

Strengthening Our Roots

Listening & Learning from Survivors & Supporters

SIKH FAMILY CENTER'S SURVIVOR-CENTERED ADVOCACY PROJECT REPORT 2017



With Special Thanks to:

Asian Pacific Islander Institute on Gender-Based Violence



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The Sikh Family Center is a grassroots community-based organization (501c3) that helps create healthy, violence-free, more equitable communities by bridging gaps in access to public resources and social services, and providing education and direct support to community members using an empowerment approach that attends to cultural tradition, immigration experiences, and language access.

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Introduction

Sikh Family Center undertook a series of listening exercises (qualitative research) to learn from community members through safe, structured, and empowering methods. We sought to further understand:

What kinds of community-based interventions on family violence are attempted in the Sikh community currently?

How can such interventions be strengthened to the benefit of survivors and their families? (Especially since most of the survivors Sikh Family Center works with often show an interest in alternatives to police, courts, mainstream shelters, public hearings, etc.)

This report, prepared by Sikh Family Center (SFC), compiles the qualitative data from 2 focus groups and 3 individual storytelling interviews facilitated by SFC in the Bay Area, California between November 2016 and January 2017. These groups and interviews consisted of survivors of gender-based violence, specifically family violence, as well as community members who regularly work (formally or informally) with survivors of violence. All participants identified as Sikh women. The groups and interviews were conducted bilingually, in English and Punjabi.

SFC acknowledges all diversity in victim-survivors of family violence: whether they have publicly identified themselves as such or not, whether they have received official support/intervention (police, courts, shelters, social services) or not, whether they have left their abusive situation or not.

The report groups the various themes that emerged as well as highlights divergences and differences. It compiles the various contemporaneous notes and observations of facilitators and note-takers of the focus groups and also employs the transcriptions of the recorded longer individual storytelling interviews. The report thus hopes to amplify the voices that may not otherwise be heard, voices that are critical toward building sustainable community solutions to family violence in the Sikh community.

Methodology

Spreading the Word

In order to identify participants for the focus groups and individual storytelling interviews, we employed a snowball methodology. SFC volunteers as well as former “clients” were first contacted to see if they would like to participate. Many of the volunteers and “clients” then also helped identify other suitable participants, thus increasing the sample. Participants were given knowledge about the process and goals of conducting the groups or interviews and were prepared to discuss family violence in the Sikh American community.



Potential participants were screened by a standardized method focused on determining suitability and safety of their participation. The main criteria used for screening were:

1. Willingness to share experiences in a group or long interview setting.
2. Low likelihood of re-traumatization (determined by trained crisis counselors who assessed factors including sufficient time elapsed since last crisis and adequate security in current living situation).

Conducting Focus Groups

Each focus group had 2-3 facilitators, including one designated note-taker. Every participant signed a consent form. Each group began with a discussion of the Guiding Principles of the group: confidentiality, respectful listening, time management, and creating a safe space for diverse experiences and views. Participants were informed that their role was as “co-researchers,” or as experts on the topic, rather than subjects of a study.

Conducting Storytelling Interviews

In these detailed one-on-one interviews, the interviewee herself selected the location for the interview and provided informed consent. With permission, each interview was audio recorded and later transcribed.



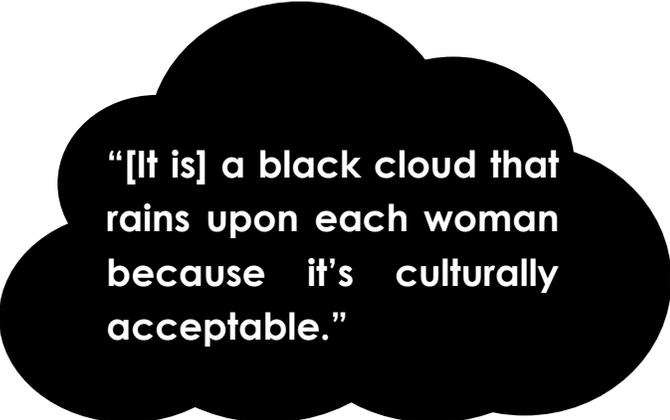
To facilitate the movement of discussion from the personal and individual experiences to institutions and the community, the below questions were used as conversation starters. However, facilitators were careful to not stick too closely to the script, so as to not miss key observations by the participants:

1. *What is Intimate Partner Violence, or Domestic Violence, or Family Violence? How do you define it?*
2. *How many cases of DV/Intimate Partner Violence are you aware of personally in our community?*
3. *What responses to DV/IPV have you seen?*
4. *What services have you heard being utilized?*
5. *Have you yourself directly used or helped someone use such services? What was your experience?*
6. *What responses to DV/IPV have you seen from: Families? Extended families? Friends? Gurudwaras? Sikh orgs?*
7. *Did you notice anything surprising?*
8. *What do you think the response would be from the above? What do you think it should be?*
9. *Could you tell us more about the results of such responses? How did the victim-survivor respond to them? Was there any change in violent behavior?*
10. *How do you define success...?*
11. *How do you think responses can be strengthened, by you, by your immediate community, by SFC and all of us?*

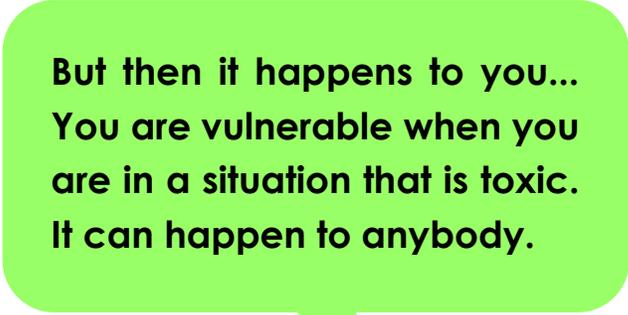
Observations and Findings

1. Family Violence is at Once Hypervisible and Invisible

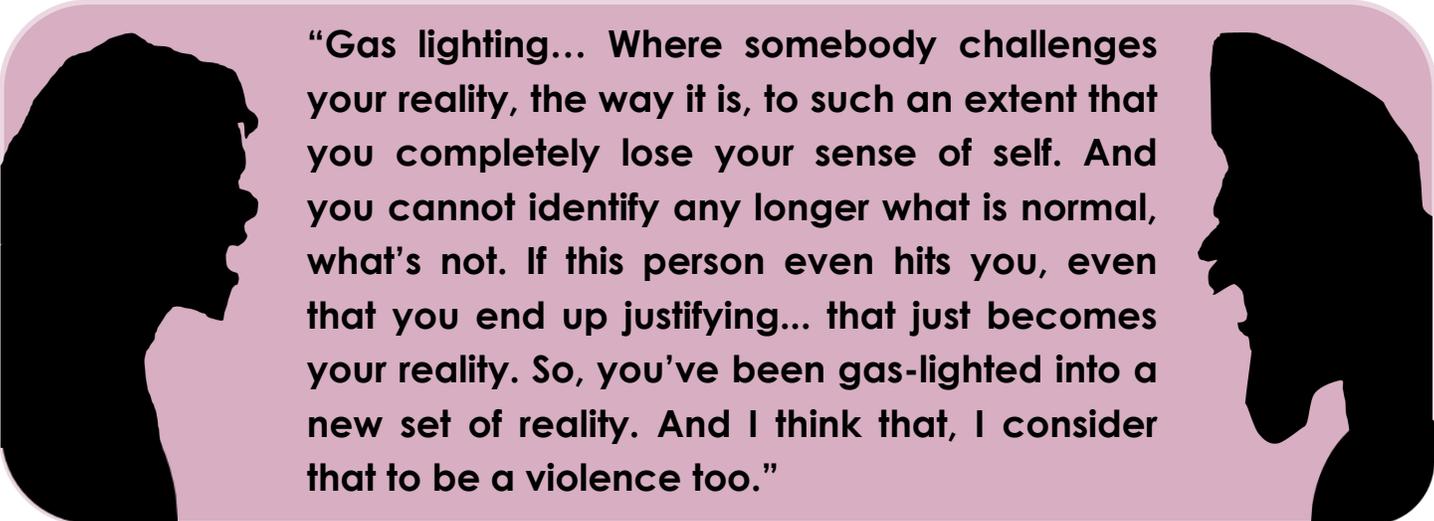
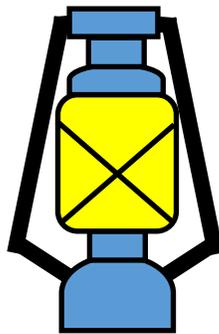
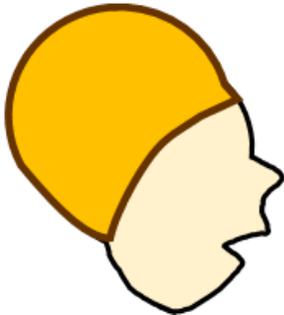
Participants recognized that family/domestic violence, although viewed very differently in every community, does not discriminate against who becomes victim to it. In the Sikh American community, family/domestic violence comes in every shape but is often overlooked as the norm, to the detriment of the person being harmed (victim) and the person doing the harm (abuser).



“[It is] a black cloud that rains upon each woman because it’s culturally acceptable.”



But then it happens to you... You are vulnerable when you are in a situation that is toxic. It can happen to anybody.

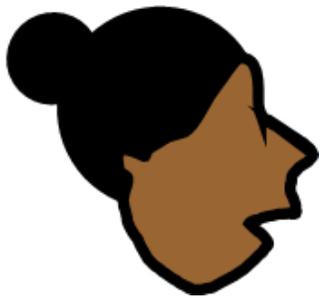


“Gas lighting... Where somebody challenges your reality, the way it is, to such an extent that you completely lose your sense of self. And you cannot identify any longer what is normal, what’s not. If this person even hits you, even that you end up justifying... that just becomes your reality. So, you’ve been gas-lighted into a new set of reality. And I think that, I consider that to be a violence too.”

2. "Image" in the Community Determines Many Unhealthy Responses

For the victim-survivor, maintaining her social image, while feeling shame, often takes precedence over making safe choices. For community members, offering any form of assistance or support is hindered by the mere thought of what repercussions they may face by doing so.

...In our culture, you'll say, 'Oh if you don't talk about it it's a strength!' No, it's not, that's ludicrous. ...That's the reason we still have so many problems. There's so much shame: 'by talking about it you bring shame upon your family.' Oh, I see. By doing it [abuse] you're not?



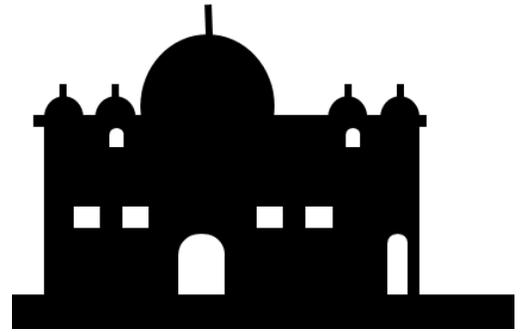
"Because he lives for that image. Being an observant Sikh, which he's not. Being liked by the community. It's just amazing to me how these people function. Ok that, that's what's important to them. And that's the only threat I could use against him, you know, 'We'll [expose] this ...and they'll see you for who you are.' And that worked."

...I think the only shameful thing was that I actually hid it and I actually felt the shame and I shouldn't have. I should have been able to come out and say this is happening to me and that I need help. Or I need some sort of support, but I was so ashamed I couldn't do it. And I think that's the biggest problem. Our community has way too much shame, way too many labels.



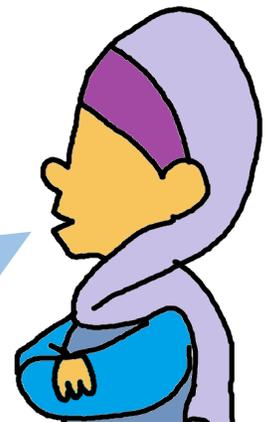
3. Gurdwara May Not Be Able or Willing to Offer Support

The first gurdwara in the U.S. was established in 1912 in Stockton, California. It served the then fledgling Sikh immigrant community in the Central Valley. Today, gurudwaras have multiplied throughout the state and country, but participants noted that when it comes to meeting specific social needs of the community and its women, the gurdwaras may lack empathy, often lack resources, and have largely gained a reputation as being places of gossip, indulgent dining, and petty politics.



Gurdwara = Sikh Faith Center

Whenever brought up – the tone will be to deny it, not recognize it. [They] talk about it as a personal matter and should only be dealt with as a family issue. Not trained in supporting this area. They may show concern, but not actual action and no resources or guidance. Although there is other tabling and pamphlets distributed, there isn't any focus to have discussion about women's safety.



"I think one of the biggest problems is, or the reason why I didn't think of going to the gurdwara was:

- A) I didn't think they would be a resource, and**
- B) I wasn't sure if I go tell somebody what are they going to tell other people and how quickly it's gonna spread around."**

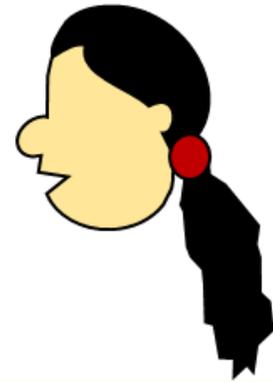


When I went to gurdwara I ended up asking the bhai sahib (who sang kirtan there) 'If someone needs to stay, are you able to help if someone needs to stay the night?' He said that it was difficult. I pressed, 'Even if it was very serious, is there any way?' He was like, 'We don't allow anyone to stay more than one night, and it's for men only and not for women.' He didn't even ask me if I'm safe or something. Or what is the concern or do you need it for yourself or do you need it for somebody else? No. It's just indifference.

4. Individual Interventions are Often Insufficient or Unreliable

Participants noted a mixed range of responses from immediate family and friends when they disclosed the violence they were experiencing.

“No one says anything. That is just how things are supposed to be.”



“My parents were not here right, so it was like they couldn’t help or whatever and then I didn’t have anybody here so I told one of my friends. My friend then did the google search and everything and she told me about [a South Asian domestic violence agency]. And that’s where I got help.”

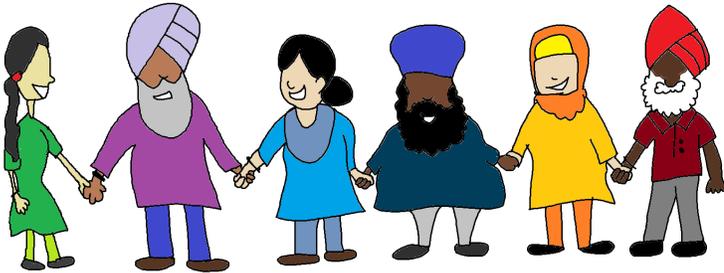
And unfortunate as it is, even the parents, even the parents, and I’m not blaming them, it’s easy to give up that responsibility because they’re older, they don’t know how to deal with it, they don’t want the social stigma. Whatever their reasons I think even parents have failed their children, big time.



5. We Must Pave the Way Forward Together

Participants made several suggestions for the way forward in addressing family/ domestic violence. They recognized the need for change at various levels and the participation of various stakeholders

Collectively as a Community



“We need to focus on girls who are growing up because we want them to know, but then we also need to focus on boys who are growing up because they should know how to treat a woman right. Like how does it become Ok in somebody’s mind that it is Ok to hit the other person? Either which way, maybe it’s a girl hitting a guy right or a guy hitting a girl – how does it become Ok? I think somewhere the fabric of our community needs to change... you know this whole macho thing that oh you know ‘We have a boy’ etc.”

In Gurdwara Setting



“Information should be presented or even passively shared as resources in the area. This is the first step of recognition.”

“At a bare minimum let’s just start educating the people who are working there. The least that a Bhai Sahib [caretakers, workers] at the gurdwara can say is, ‘If you need help, these are the places or these are the women’s agencies, why don’t you talk to them?’ We can accept that at that stage maybe a woman can’t talk to that Bhai Sahib but they can ask ‘Do you need something? Are you upset or something?’ At least a little bit of concern doesn’t hurt, right?”

What SFC can do:

Recognizing that is it challenging and others aren't trained. SFC could provide basics on how to support someone in a dangerous situation.

“Even like a singles’ mixer event, but sort of attached with some sort of opening talk. And yeah sure is it a damper, yeah probably, but it’s also necessary. You know it’s like you give a medicine with a spoon full of sugar.”

Keep having these conversations, so the awareness can spread and empowerment may expand!

Conclusion

As a grassroots community-based organization focused on health, safety and equity, Sikh Family Center connects members of the Sikh American community with resources they may not otherwise access. SFC also seeks to create resources that do not exist. Finally, SFC proactively works with our community’s existing resources. Family Violence is an issue that blights every community, but remains especially under-resourced and unaddressed in some.



While SFC has worked with countless Sikh individuals, families, and institutions including gurudwaras that have supported victim-survivors with passion, compassion and as Sikh duty, SFC has also faced challenges. Much more prevalent than vocal opposition is Silence. Such silence during times of emergencies can be deadly and at all times, it is disempowering. We thank the participants of these focus groups and interviews for breaking the silence. We hope their candor and courage will prompt further conversations, which then must translate to action. The idea is not to create new victims or scapegoats, but to move forward, together, stronger. This fight begins at home and there are no shortcuts.