



**“..There is a war on women”**

## **Women and Violence**

**A Desh Pradesh Workshop**

**Sunera Thobani**

...There is a war on women. And it is so good that that violence is being named. Violence against women. That is what it is, and it's wonderful to see a workshop that actually calls it that, because there are so many conferences, so many workshops which are organized, which call it 'family violence,' 'domestic violence,' and it is really wonderful to see that it is being named for what it is.

Now, I think the issue of violence is very, very difficult to deal with in our communities, because we live in a racist society which just jumps on any issues and problems that we have in the community, and uses that as yet another sign of our backwardness. So it's quite common when we're talking about violence in the South Asian community, to have women, white women, feminists even, who are committed to doing work in this area, explain it away in the name of sort of Third World machoism, Third World culture... "See, you are from a backward culture. See, your men are worse than our white men here."... So you're constantly walking this sort of tight-rope and hoping that you don't fall and drown on either side. Because when it comes to work against racism, it is with these men that you're fighting. It's not this white women's movement who's going to be there to support you in any way in this struggle against racism.

At the beginning of this year, a South Asian woman's body was found dumped off a highway in BC. She had been murdered and by the time they found her body, half the face had been eaten away. There was no one who was willing to come forward and claim this woman as our own. There wasn't any organization that was strong enough to step up and say, "This woman was one of us." There was no women's organization that was strong enough to stand up and say, "No, she was a sister." This is the kind of fate that women are meeting, and we need to organize. What we need really desperately is a national women's

# *Creating* **Solidarity:** **Race, Gender & Violence**

One in three women is sexually assaulted. Eighty-five percent of rapists are acquaintances of the women they rape. Eighty to ninety percent of women experience sexual harassment in the labour force, and the majority of women who are murdered are murdered by their male partners or acquaintances.

These statistics enumerate the reality of women's lives as casualties in the war against women. Desh Pradesh's panel on "Violence Against Women" addressed the war against South Asian women on both fronts, those of sexism and racism.

Desh's panel consisted of Jennifer Chew, from the South Asian Women's Community Center in Montreal; Fauzia Rafiq, from the Toronto South Asian women's journal, *Diva*; Sunera Thobani, from the South Asian Women's Action Network in Vancouver (SAWAN); and, writer/feminist/activist Rita Goli, who moderated the panel.

The "Violence Against Women" panel was set for noon on Saturday, in the hectic schedule of Desh Pradesh. Due to the well attended and late-ending Bhangra Dance Party held the night before, there was a meager turnout. This was unfortunate, given the critically important issues to be discussed.

In her presentation, Sunera Thobani addressed the dual issues of racism outside the community and sexism inside the community, both of which combine to victimize South

Asian women. For example, while the white feminist movement tackles the issue of violence against women, it buys into the racist mythology that when so called 'Third World' women get raped, it is because 'Third World' men are more violent, or the manifestation of violence is 'culturally specific.'

In addition, although the white feminist movement proclaims to help ALL women against male violence, most white feminist organizations are not accessible to the majority of South Asian women and women of colour due to difficulties with, amongst other things, language and cultural sensitivity. When the issue of violence against South Asian women and women of colour is raised within white feminist organizations, the tendency of these organizations is to focus on dowry deaths and the marriage of child brides. The oppression of South Asian women and women of colour is presented as being inherently linked to our cultures instead of to the overriding patriarchal power relations between men and women.

The racist assumptions of white feminist organizations and the lack of service provided by them, form barriers that do not allow for valuable and often life-saving information to be passed on to South Asian women and women of colour. By categorizing the violence experienced by South Asian women and women of colour as 'culturally accepted,' these organizations fetishize the violence experi-

enced by South Asian women and women of colour, and minimize the universality of violence against women.

One of the results of there not being sufficient services available to South Asian women and women of colour who are the victims of violence is that they feel trapped, alienated and alone in their painful struggle. The panel at Desh Pradesh attempted to address the issue of alienation and explored strategies for change.

Jennifer Chew discussed the variety of services that the South Asian Women's Community Center provides for women; services such as counselling, potlucks, social events, information, accompaniment, and advocacy. Generally, the centre provides the services which white feminist organizations either cannot provide or will not provide. Jennifer also discussed a theatre production that addressed the issues of violence in the home. The production was organized and performed by members of Montréal Serai, a South Asian cultural group in Montréal. The idea of theatre or any public performance of the issues involved, aids in the fight against the alienation felt by the female victims of the abuse by saying, "You are not alone."

The discussion panel also examined the difficulties that the South Asian community, not unlike other communities, has in acknowledging the reality of violence in South Asian women's lives. The panel talked about the many reasons why the South Asian community does not want to address the reality of violence. Much of the discussion revolved around the roles of women in family, religious and community life. To address the issue of violence against women, the South Asian community, and other communities, must face issues such as the oppression of women, the dominance of men, and the demands for equality. A meaningful discussion of these issues would eventually culminate in a restructuring, a redefining of so called traditions and roles in family, religion and community. It is the fear and obstruction of those who presently hold power in the patriarchy that hinders any meaningful and reconstructive dialogue.

One method of approaching the topic of violence against women in the South Asian community would be to universalize the problem to all men, not specifically South Asian men. Such a universalization would, I believe, allow South Asian women to show solidarity with South Asian men in the fight

against racism without compromising on the issue of the violence which they experience at the hands of men. This strategy allows South Asian women to, on one hand, display an understanding of the conditions of racism experienced by people of colour in this country. On the other hand South Asian men, along with other men in society, have to be held accountable for their misogyny, sexism and the violence they commit against women. To recognize the issues of violence against South Asian women, South Asian men must educate themselves, acknowledge their position as oppressors and learn to give up their power so the status quo can be abolished. Basically, South Asian men, and men in general, have to want to change. They have to want to give up their power, and the resistance to giving up power is a significant problem in society at large.

As a part of her presentation, Fauzia Rafiq read a story she had written in 1987. The story was entitled, *The Birth of a Murderer*, and related an incident which took place in 1982. In this story a woman's baby was stoned to death on the steps of a Mosque in Karachi. The intense and powerful story that Fauzia read aloud to the small audience was not only painful to listen to, but as displayed by Fauzia, painful for her to read. For me, the story illustrated yet another means by which the South Asian community can put the issue of violence against women on the table. It is clear that the role of literature, drama and other forms of cultural production can play a significant role in reducing alienation and creating solidarity amongst women.

One of the benefits of the different styles of presentation on the panel is that they helped to expose the different approaches which can be taken to battle the problem. One aspect of the struggle is to create centres, lobby, rally, and develop strategies. Another aspect of the struggle involves listening to and understanding the individual experiences of women; the pain, anger, injustices and sadness. The two aspects are necessary so as to provide solidarity and empowerment. Desh Pradesh's attempt to facilitate a forum on "Violence Against Women" was an important step in the South Asian community towards dealing with the continued war against women.

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**Zara Suleman** is a feminist, artist and cultural activist in Vancouver.

**"We live in a racist society...it uses [the issue of violence against women] as yet another sign of our backwardness."**

organization, where we can come together, where we can break this marginalization, where we can break this silence on this issue, come together, and look at how women are coping with this in different parts of the country.

### Jennifer Chew

People ask, "Why do you want to have a South Asian Women's Community Centre?" We had to explain that there are basic needs of women that we had to attend to. We needed to bring the women out of their isolation in the homes to the Centre, [which is located in Montréal], to feel at home talking languages that we are familiar with. We do this. We also bring them out to go to English and French classes, so that they can also participate in the life over here. And we run many referral services, such as health and legal advice, treating abuse and problems that arise through immigration. Then we provide translation services, and we support the network for battered women. Apart from that, we come together at potluck lunches every last Friday of the month. At these we have information sessions that are built into our needs. I've also left our magazine, *Shakti*, and a pamphlet that describes in more detail the work that is done by SAWCC, on the table outside.

We, the women of the Centre, we wanted to express ourselves [in a play]. We didn't want anyone to write it or interpret it for us or act it out for us. We wanted the women from the Centre to participate in the play. We didn't want to have people from outside, or amateur professionals, or anything like that, and we found that a lot of women, many women, were very, very shy to come out and act. But I think that once you overcome that shyness, it's okay. The greater problem is that women are seen as people who have homes, commitment to children, commitment to husbands, and it was very, very difficult. It was like drawing teeth, to get us all together in time to practise. A lot of women could not participate in our practices because they had to go home and see to the children, and see to the meals, and if the husband calls up from work and says, "I'm working late," that was it, they could not attend rehearsals, they had to be there. I find that performance for women is a very difficult thing to accomplish.