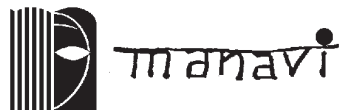


Manavi Occasional Paper No. 7

**Shifting the Frame:
Addressing Domestic Violence in
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender,
and Queer South Asian Communities**

gita mebrotra and Soniya Munshi



working to end violence against South Asian women
New Jersey, USA
2011

inside front cover

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Foreword

With great pleasure, I would like to introduce the next several papers in Manavi's Occasional Paper Series, launched in 2007. Our work to end violence against women is reinforced by this documentation and welding of connections between theory and practice.

Manavi is a New Jersey-based women's rights organization committed to ending all forms of violence and exploitation against South Asian women living in the U.S. Established in 1985, Manavi was the first organization of its kind in the U.S. Manavi's programs involve direct service provision for women survivors of violence; grassroots organizing for social change within the South Asian community; and informing the practice of mainstream U.S. institutions and organizations to better serve South Asian battered women. Through its work, Manavi ensures that women of South Asian descent in the U.S can exercise their fundamental right to live a life of dignity that is safe and free from violence.

Like much of the work in immigrant communities, the area of violence against women among South Asian immigrants also suffers from an enormous paucity of research. At Manavi, we believe that research and practice are inextricably intertwined. Research provides direction to the practice of direct service to battered women, just as direct service informs future areas of research. Together, both research and practice have policy implications that create lasting change. In other words, it is essential to continually build upon and refine a body of knowledge. The Manavi Occasional Paper Series was conceptualized in order to further this thought.

This series was launched with funding from the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. We are grateful for their assistance in helping us start the process, as well as continue it. Ultimately, we hope to develop a comprehensive series of papers that will inform the research and activist communities in the U.S. and beyond. Scholars who are interested in contributing to the series are encouraged to contact us with their ideas. Such collaborations, we believe, will not only enhance the series but also expand the Manavi community.

Maneesha Kelkar
Executive Director
Manavi

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1

Introduction

Community-based efforts to counter domestic violence¹ have arguably become one of the most established forms of social change work in South Asian² immigrant communities in the United States. Since the founding of Manavi, the first organization in the US to specifically address violence against South Asian women, in 1985, over 25 South Asian women's organizations (SAWOs) have emerged to work against domestic violence. Almost every metropolitan area in the US houses a SAWO. While the original SAWOs emerged in locations on the east and west coasts and in areas with a critical mass of South Asian immigrants, in recent years, we have seen an increase in SAWO presence in areas with newer, smaller South Asian immigrant communities (e.g., Alabama, Arizona, and New Hampshire) (Munshi, 2010).

SAWOs generally work on local, national, and transnational levels, both independently and in collaboration with one another. They play a leadership role in broader South Asian social movement and community politics; almost half of the organizations in the National Coalition of South Asian Organizations, formed in 2008, state that providing some form of support services to people experiencing domestic violence is one of their main activities (Munshi, 2010). SAWOs also collaborate, to varying degrees, with mainstream local and national domestic violence organizations as well as pan-Asian and other community-based groups and organizations. Generally operating from a platform that prioritizes culturally-specific needs of South Asian survivors of violence, SAWOs are involved in a diverse array of activities, such as social service provision, community outreach/education, and policy reform (Abraham, 2000; Das Gupta, 2006; Munshi, 2010).

The majority of these US-based programs have adopted some version of a feminist analysis of gender-based violence that is focused on male violence against women. While this understanding of domestic violence has been of critical importance in addressing the needs of female victims who have experienced abuse from their male partners, the analysis and approach of most SAWOs has not yet adequately met the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ) South Asians experiencing violence in their relationships. The inability of SAWOs to, thus far, effectively respond to domestic violence in South Asian LGBTQ communities has contributed to the reality that South Asian LGBTQ survivors of violence

have extremely limited options for support and safety. As advocates dedicated to providing effective support and services to *all* members of South Asian communities, we must continue to grow our understanding of the experiences, issues, and challenges facing LGBTQ South Asians experiencing relationship violence.

A 2010 study of a sample of SAWO websites from across the country offers insight into how SAWOs are currently engaging with the issue of LGTBQ domestic violence through their public materials. This study reviewed the websites of twenty community-based South Asian organizations in the US that engage with anti-domestic violence work as one of their main, if not only, programmatic areas (Munshi, 2010a). From this sample of SAWOs, we learned that:

- 15% of the organizations explicitly mention that their programs and/or services are accessible to LGBTQ communities and/or their organization is concerned with issues that impact LGBTQ people.
- While 15% of the groups provide information somewhere on their website about resources that are available to LGBTQ survivors of violence seeking support, only 5% of the organizations post any information about the dynamics of domestic violence in LGBTQ communities on their websites, or acknowledge LGBTQ survivors in their overall definitions of domestic violence.
- 15% provide information about local South Asian LGBTQ groups with whom they have built ongoing relationships. An additional 10% make a brief mention of a one-time collaboration (such as participation in a community event) with a local South Asian LGBTQ group.
- 5% of the organizations display a biography of a staff person who directly states being involved in LGBTQ communities.
- Most of the organizations that use non-discrimination language in their mission/values statements explicitly include identities such as national origin, religion, caste, and/or marital status. A few organizations (10%) expand their mission/values statements to include non-discrimination of LGBTQ people.
- *60% did not mention LGBTQ people at any point.* No reference was made to LGBTQ communities as part of the organization's demographics, LGBTQ domestic violence, South Asian LGBTQ groups, or resources available to LGBTQ people.

From this sampling of websites, we see that the majority of SAWOs are not currently presenting themselves as accessible to LGBTQ survivors of violence. By not mentioning LGBTQ people as part of their constituencies, SAWOs reinforce the invisibility of domestic violence in LGBTQ communities, further creating barriers between South Asian LGBTQ survivors and safety, services, or support.

We recognize that SAWOs have initiated difficult interventions in conventional modes of thinking about domestic violence in order to effectively address violence in the lives of South Asian immigrant women. SAWOs have been working on analyses of the barriers and challenges, such as racism, xenophobia, and classism, that face immigrant women in the US. However, South Asian LGBTQ people face particular gender and sexuality-based oppressions in society-at-large, in the South Asian community generally, and within SAWOs themselves. These particular oppressions, as they intersect with racism, classism, xenophobia, and other forms of inequality create complex circumstances and needs for LGBTQ South Asians who are experiencing domestic violence. Many initiatives aimed at addressing domestic violence specifically within LGBTQ communities may not be accessible to queer South Asians or effectively meet their needs, given the intersection of their unique racialized, immigrant, and cultural experiences with gender, sexuality, and other salient identities.

If our ultimate goal is to work toward social change and end violence within the South Asian community and beyond, a deepening of our analysis of gender- and sexuality-based oppressions, and their links to intimate partner violence, is of critical importance. SAWOs in the US have the difficult charge of addressing the various needs of a diverse community. Our organizations are adept at building capacity, developing advocacy knowledge and skills, and employing creative strategies in order to meet the needs of those who are marginalized within our communities. It is imperative that we amplify those perspectives and skills into broad-based organizational efforts to meet the needs of South Asian LGBTQ survivors of violence.

The authors of this paper come to this discussion as South Asian queer women who have each been a part of anti-violence movements and other social justice efforts within South Asian, Asian Pacific Islander (API), people of color and/or LGBTQ communities for over 15 years. We have also been involved with *Transforming Silence Into Action* (a project of Asian Women's Shelter, San Francisco), a national effort to organize a network of queer API women and transgender people to share information, strategies, analysis, and resources for addressing relationship violence specifically within LGBTQ communities. These experiences, combined with our experiences within queer South Asian communities, have contributed significantly to the ideas presented here, and to our ongoing commitment to addressing and preventing violence in the lives of LGBTQ South Asians.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an educational tool that will strengthen SAWOs' abilities to be effective resources for South Asian LGBTQ communities. One of our overall goals is to facilitate change in our organizational cultures in order to increase our institutional commitments and practices to support LGBTQ communities. We believe that advocate education is an important component of this work; thus, the focus of this paper is to promote the education of domestic violence advocates and service providers within the South Asian community who are relatively unfamiliar with LGBTQ communities and issues of queer domestic violence. Given the limited scope of this paper, our primary goal here is to provide basic information to orient South Asian domestic violence advocates to some of the distinct issues facing LGBTQ survivors of domestic violence in order to strengthen analysis and advocacy within all of our diverse South Asian communities.

Working Assumptions

The following is a summary of key working assumptions that we bring to this discussion about domestic violence in South Asian LGBTQ communities. These values inform and shape the perspectives we have presented in this paper.

- All people, regardless of sexual orientation, gender expression, and/or gender identity deserve to be in healthy, safe relationships and should be able to effectively access services, systems, and support. SAWOs should have the capacity, and be prepared, to work with *all* members of the South Asian community who may be experiencing domestic abuse.
- LGBTQ people are a part of all communities, live all over the world, and have existed throughout history. Being LGBTQ is not a “contemporary” phenomenon, or an “American” experience.
- We believe it is okay, and even great, to be LGBTQ. We know that people reading this paper and/or working in SAWOs may have a range of personal beliefs and values regarding LGBTQ issues; however, we are not here to discuss the acceptability of LGBTQ people’s identities and relationships.
- This material is presented through an anti-oppression framework that assumes that racism, xenophobia, sexism, classism, homophobia, heterosexism, transphobia, genderism, and other forms of institutionalized and interpersonal oppression exist, are interconnected, and are damaging to all members of our communities (Note: Many of these terms are defined later in the text and/or in the attached glossary). We also understand that unlearning oppressive behaviors and cultural and institutional practices is a life-long process.
- We all bring diverse life experiences, identities, and perspectives to anti-violence work and to this conversation. It is not our intention to present “right” or “wrong” ways to approach these issues. We are interested in promoting critical thinking and dialogue that will contribute to South Asian anti-violence advocates deepening our analysis and capacity to address the needs of LGBTQ South Asians.

2

Expanding Our Vocabulary Regarding Gender & Sexuality

The terms people use to identify themselves and their experiences are complex and vary greatly depending on context and language. The vast diversity of identity terms and the myriad of meanings that people attach to gender and sexuality are beyond the scope of this current discussion. However, our framework in this paper, and in our general approach, requires that we untangle different aspects of sex, gender, and sexual orientation that often get confused or combined. We want to extract these different components and take a closer look at their definitions, especially as we know that language is a critical component of understanding identity. Using appropriate and relevant language is an essential step in challenging assumptions about gender and sexuality, and growing our capacity to be accessible to people who are in marginalized positions within our communities.

The terms we use here are working definitions; our intention is not to provide “correct,” or definitive ways of conceptualizing or naming gender or sexual identities. We have included brief definitions below on some of the relevant language that we use throughout the paper. *(Also, please see a glossary of terms attached at the end of this paper for a lengthier and more comprehensive list of relevant vocabulary.)*

Expanding Our Vocabulary: Gender

It is important to acknowledge that some people identify their gender outside the gender binary system of male and female, therefore finding the most accurate language to describe intimate partner violence can be difficult because language itself is not neutral and reflects many assumptions that are embedded within dominant culture and frameworks of domestic violence. (Ristock & Timbang, 2005, pp. 3–4)

Sex: A person’s biological or anatomical identity as male or female, usually assigned at birth.

Gender: A collection of characteristics that are socially and culturally associated with maleness or femaleness. Our gender is made up of:

- **Gender expression:** This is the set of external characteristics and behaviors that are socially defined as masculine or feminine, such as dress/appearance, mannerisms, ways of speaking, and ways of being in social interactions. Gender expression is external and can be perceived and interpreted by others.
- **Gender identity:** This is a person's internal feeling about their gender, their deep feeling of being male, or female, or something other, or something in between. Gender identity is internal and defined by oneself; it is not visible to others.

Gender Binary: The dominant, institutionalized idea that there are only two genders: male and female. We know that this binary understanding of gender is simplistic and does not account for the array of gender identities and expressions that exist in the world.

Transgender: This word is often used as an umbrella term and refers most broadly to those who do not conform to societal gender norms. Generally, people who identify as transgender exhibit some behavior or traits that transgress, or fall outside of, traditional gender expectations. Transgender is often used to include people who identify as gender non-conforming, androgynous, cross-dressers, gender-benders, gender queer, hijras, and/or trans or transsexuals. The boundaries of the term transgender are not rigid and the term is used differently in different contexts (i.e., medical, psychological, academic, etc.).

Everyone has an assigned sex, mode of gender expression, and gender identity. For some people, all of these aspects are consistent with societal expectations of sex and gender. For example, someone can be born with anatomy that is classified as female, express gender in a way that is recognized as female, and feel, deep inside, that she is a woman. For other people, one aspect does not determine the other. For example, someone can be born with anatomy that is classified as female, express gender in a way that is recognized as masculine, yet not identify with being a woman or a man. Gender identity and expression are distinct from sexuality. Someone can be trans-identified and heterosexual while another person can be trans-identified and gay.

Expanding Our Vocabulary: LGBTQ

In this paper, we use the language of *LGBTQ* (which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, & queer) as a broad way to reflect common terminology that can help to facilitate a straightforward conversation regarding issues of gender, sexuality, and domestic violence in the South Asian community. The acronym LGBTQ is intended to reflect a diversity of sexuality and gender identities. We also use the term "queer" in some places as a broad term to encompass all LGBTQ identities and relationships.

Sexual orientation: One's core sense of the gender(s) of people toward whom one feels romantically and sexually attracted; the inclination or capacity to develop intimate emotional and sexual relationships with people of the same gender, a different gender or more than one gender.

Lesbian: Woman with emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to other women. Not used in reference to gay men.

Gay: Common word for men with emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to other men, but also used sometimes used in reference to lesbians.

Bisexual: Person with emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to both men and women, not necessarily at the same time or to the same extent.

Queer: Originally a pejorative term for gay and lesbian people, many LGBTQ people have reclaimed this term as an inclusive and positive way to identify all non-heterosexual and/or non-gender-conforming people and/or relationships. Some people still are uncomfortable labeling themselves with or using the word “queer,” but many younger LGBT people use “queer” as both a political statement and a reflection of their approach to sexuality and gender.

In most contexts, people group lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities, relationships, and individuals together as a “catch-all” approach to encompassing the experiences of those who are not heterosexual and/or gender non-conforming. However, it is important to note that there is some tension associated with the grouping of all of these individuals and communities together. Most importantly, the experiences of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual center on *sexual orientation* or who one is attracted to, while “transgender” is primarily concerned with *gender identity*, or a person’s understanding of their own gender irrespective of their sexual orientation. Gender identity is often confused with or considered tied to sexual orientation, but this is inaccurate. Gender identity and sexual orientation are exclusive of each other. For example, a woman who expresses her gender in ways that are seen as more traditionally masculine than feminine is not necessarily lesbian-identified.

The language of “queer” is often used to try to promote a more inclusive identity that can include political solidarity between and amongst LGBTQ people and communities. Yet, differences in gender and sexuality across LGBTQ peoples impact their experiences of oppression and marginalization, and therefore impact their experiences of and responses to abuse. In addition to diversity of gender and sexual identities, considering the intersection of transgender and lesbian/gay/bisexual identities with other social positionalities (such as class, religion, immigration status, ability, religion, geography, etc.) is also critical to understanding the array of issues that could significantly impact someone in a domestic violence situation. Therefore, we use the language of “LGBTQ” or “queer” in this paper while knowing that the differences inherent in these terms matter in discussions of domestic violence. Presenting a discussion that can adequately and simultaneously address all issues facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer South Asians is very difficult, if not impossible.

A final note on language: in a number of places in the discussion that follows we have used the pronoun “she” to refer to survivors of violence. We acknowledge that this excludes gay male

survivors and those who may use other pronouns to define themselves. We see the importance of not reproducing the idea that only women are survivors of violence, thus we have tried to avoid using pronouns in our discussion when possible. However, we have used “she” for convenience in some places in the text.

Expanding Our Vocabulary: Homophobia, Heterosexism, Transphobia, & Genderism

The above sections discuss **sex, gender, gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation** as distinct components of an individual. Even though these components do not determine one another, dominant societal understandings expect that there is a predictable relationship between them. For example, if a person is born with male anatomy, he is assigned as male, expected to dress, act, and feel “like a man,” and be sexually attracted to women. These dominant expectations and assumptions about the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality are produced and reinforced through the following systems of oppression which dictate acceptable ways of being and punish transgression of these norms:

Genderism: A system of values, practices, policies, and institutions that promotes the assumption that there are only two genders. It also promotes the assumption that the gender assignment one received at birth must then conform with one’s gender expression and gender identity. Genderism values institutions, as well as social and cultural norms, that validate a gender binary system and clear boundaries between genders. It is the assumption that this practice of gender is a normal part of human society, and that everyone shares these values. It therefore justifies the devaluation of gender transgression.

Heterosexism: A system of values, practices, policies, institutions that promotes the assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual because heterosexuality is the normal and superior sexual orientation. It also values social and cultural institutions, like marriage, and other social and cultural norms and practices that celebrate heterosexuality. Heterosexism assumes that everyone (or at least all “normal” people) share this system of beliefs that justifies the devaluation of other sexual orientations.

Transphobia: Irrational fear of, hatred of, aversion to, or discrimination against people whose gender expression and/or identities do not conform to the social conventions attached to the sex that they were assigned at birth.

Homophobia: Irrational fear of, hatred of, aversion to, or discrimination against people who identify or appear to be lesbian, bisexual, gay, or queer.

These systems of oppression—genderism, transphobia, heterosexism, and homophobia—maintain and feed off of each other to effectively oppress those who violate their rules. They operate in conjunction with one another as they require continuous validation and strengthening

in order to effectively oppress those who violate their norms. We experience these systems of oppression in a variety of ways. Some key examples are through:

- **individual/interpersonal interactions:** Assuming a single woman wants to get married and that her life is incomplete without a husband; making fun of someone for not grooming her facial hair because she does not appear feminine enough; feeling that LGBTQ people are disgusting or mentally ill; verbally and/or physically expressing hate violence and street harassment; getting stared at; not getting served at a restaurant; being made to feel like our gender or sexuality is wrong or a disgrace to our families; being made to feel like heterosexual marriage is the only way to participate in South Asian traditions and culture.
- **cultural/community norms:** Training young children to look forward to their marriage; consistently asking young adults about their marriage plans; teasing young girls about boyfriends/young boys about girlfriends; controlling what people wear so that they conform to their gender assignment; using gendered language for relatives (e.g., mashi, bua); controlling what gender-specific toys children can play with; training children about what adult tasks or jobs they can expect or aspire to learn; worrying that if children play with the “wrong” toys or wear the “wrong” colored backpack they will become LGBTQ; celebrations of heterosexual relationships, through weddings and other community events, and providing material resources (e.g., gifts, money) to people who decide to get married.
- **institutional interactions:** A South Asian LGBTQ person may experience these oppressive systems in their dealings with legal and medical institutions, educational bodies, religious communities, immigration offices, as well as through social service providers. This has presented a variety of challenges for LGBTQ individuals: a lack of legal control over assigned gender (as opposed to being able to decide one’s own gender identity); an absence of spouse-based immigration options; a lack of recognition in the immigration system of LGBTQ relationships; an inability to access health insurance that covers medical procedures for trans people; the overt promotion of heterosexual norms in schools and in religious contexts; the targeting by police of LGBTQ communities; and the invisibility of LGBTQ issues in mainstream media outlets.
- **personal internalization:** This is an individualized experience of shame or self-hatred in reaction to one’s own feelings about one’s gender or sexuality. It can also be expressed through projection of self-hatred onto other LGBTQ people, especially people who are less able to “pass” as heterosexual or less able to “pass” as clearly male or female.

We can take an example, such as a hate crime, to see how these systems of oppression interact: A person experiences street harassment and violence because he is perceived to be gay. The violent interaction, the actual harassment, is an illustration of *interpersonal/individual oppression* between the perpetrator and the survivor of violence. *Cultural/community norms* produce negative stereotypes about gay people, which facilitates harassment of people

perceived to be gay. *Institutional oppression* occurs when the survivor of violence does not call the police because he fears the response of the police, or when he does call the police but they do not take his claim seriously because there is no visible proof of the violence. The survivor blaming himself for presenting himself as gay and making himself a target is an example of *internalized oppression*.

All of these systems of gender and sexuality-based oppressions create the larger social environment in which LGBTQ people live. This framework is important to understanding what abuse looks like in queer relationships and why and how queer South Asians face unique challenges in navigating safety and support in domestic abuse situations.

3

Reframing Our Analysis of Domestic Violence

Over the past 40 years, the movement against domestic violence in the US has developed a social service delivery system, legal remedies, and policies to address violence against women that have been built upon a mainstream feminist analysis of intimate partner violence. While this work has been of critical importance given historical and contemporary contexts of sexism and pervasiveness of male violence against women, this analysis of domestic violence has relied heavily on heterosexist gendered assumptions. Mainstream feminist domestic violence paradigms are primarily based on binary understandings of gender and assumptions about gendered behavior that do not acknowledge that there are people who may identify outside of this binary, who may have gender identities that do not fit neatly into a male/female analysis, and/or who may act in ways that are not aligned with social expectations or gender stereotypes. This mainstream feminist analysis challenges sexist male dominance over women but not heterosexist dominance over those who do not fit heterosexist norms of gender and sexuality. This, in turn, has limited our ability to understand and respond effectively to domestic violence in LGBTQ communities.

In addition, understanding and addressing domestic violence in same-gender and/or trans relationships requires recognition that people of all genders can be victims and/or perpetrators of intimate partner violence. Mainstream feminist domestic violence discourse and services most often rely on the assumption that men are abusers and women are survivors. This, then, forecloses the possibility of seeing and adequately responding to gay male survivors of violence, women who abuse their intimate partners, and/or transgender people who are experiencing or perpetrating violence. Because of these gender assumptions, domestic violence advocates may wrongly apply a gender-based framework to understanding domestic abuse in LGBTQ relationships and assume that the more “masculine” person in the relationship is the perpetrator or that the smaller person in the relationship must be the victim. These gender-based assumptions cannot be used to determine who is being abusive in queer relationships. LGBTQ relationships require more comprehensive systems for assessing abuse than is in place in many anti-violence service settings. Goldscheid (2009) notes that:

Although domestic violence service delivery rightly is subject to the critique that it has become depoliticized and that it has evolved from its roots as an outgrowth of

a progressive political movement into a bureaucratized social service system, it is nevertheless hard to deny the ways that a gender paradigm informs practice on the ground daily. (p. 2)

The prevalence of the “power & control wheel” as a primary paradigm to understand abusive relationships has also had limited applicability to LGBTQ communities. Some power and control wheels have been expanded to reflect issues facing specific communities (such as immigrants) or have been adapted to capture tactics of abuse that might apply to particular relationships such as queer relationships. While these models can be useful and intend to expand our understanding of dynamics of domestic violence, they are often limited in terms of being able to encapsulate multiple identities (such as someone being transgender, South Asian, and immigrant simultaneously, etc) and have constrained our ability to think about domestic violence in more complex or varied ways. In her study of woman-to-woman violence, Ristock (2002) found that in some relationships, violence occurred in less predictable patterns and was more sporadic. This is not to assume that queer domestic violence is not as serious as violence in other relationships or that it is “mutual,” but, rather, that as advocates, we need to stay open to the idea that abuse in these relationships is complex and may not fit neatly into the mainstream power and control wheel paradigm.

To better address domestic violence in LGBTQ South Asian communities, we need to be open to shifting our frame. We need to simultaneously hold that men may be significantly more likely to be a perpetrator in a heterosexual intimate relationship, but that the gender binary, which dictates that men are perpetrators and women are survivors, is not applicable outside of this context of heterosexual relationships. The assumption that men are perpetrators and women are survivors can be a difficult one to give up, especially because it has emerged through mainstream feminist efforts to understand domestic violence within a gendered paradigm in order to expose the sexism and misogyny embedded in these dynamics of violence. However, its utility is limited and the reinforcement of this paradigm serves to further make invisible LGBTQ communities. We may also be concerned about integrating the idea that women can be perpetrators of violence into our analysis. We have worked hard to protect survivors who use violence in self-defense and we may be concerned that, if we accept that women can be perpetrators, these acts will be confused for aggressive, abusive uses of violence. We may also want to defend women from potential exploitation of this idea to confirm that women are “just as bad” as men, as this takes violence out of a context of misogyny, sexism, and other forms of oppression. We need to recognize these concerns so that we can address them when we re-frame our analysis so that all survivors’ experiences are seen and validated. We also need to be open to deeper understandings of the various forms of violence and their interactions, as LGBTQ South Asian communities are positioned amidst multiple forces of oppression. This re-framing and expansion of our analysis will require careful attention and engagement, on individual, organizational, and community levels.

4

Overview of Domestic Violence in LGBTQ South Asian Communities

To date, no empirical research has been conducted that assesses what domestic violence looks like amongst LGBTQ South Asians. While a small number of writings have aimed to raise awareness about LGBTQ domestic violence and explore the prevalence and tactics of abuse within LGBTQ relationships (see for example Island & Lettelier, 1991; Lobel, 1986; Renzetti, 1992; Waldner-Haugrud, Gratch, & Magruder, 1997), the majority of such work is dated and has focused primarily on the experiences of white lesbian and/or bisexual women. Thus, much less is known about LGBTQ communities of color, violence in gay male relationships, or issues specifically facing transgender communities. However, from experiences of service providers, domestic violence advocates, activists, and community members, we know that domestic violence is an issue within all LGBTQ communities, including amongst queer South Asians.

Many of the same factors and dynamics that impact experiences of domestic violence within heterosexual relationships in the South Asian community also affect LGBTQ South Asians. In addition, the larger context of multiple and particular oppressions such as homophobia, heterosexism, genderism, and transphobia impact both what the abuse looks like and the barriers and challenges that LGBTQ South Asians may face in seeking safety, support, and/or services.

What Abuse Looks Like in LGBTQ Relationships

Domestic violence within LGBTQ relationships can include tactics of power and control similar to those seen in heterosexual DV situations, such as: verbal abuse, physical violence, social isolation, sexual abuse, economic control, exploitation of immigration status, and threats against children and family. In addition, because of the impact of homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism on LGBTQ people and relationships, a violent partner can also use the victim's identity as transgender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer as a tool of power and control (Allen & Leventhal, 1999). For instance, an abusive partner can use the threat of "outing" someone—or disclosing information regarding a person's gender and/or sexual identity—against them as a

tactic of abuse by threatening to tell friends or family members about their identity or their relationship (Lindhorst, Mehrotra, & Mincer, 2009).

From our work and experience with heterosexual South Asians, we know the ways that immigration threats and/or threats involving custody or children can be leveraged by abusive partners. Within queer relationships, these threats can be further enhanced by the heterosexism, homophobia, and/or transphobia that may be at play. For example, an abusive partner may threaten a survivor by saying that if they leave they will not have any legal rights to the children because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Since child custody and co-parent adoption laws vary from state to state, a non-biological parent in a LGBTQ family may have limited rights to custody or visitation if the couple separates; a threat to take the children can be particularly devastating. A transgender immigrant may be particularly fearful of immigration authorities knowing about their gender identity, particularly if their legal documents do not match with the gender that they are living and presenting as. This can, in turn, be used as a point of control and power by an abusive partner. In terms of immigration status, queer immigrants, including those in abusive relationships, often have more limited options for obtaining legal status as they are not eligible for immigration remedies that rely on spousal sponsorship or marriage, including immigration relief available for survivors of domestic violence through the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (i.e., VAWA self-petitions).

Challenges to Addressing LGBTQ Domestic Violence: Barriers Within South Asian Queer Communities

The larger social context of homophobia, heterosexism, and transphobia mean that South Asian LGBTQ people often have to fight for the legitimacy of our relationships and identities. Further, since these identities and relationships can be viewed as inherently abnormal or wrong, it can be particularly difficult to acknowledge that violence may be occurring within these relationships.

Some of the reasons that LGBTQ domestic violence is difficult to address *within* LGBTQ communities themselves is also common to other marginalized communities. LGBTQ South Asian survivors of abuse may feel particularly protective of their intimate relationships. People in same-gender relationships may also experience a high level of emotional as well as material reliance on their intimate relationship. This is particularly important if the individual or the couple does not have family support or is not “out” about personal identity or being in a same-gender relationship.

South Asian survivors may also be fearful of exposing unhealthy or abusive dynamics that may further contribute to negative perceptions of LGBTQ people and relationships (Balsam, 2001) and/or fuel xenophobia and racism against South Asians. In addition, for LGBTQ South Asians there can be an extra protectiveness of queer relationships as they may be under attack both within the South Asian community as well as in the community at large. Amongst LGBTQ people there can also be a tendency to deny that domestic violence happens in queer

communities because of norms around conflict avoidance, or “saving face.” South Asian queer people may not see what is happening in their relationship as “domestic violence” as they may perceive relationship abuse to be a “heterosexual problem.” This inability to recognize domestic violence and/or how to respond to it, and the pervasiveness of a heterosexual understanding of domestic violence (male violence against women) may prevent a LGBTQ from seeking support (Pusey & Mehrotra, 2010).

Challenges to Addressing LGBTQ Domestic Violence: Barriers in the Broader South Asian Community

Interconnected systems of social inequality contribute significantly to why it has been difficult to address LGBTQ domestic violence within South Asian anti-violence efforts. Because of the realities of gender and sexuality-based oppressions, LGBTQ South Asians have often been made invisible and/or ostracized within the South Asian community as well as in society-at-large. This marginalization, combined with the persistence of heterosexism and homophobia within the community, has meant that LGBTQ South Asians are often not acknowledged as part of the community since their relationships are not accepted as legitimate. These perceptions have contributed to the lack of attention given to queer domestic violence within South Asian anti-violence organizing. In addition, because one manifestation of homophobia is to see South Asian queer relationships and identities as “abnormal,” “white,” or “American,” South Asian domestic violence programs may not see LGBTQ South Asians as part of the community that they serve. As discussed earlier, assumptions about gender dynamics in violent relationships also contribute to the lack of attention paid to LGBTQ domestic violence in South Asian communities.

Challenges to Addressing LGBTQ Domestic Violence Communities: Barriers in Systems/Services

Although homophobia and heterosexism can impact all LGBTQ survivors of violence, there are also differences between how oppression impacts lesbians, gay men, bisexual, and transgender people’s experiences of domestic violence that are impossible to fully capture but important to recognize. Similar to other marginalized communities, institutionalized oppression also factor into the difficulty in addressing domestic abuse in the LGBTQ South Asian community.

As has been previously discussed, the orientation of the mainstream domestic violence movement is to always believe survivors. It also includes a common assumption that women are the survivors of violence and men are the perpetrators. As such, services for abuse survivors are built on the assumption that women are victims and that any woman who calls should therefore be able to access services. For example, a perpetrator of woman-to-woman violence may contact a domestic violence program before the survivor is able to access help, and she may perceive or describe herself as the “victim” of abuse even though she is actually the

primary perpetrator in the situation. This may mean that a perpetrator of abuse gains assistance from service providers which can negatively impact the survivor, such as obtaining a restraining order against the survivor, or entering a shelter program which can block the survivor from being able to access the same program for help.

Addressing gay male violence also challenges many service and systems paradigms for addressing relationship violence as it requires advocates to recognize the potential of men to be victims of violence as well as perpetrators. Gay men may already be more hesitant to disclose about their experience of relationship violence because societal expectations of what it means to be masculine may imply that men can only be perpetrators of abuse and not victims, or that men should be able to defend themselves against abuse (Ristock & Timbang, 2005). The mainstream feminist framework for understanding male violence against women has often meant that if a male calls a domestic violence program or calls himself a victim of abuse, the advocate will assume that he is actually the perpetrator. A transgender person calling a program for assistance may experience a gender misread based on the sound of their voice that may impact whether or not that person is able to access appropriate support.

As a result, LGBTQ people may not have access to options for safety, such as domestic violence programs, support groups, or legal remedies. Because domestic violence shelters are generally aimed toward meeting the needs of “battered women,” gay male or transgender survivors of abuse (especially those who do not identify full-time as women) most often are not able to access shelters or safe housing options (Lindhorst, Mehrotra, & Mincer, 2009).

Transgender people in abusive relationships also face unique challenges. While homophobia and heterosexism are oppressions based specifically on who people are in relationships with (i.e., same-gender relationships vs. heterosexual relationships), transphobia targets the gender identity of an individual. Transgender people may be in same-gender or straight abusive relationships depending on their sexual orientation. As access to various policies and programs often depend on gender identity, transgender-identified people experiencing violence may have limited access to services, adoption, and other types of social services.

Another challenge to addressing domestic violence in LGBTQ communities emerges from the institutionalization of legal responses to intimate partner violence. Although there are legal remedies for domestic violence survivors, LGBTQ people may not be able to access these resources. For example, in many states, it is not possible for people in same-gender relationships to obtain a restraining order or to do so without defining their relationship in some other way (i.e., as roommates vs. intimate partners, etc.).

Another concern that emerges from the institutionalization of legal responses is located in the increased role that the criminal legal system plays in domestic violence situations. The anti-domestic violence movement, beginning in the 1970s, has worked with federal governmental and state agencies to criminalize domestic violence. The criminalization of domestic violence is predicated upon logics of punishment that require a binary relationship between a victim,

who is to be helped, and a perpetrator, who is to be punished, by the legal system. Over the past three decades, the criminalization of domestic violence has become institutionalized, most directly through mandatory arrest and no-drop prosecution policies.³ Currently, at least thirty states have implemented mandatory or pro-arrest policies. State recognition of domestic violence and its classification as a crime is often heralded as a success of the anti-violence movement's efforts. Yet, the increased reliance on the criminal legal system for intervention in domestic violence can be complicated, at best, and dangerous, at worst, for marginalized communities, including LGBTQ South Asians (Munshi, 2010).

Domestic violence arrests and prosecution can have adverse consequences for a South Asian LGBTQ survivor of violence. Oftentimes police do not even view domestic violence in same-gender relationships as abuse and may see it as "mutual abuse" or a "cat fight." However, if the police do interpret the situation as domestic violence, the survivor may not want the abuser arrested, for reasons as variant and complicated as love, economic dependence, dependence for mobility, fear of retaliation by the abuser/community, shame, or embarrassment. The abuser may have an insecure immigration status, meaning a criminal conviction would prompt a loss of status and an increased risk of detention and deportation. Or, the survivor may be the one who is arrested, especially if there is visible evidence that she inflicted physical injury upon the abuser and the police officers are unable or unwilling to do further assessment of the situation. Such an arrest can present problems for her immigration status, cue deportation proceedings, require jail time, cause retaliation from her abuser or community, jeopardize her employment, or adversely affect child custody (Munshi, 2010).

The survivor may also be concerned about interacting with law enforcement, particularly if the survivor or her partner is, or perceived to be, queer, trans, undocumented, disabled, Muslim, and/or identified with other characteristics that may increase their vulnerability to police violence, and homophobic or transphobic violence from others while in criminal custody and proceedings. A recent study conducted by Amnesty International (2006) regarding LGBTQ communities and law enforcement showed that immigrants and transgender people were among those most targeted by the police. In particular, gender non-conforming people experienced regular abuses by law enforcement, including physical, emotional, and verbal violence from police, inappropriate searches to determine a person's physiology, and failure to protect transgender people from abuses while in detention (Amnesty International, 2006).

The institutionalization of legal responses to domestic violence, then, have created an emphasis on these solutions; for LGBTQ communities, however, these responses may not be desirable. Again, the intersection of LGBTQ identity with other salient oppressions can also impact access to resources based on a multitude of factors such as culture, language, immigration status, ability, and/or religion, etc.

5

Shifting the Frame in Practice: Case Study

In order to provide an opportunity to reflect practically on some of the realities facing LGBTQ people in abusive relationships, we are presenting a case study for reading and discussion. The purpose of the case is to stimulate critical thinking as well as to make visible some of the specific advocacy needs and challenges that may arise in responding to abuse in queer relationships. When reading the case example, keep track of your own responses: How does reading the case study make you feel? What comes up for you when you read about this situation of domestic violence?

Case Study: D. and K.

D. and K. have been in an intimate relationship for three years. K.'s parents have not spoken to her in five years, since they learned about her sexual orientation. However, K. is "out" at work and has many friends in the LGBTQ community. Before meeting K., D. had not been in a relationship with a woman before. When D. and K. moved in together, they told D.'s parents that they were just roommates. K. was raised in the US and is a well-known immigration attorney in town. D. has been in the US for 7 years and is on a student visa that will expire in a year. After she finishes school, she is hoping to get work with an employer that will sponsor her to stay in the US. D.'s parents do not know anything about her relationship with K. or that D.'s gender expression and identity are generally masculine. They expect that she will either marry a South Asian man in the US, or return to South Asia to marry after her visa expires. D. loves K. but is also very afraid of what might happen if her family learns that she is in a lesbian relationship and/or that her gender expression and identity do not conform to societal and cultural expectations of femininity.

Starting in the second year of their relationship, K. and D. began to argue more regularly and there started to be more tension in their relationship. K. started to criticize D. often. Since D. has a more masculine appearance and prefers to wear men's clothing, early on in their relationship, K. began to constantly criticize D.'s clothing and told her that she needed to look less "butch." K. would often get angry when D. had evening plans and often expressed disapproval of how much time D. spent with her friends. She became particularly jealous of the relationships D. had

with other South Asian graduate students in her department. K. wanted D. to quit her job in the department so that she could spend more time at home and assured D. that she could support her on her attorney salary. However, D. was determined to keep her job because her student visa did not allow her to work off-campus, thus making it difficult for her to find other employment.

One night last week when D. came home from a South Asian Students Association (SASA) meeting on campus, K. and D. got into an argument because D. arrived home an hour later than she had originally expected. During their fight, K. slapped her, pushed her against the wall, and accused her of having a crush on one of the women in the group. She also threatened to attend the next meeting and tell everyone about their lesbian relationship K. coerced D. to have sex with her to prove that she loves her and that she is not interested in the woman in the group.

D. is worried about what will happen if her SASA friends know about her relationship with K. She knows that many of her SASA friends are religious and believe that lesbian relationships are wrong and abnormal. D. is also very worried about K.'s temper and how much they have been arguing. D. believes that K. is depressed and is concerned about her. K. constantly reminds D. that since her parents aren't speaking to her, D. is the only family she has.

D. is extremely fearful of K. and does not know what she might do. She is worn down by K.'s constant criticism of her and is also concerned that K. might get more physically violent if D. doesn't do what she wants. D. has not seen her parents in almost two years and since she last saw them she has cut her hair and changed her appearance to be more masculine/butch in nature. K. accused D. of being a fraud because she changes her gender expression around her family to appear more feminine. K. recently threatened to send D.'s parents a photograph of her to show them what she looks like. D. is scared of what her parents will say when they see what her gender expression is like.

In another recent argument, when D. told K. about her plans to travel to see her family for a month in South Asia, K. told D. that she would kill herself if D. left her for so long. She told D. that D. was the only person that understood her and that living without her for a month would be impossible. D. became very worried about K.'s safety and emotional well-being. When D. suggested K. go to counseling, K. refused and made fun of D. for suggesting such an "American" idea. D. is also becoming increasingly depressed in part as a result of challenges in her relationship with K. D. only has one close friend who knows about their relationship and that friend is telling D. that she should leave this relationship because it is unhealthy.

Questions to Consider:

1. What is going on in this relationship? How does power operate?
2. What strategies are D. and K. using to hurt each other, help each other, and/or hurt and help themselves?

3. How are D. and K. affected by homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, and/or genderism? Other oppressions such as xenophobia, racism, sexism, etc.?
4. What resources, support, and/or advocacy might both D. & K. need?
5. What might be some of the barriers/challenges to D. & K. seeking and getting support/resources?
6. If we received a call from D. and/or K., what would we do? What questions would we want to ask them? What kind of support could we provide?
7. What about this case fits with our assumptions about domestic violence? Does this case challenge our assumptions about domestic violence? If so, how?
8. What are our own biases and, insecurities that this case study evokes? What can we do to overcome them? What resources are needed to do this?

Discussion

What is happening in this situation?

In the case of D. and K., there are a number of abuse tactics that K. is using in her relationship with D. K. is controlling of D.—she is controlling about how she spends her time, how she expresses her gender, and what she does. K. expresses a great deal of anger and a high level of jealousy. As a result, she accuses D. of having a crush on a woman at school and is not comfortable with D.'s relationships with her friends. She attempts to heighten D.'s dependence on her by offering to support her financially. During one argument, the abuse escalated to a physical level as K. slapped and pushed D. K. threatened to “out” D. by telling her friends, who believe it is abnormal and wrong to be a lesbian, about their relationship. She also threatened to “out” D.'s gender expression to her parents by sending them a recent photo of her with short hair and a more masculine appearance. K.'s depression and suicidal threats are worrisome to D., though it is possible that K's suicidal threats are being used a tool to manipulate D. into staying in the relationship.

What are the barriers and challenges facing D. and K. in seeking resources, safety, and support?

Because of homophobia and heterosexism, D.'s parents do not know about their relationship with K. and K.'s parents are not speaking to her; both partners are reliant on this relationship in different ways to provide them with a sense of family. D. has not been in a lesbian relationship before, which also may impact how she is coming to understand her identity and the kind of dependence and/or fear she may have in this relationship. For fear of being judged about her lesbian relationship, D. is reluctant to disclose her relationship to her SASA friends and family, which isolates her from her support network. D. is concerned about her immigration status and is invested in keeping her student visa because her immigration and financial options are limited. D. does not know where to turn for help for herself or for K. It is also possible that, because D. is more butch-identified, that she fears she may not be believed if she contacts a service provider or a SAWO about the abuse that she is experiencing. Since she does not have

many connections to the LGBTQ community and does not have many South Asian friends who are supportive of her relationship, she may assume that she cannot contact the local SAWO and talk about her relationship openly and honestly. D. may also not perceive what she is experiencing as domestic violence—which she may think cannot happen between women—which could also prevent her from seeing the SAWO as a resource.

How can we respond to D. and K.'s situation?

Someone in D.'s position, due to issues such as isolation, protectiveness over the relationship, denial of the severity of the abuse, shame, or lack of trust in social service/helping institutions, would be unlikely to contact an organization for assistance and much more likely to rely on friends or peer networks if they were available (Pusey & Mehrotra, 2009). Or, if D. were to contact an organization for support, she might prefer to contact a mainstream (i.e. non-South Asian group) for assistance because of real and/or anticipated concerns regarding homophobia and confidentiality. Our goal here, however, is to eliminate the barriers and challenges that have existed for South Asian LGBTQ survivors. What if the SAWO and South Asian community had more capacity to support her? What if existing limitations that have existed for South Asian LGBTQ survivors were shifted and the SAWO was explicitly willing and prepared to support her?

Case study continued:

D.'s friend continues to urge D. to leave the relationship, but D. refuses—she is certain that she loves K. and she does not want to abandon her. She also does not want to be responsible for K.'s mental health deteriorating, particularly in regards to her recent suicide threats, if D. leaves. After ongoing discussions, D.'s friend asks her to call a local South Asian women's organization: she tells D. that she can discuss her relationship with someone, confidentially, and learn more about the options that may be available to her and K., to improve their relationship. D. is completely opposed to this idea. Firstly, the local organization works with women in violent relationships and she does not believe that K. is violent. Secondly, she saw the SAWO volunteers at an event at K.'s mandir and is afraid to identify herself as a lesbian, as she doesn't know anything about their homophobia; she is worried that their religiosity may mean that they will not accept her gender and sexual identities. D.'s friend is persistent that she give them one phone call, and D., although not convinced, finally does agree to call the local SAWO.

As an advocate who may respond to D.'s call, what are some of the key issues we need to consider? First, there are fundamental advocacy guidelines that we always follow that are particularly critical in a situation that involves LGBTQ domestic violence:

- **Ensure confidentiality about all aspects of the situation.** Although we are already accustomed to maintaining confidentiality about cases of domestic violence, there may be additional considerations for LGBTQ survivors of violence. As noted earlier, homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, and genderism can make it unsafe for South Asian LGBTQ survivors of

violence to expose different dimensions of their identities. Being “out” can be complex; someone can be “out” in their family but “closeted” at work. Or, someone can present a gender conformist identity in public yet express gender non-conformity at home. As such, we cannot make any assumptions about the degree to which a survivor is “out” or “closeted” about the relationship that they are in or their sexual and/or gender identities. We also cannot make assumptions about how safe or unsafe it is for the survivor to be “out” in the different arenas of her life. So, in addition to maintaining confidentiality about the violence in the relationship, we must also maintain confidentiality about an LGBTQ survivor’s identities, unless we are explicitly given permission to share information with others. Here, we see that D. is not “out” to her family or in her social spaces at school, but is “out” to one close friend. To respect her privacy, as well as her safety, it would be critical for us to maintain confidentiality about her being in a relationship with K.

- **Do not assume anything about the relationship the survivor is in.** Most of the survivors who currently contact our organizations are married women who are in violent relationships with their husbands. As we know, these situations are complex. Many times there are multiple abusers involved: brothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law or other extended family members. We also receive calls from women who need support because they are in an abusive relationship with their employer, a neighbor, or a family member. We already know that we cannot assume what the relationship is between the survivor and the abuser; we listen to her narrative of the violence and learn from her. In order to increase our accessibility to South Asian LGBTQ survivors of violence, we want to extend this idea to include assumptions about the gender of the abuser. When a survivor calls a helpline, we should not assume that she is in a violent heterosexual relationship; if we make that assumption, and she is an LGBTQ survivor, she may interpret that assumption as an indication that we are not going to accept or understand her LGBTQ identity or relationship. As such, we need to be careful that the questions we ask her do not include gendered pronouns (unless she has revealed the gender of her abuser). Instead of asking “How long has he been hurting you?,” you can ask “Can you tell me about the situation you are calling about?” “How long have you been experiencing this violence in your relationship?” Avoid expressing shock or confusion if the person gradually comes out about being in a queer relationship. Stay grounded in offering compassion and support, not advice or answers. Here, we see that D. is already worried about the SAWO being inaccessible—at worst, actively homophobic, and at best, unprepared to offer her support. If we make and reveal an assumption that D. is in a heterosexual relationship, we are likely to confirm her fear.
- **Follow the survivor’s lead with respect to language about identities and relationships.** Our responsibility as advocates is to support domestic violence survivors’ process of self-empowerment. We already are accustomed to actively listening and responding to a survivor’s narrative of her experience of violence. When working with LGBTQ survivors of violence, the same approach is necessary. It is especially important to follow the survivor’s lead with respect to the language that she is using to describe herself, other

people in her life, dynamics within the relationship, and the relationship itself. For example, a woman may be in a relationship with another woman but may not see herself as a “lesbian;” she may identify as queer, or gay, or pansexual or something else. A trans man may currently be in a relationship with a straight-identified woman—he may identify as queer though she does not. Or, a woman who is being stalked by a woman she once had a relationship with may identify as heterosexual. These examples illustrate the complexity of identity as well as the need to hear from the survivor herself about how she names herself. Another set of issues are concerned with the description of the relationship. Unlike heterosexual relationships that culminate in marriage, many LGBTQ (and increasingly, many heterosexual) relationships are not on a linear path with an end goal of marriage. LGBTQ people can define their relationships using a wide range of terms, often not including the legal and cultural terms of “husband” and “wife.” We cannot make assumptions about what a survivor calls the other person in the relationship. It can also be common for a person in a queer relationship to avoid using pronouns when describing the person they are in a relationship with or to call the relationship a “roommate” or “friend” relationship, particularly if the person does not know whether or not it is safe to be “out” as LGBTQ. Again, we listen and follow the lead of the survivor: we wait until she names the person, as her girlfriend, date, partner, or lover, and then mirror that language when we respond.

- **Follow the survivor’s lead with respect to language about the violence.** We already know that although we use terms such as “domestic violence” in our work, the survivors we are supporting may describe the dynamics in their relationship in a different way. We need to listen to how people talk about their experiences in their relationship. For example, an average caller is more likely to describe feeling terrible in their relationship than to locate the source of these feelings in emotional abuse. Or, a survivor may talk about restrictions of mobility in the relationship rather than state that these restrictions are because of the partner’s controlling behavior. We should listen to how survivors attribute blame in the relationship and know that blaming oneself while protecting the abusive partner is a common survival strategy utilized by people who are experiencing violence.
- **Listen to what the survivor needs.** Most of our work facilitates survivors going through a process of empowerment in which they make informed decisions about how to move forward in their lives, and we provide non-judgmental support, information, and resources. As we work with LGBTQ survivors, we want to prioritize this survivor-centered approach. We also want to be aware that South Asian LGBTQ survivors, as members of communities that may be impacted by multiple forms of oppression (such as homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, racism, sexism, and classism) may not be interested in pursuing legal strategies to address the violence in their relationship. The institutionalization of legal responses to domestic violence in the US over the last 40 years has created a need to establish binary relationships of victim and perpetrator, where a “successful” intervention includes some form of punishment for the violent party (such as arrests and imprisonment). For communities that are more vulnerable to

various forms of oppression, including but not limited to LGBTQ communities, looking to the law to provide safety may not be a desirable strategy. As such, it is especially important that we listen to what survivors state they want and do not want, and that we encourage identification of possible resources within survivors' own communities and social networks (centering safety concerns, of course). Here, we need to take seriously that D. loves K. We also need to take seriously that their everyday experience of being South Asian LGBTQ intensifies their perceived need for each other for social support and that D. may not see leaving K. as an option.

Additionally, there are some guidelines that are more specific to LGBTQ survivors of domestic violence, especially as they address common misconceptions and/or myths about violence in LGBTQ communities. Below are some key issues to consider.

- **LGBTQ relationships can be just as violent as any other relationships.** Even if the violence that is occurring does not conform to the ways that we have been taught to understand domestic violence, we need to recognize that abuse can happen in an LGBTQ relationship and that safety is a real concern for survivors.

- **We cannot make assumptions about gender based on what someone sounds like.** There are many potential obstacles that can emerge when so much of our work occurs over the phone. We cannot see what the caller looks like, her facial expressions, or her body language, and so we do our best to respond based on what we hear on the phone call. We need to remember that it is not possible to be certain about someone's gender, gender expression, or gender identity, by talking to them on the phone. Part of being committed to becoming accessible to South Asian LGBTQ survivors of violence is being open to the uncertainty of gender. If it is critical for us to know the gender of the person, we can ask, either orally or through a written intake, one of the following questions:
 - "What is your gender?"
 - "How do you identify your gender?"
 - "What types of pronouns do you prefer? Male or female or something else?"

- **We cannot use gender shortcuts to determine the dynamics of violence in a relationship.** In (non-trans) heterosexual relationships, the majority of abusers are men and the majority of survivors are women. But, as discussed earlier, dynamics of domestic violence and gender are more complicated in LGBTQ communities. Knowing someone's gender presentation/expression or gender identity alone cannot predict the likelihood of being a survivor or a perpetrator of abuse. Instead, we need to reflect upon our assumptions about masculinity and violence and the role that (real or perceived) physical strength plays in domestic violence. In a LGBTQ relationship, gender cues are less relevant, so we need to do more work to decipher the dynamics. We need to ask critical questions such as: How is power operating in the relationship? Who maintains control over which aspects of the relationship? Who is afraid of whom? For example, in this case study, we

need to be careful to accept that D. can be a survivor of violence even though her gender presentation is on the masculine end of a gender spectrum. We also need to be aware of ways in which D.'s gender non-conformity may be exploited by K. For example, her threats to "out" D.'s gender identity to her family are a way for K. to maintain power and control in her relationship with D. These assessment questions are especially critical for same-gender relationships in which it is possible that the person who is primarily perpetrating the abuse in the relationship may reach out for assistance. If the abusive person claims to be the survivor, and is recognized as such by helping organizations, the actual survivor may have more difficulties accessing services as she will be considered to be the perpetrator.

- **We cannot dismiss LGBTQ domestic violence as mutual abuse.** Because we cannot rely on gender-based cues to determine the dynamics in a violent LGBTQ relationship, it can often be difficult to discern which person is perpetrating abuse and which person is the survivor. We need to be careful not to dismiss the violence as mutual violence; this invalidates the survivor's experience of violence by making it invisible. Also, we need to remember that it is possible that the survivor uses violence in the relationship. For example, she might resort to it to protect herself or even to retaliate. But these uses of violence must be seen in the larger context of the relationship, as strategies of survival within a relationship where she is experiencing violence. Here, we can utilize a metaphor that distinguishes between a snapshot and a movie:⁴ A snapshot is a still image that captures a single moment in time while a movie offers a bigger, ongoing, more complex story. When listening to a narrative of violence, we need to place the snapshots (i.e., individual incidents of violence) in the context of the movie (i.e., the patterns that exist in the relationship over time). Snapshots alone don't reveal the bigger picture. So, for example, in this case study, K.'s continued verbal abuse may drive D. to physically push her away and K. may have a visible injury from the incident. A snapshot of this event would mis-lead us, as we would see that D. was physically violent towards K. A movie of their relationship, however, would reveal that K. is continuously abusive towards D. and the act of physical violence was not because D. was aggressively trying to harm K. but because she was feeling unsafe and wanted to create a boundary between them.

Based on our earlier assessment, we can review the information that we already know:

- The relationship between D. and K. contains emotional abuse, including exploitation of D.'s social isolation through threats to "out" D. to both the SASA members (her local social network) and her family in South Asia.
- There has been at least one incident of physical violence, and at least one incident of sexual coercion.
- D. and K. are in different financial positions, and K. is encouraging D. to become more financially dependent upon her.
- D. is on a temporary visa which in itself contributes some precariousness to the situation.

Given this information, and the above guidelines, what can we do to support D.?

We may want to ask D. some of the following questions:

- **How does D. feel in her relationship with K.?** How is the relationship affecting D.'s overall well-being? How is her emotional, physical, spiritual health?
- **What kinds of safety concerns does she have?** We need to make sure to think broadly and holistically about what we mean by safety, so that we include physical safety as well as emotional, sexual, economic, immigration, and social arenas. What are the different risks that she is managing on an everyday level? For example, what would it mean for her social network if she is "outed"? What will happen to her familial relationships if they learn more about her gender identity? What are her job prospects? Are there ways to make her immigration status more secure?
- **What existing resources and support can D. access (e.g., friends, family, school, religious organization)?** Are there safe, supportive people within these networks and/or institutions that D. can rely on?
- **Does D. want to leave her relationship?**
 - **If yes, what kinds of resources/support are available to her?** Is D. interested in going to a shelter? There are many reasons why a South Asian LGBTQ survivor may be reluctant to go to a domestic violence shelter, including but not limited to, real or perceived homophobia, heterosexism, transphobia, genderism, classism, xenophobia, and/or racism in the shelter institutions. There are also interventions that we can make as advocates to make shelters more accessible to South Asian LGBTQ survivors who may be in need of emergency safe space. For example, we can try to locate shelters that assert that they are accessible to LGBTQ survivors, and continue to advocate for D. within the shelter during her stay. It is critical that, as D.'s advocate, we see the shelter from her perspective, and understand it as an institution that she is engaging with so that we continue to be available to her, to support her in getting her needs met. We can also talk to the shelter about their policies to ensure that they are accessible to LGBTQ survivors, and forge a collaborative relationship in which we help support each other's internal training/education about LGBTQ domestic violence.
 - **If not, what other types of resources are available to her?**
- **Does D. want legal intervention?** What types of legal options are available to her? Can she get a restraining order? If there is an escalation of violence and D. decides to call the police, what can she expect? What are her rights and what are the risks she will take? As advocates, we can be best prepared to support D. by providing information about services that are available in our local jurisdiction. This might include information about legal remedies available to LGBTQ survivors of violence, or help to identify what local resources exist that can help LGBTQ survivors navigate the legal system.

6

Conclusion

Our intention in this paper is not to present a generic or prescriptive way for our organizations to increase accessibility for LGBTQ South Asian communities. We do not believe that there is an easy “formula” or a list of items that we can check off in order to meet the needs of LGBTQ South Asians. This work requires deeper engagement with our approaches to anti-violence work, our values and how we practice them, and ongoing openness and self-reflection to critique in order to move further towards our goal of being safe, approachable spaces for LGBTQ South Asian people experiencing violence in their relationships. We also know that change takes time. Working toward shifting our frame for understanding domestic violence, changing the culture of organizations, creating new norms in our communities, and unlearning our own biases happens in gradual steps, but this work is possible and important to our charge as SAWOs. To this end, we offer some guiding questions for ourselves as individuals and for our organizations and movements (Adapted from Lindhorst, Mehrotra, & Mincer, 2009; Ristock & Timbang, 2005).

Questions for Individual Reflection

- How do I define my own sexual orientation?
- How do I define my gender identity? Gender expression?
- What are my values and beliefs regarding LGBTQ people and communities? How familiar am I with these communities?
- What do I anticipate as personal challenges in working with LGBTQ survivors of domestic violence? What am I afraid will happen? What kind of support and/or resources can I access in order to overcome these challenges?
- What is one thing I can do to proactively communicate to South Asian queer community members that I want to be a safe and accessible resource for them?

Questions for Organizational and Movement Reflection:

- Who benefits from the way we currently talk about relationship violence?
- Whose voices are heard and not heard when we use the category heterosexual domestic violence; family violence; violence against women; LGBTQ relationship violence, etc.?
- How can we think and work outside the gender binary system?
- How do we position our organization in the community? Who are our allies? Do these relationships align with our values? What relationships do we want to build with LGBTQ groups, organizations, & communities, and how?
- What are the demographics of our organization? Who makes up our internal group (staff, board, and volunteers)? How do we bring more LGBTQ people into our group without being tokenizing?
- What concrete steps can we take to actively create and continuously nurture an organizational and community culture that resists heterosexism, genderism, transphobia, and homophobia?

7

Afterword

As queer South Asian women working to end violence in our communities, many tensions emerged for us in the process of writing this paper. We invite you, as readers, to join us in grappling with some of these questions and the possibilities that they produce for future directions in our movement work.

- Framing domestic violence as gender-based violence, and attributing its root to patriarchy and sexism or other forms of oppression, has had its benefits. What does it mean for our anti-domestic violence work if we disrupt assumptions that are based in a gender binary system that expects violence to be unidirectional (with male perpetrators and female survivors)? What do we risk or lose? What do we gain? What type of framework(s) can we use instead?
- Another success of struggles to end domestic violence has been to center the survivor in the work. What do we gain/lose if we move away from a survivor-centered approach to one that accounts for both individual and community well-being? How can we simultaneously center individual and collective well-being to allow for creative and sustainable community-based responses to domestic violence? What are the barriers to developing these kinds of approaches?
- Anti-domestic violence work has been predicated on a binary of survivor and perpetrator, where the person committing the abuse is to be punished. Most anti-domestic violence programs do not work with perpetrators in any way. What do we gain/lose by addressing perpetrators of violence in our work? Can we move towards more inclusive models without addressing perpetrators?
- LGBTQ South Asians experience unique forms of violence due to our multiple positionalities, such as hate crimes, violence from families for being queer, institutional discrimination, among many more, some of which we have highlighted in this paper. These experiences continuously interact with each other and/or occurring intimate partner violence. How do we integrate this into our understandings and responses to

violence? What are the benefits/limitations of focusing our work on intimate partner violence? How do we effectively situate our concerns about intimate partner violence within a larger context of violence?

- In addition to continuing to develop capacity and implement strategies to respond to queer domestic violence situations, there is an ongoing need to develop prevention approaches that are relevant to LGBTQ South Asian people and relationships. What could such programs look like? How can SAWOs play a part in supporting prevention efforts focused on healthy relationships within LGBTQ communities?

8

Glossary of LGBTQ Terms

These definitions are meant to be a guide for understanding vocabulary relevant to gender, sexuality, and LGTBQ communities. They are not meant to be “complete” or “correct” definitions. These terms, their histories, the politics associated with them, and their ongoing usages are complex and diverse. They are constantly evolving and used differently in varied contexts and communities.

Sex: A person’s biological or anatomical identity as male or female, usually assigned at birth.

Gender: A collection of characteristics that are socially and culturally associated with maleness or femaleness. Our gender is made up of:

- **Gender expression:** The set of external characteristics and behaviors that are socially defined as masculine or feminine, such as dress/appearance, mannerisms, ways of speaking, and ways of being in social interactions. Gender expression is external and can be perceived and interpreted by others.
- **Gender identity:** A person’s internal feeling about their gender, their deep feeling of being male, or female, something other, or something in between. Gender identity is internal and defined by oneself; it is not visible to others.

Gender Binary: The dominant, institutionalized idea that there are only two genders: male and female. We know that this binary understanding of gender is simplistic and does not account for the array of gender identities and expressions that exist in the world.

Transgender: This word is often used as an umbrella term and refers most broadly to those who do not conform to societal gender norms. Generally, people who identify as transgender exhibit some behavior or traits that transgress, or fall outside of, traditional gender expectations. Transgender is often used to include people who identify as androgynous, cross-dressers, gender-benders or gender queer, hijras, and/or trans or transsexuals. The boundaries of the term transgender are not rigid and the term is used differently in different contexts (i.e., medical, psychological, academic, etc.)

Gender queer (or genderqueer): A person whose gender identity does not fit into the socially constructed “norms” associated with his/her biological sex. Genderqueer is an identity that falls anywhere between man/boy/male and woman/girl/female on the spectrum of gender identities.

Gender non-conforming: A person whose gender expression is different from the societal expectations based on their assigned sex at birth.

Intersex: Intersexuality is a set of medical conditions that feature congenital anomaly of the reproductive and sexual system. That is, intersex people are born with “sex chromosomes,” external genitalia, or internal reproductive systems that are not considered “standard” for either male or female. The existence of intersexuals shows that there are not just two sexes and that our ways of thinking about sex (as either male or female) is socially constructed.

Transsexual: A person whose gender identity differs from what is culturally associated with their biological sex at birth. Some, but not all, transsexuals wish to change their bodies to be congruent with their gender identity through sex reassignment surgery. Many transsexual people may also refer to themselves as transgender.

Hijra: Hijras are born as biological/anatomical males who reject their ‘masculine’ identity in due course of time to identify either as women, or not-men, or in-between man and woman, or neither man nor woman. (The term *hijra* is used in North India, while *aravani* and *thirunangai* are used in Tamil Nadu.)

Sexual orientation: One’s core sense of the gender(s) of people toward whom one feels romantically and sexually attracted. The inclination or capacity to develop intimate emotional and sexual relationships with people of the same gender, a different gender, or more than one gender.

Lesbian: A woman with emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to persons of the same gender.

Gay: Common word for men with emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to other men, but also used in reference to lesbians as well.

Bisexual: A person with emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to both men and women, not necessarily at the same time or to the same extent.

Queer: Originally a pejorative term for gay people, many LGBTQ people have reclaimed this term as an inclusive and positive way to identify all non-heterosexual and/or non-gender-conforming people and/or relationships. Some people still are uncomfortable labeling themselves or using the word “queer,” but many younger LGBT people use “queer” as both a political statement and a reflection of their approach to sexuality and gender.

Pansexual: A person with emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to people of any gender, with an assumption that there are more than two possible genders, not necessarily at the same time or to the same extent. This term is not often included in acronyms that refer to people who claim non-heterosexual identities but we want to recognize this identity and its challenge to the gender binary system.

Asexual: A person who is not interested in or does not desire sexual activity, either within or outside of a relationship. Asexuality is not the same as celibacy, which is the willful decision to not act on sexual feelings. Asexuals, while not physically sexual, are often fully capable of loving, affectionate, romantic ties to others.

Heterosexual: A person with emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to persons of the opposite gender.

Straight: A term used to refer to heterosexual people and relationships.

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity and expression matches the gender typically associated with their biological sex. For example, someone who is biologically female who identifies as a woman.

Coming Out: To declare and affirm both to one's self and to others one's identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc. It is not a single event but instead a life-long process.

Homophobia: Originally coined to mean, in classic psychological terms, irrational fear of homosexuality. Now refers usually to fear, hatred, or intolerance of gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer people, of stereotypically gay/lesbian behavior, discomfort with one's own same-sex attractions, or of being perceived as LGBTQ.

Heterosexism: The societal/cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that assume that heterosexuality is the only natural, normal, acceptable sexual orientation. Heterosexism is a system of oppression that reinforces the belief in the inherent superiority of heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships and negates gays', lesbians', bisexuals', and transgender people's lives and relationships.

Transphobia: Fear, hatred, or intolerance of transsexual and/or transgender people, or any behavior or physical gender expression that is outside the boundaries of traditional gender roles and expectations. There is often transphobia within lesbian and gay communities, as well as in straight communities.

Biphobia: The fear, hatred, or intolerance of bisexual people. This term addresses the ways that prejudice against bisexuals differs from prejudice against other queer people. There is often biphobia in lesbian, gay, and transgender communities, as well as in straight communities.

Genderism: The assumption that we live in a world where there are only two genders, and that the gender assignment one received at birth must then conform with one's gender expression and gender identity. Genderism values institutions as well as social and cultural norms that validate a gender binary system and clear boundaries between genders. As it also contains the assumption that this is normal, and these values belong to everybody, it justifies the devaluation of gender transgression.

Questioning: A person who is in a process of exploring their own sexual and/or gender identities.

Closeted/In the closet: Hiding or being unable to state openly to others or to oneself that one is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer. To be "in the closet" means to hide one's LGBTQ identity in order to avoid negative social repercussions, such as losing a job, housing, friends, or family. Many LGBTQ individuals are "out" in some situations and "closeted" in others, based on their perceived level of safety and support for their identity.

These definitions were compiled and adapted from:

Asian Women's Shelter, Glossary of Key Terms, 2002

<http://www.queer-ink.com/lingo.asp>

<http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org>

<http://internationalspectrum.umich.edu/life/definitions>

<http://www.urbandictionary.com>

http://geneq.berkeley.edu/lgbt_resources_definiton_of_terms

<http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/reports/reports/TransgenderEquality.pdf>

<http://www.transgenderzone.com/library/hl/fulltext/33.htm>

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Notes

1. There are a variety of nuanced debates over the meanings of different terms that are used to talk about violence in intimate relationships. In this paper we will be utilizing the term “domestic violence” (DV) and “relationship violence,” to indicate a pattern of abusive behaviors where the use of fear, intimidation, and control both facilitate and perpetuate an imbalance of power in an intimate relationship.
2. Here, we follow the lead of the majority of South Asian women’s organizations in the US and use “South Asian” to refer to descendants of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
3. These policies refer to the removal of discretion in cases where sufficient acts of violence have been committed to allow one party to obtain a restraining order against another party. When police respond to a “domestic violence” call where there is probable cause that a crime existed and a removal of discretion, police officers are required to arrest an offending party. Mandatory arrest polices are often accompanied by “no drop” prosecution practices, which limit prosecutorial discretion with respect to reduction of charges or dismissal of cases. (Munshi, 2010)
4. This metaphor was presented by the Northwest Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian, & Gay Survivors of Abuse (www.northwestnetwork.org). “Survivor’s Use of Violence”—Training for Advocates, April 2009, Seattle, WA.

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