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## Surviving Domestic Violence in an Indian-Australian Household: An Autoethnography of Resilience

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## Surviving Domestic Violence in an Indian-Australian Household: An Autoethnography of Resilience

### Abstract

This study explores how my personal experiences with domestic violence in my family have shaped my identity and my current self as an Indian-Australian woman, teacher, and researcher. Domestic violence touches many children and their families and affects their sense of identity and belonging as individuals and in their social spaces. An autoethnographical method is used to investigate my experiences within a domestically violent family and how it has shaped my identity as an Indian-Australian woman. The study reveals various themes including three themes that were noted to be the most significant: patriarchy in Indian culture, resilience, identity and belonging. The study reveals my ongoing struggle in a domestically violent household, feeling torn between protecting my mother and protecting myself. It offers insights into how cultural backgrounds, social frameworks and social values and beliefs may influence others and their development as a person.

### Keywords

Domestic Violence, Autoethnography, Family, Identity and Belonging, Resilience

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# Surviving Domestic Violence in an Indian-Australian Household: An Autoethnography of Resilience

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*This study explores how my personal experiences with domestic violence in my family have shaped my identity and my current self as an Indian-Australian woman, teacher, and researcher. Domestic violence touches many children and their families and affects their sense of identity and belonging as individuals and in their social spaces. An autoethnographical method is used to investigate my experiences within a domestically violent family and how it has shaped my identity as an Indian-Australian woman. The study reveals various themes including three themes that were noted to be the most significant: patriarchy in Indian culture, resilience, identity and belonging. The study reveals my ongoing struggle in a domestically violent household, feeling torn between protecting my mother and protecting myself. It offers insights into how cultural backgrounds, social frameworks and social values and beliefs may influence others and their development as a person. Keywords: Domestic Violence, Autoethnography, Family, Identity and Belonging, Resilience*

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## The Researcher

I am a doctoral candidate researching domestic violence and educational experiences of Indian-Australian women. This study explores my experiences as a child in a domestically violent household and how it has shaped me as a woman, researcher and an activist. With an initial Bachelor of Science and a Masters in Secondary Education, my long-term goal was to research and work with women of colour towards the betterment of their lifestyles and question the educational opportunities available to them. This study explores the crucial moments in my life that have led me to pursue research in domestic violence within the Indian-Australian community. This study invites readers to understand my interest towards this topic and how my life experiences drive my passion. Learning from my personal experiences along with my mother's experiences, this autoethnographical study explores my personal identity, my relationships with others around me and my perception of Indian culture and the existence of domestic violence.

## Introduction to the Study

At present, there is a wide amount of literature based around the migration experiences of Indians to Australia. There is however a lack of research on women migrating from their countries to settle into other countries, particularly Indian mothers and their daughters. A crucial reason why most parents decide to migrate to a new country is to offer an enhanced future for their children (Manuelrayan, 2012).

Migrants grapple with complicated connections that are copied within and throughout multiple countries and it is complicated to understand their lives strictly according to the host country (Somerville, 2008). Internet, long distance phone calls, and international flights have assisted migrants to sustain their connections to their homeland. However, the lives of these migrant's children are less committed to a homeland. The children of migrant parents negotiate

identities in a space where their identities are different from that of their parents. Their parent's identities were formed in their native country prior to their migration; their children's identities were formed in their new host country but influenced by their parents' understandings of culture. The second generation apprehend that they are different from their parents due to the ongoing cross-border communications. Since they have not experienced an immigration journey, they don't belong to the native-born whites or the people of colour, but rather they inhabit a space between cultural homeland and new place of residence (Somerville, 2008).

Children of migrant parents consider themselves in one of two ways: one that is more stable connected to their roots and values; the other has more fluidity connected their current practices and acquired customs. These children of immigrants go to great extents to participate in belonging to their country of settlement. They are an active member in a community, are trying to earn the right of participation, on the same basis in their societal lives and avoiding negative locations that lead to biased and eliminating practices (Colombo & Rebughini, 2013).

Research on the identity development of women in India has predominantly concentrated on their role as family members. Interpersonal relationships are foundational in women's lives and her role as a daughter, sister, wife and mother in her family is highlighted as integral (Kakkar, 1998). Women in India view themselves as a vital aspect of their family and their society. These mothers, daughters and grandmothers' personal sense of identity and personal development is linked to their assigned duties and jobs (Seymour, 1999).

Indian social culture makes women vulnerable to violence because Indian society is patriarchal and patrilineal in nature; men head the family. Women's inferior, economic and societal position within this structure can be traced to ancient India (c.1500 BC), when Kautilya, Manu and Smriti philosophers called for unconditional subservience of women to their families and their husbands. The ancient writings showed that the husband upholds total control over his wife's mind and body and has "the right to use physical corrective methods over his erring wife" (Mahajan, 1990, p. 120). Such ancient Indian cultural beliefs have permitted the continuation of facts allowing men to control the social, economic and sexual boundaries within the house (Roy, 2014).

Women who may have experienced childhood or adulthood trauma identify as survivors rather than victims (Campbell, 1986; Kondora, 1993). Women who were suffering from domestic violence and did not actively ask for assistance were called victims and those who have made substantial progress towards recovery were referred to as a survivor (Walker, 1979). Due to the traditional notion that discussing experiences of domestic violence brings shame to the family and community, women have found themselves reluctant to disclose their experiences. Most survivors of domestic violence either refuse to name the perpetrator of the assault or blame the injuries to other reasons (Daga, Jejeebhoy, & Rajgopal, 1999).

This study investigates how my experiences of domestic violence and sexual assault has shaped me as an individual. I explore my sense of identity as an Indian-Australian and my sense of resilience while examining my teenage years. As an educational development, this self-awareness will progress my self-knowledge and personal development (Britzman, 1998). This process as defined by Roberts (2004) is researching "identity construction" or searching for "who is he (or she) and how did he or she get to be that person" (p. 3). The research question that drives my study is: how have the pivotal moments in my life led to my pursuit of a research degree that explores domestic violence within the Indian-Australian community? I believe that my autoethnography is unique in the literature that explores domestic violence in Indian diasporic populations, and thus offers a different voice and lens to considerations of these issues.

## Research Approach and Methodology

Autoethnography is the methodological approach in my research study that explores the cultural and social influences that have impacted and shaped my personality, values and preferences. Autoethnography is an effective qualitative research method that provides the subject concerned a special means to voice their personal lived experiences (Heewon, 2008; Morse, 1994; van Manen, 1997). Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe autoethnography as “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history and ethnographic explanation” (p. 742). Autoethnography as a form of self-study is a kind of autobiographical private anecdote that investigates the author’s experience of life (Mallet, 2011).

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), explain that, “Autoethnography combines characteristic of *autobiography* and *ethnography*” (p. 2). The autobiography lets the writer reference critical moments of their lives that are chosen in retrospection. These moments are chosen due to their transformative and influential nature in the narrator’s life. Ethnography emphasises the study of social and relational practices within a group of people in order to enhance the emic and etic (insider and outsider) understanding of that culture. Hence, this idiographic methodology entails the researcher to reference crucial personal moments as an insider and then examine the implication of the narrative as an outsider. This method requires the ability to remember events in a personal manner and compose them using the first-person narrative. As discussed by Ellis and Bochner (2002), “Autoethnography represents a significant expansion in both ethnographic form and relationship potential. In using oneself as an autoethnographic exemplar, the researcher is freed from the traditional conventions of writing” (p. 15). Ellis (2009) notes a significant facet of conducting autoethnographic research is fluctuating between various deviations of our current and previous selves.

An autoethnography allows the researcher to develop an understanding of his or her position to further comprehend research that may follow. A grasp of the self is essential when considering the position adapted while analysing others. This enables the researcher to be upfront and honest about their bias and the decisions made throughout the research journey are transparent. By understanding the self, a stronger understanding can be extended when trying to understand others. This is explained by Ellis and Bochner (2002) as “the autobiographical project disputes the normally held divisions of self/other, inner/outer, public/private, individual/society, and immediacy/memory” (p. 216).

The use of autoethnography is considered especially suitable for studies that involve a cultural context. The practice of an ethnographic wide-angle lens on the wider scope of cultural practice is joint with a continuous reflection and inner look at the vulnerable self. Unfortunately, I am not the sort of person who has kept a diary, but I have strong memories of my younger self. I wrote these down in great detail and shared them with a friend who asked me questions when I did not explain enough about cultural context or my feelings. I still live at home, and so my family is a constant trigger to my memory. My own recollections contributed to the vignettes and the specific stories were included due to the experiences being tremendously moving. Following the completion of the stories, re-reading took place to identify repeated words and phrases. These repeated words and phrases, when analysed, helped identify common sequences leading to the emergence of strong themes. This process of reading and re-reading ensures that consistent results would be obtained if the vignettes were analysed again. Eatough and Smith (2006) mention that “With each reading, the researcher should expect to feel more wrapped up in the data, becoming more responsive to what is being said” (p. 487). I made marginal notes of keywords and phrases, and then I looked for larger emergent themes (Biggerstaff, & Thompson, 2008). I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for determining the larger themes to allow for arduous examination of idiographic personal

experiences and social awareness. I used IPA to understand how I had recognised the meaning of my experiences and how these encounters influenced my interactions with my environment. Understanding my experiences allowed me to decide to express them to a wider community and acknowledge their contribution into shaping me as a learner and a teacher.

After the completion of the autobiographical narratives, and coding the text for recurring strong themes, three themes were noted to be the most significant: patriarchy in Indian culture, resilience, identity and belonging. These themes tend to overlap and can be difficult to differentiate within a specific narrative. Writing this Autoethnography, at times, was a very difficult and confronting analysis. There were periods when delving into the experiences was painful and something I didn't desire to write about (Tenni, Smith, & Bochner, 2003). However, the findings of this study highlight valuable understandings into my beliefs, my upbringing and the experiences that shaped me as an individual. An important part of my research was to consider the ethical dimensions of my autoethnography. As I am writing about myself, I was not required to seek Ethical Approval for my research from my university. However, I was well aware that in telling my story, I am telling the story of my family. I spoke at length with my mother and siblings who are comfortable about what I wrote. My family and I agreed that my father would be informed in general terms and if he was interested at all in my work, he could be given a copy of this article.

## Findings

I have organised my narrative under loosely chronological headings that begin with The History of Domestic Violence in my Family. I then discuss the watershed event in my life, The Sexual Assault. The subsequent sections discuss aspects of my life as an adolescent: 15 and not allowed to party; Being the oldest sibling; Reporting to Police. I have built these headings from my analysis of my narratives.

### The History of Domestic Violence in my Family

Being born a girl in India automatically put me in this category known as *ladki* meaning girl. On one hand, when boys are born, people congratulate the lucky family for their newborn heir and the little boy is considered a blessing. On the other hand, when girls are born in Indian families, they are not celebrated. No sweets are distributed, and no parties are thrown. Relatives, neighbours and family friends bring presents and gold jewellery for the mother since she has blessed the family with a son, who will carry the family name forward. The mother who has given birth to a daughter is blamed and treated poorly even though she has just gone through a long and painful labour.

I was the third girl born on my dad's paternal side since his elder brother already had two daughters and it wasn't looking too good since girls couldn't carry the lineage forward. In saying that, I was and still am the most pampered child. Being the first-born child meant I was my parents' favourite until my siblings came around. Before my younger sister was born, my family was a "joint" family. A "joint" family in India consists of the grandparents and uncles living under one roof. So in my family, we had my grandparents, my parents and I and my uncle and family. My childhood was a stable and happy time until I started witnessing the regular arguments and fights in the household from age 3 onwards. These fights were a weekly occurrence and turned into a normal routine of my life. The fights weren't always between my parents but usually between my father and his older brother or his older brother and grandfather.

Due to their workplace being a family business, my uncle would always target my father for any missing money which would then lead to quarrels in the house in front of the kids. Sometimes my grandparents would get involved and my uncle wouldn't shy away from

physically and verbally abusing his own parents. Sometimes it would get so bad that my grandfather would get some freezing water and pour it over his head to cool himself down. Seeing all this commotion as a 4-year-old was confronting and confusing. I loved my grandparents and my uncle's family. My aunty is a bitter woman, but I believe that's because my uncle has been verbally and physically abusing her throughout their marriage—leading to two suicide attempts.

The first time I saw my father trying to threaten my mother with suicide, I was four years old. We had moved out of our family home as my mum was pregnant with my sister and we needed a bigger place to accommodate a growing family. I clearly remember him getting a cloth and tying it around his neck and then around a fan and telling mum he was going to kill himself and that she is responsible for it. You see, when mum was 3 months pregnant with me, my uncle decided to kick my dad out of the family business leaving us with no money and no work. My mum's father who had a business of his own taught my dad the trade and helped him establish a business of his own. Both the businesses were in the same area, providing very similar services to customers. This created a sense of competition between my father and my grandfather. Our business suffered a robbery a few years later, resulting in my dad losing all of his business and upcoming deals. We were bankrupt, and my dad still blames my grandfather for everything we suffered, even though my grandfather helped establish my dad from scratch when his own family turned away from him.

From the time I have been 4 years old, physical and verbal abuse towards my mother has been a weekly, if not daily, occurrence. It has had a defining impact on my life, my values and who I am today. Growing up as a child, I was very anxious but also very happy. You know how kids can avoid and overcome hard times and bring joy in the house, I was that kid. I wanted to bring joy to my family because I hated seeing my dad hit my mother. It was challenging and confronting to be amidst so much violence. I could never understand my father's urge to abuse my mother in private as well as in public. My father's behaviour made me feel very embarrassed. I used to believe that once I had siblings, my father would change. I mean how could you hit the mother of your children in front of your children? It always used to perplex my mind and still does.

### **The Sexual Assault**

In Indian culture, a girl's virginity is her most cherished possession. It is more important than her education, her manners, her dreams or aspirations. Her virtue is meant to be protected with her life. If this virtue is tainted, a girl is considered dirty and second-hand, used property. She isn't so pure anymore.

One of the most defining moments of my life was when my younger sister had her accident and the events that followed. One uneventful afternoon we were coming back from school and crossing the road while holding each other's hand, she was eight years old and I was twelve years old. I clearly remember a two-wheeler coming out of nowhere and dragging my sister with his vehicle on the road. People gathered around us and I was starting to panic. This was in 2003, which meant my mum was at home with my one-year-old brother and mobile phones were very rare. I started asking people around us if any of them had a mobile, so I could contact our neighbour who had a mobile and surprisingly enough I remembered her number by heart. I remember telling her to contact my mum to come to this stand where all the autos used to be parked so she could take my sister to the hospital. Much to my dismay, mum told me to go home as my younger brother was sleeping at home and she had left our neighbour to be there in case he woke up.

I clearly remember walking home with my heavy school bag on my shoulders, wailing and worried for my sister's life as she was losing consciousness and had lost a lot of blood.

People were watching as I was crying, and our neighbour's younger brother came over to comfort me and I hugged him. Let's call him Ashu. Ashu was 18 years old and we had been friends since he moved in with his brother and his brother's wife as our neighbours. I was crying and hugging him for comfort and as I opened my eyes, I caught him looking down my shirt. Since we were friends, I didn't think much of it as I was only twelve and was more worried about my sister and her life.

From that day onwards, mum was spending more time at the hospital as my sister stayed there for a few weeks, getting treatment for her broken knee and losing most of her front teeth. This was a challenging time for me as I was always home alone looking after my younger brother. Ashu started visiting us almost every day as he had a nephew who was my brother's age and they liked to play together. Ashu would bring him over so they could play together, and I didn't mind as it took my mind off from my sister and not having my mum around for hours. We would sit and talk while the little ones played in the other room. One day I felt Ashu randomly caressing my leg and playing with my hair, I asked him "hey, what are you doing?" He replied saying he "was just playing with my hair because it looked soft and shiny." That day was the first time Ashu touched me out of nowhere. After that, it turned into an everyday occurrence for when he came over. He started coming over multiple times a day using his nephew as an excuse.

I clearly remember the day when he came over without his nephew and said he wanted to talk to me about something. I innocently said "okay," not knowing what was to follow. That day, Ashu raped me. I didn't know what sex was and how I was meant to feel when someone forcefully penetrated me. It was the dirtiest feeling knowing I couldn't stop him because I was completely frozen in time. I didn't scream or make a single sound until he got up after he had finished and left. My younger brother was asleep in the next room and I went and laid down next to him. I didn't know why I was bleeding and why it hurt so much. I didn't tell anyone about what happened until I was 21 years old. My sister needed my parents more due to her accident and what was I going to say to them anyways? I didn't know what rape was; I should have known. I constantly blamed myself by believing that I had given him the wrong message and that's why it happened to me. I believed that my life was meant for people to molest and use, and I stopped caring about how people treated me. After years of feeling disgusting and blaming myself, I finally went to see a psychologist when a friend committed suicide. I was diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety.

This experience was life altering and controlled my emotions and actions for over 10 years of my life. After the therapy from a rape specialist, I was able to acknowledge what had happened to me and how it wasn't my fault. I was able to accept my experience and move on, growing up and meeting my very supporting, understanding and loving partner.

### **15 and Not Allowed to Party**

Growing up as a teenager was a challenging time for me. After the sexual assault, I felt as though everyone was staring at me and judging me for who I was. There was this feeling of how I was the centre of attention and how I was being observed by all males at the school. Growing up as a girl in India, I always received plenty of unrequited attention from the opposite sex. It made the conservative teachers and parents doubt my Indian values to protect my body and my virtue. I didn't feel comfortable enough to tell anyone about my experience and how it had changed me and my self-perception. I started to believe that I was someone who was dirty and deserved to be treated poorly by men.

An incident that shaped my relationship with my father as a teenager was in February 2006 after a "farewell" party when I was in my early teens. My dad has always been a very controlling father, thinking he needs to protect his children from everything wrong in the world,

not realising that his behaviour has hindered us from experiencing “normal” and “teenage” things. He considers it his duty as a father to teach his children from his own experiences. It is one of those behaviours that I have always been against as I believe that learning should be from firsthand experience. In 2006, when I was close to finishing my year 10 and moving schools for year 11 and 12, there was a party known as a farewell party where the year 9s farewelled and wished good luck to the year 10s for future endeavours. When dad dropped me to school that afternoon for the party, I had clear instructions that he was going to drop me and pick me up and I wasn't to roam around or go out with any friends when the party ended. Dad had given me a phone to call him as soon as I finished so I could be picked up. Given that I had the power to decide when I was to be picked up, I decided to go out with my friends after the party finished around 4pm for a quick bite. I wasn't to know that my dad would visit the school to see that the party had finished, and I hadn't contacted him to pick me up.

I remember being really happy that day after the party as for once I had been able to spend time with my friends outside of school. I was naïve to think that my dad would never find out as when I got back to the school I called him, and he asked me where I had been this whole time. To say that I was scared would be an understatement. My siblings and I had fear instilled within us towards our father and he always considered it a sign of respect. He didn't say a word to me the whole trip home, not a single question or word was said. Once we got home, I went and changed my clothes and hid in the toilet expecting the worst. What he did next was surprising even after witnessing his worst abuse towards mum. He yelled at me to get out of the bathroom and I still remember him beating me and hitting my face with the shoes I had worn to the party. I remember my face was burning because he didn't stop to breathe and kept on hitting me until my mum fainted from begging him to stop. After he was done hitting me, he left me in my room and I remember feeling so defeated and degraded. This day was the first day I saw my dad crying. He came back to my room and tried to hug me, but I wouldn't let him touch me after how he had just treated me 10 minutes ago. He joined his hands and cried and apologised to me because he realised and saw what he had done was so atrocious and disgusting. This day was a moving day for me because he had scarred me, physically and mentally. I remember people asking me if I had been in a boxing match because my face was black and blue from all hits and punches. For some reason I wasn't embarrassed. I expected it to be a lesson for my dad, for him to be embarrassed and learn from what he had done to me.

### **Being the Oldest Sibling**

This aspect is an ongoing experience of my life. Being the first born in India means that you are automatically assigned the role of a parent. Your actions, choices, values, words, and achievements affect your siblings. Every move is monitored with great vigilance and attention. Every decision is scrutinised to observe its impact on the other siblings and how it could potentially affect their values and actions. For as long as I can remember, my parents told me that I was meant to be their mother and do everything my parents would do when they weren't around. As a child, I enjoyed this role as it meant I could control and monitor their activities and boss them around. As I grew up, I realised the weight of the responsibility that had been assigned to me.

Following my sister's accident, I felt a sense of guilt following me as I always wondered if she wished it was me instead of her and if she blamed me for not protecting her. My relationship with both my siblings has been a positive one for most of my life with the usual sibling bickering. Due to my dad's behaviour and violence towards mum, I wanted to protect my siblings from what I had experienced from a young age. I felt a sense of responsibility to provide them with a better life as a teenager than I did. This was a fine line that I crossed, and it affected my relationship with my siblings as I endorsed poor habits and supported their

financial needs. I created this habit of providing them with money, doing their shopping for them and spoiling them with anything they wanted and asked for from me.

I didn't realise at the time that I was enabling a bad habit and setting wrong expectations that would affect me in the future as I grew older. I wanted them to have a better adolescence than I did because I always struggled for money and felt embarrassed when going out with friends since I was unable to do any shopping or do extravagant dinners since my parents couldn't afford these expenses. When I finally realised that my actions were encouraging a habit I wouldn't be able to keep for a long time, I had to ask them to manage their own expenses which wasn't accepted. It was asking them to start supporting their own expenses which didn't go down so well. They had this safety net and I took it away from them. I thought it was only fair for me to do that since I had to save for my own future and my sister had a job that could support her expenses. I started to disconnect from this role of a parent and stopped supporting my siblings financially. I realised that it was a duty my parents had to fulfil as they were only my siblings and I had to save for myself and my future.

My desire to help them has always been there and it will be there for a very long time. It is due to my sister's accident and my parents' rocky relationship. When no one else was willing to step up and be an adult, I felt that I had to do it to keep my family together and safe. When you're stuck in bed with both your siblings shaking on each side because your parents are fighting, and your dad is threatening to hit your mum, the least you can do is hold them and whisper calming words to them. I remember when I was an only child for four years before my siblings came around and when my parents would fight, I would just cry on my own and not know how to feel. I didn't show mum how I felt about their fights and how much it affected me because I didn't want her to worry about me on top of worrying about her own safety. I felt obliged to protect her because she was sticking around in an abusive relationship because of me and to give me a good life with the presence of a mother.

### **Reporting to Police**

My Indian background is a part of me, it informs my skin colour, my languages, my family and my values to a certain extent. I was 16 when my family decided to move to Australia for the betterment of our family and our education. I had to re-enrol in year 11 and year 12 to accustom myself to Australian curriculum and the ways of education and teaching. I went to a school where I was the only Indian student and stood out like a sore thumb. Leaving my friends behind at the age of 16 was painful, along with having to repeat year 11 and 12 again. I always questioned if I would have any friends in Australia and if teachers would be nice and supportive and if my repeating VCE would make me fall behind with my other friends and their achievements.

Coming to Australia was a very big move for my entire family. After spending the first 40 years of their life in India, it was very challenging for my parents to adapt to a new culture in Australia and leave their own family behind. They were worried about their kids losing the essence of Indian culture and adopting a Westernised lifestyle. It is legitimate for them to be concerned about that as we were young and to merge into the society it was essential for us to adapt the Australian lifestyle to feel integrated and make new friends.

When we made the move to Australia, I was 16 years old with my siblings being 12 years old and 6 years old. We stayed here with one of my dad's far relative and had one room to our disposal. During the move, I had always wondered if dad would stop being violent towards mum because we weren't in India anymore. Indian laws with domestic violence are almost non-existent, with domestic violence being accepted as a "personal matter" and doesn't require other people to be involved. It is a practice promoted by most parents to keep the wives

“in line” and under their control. After all, most Indian women are treated as assets, first by their parents and then by their husbands.

On 19<sup>th</sup> October 2014, night before my sister’s 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, dad asked us what our plans were for the next day. I had organised a lunch for my sister with her friends there and I relayed that information to my dad. He got upset and angry about not informed and asked permission about this celebration as he preferred we ask him before we make any plans. I was taken aback by his desire to be informed about everything as telling him should be enough, I shouldn’t have to ask him every time I step out of the house. He was quite outraged and dramatic about the way I spoke to him and the usual argument started of how my mother had promoted our bad behaviour and how we don’t respect our father or his demands. It always goes back to my mother because being the mother she should be turning us into obedient slaves who follow every rule and regulation set up by my dad irrespective of how unreasonable it might sound. It escalated into an argument where he was physically and verbally abusing my mother, myself and my sister by threatening to hurt my mother. That night, I lay between my siblings in their bed crying and holding their hand while they were both shaking with the fear of their mother not making it through the night. I decided to call the police.

Mum heard a car stop outside the house straight away and knew that I had called the police. Both my parents came out of their room and begged me to ask them to go back but I was adamant for the police to know what my father was doing and how it wasn’t okay for this to continue. Two constables came and sat in our living room to enquire why they had been summoned. My parents insisted that nothing had happened that required the constables to be there as they didn’t want their records to be affected by this incidence. I wanted my dad to learn a lesson, so he would stop punishing my mother for no mistakes of her own. After the constables had left, dad expressed his disappointment because I had “ruined” his life. It was, apparently, going to affect his job and his status in the society and I should have kept the private business inside the house.

To this day, my dad has not let me forget the decision I made that night. I don’t regret making it and I would make it again if my mother’s safety was in question. Dad made sure that he was in India in 2015 on my sister’s birthday so he wouldn’t have to remember the “horrible” mistake I had made. I will always protect my mother and maintain her wellbeing before anyone else’s pride and societal status. Since then, my relationship with my dad has improved; he understands that what he did was wrong, and I consider him someone with a sickness. Someone who doesn’t remember what he says and does when he gets angry. Someone who chooses to blame everyone else for things that go wrong in his life. Someone who will always blame my mum for other’s actions and words and I can’t do anything to change that.

## **Discussion**

In my journey towards discovering myself and my motivations towards researching domestic violence, this autoethnography plays a pivotal part. It explains my desire to improve the quality of life, educational opportunities available for women around the world. This autoethnographical writing has helped me realise that my identities in professional and personal spaces are intermingled. It has been an empowering experience for me as a woman, researcher, teacher and academic in training. I learned from writing these experiences down and making meaning from my lived understandings of my previous and present self. I re-examine and reassess my experiences and they shape me and will continue to do so in future. I admit that I tend to focus on the good. Parts of my childhood were filled with love—I was pampered and considered myself special. I prefer to remember these times even though I know full well that life was not always like that for me. Writing this was difficult. It affected how I thought about myself, how I felt about my body and my relationships, and I felt that my PTSD had returned.

I struggled to write my narratives. I would write a few words and find reasons to stop and do something else. I had to drag myself back to the page.

This autoethnographical piece has enhanced my ability to understand my emotions and to express them in a coherent way through my writing. I feel more aware of who I am and how my work reflects me. I gained deeper understandings of myself by questioning the meanings of my stories as defined by my current self and understood how to engage them in my day-to-day dealings. From the presentation of my Findings under five headings, three underlying issues materialized as being momentous in my life: Patriarchy in Indian culture, Resilience, Identity and Belonging. I acknowledge that a limitation of this study is that it is an insider view by one person. I have chosen to write my story about my younger life growing up as an Indian woman who experienced domestic violence and sexual abuse. I realize that as a study of one person (me) my findings are not generalizable, but from anecdotal discussion with other diasporic Indian women I believe that others may have experienced similar trauma. I hope to explore this in my future research.

### **Patriarchy in Indian Culture**

Growing up as a girl in an Indian society meant that I was faced with cat calls, comments on my body, no dating or partying allowed and a non-existent social life. Throughout my 16 years spent in India, there were constant restrictions on what was allowed and what was not allowed. This was not limited to myself, but I also heard other girls around me with the same lifestyle. My life was about what I was not allowed to be or do rather than about what was my value and my potential. It is challenging to reside in a society and see the faults that exist within to the full capacity but that was not the case with India. The patriarchal and patrilineal culture in India is globally known. Moving to Australia, the biggest move of my life, was a blessing and made me realise just how constricting the patriarchy was in India. Australia is not perfect but being here made me realise that India needed help to fix its culture and its treatment of women. The cycle of violence and inequality has to end, and it cannot be done overnight. It is a patriarchal culture that has been growing for thousands of years and has been passed on to every male being born in the culture to varying extents. Indian culture is not restricted to India but is brought through by every migrant moving to countries all over the world. The desire to control wives and daughters with everything in their lives comes from a place where Indian men lack control over their own lives. Through watching my father try to control his wife and his children, I realised how much control he lacked over his own life and how he had been experiencing this since he was a child himself.

Patriarchy is “a set of symbols and ideas that make up a culture embodied by everything from the content of everyday conversation to literature and film” (Johnson, 1997, p. 84). Central to the notion of patriarchy is “the oppression of women, which takes several forms” (p. 11). India is a society whose governing system consists of males holding the power. The ideal of patriarchy is that a woman’s job is to serve men all her life including her father, brothers and husband (Johnson & Johnson, 2001). An Indian woman, from the moment of her birth, is expected to obey a man’s rule and serve him without any questions (Kelkar, 1992; Narasimhan, 1994). This sentiment applies to many societies where spousal abuse is a daily occurrence. Daughters are considered less valuable than sons and daughters and are often considered a social and economic burden. Indian women are vulnerable to abuse due to domination by men. One of the reasons, daughters are considered a burden is due to the patriarchy present in Indian culture being passed on through generations (Johnson & Johnson, 2001). An Indian community is not a mere location for a home but a space where a person’s reputation is an integral and important part. While examining the role of women in the Indian society, one can quite clearly pinpoint its patriarchal nature. Women are treated and considered inferior to men, are

financially dependent and are deemed unfit to make occupation and education choices (Miller, 1992).

## **Resilience**

Throughout this autoethnographical piece and my life, resilience has been a recurring theme displayed by my mother, myself and my family. My parents have been married for 26 years and throughout these years, my mother has constantly faced some sort of domestic abuse at my father's hands and sometimes his family. My mother's resilience knows no boundaries as she has not just survived the domestic violence but also worked very hard to ensure some sort of family life for her three children.

During my childhood, I was always wary of my father, not knowing when he would react violently towards my mother. That constant anxiety has a lasting impact on a child and her mental health. I cannot say with certainty if it was the same for my siblings but throughout their lives, they have displayed and shared the same anxious thoughts with me. When my dad first abused my mother, my mother could have chosen to leave, she almost did, but her resilience brought her back to her only daughter. She knew if she didn't return then I wouldn't know who my mother was and what she stood for. My mother has been there for my family, especially my father, through thick and thin. Her resilience has enabled her to work full time, look after her family and survive. There are days when you can see through my mother's layers of strength, you can see a woman who is tired and somewhat defeated but a fighter.

Resilience can be defined as a weight on people to do more than simply survive difficult emotional experiences, holding on to their inner balance loosely (Higgins, 1994). When faced with a challenge, individuals may give in or they can respond in one of three different ways – survive, recover or thrive (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995). Although it is essential that women experiencing domestic violence be able to start recovering as soon as possible, this may not be within their power. Factors of resiliency are able to shed light on some of the individual dissimilarities in terms of women surviving from domestic abuse. There are four characteristics of individuals that are considered resilient (Dyer & McGuinness, 1996). These include, (i) carrying on and rebounding; the ability to keep going after experiencing adversity, (ii) a sense of self; achieving a poised perspective of life and its experiences, (iii) determination which involves the capacity to persevere until aims are reached and a pro social attitude which adopts openness to social interaction.

## **Identity and Belonging**

My journey through struggling with my identity and belonging began when I was in India. I questioned my place in my family, the community and the wider society on a constant basis. I felt like an outsider in my own world because I did not believe in the same values and beliefs as everybody else. I did not want to get married in my early twenties, I wanted to continue studying and discovering who I wanted to be. The same struggles continued when I moved to Australia with my family. It was a different turmoil but much the same. Moving to an English-speaking country from India, being a different skin colour and having no friends made it really isolating and confusing. I missed my friends in India, but I also didn't know what to do to fit in. I felt left out and lonely and I can only imagine the turmoil my family must have faced too. I was 16 years old, but my parents were older than 40, when you spend that many years under a strong and influential culture, it is difficult to adapt and develop new values.

Migrants and their children face and struggle with fragmented identities divided between multiple countries, not knowing where they belong (Somerville, 2008). The children of migrants struggle with negotiating their identities and belonging to multiple countries. They

have an emotional connection to their original country while also maintaining love and respect for their country of settlement. There is a sense of debt that is felt by these children, I felt it myself. You are aware of your parents giving up their settled lives to establish a new home in a new and unknown country. They do it because they want you to have a better life with better opportunities. I know that if I had stayed in India, I would not be pursuing my dreams, I would not be engaged to a non-Indian, non-Sikh man, I would not be planning my future the same way I currently am.

Australia has provided me with multiple life-altering opportunities including better education, better life style and my partner. I define as an Indian-Australian woman and my children will be Indian-Sri Lankan-Australian. I know that my identity is fluid and will continue to change but after being in Australia for over nine years, I feel that Australia is home. No matter where I am in the world, I will always want to come back because Australia has given me what I am grateful for today. I built my identity and a sense of belonging in this country. I developed my confidence and my voice to stand for what I believe in and what I consider fundamentally right.

This study has been a cathartic and emotional experience shedding further light into my life and my experience from my own point of view. I grew up the way I did due to my parents, my life experiences and my cultural background. My past, present and future impact me and shape me into the woman, researcher and teacher that I am today. My learning is a continual process, deepened by my past, content in the present and driven for my future.

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