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Bianca Jahnavi Kaushal
Washington University in St. Louis

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Invisible Violence: Battered South Asian Women’s Experiences in the American Legal System

Bianca Jahnavi Kaushal

Mentors: Jami Ake, Linling Gao-Miles, and Mary Ann Dzuback

This project examines the experiences of battered South Asian women in St. Louis and their journey through the legal system to obtain justice against their South Asian abusers. Through a partnership with Saweraa, St. Louis’s only South Asian domestic violence agency, I connected with nine current or past clients. In addition to their in-depth narrative interviews, I interviewed the Saweraa’s only staff member in order to understand her strategies for supporting clients through the legal system.

Throughout the project, I move from the macro to the micro to explain why battered South Asian women in St. Louis struggle to obtain justice. In my first chapter, I trace the development of the Nonprofit Industrial Complex by pairing historical analysis of the Battered Women’s Movement with direct observations of mainstream domestic violence agencies. This reveals a disjunction between the priorities and capacity of mainstream agencies and the needs of battered South Asian clients. In my second chapter, I articulate the structural necessity for Saweraa, a sparsely staffed organization that provides wrap-around services to clients. I develop a theory of a “perfect advocate” who coded herself as an ally while deftly maneuvering the legal system. Finally, I address the clients themselves, and explain how their interactions with a “perfect advocate” shield them from the cultural incompetence of the legal system and mainstream agencies. Combined, these interviews demonstrate how the interpersonal effectiveness of a “perfect advocate’s” work conceals the deep inadequacies within the legal system. Ultimately, her advocacy style removes burden from the legal institutions to meet the needs of marginalized populations in culturally-competent ways. The project concludes with recommendations on how Saweraa can sustain itself in the current funding climate without forgoing a commitment to wrap-around services. I also advocate for courts and legal-adjacent intuitions like DV agencies to adopt a margins-to-center approach.