

Combatting Family Violence

The South Asian Experience in Canada

by Usha Thakur

On ne peut pas légiférer pour éliminer la violence contre les femmes, ni le patriarcat. Les deux phénomènes ont une longue histoire et leurs racines sont bien implantées dans plusieurs aspects de notre existence. Naturellement, il faudra plus que des mesures législatives pour les supprimer. C'est en reconnaissant cette réalité que la « Asian Women's Community Centre » de Montréal a organisé une conférence de deux jours en août 1991 sur la lutte contre la violence familiale dans les familles canadiennes originaires de l'Asie du Sud.

The South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC) in Montreal was established in 1981 to help newly arrived South Asian immigrants adjust to their new lives in Quebec and Canada. A major component of SAWCC's service is coming to the assistance of women who are in abusive situations at home or at their place of work. As part of its mandate, SAWCC held a national conference in Montreal on Combatting Family Violence among South Asian families in Canada from August 10 to August 11, 1991.

The conference brought together nearly 200 participants as individuals and members of organizations active in combatting family violence across the continent. There were nine workshops and each of them had resource persons, an animator and a recorder. A conscious effort was made to structure the workshops in such a way that they did not turn into seminars given by the panelist. Consequently, each topic was carefully debated by all the participants, with a view to making concrete proposals for action to the Plenary Meeting. There were two keynote addresses, one by Madeleine Parent, a veteran trade-union-

ist, and the other by Poonam Khosla, an activist and founding member of the Shirley Samaroo House in Toronto. There were two other events that marked the Conference: a Solidarity Evening on August 9th, and a banquet the following evening which featured a play on family violence called *Devi-Dass*. It was written, directed and performed by SAWCC members and friends.

SAWCC acknowledges that while some South Asian families are not resisting patriarchal norms, others are trying to create a family based on mutual respect between men and women, and boys and girls. At the Conference, we wanted to focus on the former because they are the dominant trend. The cases which SAWCC has handled in the past decade amply attest to the fact that men's impulse to dominate and their concomitant view of how they should relate to women, and vice versa, are major contributing factors to mental and physical abuse of women in South Asian families.

All the workshops stressed that immigrant women who come to Canada as sisters, wives, parents, or grand-parents become increasingly dependent on their sponsors—their brothers, sons, grandsons, and husbands. This is because they lack not only independent sources of income, but also the basic work skills (such as the ability to communicate in either French or English) which would enable them to earn a living. The few that do make it into the working world have to come to terms with racism, as well as confronting problems which are faced by women in general, such as restriction to ghettoized sectors of the workforce, wage discrimination, lack of professional retraining, and a scarcity of, or expensive child care facilities. Given

their vulnerable position in and outside the home, these women become easy targets for abuse, and many suffer in silence without ever reaching for help. This is not only the plight of unemployed women.

Violence is about systematic control, ownership, power and authority exerted by men over our communities and in particular over women.

Many noted that even when women were economically independent, they were still bound to an abusive situation.

The discussions in the workshops on "Abuse and Exploitation of the Elderly," "Impact of Family Violence on Children," and "Women and Law" left no doubt of the inadequacy of structures and services in our society which could be accessed by victims of male violence. In theory, women can press charges against a violent man, but in practice, this is not the norm. It presupposes a great deal of confidence on the part of women who have already internalized and rationalized their oppression, and who are fearful of adverse consequences for their children or themselves. In the workshop on "Women and Law," it

was learned that in 1990, 4,569 cases of family violence were reported to the police on the island of Montreal. Of these, 17 resulted in a woman's death. It was suggested that the true picture is at least ten times higher.

When women do press charges, they face legal and other obstacles. The woman who presses charges against a violent man is not allowed to have her own lawyer in court. It is the State's Crown Prosecutor who supposedly acts on her behalf. Hence, she appears in court only as a witness to her own case. To make matters worse, due to time constraints and case overload (30 to 40 cases must be dealt with each morning), the Crown Prosecutor is unable to properly represent the abused woman. By contrast, the abuser is represented in court by his own lawyer, and when the verdict

hundreds of years, women have been told that the onus of saving the family's honour rests with them and with their behaviour, even though they rarely have a say in what the content of this honour should be, it is not easy, and is sometimes considered scandalous for women to relinquish their assigned duties and simply say: I have had enough!

Time and time again, it was stressed in almost every workshop that no social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist or counsellor can claim to help women if their approach to this problem fails to empower the victims of male violence. Counselling aimed at saving the marriage, irrespective of the cost to women, is known to cause a great deal of psychological and emotional stress to women, often driving them to the point of suicide and insanity. The primary

they do not remain duty bound to men, and teach the same to their daughters; so that they can play an active role in making their sons into humble, respectful, caring and giving men; so that we can all believe that just as women are not naturally more nurturing and caring, men are not naturally aggressive and domineering. This process is important if women who refuse to live under a patriarchal roof are not to be exiled from their "own community."

At the beginning of the Conference, most participants had accepted the notion of family violence uncritically, but this was no longer the case towards the end. At the Plenary Meeting when all the participants came together to discuss the solutions proposed in their workshops, many felt that we must leave behind the notion of family violence because it is not women



Sharon Fernandez, Untitled, 1991
Ink on Paper

is given, the penalties are incommensurate with his crime. An example was given of a man who gave a woman a black eye and two broken ribs, and was fined only \$200. Later, he said to his victim that he still had the money to break three more of her ribs.

Do victims of male violence have other options? They could, and do reach for help within their own community, but often find themselves being pressured not to take any radical action (such as making their grievance public) that might damage the honourable name of their family. It is quite common for members of the South Asian community to encourage women to go for marriage counselling to patch things up with their husbands. Given that for

goal of counselling, it was stressed, must be the sanity, security, and interest of women; the counselling must help them to stand firmly on their feet and enable them to make the decision to stay with their husbands or not from a position of strength; it must also help women in overcoming the shame and guilt they may feel for breaking-up their family. These are precisely the objectives of community centres and shelters like Apna Ghar in Chicago, Manavi in New Jersey, Shirley Samaroo House in Toronto, and sawcc in Montreal.

After the courts penalize abusive husbands/partners, women need a network of support to empower themselves; so that they can be strong individually; so that

who beat and abuse men and that as feminists we must face and name the male domination that oppresses women. Moreover, as one of the speakers reminded everyone, violence against women in our communities will not stop because we say it should, or because we have detailed its horrors, or even because we expose its nastiness. Violence is about systematic control, ownership, power and authority exerted by men over our communities and in particular over women. This can only be stopped by concrete measures which historically have been preceded by struggles. And, if head-on confrontations are to be avoided as women are beginning to say "no; we have had enough!", men have to be willing and ready to relinquish power.

They have to make space for women. There can be no peaceful homes without genuine equality and mutual respect between men and women.

Given that this was the first attempt to address the issue of violence against women in South Asian families at a national level, the solutions that were proposed in every workshop were in the nature of "what we must or should do," rather than "what we will do."

At an individual level, women must strive to play an active and equal role with men in defining the content of family norms, values and honour. This is essential not only for their own empowerment but also for that of their children, and of those men who are trying to distance themselves from patriarchal roles. Such men and women can act as non-sexist role models for their children and influence their choices. In this respect, an interesting and practical suggestion was made in the workshop on "Popular Media and Family Violence." It was proposed that women's groups should monitor those stores which carry video films from South Asia. If these videos justify violence against women and portray them in demeaning ways, the owners of such stores must be approached and discouraged from continuing to carry that genre of video. This has apparently been tried by a women's group in New Jersey with success, where a grocery store owner carrying Bombay video films agreed not to rent or sell videos which the group considered offensive to women. It should be noted that the owner agreed to this only after the group threatened to boycott the store and, if necessary, to launch a campaign among South Asians, who are the main client of this store, to do the same.

Through similar initiatives, we could encourage stores to sell or distribute alternative magazines and videos. The workshop on "Creative Expression and South Asian Women" focused on ways in which women could heighten awareness of issues like male violence against women and children. It was suggested that since individuals are most expressive in their own language, alternative magazines like *Diva* and *Shakti* should extend an open invitation to all South Asian women (and not just to writers, poets and artists) for submissions. Another suggestion was to look into ways of making a five to ten

minute video on issues touching the lives of South Asian women in Canada.

Violence against women and children must not be viewed as a private matter. South Asians have a responsibility to deal with this issue and not act as if it does not exist. Religious gatherings and social occasions were suggested as possible venues for discussions.

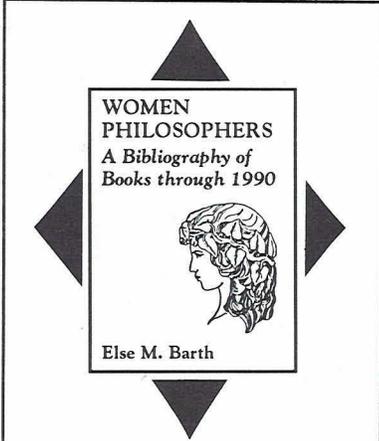
A more concerted effort should be made to inform victims of male violence about where they can seek help. The workshop on "Women and Law" called upon community groups to play an active role in sensitizing the police to the gravity of male violence against women and to the specificities of the various cultural communities. This could be achieved by acting as resource persons for courses aimed at police officers, and by requiring police to work in battered women's shelters to better understand the abused women's point of view and in community centres to better appreciate the problems faced by women of colour.

Another proposal made in the same workshop suggested that a network of lawyers, social workers, and counsellors who are experienced in the field be put in place within the criminal justice system to provide the abused women with the support and knowledge to use the court successfully to incriminate her abuser. Such a "victim assistance program" already exists in Toronto, Kingston and Thunder Bay.

At the Plenary Meeting, following the recommendations made by the recorder of every workshop, it became clear that we would require another workshop to prioritize our proposals for action. A Networking Committee was struck with a mandate to prepare a follow-up conference in two years to explore concrete mechanisms for shared resources among South Asian organizations.

The Conference on Combatting Family Violence was a vindication of the existence of South Asian women as conscious subjects and makers of their circumstances, and not merely as helpless objects and victims. And, as conscious subjects, we were thinking, analyzing, and speaking for ourselves about ourselves, and standing together to take our rightful place in our own communities and in the wider society.

The South Asian Women's Community Centre is a centre for women of South Asian origin and their families. SAWCC provides frontline services such as escorting people to court and hospitals, providing language courses, workshops on entry into the job market, and retraining and upgrading of skills, as well as providing all the necessary information for orienting new immigrants to the realities of Quebec and Canada. For further information, please write to 3600 Hôtel de ville, Montreal, Quebec, H2X 3B6; telephone (514) 842-2330.



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