

# Conceptualizing Partner Abuse Among South Asian Women in Hong Kong

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Jenny Chingkhannem Tonsing<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This qualitative study was conducted with 14 South Asian women in Hong Kong to explore their perception and experiences of domestic violence by an intimate partner. **Design:** All interviews were transcribed and then coded based on the process of coding suggested by Strauss and Corbin, including both open and axial coding. **Results:** Data analysis resulted in two main core categories, “Women’s perception of domestic violence” and “Cultural factors that influence their help-seeking behavior,” denoting that the context in which domestic violence is experienced influences women’s perception and understanding of domestic violence. Participants also drew on the discourse of culture to explain its role in their experiences of domestic violence. **Conclusion:** Domestic violence is a concern among this group of South Asian women. Culturally appropriate domestic violence services and public education on domestic violence are needed for this community.

## Keywords

Domestic Violence, South Asians immigrants women, Hong Kong

## Introduction

Domestic violence against women is a worldwide social problem and has been acknowledged as one of the leading causes of injuries for women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Griffin & Koss, 2002; Hague & Malos, 2005; Levinson, 1989; Smith, Thornton, DeVellis, Earp, & Coker, 2002). Although numerous changes have been made, and activism on the part of women’s groups at the grassroots level has propelled violence against women as a human rights issue onto the world stage (Heise, Alanagh, Watts, & SZwi, 1994), it continues to be a serious social problem that needs ongoing attention. Although numerous studies on domestic violence have been conducted, especially among ethnic minorities and immigrant groups (e.g., Abraham, 2000a; Dasgupta, 2000a; Han, Kim, & Tyson, 2010; Menjivar & Salcido, 2002; Nguyen, 2007; Raj & Silverman, 2002b), most of these studies have mainly explored the impact, prevalence, consequences, and prevention of domestic violence. This article explores women’s perception of domestic violence and how their perception influences their help-seeking behaviors.<sup>1</sup>

According to the 2011 Hong Kong Census, 6.4% of the total population constitutes ethnic minorities, of which South Asians comprise 0.9% (Census and Statistics Department, 2012). *South Asians* are composed of people from the Indian subcontinent such as from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The majority of Indians, Pakistanis, and Nepalese are permanent residents, whereas people from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are mainly migrant household workers, many of whom are living without their families.

Thus, this study mainly focuses on Indian, Pakistani, and Nepalese women.

The Pakistani and Indian community has been in Hong Kong since the early 20th century, and migrants from the Indian subcontinent started settling in Hong Kong after the British took possession of the colony in 1841 (Welsh, 1997). The majority of the “Indians”<sup>2</sup> at that time were employed as policemen and prison guards under the British administration (Vaid, 1972; White, 1994). The Nepalese, on the other hand, came to the territory as Gurkha soldiers under the British army in 1948 (Far East Overseas Nepalese Association, 2000). Although the South Asians have been living in Hong Kong for decades, most of the present-day South Asians migrated to Hong Kong recently, as indicated by “Place of Birth” information in the 2011 Hong Kong Census and Statistics data, which shows that a majority of them were born outside Hong Kong (about 77.3% Indians, 60.5% Nepalese, and 61.3% Pakistanis).

Review of local studies on minority ethnic groups has observed the numerous challenges they encounter in various spheres such as in education, housing, employment, experiences of discrimination, language barriers, and in a lack of knowledge and accessibility of supportive services (e.g.,

<sup>1</sup>Royal Holloway University of London, UK

## Corresponding Author:

Jenny Chingkhannem Tonsing, Centre for Criminology and Sociology, Royal Holloway, University of London, TW20 0EX, UK.  
Email: pujd016@live.rhul.ac.uk

Chan & Wong, 2005; Crabtree & Wong, 2012; Ku, Chan, & Sandhu, 2005; Loper, 2004; K. L. Tang, Lam, Lam, & Ngai, 2006). Although there is a proliferation of studies on violence against women, there is a dearth of information about this issue among South Asian immigrant women in the context of Hong Kong (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 2008). The lack of in-depth studies on the experiences of domestic violence among the South Asian communities in the Hong Kong context highlight that this issue remains uncharted.

## Literature Review

Domestic violence against women is a broad encompassing term that includes physical, psychological, sexual, and/or verbal abuse (Arias & Corso, 2005; Ellsberg, Jansen, Heise, Watts, & Garcia-Moreno, 2008). Physical violence includes shoving, slapping, and hitting with objects (Gordon, 2000; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Psychological and verbal abuse includes using degrading comments and put-down words, restricting activities, financial control, and social isolation (Gordon, 2000). Sexual abuse includes coerced sex, sexual decision making by the male, and threats of infidelity (C. S.-K. Tang, 1999; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Numerous studies have also reported experiences of these behaviors among various immigrant groups (e.g., Morash, Bui, & Santiago, 2000; Raj & Silverman, 2002b; N. Siddiqui, Ismail, & Allen, 2008). Other types of immigration-specific abuse include restricting women's contact with their families and opportunities for learning the host language, thereby decreasing their integration in the host society (Menjivar & Salcido, 2002; Raj & Silverman, 2002b).

Various approaches and theories have been used to explain the social structure, cultural traditions, and personal behaviors that lead to abuse and violence (Hanrahan, Campbell, & Ulrich, 1993). From the feminist viewpoint, gender-based oppression is due to gender imbalance in society (Cheyne, O'Brien, & Belgrave, 2000). According to the social cultural models, which include elements of family systems theory, social learning theory, social structures, and cultural factors (Straus & Gelles, 1990), it is the societal influences, sexist organization of the society and the family system, and the cultural norms that legitimize domestic violence (Kelly, Gonzalez-Guarda, & Taylor, 2011). Conformity to traditional, patriarchal gender roles is common in most Asian communities (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Kibria, 1990; Tran & Des Jardins, 2000; Yllo, 1993). Strict gender norms are aimed at controlling females, whereby they are expected to uphold the reputation of the family through conformity to traditional roles as good and dutiful wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law, and these are further supported by conservative cultural and religious value systems (H. Siddiqui, 2013; Takhar, 2013). Often men try to justify their abusive actions as necessary for the purpose of regulating their actions and behaviors to comply with patriarchal norms (Bui

& Morash, 1999; George & Rahangdale, 1999; Kishore & Johnson, 2004; Thiara & Gill, 2010), whereas society, including family members, often refrains from defining the matter as a social problem. Previous studies have also observed that wife abuse and aggression toward women were mainly due to patriarchal beliefs and ideology (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Goodrum, Umberson, & Anderson, 2001; Haj-Yahia, 1998; Russo & Pirlott, 2006; Yllo, 2005; Yllo & Straus, 1990). In some cultures, it may be accepted as a "normal" part of marriage, especially in marital disputes, and hence may not be considered abusive action (INCLIN, 2000; Nguyen, 2007). This normalization of violence against women is communicated through the process of socialization as well as through cultural and traditional values and beliefs, and may thereby limit the development of efforts to address this concern in the South Asian culture. Dasgupta (2006) also observed that patriarchal power imbalances are also increasingly propagated within immigrant communities as a way of preserving the traditional cultural beliefs and values while living in a foreign country.

In studies on domestic violence in Asian families, it is imperative to understand the importance attached to family and cultural values, not as an excuse, or to imply a pathological presence for domestic violence, but rather to better understand the influence of cultural and traditional values and beliefs on women's response to domestic violence.

## The Situation of Domestic Violence in Hong Kong

Domestic violence is legislated in Hong Kong since the enactment of the Domestic Violence Ordinance (DVO) in 1986 (Law Reform Commission, 2005). The DVO provides victims of domestic abuse the right to seek speedy injunction against the other party (Liu, 1999). However, under the DVO a threat to cause bodily harm was not considered sufficient, and no injunction will be carried out against the other party unless there has been actual bodily harm to the applicant (Chow, 2009). Despite the various limitations and inadequacy of the DVO, it remained in operation for more than two decades without any substantive amendment (Chow, 2009). The incident of the Tin Shui Wai tragedy in 2004 (Scully-Hill, 2011), in which a mother and her two daughters were murdered by the husband when his wife attempted to leave him, brought the issue of domestic violence to the forefront. The public outcry was amplified when it was made known that the mother had earlier appealed to the Hong Kong police and Social Welfare Department (SWD) on various occasions for their help in leaving her husband. There were pressing demands on the SWD and the Hong Kong Police Force to improve the measures and strategies for victims of domestic violence (Chow, 2009). This led to the amendment of the DVO in 2007, and the Domestic Violence (Amendment) Bill was introduced, which expanded the scope of the DVO and includes psychological abuse and

intimidation without waiting for actually bodily harm to occur (Lee, 2008).

## Aims of the Study

There are three main aims in this study: (a) explore South Asian women's understanding and perception of partner abuse, (b) address South Asian cultural factors that influence women's help-seeking behavior, and (c) suggest intervention measures to decrease domestic violence against South Asian immigrant women.

## Method

### Design

A qualitative study based on in-depth interview was conducted with 14 South Asian women during the period of November 2011 to May 2012. Based on social constructionist approach, this study seeks to examine how the women conceptualized and explained domestic violence in intimate relationship from their subjective experiences. As such, in-depth interview is best suited to help provide a rich contextual understanding of the participant's experiences as told from their own perspectives (Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993). This also allowed the active involvement of the participants in the construction of data about their lives (Reinharz, 1992), and for the women to define in their own words their experience.

### Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by the College Research Ethics Committee of Royal Holloway, University of London, in 2010. Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to their voluntary participation in this study. All information was kept confidential, and pseudonyms are used to protect informants' identification.

### Sampling and Recruitment of Participants

The inclusion criteria for this study include the following: South Asian immigrant women living in Hong Kong who have experienced some form of abuse or violence (physical, emotional, and/or psychological abuse) by an intimate partner within the past 2 years. Although violence in intimate relationships may also refer to same-sex relationships or violence from in-laws, in the present study it focuses only on violence against women by an intimate partner, irrespective of their marital status (i.e., cohabiting or legally married, divorced, or separated). In this study, South Asian women refer to Pakistani, Indian, and Nepalese immigrant women. Participants in this study were mainly recruited through purposive and snowball sampling method. Initially five women were referred by four social service agencies. These five

women in turn refer the other nine participants in this study. Ultimately, a total of 14 women participated in this study.

The 14 women who participated in this study comprised Pakistanis ( $n = 10$ ), Indians ( $n = 2$ ), and Nepalese ( $n = 2$ ). The women were relatively young, ranging in age from 27 to 39 years (mean age = 33.9). The length of residence in Hong Kong ranged from 3 to 20 years. Five of the participants were currently married, five were divorced, three were separated, and one was cohabiting at the time of conducting the interview. All the women were married/cohabiting with spouses from similar nationalities. Five of the women were employed part-time and nine are housewives. In terms of their religious backgrounds, the majority are Muslim, with two Hindus, one Buddhist, and one Sikh.

## Analytical Procedures

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in English. Five of the interviews conducted in the native languages of the participants (i.e., Hindi, Urdu, and Nepali) were also transcribed in English based on the translations provided by interpreters. Additionally, bilingual translators were also asked to cross-check the translated version. Interview transcripts were then coded following the process of coding suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). First, open coding of the text was performed in which texts were examined and then categorized into groups of concepts, while constantly comparing for similarities and differences by going back to the original text. In the open-coding phase, each interview transcript was examined for any references to the main research objectives. Revision of codes was an iterative process. This was followed by axial coding, in which relevant codes were further conceptualized, which were then grouped into two main categories with several subcategories. All coding were done by the researcher.

As a qualitative study is concerned with meaning in context, ensuring the credibility and validity of the research findings was also a concern for the researcher. The researcher employed some of the techniques suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), such as peer debriefing and member checks. At the end of each interview, the researcher also presented a summary of the woman's narrative, which also provided an opportunity for the woman to clarify, omit, or add anything from her narrative. Additionally, to ensure the fitness and relevance of emerging categories to the research questions, the texts were subject to constant comparison and checking between the text, codes, and categories with the original text, while looking out for outliers or negative cases.

## Results

Analysis of the data was organized around two main categories, with several subcategories. The first category pertains to "Women's perception of domestic violence in an intimate relationship." This core category was derived from three subcategories: physical, psychological, and financial abuse.

Consistent with previous studies, participants in this study also perceived physical violence as abuse, such as being hit with an object (e.g., Adames & Campbell, 2005; Gill, 2004; Khan & Hussain, 2008). Women also talked about other issues ranging from put-down words, controlling finances, being ignored, and spousal infidelity, which resonate with emotional, psychological, and financial abuse. In this study, some participants described domestic violence using the term *bad marriage*. As one woman stated:

There are two kinds of marriage; a good marriage and a bad marriage. Bad marriage is where the husband is shouting, beating, unkind, and not loving to the wife. That is domestic violence.

For this participant, being shouted and beaten by her husband is perceived as domestic violence. She said that a “bad marriage” is where the husband ill-treats the wife, is not kind and loving. Participants also talked about being ignored by their husbands, which they consider more hurtful than physical abuse (mentioned by three women). This kind of psychological abuse has also been noted in previous studies where many women shared that being ignored or being put-down by their abusive partner is the worst kind of abuse (Fitzpatrick & Halliday, 1992) that undermines their self-worth and self-esteem and is an indirect way in which the abuser denies the women’s value as a person (Raj & Silverman, 2002a). As some participants shared:

Being ignored by my husband is the worse abuse . . . it makes me feel very bad . . . the feeling is worse than being hit by him. He is out of the house every day, and comes home late at night . . . when I tell him to spend more time at home with me and the children, it turns into argument . . . he wants me to do household work and to keep quiet, and does not want to talk with me or the children.

It hurts me a lot when my husband calls me “names” . . . it makes me feel useless and I feel like rubbish.

Financial control is often used by men to dominate their spouse/partner. Most of the participants in this study are housewives and financially dependent on their husbands, and they shared that their husband would often withhold financial support even to buy essential household items, which may also make them more vulnerable to his abusive behaviors. Without money they are unable to go out or take public transportation, or to buy essential household needs. As one participant remarked:

He stopped giving money for the household and sometimes would disappear for days without telling me . . . whenever I asked him for household money, he would get angry and shout at me . . . it [money] is to buy food for the children . . . it is not good, it is wrong, what he does.

The second core category “Cultural factors that influence their help-seeking behavior,” emanates from four

subcategories. The first subcategory “make the marriage work” pertains to the importance attached to marriage and family, and to the women’s desire to maintain an intact family. In most South Asian cultures, marriage is central to family life and is viewed as a cultural marker of women’s identity and social status (Abraham, 1999). Therefore, women will strive to maintain their marriage regardless of the cost. Although the majority of the women in this study were divorced or separated at the time of conducting this study, they shared that despite the abuse, they did not opt for divorce, but instead it was their husband who initiated the divorce (except in the case of two participants). Other participants who were still married at the time of conducting this study shared that maintaining an intact family was more important, hence they would not consider divorce or separation as an option. Some women shared the following:

I do not think of divorce. . . I want my marriage to work. I want the children to have a father. If I divorce I feel ashamed to my friends and the community . . . also I cannot go back my home-country.

I do not consider divorce because it will give bad name to family and relatives. Also, because of my children I don’t want the divorce; it will not be good on children. I want my marriage to work.

The second subcategory “stigma of leaving the relationship/divorce” is closely linked to the first subcategory discussed above. In most South Asian culture, divorce is considered taboo and often women are blamed for the break-up of a marriage, and they may be socially ostracized by their communities (Abraham, 2000b; Dasgupta & Warriar, 1996; Nankani, 2000). As some women stated:

I know, if I leave the marriage, I cannot go back to my home country. . . . People will talk, and the shame . . . the shame on my family . . . it is not easy.

Divorce is not a good thing in our culture. We will lose respect from the friends and community . . . and nobody will want to talk with you.

Even if a woman is divorced by her husband, the community will blame her, they will say that she is a bad woman.

From the above excerpts, it can be observed that women usually do not consider divorce to be an option, as divorced women are often stigmatized and blamed for the disintegration of their family. The women in this study who were divorced or separated shared that they have not returned to their home country since the divorce/separation.

The third subcategory pertains to the value of “maintaining social face.” In most South Asian cultures, there is a strong social obligation to ensure that the family is well thought of by the community (Ramisetty-Mikler, 1993),

hence a strong emphasis against exposing what are considered to be “private” family matters. Family matters are kept within the family as much as possible and individual members are discouraged from speaking out or sharing about family matters. The fear of losing face in front of one’s community as well as the sense of failing in her marital commitments may keep a woman silent about being abused (Dasgupta, 2000b). In line with this, some participants shared:

I pretend to my community and others everything is alright in my marriage. I am afraid people will talk and blame the woman if she has marriage problem and say, “She is a bad woman.”

It is hard to let other people know about your marriage problems. And you don’t want them to know, you want to cover up.

These quotes reflect participants’ desire to keep family matters private, and maintaining social face was a principle guideline for “acceptable” social behavior. To save face is to avoid being shamed. Gill (2004) also reported that for the majority of South Asian women in her study ( $N = 18$ ), the notion of “shame” was a central factor, regardless of whether they remained in or left the abusive relationship. Shame is not merely an individual consequence; rather, the entire family is shamed. It is probable that the majority of the women in this study agreed to share their stories only because they were already divorced or separated at the time this study was conducted.

The fourth subcategory is “concern for children.” Traditionally in most South Asian cultures women have multiple roles such as nurturer and caretaker and as wives and mothers (Assanand, Dias, Richardson, & Waxler-Morrison, 2005). Although the women in this study shared that they knew it was not right for their husband/partner to abuse them, the concern for their children and thoughts of future prospects gave them the strength to endure and tolerate the abuse. As some participants shared:

I do not consider divorce when I think of my children because I want them to have a father . . . the children love their father very much and the father also love the children . . . because of the children I bear it . . . we have to think of our children.

Mostly women don’t want the divorce because they don’t want broken family for the children. Also I am concerned that divorce will have a bad effect on children . . . the children can have emotional problem growing up without a father.

The majority of the women in this study have children (except for one, who did not have any children) and they shared that thinking of their children’s future prospects in Hong Kong gave them the strength to endure the abuse.

## Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the context in which domestic violence is experienced influences how women

perceive and respond to domestic violence. The women in this study also identified physical, emotional, and financial abuse as constituting domestic violence. Although the women did not specifically use these categorical labels, they explained it in terms of specific behaviors (e.g., hitting, threatening, controlling, insulting, using harsh words or action, name-calling, using put-down words, and ignoring). This is also consistent with findings from previous studies among South Asians. For instance, in a recent study conducted in Pakistan (Khan & Hussain, 2008), it was also observed that the women participants perceived domestic violence in terms of physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and financial abuse, although the nature and intensity of the abuse vary from slapping, kicking, punching, or being attacked with knife or scissors. In conceptualizing their understanding of domestic abuse within their intimate relationships, the women showed an advanced level of consciousness about their lived experiences and understood that the circumstances of their intimate relationships are not solely unique experiences rooted in individual characteristics.

The findings of this study also reveal that the women’s decisions, particularly those related to relationships, marriage, and family, are strongly influenced by their cultural beliefs and family considerations. Previous studies have also observed that maintaining family honor and the notion of shame caused many abused women to keep silent and to strive to maintain the relationship (e.g., Abraham, 2000a; Gill, 2004; Midlarsky, Venkatapamani-Kothari, & Plante, 2006; Thiara & Gill, 2012). In the present study, it was also observed that the women were very concerned about shaming and bringing dishonor to their families. Thus, their struggles against male violence are also influenced by the need to maintain the social and cultural values placed on marriage, relationships, and family roles.

Additionally, this study likewise reveals that their help-seeking process is also influenced to a certain extent by the responses they receive from their helpers. According to Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, and Weintraub (2005), an abused woman’s decision to seek help involve first recognizing and defining the problem, and once she has decided to seek help, she will proceed to select from whom to seek help. However, the suggestions she gets from the helper whom she chooses might influence her help-seeking decision. Although these processes seem to indicate a linear pattern, Liang et al. (2005) stressed that these stages are interrelated and occur in an ongoing feedback loop. Although the women in this study were able to define the problem (i.e. the abuse), they were also influenced by the responses they received from their helpers (i.e. the family), who often advised her to “try and work it out.” Those participants who are divorced or currently separated shared that although they do not condone their husband’s abuses, they were not the one to initiate the divorce.

Sometimes people may stay in a relationship because the perceived cost of leaving is considered to be high. According

to Rusbult's investment model (Rusbult, 1980), a person's decision to stay or leave a relationship may be determined by the level of commitment to a relationship in terms of one's satisfaction with, quality of alternatives, and investments in the relationship. In the present study, for the majority of women, maintaining an intact marriage and family, the concern for their children, and the notion of shame and fear of dishonoring their families were considered more important.

Although there are social services for victims of domestic violence, often due to the language barrier (most services mainly cater to Chinese-speaking clients) or cultural sensitivity issue in handling such cases, many ethnic minority women are hindered from accessing such services. Exploring how women's perception of domestic violence influences their help seeking lends some understanding to how complex the process has been for women in this study. Since divorce and separation are not always the first option these women would choose, implications for interventions and practice in working with abused South Asian women are highlighted.

### Interventions and Implications for Practice

One important ethnic-specific factor highlighted in this study is the cultural factors that influence women's decisions and help-seeking behaviors. Due to the need for maintaining secrecy, a telephone hotline in South Asian languages to provide confidential crisis intervention would be appropriate. Educational materials and pamphlets in South Asian languages can be provided that would include definitions of domestic violence, the negative impact on health and on their children, and address those barriers that prevent women from seeking help, such as the stigma of divorce, the notions of shame, and lack of ethnic specific domestic violence services.

It is also imperative for helping professionals to be cognizant of the cultural values, community attitudes, and social experiences that might influence abused women's reactions and responses to domestic violence and to provide counseling with an understanding of the client's culture and migration-related issues. Since it may not be possible for all those in health and human service to be familiar with all the nuances of different cultural groups, a culturally appropriate assessment instruments and techniques could greatly be of help in service delivery. Such instruments can also allow for a more accurate identification of social problems as a first step rather than guesswork to determine the existence of domestic violence.

### Limitations

One limitation of this study is the uneven sample size; hence, caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings beyond the study sample. The majority of the women in this

study were Pakistanis, with only two Indians and two Nepalese. It is probable that the amount of domestic violence reported in this study may be different from other samples of Indian, Nepalese, and Pakistani women in Hong Kong. Due to recruitment difficulty, a more diverse sample in terms of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and marital status could not be obtained. Additionally, this study does not explore the extent to which their socioeconomic statuses may have influenced their help-seeking process. The majority of the participants in this study were housewives and financially dependent on their husband. Clearly this may have also affected their help-seeking decisions.

### Conclusion and Future Research Direction

This study has outlined and recognized that women's perception, experiences, and responses in the face of partner abuse are influenced and determined by a multitude of factors, such as traditional beliefs and values and social structure, which further maintain or perpetuate the violence. Examining domestic violence in South Asian immigrant families provides a new direction for further research. For instance although no standardised mental health measures were utilised in this study, some anecdotal findings suggest that the mental health impact of abuse on these women needs further research. From the interview data gathered from the participants reveal that some women report experiencing symptoms of depression, feeling depressed and having suicidal thoughts as a consequence of the abuse. Since it was beyond the scope and focus of the present study, the impact of abuse on their psychological health and well-being was not investigated. At the time of conducting this research, some women were still under medication for depressive symptoms. More prevalence studies can help provide information on the severity and frequency of partner violence.

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### Notes

1. Although both men and women can be both abuser and victim, this article focuses on women victims. Different terms such as battered women, intimate partner violence, survivors of domestic violence, and abused women may be used to refer to both victims and survivors.
2. During the early days, in local parlance, everyone from the Indian subcontinent was regarded as "Indian" irrespective of where they are from geographically (Weiss, 1991).

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