

FAMILY VIOLENCE IN ASIAN COMMUNITIES, COMBINING RESEARCH AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This study aimed to begin to fill gaps in research on family violence in Asian communities in Aotearoa New Zealand, and increase understanding of what can be done to prevent its occurrence and reduce its impacts on families, relatives and friends. The study employed interviews with migrants from China, South Asia and South East Asia who used family violence services, key informant interviews with practitioners working in the family violence field, and focus groups with service users, practitioners and trainees. The study found the triggers for family violence within these New Zealand Asian communities related to difficulties in adjusting to living in a new country, in particular, finding suitable employment and experiencing financial hardship. Men's dominance in some Asian families was an issue, especially when men saw control over their wives as a last resort to protect their cultural values and traditions. The racism and discrimination some women experienced in this study, when they attempted to find paid jobs or solve their financial dependency issues, put women at extreme risk of abuse and violence. The barriers to preventing or dealing with family violence related to perceptions in the Asian communities researched that family violence is a private matter, and to the women's desire to keep the marriage/relationship intact and limited responsiveness.

1 Acknowledgements

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BACKGROUND

While there is some research on family violence in Pacific, Māori and Pākehā communities, there is limited research conducted on family violence in Asian communities within the cultural context of New Zealand. Little is known about the factors that trigger family violence in Asian communities in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the consequences of violent behaviours at home, particularly the impacts on people. More importantly, how can a strengths-based approach be utilised to prevent the occurrence of family violence in Asian communities and reduce its horrific impacts on families, relatives and friends in New Zealand?

For the purpose of this report, the term “family violence” is adopted over other commonly used terms, like “domestic violence” or “intimate partner violence”, for two reasons. First, in the context of this study, the family is considered to be the basic unit of analysis and, when the term “domestic violence” is used, the abused woman tends to be the unit of analysis (Kurz 1989). The “family” is a system of social relations with unique properties that make it a particularly fertile ground for violence (Gelles 1993), and the triggers for spouse abuse lie in the structure of the contemporary family (Kurz 1989). Second, the notion of “family violence” has greater salience or “buy in” with Asian communities, where the family is seen as the fundamental unit of society and source of strength, and a family member’s problems are often considered a threat to the balanced or harmonised relationships of the family unit. The primary focus of this study is “spouse/partner abuse” (physical, sexual and psychological violence among adult partners).

For the purpose of this report, the term “Asian peoples” is used to represent the diversity and plurality within the Asian communities. More specifically, this project focuses on South Asians and Chinese. “South Asians” refers to people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and to Indian Fijians. “Chinese” covers individuals from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the South-east Asian region including Malaysia and Singapore. Within the Asian population, the immigrant communities are the focal point of the present investigation. The reason for choosing the South Asian peoples and Chinese immigrants to study is that they are the two largest population groups under the umbrella term “Asian” in New Zealand. Also, 70% of Chinese and 59% of Indians are recent immigrants (people born overseas who have arrived in New Zealand in the last 10 years) and two-thirds of the Asian population live in the Auckland urban area (Statistics New Zealand 2002), where this research was carried out.

The overall aim of this project was to utilise a capacity-building approach to address issues surrounding family violence in the immigrant and refugee communities in New Zealand. The specific objectives of this project were:

- to explore the contextual issues of social, cultural and economic triggers of family violence in Asian communities
- to identify and articulate community (and family) cultural/belief systems and mechanisms for responding to the needs of those affected by family violence
- to identify any underlying positive aspects such as creativity, leadership building, self-determination, and how these aspects could contribute to preventing family violence.

METHODOLOGY

There were five groups of participants involved in the present project:

- women who left their abusive relationship and currently live in a safe house
- women who have left a safe house and may or may not have returned to their family (the aim is to investigate their experiences and how they re-integrated into the community – or did not in some cases)
- women who have used family violence services (e.g. counselling, support and mediation), thus dealing with family violence, but not left their abuser or used safe-house facilities
- husbands/partners who have abused wives/partners
- key informants: professionals working in the sector to provide services to individuals affected by family violence.

Demographic Background of Participants

The demographics of the 56 Asian immigrant participants (50 women and 6 men) are described in Tables 1–4.

Table 1 shows the distribution by ethnic background: 23.2% of participants were Chinese, 21.4% were Indian, 19.6% were Bangladeshi and approximately 15% were Indian Fijian or Pakistani respectively.

Table 1 Participants' Ethnic Background (n=56)

Ethnic group	Number of participants
Chinese	13
Indian	12
Bangladeshi	11
Indian Fijian	9
Pakistani	8
Other	3
Total	56

Table 2 shows that approximately 43% of participants (n=24) have lived in New Zealand between two to three years.

Table 2 Participants' Length of Stay in New Zealand

Number of years in NZ	Number of participants
<1 year	3
2–3 years	24
4–5 years	3
6–8 years	9
9–11 years	9
>11 years	7
did not disclose	1
Total	56

Table 3 shows almost 30% of participants came to New Zealand in the family category (e.g. joining their parents, and some women, according to the interview data, entered into a pre-arranged marriage relationship); 80% of participants were citizens or permanent residents in New Zealand. The 20% who were not permanent residents were not eligible for the same family violence support services as the permanent residents. Participants whose current immigration or citizenship status was "Other" include individuals whose applications for residency under the Domestic Violence Act or on humanitarian grounds were being processed.

Table 3 Participants' Change of Immigration Status over Time

Immigration status upon arrival	Number of participants	Current immigration status or citizenship	Number of participants
Family category	16	New Zealand citizen	25
Skills category	15	NZ permanent resident	20
Spouse as sponsor	9	Work permit	5
Visitor	9	Student visa	0
Refugee	3	Visitor	1
Humanitarian	1	Other	5
Student	1	Total	56
Investment	0		
Work permit	0		
Other	2		
Total	56		

This study involved people who had a range of experiences with regard to the use of family violence services. In this study, the men were not "clients" presenting to services, but they might be asked to undergo training in anger management. Table 4 shows that approximately 65% (n=33) of the women in this study did not use the safe house facility to deal with violence at home. The qualitative interview data suggests some of the women stayed with relatives as a temporary shelter from violence inflicted by their husband or partner.

Table 4 Participants' Use of Family Violence Services

Sex	Use of family violence services	Number of participants
Men (n=6)	Did not use the services	6
Women (n=50)	Staying in a safe house during study	7
	Left safe house	10
	Used family violence services (e.g. counselling, support and mediation)	33
Total		56

The focus group participants were 13 women: clients, service coordinator, support workers and social work trainees from tertiary institutions. Their countries of origin included mainly India, China, Fiji and Bangladesh.

Recruitment

Women who lived in a safe house or had left a safe house were contacted through the various safe houses' management based in Auckland. Women who faced family violence but did not use safe-house services were contacted by social workers or

counsellors from relevant agencies. Male perpetrators were approached through the case social worker or counsellors (e.g. peer support groups for men with addiction problems) or through the researchers' community networks. Key informants were identified through community support people.

The three key informants interviewed to gain their perspectives on family violence within the Asian immigrant communities in New Zealand were selected on the basis of their experiences in the field, and their ability to reflect and articulate on the relevant issues.

Data Collection

The project researchers were competent in Hindi, Punjabi, Telugu, Kannada, Bengali, Urdu, Tamil, Gujrati, Cantonese or Mandarin; English was used where appropriate. The data collection was carried out in the participant's preferred language, and then the notes were translated into English and used for further analysis. When the data were interpreted and analysed, appropriate cultural expertise, input and validation was sought. The two main data collection methods were in-depth individual interviews and a focus group.

- In-depth interviews were held with women victims, perpetrators, family members, legal service providers, safe-house service providers and other relevant personnel.
- A focus group was used to explore the contextual factors related to family violence and to find out the means to address the issues. The focus group was co-facilitated by the author and an experienced family violence researcher.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis were concurrent and reflexive. Analysis began following the first interview. The initial information was analysed as a case analysis and served as a basic framework to identify emerging concepts, which were linked to themes and sub-themes, with new categories created as required. To maximise the credibility of the findings, a small number of participants and key informants and experienced researchers in the field were consulted after the interviews and focus group to check the closeness of fit between their experiences and the emerging research analysis, as well as the ease of comprehension. The key themes included in the results are:

- triggers for family violence within Asian immigrant communities
- barriers in tackling family violence in Asian communities
- strengths and capacities in preventing and reducing family violence.

The following sections of this paper summarise the findings of the study. The quotes are examples of responses expressed by participants in this research, however they do not necessarily represent the voice of every individual involved in this study.

TRIGGERS AND FACTORS

This section covers the sub-themes that emerged from the study regarding factors and triggers for family violence in Asian immigrant communities.

Factors Related to Cultural Beliefs and Customs

Some cultural beliefs and values were seen by participants as influencing violence against women. Participants explained how some aspects of the traditional Asian culture tend to reinforce violent behaviours against women at home. Several Chinese women shared a similar sentiment:

“[Chinese traditions say] ... a man should always control his wife ... he should never accept different opinions from his wife.”

A South Asian woman said:

“How you grow up, your background, what your grandpa teaches you, not answering back ... it’s what you learn from your elders and learn from your family.”

Both men and women have internalised these cultural values and customs from their early childhood. A key informant explained:

“Men are brought up to be aggressive. They are brought up in a special manner. They are treated specially, have special rights. Women are brought up to service men, to be obedient, to be submissive.”

Participants felt that some traditional values sanction and tolerate family violence, that sometimes women are seen as the men’s property, and some Asian men believe they have authority to do whatever they want. One focus group participant said:

“Your body belongs to him until he dies ... he can do anything he wants to do – there is no concept of marital rape.”

Another group member added:

“If I complained, my mother would turn around and ask, ‘What did you do? You must have done something wrong’. They don’t want to know ... no one wants to address the issue.”

Sometimes cultural and religious norms are subject to misinterpretations. One participant explained:

“When you are married you are in the service of your husband. He is like a God; he is most important. There is a proverb in India – ‘Pati Parmeshwar’ which in English means ‘the husband is like God’. There can be no faults in him. If there are problems, you are the person who will be judged.”

One participant quickly challenged the above statement, saying, “(That) is not said in the Book”.

Here we make two observations. Firstly, religious texts can be variously interpreted which leads to confusion and misinterpretation of what behaviour is acceptable and what is not. Secondly, we do not know whether or how cultural and religious norms are associated with violence within Asian families. It is a sensitive issue that requires a more careful discourse among researchers, workers in the field, and members and leaders of the Asian communities.

Some participants said that husbands might marry for the sake of the dowry or New Zealand residency. The dowry system is a cultural institution practiced in Asia, particularly the South Asian region. The system of dowry demands a sizeable amount of money and goods, such as gold, land, house or other valuable goods, be given by the bride’s family to the groom’s family. A current study found some men who have permanent residence or citizenship went to the women’s home country for the wedding and received large dowries, including cash, jewellery, furniture, clothing and other items. A dowry is believed to be one of the reasons to marry a girl from overseas. The following quotes provide some examples. One South Asian women said:

“He did not want to marry me ... I had ornaments and money and he took \$10,000 from me ... because I gave him money, thinking we are nearly married. He took money to get sponsorship only.”

Factors Related to Immigration

A number of women participants in this study revealed that they came to New Zealand on their husband’s sponsorship. Some women from Asian countries speak limited English, have few work skills and have no knowledge about New Zealand culture, making them particularly vulnerable to threats and abuse. A woman participant recalled what her husband said to her:

“If you don’t do things my way I am going to send you back ... this is what is going to happen to you and your family back home.”

A counsellor who has worked with migrant women victims for a long period summarised:

“Most of these women [in the safe houses] get sponsorship from their respective husbands. They legally are married and come here with a visitor’s visa. They have no work permit, permanent residence or anything. They have only got a visitor’s visa but after a few months it expires. They have no say in the household. They face domestic violence. They are tortured by their husband and by their mother-in-law, so they come to the safe house. Most of them are burned or cut. Some have been terribly tortured. They come with signs of abuse. These women have no protection whatsoever. Their family doesn’t want them either. They are told to go back to their mother-in-law and husband.”

Participants found that there were sometimes clashes between traditional values and values of the new host country. One focus group member put it succinctly:

“Back home, it’s OK. You don’t argue, you can’t prove your point ... but when you come to a new country, problems arise because you start asking questions and challenging authority.”

The women’s awareness of their rights to love and care, free from abuse, generally increased when they come to New Zealand. Many tried to adopt a new set of values but this change was not welcomed by their men, seemingly because the men are afraid they may no longer have control over their women. In the group discussion, women explained how conflicts increase in the family when recently arrived immigrant women want to assimilate to the host culture:

“As women come to New Zealand and see Kiwi, Māori or Pākehā women out working and earning as a part of a family, they want to do it themselves. They want to be part of New Zealand society, basically to integrate ... Women want to be in New Zealand society themselves, but men want women to remain traditional.”

However when women want to continue making those changes, they are confronted by strong resistance. The focus group discussion suggested that some ethnic communities or men become even more traditional, “more oppressive” (quoted from one group member) when living in a new country than they would when living in their home country. This was thought to be a result of clinging to traditional values in the face of uncertainty embedded in the new environment. Men started resorting to violence as a means to reinforce social customary practice when they were fearful of losing control and power over women.

This was not a problem confined to marriage to Asian men. Some Asian women who married a New Zealand Pākehā on a visitor's visa found they were treated by the men as a second-class person with no rights. A woman victim clarified:

"Men have got more rights here ... For me and my kids we don't have anything, but he has everything ... He was so arrogant, saying that he has his own way, like he has residence and he has his own house, so he wants it the way he likes."

Some participants said that unemployment, an unsettled future and financial hardship were all important factors in their experience of family violence. When men who had migrated recently could not find work and had money problems, anger could follow. A participant said:

"[A couple started to] hit each other ... and the children were involved in the violence ... A simple statement triggers an argument ... Money pressures don't help."

A key informant estimated:

"I think most of the violence, approximately 90%, is caused by financial situations. If they don't have enough money to look after their family and children, men may get depressed and take out their frustration on the family."

Some participants experienced clashes between the younger and older generations in the family. Often parents or older family members want to hold on to their culture and heritage links whereas children adopt a different set of values and worldview in a new country. According to some focus group members, this often results in arguments and physical violence against children or young people.

Factors Related to Marital Problems

Family violence among Asian peoples in New Zealand may be related to pre-immigration marriage difficulties that are exacerbated by adjustment problems after arriving in New Zealand. A Chinese man described such a situation:

"We had a three-year separation prior to coming to New Zealand. She was in [one place] and studied, whereas I worked in [another place] doing the dishes and cleaning clothes. We didn't feel good for a long time. It was a very stressful and frustrating marriage ... Our psychological and physical health deteriorated."

A husband having a girlfriend was found to be a trigger for violence for some South Asian couples. One woman said bitterly:

“There were some good times between me and my husband when we stayed alone. I always thought he loved me, but later I actually realised that there was no love between us ... The violence started again when another girl came into his life. She was working with him.”

Another woman remembered vividly:

“Actually he started to phone other women and had sex with them. His ex-girlfriend arrived and he is living with her now.”

Among the participants, some marriages were arranged. One of many instances is the following:

“My husband is a New Zealand citizen. He came to my country to marry me. His parents and my parents organised the marriage through one of our neighbours ... After a few months of marriage I faced violence when he became involved with his girlfriend ... I wasn't his choice. It was an arranged marriage.”

One participant described an extreme situation of a marriage she had not chosen:

“He kidnapped me and married me at gunpoint ... My parents didn't accept me after it happened. Since then, I've been living with him with nowhere else to go.”

Factors Related to Social Fragmentation

Racism, discrimination, language barriers, isolation and oppression of Asian women were indirect factors leading to family violence at home. Asian women felt they were discriminated against when applying for jobs and, in turn, this made them dependent on men. A woman with a graduate degree talked about her frustrations:

“I have made approximately 30–40 applications and they were all rejected ... I didn't grow up here, but I can speak English, I can communicate and I can understand people. But where exactly is the problem and how come I can't get a job?”

Paid employment gave women identity, status, a life role and bargaining power in the household. It helped make their voice heard at home. Unfortunately these migrant women found it very difficult to secure a paid job even if they had educational qualifications and experiences. A woman said:

“I had an identity when I was in my country because I could work there. I was a [high-status professional]. But what is my identity here? I am just a housewife.”

It impacted on our relationship. My self-esteem and self-confidence were reduced. One thing is related to the other. If I have a job, I have an identity and I may enjoy my life. My husband will value me and my children will respect me."

A woman participant explained how unemployment and subsequent financial hardship further burdened an already strained relationship:

"Employment issues and the effects on the children affect both men and women. If you don't have money and you don't have food, what will happen then? You can imagine that the relationship will die."

Language barriers limited women's ability to communicate with members from wider society, access information and seek support when marriage problems or family violence emerge. Language barriers also put women in a very vulnerable position since men had so much power and control over them. A woman said:

"The language problem is a big problem, because she isn't fluent in English. That's why she doesn't have the courage to go out and speak to people. She has a sense of inferiority."

Being in a new country and having no extended family around meant minor problems usually became big problems. Having little idea where to seek help made it even harder for everyone concerned. In some cases, men thought they could do whatever they liked because their women did not know anything about this new country. One woman said:

"It isn't too bad for a woman in her own country as she can go to her mother and, once in a while, she can come back. Compared with here, she knew her own country, her own place. She had a few relatives around her, but here she doesn't have any. Things are different here, people are different, and they don't make friends easily here. Isolation, frustration and the reduction of a man's status makes them control women more."

Issues to do with Extended Family

Women victims shared how in-laws could be uncaring, and abusive or allowed their sons to act violently against their wives. The in-laws' abuse toward or control over women might be in a financial, emotional or physical way. One woman from a South Asian country described:

"Actually, problems with my husband started just after our wedding. My husband's family never actually wanted me. Just after my marriage, they were thinking about going to [another place to live], so they asked him to leave me."

Another tragic account was:

"[Mother-in-law] gave me a hard time ... She knew that I was pregnant, but she made me carry heavy things, do all the housework work then go to work without having a break first. My miscarriage happened because of stress."

In some cases, girls were used as slaves when they came here after marriage. A young girl said:

"I used to do all the housework, like cooking, cleaning and washing. Even my mother-in-law gave me all her dirty clothes during her menstruation period for washing ... She had many men friends. When they are around I have to prepare meals for them. Sometimes I believe that her son has learned these things from his mother."

Conflict sometimes occurred when women wanted their family members to come here and live with them. One woman illustrated:

"If a woman has a family in an overseas country and she wants her mother to come and stay, that normally causes conflict. His immediate family might live with her and her husband, and it might cause big conflicts. If a husband and in-laws live together, then it's difficult for the woman to bring her family to New Zealand."

Addiction Problems Contributing to Family Violence

In this study, a number of men and women identified drug and alcohol addiction and problem gambling as being the primary factors leading to family violence.

"We always had violence at home. After coming to New Zealand I found him doing drugs and addicted to alcohol, so violence was a daily event in my house ... He stopped giving me money."

A Chinese man admitted he began acting violently against his wife:

"It was because of loneliness, role reversal, looking after children at home. It's boring. I was also accused of not doing useful things, but I didn't want to come here anyway. We argued over trivial matters. I started gambling, which resulted in financial problems. I had limited English skills and had to rely on her for everything. I feel very angry."

Contributing factors and triggers for violence vary but, from the interviews conducted, there are clear factor groupings as summarised in Box 1.

Box 1 What Triggers Family Violence in Asian (South Asian Peoples and Chinese) Immigrant Communities?

Categories of factors influencing family violence in Asian immigrant communities				
Cultural beliefs and customs	Immigration	Marital problems	Social fragmentation	Other factors
Cultural beliefs and values reinforce violence against women	Women have no permanent residency	Pre-immigration marital problems	Racism and discrimination	Living with in-laws
Traditional values sanction and accept family violence	Clashes between the traditional values and values of the new host country	Husbands' infidelity	If women have no paid job, they have no identity	Women wanting to support their birth family
Misinterpretations of cultural and religious norms	Unemployment, unsettled future and financial hardship	Arranged marriage	Language barriers	Addiction problems lead to family violence
Husbands marry for dowry or New Zealand residency	Clashes between younger and older generation		Isolation	

BARRIERS IN TACKLING FAMILY VIOLENCE WITHIN ASIAN COMMUNITIES

Family Violence is a Private Matter

Women can hide family violence as a private matter, which then becomes a barrier in preventing or reducing family violence within Asian communities and to providing assistance to women experiencing this:

"Family violence is a private matter. When arguments happen with my husband, I think it's the saddest thing in my life. We are human beings – arguments occur when two people live together, but it's a private business."

"Women can't make complaints against their husband ... Women don't talk like that."

"Sometimes, as Indian women, we don't want to be open. Our private lives are kept to ourselves, we are brought up in this way ... Most of the time we need to hide things, thinking what will happen if anybody knows."

"You see if I am going to stand up and talk about my husband, nobody will support me. That's why normally we don't talk about what we are going through."

Keeping the Marriage Together, No Matter What

Research participants of South Asian origin said the first priority in a woman's life is to keep the marriage together, it does not matter how a husband treats his wife. As discussed above, girls are taught by their fathers or any other elderly person before marriage that they should not leave the husband's house. A young woman illustrated:

"My father told me during my wedding that when you get married, that is your home ... It is only your dead body that leaves this house."

One key informant reflected on the cost of doing that:

"Women want a secure life with their husband's family in an Asian culture. But for this they suffer and make sacrifices. At each stage they put their marriage first and try to keep it going. Yes, in many cases it does work. [But in other cases] we see it ending up with suicide or murder."

Participants said that women are socialised to be submissive to men, regardless of what he does to her to make her husband happy. Divorce or separation is unacceptable in most cases and seen to bring shame and a bad name to the couple's families.

Women Have No One to Support their Cases

Several women found it hard to make their case against their abusive husbands because the other members of the household were related to the husband and supported his account of events. They believed that they required witnesses, even though family violence often does not have witnesses.

Community groups could have an important role informing women about their rights in these situations and, together with personal support systems, help women when they are being pressured, as in the situations described below:

"I had some neighbours who helped me. One went back to his country and the other went to [place name]. I don't know their full names."

"I applied for a protection order and then I withdrew it because of the pressure from my husband."

Unresponsive Community

Participants in this study strongly felt that the Asian communities hide family violence. They are ashamed to disclose it to outsiders as they consider family violence is a private matter. It damages the whole community reputation and brings shame to the country,

children and parents. A legal practitioner described how the community is unresponsive to family violence:

"Some communities cover it up. Like they don't let it get out. It's also accepted as well, that as you are a woman you can be treated as a second-class citizen. I know for some of my clients, their culture accepts domestic violence. Women are treated like enemies. They are supposed to listen to their husbands and they're supposed to be submissive."

If women start to disclose violence, it becomes a "community affair". One focus group member said:

"Community leaders turn up in your home and talk about it ... A very inhuman experience ... It makes you feel more guilty ... It makes women responsible."

Women are not supposed to bring their family into disrepute in the community:

"Women represent the ambassadors of their country. Women feel that they have to take the violence rather than speaking up."

Participants said that women who marry New Zealand men face a different kind of "unresponsiveness". They cannot talk to their own family and cannot return to their home country when abuse happens. Families from Asian countries somehow believe, "There is no violence in Western society ... white men are all good". There is a myth in Asian culture that women married to men in a Western country are protected by law, respected by their husband and given all the freedom they want. Therefore, parents back home have difficulty accepting violence against their married daughters:

"They won't accept this is what is happening ... They think you must have done something wrong for your husband to beat you up ... Women have no place to go."

Limited Capacity

Very few individuals from Asian communities have the capacity to prevent and reduce family violence. A participant affected by family violence said:

"It requires a lot of strength [to be open about one's personal experiences as a family violence victim] ... [it takes] 20 years to grow a leader ... "

Box 2 summarises the barriers to dealing with family violence within Asian migrant communities.

Box 2 Barriers in Tackling Family Violence within Asian Communities

Categories of barriers in tackling family violence within Asian communities				
Family violence is a private matter	Keeping the marriage together no matter what	Women have no witnesses	Unresponsive community, for women who marry in or marry Europeans	Limited capacity

STRENGTHS AND CAPACITIES IN PREVENTING AND REDUCING FAMILY VIOLENCE

Individual Strengths

Towards the end of the focus group, one member said:

“If we are stronger we can ... we have the power from our heart to stand up ... I learned, I grew ... I was able to stop the violence.”

The sources of strength may also come from family. One participant attributed her source of strength to her parents and her children:

“I have been in an abusive relationship for three years ... It was not my husband who gave me a life, it was my parents, they gave me this life.”

Other participants agreed and added:

“My children are my strength. That’s why I’ve been in an abusive situation for 21 years. I want them to be cared for more, have proper food, sports, friends, recreation.”

During the focus group discussion, it was mentioned that women can enhance their strengths, if they could see someone affected by family violence as a role model who could lead the way to fight against family violence.

Another two participants mentioned how they enhanced their strengths by participating in regular activities or studying (or doing other things) that helped to distract them from their problems and provided enjoyment. One of them said:

“I continued to study, got recharged ... I could disperse my focus from those bad things.”

A number of individuals said they learned to use their religious beliefs to fight against the violence at home:

"With continuous prayers, I could gain strength from God. I was nearly crushed by my husband and my family's attitude ... God is my only strength to overcome the hardship. If you are fully dependent on Him, He will give you more blessings."

Meeting with people from a similar background was another source of strength:

"I joined the weekly solo mother support group. I think it is a very good group where women with similar experience in family relationships get together. We share, empathise and support each other without any shame, guilt and worry. Through this group, we gain strength to continue living."

Lastly, a couple of participants found that working as a volunteer was also a helpful way to nurture one's strengths:

"I act as volunteer and talk to people and feel good, rather than sitting at home and being lonely."

For some individuals the above "self-care" strategies or ways to enhance one's strengths were considered as useful ways to help leave a safe house and return to the community.

Collective Strengths

Various sources of collective strength in existence were identified as preventing or reducing the harm caused by family violence:

- media, especially the ethnic or language-specific radio programmes and newspapers
- existing community groups or organisations
- existing support services (specific family violence and general services) and safe houses where women can go
- support and resources from government
- translation of information sheets and pamphlets on family violence to Asian languages.

On the whole, research participants (in both individual interviews and the focus group) were not very enthusiastic about discussing the individual or collective strengths or capacities to combat family violence. However, participants were more comfortable in elaborating what they have found helpful when confronted by family violence. The material covered here concentrates on what was helpful in dealing with a crisis and the subsequent reintegration associated with family violence among Asian communities, according to participants' first-hand experiences.

Help from Family

Several participants described in detail how they were cared for by their family:

“My family overseas sent me clothes, they cried for me.”

“[My husband’s sister-in-law] lives in New Zealand and she introduced me to a lawyer, so I am applying for a protection order, custody and divorce [separation] with this lawyer’s help.”

Another participant mentioned that the ethnic community can help:

“My family, the [ethnic] community, and auntie and uncle can help.”

Evidently in this study, it is rather uncommon to receive support from family, parents and friends in the case of family violence. Most help comes from neighbours, the wider community and professionals.

Help from Neighbourhood and Community Organisations

According to several participants, neighbours played an important role in terms of providing practical assistance to the family. In two extreme cases, they went over to rescue the battered women and children.

“My nice neighbour helped me a lot. They empathised with my situation and offered great help. They scared my husband away.”

“It’s a good neighbourhood ... I’ve been saved by them.”

A few participants talked about their “good, kind landlord”, “good people from the European community”, and “helpful, kind workmates”, and several participants mentioned obtaining help from church and “language school teachers and classmates”.

Regardless of where the help came from, participants recalled friends and neighbours alike were crucial in providing practical assistance, such as transport and urgent childcare.

Making contact with organisations like the Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB), childcare centres or the City Mission was helpful:

“The CAB helped my grandson with school and supervision.”

“I’m getting food support from the City Mission.”

Participants considered group support helpful in their ordeal:

“A Chinese counsellor started a solo mother support group a few weeks ago. I was encouraged to join in and found it’s quite supportive. Eight to 10 women with similar backgrounds gather together to share, to cry, to laugh.”

Three participants commented that employment courses, job training and evening classes were helpful in equipping them with work skills, and in turn improve their employability.

Help from Professional Services

Most of the participants were recruited from domestic/family violence services, and a number of people found their services very helpful:

“Staff in the women’s refuge helped me apply for a protection order [not approved] and legal aid.”

“The safe house helped me apply for public housing, to read English letters and filter calls by my husband.”

“[Name of family violence services] gave me a support letter for the IRD and helped me with banking matters.”

In terms of the multitude of services required, one participant summed it up:

“Emergency food benefit, friends, talking to people, safe-shelter, pregnancy help, health care, social network, telephone facilities, counselling, transport, social work.”

No one single organisation can provide all these services. According to participants’ personal accounts of family violence, a whole range of professionals or offices (e.g. social welfare, budgeting services, legal advice services, police) have to cooperate in order to provide optimal outcomes for individuals and families affected by family violence.

Help from Legislation and the Legal Framework

Protection Order: The majority of women found a Protection Order very helpful to secure some level of security. However some women commented that a Protection Order was a double-edged sword. Once women get a Protection Order it means they are taking legal action against the man. Police could arrest the man and he could go to jail. All of these issues could affect a man’s employment, as well as the future of the family. So it closes the door for any further negotiation with their husband or family.

The Domestic Violence Act and permanent residency: Women participants with non-permanent resident status regard the approval of permanent residency as the ultimate solution to their problems, be it for employment or accessing services like health care and income support benefits. Some women indicated that without permanent residency, they lived in constant fear and uncertainty.

Box 3 summarises the strengths and capacities available to migrant Asian women to help prevent and reduce family violence and mitigate its impact.

Box 3 Strengths and Capacities in Preventing and Reducing Family Violence

Categories of strengths and capacities		
Individual strengths	Collective strengths	Sources of help in dealing with family violence
Family	Ethnic specific media	Help from family
Role models	Existing organisations/groups	Help from neighbourhood and community groups
Religious beliefs	Existing family violence services	Help from professional services
Peer support groups	Translated printed material on family violence	Help from legislation and the legal framework
Working as a volunteer		

DISCUSSION

This study identified a range of factors and triggers for family violence within New Zealand Asian communities. The key issues are related to difficulties in adjusting to living in a new country, such as finding suitable employment and financial hardship. Men’s dominance in some Asian families remains a concern, in particular when men see controlling or abusing their wives as the last resort to protect their cultural values and traditions. The power men hold over their immigrant wife’s residency status, coupled with the racism and discrimination some women experienced in this study when they attempted to find paid jobs or solve their financial dependency issues, put women at extreme risk of abuse and violence.

The barriers to prevent and reduce family violence within Asian communities are best summarised in Box 4.

Box 4 Summary of Barriers

	Institutional barriers	Cultural barriers	Individual barriers
Examples of barriers	Mono-lingual workers Racism/discrimination Lack of service options Culturally insensitive systems	Values Isolation Shame Community Religion No support from the community No support from family	Values around shame and fear Self-esteem/self-confidence Language

Source: Modified from Warriar et al. (no date:10)

Women in this study indicated that the main sources for their strength and resilience were peers, religious practices, neighbours and professional services for support and care at the time of adversity.

When we compared the findings between South Asian people and Chinese, there were many more similarities than differences. Participants from both groups showed a strong sense of shame associated with family violence. There was also bitterness about the fact that Asian communities – and some families – are not responsive to incidents of family violence. The majority of participants, both men and women, referred to their adjustment periods after arriving in New Zealand, the difficulties in finding suitable paid employment and their urgent need to improve their English language skills. The effects of violence are very similar across the two population groups. The need for appropriate services provided by safe houses, financial aids, food and childcare are the same for the South Asian peoples and Chinese, particularly for women with non-permanent resident status. Another common theme that transcends the two categories of participants is men’s tendency to be dominant and controlling over women, which creates a lot of friction at home and leads to violent outbursts over trivial matters. The only two apparent differences between Chinese and individuals from the South Asian communities are the customary practice of dowry and the misuse of religious beliefs to suit men’s desire to overpower women among people from the Indian sub-continent.

The strengths of this study lie in the setting and design. This study involved individuals from multiple ethnicities, women and men from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and Indian Fijians and Chinese. In addition, collecting data from people with a variety of backgrounds, such as women at different stages of using family violence support services (e.g. participants who were still staying in a safe house, women who used community-based services as opposed to residential safe-house facilities, individuals who were new to the country and long-term settlers), key informants from legal or law enforcement backgrounds and helping agencies, reduced the possible bias of people’s experiences and views on family violence in Asian communities.

The combination of using individual interviews and a focus group achieved two specific purposes in this study. Firstly, the in-depth individual interviews provided a wealth of information about what contributed to their family violence, participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the difficulties in preventing and reducing family violence in ethnic communities, and the specific context of individual experiences. Secondly, the key informant interviews and the focus group enabled the researchers to explore individual and collective strengths in combating family violence and helped to provide additional information and insights into the means to prevent and reduce family violence in Asian communities.

Like most research studies, the present project is subject to several limitations and qualifications. Firstly, very few representatives of some population groups were interviewed. It is not possible to generalise the research findings to the rest of the Asian population. Secondly, the information and data provided retrospectively by the participants in both individual interviews and the focus group were probably subject to the problems of response bias and faulty recall. For example, research participants who have been free from family violence for over five years might have a tendency to minimise the effect of family violence on their behaviours and general wellbeing. Finally, it has been complex for Asian peoples to be involved in this study (as with all research studies) where they may not have appropriate ethnic models on wellbeing – or, specifically, on family violence – to guide them and there are multiple ethnic, language and religious groups under the umbrella term “Asian”. However, it is worth noting the Shakti Community Council has a long-standing commitment to prevent family violence in New Zealand and has pioneered a working model for Asian women and families to deal with the issues since 1995.

The project team would like to make specific recommendations for family violence policy for the Asian migrant communities, drawing on our research and the relevant literature (Fairfield Immigrant and Refugee Women's Network 1996, Abraham 2000, Natarajan 2002, Astbury et al. 2003, Fanslow 2005, National Asian Pacific American [APA] Women's Forum no date, Warriar et al. no date). The recommendations include:

To prevent family violence:

- Channel resources to support leadership development and advocacy training of Asian migrant women to increase their participation in violence prevention programmes and policy development.
- Government agencies collaborate with community organisations and immigrant women's groups to prevent family violence in Asian New Zealand communities, by increasing the awareness and cultural sensitisation to social services, health, justice, education, faith/religion, media, immigration, employment and government systems.

- Raise awareness of family violence in New Zealand Asian communities to support screening and risk detection.
- Increase visibility of family violence services in the Asian communities.

To respond to the needs of Asian migrant women affected by family violence:

- Development and delivery of a culturally competent educational curriculum to address barriers and stigmas that have been preventing Asian women from speaking out and seeking help.
- Health care practitioners, social workers, income support staff, immigration and police officers should undergo cultural sensitivity training to better assist Asian women. The training should address the various forms of oppression against Asian women, issues relating to gender and culture and effective cross-cultural communication.
- Provide courts with expert witnesses who can explain the cultural aspects of cases that require such information. Consistent and available interpreter services in Asian languages should be accessible in court. The gender match between interpreters and clients who use the service is important in this context. Interpreters should be trained in the issue of family violence and be held accountable when there is evidence of collusion with the perpetrator.

To conduct further research:

- Obtain systematic data about immigrant communities and neighbourhoods, learn more about family structure, religious and customary practices, level of social integration and experiences of racism and discrimination; empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative, to advance greater knowledge of modifiable risk factors, increase understanding of consequences associated with violence and advance the development and evaluation of new prevention strategies.
- Future research should focus on planning, implementation and evaluation of cultural competence training for a range of professionals and individuals working in the sector of family violence across the legal, immigration, police, social and health care services.

An understanding of family violence in New Zealand would be incomplete without an account of the experiences of those who are often deemed “invisible others” because of their gender, ethnicity, class and legal status. This report sought to capture the subtleties of culture, the varying situational contexts, and the relative unfamiliarity of the New Zealand social, legal, economic and other institutional systems. The remaining challenges are to improve inter-agency coordination, collaboration and communication and to establish how to access the difficult-to-reach group of immigrant women. By the nature of family violence, women tend to be very isolated and have little or restricted contact with the outside, such as community or cultural activities. Therefore, it is

important to employ multiple strategies to reach those women. This study has to be seen as a first step to assist government ministries, policy advisors and service providers to prevent and reduce the harm caused by family violence among people from diverse cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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