

VAW 2017: Issues of Economic Safety and Economic Abuse in British South Asian Households: Reflections from an ESRC Festival of Social Science Event

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Issues of economic safety and economic abuse in British South Asian households: reflections from an ESRC Festival of Social Science Event

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Findings from a recent study (Chowbey 2017) by Sheffield Hallam University focussing on South Asian women from diverse socioeconomic and migration backgrounds revealed that there is little awareness of the issue of economic abuse. Out of 84 women interviewed, 33 women reported some form of economic abuse. Although many women interviewed did not recognise economic abuse as a form of 'abuse' several of the interviewees were fighting it in their own ways. In their fight they faced substantial barriers, such as a lack of resources, access to legal guidance and family pressure, which prevented them from seeking support.

In order to support South Asian women suffering from economic abuse, there is a need to understand the economic risks that threaten their economic safety on two levels. While anyone can experience economic hardship, systems of discrimination mean that not everyone has the same opportunities to access economic resources (money, housing, transportation, mobile phone etc.). For instance, barriers still exist which stop many women from being economically independent. The gender pay gap means that many women are paid less than men and because of their caring responsibilities they are less likely to be working or working in part-time and low-paid work. Other risks here may be linked to other identifies such as age, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation and citizenship status. Welfare benefits act as a safety net so that if a woman is experiencing abuse from her partner then she is able to leave and have an income. Yet the immigration status of some women means that they are unable to claim benefits. This means they have fewer options to choose from when they try and find a place of safety.

The second type of risk occurs when an individual seeks to control over a woman's current and future economic choices. This may be partner or a family member. The gender discrimination which exists in society may be reflected in women's own households. So, for example, men may expect to be in charge of economic resources. They may expect women to stay at home and look after the family rather than go out to work. More economic resources may be allocated to sons than daughters. In some cases this behaviour may be deliberate. A man may choose to control a woman's access to economic resources to stop her from being able to make her own choices. If a partner is abusive, he may threaten to throw her out of the house if she does not do what he says. He may prevent her from eating food or turning on the heating if she challenges a decision she has made. He may stop her from going to work and having access to money, a mobile phone and a car in order to stop her from getting help or leaving.

To engage with the community members on this subject, Sheffield Hallam University held an ESRC Festival of Social Science event on the 8th of November in Sheffield in partnership with Pakistan Community and Advice Centre. The event engaged members of the local community, women from South Asian background and academics and practitioners. The participants concurred with the research findings and suggested a number of issues as key to ending economic abuse. Their suggestions considered how economic abuse can be prevented and how those experiencing it can be supported:

- Parenting emerged as one of the key areas where attention is needed. Several participants identified the roots for economic abuse in parenting practices in South Asian families which promote gender roles that encourage economic independence for sons and housekeeping skills for daughters.

- Participants said that parents saw sons and daughters having different economic needs. Whilst economic responsibilities towards sons are often realised through education and investment in making them financially independent, economic responsibilities towards girls involves savings for their dowry and marriage. Participants felt that this way of thinking is a big barrier in making women economically independent.

- Education and awareness of economic rights including inheritance rights came up as a major issue. Participants felt that there is little knowledge of economic rights among South Asian women. Several of them pointed out that women are expected to follow the inheritance rights and practices of South Asia and they knew very little about their economic rights in Britain.

- Participants also identified the need for communities to look within itself. Sociocultural norms can make it difficult for women to speak up and seek support.

Finally, women should be adequately supported in reaching out to services for help to become economically stable. This may mean getting support to find employment and access benefits or tailored support if their age, sexuality, ability, ethnicity or immigration status means they have particular needs or concerns.

Reference:

Chowbey, P. (2017). Women's narratives of economic abuse and financial strategies in Britain and South Asia. *Psychology of Violence*, 7(3), 459-468.

