CULTURAL GENDER ROLE BELIEFS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE WITHIN SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my mother. Your resilience and courage continue to inspire me every day, and witnessing your strength and growth has been one of the greatest privileges of my life. Thank you for your unwavering faith and for always standing by my dreams – it has given me the confidence to pursue my goals. Your support and compassion have carried me through the most challenging moments, and I am endlessly grateful for all that you've given me. This achievement is as much as yours as it mine.

ABSTRACT

Domestic abuse is highly prevalent yet significantly underreported within South Asian immigrant communities. Cultural gender role beliefs held closely by South Asian families have been closely linked to increased vulnerability to abuse and reduced help-seeking. This qualitative study aimed to explore how these beliefs may be contributing to the manifestation and perpetuation of domestic violence within the South Asian immigrant community. Using a multiple case study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three South Asian immigrant women. Interviews explored the participants' perspectives on how cultural gender role beliefs may have impacted the abuse experienced and created barriers to seeking support. Thematic analysis and cross-case comparison revealed six themes: (a) acceptance of abuse due to its normalization in marriage, (b) expectations of the "good" wife and husband, (c) power dynamics within the family hierarchy, (d) discouragement of women's autonomy, (e) perseverance of marriage through the sacrifice of safety, and (f) "what will people say?" - the detrimental impact of divorce. Findings showcase that women experience a lack of autonomy and agency as a result of how gender role beliefs are understood and portrayed within the patriarchal and hierarchal structures of the South Asian community. These expectations and power dynamics create unique sites of violence and vulnerability that perpetuate the normalization of abuse and discourage help-seeking. Implications include the need for increased awareness and access to resources and initiatives to strengthen women's autonomy and encourage dialogue within South Asian communities.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Work described in this thesis received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Gender roles that perpetuate cycles of domestic violence within South Asian immigrant communities”, No. Pro00149097, January 16, 2025.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Violence against women has been increasingly recognized as a common phenomenon regardless of race, religion, country, and socioeconomic status. The most well-known form of violence against women is domestic violence within intimate partner relationships, known as intimate partner violence (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025). Despite changing social contexts and attitudes towards domestic violence against women, this form of violence continues to be a significant issue around the world. According to WHO (2025), 682 million women (nearly one in three) have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse from their intimate partners. In most cases, this violence is a continuing pattern of behaviour rather than an isolated event. In the United States, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) reported that almost one in two women (47%) experience some form of domestic violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Leemis et al., 2022). In Canada, recent police reports show that 128,175 Canadians experienced domestic violence by their current or previous intimate partners in 2024 alone (Statistics Canada, 2025).

Additionally, gender is a significant factor in individuals experiencing domestic violence, with women being approximately four times more likely to be abused by their partners than men (Conroy, 2021; WHO, 2025). Of the 128,175 Canadians who experienced domestic violence in 2024, nearly eight in ten individuals (78%) were women and girls (Statistics Canada, 2025). In fact, domestic violence has been reported as the leading form of violence experienced by Canadian women (45%) for the past several years (Conroy, 2021). Additionally, women also disproportionately experience more severe forms of domestic violence, such as being choked, beaten, threatened with a weapon, or sexually assaulted (Burczycka, 2016; Conroy, 2021).

Some of the most extreme instances of domestic violence result in fatal killings, with the proportion of women killed by a spouse or intimate partner being eight times greater than the proportion of men (Dawson et al., 2022). The most recent report by the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability (CFOJA, 2024) indicated that 187 women and girls were violently killed in Canada in 2024 alone - a 26% increase from 2019. Racialized minorities accounted for 29% of the women and girls killed, and approximately 50% of the women killed were in a current or former intimate partner relationship with the accused and almost one-third were killed by other family members (28%), accounting for 78% of the women killed (CFOJA, 2024). Two of the most common methods of killing, when known, were stabbing (51%) and shooting (33%). The majority of the women (77%) were killed in their own home or in a residence they shared with the accused (CFOJA, 2024).

While domestic violence is recognized as a prevalent issue across various populations, researchers acknowledge that domestic violence is defined, manifested, and addressed differently across different socio-cultural groups (Cuevas & Cudmore, 2017; Dasgupta, 2000, 2017; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020). Despite this acknowledgement, there has been a historical lack of effort towards understanding these differences within domestic violence experiences, and as a result, a lack of culturally informed and sensitive legal and social resources available to diverse groups. There is limited information about prevalence rates of domestic violence among underrepresented ethnic and immigrant groups in Canada (Dawson et al., 2022; Stockman et al., 2015). For instance, CFOJA noted that there is missing information about women's race and ethnicity in almost half of the reported cases in Canada (Dawson et al., 2022). Data collection on racialized groups of homicide victims and accused perpetrators only began in 2019 in Canada, limiting the ability to accurately predict and convey the risk of violence against women (Dawson et al., 2022).

This lack of attention to differences among domestic violence experiences and the contributing socio-cultural factors further minimizes and silences the issue of domestic violence within culturally diverse groups (Cuevas & Cudmore, 2017; Dasgupta, 2000, 2017). To develop and enhance our understanding of these differences within domestic violence experiences, it is crucial to include the narratives and perspectives of culturally diverse individuals. Notably, efforts to include and empower culturally diverse women are crucial to addressing the disproportionate violence perpetrated against them.

Prevalence of Domestic Violence Among South Asian Immigrants

Domestic violence is prevalent in South Asian immigrant communities, and yet it is significantly underreported (Ahmad et al., 2004; Chokshi et al., 2009; Dasgupta, 2000; Raj & Silverman, 2002b, 2003, 2007; Rai & Choi, 2018; Madden et al., 2016). For instance, a popular Boston study conducted among 160 South Asian women showed that 40% of women reported they had been physically and/or sexually abused by their current male partners and only 3% of women physically injured sought medical help for injuries (Raj & Silverman, 2002b). In 2007, another small sample of South Asian immigrant women in Boston reported that they did not seek formal help against domestic violence (52%) and instead, relied on their family and friends for support (Raj & Silverman, 2007). Similarly, other researchers have also found that immigrants are much less likely to report physical or sexual violence to authorities, for fear of further victimization and deportation (Bhuyan et al., 2014; Raj & Silverman, 2007). This is supported by literature confirming that immigrant women in general face a heightened risk of domestic violence driven by financial reliance on partners, language barriers, and lack of knowledge about community resources. Despite this, I did not find any large-scale studies aimed at reporting

national prevalence rates of domestic violence with the South Asian immigrant community across all of Canada.

In a 2012 study conducted in the United States, 38% of South Asian women in a sample of 215 participants reported experiencing psychological, sexual, or physical abuse within the past year (Mahapatra, 2012). More recently, Rai and Choi (2022) conducted a cross-sectional, quantitative study across the United States with a sample of 468 South Asians. They found that the most prevalent type of domestic violence experienced by South Asian immigrants was physical (48%), followed by emotional (38%), economic (35%), verbal (27%), immigration-related (26%), in-laws related (19%), and sexual abuse (11%), with prevalence rates being significantly higher for women in each type of violence. In Canada, a community-based survey of 188 South Asian women living in Southern Ontario revealed that nearly 1 in 5 women reported having experienced intimate partner violence within the past year, proportions which were noted as comparable to the general population (Madden et al., 2016). Given these rates of violence, resources available and specific to South Asian women should be given consideration.

Beyond statistical prevalences, qualitative research findings demonstrate that domestic violence is a significant issue within the South Asian community (Ahmad et al., 2009, 2017; Chaudhuri et al., 2014; Dasgupta, 2000; Hyman et al., 2011; Kallivayalil, 2010; Mahapatra, 2012; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Rai & Choi, 2018). More specifically, these findings point towards the significant prevalence of domestic violence but also demonstrate that intimate partner violence is influenced by and remains largely unacknowledged in the community due to stigma, sociocultural barriers, and cultural mandates. Findings from these studies are introduced in the next section and further discussed in the literature review.

Outside of research contexts, media coverage provides recent insight into the high prevalence rates of domestic violence in the South Asian immigrant community in Canada. Inspired by Aujla's (2013) commitment to sharing the stories of women in this community, I have also highlighted some stories in recent media:

Kamaljit Sandhu (July, 2022): A 45-year-old mother of two, who arrived from India in 2000 and was murdered (strangled and beaten to death by a hatchet) by her husband in Vancouver, British Columbia. Prior to her death, Kamaljit had filed for divorce after enduring years of domestic violence. Her husband, Inderjit Sandhu was sentenced to life in prison without the possibly of parole for second-degree murder after pleading guilty to killing his wife (CBC News, August 1, 2024).

Pawanpreet Kaur (December, 2022): A 21-year-old woman from Punjab, India who was shot and killed while working at gas station in Mississauga, Ontario. Her presumed partner, Dharam Singh Dhaliwal is wanted on a Canada-wide warrant for first degree murder in her death. Two people, a 25-year-old man and 50-year-old woman have been arrested and charged with accessory to murder (CBC News, April 24, 2023).

Davinder Kaur (May, 2023): A 43-year-old Indo-Canadian immigrant woman and mother of four, who was stabbed to death in a park by her estranged husband, Nav Nishan Singh. At the time, Davinder was contemplating divorce from her husband and had agreed to meet him upon his request. Her husband was charged with first-degree murder (CBC News, May 23, 2023).

Kulwant Kaur (October, 2023): A 46-year-old immigrant from Punjab, India and mother of one, who was stabbed to death at her home in New Westminster, British Columbia. Her husband, Balvir Singh has been charged with second-degree murder in her death. Family members shared that they were aware he was an alcoholic and not supportive but stated no knowledge of violence (Global News, October 19, 2023).

Balwinder Kaur (March, 2024): A 41-year-old mother of two, who had arrived from India with her husband, Jaspreet Singh, one week prior to being stabbed to death by him in Abbotsford, British Columbia. Her husband was charged with second-degree murder (CBC News, January 12, 2026).

Himanshi Khurana (December, 2025): A 30-year-old immigrant from Punjab, India, was found murdered in her home in Toronto, Canada. The police classified her death as a homicide and an act of intimate partner violence. Her boyfriend, Abdul Ghafoori is currently wanted by the police (CBC News, December 22, 2025).

Despite the Canadian media coverage of these extreme cases, domestic violence in the South Asian community remains an underreported issue in Canada. We must question whether

these incidences could have been prevented and take responsibility in developing culturally informed resources to help reduce this violence. Exploring and understanding how these incidences occur and what contextual factors are perpetuating this violence is one avenue to help achieve this.

Research Purpose

In an effort to summarize the socio-cultural risk factors related to South Asian immigrant women's experiences of domestic violence, Rai and Choi (2018) conducted a scoping review and synthesized results from empirical studies in English speaking countries. Along with low acculturation, high enculturation, lack of social support, and economic control by the husband, existing studies have identified patriarchal beliefs and gender role attitudes as risk factors for domestic violence (including Ahmad et al., 2004, 2009; Bhandari & Sabri, 2020; Hyman et al., 2011; Kanagaratnam et al., 2012; Mahapatra, 2012; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Rai & Choi, 2018; Yoshihama et al., 2014). These findings show that the prevalence of domestic violence within South Asian communities has been strongly associated with traditional and closely held beliefs about gender roles (Kallivayalil, 2010; Mahapatra & Murugan, 2023).

Cultural gender role beliefs and expectations play a significant role in the life experiences of South Asian women (Ahmed, 2021; Husain, 2019; Mahapatra & Murugan, 2024; Papp, 2010). In a recent study, Ahmed (2021) qualitatively examined South Asian immigrant women's perceptions of gender roles within familial and societal contexts, both prior to and after immigration to Southwestern Ontario. Although this study did not specifically aim to understand gender roles within domestic violence experiences, its findings support existing literature by establishing the significant role gender plays in the lived experiences of this population

(discussed in Chapter 2). Furthermore, Ahmed (2021) highlighted the importance of centering participant voices and knowledge to authentically contribute to the literature.

Patriarchal and hierarchical structures embedded within South Asian families and communities enforce these cultural gender beliefs (Mahapatra & Murugan, 2024; Papp, 2010; Venkataramani-Kothari, 2007). These structural dynamics create imbalances of power and control, which foster the expectation of women to endure abusive behaviour from their spouse and other family members (Bhandari & Sabri, 2020; Husain, 2019). For example, researchers find that some South Asian women internalize the belief that they are men's property and must accept domestic violence as a reality they must learn to live with (Bhandari & Sabri, 2020; Husain, 2019). In the Greater Toronto Area, Hyman et al. (2011) explored Sri Lankan Tamil immigrant women's views on factors contributing to intimate partner violence and found patriarchal social norms that dictated gendered behaviour as significant factors, along with postmigration sources of stress and conflict. In a similar study, Kanagaratnam and colleagues (2012) investigated Sri Lankan Tamil immigrant women's perceptions of coping with intimate partner violence in Toronto using focus groups. Their findings suggest that women feel responsible for preserving the marriage, even at the cost of enduring abuse. This responsibility is deeply rooted in sociocultural contexts and influenced by gender-role expectations (further outlined in Chapter 2).

Therefore, these patriarchal norms and gender role beliefs can significantly heighten South Asian women's vulnerability to domestic violence and deter them from seeking help, regardless of the extent of the abuse they experience (Bhandari & Sabri, 2020; Husain, 2019; Kallivayalil, 2010; Mahapatra & Murugan, 2024). Ahmad and colleagues (2004) investigated this relationship by asking a sample of 47 South Asian women in the Greater Toronto Area to

evaluate vignettes of abusive situations, and asked about their perceptions of whether the women in the vignettes were victims of spousal abuse. They found that women with stronger patriarchal beliefs and greater adherence to cultural gender norms were less likely to categorize spousal violence as abuse, with only 17% viewing forced sex by a husband as a possibly violence act. Therefore, Ahmad et al. (2004) suggested that professionals must increase women's awareness of how patriarchal beliefs influence their definitions of abuse while providing culturally sensitive resources. To dismantle the cultural structures that perpetuate domestic violence, abuse experiences must be explored and understood through the lens of cultural gender role expectations. This qualitative study therefore investigates South Asian immigrant women's gender role beliefs and considers how these perspectives may contribute to the ways domestic violence is defined and manifested within the South Asian community.

Few studies *directly* explore how gender role beliefs manifest within the context of domestic violence (with the exception of Ahmad et al., 2004; Chaudhuri et al., 2014; Mahapatra & Murugan, 2024; Yoshihama et al., 2014). Yoshihama and colleagues (2014) examined the relationships among enculturation, attitudes supporting intimate partner violence, and gender role attitudes among Gujarati men and women in the United States. Their surveys identified enculturation as the strongest predictor of IPV-supporting attitudes among married individuals, with patriarchal gender role attitudes being positively associated with IPV-supporting attitudes (Yoshihama et al., 2014). Similarly, Chaudhuri and colleagues (2014) employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate how patriarchal family structures influence South Asian women's experiences of abuse and strategies for coping. Based on comparison data collected from groups of abused and non-abused women, their findings revealed that women who immigrated to marry were more vulnerable to marital homes with highly patriarchal or abusive

husbands. Further, families that were characterized by extreme patriarchy used abuse to impose strict rules on wives.

These studies establish a clear connection between gender role attitudes and experiences of abuse within South Asian immigrant communities. Interestingly, most of these studies have been conducted in the United States or in highly populated provinces in Canada, including British Columbia (BC) and the Greater Toronto Area in Ontario (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020). In their scoping review of intimate partner violence in Canadian immigrant communities, Okeke-Ihejirika et al. (2020) emphasize the need to extend research to the broader immigrant population in Canada, particularly beyond Ontario. To my knowledge, very few studies directly explore *how* cultural gender role beliefs manifest and perpetuate domestic violence among South Asian immigrants beyond these regions. Therefore, I aimed to expand the literature by capturing the first-hand perspectives of South Asian women in Alberta. Given how entrenched gender role beliefs can be within South Asian culture, I wanted to understand *how* South Asian immigrant women conceptualize gender roles in the context of domestic violence. I utilized a qualitive approach and was guided by the following research questions:

(1) How and to what extent do cultural gender role beliefs perpetuate domestic violence within South Asian immigrant communities?

(2) How do cultural gender role beliefs act as barriers to help-seeking for South Asian immigrant women who have experienced domestic violence?

Although the study aimed to explore how gender roles manifest within the domestic violence experiences of the South Asian immigrant community as a whole, I primarily focused on understanding this phenomenon through the perspectives of South Asian women to give voice to and empower those who have disproportionately been affected. Consistent with previous

research, I expected that (a) cultural gender role beliefs held by South Asian communities perpetuate domestic violence against women and (b) these beliefs create significant barriers (e.g., fear of bringing shame upon the family) that prevent South Asian women from seeking help.

South Asians represent Canada's second largest and fastest-growing visible minority group (Statistics Canada, 2023a). This research aims to increase understanding for healthcare providers and inform strategies to address domestic violence within these communities. By increasing our understanding of how cultural risk factors contribute to the prevalence of domestic violence, this study can help inform and develop education, social, and mental health resources that target, challenge, and dismantle how domestic violence manifests within gender beliefs that silence South Asian women. Next, this chapter defines the South Asian immigrant population in Canada and outlines forms of domestic violence.

South Asian Immigrants in Canada

The term *South Asian* describes a diverse group of individuals from the South Asian subcontinent, specifically those from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Naganathan & Islam, 2015). Many academic and media reports often also refer to *South Asians* as *East Indians* or *Indo-Canadians*. Since *South Asians* is the term most frequently used to describe this group of individuals within academic research, I will do the same. For the purpose of this thesis, South Asian immigrants are individuals who have immigrated to Canada and have birth origins in the following regions: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Additionally, the term immigrant refers to those who are born outside of the country and have migrated to Canada, with or without legal status (Alaggia et al., 2009). In the most recent census, Statistics Canada (2023a) reported that foreign-born individuals make up the majority of South Asians in Canada (59.3%), with an immigrant population of 1,524,310. India and Pakistan rank

among the top 10 countries of immigrant origin, accounting for 26.3% of Canada's total immigrant population and 18.6% and 2.7% of recent immigrants in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2023a). Statistics Canada (2023a) further specifies that the South Asian immigrant population primarily originates from India (62.4%), Pakistan (12.8%), and Sri Lanka (7.6%).

Moreover, South Asians are the largest visible minority group in Canada, with an overall reported population of 2,571,400 (Statistics Canada, 2023b). The South Asian population is spread throughout Canada, with the majority residing in the provinces of Ontario (1,484,185), British Columbia (428,910), and Alberta (267,375) (Statistics Canada, 2023b). Within Alberta, the third most populous province of South Asians in Canada, the largest South Asian populations reside in Calgary (138,280) and Edmonton (109,615) (Statistics Canada, 2023b). Statistics Canada (2023b) predicts people of South Asian heritage will continue to remain the largest visible minority and exceed 5 million people in Canada by 2041, constituting over 12% of the Canadian population.

While this thesis focuses on domestic violence in the South Asian immigrant community in general, it is important to recognize that South Asians are not a homogenous group and great ethnic and cultural diversity exists within this group (Papp, 2010). For example, diverse religions such as Sikhism, Hinduism, Islam, and others exist within the South Asian community. Furthermore, majority of the existing reports often group all South Asian women together, overlooking the unique challenges faced by the immigrant population. This oversight can be problematic since literature shows that immigrant women in this community encounter significantly greater barriers to seeking help for abuse (Ahmad et al., 2009; Dawson et al., 2022; Hyman et al., 2011; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Rai & Choi, 2018). Finally, most available

reports do not reliably represent immigrant women as the information was collected in English, excluding immigrants who may not have spoken or been fluent in English.

Forms of Domestic Violence

To truly understand the experiences of South Asian immigrant women, it is important to explain the terminology used to describe domestic violence. I primarily use the term *domestic violence* in this thesis, as opposed to intimate partner violence, as it is most frequently used within existing literature exploring similar experiences amongst South Asian and immigrant women. Furthermore, the term *intimate partner violence* solely refers to abuse perpetrated between an intimate couple (WHO, 2025) and this thesis explores and includes experiences of abusive behaviour beyond intimate couples. Given the complexity of abusive situations, domestic violence has been defined in various ways that are inclusive of different types of violence. In general, domestic violence typically refers to abusive behaviour individuals experience in relationships with intimate partners (WHO, 2025). Domestic violence is a term that can also be used to characterize the patterns of abuse that take place among members of a family or those living together, also referred to as family violence. Other family members may be influencing the abuser and/or participate in the abuse of a spouse, and do not need to reside within the same household to contribute to marital disputes. Later, I use existing literature to highlight how perpetrators of domestic violence within South Asian families are not exclusive to spouses but can also include extended family members and in-laws. Thus, I adopted a broad definition of domestic violence, including intimate partner and family violence, to guide this exploration of South Asian women's abuse experiences. While it is important to recognize men are also victims of domestic violence, this thesis focused exclusively on the narratives of South Asian women due to their disproportionately higher rates of reported domestic violence (Rai & Choi, 2022). I also

recognize that queer South Asian individuals experience unique forms of violence in romantic relationships, shaped by both cultural and institutional homophobia (Dasgupta & Mahn, 2023). However, this study examined these experiences specifically within a heterosexual context to better understand the impact of traditional gender roles, while also considering recruitment feasibility of a master's thesis. As such, I did not explore the dynamics of non-heterosexual couples or queer identities in this research.

Domestic violence is inclusive of several forms of abuse. Within the literature, these forms of abuse are typically categorized as physical, sexual, psychological, financial, and spiritual abuse (Department of Justice Canada [DOJC], 2024; National Domestic Violence Hotline [NDVH], 2023). Prior to describing these forms of abuse, it is important to recognize that types of violence differ in each culture and as such, no universal or all-encompassing definition of violence against women exists (Pande, 2014). Among immigrant women, behaviours defined as abuse are uniquely influenced each woman's intersecting identities and social positions, including their culture, immigration status, education, socio-economic status, and language expertise (Papp, 2010). Therefore, while the Western descriptions of types of domestic violence were used as the starting point in framing abuse experiences, I invited and accepted different descriptions and understandings of the abuse South Asian immigrant women experience in this research.

The most recognized form of domestic violence is physical abuse, which refers to aggressive behaviour that involves harm to the body, or the threat of harm (DOJC, 2024). Physical abuse may include hitting, punching, shoving, throwing items, kicking, or assaulting a person with severe cases including the use of a weapon. Another type of abuse that may include aspects of physical abuse is sexual abuse. Sexual abuse refers to sexual assault, when someone

uses their power or influence to force another person into sexual activity against their will. It covers a range of harmful behaviours that lack consent, including harassment and exploitation (DOJC, 2024). Psychological, verbal, or emotional mistreatment of another person is also recognized as a form of abuse (DOJC, 2024). This form of abuse may include verbal insults and threats with preparators being verbally violent, jealous, and manipulative. This abuse often results in the victim becoming socially isolated from their social network of friends and family and leads to low levels of self-esteem. Economic or financial abuse is another debilitating form of abuse which refers to the illegal use of another person's property or finances without consent or with fraudulent or coercive consent (DOJC, 2024). This form of abuse may include withholding money or denying access to personal finances to those who relies on others, such as partners, children, or elders. Lastly, the term spiritual or cultural abuse refers to behaviours that prevent a person from following or practicing their religious or cultural beliefs (NDVH, 2023). The different forms of abuse may manifest in South Asian communities and interact with immigration factors in a manner unique to this population, and this will be explored in the next chapter and through this study. Additionally, there are several popular theories that aim to understand domestic violence experiences in general and are discussed in the literature review.

Positionality Statement

One of the distinct features of qualitative research is that the researcher is an active participant throughout the research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Feminist scholars believe that the subjectivity of the researcher becomes a part of the meaning making process, and acknowledging this subjectivity through reflexive practices becomes a crucial research practice (Flick, 2014). Constructionist approaches also move away from the search for objective reality, asserting that human interpretation is inherently biased

by the context in which it occurs (Atewologun, 2011). Therefore, rather than trying to eliminate my subjectivity and biases, which may not even be possible, I attempt to acknowledge my subjectivity and utilize a reflexive approach to help highlight how it guided this study. Reflexivity refers to the process of routinely reflecting on your assumptions, expectations, choices, and actions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As the first step, I acknowledge my positionality, including my social positions/identities, as it relates to this study. I will also highlight my perspectives and insights throughout this thesis, to help represent the ongoing process of reflexivity.

I am a 25-year-old Punjabi, Sikh woman born in British Columbia. I was raised in India for about four years and spent the majority of my life in Alberta as a second-generation immigrant. I am a woman of colour raised within a South Asian immigrant community in Canada, and I have often witnessed various forms of domestic violence within my community. I am also a student and researcher, with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and currently completing a Master of Education in Counselling Psychology. As a researcher, I have experience conducting qualitative research and recognize the significance it holds in empowering the voices of underrepresented communities. Therefore, I recognize that I hold an "insider-outsider" (Couture et al., 2012) position in this study, as I share group membership with South Asian women while also being a researcher with different lived experiences as the participants I am working with. Additionally, by having bilingual skills to conduct this study in English and Punjabi, I was able to facilitate rapport and foster feelings of connectedness with the participants. For these reasons, it was especially important that I took extra efforts to monitor my feelings and reactions, and to distinguish them from the participants' experience, not impose my life experiences and perspectives onto theirs, or overidentify with their experiences.

As a counsellor-in-training, my theoretical orientation aligns with social constructionism and is rooted in the belief that people's knowledge and understanding of the world is shaped by social interactions. Thus, I hold the personal belief that it is crucial to explore the meaning constructed by individuals in their experiences to develop an understanding of how these meanings manifest in society. I recognize my positionality is shaped by my privilege and access to resources, and as such, I strive to actively listen to those with different lived experiences while continually practicing reflexivity in my research. Additionally, I have worked with my thesis supervisor, an experienced researcher and academic within the field of education, to help ensure the integrity of my findings. Lastly, I acknowledge that the meaning-making and interpretation process of this study occurred within the context of my intersecting social identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Therefore, I view the findings of this study as socially constructed by the participants and me as the researcher and should considered within this context.

Organization of the Thesis

Following this introduction, I provide a review of existing literature on theories for understanding domestic violence and examine the South Asian culture through the lens of gender role beliefs. In Chapter three, I explore various qualitative research designs and provide a rationale for using a multiple case study approach. Chapter four details the methods used to guide this research, including participant recruitment, ethical considerations, data collection measures, and cross-case analysis. I also explain the feminist intersectionality theory as the framework for this study. Chapter five presents the analysis, along with case descriptions of each participants' story to honour their participation. In Chapter six, I present findings within the context of literature in the field. In Chapter seven, I discuss implications and recommendations for culturally informed domestic violence interventions, informed by participants' perspectives. In Chapter

eight, I conclude this thesis by outlining the study's contributions to the field, including theoretical and methodological contributions. I also present directions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review begins by exploring theoretical frameworks for understanding domestic violence before turning to an overview of South Asian culture. I highlight how the collectivist values and gendered dynamics shape the lived experiences of South Asian community members. Specifically, I highlight how gender role beliefs manifest within familial and marital dynamics. Lastly, I address the cultural barriers to help-seeking and review existing community services tailored for South Asian women.

Perspectives and Frameworks for Understanding Domestic Violence Experiences

In examining violence among South Asian individuals, Deenoo (2020) provided a comprehensive description of many theories that aim to understand the *causes* of domestic violence. These theories of domestic violence can largely be organized into three categories: psychological and social-psychological theories, feminist theories, and intersectionality theories. In this section, I outline and expand on relevant existing literature in each category as highlighted by Deenoo (2020).

Psychological and Social-Psychological Perspectives

Psychological and social-psychological theories of domestic violence "are not gender-specific" (Sev'er, 2002, p. 43). Psychological theories aim to understand not only domestic violence but also individual characteristics, while social-psychological theories seek to understand violence and other behaviours through modelling, interpersonal interactions, and learning processes (Sev'er, 2002).

Psychological theories surrounding domestic violence seek to provide explanations for the interpersonal factors that affect both the individual being abused and the individual perpetrating the abuse (Ali & Naylor, 2013). These perspectives are rooted in Cesare Lombroso's individual

pathology model of general violence. This model tends to ignore the social and structural conditions contributing to domestic violence and instead focuses on personal characteristics to help explain violent behaviour (Sev'er, 2002). Ali and Naylor (2013) note a range of psychological and psychiatric "difficulties and disorders" that have been used as single-trait explanations for "wife abuse" (p. 376), including personality and mental health disorders, anger management problems, substance abuse, low self-esteem, and poor communication skills. Although these "difficulties and disorders" are important to consider when seeking to understand domestic violence, critics of these single-trait theories argue and question why all men with these traits (difficulties and disorders) do not exhibit the same abuse behaviours (Ali & Naylor, 2013).

Other psychological frameworks, notably the "battered woman syndrome" and "learned helplessness," centre on the experiences of women who have been abused. Walker (1979) proposes that battered women's syndrome develops as a result of severe ongoing abuse, with the women progressing through four stages: denial (refusing to acknowledge the abuse), guilt (feeling responsible for why the abuse is happening), enlightenment (recognizing their partner is abusive and they don't deserve the abuse), and responsibility (accepting their partner is solely to blame). In this final stage of responsibility, many women seek to escape the abusive relationships. Women undergoing this experience tend to internalize the blame for the abuse, conceal the abuse from others, fear for their own safety, and live in a constant state of anxiety and worry due to their partner's unpredictable behaviour. This condition is categorized as a specific manifestation of post-traumatic stress disorder and often results in women experiencing depression, low self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, and damaged relationships.

The learned helplessness theory suggests that continuous abuse diminishes a woman's motivation to respond and fosters a passive mindset. This mindset can hinder her ability to

recognize her strengths and reinforces the belief that her efforts won't result in positive changes, making it less likely for her to leave the relationship (Walker, 2006). However, this theory fails to consider various other factors that influence a woman's decision to stay in an abusive relationship, such as fear of retaliation, financial dependence, and concerns of rejection from family and community (Naved et al., 2006). This theory does not acknowledge or honour the proactive steps some women take to minimize the abuse and protect themselves, including their conscious planning to eventually leave the abusive situation.

Next, social-psychological theories aim to understand the causes of domestic violence, especially intimate partner violence, through the lens of social structures. Jewkes (2002) proposes that intimate partner violence is a result of "thwarted sexual relationships" and is influenced by poverty and associated stresses (pp. 1423-1424). Thus, this perspective aligns with individual pathology theories of violence (Sev'er, 2002) on intimate partner violence while also acknowledging the influence of socio-structural factors. This perspective also aligns with the structural inequality theory, which suggests that systemic issues such as educational barriers and economic hardship drive the higher rates of domestic abuse observed within specific socio-economic and ethnic communities (Tartakovsky & Mezhibovsky, 2012). According to structural inequality theory, men in poor neighbourhoods struggle to successfully meet the societal standards of masculinity, causing them to experience heightened stress and eventually turning to violence against the women they can no longer dominate or provide for financially (Jewkes, 2002). However, Jewkes' (2002) theory explaining domestic violence over-generalizes how men in poor communities are impacted by poverty and ignores the reality of domestic violence that takes place in wealthy communities (Haselschwerdt & Hardesty, 2017).

Social learning theory and resource theory are additional sociological theories that aim to explain the causes of domestic violence. According to the social learning theory, also known as the "learned behaviour theory," individuals who commit and accept abuse do so because they have been conditioned to - they learned these behaviours in their childhoods (Ali & Naylor, 2013). In other words, men may commit domestic violence if they witnessed their fathers abuse their mothers, and women may tolerate it if they observed their mothers being abused (Ali & Naylor, 2013). In a study investigating the impact of adverse childhood experiences (witnessing abuse of one's mother) on intimate partner violence perpetration among Sri Lankan men, Fonseka et al. (2015) found that witnessing such abuse was correlated with an increased chance of perpetuating intimate partner violence. As such, many domestic violence prevention programs are rooted in the premise of social learning theory - what is learned can also be unlearned (Danis, 2003). Despite the popularity of this theory, it has received several criticisms. For instance, it is unclear what types of abuse witnessed and levels of exposure lead to future abusive behaviour (Ali & Naylor, 2013). Also, this theory does not explain why all men that have witnessed abuse or been abused as children do not becomes perpetrators. These criticisms suggest an area of further research on the effects of experiencing and witnessing domestic violence in childhood, specifically as it relates to intimate partner violence as an adult. It is important to note that this theory does not try to justify domestic violence but rather investigates the multi-generational transfer of domestic violence within the family unit.

Now, resource theory takes a different approach to understanding domestic violence and argues that men's lack of financial superiority relative to their partners' earnings serves as a significant predictor of abuse (Ali & Naylor, 2013). This theory claims that a woman's risk of abuse increases if she out-earns her partner, compared to women with lower incomes (Ali &

Naylor, 2013; Fox et al., 2002). However, this theory contradicts liberal and radical theories that suggest empowering women through education and employment are the best ways to address the problem of domestic violence. Given the focus on culture in this study, another sociological theory of domestic violence worth highlighting is the subculture of violence theory. This theory suggests that some cultures are more permissive of violence against women than others - it assumes that certain individuals from various cultures accept violence against women, and that these individuals continue to maintain and live by these specific social standards after moving to a host country (Tartakovsky & Mezhibovsky, 2012). This theory is problematic because it is rooted in cultural essentialism (George & Stith, 2014) and because it disregards generational influences and barriers that may be contributing to domestic violence.

Feminist Perspectives

Feminist theories have historically progressed through three major "waves," with each "wave" tackling its own specific set of social hurdles (George & Stith, 2014; Saulnier, 2008). While their approaches may differ, most feminist frameworks prioritize gender equality and women empowerment, and collectively reject the idea that domestic violence is a byproduct of individual pathologies (Ali & Naylor, 2013). The "wave" metaphor can be problematic because it risks generalizing the diverse and complex bodies of thought in feminist politics, however, I use it as an organizational structure because it provides a historically grounded framework for categorizing feminist history (Lewis & Marine, 2015). In the following sections, I discuss the explanations for domestic violence proposed by the first two waves of feminism, along with the responses from the third wave, particularly its intersectionality theory.

First Wave Feminism. Beginning in the mid-19th century and lasting till early 20th century, the first wave of feminism was predominantly led by white women from middle- and

upper-class backgrounds, along with several notable African American women (George & Stith, 2014). The women of this wave called for slavery to be abolished, for women to be given the right to vote, and for women to be given other political rights including the right to inherit property (George & Stith, 2014). Majority of the first-wave feminists were liberal feminists, which is heavily influenced by social learning theory. They believed that women and men possess equal potential for achievement, but that systemic barriers limit women's access to educational and economic opportunities. Liberal feminists believed that women could eliminate domestic violence by being more assertive and individualistic, in a manner similar to "successful" men (Saulnier, 2008). Therefore, first wave feminists believed that men's perceptions and behaviours hindering women's progress need to be fundamentally dismantled and changed (Saulnier, 2008).

Second Wave Feminism. Second-wave feminists believed that gender relations are the foundation of systemic oppression, suggesting that the elimination of domestic violence is a prerequisite for achieving gender equality (Kapur & Zajicek, 2018). Within this framework, domestic violence is primarily defined as intimate partner violence and is interpreted as an instrument of control (Ali & Naylor, 2013). Such violence is viewed as a consequence of gendered power inequities, which are "inherent in the patriarchal structures of most societies" (Ali & Naylor, 2013, p. 612). Thus, this wave of feminism calls for structural changes that help women become economically independent and protected from domestic violence (i.e., funding women's shelters, provision of safe houses). Scholars of the second-wave feminist movement utilize various theoretical frameworks, including the cycle of violence, the power and control wheel, and patriarchy, to understand intimate partner violence.

Informed by theories of learned helplessness and battered women's syndrome, Walker (1979) introduced the concept of "cycle of violence" to explain the reasons and factors that influence a woman's decision to stay in an abusive relationship (Ali & Naylor, 2013). According to Walker (1979), the cycle of violence is predictable and consists of three phases: tension building, abuse or explosion, and honeymoon or remorse and forgiveness. In the initial phase, tension rises between the couple and as the abuser gets frustrated, his frustration surpasses the point of control and he becomes violent towards his partner, which can include physical, psychological, emotional, or sexual abuse for varying period of times. Next, the abuser feels relieved and may start regretting his violent actions towards his partner and express his remorse by apologizing. Following this apology, the couple enjoys a honeymoon period in which the abused woman believes the abuser will change and not be violent again (Ali & Naylor, 2013). This ongoing exposure to violence leads to experiences of learned helplessness and as a result, abused women have less motivation to respond assertively and fewer decision-making abilities (Walker, 1979). Consequently, the woman often internalizes and assumes responsibility for the abuse, attempting to navigate situations carefully to prevent further violence. However, critics of this theory frequently challenge its validity by asking why the perpetrator's frustration and volatility is reserved exclusively for his partner rather than manifesting in professional settings or other social circles (Ali & Naylor, 2013). Moreover, the cycle of violence theory universalizes the violence cycle, similar to the tendency of second-wave feminists to generalize the diverse experiences of women facing domestic violence (George & Rashidi, 2014).

Next, second-wave feminists argue that men's desire for power and control is the main motivation for intimate partner violence (Ali & Naylor, 2013). To further conceptualize this, the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth in the United States proposed the power and

control wheel theory in 1980-1981. This wheel depicts how men seek to control women by using (a) coercion and threats, (b) intimidation, (c) emotional abuse, (d) isolation, (e) minimizing, denying, and blaming, (f) children, (g) male privilege, and (h) economic abuse. The power and control wheel has been applied to violence, separation, and divorce situations. However, third-wave feminists' question and criticize the use of a single label like male power and control to understand such a complex issue and its lack of consideration for individual differences (George & Stith, 2014). Lastly, second-wave feminists use the concept of patriarchy to explain intimate partner violence. Patriarchy is an umbrella term for describing men's systemic dominance of women (Ali & Naylor, 2013). Patriarchy is also represented in the power and control wheel, under the title "Using Male Privilege," which refers to the idea that abusive men draw upon systemic, normalized social benefits, specifically the command over finances and sexual entitlement (Sev'er, 2002). From a patriarchal perspective, domestic violence is perceived as socially sanctioned means for men to assert and validate their social and domestic superiority (Ali & Naylor, 2013).

Moreover, two theories laid the groundwork for third-wave feminism and intersectionality: radical feminist and socialist feminist theories. As mentioned, liberal feminists from the first wave believed that male attitudes that undermine women's opportunity for equality need to be unlearned. Opposite of this belief, some radical feminists believe that violence against women is an intrinsic component of the male psychological makeup, acting as both an instrument of gender-based dominance and a means of satisfying the male ego (Nes & Iadicola, 1989; Saulnier, 2008). Radical feminists describe violence against women as political in nature and believe that patriarchy depends on ideology, law, and violence for its survival (Nes & Iadicola, 1989; Saulnier, 2008). Therefore, radical feminists argue that domestic violence against women

cannot be eradicated by only changing men's attitudes and women's assertiveness, as suggested by liberal feminists. Instead, oppression must be defeated by radical social change through "non-violent feminist revolution" (Nes & Iadicola, 1989, p.14; see also Saulnier, 2008). The radical feminist view of domestic violence and its proposed solution emphasize how second-wave feminists perceive domestic violence through a single lens of gender and gender power imbalances. Third-wave critics of radical feminism oppose the underlying assumptions that "all intimate [partner] violence is heterosexual, that violence is a one-way street (male to female), that all violence warrants a state response, and that women want to leave rather than stay in their abusive relationships" (Ali & Naylor, 2013, p. 614). Additionally, radical feminism may be viewed as precluding "the notion of female violence," trivializing "injuries to males," and maintaining "a monolithic view of a complex social problem" (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005, p. 680).

Socialist feminist theory sits in the center of the feminist spectrum, acting as a bridge between liberal and radical viewpoints. Drawing on the works of Marx and Engels, socialist feminists argue that the way men treat women is historically rooted in a drive to govern female sexuality and reproduction during the early stages of capitalism (Sev'er, 2002). For social feminists, you cannot separate patriarchy from class oppression (Sev'er, 2002). Therefore, domestic violence is not seen as an isolated issue, but rather as a symptom of two overlapping worlds of oppression: gender and class (Nes & Iadicola, 1989; Sev'er, 2002). Given this perspective, eliminating domestic violence requires the dismantling of capitalism itself and must precede or accompany a feminist revolution to be truly effective (Saulnier, 2008). Additionally, early scholars identified the importance of exploring how racism intersects with class and gender when discussing women's oppression (Nes & Iadicola, 1989; Saulnier, 2008). By looking at how

these multiple systems of power and oppression collide, social feminism essentially laid the groundwork for the "intersectionality" that defines the third wave of feminism.

Third Wave Feminism and Intersectionality. Critics have increasingly criticized second wave feminist theories for focusing on gender as the main or sole explanation for domestic violence. Several researchers instead argue that a complete understanding requires studying how other forms of oppression (i.e., race, sexual preferences, class, age) intersect with gender. This position developed in opposition to second wave feminists, who researchers like Mann and Huffman (2005) view as essentializing domestic violence experiences to unify the women's movement.

In response to this essentializing view, African American theorists proposed the concept of "womanism," which can be described as a branch of feminist theory that leads with the perspectives of Black women. It centers on various forms and systems of oppressions while also encouraging Black women to re-define themselves authentic to their perceptions rather than those in power or with higher status (Saulnier, 2008). Therefore, there was a deliberate effort to de-center second wave perspectives, allowing for a more inclusive exploration of how gendered relations contribute to domestic violence (Mann & Huffman, 2005). Moreover, post-colonial and post-structural theories largely contributed to these decentering efforts. Post-colonial feminist scholars challenge the portrayal of women in developing nations, including South Asian women, as inherently oppressed, passive, and voiceless. They argue that such tropes serve as a false contrast to the idealized Western archetype of the modern, empowered, and self-governing woman (Ali & Naylor, 2013). Similarly, post-structural feminists suggest moving away from static and rigid group classifications, such as the working class or South Asian women. Instead, they advocate for an understanding of identity as a complex, evolving construct generated

through various compounding factors, along with language and culture (Mann & Huffman, 2005). Essentially, third-wave feminists aim to advocate for a view of identity as multifaceted and constantly evolving (Mann & Huffman, 2005).

Feminist intersectionality theory, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), was developed to incorporate the above perspectives. This theory is rooted in the assumptions that every social group possesses unique qualities and that individuals are positioned within societal structures that influence power relationships (George & Stith, 2014; Kelly, 2011). It further suggests that an individual's different social identities, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and immigration status, interact with each other (George & Stith, 2014; Kelly, 2011). Driven by social justice efforts, feminist intersectionality aims to understand how the intersection of social identities for individuals and groups results in oppression and inequitable access to resources (Chavis & Hill, 2009). Thus, feminist intersectionality theory provides the framework to explore gender's role in domestic violence experiences while examining its intersecting relationship with cultural factors, such as immigration and family systems. Therefore, while this thesis focused on gender role beliefs, my approach does not isolate gender as an independent factor that can be understood without other contextual factors. Later, I further elaborate on feminist intersectionality when discussing how it guided this study as a theoretical framework (see Chapter 4).

South Asian Feminism. Intersectionality theory supports and overlaps with perspectives proposed by South Asian feminists (Jha & Kurian, 2017; Pande, 2014). Gaining momentum in the 1970s, the women's movement in South Asia brought women together to help address the oppressive experiences (Jha & Kurian, 2017). South Asian feminists do not view feminism as merely a concern for "women's issues." They aim to understand and critique the domination/subordination dynamic central to violence against women, which they believe is

rooted within patriarchal structures that value men over women (Pande, 2014). Furthermore, South Asian feminists argue that we must understand and challenge these patriarchal structures within the context of culture, race, and social class (Jha & Kurian, 2017; Pande, 2014). According to Pande (2014), the root of gender violence lies in the assumption that one has the right to control another within interpersonal relations, a belief that is often sustained by surrounding socio-economic contexts. Therefore, understanding of violence against women must include the daily, "unseen" violence perpetrated through socialization, language, and interpersonal relationships (Pande, 2014*).*

While domestic violence is neither unique nor recent to South Asia, the societal resistance to its elimination and lack of recognition remains unusual (Pande, 2014). Critics who view South Asian feminist efforts as a threat to South Asian culture have often responded by pushing to enforce traditional gender roles for women as a means to preserve culture (Jha & Kurian, 2017). Notably, as the significance of tradition lessens with modernization, gender violence within families tends to *increase* as a strategy to maintain control and enforce traditional gendered dynamics for women (Pande, 2014). It was only in 1983 that India criminalized domestic violence and began protecting women in their marital homes. Only recently in 2005, India proposed the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, approving a civil law that protects women from *all* forms of domestic violence, not just physical, including sexual, emotional, verbal, and economic abuse.

Thus, violence against women has been a reality within the South Asian region regardless of income, class, and culture. Views presented by South Asian feminists and their critics highlight one common perspective: the lived experiences of South Asian women, especially the violence they endure, cannot be separated or understood in isolation from their culture context

and patriarchal social structures. As such, South Asian feminists argue for "culturally located responses" that prioritize and listen to the voices of women from diverse backgrounds (Pande, 2014, p. 13).

South Asian Culture

To truly understand how domestic violence manifests for South Asian immigrant women, it is crucial to examine the cultural contexts that shape their experiences of abuse. While described in various ways, culture represents a group of people with shared attitudes, beliefs, values, traditions, and language passed on through generations (Das, 2008). In the following section, I provide an overview of South Asian culture through the lens of gender roles and dynamics, specifically focusing on how they contribute to familial and marital structures. I particularly highlight cultural gender role beliefs that may contribute to domestic violence or act as barriers to help-seeking for South Asian women. This contextualized focus is important because the definition of domestic violence within this culture "rests not only upon the nature of relationship between the perpetrator and those abused but also upon the culturally accepted norms of behaviour" (Pande, 2014, p. 11). However, my approach to this review supports the position that domestic violence is not synonymous with South Asian culture. Rather, we must contextualize the abuse in relation to gender dynamics that exist within and may be protected by cultural beliefs. Applying this framework helps shift the perspective away from cultural pathology and blame toward a more critically informed understanding of how domestic violence manifests within South Asian communities (George & Rashidi, 2014).

Collectivist Values

Cultural values and norms act as powerful forces that influence how individuals see themselves and others. South Asian communities, in particular, ground themselves in collectivist

values (Abraham, 2000; Husain, 2019; Zaidi et al., 2016). Collectivist cultures prioritize group harmony, interdependence, loyalty, and shared goals over individual desires. Key guiding values include social cohesion, duty to family, and maintenance of strong, support relationships. Typically, individuals derive and define their self-identity through relationships with group members. Reflecting these values, the South Asian community emphasizes the paramount importance of family, community, and marriage, to uphold collective dignity (Zaidi et al., 2016). One's family serves as a salient agent that guides individual values and social interactions by teaching culture and class ideologies. The community protects and holds these values with high importance, and the South Asian population often carries and transports these values and practices as it migrates to Canada (Merali, 2008; Papp, 2010).

Within South Asian communities, there is specifically a strong presence of family ties (Zaidi et al., 2016). The family structure dominates any other relationship. Family members discuss all decisions, significant or otherwise, in light of how they affect the family and the community (Zaidi et al., 2016). These cultural traditions prioritize the needs, values, and expectations of the family of origin above any one individual. Rather than considering members independent of the family unit, the culture views them as part of a single unit that must move in sync to respect the community. In fact, many view untwining one's life from their family as nearly impossible. This dynamic significantly impacts South Asian women, often requiring them to respond in a manner that prioritizes community values over the self (Maheshwari, 2025). Furthermore, marriage represents a crucial and distinct milestone in a woman's life, one the community strongly guards. Therefore, the deeply intertwined nature of family and community life creates a social landscape where a woman's personal identity and experiences are inseparable from her marital and familial status.

Gender Dynamics and Patriarchy

Traditional South Asian culture is deeply rooted in structures of patriarchy. These patriarchal structures create dynamics that may help explain how cultural gender role beliefs influence the abuse experiences of South Asian women (Abraham, 2000; Papp, 2010; Husain, 2019; Mahapatra & Murugan, 2024; Rai & Choi, 2018; Shirwadkar, 2004). Gender roles beliefs can be defined as "a set of rules generated by society to dictate behaviours that are desirable and deemed appropriate for individuals belonging to a particular gender" (Rai & Choi, 2018, p. 83). A significant portion of cultural teachings focus on prescribed familial roles that typically center on gender. From childhood, South Asian men and women are socialized about the gendered expectations of their culture. They adopt these gender expectations throughout childhood, which ultimately shapes their self-identity and how they navigate the world. Consequently, men and women tend to exhibit behaviours that align with the roles society has assigned to their gender. For example, men are taught to be the breadwinners or head of finances, while the traditional expectations for women focus on home life and are submissive in nature.

This comes with the overarching teaching that individuals must maintain these gendered roles to prioritize and signify their dedication to the family unit (Guruge et al., 2010; Zaidi et al., 2014). Additionally, gendered expectations are considered important to maintain cultural identity. In a 2024 qualitative study conducted in the United States, young South Asian women shared that they received unfair pressure and biased messages, compared to their male counterparts, to adhere to rigid gender roles and carry the importance of family and community throughout their lives (Mahapatra & Murugan, 2024). These messages were reinforced by immediate and extended family members, partners, and society at large. This showcases how the pressure to

uphold South Asian gendered practices falls on women, often influencing women's position within patriarchal structures.

Patriarchal practices result in hierarchal systems that can create, perpetuate, and normalize the subordination and dehumanization of women experiencing abuse (Abraham, 2000; Husain, 2019; Papp, 2010; Rai & Choi, 2018; Yoshihama et al., 2014). For instance, Yoshihama et al. (2014) reported that South Asian community members who showcased more conservative gender role attitudes also demonstrated higher support for attitudes that perpetuated intimate partner violence. Historically, some scholars believe South Asian women are subjected to "three obediences" throughout their lives: to her father, to her brother, and to her husband (Kim et al., 2006). Scholars also argue that South Asian men who are perpetrators of abuse typically engage in these behaviours to maintain these patriarchal structures and power within the family. Recently, Mahapatra and Murugan (2024) found that South Asian young adults recognize the association between rigid gender norms and the perpetuation of male domination, especially in cases of intimate partner violence. However, some South Asian men reported challenges in adjusting to role expectations that reflected more progressive and equal responsibility due to their socialization in predominantly patriarchal households (Mahapatra & Murugan, 2024). Given this understanding of gender dynamics within South Asian culture, I argue that the domestic violence experienced by South Asian women is not accidental. Instead, institutionalized gender dynamics and patriarchal structures create power imbalances that lead to women being marginalized and abused, who are expected to uphold family values by maintaining these very systems.

Family Dynamics

Within South Asian culture, the emphasis on collectivism over individualist ideals significantly shapes family dynamics. For instance, it is common for South Asian immigrants to

live in joint family households and often prioritize and engage in behaviours that serve the family's best interest (Choudhry, 2001). Joint family households refer to arrangements in which at least two (but sometimes several) generations live together (Choudhry, 2001). The hierarchical structures within these families tend to manifest patriarchal values by assigning the eldest males and sons the most authority, then to the mother-in-law and unmarried daughters, and finally the daughter-in-law (Papp, 2010; Venkataramani-Kothari, 2007).

Given this distribution of power, patriarchal control becomes embedded within the foundation of marriage and is exerted over a woman through her inferior statuses as a wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, and mother (Abraham, 2000; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Raj et al., 2006; Rastogi & Therly, 2006). For instance, despite the changing social context of living in Canada, new brides are expected to adhere to traditional customs and gender roles, including fulfilling in-laws' expectations (Merali, 2009). Mothers-in-law exert authority through the hierarchal power granted to them as the mother of the husband (Abraham, 2000; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Choudhry, 2001; Rastogi & Therly, 2006). For example, they may exercise this power by assigning household duties to their daughters-in-law, particularly when a mother-in-law feels her daughter-in-law's presence jeopardizes her relationship with her son (Abraham, 2000; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Choudhry, 2001). By controlling his wife, she assumes she can maintain her grip on power (Rastogi & Therly, 2006). Therefore, women, especially older women, contribute to abuse by reinforcing patriarchal dynamics within familial structures.

Altogether, South Asian women's position at the bottom of the family hierarchy exposes them to abuse not only from their husbands but also from in-laws (Ahmad et al., 2013; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Dasgupta, 2000; Raj et al., 2006; Shirwadkar, 2004). In a mixed methods study, Raj and colleagues (2006) were among the first to report that emotional abuse by in-laws is

significantly more likely among women experiencing intimate partner violence. Among 169 participants reporting abuse in their current relationship, 15.4% reported emotional abuse from in-laws. Among the 23 women who participated in the interviews, about 55% reported various forms of emotional abuse from in-laws, including isolation (i.e., limiting contact with family, controlling how and where she spent her time), economic control (i.e., preventing economic autonomy), verbal abuse and degradation (i.e., questioning her character and contributions to the household), criticism of her family and complaints about dowry, domestic servitude (i.e., cleaning, cooking, laundry), and controlling intake or access to food (i.e., not being allowed to join family meals, waiting until everyone in the household has completed their meal). Furthermore, interviews revealed that in-laws' directly physically abused women as well as supported and incited male-perpetrated intimate partner violence. In a 2013 study conducted in the Greater Toronto Area, many South Asian women explained how their in-laws aggravated their situations or were overtly abusive. These in-laws called the women names, isolated them from family and friends, and even physically abused them at times (Ahmad et al., 2013). Notably, the abuse perpetrated by in-laws most often stems from the mother-in-law.

Mothers-in-law may perpetuate violence because they experienced violence themselves (Kandiyoti, 1988; Rastogi and Therly, 2006; Shankar & Northcott, 2009). Consequently, young women may accept traditional roles and the resulting abuse because they expect to be rewarded similar authority over their own daughters-in-law later in life (Kandiyoti, 1988; Shankar & Northcott, 2009). This perspective can be explained by Kandiyoti's (1988) theory of "patriarchal bargaining," which moves beyond the broad conceptualization of patriarchy and explores its manifestation through the diverse ways women actively engage and strategize to maximize their security. This theory explains how the powerlessness of a "young bride is eventually superseded

by the control and authority she will have over her own subservient daughters-in-law" (p. 279). A South Asian woman's hierarchical status changes over the course of her life, from daughter to married woman to mother in-law. Daughters and wives are expected to be compliant and submissive, and by fulfilling these duties, she later gains status and power in her position as the mother-in-law. These expectations discourage women from speaking out against abuse, as they view their submissive role and associated violence as part of the South Asian woman's life cycle (Dasgupta, 2000; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004). Ultimately, these hierarchical positions assign powers that lead to cycles of abuse perpetuated by both men and women (Abraham, 2000; Raj et al., 2006; Shankar & Northcott, 2009). Therefore, it is crucial to consider how familial dynamics and resulting power imbalances influence the abuse experiences of South Asian women.

Marital Expectations

South Asian culture places significant pressure on women to marry by a certain age and remain married (Mukherjee et al., 2025). Those who do not meet these marital expectations often face stigmatization and find their lives labeled as "incomplete" (Mukherjee et al., 2015). A traditional saying often cited in the literature encapsulates this view: "a daughter is like *ghee* (clarified butter) – both are good up to a point. If you do not dispose them off, they start stinking" (Pande, 2014, p. 9). Arranged marriage, one of the most common and historical marriage practices within South Asian communities, continues to be practiced in North America (Abraham, 2000; Merali, 2008). The practice refers to parents or elder family members selecting suitable marriage partners for their child, who match their familial and cultural values. Arranged marriages are believed to be the union of two families rather than just individuals, and this collectivist view reinforces the idea that the honour and reputation of both families' rests on the woman. Therefore, South Asian women experience significant cultural pressure to maintain their

marriages. Once married, a woman must fulfill her marital obligations as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, and must always consider the honour of her own family, her husband's family, and her community (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Choudhry, 2001; Husain, 2019).

Consequently, this puts pressure on women to maintain harmony and avoid any actions that would jeopardize the families' reputation and honour within the community. This can lead to dynamics in which South Asian women do not recognize abuse or are expected to continue suffering in silence (Abraham, 2000; Ahmad et al., 2004, 2017; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Dasgupta, 2000; Husain, 2019; Papp, 2010; Shirwadkar, 2004). In Ahmed et al. (2004), strong patriarchal beliefs prevented South Asian immigrant women from recognizing abusive behaviour as domestic violence and as such, they did not find it appropriate to seek help. Thus, familial obligations to avoid "sharam" (shame) and maintain "izzat" (honour) hinder help-seeking even within North America (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Husain, 2019). Research by Hyman et al. (2011) further supports this, noting that Sri Lankan Tamil immigrant women often felt that their inability to preserve family peace meant they were the cause of the violence they experienced and were deemed as "bad" by their culture. Within this perspective, "failing" often includes engaging in behaviours that do not conform to traditional gender roles or are considered unacceptable by community norms (Hyman et al., 2011). Similarly, Ahmed and colleagues (2009) found that even South Asian women born or living in the United Kingdom for most of their lives experienced abuse justified by a "culture" that forced them to remain "obedient" and "subdued" to their husbands. Therefore, cultural expectations force South Asian women to remain silent against violence and accept it as a marital problem they must endure to protect their family's honour (Abraham, 2000; Ahmad et al., 2017; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Husain, 2019; Rastogi & Therly, 2006; Shirwadkar, 2004, Venkataramani-Kothari, 2007).

Yoshioka and colleagues (2003) documented that South Asian women experiencing intimate partner violence were more likely than African American and Hispanic women to be advised to put up with violence by family members and acquaintances. A qualitative study by Ahmad and colleagues (2017) revealed that South Asian women in the Greater Toronto Area place unique significance on the public versus private nature of abuse. This often stems from a desire to protect the face (referring to the individual's and family's social reputation and dignity) by minimizing and not acknowledging experiences of partner abuse to uphold cultural values of familism and collectivism. The cultural stigma associated with divorce further enforces this silence, as South Asian parents often see divorce as an act of great shame and failure. Women are blamed for being a "bad" wife and failing to maintain the marriage, and this stigma also perpetuates self-blame for the abuse (Venkataramani-Kothari, 2007; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004). Therefore, researchers have found cultural stigma plays a major role in women being implicitly forced to remain in abusive relationships out of fear of facing the dishonour and humiliation attached to divorced women (Tonsing, 2017).

South Asian women's life experiences are expected to occur in accordance with family traditions and cultural norms. In all stages of their life, they must be willing to sacrifice their individual identities to protect the reputation of their immediate family and avoid shame upon their husband's family (Abraham, 2000; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004). Such sacrifices give a woman honour and "power," especially since the community considers role adherence a more respectable route to acceptance than self-expression (Goel, 2005). Community interactions enforce this expectation. For example, Tamil women who sought professional help for intimate partner violence shared how "publicizing their family secrets" led to their marginalized position within their community and forced them to defend their moral virtue (Kanagaratnam et al., 2012, p.

655). Therefore, when a woman makes an active choice against cultural values, she must be prepared to give up her role as a "good" housewife who tolerates everything through sacrifice (Kanagaratnam et al., 2012). Confirming these consequences, Rai and Choi (2018) found isolation to be a significant predictor of abuse within several studies, with the threat of isolation curbing South Asian women from help-seeking and leaving abusive relationships.

Overall, these studies demonstrate that patriarchal teachings and structures create dynamics that can force South Asian women to remain in abusive relationships. Many women do not perceive abusive behaviours as "abuse," instead viewing these experiences as a normal part of their lifecycle and as normalized behaviours resulting from their husband's or in-laws' dominant position. Women who endorse patriarchal beliefs are less likely to recognize spousal abuse, which puts them at a greater risk of sustained abuse (Ahmad et al., 2004; Mahapatra, 2012; Rai & Choi, 2018). Furthermore, the fear of community isolation and bringing shame to the family honour further intensifies the pressure to remain in these relationships.

Cultural Barriers to Help-Seeking for South Asian Women

Several researchers have documented the social and legal barriers preventing immigrant and South Asian women from seeking help for domestic violence (Alaggia et al., 2009; George & Rashidi, 2014; Merali, 2009; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020). For instance, in a Toronto-based qualitative study, Alaggia and colleagues (2009) reported that immigrant women's decision to disclose abuse was heavily impacted by cultural practices (stigma of separation and divorce), reluctance to police intervention, economic barriers (financial dependency on the spouse), and fears related to immigrant status. To best align with this study's purpose, I have primarily outlined literature that sheds light on the *intracultural* challenges (i.e., cultural practices) that act as barriers to help-seeking South Asian immigrant women.

Several studies reveal that unique intracultural challenges, such as stereotypes, cultural differences within immigration contexts, patriarchy, and limited community support, increase South Asian women's vulnerability to domestic violence (Ahmad et al., 2004, 2009, 2017; Alaggia et al., 2009; Guruge, 2010; Raj & Silverman, 2002a, 2003; 2007; Shirwadkar, 2004). Mentioned earlier, Kanagaratnam and colleagues (2012) conducted focus groups with Tamil women in Toronto to explore their perceptions of coping with intimate partner violence. They found that although coping strategies fell along a continuum, Tamil women preferred emotional coping strategies that were more acceptable for the community, including self-blaming, relying on faith, diverting the mind, normalizing the abuse, enduring, and being strategic. The more active problem-focused strategies, including gaining independence, getting a separation, getting treatment for the partner, and professional help for themselves, were only considered appropriate in situations where there was (a) an increased frequency and intensity of abuse or (b) spousal infidelity. However, when choosing these options, women indicated they must be prepared to give up the respect their marital status brings them in the community and accept varying levels of community ostracization. Women who adopted more emotional strategies were often perceived as more "resilient" and "honourable" due to their willingness to sacrifice for the harmony of the marriage. Based on these findings, Kanagaratnam et al. (2012) argue that mainstream interventions will remain ineffective until they consider and integrate an understanding of "coping" through the lens of South Asian women.

A small-scale qualitative study of 22 South Asian immigrant women in Toronto found that social stigma, shame, rigid gender roles (marriage obligations and silence), and loss of social support were significant reasons for delayed help-seeking assistance (Ahmad et al., 2009). Particularly, cultural values that foster patriarchy, women's submissiveness, and collectivism

create the sociocultural context that impacts South Asian women's silence and delay in help-seeking. Similarly, Sri Lankan Tamil women in the Hyman et al. (2011) study argued that prevention efforts must address domestic violence through the lens of women's unequal status in the community. They proposed three critical actions: (a) redefining rigid gender roles and reconsidering the importance of women's submissive attributes, (b) reducing and eliminating male domination, and (c) achieving financial impendence and equal rights for women (Hyman et al., 2011). Ahmad et al. (2009) also highlighted the need for professionals to increase their cultural competence to create more responsive community education and prevention resources. Additionally, researchers have identified that when South Asian women seek abuse-related help, they often turn to informal sources, such as friends and family (Bhandari, 2018; Raj & Silverman, 2007). However, Mahapatra and Murugan (2024) reported that these informal sources often reinforce cultural norms and values that encourage women to tolerate and normalize the abuse they experience. These findings showcase importance of understanding community-level perspectives towards help-seeking to develop strategies that transform these informal support systems into healthier resources for women experiencing abuse.

Tailored Community Services

Research highlights the need for culturally appropriate services tailored to the challenges faced by South Asian immigrant women, as mainstream services often fail to address the cultural factors at the of core of domestic violence (Ahmad et al., 2004, 2009, 2013; Chokshi et al., 2009; Raj & Silverman, 2007; Shirwadkar, 2004). Reports from the South Asian community support this position, showing that women are often aware of available services but do not view them as helpful or culturally adequate (Raj & Silverman, 2002a). Goel (2005) further states that the sociocultural context of immigration leaves women with fewer opportunities to make informed

choices, arguing that “choices based on a perceived shortage of options cease to be informed choices” (p. 646).

Many researchers argue that existing supports fail to recognize the importance of gender roles and address cultural barriers unique to immigrant women experiencing domestic violence (Shirwadkar, 2004). Interestingly, Ahmad and colleagues (2013) found that abused South Asian immigrant women experience a sense of reciprocity when helping other women in similar situations. This includes providing emotional support, facilitating connections to services, and helping others find employment and skills training. Thus, involving South Asian women in service delivery and support roles may reduce stigma and making help-seeking more accessible by increasing comfort, while also empowering community voices. Other researchers also support the view that developing resources informed by South Asian women can help increase cultural relevancy and encourage women to report abuse (Ahmad et al., 2009, 2013; Guruge, 2010; Hyman et al., 2011; Raj & Silverman, 2007; Shirwadkar, 2004).

Additionally, South Asian women who possess knowledge of available resources report higher confidence in seeking help and do not view their challenges as insurmountable (Ahmad et al., 2013). Therefore, increasing community awareness of these resources and the realities of domestic violence can foster resilience and reduce help-seeking delays. Increasing this awareness is critical in transforming family responses that frequently advise women to stay in abusive situations (Yoshioka et al., 2003). Ahmed and colleagues (2013) found that consistent support from family and friends, especially mothers, was central in helping South Asian women seek help and reduced depressive symptoms after leaving an abuser (Ahmad et al., 2013).

Building on the Literature

While media and qualitative research highlight the prevalence of domestic violence, the firsthand perspectives of South Asian immigrant women in Canada remains under-researched. Although research recognizes cultural gender role as significant barriers to seeking support for South Asian women, few studies specifically aim to investigate *how* these gender roles perpetuate domestic violence within Canadian South Asian communities. This gap persists despite the known influence of cultural gender beliefs (gender dynamics, familial structures, and marital expectations) on the lived experiences of South Asian individuals. In their scoping review, Rai and Choi (2018) call for researchers to provide a more in-depth understanding of specific cultural risk factors, including gender role, rather than broad generalizations. This study addresses that gap by highlighting and empowering the perspectives of the South Asian immigrant women with lived experienced of domestic violence. This study also extends research beyond established hubs for this research, like Ontario, to reflect variations in regional resources and Canada's growing South Asian population, particularly in Alberta.

A qualitative approach centering the perspectives of South Asian immigrant women is crucial to understanding how gender roles contribute to domestic violence experiences. This lens provides the culturally informed insight vital to develop resources and supports for this community. Ahmad and colleagues (2013) highlight the importance of creating tailored, culturally sensitive resources in fostering resilience for South Asian women. In their study, the researchers found that participants accessed social supports both before and after the turning-point of seeking help. Notably, cognitive resources were more important before the turning point, including confidence, self-esteem, and optimism, while professional assistance (i.e., social workers, lawyers, police) was more important after the turning-point (Ahmad et al., 2013).

Therefore, focusing on resources that promote resilience before, not just after, help-seeking could be significant in reducing the prevalence and impact of domestic violence. Creating these resources requires a deeper understanding of how South Asian women view perceive their abuse experiences and challenges with help-seeking. This study aimed to produce findings that can help generate such resources by increasing service providers' understanding of how domestic violence manifests within the South Asian community. These resources may focus on highlighting and challenging certain gender role beliefs and the meanings derived from them, while also sharing strategies to promote cognitive resources like building confidence and self-esteem. Directly involving the South Asian women in informing and sharing these resources may be extremely beneficial in fostering resilience (Ahmad et al., 2013).

The present study adds depth to the literature on domestic violence among South Asian immigrant women by (a) expanding the understanding of abuse through the lens of closely held gender role beliefs, (b) highlighting the voices of South Asian women and centering their knowledge, (c) reflecting the growing South Asian population in Canada, and (d) producing findings to help inform culturally sensitive supports. In short, I ask: How do South Asian immigrant women understand the ways these gender role beliefs manifest within their domestic violence experiences?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the qualitative methodology used to guide and conduct this research study. I share the decision-making process for selecting a qualitative, multiple case study approach. Additionally, I describe the two schools of thought and research processes presented by Merriam (1998) and Stake (2006) and how both processes were adapted to best fit this study.

Qualitative Methodology

I selected a qualitative methodology to help build knowledge and understanding about how gender role beliefs perpetuate cycles of domestic violence and act as barriers for help-seeking among South Asian immigrant women in Alberta, Canada. Qualitative research is a means "for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). Using a qualitative design allows researchers to describe any social inquiry utilizing information collected in the form of words (Flick, 2014). It creates the opportunity to examine a phenomenon without reducing it "to single variables: rather, they are represented in their entirety in their everyday context" (Flick, 2014, p. 44). Therefore, unlike quantitative approaches that aim to measure and quantify phenomena, qualitative approaches provide a richer, in-depth understanding of human experiences. In essence, qualitative research is grounded in its purpose to identify the unique characteristics of specific phenomenon, and is the ideal framework for exploring "how" and "why" questions (Cleland, 2017). Given this, I deemed that a qualitative design was most appropriate for this study as the essence of this study is to understand *how* cultural beliefs related to gender roles perpetuate domestic violence within South Asian communities. Additionally, the overarching goal of qualitative research is to "discover and explore the new" while taking "into account that viewpoints and practices in the field are

different because of the different subjective perspectives and social backgrounds related to them" (Flick, 2014, p. 44).

Schwandt (2014) identifies authenticity, context, and action as the pillars of qualitative research. In this framework, authenticity refers to a researcher's dedication to producing an account that is both credible and trustworthy, ensuring the resulting insights are a faithful representation of the person or subject being studied (Schwandt, 2014). Researchers achieve this by directly asking and involving the specific population group affected, through interviews and observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since one of the guiding principles of this study is to understand domestic violence by directly incorporating the perspectives of South Asian women, I wanted participants to be able to share and describe their point of view, with a focus on individual meaning. Doing so also helps empower research participants through relationship building and collaborative social problem-solving (Mertens, 2010).

Second, qualitative research recognizes that participants are deeply embedded within their specific social and environmental contexts, including culture, tradition, intersecting identities, and previous life events, among other factors (Schwandt, 2014). Given that this study is grounded in understanding contextual factors (i.e., cultural beliefs) contributing to domestic violence experiences for South Asians within a specific environment (i.e., immigration to Canada), a qualitative approach will be able to honour the complexity of the situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This contextual feature aligns with and allows me to utilize my social constructionist orientation throughout the research process (Stake, 2010). The constructionist paradigm assumes there are multiple realities, prioritizes authentic data collection within real-world environments, and posits that knowledge is co-constructed through direct engagement with participants (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Third, qualitative research aims to understand participants' experiences as they engage in certain social actions (Schwandt, 2014). The researcher assumes that behaviour is purposive and holds meaning, "not simply a physical response to stimulus" (Schwandt, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, the research aim is to uncover the meaning participants attach to their behaviours, under the assumption that behaviours represent a multifaceted set of elements that must be studied collectively. This feature of qualitative research will allow me to explore how the meanings ascribed to gender roles not only contribute to actions that perpetuate domestic violence but also the barriers to help-seeking for South Asian women, accounting for intersecting factors. Next, I consulted Creswell and Poth (2018) for various qualitative research designs and compared several to determine which one would be most effective in addressing the research questions in this study.

Design Selection

When designing this study, I considered five primary qualitative approaches to best address the research focus: narrative research, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, and case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Initially, this study had a broader scope that aimed to understand the domestic violence experiences of South Asian immigrant women. During the early stages of the literature review, I decided to narrow the scope of the research and specifically explore how cultural beliefs related to gender roles play a part in the domestic violence experiences of South Asian women.

Narrative research explores the life of an individual with the aim to tell stories of individual experiences as expressed through the stories of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This often involves organizing the insights into a sequential order following the trajectory of one's life. While this study does honour the lived experiences of South Asian women through

first-hand narratives, the purpose of this study was to focus on a specific factor (gender role beliefs) that influenced a specific experience (domestic violence) in their lives, rather than exploring their entire lives. Given this, a narrative research design was excluded from consideration.

A grounded theory research design was also quickly dismissed. Grounded theory aims to generate or discover a theory for a process or action and is grounded in information collected from participants with experiences of the same process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; see also Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This study does not aim to develop a theory to explain a process. Similarly, an ethnographic research design was deemed unsuitable for the purpose and scope of a master's study because I would need to immerse myself in the community and day-to-day lives of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Also, while this study does focus on South Asian immigrant community in Canada, individual women who have experienced domestic violence do not belong to a "culture-sharing group" that can be observed together and as a unit.

Phenomenology describes the "common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" and aims to "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 121). Essentially, the purpose of phenomenological studies is to develop a description of the nature/essence of individual experiences, including *what* was experienced and *how* it was experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While this study does explore the lived experiences of South Asian women, the primary focus was to understand how cultural gender role beliefs perpetuate domestic violence rather than understanding their domestic violence experiences in general. Given this, a phenomenological research design seemed to align better with the latter research purpose and was considered not as suitable for this study as a case study design.

The purpose of a case study research design is to "either develop an in-depth understanding of a single case or explore an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 153). I selected a case study research design as my research questions aim to explore *how* cultural beliefs related to gender roles perpetuate cycles of domestic violence (issue) for South Asian immigrant women in Canada (cases), and this aim aligns well with the focus and structure of a case study design. Additionally, a benefit of utilizing a case study design over phenomenology was the smaller sample size needed, especially given the vulnerable demographic being studied (phenomenology commonly requires between 5 to 25 participants while a case study can include one or more) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the next section, I further describe case study research design and the *type* of case study I used in this study.

Case Study Research Design

Case study research provides the tools to explore complex social realities that are not easily translated into statistics or data points (Yazan 2015). Case study research design is defined as an approach that "explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases)" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 153) within its context or setting over time. Hancock et al. (2021) shared three primary features of a case study: (a) it typically centres on a specific individual or entity that serves as an example of a broader group or occurrence, (b) the subject is examined in its natural context with careful consideration for its specific boundaries of time and space, and (c) it draws upon multiple qualitative sources, such as narratives and interviews, to generate a multifaceted description of the case. More importantly, a case study design is best used when attempting to answer a *how* question, when the researcher cannot or does not wish to manipulate the participants' behaviour while also incorporating contextual

factors, and when the boundaries between what is being studied and the context in which they exist are not clear (Creswell & Poth, 2018; see also Yazan, 2015). Given these defining characteristics of a case study, I employed a case study design as it allowed me to consider the contextualized experiences and socio-cultural identities of South Asian women, without manipulation.

Case study research can be approached through various strategies, with the three primary schools of thought led by Yin (2009), Stake (1995), and Merriam (1998). According to Yazen (2015), there are notable differences in the techniques used by each of these methodologists. Based on Yazen's (2015) paper comparing the differences between each approach, I identified Stake (1995) and Merriam's (1998) approaches to case study research as best aligned with my epistemological orientation (social constructionism) and the purpose of this study. In this next section, I outline the foundations for both approaches and provide a rationale for the combined approach I selected for this study.

According to Stake (1995), qualitative researchers should approach their research from a constructionist viewpoint in which knowledge is "constructed rather than discovered" (p. 99). Qualitative researchers should gather interpretations from the case while also expecting readers to have their interpretations of the case and information provided by the researcher. From this viewpoint, Stake (1995) believed "there are multiple perspectives or views of the case that need to be represented, but there is no way to establish, beyond contention, the best view" (p. 108).

Grounded in this viewpoint, Stake (1995) believed that case study is a method to explore complex systems (cases) in which the case study cannot be precisely defined due to the multiplicity of perspectives. He identified two types of case study: intrinsic case study, in which the case is central, and instrumental case study, in which the issue is central. Stake (1995)

strongly believed in flexibility during the research process and that researchers are not able to definitively structure a case study from the beginning of a project due to the fluid nature of qualitative inquiry. Therefore, a Stakian (1995) case study allows researchers to oscillate between study design and data collection by recognizing that new data can impact the research process. Moreover, data collection methods can be less defined in a Stakian (1995) case study as most data is viewed to be "impressionistic, picked up informally as the researcher first becomes acquainted with the case" (p. 45). Thus, Stake (1995) posited that the effectiveness of a case study design is largely dependent on the competence of the researcher.

Within Stake's (1995) approach, data analysis primarily relies on the interpretations of the researcher during simultaneous data collection and analysis. However, Stake (1995) also believed that researchers should use theoretical frameworks to guide their inquiry and minimize misinterpretations. In terms of data validation, Stake (1995) recognized the importance of exploring "alternative explanations and having discipline" (as cited in Yazan, 2015, p. 147), a shift from his purely constructionist perspective. To accomplish this, Stake (1995) recommended protocols, member checking, and procedures that demonstrate the researcher's effort to "increase credence" (p. 112) to the interpretations. While embracing the traditional constructionist perspective shared by Stake, Merriam's (1998) approach to case study research embraced a more systematic and explicit structure.

Merriam (1998) believed that reality is based on how individuals interact with their "social worlds" (p. 6). Therefore, there is no objective reality and instead, each individual views reality through multiple interpretations. Given this, the aim of qualitative research is to understand the meaning people ascribe to their interactions, along with how people make sense of their experiences and the world (Yazan, 2015). Moreover, Merriam (1998) described case study

research design as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). Merriam believed that researchers should use an in-depth literature review to guide the research process. Specifically, she outlined a step-by-step research process, including conducting a literature review, constructing a theoretical framework, identifying a research problem, crafting research questions, and selecting the sample. In terms of data collection methods, Merriam (1998) provided detailed techniques and procedures for interviews, observations, and document analysis. She viewed data analysis as the process of consolidating and making meaning of several pieces of information. Similar to Stake, Merriam’s viewpoint on case study research allowed for simultaneous collection and analysis of data to refine the inquiry as the study progresses (Merriam, 1998). Additionally, Merriam (1998) and Stake (1995) both agreed that enough information must be collected for the interpretations and conclusions to make sense to the reader, and “increase the credence of the interpretation” (as cited in Yazan, 2015, p. 147). Further, Merriam (1998) recommended triangulation, long-term observations, member checks, peer examination, participatory research, and disclosure of researcher bias to increase case study validity.

As noted in my positionality statement, I align myself with a social constructionist theoretical orientation as a researcher, informed by my clinical practice as a counsellor-in-training. Given this, Merriam (1998) and Stake’s (1995) approach to case study design, grounded in constructionism and meaning making, best reflected and aligned with my theoretical orientation. Upon further review, there were certain complementary elements from both approaches that best aligned with the research purpose of this study, and therefore, I chose to combine aspects from both approaches. Merriam (1998) emphasized the importance of a thorough literature review and a theoretical framework to guide the research process, both of

which were necessary to guide this inquiry. Furthermore, a single case study design did not align with my constructionist perspective of multiplicity existing within meaning-making. A multiple case study, a type of case study design, allows researchers to gain a more in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon by exploring the similarities and differences between multiple cases. Stake (2006) recommended a multi-case study research design that honours the distinct qualities of each case while simultaneously identifying overarching patterns across cases. Therefore, this study combines Merriam's (1998) single-case study design rooted in a thorough literature review and theoretical orientation with Stake's (2006) multiple case study analysis. Specifically, the blended research process allowed me to capitalize on the structure provided by Merriam's (1998) techniques for single case data collection and Stake's (2006) rigorous analysis procedures for multi-case designs.

Multiple Case Study

Multiple case design offers a richer understanding of the *how* than a single case can offer (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake 2006). Additionally, this design allows researchers to explore a range of factors to help understand similarities and contrasts between cases (through a process called cross-case analysis) without losing the uniqueness of each case, overall creating deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I analyzed the perspectives shared by each participant individually (through single case analysis) and reviewed the parallels emerging between their narratives (through cross-case analysis) to develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how gender role beliefs influence their domestic violence experiences. This also allowed me to recognize and highlight contextual differences. Therefore, a multiple case study design provided me with the structure to include more individual perspectives from South Asian women and explore nuanced experiences of

meaning-making. This is also supported by Stake's (2006) claim that multiple perspectives should be represented to help fulfill the purpose of providing rich understandings as required by a qualitative approach.

Research Process

Merriam (1998) recommended the following case study steps: (a) constructing a theoretical framework, (b) conducting a literature review, and (c) identifying a research problem. These initial three steps do not need to be conducted in a linear manner, instead, they work simultaneously to form a solid foundation that will inform the research process (Yazan, 2015). Once the study foundation has been formed, Merriam (1998) and Stake (2006) recommended the following steps to complete the inquiry: (d) selecting a sample, (e) collecting data, (f) analyzing data, and (g) reporting data.

Constructing the theoretical framework of a study is informed by the orientation of the researcher and the perspective it brings to the study (Merriam, 1998). Accordingly, the researcher's discipline often influences the purpose and emphasis within a research study. Merriam (1998) stated that "this disciplinary orientation is the lens through which you view the world" (p. 45) and thus, impacts each step of the research process. Throughout this thesis, I identify and describe my theoretical orientation of social constructionism (see positionality statement) and the intersectionality framework (see Chapter 4) used to inform and guide the research process, including generating the research questions, data collection and analysis techniques, and interpreting findings. However, Stake (2006) and Merriam (1998) held opposing views on the use of a theoretical frame in research. Stake (2006) believed that using a literature review and theoretical frame to guide the study can create bias in the researcher. In contrast, Merriam (1998) held the view that the theoretical framework decreases researcher influence on

the study since the study is being grounded in literature from the field rather than the researcher's personal beliefs. My approach to this study and my subjectivity as the researcher fell along the continuum of both these views. From my perspective, since the researcher is involved in each step of the research process, researcher subjectivity exists and inevitably influences the research process, especially within the qualitative analysis process. Therefore, I embraced my subjectivity by engaging in reflexivity throughout this study, and through the practice of using a theoretical framework to further inform my process. I describe the theoretical framework and my reflexive process in the following chapter.

The next step in the research process is conducting a literature review. Merriam (1998) believed that the literature review serves many distinct purposes in establishing a study. The four primary purposes are: (a) establishing a foundation for how the researcher will contribute to existing knowledge and gaps, (b) providing a rationale for the theoretical framework, (c) guiding the research inquiry (i.e., questions asked, methods used, data analysis strategy), and (d) allowing the researcher to present a hypothesis for how the findings will advance discussion in the field area. The second chapter demonstrated how I engaged in the literature review process (step b) to understand gaps in existing research, the depth to which this topic has already been explored, and gain a rich understanding of the topic of South Asian culture and domestic violence (Merriam, 1998; see also Yazan, 2015). The next step of identifying a research problem (step c) is showcased in chapter one, where I began to survey the literature and current social issues to determine what is impactful and interesting for me as the researcher and within the greater social context as well (Merriam, 1998). This spark of curiosity is the "core of the research problem or problem statement" (Merriam, 1998, p. 58). The remaining four steps (selecting a sample, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting data) are described in detail in Chapter four.

Strengths and Limitations

Since a case study design expects significant depth from its data collection methods, the findings provide a rich, thick description of the phenomena within a larger context, making it an appealing choice for researchers to understand complex problems (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, dedicating the required time and energy to collect and analyze the amount of data to provide that rich description can be challenging (Baxter & Jack, 2008). While the primary purpose of the study is not to produce generalizable results, the multiple cases will increase data depth while honouring each individual experience (Merriam, 1998). Next, a case study design includes capturing comprehensive insights from insider voices through data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., interviews, observations, documents) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, I only collected data via two primary sources: one-on-one semi-structured and reflexive interviews and the researcher journal, rather than multiple sources. Thomas (2015) argues, "Your case study is defined not so much by the methods that you are using to do the study, but the edges you put around the case" (p. 21). Similarly, Stake (2005) emphasizes that the key feature of a case study is the choice of what is to be studied (i.e., a case within a bounded system, bounded by time and place). Given these statements, I decided that only using two sources of information would not hinder the research process or lessen the validity of the findings since they were still inclusive of multiple perspectives. This decision is also informed by my social constructionist orientation, which allows me to recognize and honour the perspectives and shared experiences of participants as rich and holistic, along with my perspective as the researcher, without requiring several additional sources of information. I am not seeking one absolute truth, but rather a well-informed conclusion drawn from the participants' perspectives.

CHAPTER FOUR: CURRENT STUDY

Adopting the case study characteristics outlined by Stake (2006) and Merriam (1998), I frame this research as a holistic inquiry that investigates cases by addressing "how" and "why" questions about the phenomenon. Thus, considering the suitability, subject matter, and research aims, a *multiple case study design* allowed me to collect rich, holistic information to investigate how cultural gender roles beliefs manifest within and influence the domestic violence experiences of South Asian immigrant women. My case study was guided by two research questions:

1. How and to what extent do cultural gender role beliefs perpetuate cycles of domestic violence within South Asian immigrant communities?
2. How do cultural gender role beliefs act as barriers to help-seeking for South Asian immigrant women who have experienced domestic violence?

To consider the relationship between the phenomenon and its context, I used feminist intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) as the guiding framework for the research process. In this chapter, I describe the history and underlying philosophical assumptions of feminist intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) while providing the rationale for its application in this study. I also outline the methods I employed to conduct this study, including case selection criteria, participant recruitment and enrollment steps, and data collection and analysis procedures.

Theoretical Framework

As discussed in the previous chapter, selecting an appropriate theoretical framework is one of the most critical decisions in qualitative research design, and guides the inquiry process (Merriam, 1998). The chosen framework should reflect align with the researcher's belief systems and assumptions about the world while reflecting the purpose of the study's research questions

(Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998). My interest in understanding how gender role beliefs influence domestic violence experiences for South Asian women stems from my passion for increasing awareness about this issue through culturally informed resources that reflect the unique needs of this community. Therefore, I selected feminist intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) as the most appropriate framework to guide this research as it creates space explore and honour the community's cultural beliefs while recognizing interactions with other contributing contextual factors.

Feminist Intersectionality Theory

As noted in the literature review, feminist intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) emerged during the third wave of feminism as a response to the first and second waves, which grounded their views in the belief that women experience violence only due to their gender (Crenshaw, 1989; George & Stith, 2014). Third-wave feminists reject this "gender essentialism" and instead use an intersectionality framework (George & Stith, 2014). In an effort to highlight the unique legal challenges faced by African American women, Kimberley Crenshaw (1989) coined the term "intersectionality." Her work argued and emphasized that gender and race are not separate issues, but rather interconnected factors that shape these women's experiences (Atewologun, 2018). Intersectionality theory conceptualizes knowledge as situated and relational, and reflective of power dynamics in societal structures (Atewologun, 2018). By examining how diverse social identities interact to shape reality, this theory aims to explore the adverse effects on individual health and well-being while explaining how marginalized groups experience social injustice and inequitable access to resources (George & Stith, 2014; Kelly, 2011). Therefore, the pursuit of social justice drives both the foundation and application of feminist intersectionality.

I selected the feminist intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) as the framework for this research for several reasons. Intersectionality theory operates as a dual-layered framework: (a) first, it acts as a lens to critique the systemic power structures that oppress individuals, and (b) second, to understand how an individual's intersecting identities shape their lives (Deenoo, 2020; Syed, 2010). Using this framework allowed me to examine (a) how gender role beliefs perpetuate the domestic violence experienced by South Asian immigrant women, and (b) the interaction of these beliefs with their other social and cultural identities. Specifically, this research investigated how South Asian women conceptualize cultural gender roles and how these intersecting factors manifest to shape their domestic violence experiences. Rather than examining domestic violence in a vacuum, I explored how gender role beliefs manifest within specific contextual patterns. Disregarding these interactions would lead to an incomplete understanding of how South Asian women internalize and experience these gender roles and abuse. To achieve this, it was essential to consider third-wave feminist theories that acknowledge these interactions, such as the intersectionality theory.

Informed by Deenoo's work (2020), this study applies the assumptions of feminist intersectionality as: (a) South Asian immigrant women have unique qualities, (b) they are positioned within social structures, such as their marriage, family, South Asian community, and the larger Canadian societal structures, that are oppressive, and (c) there are interactions between their different social identities (i.e., gender, immigration status, culture, marital status), which may produce compounding negative effects on their well-being (Crenshaw, 1989; George & Stith, 2014; Kelly, 2011). Specifically, cultural gender role beliefs within the South Asian community interact with these variables, and this interplay may perpetuate domestic violence and

create barriers to help-seeking. Therefore, this intersectional lens helps explain the processes by which South Asian immigrant women experience violence and face challenges to help-seeking.

Lastly, feminist intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) aims to understand how social systems function to restrict resources for women in oppressed social positions (Kelly, 2011). This study aimed to produce findings that expand our understanding of domestic violence within the South Asian immigrant community, hoping to inform culturally relevant resources that increase awareness and reduce barriers to help-seeking. Third-wave feminists have increasingly critiqued second wave models for their reductionist approach, which often prioritizes leaving the abusers as the only pathway to empowerment for women. Additionally, despite the deep commitment many South Asian women have toward preserving their marriage and family unit, there is a noticeable shortage of support services tailored to their specific circumstances. Gaining in-depth knowledge of their firsthand experiences can enhance our understanding of domestic violence, which in turn, can help enhance culturally sensitive resources available to the South Asian community across Canada. Therefore, this study aligns with the social justice mission of feminist intersectionality by aiming to inform tailored resources for providers that account for South Asian women's varying identities.

Philosophical Assumptions

In this section, I further elaborate on how the philosophical assumptions of intersectionality theory align with this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontology. Ontology refers to the nature of existence and is concerned with the characteristics of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998). In qualitative research, researchers, participants, and readers all embrace different realities. The ontological assumptions of feminist intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) are rooted in the premise that knowledge is

socially constructed. It acknowledges that human experience forms through the intersection of one's various social positions. This study avoids generalizing how gender roles influence domestic violence experiences. Instead, it aims to understand how the intersecting identities of South Asian immigrant women relate to their beliefs and experiences within the community. Furthermore, since everyone's varying identities intersect uniquely, even within same groups, this framework embraces the belief that multiples realities exist (George & Stith, 2014). This study honoured that belief by reporting these multiple realities through the multiple case study design.

Epistemology. Informed by ontological assumptions, epistemology is concerned with how knowledge is created, known, and justified (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998). Qualitative research often explores this through subjective experiences, typically utilizing participant quotes. Intersectionality theory rests on three epistemological pillars: (a) social identities are neither discrete nor exclusive, (b) social identities are grounded in social structures and systems, making them historically and contextually situated, and (c) although identities are situated within individuals, they are influenced by systems of power (George & Stith, 2014; Kelly, 2011). Altogether, these assumptions reject a unidimensional view of identity (Cho et al., 2013). By applying an intersectional framework, I was able to acknowledge how the multiple interacting identities of South Asian women shape the meaning of their gender role beliefs and their experiences of domestic violence. This approach recognizes that these identities are situated in the historical and present realities of South Asian culture and immigration.

Axiology. The axiology of feminist intersectionality theory, defined by ethical practices and values, establishes the framework's foundational approach to research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The commitment to social justice and culturally informed ethics shapes the framework's

broader ontological, epistemological, and methodological systems (Mertens, 2010). In practice, researchers must respect the cultural history and traditional practices of community groups while simultaneously challenging discriminatory forces (Mertens, 2010). Thus, I conducted this study's analysis with the explicit intent to *understand*, not to disrespect or label cultural gender beliefs as inherently "bad" or negative. Additionally, I employed several strategies to ensure ethical participation (see ethical considerations section).

Methodology. Members of ethno-cultural group often hesitate to participate in research due to previous encounters that lacked cultural sensitivity or failed to improve their community's well-being (Liamputtong, 2010). Recognizing that many individuals may view participation as a poor use of their time, this study adopts a more collaborative approach. I actively encouraged participants to share *their* perspectives on how gender roles beliefs manifest. This study prioritizes their knowledge and interpretations as critical sources of information, rather than solely relying on my interpretations as the researcher. The interview questions reflect this collaborative focus (see Appendix F).

Defining the Quintain

Stake (2006) argued that each case in a multiple case study is only relevant due to its relation to other cases of interest. Therefore, it is essential that researchers choose cases with shared characteristics that bind them together (Stake, 2006). These cases share a commonality and are categorically bound. The collective characteristics or phenomenon that connects the individual cases is what Stake (2006) described as the *quintain*. Researchers must identify the quintain and then build the multiple case study by selecting individual cases that allow for the comparison of similarities and differences to provide a better understanding of quintain as a whole (Stake, 2006). The quintain guiding the case selection in this inquiry was identified as

gender role beliefs that may perpetuate domestic violence within South Asian immigrant communities in Canada.

Case Selection

Within case study research, cases are the tools with which researchers better understand the quintain (Stake, 2006). Therefore, one of the most defining components of case study research is the identification of a specific case bounded within certain parameters (i.e., specific geographical setting of the case, window of time in which the case is studied). Combining the perspectives of Merriam (1998) and Stake (2006), a case can refer to a concrete entity, such as an individual, small group, or organization, or it may also refer to less concrete entities, such as a community, relationship, or specific project (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In some instances, people involved in the case may also be defined as a parameter. For the purpose of this study, a case was defined as a South Asian immigrant woman who has experienced domestic violence within a previous or current marriage. The South Asian women interviewed in this study belonged to the quintain as they carried perspectives and knowledge of cultural gender role beliefs and lived experiences of domestic violence within the community.

Despite how the case is bound, a common weakness in case study research is examining cases that are too broad or that include too many variables (Yazan, 2015). While the data collection and analysis design of this study invited any information presented by participants, the primary focus was perspectives on gender roles within the context of domestic violence experienced by South Asian immigrant women, rather than gender roles or domestic violence in general. To understand how the quintain changes in different environments, it is considered best to select cases that are both typical and atypical (Yazan, 2015). Considering that the domestic violence experienced by the participants will have taken place in different settings (i.e., different

families, relationships), I was not concerned with specifically identifying typical and atypical cases. Additional case parameters were established using the eligibility criteria.

To participate in this study, eligible participants needed to: (a) be 18 years of age or older; (b) identify as a South Asian woman; (c) be immigrant/foreign-born in a South Asian country (as identified in Chapter 1); (d) be currently married to, divorced, or widowed from a South Asian immigrant male partner and; (e) have lived experience of domestic violence within their marriage. Participants needed to be adults (18 years of age or older) to ease complications around informed consent when participating in this study. Participants needed to be currently or previously married to a South Asian immigrant male to allow the study to encapsulate the cultural and marital expectations and norms of the South Asian immigrant culture, specifically as it relates to gender role beliefs, as best as possible. These criteria met the case selection criteria outlined by Stake (2006): the case needs to (a) be relevant to the quintain, (b) provide diversity across contexts, and (c) provide good opportunity to learn about the complexity and context.

Participants were not required to be fluent or proficient in speaking English as appropriate accommodations were provided (see enrollment and ethical considerations sections). Exclusion criteria and precautions taken to minimize harm to participants are detailed in the ethical considerations section of this chapter.

Participant Recruitment

In a multiple case study, purposive sampling is considered the most appropriate for selecting single cases to ensure they contribute to a better understanding of the quintain (Merriam 1998; Stake, 2006). Therefore, this study employed a purposive sampling strategy to recruit South Asian immigrant women residing in Calgary. I chose the city of Calgary, in which I reside, to accommodate for time and resource limitations of this master's research project (i.e.,

recruitment and interviews did not require travel). Additionally, Calgary has one of the largest South Asian populations in Alberta and has experienced the greatest increase in South Asian immigrants across Canada in recent years (Statistics Canada, 2023b).

As described by Denscombe (2008), a purposive sampling approach allows researchers to include participants who can best provide information about a certain issue while giving voice to individuals who may have been previously silenced. The most important consideration when selecting participants is that all individuals selected must have experienced the phenomenon being studied and be able to provide insight about the quintain (Stake, 2006). To accomplish this, participants were recruited through collaboration with organizations within Calgary that provide specialized services to South Asian women who have experienced domestic violence. By using purposive sampling to select participants from such organizations, I was able to recruit participants who fit the case criteria and who have already acknowledged their lived experiences as encapsulating domestic violence (see minimizing harm section).

Based on the literature and my position within the South Asian community, I recognized that recruiting South Asian women who have experienced domestic violence and are willing to share their lived experiences would be challenging. Domestic violence is a sensitive topic in the South Asian community and personal experiences of domestic violence are seldom discussed in public, due to the shame and guilt surrounding these conversations (Kanagaratnam et al., 2012; Rai & Choi, 2018). Given this stigma, I did not use flyers, posters, or postings to help with advertisements as I did not believe it would be helpful or appropriate. Instead, I recruited participants through the assistance of service providers and by word-of-mouth at the organizations. The benefits and ethical considerations of working with community partners when conducting culturally informed and sensitive research are discussed in the discussion section.

The recruitment email to the community partners included a brief description of the study and a request to book an appointment with me to further discuss the nature of my research (Appendix A). Within these appointments, I explained the research, my educational background, participation process, and selection criteria in detail and asked the service providers' willingness to help recruit participants. The service providers who were willing to help recruit were asked to contact women who met the selection criteria, explain the study, and to provide them with my contact information. I contacted community partners and service providers with study details first, before connecting with potential participants, as an effort to minimize potential harm (see minimizing harm section).

Once potential participants contacted me, they were given the opportunity to book a meeting with me in which I explained the study and participation process in further detail, along with the potential implications of the findings (Appendix B). Interested participants were made aware that their participation would be voluntary and confidential, and their decision to participate would not affect the services they are receiving. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions about me and my background, to help establish rapport and trust. Participants were also encouraged to book an additional meeting to continue discussing their concerns around participation if they were interested but unsure and wanted more information, to ensure informed participation. At this stage, individuals who agreed to participate in the study continued with the enrolment process as described in the following sections.

Sample Size

I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with three South Asian immigrant women, individually. Within qualitative literature, there is no definitive consensus on an appropriate sample size. Many researchers suggest that data collection is complete once

saturation has been reached and no new information is being presented from the sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018). On the other hand, some researchers do not believe saturation can ever be achieved since each individual has a unique lived experience to be shared, and that the sample size should best align with the theoretical framework or purpose of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998). Also, Stake (2006) believed that a multiple case study would be most effective if no fewer than four single cases or more than ten single cases are examined. Based on these recommendations, I initially aimed to conduct interviews with four or more participants for this study. However, I stopped the recruitment process was stopped after three participants due to various factors.

First, I considered the time I need to interview participants and analyze each interview when determining whether or not to continue recruiting participants beyond three interviews. Additionally, I recognized the challenges in recruiting participants given the sensitive nature of domestic violence experiences and participants' reluctance to share these experiences due to fears of breaches of confidentiality and cultural stigma, as noted by previous studies as well (Kanagaratnam et al., 2012; Rai & Choi, 2018). Finally, I wanted to prioritize "information power" over data saturation (Malterud et al., 2016). For Malterud et al. (2016, 2021), the more information a sample holds and the greater its relevancy to the study, the lower the number of participants is needed. Through this lens, the recruitment purpose is shifted from the amount of input to the content of the input. After the third interview, I determined that I had sufficient data to answer the research questions of this study. This decision was also supported by my constructionist lens, that saturation cannot be reached through a specific number as individual's each have unique experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998).

Pre-Screening and Enrollment

In the initial appointment, I asked prospective participants to complete a pre-screening survey to ensure they met the eligibility criteria for the case selection of this study (Appendix C). The pre-screening survey was approximately 10 minutes in length and administered verbally on a phone call. To collect sociodemographic information, I asked prospective participants to report their gender, age, nationality/birth country, citizenship status in Canada, whether they have been married, and whether they have experienced domestic violence while being married. I also asked them to report the gender, nationality/birth country, and citizenship status of their marriage partner. Prospective participants who were above 18 years of age, identified as a South Asian woman, reported being married to a South Asian immigrant male partner, and reported previous lived experience of domestic violence within their marriage, met the case selection criteria and were eligible to participate.

Once deemed eligible, I sent participants the informed consent forms (Appendix D). Once the consent form was signed, I asked participants to complete the background questionnaire (Appendix E) and I scheduled a semi-structured interview (Appendix F). I asked participants to complete the background questionnaire prior to their interview to provide me with relevant context to best prepare for the interview. To increase accessibility, participants were given the option to participate in the interview in-person (i.e., at the community organization, local facilities such as bookable rooms at the public library) or virtually via Zoom, an online secure communications platform. Each participant chose to participate in the interview virtually, noting ease of access. Prior to and at the start of the interviews, I encouraged participants to find a quiet space to limit outside distractions or interruptions during the interview, as advised by Creswell

and Poth (2018). The process was repeated for the reflexive interviews. Each participant completed a semi-structured interview and a follow-up reflexive interview.

Given the sensitive nature of the interviews, I debriefed participants post-interview and gave them a list of community mental health, social, and legal resources (Appendix G). Following the interviews, I shared respective single case descriptions with each participant, to help gain feedback on how the information was presented (Kullman & Chudyk, 2025). It was important to seek and incorporate participant feedback to ensure that the single case descriptions accurately reflected the essence of the participant's experiences and perspectives. Participants were asked to provide their feedback within two weeks. Participants were also asked if they would like to receive a copy of the findings, once the research has been completed, and each participant indicated interest. All email templates used to contact the organizations, service providers, and participants during all steps of the study are included in Appendix B.

Ethical Considerations

Navigating ethical considerations is the researcher's responsibility and a crucial aspect of any research design (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It includes consideration for where, how, and from whom the data is being collected. In their qualitative studies, Deenoo (2020) and Aujla (2013) shared several guidelines for ethical research among South Asian immigrant women who have experienced domestic violence. Thus, the methods and ethical considerations of this study are informed by those guidelines. I next outline and discuss the ethical issues that were carefully considered throughout the data collection process, including informed consent and confidentiality, minimizing harm, and increasing accessibility via language.

Informed Consent and Confidentiality

When conducting a study, researchers must obtain the informed consent of participants to demonstrate ethical responsibility (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The foundation of informed consent is the belief that participation must be voluntary (Denscombe, 2008). As Denscombe (2008) highlights, this can be achieved by providing individuals with enough information so they can fully understand the study's scope and are able to make an informed, independent choice about their participation. Therefore, during the initial appointment, I explained the following aspects in detail: the purpose of the study, the information participants would be asked to share, the nature and length of interviews, the participant's rights (i.e., right to withdraw, right to contact the ethical board), efforts taken to ensure confidentiality, potential risks (i.e., the possibility of feeling distressed), and the steps that would be taken in cases of participant distress. Only once the participants were satisfied and felt confident in their decision to participate were they asked to sign the informed consent form (Appendix C). I provided participants with a copy of the signed informed consent form for their reference. Participants were also given the space to further discuss any concerns or questions prior to the start of the interviews in a follow-up meeting, emphasizing their right to refuse or withdraw at any time.

Special consideration was given to protect the confidentiality of participants (Heron & Eisma, 2021). I informed participants that any information discussed during the interviews will be strictly confidential. I also discussed the importance of maintaining confidentiality within my professional capacity as a counsellor-in-training when sensitive and vulnerable information is shared with me (College of Alberta Psychologists, 2018). I shared relevant personal information about myself, with a focus on my South Asian identity and my understanding of the cultural norms and expectations around discussing domestic violence experiences, to help further

establish rapport and their trust in the confidential nature of their participation in this research (Schmid et al., 2024). Measures taken to protect the confidentiality of participants when obtaining, transcribing, and storing the data from the interviews are outlined in the next section and were discussed with participants.

Minimizing Harm

Given the sensitive nature of this study, it was important that I took steps to minimize the risk of harm to participants (Nonomura et al., 2020; Nyklova et al., 2023). Eligible participants were required to have already acknowledged their lived experiences to include domestic violence within their marriage prior to participating in this study, to mitigate the risk of further causing emotional distress or re-traumatization (Nonomura et al., 2020; Nyklova et al., 2023). This was accomplished by recruiting women who had already reached out and were receiving support from domestic violence organizations. Additionally, potential participants who were still experiencing and/or fleeing domestic violence were not allowed to participate as the interview experience could have increased the trauma they are experiencing. This was determined in consultation with their service providers prior to contacting interested participants, and also confirmed in the initial appointment and pre-screening with the participants. The purpose of this research was to better understand the domestic violence experiences of South Asian immigrant women and not to provide medical or psychological assessments and suggestions to these individuals as I was not qualified to do so in my position as researcher, and it fell outside the scope of this study.

In the interviews, issues that were extremely vulnerable and associated with painful memories and trauma were discussed. Therefore, participants were given the option to bring a support person to the interview if they chose. Participants were informed that the confidentiality of their identity and personally identifiable information cannot be guaranteed if the support

person is present. Each participant declined to bring a support person. If the participants showed signs of distress at any point in the interview, they were asked and encouraged to take a break. If needed, I was also prepared to end the interview (Nonomura et al., 2020; Nyklova et al., 2023). My knowledge as a counsellor-in-training and experience with trauma-informed approaches was helpful in determining if the interview was becoming distressing for the participant and when the interviews need to be paused or stopped completely. My clinical skills also helped me further build rapport with participants and create a non-judgmental space in which they felt respected and comfortable sharing their lived experiences and cultural beliefs around gender roles. However, I was acutely aware that in the context of these interviews, I was the researcher who is focused on gathering high-quality information and not a counsellor providing interventions (Nyklova et al., 2023). Using the interview guide to help guide the interview and providing information about counselling resources after the interview was helpful in maintaining my role as a researcher in the interviews.

Once the interviews were completed, I debriefed with participants to allow space for any questions and to conduct a safety check to ensure they were not in any distress (Nonomura et al., 2020). I also provided them with a debriefing form with resources and services available in Calgary for supporting women who have experienced domestic violence (Appendix G), and I encouraged them to debrief the interview with their service providers at the recruiting organizations to reduce any harm by delayed distress. Given the nature of the interviews, I also recognized it was important to engage in efforts to minimize harm for myself as the interviewer. I used my coping strategies developed and practiced in my clinical training to help mitigate the distress experienced by listening to the women's experiences, similar to in my practice as a counsellor.

Increasing Accessibility via Language

Feminist intersectionality framework (Crenshaw, 1989) prioritizes inclusivity and attempts to reduce barriers that prevent individuals from participating in research. To reduce the barrier of language accessibility in this study and enhance informed consent, I offered participants the option to receive study materials in their preferred language.

Moreover, knowledge is viewed to be produced within specific cultural and linguistic contexts from constructionist lens, and it is especially important to consider how this impacts the research process within cross-cultural research (Abfalter et al., 2021). I conducted the interviews in Punjabi and Hindi (participants' native language) for several reasons. It was crucial that participants were able to share their lived experiences in the language they felt most comfortable expressing themselves (Abfalter et al., 2021). Linguistic comfort increases the quality of the results as participants feel more at ease when speaking in their native language and are able to provide more emotional depth. It also reduces the responsibility placed on the participants to translate their experiences for the researcher. Additionally, it helps reduce and address the power imbalances between the researcher and the interviewee. I am fluent in Punjabi and Hindi, two of the most predominant languages used within the South Asian community. Therefore, I was able to conduct interviews with participants who indicated their preference for speaking in Punjabi and Hindi. Bilingual researchers are often viewed as bridge-builders between communities and thus, my shared position as a researcher and interviewer was considered a strength (Abfalter et al., 2021). Considerations around transcribing interviews in another language are noted in the data transcription section.

Data Collection Measures

Data collection measures involved the following: background questions, semi-structured interviews, reflexive interviews, and reflexive researcher journal. Each measure is described in detail.

Background Questionnaire

I asked participants to complete the background questionnaire prior to the first interview to help me prepare appropriately. In this questionnaire, participants reported the forms of domestic violence they experienced and indicated their preferences regarding the interview format (in-person or online) and the presence of a support individual in the interview. I also asked participants to specify their language preferences for the interview.

Semi-Structured Interview

Since case study research seeks to understand the holistic nature of cases, the selected data collection method should increase the breadth and depth of understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stake, 2006). Therefore, I chose interviews as the primary source of data collection (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). By interviewing participants about their observations of gender role manifestation, the data will be directly informed by community members' learnings (Stake, 2006). This method also aligns with my constructionist orientation and the intersectionality framework, as interviews give voice to participants' meaning-making processes while providing space to explore their intersectionality (Atewologun, 2018).

I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. Semi-structured interviews are in-depth interviews in which participants are asked to answer preset open-ended questions outlined in an interview guide (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The questions are organized by topics that the researcher wishes to explore with the participant. Given

this, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore participants' thoughts, feelings, opinions, and life experiences in a more systematic and comprehensive manner which also helps guide the interview focus on the desired topic of investigation. Therefore, I chose this interview style since it provided the best structure to specifically explore cultural gender roles and expectations while also providing the participants with the opportunity to share unexpected information.

The interview guide consisted of four major topics: (a) cultural gender role beliefs and expectations, (b) domestic violence experiences, (c) understanding of domestic violence, and (d) seeking informal and formal support. I designed the questions to be open-ended and encourage participants to discuss what was particularly salient to them. Also, I did not conduct pilot interviews. Since this study employed a qualitative approach and is informed by the constructionist and intersectionality framework, I considered each interview as relevant and significant to honour all information shared (no data was eliminated). Instead, I reviewed interview questions and adapted them for relevancy as the interviews progressed. This is in line with Stake (2006) and Merriam's (1998) viewpoint on the importance of flexibility during the research process and acknowledging that new data can impact the research process by allowing for simultaneous collection and analysis to refine the inquiry as the study progresses.

The initial questions inquired about the participant's background information related to their marital status, cultural identity, and living situation (e.g., "how did you meet your (ex) spouse?," "what ethnicity and religion do you identify with?," and "can you tell me about your current living situation?"). This section was followed by a series of questions exploring the participant's perspective on their cultural gender role beliefs and expectations and how these may be encouraging or discouraging abusive behaviours within the South Asian immigrant

community in Canada (e.g., “what is the role of the husband and wife in marriage?” and “how do you think your cultural beliefs and roles compare and contrast with what you know about Canadian culture?”). The next set of questions focused on the participant’s domestic violence experiences while being married in Canada, specifically, how the participant’s understanding of gender roles and expectations affected the abuse they experienced. The role of the spouse and extended family members in the abuse was also explored (e.g., “were other extended family members contributing to the situation?”). The third section explored the participant’s knowledge about domestic violence and the cultural barriers to recognizing domestic violence with the South Asian immigrant community (e.g., “how would you define domestic violence?” and “what are some of the challenges the South Asian community faces when trying to create awareness around domestic violence?”). The last set of questions focused on the participant’s experience with seeking informal and formal support, such as what responses they received from within their community when seeking support and fears related to speaking negatively about their marriage. Although the interview questions were not changed, I adapted the approach and structure of the interviews to allow space for the storytelling. For instance, although I did not probe about personal experiences, I did not stop participants from providing examples of how their perspectives were formed through life stories.

The interviews were designed to be completed within 60-90 minutes, approximately. Two of the interviews ranged from 90 minutes to 110 minutes; one interview took 3 hours in total and was completed over two meetings.

Reflexive Interviews

Lastly, the participants engaged in reflexive interviews following the initial semi-structured interviews (Pessoa et al., 2019). The semi-structured interviews focused on an in-depth

understanding of the meaning participants produced from their experiences. The reflexive interviews focused on elaborating understanding by (a) clarifying and seeking further details and (b) sharing and reviewing the initial interpretation and meanings I produced from the interviews (Pessoa et al., 2019). This helped ensure I appropriately reflected the participant's voice and what was most salient for them in the findings. By engaging in this reflexive process, the researcher is able to promote culturally sensitive and responsive research and practices (Pessoa et al., 2019). Information collected was specifically helpful during the development of single case descriptions. Using this as an additional source of data also helped strengthen the study by fulfilling the multiple sources of data requirement by Merriam (1998) and Stake (2006) and addressing some of the limitations by the small sample size of three.

Reflexive Researcher Journal and Field Notes

One of the distinct features of "Big Q" qualitative research is that the researcher is an active participant in data collection and analysis, using himself or herself as the primary tool to conduct interviews and observations (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Flick, 2014; Stake, 2006). In fact, the subjectivity of the researcher becomes part of the research process (Flick, 2014). Therefore, to achieve the authenticity required by a qualitative approach, it is crucial that the researcher practices continued reflexivity throughout the research process. Reflexivity includes demonstrating awareness and acknowledging how your perspectives, experiences, and positions shaped the research study (Flick, 2014; Stake, 2006). Engaging in this self-reflection enhances the data analysis process as it allows the researcher to acknowledge and address how their subjectivity influenced the study process.

Therefore, I maintained a reflexive research journal throughout the study, which provided a space to record and monitor my experience and interaction with the study process, including my

assumptions, reactions, thoughts, feelings, and questions as they emerged to try to catch organic thoughts (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Cunliffe, 2016). Journal entries also included insights related to personal motivations for the proposed study and reflections about the data analysis process. For instance, I wrote journal entries right after each interview, after the transcription of each interview, and each stage of the analysis. It was also a space for me to question and push myself and my assumptions, including alternative interpretative possibilities (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Cunliffe, 2016). Project meetings and supervisory discussions also provided space for reflective practice and were noted in journal entries. Information, including personal reflections and decision-making processes, from the journal entries has been shared throughout this study (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Cunliffe, 2016). For instance, I shared detailed information on my intersecting identity and theoretical orientation in my positionality statement and continued to share how it impacted my subjectivity throughout. Efforts were made to ensure this study reflected my voice as a conscious effort and choice to stay true to the reflexive process.

Additionally, I engaged in the practice of writing field notes for each interview to provide rich descriptions of each case in the analysis. Field notes aid in constructing contextual descriptions of the participants and interviews, and help frame the study in a specific time, place, and population (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Therefore, I viewed this as an essential practice since this study employed an intersectional case study design, which is grounded in considering contextual factors as one makes meaning from the data. The field notes were guided by the steps outlined by Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018). Similar to the journal entries, information from the field notes has been incorporated throughout this study. The field notes were particularly helpful when constructing the single case descriptions and during the initial round of analysis as I would often recognize assumptions I had made in the interviews or remember initial insights that were

missed. Upon reflection, I noted how my training as a counsellor helped with reflexive journaling and creating field notes, as these practices can parallel acknowledging your subjectivity in real time and documenting important details and larger themes when in clinical practice. Altogether, I found both practices extremely valuable in actively engaging in reflexive research by helping contextualize my intersectionality throughout. I have also acknowledged and embraced my subjectivity, allowing it to become a part of the research process.

Lastly, Stake (1995) states that most data is "impressionistic, picked up informally as the researcher first becomes acquainted with the case" (p. 45). Therefore, I considered the information collected in my reflexive journal and field notes an additional source of data for each case. This also strengths the study design as it is reflective of the recommendations by Stake (2006) and Merriam (1998), to collect information from more than one source of data in case study research.

Data Recording, Transcription, and Storage

With the consent of the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded to allow me to best focus on the participants without worrying about taking notes during the interview. All interviews were transcribed by me, the primary researcher. The transcription process for the interviews included simultaneous translation from Punjabi to English.

Translation is the process of finding equivalent words in another language (Abfalter et al., 2021). This can become challenging as not all concepts are universal. For instance, the term "domestic violence" and "trauma" do not have direct translations in Punjabi. Therefore, words or phrases that held cultural significance or did not have direct translations were annotated and translated to the closest meaning, with the original language wording provided in brackets. For example, the phrase "*mera ghar tut jayuga*" was repeated several times by each participant but

has several potential translations in English, such as “my house will be shattered” or “my home will be separated,” but also served as a symbolic metaphor at times. In this instance, the translation closest to the contextual location of the phrase in the interview was used. It should be noted that translation decisions were influenced by prioritizing understanding and ensuring equivalent meaning rather than direct translation that may not convey the essence of what the participant was trying to say (Abfalter et al., 2021).

Additionally, a qualitative transcript can also document the situational context, deeper meaning, and nuances present in the spoken interaction, beyond transcribing spoken words into text (Harper et al., 2026). This can be especially beneficial when transcribing interviews in another language, where meaning and nuance can often be lost in translation (Harper et al., 2026). The transcription process also involved noting participants’ tone of voice, emotional expressions, and body language. These non-verbal cues helped provide rich insight into the participants’ attitudes and relationships with the experiences they were sharing, noted in the results. For instance, each participant often utilized dark humour when discussing traumatic experiences. Information from the field notes and journal entries was helpful in this process. Therefore, the transcripts also included notes about *how* something was said along with *what* was said. After the initial transcription, I reviewed and cross-checked the transcript with the recording for accuracy of translation and transcription. Since the interviews contained sensitive information, the transcription process for each interview was conducted over several days to provide myself with the space to process participant stories and mitigate feelings of overwhelm and distress.

Measures were taken to protect participants’ confidentiality when obtaining, transcribing, and storing the data from the interviews. Audio files of the interviews were deleted once

transcription was completed. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, which replaced their name in the transcripts and single case descriptions to prevent revealing the participants' identities. Any other identifying information was also removed from the transcripts (i.e., organizations, addresses). Interview tapes, transcripts, and other data files were assigned numerical titles corresponding with their respective pseudonyms. Any identifiable information provided in the interviews was only accessible to me. All electronic files (i.e., transcripts, pre-screening survey, background questionnaire) were stored on an encrypted device and are password protected, with the physical copies (i.e., consent forms) destroyed once they were scanned into electronic files. All data from transcriptions, consent forms, pre-screen surveys, and background questionnaires will be destroyed five years after the conclusion of the study. Related documents (i.e., thesis manuscript, thematic maps) have been kept for academic research and publication purposes.

Data Analysis Procedure

When utilizing a qualitative and case study approach, data analysis occurs concurrently with data collection as researchers begin analyzing data once the first piece of data is collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2006). By interacting with data early in the research process, researchers are able to address ethical implications as they arise during the study while also using their knowledge to inform following data collection procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Merriam (1998), this fluid process produces reliable and valid findings that best align with the data collected from the cases. Therefore, the data collection and the analysis process of this study occurred concurrently. The analysis of this study was guided by Stake's (2006) framework for multiple case study analysis, integrated with Braun and Clarke's

(2022) reflexive thematic analysis. Here, I explain both approaches to data analysis and provide the rationale for choosing a hybrid approach.

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) provides a systematic and flexible toolkit for identifying, analyzing, and reporting shared meanings and patterns within a qualitative dataset. It is considered most suitable for studies that wish to explore complex, nuanced meaning and understanding. Within this study, reflexive thematic analysis was viewed as "a process where the researcher, as a situated, subjective, and skilled scholar, brings their existing knowledge to the dataset, to develop an understanding of pattern meaning in relation to the dataset" (p. 232). This approach aligns with the Big Q research design of this study as it positions theme development as an active, reflexive process. Rather than focusing on right and wrong decisions, it allows me to showcase the conscious, knowing choices made throughout the process, as it reflected throughout this section (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

According to the steps outlined by Stake (2006), a multiple case study analysis is completed in two overarching phases: analyzing single cases independently and conducting a cross-case analysis across the multiple cases. Stake (2006) emphasizes the "situatedness" of each individual case while also providing structure to study the quintain, which is considered best understood through examining several cases together, including their nuances and common features. Essentially, Stake's (2006) approach provides a lens for comparing how those shared meanings change across different contexts.

Many approaches can be used to analyze the single cases. According to Merriam (1998), there are several approaches to analyzing qualitative data that can be considered appropriate for a multiple case study, including "ethnographic analysis, narrative analysis, phenomenological analysis, content analysis, analytic induction," constant comparative method, and thematic

analysis (Merriam, 1998, p. 157). However, the purpose of analyzing single cases in a multiple case study is to generate themes or identify patterns that represent the quintain and can be compared across cases (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2006). This purpose fits well with the "ultimate analytic purpose" of reflexive thematic analysis to produce themes that represent shared meanings across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 4).

Furthermore, the decision to combine these approaches stemmed from the need to avoid "decontextualization" of the cases and to have a flexible structure to guide the theme development process. While thematic analysis is often used in qualitative research since it allows researchers to acknowledge unique lived experiences, the theme generation process can sometimes risk flattening the data into one big bucket of the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thus, while reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) provides a systematic rigor for identifying patterns of meaning, Stake's (2006) framework ensures those themes are anchored to the specific circumstances of each case. By layering Stake's framework over the thematic process, I ensured the findings are grounded and interpreted within the "bounded system" or specific realities of each case while also being applicable to the phenomenon as a collective. I was able to identify universal themes without sacrificing the unique narratives of each case. Additionally, special attention was given to ensure that the interpretation did not reflect a patronizing or belittling perspective, in line with ethical thinking practices (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The combined analysis process followed a multi-stage approach and moved through three distinct phases: (a) within-case thematic analysis, (b) development of single case descriptions, and (c) cross-case thematic synthesis.

Within-Case Thematic Analysis

I engaged in reflexive thematic analysis and the six phases presented by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022) served as the foundational guide for the analysis. Braun and Clarke (2022) also emphasized the importance of rationalizing your choice of reflexive thematic analysis through four categories of variation: (a) orientation to data (inductive vs. deductive), (b) focus of meaning (semantic vs latent), (c) qualitative framework (experiential vs. critical), and (d) theoretical frameworks (realist, essentialist vs relativist, constructionist). An inductive orientation is guided by the idea of prioritizing the voice of participants, with the analysis being driven by data content. A deductive orientation refers to a more theory and researcher-driven approach, in which theory provides the lens through which a researcher interprets the data. My orientation to the data fell along a continuum of both orientations, with a component of the analysis focused on honouring the participant's narratives through their voice in the single case descriptions, layered with the lens of intersectionality used to guide the analysis throughout all components. When considering focusing on semantic or latent meaning, I chose to primarily focus on latent meanings that represented how gender roles manifest within domestic violence experiences since it best aligned with the research aim of exploring the *how* rather than the *what*. Lastly, a constructionist theoretical framework guided this analysis, as the goal of this research was to explore the multiple realities and perspectives expressed within the dataset, not to discover an absolute truth or reality.

Similar to the concurrent nature of data collection and analysis noted by Merriam (1998), the phases of thematic analysis are not linear, but recursive and allow the researcher to move back and forth between them (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To begin, I treated each case as a self-contained universe. Following the initial phase of thematic coding, I immersed myself in the

process of familiarization with data from single cases at a time. The first level of familiarization and interpretation began prior to the analysis process because (a) I shared the role of the interviewer and researcher who will analyze the data, and (b) transcribing and translating the interviews from Punjabi to English required a certain level of interpretation and analysis of what was said and meant by the words (especially for words and phrases that did not have direct translations). Therefore, there was a significant level of familiarization with the data that already existed before the analysis began. I re-read the interviews, journal entries, and field notes several times for content and made notes of any insights in journal entries. Using the second phase of thematic analysis, I began the process of generating initial codes to capture the meanings and nuances shared by each participant. Quotes that were relevant to the quintain and captured single meanings were highlighted and organized into codes, and reflected a latent approach. In the first round of coding, over 110 codes were generated. After additional rounds of reviewing the codes for outliers and overlap, the number of codes was reduced to approximately 80.

Next, I grouped each code into potential themes and subthemes (phase three: initial theme generation). Specifically, codes that represented "shared meaning" were clustered into a theme, with a focus on capturing implicit meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Journal entries and field notes were also used to include initial themes identified in the interviews. As part of phase four (theme development and review) and five (reviewing, defining, and naming themes), I further refined each potential theme and subtheme, with some themes collapsing into each other and others being separated. Particular attention was given to defining the themes and ensuring each theme had a central organizing idea or concept, meaning codes with different single meanings could still be clustered together. Thematic maps were used to help this process. The themes identified at this stage were case-specific themes that allowed me to understand the uniqueness of

each case before any comparison took place. Producing within-case themes also helped organize the comparison in the cross-case thematic synthesis (i.e., easier to compare 5 themes per case rather than 150 codes per case). Within-case themes were later used to conduct the cross-case analysis across the multiple cases.

According to Braun and Clarke (2022), interpretation should be anchored to the research question and the purpose of the study. Any themes that did not contribute to developing an understanding of the quintain were removed (Stake, 2006). However, emergent themes that fell within the scope of this study were still included. Similarly, any codes that had insufficient quotes/data to support them were excluded from the analysis. Certain codes that were relevant to the quintain, but reflected more descriptive information than shared meaning, were included in the discussion (i.e., strategies to increase awareness of domestic violence within the community). Additionally, NVivo 12 software was used to facilitate the coding process, however, digital thematic maps were used to facilitate the theme generation process. Therefore, NVivo 12 software was utilized as an organizational tool in the analysis process, without its interpretative features. Lastly, thematic maps were generated using the website, Mindmup.

Throughout this analysis, I was aware that my personal experiences and feelings were showing up in how I interpretated and empathized with the participant's stories. I conducted the analysis over several days to help mitigate those feelings. However, I also do not believe my subjectivity or empathy was a negative influence on the analysis. As a researcher wanting to do the participant's stories justice, I view it as a strength.

Single Case Descriptions

In this next phase, I developed single case descriptions. The case descriptions are holistic vignettes that summarize the essence of each case along with unique aspects, informed by the

interviews, reflexive journals, and field notes. For instance, as the interviewer, I became familiar with the participant's stories, tones, and what was most salient for them, and I used this to write their descriptions. The field notes and journal entries were helpful in recalling this information. The within-case themes also helped provide the analytical structure for the single case descriptions as the themes were synthesized into a narrative that describes the case's context and perspectives. By drafting these descriptions, I also created an anchor for the context to help ensure that as the analysis became more abstract and focused on the quintain, the individual voices in this study were still evident. The detailed profiles were also helpful in referencing important details during the cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006). A description of the sample (i.e., sociodemographic information) was also organized into a table to help detail the context of each case and the overall study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2006).

Cross-Case Thematic Analysis

In the third phase, the analysis focus shifted from "particular" to the "collective." While the single case descriptions provide a rich, situated understanding of each participant's unique experiences, a broader perspective is required to understand the quintain as a collective. Stake's (2006) framework for multi-case analysis provides three distinct analytic tracks for generating findings about the quintain: Track 1 emphasizes the unique situationality of the individual case findings; Track 2 focuses on merging findings across cases; Track 3 utilizes a more structured comparison of pre-defined factors. Within the context securely established in the single case descriptions, I chose Track 2 as the guiding tool for the cross-case analysis. This choice was driven by the research goal of identifying patterns across cases and to allow for a merging of similar findings that reflect the phenomenon as a whole. This track was also chosen because it helps determine the prominence of themes across the quintain, allowing for a synthesis that

highlights shared meanings while references unique contexts from the case descriptions. Therefore, a cross-case analysis was conducted using the following Track 2 steps outlined by Stake (2006): evaluate case utility, merge findings into categories based on common patterns, and propose cross-case assertions. This process synthesizes individual experiences, moving from the particularities of the cases to the overarching themes.

The first step involved assessing the analytical utility of each case in relation to the multi-case themes. I evaluated the depth and richness of evidence within each case for the within-case themes (i.e., how much did this specific case teach me about my quintain?). This step helped decide how to merge the themes in the next step. For instance, if no case had high utility for a theme, that theme would be dropped or merged with others. This also informed which cases were most useful and the anchors for potential merged themes, and rationale for why certain cases were more prominent in the final report. Next, I moved into the "merging" phase of the analysis. I clustered the case-specific themes into broader categories based on shared meaning. This involved a constant comparison of findings from each case to determine which meanings overlapped or diverged. Within-case themes that were contradictory but fell under the same category were also clustered together. These steps reflected a similar process to the latter phases of thematic analysis conducted in the within-case analysis, including the use of thematic maps.

The analytic utility phase was helpful in determining the prominence and relevance of the merged categories. This allowed me to see which themes were central to the quintain and which were unique to the situational context of a single case. I also looked for patterns of consistency and variance within the categories to understand how they are represented in different cases, to help identify nuances in how gender role beliefs manifested across the cases within the context of domestic violence (i.e., are there certain categories that appear in all cases or do some cases have

unique approaches/outcomes in that category?). This process helped refine the themes of the quintain while also providing clarity on which cases offer in-depth, rich information for each theme (Stake, 2006). The categories were defined by clear, descriptive names, similar to the within-case themes. The constant comparison between the single cases and the collective themes allowed me to refine the thematic structure until it best represented the complexity of the quintain. Essentially, within-case themes were compared and synthesized to identify categories, or overarching themes, that characterized the quintain as a whole. The final stage of this process was to interpret the findings and determine what the cross-case comparisons conclude about the quintain. This final interpretation is shared in the form of "assertions." In Stake's (2006) framework, assertions are the final meaning making of a multiple case study. They are conclusionary statements that represent the researcher's interpretation of the quintain based on the collective evidence. Unlike the themes, which described what the information reflected, the assertions propose the *how* and *why* it happened and what it means for the phenomenon at large.

The findings should be organized and consolidated to reflect a cohesive picture that demonstrates the in-depth nature of the study design and that makes sense to the reader (Merriam, 1998). To maintain a clear flow, the final report of this analysis is presented in two parts. The results section provides the foundational evidence: the single case descriptions used for contextualization and a summary of the synthesized thematic findings that represent the collective experience of the phenomenon. This ensures that the evidence from each phase of the analysis is visible. Also, the thematic report will be supported with quotes and extracts from the data, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). The final assertions have been presented in the discussion section. This allowed each assertion to serve as a pillar for discussion, including

being contextualized within the existing literature, theoretical framework, and broader social context.

Qualitative Quality

Stake (2006) and Merriam (1998) outline several strategies to enhance the internal validity of case study research, including triangulation, long-term observation, participatory research, and disclosure of researcher bias. While Stake (2006) emphasizes triangulation to prevent misinterpretation, Braun and Clarke (2022) discuss the importance of applying quality strategies that are coherent with a study's theoretical framework. This study is guided by a social constructionist and intersectionality lens, which acknowledge that multiple realities exist, and thus, multiple interpretations as well. Therefore, I do not wish to provide interpretations removed from my subjectivity or as absolute truths achieved by eliminating other explanations. Instead, I focused on producing interpretations that best represent the participants' information through an intersectional lens. By treating myself (the researcher) as a primary research tool, I embraced my subjectivity as a necessary component of the analytical process rather than a threat to validity.

Tracy (2010) provides a framework of eight criteria for quality qualitative research, known as the "Big Tent," which honours researcher reflexivity and complex realities. These criteria include: (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. I met the "worthy topic" criterion by establishing and communicating the study's relevance and significance through an engaging narrative in the first two chapters. This study also demonstrates rich rigor by matching theoretical goals with context, including choosing appropriate data collection methods and providing a detailed explanation of analytic procedures. I also used fields notes as an essential

component of rigor. My decision to focus on latent meaning and contextual knowledge also helped engage in a strong analysis process, as defined by Braune and Clarke (2022),

Tracy (2010) characterizes “sincerity” through a researcher’s reflexivity and transparency regarding their methods and challenges. Braun and Clarke (2022) also emphasize that producing high-quality research requires making reflexive choices throughout the analysis. Good quality research does not just involve embracing subjectivity, but it requires us to interrogate it. I engaged in this interrogation process through journal entries and using my position as researcher to explain how my assumptions influenced the knowledge production process. My use of a first-person voice ensures my presence and influence remains transparent throughout this study. To further demonstrate transparency, I have described and rationalized my methodological choices. This approach aligns with Merriam’s (1998) view that that high-quality data collection and analysis require a dynamic process where researcher remains attuned, attentive, and responsive to the data.

Credible reports are “those that readers feel trustworthy enough to act on and make decisions in line with” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). I achieved credibility in this study by providing thick descriptions and incorporating member reflections within reflexive interviews. By providing in-depth contextual details and nuanced interpretations, I accounted for the complexities of the data while focusing on *showing* my interpretative process. This approach allows researchers to draw their own conclusions rather than simply being told what to think. Member reflections served as a vital collaborative practice, engaging participants in dialogue and providing opportunities for questions, critiques, and feedback (within the reflexive interviews). Furthermore, these reflections offered “fresh light” on the inquiry, resulting in a deeper analysis

as participants reviewed my interpretations and provided new, meaning information about what is most meaningful to them.

Tracy (2010) asserts that quality qualitative studies must offer significant contributions to our understanding of social contexts. This study does so by attempting to extend knowledge that can help inform ongoing social resources regarding how gender roles impact South Asian women affected by domestic violence. I demonstrate ethical practice through several considerations outlined in the ethical considerations section (Tracy, 2010). Lastly, meaningful coherence ensures that a study's findings remain worthy and trustful. By sharing my decision-making process, I demonstrate this coherence and encourage readers to ask themselves the same question I did: does my research purpose, theoretical and methodological assumptions, and methods align with each other?

CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I present the information collected in the interviews along with the findings from the cross-case analysis. This chapter begins with narrative descriptions of each case as I aim to provide the reader with a rich, contextualized depiction of the women's lived experiences of domestic violence. Through these case descriptions, I also aim to honour the stories shared by these women. The following section presents the cross-case analysis and provides a description of the six themes I identified across the three cases. The single case descriptions will help enhance understanding for these themes. Lastly, when describing the findings, I have used direct quotes (italicized) from the women to best capture their perspectives. It should be noted that although the interviews were transcribed and translated from Punjabi and Hindi to English, certain words and phrases repeated across the interviews are still presented phonetically in Punjabi. This decision was made to help convey and maintain the shared cultural significance of certain words and phrases.

Case Descriptions

I present each woman's case description within the context of their everyday lives, focusing on their experiences within marriage. I wrote the case descriptions to best reflect the participants' narratives and made efforts to ensure the tone stayed true to the women's voices and perspectives. The women also reviewed and approved the information shared in these case descriptions.

Three women who identified as South Asian were interviewed across one semi-structured interview and one reflexive interview, defining one case. Appendix H details the socio-demographic information for each woman. The women ranged from 32 to 43 years of age, and had immigrated to Canada seven years ago or longer. Despite efforts to recruit a broader or more

diverse South Asian sample, all three women originated from the state of Punjabi in India. Two of the women had family living in Canada, and all three women described belonging to a South Asian community in their city. Although the circumstances around marriage varied for each woman, their families were heavily involved in the process of approving their partners and arranging their marriages. Only one of the women knew her husband before marriage. The women had been married to their husbands between two and 13 years, had children, and had lived in joint family households for an extended period of time. All three women had initiated a separation from their husbands, and were currently utilizing group counselling programs.

I assigned pseudonyms to the women in this study to protect their confidentiality and refer to them as: Amrit Kaur, Nirbhau Kaur, and Himmat Kaur. I chose each pseudonym with respect to the women's Punjabi cultural identities, and with the intention to symbolize and reflect the essence of their journeys. Rather than assigning names at random, the process involved reflecting deeply on the themes in each woman's narrative and identifying names that best honoured their experiences. I have included brief descriptions of each pseudonym and its symbolism at the beginning of each case description and provide detailed explanations on how they were chosen in Appendix I. I offered each woman the opportunity to choose their pseudonym, however, all declined.

Amrit Kaur: One Who Brings Renewal

(Represents renewal and transformation, reflecting her choice to end the cycle of abuse and reclaim her life)

Amrit is a 32-year-old Punjabi Sikh woman. Amrit was born in Punjab, India and immigrated to Ontario with her family twelve years ago. Amrit received her high school diploma in Punjab and completed a business diploma upon arriving in Canada. Amrit met her husband

soon after arriving in Canada, also a Punjabi Sikh immigrant man, and was in a seven-year relationship before they married. Amrit referred to her marriage as a "love marriage," a marriage that occurs after a romantic relationship was initiated without parental or family involvement. She noted that this is not a typical approach to marriages in South Asian culture as most couples of her and her parents' generations had "arranged marriages," a marriage that occurs after the parents have viewed and approved the man and his family for their daughter and often minimal interaction takes place between the man and woman before marriage. Although her parents approved of the union, Amrit remarked love marriages are often not approved by the parents and viewed as a respectful decision within traditional Punjabi communities. Amrit noted that her choice of love marriage later played a role in heightening the pressure she felt to remain in the marriage to "*stand by her decision*."

Upon getting married, Amrit and her husband moved to a Canadian city several hours away from her family. Soon after, her mother-in-law came to live with them from India and stayed for the entirety of the four-year marriage. Amrit experienced physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse throughout her marriage, noting that it heightened significantly after the birth of her son. Amrit emphasized that the perpetration of the abuse extended beyond her husband to her mother-in-law, who frequently enacted, incited, and approved the abuse. However, Amrit was adamant that the responsibility to end the abuse lay solely with her husband, and does not blame anyone other than him.

Amrit expressed deep uncertainty about staying in an abusive marriage, despite "*knowing better*." Amrit grew up witnessing an abusive relationship between her parents, and her and her siblings would often try to help their mother by warning her or asking her "don't say anything, stay quiet, don't make matters worse." Amrit described hating the "*chaos*" she grew up around

and being determined to never accept abuse or create a similar environment in her marital home, labeling herself as having very "*feminist*" views at the time. Amrit noted, with great sadness, that she allowed herself to be abused in silence to shield her child from the same "*chaos*."

Amrit stated that although she had heard of the term "domestic violence," she never connected the concept to what she saw growing up or experienced in her marriage. Amrit recalled thinking her father's behaviour was normal as a child, considering its frequent occurrence, and later believing that her husband's and mother in-law's behaviour was normal too. When married, she remembered believing it was expected for her to "*remain quiet*" and maintain the peace for the sake of others as a "*good wife*." "*Ek chup, sau sukh* (one silence, a hundred comforts)" - this messaging was something she repeatedly heard growing up and continues to hear to this day. She also described herself as "*too protective*" of her marriage as she was determined to remain quiet and avoid getting divorced at all costs, both for herself and to protect her family's reputation in society.

Amrit's decision to open-up to her family about the emotional abuse was a significant decision and was not taken lightly - it was only because she believed she "*couldn't breathe in the house anymore*." She was initially met with disapproval from her parents for considering divorce and only received support once they learned about the physical abuse. Amrit shared that although receiving her family's support was crucial for her, she first had to "*fight herself*" and her views around being a divorced woman and accept the shame she anticipated she would receive in society. Amrit expressed that she no longer cares about how she is received by her community. However, her parents still occasionally make comments about how their family reputation is ruined.

Amrit noted that although she recognizes she "*repeated the same patterns*" as her mother and "*carried that trauma into her life*," she was proud of herself for choosing a different outcome for her life than her mother, stating, "*Yes, I suffered for four years but I didn't suffer my entire life*." Amrit is determined to break generational patterns and believes change begins with women learning "*self-love*," "*self-respect*," "*boundaries*," holding their husbands accountable, and "*parenting*" their children accordingly. Amrit is raising her son by these values, often referring to "Western" parenting books to teach the concepts of self-care, respect, and boundaries that she feels were lacking in her upbringing and in her community. Consistently engaging in individual and group counselling with other South Asian women who share similar experiences has been profoundly helpful for her mental health, better understanding her experience, and helped her realize she is not alone in her experience. At the time of the interview, Amrit was finalizing her divorce. She currently lives with her son, and is seeking employment opportunities to help establish a financially comfortable life for her and her son. Amrit's story exemplifies resilience, strength, and a hopeful desire for change.

Despite her experience, Amrit holds a cautiously hopeful view of change towards more equitable gender roles, less normalization of abuse, and greater acceptance towards divorce in the South Asian community. She shared that change is happening, noting how girls are "*not getting married*" and are "*not accepting red flags*." Although elders in the community often view this shift as negative, Amrit expressed her approval: "*I like how the environment/society is changing, how the girls are becoming more aware, sensible. They don't accept bullshit anymore. It's how it should be.*" Amrit was highly reflective of her experiences and often categorized her perspectives on gender roles into a "before" and "after" separation view. Amrit also adopted a humorous tone throughout the interview, noting her tendency to cope through "*dark humour*."

Nirbhau Kaur: Fearless Woman

(Reflects her courageous journey of confronting fear and reclaiming her autonomy)

Nirbhau is a 42-year-old, Punjabi Sikh woman. Nirbhau was born in Punjab, India and immigrated to Calgary with her family, including her parents, brother, sister-in-law, and their daughter. Although Nirbhau held a master's degree in computer sciences from Punjab, she worked in customer service at a fast-food restaurant throughout her marriage. Following her separation, she completed a fast-tracked medical administration diploma in Canada.

Nirbhau's parents had been seeking a potential husband for her and were increasingly becoming concerned as she reached the age of 32 as this was considered "*late*" according to her relatives and community standards. Nirbhau's journey to marriage was one that followed the more traditional South Asian approach to marriage, through arranged marriage. Nirbhau was introduced to her husband, also a Punjabi Sikh immigrant man, two months before their wedding and recalled his unsettling behaviour during that phase, including unreasonable fights. Despite sharing her concerns with her parents, Nirbhau's mother encouraged her to marry him, stating that these issues are normal at the start of a marriage and often dissipate with time. The pressure of getting married by the "*right time*" also played into Nirbhau's decision to reluctantly agree to the marriage proposal.

Upon getting married, Nirbhau and her husband moved into her family's basement for a few months before finding their own home. Shortly after the birth of her daughter, her in-laws came to live with them from India. Throughout her two-and-a-half-year marriage, Nirbhau experienced verbal, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse. She noted that the abuse started within the first week of marriage, and recalled being ready to leave her husband at that time. However, she was discouraged by her in-laws to take such a "*big step*" and this fed into her fear

and internal dialogue of wanting to "*keep and maintain her home/family*." Later in the marriage, Nirbhau described how the abuse was often incited and encouraged by her in-laws, first covertly and later openly in front of her. Nirbhau holds her in-laws accountable for role they played in her abuse, believing parents have the power to influence their children's actions. She now believes her husband married her primarily for permanent resident (PR) status, as the abuse heightened significantly once he received it.

Nirbhau's husband constantly targeted her character and integrity as a married woman, often accusing her of affairs, acting inappropriately, or criticizing her appearance. It was clear that Nirbhau held her integrity as a married woman close to her heart, describing it as her "*first priority.*" Any accusations stating otherwise were deeply hurtful, and eventually became the deepest source of her distress. Consequently, she explained how she isolated herself from friends and relatives to avoid the resulting abuse. In dire times, Nirbhau shared how she reached out to her family physician for support, however, her husband ignored any advice.

Nirbhau described great internal conflict when deciding to seek a divorce, explaining how no one in her immediate or extended family had ever been divorced and debilitating fear of being alienated by the community. She recalled the immense pressure she received to "just adjust" to preserve her marriage. After she decided to stop hiding the abuse from loved ones, she often found herself trying to prove the extent of the abuse to garner support. Now, Nirbhau shared her surprise at learning that other women in her community share similar experiences. Her group counselling experience has been deeply impactful in reducing the shame she carried around her divorce - an example of how significant it is to find spaces in which one's story is heard and honoured.

Nirbhau shared about not having any knowledge of the term "domestic violence" until after her separation, and described her shock upon learning that these behaviours in a marriage could be considered as abuse. During her childhood, Nirbhau's parents treated each other with respect and compassion, and she always hoped for a similar relational dynamic. However, she was also raised to "*not speak in front of anyone*" to avoid being disrespectful, especially to your husband and elders. Nirbhau reflected on how values conveyed by her parents and community around being a "*respectful, sincere girl*" played a role in hindering her self-advocacy. Nirbhau now speaks passionately about standing up for herself and teaching her daughter to do the same, believing that community change starts with what parents teach their children. Nirbhau believes that "*change will come in the next generation*" but remains skeptical about wider changing perspectives on domestic violence and women who advocate for themselves.

Nirbhau proudly shared how she now works at the same hospital in which she first learnt about domestic violence as a patient. Her transition from a woman silenced by fear and shame to one who now works in that very hospital where she once sought help serves as a powerful symbol of resilience and growth. Nirbhau described "*gluing herself together*" and now believes in living life without shame and on her own terms. At the time of her interview, Nirbhau lived in a comfortable, safe home with her daughter. Nirbhau's journey reflects a tireless pursuit of finding her identity and striving to live by her values, which continue to serve as the guiding compass for her choices today. Nirbhau's story is one of determination, empowerment, and transformation. Nirbhau conveyed her evolving worldview before, during, and after her marriage with admirable clarity and confidence.

Himmat Kaur: Woman of Courage

(Captures her bravery in leaving an abusive marriage and rebuilding her life with her children)

Himmat is a 43-year-old, Punjabi Sikh woman. Born and raised in Punjab, India, Himmat grew up alongside her older brother and younger sister. Unlike Amrit and Nirbhau, Himmat immigrated to Canada after getting married in India. However, Himmat's journey to getting married followed the same traditional route of arranged marriage as Nirbhau. Himmat recalled knowing little about her husband before the wedding, aside from him age and heritage. Several years after her marriage, Himmat immigrated to Canada and eventually settled in Calgary, Alberta with her husband, children, and in-laws. Himmat is a proud mother to two twin daughters and one son, and lived in a joint family household for the entirety of her marriage.

Throughout her marriage, Himmat experienced physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse. The abuse initially began with her in-laws, while her husband remained complicit and became more involved after their move to Canada. Himmat recalled how she was often treated as an "*outsider*" and felt the need to sacrifice her needs and comply with her in-laws demands to earn the status of a true family member and a "good" wife. She also considered her ability to fulfill the role of a "good" wife as a direct reflection of her parents' upbringing and honour, something she felt a significant obligation to uphold. Despite her husband's actions, Himmat holds the position that her in-law's involvement in her marriage was the primary catalyst for her divorce.

Himmat described an incredibly hard yet rewarding journey of pulling herself out of the community's grasp. While her marriage was marked by isolation and domestic confinement, her current life is defined by a different kind of distance. She now avoids close community connections by choice, protecting herself from the threat of shame and the lack of trust in being supported after divorce. When recalling her experience sharing the abuse with her brother, Himmat remembered that his advice was to prioritize her marriage, to remain in the good graces

of her in-laws, and to avoid them leaving her. She explained how his advice was well-intentioned and rooted in concerns about the challenges she would face as a divorced single mother. Himmat still experiences guilt about the negative impact of her divorce on her brother's mental health. The fear of how her, her children, and her family will be perceived and possibly isolated by society was a significant factor in how long she remained married.

Prior to seeking a divorce, Himmat was unfamiliar with the term "domestic violence." She reflected on how validating and impactful it has been to share her story in group counselling, describing it as a foundational resource for understanding her experiences and how her children's mental health may have been impacted by the household environment. Since the separation, her children have shown notable improvements in their well-being with the support of counselling. It was apparent that Himmat's desire to raise her children in a healthier environment fueled her strength and motivation.

When sharing her challenging experience with securing a job in Canada, Himmat reflected on the impact her lack of higher education and financial knowledge had on her confidence to leave her marriage, describing herself as "*naïve and clueless*" about "*the world outside*" her home. The pressure to provide for her children further heightened this fear. Now, Himmat emphasizes the importance of building English language skills and financial literacy, as these foundations shaped how she viewed her capability to succeed as a single mother. While Himmat continues to value household knowledge, she also passionately believes in the power of being independent as a South Asian immigrant woman in Canada.

Although Himmat believes her community will continue to shame women for seeking a divorce, she is hopeful that the next generation of South Asian children will make healthier choices, advocate for their independence, and refuse to accept abuse. Her perspective on how this

may be achieved, however, reflected a black-and-white view of avoiding marriage altogether to prevent abuse. At the time of the interview, Himmat had been separated for eighteen months and was finalizing her divorce. Now holding full custody, Himmat expressed disbelief and pride in her ability to support her children, something she once believed was impossible. Himmat's story reflects the journey of a courageous woman finding her voice and proudly navigating her life choices as she continues to grow, persevere, and find joy through self-empowerment. Himmat shared her story with honesty and raw emotions, bravely willing to revisit her experiences and worldview while she was married. Himmat often shared her perspective through vivid storytelling of her own experiences and how they shaped her perspectives, and described herself as an open book.

Cross-Case Analysis

I identified six themes to highlight the women's experiences and perspectives towards domestic violence and gender roles: (a) acceptance of abuse due to its normalization in marriage, (b) expectations of the "good" wife and husband, (c) power dynamics within the family hierarchy, (d) discouragement of women's autonomy, (e) perseverance of marriage through the sacrifice of safety, and (f) "what will people say?" - the detrimental impact of divorce. The corresponding subthemes are listed in Table 1.

Braune and Clarke (2022) mention how themes often "work together to tell an overall story about the data" (p. 264). Since the women's identities were situated and complex (roles as a daughter, wife, and mother; belonging to the South Asian community; immigrant living in Canada), so were the themes identified. Thus, while each theme identified has its distinct features and boundaries, it is clear the themes intersect and interact with each other to form a larger picture. The relationship between the themes is displayed through a thematic map in Figure 1.

Table 1

Themes and Corresponding Subthemes From Semi-Structured Interviews

Theme	Subthemes
1) Acceptance of abuse due to its normalization in marriage	• Community messaging minimizing marital abuse • Childhood experiences of witnessing abuse
2) Expectations of the "good" wife and husband	• Unrealistic expectations of the wife • The "good" wife does not speak up • Messages about masculinity through the role of the husband
3) Power dynamics within the family hierarchy	• Women hold less value than men • In-law's position within the family hierarchy and its manifestation
4) Discouragement of women's autonomy	• Expected to not have a self-identity • Lack of opportunities to develop life skills • Women need family approval to seek divorce
5) Perseverance of marriage through the sacrifice of safety	• Protecting the marriage over self-autonomy and safety • Women have the power to maintain their marriages
6) "What will people say?" - the detrimental impact of divorce	• Fear of community response • Negative impact on family reputation

Theme 1: Acceptance of Abuse due to its Normalization in Marriage

The first theme was built upon repeated references to the normalization of marital abuse. Across the interviews, all three women described a personal and community understanding that abuse is "*just so normal*" (Amrit) and is considered acceptable within the South Asian community. This assumption seems to act as the underlying foundation for how women perceive and respond to the abuse they experience within marriage. Reflecting on her initial reaction to the abuse, Nirbhau shared: "*Yeah, it was normal for us. This is going to happen. They're going to do this."* Responses such as these highlight a pre-conceived expectation that husbands are going to engage in abuse, essentially viewing the abuse as synonymous with married life. When asked about *how* this understanding was developed, the women shared two prominent avenues: (a)

community messaging that minimized and lacked acknowledgement of marital abuse as wrong, and (b) childhood experiences of witnessing abuse between one's parents.

Community Messaging Minimizing Marital Abuse. The participants highlighted a lack of community awareness regarding domestic abuse, with Nirbhau noting that "*there's no awareness, at all*." Two of the participants had never heard the term "domestic violence" until they sought social supports after separation. Amrit shared that although the word domestic violence was not foreign to her, an understanding of the concept was missing because "*nobody ever really talked about it*" and she wasn't aware "*something wrong was happening*" to her. She just "*knew that it was normal.*" Whether or not the women had heard of the term "domestic violence," there is a lack of understanding and applicable knowledge of what constitutes domestic violence. The women spoke about how this lack of awareness and conversation contributed to their understanding that the concept of "*abuse cannot exist between husband and wife*" (Nirbhau). Himmat illustrated this as she expressed:

> *"All I knew was that fights happen in the house. My husband yelling at me, taking his anger out at me, hitting me, it's a normal part of being a woman, of being married. If your husband beats you or in-laws raise their hands, I didn't know that was domestic violence. I had never heard anyone say that it was wrong. They think that these things happen in the marriage."* (Himmat)

There is an awareness that abuse exists within marriage, however, it is not defined or acknowledged as abuse. The behaviours that they now recognize as abuse are simply considered normal between husband and wife in the community. In fact, Himmat noted that abuse is defined as a characteristic of marriage and "*part of being a woman.*" Such normalization creates an environment in which the abuse is minimized and the notion that abuse is wrong is rejected. Nirbhau repeated messages she heard in the community when women vocalized the abuse they experienced: "*A little bit always happens between husband and wife. Don't worry about it, slowly*

everyone adjusts. There's always issues in the start." This social messaging is not only external but is also internalized in how the women respond to abuse. Amrit shared how despite her sister supporting her in the divorce, her sister continued to minimize her husband's abusive actions: *"She's still saying, 'He got angry. He raised his hand, it happens, it fine.' You made me so mentally strong, and now even you are getting slapped. 'No, it wasn't hard. It was barely a slap.'"*

The (lack of) understanding of domestic violence contributes to women not being aware that abusive behaviour is something they can stand up against, especially with the community supporting the narrative that "*these fights, a little bit of beating*" is normal for women in the home and "*there's no need to divorce because of it*" (Himmat). The normalization and community response to abuse creates an expectation that women must accept the abuse and not "*create such a big fuss about it*" (Nirbhau). If a woman is unwilling to cater to this norm, she is viewed as difficult and met with frustration. Amrit provided an example, stating that despite her brother-in-law being "*very nice*," he often expresses annoyance at her sister maintaining her boundaries when he tries to challenge them: "*'Why can't you accept more?' They have this mentality that what's the big deal if a woman suffers a little. They expect you to accept the suffering. 'She's a woman, she has to.' There's this label on women."*

Therefore, the expectation for women to accept abuse within marriage perpetuates a greater assumption and belief within the South Asian community: abuse is part of the life experiences of women in marriage. This belief is strongly enforced through social messaging, as evidenced by participants' struggle to accept that the abuse they experienced was wrong, even after learning about domestic violence. Nirbhau shared, "*It (learning about domestic violence) made sense to me. But it's still hard to accept that it's wrong, to treat your wife like that, when*

people always say it's normal." Acknowledging their experiences as domestic violence created great internal conflict as the participants struggled to reconcile their new understanding with surrounding community messaging.

The lack of awareness and conversations particularly influenced how the participants processed the sexual abuse they experienced. It was clear that this type of abuse was a salient part of their experiences and reflections post-separation, as each participant mentioned sexual abuse when prompted about how their understandings of domestic violence have shifted. Nirbhau described how she was shocked to learn about sexual abuse in group counselling because she "*didn't know that if he's forcing you to have sex, it's also a type of abuse. They don't talk about it or tell you that it's wrong, so you assume it must be normal."* Amrit emphasized how "*you can't talk about the things that happen in the bedroom with anyone*" because of how heavily stigmatized sex is in the South Asian community.

Thus, the minimization and lack of awareness around domestic violence is further enforced through the discouragement of any conversations acknowledging it, which increases women's susceptibility to accepting abuse in silence. Himmat expressed how the community "*wants to make sure we never talk about it and never call it domestic violence.*" In fact, individuals who engage in such conversations are viewed as "*betraying the community*" (Nirbhau) and "*being too modern, too Canadian*" (Amrit). This response reflects how the normalization of abuse and its acceptance is intertwined with culture and can be viewed as a *cultural* expectation rather than just a societal one. In some ways, upholding this expectation is seen as synonymous with preserving the culture. This is especially salient when viewing it through the lens of the women's intersecting identities as a South Asian woman and immigrant in Canada. On a larger scale, Nirbhau shared how the lack of acknowledgement of domestic

violence as wrong prevents any change within the community: *"Only if we know that a problem exists can we move towards a solution. But people don't even know that it's a problem. They keep accepting it as normal.*"

Altogether, the community messages minimizing marital abuse seem to stem from two intersecting factors: (a) lack of knowledge of domestic violence, and (b) discouragement of conversation around domestic violence. Consequently, these create a pattern of not acknowledging the abuse that perpetuates the notion that abuse is a normal, acceptable, and expected component of marriage for women.

Childhood Experiences of Witnessing Abuse. Acceptance of marital abuse is also influenced by how women make meaning of childhood experiences of witnessing abuse and carry those learnings into their married lives. Witnessing a mother's acceptance of constant domestic violence often develops an understanding, and reinforces community messaging, that abuse is a normal, acceptable part of a woman's life. Reflecting on her childhood, Amrit noted how she and her siblings came to expect the abuse in their home, describing it "*like a normal routine almost. Now my dad's coming home, now we're going to be scared, now we're going to cry."* This childhood exposure later impacted Amrit's own response and acceptance when she experienced abuse for the first time:

> *"He was drunk. He apologized and cried a lot. I thought, he must have really made a mistake. This happens, that's what was going around in my head, that when men get angry, they raise their hand. So, I didn't make an issue out of it, I accepted his apology. Yes, I was very shocked. But I didn't know then that he shouldn't have done that. I thought this is right, not a big deal. It was okay for me."* (Amrit)

Amrit's internal dialogue reflected a childhood understanding that men reacting violently when angry is common and normal. This perspective was reflected in how she minimized her own experiences of abuse. Reflecting on her childhood, Amrit gained deeper insight into how

much her responses paralleled her mother's, stating: "*What I did in my married life, that was me repeating everything of my mom. I went and repeated that trauma, without even knowing."* Nirbhau's reflections echoed this sentiment, suggesting that the normalization and acceptance of abuse is often learned through witnessing a mother's life experiences. These learned behaviours can often be more influential than a general sense of "right and wrong," especially when reinforced by social messaging. For instance, Amrit's adult response to abuse contrasted sharply with her adolescent vow never to accept it: *"I always used to think, 'If someone does this to me, I'll break their face.' But I repeated my mom's actions, not her wording. She always used to say, 'You don't do that,' But that didn't stick with me."* Each woman highlighted a cycle of generational patterns being repeated and fueled by unaddressed trauma within the community: "*We've been passing down the same traumas we've seen. We don't know when to end the generational trauma"* (Himmat).

Theme 2: Expectations of the "Good" Wife and Husband

This second theme examines women's perspectives on the roles of the wife and husband within the South Asian community. The concept of being a "good" wife, and how this may be achieved through expected responsibilities, heavily influences how women show up in their marriages. These responsibilities parallel those expected of a "good" husband, and both work synchronously and in relation to each other. These defined roles are held in high regard and protected fiercely by the community. The community's rigid response to any changes conveys how these roles represent an important pillar of South Asian cultural values.

Unrealistic Expectations of the Wife. There is a clear understanding of the expectations from a wife in South Asian marriages, including wives must (a) bear the burden of all household responsibilities, and (b) always listen to and please the husband. The participants emphasized the

"unrealistic" expectations they were held to as the wife in their marital families. In a vivid description, Amrit expressed:

> *"A wife's expectations are like superwoman. She should take care of everyone, his entire family, his mother, his relatives. She should greet them properly. Basically, the wife should do everything. She should do all house tasks too. It's such bullshit thinking of our culture. Wife is superwoman. Wife, superwoman, it's the same thing."* (Amrit)

It was evident that childcare fell solely on women, who must learn to balance it with all other household responsibilities. Nirbhau illustrated this by sharing how her in-laws maintained these expectations only days after she gave birth: "*They still used to say, 'When she's awake, you should take care of her completely, and when she's sleeping, hand her to us and do everything, all the work around the house.'"* Similarly, Himmat described organizing her daily work commitments around her household and childcare responsibilities. This immense daily burden extended from being the sole parent managing her children's school and activities to waking up two hours early to prepare all meals for her in-laws and husband before starting her workday. When asked about hypothetical scenarios where women do not take responsibility for "everything," all three women shared a similar sentiment of how that would "*never be an option*" (Nirbhau) and that the "*house would get imbalanced*" (Amrit). Amit recalled example: *"One time, I had a fever of 104, and I was cooking, I knew my son had to eat. To the point that my stitches got moved. No one would pick him up. So, these expectations are very set in place."* If they tried to ignore any household responsibilities, they would "*still be waiting to be done*" (Himmat). Himmat shared how her in-laws "*wouldn't even pick up their dishes and wash them*" and she was responsible for doing so after her night shift. Expectations for women to bear all household burdens, even within joint family households, amplify the frustration surrounding the role of the wife. Himmat highlighted this disconnect between shared living space and individual responsibility, stating, *"They expect you to do everything while they do nothing*." The women

expressed feeling overwhelmed by the burden of responsibilities, with Amrit specifically noting "*there's no time to breathe*" (Amrit).

These accounts also highlight how the women's responsibilities and expectations of a wife extend beyond taking care of the husband to other household members, particularly in-laws within joint families. The responses captured how the expectations of a "good" wife and "good" daughter-in-law are intertwined: to be a "good" wife, one must be a "good" daughter-in-law. This often triggers the expectation and transfer of domestic responsibilities from the mother-in-law to the wife, once married. Himmat's recalled her mother-in-law explicitly communicating, *"I'm here to sit and enjoy, not to do your work for you. Our son is married. We're not supposed to do any work now.'"* Expectations of the "good" wife stem from a woman's identity not only as a wife, but as a daughter-in-law and mother as well. These intertwined expectations reflect the complex, overlapping identities a woman assumes upon marriage and motherhood.

A more subtle underlying expectation exists that to be deemed a "good" wife, she must fulfill her responsibilities without any assistance. Despite requesting support, none of the women received help in their marriages. Nirbhau shared that even after her family physician explained her need for postpartum rest, she was met with no compassion and "*zero efforts*" from her husband. Nirbhau explained that seeking support often triggers social backlash, stating "*They start talking badly and blaming the woman.*" A request for assistance is treated as a "*big deal*." Seeking help is shamed and accepting it is considered shameless. A woman who accepts help effectively fails the criteria of a "good" wife. Amrit believed she would have only received help under extreme circumstances, stating in a humorous tone that unless she was "*completely on the bed*" from an accident, her husband would not intervene. She noted that "*until my arms and legs are not broken, there is no option. You have to get up and do it.*"

The "Good" Wife Does not Speak up. In their roles as wives, the women were expected not to speak up - to listen and please. Himmat shared how she always thought that the role of the wife was to "*listen to her husband*" and "*do whatever he wants you to do*." If a woman does not adhere to these expectations by "*tolerating what they say*" or "*speaking up against it*" (Himmat), she is viewed as disrespectful and a "*bad wife.*" When Amrit wished to speak up, she faced an internal conflict between her own needs and the expectation to please, *"be a good wife," and "chup rahana (keep quiet)."* These perspectives illustrate an ongoing judgement from the family, community, and the women themselves regarding their performance as a "good" wife. This expectation, and the fear of consequences from not fulfilling it, controls how women react within their marriages. For instance, Nirbhau "*remained silent*" due to fear of "*everyone getting mad*" and to avoid having them "*comment on [her] character*." Now, Nirbhau shared that through her personal growth, she has accepted being viewed as an "*evil woman*" for being vocal and standing up for herself. The standard for a "good" wife, involving listening to and pleasing the husband, directly influences how women view their experiences of abuse. For example, Amrit described abuse as an expected consequence of speaking up: *"You're tired from working all day and then have to do everything yourself at home. And when you say something, of course there's going to be rola (ruckus/noise). There's going to be abuse"* (Amrit).

The women's belief that they must always please their husbands extended into the bedroom, defining what they understood as acceptable. Himmat shared how she wasn't aware that forced sex was domestic violence until she attended group counselling. Instead, she believed sex was a "*man's right*" and "*her job*" to "*make him happy and please him,*" despite "*not feeling good about it.*" Amrit also shared, "*Our women have never been taught to say 'no' to men. If you're in bed, don't say no for any reason. You'll cry, but you can't say no. You just know that*

you have to just keep pleasing him." These gendered expectations appear to be deeply intertwined and conflated with experiences of sexual abuse.

When I asked *how* they came to know about expectations of a wife, the women referenced their childhood experiences and the social messaging they received. For a couple of the women, this learning occurred through witnessing dynamics between their parents: "*My mother always listened to her husband and in-laws. I thought that was what made you a good wife, a good daughter-in-law. You should be quiet and obedient.*" (Himmat). The expectation to "*always listen and please*" also extends to the in-laws. Parents also often directly messaged that women must remain silent as a necessary means of maintaining peace in the marital and familial unit. Amrit shared how she adopted her mother's motto in her marriage, "*Ek chup, sau sukh (one silence, a hundred comforts/remaining silent can lead to greater peace),*" noting the personal cost of this silence ultimately "*ruining*" her life. Nirbhau shared how, despite her parents' healthy relationship, she was also taught the importance of always "*doing everything according to how her husband says it*": "*There was a lot of teaching that a woman can't speak up in front of her husband or anyone, really. It's a bad thing.*" Adhering to this expectation is considered important especially because women reflect their parents' upbringing and values. Conversely, failing to fulfill this role as expected reflects poorly on her identity as a daughter, suggesting that her "*parents didn't teach her well*" (Himmat). Therefore, a woman's identity as a daughter intersects with her role as a wife and daughter-in-law, further solidifying the importance of being a "good" wife.

Messages About Masculinity Through the Role of the Husband. Expectations for the role of the husband center on proving masculinity rather than performing as a "good" husband, a standard that differs from the wife. These expectations develop parallel and in relation to the

wife's role, through similar community messaging and childhood experiences. Amrit described how expectations of household responsibilities are formed: "*Most mothers say, 'Just leave it. It's not something that you do. Boys don't do this sort of thing.' My mom used to say that a lot, so even my brother has that mentality.*" Similarly, Nirbhau characterized expectations of the husband by a lack of responsibilities rather their fulfillment, noting that "*most parents teach their boys*" it is "*okay*" for girls to do all the work while they sit and wait for food since housework is exclusively "*the wife's responsibility, her job*."

An overarching expectation exists for the husband to ensure his home reflects the "cultural" values and marital expectations and dynamics. By meeting this expectation, the husband "secures" his masculinity. Conversely, when a husband assists with his wife's responsibilities, he challenges his masculinity and position, with others then viewing him as "*lesser of a man*" (Amrit). Participants described instances where family and friends shamed and mocked their husbands for helping in the kitchen. In response, their husbands completely withdrew any help and support for responsibilities assigned to their wives. Amrit shared that her husband stopped his equal contributions after his friends joked, "*You've been washing dishes all day. Are you here to wash dishes?*" Similarly, Nirbhau shared:

> *"If a man starts working in the kitchen, there's an uproar. My husband used to cook chicken on the weekends. I still used to do all the prep work, serve, do the dishes, clean up. But even then my dad would say in front of him, 'He's always in the kitchen. It must be so nice for you that he cooks.' These things make the man irritated and think he's on top. He starts thinking, 'I wonder how good I'm being?' These things affected my husband so much, that he used to just lie down on the couch while I got absolutely exhausted and felt like my hips were going to break."* (Nirbhau)

Her experience reflects the significant influence of family and community opinion on one's actions within a marriage. Additionally, the expectation that husbands should not contribute to housework enables and supports the unrealistic burden of responsibility placed on wives. One

allows for the other. Social messaging also illustrates this relationship by promoting the notion that a wife should not speak up, and a husband should not listen: "*If you listen to your wife, then you're not a man*" (Himmat). Therefore, husbands are also assigned the responsibility "*to keep their wives within their limit*" (Amrit) to uphold these gendered expectations. This includes ensuring the wife listens and does not speak up. Himmat shared that men are viewed as the "leaders" (Nirbhau), and are expected "*to keep their wife in check*" by "*yelling at her and controlling her*" (Himmat). This dynamic extended to husbands demanding permission before their wives engaged in independent activities. The expectation to "lead" one's wife creates space for the existence and normalization of controlling and abusive behaviours, such as social isolation. Nirbhau described her husband's "*controlling nature*," noting he forbade her from speaking to other women and eventually prevented her from calling her parents. Similarly, Himmat shared how her husband dictated when and how she could speak to others, leading her to fear talking to anyone in public.

In fact, an understanding exists that it is normal for husbands to release emotions, primarily anger, onto their wives, especially when a wife "*steps out of line*" (Nirbhau). Amrit noted how abuse is a predictable response: "*If a woman doesn't do these things (listen), then of course, a man is going to abuse.*" Himmat's narrative further illustrates this understanding, explaining that men are "*raised to think they're always right*" and possess a "*right to show their anger*" while women are expected to "*always be happy*" and "*never ask for more*." Overall, expectations of the husband act as messages and avenues to demonstrate and maintain masculinity within the South Asian family unit. These expectations, enforced by community responses, also contribute to the normalcy and acceptance of abuse.

Theme 3: Power Dynamics Within the Family Hierarchy

Participant's experiences reflected an established hierarchy of power assigned by society, based on gender and position in the family unit, that shaped their experiences from childhood through adulthood. Both the household unit and the community at large enforce this hierarchy, which distributes power starting from younger-generation husbands, followed by elder parents (in-laws), and lastly, the wife. This distribution showcases that gender alone does not determine one's status; rather, its intersection with one's family position determines their place in the hierarchy (i.e., all women are not at the bottom of the hierarchy). These power dynamics shape how abuse is perpetrated, who the perpetrator is, and the perceived motivators for abuse.

Women Hold Less Value Than Men. Throughout the interviews, the women emphasized a common societal message they received in society: women hold less value than men. Nirbhau illustrated this through her in-laws disappointed response to her daughter's birth: "*My in-laws had stopped talking to me at that time. They said, 'There can only be a son born in our house. A girl can't come into our home*.'" The view that daughters are a family burden until successfully married further reinforces this lower status. Himmat echoed this, noting that her husband and in-laws saw her twin daughters as a "*very big issue*," worried about the societal pressure of "*educating and marrying them.*" Beyond childhood, married life reflects this message through a rigid family hierarchy that enforces male dominance and grants men superior status and decision-making power. Amrit exclaimed that men are "*given so much power*" and "*everyone agrees with them*."

Granting husbands decision-making power increases the opportunities for, and social acceptance of, controlling behaviour. This dynamic shows up in the normalization of a husband's disregard for his wife's opinions and choices, while expectations from the "good" wife further

discourage her from objecting. Himmat shared how her husband "*didn't listen*" to her and moved the family despite her stable job and their children's school, and later bought a home with her input, with her stating "*It's not like my opinion mattered.*" Amrit similarly shared how her husband "*forced [her] to quit*" her job to increase her dependency, noting, "*it would have been harder to control me if I kept making money.*" He also prevented her from obtaining further education as a means of controlling her. The inherent power assigned to husbands overshadows a woman's agency of choice and seeps into the expectation to "*always listen and not speak up*" (Theme 2).

In-law's Position Within the Family Hierarchy and its Manifestation. The women described a family dynamic governed by an invisible hierarchy extending beyond the husband and wife. Within this structure, in-laws serve as the "heads of the family," a power assigned and controlled by the husband, and the wives remain at the bottom. Husbands and community expectations uphold this hierarchy, which primarily manifests as the wife's life decisions being controlled not only by the husband, but by the in-laws as well. Nirbhau shared how she always heard that she should "*do whatever your in-laws want you to do.*" Consequently, any attempt at making decisions without family approval or showing agency is viewed negatively. For example, Himmat's in-laws expected her to ask permission before spending *her* own income, and felt threatened by her viewing houses without them. This reflects how in-laws view their position while believing women have no right to participate in family decision-making.

Nirbhau's account illustrates how a husband's unwavering support reinforces the in-laws' superior position within the family hierarchy. She described how her husband valued and prioritized his relationship with his parents above all else, even telling her during their divorce, *"'I can't leave my mother and father, but I can leave my wife and kids.'"* This dynamic meant he

often overlooked and disregarded her opinion in favour of the in-laws. Nirbhau identified this as a large contributor in her decision to seek a divorce, sharing that her husband "*only listened to my in-laws*" and would "*just keep blaming me*" rather than listening to her side of the story." Much of the conflict within the family unit manifests from the in-law's desire to maintain power over the husband. For instance, the husband's choice of whom to listen to determines which woman of the house (wife or mother) is assigned power over the other. Does he listen to the wife or the mother? The women described mothers-in-law competing for their husband's attention and feeling a sense of pride when he deferred to them. Amrit recalled her mother-in-law boasting that her son "*will only listen to her and will do whatever she says*," citing an instance where he forcibly removed a relative from the house on her command to remind Armit that her voice "*didn't matter.*" Altogether, the stories clearly reflect the importance of family. However, the definition of family in joint households often exclude the wife as a valuable member until she assumes the role of mother-in-law or a son is old enough to advocate for her. The family hierarchy also explains *why* the wife's responsibilities extend to the in-laws, as mentioned in Theme 2, and why community emphasizes fulfilling these duties to maintain the established hierarchy.

The power dynamics in the family hierarchy create an environment that normalizes in-laws' involvement in the abuse of the women. None of the women experienced abuse in isolation with their husbands. Instead, each mentioned their in-laws' involvement to some capacity, whether it was inciting or directly participating in the abuse, sharing how they "*suffered at the hands of their mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law*" (Amrit). Himmat shared that her in-laws would often join her husband in "*raising their hands*" at her and threaten her life. Similarly, Nirbhau described her in-laws encouraging her husband to hit her so she would "*learn to behave*"

and holding down her arms. These accounts illustrate how in-laws can often act as key contributors in instigating and endorsing the abuse. Amrit shared that her mother-in-law's "*meharbani (blessing/grace)*" often preceded the abuse, as she would often *"get abused in front of her"* and it was often *"because of her saying to hit"* her. Nirbhau noted how her in-laws often engaged in very little efforts to hide the instigation, inciting her husband "*without any shame*" directly to her face. The abuse by the in-laws is also often a direct response to a woman attempting to voice her opinion or act without family permission, and the in-laws' involvement reinforces the family hierarchy.

Theme 4: Discouragement of Women's Autonomy

This theme highlights an overarching concept reflected in the two previous themes. Underneath the expectations assigned to a wife and her place in the family hierarchy is the belief that women's autonomy should not exist. Several societal systems help discourage that autonomy by shaming women who seek opportunities to develop an individualized identity. This expectation also creates a lack of opportunities for women to develop skills that promote independence and confidence. This discouragement of women's autonomy further surfaces in the family and community responses when a woman is seeking a divorce.

Expected to not Have a Self-Identity. Within the South Asian community, expectations often prevent women from having an identity outside of being a daughter, wife, and mother. Specifically, the "superwoman"-like expectations of wives leave no space to explore a self-identity. Nirbhau noted that "*no one allows you to give [hobbies and interests] importance, [your] hobbies can only be cooking and taking care of her family."* There is an expectation for a woman's life to exist within the responsibilities of a wife: "*they don't want you to have your own life*" (Himmat). The community enforces this by shaming woman who challenge this, with

Himmat noting that others will "*talk badly about you*" or complain to your family. Consequently, women described their rights as "*non-existent*" (Amrit). Challenging these notions reflects poorly on a woman's family, which encourages woman to adhere to these expectations to protect their family's reputation and meet societal standards. Nirbhau shared a recent distressing conversation that illustrated how women's identities and rights are viewed within the community:

> *"Men think that 'Women don't have the right to say anything. She can't say that she has her hobbies or interests, that she has her own life…She has no rights. If she says something, then she must be insane. They start commenting on your character again…They think these things are bad. 'How dare a woman speak up like that?'"* (Nirbhau)

Himmat reflected on how her responsibilities as a wife, including the expectation to always prioritize others before herself, overshadowed her identity and led to a loss of self. She recalled never considering her own needs during her marriage: "*It wasn't even a thought that I can relax. You don't even matter. You don't even know yourself.*" Even "small" parts of her identity, such as food preferences, vanished as the constant pressure to serve her family meant tailoring every meal to her in-laws' and husband's taste. Himmat concluded that "*the whole life of a married woman*" is defined by "*always thinking of others before yourself*" (Himmat). Himmat's experience demonstrates that the notion of a "good" wife is grounded in a woman's sacrifice of identity and autonomy, a dynamic further reflected in the isolation the participants experienced.

The women described an expectation to not have social relationships outside of the home, a lesson they learned through lifelong social messaging. Amrit reflected on how she internalized these rules earlier in life, believing it was "*inappropriate*" to socialize independently as a married woman. This isolation not only prevents close connections, but also removes a protective factor for the women's mental health and creates a barrier to seeking support for abuse. Himmat shared

that she "*never used to really talk to anyone"* as she didn't have "*any close friends,*" only leaving the house for work as preferred by her husband. This isolation, born from the expectation to "*only be a wife*" (Amrit), removes access to spaces for conversation about shared lived experiences with other women in the community, which further perpetuates the normalization and acceptance of abuse. Amri expressed that the community "*doesn't want to change or for the women to take a stand. The men keep their women at home because they think that if she talks to other women, she'll have too much knowledge, too much awareness*."

Amrit described a hope of living on her own terms once married woman, but her reality greatly contrasted this expectation. She recalled people saying that "*once you're married, you can do whatever you want*," only to be told after the wedding that she "*shouldn't be doing whatever*" she wants and needs to focus on "*listening and being a good wife.*" Her narration reflects the common experience of the participants, a shift in identity from daughter to wife and mother, with no space for the self. When asked about *why* a woman's autonomy was discouraged, the women explained that the community considers that by avoiding self-expression, it "*makes it easier*" (Amrit) to prevent conflict in the marital home. Nirbhau provided an explain of something she recently witnessed to help explain this:

> *"There's this girl….thirteen or fourteen [who] doesn't even have permission to talk in her house. Can you imagine? And the reason, her mother was saying that her (daughter's) father says that, 'If she talks now, it's going to be difficult at her in-laws house.'…They don't think it's a wrong thing. They think they're doing the right thing."* (Nirbhau)

By preventing space for self-autonomy and identity development from an early age, families ensure women more easily meet the expectation of silence. This story, along with the preceding themes, portrays a life experience for women that exists solely within the construct of marriage.

Lack of Opportunities to Develop Life Skills. South Asian women do not inherently lack an individualized identity, but rather the community they grow up in produces a lack of opportunities to explore that identity. Efforts to contain a woman's identity from daughter to wife also removes her access to develop life skills that promote confidence and independent success. Himmat illustrated this by noting how her "*world*" and skillset remained confined to the home prior to her divorce: "*I was a complete housewife… I just knew about making roti paani (food and water). That's it."* This focus on domesticity reflects a broader community value of prioritizing learning to maintain the home over formal education, starting in adolescence. Himmat shared:

> *"My parents always told me how important it is to learn how to manage a house…how that will make me a good wife…'What are you going to do with the education? Just get married now.'…I should have focused more on my studies. Then maybe I would have felt more confident, more capable of being independent."* (Himmat)

Therefore, the community associates domestic skills, such as cooking and cleaning, with a wife's ability to fulfill responsibilities. In contrast, it associates skills related to finances and life administration with the "*man of the house*," effectively discouraging women from learning them. The lack of financial knowledge and independence for women creates the opportunity for financial abuse and acts as a barrier used to "*control*" women seeking a divorce. Amrit noted that "*there's a lot of (financial abuse)*" in the South Asian culture, recalling how her husband "*never gave [her] any money*" and "*just took the money from [her] account*." She urged women to "*always keep [their] share*" so they aren't left with "*not a single dollar in the bank*." Himmat similarly shared how her husband used lack of financial literacy to "*control*" her, noting that because everything was "*under the husband's name*," she "*didn't know how to do anything*" when he stopped her car insurance.

The lack of financial literacy, along with lack of knowledge about life administration, creates a dynamic where women depend on men. Consequently, women often do not view themselves as capable of leaving abusive marriages. Nirbhau internal dialogue reflects the fear of not succeeding independently and echo community messages: "*When you think about taking a step…you start remembering all these things you've heard…'What can a woman even do by herself, without a husband?' That's just how our society is. That's just how we've grown up."* The lack of opportunities and importance given to these skills and the fear of independent success serve to control women and act as a barrier to help-seeking. This stems from the belief that women do not need these skills to be a "good" wife, showcasing how a woman's role as a wife shapes her life.

Participants reflected on specific skills and competencies that significantly transformed their perceived ability to succeed independently. There was a particular emphasis on financial literacy and security as essential tools for autonomy. In reflecting on how others can prevent their daughters from experiencing a similar barrier, the women highlighted the necessity of life administration skills:

> *"I'll tell them [my daughters] to stand on their own feet, learn how to do paperwork, understand bank accounts, learn how to take care of yourself…Don't get your daughter married until she is fully independent. It's easy to say separation, but your life becomes zero if you know nothing…Maybe if us women know how to do these things, then maybe we wouldn't be so scared to leave."* (Himmat)

The women clearly indicated that developing these skills during a girl's upbringing, not only after a divorce, is vital to fostering lifelong confidence and self-autonomy. In an insightful reflection, Himmat proudly shared her growing ability to drive to downtown and explore the city alone, a stark contrast to the anxiety she felt traveling outside of her neighbourhood while married. She shared, "*I didn't even know how to use maps…Someone who didn't even go down*

the street, now I go to downtown." Her heavy tone made it clear how meaningful this change was for her. This serves as a reminder of how independence and resilience can often be found in the "small" moments of daily life, and can be so impactful and foster great confidence. Developing fluency in English can also foster confidence and significantly increase a woman's perceived capability to leave an abusive marriage. Himmat shared her desire to "*start English classes*" so she can "*feel capable of taking care of [herself] and talking to others.*"

Overall, the lack of opportunities to develop life skills and the subsequent lack of confidence significantly impacts how a woman views her ability to succeed post-divorce. These factors perpetuate a level of dependence on others in their daily lives. The women's accounts support this by showing how finding independence through knowledge can be very impactful for those within the abusive marriages and within the South Asian community.

Women Need Family Approval to Seek Divorce. All women endured abuse for an extended period before considering a divorce. However, deciding to seek a divorce did not directly translate to being able to file for one. A woman's ability to seek a divorce relies heavily on securing her family's support and approval. Amrit shared how she felt trapped once her father refused the notion of leaving her marriage:

> *"I first told papa that when I was completely exhausted. 'Papa, it's hard for me to stay here now." I even told my brother. And papa said 'No, divorce is not an option...You're absolutely not going to do that.' I thought then, 'Even now there is no out.'"* (Amrit)

Thus, leaving a marriage is a family decision. Without approval, women do not view divorce as a possible route. Within the shared narratives, the women expressed that the South Asian community only recognizes physical abuse as abuse. While still normalized, physical abuse gains recognition while other forms do not. Amrit illustrated this by explaining how her family dismissed her initial reasons for seeking a divorce:

> *"At that point, I didn't even think about physical abuse as physical abuse. But I couldn't stand the mental abuse anymore…I was numb [physically] but I used to feel the mental torture a lot.* So, *I just told them about the mental abuse, but for them, mental abuse is not abuse, until he raises his hand."* (Amrit)

Amrit described how other forms of abuse were not considered "enough" to seek a divorce. Only when her family became aware of the physical abuse did her father grant her permission and support to leave. Nirbhau and Himmat shared similar experiences with friends and family, expressing a need to prove their abuse experiences to defend their decision to get divorced. It was clear that Himmat was heavily impacted by the people in her close circle not believing her, going as far as offering to send the interviewer recordings of the abuse to prove and validate her story. More specifically, women must prove the abuse is happening to an extent their families deem acceptable for divorce. Thus, a woman's ability to seek a divorce becomes largely hindered by the community's (lack of) understanding of domestic violence (discussed in Theme 1).

Altogether, within this theme, an underlying assumption guides the women's experiences: women cannot determine or judge their life circumstances for themselves. This manifests not only in the discouragement of autonomy but also intertwines with the expectation for a wife to listen to others. Therefore, it is important to note that each theme does not exist within a vacuum but rather carries distinct features that hold a relationship with and reflect other themes as well.

Theme 5: Perseverance of Marriage Through the Sacrifice of Safety

This theme covers a prominent idea guiding the women's experiences: that marriage must persevere at any cost. Each women shared that she hid and remained quiet for several years. In discussing their ultimate decision to seek a divorce, the participants shared the internal thoughts that determined how long they endured the abuse quietly. Once again, community dialogue significantly impacted and shaped their thinking.

Protecting the Marriage Over Self-Autonomy and Safety. Each woman shared a common, highly regarded belief: maintaining a marriage takes priority over "everything," including one's safety and self-autonomy. This belief was built on the importance of protecting the practice of marriage in South Asian communities. Nirbhau experienced this pressure *even* prior to being married. Despite raising concerns about her husband's scary, unsettling behaviour, she proceeded with the marriage arrangement: *"I had told my mother that, 'I don't want to get married to him.' But my mother said, 'No, sometimes this happens…Just put your faith in God and get married.'"* (Nirbhau). For Himmat, this intense pressure to resulted in a devastating choice: she was forced her to leave one of her daughters with her brother to save her marriage. In an emotional response, she shared how her in-laws used the threat of abandonment to ensure her compliance:

> *"Then [after giving birth] my in-laws said, 'We're not going to bring one of the girl's homes.' So, then I had to leave her. My brother said, 'You should focus on your home, your marriage. It's okay.'…I didn't have a choice…My mother-in-law would threaten me that they would take me to my family's house and leave me there otherwise."* (Himmat)

Despite experiencing great internal conflict, Himmat believed she did not have the choice to ignore her in-laws' wishes as she would have risked them leaving her. She was forced to prioritize her role of as a wife over a mother. Participants experiences reflect how the expectation to protect their marriages influences major life decisions.

The belief that marriage must be protected above all extends even to a woman's physical safety. This is evident in the community's responses to physical abuse, where family members often prioritize marital longevity over personal security for women. For example, Amrit recalled her mother's desire for her to remain married despite knowing about the abuse: "*Mama was still okay. Mama was okay with the physical abuse too. She didn't want me to get divorced."* Similarly, Nirbhau's brother responded to her desire to separate by telling her, "*You have a child.*

You two should stay together. You house will be saved." Responses such as these capture the community pressure and reinforce the belief that marriage must protected above all. Importantly, the responses support the notion that *women* are responsible for maintaining and protecting their marriages.

Women Have the Power to Maintain Their Marriages. All three women conveyed a shared sentiment: for the majority of their marriages, they believed they held the responsibility to maintain the union by hiding the abuse. This responsibility fell solely on them, similar to the household responsibilities described in Theme 2. In fact, the community frames this responsibility as a "power" that women possess. Nirbhau's statements provide evidence for this: *"The society, even my close relatives, say the same thing. 'If a woman wants something, what can she not do. She can stop her house from breaking. Ghar tutan nee doongi (she won't let her house break).'"* Framing this responsibility as a power leads women to view hiding and accepting abuse as an exercise of their own agency for the good of their families.

Maintaining the marriage is considered achievable through "compromise." However, the concept of "compromise" is skewed within the context of preserving marriages. While compromise typically reflects adjustments by two or more parties, the expectation to "compromise" often becomes conflated with women hiding the abuse. Himmat shared: "*I thought it was just something I had to adjust to…It was your job as the wife to adjust, to accept it, to not ruin the peace of the house."* Nirbhau echoed this, noting that parents say: "*'You have to adjust as much as possible.' Nobody ever said that there needs to be adjustments from both sides."* There is tremendous pressure on women to "compromise" when experiencing abuse. Himmat described how her brother tried to placate her: *"He would just say, 'Stay patient. Things change*

with time. These things (abuse) happen in the marriage. Adjustments happen. You can adjust.' If I'm being honest, my brother just told me to take care of my house, my marriage."

The expectation for women to "*adjust*" to abuse stems from but also perpetuates the normalization of abuse within marriage. Women often internalize the importance of protecting their marriage, demonstrated through their efforts to compromise and hide the abuse to prevent their homes from being "*destroyed.*" Participants recalled their immense efforts to "save" their homes, even at the cost of their own safety: *"I was hoping that I would adjust one way or another, so that mera ghar na tute (my house won't break/be destroyed). I wanted my house to be saved (ghar bach jayoga)"* (Nirbhau). The following phrases were repeated several times by each woman: "*mera ghar na tute*" and "*ghar bach jayoga,"* showcasing how this fear was a significant factor in hiding the abuse.

Amrit shared how she felt passionate about not sharing anything happening within her home with the outside world, including cutting herself off from her family:

> *"I didn't even tell anyone when I was abused for two and a half years. I was cut off from my family. They would FaceTime me, and I wouldn't pick up…because I had marks on my face...I didn't share anything about the house to anyone outside (ghar di gal baar nee kadthe). I thought no one should know…I was so protective, that in that protectiveness, I was ruined."* (Amrit)

Amrit reflected on how her response of hiding the abuse parallelled her mother's behaviour. She recalled witnessing her mother endure abuse in silence, never "*making a ruckus*" or telling anyone. Amrit internalized this expectation of "*acting normal,*" ensuring that "*outside, no one would know*" she was being hit. She illustrated the extreme nature of this expectation by describing a time she served guests immediately after she was abused: *"I came downstairs after getting hit upstairs and [greeted everyone]…I started making food in the kitchen. Like no one even knew that I had just gotten hit upstairs before coming downstairs…Mama was the same.*" A

desire to protect her children from the trauma she witnessed in her own childhood further enforced Amrit's decision to hide the abuse. This included not fighting back to prevent further conflict and "*rola (chaos)*" in the home. Amrit shared:

> *"I used to be very scared of rola because in my [childhood] house, there used to be a lot of…screaming and fighting…I never wanted my kids to hear any rola or see any fighting…I kept getting so protective that I didn't even realize if I'm going in the right direction. I never fought in the house, never screamed.'"* (Amrit)

Amrit's experience illustrates how the cycle of childhood trauma can drive a mother to endure and conceal abuse in an attempt to provide a "peaceful" environment for her children.

When standing up against the abuse, women are often viewed as "creating" conflict within the home, shifting the blame away from the men's actions. Thus, the community blames women who do not hide the abuse for "*not knowing how to maintain their homes*" (Himmat). Himmat explained that, "*People in the community are always blaming the girl…for not having a peaceful home."* This fear of social blame hinders and prevents seeking support from close friendships. Nirbhau avoided sharing her unhappiness because she feared her friend would wonder, "*'How can this be true? I'm happy in my married life. How come she's not happy in hers?' So the blame is on me again."* As a result, the community's response enforces the notion that women must protect and persevere through their marriages to avoid being blamed for a failing home. Importantly, the community frames this as a woman's "power" to maintain her homes through compromise, even if that includes hiding and accepting abuse. To accomplish this, women must sacrifice their self-autonomy and safety.

Theme 6: "What Will People Say?" - The Detrimental Impact of Divorce

The final theme highlights how the South Asian community views and receives divorce. The importance of community opinion and how it impacts one's reputation, along with their families, is evidenced in the women's fear around seeking a divorce. Each women repeated the

message that "*divorce is not an option,*" describing an internal battle against their own cultural self-perceptions and "*society's voice*" (Nirbhau): "*I was in denial mode. 'Mera ghar tut jaooga. Me, get a divorce, no no no.'...Nobody in my family has gotten divorced…[it was] a big thing"* (Amrit). The fear of being the "*only one*" within the family to divorce further solidified the belief that leaving is impossible. Himmat reflected on this isolation, noting, "*Sitting at home, I used to think,' I'm the only one.'...So there was a lost of pressure…I didn't know that it was common*." The rigid notion that divorce should "*never be an option*" (Himmat) also manifests in family responses, where fathers and relatives often denied support even after learning about the abuse. Knowing they would not receive family support acted as a significant barrier to help-seeking and also perpetuated the belief that women must continue to accept and hide the abuse, with the women noting that sharing "would be no use and they wouldn't care." Not only are the women "*suffering so much in the house*" but they are also "*suffering from their (family's) reaction to it as well*" (Amrit).

Fear of Community Response. Participants repeatedly highlighted the paralyzing question, "*What will people say? How will people react to me?*" (Nirbhau). The fear of how the community will respond to divorce forces women continue hiding and accepting the abuse to avoid the shame and blame that follow. Nirbhau recalled her fear that a failed marriage would lead others to blame her for being unable to "*handle/take care of her home."* As such, the community views divorce as "*ruining their homes.*" Himmat echoed this, sharing how societal pressure prevents women from leaving:

> *"I think it's the people. It's our society that doesn't let you leave…People don't say that the girl left the man. No. They say, 'They [in-laws and husband] left their [girl's parents] girl.' They blame the girl. Women are so scared of our community that in that fear they accept everything, all the abuse…The community will always talk and always blame the girl."* (Himmat)

Responses such as these continue to emphasize how community opinion acts as a guide for decision making. Seeking a divorce often reflects poorly on a woman's character. Nirbhau expressed hurt when even close friends withdrew support and viewed her standing up for herself as "*stubbornness*": *"After I got separated, they would call me and say, 'You're still holding on to your stubbornness?' And the people you think are going to support you…they put you down even more and blame you for taking that step"* (Nirbhau). In the South Asian community, stubbornness remains a negative trait for women, serving as a hindrance to women fulfilling the expectation of prioritizing and protecting their marriage above all else (Theme 5). Amrit described a vivid childhood memory that formed her understanding of how divorce impacts a woman's reputation: *"I remember someone far away got divorced. The guy had slapped the girl, and the girl's family took a stand. Oh my god, papa…blamed the girl so much. That 'She broke her home. She's like this, she's like that.'"*

Negative Impact on Family Reputation. Seeking a divorce is detrimental to a woman's reputation *and* significantly impacts how the community views her family. Amrit recalled how her father's past judgements of others often echoed in her mind during her marriage: "*When someone got divorced, papa used to be the first one to…talk badly about the girl's family. Those things were sitting in my mind. That no divorce. It can't happen."* The fear of shaming one's family, children, and community status was often a salient factor in the women's decision to hide and accept the abuse. Himmat shared the weight of this collective shame:

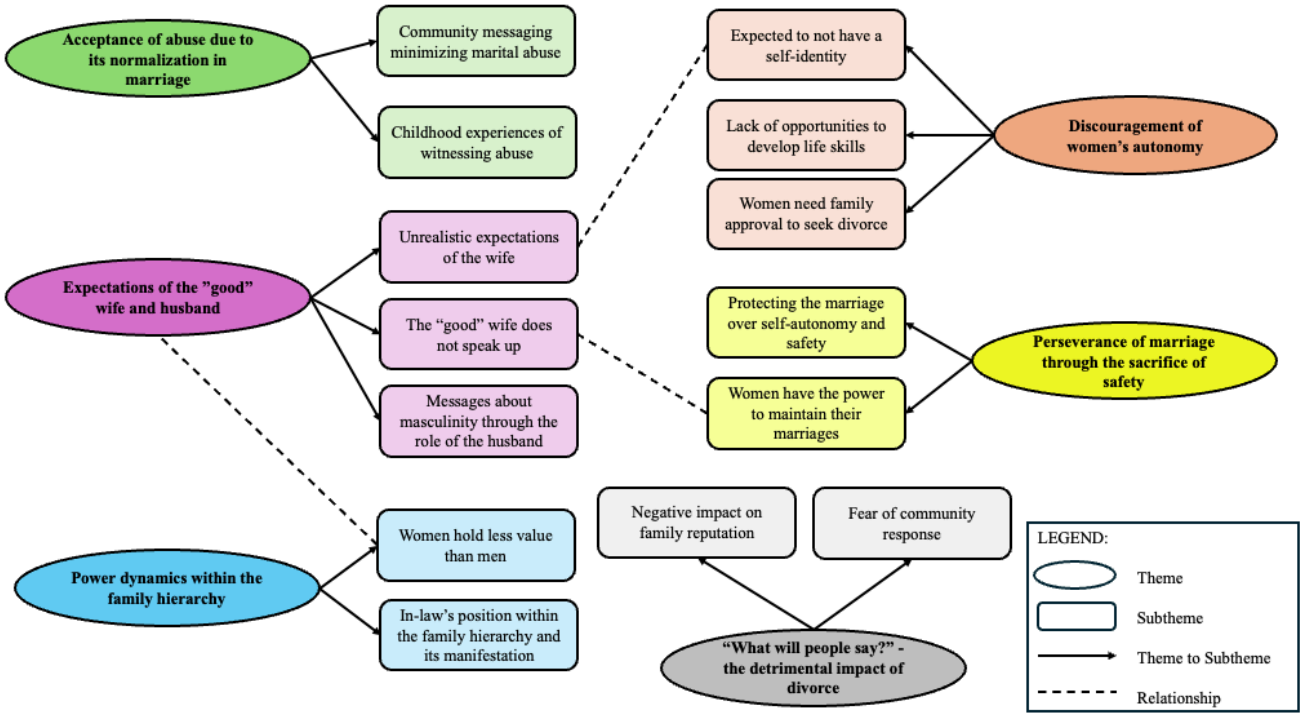
> *"I was so scared of what my parent's will have to tell other people or have to listen to…They know people will talk behind their backs. The society scares them… So many people are…accepting domestic violence, just because they don't want to deal with what people will say…They'll talk badly about your family, so much….My brother, to this day, feels ashamed…because people say, 'Their daughter/sister didn't know how to settle down/maintain a home.' Society doesn't let you live in peace…I didn't want to bring shame to my kids, to my parents, to my family."* (Himmat)

Amrit's mother reinforced this by telling her that now that she is divorced, "*kalank lag gaya, kalank lag gya (a blemish has been put on/we've been disgraced)*." Furthermore, divorce can negatively impact the marriage prospects of other family members. This intensifies the fear experienced by women when considering a divorce as marriage is highly valued within the South Asian community. Amrit shared specifically worried about her unmarried brother: *"The sister's house is broken (ghar tutya). How will he find relationships?' 'Izaat aa, izaat aa, izaat aa (honour, honour, honour/reputation, reputation, reputation),' is stuffed inside your head."*

Examining how a woman seeking divorce affects a family's reputation clearly reflects that a family's value in society is dependent on a woman's marital status. Because women represent the family's honour, the burden of upholding the family's value falls on them and the responsibility of maintaining that reputation shapes how women view and approach their lives. For those in abusive marriages, this responsibility acts as a barrier to seeking a divorce. Nirbhau illustrated this pressure, noting that the community judges a woman's parents based on her performance as a wife: *"It's the same. If you're not a good wife…if you speak up against [the abuse], they'll blame your parents. So you have to be a good wife to be a good daughter."* The link between family honour and women's marital status creates a self-perpetuating loop. By not seeking a divorce to protect the family's value, women inadvertently perpetuate the acceptance of abuse.

Figure 1

Thematic map of Themes, Subthemes, and Relationships Between Subthemes



CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

Gaining a comprehensive understanding of any study's findings requires considering them in relation to theoretical perspectives and within the context of existing literature. Therefore, the following chapter presents the identified themes in relation to the research questions and existing literature. The research questions that guided this investigation are:

(1) How and to what extent do cultural gender role beliefs perpetuate domestic violence within South Asian immigrant communities?

(2) How do cultural gender role beliefs act as barriers to help-seeking for South Asian immigrant women who have experienced domestic violence?

I begin by discussing how cultural gender role beliefs manifest to perpetuate domestic violence for South Asian immigrant women. In the next section, I discuss how these beliefs act as barriers to help-seeking. Specifically, I elaborate on how these beliefs manifest in responsibilities and dynamics to encourage individual and community responses, which contribute to the normalization and acceptance of domestic violence. Lastly, I highlight additional perpetuating factors and barriers reflected in the interviews. While not directly related to gender role beliefs, these factors interact with those beliefs to create environments that perpetuate domestic violence.

The collectivist values of the South Asian community, including the importance of family, community, and marriage, inform how women make sense of, view, and respond to their life experiences (Zaidi et al., 2016). Women in this study showcased how gendered expectations are considered important to maintain cultural identity. Their identities as women and their memberships within the South Asian community intersected to construct their realities, specifically creating the lens through which they experienced abuse and the process of seeking help. Therefore, as highlighted by South Asian feminists, it was clear that the domestic violence

experiences of South Asian women cannot be understood separated from the social and cultural contexts in which they exist (Jha & Kurian, 2017; Pande, 2014). Through a feminist intersectional lens, the cultural values and beliefs did not just influence their experiences but created the landscape in which the violence occurs.

At the start of the literature review, I stated that South Asians are not a homogenous group (Papp, 2010), and it is important to return to that point to avoid cultural essentialism (George & Rashidi, 2014). While the women in this study described "the community" and "the culture" as unified, singular entities of control, these descriptions represent their specific, situated experiences with abuse. South Asians identities are dynamic and diverse, shaped by varying degrees of acculturation, immigration, class, education, and religion. In line with that, many counternarratives of support and equality exist throughout the South Asian diaspora, such as supportive male allies, progressive community organizations working to end domestic violence, and families who actively dismantle patriarchal norms (Menon & Allen, 2021). By focusing on these perpetuators and barriers, this study does not mean to give a unidimensional view of the entire culture. Instead, I aimed to address a critical site of vulnerability without essentializing the entire culture as inherently violent. Therefore, this research represents one specific intersection of experience, acknowledging them as one part of a much larger, more diverse story of South Asians in Canada.

Gender Role Beliefs as Perpetuating Factors

In this section, I discuss the findings in relation to the study's first research question: how and to what extent do cultural gender role beliefs perpetuate domestic violence within South Asian immigrant communities? Through the analysis, it was clear that gender role beliefs within the South Asian communities perpetuate domestic violence through the manifestation of various

beliefs, systems, and power dynamics. These findings align with previous literature identifying gender role beliefs as a significant risk factor for domestic violence (Ahmad et al., 2004, 2009; Bhandari & Sabri, 2020; Hyman et al., 2011; Kanagaratnam et al., 2012; Mahapatra, 2012; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020; Rai & Choi, 2018; Yoshihama et al., 2014). I use the feminist intersectionality framework (Crenshaw, 1989) to illustrate how these gendered systems intersect to create a unique environment that promotes abusive behaviour within marriages and fosters the acceptance of domestic violence. I explain these systems through the following subsections: power dynamics within patriarchal and hierarchal structures, measuring women's worth through obedient listening, defining women's identity and value through marital status, women's responsibility to protect the family reputation, and women possess the "power" to save their marriages.

Power Dynamics Within Patriarchal Structures

Patriarchy plays a significant role in shaping the roles and identities of men and women within South Asian communities (Pande, 2014; Zaidi et al., 2014). Patriarchal structures organize and assign gender expectations, creating power dynamics that influence the perpetuation and acceptance of domestic violence. Specifically, the expectations assigned to South Asian husbands and wives reflect these structures (Abraham, 2000; Husain, 2019). While South Asian men learn to be the family's breadwinners, women are expected to be obedient wives and mothers staying within the family environment (Abraham, 2000; Husain, 2019; Mahapatra & Murugan, 2024). Women in this study expressed how their role expectations as a wife included cooking, cleaning, and caretaking for both children and husbands, emphasizing that their husbands neither shared nor were expected to share the burden of domestic responsibilities. Similarly, Gill et al. (2004) found that South Asian women reported a responsibility to manage household chores and take

care of her in-laws after marriage. Despite this, Hyman et al. (2011) reported how Tamil women in Toronto were also expected to work outside of the home and contribute to the family income while still maintaining these traditional domestic roles, a reality for the women in the study as well. This double burden reflects the unique intersection of gender expectations and economic pressures, specifically within the Canadian context. Thus, the changing context of immigration to Canada adds responsibility for South Asian women rather than provide them with increasing independence.

South Asian women in this study identified the exploitation of their labor and "superwoman"-like domestic responsibilities, by their husbands and in-laws, as a form of abuse that significantly damaged their mental health. This finding aligns with the findings of Rianon and Shelton's (2003) study. In a qualitative study of 23 immigrant Bangladeshi women, Rianon and Shelton (2003) found that mental abuse often manifests as a husband's failure to acknowledge a woman's household contributions. Additionally, findings from the current study showcase that women believe they have no choice but to fulfill these expectations, and endure the resulting exhaustion and mental abuse. Socialization during childhood and personal conformity to gender norms strengthen this belief, especially given the community's collectivist emphasis on abiding by these expectations. The burden of home responsibilities is considered a normal part of the wife's role, and as such, women are expected to learn to live with the resulting mental abuse. Ultimately, the learned expectation that a woman must fulfill these responsibilities perpetuates and normalizes the mental abuse stemming from the unequal division of labour. In some ways, this division of labor acts as a mechanism that maintains the gendered hierarchy through the exploitation of women's time and energy, at a systemic level.

The information collected in this study reveals that the expectations from men in the role of the husband are founded in behaviours that promote the heavy burden of responsibilities for the wife. These expectations are conflated with societal messages about masculinity. For example, family members and friends often tease and ridicule husbands who attempt to help with their wives with domestic tasks. This embarrassment often prompts men to abandon any support for their wives. This social "policing" of masculinity functions as a structural barrier to gender equality within the home. Similar to women, childhood socialization enforces the message that men should not help in the kitchen, as doing so draws their perceived masculinity into question. This perspective increases the burden placed on women, along with mental abuse they experience.

Additionally, husbands are assigned the responsibility to enforce the expectations of a wife. Women are expected to abide by their expectations, and as a result, those who challenge or disregard them are considered disrespectful. Challenging the norms of gender expectations becomes synonymous with questioning the husband's masculinity and the power assigned to him within the family unit. Within South Asian patriarchal structures, the husband holds the responsibility to right this and ensure the wife acts according to her position, including remaining obedient (Abraham, 2000). Husain (2019) reported that this structure frames husbands as inherently correct, granting them the right to act as they deem necessary. This study showcases how the focus is not on communicating or understanding the women who challenge these expectations, but rather focused on how to return to the "norm." In many cases, including those in this study, men accomplish this by perpetrating abuse. Similar to Tonsing's (2017) report, women believe South Asian communities normalize the abuse as an expected communication of anger for men and view it as a culturally appropriate and acceptable form of discipline for women

who deviate from their prescribed roles. Therefore, cultural disciplining of the wife and patriarchal authority intersect and create a view that changes violence into a socially accepted response. This normalization also upholds systems of male privilege at the expense of women's safety. Cheng et al. (2025) conducted a review of existing literature and identified that traditional gender norms, specifically male privilege and the expectations that women be tolerant and responsible for maintaining domestic harmony, hinder the recognition of these abusive behaviours. Thus, husbands become the enforcers of societal expectations, often utilizing domestic violence to protect patriarchal structures and values of South Asian families.

Power Dynamics Within Hierarchal Structures

However, the power structures and dynamics do not exist only between the husband and wife, but also extend to the in-laws residing within the same home. The hierarchal structure of South Asian families assigns status to the in-laws above the wife, and they assume a power similar to that of the husband. As such, the in-laws also become protectors of this shared power, often accomplishing this through the emotional and physical abuse of the wife. This shared power acts as a tool of collective patriarchy, where the entire household polices the woman's behaviour. In this study, the influence and involvement of the in-laws is persistent across the women's experiences, as they contributed to the abuse through instigating, supporting, and perpetrating the abuse. In a qualitative study, Ahmad et al. (2013) also shared how many South Asian women's stories of domestic violence included in-laws aggravating or participating in the physical abuse. Specifically, the in-laws played a significant role in enforcing gender role expectations through abuse, a finding supported by Raj et al. (2006). They reported that women experiencing intimate partner violence are 5.7 more likely to endure violence from in-laws, typically as a result of extreme expectations of domestic servitude. Similarly, Raj et al. (2006)

found that a woman's perceived underperformance in her household tasks often resulted in abuse by the in-laws. Because the abuse is rooted in patriarchal beliefs of women's servitude, the way a woman fulfills her responsibilities as a wife influences and serves as a rationale for the abuse perpetrated by the in-laws. The collective abuse is not a random family conflict, but a structural tool used to maintain a system of women's servitude. Altogether, the family hierarchy and expectation of "unrealistic" domestic responsibilities create sites of violence, where failing to meet these expectations elicits a familial punishment.

The current study found that mothers-in-law were particularly key contributors in perpetuating the domestic violence experienced, similar to the findings of Raj et al. (2006). Few studies have investigated in-laws' involvement in domestic violence and even fewer studies have aimed to understand the specific mechanisms through which domestic violence from in-laws originates. Kandiyoti's (1988) theory of "patriarchal bargaining" helps contextualize the mothers-in-law involvement in this study: women know that by remaining submissive and fulfilling their role as a daughter and wife, they will eventually achieve status and power as a mother-in-law. Women view this cycle of power and control as part of their life experiences, and consequently, leads women to accept patriarchal norms and discourages them from speaking out against abuse. Additionally, Fernandez et al. (1997) also proposed that the perpetuation of violence by mothers-in-law may be explained by a shift in her own identity, as a once "victim" to a "now-batterer," as woman's power status changes. These theories support the women's experiences in this study, where hierarchical structures create constant power struggles to determine which woman of the house holds more power. In trying to secure their power, the mothers-in-law perpetuate the abuse. Collectivist values and the significance of family further solidify this hierarchy, effectively sustaining the power and abuse that manifests through the in-laws. Therefore, the mother-in-

law's participation in abuse may be a complex intersection of her own previous oppression and her current need to maintain status within a patriarchal system.

Measuring Women's Worth Through Obedient Listening

Based on this study's findings, the value and success of a South Asian woman is connected to her ability to listen to others, which significantly influences her response to domestic violence. Cultural gender role beliefs can influence expected communication styles within a community (Maheshwari, 2025). In many patriarchal South Asian societies, cultural norms dictate how women speak to best align with their social roles. While men are typically encouraged to adopt an assertive and direct style, women are socialized to be more subtle, cooperative, and nurturing in their communication (Maheshwari, 2025). Patriarchal values influence several aspects of a woman's life. Given women's position in the hierarchy, community standards for communication often require them to be humble and respectful of authority. This standard reflects how patriarchy and cultural identity work together to silence women by labeling authoritative speech as a betrayal of their social role. Thus, this ability to listen functions as a systemic tool of control that enforces women's submissiveness, rather than just a cultural trait.

Specifically, South Asian women are expected to be obedient daughters and wives (Ahmad et al., 2009, 2017; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004). Moreover, this obedience is not just a cultural preference, but a structural requirement that maintains the patriarchal family structure. For the women in this study, this expectation was reflected through the belief that a good daughter and wife listens and refrains from speaking up. This socialization begins in childhood and follows women into their marriages, often contributing to and sustaining the abuse. Rianon and Shelton (2003) noted that Bangladeshi women view the denial of any decision-making authority in their lives as a form of mental abuse. This denial of agency creates a unique vulnerability where

gender, culture, and social isolation intersect to protect the systems that perpetuate abuse. Oddly, the community frames this silence as a helpful tool for women's marital success and to avoid conflict. When experiencing domestic violence, this teaching translates to an expectation for women to endure the abuse without protest. This expectation is especially apparent in cases of sexual abuse, where the pressure to please a husband overrides personal consent and the right to refuse. As described by Husain (2019), wives may view accepting abuse as acting according to their role as a wife. In line with that, Hyman et al. (2011) reported that Tamil women frequently believed that by failing to maintain family peace through their silence, they were responsible for their husband's violent behaviour. This internalized guilt provides an example for how the intersection of cultural stigma and patriarchal forces turns the women into the individual responsible for their abuser's actions. While the women in this study did not hold this view at the time of the interviews, they did convey holding a similar belief when they were married. Therefore, women's efforts to meet expectations for silence and obedience encourages (lack of) responses that perpetuate the acceptance of abuse. A vocal woman is shamed, and her self-advocacy is weaponized against her status as a good South Asian woman. Conversely, adhering to the expectation of remaining quiet and accepting abuse inadvertently proves a woman's value and success as a wife and daughter. Thus, the acceptance of domestic violence is integrated into the teachings of what it means to be a good wife and daughters.

Defining Women's Identity and Value Through Marital Status

Given the cultural significance of marriage and how women reflect their family's reputation, marriage becomes the most salient component of a South Asian woman's life. Consequently, a woman's identity and life experiences are largely centered on their marital status, while the community views her marriage success as synonymous with success in life

(Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Zaidi et al., 2016). This cultural centering of marriage becomes a tool of control, where a woman's social value is inextricably tied to her servitude and submissiveness within a patriarchal family structure. In this collectivist context, community perception of a woman's character holds immense weight. For one participant, instigating comments about her virtue and interactions with other male friends proved detrimental to her mental health, something she categorized as mental abuse. Further, the pressure to meet a wife's role expectations guides both women's and community's responses. Overall, women maintain community respect through devotion as subservient wives, fostering an environment that actively encourages women's subordination.

The expectations of a South Asian wife encourages the sacrifice of self-autonomy. A woman's identity shifts from being a daughter to being a wife and mother, with no room for self-exploration. In fact, participants experiences reflect that the community uses a woman's willingness to abandon independence as a measure of her success. This forced choice to abandon autonomy is produced by the overlapping pressures of patriarchal gender roles and the fear of community isolation. The community enforces this by shaming women who seek equal rights, opportunities outside of the role of wife, or attempt to build social relationships outside of the family, viewing such connections as hinderances to being a "good" wife. This shaming acts as a form of violence that weaponizes a woman's cultural identity against her personal safety. This lack of autonomy and social isolation contribute to mental abuse experienced by women and act as significant risk factors for experiencing abuse. These mirrors findings by Rianon and Shelton (2003), where women identified the denial of their independence as a primary contributor to mental abuse. Overall, South Asian women and their life experiences start existing only within the construct of marriage. This cultural framework deeply intertwines a woman's value with her

ability to meet marital expectations, effectively defining her entire life by her success as a wife. This is not a cultural practice, but rather a state of systemic vulnerability where a woman's social and economic rights are absorbed by her marital role. Abandoning this role comes at the expense of community shame and the label of failure. Thus, this intersection of patriarchy and collectivism fosters environments where women accept abuse and remain in marriages to protect their identity and value in the community.

Women's Responsibility to Protect Family Reputation

The socialization that women reflect their family's reputation further amplifies the belief that a woman's identity and value must be protected. In collectivist South Asian cultures, the community views families and the individuals as interconnected and interdependent. Consequently, women are viewed as reflections of their family's value, and as such, are expected to prioritize family honour (Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996). This study found that such beliefs encourage decisions that prioritize family reputation, manifesting in women enduring abuse to remain in marriages. This finding is supported by Tonsing et al. (2016), who discovered that even when women recognized abuse as wrong, they continued to accept it to fulfill familial obligations. These obligations become structural mechanisms that weaponize a woman's loyalty to her community against her own bodily autonomy. According to Wardak (2002), social institutions, such as family and community, often function as forces or anchors of social control that ensure cultural traditions and social order are maintained within families. In this study, the fear of ruining the family's reputation functioned as a control mechanism to stop women from seeking a divorce, enforced through community social messaging. The threat of community isolation forces women into silence. The intense policing by community and family members ensures that family honour is maintained at all costs, often by hiding the abuse. In interviews with

Indian women, Dasgupta and Warrier (1996) found that women especially "shouldered the burden of maintaining an unblemished view of the family to the outside community" (Kallivayalil, 2010). Altogether, by applying the pressure on women to protect their family's reputation, the intersection of patriarchy and collectivism effectively eliminates her avenues for safety and dictates her (lack of) choice to remain in abusive marriage. This internalized burden also turns the survivor into the protector of the abuser's reputation.

Women Possess the Power to Save Their Marriages

Moreover, given the central importance of family and marriage in South Asian communities, women maintaining their marriages is seen as crucial in upholding the values that make the fabric of the culture. However, for the women in this study, the community frames this responsibility as a "power." This underpins the expectation for women to use their "power" to respond to abuse in a manner the prevents conflict and maintains the marriage. These expectations to remain quiet and prioritize roles as a wife and daughter perpetuate the acceptance of abuse by equating silence with the ability to maintain a marriage. This also creates an environment in which women must constantly defend their commitment to familial values through servitude and sacrifice. Within the intersection of patriarchy and collectivism, this commitment translates into a woman's capacity to endure abuse. How much abuse a woman withstands without seeking support determines how much value she and her family hold in the community. Essentially, by withstanding the abuse, a woman is believed to have the power to protect her family and the outcome of her life. Thus, the community weaponizes the responsibility to protect a marriage as a "power" used to judge a woman's commitment to familial values and encourage silence, rather than empowering her. Through a feminist

intersectionality lens, this "power" is a deceptive construct that masks systemic control, as it redefines a woman's endurance of violence as a sacrifice for the collective.

An interesting contradiction exists between the expectations placed on a woman and the "power" assigned to her for maintaining her marriage. While the perseverance of a family's reputation and cultural values rests upon a woman's actions, the woman herself holds little individual value. She carries significance as a symbol, but not as a person, and the community fiercely protects that symbolic worth. This contradiction highlights a key intersectional finding of how the community protects a woman's symbolic worth as a "culture bearer" for the family and community while simultaneously stripping her of agency and independence. The community utilizes this "power" to control women - a reality further reflected in the barriers to seeking help.

Gender Role Beliefs as Barriers to Seeking Support

The following section presents the findings in relation to the second research question: how do cultural gender role beliefs act as barriers to help-seeking for South Asian immigrant women who have experienced domestic violence? Gender role expectations enforce three prominent barriers identified in this study: burden of family reputation and lack of familial support, perceptions of women's incapacity for decision-making, and cultural narratives of post-divorce failure. By applying a feminist intersectional lens, I explain how these barriers arise from the intersection of patriarchal hierarches, community policing, and the collective need to protect the family reputation, producing unique vulnerabilities for women.

Burden of Family Reputation and Lack of Familial Support

Not only does the responsibility to maintain family reputation perpetuate the acceptance of abuse, but it also acts as barrier once South Asian women consider seeking a divorce. In this study, this barrier manifests primarily as a lack of familial support. Familial support functions as

a conditional resource that families weaponize to ensure a woman's compliance with patriarchal marriage norms. The South Asian women in Tonsing's (2016) study revealed that women's decision not to leave their husbands often stems from the realization that divorce will lead to minimal support from their own families. In a qualitative study conducted by Bhandari et al. (2018), South Asian women described this lack of support from families of origin, until an abusive situation became significantly worse. While South Asian culture values interdependence, and one might assume that families of origin would be the ideal support system for daughter experiencing domestic violence, the mandate to prioritize marriage overrides considerations for individual safety. Dasgupta and Warrier (1996) reported how women who leave their husbands, even if being abused, frequently face ostracization, and the resulting shame extends to a "loss of face" for the entire family (see Kallivayalil, 2010). This rigid perspective and response seem to stem from how vital the construct of marriage is to a woman's existence within the South Asian community. The family of origin perceives divorce as a direct barrier to their own social identity. Thus, the importance of saving communal "face" and gendered duty interact with each other and transform the family from a potential safety net into a gatekeeper that blocks a woman's path to safety. Furthermore, divorce carries negative consequences for the family, including reduced marriage prospects for siblings and children and negative impacts on mental health (Mahapatra & Rai, 2019; Tonsing & Barn, 2017). Thus, women do not want to burden their families with these consequences by seeking a divorce. Therefore, the burden of protecting family reputation increases pressure on women to avoid help-seeking and creates a lack of familial support during divorce.

Perceptions of Women's Incapacity for Decision-Making

Within South Asian patriarchal structures, women lack the agency or permission to make independent decisions. Socialization also leads women to believe they cannot seek a divorce without permission from someone with great power and status, as was the case for those in this study. This requirement for permission stems from the expectation that women must remain obedient daughters and listen to others. Given the cultural significance of marriage to both a woman's and her family's identity, families often deny this permission, forcing women to return to and endure further abuse. In rare instances where women seek a divorce *with* their family's approval, they often require women to prove the "unacceptable" extent of the abuse. The requirement for familial permission functions as a systemic gatekeeping mechanism that grants the family, rather than the woman, the power to define what consists as "unacceptable" abuse. Conversely, families shame and isolate women who demonstrate agency by making decisions without familial consent. Given the lack of independence assigned to women, the perceived need for familial permission acts as a structural barrier to women's independence and to them leaving abusive relationships.

Cultural Narratives of Post-Divorce Failure

By existing in structures where women are not encouraged to have an identity outside of familial roles, South women experience a lack of autonomy and independence. These systems enforce the belief that they are not capable of succeeding after divorce. Women in this study shared fears of what their identity will be outside of marriage, a belief enforced by societal messaging that echoes similar fears and acts as a barrier for help-seeking. More specifically, families expect daughters to take on domestic responsibilities from a young age while sons focus on education to pursue financial success. This disparity creates decreased opportunities for

women to develop skills typically associated with establishing an independent, successful life. Consequently, this intersection of expected gendered domestic responsibility and denied skill development opportunities create a specific site of vulnerability for women, especially financial. Women are not given the knowledge or tools to exist independently. In other words, the systemic denial of education and financial literacy functions as a structural barrier to ensure lifelong dependence, negatively impacting a woman's perceived capability in succeeding outside of marriage. As supported by Panchanadeswaran and Koverola (2005), low confidence stemming from a lack of education and skills significantly delays help-seeking. Altogether, these restricted opportunities act as a barrier to seeking help by fostering a lack of confidence in succeeding after divorce. Intersectionality suggests that women's low confidence is not an individual trait, but a byproduct of a system that weaponizes a woman's lack of knowledge to prevent her from escaping an abusive marriage.

Additional Perpetuators and Barriers to Domestic Violence

Beyond gender role beliefs, this study identified (a) a lack of community spaces for discourse and (b) repeating generational patterns as additional factors perpetuating domestic violence in the South Asian community. In the following section, I describe these factors in relation to women's lived experiences of abuse. I analyze how these factors influence a woman's understanding of gender roles and her subsequent domestic violence experiences. Throughout, I apply the feminist intersectionality framework to understand how these factors interact to reinforce patriarchal control and systemic silence. Lastly, I discuss how these factors, including those identified in the earlier section, interact and contribute to the normalization of abuse within the South Asian community.

Lack of Community Spaces for Discourse

The South Asian community perceives any attempt to challenge established gender roles as a threat to and betrayal of fundamental cultural values, including marriage and family. This response is reflected in the shaming of husbands who assist their wives and wives who vocalize different expectations. Community efforts actively discourage such actions and thoughts by restricting access to social spaces and preventing conversation about change and shared lived experiences for women. In this study, women described how social isolation contributed to a lack of safe spaces to have such conversations, further normalizing and perpetuating the concealment of abuse. Participants shared their shock at learning what defines domestic violence and the different types of abuse only after their divorces. In particular, the lack of dialogue and knowledge led to the normalization of sexual violence. Notably, the community's overarching desire to protect cultural values, rather than malicious intent, drives the suppression of these conversations. Thus, this community policing, absence of dialogue, and removal of safety nets intersect in a manner that ensures patriarchal norms remain unchallenged and directly shapes a woman's perception of and vulnerability to domestic violence experiences.

Interestingly, women in this study always used English terms to define and describe domestic violence, despite Punjabi being their native language. When reflecting on my vocabulary, I was surprised by the realization that I was *also* not aware of appropriate translations. This insight reflects a gap in the South Asian language, where vocabulary for domestic violence associated terminology is either missing or inaccessible, including "domestic violence," "trauma," "boundaries," and "sexual abuse." While some translations exist, they do not reflect or capture the true meaning of the words or concepts. For example, "trauma" translates to "*sadama,*" which directly means "shock." This translation literally "writes out" a person's pain

from the language itself. Similarly, "domestic violence" translates to "*gharelu hisa,*" with the direct meaning of "homely incident." This translation in itself illustrates how a woman's abuse experience may be minimized and viewed as a "private" incident through the language used to define it.

According to Abfalter et al. (2021), language constructs the social world as much as it describes it, reflecting constructionist assumptions. This lack of terminology may be a byproduct of the community enforced silence, since a culture that does not speak about a problem will naturally lack the vocabulary to define it. Therefore, the lack of accessible domestic violence terminology in Punjabi and Hindi impacts how South Asian cultures classify and define abusive behaviours. In the absence of specific terminology, individuals often rely on the very traditional gender roles that oppress them to interpret these actions. Ultimately, women navigate an intersection of missing language and cultural silence that acts as a primary to barrier to naming their experiences or engaging in conversations to discuss them. For instance, when seeking help, a woman may struggle to finds the words to convey the severity of the abuse. This can often lead to re-traumatization as she feels misunderstood by formal systems of support or as the abuse being recorded as a "family dispute" rather than a crime (Cheng et al., 2025; Cho et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of providing South Asian communities with domestic violence vocabulary in their mother tongue as a form of empowerment.

Repeating Generational Patterns

Witnessing domestic violence during childhood fundamentally shaped how these women made meaning of, and responded to, their husband's violence. By observing their fathers' aggression and their mother's concealment and acceptance of the abuse, participants learned to view men's violence as to be expected within marriage. They also developed attitudes accepting

of abuse and learned to hide it. Social learning theory best explains these experiences and the resulting development of accepting attitudes towards abuse (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Copp et al., 2019). Social learning models link experiences in the family of origin to later partner violence and tolerant attitudes through observation and learning. This intergenerational transmission of violence exists at the intersection of cultural preservation and gendered duty, and the family home serves as the primary site of socialization.

Social learning theory also emphasizes that responses to violence influence whether individuals learn and accept abusive behaviours (Copp et al., 2019). In South Asian communities, the absence of negative consequences for perpetrators, combined with the enforcement of silence, increases learning of these abusive behaviours. Within this context, gender role expectations frame domestic violence as an acceptable facet of a wife's life experiences. Several factors uphold these learnings, including the suppression of dialogue and a limited understanding of domestic violence, all within the landscape of protecting the core cultural values. Therefore, these learned behaviours and attitudes manifest within rigid gender roles to perpetuate the acceptance of domestic violence across generations.

Normalization and Acceptance of Abuse

Altogether, the normalization of abuse and its acceptance is an amalgamation of the perpetuating factors and barriers and the collectivist values they stem from. This normalization becomes a driver of domestic violence and a significant barrier to help-seeking. For South Asian women, entering a marriage often equates to an implicit agreement to accept abuse within the role of a subservient wife. When the community intertwines gender role beliefs with abusive experiences, it effectively normalizes the abuse as "part of the culture." This leads to community responses that minimize abuse, fail to acknowledge it as wrong, and push for its acceptance to

maintain traditional expectations. To preserve these values and systems, the community utilizes the fear of being ostracized to discourage any challenges to these norms. Thus, protecting the culture and the normalization of abuse is heavily integrated. Additionally, the lack of awareness and generational patterns allow many to conflate abuse with gendered norms. This normalization, paired with discouragement of women's autonomy, creates an environment where seeking a divorce is tremendously difficult and met with resistance. Therefore, as the gendered beliefs perpetuate the actions, responses, and acceptance of abuse, they also simultaneously normalize it.

CHAPTER SEVEN: IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I discuss and make meaning of this study's findings within the context of promoting change and reducing domestic violence experiences in the South Asian community. In the interviews, participants shared unique perspectives on community change that expand upon existing literature in this field (Ahmad et al., 2004, 2009, 2013; Chokshi et al., 2009; Hyman et al., 2011; Kanagaratnam et al., 2012; Raj & Silverman, 2007; Shirwadkar, 2004). Therefore, I begin by sharing these perceptions and responses to change, as they inform the subsequent recommendations for healthcare professionals in domestic violence prevention.

Binary Perspectives Towards Seeking Support and Creating Change

When discussing change within the South Asian community, participants expressed reserved hopefulness that the next generation of South Asian women will not face the expectation to accept abuse within marriage. Most interestingly, the women's responses reflected a binary perspective on reducing and eliminating abusive behaviour. Participants believed change is possible through the omittance of marriage while community perceptions and responses to abuse and divorce remain the same. Essentially, this binary requires women to either avoid marriage entirely *or* accept the expectation of silence and endurance of abuse if they do marry. There was also a binary perspective towards seeking support, which should be considered in resource development for this community. From the participants' perspectives, acknowledging abuse as domestic violence and seeking supports inevitably leads to divorce. Because the community views divorce as "*not an option,*" women often feel they cannot acknowledge abuse or seek support while married. Consequently, women only seek help when the abuse becomes physically and emotionally unbearable, at which point support often result in divorce. Thus, acknowledging and seeking support for abuse becomes synonymous with divorce, which prevents the community

from creating spaces for conversations of growth and change. This all-or-nothing perspective ignores the spectrum of possibilities that exist through social supports, which can support change and promote mental health while respecting cultural values that prioritize family and marriage.

Binary perspectives also influence how women view change through the belief that women must uniquely enforce positive change within the community. In the participants' responses, men remained absent from the conversation. Not only does the community view women as protectors of marriages and families, but women also view themselves as the primary agents responsible for change. While this empowers and fosters agency, it also creates a burden of responsibility that the community should share. The following recommendations consider how to address these binary perspectives to reduce the acceptance of abuse, increase help-seeking at varying stages of marriage, and encourage collective community for change.

Recommendations for Culturally Informed Domestic Violence Interventions

Increasing both access points and knowledge of available social supports is critical to encourage help-seeking. While participants did not find a lack of resources once they were divorced, they expressed shock at learning about everything available after the fact. Raising awareness of resources can encourage women to seek support before the abuse becomes severe. Participants suggested using social media and religious institutions to distribute informational materials, as both remain highly accessible to community members. These suggestions align with Sabri et al. (2018), who recommended educational materials with clear contact information, and Yoshihama et al. (2014), who suggested campaign messages for grocery stories, radio announcements, and community events. Since participants also reached out to family physicians for support, healthcare professionals should focus on initiatives that turn doctors' offices into visible hubs for resources and information.

Special consideration should be given to increase and enhance culturally sensitive resources (Ahmad et al., 2009; Kanagaratnam et al., 2012; Sabri et al., 2018). Participants in this study often avoided seeking support in fear of it leading to a divorce before they were ready. Thus, it is important to develop supports that honour the value of marriage within the South Asian community while providing necessary interventions. One strategy to reduce barriers may involve specifically targeting the binary thinking by increasing awareness about the full spectrum of available resources. For example, information sessions could introduce mental health tools or marriage-based supports as a way to promote healthier relationships, rather than framing them solely as a resolution to divorce. Building this knowledge can allow more women to access help without the fear of divorce. The focus of these supports should be to work with women to create strategies for their mental health that reflect their current stage of help-seeking. This approach does not condone remaining in abusive marriages but rather acknowledges a significant barrier and uses awareness to increase comfort and accessibility with seeking support.

Utilizing community values and influence to create positive change offers another approach to increasing culturally sensitive resources. This study and existing literature reflect that the core value of "community" often serves as a mechanism to isolate and shame women seeking divorce (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Husain, 2019; Tonsing, 2017). Since community responses significantly influence marital decisions and encourage silence, it is important to address perspectives on domestic violence at the community level rather than only on a case-by-case (individual) basis. Thus, given the influence of community, resource development should explore how to harness community influence to increase support and awareness for South Asian women, especially as researchers have identified women often turn to informal sources for abuse-related help (Bhandari, 2018; Raj & Silverman, 2007). Social interventions could target community

dialogue, creating avenues that invite and increase conversations surrounding domestic violence. Healthcare providers should also seek to understand how abuse manifests through these conversations, rather than villainizing the community, to ensure practices align with a trauma- and culturally- informed lens. Such spaces can foster honest, transformative dialogue and reduce the alienation women experience when acknowledging abuse or seeking divorce. Implementing this strategy may involve creating safe community spaces for conversations with trusted individuals, such as religious leaders, elders, or peers. Peer supports groups helped women in this study reduce the fear of being "the only one" to divorce and increased their confidence in succeeding after divorce. Inviting community members to lead these groups can also be empowering for both women and men and increase their impact, particularly those with similar experiences. Given the link between domestic violence and childhood learned behaviours (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Copp et al., 2019), these community spaces should expand to include and support children growing up in abusive households.

These guided conversations and peer support groups should include topics that address the patterns and beliefs that perpetuate domestic violence. To begin, education regarding various forms of abuse should be prioritized. Increasing knowledge can help increase awareness of domestic violence as a problem and encourage women to seek support. Such education can also help provide the necessary language to name and describe abusive experiences, especially regarding sexual abuse and the concept of consent. Increasing this understanding may encourage perspectives on abuse that exist outside the context of gender roles. Furthermore, information on healthy relationship dynamics, boundaries, and emotional regulation should be included. As study participants noted, a lack of opportunities to develop skills significantly hindered their

independence. Therefore, providers should develop initiatives that prioritize skill development and foster self-identity and confidence for South Asian immigrant women.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

This multiple case study explored two primary questions: How and to what extent do cultural gender role beliefs perpetuate domestic violence with South Asian immigrant communities? How do cultural gender role beliefs act as barriers to help-seeking for South Asian immigrant women who have experienced domestic violence? These questions were examined by using a feminist intersectionality lens (Crenshaw, 1989) and were explored through the first-hand narratives of South Asian immigrant women in Alberta. All three of the participants demonstrated incredible courage in sharing their journeys and insights on the several gendered beliefs and systems that perpetuate and act as barriers for women in their community. Six themes were identified through the cross-case analysis: (a) acceptance of abuse due to its normalization in marriage, (b) expectations of the "good" wife and husband, (c) power dynamics within the family hierarchy, (d) discouragement of women's autonomy, (e) perseverance of marriage through the sacrifice of safety, and (f) "what will people say?" - the detrimental impact of divorce.

Findings highlight how power dynamics within patriarchal family structures create unique sites of violence and vulnerability for South Asian women, enforced by the husbands and in-laws. A woman's identity and value are defined by her marital status and ability to adhere to gendered expectations of submissiveness and servitude, resulting in environments in which a woman's sacrifice of identity and enduring abuse is valued. The contradictory nature of the "power" women possess to maintain their marriages and the burden of family reputation create unique cultural barriers to help-seeking. Challenging these mandates is met with stigma, lack of familial support, and social isolation, a fear that is intensified by rigid beliefs against divorce and the collectivist values of the community. Socialization within the community, childhood experiences

of witnessing abuse, and lack of community spaces for discourse play a significant role in upholding these hierarchies and beliefs that foster the normalization and acceptance of abuse.

Perceptions towards change within the gendered expectations, family hierarchies, and community responses to domestic violence reflect binary perspectives that isolate women's options into two categories: be married and accept abuse *or* never get married to avoid abuse. These perceptions have significant implications for domestic violence prevention and interventions, also informed by participant recommendations. Increasing access points and knowledge of available supports was most significant for participants. Resources should also consider strategies to include community members in increasing transformative dialogue, such as peer support groups and educational sessions focused on knowledge of forms of abuse and healthy relationship dynamics.

Contributions to the Literature

This thesis expands on the existing body of literature surrounding South Asian immigrant experiences by documenting how cultural gender role beliefs act as both perpetuators of domestic violence and systemic barriers to help-seeking. Specifically, the findings help explain *how* these beliefs are interpretated by the community and the structures in which domestic violence manifests. While existing research has largely focused on large metropolitan hubs in Ontario and British Columbia (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2020), this study addresses a critical geographic gap by providing a detailed account of the unique challenges faced by South Asian women in Alberta.

The involvement of in-laws in abuse against South Asian women is largely under-researched. Thus, this study supports existing literature in establishing the critical role of in-laws as active participants in domestic violence, challenging the conventional focus on the husband-and-wife relationship (Ahmad et al., 2013; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004; Dasgupta, 2000; Raj et al.,

2006; Shirwadkar, 2004). The findings also highlight how the absence of safe, community spaces for conversations around domestic violence and lack of accessible native terms function as systemic barriers for women understanding their experiences and seeking appropriate support. This finding was unexpected and offers a novel contribution as, to the best of my knowledge, this specific aspect has yet to be explored within the existing literature. While existing literature does identify a lack of terminology for mental health related terms (Kular et al., 2025), no such connection has been made for domestic violence. Ultimately, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the barriers that prevent South Asian women from accessing safety within the Canadian context.

Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, this study extends the feminist intersectionality framework (Crenshaw, 1989) by demonstrating that cultural values such as family reputation and marital significance do not act as independent traits, but as structural tools for maintaining patriarchal structures and social control of women. This research moves beyond the traditional lens of husband-wife to conceptualizing collective patriarchy. It positions in-laws and the family of origin act as co-enforcers of women's servitude, that work to strip women of their autonomy and agency. Given the significance of these findings, I argue that an intersectional lens is essential for understanding how domestic violence manifests within patriarchal structures and familial systems at the core of South Asian communities. Furthermore, this thesis introduces a linguistic factor to the intersectionality framework. It positions the absence of native terminology for domestic violence as a unique systemic barrier that hinders a woman's ability to name her abuse. Through the lens of feminist intersectionality, this study showcases how a South Asian women's vulnerability to

abuse is not a static trait, but rather produced at the intersection of her gendered duty and status, access to language, and community policing.

Methodological Contributions

This research contributes to the field by utilizing a deep qualitative approach to capture the nuanced perspectives of South Asian women who have experienced abuse, a population that is typically challenging to recruit (Kanagaratnam et al., 2012; Rai & Choi, 2018). A significant strength of this study lies in my "insider-outsider" status as a member of the South Asian community (Couture et al., 2012). This unique positionality allowed me to navigate the ethical and cultural landscape of domestic violence research with transparency and honesty, building rapport and trust while also using my professional awareness of trauma-informed approaches to prevent harm. My insider status encouraged participants to share their perspectives on the community with a reduced fear of judgement that may be felt when disclosing to an "outsider" (Couture et al., 2012). I also collaborated with trusted providers for recruitment, ensuring that my approach remained ethically sensitive and culturally appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nonomura et al., 2020; Nyklova et al., 2023). This also helped foster a level of comfort that was clear from the first point of connection with participants.

By prioritizing first-hand narratives, this study uncovered critical insights, such as the linguistic barriers to defining abuse, that may not be identified through quantitative data or interviews in English. This was also made possible by my insider knowledge of the language, ensuring that spoken nuances were not lost in translation processes with another individual. This insight does not suggest that researched on marginalized communities or sensitive topics can *only* be conducted by those with an insider position. Rather, it highlights the power of insider involvement in producing authentic, ethical research. Thus, researchers should consider

initiatives that produce strong ethical findings, particularly focusing on direct collaboration with community members or "insider" researchers. For example, involving South Asian women with lived experiences of abuse from the start of a project can help strengthen its ethical design and cultural relevancy (i.e., development of research questions, identifying lacking resources and topics with limited community understanding). Ultimately, this study design offers a helpful framework for future research within marginalized communities while also encouraging considerations for improvement.

Limitations

Completing this research within the timeline of a master's program limited the time and resources available for participant recruitment. While I initially designed the study to include four to ten participants, the challenges of recruitment for domestic violence research within the South Asian community resulted in a final sample of three. Consequently, the findings represent the lived experiences of a small group, and the identified themes would benefit from future investigation with a large sample to expand our understanding of domestic violence within South Asian immigrant communities. Additionally, recruitment challenges prevented the inclusion of a broad range of South Asian ethnicities. Since the final sample consisted exclusively of South Asian women from India, specifically the region of Punjab, the findings reflect the specific cultural context of Punjabi, Indian immigrant women experiencing domestic violence. Therefore, readers should interpret these results within that specific cultural framework rather than applying them to the entire, diverse South Asian community. Even within this specific framework, these findings reflect the experiences of patriarchy and community as experienced by the three participants in this study.

Directions for Future Research

Based on the findings, I identified several areas for future investigation and offer specific direction for researchers. Given the importance of understanding domestic violence experiences through the intersection of culture and gender, future research should continue to explore how specific gender role beliefs influence the meanings community members assign to their experiences. Additionally, researchers should further investigate the role of language in domestic violence, specifically focusing on the lack of native terminology within various South Asian languages. Such findings may produce critical information to help inform educational resources that reduce barriers for South Asian women. Since this study highlights in-laws' involvement as a significant theme, future research should explore family hierarchies and how abuse manifests within other relationships in the family unit. Participants briefly mentioned instances in which in-laws and other extended family members instigated abuse while *not* residing in the same home. Thus, exploring the role of extended family members (beyond in-laws) and physical proximity may provide interesting insight into additional influences on domestic violence within the South Asian community. It would also be interesting to examine the abuse involvement of husbands and in-laws across various stages of a couple's relationship to understand how these dynamics evolve and such findings may help further tailor prevention resources. Future research designs should also aim to engage South Asian men and in-laws directly. Including these perspectives may provide a more holistic understanding of the systemic nature of abuse and family power dynamics within the South Asian community.

Furthermore, the perspectives of first-generation South Asians who have witnessed parental violence is missing from the literature. Considering the impact of childhood experiences and the changing context of immigration as generations progress, research should explore these

perspectives to help inform prevention resources that may be accessible in the early stages of one's life. Lastly, another notable finding was the enthusiastic willingness of participants to engage in research aimed at supporting women in similar circumstances, as well as their interest in projects that directly involve them in providing help. Based on this, future researchers should consider how their work can empower those they study and actively create opportunities to do so. By building active partnerships with participants throughout the research process, research can extend beyond data collection and itself serve as an avenue to dismantle barriers faced by South Asian immigrant women.

Concluding Thoughts as the Researcher

Completing this thesis has been an interesting exercise in navigating my "insider-outsider" identity. While my cultural identity and shared language helped build trust and a more accessible understanding of cultural nuances, it also required me to continuously acknowledge that these stories are lived experiences of my own community - not just data. Thus, I learned that being an insider grants unique access but also requires a higher level of emotional effort and ethical responsibility. I've learned that reflexivity is not about removing bias, but about recognizing how my positionality and experiences allowed for a deeper exploration of my community's unhealthy dynamics without "villainizing" the culture. This research process also challenged me to reconcile my identity as a counsellor with my responsibilities as a researcher. I found myself constantly navigating the clinical urge to help in interviews with the researcher responsibility of observing. Now, I realize these roles are not exclusive. My training provided me with the tools to hold a safe space for participants to share vulnerable experiences, and in that process, my approach shifted from a researcher collecting information to the act of witnessing the participants stories.

As a counsellor, I believe it is important to acknowledge the power dynamics that exist within any interaction and space. In applying an intersectional lens in not just how I explain the findings, but also in my research process, I have developed a more informed understanding of power and agency as a researcher. I have learned that the idea of "giving voice" does not a fit with my view on research within marginalized communities. The voices are already present, but the structures to *hear* them are lacking. This realization encourages me to continue practicing humility as I recognize that, as a researcher, I am a privileged learner of the participants' lives. As those with more privileged positions, it is our collective responsibility to take action and ensure our contributions lead to meaningful change and healing. As I conclude this work, the findings of this study and my reflections throughout have deepened my commitment to the South Asian community. My identity as a counsellor informs my belief that community-led research is one of the most effective avenues for creating systemic change. I finalize this project with stronger appreciation for the power and bravery of first-hand narratives, and with a clearer vision of my roles as a researcher, counsellor, and community advocate.

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Appendix A: Agency Recruitment Email Template

SUBJECT: Recruitment Inquiry for Domestic Violence Research Study

Hi _____, (Insert organization/service provider name here)

My name is Henna Hans, I am a Counselling Psychology graduate student at the University of Lethbridge working on a thesis that focuses on South Asian immigrant women who have previously experienced domestic violence. I have become aware of the work your organization does to support immigrant women suffering from violence. I would like to ask if your organization would be willing to assist me in recruiting participants for my study. I have provided a description of my study below, along with the eligibility criteria for participants.

I am interested in the larger question of how the experience of domestic violence differs for many immigrant women and the cultural factors that may play a role in those experiences. Specifically, the goal of this present study is to understand how cultural gender role beliefs and expectations manifest and influence the domestic violence experiences of South Asian immigrant women. The study is titled: *Cultural gender role beliefs and cycles of domestic violence within South Asian immigrant communities*.

I hope to recruit at least 4-10 South Asian immigrant women who have previously experienced domestic violence while being married. Participants will be asked to participate in a semi-structured in-depth interview lasting approximately 1 - 1 ½ hours in length, followed by a shorter interview (approximately 45 minutes). Participant names and other personally identifiable information will remain confidential.

If you are willing to help with recruitment, I would ask you to share this study with prospective participants that may meet the eligibility criteria, and you believe are suitable for this study. Please forward my contact information so interested participants can contact me directly. Interested participants who meet the following criteria will be able to participate:

1. Must be 18 years of age or older,
2. Immigrated to Canada,
3. Identifies as part of the South Asian community, and
4. Has previous experience of domestic violence within their marriage to a South Asian male.

Interested participants who are currently in crisis and/or experiencing domestic violence will not be able to participate in the study, to mitigate the risk of further harming participants. Participants do not need to be fluent or proficient in speaking English as appropriate accommodations will be provided. I am fluent in Hindi and Punjabi, and if participants indicate a preference for another South Asian language, I will do my best to have an interpreter available for the interview.

If you may be willing to help with recruitment, I would like to set up a virtual or in-person meeting to provide you with further information about the study and answer any questions you may have.

Thank you for considering this request. I look forward to hearing from you! Meanwhile, if you have any further questions about the study or about me, please do not hesitate to email me at hans@uleth.ca.

Sincerely,
Henna Hans

Appendix B: Email Templates for Participant Communication

SUBJECT: Thank you for contacting me!

Hi _____, (Insert prospective participant name here)

Thank you for contacting me! My name is Henna Hans, I am a Counselling Psychology graduate student at the University of Lethbridge working on a study that focuses on South Asian immigrant women who have previously experienced domestic violence.

I am interested in the larger question of how the experience of domestic violence differs for many immigrant women and the cultural factors that may play a role in those experiences. Specifically, the goal of this present study is to understand how gender roles influence the domestic violence experiences of South Asian immigrant women. The study is titled: *Cultural gender role beliefs and cycles of domestic violence within South Asian immigrant communities*.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an in-depth interview with me lasting approximately 1 - 1 ½ hours in length. In this interview, I will ask you about your perspective on gender roles in South Asian immigrant communities and your experience of domestic violence. The interview can be conducted in English, Punjabi, Hindi, or any other language you prefer. The interview can take place in-person or online, depending on your preference. You will also be allowed to bring a support person to the interview, if you would like. A few weeks later, you will be asked to take part in a follow-up interview that will be approximately 45 minutes. I assure you that your name and other personally identifiable information will remain confidential.

If you are interested in participating, I would like to set up a meeting with you to give you information about the study and answer any questions you might have about me or this study! We can meet virtually or in-person or over call, whichever you prefer.

If you are willing, please respond with a few dates and times that work for you within the next two weeks to have a meeting with me. If you would like to meet in-person, please let me know the location you would prefer to meet at.

If you have any questions in the meantime, please feel free to email me at any time!

Warm regards,
Henna Hans

SUBJECT: Schedule Initial Meeting

Hi _____, (Insert prospective participant name here)

It's great to hear from you!

I have scheduled our meeting for _____ (insert meeting date) at _____ (insert meeting time). The purpose of this meeting is for me to give you more details about this study, what your participation will include, and answer any questions you might have about this study.

[If in-person] As you indicated, we will meet at _____ (insert participant's preferred location).

[If virtual] As you indicated, we will have the meeting virtually over Zoom and I have included the meeting link here: (insert meeting link).

[If over call] As you indicated, you will receive a call from me at the time of the meeting.

I look forward to chatting with you and giving you more information about the study! If you have any questions in the meantime, please feel free to email me at any time!

Warm regards,
Henna Hans

SUBJECT: Consent Forms and Background Questionnaire

Note: For participants who agree to participate in the initial meeting and meet the eligibility criteria in the pre-screen survey, they will be provided with physical copies of the informed consent and background questionnaire in the initial meeting. Participants will be asked to send me a copy of the signed and completed forms before scheduling an interview. Participants will only be sent this email if they choose to confirm their participation after the initial meeting, if they request consent forms in a language not readily available, or if the initial meeting was virtual or over the call.

Hi _____, (Insert prospective participant name here)

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study! As discussed in our initial meeting, I have attached the consent forms and background questionnaire in this email.

Please take your time in reading the consent form and send me any questions that may arise. Once completed, please send me a copy of the signed consent form.

I have also attached the background questionnaire. Please take your time to complete and send me a copy of the completed background questionnaire to help me prepare for the interview.

Once I have received both, your consent form and background questionnaire, we will schedule the interview. Feel free to reach out to me with any questions in the meantime!

Warm regards,
Henna Hans

SUBJECT: Schedule Interview

Hi _____, (Insert participant name here)

Thank you for sending your completed and sign consent form and background questionnaire!

As you have indicated, the interview will take place _____ (in-person/virtually). The interview will be conducted in _____ (insert participant's language preference).

[If preferred language is Hindi/Punjabi] Since I am fluent in (Hindi/Punjabi), I will conduct the interview myself.

[If preferred language is another South Asian language] Since I am not fluent in _____ (insert preferred language), there will be an interpreter present during the interview who will help with conducting the interview. I will reach out to you before our scheduled interview to notify you of the interpreter's name to make sure there are no conflicts, and you feel comfortable. *Note: this information will already have been discussed with participants in the initial meeting.*

The next step is to schedule the interview. I have included a list of potential interview dates and times over the next two weeks below. Please let me know if any of the dates or times work for you. If they do not, please send me a list of dates and times that work best for you!

(Insert list of dates and times for the interview)

I look forward to hearing from you!

Warm regards,
Henna Hans

SUBJECT: Confirm Interview

Hi _____, (Insert participant name here)

Thank you for getting back to me!

I have scheduled the interview for _____ (insert interview time) on _____ (insert interview date).

The interview will take place _____ (insert in-person location as indicated by client/virtually). [If virtual] Here is the interview link: (insert virtual meeting link).

If any questions arise in the meantime or you need to reschedule the interview, please feel free to email me at any time! As a reminder, your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can choose to withdraw at any point. I kindly ask that you please let me know if anything changes 48 hours in advance of our meeting, if possible.

I look to chatting with you!

Warm regards,
Henna Hans

SUBJECT: Interview Feedback

Hi _____, (Insert participant name here)

Thank you so much for completing the interview!

As discussed, I have attached a written copy of a summary of our interviews. I kindly ask that you read the written copy and summary, and send me any feedback you might have. For example, if you feel that I have missed an important aspect of what you had said in the interview in the summary, please let me know.

You can send me this feedback via email. We can also set up a virtual or in-person meeting to discuss any feedback you might have. Please let me know if you would prefer that!

If possible, please send me the feedback within 2 weeks so I can ensure I include your feedback in this study!

I greatly appreciate your participation and time!

Warm regards,
Henna Hans

Appendix C: Screener Survey

To help the researcher determine if you are eligible to participate in this study, please answer the following questions:

1. Age: _____

2. Gender:
   - ☐ Woman
   - ☐ Man
   - ☐ Other: _____

3. Nationality / Country of Birth:
   - ☐ India
   - ☐ Pakistan
   - ☐ Sri Lanka
   - ☐ Other: _____

4. Citizenship Status in Canada:
   - ☐ Canadian citizen
   - ☐ Permanent Resident (PR)
   - ☐ Other: _____

5. Have you been married before?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No

6. (Ex) Spouse's gender:
   - ☐ Woman
   - ☐ Man
   - ☐ Other: _____

7. (Ex) Spouse's nationality / Country of birth:
   - ☐ India
   - ☐ Pakistan
   - ☐ Sri Lanka
   - ☐ Other: _____

8. (Ex) Spouse's citizenship status in Canada:
    - □ Canadian citizen
    - □ Permanent Resident (PR)
    - □ Other: _____

9. Did you experience domestic violence while being married?
    - □ Yes
    - □ No

10. Are you currently experiencing domestic violence?
    - □ Yes
    - □ No

11. Do you prefer the study materials (consent form, background questionnaire) to be provided in a language other than English?
    - □ Yes
    - □ No

    If yes, please indicate which language you would prefer to receive study materials in?
        - □ Punjabi
        - □ Hindi
        - □ Urdu
        - □ Arabic
        - □ Farsi
        - □ Other: please specify _____

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

University of Lethbridge

FIAT LUX

Informed Consent Form for Study Participation

Title of Study: Cultural gender role beliefs and cycles of domestic violence within South Asian immigrant communities

Principal Researcher: Henna Hans
Master of Education, Counselling Psychology Student
Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge
P: 403-399-9151
E: hans@uleth.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Lisa Starr
Dean, Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge
P: 403-329-2425
E: lisa.starr@uleth.ca

You are being invited to take part in a research study. This consent form is only part of the process of obtaining your informed consent for participating in this study. This form will give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like to learn more details about the study, please feel free to ask me for more information at any time. My contact information is provided on this form. You will be given a copy of this form.

I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge. As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research for my Master of Education in Counselling Psychology degree. My research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Lisa Starr. You may contact her by email at lisa.starr@uleth.ca.

What is the purpose of this research study?

The purpose of my research is to explore how gender role beliefs influence cycles of domestic violence within South Asian immigrant communities through the perspective of South Asian women (18 years of age and older). I am particularly interested in learning (a) your perspectives

on South Asian gender roles, (b) how these gender roles influenced your experiences of domestic violence, and (c) how these beliefs may have acted as a barrier to seeking social and professional support.

□ I understand the purpose of this study.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a South Asian immigrant woman, over the age of 18, who has experienced domestic violence while being married to a South Asian man. Your perspective and personal experience is valuable in understanding how gender roles influence the domestic violence experiences of South Asian immigrant women in Canada.

If you are currently in crisis and/or experiencing domestic violence, please let me know as soon as possible as you will not be able to participate in this study.

□ I am not currently in crisis or experiencing domestic violence.

What are the benefits to me?

While there may not be any direct benefit to you, your answers will help researchers better understand the domestic violence experiences in South Asian immigrant communities and help inform service providers to create resources that meet the needs of the community. Your participation may benefit others in the future.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to complete a background questionnaire, which will ask basic questions that will help me prepare for your interview. The questionnaire should take less than 10 minutes to complete. You will be given the opportunity to complete the questionnaire over call with me or send me the completed form over email.

You will be asked to take part in two interviews and the interview will be completed in-person or online, based on a time and location of your preference. If you choose to complete the interview online, you will be emailed a secure link to join a virtual interview via Zoom or Google Meets. If you choose to complete the interview in-person, I will ask you to let me know which location is most convenient for you.

The first interview will last for about 1 - 1 ½ hours. The second interview will last for about 45 minutes. During the interviews, I will invite you to share your perspective on gender role beliefs and understanding of domestic violence in the South Asian community. I will also invite you to share about your lived experience of domestic violence and experience with seeking informal and formal supports. In order to help me with my data collection, I will audio tape your interview after asking for your permission. You can ask me to stop recording the interview at any time. You may choose to turn off your camera if the interview is being conducted online.

□ I understand what I will be asked to do in this study.

What are potential risks and discomforts of my participation?

Since the interview may include discussion of vulnerable and sensitive experiences, there is a risk of potential for emotional distress. You will be allowed to pause, stop, or end the interview at any time if you are feeling distressed. You also have the option to bring a support person to the interview to make you most comfortable. After the interview, you will be provided with a contact list for resources and services available in Calgary for supporting women who have experienced domestic violence.

To help reduce the risk of potential for emotional distress, my study will not include women who are in crisis and/or experiencing domestic violence at the time of the study. You will be asked to confirm this prior to any participation in the study.

It is not possible to know all of the risks that may happen in a study, but the researchers have taken all reasonable safeguards to minimize any knowns risks to a study participant.

□ I am aware of the potential risks and discomforts of my participation.

Do I have to take part in the study?

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Being in this study is your choice and you are allowed to change your mind at any time. You can refuse to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. You can also choose to pause, stop, and withdraw from the interview and this study at any point. If you withdraw from the interview, any information obtained from you will be deleted and not be used in the study.

You can withdraw from the study up to 2 weeks after your participation in the interview and any information collected will be deleted. After 2 weeks, we cannot remove you from the study because your information may have already been de-identified and/or analyzed.

To withdraw from the study, please contact me at hans@uleth.ca or my supervisor at lisa.starr@uleth.ca. Your refusal or withdrawal will not have any effect on any services that you are currently or plan to receive from any organization.

□ I am aware that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to answer a question or stop the interview at any time.

What will happen with my information?

You will be given an opportunity to review a summary of the interview. You will be asked to provide your feedback within 2 weeks. The researcher may request a follow-up meeting to discuss your feedback. If you do not respond within 2 weeks, the original version of the interview

will be used. This is because the interview may have already been de-identified or data analysis completed.

I will report my findings from the interviews in my thesis and I may potentially also share findings in academic journals, presentations, and community workshops. However, the reporting of this research will not reveal any personal identifying information. Your personal information will be kept confidential.

Will my information be kept private?

Your information will be kept private, confidential, and will be de-identified, to protect your identity.

During this study, we will do everything we can to make sure that all information you provide is kept private. The information you provide in the interview will only be accessed by me and my thesis supervisor, Dr. Lisa Starr. I will transcribe the interviews myself. In case we need to use an interpreter during the interview, the interpreter may help confirm the information in the transcribed interview to make sure it is accurate. The interpreter will be required to sign a Confidentially Agreement and will be asked to keep your information confidential as well.

The information you provide will be stored securely. I will store all the audio files and interview transcripts in password protected electronic files. All physical copies of the consent forms and background questionnaires will be destroyed once scanned into electronic files. All audio files will be destroyed immediately after transcription is complete. I will destroy all other files 5 years after I have completed this study. I will continue to keep related documents for academic research and publication purposes only.

When your interview is transcribed, we will assign a pseudonym (fake name) to protect your identity. If you would like to choose your own fake-name or if you choose to use your real name, please indicate this on the last page of this document. We may use some quotes and stories that you have shared with me. I will use the pseudonyms to ensure that your identity will not be revealed.

Sometimes, by law, we may have to release your information with your name so we cannot guarantee absolute privacy. However, we will make every legal effort to make sure that your information is kept private. If there is any risk of imminent harm to you or others (children, seniors, vulnerable peoples), the researcher has an ethical duty to report to appropriate authorities.

□ I am aware of who will have access to the audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes.

□ I agree to have the data from this project kept on file for five years.

□ I have been informed about confidentiality and pseudonyms being used in any publications that come out of this research.

□ I agree to have short quotes or excerpts used and study results published or presented at conferences/shared with organizations.

□ I am aware that there are exceptions to confidentiality that the researcher must follow to prevent risk of imminent harm of threat to myself and others (children, seniors, vulnerable peoples). This may also apply to court orders.

What if I have questions?

If you have any questions about this research and your participation now or later, please contact me by either telephone at 403-399-9151 or email at hans@uleth.ca. You may also choose to contact my thesis supervisor by email at lisa.starr@uleth.ca.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office at ethics@ualberta.ca or (780)-492-2615 and quote Ethics ID Pro00149097. This office is independent of the researchers.

□ Any questions I have about this study have been answered by the researcher.

How do I indicate my agreement to be in this study?

By signing below, you understand:

- That you have read the above information and have had anything you do not understand explain to you to your satisfaction.
- That you will be taking part in a research study.
- That you may freely leave the research study at any time.
- That you do not waive your legal rights by being in the study.
- That the legal and professional obligations of the researchers and involved institutions are not changed by your taking part in this study.

SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT

_____	_____
Name of Participant	Pseudonym
_____	_____
Signature of Participant	Date

SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT

_____	_____

Name of Person Obtaining Consent | Contact Number

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent | Date

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Appendix E: Background Questionnaire

To help the researcher prepare for your interview, please answer the following questions:

1. Based on what you know, what forms of domestic violence have you experienced?
   - ☐ Physical abuse
   - ☐ Emotional abuse
   - ☐ Sexual abuse
   - ☐ Financial abuse
   - ☐ Religious or spiritual abuse
   - ☐ Other: _____

2. Do you prefer to complete the interview in-person or online?
   - ☐ In-person
     If in-person, what location is most convenient for you? _____
   - ☐ Online

3. What is your level of verbal English proficiency?
   ☐ Beginner ☐ Intermediate ☐ Advanced

4. Would you prefer to have the interview in a language other than English?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No

   If yes, what language would you prefer to have the interview in?
   - ☐ Punjabi
   - ☐ Hindi
   - ☐ Urdu
   - ☐ Other: please specify _____

5. Would you be comfortable with having an interpreter present during the interview if needed?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No

6. Will you be bringing a support individual to the interview?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No

Appendix F: Interview Guide

Estimated Time: 1 – 1½ hours

Background Information

- Age:
- Marital Status:
    - How did you meet you (ex) spouse? How long did you know each other before marriage?
    - How old were you and your (ex) spouse when you got married?
    - Were you married in your country of origin or in Canada?
    - If separated or divorced, when did you separate or when did your marriage end?
- Number of children:
- Education, Occupation, Income:
- Ethnicity and Religion:
- Number of years in Canada:
- Living Situation:
    - Who did you live with when you were married/arrived in Canada?
    - Can you tell me about your current living situation?
    - What family do you have in Canada?

Topic 1: Cultural Gender Role Beliefs and Expectations

- What is the role of the wife in the marriage?
    - What expectations and responsibilities is the wife expected to fulfill?
        - When and how did you first learn about these responsibilities?
    - Did you feel pressure to adhere to these responsibilities?
        - If so, how did this pressure affect your life experiences and decisions?
        - What would happen if a wife did not adhere to these expectations?

- What is the role of the daughter in a South Asian family?
    - What expectations and responsibilities is the daughter expected to fulfill?
        - When and how did you first learn about these responsibilities?
    - Did you feel pressure to adhere to these responsibilities?
        - If so, how did this pressure affect your life experiences and decisions?
        - What would happen if a daughter did not adhere to these expectations?

- What is the role of the husband in the marriage?
    - What expectations and responsibilities is the husband expected to fulfill?
        - When and how did you first learn about these responsibilities?

- What is the role of the son in a South Asian family?
    - What expectations and responsibilities is the son expected to fulfill?
        - When and how did you first learn about these responsibilities?

- What is the role of <u>others (extended family members)</u> in the marriage?
    - When and how did you first learn about these responsibilities?

- How did these roles and expectations show up in your marriage?
    - With your husband?
    - With other family members?

- Do you think these gender roles and expectations are changing in Canada?
    - If so, how are they changing? What is leading to this change?
    - If not, what is preventing change?
    - How do you think your cultural beliefs and roles compare and contrast with what you know about Canadian culture?

<u>Topic 2: Understanding of Domestic Violence</u>

- When and how did you first learn about the term "domestic violence"?
    - How did you feel when you first learnt about this term? What were you surprised to learn?

- How would you define domestic violence? What behaviours does domestic violence include?
    - What is your understanding of physical abuse? emotional abuse? financial abuse? sexual abuse? religious or spiritual abuse?

- Based on what you know, how is domestic violence understood within the South Asian community?
    - How do you think the South Asian community responds to domestic violence?
    - Do you think the South Asian community acknowledges domestic violence?
        - What are some of the challenges the South Asian community faces when trying to create awareness around domestic violence?

- Do you notice some changes currently happening in the community in attitudes towards domestic violence?
    - If so, can you tell me more about these changes? What do you think is leading to these changes?
    - If not, what do you think is stopping this change from happening?

<u>Topic 3: Domestic Violence Experience</u>

- What made you want to participate in this study?
- What would you like to share about your own previous experiences with domestic violence, if anything? If you feel comfortable sharing…
    - How did you choose to end your marriage?
    - Were others (extended family members, elders) contributing to the situation? How?

- How did your understanding of gender roles and expectations affect the abuse you experienced?
    - How do you think these roles and expectations encourage or discourage abusive behaviours in the South Asian community?

Topic 4: Seeking Informal and Formal Support

- When did you realize that you needed to reach out for help?
    - What made you come to that decision?

- Who else knew about your situation?
    - How did they know? What was their reaction?

- What were some of the challenges you encountered when seeking support?
    - How did you feel about sharing what you were experiencing/your decision to leave?

- What do you believe are some of the factors that stop South Asian immigrant women from seeking support and accessing support services?

- How do you think immigration plays a role in South Asian women seeking support against domestic violence?

Closing

- Do you have anything else you would like to add?
    - Is there anything we talked about today that you would like to talk more about?
    - Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you would like to share?

- Do you have any questions for me?

- Would you like to receive a written version of the interview and/or summary of the interview?

Appendix G: Debriefing Form

Domestic Violence Resource Sheet

(Adapted/Revised from the Calgary Police Services, City of Calgary Family Violence Resources List)

Community Resources

Connect Family & Sexual Abuse Network	403-234-7233 / 1-866-606-7233
Alberta Works – Support for Albertans Fleeing Abuse	1-866-644-5135
Centre for Newcomers Calgary	403-537-8806

Counselling Resources for Adults

The Distress Center	403-266-4357
Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter	403-234-7233 / 1-866-606-7233 / 403-234-7233
Calgary Counselling Centre	833-827-4229
Woods Homes	403-299-9699
Calgary Immigrant Women's Association	403-263-4414
Punjabi Community Health Services	825-414-0355 / 587-999-9312
YWCA of Calgary	403-266-0707

Domestic Abuse Shelter

Awo Taan Healing Lodge Society	403-531-1970 ext. 200
Discovery House	403-670-0467

Resources for Court

HomeFront	403-206-2100
Victim Assistance Support Team	403-428-8398
Family Law Office	403-297-6380

Appendix H: Sociodemographic Information

Interviewee	**Amrit Kaur**	**Nirbhau Kaur**	**Himmat Kaur**
Age	32	42	43
Country of origin	India	India	India
Religion	Sikh (Punjabi)	Sikh (Punjabi)	Sikh (Punjabi)
Years in Canada	12	10	7
Employment status	Unemployed	Employed – administrative position	Employed – grocery store associate
Education	Business administration diploma (Canada)	Master's in computer science (India), Medical administration diploma (Canada)	High school diploma (India)
Number of children	1	1	3
Utilizing supports	Peer support group	Peer support group	Peer support group
Participants' marriages			
Arranged marriage	Not arranged	Arranged	Arranged
Time spent with husband before marriage	7 years	2 months	Did not know each other.
Duration of marriage	4 years	2 years	13 years
Current marital status	Separated (10 months)	Divorced (8 years)	Separated (18 months)
Living situations			
While married in Canada	Living with husband and in-laws	Living with husband, extended visits (>5 months) from in-laws	Living with husband and in-laws
Current living situation	With her child	With her child	With her children
Extended family members in Canada	Yes	Yes	Yes

Appendix I: Participant Pseudonyms and Significance

Each pseudonym aims to preserve the women's cultural authenticity while emphasizing who they have become through their personal journeys.

Amrit Kaur (ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਕੌਰ), "one who brings renewal": Amrit's journey embodies resilience, self-awareness, and transformation. It was important to choose a name that reflected her strength and breaking of generational cycles. Her story is one of her reclaiming herself after years of endurance, turning her suffering into wisdom and self-love. Like *amrit*, the nectar of immortality, her strength nourishes both her and the next generation, breaking cycles and creating a new legacy of empowerment.

Nirbhau Kaur (ਨਿਰਭਉ ਕੌਰ), "fearless woman": Nirbhau's story embodies the spirit of fearlessness. Her story is of a woman who reclaimed her voice and power after years of silence. She showcases the courage it takes to confront fear, the strength to stand firm in one's truth, and the grace to rebuild one's life on their own terms. It was important to choose a name that reflected the strength she demonstrated in standing up against abuser and social stigma to build a safe, independent life for herself and her daughter. She chose courage over conformity, redefining what it means to be a "respectable" woman within her community. Through her resilience and conviction, she transforms her fear and shame into freedom and self-respect, becoming an example of quiet but unshakable strength.

Himmat Kaur (ਹਿੰਮਤ ਕੌਰ), "woman of courage": Himmat's story embodies resilience, courage, and growth after years of struggle. She demonstrated quiet yet unyielding courage to rise after years of silence. It was important to choose a name that reflected inner strength and new beginnings. Her story reflects a woman who refused to be defined by fear, instead choosing self-worth and strength. Her journey reminds us that courage is not loud or sudden, but often hope and resilience that is present even in the darkest moments.