

# Because we are **GIRLS**

HIGH SCHOOL LEARNING KIT



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## WARNING

The following study guide discusses the difficult topics of sexual abuse and violence against women and girls. The content may trigger traumatic memories of lived experience, and some students may find it difficult to read and discuss. We have provided a list of resources at the end of the guide for additional support for you and your students.

## LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given the subject matter of this unit, there is a possibility that students may disclose experiences of violence to facilitators. Facilitators should check with their relevant government and professional regulatory bodies on legal considerations.

## RECOMMENDED AGE

Ages 14+

## RECOMMENDED SUBJECTS

Health/Personal Development – Healthy Relationships

Family Studies/Home Economics – Adolescent Development

Diversity/Pluralism – Diversity in Communities

## BECAUSE WE ARE GIRLS SYNOPSIS

A conservative Indo-Canadian family in small-town British Columbia must come to terms with a devastating secret: Three sisters were sexually abused by an older relative beginning in their childhood years. After remaining silent for nearly two and a half decades, the sisters decide to come forward – not only to protect other young relatives, but also to set an example for their daughters.



Kira Pooni, younger sister

## AN INDIAN IMMIGRANT STORY IN CANADA

India is one of the countries in the southern region of Asia known as South Asia; the others are Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Maldives. Although the Pooni family is from the Punjab region in northern India, in this guide we use the term South Asian in reference to South Asian culture or traditions because of similar or shared experiences within South Asian families.

- There was a large influx of immigrants migrating to Canada from India in the early 1960s and '70s. In the film, the Pooni parents immigrated to Canada in the early '70s.
- Those that immigrated during this time did not have much if any financial support from family, and as their extended families still resided in India, they were also not supported emotionally or mentally. Many of them came to Canada alone or newly married. The immigrants at that time often experienced isolation and struggles with racism and assimilation; they were coming into a new country, where they had to learn a new language and adapt to new customs and traditions. Moreover, the age demographic of those who migrated to Canada at the time was very young, often between the ages of 17 and 25. Not many young people today could leave their families and friends, take up residence in a new country, learn a new language, and at the same time adjust to the beginning of an arranged marriage.
- Immigrants at that time often worked hard and long hours, typically earning the minimum wage. Many settled in small towns, where they found work in mills, factories and mines.
- The women usually didn't work outside the home. When they did it was also minimum wage and labour-intensive. This left them vulnerable, and they often had to face emotional, physical and financial crises on their own, or with just their partner and very little outside support.
- Young men and women who had migrated to Canada were expected to send money home to their parents and/or sponsor their parents along with other family members as immigrants to Canada. Nuclear families would then expand into joint families with as many as 20 members.

## Classroom Discussion:

What are some of the difficulties and struggles you would face if you were in a situation like that of the Pooni parents, immigrating to a new country at such a young age? What would it be like if you were just married and starting a family?

## MEDIA LITERACY

*What impact have Bollywood films had on South Asian women's cultural socialization?*

In India's Bollywood films, women were often portrayed as docile, lowering their eyes, never talking to a man directly or looking him in the eye, and covering their faces if they are talking to an unknown or older man. They were portrayed as feeling shame just because they are women. If at any moment a female character took a wrong step or acted a certain way or was even perceived to be acting in a certain way, she was considered to be bringing shame not only to herself but to her family as well. By watching women in Bollywood films but also by observing their own family members and the women in their families, girls were taught to bow down to men, to be submissive. This is often seen in the films in scenes where a woman is expected to bow down and touch a man's feet, or ask for forgiveness from a man. Jeeti, the middle sister, describes how she learned submissive behaviour not only from her parents and how they interacted, but also from the portrayals of marriage in Bollywood movies.

## Classroom Screening and Discussion:

Watch this clip from the film ***Because We Are Girls*** on Bollywood's influence on the Pooni sisters:



After watching the clip, break into small groups and discuss the cultural impact of Bollywood films. After the discussion, replace the word Bollywood with Hollywood and have another discussion with the new questions.

1. How has Bollywood's representation of women impacted the role of women in the home and in society?
2. How do Bollywood films influence young women's perceptions of marriage?

In ***Because We Are Girls***, the middle sister, Jeeti, alludes to the love and glamour that she saw in films, and talks about how as a young girl she would pretend that her life was like those stories, and that she too could "live in a world that had so much love," when in reality her own life was very different.

1. How do Bollywood films project a false image of reality?
2. How do Bollywood films influence young women when their reality is vastly different?

Bollywood from the '70s to the early 2000s depicted fairy-tale romances, glamorous lifestyles, and exaggerated

relationships; it defined very specific gender roles for both men and women. As Jeeti describes them, the films always show love and romance, with a young woman being won over by a man. Bollywood stories modelled how a woman should respond to a man's advances, and dramatically depicted what would happen to her and how she would be treated if a man was able to take advantage of her or rape her. Bollywood continues to instill these ideas, as well as the shame and the blame that victims of rape and sexual abuse feel.

## SHAME

### *Shame and the Silencing of Women*

Shame, for a survivor of sexual abuse, is a deep-rooted negative emotion that can be planted early and then last for many years. Most of us have experienced shame on some level and to varying degrees at different times in our lives. We may feel shame because we got upset over something trivial and hurt the feelings of someone who was already having a bad day. We may feel shame because of a choice or decision we made. Some of us have been made to feel shame since our childhood, and may have been told we were useless. We experience varying degrees of shame for many reasons, and we deal with it in different ways.

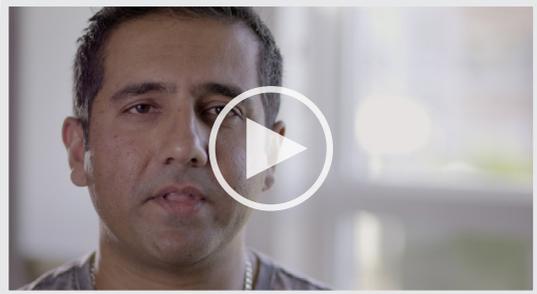
However, the shame felt by a survivor of sexual abuse is unlike any other. Survivors feel shame from the very first time the abuse occurs. Perpetrators often use manipulation and coercive techniques to pressure a child or young person into doing what the abuser wants, and to go along with the abuse. Victims may be told that they invited or wanted it, or that this is what they deserve, or that no one will believe them if they ever tell. These statements may be repeated time and time again, and if the victim doesn't tell anyone – or does tell and isn't believed or helped – the feelings of shame and blame are reinforced.

Society's attitudes often make survivors, both male and female, believe that the abuse is their own fault and that they could have prevented it, and in this way the perpetrator's threats and the children's fears are reinforced.

In many societies, regardless of race, women who have been sexually abused or raped are disrespected and not believed. Women are talked down to and encouraged to believe that they are the ones responsible if they are abused or raped, because in some way they allowed it to happen. In the film, the girls' father, brother and mother all attest that

## Classroom Screening and Discussion:

Watch these clips on the shame the Pooni sisters and the Pooni family had to live with during and after the abuse.



"In our culture we always blame the girls," says Jeeti's mother. Her brother reiterates that the sisters never came forward because they were facing not only the perpetrator, but also a community that would not have believed them. "It's always the girl's fault": This is instilled in girls from a very young age. What is the impact on young girls if the message they are hearing is "It's always the girl's fault"?

in their South Asian culture, nobody will believe the woman; everyone from the perpetrator to the community and the society will say that it's the woman's fault.

In Bollywood films, women who are raped are portrayed as worthless and are often depicted committing suicide by jumping off cliffs or bridges. How does this message trickle down to young girls and what they believe? These themes, strongly influenced by Bollywood, are widespread in South Asian culture and are instilled early in young women's minds.

In the film, Jeeti, the middle sister, says, "When bad things happen, you are shunned." She is referring to the fact that young girls are brought up to be a certain way and behave a

certain way, and if you don't follow the rules exactly you will be cast aside, and society or the community will reject you.

How do cultural and societal expectations reinforce feelings of shame in a young girl?

### ***Shame and the Family***

In the film, when the sisters decide to tell their family and relatives about the abuse, Salakshana, the eldest sister, expresses her underlying fear when she says she has nothing to lose because she has no husband. This statement illustrates how women expect to be blamed and fear repercussions not only from the community and society, but also from their families and husbands. Women are made to feel that the abuse was somehow their fault, that they are to blame, and they are silenced again and again.

The reasons for their fear of speaking out are depicted in different ways, but the feelings of shame, blame, betrayal and guilt don't change. Later in the movie, Jeeti, the middle sister, who is married, says she has to tell her husband, and when she does she'll have to deal with the "consequences."



Jeeti Pooni, middle sister

### **Classroom Discussion:**

1. Why is Jeeti afraid to tell her husband about the abuse?
2. Where do these fears come from?
3. What are the "consequences" that Jeeti is talking about?
4. Why does she feel that she has somehow disgraced herself and perhaps him? Is this due to an idea of honour?

### ***Shame and the Community***

The mother and father go on to say how the girls stayed silent because they feared the community's reaction as well as their parents'. The parents had consistently advised their daughters as they were growing up not to talk to boys, not to befriend them, not to stand around talking to them. This is a common theme for girls growing up in Indian families. If abuse does happen and a girl or a woman discloses it to her parents, her family members or her partner, she will be strongly encouraged not to let anyone else know. "Don't let it get out of the house," we hear Jeeti's brother say. The girl has to continue pretending nothing ever happened. When her family, society and culture all agree that such things must be kept quiet, brushed under the carpet and kept "secret," it only reinforces the feelings of shame, blame and guilt that a survivor of rape or sexual abuse already feels.

Having parents or family members and supposed supporters ask a girl or boy to keep silent about their experience—which the perpetrator also told them to do—intensifies their shame and feelings of guilt. In the film, one of the sisters confronts her father, accusing him of avoiding eye contact with his daughters since they told him about the abuse, and making the daughters feel "less than," adding to the shame, blame and guilt that they already feel.

### Classroom Discussion:

Why do you think the Pooni sisters' parents wanted to keep the abuse a secret? What do you think are the roots of these choices? And how do you understand these choices?

Shame is felt by all members of the family, including the parents. What do you think are the parents' reasons for feeling shame?

In the film, we also hear about how the parents' marriage was arranged. There is a discussion about the "qualifications" a family seeks in a good or ideal bride for their sons. Families seek young women who are attractive (tall, fair, slim) and who are prepared to do all household chores such as cooking and cleaning. We hear the father state that when his parents chose his bride, they were looking for a "lady" who would "do her part." Today, these considerations are not so openly discussed, but families still adhere to the same values; no matter how difficult it is, girls must stifle or sacrifice their own wishes and desires for the sake of the family, for the greater good. The eldest sister, Salakshana, describes how she felt when her husband was chosen for her. She states that her husband never liked her and only married her to come to Canada.

### GENDER ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

Generally, women in South Asian families are not the decision makers. Women are not usually the providers. Even when a woman works outside the home and earns the same amount or more than her partner, she does not make major financial or household decisions. She relies on her husband or other male relatives to make those decisions. Women are required to do the domestic and housekeeping work, take care of the children, and look after elderly relatives who live with them as a part of the family unit. In *Because We Are Girls*, the mother of the three sisters makes reference to doing all the cooking and cleaning of the house and adds that when the extended family moved in, her workload in taking care of them became that much greater.



Salakshana Pooni, eldest sister

### Classroom Screening and Discussion:

Gender expectations of this kind exist all over the world in various forms. Watch this clip on gender expectations in the Pooni family.



1. What are some gender roles and expectations you have seen or heard of?
2. Do gender expectations exist in your household? If so, what are they?
3. How are gender expectations formed?

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## STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE FAMILY

The Pooni sisters state in the film that if an Indian woman doesn't have a baby boy, she is not considered complete. The pressure placed on women to give birth to boys is less extreme now than it was 10 to 15 years ago, but it still exists, and women are still expected to perform all the duties of a wife, including household chores, cooking, raising children, and caring for members of the extended family, even if they are employed outside the home.

### Classroom Screening and Discussion:

*Because We Are Girls* shows how overjoyed the family was when they had a son. "Happiness entered the house when our brother was born." Watch the clip here:



1. What is the impact on the Pooni sisters of being raised in a family where boys are preferred over girls?
2. How would it make you feel knowing that you are loved less than your brother? Or if the boys in the class were favoured over the girls? What are the long-term effects of this type of favouritism?

The girls were excited to have a baby brother. In a scene in the film, we see that when a woman has a son, she is told she has truly received a "gift." This preference for boys in Indian families is expressed both subtly and overtly; it is apparent not only in the way they treat their sons or the males in the family, but also in the way adults talk to the girls or young women, telling them how important it is to give birth to a boy, so that women who do not or cannot have a boy are often cast aside and treated poorly by family members and society in general. We see this tradition in the film when the mother recounts how the women at the temple told her that due to her service to the temple she had received a blessing, which was her son. Women are often made to feel "less than" or incomplete if they don't have a son.

## THE IMPACT OF A JOINT FAMILY ON THE POONI SISTERS

In a joint-family living arrangement, multiple generations of an extended family live together under the same roof.

- Children who are brought into a joint-family system often lose the sense of security they had in their nuclear family. Unless an effort is made to maintain the attachments and bonds that children normally establish with siblings and parents, they may lose these bonds. They may feel they have lost their place or their importance within the family structure. In the film, the sisters several times refer to their household as "this sea of people."
- In the film, we hear how the children are expected to bond with, listen to and respect virtual strangers that they have just met.
- In a patriarchal family system, men have full authority over the women and girls. Older male cousins, grandfathers or uncles will often take on the role of keeping female family members in line if the father, husband or brothers are absent. This can lead to men exploiting the trust that has been placed in them, and taking advantage of a vulnerable girl or woman. In the film, you hear the sisters describe how their abuser had "full authority over them" just because he was a male. For example, a male relative might discipline a girl if he sees her talking to a boy; he could follow her around to make sure she isn't doing anything "wrong," prevent her going anywhere unsupervised, or keep her busy with chores and household work.

In the film, the youngest Pooni sister states that all the extended family members were allowed to discipline, scold or hit any child who was younger than they were.

### Classroom Screening and Discussion:

Watch this short clip where Kari, the youngest sister, describes living in a joint family:



How does a joint family leave children more vulnerable and more susceptible to abuse?

In the film, we see how the family tried to help their extended family, but their trust was broken in a way that damaged the entire family unit. How can parents protect themselves and their children from potential abuse, either physical, sexual or emotional?

### IDENTIFYING ABUSE

#### *Grooming*

In these clips from the film ***Because We Are Girls***, the sisters speak about their experience of being groomed:



What is “grooming”? Broadly, sexual grooming refers to the behaviours that a child molester employs in preparation for committing sexual abuse against a child.<sup>1</sup> Grooming is a technique that perpetrators use to manipulate not only the child they want to abuse, but also the parents and the community at large. Perpetrators who use grooming often seem to be kind, caring and charming individuals.

**Targeting a victim:** This is the first step. A predator targets a child, choosing a victim by observing the child’s traits and vulnerabilities. They seek out children with low self-esteem or low self-confidence, who are trusting and/or naïve, and who have less parental oversight.

**Gaining access:** In the second stage, the perpetrator is looking to gain access to the child by separating them physically and emotionally from their parents or guardians. In cases where the predator is a family member, they have easier access to the child and, as seen in the film, the abuse often takes place in the child’s bedroom or after everyone is asleep. When the predator is not a family member, access to a child is a little more complex, but predators may take positions in the community or offer parents help with their child or children.

**Gaining the victim’s or parents’ trust by filling a need:** In this stage of grooming, the perpetrator’s purpose is to gain the trust of the victim, their parents or guardians, and the community at large, so that they can conduct the abuse



without anyone noticing or being able to identify that it's happening. At first, the perpetrator may make the child feel special and believe he really cares about them.<sup>2</sup> If an adult is seen behaving this way with a child, it should raise concern; greater vigilance should be practised around that adult. For example, with younger children the perpetrator's approach may involve playing games or giving presents to the child, while with adolescent children it may involve drugs, alcohol, or other small gifts.

Parents often don't realize that such an adult is trying to gain access to their child or children. Not realizing or knowing what is going on, the parents trust the perpetrator. This situation is partially portrayed in the film; the father had asked the cousin who was the abuser to keep an eye on the girls, and the girls were told to give him respect. As Jeeti, the middle sister, states, "He had full authority over us."

In the film, we hear how the girls were manipulated emotionally. Jeeti describes their abuser telling them how much he cared about them or how pretty they were. It left the sisters fearing that they bore some responsibility for the abuse, or that others would think they were willing participants.

*Isolating the child:* The perpetrator attempts to build a relationship with the child in order to create situations where they are alone together. For example: If the parents are working, the perpetrator might offer to babysit, or take the child to their soccer game.<sup>3</sup>

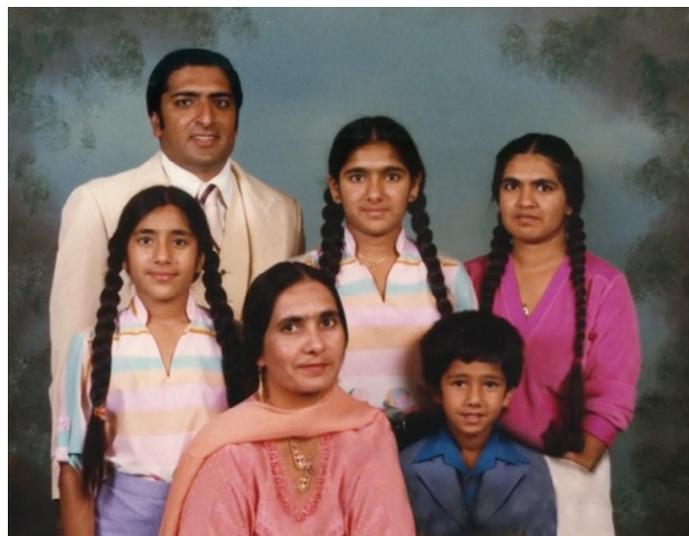
*Desensitization to touch:* At this point the perpetrator will begin to sexualize the relationship, first by touching the child in non-sexual ways so that a degree of comfort is established between the child and the perpetrator. For example: drying off a child after they've gone swimming; or calling the child into the bathroom to pass the perpetrator something, so the child may see the perpetrator naked.

*Maintaining control:* Once the abuse begins, the perpetrator will use blame, the child's guilt, demands for secrecy and other fear tactics to maintain the child's participation. The child may be made to feel obligated to and protective of the abuser.

How do you think the sisters felt about their perpetrator? Why do you think they didn't tell anyone what was happening, or even discuss it with each other? Do you think it was out of a sense of obligation to the perpetrator? Or was it because of the fear that had been instilled over time and the way that they had been raised?

Children often feel very entangled in these relationships, not really knowing how to step away from them or put an end to them. The eldest sister states in the film that she knew that what was happening to her was also happening to her sisters, but she didn't know what to do about it. Children are most often manipulated to believe that if they do tell someone, they will not be believed, or they will be told it was somehow their own fault. They may even fear that they deserve what's happening to them, and continue to comply out of a sense of guilt.

Later, Jeeti shares her thoughts about the whole grooming process, saying, "There is a routine to this." The perpetrator targeted each sister at a different time and the sisters did not tell anyone what was happening to them, not even each other. Think about the fear that each sister must have felt, as well as the guilt. They blamed themselves for what was occurring, and the fear of their family or community finding out had already been instilled in them by their environment and their upbringing. The perpetrator took advantage of that.



<sup>2</sup>Jeglic, *Psychology Today*, January 16, 2019.

<sup>3</sup>Dr. Michael Welner, "Child Sexual Abuse: 6 Stages of Grooming"; National Association of Adult Survivors of Child Abuse (NAASCA).

## SEXUAL ABUSE

*What is sexual abuse?*

Any form of sexualized interaction between an adult and a child is sexual abuse. Children do not have the knowledge, maturity or emotional development to consent to such interactions. Sexual abuse of a child may occur through behaviours that do not involve actual physical contact.

Contact sexual abuse includes:

- Touching the genital area, over or under clothing
- Touching breasts, over or under clothing
- Encouraging or forcing the touching of another person's genital area
- Oral sex
- Vaginal or anal penetration with a part of the body (e.g., finger or penis) or with an object

Non-contact sexual abuse includes:

- Invitation to touch another in a sexual way
- Voyeurism ("Peeping Tom")
- Encouraging or forcing a child to masturbate or to watch others masturbate
- Indecent exposure ("flashing" or showing genital areas)
- Showing children pornographic materials, involving children in the production of such materials, or having them watch sexual activities
- Encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways

## HOW CAN YOU BE AN ALLY?

1. Believe a survivor. When someone discloses that they have been sexually abused, we need to believe them. They often have deep feelings of blame, shame and guilt. Victims of abuse have often been silenced by their abuser; they are often told they won't be believed if they tell someone, that they wanted this to happen, or that this is what they deserve. We saw some of this being described in the film with the sisters and their perpetrator. As a supporter and ally, do not reinforce these feelings.
2. Listen to what a survivor has to say, and respect their boundaries. Try not to push for more than they are able to share.
3. Try not to ask invasive questions. It's a highly sensitive issue, and focusing on details can be triggering for a survivor.
4. Be patient. Just listen. If you don't feel able to do that or feel that you are out of your depth, tell them how you feel and perhaps suggest someone else who may be able to assist them better. Generally, a survivor just wants a safe space where someone will listen and hear them.
5. Please do not give advice or explanations of people's psychology or behaviour. Do not offer suggestions on how to stay safe.
6. Know that disclosing this kind of experience is difficult. Don't make it personal or begin telling your own story. Provide the space they are seeking, and listen. Don't minimize or maximize what has happened. Don't mention another person's story, because that may make it seem that what the individual has gone through is somehow less or more than someone else's experience. Everyone's experience is their own and very different. Everyone will react and respond uniquely.



## HOW CAN WE USE OUR VOICES TO SPEAK OUT?

The greatest and most powerful tool we have is our voice. Whether as survivors or supporters, we need our voices to initiate change—for ourselves or for society in general. For a survivor, the ability to share is the key to mental, emotional and physical health. If you are someone who has been abused, or if you are unsure of what's happened and need someone to talk to, go to your school counsellor or your teacher. If you are comfortable telling a parent or guardian, then tell them; if not, tell an adult you trust and are comfortable talking to. Share what has happened and make sure you are safe.

Discuss ways we can use our voice against violence against women and girls. How do we support survivors coming forward and sharing what they've been through?

Work with an educator to create two high-school-geared activities.



## RELATED NFB TITLES AND RESOURCES

### **A Better Man**

[nfb.ca/film/better\\_man](http://nfb.ca/film/better_man)

### **A Better Man High School Learning Kit**

[nfb.ca/sg2/NFB\\_ABetterMan\\_Guide\\_En.pdf](http://nfb.ca/sg2/NFB_ABetterMan_Guide_En.pdf)

### **Namrata**

[nfb.ca/film/namrata](http://nfb.ca/film/namrata)

### **Heaven on Earth**

[nfb.ca/film/heaven\\_on\\_earth](http://nfb.ca/film/heaven_on_earth)

### **Some Kind of Arrangement**

[nfb.ca/film/some\\_kind\\_of\\_arrangement](http://nfb.ca/film/some_kind_of_arrangement)

### **Because We Are Girls Mini-Lesson**

[blog.nfb.ca/blog/2019/08/26/mini-lesson-because-we-are-girls](http://blog.nfb.ca/blog/2019/08/26/mini-lesson-because-we-are-girls)

## RESOURCES

### **Support Services**

#### **Shelter Safe**

[sheltersafe.ca/shelter-list](http://sheltersafe.ca/shelter-list)

Directory of emergency and transitional shelter and housing services across Canada for women experiencing gender-based violence.

#### **Justice Canada – Victim Services Directory**

[justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/victims-victimes/vsd-rsv/agencies-agences.aspx](http://justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/victims-victimes/vsd-rsv/agencies-agences.aspx)

Directory of support services across Canada for survivors of gender-based violence and other forms of violent crime.

#### **Assaulted Women's Helpline**

[awhl.org](http://awhl.org)

1-866-863-0511

Toll-free support hotline for women who have experienced gender-based violence.

#### **Fem'aide Hotline**

[femaide.ca](http://femaide.ca)

1-877-336-2433

Toll-free support hotline for francophone women who have experienced gender-based violence.

**Kids Help Phone**

[kidshelpphone.ca](http://kidshelpphone.ca)

1-800-668-6868

General distress hotline for children and youth, including those who may be experiencing or using violence.

**Ontario Women's Justice Network**

[owjn.org/getting-support](http://owjn.org/getting-support)

Extensive and diverse list of counselling, legal and support services for women across Ontario, including those experiencing gender-based violence.

**Rainbow Health Ontario**

[rainbowhealthontario.ca](http://rainbowhealthontario.ca)

Rainbow Health Ontario works to improve the health and well-being of LGBTQ people in Ontario, and to increase access to competent and LGBTQ-friendly health-care services across the province.

Jeglic, E.J., & Calkins, C.A. (2018). *Protecting your child from sexual abuse: What you need to know to keep your kids safe*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.

**CREDITS**

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**Nimi Chauhan** is a mediator and a community activist. She has been working in the field of domestic violence, sexual assault and suicide for the last 18 years. Nimi is currently employed by the provincial government of British Columbia, and she is also a writer for *Aaj* magazine. Nimi has served in various positions with community agencies and on numerous boards, varying from community policing, national parole board, addictions and recovery, to youth gang violence as well as political bodies. She is also the founder of Sahara Services and a survivor of childhood sexual abuse.

**Anne Koizumi** works in Educational Programs at the NFB as a learning program manager. She is passionate about media and the arts, and has taught animation and documentary workshops across Canada.