



JAHAJEE ISSUE BRIEF

INDO-CARIBBEANS AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

During Indian indentureship in the Caribbean (1838-1917), 450,000 Indians were transported to the Caribbean, landing mainly in Guyana and Trinidad. After slavery came to an end, they replaced African labor on British sugar plantations. Patriarchal values from India coupled with the oppressive British colonial system made women extremely vulnerable to gendered violence. The legacy of brutal violence against women continues today throughout the Caribbean countries Indians call home as well as in Western diaspora communities.¹ In the United States, Indo-Caribbean women in Queens, New York – home to the largest concentration of Indo-Caribbeans in the United States – experience high rates of domestic violence. News headlines announcing the gender-based murders of Indo-Caribbean women are all too familiar for those living in and serving the Indo-Caribbean community.



Indo-Caribbean New Yorkers killed in acts of gender-based violence: From left to right: Natasha Ramen (2007), Diane Sharma (2012), Guiatree Hardat (2007), Felicia Cassadean (2012), Rajwantie Baldeo (2016), Stacy Singh (2018), Marian Singh (2019), Donna Dojoy (2019); These murders took place in Queens, NY after the start of our organizing in 2007. We are certain there are other murders we are unaware of.

They Came On Ships

The majority of women who migrated to the Caribbean were kidnapped and trafficked or living on the fringes of society. They are said to have been primarily low-caste, sex workers, and widows seeking a to escape poverty and social barriers. Migrating to the Caribbean was a brutal experience, made worse for women who were often traveling alone and outnumbered by men.

Traveling by ships surrounded by many other migrants, women faced threats and acts of sexual harm. British officers were known to interrupt Indian women during toilet breaks to offer food in exchange for sexual acts.³

The Plantation Experience

Far outnumbered, women were relegated to property by Indian men who desired to “claim” the few who were the only option for partnership. As a result, women were often abused and murdered by men in fits of jealous rage. The barbaric violence is reflected in reports from that time, where common words describing abuse were “dismembered” and

**“AT A RATIO OF 400 MEN TO 14 WOMEN,
THE FIRST SHIPS SAILING FROM THE PORTS
OF CALCUTTA TO GUYANA CREATED A
GLARING UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF GENDERS.”**

– Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture², Gaiutra Bahadur

“hacked” — brutal murders by cutlass, the plantation tool used by laborers to chop sugarcane.²

Between 1859 and 1917, 167 Indo-Caribbean women were murdered in Guyana. Infidelity - or the fear of it - motivated the crime in most cases, colonial authorities claimed.⁴

By 1871, the British empire found that indentured Indian men in Guyana murdered indentured Indian women at a rate of 142 times greater than in the provinces in India from which they came.²

The violence against women was greater than the murder statistics suggest. Often, the aim was to disfigure, not kill. Indeed, the cases that didn't end in death outnumbered those that did. “Between 1886 and 1890, when twenty-five were murdered in Guiana [Guyana], thirty-five were wounded, usually with cutlasses. Noses, those representatives of women's honor, seemed to be a particular target.”²

Present Day Femicide & Domestic Violence

The legacy of plantation violence can still be seen in the high rates of femicide in Guyana and Trinidad, and in the American neighborhoods where Indo-Caribbean immigrants made their homes. Fifty-five percent of women in Guyana and forty-four percent of women in Trinidad experience domestic violence.⁵

Femicides in our New York community are often shocking and gruesome in nature. Many have occurred in public, indicating a lack of shame among harmdoers. The case of Rajwantie Baldeo, whose husband tried to behead her with a kitchen knife in the street, reminds us of the deaths by cutlass (machete) that were commonplace in our home countries.

“WOMEN ARE ASHAMED. THEY TALK IF CONCERN IS SHOWN, THEY SUGARCOAT IT AND LIE ABOUT IT.

MY COUSINS HAVE ABUSIVE HUSBANDS AND THEY SAY THEY WERE ACCIDENTALLY HIT WHEN THEY HAVE BLACK AND BLUE EYES.” - NADIRA, 24

- “Indo-Caribbean Immigrant Perspectives on Intimate Partner Violence”⁶, Aneesa Baboolal

In 2021, Jahajee conducted a needs assessment survey of 227 women and gender-nonconforming Indo-Caribbeans living in New York.

65%
OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OR KNEW SOMEONE WHO DID.

Domestic violence is often underreported, and the true number is certainly higher.⁷

Despite the prevalence of domestic violence in our community, **over half of respondents did not believe domestic violence survivors have many options for where to receive help.**

Societal expectations of how a family should appear in the Indo-Caribbean community facilitates complacency in allowing women to be taken advantage of. Many victims are unable to seek justice or spread awareness to their case, as the dissolution of marriage is seen as especially scandalous.

Mental Health & Alcohol Abuse

While not the root cause, substance abuse can be a major contributing factor to gender based violence. The consumption of alcohol is a prominent aspect of Indo-Caribbean culture, making many dangerous situations even worse.

When living with a partner dealing with chronic alcohol use, not only is stress placed on the individual members of a family or relationship, but also affects the entire unit and household as well. Alcohol and drugs create a hostile environment in an already intense situation.

The subject of mental health is commonly a “taboo” topic in many Indo-Caribbean households. Issues such as cultural stigmas, immigration stressors, and generational gaps contribute to an influx of anxiety and depression amongst Indo-Caribbeans. These mental health concerns often go unaddressed and undiagnosed, resulting in pent-up aggression released through physical violence and abuse.

Men, in particular, are expected to maintain a sense of emotionless masculinity, which enables them to consume unhealthy amounts of alcohol or drugs. These harmful coping mechanisms result in toxic relationships and detrimental consequences.

Economic Dependence

Over half of our survey respondents said economic insecurity is a major issue for Indo-Caribbean women, saying it was "extremely important." Of these respondents, 74% said the biggest contributing factor to economic insecurity is living expenses. This was the second most important issue for our respondents, followed by immigration and citizenship issues.

Economic insecurity is a risk factor for domestic violence, as many survivors depend on their abusers for food, shelter, and to support their children.⁸ Immigration status can add additional vulnerability, as survivors may be unable to work legally and are often threatened with deportation by their abusers. Indeed, the majority of femicides in our New York community were against young immigrant women new to the country and struggling economically.

“DOMESTIC VIOLENCE WAS REPORTED WITHIN ALL SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASS GROUPINGS BUT IT WAS MOST PREVALENT WITHIN THE WORKING CLASS AND LOWER MIDDLE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASSES. THE MOST PROMINENT REASONS CITED FOR THE PHYSICAL VIOLENCE WAS DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE (37%) AND COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES (16.3%).”

- "The Prevalence of Domestic Violence within Different Socio-economic Classes in Central Trinidad"⁸

“THE COMBINATION OF CAPITALISM AND PATRIARCHY CAN CREATE A VERY DETRIMENTAL POSITION FOR WOMEN AS THOSE WHO WISH TO LEAVE ABUSIVE SITUATIONS MUST CHOOSE BETWEEN THEIR OWN ECONOMIC STABILITY OR SAFETY.”

- "Indo-Caribbean Immigrants Perceptions of Dating Abuse"⁹,
Nelesh Singh

Policy Recommendations

We encourage policymakers to prevent and address gender-based violence in our community by:

- Promoting measures that will increase economic security, including free higher education, access to unemployment benefits regardless of the type of work one does, and secure jobs
- Supporting funding for community-based, culturally competent prevention and crisis intervention programs that allow people to to engage indigenous ways of healing and wellness
- Creating pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, so they make work and receive a living wage - eliminating the need to depend on an abusive spouse for legal status
- Increasing affordable housing in the neighborhoods in which we live and creating more access to safe emergency shelters for survivors fleeing abuse
- Investing in culturally competent mental health and healthy masculinity programs for communities of color, including support for those facing suicidal ideations and substance abuse

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