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"Redifining Victimhood: Vicissitudes of Empowerment" Domestic Violence in South Asian Immigrant Communities

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Redefining Victimhood: Vicissitudes of Empowerment

Domestic Violence in South Asian Immigrant Communities

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Introduction

Project Goal: I seek to further understand the experience of domestic violence (DV) survivorship in South Asian immigrant communities and the associated processes of post-traumatic recovery and rehabilitation.

Research Themes

- Empathy and gendered intersubjectivity
- Constructions of choice and agency
- Cultural memory in post-traumatic transnational identities



Informants



- 10 South Asian DV survivors
- Immigrants seeking asylum
- UK citizens
- Visa holders
- Pakistani or Indian origin
- Muslim or Hindu religious identity
- Ages: Mid 20s to Early 50s

Fieldsite

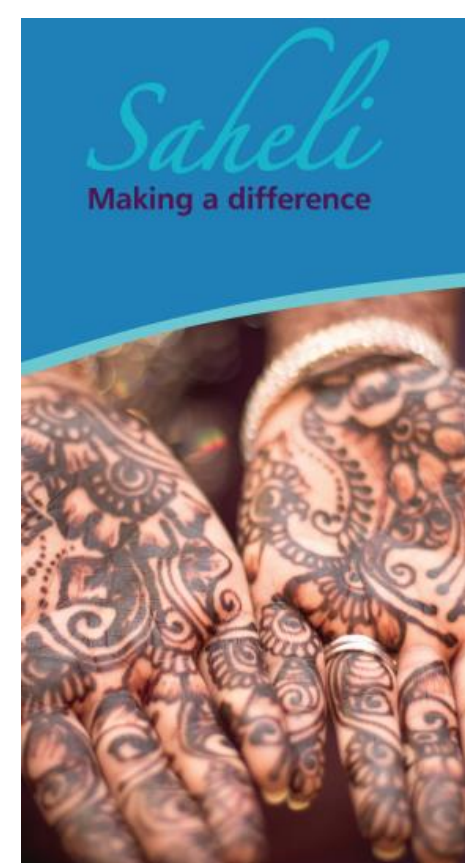
Manchester, UK: An Industrial City

- Industrialization heavily reliant on immigrant labor
- Overcrowding, social stratification
- Led to the formation of segregated communities and ethnic enclaves



Saheli Asian Women's Project

- Hosla Outreach – provides opportunities and resources to women escaping from abuse
- Refuge Accommodation – hosts 6 families in transitional refuge living
- Women's Support Groups – hosts social and activity-based groups to build confidence and career skills



Theoretical Frameworks



"It's like being at the bottom of a well that's so deep you can't even see the light at the opening, and when you scream nobody can hear your voice...you're all alone."

1 Situational Transnational Identities

Transnational identity: "thoughts, feelings, dreams, and considerations of one place when one is physically in another place"

- DV survivors are functional in two culturally different communities (South Asia and England)
- DV survivors recognize and value the advantages of English community membership, and are proud to be able to use its resources for themselves and their children; they simultaneously remain proud of their South Asian identity and maintain a superiority over English culture behind closed doors

"I would never go back to Pakistan, because my country and my people would never give me the second chance that England has. I live independently: I have my own home, I'll soon have my own job, I've made a life for myself outside of my marriage. I never could have done that in Pakistan, and I'm never going back."

"The English...they are cold blooded. Their hearts are cold. In Pakistan, the sun is shining, the people are warm, and they are happy. I have only been unhappy here, and it seems like everyone else is too."

2 Resourcefulness

- DV survivors use their newfound transnational English and South Asian identity to demand higher standards and greater successes for themselves
- DV survivors are aware of their positions as categorical "victims" in society, and recognize that this identifying terminology comes with resources and opportunities otherwise unavailable to them such as:

- Citizenship
- Monetary Benefits (Rent-free housing, stipends)
- Debt forgiveness
- Child Care

DV survivors work hard to take advantage of these resources, but reject the "victim" label attached to them: *"Claiming 'victimhood' takes away my agency. I'm not defined by my past, but by my future. So I will work hard now, and be a survivor. I am not a victim."*

3 Community Building

- South Asian DV survivors face rejection and social isolation from the larger South Asian community^{1,2}
- In response, DV survivors have formed an insular community among themselves to support one another
 - The precarity in this process of community building is evidenced in:
 - Power "plays"
 - Gossiping/Backstabbing
 - Racial Hierarchies
 - Social Control/Manipulations

These behaviors are often displayed by women who seek power in relationships, perhaps in response to their abusive past



Ethnographic Methods

- Fieldwork in Hindi/Urdu or English
- In-depth semi-structured interviews
- Spontaneous unstructured interviews
- Participant observation
 - Worked closely with Saheli refuge care staff, social workers
 - Moderated women's support groups
 - Volunteered within refuge community
 - Shadowed outreach consultation visits



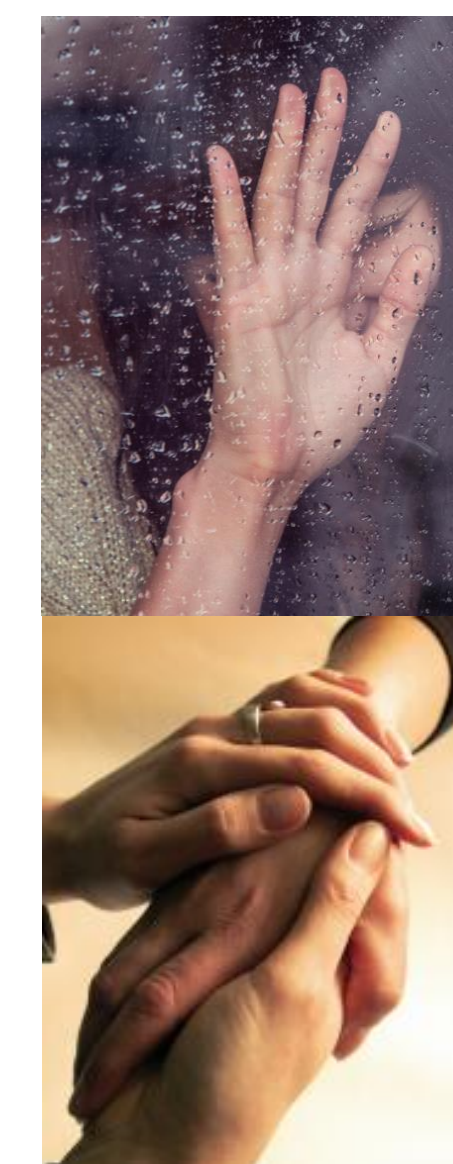
I attended religious/holiday parties, festivals, and potlucks.

I represented Saheli at conferences and media opportunities.



Conclusion

Using resources at their disposal, domestic violence survivors enhance and augment their viability by learning to use their labels as "victims" to leverage their current marginality into a position of survival, while building and empowering a small, yet intricate survivor community. In recasting their social roles, they challenge assumed gender roles while empowering themselves and attempt to establish their small survivor community as one of strength and power.



Applications

Sustaining Independency in DV Survivorship

Material Culture in Refuges

- Helps maintain transnational identity
- Allows DV survivors to be comfortable while in transitional living, so they can focus on building a sustainable future for themselves



"Victim" labeling as problematic terminology

- "Victimhood" implies: weakness, inability, instability, and deficiency
- "Victim" label focuses on the past, not the present or future, effectively stripping a woman of her agency

Future Directions

What are the intergenerational consequences of domestic violence and their effects on maternal ecology in South Asian immigrant communities?



References and Acknowledgements

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2. Fingeld-Connett, Deborah, and E. Diane Johnson. 2013. "Abused South Asian Women in Westernized Countries and Their Experiences Seeking Help." *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 34 (12): 863-73.

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