

Diversifying Justice:

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



RESEARCH BRIEFING 4

Cultural and Community Dynamics

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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).

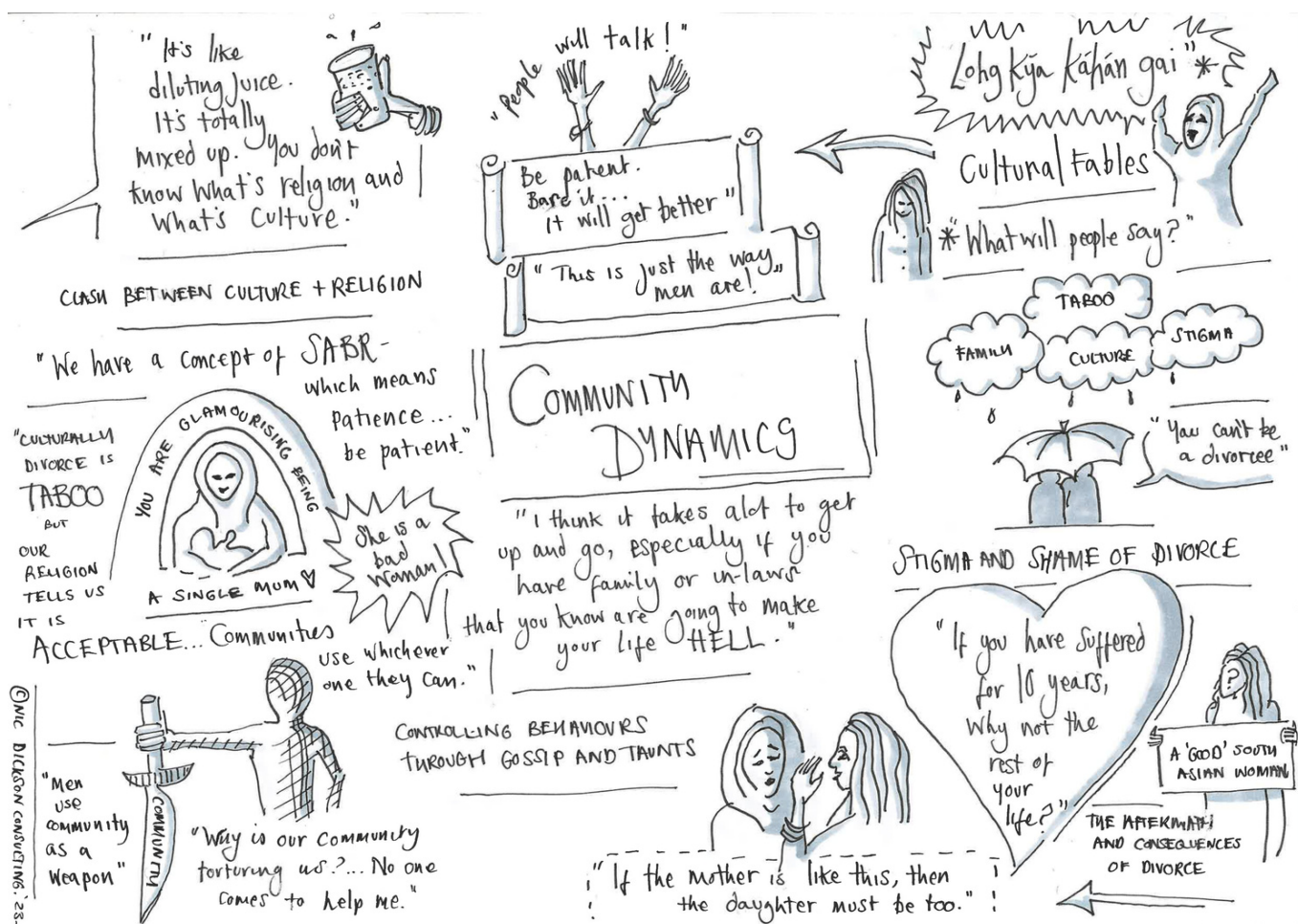
Despite evidence of severe, culturally specific patterns of abuse, and multiple and persistent barriers to support, very few studies have focused on the experiences of South Asian women in Scotland or explored how they understand and seek help for domestic abuse. *Diversifying Justice* aimed to address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

- **Engaged South Asian women in 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: **Cultural and community Dynamics***

[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.



Community dynamics. Digitised hand-drawn illustration by Nic Dickson.

KEY FINDINGS

- Racism and migration increase dependence on South Asian communities, which can also be used to control, isolate, and abuse women.
- Cultural expectations, gossip, and fear of judgement pressure women to stay silent or remain in unsafe relationships.
- Divorce is heavily stigmatised, creating shame and barriers to leaving abuse.
- From childhood, many South Asian women are taught that marriage must succeed at all costs, no matter the harm.
- Cultural and religious beliefs are frequently mixed or misused to justify abuse and prevent divorce.
- Limiting access to Islamic education leaves women unaware of their rights and more vulnerable to religious manipulation.

Cultural Fables

Participants described how stories and messages were “drilled” in participants from a young age, shaping their views of marriage, abuse, and silence. Some women were told from a young age that their husbands were their “*mujahzī khūdā*”[3] and that marriage must work at any cost. Another phrase repeated across many accounts was “*lohg kyā kāhān gai?* [4]” which created a lasting fear of judgement and pressure to conform to cultural expectations of what it means to be a “good” South Asian woman. Noor described this sense of performing for others:

“It’s almost like it’s a double life that when we were growing up families want you to show keh lōhgo kai liyai ehsai kurlō[5]. I think a lot of things in our childhood we do because we are told that this is for that this is for lōhg[6] and lōhg becomes very important.”

Even when women recognised abuse, they were told to be quiet, compromise, and endure. Noreen explained: “*No matter what you go through, people go through hell ... But they just keep quiet*”.

Noor described how her affinal kin[7] enforced secrecy.

“... whatever happens in this house it has to stay in this house, you can’t talk about it vurnā budnāmī ho ghī[8], lōgh bahtai karain gai[9] ... that was the biggest thing that you don’t tell anybody.”

Khadija shared the consequences of such silencing behaviour: “*You just become people pleaser because you just think people around are you so important.*”

When participants did speak up, they were met with dismissal and normalisation of abuse. Israa described how the community accepted violence as inevitable:

“I’ve done work with different women’s organisations and it’s a lot of single mums with four kids ... The stuff that they said to me that their husbands had done to them and left them homeless and left them because there’s four girls. Again, it was the same pattern of, ‘Oh, but you know, men are like that. Men are violent. You know, you expect that. Men cheat’ and I’m like, ‘No.’ ... that’s not what men are supposed to be doing.”

Even Israa’s own mother tried to reassure her that her abusive fiancé would change after marriage: “*Oh, don’t worry, once you’re married, he will be fine*”. Naseem faced similar response for her family: “*Don’t speak. You shouldn’t speak. All men do this. There is a time that comes when he will change.*”

[3] Translated by Samina as: “God is your ultimate person, and you look to him [husband] as God”.

[4] what will people say?

[5] do it for the people – the community

[6] people in the community

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

[8] otherwise there will be disgrace

[9] people will gossip

Stigma and shame of divorce

All participants described divorce as deeply stigmatised – as “*taboo*” and “*frowned upon*” – and shaped by cultural expectations that marriage must be preserved at any cost. Saira explained:

“We’re brought up that you are married once like, so you make do, and you make it work no matter what. Divorce is taboo. So, they’ve probably had those feelings perpetuated. Think about what will happen to the children, think about divorcee status in society.”

This stigma created intense fear of ostracism and backlash, preventing many women from leaving abusive marriages. Noor recalled receiving no support after her divorce and being warned: “*You’re gonna be called a divorcee*” – a label that carried heavy shame. Noreen felt “*distraught about being divorced,*” describing how the fear of judgement and isolation made it harder to act.

Some participants highlighted how these pressures also extended to their children. Hena worried about her daughters’ future marriage prospects:

“... when proposals will come, they will ask, ‘Where is their father? Why did you separate? What happened?’ This pressure will always remain. If tomorrow something happens [between daughter and future husband], they will say, ‘Yes, your mum was like this too.’”

For Naseem, this fear was so powerful that she never pursued divorce, concerned it would damage her daughter’s chances of marrying.

Controlling behaviours through gossip and taunts

For many participants, leaving an abusive marriage did not end the abuse, but instead shifted it into the community. Women were often blamed for the breakdown of their marriage, accused of affairs, or described as “*bad women*”. Gossip became a method of community surveillance and policing, used to isolate and control.

Noor described being ostracised by the “*Asian community*” and being very “*hurt*” by them. Naseem felt judged and ostracised despite her husband being the one who left:

“I can’t tell you what I’ve experienced in these years and what I’m still experiencing ... he didn’t fulfil his relationship, and he left, but why is our community torturing us? I used to have the neighbouring women over and have dinners ... But now if I need anything done ... no one comes to help me.”

She described “*friends*” crossing the street to avoid her, afraid she might bring bad luck.

Khadija’s affinal kin were well known in the community, was “*disowned*” after her separation. Returning from Pakistan alone, she was met with whispered gossip: “*There is Khadija with her child, but nobody’s here to pick her up from her own house*”. She went on to explain: “*that was my exposure to what is community and how strong a community can be ... how damaging a community can be.*”

Even single women were targeted. Israa described being taunted and ridiculed for not marrying, while Naseem felt continual judgment:

“We try to be brave, but we are not brave and strong on the inside ... They have seen us drink tea outside, they say, ‘you’re on your own, you don’t have a man on your head’. This is like stabbing a knife in ... Think yourself, who doesn’t want a companion. Do you not think I want someone who I can sit with? I’ve not even experienced this.”

Clash between religion and culture

Participants described a clash between culture and religion, where both were used to justify control and discourage divorce. Amina reflected that while culturally divorce is taboo, Islam does not forbid it:

“Culturally divorce is taboo, but our religion tells us it’s acceptable ... people will, communities will use whichever one they can ... to try and get you not to divorce or not taking on an abusive partner for example, so they can be quite conflicting with each other.”

She likened the confusion to “diluting juice” – so mixed that “you don’t know what’s culture and what’s religion.”

Furzana explained that the stigma attached to divorce came from culture, not faith:

“Divorce was always a normal part of everyday society. It wasn’t a stigmatised thing. And being divorced wasn’t something that prevented people from remarrying.”

The concept of “sabr”[10], was frequently misused to keep women in violent marriages. Furzana explained:

“... or some reason [South Asian] culture just seems to perpetuate this idea that when you’re within the marriage, you have to be patient. It’s like well no, actually, patience is something that applies to you in whatever stage of life you’re in, regardless of whether you’re married or not ... It’s not something that’s specific to marriage. So, stop using that concept as a way of forcing women in particular to stay in abusive or toxic relationships.”

Amina described being told by Imams and elders to “have sabr” but added: “You have ten years of sabr and ... you get black and blue.”

Noreen pointed out that many women don’t know their religious rights and “just listen to their elders saying, oh no, Islam says divorce is frowned upon.” Fatima, in contrast, said her faith gave her strength to leave:

“Our deen[11] does not tolerate this [abuse], it does not give any man the right to make a woman feel the way he made me feel. That had absolutely nothing to do with Islam, that had to do with Pakistani culture.”

Some participants felt men deliberately blocked women’s access to Islamic education, fearing it would empower them. Amina described certain urban areas of Scotland as a “breeding” ground for cultural toxicity and shared how women in their forties were only starting to learn their rights. She recalled supporting a woman denied cancer treatment because her husband claimed it

[10] patience

[11] religion

was religiously forbidden to be examined by a male doctor. She spoke of other women who were pressured to have multiple children in the name of faith:

“They’re having a child, after child, after child. They’ve got three or four children all under the age of five. That for me is a form of abuse.”

Without access to accurate Islamic education, participants felt South Asian women would remain vulnerable to manipulation and control.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Invest in the development of community education initiatives that differentiate cultural practices from Islamic teachings, and promote awareness of women’s rights in Islam, including the right to divorce.
- Develop culturally and religiously informed training for frontline professionals to recognise when religious narratives are misused to justify abuse and control.
- Further enhance the provision of safe spaces where women can learn about their rights without fear of stigma or repercussion.
- Challenge harmful cultural narratives that shame women for leaving abusive marriages through partnership with trusted community leaders.

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