

Revealing domestic abuse realities and viable help-seeking pathways for South Asian women in Scotland



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BACKGROUND

This briefing is one of five drawn from the study *Diversifying Justice* (Mirza, Bradley, Dickson, 2025), a participatory research project that set out to build a fuller understanding of **how South Asian women in Scotland perceive and experience domestic abuse**. Each briefing shares key insights and recommendations to help improve support and services.

South Asian women's experiences of domestic abuse are **shaped by their cultures and communities** (Gill & Virdee, 2021; Gill, 2004; Burman & Chantler, 2005). Help-seeking is **influenced by individual and structural factors** (Tonsing & Tonsing, 2019). The impact of gender-based violence on BME women and girls is “**disproportionate and devastating**” (Siddiqui, 2018: 1). This includes **prolonged abuse, reluctance to access services, and fear of racism**, leading to **under-reporting** (BMA, 2014).

Despite evidence of severe, culturally specific patterns of abuse, and multiple and persistent barriers to support, very few studies have focused on the experiences of South Asian women in Scotland or explored how they understand and seek help for domestic abuse. *Diversifying Justice* aimed to address this gap by working directly with South Asian women. Using an arts-based, participatory approach this research:

- Engaged South Asian women in arts-based focus groups^[1] (n=15) to explore experiences of domestic abuse and justice. These sessions used object-based introductions and collage-making to support the sharing of personal and collective stories and encourage creative reflection on abuse and help-seeking.
- Conducted narrative interviews^[2] with South Asian victim/survivors of domestic abuse (n=14). Conducted in Urdu and English, these narrative interviews focused on the lived experience of participants and their perspectives on abuse, help-seeking, and support.
- Prioritised care and reciprocity through a feminist methodology designed to reduce harm, and support participants to share their experiences in safe and meaningful ways.

*This briefing focuses on: **Understandings and experiences of ‘domestic abuse’.***

[1] Owing to the sensitive nature of this research, pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the identity of the women who participated.

[2] Urdu has been retained in certain quotes in transliterated form with the English translation provided in parenthesis.



Understanding experiences of domestic abuse. Digitised hand-drawn illustration by Nic Dickson.

KEY FINDINGS

- Abuse takes place in everyday home environments.
- Some experiences of abuse that South Asian women face are the direct result of husbands' violent, coercive, and controlling behaviours.
- The role of affinal kin, including women, as perpetrators of abuse is often overlooked but is central to South Asian women's experiences.
- Abuse includes physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual violence, as well as more subtle forms of control and isolation.
- Some experiences, such as forced domestic labour, do not fit common definitions of domestic abuse in Scotland.
- Participants do not see themselves or their experiences reflected in Scottish services or representations of domestic abuse.

Forced domestic labour

Participants described being responsible for household work for extended families, including cleaning and cooking. Anitha (2019: 1855) refers to this as “reproductive labour” – “tasks, responsibilities, and roles that are necessary for the social reproduction of the family and the home through cooking, cleaning and caring”.

Khadija noted the direct control her mother-in-law exerted over her by making her stitch clothes for them:

I thought I will never go near a sewing machine because it reminds me of those things. The control she had over me ... My job was to stitch all of her clothes.

Many participants described how this forced domestic labour caused exhaustion, and knock on effects such as isolation, and low self-worth. Asma explained: “All day, my day would go in cooking, taking the kids to school. I wouldn’t go anywhere else”.

Physical & sexual abuse

Some women described physical abuse, including hitting, kicking, punching, slapping and strangling. Noor recalled: “... he beat me up so badly, he ripped my clothes, he slapped me, he strangled me, he spat on my face”.

Sexual abuse was also described. Amina shared a harrowing incident where her sister, with “learning disabilities”, did not name her experience as rape but described it as: “[husband’s name] did something to me that he shouldn’t have done”

In some cases, women did not name experiences as abuse but described coerced and forced sex. Khadija reflected on an “*embarrassing situation*” where, during a smear test, the nurse questioned whether she was sexually active. When she told her mother-in-law about this, she recalled: “She ... called her son and said, ‘Well, you have to show you are a man’ ... he had to show [me] there and then in the middle of an afternoon”.

Verbal abuse

Verbal abuse included “swearing” and “shouting”, as well as “accusations” and “taunting”. Noor recalled:

They gave me a lot of verbal abuse, they gave me tāhne [3] about my mum, they made fun of my ... squint, they made fun that I was asthmatic, they used to say oh you don’t know anything ... koī soche ga tūm kohī kohtī kī thī ho [4] ... they kept me away from my family for a whole year, I never attended my sister’s wedding because of that, I used to get sworn at by him as well.

[3] Urdu word for taunts

[4] Someone will think you’re the daughter of a donkey

Financial abuse

Amina described financial abuse that her sister, Jannah, endured:

Jannah had ... tens of thousands of pounds ... as a deposit on her house. Then all of a sudden, it's like she gets married, and ... she wouldn't look after herself. She wouldn't go for a haircut ... Her coats had got really old ... If we went out for lunch and she's like, "Oh, I've not got any money to pay for lunch," one of us would always step in say, "Oh, don't be silly Jannah, we'll get it." But how long do you keep doing that knowing that she had a husband who was also working full-time?

Aisha and Fatima described how husbands took disability benefits meant for their children. Aisha said: *"took out £2000 ... This was not his, this was benefit money"*.

Isolation

All participants described isolation. Furzana explained that visiting her mum would elicit attention from her affinal kin who would ask, *"why is she going to go and visit her mum?"* Aisha shared: *"I didn't have permission to go to [aunt's] house. ... he would find out that I went. Then he would fight with me."*

Aisha was also prohibited from keeping friends, and shared her husband's instruction: *"Don't speak to any friends on the phone. Friends are for before marriage not for after"*.

Recognising and understanding domestic abuse

Many participants did not initially recognise nor name their experiences as abuse. Furzana explained she did not have *"the language to be able to explain those experiences"* but felt that *"something is really off and that this is not a situation I want to be in"*. Saira also shared:

... it wasn't on TV, it wasn't things that people discussed, it wasn't on my radar. It probably didn't get onto my radar until other people coined that term when they were talking to me, like police officers predominantly or lawyers or people that were trying to reach out to help to support services ... I mean it was like a whole world opened up.

Saira puts this down to not being the *"target audience"* for domestic abuse awareness raising.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Domestic abuse policy arenas, and other policy arenas, should develop greater awareness of unpaid forced domestic labour as a specific and significant site and form of abuse.
- Improve understanding of financial abuse in the domestic sphere, including how it manifests within South Asian households.
- Ensure support services take account of wider kinship structures and family relationships beyond spousal partnerships.

- Invest in arts and cultural outputs that better represent minority experiences.
- Ensure policy and services recognise forms of abuse that fall outside dominant definitions and are culturally responsive to the specific experiences of South Asian communities, including marriage practices.

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