

# *Sexual Abuse in South Asian Immigrant Marriages*

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*This article focuses on a discussion of some of the norms around sexuality and their implications for sexual abuse of South Asian immigrant women. Based on the narratives of abused South Asian immigrant women, it explains how women define and understand their own experiences of sexual abuse. The article examines three forms of sexual abuse: (a) marital rape and sexual assault, (b) sexual control through manipulation of reproductive rights, and (c) sexual control through the construction of the "sexual other." Sexual abuse by significant others besides the husband in the immigrant context is also briefly discussed.*

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*In many cultures, acceptable levels of sexual aggression by men within marriage often result in normalizing women's experiences of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is often tolerated by institutions and by cultural beliefs that uphold the superior position of men, the sacredness of the family, and women's socioeconomic dependency on men (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Maynard, 1993; McWilliams & McKiernan, 1993). It is an important mechanism of power and social control in an abusive relationship and is used by men as a way of attaining and maintaining a relationship of dominance and subordination that is central to the patriarchal order. Within marriage, men have historically had more power than women have. Sexual abuse within marriage is therefore often the hardest to name, given the asymmetry of spousal power relations and cultural notions of sexuality.<sup>1</sup>*

*This article focuses on a discussion of some of the norms around sexuality and their implications regarding sexual abuse for South*

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Asian immigrant women.<sup>2</sup> Based on the narratives of abused South Asian immigrant women conducted between 1991 and 1993, this article explains how women define and understand their own experience(s) of sexual abuse.<sup>3</sup> Sexual abuse is defined here as a range of sexual behavior used by an individual to exercise power and control over another. It includes sex without consent, sexual assault, rape, sexual control of reproductive rights, and all forms of sexual manipulation carried out by the perpetrator with the intention or perceived intention to cause emotional, sexual, and physical degradation to another person. Using an ethnogender perspective, I argue that South Asian immigrant women's experiences of sexual abuse within marriage must be explained within a bicultural context and also incorporate the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class.<sup>4</sup> The interactive effect, particularly of gender and ethnicity, should include an understanding of how sexual interaction can be physically and psychologically coercive to immigrant women as they renegotiate their lives in a new country.

In South Asia, violations of a woman's body, particularly within the institution of marriage, are frequently justified through cultural values. These values make violations, particularly rape within marriage, "ethically permissible" (Mazumdar, 1998, p. 131). South Asian immigrants frequently transport some of these cultural beliefs and patterns from their country of origin to avoid assimilation and to re-create an authentic community ethnic identity in the United States (Mazumdar, 1998). This has major ramifications on the social construction of immigrant women's ethnic and gender identity and has implications for their experiences of sexual abuse. Abused immigrant women may also feel discouraged from speaking about or reporting sexual abuse due to their perceptions and experiences of ethnic, class, and gender discrimination in the United States. Thus, the dominant ethos of marriage and family as sacred and the relative isolation of immigrant women in the United States render the silence around sexual abuse pervasive in South Asian communities.<sup>5</sup>

## METHOD

This article gives centrality to women's narratives. In the feminist tradition, I believe that our methodologies demand that we

believe women's accounts and lived experiences as well as involve a contextualized feminism (Abraham, 1998a; Smith, 1987). I believe that complexities of beliefs, values, and actions that shape marital relations and contribute to marital violence are often most succinctly put by the women who are abused. This allows for an understanding of marital violence not just in terms of that particular individual but also the many others who are in a similar position. Other scholars writing on marital violence in the South Asian community have used such an approach (Dasgupta & Warriar, 1996; Krishnan, Baig-Amin, Gilbert, El Bassel, & Waters, 1998; Wilson, 1978).

Because research in the area of domestic violence has its limitations in terms of ethical and practical barriers, when compared to most other types of research, sources for data collection were extremely difficult and limited (Strube, 1988).<sup>6</sup> Data for this article are drawn primarily from the unstructured taped interviews I conducted between 1991 and 1993 with 25 South Asian immigrant women who were abused within their marriages. The perception of marital violence as a private problem, especially in the immigrant community, made gaining access to interviews with abused South Asian women a long, arduous process.<sup>7</sup>

The women I interviewed were Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi; ranged in age from early twenties to late forties; and were from different socioeconomic backgrounds and different religions (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Sikh). All were first-generation immigrant women to the United States (see Table 1). The unstructured taped interviews ranged in length from 1 to 3 hours. Interviews were conducted in English, Hindi, Malayalam, and Bengali.<sup>8</sup> The attempt was to elicit the type of detail that approximates the actual lives and marital violence experienced by these immigrant women. I gave particular emphasis to instilling a sense of safety, trust, intimacy, and cultural bonding that I believe allowed the women to speak about issues that are usually perceived as private and normatively unspeakable.

Drawing upon Liz Kelly's (1988) concept of "a continuum of sexual violence" as a means of discussing the range of sexual abuse that women experience, I include South Asian women's narratives of sexual abuse without their specific use of words, such as sexual harassment or marital rape (p. 115). Given the South Asian cultural milieu and the different languages used during the interviews, this is a deliberate choice. Based on patterns

TABLE 1  
Profile of Respondents at the Time of Interview (Self-Report)

Respondent	Age	Immigration Status	Marital Status	Type of Marriage	Religion	Educational Attainment	Occupation	Annual Income (\$)
1	30	GC	legally separated	arranged	Hindu	10th grade	clerical	12,000
2	30	GC	divorced <sup>a</sup>	arranged	Hindu	BA	clerical	18,000
3	32	GC	divorced	arranged	Sikh	BA	bank assistant	30,000
4	47	GC	married	love	Muslim	BA	unemployed	4,800
5	41	GC	divorced <sup>a</sup>	arranged	Hindu	BA	hospital assistant	6,000
6	47	GC	divorced <sup>a</sup>	love	Hindu	BS	systems engineer	40,000
7	34	GC	divorced <sup>a</sup>	arranged	Muslim	MS	chemist	22,000
8	34	no GC	separated	arranged	Hindu	BA	self-employed	600
9	30s	citizen	divorced	arranged	Hindu	BA	gas station	NA
10	32	citizen	married	arranged	Christian	DDS	dentist	60,000
11	44	citizen	divorced	arranged	Hindu	BS	nurse	17,000
12	37	GC	separated	arranged	Christian	BA	secretary	24,000
13	32	no GC	divorced <sup>a</sup>	arranged	Hindu	Ph.D. <sup>a</sup>	graduate student	12,000
14	29	GC	legally separated	arranged	Hindu	medical school	student	public aid
15	26	GC	divorced <sup>a</sup>	arranged	Muslim	9th grade	unemployed	public aid
16	35	GC	divorced <sup>a</sup>	arranged	Muslim	MA	unemployed	13,000
17	30s	GC	divorced	love	Muslim	MA	unemployed	18,000
18	26	GC	divorced	arranged	Hindu	1-year college	packer	17,000
19	22	GC	divorced	love	Muslim	2-year college	teacher	18,000
20	49	GC	divorced	arranged	Hindu	3-year college	programmer	30,000
21	31	citizen	married	arranged	Muslim	2-year college	unemployed	28,000
22	28	citizen	separated	arranged	Muslim	high school	travel agent	18,000
23	32	citizen	divorced	arranged	Hindu	BS	insurance agent	32,000
24	33	GC	divorced <sup>b</sup>	arranged	Muslim	6th grade	seamstress	7,800
25	30s	GC	divorced	arranged	Hindu	BA	teacher	30,000

NOTE: GC = green card.

a. pending.

that emerged from the analysis of the coded categories and the researcher's interpretation, typologies were developed.

My analysis of the narratives focuses on three forms of sexual abuse: (a) marital rape and sexual assault, (b) sexual control through manipulation of reproductive rights, and (c) sexual control through the construction of the "sexual other." These three categories are not exhaustive but rather are some important ways that sexual abuse occurs. I also briefly describe sexual abuse by significant others besides the husband in the immigrant context. The attempt is not to make generalizations but to profile how immigrant women experience abuses within the family, community, and the larger social institutions of society.

### MASCULINITY, FEMININITY, AND SEXUALITY IN SOUTH ASIAN CULTURES

In traditional South Asian cultures, patriarchal authority and control of female sexuality are important values related to the construction of masculinity and femininity and are often interpreted within such a framework by major social, economic, political, and legal institutions. To understand the different manifestations of sexual abuse experienced by South Asian immigrant women, it is therefore essential to understand what makes up South Asian masculinity and femininity. We also need to understand the norms around sexuality and marriage, because the iconicization of South Asian women has a major impact both within their nation states and internationally.<sup>9</sup> These norms and values are frequently the foundation for sexual relations within marriage and are transferred in complex ways to the immigrant bicultural experience in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

Femininity in South Asia is defined both in terms of submissiveness and power. Unlike the Judeo-Christian ideology, female sexuality in South Asian cultures is also associated with female power (Mazumdar, 1998; Mernissi, 1987; Wadley, 1994). Drawing from her interviews, Susan Wadley states in her study of Karimpur,

Female power is allied to female sexuality. Two themes emerge here: first, that there is a relationship between digestion/eating and sexuality, and second, that women have greater sexual power

than men—they can “digest” (*Hazam karna*) twice as much as men. Although many of the comments made by the village residents focus on men lusting after women and women seeking to escape, the greater digestive capacities attributed to women are markers of phenomenal female sexuality and female powers more generally.

Similarly, Dasgupta and Warriar (1996) point out that “the concept *Shakti*, femininity in control of her own sexuality, and its real-life translation, *Virangana* (the warrior woman), is a pervasive image that is widely accepted in Indian society” (p. 255).

However, despite these more powerful images, there is a general tendency in mainstream South Asian cultures to primarily construct femininity in terms of submissiveness, inferiority, self-sacrifice, nurturing, good moral values, docile demeanor, social dependency, and chastity.<sup>11</sup> This is particularly so in the socialization of females, especially in the realm of sexual relations, with the emphasis on female virginity.<sup>12</sup>

South Asian cultures ascribe a high value to women’s purity. This is especially understood in terms of premarital virginity. Most women are socialized to believe that loss of virginity prior to marriage means shame, loss of family honor, and resultant social ostracism if it becomes known. Sexual purity of the woman is a measure of male honor of her family and kin as it ensures caste purity and/or legitimacy of heirs to propertied classes (Uberoi, 1996; Yalman, 1963). Hence, there is considerable pressure to harness women’s sexuality by limiting their social interaction with other men. Sexual relations prior to and outside of marriage for women is taboo as family honor is closely linked to controlling women’s sexuality.

Sherry Ortner (1978) states that all complex agrarian societies have some form of “virginity complex” based on the importance of the connection between inheritance and legitimate birth as a criterion for determining status inequalities. The construction of female sexuality is closely connected to the maintenance of the social order and legitimate inheritance (Ortner, 1978). A man’s honor and his own legitimacy rest on the control of his female relatives whereas a woman’s honor is linked to her own sense of shame. Sexual transgression on her part can jeopardize her position in the material, spiritual, and social world (Young, 1993). In some segments of South Asian society, this leads to young women’s seclusion for fear of other men tainting their sexual

purity. The assumption is that women's sexuality must somehow be controlled because female premarital virginity is an essential cultural prescription that benefits men. Thus, men in South Asian cultures are taught to be controllers of women's sexuality (Wadley, 1994).

Until recently, for many South Asian women, especially for those raised in South Asia, open discussions of sexuality with parents and elders or at school were relatively rare and somewhat forbidden in the socialization process. This is not to assume that all South Asian women have the same experiences growing up or to minimize the differences that arise based on women's location in terms of class, religion, status, or region (urban/rural). In fact, these differences play an important role in power relations and issues of sexual accessibility of women. Rather, it is to indicate that the overarching culture in South Asia is one in which there is not much open discussion of sex, and women as a gender category are discouraged from being sexually active prior to marriage. Irrespective of material specificity, the one image that gets centrality in the dominant religious and cultural rhetoric is that of the "true" South Asian woman in terms of purity, docility, keeper of cultural traditions, and family unity (Abraham, 1998b; Dasgupta, 1994; Mazumdar, 1998). It is this image that is then extended to the immigrant context with little attention to the ongoing contestation of such images by the women's movement in South Asia.

Because the normative order denigrates sexual activity by unmarried females, understanding one's own sexuality and the nature of sexual interaction is drawn, at times, on stereotypes from popular culture and, in some cases, individual experiences of sexual interaction or sexual coercion by a family friend or relative.<sup>13</sup> Until recently, popular films continuously presented icons that focused the viewer's attention on the relationship between men and women, portraying specific qualities such as self-censored sexual repression as essential for women, glorifying chastity, and condemning premarital sex (Dasgupta, 1994). These popular culture images, especially in South Asian films, illustrate punitive outcomes, both personal and societal, for sexual transgression. Thus, the representation of women on the social structural level, through popular culture, gets potentially replicated within each individual and becomes the basis for sexual

knowledge, values, and behavior (Collins, 1990). Sexual purity is understood as the burden of women, for the honor of men, family, community, and country.

Masculinity in mainstream South Asian cultures is defined to a large degree in terms of men's power, virility, and ability to control women's morality and sexuality. If an important component of femininity is sexual purity, a defining feature of masculinity is sexual virility. South Asian men are socialized to believe sexual virility is an indicator of masculinity and that male sexual needs are natural. As access to women is controlled through the larger culture of virginity and chastity, it brings forth the complex intersections of class, caste, and religion in men's accessibility to unmarried women. Therefore, men's sexual knowledge prior to marriage may be drawn from pornography or limited sexual interaction with women, who are constructed as the sexually exploitable other, based on their caste or class status or a man's perception of a woman's morality.

In South Asia, the traditional normative order socializes men to believe in their sexual prowess and women to believe in the fulfillment of their husband's sexual desires without addressing their own sexual needs. South Asian men are socialized to have expectations of their sexual needs and assumptions of female accessibility that justify forcing sexual access, especially within the context of marriage. This sexual access is supported by legal, religious, and social definitions of women as male property and sex as part of the obligations for exchange of goods (Abraham, 1998b; Bacchetta, 1994; Bart, 1979; Uberoi, 1996). Male domination and the fulfillment of male rights then are an essential component of gender relations. This has consequences on women's and men's sexual relations within marriage and can lead to sexual abuse, particularly marital rape (Mazumdar, 1998).

## TYPES OF SEXUAL ABUSE

### MARITAL RAPE AS MALE MARITAL RIGHT

The sexual repression of women in South Asian cultures compels both men and women to view sexual intercourse for women as acceptable only within the confines of marriage. Traditionally, men are taught that sex is their masculine right as husbands and

little attention is given to socializing them to fulfill the sexual desires and needs of their wives. As the dominant cultural rhetoric upholds the subordination of women by men as an integral part of the gendered construction of the family, the socialization of both males and females in the context of sexual relations within marriage emphasizes sexual gratification for men and the suppression of women's sexual needs. Given the notions of masculinity and femininity, men assume that it is their responsibility and marital right to take control of sexual interaction and affirm their sexual prowess. This often results in marital rape (Mazumdar, 1998). Marital rape can be defined as when a husband forces his wife to have sex against her will. It may involve genital intercourse, sodomy, and fellatio.

Notions of natural male sexuality and ordinary sexual intercourse within marriage often normalize rape within marriages. Given this cultural ideology, many South Asian women subjected to sexual violence by their husbands find it hard to reveal the abuse. They not only have been socially conditioned to acquiesce to the needs of their husbands but also are silenced by the larger culture and structure that legitimate men's dominance and women's subordination in the patriarchal order. As Stanko (1985) puts it, women "learn to define their worlds and thus their experience as less important than men . . . [and therefore] . . . internalize and silence many of their experiences of sexual and/or physical intimidation and violation" (p. 17).

Among the women I interviewed, about 60% spoke of being forced to have sex with their husbands against their will. Yamuna was the second woman I interviewed. Approximately 5 foot 3 inches tall, slim, and dark-complexioned with dark eyes, an expressive face, and a beautiful smile, Yamuna was 30 when I interviewed her. At that time, she was living alone and had recently received her green card and a divorce with the help of a South Asian women's organization. Her story about marital rape is not uncommon for many South Asian women. Yamuna explains,

My first contact with him came after the wedding. That's when I realized what a horror the whole thing was. You know that it's not the easiest thing being in a hotel, I mean being with someone you don't even know and you are starting off a new thing. I think I must have been nervous actually. He started off very aggressively . . . was very aggressive. I mean the whole act was like—I, I almost felt

like I was raped or something like that. It was very aggressive. He knew that there was no response from me, but he continued obviously. He said, "You should not be shy." He just took it to be shyness. . . . I just couldn't get myself to talk. I think if I had spoken, I may have just said, "No." Then he turned off the lights and all. And I thought, um, one has to go through this sort of thing—your mind is prepared for some things, but your body just isn't. And I couldn't say, "No." I didn't say no and I went through it all. . . .

I guess I felt violated. The way he treated my breasts, not only was it painful, uh, uh . . . was very painful, definitely just very painful. I don't know what I had expected. It's not as if I did not know anything, but I was without any sexual experience. It's not as if one had read enough, one had talked enough of these things to know what things are like. But I guess I didn't expect violence. And definitely I must have expected tenderness and some kind of gentleness. This aggression really threw me off. It was fortunate that next morning my parents, my mother, didn't see. After that, we went to his sister's place. The next morning I was in a state of shock, I just could not get myself to say a word to him. And then at some point I said "OK." I mean I am married to him now.

Many women are sexually inexperienced when they get married and are emotionally unprepared for the wedding night. Here, unprepared means that although women often know that they will engage in sexual intercourse on the wedding night, they anticipate sex to at least fulfill some need for intimacy. Their concept of sexual intimacy is not based on personal observation or experience but comes from popular culture, such as films and books that romanticize and idealize the wedding night. These films and romantic fiction often portray the wedding night as the coming together of mind, body, and soul, where sexual pleasure and intimacy are felt by both parties. Often, the images portrayed are of women demurely but eagerly waiting for their husbands to show them the pleasure of sexual intimacy and ultimately the joy of motherhood. Because the films are not sexually explicit, the concept of sexual intimacy in marriage remains relatively vague and left to the imagination of the viewer.

If the wedding night becomes sex without intimacy, many women, like Yamuna, feel empty, lonely, and objectified. The sexual act thus becomes one in which women are silenced, controlled, and subordinated. Often rape occurs on the first night, with the husband justifying the woman's silence as shyness. Given that women are supposed to be virgins when they marry,

men confuse or attribute a woman's lack of sexual experience, her reluctance, or her silence at his aggression with shyness on her part as a bride. The assumption that nonparticipation culturally implies shyness in the case of the woman and must be overcome by the husband is closely connected with cultural notions of femininity, masculinity, and gender role expectations. Women often keep silent from shock and dismay and because they have been socialized to place their husbands' needs before their own. This, they have learned, is the glue that holds their marriages together. Many of the women I interviewed talked of their lack of sexual knowledge and experience. Many also described the pressure they felt to hold the marriages together, because marriage is an important cultural marker of a woman's identity and social status in South Asian cultures.

Thus, rather than enhancing the marital relationship, the gender expectations within a marriage lead to unilateral power and control. This is one of the first impediments to the development of a happy and egalitarian marital relationship and, later, the basis for continued sexual violence through the appropriation of the wife's body. Yamuna explains,

We went to \_\_\_\_\_. We spent about 4 days there. He seemed to want sex endlessly—all the time. And, I don't know, the way he went about it. It was terrible, even if I tried saying no. The first night I was silent, but by now I had kind of said, "Let's not." He did not listen. He absolutely said no. He just put it down. He said you just can't be like this. . . . He always said the word shy. He said, "You can't be shy." You must be bold like them [American women] and do what I ask you to do because if you can't please me, I'll probably have to look for it elsewhere. Also, sexually he would like to do things, like uh, um, like he would hurt me. Like say when he put his fingers in my vagina, like he would try putting fingers up my vagina. He would put two or three fingers. It would hurt. I said, "Don't do it," and he said, "No." There was no way [that he was going to stop]. I just couldn't physically throw him off, maybe I could have done it or something. I don't know. I couldn't just get myself to do this kind of thing. Maybe I was afraid that if I tried, if the slightest aggression on my part would make him more violent. Maybe he would beat me or things like that. . . . He would do things, like I remember one occasion, he forced his penis into my mouth. I just wasn't prepared for those things. For him the whole thing was like a big game, like some big play. Once I remember, I was lying and he just squirted his semen all over my back and started laughing at me.

Studies point out that immigrant Asian women in the United States are at a higher risk of sexual abuse than their American counterparts because they may be socialized to believe that they have fewer sexual rights than their husbands (Ho, 1990; Lum, 1998). For men, the assumption is that male aggression is natural and a normal part of sexual intercourse and sexual activity. As Yamuna mentions, rather than provoke her husband and risk his anger or desertion, she capitulated to this abuse. In South Asia, consent to marriage generally assumes consent to sexual intercourse with or without a wife's consent, and this is not treated as rape. The concept of marital rape is generally absent in the culture. Rinita Mazumdar (1998) notes that marital rape has "ethical permissibility" in Hindu culture.<sup>14</sup> Using three different illustrations, she demonstrates that the justification for this permissibility is based on the following assumptions involving the notion of obligation. First, entering into marriage obligates the female to fulfill all duties that her husband deems fit, irrespective of her own wishes. Second, entering into a marriage obligates a woman to produce progeny and, therefore, any actions on the part of the husband to achieve this goal are justifiable. Third, marriage involves the complete transfer of ownership of the woman (a burden) from her father to her husband. This transfer of woman as property assumes that the husband has all rights and that the father gives up any rights and obligations in relation to this property. Thus, Mazumdar (1998) contends it is from this notion of obligation that marital rape gets justified within the South Asian context.

The legal interpretation of rape in many South Asian countries is also extremely limited and affects individuals' social construction of marital abuse. In Pakistan, Islamic law does not view rape of a wife as a legal offense. Similarly, in India, a husband who rapes his wife is not committing a legal offense (unless she is less than 15 years old). This is because the law assumes that a man has the right to sexual intercourse, and the woman does not have the right to withhold her consent to it; she is her husband's property.<sup>15</sup> In Indian rape law, rape is defined only in terms of achieved penile-vaginal penetration, thereby excluding other nonconsensual acts, such as vaginal penetration by fingers or other objects, although these may cause considerable physical and psychological injuries.<sup>16</sup> Cultural notions upheld by the legal system in a way

strengthen men's assumption that it is permissible to sexually abuse, because there are no cultural or legal sanctions against such behavior. Although these laws may vary in the immigrant context, ignorance of the laws, cultural chauvinism of immigrant men, and the relative isolation of immigrant women allow sexual abuse to continue. Like Yamuna, Jayathi, a 43-year-old woman, currently divorced and working as a staff person in a hospital, speaks of her husband's insensitivity and abuse and assumptions of his sexual rights in marriage:

He was just too quick, too rough, and too crude. He did not think about making my feelings more pleasant. . . . All I felt was pain. . . . After the children came, the kids and I would be in one room [her husband's decision] and he would be in another bedroom . . . whenever he felt like having sex . . . he would ask me to come to his room. . . . After that, he would send me back to my room, go because the kids are sleeping there alone. It made me feel cheap. Like I felt I was whoring myself for him. There was no intimacy, no compassion, no friendship, no companionship between the two of us. I always felt that I was the cook, housekeeper, nanny, and then his prostitute.

Within the context of traditional South Asian patriarchal marriages, men initiate the sexual act, define its nature, and determine when it ends, whereas women rarely have any say in the matter. The lack of sexual gratification or sympathy leaves women feeling that there is no room for intimacy and caring. Women become the objects and see themselves as unequal participants in sexual activity. The sexual act is one in which women are silenced, controlled, subordinated, and experience bodily alienation (Abraham, 1998a). Sex, then, becomes defined by men for their pleasure and for women's reproductivity. This is not to say that women do not rebel and try to change their sexual relationships, or that all men behave in this way. Rather, it is to show that in an abusive relationship, the baggage of an overwhelming cultural prescription that allows men rights to premarital sex and unquestioned gratification within marriage, but defines women's sexuality in terms of premarital sexual purity, renders the marital relationship unequal.

Marital rape and sexual control are not only justified by men in terms of women's shyness but can also be a punitive mechanism. Like Yamuna and Jayathi, Zakhia's husband felt it was his right as

a husband to sexually control her. However, he did not justify marital rape and sexual assault as shyness on Zakhia's part but as her punishment for his allegations about her immorality. Zakhia, a 33-year-old woman with a 7-year-old daughter, migrated to the United States with her husband, who had been sponsored by his elder brother.

Zakhia explains how her husband did not work, and it was she who had to support the family with her low-paying job as a garment worker. Although he had never abused her in Pakistan, 3 months after his arrival in the United States, he began sexually abusing and hitting her, claiming that she was sexually involved at her workplace. She says,

My husband would bother me at night. He would accuse me of doing immoral things at the job and for being tired at night. He would beat me and then do whatever he wanted to . . . he never asked me at all. He did whatever he wanted to do. If I refused then fights would start. He would never apologize. I had to apologize to him . . . he used to say, "I am married to you, I don't have to ask or apologize for anything."

Here aggression and violence are used to justify punishment for a perceived transgression as well as to reaffirm masculinity and a husband's control over his wife's body. Zakhia's husband assumes that she is deviating from her role as his wife and treats his own behavior as a form of social control, punishment, or revenge for her alleged infidelity.

A woman's sexuality is perceived as being under control within marriage. Thus, when the husband feels that he has no control over his wife's sexuality and that there is the possibility of a sexuality independent of him, he seeks to regain this sexual control (Thapan, 1996). Studies have also shown that when there is status incompatibility, that is, when the husband, whom society expects to be the head of the family, has lower education or job opportunities than his wife, the risk of marital violence increases (Gelles, 1997; Hornung, McCullough, & Sugimoto, 1981).

In the United States, it is the interplay between culturally sanctioned sexual rights to a woman's body, status inconsistency, and the discrimination based on ethnic, class, cultural, and structural location of immigrant men and women that may indirectly exacerbate sexual abuse. It is also partly connected to the larger culture

of sexual violence in the United States and assumptions by South Asian men that they must control their women's sexuality in what they perceive as a sexually permissive culture. At the same time, it is often the stereotyping of ethnic minority women and men, as well as cultural prejudice of mainstream American society, that silences sexually abused women for fear of ramifications on their families and communities, given the history of racial and ethnic discrimination in American society. Minorities may have to contend with racial, ethnic, and class discrimination from the institutions where they are seeking help, which often deters abused immigrant women from addressing their concerns. Torn between the gender discrimination within their own community and the racism of dominant culture, many immigrant women remain silenced and continue to experience sexual abuse.

#### SEXUAL ABUSE BY CONTROLLING WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

A husband's assumption of his right to control his wife's sexuality often extends to include his power to manipulate her reproductive rights. This fits in with the previous discussion of how protecting women's virginity and harnessing female sexuality are linked in the larger South Asian culture to ensuring men's right to legitimate heirs. Here, sexual abuse by controlling a woman's reproductive rights implies controlling a woman's body by controlling choice and access to contraceptives, the decision to have a child, or the right to an abortion. Control of a woman's reproductivity by South Asian men is viewed as male entitlement as husband and patriarch. It is important to note here that women have no choice in the matter; reproductivity is also closely linked with a man's power to deny or perpetuate the notion of motherhood for a woman. Some of the women I interviewed talked of the different ways that their husbands sexually abused them by forcibly impregnating them, battering them when they were pregnant, or forcing them to have an abortion.

For example, Zarina, 48, who had a love marriage when she was 17 and now has five children, four of whom were born within the first 5 years of her marriage in South Asia, explains how her husband controlled her sexual and reproductive rights:

Most of the time he would force himself on me . . . he did not feel any guilt and would go about his activities like nothing happened . . . after my fourth child, my sister's friend suggested I go on the pill . . . but my husband was reluctant to buy them. He himself never wanted to use condoms or anything . . . and by making me pregnant time and time again, he was trying to tie me down to him.

For Zarina's husband, this was visible proof of his virility to outsiders. While confining Zarina to the home and motherhood, he himself sought other women to satisfy his normalized sexual needs, especially during the times that he sent Zarina to her parents' home for the delivery of their children. Underlying this sexual control through impregnation is the larger cultural belief that producing progeny is the natural desire of men and women. It is also the basis for defining a wife's sexual relationship as primarily oriented toward motherhood rather than her own sexual desires or gratification.

Tara was another woman I interviewed who had experienced considerable sexual abuse and battering. At the time I interviewed Tara, she was 37 years old, working as a secretary, and had two children, ages 12 and 3. She had left her husband a year earlier, after having lived with him in an abusive relationship for almost 14 years. Tara, who went back to South Asia to get married and sponsored her husband's migration to the United States, explains how her husband controlled her sexual and reproductive rights. In her case, unlike Zarina's, her husband controlled her not by forcing her to have children, but by forcing her to have abortions, thereby denying her the right to motherhood as well as causing her psychological trauma for going against her religious beliefs as a Christian.

Those first 2 years, I got pregnant three times. He didn't want to be a father at that time. Three times he forced me to go for an abortion, which I was totally against. But I couldn't do anything at the time . . . he said, "We can't afford it, we are not settled. We have nobody to watch the baby," things like that . . . when I finally got pregnant for the fourth time, I told him that I was not going back for the abortion. I convinced him somehow to keep the baby. He was not happy throughout the pregnancy, but after my son was born he started playing with him . . . but a year later he said he can't stand this, he does not want to deal with the responsibilities, it is too much for him, he is too young for all this, he should be enjoying his life. He started going out and having an affair.

In Tara's case, sexual abuse was accompanied by battering, especially when she questioned her husband's relationship with other women, thereby challenging his power and the notion of obedience, docility, and subordination of wife. As Tara said,

He slapped me. He punched me. I was already two and a half months pregnant at that time. I lost the baby. He punched me in my stomach several times, and he kicked me. He would hit me in places, where you can't see the bruises. Like under the thighs, underarms, or my back. He will grab my arms real hard and in the morning you could see. With the dark skin I have, you could still see the marks. That day, he took my clothes off and hit me with a belt. . . . That same night, he also put some pins and needles between his fingers and he used to punch me with that. I know it is hard to understand that, but those little pins with a head on top [thumb tacks]. I finally called my sister that day. She lives just 2 minutes away from me. . . . She came straight away and tried to stop him. . . . She called the police and then she said just get out of the back door. . . . the first thing she did was take me to the hospital emergency right away. . . . then I found out that I lost the baby.

This use of sexual and physical violence to deny a woman her right to have a child and to go against her fundamental beliefs is an extreme case of controlling reproductive rights. Four of the women I interviewed explicitly talked of the physical abuse they encountered during pregnancy. A woman may be more prone to abuse when she is pregnant, as her husband may feel that there are competing interests in her loyalty and attention toward him. Studies point to the high incidence of domestic violence during pregnancy (Schornstein, 1997).

#### SEXUAL ABUSE BY FLAUNTING THE "SEXUAL OTHER"

Interestingly, in the South Asian immigrant context, a man also sexually abuses his wife by manipulating the "other woman" factor as a means of sexually intimidating her and exercising power and control through sexually appropriating or rejecting his wife. By insinuating, threatening to, or actually having a sexual relationship with another woman, the husband makes the wife feel sexually inadequate and alienates her from her own body (Abraham, 1998a). This also includes the process by which a husband humiliates his wife by flaunting that others are sexually more

desirable than her. In my interviews, I found this behavior closely linked to women's and men's notions of sexuality. Based on the women's narratives, it can be deduced that there is a double standard whereby a husband feels that only he but not his wife is allowed and justified in having extramarital sex. In some cases, flaunting the other may be linked to the notion that Western women are more sexually permissive than South Asian women and, therefore, are easily sexually accessible. It may fit into the concept of the sexually exploitable "other" previously discussed. However, this concept needs to be further researched.

Notions of what is perceived as Western sexuality are superimposed by some husbands on their wives while simultaneously drawing on traditional cultural values of the rights of a husband to demand sexual gratification from his spouse. For Yamuna, this type of abuse took the form of her husband threatening to seek sex elsewhere if she did not succumb to his desires. Describing her wedding night, Yamuna says,

He said, "I'm sure when you were told that someone from America was coming, you were expecting somebody with movie star looks, weren't you? . . . You sisters, you can communicate so well. I'm not so good, but you have married me now, so you have to live with that kind of thing." It was a very bad beginning. He went on about how things are like in America, how sex is like in America, how easy it was to get girlfriends, how easy it is to have sex in America and if I don't comply with what he wants, if I am shy, he would probably have to seek it elsewhere. I just couldn't get myself to talk.

A somewhat similar situation occurred to Shahida on her arrival in the United States. Shahida was 34 years old when I interviewed her and had been living in the United States for 3 years. She worked in a large pharmaceutical lab, earned about \$250 a week, and lived alone in a studio, having left her abusive husband. In her interview, Shahida mentioned how her husband wanted her to watch pornography and perform oral sex and justified it as something that all Americans do. She says,

He had dirty movies at home. I hadn't seen any before. He made me see them and wanted me to perform oral sex. Since I had gone there, barring the time we had sex, he never kissed me or showed affection in any other way. He said he did not like those things, but he wanted me to perform oral sex. After that if he wanted to do

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something he would. I told him that I did not like this at all. He told me that everyone does that in America. I told him I didn't like them [movies] at all. I had seen them a couple of times and when Ramzaan came, I told him that I would throw them as they didn't contain anything much. I was willing to perform for him if he wanted, but I felt like throwing up when I saw them. He told me not to talk nonsense. "If you don't want to see, don't see them."

It is important to note here that pornography often represents men in a position of power and influence over women. Russell (1993) notes that sexual objectification, typical in pornography, portrays human beings, especially women, as depersonalized sexual objects, degrading women while sexualizing and eroticizing dominance and submission, which has ramifications for men's and women's relationships. Drawing on various studies, Geraldine Moane (1996) concludes that exposure to pornography has a negative impact on attitudes, sexuality, and behavior. Thus, viewing of pornography as normal in the United States has implications for immigrant men's and women's perceptions of sexual behavior and undermines women's ability to resist sexual acts that are against their will.

In Tara's case, her husband had many affairs both with South Asian women and non-South Asian women. Confronting her husband only heightened his anger toward her and once resulted in a sexual assault in front of her child and father-in-law. In the following narrative, Tara explains how her husband defines their relationship to other women and his anger at this construction being challenged.

He always had affairs . . . I found out about one of the girls, because she called at home and she was looking for him. I said, "I am sorry that he is not at home." She said, "I am calling from the office." So I said "If you have anything, call him at work tomorrow." So she says, "Who is this?" So I said, "This is his wife" She says, "Oh my God! But he told me that he was divorced." I said, "No, sorry." She started telling me, it was strange. That's how she started telling me things that he had promised her. That he was going to marry her and that he is divorced. His sister is living with him, with his little boy. I said, "It is not his sister, none of his sisters are here right now, but we have a little boy." He [her husband] was outside shopping.

After he [her husband] came back she called again. So he went into the room. Every time anybody called, he would close the bedroom door. He used to ask me to leave, so that he would be in the room alone. After he hung up with her, he came out. He was furi-

ous. I was feeding my son, and his father [her husband's father] was also sitting there. He came and grabbed me by the hair and said, "How dare you tell her that you are my wife." I said, "What am I supposed to tell her?" He dialed the phone and he said, "You tell her right now that you are not my wife." I said, "I can't do that." His father was sitting there not saying anything. He started really abusing me. I was running from one room to another. We had a two-bedroom apartment. I was running from one room to another trying to escape. Then I went into the bathroom and closed the door. He broke the door. The frame came off. The lock came off. He grabbed me and pushed me into the tub. My son was four and half years old. He was watching, standing by the bathroom, but there was no feeling there for me. He wasn't scared or crying, he was just staring. I was already hurt, like cut on my head and was bleeding. He finally called me to the phone, grabbed my hair by one hand and another hand was on my throat and said now tell that woman. He dialed the number. This lady was on the phone. So I said, "Mary, he is my husband holding me by the neck and asking me to tell you that I am not his wife." He got so angry that he hung up the phone and started abusing me. That night he abused me all night. . . . He ripped my nightgown, pushed me down on the sofa in the living room [and sexually abused her in front of her child and father-in-law].

In yet another instance of sexual power, when Tara was pregnant with her second child, she found her husband having sexual relations in their own home with the daughter of a pastor who had come from India and was temporarily living with them.

Shahida explains how, on her arrival in the United States, her husband, Ahmed, made her feel inadequate and unwelcome by devoting all his attention to their neighbor, a divorced Italian American woman. In her case, we see how the construction of the other left Shahida feeling inadequate and alone in a foreign country.

He told me that there is somebody called Jen in the neighborhood. She is Italian American. He used to do his groceries with her. After 2 or 3 days [after Shahida's arrival in the United States], Jen invited us over for coffee, and we had gone to her place. That day, there were two of us and one of Jen's friends. Ahmed had brought his camera. The three of them were talking and taking pictures. I was sitting all alone. They asked me a few questions and then neglected me completely. They were taking pictures of each other. Even then, I didn't mind too much, as I am not that jealous. I just accepted the fact that they were good friends but it was very awkward. They

gave me two presents. One for my marriage and one for coming to America, but other than that they ignored me completely that day. After we went home, I asked him why he couldn't have taken a couple of pictures of me. He said OK and clicked a few.

Jen came to our house twice during the 7 months I was there. Ahmed used to go there nearly everyday. After dinner, he would go. A couple of times, he asked me to come along and I went. But they sat and played cards and talked about their old friends. I used to sit there and read the newspaper. So I stopped going there myself and even he never asked me. But he used to go and have coffee. He used to go to Jen's everyday. He said that they were very good friends. She had helped a lot after his divorce, and he helped her after her divorce and that they had a very good understanding. I said it is fine, but why don't we invite her to come here sometimes. We can sit here and drink coffee. But he never gave any reply to that. He used to come back around one at night. I could see from the kitchen door that her car wasn't there. So I knew that they used to go out together.

Once he tried to hit me with a brush but I managed to duck away, so he didn't hit me. I had asked him why he got me here if he wanted to spend all his time with Jen. I would always feel that I was totally unwelcome. If I ever smiled at him, he would ignore me. I felt unwanted. I told him all this that day. He told me that I was misunderstanding the whole thing. I didn't ask him if they had any relationship. I just told him that he could take me out with them sometimes, when they went out. He knew that I was alone at home from morning. Whenever they went shopping or for grocery or anywhere, I could go along too. He didn't give any reply to that. He just banged the door and left. He had thought that because I didn't go out or anything I wouldn't come to know.

This process of using the other woman to abuse the wife has multiple consequences. The South Asian woman finds herself experiencing not only loss of self-esteem but also a sense of emotional and sexual inadequacy. In some cases, she sees this as a failure in her role as wife; she feels rejected or compelled to have sex without any satisfaction for her. In the immigrant context, the construction of the sexual other woman, frequently a non-South Asian, as the foe/intruder/sexual competitor, diverts some of the resentment by the wife against her husband toward the foreign other. It hinders the potential solidarity among women of different ethnicities and classes by defining them in terms of sexual competitors. This interplay of ethnicity, race, class, and gender location plays a part in the process of constructing immigrant women's experiences of abuse. Sexual competition among

women in their relationships with men allows men to appropriate and objectify both women's bodies, those of the wife and the sexual other, and allows for the continued sexual domination of women by men.

### SEXUAL ABUSE BY SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Last, a discussion of sexual abuse among South Asian immigrant women necessitates a brief discussion of how it may not be limited to a woman's husband and gets extended to other men. This becomes extremely problematic in the immigrant context when a woman is isolated and is vulnerable due to the lack of alternative viable cultural or structural support systems. Three of the 25 women I interviewed spoke of such experiences. They were Reena, Shahida, and Yamuna. Her mother and family members (father had died) had arranged Reena's marriage through a marriage broker to her husband, who was a U.S. citizen.

Raised in India and fluent only in her own local language, Reena came to the United States in 1986 to find that her husband was already having a relationship with his younger brother's wife. On questioning him about the liaison 3 days after her arrival, Reena was sexually coerced and beaten by her husband. Having no support of her own and in a foreign country, Reena found herself more vulnerable to abuse from other family members besides her husband. Reena's brother-in-law and his family also lived with them. One day when the others were out, the brother-in-law sexually abused her. According to Reena,

That night [when her husband was away] my brother-in-law molested me . . . he could not get too far but he told me not to repeat to anyone what had happened. But I repeated and he got angry. . . . I told my husband . . . when he [brother-in-law] came to know and was questioned, he got furious and [later] beat me . . . when my husband was at work.

Although her brother-in-law never sexually abused her again, she was faced with the struggle of living in an environment where her husband continued with his affair, while she had no avenue for support from either her brother-in-law or his wife.

For Shahida and Yamuna, the sexual abuse and harassment came from people who were helping them in getting out of

abusive marriages. These women's dependency in an immigrant context made them sexually vulnerable. In Shahida's case, the husband of a couple with whom she was staying tried to take sexual advantage of her dependence on them. As Shahida describes it,

They had been very nice to me, even told my father on the phone that they were like my parents. They had helped me a lot, taken me to the airport, taken me to the lawyer and all that. He was in his fifties. They told me to come over and stay with them. Since she [the wife] was studying, they wanted me to help them. The night before my meeting with an organization, I was getting my papers, certificates, and mark sheets ready for the meeting. She was putting their 4-year-old to bed. He came into my room, sat down, looked at the papers, commented on my grades, and as he was leaving tried to kiss me. I told him not to do all that and leave me alone. I was totally unprepared for this . . . he had said he was like my father. I couldn't sleep all that night. I was very scared that he might come in once she and the child were asleep. That day, he had stayed home with sick leave while she had gone out. He asked me to sit down with him and talk. I did that. He said that he wanted to help me and not to think of it [of his sexual advances] as right or wrong. I told him that I couldn't do that because right is right and wrong is wrong. I knew how much his wife respected him. I was so scared as I had nowhere to go. I told him that I had to go and meet someone. He said that he was not happy that I was leaving without finishing my talk with him. When I rushed out he said that I was misunderstanding him and that he could take advantage of me if he wanted to. I told him that I wasn't blaming him for anything and rushed out.

The next day on the way to the meeting, he said that I shouldn't hide from him as he wanted to help me. He said that I fall sick because my body fluids were not circulating. I told him that I knew all that and that I used to be sick even before my marriage. I told him not to touch me at all. You see, he had started touching me with his hands whenever he passed me. I told him that he had never behaved like that when I visited them with Ahmed. As soon as possible, I called [the South Asian women's organization] and told them everything. They got me out of there without making his wife suspicious. I could have told her everything, but I don't know if she would have believed and I did not want to hurt her. Even now, we meet, although I hate him.

Immigrant women like Shahida find themselves being sexually abused once by their husbands and then by their friends. Significant others take advantage of these women's vulnerability and

assume that they won't be accountable for their actions. It is the abuser's belief that he has economic, social, and emotional powers that allow him to take such sexual liberty.<sup>17</sup> What most probably occurred in Shahida's case was that the man was counting on her silence, her affection for his wife, and desperation for support, when he had dared to sexually abuse her. Under the guise of protector and confidant, men often sexually harass women, justifying it, as in Shahida's case, by claiming that it will improve their health.

In Yamuna's case, the husband of the family she lived with did not touch her but constantly looked at her in ways that made her feel sexually objectified. She was financially and socially trapped and had to stay with this family due to lack of viable alternatives.

The experiences of these three women point to how significant others within the South Asian immigrant community also become partners in sexual abuse by their sexualization of women's bodies, through their sexualized gaze, language, and action.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have tried to show, using women's narratives, some ways in which sexuality is constructed for South Asian immigrant women and some of the forms of sexual abuse they experience. Although there has been an emphasis on the cultural aspects, this is not intended to suggest a cultural justification of sexual abuse of South Asian women. Rather, culture is used to contextualize the experiences of women, which again does not imply ignorance of the structural impediments that women experience in abusive relationships (Abraham, 1995, 1998b; Dasgupta & Warriar, 1996; Krishnan et al., 1998). That many immigrant women look toward members of their own community for support in the United States is not only a result of cultural identification but arises from the reality of the race, class, ethnicity, and gender divisions that typify U.S. social, economic, and political structures and relations.

It is important to note that this article on sexual abuse is only part of a larger picture, pointing to the need for more research that includes the voices of invisible or marginalized women due to

their ethnic, class, and legal status as well as regional location. Although limited in scope, this article provides some space for the experiences of South Asian immigrant women. Implicit in this work is the notion that only when different women's accounts of abuse are incorporated into the discourse on abuse can we truly contribute to identifying and obliterating violence against women.

## NOTES

1. By norms of sexuality I mean those norms and values that define the nature of female and male sexuality, including notions of sexual propriety and deviance, notions of male and female sexual disposition, and cultural expectations about desirable and undesirable sexual behavior in a given society.

2. This article is drawn from my larger research project on marital abuse among South Asian immigrants in the United States, conducted over a 3-year period (1990-1993). My research examines the cultural and structural factors that contribute to marital abuse in the South Asian immigrant community in the United States, such as norms and values, socio-economic status, isolation, language barriers, the green card factor, and availability of support networks. Although all these issues may also affect sexual abuse, a discussion of these factors is beyond the scope of this article. For a discussion of these issues, see Abraham, 1998b.

3. Pseudonyms have been given to the subjects to protect their identities.

4. I define an ethno-gender approach as the multiple intersection of ethnicity, gender, class, and legal status as significant categories in the analysis of domestic violence, but with a special emphasis on the relationship between ethnicity and gender. For a detailed theoretical perspective, see Abraham, 1995.

5. See Mazumdar in Dasgupta, 1998, pp. 137-138.

6. The difficulty of doing research in the area of sexual abuse and sexuality is addressed by Krishnan et al., 1998.

7. It was only after the creation of South Asian women's organizations in the 1980s that South Asian women began gradually contacting these organizations as an alternative power resource. Three organizations that I approached to assist me in contacting potential participants for this research were extremely helpful. These were Sakhi for South Asian women in New York, SEWAA (Service and Education for Women Against Abuse) in Philadelphia, and Apna Ghar in Chicago. In all these organizations, specific individuals who knew abused South Asian women or were caseworkers helped me. These individuals talked about my work to abused women and told them that if they were interested in knowing more about the project or wanted to participate in it, they could either contact me or have me contact them. When we made contact, I spoke in greater detail about my research. They then made their decision as to whether or not they wanted participate. I also informed them that at any point in the interview they could decide not to answer a question or stop the interview. Of the 28 women who were contacted, 25 agreed to participate. Their consent was tape-recorded.

8. Most of the interviews were either in English or Hindi. One interview that was conducted in Bengali was done with the help of a translator.

9. For an excellent collection on issues of sexuality in India, see Uberoi, 1996.

10. This is also discussed by Ng (1994) with reference to Qing China.

11. Cook (1998) points out how the public and state discourse in Pakistan constructs women's identities primarily as mothers and wives who are vulnerable and need the protection of men. Women's main goals are to nurture, socialize, and sacrifice for the good of the nation.

12. Today in South Asia, the women's movement challenges existing notions of gender relations and attempts to reconceptualize sexuality in ways that empower South Asian women.

13. I remember watching Hindi films on television many years ago. Nearly all of them had a hero, heroine, and villain, with at least one segment of the film dealing with the villain's intent to rape the heroine or supporting actress. This was followed by the woman's mother or father finding out and saying, *Usne meri beti ki izzat loot lia! Hamari khandan ki izzat mitti me miladi* ("He has robbed my daughter's honor and ground our family honor into mud"). This was how sexual abuse was conceptualized; not as violence against a woman, but as a violation of patriarchal family honor. Although these images have partially changed in South Asia, immigrants, depending on their period of migration, still hold some of these images.

14. I believe this is also applicable to other religions practiced in South Asia, particularly in India, which have been strongly influenced by Hinduism.

15. See Lawyers' Collective, 1992.

16. See Uberoi (1996) for a discussion of legal interpretation and judicial discourse around sexuality and marriage in Hindu marriage in India.

17. Dziech and Weiner (1994), in the context of the lecherous professor, point to some of the forms of sexual harassment relevant to immigrant women's predicament vis-à-vis significant others.

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