

# Diversifying Justice:

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



## RESEARCH BRIEFING 3

### Marriage patterns and migration realities

Nughmana Mirza, Lisa Bradley and Nic Dickson

**JULY 2025**



## 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:

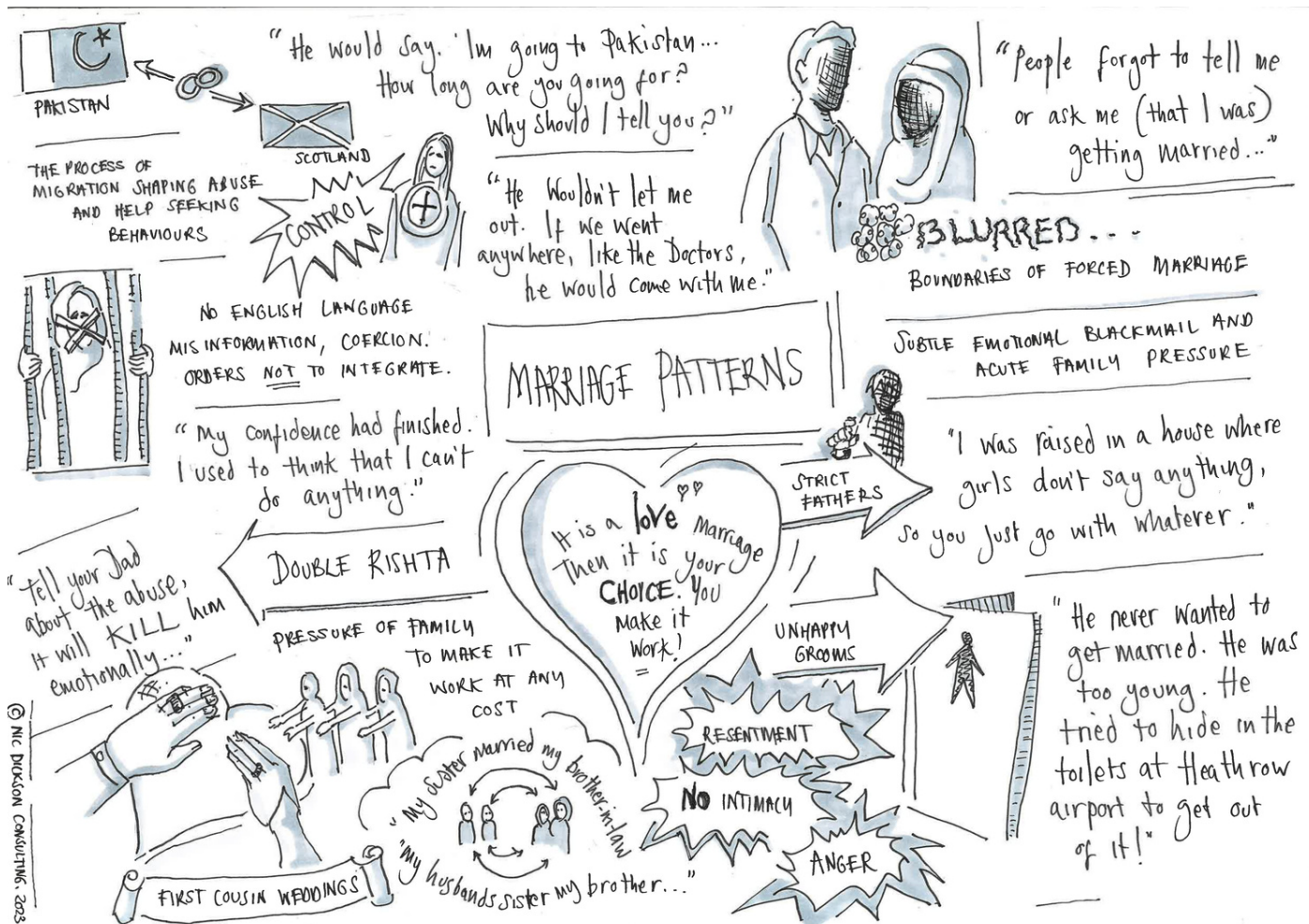
- **Engaged South Asian women in arts-based focus groups**[1] (n=15) to explore experiences of domestic abuse and justice. These sessions used object-based introductions and collage-making to support the sharing of personal and collective stories and encourage creative reflection on abuse and help-seeking.
- **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: **Marriage Patterns and migration realities***

---

[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.



Marriage patterns. Digitised hand-drawn illustration by Nic Dickson.

## KEY FINDINGS

- South Asian marriage patterns are distinct from what would be considered more mainstream marriage norms in Scotland.
- South Asian marriage patterns are varied and complex, shaping women's experiences of abuse and their ability to leave unsafe relationships.
- Emotional pressure, family expectations, and blurred boundaries between arranged and forced marriage are common.
- Cousin marriages create additional pressures to maintain relationships and protect wider family ties.
- Migration, language barriers, and immigration status increase isolation and dependence on abusive partners and extended families.

## Blurred boundaries of forced marriage

Participants described how the boundaries between arranged and forced marriage were often unclear, shaped by emotional blackmail, family pressure, and the absence of full consent. This reflects research showing that there can be a “slippage” between arranged and forced marriage in the UK, and that the distinction is not only about the presence or absence of consent, but also about the pressures applied to secure agreement (Gangoli et al., 2011). Some women either named their marriages as “forced” or described them as such – where *“there is no full or free consent and where duress is used to enact the marriage or to seek consent”* (Chantler, 2012: 176).

For example, some women were only informed of their marriage on the wedding day or had never met their husbands beforehand. Khadija explained she did not realise she was getting married until her wedding outfit was presented to her and described the emotional coercion from her father:

***“He told me that he’s very ill, and if I don’t get married, something will happen and then my mum’s side will come and take me to the village, and they will sell me or they will do worse things. So, he thought it’s better for me.”***

Khadija herself still questioned whether it had been forced:

***“... obviously at that time you are in a very different frame of mind. But with the time I reflect back, and I think, ‘Was that a forced marriage?’ That was definitely something which was not arranged in a way, but I struggle to define it at times that it’s somewhere in between because I look back and I say, ‘So if I would have said to my father, no, would he have listened?’ But then I was raised in a house where girls don’t say anything, so you just go on with whatever happens.”***

Some women said their husbands were also pressured into marriage, creating resentment, lack of intimacy, and infidelity. Aisha recalled her husband disclosing on their wedding night that he loved someone else: *“I was embarrassed, so I didn’t say anything. I was like ‘fine, good for you’. What else was I supposed to do say. It was the first day. Who fights on the first day?”*

**‘Double Rishta<sup>[3]</sup>’ – cousin marriages and intertwined family relationships<sup>[4]</sup>**

---

[3] Urdu word for relationship.

[4] Shaw and Charsley (2006:418): Refers to marriage with cousins, but literally means a double relationship.

Twelve participants described being married to a first cousin, often as part of double rishta arrangements, where siblings from one household marry siblings from another. These consanguineous marriages (Hussain, 1999; Shaw & Charsley, 2006) created complex ties that merged affinal<sup>[5]</sup> and natal<sup>[6]</sup> relationships, making it harder for women to leave abusive situations. Sumer explained:

***“My marriage was cousin marriage, not only cousin marriage, but it was one household brother and sister getting married to a cousin’s brother and sister... My sister is married to my brother-in-law and my husband’s sister is married to my brother.”***

Many participants described feeling pressure to make these marriages work to protect relationships with close kin. For some, this sense of familiarity was positive. Parveen explained feeling safe when knowing “*it’s your uncles house, it’s your aunts house*”. Aisha shared that her mother-in-law, who was also her “*phupo*<sup>[7]</sup>”, “*didn’t deprive me of anything*” and was “*really good*.” For others, these arrangements intensified control and abuse. Khadija explained that having her brother married to her husband’s sister meant her brother became part of the same structure that oppressed her. She felt she could not speak out:

***“My mother-in-law used to say to me that if you speak up or if you tell your dad about the abuse you’re experiencing, that will kill your dad emotionally and it will ruin your brother’s marriage as well.”***

Additionally, cousin marriages can create complex landscapes to manoeuvre, with women feeling pressure to maintain the marriage to sustain other relationships. Women also described the burden of carrying responsibility for the wider family’s happiness. Sumer reflected: “... *[The] women is carrying not only her own marriage pressure, but somebody else’s happiness is depending on her as well*”.

## Migration

Migration, immigration status, and language barriers were key factors shaping women’s experiences of domestic abuse. Some participants (n=6) had moved from Pakistan to the UK for marriage and described arriving without English, which left them dependent on abusive partners for information, communication, and access to support. Others were UK-born but married to men who had migrated (n=5), which sometimes introduced additional pressures and control.

Women spoke about how lack of language skills could be misjudged as laziness. Reflecting on her wider community, Israa explained how people would describe migrating South Asian women as “*lazy*” for not knowing or learning English. The reality is, she reflected:

---

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

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

[7] father’s sister

***“You need to take in the women’s circumstances. You don’t know what’s happening behind closed doors ... My mum didn’t get a chance to learn proper English until my dad left ... He wouldn’t let her do literally anything. Work, learn, nothing. He didn’t want her to grow in any aspect to understand what was around her.”***

Aisha described giving birth and being unable to communicate with healthcare staff, having to rely on her husband even when he refused to help. She also spoke of another incident where her health had severely deteriorated. Her husband refused to take her to a hospital and instead told her, *“Eat a painkiller, you will be fine.”*

Some participants explained that they did not know things like when their child should start nursery and school, or the telephone number for the police. Misinformation was often used to keep women isolated. Aisha, who didn’t speak English, shared that she was instructed by her husband and her brother-in-law not to talk to anyone, including *“white women”*, and to *“with your head down and come home with your head down”*:

***“[They told me] ‘the police will come and take you away’. So, I never spoke to anyone.”***

Some women were accompanied everywhere so they could not learn or seek help. Hena explained:

***“My problem was that he wouldn’t let me go out. If we went anywhere, like the doctors, he would come with me. He never used to let me go anywhere on my own, so I don’t get information from anyone.”***

A few participants described how migrant husbands, too, used controlling behaviours to reassert power. Fatima recalled:

***“He would just get up and say, ‘I’m going to Pakistan.’ ‘How long are you going for?’ ‘Why should I tell you?’ ‘When are you going?’ ‘Why should I tell you?’ Packing up his bags and leaving, ‘I’m going to Spain for a week.’ ‘Okay, when are you going?’ ‘I’m not going to tell you.’ ‘When are you back?’ ‘I’m not going to tell you.’”***

Hena described the lasting impact of these experiences:

***“My confidence had finished. I used to think that I can’t do anything. I don’t know anything. I’m the world’s most useless person. I don’t know anything. I can’t even speak, nor do I know any work [cries].”***

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Ensure policy and services recognise the specific vulnerabilities created by migration, including dependency linked to immigration status and lack of English language skills.
- Further investment in accessible, high-quality interpreting and advocacy support for migrant women experiencing domestic abuse.
- Develop information resources in multiple languages to counter misinformation used to isolate women and restrict their rights.
- Create and provide targeted training for frontline practitioners, including interpreters, to understand and safely respond to the additional risks faced by migrant and linguistically isolated women, including awareness-raising around signs of coercion, control, and misinformation.

## REFERENCES

BMA. (2014) Domestic Abuse. BMA Professional Policy Division and the Board of Science. Available from: <https://www.bma.org.uk/collective-voice/policy-and-research/equality/healthcare-for-vulnerable-group/domestic-abuse-report>.

Burman, E. and Chantler, K. (2005) 'Domestic violence and minoritisation: Legal and policy barriers facing minoritized women leaving violent relationships', *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 28(1): 59–74.

Chantler, K. (2012) 'Recognition of and Intervention in Forced Marriage as a Form of Violence and Abuse', *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 13(3): 176-183.

Gangoli, G., Chantler, K., Hester, M. and Singleton, A. (2011) 'Understanding Forced Marriage: Definitions and Realities.' In *Forced Marriage: Introducing a Social Justice and Human Rights Perspective*, AK Gill and S Anitha (eds), 25–45. London: Zed Books Ltd.

Gill, A. (2004) 'Voicing the silent fear: South Asian women's experiences of domestic violence', *Howard Journal* 43(5):465–483.

Gill, A. and Virdee, G. (2021) 'Intersectional interventions to prevent violence against women in Black and minority ethnic communities'. In *Domestic Abuse across the life course*, L Radford and RK Thiara (eds). Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London.

Hussain, R. (1999) 'Community perceptions of reasons for preference for consanguineous marriages in Pakistan', *J. biosoc.Sci.* 31: 449-461.

Mirza, N., Bradley, L. and Dickson, N. (2025) Diversifying Justice: Revealing domestic abuse realities and viable help-seeking pathways for South Asian women in Scotland, Project Report, SCCJR. Available at: <https://www.sccjr.ac.uk/publication/diversifying-justice-report-2025/>

Siddiqui, H. (2018) 'Counting the cost: BME women and gender-based violence in the UK', IPPR Progressive Review 24(4). Available from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/newe.12076>

Shaw, A. and Charsley, A. (2006) 'Rishtas: adding emotion to strategy in understanding British Pakistani transnational marriages', Global Networks 6(4): 405-421.

Tonsing, K. and Tonsing, J. (2019) 'Exploring South Asian Women's Experiences of Domestic Violence and Help-Seeking Within the Sociocultural Context in Hong Kong', Violence Against Women 25(12): 1417-1432.