global phenomenon and derives essentially from cultural patterns. In particular, honour-based violence is due to the harmful effects of specific cultural traditions and customs. Honour-based violence within South Asian communities emphasizes the importance of culturally specific concepts of Izzat (honour) and Sharam (shame). In this community, honour and shame are based primarily on the conception that the bodies and actions of women and girls represent family and community honour. South Asian adolescents are especially vulnerable to such control, as there can be a high premium attached to the idea of sexual purity and chastity for young unmarried girls. This can manifest itself in forced marriages of young girls to prevent premarital sexual activity or to end sexual behaviour considered transgressive.⁴³

Research within South Asian populations in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia reveals that second- and third-generation children of South Asian immigrants are at risk of poor social integration. This is particularly true when the establishment of identity is delayed, and it results from family adherence to traditional cultural practices and customs that conflict with those of the host culture.⁴⁴

Strategies for change

While awareness of honour-motivated violence does not solve the problem, it is at least a step in the right direction. But there needs to be action. There may be two main reasons as to why elected officials in Canada have been reluctant to address honour-motivated violence and provide solutions. One is ideological and the second, and surely more difficult than the first, is pragmatic. Multiculturalism and its inherent relativism have put its adherents in a contradiction. To them, all cultures and cultural values are equal, and one culture is not superior or more desirable than another. They are thus unable to condemn abhorrent or barbaric cultural practices. Pragmatists acknowledge that there is a problem with honour-based violence, but they are reluctant to use the state's power in this context, as it may have hues of intervening in people's home lives or in cultural matters from which traditionally they would prefer the state to stay away.

Ideology or practicality, however, should not get in the way of adopting strategies that prevent barbaric acts and promote the just and right thing.

The state may not have any business in the dining rooms and living rooms of the nation, as some believe. This is to some extent understandable. Individual autonomy from the state is a strong component of Western culture, and people's privacy needs respect. But we also need to be reminded that similar arguments about private affairs were once used as a barrier against dealing with husbands who abused their wives. We cannot continue to allow culture to be a protective shield for the perpetuation of barbaric acts against vulnerable women. A man's home may be a castle, but even in the Middle Ages, lords were subject to the law and could not lawfully dispose of the lives of their serfs at whim. We have not lost that sense of individual dignity in the tradition.

A proper strategy to deal with these serious problems will take some time, but there already is a desperate need for the provision of culturally sensitive and relevant services for South Asian women in distress as well as appropriate preventative strategies.

Policy recommendations

- An in-depth, countrywide study should be conducted on young South Asian women and suicide in Canada with a view to establishing its statistical significance in comparison with other cultural groups in Canada and for comparison with other large South Asian populations.
- Canadian policies of multiculturalism are rooted within and limited by their specific historical origins. They need to be reformed. Canada's reality has changed, and therefore the policies need revising to the extent in which they prevent individual rights and equal opportunity. A collective rights-based approach has proven to be inadequate. Living in ethnic ghettos prevents people from understanding their rights. Therefore, raising awareness about the fundamental rights of each individual through the ethnic media would go a long way to counterbalance collectivist notions as supreme.
- Intervention must begin with targeted education. The focus of such education should be the South Asian community. Adults in the community must be informed about the legal traditions of rights in Canada, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, its history and heritage. They must be made aware that every individual, child, woman and man, has the right to self-determination and a safe place to grow and thrive. The community should be informed that the laws of Canada include practices outlined here as abusive and that they have the right to call for help. This information should be published in several languages and through the ethnic media. Service providers such as doctors, teachers and clergy should be encouraged to recognize and report this kind of abuse.
- Provincial policies that span across boards of education need to be developed along with a full range of prevention, intervention and post-intervention approaches, not only for students but also for staff and parents in the most sensitive areas of the country.
- Social and welfare codes at provincial levels need to consider practices such as the forced marriage of children and similar behaviours as abusive. Ultimately, however, the state must find ways to encourage leaders in these communities to promote the reversing of patterns of abuse. It must send a strong signal that specific abusive practices and practices leading to abuse can no longer be tolerated in Canada.
- Police forces across the country, especially those where there is a high concentration of South Asians, need to be trained to identify honour-based situations of abuse and to be more sensitive to them. In certain circumstances, this ability may enable police officers to distinguish and separate a case of normative domestic violence from a situation of honour-based conflict where there is more likely to be lives of women at stake.
- Police officers and prosecutors need to learn to ask the right set of questions in cases of honour-based violence and to endeavour to charge and prosecute family members as co-conspirators in the killing or harming of victims in all situations in which family members are involved in discussing how a woman will be punished.

Conclusion

The South Asian community must own up to the reality of harmful cultural practices involving young females and confront the difficulties experienced by both second- and third-generation young women. To this community belongs the greatest of challenges to reform itself and the harmful cultural practices imported to Canada.

However, I would like to challenge non-South Asian Canadians to take a principled stand on these issues and not be afraid to start a wide discussion about the importance of cultural frameworks in mental health and in patterns of abuse against women in Canada.

This discussion should occur at the community level, in private homes and among the larger public. Taking a stand against deplorable traditional practices is a way of denying legitimacy to the perpetrators. Community leaders, religious leaders and those in other leadership roles need to be challenged to instruct and educate men and women in their communities to eradicate practices that are abusive toward women and especially those against young girls.

It is my hope that the discussion that I presented here can be put to good use and that it may be a springboard to further research. I also hope that it will generate programs and policy development directed at specific communities but more importantly, it will inspire personal change among South Asian families and the community. Ignoring the issue, blaming others and denying the role that each of us plays in its existence will not make the problem go away. As South Asians, we need to accept the reality of what is happening to our young women and to confront the difficulties experienced by both first- and second-generation South Asians rather than worry about perpetuating stereotypes and wanting to be viewed as a model immigrant community—only then can we move forward as a country.

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Further Reading



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Culturally-Driven Violence Against Women

By Aruna Papp

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