

The Research Approach

Collaborative:

Maintaining the partnership between Apna Ghar & CURL by working together on all stages of the research, from conceptualization to dissemination.

Holistic:

Examining the issue from an individual, community level, and institutional perspective

Solution-focused:

Moving beyond identification of barriers to working with immigrant women to identifying effective strategies for positive change.

We used a tiered methodology.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of domestic violence among South Asian immigrant women, the research team conducted:

Case File Review: Detailed review of randomly selected Apna Ghar client files from 2001.

Legal/Policy Research: Review of literature; Interviews with 11 Chicago-based attorneys and legal advocates; and 5 interviews with national attorneys and advocates.

Innovative Service Models: Phone interviews with 30 organizations in the United States and Canada.

Of the 30 organizations interviewed:

- 7 were located in Northeastern U.S. region
- 3 were located in the Mid-Atlantic region
- 5 located in the Southern region
- 6 located in the Midwestern region
- 7 located in the Western region
- 2 located in Canada

Full research reports of "Transcending Boundaries: Investigating Domestic Violence Among South Asian Immigrant Women" can be accessed at www.luc.edu/curl/announcements/apnaghar/index.shtml.



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Apna Ghar
(Our Home)

Loyola University Chicago's Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) is a non-traditional university research center that builds and supports collaborative research and education efforts by connecting Loyola faculty and students with community and nonprofit organizations, civic groups, and government agencies. More information on the Center can be found at www.luc.edu/curl.

Apna Ghar Inc. takes its name from a Hindi-Urdu phrase meaning "Our Home", and since January 1990 has served over 4300 domestic violence clients. The mission of the organization is to provide multi-lingual, multicultural services including shelter to South Asian women and their children seeking lives free from violence. More information on Apna Ghar can be found at www.apnaghar.org.

Research team members include:

From Loyola CURL: Christine George, Aparna Sharma, Chiara Sabina, and Sara Plachta-Elliott

From Apna Ghar: Aparna Sen and Bharati Dev

Special thanks:

To the initiative's Advisory Board, Apna Ghar staff and Loyola CURL undergraduate fellows and Urban Studies students.

Transcending Boundaries:

RESEARCH BRIEF

Investigating Domestic Violence Among South Asian Immigrant Women

A collaborative research initiative between Apna Ghar Inc. and Loyola University Chicago, Center for Urban Research and Learning

July 2005

Domestic violence is a problem that affects women from all backgrounds.

Nearly 25% of women indicated in the 2000 National Violence Against Women Survey that they were raped and/or physically assaulted by a current or former spouse, cohabiting partner, or date at some time in their lifetime. Immigrant women are no exception. The issues regarding immigration status, linguistic and cultural isolation, and strong cultural or religious norms that differ from the mainstream society complicate the experience of domestic violence among immigrant families.

According to the 2000 Census, there are over 1.8 million documented South Asians living in the United States. South Asians come from a cluster of countries that includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan. This growth in the South Asian population in the U.S. is mainly due to immigration and not increased fertility. Furthermore, these Census figures represent only those South Asians who responded to the Census survey and does not reflect undocumented immigrants and refugees, thus making these figures even higher.

“...more research needs to be conducted in assessing incidence rates, forms of violence, needs of victims, and efficacy of interventions. A true collaboration between investigators and activists is a prerequisite of effectively addressing the issues surrounding domestic violence in the South Asian context.”

Shamita Das DasGupta, Ph D Founder of Manavi, one of the first domestic violence organizations to primarily serve South Asian women, 2000

Given this growth of the South Asian immigrant population in the United States, service providers must react to the particular needs of Asians, who often fall under the stereotype of the “model minority” and are not perceived as needing social services. Furthermore, those services that are provided must meet the realities of immigrant status and cultural context.

In 2002, Apna Ghar Inc. and Loyola University Chicago’s Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) collaborated to investigate:

- Effective models of culturally competent services that address the needs of domestic violence survivors within the context of South Asian immigrant culture and circumstance;
- The current status of policies and laws impacting immigrant women who access services; and
- The incidence and the trends of domestic violence in Metropolitan Chicago, particularly with respect to the South Asian population.

Case File Review

Based on a review of Apna Ghar client files comparing immigrant and non-immigrant domestic violence victims, we found

- Immigrant clients were more likely to need and receive legal services, and have limited English language skills.
- Due to the clients’ limited facility with English and immigration status, they were less likely to be employed.
- Immigrants were more likely to report being abused by both their husbands and other family members.

Legal/Policy Research

Immigrant women who are victims of domestic violence residing in the United States are in a “perfect storm” – a convergence of detrimental factors. Those who are not married to citizens or resident aliens have little ability to find relief due to their lack of citizen – or citizen like – rights. Those who do have rights are often blocked from exercising them because of a lack of knowledge, manipulation by the sponsor/abuser and fear of consequences of interacting with various US government institutions. Due to the intricacies of policies and serious drawbacks in serving immigrant women by many front line workers and adjudicators, women, regardless of status, need skilled advocates to assist them.

Immigrant women who are victims of domestic violence residing in the United States are in a “perfect storm.”

In particular, our review of the immigration and social welfare system concludes that:

- Many of the aspects of US “family based” immigration provisions create and/or exacerbate an unequal power relationship between the abuser (the sponsor) and the victim
- The US social welfare system limits the options available for victims of domestic violence to successfully receive support. In particular the lack of universal entitlement to family, employment and housing benefits, combined with the cutbacks in entitlement to other social welfare programs for women and non-citizens, have severely limited assistance available to abused immigrant women.
- A domestic violence service system based on “citizen rights” as opposed to human rights, such as that in the US, has some profound limitations in fully serving immigrant women.

Emerging Issues for Service Providers

With regard to the models of service delivery being employed by service providers around the country, there were issues with which organizations seemed to be grappling. These emerging issues revolve around a dialogue about improving services aimed at immigrant populations.

Conventional measures of success fail to recognize progress where it is being made.

Re-defining success

In a conventional Domestic Violence framework, it is assumed that success is achieved when the survivor leaves the abusive situation. When working with immigrant populations, this definition of success needs to change because of a woman’s dependence upon her abuser for legal immigration status and fear of isolation from her community.

Almost all of the organizations felt that this conventional definition of success did not capture the progress made by their clients, and that to truly honor these women is to laud their ability to overcome barriers, both big and small. For example, service providers talked of celebrating a successful navigation of the public transportation system, application for benefits, and knowing where to inquire for resources.

This strength-based approach really turns the notion of success on its ear and allows women to define what success looks like to them.

Working with families

Many of the organizations talked about the need to not only work with individual women, but also the need to create safe ways to work with the woman’s family and/or support system (e.g. relatives, friends). The idea of working with a family unit instead of an individual can be a comforting notion for many clients who feel that seeking “help” is a selfish act.

Moving toward a truly community-based approach

Organizations felt they were viewed as being detached from their ethnic communities and, therefore, needed to allocate some effort into “integrating” survivors back into their respective communities.

These organizations spoke about their efforts to become more rooted in the community – creating collaborative relationships in ethnic communities; building a coalition around a mobilizing issue (e.g. immigrant rights). Consequently, women do not feel they are abandoning their community as they seek services to free their lives from violence.

Conclusion: Individual “success” is determined by the ability to navigate multiple, complex systems.

In examining the issues that arise from both the political/legal and social service analysis, it is clear that these emerging issues are very much related; that speaking of individual survivor issues is absolutely related to the institutional issues around the immigrant system and human rights.

Decision-makers and policy shapers in “mainstream” North American culture often fail to understand how the lives of immigrants connect with, and are often determined by, institutions. Working with immigrant populations necessitates that we see these connections.

Making these individual-to-institutional connections and tying innovative strategies to them, organizations and advocates can create a space for these women to honor themselves and eventually free themselves from a life of violence.

