



## **Brief to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women**

February 18,2022

### **Background:**

Established in 1982 South Asian Women's Centre (SAWC) has over 35 years of experience and acquired expertise in serving South Asian women living in abusive situations. SAWC has served 900 women from abusive situations over the past 3 years; almost 95% of them live in poverty, which is further exacerbated if they leave the abuse. SAWC is careful not to identify the South Asian community as homogenous. 90% of SAWC clients are from patriarchal traditional families. Marital sexual abuse is not even viewed as abuse, but rather as marital duty. Family loyalty, social and religious isolation dominate the unwillingness to report a family member for fear of reprisal and deportation.

Our internal statistics show that our South Asian women clients have unique needs compared to other communities because some of them live in joint patriarchal families controlled by spouses and in-laws. Other Issues include spousal dependency, low literacy, fear of deportation, forced marriage, language barriers, no access to funds, and isolation.

SAWC has undertaken groundbreaking research and training on forced marriage human trafficking, conditional permanent residency, honour-based violence, marital rape, and female feticide; SAWC is frequently called upon for comment by the media and has served as an expert on panels; all of these demonstrate SAWC's historical connection to our community and our deep understanding of our community's social challenges.



The South Asian population is the largest growing population. According to CIC, the South Asian group is amongst the top five source countries to seek immigration. Census stats establish that by the year 2017 more than one million South Asians will call Toronto home and to quote CBC, “making this city the largest South Asian Diaspora in the western hemisphere”. Yet, Violence against South Asian women, within the community, has increased and is at an all-time high. Most recently there has been some coverage in various media reports, including a recent segment featured by the CBC to highlight the severity of violence. There is literature analyzing ethno-racial inequalities in Toronto (Ornstein 2001; Ornstein 2006; Khosla 2003; MacDonnell 2004; Galabuzzi 2006).

Statistics gathered in the above reports focus on ethno-racial inequalities experienced by South Asians. While the South Asian community faces barriers similar to other racialized communities, this community also experiences distinctive challenges. They need not only linguistic and culturally sensitive services, but they need services that address and dismantle systemic exclusion. (Excerpted from SALCO) In 2013 SAWC assisted almost 700 cases of women fleeing abusive situations. Approximately 4% of the Canadian population identify as South Asian, a large portion of this 4% exists within the Greater Toronto Area.

The South Asian community views marriage and family relationships as a major part of social/cultural identity and tradition. However, there are families that are more traditional than others and continue to maintain a strong connection to their home countries including their socio/cultural and religious practices. Joint family structures still exist in these homes. The peculiarity is that in the home countries there has been greater advancement and many people have moved out of these orthodoxies, but some of those who call Canada home have not yet changed.



Based on SAWC's client feedback and case management, SAWC has identified Forced Marriage is a form of Human Trafficking. However, because of the lack of support within the sector many visible minorities, women especially, fear coming forward and sharing their experiences until it is too late.

### **Impact of the pandemic:**

SAWC would like to focus on the condition and status of South Asian women during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The issue of recovery cannot be trivialized as it will take years for women to get over the traumatic consequences of heightened abuse because of isolation. The barriers that South Asian women across all ages and genders face include racism, language, death, grief, access to housing, health, transportation, income security, childcare, immigration status. COVID-19 has magnified these issues. This is apparent based on the numbers of women seeking help during this time. SAWC's office has remained open every day to ensure we could connect and support women with unique needs. Between April 2020 to December 2021 SAWC's seven counselors received over 4000 calls and approximately 900 of these were related to abuse.

The focus of this brief is to look at the intersectionality between gender, poverty, mental health, trauma, and immigration status. SAWC has been struggling with questions related to the following issues coming out of Covid-19. We know of at least 10-15 cases of women whose spouses lost their employment and returned home. Many were employed as taxi drivers, restaurant workers or own small businesses. Most of them lost everything during Covid and men decided to return to their home countries essentially deserting their wives and children. Many women are not fluent in English and never had a job. SAWC spent hours filling application forms to get women some financial help, SAWC's food bank saw an increase in clients but the



South Asian community as well as the Daily Brea food bank helped us fulfill many needs. A couple of the men who went back home even remarried, completely leaving the women to fend for themselves along with the dependent children.

There is an intergenerational impact to this. Most of the women do not know how to use a computer and have no access one. So, the issue of online schooling was really tough for them. Isolation did not allow for any kind of personal support system and SAWC received calls from the same women 4 to 5 times a day due to their desperation. Housing became another survival issue as many could not afford the rent and some even joined with another family to rent 2-bedroom apartment for rent sharing creating unhealthy situation during Covid-19. These are the invisible and silent face of Covid.

SAWC also struggled with international women students who were evicted by their landlords, and we tried to work with the Indian Consulate Office, Toronto to find solutions to these problems. Some of these students were vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

It is important for this committee to consider having a representative from the immigration committee because we have seen at-least 20 – 25 cases of women who have sent e-mails because men from Canada have married them and left them stranded in their home countries. These women and their families have been exploited for money, jewelry, etc. in return for marriage. A large percentage of these cases are from the Indian diaspora. SAWC feels that there is a discriminatory practice when rewarding PR status to women because her husband may or may not choose to apply for her PR status. This is disempowering women, and we feel at the very least, women in these circumstances should be given temporary PR status so they can access legal services to fight for their rights.



**Recommendations:**

- Adequate funding to organizations that is more permanent, and core will be required for the next several years to focus on providing a holistic and not a patchwork solution to ensure BIPOC women's lives are free from abuse, stable financial security that ensures proper housing, childcare, and employment.
- That senior BIPOC women have access to long term care support, adequate income support, and housing support.
- That women who have been deserted by Canadian men in their home countries be granted temporary permanent residency status to enable them seek justice.

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