

## **A Summary of SALCO Work**

### **Introduction**

Ontario has the largest population of South Asian immigrants in Canada. Several organizations, collectively and individually, are serving these immigrants, working to empower them and ensure they have a voice in Ontario and Canada. Established in 1999, SALCO's mandate is to improve access to justice for low-income South Asians in the Greater Toronto Area in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner. As a specialty clinic funded by Legal Aid Ontario, SALCO provides advice, brief services and/or legal representation in various areas of poverty law, including:

- **Immigration**
- **Ontario Disability Support Program**
- **Ontario Works**
- **Old Age Security**
- **Canada Pension Plan**
- **Criminal Injuries Compensation**
- **Employment Insurance**
- **Human Rights (Advice)**
- **Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (Advice)**
- **Employment Law (Advice)**
- **Family Law (Basic Advice)**
- **Tenants Rights (Basic Advice)**

In addition to casework, SALCO's mandate also includes public legal education, law reform initiatives, community development, and test case work. SALCO is a national leader on the issue of forced marriage and is actively involved in law reform and legal education on forced marriage, honour based violence, and family/partner violence in the South Asian community. SALCO provides expert advice throughout Canada on South Asian specific issues and has intervened at the provincial and federal court level, including the Supreme Court Canada, on issues of racism, freedom of religion, and family violence amongst other things. SALCO's goal is to make access to justice a reality for marginalized low-income South Asians in Ontario by advocating on their behalf in regards to various legal issues.

### **Advocacy and Training**

SALCO's advocacy goals include providing a strong position on legal issues that affect South Asians in Ontario in media, government, and community groups to address the gaps not only in access to justice, but in justice system itself.

SALCO has further been achieving its mandate through partnerships and collaborations with various different agencies. These collaborations are very successful for the purposes of operating drop-in legal clinics, public legal education workshops, advocacy and awareness-raising in the community.

As part of our advocacy efforts, SALCO is consistently present in printed, visual and audio media. Our expert advice and knowledge in poverty law as it affects South Asians is sought after by journalists and other media. We encourage people to create a "Google Alert" for SALCO to receive email updates on our media activity and forced marriage work.

Further, SALCO leads and participates in various training – this includes providing training to community agencies and public on SALCO and its work as well as inviting other agencies to provide our staff with training on their services. This allows us to connect with the community and resources and reinforce SALCO's presence as a legal service provider.

### **Forced Marriage Project**

SALCO is also a national leader on the issue of forced marriage ("FM") in Canada. In 2005, SALCO started to receive calls from individual FM clients. In response to that demand for assistance SALCO created a small working group of advisors and soon after held the first North American conference on FM in June 2008 focusing on providing an international perspective on how FM had been dealt with in other jurisdictions. Delegates from all over Canada, United States, France and the United Kingdom attended the conference.

The conference distilled the need for further training and education on FM in Canada and SALCO responded by creating a training module. The module was used to train front-line workers and in doing so, SALCO also identified the need for a more detailed and descriptive toolkit for stakeholders. In 2010, SALCO's Forced Marriage Project created Canada's first and only comprehensive toolkit on FM, *Forced/Non-Consensual Marriages: A Toolkit for Service Providers*, to serve as a guide for agencies dealing with FM cases in Canada. To accompany the toolkit, SALCO launched an FM website, [www.forcedmarriages.ca](http://www.forcedmarriages.ca), which is used as a national reference on the issue of forced marriage. Since 2010, SALCO has conducted 138 trainings on FM using its toolkit and website, including trainings for various federal government agencies and departments, the police, children's aid societies, schools, frontline workers, legal professionals, social workers, and young people throughout the province.

Also in 2010, as part of an effort to unify stakeholders working on FM in Canada SALCO founded the Network of Agencies Against Forced Marriage ("NAAF"). The NAAF has approximately 80 members, and meets 2-4 times a year to discuss FM issues and the work being done by partner agencies throughout the country. The NAAF has also been SALCO's advisory on its own FM work, including individual case consultations, community development and law reform initiatives. SALCO continues to organize the NAAF group. In 2011, our NAAF members expressed an interest in more education on the existing resources in Canada to address FM,

including legal resources, legislative context, health resources, and federal government policy as it pertains to FM (example: human trafficking, immigration, visa post intervention). In response to that articulation, SALCO held a second national conference in October 2012. This conference brought together service providers and stakeholders to share resources available in Ontario and brainstorm on how to respond to FM cases in Ontario. The conference also aimed to shed light on the gaps that exist in policy and services that hinder the service providers' ability to service clients in a FM situation.

In 2012, SALCO continued its work on forced marriage by conducting a survey aimed at identifying the incidence of forced marriage in Ontario. On September 20, 2013 SALCO held a launch event in Toronto for its first-of-its-kind report, *Who/If/When to Marry: The Incidence of Forced Marriage in Ontario*, along with an educational graphic novel and emergency card for youth at risk of forced marriage. The event was attended by stakeholders, community representatives and media. The recommendations in the report have been considered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and have been noted as a guideline for how Canada should respond to forced marriage.

In fact, many of SALCO's own recommendations are embedded in the current call for proposal from the Department of Justice. SALCO has had a long-standing relationship with the Department of Justice on forced marriage, including conducting training for staff and pushing for more national awareness and training on forced marriage in Canada. SALCO continues to be an expert advisor on forced marriage to many stakeholders including police forces, children's aid, schools, NGOs, and the federal and provincial government.

SALCO also continues to do its grassroots work with victims of forced marriage. In 2013 SALCO worked with 44 victims of forced marriage on various legal and settlement issues. SALCO has also led the way domestically on education and training on forced marriage within the Canadian context.

In 2013, SALCO was happy to team up with Plan Canada to push the agenda of early and forced marriage to the forefront. In meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs John Baird, SALCO provided concrete evidence of forced marriage domestically. Using our information, Minister Baird has been able to make a strong statement and position Canada as a leader on ending child and forced marriage internationally and domestically. SALCO's report was featured in several print, online and television media reports after its launch and has started to raise Canada's awareness of the issue and a dialogue on how to tackle it.

### **Community Partnerships and Collaborations**

SALCO also works with several organizations on various projects related to violence against women and poverty reduction in the capacity of community representative and subject matter expert. For example, we are members of and advisors for the Colour of Poverty campaign, "Outburst" a Muslim women project hosted by the Barbara Schlifer Commemorative Clinic, "There is no 'Honour' in Violence" project of the South Asian Women Centre, and the University of Toronto project on Cultural Stigma. We are also expert advisors and presenters for the Social Service Networks project to address family violence in the South Asian community.

All year-round SALCO works in partnership with other South Asian community groups, non-South Asian community groups serving South Asians, educational institutions, and religious institutions to deliver public legal education (PLE) seminars on a variety of topics in the traditional areas of poverty law, family violence, human rights and various socio-legal issues impacting South Asian communities. In the last one year alone SALCO has delivered PLE seminars in over five South Asian languages. We aim to use creative and innovative means to deliver our workshops in an interactive manner that includes but is not limited to using Bollywood clips, drama, ice-breaker games and others methods. SALCO also invites lawyers from the pro-bono roster as experts to PLE seminars.

### **Pro- bono Partnerships**

The pro-bono roster at SALCO is a legacy we received from a pro- bono project (in partnership with PBLO), which was successfully delivered for over 5 years. Through that project SALCO was able to formalize partnerships with private bar lawyers to deliver services to clients who are unable to access justice through the current systems. SALCO continues to be committed to engaging private bar lawyers and offering pro-bono opportunities through community collaborations and alliances. Currently, SALCO co-ordinates a free monthly family law drop-in clinic at India Rainbow Centre in Mississauga with the assistance of private bar lawyers Asma Khadim, Kishore Subramaniam, and Archana Medhakar who have donated hundreds of hours to SALCO through this initiative. SALCO has also established another drop-in in area of family law and immigration law at Four Villages Health Centre with help of four pro-bono lawyers from private bar.

### **Advisory Roles**

As part of our efforts to give voice to South Asian issues SALCO participates on various tables in capacity of project advisor and partner. Some of these projects are: The Rights of Non-Status Women Network (RNSWN), Diverse Family Homelessness through the Centre for Urban and Community Studies (CUCS), Mobilizing Ethno-racial Communities against HIV Stigma and Discrimination research project through Communities for Accessible AIDS Treatment (CAAT), Family Law Education for Women (FLEW), and the Provincial Learning Action Committee (PLAC) of Legal Aid.

In SALCO's experience of last 14 years SALCO has been able to reach many milestones of its growth through partnerships and community engagement at various levels.