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## Chapter

# Under the Cover of Silence: The Burden of Marital Rape among Immigrant, Muslim, South Asian Survivors of Domestic Violence

*Dheeshana S. Jayasundara, Durdana Ahmed,  
Prita Das Gupta, Susan Garcia and Sarah Thao*

## Abstract

This chapter looked at the experiences of marital rape among immigrant South Asian Muslims domestic violence survivors who are living in Texas, USA. Based on qualitative interviews with 20 participants, this chapter discusses the hidden nature of marital sexual abuse. Specific themes include: abuse took place in a larger context of domestic violence; duality in sexual behavior allowed for husband and wife; submission through threat and intimidation; it is not rape but, I feel the same as a rape victim; shame of talking about something so private; and divorce and vulnerability from sexual advances by outside men. Implications to advocates and human service workers, especially those living in Western countries and work with Muslim communities are discussed, as well as how to effectively assist these diverse communities in a culturally sensitive manner, being mindful of their religious background.

**Keywords:** Marital rape, spousal abuse, domestic violence, south Asian, Muslims

## 1. Introduction

Marital rape unfortunately exists in every society. In the US, sexual coercion within marriage was banned in all 50 states by 1993 [1]. Still, marital rape charges are hard to prove, and consent to sex within marriage for each sexual encounter is a concept that remains elusive. Consensual sex between partners within the confines of a marriage is the generally accepted norm in non-abusive relationships. However, like in any other country, in abusive relationships sexual coercion continues to occur in the US and remains a difficult topic to battle. One study found that in the US 40–52% of the women in intimate relationships experiencing domestic violence, also experience sexual violence [2]. These cases can be hidden in some minority communities. The US is made up of diverse communities, and cultures. Immigrants to the US not only abide by US laws and cultural norms of the dominant culture, but also bring with them cultural values, beliefs, and practices from their own countries that are different. Many practice biculturalism, navigating two worldviews that, at times, appear to clash with each other [3]. Multiculturalism and diversity enhance the local culture and force everyone to embrace change, and look to within their

customs and identify areas that need to be remedied. Domestic violence, especially marital rape, is a dark side of any culture and is unfortunately prevalent across all societies [3, 4].

Most South Asian immigrants within the US have their own values and customs regarding marriage. Like anywhere else, consent to sex is a generally accepted norm within a marriage, but how that consent is obtained varies in different cultural communities. In South Asia, marital rape is not a crime under the law, except for Nepal and Bhutan [5]. For example, the penal code of Bangladesh reads that, “sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under 13 years of age, is not rape” [6]. The legal and the cultural implication of that is that by the consent to marriage, sexual consent is granted at the outset, and sexual acts are not negotiated by each encounter. This means that legally by design a husband cannot rape a wife. While these views on sexual consent within a marriage vary by age, class, education, religion, and other intersectional factors, it creates a situation in abusive relationships where sex can be demanded by the spouse at any time, regardless of their partner’s wishes. This is further complicated by patriarchal gendered norms about differences in male and female sexuality that exist within many South Asian communities. In South Asian countries, men are generally granted sole entitlement to initiation of sex and to sexual pleasure, being viewed as having biological sexual needs, and there is a common acceptance of males having multiple sexual partners or sexual encounters before and after marriage. On the flipside, women are typically viewed as the pillars of society for socialization. Hence, viewed as chaste beings, access to sex is generally accepted only through marriage. There is an expectation they will remain a virgin until married and will remain faithful to their partner after marriage. Women’s sexual pleasure is not a concept that is often accepted, written about, or talked about [7, 8]. This dichotomy between male and female sexuality creates distinctions within women, where “good women”, or those who abide by the cultural norms, have access to marriage and social status. “Bad women”, those who do not conform, have difficulty finding marriage partners and are branded within their communities. The more you deviate from those norms, the more negatively you are sanctioned. Sex workers, who are not just viewed as deviants but also as a group who takes advantage of the sexual entitlement and the biological needs of men, are granted the lowest social status, relegated to society’s margins, and are criminalized [8–10]. From this perspective, for women who abide by social norms, access to sex is seen both as a reward but also as a duty to the partner for the security and social status that marriage brings. This creates a power differential in relationships that complicates giving willing consent [7]. Misinterpretations of religious passages and cultural practices tied to religion further complicate sexual negotiations within South Asia. In the Muslim faith, many verses in the Quran and hadiths from Prophet Muhammad preach peace, love, and equality within marriage. For example, the verse, “They (your wives) are your garment and you are a garment for them” (Quran - 2:187) [11], describes equality of partners in marriage. Additionally, the hadith (hadith - teachings of Prophet Muhammad) that the Prophet said to his companions: “Not one of you should fulfill one’s (sexual) need from/fall upon his wife like an animal; but let there first be a messenger between you” And when asked “What is that messenger?”, he replied “kisses and sweet words”. In effect, the Prophet Muhammad was talking about foreplay. Several other hadiths and verses from the Quran also show that foreplay was recommended before sexual relations. This recognizes the fact that women need some time for arousal for sex to be comfortable and pleasurable. “And one of the signs is that he created for you spouses from among yourselves so that you might take comfort in them and He has placed between you, love and mercy.....” (Quran - 30:21) [11].

Yet, many Muslims believe that men can request sex from their wives anytime. In Islam, marriage is a civil contract, under this contract, both men and women are assigned specific duties. The husband is considered to have *Qiwama* (authority) over the wife, he is expected to provide for her within the marriage. The wife is expected to have *ta'a* (duty to obey) the husband. While this concept of *ta'a* is interpreted differently, many imply sexual obedience [11, 12]. Additionally, the verse “Your wives are tilth for you, so go to your tilth when or how you will...” [Quran - 2:223] [11] is cited as the justification for this religious sexual entitlement by the husband. Furthermore, the old cultural practice tied to Islam where men can have multiple wives is still practiced by some South Asian Muslims, though it is rarer among educated Muslims [12]. These concepts complicate sexual negotiations further within marriage for Muslim South Asian women living in the US.

These intersectional factors create a context where marital rape as a concept is nullified. This allows society to believe that consent is given at the time of the marriage and not with each sexual act. These values further complicate marital rape as it creates a situation where husbands can demand sex from their wives anytime, and as dutiful wives, they need to comply every time. No matter how painful it is, the concept of coercion is not accepted as rape, rather as part of wifely duty, and in some situations with the threat of a second, or third wife hanging over her head. While these concepts may create dilemmas for women even in peaceful families, these cultural norms can have especially detrimental ramifications for women undergoing domestic violence. To understand the impact of marital rape, this paper looked at immigrant Muslim South Asian female survivors of domestic violence experiences of marital rape. At the time of the interviews, all women were living in the US.

## 2. Methods

The study was conducted in the United States of America. This study is part of a larger study conducted in Texas, looking at domestic violence in the Muslim communities. While the overall study conducted qualitative interviews with 48 Muslim survivors of domestic violence coming from various backgrounds, only 20 South Asian women talked about their experiences of sexual abuse within the marriage. All 20 women were foreign-born and came from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Ages varied from 23 to 58. The interviews took place between 2011 and 2018. All women were fluent in English and the interviews were conducted in English. The education background of the participants varied with 10 participants having a college degree or some college experience, and 10 participants with no higher education. A content analysis approach was utilized to analyze the data. It is important to note that all participants were seeking services for domestic violence. Themes identified were based on the participants' views only. These should not be generalized to all South Asian cultures or those who are considered Muslim.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Abuse took place in a larger context of domestic violence

Sexual abuse did not take place for these women in a vacuum, rather it took place in a larger context of psychological, physical, financial, spiritual, and at times even immigration related domestic violence. As the participants came from a domestic violence shelter, all the women discussed a range of abuse that took place leading them to seek help from an agency. None of the women sought help because

of the sexual violence, rather it was due to other aspects of abuse. Some were there due to emotional abuse, while the majority experienced physical violence. Some stated that they were talking about their experiences related to sexual coercion and marital rape for the very first time. Women in the study appeared to have a perception that being forced to have sex with their husband was not abuse, similar to other types of abuse they had undergone. Rather it was part of marriage. The women were groomed to believe that culturally and religiously, they were expected to comply with their husband's wishes. Sexual abuse within marriage appears to remain relatively covered up, even though every US state since the 1990s has marital rape laws. The following conversation between the researcher and the interviewee elaborates this context very well.

“Interviewer: Who do you confide about feeling forced to have sex?”

Interviewee: No one.

Interviewer: You have not spoken to anyone about what you just mentioned?

Interviewee: Well, I have spoken to a counselor and the case manager about the other abuse, how he tried to choke me and kill me, how the police were involved, but not about other stuff I just told you, no.

Interviewer: May I ask your reasons for not telling anyone?

Interviewee: It is private, our culture, everyone is in the same situation, I think. You have to give in at some point. You married him. We are told that all the time growing up.”

South Asian culture in general, and Muslim culture in particular, value modesty in women very highly. Sex is not a subject that is talked about and young girls are not given much information about what to expect with regards to marital relations. They are not aware of what acceptable or “normal” behavior is and what is unacceptable or pushing the boundaries into rape. For them, anything their husband does is to be tolerated, even if they do not enjoy it or find it painful. Consent, or lack thereof, certainly never enters the equation. They are not aware they have a right to refuse certain acts if they choose to do so.

### **3.2 Duality in sexual behavior allowed for husband and wife**

Similar to past studies on sexual behavior from South Asia, the women in the current study identified variations in the code of behavior allowed for men and women, and extending to husband and wife. While men were identified with entitlement to demand sex when desired and even allowed access to other women, the women's role in terms of sexuality was identified by duties and an obligation to the husband. Rather the women were considered more the property of the men, with obligations to fulfill. Participants discussed that men did not consider wives as equal in sexual play, and when sexual pleasure was sought after by women, it was discouraged even within the marriage. Men are sexual beings, while women are mere receptacles. They are not viewed as active participants with sexual desires. This is derived more from South Asian culture, rather than Islamic teachings.

#### *3.2.1 Viewed as property, and duty to oblige at any time*

As mentioned above, the participants repeatedly used language of ‘belonging’ to the spouse, and discussed their role in sexual play as duties and obligations. Interestingly, while the women talked with great dissatisfaction, it was also clear through their conversations that they were also accepting of these societally assigned roles and their husband's treatment of them. As one woman said, “This is not something we talk about in my culture, but he treated me like I was his property. It was an exchange somehow; he gave me a house that he earned money to pay

for where I had to cook and be sexually available when he needed. I was denied any pleasure. There was no emotions in his sexual requests. It was nothing romantic. Just satisfy me, this is your duty”.

Other women also echoed this sentiment of being treated as property and the obligations to submit. As one said, “it is like I don’t have a say, I am like an animal to him. I just have to do what he tells, my duty and obligations, that is it.”

### *3.2.2 Women are not allowed to initiated sex or enjoy*

As mentioned above many women alluded to the concept that husbands are the only one who are normed to get sexual pleasure within the marriage and women are expected to only give pleasure to the husband. Some women discussed this concept in detail. As one woman said, “I didn’t feel I could say no. at least most times...no, he didn’t care how I felt, he didn’t think sex needs to be enjoyable for the wife. Just for the man”.

One of the women at the shelter came severely injured internally. Her husband had tried to “cleanse” her with a hose pipe. He wanted a wife who was “pure”.

In a focus group discussion two participants had this exchange. One woman was explaining that her husband cheated on her, and how she had to still accept it, but as a woman she cannot do the same:

“Female 1: Yeah. And she already say, we say jealous, okay, it’s fine, with the man, what did you do, they said okay fine, but woman, it’s no.

Female 2: Because he’s a man, he can do whatever, his family is like a property for him, it’s not like human being, no. It’s his property.”

Another woman talked about a time when she was called a slut by her own husband for initiating a sexual act. She said, “One time I watched this video involving French kissing, I was naïve and wanted to see what it was like. I asked him (referring to the husband) if we can try. He told me I was acting like a ‘slut’ and to stop demanding for sexual things. He was basically telling me I wasn’t a good woman because I asked for something sexual and made me feel ashamed. Sadly, he is not alone in this, I know all his friends would feel the same way”.

A few others elaborated this further, a few women felt that their husband’s expectation for them for sex, beyond pleasuring them is to the have children. One woman simply said, “Another said, “He only wants me to make babies”. Another elaborated further, “It was just out of the blue, he just hit me. And I wouldn’t accept that. And he wanted me to be a stay at home wife, and wanted me to have kids right away, and I had already told him before we got married, I want to go to medical school. Do you think that’s something you can handle? He said yes... I told him, I don’t want to have kids until like three, four years down the road. Is that something you’re okay with? And he said yes... right. Afterward we got married, everything changed... Right away... Within marriage, as soon as we got married... Yeah. He was like, I don’t want you to go to medical school. There’s no such thing. And he wanted kids right away, so I started hiding my birth control”.

Yet another woman said, “I have children, he just wanted me to keep making children, but, with the last child I went and got an illegal abortion in my country”.

Yet not all women bought into the belief that sex is for male pleasure. One woman stated, “I enjoy sex... despite what I went though I would like to get married again”.

### *3.2.3 Expected to be obedient and just comply*

The women in the study also talked about their upbringing where they were expected to be obedient and submissive to their husbands. These values were

culturally and religiously emphasized in their childhood socialization process. Their upbringing of expectation that a good wife is someone who is obedient, submissive and one who does not complain about private matters of the household all created a context of future acceptance of sexual coercion by their spouse as normal sexual behavior expected of a 'good' wife. One woman explained, "I was told from the beginning be a good girl, men only marry good girls, I was groomed from the beginning to be a wife, a good wife, and good wife is someone who won't fight her husband, the man is the head of the household, you have to comply to his wishes. It is in the Quran too. So, I was trying to be a good wife. I tried. I tried very hard. I did everything I was brought up to believe, but, it wasn't enough for him, and it got worse and worse".

This expectation to be obedient wife was something that was brought up by several other women also, another woman said, "I was brought up to be obedient to my husband". Another talked about the more complicated dilemma it created for her, "I believe because of seeing my parents, and how I was raised everything would be easy. I didn't expect sex to be this difficult, how do you say yes every time when it hurts every time?"

It is important to note that the majority of the women in the study did not question their culture, rather they used culture to explain their experience, and even the few that were upset with their culture or religion still understood their experience within the context of their cultural and religious backgrounds, as one of the women said, "sometimes I am upset how much I went through, it is our culture, it is my religious background, but when I really think about it, I still question myself too... was I a good wife, are there things I could have done?"

### **3.3 Submission through threat and intimidation**

Beyond duty, women in the study talked about how threat and intimidation were used as weapons to get them to submit to sex. While emotional and physical threat is a constant fear they had to live with if they opposed the sexual demands from their husbands, the women in the study also talked about their husband's threat about, or actual relationships with other women.

One woman talked about how an old Islamic tradition accepted in her country which allowed men to marry more than one woman was a threat for her if she did not comply. She said, "He would threaten me all the time that he can have other women, he can have four women. He told me if I don't have sex with him, he will find someone who would and I just can't do anything about it". Another explained the complex play between actual acts of cheating, using that to get the wife to comply but also make her feel like his cheating is because of her inadequacies in the bedroom. She elaborated, "He found another woman, and he didn't care how I felt. He treated me like I had to accept. It is part of culture that men have a right to sleep with whomever they please. He made me feel like I made him go out though, because I wasn't adequate in that area. For him it was like at least it is just sex, not an emotional relationship, so I should be happy. I still had to give in to him if he wanted and if he feels like it he didn't even look at me sometimes. He threatened to go out more if I didn't".

Beyond the threat of emotional and physical abuse and cheating, women also talked about how some used their religion to force compliance. In a focus group discussion two of the participants said:

"Female 1: Show it by their religion. They say in the past – The men use Quran, interpret it wrong.

Female 2: It's different, yeah, what you – they are like it [Crosstalk].

Female 1: Like I told you, whatever you like.

Female 2: Whatever he like it, you have to obey, honestly, I'm talking about this, it's like this, you have to obey. Because in the religion, in the Quran say that, you have to be like this. You have to respect your husband like this, what he like it. But, I don't know if it means what men say it does. But, we have to comply”.

Yet another woman talked about how religion and threats to tell family were used against her, she said, “He would say he has the religious right to have sex with me anytime. He would threaten to tell my family if I did not give in. It would be so embarrassing and my family would have said I wasn't being a good wife”.

In South Asian cultures, as well as in Islamic religion, the concepts of fate and patience also play a big role in the acceptance of, and submission to, domestic violence and sexual violence. In Islam it is thought that whatever happens to you has already been decided by *Allah* (god). What *Allah* has decreed will happen and since it was decided by *Allah*, you have to accept it and be patient. That is what *Allah* requires you to do, and you will be rewarded with a place in heaven for your patience. As one woman said, “I know this is a test. It is already decided for me... he is testing me through him, even he says it, but different”.

### **3.4 It is not rape but, I feel the same as a rape victim**

Given the cultural and religious understanding that in a marriage women are expected to comply many women did not identify what they went through as rape. Yet, they talked about the same symptoms of rape survivors. As one woman elaborated, “I don't think I consider it being raped. Rape I see as someone forcibly violating you. I know I have a duty as a wife. It is part of marriage. In my case, I don't think I have a right to say no when he demands. But, I hated it. I hated him showing any affection, because I was afraid it would lead to him wanting sex. I was afraid to go on trips with him, inevitably when the night time comes he would want to have sex. Any as the day got closer to night, I would start feeling sick, I would have a headache, I would feel sick to my stomach, I could feel my body tensing up. I hated the thought of having sex with him, as it comes closer and closer to bed time I would feel more and more stressed... yes, he knew it hurt me, he didn't care. Sometimes, I would say I don't want to have sex tonight, but, if I say that his mood would change and he wouldn't talk, or he would remind me all the things he is doing for me”.

Another said, “The whole process made me feel dirty, every time we have sex. It made me want to take shower after shower. It just didn't feel right”. Yet, another woman explained a more horrific experience in her very short marriage, “He forced on me repeatedly. He was so violent. I would bleed. Even after I got pregnant it didn't matter. I would cry the whole time... my marriage lasted only a few months”. Yet, when asked if she would consider what she went through as marital rape, she was not sure, she said, “I am not sure, it was horrible...may be now...”.

One final woman, while also not quite acknowledging her experiences of having sex without emotional consent as rape, talked about how the cultural context of marriage does create a situation where wives at least initially are in a context ripe for rape. Yet, she accepted it as the price of marriage. She explained, “Obviously when you are kind of forced to marry at a young age, and these are arranged marriages, you don't know him. All your life you are told keep your legs crossed, don't let boys notice you, don't let anyone look at you, and suddenly you are supposed to be with this stranger, even though he is your husband. Of course it is going to be difficult. How do you let all that upbringing go? You can't relax, and our men, they are not like in the movies, they don't talk love. They just jump to it. How are you supposed to be okay? It is not going to be okay, but, that is price of marriage”.



In many South Asian countries, arranged marriages are still the norm. Girls are brought up in strict environments with little to no contact with members of the opposite sex. Co-educational schooling is limited in conservative areas, and girls usually attend girls-only schools and thus have limited exposure and opportunities for meeting or interacting with boys/men. Marriages are arranged for them by their parents, or families, within the social group. Many of these young women meet their husbands-to-be with both families present. There is little interaction and very few chances for getting to know their prospective husbands. Their first real contact with their husbands is after the marriage ceremony has already taken place, and they have been married to a stranger.

Another woman told her story of experiencing increasingly violent sexual abuse. She said the first few months of her marriage seemed okay, but then she began noticing that her husband started forcing her even when she was not feeling well. In fact he seemed to enjoy it more when she said no. One day she accidentally discovered that he watched videos of women being raped. That was when she realized he was acting those scenes out and it scared her enough to leave him. However, she did not identify what he played out as rape. Yet, she talked about the shock, the pain and the emotional trauma.

### **3.5 Shame of talking about something so private**

Almost all the women in the study identified that it is shameful to talk about marital sex. They acknowledged that it is the most private intimate thing in a marriage and that they were brought up not to talk about family matters, especially an area that they deem very private as sex. Some in the study acknowledged that this was the first time they were talking about their sexual abuse and that this was an area that they had not even brought up with their therapists. As one woman said, "I just couldn't talk about such intimate issues with her (referring to the therapist), it is so shameful, it is not like physical abuse, or not giving me money, this is so private." Yet, for another it was the fact that she felt she couldn't comply to her husband's wishes, "I didn't tell even my mother, I didn't want to be judged, I just couldn't give every time, how am I supposed to talk about that to anyone, this was my duty as a wife?" For another woman the shame was questioning herself for husband's extra marital affairs, "In my head, I know it is all on him for cheating like that, but he always said it was my fault that he cheated, because I didn't know how to give him... I couldn't satisfy him, I struggled with that, I questioned my worth with that... even now I feel this shame inside-I worry others think the same, and I know inside, but it doesn't help".

The women talked about how this sense of shame stopped them from reaching to anyone about how they felt. The burden of how they felt due to forcing sex upon them, or cheating on them were placed on the woman herself. The above woman continued, "I felt very alone, I didn't know how, how do I tell anyone I hate doing anything with him, and I then I also tell he is cheating? How, everyone will say it was my fault"

### **3.6 Divorce and vulnerability by sexual advances by outside men**

While these experiences within marriage were bad enough, some younger women also identified the sexual dangers of being a divorced woman. They felt that now they don't have the protection of a man, other men will think they are available for their pleasure. One woman felt like she has to weigh her options before considering divorce. A woman living on her own without a husband is

very vulnerable and exposed to a multitude of dangers... Often she does not have the support of her family and there is no one to turn to if she is harassed. As one woman explained, "It is harder because a lot of men hit on me after my divorce. They would act like they are going to help me, but they end up wanting something else. Not a relationship, but... (referring to sex) you know what I mean... because my visa expired (because her husband didn't apply for extension), I am illegal right, so in the end I thought, I am just going to stay in shelters (referring to DV shelters) till the Visa (VAWA petition) came. I am afraid to go out to work. It is almost a year now, I have stayed in 3 different shelters here, here (referring to current agency) more than 6 months. It is okay I don't have money. I don't want to be treated that way. Visa will come soon... yeah you have to consider is going through everything I went through better or am I now going to experience that from all the other men? But, I would say no. He was too extreme". Another explained, "I am talking to guys also... you know what I am saying... they want a good woman, I am not anymore, guys just want sex and not marriage... the good woman... I am praying either get married or get through my son because he is autistic... this guy try to take advantage of me... but I don't let any take advantage... These days they look at women who work with respect and women who don't work they look down... in India also divorce is not okay".

Gender roles are very strictly defined in Muslim culture. The man is the protector, the provider, and spiritual head of the family. The woman is in charge of the household and of raising the children. With the head of the family out of the picture, divorced women feel very vulnerable to any men who might try to take advantage of them. Since they are divorced, they are viewed by men in their communities as "available". They are sexually experienced and not seen as innocent virgins - leaving them even more exposed. Traditionally, in Islamic culture, the father, or the eldest male, is the "*kafeel*" (one who is responsible) of the women in his household. This means he is responsible for them, and has the authority to speak or act on their behalf. They are under his protection. Once a woman gets married, her husband becomes her *kafeel*. After divorce, the woman may choose to go back to her father's, or eldest brother's, protection. If that is not an option, then she is without a male protector and open to being propositioned by men in the community. Many of the women in the study talked about being the only one in America, or if they had male siblings them being in other states. Thus, many were without a male protector. This becomes a deterrent for many women wanting to leave their abusive relationships. As one woman said, "I had think a lot before I left him, I didn't have anyone to protect me here. I am all alone in this country. It is a matter of who will pray on me now, and to be truthful it is not easy, I try to keep away from people from ... (name of the country), because I don't know how they will view me, I am not a good woman in their eyes anymore, and there is shame there, but it also means men see me as, "oh she is not a virgin, she doesn't have anyone to protect, she is available for just sex".

#### 4. Conclusions

Women this study were all survivors of domestic violence, and findings therefore must be understood within the intersectional confines of of culture, religion, domestic violence and its impact on marital rape. This study findings reflected how South Asian girls' upbringing steeped in patriarchal culture, and misinterpretations of religious passages led to a context ripe for sexual abuse within marriages that were already experiencing domestic violence. Yet, this same socialization

prevented them from understanding marital rape as rape. Even when the women opposed what happened to them, or experienced physical and psychological symptoms related to abuse, or even when they understood the context in which they were forced to have sex by their spouses, they were reluctant to name it as rape. Within the intersectional South Asian culture and Islam, the women in the study identified that girls are taught to be submissive, obedient, silent, and patient. They identified this submissiveness as the ideal and perfect wife/daughter-in-law people are looking for. This added with the direct belief that access to women's sex is through marriage and women's role in sex is to cater to the husband's needs. It means that women in the study believed that they must cater to all the demands from their husbands in the bedroom. Hence the women in the study did not complain about sexual violence and tried not go against societal and religious norms. Unfortunately, this meant that even when they understood other aspects of domestic violence and abuse, marital sexual violence was accepted. This also means that sexual abuse will not be revealed due to the veil of silence over this subject. As participants identified it is extremely shameful to talk about this aspect of their marriage and they are taught to never bring shame on the family or their husband. Many women in the study identified that talking the researcher was the first time they talked about the sexual abuse within marriage. This contexts of uniqueness are important to understand to identify the circumstances in which marital rape happens and understood. The study findings are similar to other past studies on marital rape in South Asia [3, 7, 12–14]. These findings have implications to human rights advocates, human service workers, and legal advocates. You can't find what you don't know, and you can't fight what people understand as acceptable. Hence, the study findings indicate the importance of understanding contexts in which marital sexual abuse takes places, and the importance of targeting the socialization process itself. The study highlights the importance of long-term cultural change related sexuality, promoting respect and equality that is needed to prevent domestic violence and marital rape. On an individual level, the human service sector working with this population needs to understand these contexts to effectively assist. Legal advocates also need to understand the cultural and religious backdrop that promotes a reluctance to provide evidence in court.

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## **Conflict of interest**

“The authors declare no conflict of interest.”

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## Author details

Dheeshana S. Jayasundara<sup>1\*</sup>, Durdana Ahmed<sup>2</sup>, Prita Das Gupta<sup>3</sup>, Susan Garcia<sup>4</sup>  
and Sarah Thao<sup>1</sup>

1 California State University, Fresno, Fresno, California, USA

2 Community Consultant, Morgan Hill, California, USA

3 Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy,  
Delhi, India

4 Fresno City College, Fresno, Fresno, California, USA

\*Address all correspondence to: [djayasundara@csufresno.edu](mailto:djayasundara@csufresno.edu)

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