

Diversifying Justice:

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



RESEARCH BRIEFING 2

Domestic living arrangements and kinship structures

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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).

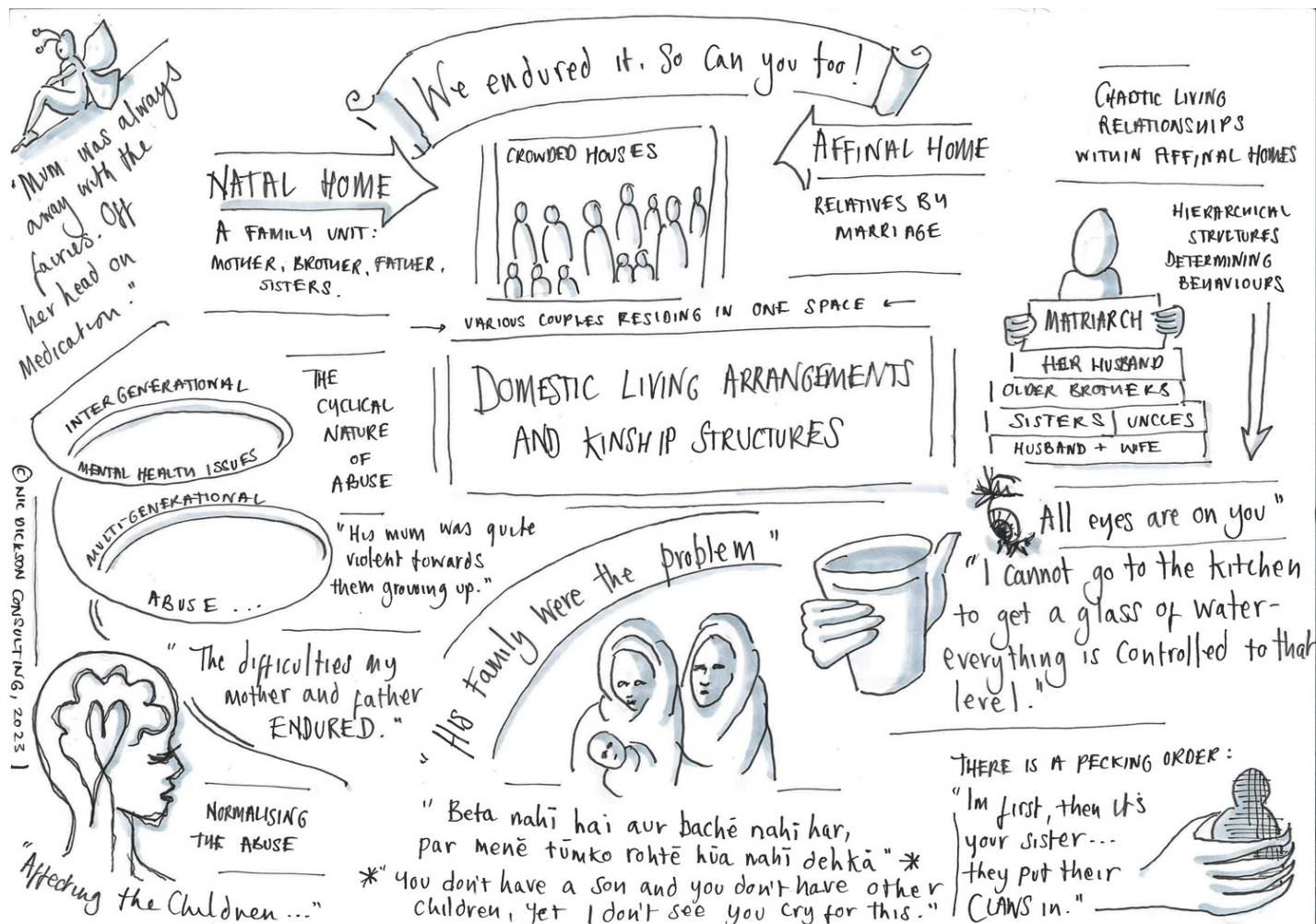
Despite evidence of severe, culturally specific patterns of abuse, and multiple and persistent barriers to support, very few studies have focused on the experiences of South Asian women in Scotland or explored how they understand and seek help for domestic abuse. *Diversifying Justice* aimed to address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

- **Engaged South Asian women in 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 with South Asian victim/survivors of domestic abuse** (n=14). Conducted in Urdu and English[2], 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: Domestic living arrangements and kinship structures

[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.



Domestic living arrangements and kinship structures. Digitised hand-drawn illustration by Nic Dickson.

KEY FINDINGS

- Perpetrators use a wide array of tactics to degrade, isolate, and control women.
- For many, abuse takes place within affinal homes[3], but for some, it is also found within natal homes[4].
- These tactics are often compounded by domestic living arrangements and kinship patterns, specifically found in South Asian households.
- All participants describe complicated and, at times, chaotic domestic living arrangements.

[3] Relatives by marriage. For women, this can include their husband's mother, sister and brother.

[4] Their family of birth, such as mother, sister and brother.

Affinal home

Participants described how living within affinal homes often involved hierarchical structures where more multiple couples and generations resided together.

Mothers-in-law were often described as the matriarchs who set the tone for the household. Furzana explained: *“Whatever she says sets the tone for others ... when you're living with in-laws, it's almost like the power of decision making is with everyone else but you.”*

Many participants spoke about sisters-in-law and other relatives who intervened in their marriages, sometimes creating conflict and tension. Naseem felt her husband's family to be *“the biggest fault in our families”* and more problematic than her husband. Aisha recalled: *“You know when they say when husband and wife fight, you should never tell your brother-in-law and sister-in-law. I told my sister-in-law. She would ask me and like an idiot I would tell her everything. Then because of this, there were more fights in our house. There were more difficulties.”*

Some women felt their husband's family was more controlling than their husbands themselves. Saira described how her mother-in-law directed her husband's actions: *“His mum had told him to throw me out of the house, that's why he was doing it.”*

Control over reproductive choices was also common. Participants were questioned about when they would have children and whether they preferred sons.

Noor shared how her mother-in-law accused her of using contraception, asking: *“Why are you not pregnant yet ... parhez kohn kar rahān hai[5]?”*

Khadija described being criticised for having daughters:

“My mother-in-law said to me once, ‘Khadija, I’ve never seen you crying for a child. Why should I cry for a child? I’ve got a daughter. She said, ‘I know, but beta nahī hai aur bachē nahī hai, par menē tūmko rohtē hūa nahī dehkā.’” [6].

Natal home

Some participants described growing up in **violent and chaotic** natal homes, where both fathers and mothers were physically and emotionally abusive. Several women spoke about poor **intergenerational mental health**, including undiagnosed bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, and suicidal ideation. One participant's mother died by suicide. Many participants reflected on how their parents' actions were shaped by the abuse they themselves had experienced across generations.

Israa recalled her *“alcoholic”* father's violence and threats; his *“cheating”* and being *“physically abusive”*. She shared that not only did he not provide any financial stability, but that he frequently threatened to *“kill us [all]”*.

Mothers were also described as abusive and unpredictable. Kossar shared:

[5] who is prohibiting themselves?

[6] You don't have a son, and you don't have other children, yet I don't see you cry for this.

“She held a knife to me, beat up my sister, locked her in her room ... She used to come home with different men. The home environment wasn’t good. We were made to feel very uncomfortable in our own home. She was also an alcoholic, so when she drank, she’d be very violent.”

Mental health

Mental health arose as a key theme when participants tried to make sense of their parents’ behaviour. Some described growing up with mothers who experienced severe depression or other mental health conditions. Kossar recalled the constant threat of her mother’s suicide:

“We lived in high-rise flats, and she was constantly trying to jump out the window. We must have been about seven or eight [years old] trying to hold her back. It was a very volatile household. The environment that we lived in, it wasn’t a safe environment. You would never know when you were going to come home from school and if mum was going to be happy, sad or what today.”

Amina reflected on her mother’s “depression” while raising children alone after being widowed. Others spoke about parents’ heavy medication use and its impact on their childhoods. Noor explained how her mother’s heavy medication meant there was no protection from abuse by her chāchū^[7]: “Mum was always away with the fairies, she was always off her head on some sort of medication so she didn’t have a clue, and dad was at work so he was providing, and then it was him, he would look after us and he would do that to us.”

Khadija described how, although as a child she felt her mother “never loved [her]”, she later came to understand that her mother had been schizophrenic.

Cyclical abuse

Some participants described how abuse in their lives felt cyclical and deeply rooted in family histories. Israa explained that she could only understand her mother’s endurance of abuse by seeing similar patterns in her grandmother’s life. Similarly, Fatima shared that her mother-in-law held and perpetuated the view that violence was inevitable:

“His mum was quite violent towards them growing up ... He didn’t grow up in a very nurtured environment himself ... [but] he became ten times worse ... more alcohol, more drugs, stuff like that, escorts and everything.”

These wider patterns of abuse often normalised violence for participants. For many participants, abuse felt so normal that they struggled to recognise it later in their own relationships.

[7] uncle – Father’s little brother.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Develop culturally sensitive policies and services to address the specific and severe forms of abuse perpetrated by affinal kin and within affinal household structures.
- Ensure policies and services also respond to other kinship arrangements that extend beyond spousal relationships.
- Raise awareness of coercive and controlling marriage arrangements, and support culturally appropriate ways to engage with and assist women living in these domestic environments.

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