



Shivangi Tarkar is a domestic violence survivor. (Spectrum News/Vania Patino)

HUMAN INTEREST

Empowering survivors, combatting domestic violence in South Asian community



BY VANIA PATINO | ARTESIA
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ARTESIA, Calif. — October is **Domestic Violence** Awareness Month, bringing attention to the millions of people who endure physical and mental abuse by their intimate partner.

Although domestic violence affects every community regardless of ethnicity, age or socioeconomic status, South Asian Americans are disproportionately **impacted**. With tradition often being at the center of South Asian culture, certain attitudes tied to family perception have allowed for gender violence to prevail.

What You Need To Know

- October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month
- About 41% of women and 26% of men have reported experiencing a form of intimate partner violence, according to the [National Plan to End Gender-Based Violence](#) report
- The South Asian community is disproportionately impacted by domestic violence
- The South Asian Network is one of the organizations providing culturally sensitive help and resources to break these generational cycles and empower survivors

“Traditions such as divorce is frowned upon in our community,” explained Sachini Rajapaksa, a program coordinator for Gender Violence at the South Asian Network.

The organization has a “Voices Against Violence” program that helps with case management and connects survivors with resources.

“We’re here with the survivors to guide them every step of the way, whether it is the emotional and mental health component or it’s the legal aspect,” Rajapaksa said. “It’s basic needs such as food, government assistance, looking for shelter or looking for low income housing.”

Although there are other organizations who help domestic violence survivors, the South Asian Network highlights their unique ability to provide culturally sensitive and language appropriate case management.

“They know we understand where they are coming from,” said Rajapaksa. “We are not here to shame them for their community, saying you could not leave the relationship. Whether it is linguistically or culturally, we understand them.”

Given those affected are often immigrants whose first language is not English, they have no community in the U.S. and no knowledge about resources available.

That was the case for Shivangi Tarkar, who moved to the U.S. with her husband and two sons in 2020. Soon after, she couldn’t understand why her world turned upside down.

Tarkar said in India, she was a software engineer, having worked against society norms to attend a university and hold a corporate job. But in the U.S. several barriers made it difficult to continue working in her profession. She described how tensions in her relationship worsened as she was not bringing in any income.

She said the situation only got increasingly worse at home, and after 13 years of marriage, her husband was cancelling her bank accounts and taking her off their medical insurance.

“He left \$10.88 in my bank account, and he knew that this time, he had that power over me, you know, financially,” Tarkar said.

This type of financial abuse is one of the most common forms of domestic abuse.

“You have no power to your own financial needs,” Rajapaksa said. “So it leaves them with financial burden, where it will make it harder for them to even leave the relationship, which causes them to want to stay in the relationship because of those barriers.”

Other forms of abuse include psychological, social, physical and sexual.

All leave long-lasting trauma in the person impacted as well as the children living in the household. Domestic violence survivors are at a higher risk of depression, anxiety and post traumatic stress disorder.

This is often heightened for those impacted in the South Asian community due to a lack of support from family members due to social norms.

“My own family member would not listen to me, and they would say, ‘Girls should not speak up. Other men should not speak up against even the men who are abusive,’” Tarkar said. “They would tell me it’s a household thing, in every household this is happening. So keep your mouth shut.”

Tarkar describes feeling hopeless until she reached out to the South Asian Network for help, which itself was a hard moment for her.

“When you come to this country and you go through such things and you’re seeking help, it shatters your self-esteem so much,” she said.

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Tarkar said her strength came from the need to keep fighting for her two sons.

“I know that I have to give my both kids a better life,” she said.

Tarkar hopes that out of this pain comes a way to break generational cycles.

The goal is shared by the network that often host workshops, marches and conversations challenging this behavior and empowering people to speak out against it.

“Our generation is a generation to fight against the societal norm,” Rajapaksa said. “And it’s to fight against the cultural norm where we’re not going to allow this to happen anymore.”

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