



In observance of Domestic Violence Awareness Month

By: Ramya Dronamraju

South Asian women residing in the United States are at an exceptionally [high risk](#) for intimate partner violence (IPV), with over 40% women [reporting](#) intimate partner violence in their current relationship. Although IPV happens to men as well, this statistic is much lower at about 5-10% of the population. South Asian women in particular are not only vulnerable to domestic violence but exceptionally vulnerable to [underreporting](#) of domestic violence. COVID-19 has created an added barrier to care and has added one more layer of danger.

By caring for our sisters, daughters and our friends, we can protect our population from the altogether common tragedy that domestic violence plays in our community. It is important to reach out and do our minimal part in this effort to stop domestic violence and erase the shackles of prejudice, taboo and superstition which hide in the shadows of religion, culture and tradition.

We think to ourselves, this could never happen to us, our children or our family members. But, sadly it is not true. The numbers don't lie. South Asian Americans feel the pressure to be a model minority, amongst many other things, and want to express and show a picture-perfect image. Conversely, this problem is becoming gradually out of our control. The shadows are emerging from closets and hidden frames of happy pictures. In many cases, what is seen to the outside world may be a pretext of happiness which may be a cover up for abuse, neglect or control within the family.

When things seem overwhelming, we can often deflect responsibility on others around us because it feels like a problem that is much bigger than us. But we as a society can move forward to reduce the incidence of intimate partner violence by changing our way of thinking.

Primarily, three quotes we need to let go of are "What will people think?", "Our family back home will never accept this", "We are not American".

"What will people think?"

What will people think if your daughter leaves her abusive partner to pursue a life of safety?

I know what I would think. I would say she's a survivor, that she's strong and that she will live a happier life without them. But at the end of the day, my opinion as an outsider shouldn't and doesn't matter. No one can fathom or assess the pain of someone who is being abused, neglected or tormented. Abused

victims choosing to stay in relationships to meet unwritten social codes is a life sentence that is not deserved by them.

Let us break that invisible social code- We have beautiful and rich South Asian communities in the US. We have to let go of the perception that anyone knows better or that their opinions matter. *“Our friends and community will be there for us, as long as we raise our families to be kind and hard-working members of society.”* This is also just the most dangerous phrase. This puts a fear of continuing to endure abuse and hardship to show others that you are in life filled with happiness and prosperity. We engrain this motto into our families so that they are constantly worried about what others think, what they say, and put their own safety behind that.

“Our family back home will never accept this”

The idea that someone overseas, without a clue in the world how hard your life is could dictate who your child marries is astounding to me. Their opinions matter, of course! But their judgment, their rules, may not understand the person who has to endure the pain and suffering caused by violence in the relationship. This could also be a huge concern in terms of the safety of the person.

“We are not American”

This last phrase is one that I know is very controversial but is a mind-shift we have to make. When we tell ourselves that we are not American, that we have to uphold South Asian values and traditions upheld by marriage, we forget that human decency is one of the core values our ancestors tried to pass down to us. It was just lost along the way. We are neither here nor there. We are a combination of the two cultures. There is a way to hold on to tradition and save the lives of our loved ones.

Supporting your family member- sister, daughter or son in their pursuit to be safe or not hurt others is a big step. The support can look like encouraging them to seek therapy, to understand healthy relationships, that marriage is happiness for both the partners, that all relationships should be equal, and explaining your difficulties maintaining that if you've ever had any.

Be transparent. We need to shift the cultural norm that we must keep everything between ourselves. Empower your child to speak up, to be strong, and express themselves when they feel uncomfortable. The internalized trauma we feel is then passed on to our daughters and sons. When we emphasize that their marriage is the most important part of their lives, the added pressure to mask the harm and damage in their relationship is causing them to prevent them from getting help for fear that they are disappointing you.

Instead of the narrative, “Your duty is to be a compliant wife/ husband”, we need to start shifting the narrative to say “Your duty is to be a kind human, but your safety always comes first.” We have so much

to offer from our beautiful cultures. But we can and must do better. Not only can we do these things, we can also volunteer our time towards helping others in need.

Reach out in whatever way you can to assist your family, friend, neighbor or program that offers support to survivors. Being a volunteer in an organization like **MaiFS** is like being an Ambassador to voice against violence and help the survivors.

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Ramya Dronamraju, MPH is the founder and CEO of [Intuition](#) , a mental health app for women and nonbinary people with the overall goal of reducing the incidence of intimate partner violence. Ramya was one of twenty winners of the 2019 VS PINK GRL PWR Project sponsored by Victoria's Secret Pink and is an inaugural fellow of the Vital Voices x TRESemmé Leadership Incubator.