

“Abuse Has No Boundaries”

Aruna Papp interviewed by Maroussia and Khursheed Ahmed

Aruna Papp came to Canada from India in 1972 with her two small daughters and husband. Like most other south Asian immigrant women she harboured illusions of Canada as the “land of opportunity”. Soon enough, however, she came face to face with stark reality—her lack of education, a tight financial situation and an “abusive husband”, to boot.

So she was quick to establish a rapport with a group of south Asian women with whom she had organised a meeting in 1980. That first meeting led Aruna to establish the Toronto Asian Community Centre in 1982. Later in 1988 she founded the South Asian Family Support Services.

Now divorced and firmly on her feet in Canada, Aruna was till recently the executive director of the South Asian Family Support Services based in Scarborough.

Aruna was interviewed by Khursheed and Maroussia Ahmed in Hamilton, Canada. Excerpts from the interview:

What were your feelings when you came to Canada?

My biggest dream when I came to Canada was that I would be able to go to school. I started school very late. I was 11 when I went to kindergarten in India. I got married at 16, so I had very little education. I thought that Canada would be a place where my lot in life would change, we would be well off, and the abuse in my marriage would stop.

But I had not expected the barriers that exist in Canada, especially for immigrant women. For the first few years, immigrant families concentrate on surviving and are unable to find out what assistance is available to them.

Like many immigrants, my husband had a job in India where he wore a suit and a tie. He was not willing to get a job that was beneath his status. We had to feed the children and pay the rent. So I had to find two or sometimes even three jobs.

I lived in North York, a suburb of Toronto, in an area where there were thousands of south Asian families. I often wondered what was happening to other south Asian women in Canada. I wanted to get to know these women.

I worked at York University as a cook, frying eggs, toast and hamburgers from 5 a.m. to 3 p.m. From 4 p.m. I worked as a locker room attendant, handing out



towels and checking identity cards. Three nights a week and on weekends, I worked as a nurses aid. So there was little time to meet people. My husband did nothing, so he looked after the children.

You had no opportunity to continue your education?

When I was working as a locker room attendant, I would seek out students who seemed friendly and I would ask them to look after my duties while I would go and attend a class for an hour. For this favour, I would pay them \$10 to \$15 while I studied. That is how I finished

my education. In fact I have not finished yet. I hope to go for my doctorate programme in September 1991. Nobody in the history of the university has taken so many independent studies and reading courses. I have completed my master's degree as a part-time student, but it has taken a very long time.

I now have a master's degree in sociology; my research is on immigrant battered women. My undergraduate work was also in the area of immigrant women and their problems.

As you were going through these difficulties, did you have any opportunity to get counselling and support?

Yes I did. At York University there is a very good counselling service and I talked to a couple of women who became my mentors. Because York University is surrounded by immigrant communities and they were aware of the problems that immigrants faced, they kept asking me: Why don't you take the initiative and do something about these problems?

I had three weeks of vacation time and I decided to go to all the apartments in the neighbourhood and knocked at all the doors with names that sounded Indian or Pakistani. I talked to these women saying, “Hi, my name is Aruna. I am new in the area and I would like to meet some people.” I would be invited

in and offered a cup of tea. In those three weeks I spoke to 1,800 people and I was horrified by the stories that these women told me.

In this community was there any network or an organisation, or even a laundry room where these women might meet and socialise? Were they talking to each other or did you find that they had a need to talk?

They were just locked up in 10 to 20 storey tall apartment buildings. Many women worked in factories with mothers-in-law looking after their children. After work they were expected to do the housework and if they complained they were beaten by their husbands. There were also a number of young, newly wed women who had just come from south Asian countries and were just suffocated because, like myself, they had a very different image of what Canada would be like. However, they were in for a shock. Back home the houses are wide open, you have neighbours dropping in, there is always something going on. In Canada, Asian women are afraid to come out of their homes, and when they do there is no place to go. They may not speak English, and it is not safe to be on the street alone. There was no network or organisation to bring them together.

I invited the women I met to a community centre to talk about our needs and what we could do about them. I expected 20 to 30 women to come, but 156 showed up!

Was it easier for them to talk to you?

Only because I told them first about my problems. I went on the ethnic TV and told the whole world that I was a victim of wife abuse and wanted to meet other women in the same situation. This had never been done before. In the first 24 hours, 69 women called. The phone rang day and night, they began to trust me.

What did you organise for them?

Nothing. I had no idea what to do. I was not a social worker and had no experience. I was so overwhelmed to see

the response, and the hope with which they had come to receive assistance, that when I stood up in front of them I started crying. I did not know what I was going to do with them. I had only one kettle and about 30 cups to make tea. But they said they had not come for tea, they came to talk and to listen. The women broke up into smaller groups and began to make plans for the group.

This was in 1980. Out of this group of women an organisation was established and two years later it was incorporated. It is called Toronto Asian Community Centre. They now have seven full-time workers. It is government funded and it has become a focal point for the south Asian families that have problems such as immigration and sponsorship, domestic violence or require help with translation.

What was the next step with these women who responded?

I went back to York University and told them what had happened, and they made many suggestions about how I should proceed. This was my first exposure to social work. I was trained on the job. I did not know what counselling

was but since I was receiving counselling for my problems, I began to take classes in this field.

Counselling is a very western concept. I had to create a different form of counselling to fit the needs of this community. At first I didn't know what to say to the women who were coming to me. I learnt about their needs, then I went looking for ways to help. I began to read all the material I could find on other immigrant communities and contacted other existing organisations for ethnic communities such as the Italians and Greek.

The other thing that really helped was that I started teaching these women English. The English classes became a pretext for us to have support groups, talk about our problems and find ways to deal with them. Women met other women from their neighbourhood and began to develop friendships. I encouraged them to go out shopping together, or go out for walks together, take their children to the park together. I taught them things like where to buy cheap clothes, what food was on sale in which store, how to dress for winter and



Aruna Papp with staff of South Asian Family Support Services Aruna is third from left

how to protect themselves against cold weather. I took them to doctors' offices, or helped them find jobs.

What were the typical problems of these women. Did they seek company and friendship, or did they open their hearts to you?

Their problems were isolation, depression, family violence, low self-esteem, suicidal behaviour. Because of depression they had physical problems. They were taking very high doses of medication. Many women were locked up in psychiatric wards because they could not cope with loneliness.

Just imagine a south Asian who comes from a joint family or a nuclear family with lots of people around, and suddenly she is locked up in a two bedroom apartment. She does nothing all day. She may not even watch the television because she does not understand the language. She has no one to talk to.

But wouldn't they socialise with each other?

We as an ethnic community are very careful about who we socialise with, we worry about what people think about us. We don't want to talk about our problems because we want others to think well of us ("Log kya kahain ge?"). We don't want them to know that we are not doing well financially, or there is family violence. We keep it all to ourselves. Also men who abuse their wives have a very tight control on the women. They do not want their wives mixing with anyone in case she tells them about their situation or she learns "western ways" and seeks help and leaves her husband.

What is the difference between the western concept of counselling and being just a friend, listening and trying to help?

In the Canadian context, counselling is very therapeutic. You sit across the table from your counsellor and tell them what is happening in your life. They then analyse your situation and tell you the

direction in which you should go. It is very clinical. There is a distance between the therapist and the client.

As a friend, however, it is all right to hold their hand, hug them when they cry, even to weep with them. As a therapist you can't do any of this. During the training programme for counselling, they drill this into you. You can't get personally involved.

In the process of sharing their problems with you, the women probably felt more reassured, and perhaps empowered. How did the families react to the changes taking place in these women?

Self-confidence and empowering takes a very long time. It does not happen in the first or even the second year of counselling. Sometimes it takes a whole year to earn someone's trust, for someone to be able to sit in a group and say, "yes, I am hurting." Because they are afraid that if their husbands find out, they might be blackmailed, beaten, thrown out of the home, or even killed.

Were there many cases of family violence in these buildings?

Yes. Not every woman was beaten but a majority of them were. You have to think of family violence and wife abuse in a Canadian context. If a woman gets slapped every two or three months in India, it is not considered family violence. In Canada, it is. Here if a woman is emotionally deprived, psychologically abused or threatened, it is considered family violence. The man can be brought before the court for it. But in India husbands often threaten their wives saying, "I'll kill your brother" ("*Tere bhai ko maar doonga*") and it is commonly accepted as something said in anger.

Are these problems more common in the south Asian community than other communities in Canada?

It is very difficult to say because there are no comparative studies. However, the problem of wife abuse exists in every community regardless of ethnic, socio-

economic, or educational background.

My feeling is that back home if somebody is abused, there is the family, neighbours, and friends to talk to, to share and help her cope with her problems. The older women would often talk of their own experiences and say, "Don't worry, it will get better. I had the same experience." So there is a support system. However, in Canada because you are so isolated even a slap which was tolerated in India becomes a big problem. The feeling of helplessness gets more acute. Many men who would never beat their wives back home start doing so here.

Do men have problems too? Do they too miss the socialising and coping mechanism?

Of course, men too have their problems. Back home they would come from work, sit around and relax, chat with their neighbours or friends, and take it easy. Here they come home, it is snowing outside, there is no place to go. To go anywhere they need money, a car, so they often end up staying at home. Alcohol is easily available. They might have a drink or two. Pretty soon it may be five or six, and before you know it, they have an alcohol problem.

Do men have difficulty getting the kind of jobs that they think they deserve?

Yes, a large number of Asian men and women are underemployed or unemployed. When a very educated man has to take a job much below his status it is devastating to his ego and to the family image. Back home they might have been professionals, but here they often don't get suitable jobs and end up taking low-paying menial jobs (for example, driving taxis, as security guards, petrol pump operators). They might be older and find it difficult to go back to school and get local professional licences. The pressure and embarrassment of coming to the land of plenty and being at the bottom of the ladder is more devastating psychologically to a man than anything else.

There is also the problem of maintaining a certain image, because everybody back home thinks that in Canada everyone drives luxury cars and has a good life.

Yes, and the pathetic part is that many people keep writing home that they are doing well, sending nice pictures, and they often don't tell the truth. So the family back home, assuming that everyone is financially well off, keep making requests for money; for example asking them to send money for their sister's dowry, or for a leaking roof which needs to be fixed. They keep making constant demands which just makes matters worse. People do not talk about these problems, and often try to outdo each other in getting cars, furniture, and so on. You don't want someone coming to your home to see an old rug, so you don't invite them and you become even more isolated. For many people, the only place they socialise with their own community is in the temple.

Do the religious groups help diffuse the problem?

Yes, but let me clarify this. There are several social agencies and clubs for the south Asian community in many cities but their activities are cultural, religious or political. They do not involve themselves with the social problems facing the community. These agencies are for a small number of elite and well established families.

However, the majority of the community has migrated to Canada in the last 10-15 years, and the religious places give them a sense of belonging. We know that all religious institutions are patriarchal in nature and structure. They often do not hear the women's side of the story. Seldom will women get help from religious institutions.

You said that many women work in factories. What is the proportion of women who work outside the home?

The community is very scattered. There are no studies to indicate how many women from this community are in factories. But government reports do



show that low paid jobs in Canada are done by women and immigrants.

Even the mainstream Canadian community reports considerable family violence and wife abuse, and that does not make it any easier.

Yes, but because the mainstream community has lived here a long time they know about the social services that are available to them. New communities take longer, maybe 20-25 years to develop that understanding.

How did your organisation evolve from 1982 onwards?

I had been managing the Toronto Asian Community Centre for about six to seven years and I felt quite burnt out. During this time I also went through a divorce. I had recruited south Asians as board and committee members.

When I got a divorce, one of the board members who I thought was my friend and supportive of my work, stood up at a meeting and said that as a divorcee I was not a good representative for the organisation. There was so much anger and character assassination in her voice that I left that city and moved elsewhere. I did not want the work I had started to suffer because of my personal problems.

I moved to Scarborough, another suburb of Toronto with a large immigrant

population. Here I started working as a probation officer. I would see the men that were arrested due to domestic violence. I would ask them about their wives and families. I was horrified to learn that often there was no support system in Scarborough for these women and no one to help them. So I invented a second job for myself. I would go to see these women and tell them that I had seen their husbands, that they were doing fine, and explain what was being done. The first thing the wife would ask: "Did he eat? Is he OK? Has he lost weight?" and I would tell her that he only got caught last night and it is not enough time to lose weight! But that is a part of our culture. We worry about them even when they beat the hell out of us! Whereas in the Canadian context, the woman might say: "Make sure you lock him up and he does not come out again!"

Do the battered women tend to leave their husbands or put up with them? Are there better coping mechanisms available now in Canada?

Research in Canada and United States on wife abuse indicates that western women are beaten on the average of 34 to 40 times before they leave their abusive husbands. These women know the language, they know the law, they

have support. But for a south Asian these support systems are missing. Even when there are these support systems south Asian women will not leave their husbands, not even when their own lives are threatened. We have socialised them so well into self-sacrificing Sitas that they just do not see a way out even if you tell them that you can have your own apartment and the government will pay you, you can look after yourself. Even if the husband is an alcoholic, battering and abusive, they still feel it is better to have a husband than not. It is not the same thing for the Canadian women. That is our cultural problem. It is my own experience that when a woman is divorced, the whole community will shun her. She can't go to the temple—all the men would look her up and down thinking that "she is available"; all the women will make sure that "you stay away from them."

Does it mean that when you were separated from your first husband, you could not work with these women because they would not trust you?

I had more support from women who were victims, than from those who were supposed to be helping battered women. They could not tolerate that I had taken steps to leave my marriage. They felt that I should have mended my marriage and should have found a "culturally approved" solution. I tried for 17 years to mend my marriage but it did not work.

Breaking away from the culture was a very bad thing to do and the greatest opposition to my work with battered women has come from people who were supposed to be helping but in reality they did not want too many changes which were uncomfortable to deal with.

There were some women who were clients and became quite close to me. We have developed great friendships.

In our culture as long as women continue to allow themselves to be beaten, they become martyrs. Everybody says, "Isn't that wonderful, she is working so hard, looking after the whole family and being submissive." The

minute you get up and say "I've had enough," you become the bad person, you left the family, you abandoned them. The first thing that our community will do is malign a woman's character. There will be stories claiming you are sleeping with men you may know or not know. Then they will start with the guilt trip: "What about your children, you have destroyed their lives, what about your parents, you have brought them pain," the list goes on and on. Most women are not strong enough to face these attacks. They begin to feel guilty and they return. Then the abuse is worse. They are trapped for life.

What made you decide to end your own marriage?

Like many millions of women in the world who are victims of their husband's ill treatment, the biggest catch was my three children. I could neither leave them behind nor take them with me. Most women can't support the children alone, even if they are working. This is true of Canadian women also. Nevertheless I tried to make my marriage work for 17 years.

One night I came home after an evening shift. It was November. I was cold and very hungry. I had not eaten all day. As I got in the house my ex-husband charged into me saying, "Where the hell have you been, who have you been with, what have you been doing?" I stood by the door, frightened that he was going to beat me. I tried to explain to him by saying, "I just called you from work 10 minutes ago, you know I was working, you have been calling all night checking up on me, you had the children call for one reason or the other. Why are you saying these things? You know that what you are saying is not true." My daughter, who was 15 years old at this time and was a very shy, very nervous girl, came down the stairs and looked at me standing by the door, not being able to come in, and heard her father yelling at me. Something happened to her when she saw me. She began to scream at me saying, "Mother, why do you keep

coming to this house? Why do you let this man talk to you in such filthy language? Why do you put up with this abuse? You make more money than he, you can support yourself. You must like what he does to you. That is why you keep coming back."

I was in shock to hear my daughter talking to me that way. But her pain was very clear. She was hurting for me but was also angry at a mother who could not or would not protect herself. I began to cry and said to her, "I keep coming back because I thought that you needed me, you would be lost without me, because you need a mother and a father". She told me in no uncertain terms that if I could not take care of myself how could I take care of my children? She said that she was old enough to cook and wash their clothes, she would also keep the house clean. If it was the children that were holding me back, now I had no excuse to stay. It was the biggest favour a daughter could have done for her mother—to free the mother of the guilt. I turned around and left.

That night I slept in my car. Later I rented an apartment. I had no furniture, no clothes. I would come home and touch the walls, saying that these walls are mine, the window is mine. I had left a big four bedroom house and my children. But I felt safe in this little apartment and for the first time in my life I could sleep through the night without being afraid that my husband would pull me off the bed, rape me, or beat me. I would go near the house and wait in the car and cry, sometimes all night. I was worried about my children, wondering if they were okay. But I could not even enter the house because he had changed the locks.

But you did not want to go back did you?

I came very close to it. During the day I kept myself very busy. But at night I would worry about the children. If the locks had not been changed, I might have gone back. But I also knew that if I went in that would be the end of me. What keeps many women from escaping

is the children. I was lucky that I was soon settled and the children came to live with me. They left because their father had begun to abuse them also.

Obviously it is not something every woman can do, for the reasons you have outlined. In your counselling do you try and get couples to work it out if possible?

Yes. Both the organisations I founded work on the basis of saving a marriage. When I moved to Scarborough, I felt that there was a lot of abuse going on in the community. Because of my own experience, I have never advocated divorce unless the woman's life is threatened or the woman had made up her mind. But once the woman has made up her mind to end the marriage, then I will do everything I can to see that she is resettled without too much trauma to her and the children.

However, when it is possible I try and work out some kind of compromise between husband and wife.

Once they have agreed to modify their behaviour and to change the rules, how do you make sure that they are keeping their promise?

In some cases we draw up a contract. When problems are written on a paper and the couple have a chance to read and reread them it is a very different picture. A lot of the time, couples who are serious about saving the marriage take the contract very seriously and realise that if it looks so bad on paper how terrible it must be to be at the receiving end.

How many of them are serious about saving their marriages?

Most of them. Unlike in the Canadian community, where it is very easy for people to get divorced and remarried, in the south Asian community it is a serious stigma. It is easier for men to go back and get another wife. But if they have not changed themselves their problems reappear with the new wife. I have known men who have married as many as three



times and it is still not working. What I am teaching couples in Canada about dealing with marital problems is not new. It has been done for thousands of years back home but it was done by the elders of the community or family. We have lost that support when we moved. We have no one who will listen to us and be fair in dealing with our feelings, both for men and women.

Does family violence cut across the classes?

It is everywhere. Among doctors, engineers, professors, factory workers. Abuse has no boundaries. One of the big problems I have come across is women being maltreated for their inability to produce a son. Out of 100 abused women that I interviewed, 22 had no male child.

Does your organisation simply react to a situation, or do you take preventive action, such as educating people or making the community aware of the problem, so that there will be less abuse?

Because we have such a limited number of people and resources, in our agency all we do is crisis management. I often do counselling in my personal time. I do workshops, seminars and lectures

for social workers, teachers, doctors and other professionals who come in contact with the south Asian community.

How many cases do you see a day, or in a week?

We have a very heavy case load. Typically, it averages between five and eight cases a day. One social worker in my office has up to 169 cases. I go home at 5.30 p.m. feed my family and then work for another four or five hours doing my reports. This is true of other workers as well.

Are your social workers south Asian?

Yes, they are women who are very well educated from back home but had a very difficult time finding jobs in Canada. I trained them all. They have taken further courses and have become very valued workers.

What happens to the children? Who takes care of them? They must be psychologically disturbed.

That is a very big problem and nothing is being done about them. I think I am not exaggerating when I say that the second generation of south Asians in Canada will be schizophrenic. They are neither Canadians nor Indians. Often they have no one to turn to. They are taught things in school that do not go down very well in our culture. In school they are told that if they do not understand something they must ask questions; at home they are not allowed to ask questions, they are told what to do. They are not allowed to think for themselves; parents want to tell them what is good for them. They are not allowed to date (have boyfriends or girlfriends). They are under pressure from their Canadian friends to become a part of the school group; parents don't want that. The parents expect very high results in school, without allowing the children to mix with those who might be able to assist them. The children are very confused. The bottom line is that many of the children can't cope and run away from their homes.

Does the justice system in Canada treat the south Asian community as fairly as other communities?

I think that the laws relating to women of all communities have to be changed and tightened.

There are built-in prejudices among the police, lawyers and even the judges. When you go to the court seeking justice and they brand you as "you people", you know you have lost the battle. Nobody stands up and says, "What do you mean by this, Your Honour?" I have done this once or twice and I have been asked to leave for contempt of court.

The social workers also carry cultural prejudices and I have heard them say numerous times that in the south Asian community wife abuse is accepted. I think that is very insulting. I always ask, "By whom? No woman wants to be beaten." It just shows their ignorance.

How does the violence towards women in India and stories of bride burning affect these attitudes?

It simply reinforces the negative stereotypes about us. We are having dowry problems in Canada too. Arranged marriages have never gone out of style and are happening more and more in Canada.

Have you done something to publicise the successful case stories?

Well I have been on a number of important TV shows in Canada, including on the national TV network. I have taken women along who are success stories. A woman had attempted to commit suicide. I met her in the hospital. Today she is in college, doing well. Several dozen of such women would talk about themselves.

I am working on a book, in fact on a couple of books. One of them is a book about 10 women who were victims of wife abuse. The book describes how we struggled to survive and finally landed on our feet. I hope this book will be of encouragement to those in similar situations, and also help the service providers to understand our culture better.

After all these years of experience, do you have reason to be optimistic about the situation? Do you feel your organisation is improving the situation?

I feel very optimistic some days, and very discouraged on other days. It is like taking one step forward and three steps backward. There is still a lot of work to be done and a lot of women will be lost. In one year nine south Asian women were killed. This is the highest proportion in any ethnic community.

But isn't this a general problem affecting all Canadians? For example, in the province of Quebec alone over 70 women were killed last year as a result of domestic violence.



Yes, it is a problem all over. But I can only speak of south Asian women. There is, however, cause for optimism. Women are beginning to realise that they have a choice. They can change their own thinking and situation without leaving their homes. Awareness of law and other options gives them strength.

Is the situation for south Asian women getting better?

The problems are on the rise and getting more complex. Perhaps more women are coming forward now. Certainly, there are few immigrants and refugees coming and bringing new problems. For instance the problems of adolescence, rape, in-laws, the high dose of medication women take to deal with stress. Last year there were 17 south Asian women in psychiatric wards. I think that is a large number for such a small community.

Do you experience resistance by other people in the community when you try to help abused women?

The biggest problem that I have is that people deny that there is a problem. They think that I am exaggerating; I have simply taken two or three cases and made a big story out of it. My view is that violence against south Asian women has reached epidemic proportions.

What advice can you give to the young women who may come to Canada?

Canada is definitely not the land of 'milk and honey'. Sooner or later you will have to find a job. Try to get some local education and a job early on before you have children and get confined to the house. It helps to take some English courses which are often available free.

Good sources of information and support are the churches and hospitals. They have social workers on their staff. In an emergency situation I often tell women to call the police.

Get to know the outside world, the social services and support systems as soon as possible. There could be an emergency and this information will prove helpful. □