# Socio-cultural risk factors impacting domestic violence among South Asian immigrant women: A scoping review

Abha Rai*, Y. Joon Choi

*School of Social Work, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA*

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Domestic violence (DV) is a significant concern for the well-being of South Asian (SA) immigrant women. Although there have been empirical studies that discussed socio-cultural risk factors related to SA immigrant women's experience of DV, there have not been any efforts to summarize these factors in a single study. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to review and synthesize empirical studies that explored socio-cultural risk factors of DV among SA immigrant women in English speaking countries. 16 English language peer reviewed articles met the inclusion criteria. The socio-cultural risk factors identified in the reviewed studies included lack of social support, low acculturation, high enculturation, patriarchal beliefs, economic control by the husband, traditional gender role attitudes, and stigma about divorce. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Evidence suggests that as high as 18% of South Asian (SA) immigrants across the world are victimized by their intimate partners (Hurwitz, Gupta, Liu, Silverman, & Raj, 2006). Other researchers state that these numbers are understated and that the actual rates are as high as being between 30 and 40% (Finfgeld-Connett & Johnson, 2013). Mahapatra (2012) explains that the statistics on domestic violence (DV) among SA immigrant women are understated because national studies often use small and non-representative samples that may underestimate the extent of the problem among the SA immigrant women or SA immigrant women underreport DV.

Men and women can both be affected by DV, but women more commonly experience DV, especially within the context of the SA culture (Abraham, 2000). In addition, DV is used interchangeably with Intimate partner violence (IPV) and is perpetrated on a woman by her spouse or extended kin within the SA immigrant community (Abraham, 2000). Therefore, we use DV to define any form of coercion, power, and/or control that could be physical, sexual, verbal, mental, or economic, perpetrated by her spouse or extended kin in this article. Furthermore, South Asians (SAs) refer to individuals having familial roots in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives in this article (Mahapatra, 2012; Raj & Silverman, 2007; Rudrappa, 2004).

SAs are spread across the world and have moved to countries outside of SA, but more specifically to countries, such as Canada, The United Kingdom (U.K.), Hong Kong and the United States (U.S.) for employment reasons or to seek refuge (Khadria, 2005; Lindsay, 2007 & South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), 2012). SA men have moved to these countries and most of them through arranged marriages have had their wives join them. SAs in these countries range from 0.9% (Hong Kong) to 4.9% of the population (Canada), with the highest number of SAs numbering 3.4 million in the U.S. (Census, 2011; Census and Statistics Department, 2012; Lindsay, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2006; U.S. Bureau of Census, 2010).

Although, SAs may belong to different religions and backgrounds, there are certain shared cultural values among them (Ayyub, 2000). There are a number of socio-cultural risk factors that make SA immigrant women more vulnerable to facing abuse in a foreign land. Due to the inherent patriarchy and chauvinism within the SA culture, scholars have repeatedly attempted to dissect specific cultural factors that make SA women more prone to experiencing DV in a foreign land (Purkayastha, 2000). The SA culture is predominantly derived from patriarchal values and beliefs (Munisamy, 2000). The need to glorify male figures right from an early age is a norm that has been prevalent for centuries now (Goel, 2005; Mangar, 2013). Notions of women's social status being secondary to that of their husbands have been culturally indoctrinated among SA women. This in turn creates feelings of inferiority and inadequacy among women. These feelings are translated into men assuming power and control over women in almost every sphere of their lives (Mangar, 2013). Increased dependency on family and peers makes the process of acclimatizing to a new culture and lifestyle, difficult for immigrant women upon movement to a new country (Purkayastha, 2000). Community ostracism and stigmatization

is another reason why SA immigrant women continue to be in abusive relationships. Being far away from home, the husband and his family are the only source of support for immigrant women. Therefore, alienating him is not an option that is available to these women (Ayyub, 2000; Mangar, 2013). Upon migrating to a country with fundamentally distinct values and practices, it becomes challenging for women to familiarize themselves to the new culture. Coupled with the stress of adapting to a new lifestyle, they face feelings of isolation and social exclusion (Yoshihama, Blazevski, & Bybee, 2014).

## 2. Current study

There have been attempts by researchers through empirical studies to understand the specific socio-cultural risk factors that impede positive marriage experiences for women, by making them susceptible to IPV. However, it is noteworthy to point out that although, there have been empirical studies that discussed various socio-cultural factors related to SA immigrant women's experience of DV, there have not been any efforts to identify and summarize these socio-cultural factors in a single study. This paper presents a scoping study of the current state of literature about socio-cultural factors that impact DV experiences of SA immigrant women in English speaking countries. A scoping study is an important contribution to the field of building knowledge since it helps in synthesizing key concepts, types of evidence, and prominent gaps in literature (Colquhoun et al., 2014). Scoping studies have not been used much in social work (Haight, Sugrue, Calhoun, & Black, 2016). Since there are knowledge gaps in this area, a scoping study is a helpful tool to point toward gaps and provide a direction for further research. Therefore, the goals of this scoping study were to: (a) comprehensively review empirical studies that explored the myriad socio-cultural risk factors of DV among SA immigrant women in English speaking countries and, (b) to synthesize socio-cultural risk factors of DV among SA immigrant women in English speaking countries.

We first broadly examined the current state of literature in this area and the general trends of publications. Within the trends, we then examined the types of socio-cultural factors looked at, study purposes, findings, populations studied, types of methodologies, and theories used.

## 3. Methods

The steps recommended by Arskey and O'Malley (2005) were used to conduct this scoping study. We began by identifying research question for the study as stated above and then followed the other stages such as identification and selection of studies, charting the data and reporting findings.

### 3.1. Identifying and selecting studies

The inclusion criteria for the study were: (a) the study must be published in a peer-reviewed journal; (b) the study must be written in English; (c) the study must be an empirical study, (d) the study's participants must be SA immigrants (could be either first or second generation); and (e) the study must explore socio-cultural factors of DV. PsycINFO, PubMed, Humanities and Social Science Index, Web of Science, Social Work Abstracts and Science Direct were searched for the study. The keywords included to conduct the search were "domestic violence" or "intimate partner violence" or "battered women" or "wife abuse" or "sexual violence" or "wife battering" or "spousal violence" AND "South Asian." Individual searches with each of the seven SA countries (Nepal, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldives and Bangladesh) in conjunction with DV were also conducted. There were no date restrictions that were imposed so as to provide a broad overview. We also included articles from the reference section of some studies that seemed relevant to the inclusion criteria. We excluded book reviews, editorials, self-help books, dissertations, articles and books
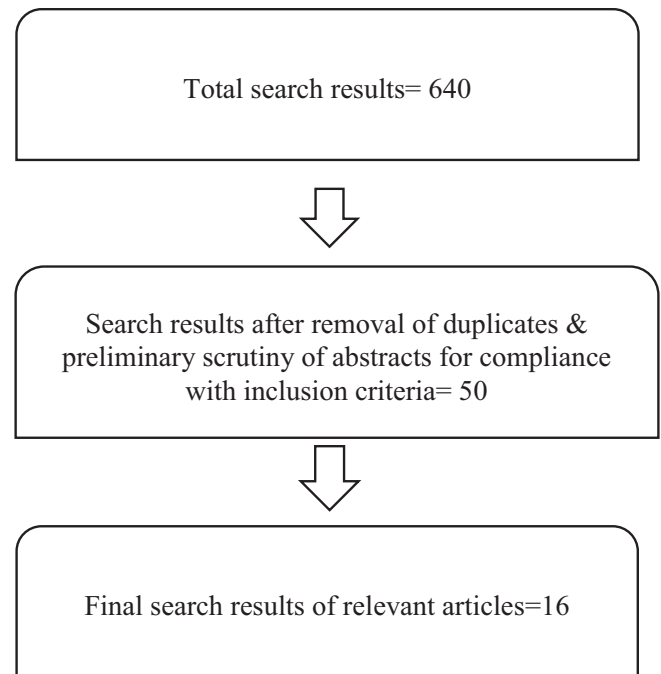


**Fig. 1.** Charting the data.

appearing in the popular media. RefWorks bibliographic software was used to store results and categorize references.

### 3.2. Charting the data

We found a total of 640 articles using all the search terms and databases discussed above. After a removal of duplicates and a preliminary scrutiny of abstracts, 50 articles appeared to match the selection criteria. Further, upon reading 50 articles completely, we retained 16 empirical articles based on the inclusion criteria (Fig. 1). Articles were either qualitative or quantitative in nature. We charted our sample of N = 16 articles in an excel document with the following information: (a) author(s), (b) year of publication, (c) purpose of the study, (d) sample, (e) theories used, (f) socio-cultural risk factors explored, (g) geographical location, (h) type of study (method used), (i) measurement used, and, (j) findings. Both researchers were simultaneously engaged in identifying the keywords, conducting searches and in the selection of retained articles. In addition, a librarian was consulted while identifying keywords for the selection of articles.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Study type and measurement

Although there were no publishing date restrictions, all the articles that met the inclusion criteria were written between 1999 and 2016, with the highest number of articles published in 2014 (three articles). All the studies included were cross-sectional in nature. Out of the 16 studies included, eight were qualitative studies, six were quantitative studies, and two studies were both qualitative and quantitative in nature. These studies were not described as mixed method studies in the articles. Out of the six quantitative studies, four used standardized scales to measure the social cultural risk factors that were being studied, and two used a mix of standardized scales and questions designed by the researcher for the purpose of the research. Out of the eight qualitative articles, four used semi-structured interviews, one used structured qualitative questions, one used a focus group discussion format and two used open-ended questions. Out of the two studies that utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods, one utilized a