

Advocating for South Asian Women

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South Asia (comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Burma) includes all of the world's major faiths: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, and a range of Tribal belief systems.

There is no straightforward association between religion and violence against women in South Asia. Some aspects of religion protect women against violence: e.g. Islam forbids female infanticide, and Buddhism and Jainism preach non violence in all relationships. However, domestic (physical and sexual) violence against women occurs in all regions and religions of South Asia and the South Asian Diaspora. Statistical studies in South Asia or overseas show that about 20% to 50% of women report recent physical or sexual abuse from their family, irrespective of religion.

None of South Asia's religions explicitly endorse violence against women. However, among all religions, daily life and cultural practice tend to be very conservative, rooted in patriarchy, with strict roles for men and women, divisions between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, customary dowry payments, and great importance given to family unity, and not bringing shame to the community. Women are socialized to endure much in the name of upholding culture and family honor. Further, in sub-regions with low female literacy and high female unemployment rates, women may have no practical alternative to enduring abuse.

Though all South Asian religions contain statements revering and respecting women, in practice religious groups have not systematically tackled violence against women. Historically, religious reformers addressed some aspects of gender based violence (such as "sati," or child marriage), but domestic abuse was largely left aside.

In South Asia, women's groups have long struggled against violence against women, and have gained many victories such as legislative amendments and targeted socio-economic development inputs. However, they rarely co-operate with religious organizations. The overwhelmingly male leadership of organized religious bodies has tended to sacrifice women's rights to the issues of communal rights (e.g. the rights of religious minorities to their own body of family laws).

In the South Asian Diaspora, women's groups have arisen to build cultural bridges between immigrant women and mainstream domestic violence service organizations. Although co-operation has greatly advanced, there is still misinformation and stereotyping of immigrant cultures and religions. For their part, immigrant religio-cultural organizations frequently view women's groups as divisive and anti-tradition, and offer little systematic support to violence

survivors. Thus, immigrant women often feel they must choose between culture and personal safety, a major gap.

Thus, a major opportunity exists for dialogue and program development among South Asian women's groups and religious organizations. A co-operative effort to highlight indigenous traditions within religions and cultures that condemn violence against women, and assist in developing solutions, would further the twin goals of eliminating violence against women and promoting progressive multiculturalism.