

Survivors shed light on domestic violence; Show opening this week focuses on South Asian community's struggle with stigma and fear

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An art exhibit opening Thursday aims to challenge the image of South Asian women as the victims of domestic violence.

"Re-Drawing Resistance: South Asian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance" showcases the work of women survivors of violence and other artists from the U.S., India and Sri Lanka.

Yet, while stories of resilience are important, it's still a struggle to give such women a voice. The opening night reception, with appearances from DJ Amita, poet Kiran Mehdee and novelist Andrea Gunraj, includes a repeat performance of Meri Kahani: My Story, a play developed by social workers to highlight the many forms of abuse that occur in South Asian families.

Meri Kahani: My Story is one of the many attempts to find innovative ways to start the conversation around abuse, a task social workers say is particularly difficult within the South Asian community.

Stigma and fear of ostracism are still the driving forces behind the silence of victims and people around them who don't intervene.

South Asian societies in Canada "are totally community-oriented," says Usha George, dean of the Faculty of Community Services at Ryerson University.

"Everybody knows everybody. A woman is always feeling judged."

Says activist Angie Rupra, "Women are told, 'Don't tell anyone' when it comes to abuse, or it leads to comments like 'The woman is at fault,' 'Don't talk back' or 'It's a family matter.' But keeping it behind closed doors is not going to solve anything."

Renu Vohra-Manocha has been involved in the domestic violence sector for more than a decade, as a board member with South Asian Family Support Services and now with Ernestine's Women's Shelter.

She believes it is essential for people to start talking about this openly and look for the signs within the community.

"If a woman is quiet, don't put it down as the woman is shy or she doesn't talk much." The problem could be social isolation, Vohra-Manocha says.

"A new immigrant, married and brought back to Canada - that lady doesn't have a social network and only knows the boy's side of the family."

Deepa Mattoo, a community worker with the South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario, says newcomers are extremely vulnerable, especially women who come as sponsored wives and feel obligated to their spouses.

She hears from immigrant women who have little idea of their rights. "A woman may take the violence because she is afraid of getting deported, even if she is a citizen."

Immigrant women often find themselves in a catch-22 situation; they fear that, by calling the police, they may further alienate the only support system available.

Or in the case of Tamil women from Sri Lanka, they often fail to report abuse to the police because they mistrust government services.

Agencies such as the South Asian Women's Centre and Punjabi Community Health Services have found that informal networks are the most effective way to create awareness.

By holding workshops and forming support groups on topics that appear unrelated to abuse, such as parenting, settlement issues or healthy relationships, these agencies have been able to make inroads where others have not.

Programs have ranged from community theatre that depicts abusive situations to a seniors' group watching the 2003 Bollywood hit *Baghban* - a film about emotional parental abuse - as a way to talk about intergenerational violence.

Ryerson Usha George, who was the executive director of South Asian Family Support Services in the 1990s, helped introduce public education programs that recognized cultural values, such as the importance of not breaking up families, while working with men around what is and what is not appropriate behaviour in the home.

But there was a problem with getting the word out.

"When we used to have workshops on domestic violence, we would be surprised when no one showed up," Rupra says.

On the other hand, peer-led education, by being less threatening, has been more successful.

Farrah Khan holds self-defence classes in mosques as a way to talk about violence around the GTA and understands how people worry about airing the community's dirty laundry.

Her dream is to set up a project where women are trained in both peer education and beauty services, such as waxing and threading, as a way to talk.

That is also why Khan believes friends and family need to take a stand. She is an advocate for the Ontario government's Neighbours, Friends and Family program, which offers advice on how to help abused women or speak to an abuser (for example, don't be confrontational, it may make matters worse) and when to call the police.

"It's hard for people to say they are survivors of violence," says Khan, who is also a counsellor at the Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic.

"But friends are the first place women go. They don't go to the Imam."

"Re-Drawing Resistance: South Asian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance" runs from Thursday until May 22 at the Women's Health in Women's Hands Community Health Centre at 2 Carlton St., Ste. 500. The opening reception takes place Thursday from 5: 30 to 8 p.m. redrawingresistance.com.

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