**Desi Dost/Chai With Sahelis**

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When Bindu Fernandes of Narika, a 30-year domestic violence organization in Fremont, California told us last June that transnational abandonment, a growing phenomenon, had spiked significantly during the pandemic, we realized immediately that this story needed to be told.

Narika reported a three-fold increase in domestic violence calls since March 2020 and two to three cases of transnational abandonment a week. They called it "one of the most sinister and damaging forms of abuse" they had witnessed.

**Transnational abandonment** is a form of domestic abuse that occurs when vulnerable immigrant women are abandoned in their country of origin by their husbands. This is particularly prevalent in arranged marriages within the South Asian community, where victims face domestic violence, emotional abuse, cultural alienation, or financial exploitation from their husbands and in-laws. Once they are deliberately removed from the US, these disposable women lose legal protections, rights to their homes, finances and even children.

As immigrant women of color ourselves, with roots in a tradition-bound South Asian community, we know that domestic violence (DV) is rarely discussed in our society and definitely not from the perspective of the survivor. We've reported on the stigma attached to issues like DV and mental health because the patriarchal nature of our South Asian culture suffocates open discourse on these taboo topics. DV survivors, mainly women, endure the trauma of domestic violence without support from their family or community. The fact that over 24 DV agencies operate in the U.S. to support South Asian survivors, is a telling reminder that DV taints our community, and that women continue to stay in abusive situations because 'log kya kahenge' — what will people say?

Initially, that's what drove our reporting. What would people say if we asked our community why they don't step up when our men abandon our women? Would survivors tell us the truth if we asked why they stayed in abusive relationships?

We intended to explore the dynamics of domestic violence in South Asian families in a culturally sensitive way to raise awareness through honest conversations with survivors and advocates.

But when our research into transnational abandonment in the U.S. produced only a few academic studies and no media coverage, it became the focus of our investigation.

We began conversations with survivors, caseworkers, therapists, academics, and advocates, then added family law experts and immigration lawyers to the roster. Our research expanded to review both the U.S. and Indian legal implications for abandoned foreign nationals.

We examined the aftermath of abandonment — what happens to survivors battling legal systems in two countries, India and the U.S. These women are dependents of H1B visa holders employed by Silicon Valley's tech sector. Without adequate support networks or access to legal or financial resources, they fall through the cracks between family law court and immigration court, because the two courts don't talk to each other.

We searched for solutions to address patterns of violence, abandonment, and resources for survivors.

**It was a huge learning curve.** Over four months, we interviewed nine survivors and 12 experts to build a clear picture of the issue. Some became amazing allies — Bindu Fernandes at Narika, immigration lawyer Shah Peerally, family law experts Dorchen Leidholt and Carolien Hardenbol at Sanctuary for Families and

Mona Kafeel of Texas Muslim Women's Foundation. They supplied information, clarified legal complexities, and introduced us to their networks. Tanya Momi, a survivor and artist, shared her artwork for free.

Some findings were disheartening. One unedifying truth that emerged in “Chai with Sahelis: (sisterhood) was the glaring lack of solidarity among the female family and friends that survivors turned to for help.

Rennu Dillon, featured in the audio story “It’s Not Just a Thappad,” said friends asked her, “Why are you leaving him? Sab aadmi aise karthe hain (all men do this). You have nice kids, a nice house, nice cars. Live with this.”

And though we discovered safety nets in VAWA, the U-Visa, humanitarian parole, and severely under-funded DV support groups, it became clear that there was no pathway to resolution in U.S. Immigration and Family Court for survivors stuck in the country without legal status.

But six months into our investigation, an exciting prospect emerged. In the next stage for our project, we will explore options that could help abandoned DV survivors and policy makers understand the chasm between U.S. immigration and family law courts. Unexpectedly, that possibility has evolved into a second phase of our project — through online and social media storytelling and other engagement strategies.

We are thrilled that USC has offered us mentors to help develop ways to continue the impact reporting and engagement on this topic.

**Getting to this point has taken commitment.** From July through October, we recorded three deeply personal stories from survivors for a unique storytelling project and wrote two in-depth articles on the dynamics of DV, transnational abandonment, and the impact of dual jurisdictions on immigration and child custody.

The most innovative and impactful community engagement piece was celebrating “Chai With Sahelis” with survivors at Narika’s offices in Fremont. Over tea and snacks, the women shared experiences and tips about training, child care, and affordable housing. One offered the other a job on the spot. There were tears, but the overall vibe was encouragement to stay positive and move on.

We published the audio stories and articles on India Currents, a Bay Area publication with a readership of more than 100,000. Links sent to our networks and allies to share on their platforms expanded outreach. Our next step is to move this story from the confines of its ethnic media narrative and try to take it mainstream as a women’s rights issue.

**Our Challenges**

The most challenging but rewarding part of Desi Dost was the community engagement. Over a period of four months, we recorded interviews in one- to three-hour sessions with each survivor. That drained us emotionally at first, but with self-care we learned to bring our full selves to each interview with empathy and curiosity.

It was important to gain survivors’ trust. Signing memorandums of understanding gave them full vetting rights over the final audio story and helped build trust but created some nail-biting moments as we went to publication.

Anjali Kour, who is still fighting a legal battle, wanted final approval from the family matriarch in India. When consent was withheld the day of publication, we spent two days reworking her story to represent her challenges without compromising her privacy, safety and family ties. Giving survivors that right is part of the journey to reclaiming control of their life.

It was hard to get data on DV in our community. National surveys had only aggregated data available, and data from DV agencies was limited. So we created a DV community survey on India Currents and shared that template with a cohort member (Pooja Garg) to establish baseline data.

It was challenging sifting through the volume of material to build a coherent story from hours of interviews with experts, especially getting to grips with family and immigration law in India and the U.S. Weekly meetings with our mentors kept us focused and our monthly cohort meetings with the USC team kept us on track.

It was our first time gathering and interpreting court documents as evidence. The cost of copies was prohibitive, and one survivor had over 50 pages listing just court hearings. We learned to pinpoint key words that identified court decisions and obtain specific documents to support our survivor's story.

No objections, requests for corrections or retractions or other controversies rose after publication of this project

**Lessons for reporters covering domestic violence**

- Keep a balance between being a journalist and a friend with survivors.
- Use an MOU with survivors that details the project plan to establish trust.
- Transcribe interviews immediately; add key findings and quotes to your roadmap.
- Request permissions on quotes ASAP, as lawyers need approval from their organizations.
- Building a network of experts takes effort. Narika introduced us to some survivors, caseworkers and lawyers, and those initial networks helped us build our expert base and gain a deeper understanding of this multifaceted issue. Every lead opened a door to a new perspective, and new stories waiting to be investigated.
- Talking to mentors helps to see things differently — especially refining nut graphs and roadmaps as the story evolves.
- Be open to change: Our initial goal changed significantly from creating awareness about DV in our community to crafting an engagement effort that reaches those most affected and a policy audience.

What lies ahead is an exciting opportunity. Changing hearts and minds takes a generation but we can create more impact by concentrating on tangible short-term goals and making it easier for survivors to understand their rights, the limits to our current framework and opportunities for change.

Women facing violence need proof that they can take control of their lives. We have to help them break the cycle of hopelessness and know their rights. Ultimately, we want these stories to shape the narrative and shift perceptions on what healthy relationships mean so that survivors in our community get the help they deserve.