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"Home is a Prison; Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse: A *Biography of Sunita Basdeo.*"

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ABSTRACT

This paper accounts for the tragedy of an Indo-Caribbean woman, whose name was altered to protect her identity and privacy during this study. She was a victim of domestic violence and sexual assault (rape) at two contrasting periods of her life. It further explores and compares the experiences the individual encountered to scholarly research based in the Caribbean. Experiences from both primary and secondary resources will also be incorporated and discussed from recent cases in Trinidad and Tobago that occurred approximately ten years after the unfortunate events that this Indo-Caribbean woman faced. The primary resource was accumulated through a face-to-face interview with the victim, while secondary research included journal articles, books, and newspapers. Throughout this paper, some experiences of the Indo-Caribbean woman and the actions taken by most perpetrators in studies mentioned were correlated to historical and sociological perspectives, as it relates to a possible thought process or ‘reasoning’ behind their behaviour. While this topic is centered on the biography of one individual, her experiences were analyzed to others younger than her who experienced similar tragedies in the hands of a male figure. It is important that such topics are continuously researched since some individuals may have close-minded opinions about women and girls who are raped or abused in any form.

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INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on domestic violence with specific attention given to gender-based violence and sexual abuse against an Indo-Trinidadian woman, Sunita Basdeo. Gender-based violence is defined as acts of aggressive and hostile behavior displayed towards a male or female, which frequently results in physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional consequences (Walby et al 2017). Domestic violence is the recurrence of any menacing or opprobrious behaviors toward another adult (over 18 years), who shares/shared a close relationship (romantically or family) with the offender (Gill et al., 2016). Though the concept of domestic violence is controversial in some publications, the situation of the perpetrator and victim also determines the definition since the majority of times both parties reside in the same household. Lastly, the concept of sexual assault is defined as unwanted acts of sexual intercourse, where the offender uses threatening measures to place the victim at a disadvantage and then proceeds to engage in sexual acts without consent (Searles 2018). Victimization through sexual violence is mainly associated with younger female victims, though it is present among elderly females and the male population (García-Moreno et al., 2013). Some Caribbean countries have recently published reports which revealed that many victims were females above the age of sixty years old (Muturi and Donald 2006). In Trinidad and Tobago, gender-based domestic violence has rapidly increased within the past ten years. Many reports and studies revealed this and stated that offenders are often well-known friends or close relatives of the victims, though there are cases where the perpetrator was a stranger (Searles 2018). Throughout this study, the life of Sunita Basdeo, currently sixty-seven years of age, will be central as she is a survivor of both domestic abuse and sexual molestation that occurred approximately ten years ago, at the age of fifty-seven.

Literature Review

Nesha Haniff (1998), discussed the factors responsible for the continuous increase in cases of violence against men and women, while simultaneously analyzing the number of male-to-male cases compared to male-to-female cases. This study aimed to detect the factors which contributed to gender-based violence in Jamaica by dissecting and revealing other tributary components centered around the male figure. Haniff asserted that violence against women often arises from a systematic belief that women are not equal to men, and so, discrimination towards women would continue. In analyzing the males as perpetrators of sexual abuse in this study, the author mentioned that "...male relation to violence as an essential part of his own self-definition" (Haniff 1998). In the case of Jamaica, this was evident to a large extent as the author elaborated on the correlations between the culture of violence and poverty, though violence and domestic violence, in particular, were not limited to the poor. The researcher utilized both primary and secondary resources, including interviews, newspaper articles, and journals which were successfully illustrated in the study. The literature mentioned in this study ranged from 1990 to 1994, with the exception of the primary sources included, which was recorded approximately in 1997. Because Haniff's work featured Jamaica, a Caribbean country, it will certainly shed some light on the experiences of Sunita Basdeo who lived all her life in neighboring Trinidad and Tobago.

Roanna Gopaul and Maureen Cain (1996), centered their study on domestic violence between spouses in Trinidad and Tobago. In this publication, the authors aimed to examine possible connections between ethnicity, occupation, education, and the status of both spouses (conjugal and married), as factors that are responsible for domestic violence. Gopaul and Cain's study consisted mainly of quantitative analysis of primary resources from 1990-1992. Data was

retrieved from various centers located in Trinidad, though no centers in Tobago were presented. Secondary resources were also utilized and compared to the findings presented in this study. Factors including calypso songs, where the subordinate statuses of women were emphasized were also brought forward in this study. This was evident in a song written and performed by Slinger Francisco, better known as the Mighty Sparrow, where the lyrics were “*Every now and then cuff dem down, they'll love you long and they'll love you strong, black up their eye, bruise up their knee, then they'll love you eternally...*” Though this song was produced in the nineteen-seventies, it revealed the ‘right’ or power men held to ‘discipline’ women if they chose. Limitations in this study were present to an extent when comparing cases between Trinidad and Guyana, thereby producing inconclusive statements. However, the main objectives of the study were achieved as an insight into the level of domestic violence among conjugal and married couples were provided. It also explained how education and childhood experiences influenced domestic violence. This study will be useful when researching domestic violence and possible factors for such actions in Trinidad and Tobago and to an extent Guyana.

Joan Rawlins and Tazhmoye Crawford (2006) conducted a study to determine the socio-economic situations related to cultural barriers and gender-based factors that threatened women’s health in the English-speaking Caribbean, with a focus on Trinidad and Tobago. The authors presented the relationship between women’s health with special emphasis on the connection between domestic violence and HIV/AIDs and their impact on the social and economic growth of societies. The study employed the use of both primary and secondary resources ranging from 1980-2006 and the data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Though this study focused mainly on HIV/AIDs and the ways in which governments and health organizations are targeting the problem, the connection with domestic violence and cultural barriers were closely

established where the expectations of a Caribbean woman was centered around unemployment, poverty, and being dependent on government assistance. This point was linked to the submissive behavior women are expected to portray in the presence of a male figure that was highly related to the risk of domestic violence and HIV/AIDS which then impacts the social and economic sectors in societies. Though this study was exhaustively analyzed and researched, only specific aspects of it would apply to the researcher's dissertation.

Benedetta Duramy (2014), in her publication aimed to highlight the problems surrounding gender and violence in Haiti from as early as the colonial period until 2010. In one of the chapters in this publication, the author mentioned gender-based violence with particular emphasis on violence against women. These issues were deeply embedded in the historical heritage of the country which supposedly provided an impetus to gender discrimination and violence during colonialization. At this time, women specifically were indefensible to physical and sexual assault from white European slave masters and drivers, who were predominantly males. This was evident due to the emergence of significantly large numbers of mixed/mulatto off-springs. Duramy further utilized primary resources such as memoirs as well as first-hand accounts written by previous enslavers and French nobles who visited the island to further account for the repressive actions against African women and girls. Throughout the chapters, issues against females in Haiti were continuously acknowledged, especially modern-day cases of women and young girls who continue to struggle for protection. This was mainly due to an increase in criminal gangs and armed groups, both relating to political and historical affiliation in the country. This study will be useful to a limited extent since historical aspects are highly developed in literature and socio-economic situations will be useful for discussion.

Nancy Muturi and Patricia Donald (2006) targeted the impact of media coverage on violence against Jamaican women and outcomes on their lives. This paper was heavily focused on the presence of inter-agencies enforced to address gender-based violence against women and girls in Jamaica, through intervening and documenting the increased cases of violence against women. It was revealed that the violence against women has been a continuous problem in Caribbean society and has not decreased in Jamaica for several years. This was supported by qualitative data provided from newspaper articles, reports from the United Nations and other outstanding organizations, both regionally and internationally, as well as through interviews and surveys. The research was concluded by highlighting the factors that should be broadcast on media in relation to violence against females and suggested that all resources in the Caribbean should be gathered to properly combat the regional issue that affects the family and by far, the economic sector in the society.

Maggie Schmeitz (2006) sought to examine the challenges women and girls in Suriname encounter as it relates to domestic violence and sexual abuse. The article also discussed the introduction of existing mitigation strategies which sought to target the societal and economic situation through the involvement of inter-agencies. These agencies educated front-line workers through seminars and training in order to properly combat cases of domestic and sexual violence against women. Data was acquired from non-governmental organizations, police stations, as well as literature and reports published by the United Nations and World Health Organization. However, this study encountered limitations which included a shortage of data given by the local authorities and inconsistency in reports, where the victims decided to withdraw reports. There were also factors raised on under-reporting cases since women were fearful of the violator.

It is evident that many scholars in Trinidad and Tobago and by far, the wider Caribbean have focused and accounted for issues on domestic violence and sexual assault. However, the existing literature shall be further expanded and analyzed by involving aspects of Sunita Basdeo's life in the chapters of this dissertation.

Parameters

This study will place focus on the life of Sunita Basdeo and her story as a victim of both domestic and sexual abuse during two contrasting periods of her life. Primary accounts will be compared to scholarly literature published for similar experiences in Trinidad, the Caribbean, and in some cases Latin-America. Literature chosen for this study shall not go beyond the Caribbean or Latin/South America to center the study within the region. The researcher will be limiting the extent to which newspaper articles are incorporated in this study since the information presented are not always reliable. Lastly, the study will cover the period 1990 to 2020.

Objectives

In this study, the researcher intends to highlight some of the common situations which, according to published sources, ignite sexual and domestic abuse. This will then be utilized and compared to the life of Sunita Basdeo, a survivor of both tragedies. The aim of this procedure is to determine a possible correlation between the existing studies compared to the time abuse began for Ms.Basdeo. The research will also evaluate the extent to which traditional roles of women in Caribbean history presumes the modern-day position of a woman in society and the relation with sexual abuse. This decision was made based on a common issue in society where women and their bodies are sexualized. However, this study will exclude any literature that does not oppose the actions of the perpetrator, where it was considered a ‘mistake’ due to psychological issues and/or dysfunctional lifestyles.

Methodology

In this dissertation, data will be gleaned from scholarly publications. Primary data will also be obtained through a face-to-face interview with Sunita Basdeo, whose life experiences will be transformed into a biography centered around gender-based violence. Ms. Basdeo was molested at the age of fifty-seven in South, Trinidad and as a victim and survivor of both domestic abuse and sexual abuse. She has agreed to share her story for the purpose of this research paper. Details provided on her life will then be used in correspondence to the aims and objectives of this study. Both primary and secondary sources will be qualitatively analyzed. These methods were selected as they were time and cost effective and efficient since tones and moods can easily be interpreted during the interview and online journals and articles were conveniently accessible.

Chapter Outline

This study will consist of three chapters, where Chapter One will present the '*Life-Changing Experiences of Sunita Basdeo*'. This chapter will be dedicated to a first-hand account of the survivor's experiences of domestic violence and sexual assault during two contrasting periods of her life. Her unjustified and life-changing situations will be the main objective in this section. Following this will be Chapter Two, where Ms. Basdeo's experiences will be analyzed in comparison to information retrieved from the Literature Review and other secondary resources to determine any possible correlations. Finally, recent cases which entailed forms of violence including sexual assault, against women in Trinidad and the wider Caribbean, will be highlighted and further discussed as it relates to the two previous chapters. The ultimate objective of the paper is to make readers aware of the increase in repulsive acts against women, especially in Trinidad and Tobago and focus on the degree of brutality taken against them.

CHAPTER ONE - *'Life-Changing Experiences of Sunita Basdeo'*

At a young age, Sunita Basdeo often shouldered many responsibilities as she was the eldest out of five sisters, and the third child out of twelve children. Barton Schwartz (1965) revealed that extended families were the typical structure of an Indian based household. However, Indo-Caribbeans especially in Trinidad and Tobago structurally modified this institution during the process of acculturation. Basdeo and her siblings frequently helped their parents cultivate rice, sugar cane, and other crops to support their large family. While children were the 'honour' and 'pride' within Indian households, they were also viewed as 'extra-hands' in subsistence economic activities. Rice cultivation is an example of this, where nuclear families assisted each other in cultivating and harvesting rice, which entailed a gender-based division of labour (Schwartz 1965). For the Basdeo's, it was solely between their family since the number of children provided enough assistance. As the eldest girl, she was expected to prepare meals for the family before the sun rose every morning as well as, care for her younger siblings and the livestock they owned.

This was her daily routine until one day at the age of fifteen, her mother and '*mausi*' (mother's sister) arranged a marriage for her. Upon interviewing Ms. Basdeo, she mentioned that the person she was married to was a young man known as Indar, who was ten years older than her and though she did not want to marry him she was expected to. Rattan Lal Hangloo (2012) emphasized that while arranged marriage was a common tradition, having an older partner usually dominated and guided a woman's life in the relationship. This was a common practice among the Indian community, especially in Trinidad and Guyana (Reddock 2008). Joseph Nevadomsky (1983) mentioned that several factors surrounded this reason, one of which entailed the financial benefits which usually came with receiving dowry. Within approximately one week

of 'knowing' Indar, she moved in with him and his parents at the age of fifteen. At her new residence, she was expected to do the same as she did at home; domestic chores for all members of the family including Indar's younger siblings. It was common for an Indo-Caribbean girl's life to be 'centered' on marriage and portraying the role of a conventional housewife. Traditional Hindu girls were also taught to contribute and serve their husband and his family from an early age (Seegobin 1999).

Though Sunita did not perceive this as a problem since the relationship she shared with her new family was generally close, challenges arose when her newly wedded husband turned to alcohol. During Ms. Basdeo's interview, she emphasized that he would often consume alcoholic beverages and gruffly demand money from her and his parents. Research indicates that alcoholism, sexual and physical abuse are known cultural aspects of a predominantly Indo-Caribbean community/household (Maharajh and Ali 2005). The marriage only lasted two months and twenty-two days and was characterized by regular bouts of verbal and physical abuse. The interviewee revealed that the *dowry* (money and jewelry) she received when married was stolen from her by Indar, her husband, and he was often absent from the household. *Dowry* was first introduced as a ceremonial 'gift' for the groom and his family, however in the Caribbean this changed as a result of low number of females during and post-Indentureship period. She added that days would go by and he would not return to the house and, she eventually felt as if she was 'married' to his family and not him. On days he was present in the house, arguments would emerge if she questioned his whereabouts and, his intentions for the future. Eventually, this escalated and became physical on two occasions when she was brutally thwacked and strangled while Indar's parents were in their garden. During one dispute, she successfully fought him off and escaped and was met by his grandmother who informed his parents of the incident. The

following day, she left their residence without informing anyone and walked approximately four hours until she returned to her parents' house, located on the opposite side of the small town in the southern part of Trinidad. From that day forward, she promised herself that she would not remarry; a personal commitment she fulfilled. Although an older brother and her father were accepting and understanding of her return home, her mother was furious and insisted that she returned and tolerated her husband's unjustifiable behavior. Shamita Das Dasgupta (1996), revealed that the tolerance of abusive partners were normalized in the homeland (India) prior to arriving in the Caribbean.

While she disagreed with her mother's position, Indar's parents and siblings often visited Sunita's home and pleaded for her return despite the valid reasons for departing. His parents grew more persistent and went as far as offering their older son's hand in marriage if she did not want to continue her 'relationship' with Indar. Eventually, they both accepted her decision. Basdeo continued living with her parents where she was once again responsible for her siblings and additional 'chores.' Unlike her brothers, she was taken out of primary school for the purpose of assisting her parents with other responsibilities while her brothers furthered their education. This was a common practice among Indo-Caribbean families as girls faced many societal and cultural obstacles as it relates to education (Hangloo 2012). This, like many other traditional Indian practices derived in India, where women were deemed as financial burdens/disabilities. Hangloo (2012) further states that women were oriented towards motherhood and husbandry. Meanwhile, the tension between her and her mother grew. This unresolved tension between the mother and daughter existed throughout Sunita's childhood days, and eventually entered her adolescent and earlier adulthood years. She was assigned almost all responsibilities in the household and faced unfair treatment from her mother in comparison to her other siblings, both

younger and older. It was revealed that her mother would only treat her similarly to the other children when her father was home as she, the mother, was expected to respect and somewhat fear the father.

At the age of seventeen, Basdeo's older brother who attended ASJA Boy's College at the time helped her gain employment at a small restaurant in San Fernando. Upon gaining employment as a cook at Ramdial's Restaurant in San Fernando, she received a weekly salary of ten dollars, which according to her was a lot given that this was around 1970. Basdeo's older brother continued to assist by traveling to and from work and home with her since she was not familiar with the routes or areas in the city. She continued working at this restaurant for a long period until the owners suggested that she married their grandson, which immediately made her reconsider the importance of her job. Sunita gave notice and left the first job. She went on to four other jobs at restaurants within a couple of months.

During this time, she was approached by a known resident in the San Fernando area who quickly became interested in her. This man was approximately fifteen years older than her and with approval from her parents and older brothers, she moved in with him. At the age of nineteen, she now lived with her common-law husband, usually referred to as 'Singh,' while she continued to work in Handsome's Roti Shop. In May of 1973, she welcomed her first son, and though it brought her a lot of joy, the years following this not only negatively impacted her life but her child's and future children's. From the birth of her first child, Ms. Basdeo noticed a drastic change in her relationship with Singh. Though they both lived happily for approximately three years before their first child, her common-law partner began to consume alcohol excessively which then evolved to domestic violence.

Following the year 1974, she was pregnant once again. However, this time she suffered a miscarriage. This was a result of the constant disputes surrounding money she saved while working since Singh felt entitled to use this on alcohol. Alcohol and domestic violence are closely correlated especially among the Indo-Caribbean community and were evident, during the days of indenture (Kanhai 2012). By 1975, at the age of twenty-two, she gave birth to her second son, followed by a second miscarriage as the assault in her relationship intensified. After her second loss, she birthed her third and final son, and by 1978 she endured another miscarriage. This was a result of verbal and physical abuse since Singh forced her to lift and push his motorcycle up a steep hill in the rain while she was seven months pregnant. Though her losses emotionally affected her, she kept tolerating the physical abuse and harsh words for what she believed would create a better life for her children. She feared that if she left one day, he would find her and murder her and the children, as he had previously threatened her. In the Caribbean, threats are often used to psychologically intimidate the victim. Fear, gives the offender more power and control (Uribe-Uran 2013). Although Basdeo had three sons, she longed for a daughter, and in 1979 she gave birth to her final child and only daughter.

To support herself and her family she became self-employed as a roadside vendor. Miss Basdeo revealed that she had a specific spot near the San Fernando hospital where she became a well-known vendor for her cookery creations, which included fried channa, ginger beer, pies, and sugar cakes. Although she admitted that there was a lot of hard work, sacrifice, and risk in doing this, she was proud and thankful for the support she received. This helped fund her children's education. She added that her children often helped her in any way they could have, especially on afternoons after school. This included assistance in the kitchen during early hours of the morning, or after school, where they walked throughout the hospital and areas in

San Fernando to gain more customers. While this made ends meet, Singh often stole her income to clear his credits at nearby 'rum shops' and when she stood up for herself, he became violent. In many cases, she would complain to her 'in-laws' about the incidents which would result in large disputes between Singh and his father. While this did not help or solve the problem between Sunita and Singh, she continued to endure it for many years.

Throughout these years, Singh spent periodic time in jail for physically assaulting persons (both men and women) at a community bar near the San Fernando wharf. This was done with a cutlass, a tool he frequently used to exert fear and dominance onto Basdeo. Singh continuously abused the interviewee and sometimes the children as well, especially they tried to assist her. Eventually, when the eldest born was fifteen years old Miss Basdeo decided to leave the relationship with her children, while he served time in jail. Although it seemed easy from an outsider's perspective it took a lot of courage, as she still feared the consequences to come when he was freed. She moved from the city of San Fernando back to her hometown where her father gave her two and a half acres of land, which was initially used for agriculture. Even though it was a new beginning she had to readjust her life to provide for her children, even though there were days they went without food, clothing, and money. However, after approximately four months, Singh was informed of where they now lived and showed up unannounced. She mentioned that he 'visited' roughly three times until he finally accepted that she was not going to return to him, especially with her children.

Sunita continued creating homemade sweets and beverages until the age of thirty-nine. As her children grew older, they all married and left the house, which was in the countryside area, where houses were not very close to each other. There was a huge front yard with a lot of vegetation around the home. The interviewee continued living there alone for many years, until

her youngest son, (third child) moved back with her due to personal problems. He was self-employed with an established company which allowed him a great deal of flexibility. On this particular morning, when the most life-changing and tragic situation occurred was the day he left earlier than usual.

The morning of June 16, 2010 was the day a well-known person in the area brutally attacked Sunita Basdeo. She mentioned that her son left for work while she was taking care of his English mastiff and rottweiler along with other the other animals she owned. While watering her plants in the backyard, she was startled when a tall and medium built man who was in his late twenties appeared. Without hesitation, she asked him to leave her property as he stood there and laughed, then went ahead to explain that he was hunting in the area. The young man slowly approached her, while she took small steps away from him in hopes to lock herself indoors. Unfortunately, she never made it inside as the man grabbed her and threw her on the ground, where he pulled out a pocketknife and held it to her throat threatening her to undress. Sunita was in a state of fear and continuously pleaded for her life and went as far as convincing him that she was HIV positive to which he simply replied, *"I doh care."* She then told him that her husband was upstairs in hopes of scaring him off but once again he replied: *"I know is just you and your son here and he just left."* Despite fighting him off, to what seemed like countless amounts of time for her, he forced himself in the victim as she cried out for help.

During this time, the victim revealed that she was physically assaulted because he did not want her making noise. After escaping from him once more she ran up to the dogs' kennel to free them in hopes that they would assist her. While they indeed 'bought time' by attacking the perpetrator, he managed to critically injure both dogs and went after Miss Basdeo. He began to stab her in various parts of her body and though she tried to escape Sunita was defeated. At this

point, she was completely exposed and weak, and so he started strangling her with the aim to leave her body lifeless. He continued physically assaulting her until she stopped breathing. Nearby he saw a pile of logs in the yard and walked off to retrieve them. She realized what he had planned, and so when he returned with two large logs, she held her breath and pretended to be inanimate.

According to the interviewee, she got the idea to “act dead” because if she continued to fight, her life would diminish since she lost a large quantity of blood. She added that it was difficult to hold her breath, especially because the attacker placed the heavy logs on her chest to ensure that she was indeed deceased. Miss Basdeo mentioned that he did murmur a couple of words while doing this, but it was exhausting to remember. However, she distinctly remembers counting twenty-seven footsteps as he walked away from the scene and waited approximately five minutes to run down the hill to her neighbors. The victim explained that the pathway she took was a short-cut she usually never used because of overgrown bushes and bamboos. When she finally made it to the neighbor’s house, she called out for help and the eldest daughter rushed out to her rescue.

Miss Basdeo fell unconscious at this point. The neighbors contacted the authorities and her son, who quickly rushed home. Her son was furious, not only did he arrive before the ambulance but, the policemen did not assist him. They were all in shock, staring at her bare body on the ground. Out of frustration, he, the last-born son (who lived with her) together with the eldest son loaded their mother in their vehicle in hopes of getting her to the hospital quickly. Though police did escort them, they were involved in an accident on the way there, as the vehicles were caught in an oil spill on the road while the rain fell. Sunita’s body now had to be transferred to another vehicle before arriving at the hospital. Many persons who witnessed the

aftermath of the attack were convinced that she would not survive. This was because she had sustained approximately twenty stabs wounds that punctured her lungs, kidneys, and other vital organs. The victim was placed in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) after many operations. She remained in a coma for over four weeks and stayed in the hospital for over three months. Though the perpetrator was arrested, he was granted bail as his family members held high positions at various police stations. It was brought to the attention of the victim's family, that the attacker also had a twin brother who committed similar acts. However, his brother was serving time in prison. After many months of recovery, the authorities were able to take proper statements from Sunita in relation to the case. In the end, justice was not served, and the victim still lives with this traumatic experience forever engraved in her mind after eleven years.



Image 1 portrays an intoxicated Indian man demanding his wife's jewelry. The Mangalsutra is a valued necklace worn by married Indian women.

Source: *Vikaspedia, National Commission for Women Government of India, 2021.*



Image 2 displays a man physically abusing a woman

Source: *Hürriyet Daily News, 2018.*

CHAPTER TWO - *'Research versus Reality'*

The study conducted by Nesha Haniff (1998), revealed that both sexes can be victims of gender-based violence where a male figure is often the perpetrator. This is similar to the case of Sunita Basdeo since the abusers throughout her life were of the opposite sex. In the researcher's study, she found that this social problem often arose from a systematic belief that women are not equal to men. While this can be correlated with Basdeo's experience as mentioned in the previous chapter, it is evidently and subconsciously rooted among societies in, and beyond the Caribbean (Theodore et al, 2012). Throughout Sunita's life, she often felt inferior to the males in her environment, even those who were not abusive towards her; her brothers and father. Research published by Seegobin (1999) proves that this is usually embedded in a traditional Hindu household, as women are raised to serve their husband and/or his family and are seen as subordinate to men. Hyacinth Evans and Rose Davies (1994) wrote that Caribbean girls, in general, are restricted to tasks within the household, while their submissiveness and obligingness are highly valued. Haniff additionally states that men and violence are connected as it is a component of their self-identity.

While the two men in Basdeo's life were physically, emotionally, and psychologically abusive towards her, it is unclear whether the abuse was correlated to their definition of self-identity or influenced Basdeo's definition of herself. What is certain, however, is that it is connected to alcoholism among Indo-Caribbean men. Nancy Muturi and Patricia Donald (2006) disclosed that alcohol, drug abuse, and poverty can be major factors that 'cause' violence against women in Jamaica. In Trinidad and Tobago, Joan Rawlins and Tazhmoye Crawford (2006) outlined that while alcohol was a leading 'cause' for abuse, financial situations and

miscommunication also contributed. Odessa Despot (2016) discussed that women who acknowledged their subordinate positions in an Indo-Caribbean household (namely Guyana and Trinidad) and have reported cases of abuse that involved alcohol, suggesting that the perpetrators (men) may suffer from a bi-gender role strain. Timothy Legg (2020), notes that consequences of this gender strain can be seen through toxic masculinity, which projects dominance, aggression, entitlement, or sexism. Most of these elements, especially aggression and entitlement can be identified in both of Sunita's offenders; Indar and Singh. It was made clear in chapter one, that Indar stealing her dowry and portraying aggression when questioned of his whereabouts are signs of toxic masculinity and alcohol was not always involved in these situations. In the case of Sunita's common-law husband, Singh, entitlement and dominance were more prominent. This only became apparent when she created a source of income for herself and her children, while Singh boldly demanded or sometimes unknowingly took the majority of her money for his alcohol addiction and indebtedness. According to the Domestic Violence Act of 1999 in Trinidad and Tobago, this is an example of financial abuse whereby a person exercises coercive control over another's financial resources (Theodore et al, 2012).

Literature published by Roanna Gopaul and Maureen Cain (1996) concluded that marital status, occupation, and education can be factors of domestic violence. While this is not applicable in Basdeo's life to a large extent, her marital status and lifestyle can be compared in both situations and used to determine the 'differences' during the periods of abuse. Results may differ since one person was her short-term legal husband and the other was a long-term common-law partner. Sunita first encountered gender-based violence and domestic abuse from her wedded and older husband Indar, whom she was forced to wed through an arranged union. Both individuals were strangers before they directly entered marriage, which could have led to

miscommunication and built-up aggression. During the interview, Ms. Basdeo mentioned that aggression was often expressed by Indar and ultimately led to multiple accounts of abusive behaviour towards her. Since the marriage only lasted for two months, the experience was not as intense compared to the relationship with Basdeo's common-law husband. Although the severity of both cases should not be compared, it is important to note the different experiences in both relationships. In the case with her partner Singh, Sunita continued this relationship over ten years despite the ongoing verbal and non-verbal abuse. This was mainly because she was ashamed and afraid to return home a second time, as he threatened to take her and the children's lives. Aneesa Baboolal (2016) states that Indo-Caribbean women usually submitted and subconsciously supported cultural values centered on the stigma of divorce and tolerance of abuse 'behind closed doors.' This was a common result that stemmed from a lack of discussion among families, especially due to fear and intimidation of the male figure. Though Sunita and Singh were not legally married, they lived together and had four children, which is a common reason why women in general continue in an abusive relationship. Lazarus-Black (2003) further notes that even when domestic violence cases were reported in Trinidad and Tobago, it was not profoundly investigated since this was seen as the husband and wife's business. This study was solidified by examining the Domestic Violence Act that was only introduced in 1991, which now allows victims to file for restraining orders.

Though Ms. Basdeo did report Singh on several occasions and no actions were taken, there were cases where he was warned by officers or felt threatened by the law. However, she stated that this frequently resulted in more 'licks' and aggressive behaviour in the household. Although he was periodically arrested and served time in prison, it was unrelated to his

unjustified actions towards Sunita but was connected to violence against men and women outside the household.

In the latter period of Ms. Basdeo's life, she became a victim of sexual assault, more specifically rape. Throughout Trinidad and Tobago, the number of victims who experienced both sexual and domestic assault are oftentimes women and children (Theodore et al., 2012). Theodore further notes that these acts are based on the perpetrator's tendency to exert power and control over the victim. This local case study revealed individual, community, and cultural factors which contributed to patriarchal ideologies, social inequities, and norms that support violent behaviour. In Caribbean culture, these factors are largely present and can result in an individual, predominantly males, engaging in violent or sexual acts on another submissive individual. Ramesh Deosaran (2009) stated that rapists in Trinidad and Tobago are known by the victim and often share a close relationship, which was not the case in Basdeo's encounter. Though she did know of the individual and even saw him playing on the streets as a child, there was no form of relationship between these two, nor had they interacted before the 'event.' The age-gap between Sunita and the rapist also differed compared to most reported cases, where the perpetrator is often older than the victim (Abbey et al., 2004). In her interview, she stated that this individual was approximately the age of her youngest child, who was thirty at that time.

During a study, many rape offenders in Trinidad and Tobago revealed that their actions were premeditated while the minority stated that they 'took the opportunity' (Deosaran et al., 2009). In this regard, though it is inconclusive, the case of Ms. Basdeo seems to follow a combination; one that was premeditated since the offender blatantly revealed adequate information indicating that he had been observing her environment before deciding to 'seize the

opportunity.’ After the offender ‘confronted’ the victim, he exerted psychological intimidation by instilling fear in Basdeo, followed by physical dominance when she tried to lock herself indoors. The rapist’s machismo approach towards Basdeo prior and during this assault is closely linked to toxic masculinity as previously discussed. It was also stated that rapists frequently release dominant and violent actions to fulfill their uncontrolled sexual desires. Literature that was based on Latin America and the Caribbean emphasized that the aggressor ‘takes’ the power from his victim using threats, to nourish his masculinity (Uribe-Uran 2013). Studies have also revealed that offenders (mainly males) are sometimes hired to commit such acts to ‘scare’ and scar the victim for life, upon which they receive a sum of money (Deosaran et al., 2009). While this was undetermined by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, Basdeo had speculations of a neighbour she had past disagreements with, who was often seen with this individual.

It was clear that the rapist’s intention after molestation was murder since he stabbed her multiple times and tried to obstruct her breathing with heavy tree logs. In 2008, a study conducted in Trinidad involved twenty-five prisoners convicted of rape. Two offenders admitted to ‘quench their thirst’ by taking the victim’s life after their needs were forcefully met (Deosaran et al., 2009). One offender briefly stated that he was just “hunting,” a phrase Sunita’s perpetrator used when she confronted him for trespassing. However, most of these men did not expect to be arrested or charged, while others showed no remorse for their actions. Unlike the man who raped and physically assaulted Sunita Basdeo, these offenders in the 2008 study faced legal consequences while Basdeo’s encounter turned to a ‘cold case.’ This directly reveals corruption within the legal system in Trinidad and Tobago since this perpetrator gained assistance from his family members within the Police Service. Though many know of him and his twin brother’s

actions in the community, legal actions were not taken due to various positions family members held. According to Seepersad and Williams (2012), during the year of this assault (2010), Trinidad and Tobago recorded two hundred and seventy-five rape cases, where most victims like Sunita Basdeo are left without justice.



Image 3 shows citizens of Trinidad and Tobago protesting against the injustices women face by men.

Source: *Trinidad Express Newspapers*, 2021.

CHAPTER THREE- ‘Crimes against women in Trinidad and Tobago’

Sunita Basdeo is one of many women who often experience outrageous acts of domestic violence and rape within their lifetime. While she belonged to the minority of those who survived, many others, some younger than her, unfortunately lost their lives in the fight for survival. Though victims who survived did escape from the hands of their perpetrator(s), injustice was a common factor that was consistent in multiple and recent cases in Trinidad and Tobago. These cases referenced in this study occurred from 2015 to 2020, roughly between five to ten years after Ms. Basdeo’s combat.

In a 2020 case, an Indian woman named Reshma Kanchan, who was a twenty-five year old mother of two, lost her life at the hands of an ex-male companion. With reference to an article published in the *Express Newspaper* (2020), Susan Mohammed stated that Ms.Kanchan was murdered “during a domestic dispute with a close male relative.” This left her head detached from her lifeless body. Mohammed further noted that the perpetrator attempted to commit suicide after his gruesome act. In an interview was conducted by the *Express Newspaper* with Sandrine Rattan, a representative for the International Women’s Resource Network (IWRN). She revealed that over the years, an increasing number of males often commit suicide following their irreversible actions, and emphasized that men must unlearn toxic conduct. The *Guardian Newspaper* (2020) further expounded on this story during an interview with the victim’s family and it was noted that the victim and her perpetrator, Sunil Dookie, previously shared a seven-years relationship before it ended in 2019. Reports suggested that Kanchan was frequently threatened, stalked and brutalized by her ex-husband prior to and following the end of the relationship. On Reshma’s social media post she wrote “*Women don’t just wake up one day*

and decide to leave. A man's actions...all his crap becomes weight that she just can't carry anymore." Members of her family mentioned that reports were lodged to a nearby police station, but officers simply warned Dookie. These repeated actions were prevalent in Basdeo's domestic violence experiences where her common-law husband Singh was the perpetrator. Similar to Basdeo's situation, law enforcers only warned the abuser about his acts and did not take legal actions which only resulted in further abuse. Statements given by the victim's mother and sister also revealed that the perpetrator was abusive towards both women on several accounts because they intervened to rescue her and her youngest daughter, as Dookie physically abused them. They declared that the matter would have been taken to court but Kanchan refused, since she insisted on 'fixing' their relationship. According to literature presented in the previous chapter, Indo-Caribbean women frequently submit to the subconsciously rooted cultural stigma around either formal or informal divorce. The victim's mother also added that Dookie frequently made threatening statements and usually reinforced his dominance by using a cutlass. It is interesting to mention since Kanchan met her death by said weapon. She also encountered monetary problems as Dookie did not financially contribute to her or the children's necessities. To help herself, she entered the Unemployment Relief Programme (URP) to provide for herself and her children, since at that point she could not purchase basic necessities such as pampers. As noted in the previous chapter, Crawford and Rawlins (2006) disclosed that poor financial situations and miscommunication often resulted in domestic abuse among partners. These similarities are relevant when compared to Basdeo's experiences as discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. In the end, the surviving culprit appeared before the magistrate court where he was charged. However, no further developments have unfolded outcomes were recently posted.

The devastating case of Andrea Bharatt, a twenty-two year old woman who was kidnapped and murdered, opened many oral confessions, which is yet to be accepted as lawful evidence. Allegations stated that Ms. Bharatt a court clerk, unknowingly stumbled into a pending court case against a well-known man in eastern Trinidad. Most of these stories were sourced directly from survivors of rape, some who had the shared perpetrator on different occasions. These women voiced their stories and experiences on social media to raise awareness to the public, where one man Devon Charles, also known as Joel Balcon was the common molester in most cases. Those who were interviewed by various newspapers remained anonymous when they presented their story. Though the number of rape victims were undetermined, the majority expressed their disbelief about the incompetent actions taken by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and the Gender-Based Victims Unit. The *Daily Express* (2021), published an article on one survivor's experience who only recognized the man that molested her when he was posted on media as a leading suspect in the Andrea Bharat case. The woman revealed that at the start of January 2021, she entered Balcon's taxi after work with two persons on a call to ensure she arrived to her destination safely. Unfortunately, she did not make it home until many hours after she was expected. She continued her story by explaining that another man entered the car and seemed aware of the plan Balcon had for her. The two men exchanged looks of complicity. Balcon's anonymous female victim mentioned that while in the taxi, she was held against her will. The perpetrator continuously raped her and when he was finished he used a cable tie, to attach himself onto her to prevent her from escaping. The victim revealed that he continuously behaved insanely and laughed scandalously. Not only was she kidnapped and raped, but she was also tortured physically. As hours passed by she pleaded for her release.

However, he had other plans for her which was oftentimes the ‘end results’ of a missing victim; that is murder.

Upon mentioning that she was a mother and displayed a picture of her child, Balcon was brought to tears and immediately apologized. The offender admitted that he “*regretted taking her*” and that the victim “*did not look like a mother.*” Fortunately for this woman, she was dropped off at the same taxi stand during the early hours of the following morning. Upon arriving home, she informed her mother and brother of her experience and went to a nearby police station to file a report against this man. However, the officers dismissed her even though the offender was notorious in the area for similar cases like hers. The victim stated that she was emotionally, mentally and physically wounded from this tragic experience, and currently continues her life with an image of the wrongdoer engraved in her mind as justice was not served. It is truly unfortunate that this testimony is deemed inadmissible in a court of law and this travesty of justice in Trinidad and Tobago has been and will continue to subject people like Sunita Basdeo and many other women to brutal treatment at the hands of evil men.



Image 4 shows protesters in Trinidad and Tobago. Source: *Trinidad Express Newspapers*, 2021.



Image 4 illustrates one protester who is tired of the ongoing crimes against women.

Source: *Trinidad Express Newspapers*, 2021

CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, many similarities and differences were established from Ms. Basdeo's experiences in comparison to previously published research. Almost a decade after this incident, crimes against women in Trinidad and Tobago have continuously increased where they are often discovered deceased or continued their life without justice. Literature disclosed many historical and sociological perceptions that are rooted in the structure of Caribbean families, especially Indo-Caribbean families. In Chapter One, some aspects of Basdeo's teenage and early adulthood years subconsciously led to her long endurance of domestic abuse from both her formal and common law husband. Literature revealed that Indo-Caribbean women often submit to their husband and his family since it was labeled a form of respect and a sign of a 'good wife.' Prior to Basdeo's arranged teenage marriage, she was expected to complete most tasks in and around the household mainly because she was the eldest girl out of twelve siblings. Studies disclosed that from a young age, Hindu girls are molded to 'stay in the house' as majority are only taught to manage and maintain a household and to nurture children. Findings from secondary resources were relevant when applied to Basdeo's biography, where the possible 'causes' of domestic violence are centered around miscommunication, financial problems, alcohol and men's struggle with self-identity. It can be concluded that the traditional perception of a woman has to a minimal extent, influence the modern-day positions they presume in the household. Although education has provided opportunities for women to become more independent, they are still to a large extent expected to perform traditional roles and uphold certain values from the past. While many female victims of rape/sexual abuse are blamed for the actions of the perpetrator, Basdeo's experience along with other literary resources largely opposed the perception, that the way a woman dresses contributes the rapist's actions. This was

unveiled through a study involving rapists in Trinidad and Tobago, who admitted that they felt powerful when they conducted such treacherous acts. It can be concluded that whether a woman submits to a man or not, abuse can occur in various forms, whether it is financially, emotionally or mentally. Oftentimes if a woman tries to leave the relationship, she faces threats, is murdered or the male partner takes both their lives as he commits suicide. In the case of rape, age and dress cannot be possible reasons for such inhumane acts carried out by mainly men, it is however, closely associated with the need for dominance or even revenge.

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