

PUNJABI SIKH WOMEN POWER & CONTROL WHEEL

By Sikh Family Center





▶ PUNJABI SIKH POWER & CONTROL WHEEL



The tactics outlined in the community-specific spokes in the inner circle apply alongside the various tactics in the outer circles.

▶▶ NOTES REGARDING THE PUNJABI SIKH POWER AND CONTROL WHEEL

This Wheel focuses on Punjabi Sikh women survivors in the U.S.

“Punjabi Sikh” refers to a unique cultural community, a people connected by ancestry in the Sikh faith and the geographic region of Punjab, South Asia. While Sikhs today live in various parts of India, South Asia, and the U.S., the majority find their ethnic ancestors—including Sikh Gurus—in Punjab and Punjabi culture.

The wheel was co-created by survivors—those who self-identified as female as well as Punjabi Sikh—who provided input through anonymous surveys and listening circles convened by Sikh Family Center. It also draws from the wisdom of various survivor-organizers at Sikh Family Center, the community-based organization that has served hundreds of Punjabi Sikh survivors since 2009.

▶▶ THE CIRCLES

The outer circle represents the physical and sexual violence that ‘holds’ the power and control in place. The inner circle represents various tools of abuse that are common, across various cultures, to various abusive relationships, even though their specific manifestations are unique to each situation. The inner-most spokes of the wheel are the various culturally-determined tactics employed by those who abuse within the Punjabi Sikh community. These tactics, detailed below, necessarily operate in the context of the two outer circles. Altogether, the various compounding tactics result in creating and maintaining power and control over the victim—the core of the wheel—that denies the victim health, safety, and self-determination.

▶▶ A CAUTION

While violence exists and proliferates when there are few resources for survivors, there is also resistance and strength in the collectivist Punjabi Sikh culture. Most survivors we serve would never wish to see the community painted only as victimizing and themselves as only “victim,” as Sikh Family Center regularly highlights.

▶▶ QUOTES

All quotes in the following discussion are direct quotes from the anonymous, confidential 2024-25 survey carried out by Sikh Family Center towards developing their new wheel.





SELECTIVELY RELYING ON SOUTH ASIAN GENDER BIASES TO JUSTIFY MALE SUPERIORITY OVER WOMEN

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- ▶ Partners who abuse conveniently select to ignore certain Sikh principles, particularly those around gender equality, in favor of South Asian gender norms that marginalize girls and women.
- ▶ Men often control finances and property, defaulting women to dependence, subservience, and violence that are often normalized within families.
- ▶ Children learn to internalize unhealthy gender roles and gendered emotions.
- ▶ Abusive parties exploit the sex-discrimination and gender roles: Strong preferences for sons persist, since they are seen as continuing the family legacy and name. Girls face restricted access to education and inheritance, the burden of dowry, and expectations to bear the bulk of domestic duties.
- ▶ Abuse is normalized by celebrating Punjabi pop culture depictions of toxic masculine behavior—such as catcalling, jealousy, possessiveness, and anger—as unexceptional, or even romantic.
- ▶ In wealthier families, often with higher formal education and visibly more independence for women, control in fact remains with the male “head of household” while abuse is often concealed—including by parroting the classist myth that abuse is a problem affecting only recent immigrants or lower-income segments of the community.

“ There is this air of “babying” the men in our families from a young age due to gender biases and role expectations, which needs to change when bringing children up. ”

“ I would change the perception that the husband would know better on how to take care of the financial, legal and medical affairs of the family. ”

“ [S]tatements such as ‘this happens in all marriages’ and normalize harmful behavior, destructive to the core of marriage. ”

“ There is a male entitlement to sex, all energy and attention, or entitlement of someone's body. ”

“ The ingrained cultural belief that men are superior to women. ”

“ Sometimes these behaviors are so engrained that they are not recognized as abuse. Like when someone insults their wife then it is considered a good thing—people think oh he is acting like a real man, while the wife is left embarrassed/ unable to react. ”

NORMALIZING IN-LAW ABUSE AGAINST WOMEN

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- ▶ “In-law abuse”—emotional, mental, social, spiritual, and/or financial abuse by members of the husband’s family—is often treated as a ‘normal’ rite of passage for Punjabi Sikh women, whose own families may even ignore or overlook abuse.
- ▶ Abuse by both the husband and the husband’s family is often exacerbated when the couple lives in the same household as the husband’s family.
- ▶ Control is maintained through passive aggression, leaving all domestic work for the daughter-in-law, excluding her from family matters or decision-making, and having coercive influence over her reproductive decisions (such as whether/when to get pregnant and holding her responsible for ensuring the birth of sons).
- ▶ Physical violence for resisting in-laws demands, threats of being socially shamed, stigma of divorce and/or being “sent back” to her birth family are all used to enforce compliance with husband’s family.
- ▶ Heavy financial investments in the wedding and/or marriage by the survivor’s family pressures her to ‘stay’ and make the relationship work.
- ▶ Abuse by female in-laws is enabled by the husband, who prioritizes appeasing his mother/sister(s).
- ▶ Sexual abuse by male in-laws is covered up through intimidation and threats (including threats of being killed or that no one will believe her).



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Sikh women can sometimes be removed from childhood homes and have limited contact being told that their husband's familial home with her in laws is her new home (and her new family) after marriage. She begins to surround herself with people who put her husband first and not her, and see her as a resource of his satisfaction or happiness.

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Serving not just men but also their families, isolating you from your family.

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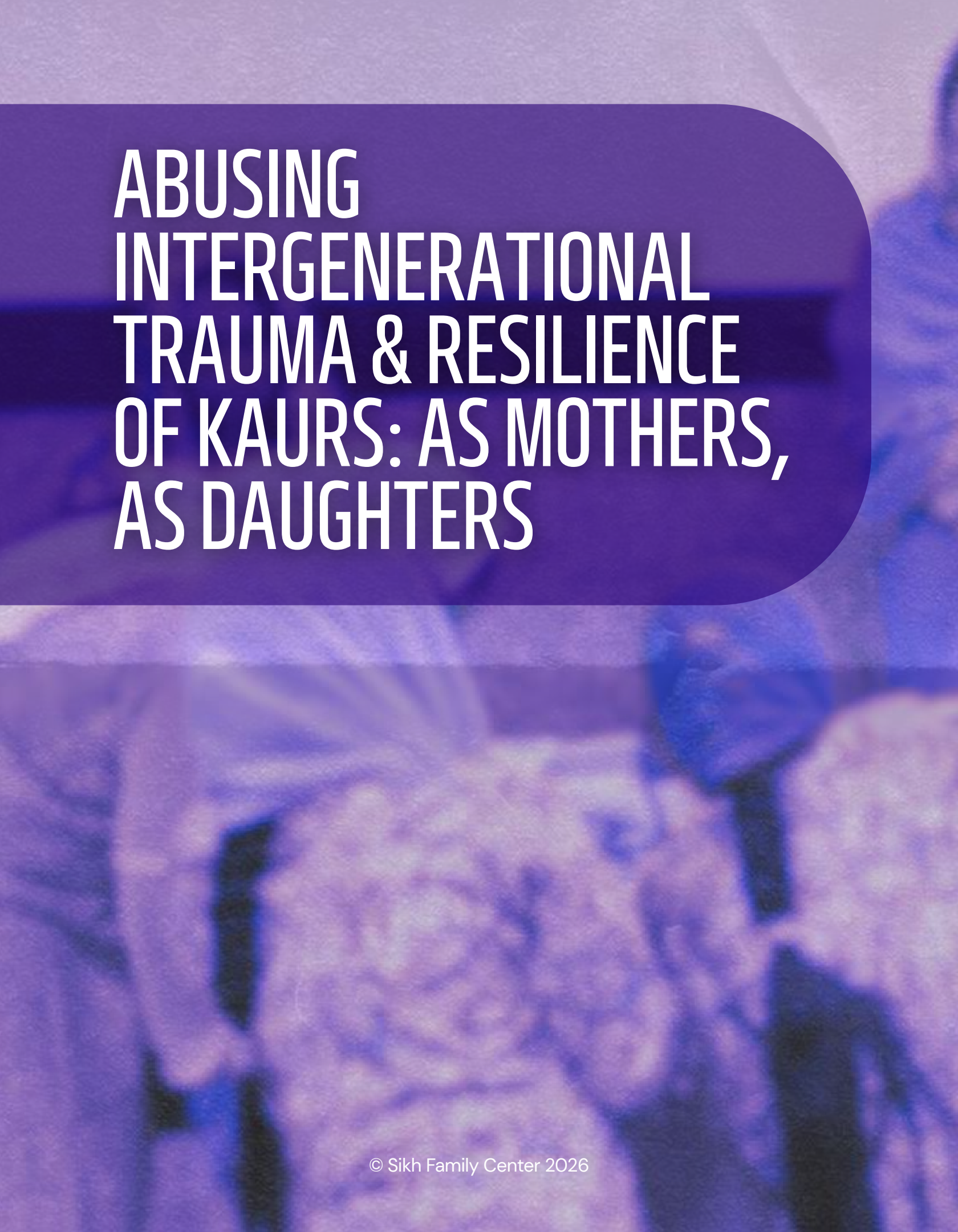
I don't believe there is anything wrong with having a large united family. I just think that we as a community lack ideas about how to bring people together without using pernicious forms of social control.

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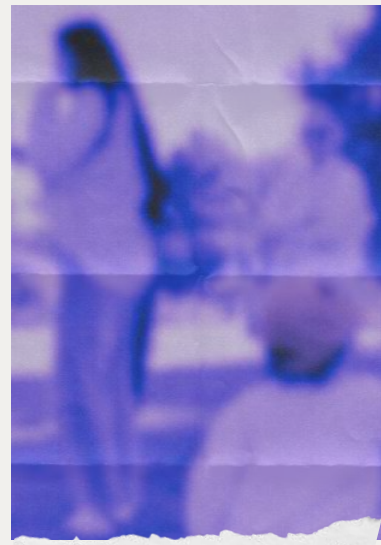
Using passive aggression, such as ignoring her presence...withholding eye contact for extended periods of time, making her feel inadequate or saying she will bring dishonor to the family if she talks about what she is experiencing....

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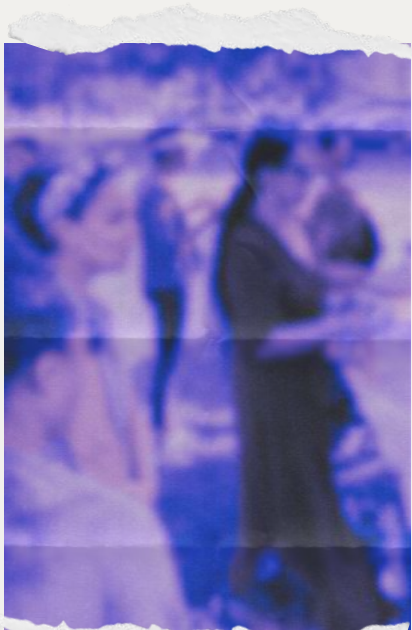


ABUSING INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA & RESILIENCE OF KAURS: AS MOTHERS, AS DAUGHTERS

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- ▶ Trauma from domestic abuse is minimized in comparison to historic traumas such as, the partition, migration, genocide, or racism.
- ▶ Abusive parties ask survivors to suppress their personal traumatic experiences and show supposed 'resilience' and bravery.
- ▶ Motherhood is at once venerated and unsupported; mothers are held to very high standards and regularly accused of being weaker than their foremothers.



- ▶ Pressure to bear sons undermines the survivor's reproductive autonomy, with abuse often intensifying during pregnancy and after childbirth, particularly after giving birth to a daughter or child with special needs.
- ▶ Survivors are told to bear more children by their own family as a solution to end violence.
- ▶ The mother-in-law, believing it is her turn to control after experiencing past abuse, repeats the same cycle of abuse against the son's wife.
- ▶ Male children are considered to 'belong' to the husband and in-laws, with the mother's status actively reduced to caregiving until she is no longer needed.

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I have often been told that the man's reputation depends on their daughter—Baaapu di paggg [the father's turban is in the hands of his daughter.

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The way in which people speak out is policed, sometime more than the harm itself! There is also a ranking of trauma.

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Blaming her for a female child being born and that there must be something wrong with her if she cannot give birth to a male child.

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Undermining her parental choices and exploiting the financial obligations [of having kids].

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Strong Punjabis don't cry about such small things.

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Children are property of the men's side, girls' side has no say in what happens with the children of the victim....Nanke (mother's side of family) [should] have equal rights.

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MANIPULATING SPIRITUALITY/SIKHI AND SIKH FAITH PRACTICE

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- ▶ Persons who abuse distort Sikh scriptures to gaslight survivors into self-blame, self-doubt, and silence, all the while deflecting accountability for their harmful behaviors.
- ▶ Survivors who take a stand against those causing abuse are labelled as “egoistic” for “violating” Sikh principles.
- ▶ Persons who abuse may use their Sikh identity—turban, beard, Amrit [initiation/baptism], or seva [community service]—to appear pious, humble, and beyond suspicion.
- ▶ Survivors who do not keep the external Sikh identity receive misguided advice that a deeper commitment to the faith will end the abuse, shifting blame on survivors because they are not ‘devout’ enough, rather than holding abusers accountable.
- ▶ Survivors married to granthis or kirtaniye (those who read and/or sing the Sikh scriptures at Gurdwaras) face heightened challenges in seeking support from within the community, because these spiritual actors/leaders are often considered too devout to commit abuse.



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That our community is holier than thou and therefore abuse doesn't exist. Denial.

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But he's taken Amrit" as if it makes him perfect. He does Seva so he couldn't hurt a fly?

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There are several tactics that are used to silence victims/ survivors by saying 'this is what our Gurus say and this is what Gurbani says' such as there is no divorce in Sikhi, and [the] victim/survivor must live with their fate.

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The patriarchy is a culturally engrained idea that needs to be directly challenged, especially given [the counter—patriarchy teachings of our] scriptures.

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**REPEATEDLY SHIFTING
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“MODERN WOMAN”**

REPEATEDLY SHIFTING THE VALUES AND ROLES DEMANDED OF THE “MODERN WOMAN”

- ▶ Women are pushed to be “modern” at work yet “traditional” at home—earning, obeying, and shouldering all domestic work.
- ▶ Educated, financially independent women defying the “the perfect victim” stereotype suffer abuse in silence, believing the circulated myth that only ‘recent immigrant, uneducated or low-income’ women face abuse.
- ▶ Abusive partners exploit both ‘traditional’ and ‘western’ values to justify sexual violence.
- ▶ A woman’s privacy, bodily autonomy, and financial independence is often met with suspicion, and is pushed back into “traditional roles” upon asserting her rights.
- ▶ Major family and financial decisions are made by male family members, ignoring women’s financial independence and personal autonomy.



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Seeing a partner as a commodity [rather] than an individual who can set boundaries. Expecting a partner to have a dual role of cleaning and working.

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Don't be so 'backward,' you can go work and contribute dollars. Don't be so 'western' or 'American' to have opinions about what we do with those dollars.

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There's definitely a culture of minimizing emotional violence against women and accepting it as a part of life.... This can also be sex shaming or blaming women who get assaulted.

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MISUSING “SECRETS” AND ABUSING INVISIBLE VULNERABILITIES

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- ▶ Abusive partners exploit both that dating is not openly accepted across the Sikh community and is often ‘secret,’ as well as the fact that girls are held to stricter standards than boys, with pressure to protect the family’s reputation and honor.
- ▶ Mental health vulnerabilities are used to exploit survivors—gaslighting them, discrediting their reality and justifying the harm being done.
- ▶ In many families still, fear of parental backlash over dating itself—especially if it is outside of caste/class expectations of parents—prevents survivors from disclosing abuse in dating relationships, resulting in unchecked violence and isolation.
- ▶ Even in families that are open to dating, dating is often only accepted if it leads to marriage, pressuring girls and women to stay in unhealthy relationships.
- ▶ Faith-based prohibitions on use of intoxicants force survivors to conceal substance use, enabling abusers to exploit vulnerable survivors through threats of exposing them.
- ▶ Queer Sikh partners face added risks, as the threat of being “outed” by disclosing abuse can lead to forced heterosexual marriages, more violence, or social exclusion.



“ Females are expected to be 'good and pure' while the same expectation is not held for the males. ”

“ Blackmail with shame and dishonor. ”

“ For me, my mental health issues would be intentionally weaponized against me. ”

“ Saying she is one that causes tension in the house, making her feel that any negative health conditions he has is her fault. ”

WEAPONIZING COMMUNITY: USING TOXIC GOSSIP AND HONOR TRAPS

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▶▶ Survivors are told and may believe that seeking intervention only brings 'negative' attention to the community—love for the community may thus even be used as a 'loyalty trap' for women.

▶▶ Persons causing harm manipulate the community, a potential refuge for the Punjabi Sikh survivor, into becoming a force that blames, polices, and/or pressures the survivor to return to the abusive situation.

▶▶ Threats of social disgrace—often framed through phrases like “What will people say?”—are used to silence survivors, sometimes even by their own relatives.

▶▶ Toxic gossip, driven by false narratives, judgement, and hostility, causes severe psychological and emotional harm, which is then exploited further.

▶▶ Persons who abuse maintain a facade of being a perfect family at Gurdwara and amongst shared relatives and friends.

▶▶ Survivors are discouraged from pursuing legal action or asserting their autonomy—which can be amplified in court, where abusers leverage community support to intimidate and confuse survivors.

▶▶ Survivors do not receive support from the husband's community, who often side with the husband/in-laws, dismiss their experience, or betray their trust if they confide in them.



“ Letting family members spread lies about partner's family members. ”

“ I am thinking of observing a behavior where the intimidator makes eye contact from afar and then proceeds to whisper or speak with another while keeping the subject in his gaze. This is a form of intimidation. ”

“ The deception of some abusive families where at home they engage in abusive behaviors but in public portray an image of being a Gursikh parivaar—making it challenging for community members to recognize or believe abuse could be taking place behind closed doors. ”

“ Sikh Punjabi Women survivors/victims may not talk about the abuse they are suffering for fear of bringing shame to the family or fear of being looked down upon for talking about what happens within the house. They may become so dependent that they stop trying. ”

“ I think being outcaste from your community when you rebel against being in an abusive environment, means that you can't rely on...friends, relatives and acquaintances that are associated with your abusers/family. So I think when you get cut off from one family unit or support system, you end up cut from all. ”

CREATING AND RELYING ON SURVIVOR MISTRUST OF NONPROFITS & SERVICE PROVIDERS

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- ▶ Survivors are told that no support agency will serve them given their limited funds, limited English fluency, or immigration status; they are told they will not be helped.
- ▶ Survivors are fed misinformation about shelters being dangerous, easily discoverable, and hubs for crime.
- ▶ Survivors may also be told of dire consequences if they leave with their children: that they will be charged with kidnapping and their children will be taken away and placed in a non-Sikh, non-Punjabi foster home (hearing about the occurrence of such consequences for some survivor-mothers further cements the fear in the survivors' mind).
- ▶ When survivors do seek help, agencies may overlook linguistic, cultural, or faith-specific nuances, leading survivors to feel misunderstood, minimized, disbelieved and dismissed, just as the abusive partner had told them they would be.
- ▶ Abusive parties' warnings also seem to be reality for survivors who engage with agencies that communicate how they find survivors' intersecting challenges confusing or even burdensome—"too much baggage"—especially when multiple family members are involved or multiple people called the agency on survivors' behalf.
- ▶ Even at South Asian-focused organizations, Punjabi Sikh women may face stereotypes and erasures, deepening mistrust the abuser had already sowed in their minds, and discouraging them from seeking safe support.

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Insufficient knowledge of/or restricted access to safe resources that can provide relief to victim/survivor.

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Negative thoughts forced onto an individual so they have a negative self-image/view of the world.

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Restricting her access to technology such as phone, computer or internet, restricting her access to social, religious or cultural groups.

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MISREPRESENTING THE U.S. LEGAL SYSTEMS

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- ▶ Abusive partners and their families exploit survivors' limited understanding of the U.S. legal systems to make survivors feel more isolated or hopeless.
- ▶ Survivors may believe that the police are more dangerous than the abusers. In the U.S., they may have been told or may have experienced biased policing of immigrants and/or brown communities. In Punjab, past communal trauma of police violence casts its shadow through generations, and contributes to the deep fear of uniforms.
- ▶ Abusive parties may manipulate survivors' discomfort sharing their deeply personal experiences with male police officers, lawyers, judges.
- ▶ Abusive parties may manipulate police into viewing survivors as the aggressor, blaming them for conflict or injuries, resulting in their wrongful arrest or criminalization.



- ▶ Colored by experiences in India, many survivors are unaware of remedies such as restraining orders or no-fault divorce (agreement to divorce by the other side is not strictly required in any U.S. state, yet survivors are told otherwise by abusive parties and often believe it is).
- ▶ Some survivors may be prevented from learning about their legal options in the United States, and assume that as in Punjab, court cases take decades to resolve and are pointless. Others assume that unlike in Punjab, the U.S. police and court systems provide very swift and fair results—then slow or unjust outcomes can lead to deeper dejection and belief their abusive partner was right about the system after all.

“ I know the police here, they won't believe you. ”

“ She is told that he won't 'give her' divorce! ”

“ Lack of awareness of legal protections available to [the] victim/survivor and their children. ”

“ Convincing authorities (such as police) that [the] victim/survivor is the abuser, dismissing her feelings of hurt, dismissing her physical injury as being her own fault. ”

EMPLOYING IMMIGRATION COERCION: SYSTEMIC, COMMUNAL, AND INDIVIDUAL

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- ▶ **Persons who abuse know that many immigrant women will hesitate to seek help due to fear of immigration officers, language barriers, deepened isolation, fear of stigma, and complete financial dependence on their spouse.**
- ▶ **Abusive men exploit the eagerness of some families to arrange marriage matches for their daughters: parents in a haste, and especially if they are living in Punjab, often neglect to thoroughly verify the grooms' background, including their criminal history, legal status or even marital status.**
- ▶ **U.S. citizens may be encouraged or coerced into marrying non-citizen men but then are abused and/or abandoned by these men once the men's immigration objectives are met.**
- ▶ **Men who abuse may intentionally withhold filing for their spouse's immigration, deliberately placing women in immigration precarity.**
- ▶ **Survivors with no U.S. legal status may be abandoned in Punjab.**
- ▶ **Abusive parties confiscate or hide immigration documents, threaten the survivors' family—in the U.S. or back in Punjab—and block survivors' access to education and employment.**

“ Using wife to attain [a] green card and then abandoning her. ”

“ Threats that he knows the police or people in Punjab who can cause harm to her family, those she cares about. ”

“ You are only in America because of me, if you want I can send you back to your family. ”

“ Threatening to abandon children, cut off financially, or deport children or the mother if they try to leave. ”

“ Not applying for her immigration/legal status. ”

“ Hiding immigration related documents, or threatening to get her deported. ”

“ Not allowing one to learn the language if they've move[d] to a new country. ”

“ Women are brought to this country by marriage because his parents want him to get married and then when he or they see fit women are abandoned straddling between two countries. ”

Sikh Family Center is a nonprofit organization in the U.S. that promotes community well-being with a particular focus on gender justice. We provide trauma-centered resources for victim-survivors of violence while organizing to change the social and cultural conditions that allow gendered violence to occur in the first place. Our training, outreach, and advocacy are grounded in cultural tradition, grassroots power, and intergenerational healing.

**Website:
<https://sikhfamilycenter.org/>**

**For more information email:
contact@sikhfamilycenter.org**

**For support:
Sikh Family Center National U.S. Helpline**

866-SFC-SEWA | 866-732-7392

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The Punjabi Sikh Power & Control Wheel discusses various tactics and trends of domestic violence in the Punjabi Sikh community, making many invisible aspects visible. This zine depicts how interlocking tactics to create and maintain power and control over victim-survivors denies them true health, safety, and self-determination, in direct contradiction to the Sikh tradition.

The wheel was co-created by survivors of domestic violence—those who self-identified as female as well as Punjabi Sikh—and draws from the wisdom of various survivor-organizers at Sikh Family Center, the community based organization that has served hundreds of Punjabi Sikh survivors in the United States since 2009.

Fear None, Frighten None!

