

South Asians have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and we need to acknowledge the real cause, systemic racism and not our cultures

November 23, 2020

The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada

CC:

The Honourable Bardish Chagger, Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth

The Honourable Steven Guilbeault, Minister of Canadian Heritage

The Honourable David Lametti, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada

The Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health

The Honourable Marco Mendicino, Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship

The Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Economic Development and Official Languages

The Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development, and Disability Inclusion

Peter Flegel, Executive Director, Federal Anti-Racism Secretariat

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau, Ministers, and Executive Director of Federal Anti-Racism Secretariat,

We were shocked and saddened to see the Toronto Star article titled, “South Asians play a part in COVID-19 transmission and we need to acknowledge it” on November 15th, 2020. While it brings attention to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on South Asians in Canada, this colour-blind article remains more focused on feeding xenophobia, shaming South Asian communities and creating a smokescreen over the reality of the systemic racism that has left the members of our racialized communities more at risk and vulnerable to this virus.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has been raging world-wide for almost a year now, we are beginning to see that systems, structures, and policies continue to discriminate against racialized communities and determine how the virus impacts us. As of June 26th of this year, we finally started collecting race-based data to track the infection rates by race. Now we know that South Asian communities and Black communities are among the hardest hit communities by COVID-19. Unfortunately, as Public Health Units release race-based COVID-19 data, there is no contextualization of that data nor an acknowledgement that systemic racism is the root cause of the disproportionate impact on racialized communities. As a result, many “experts” have taken it upon themselves to make uninformed statements as to why certain communities have greater impact, which has led to further marginalization and demonizing of our communities that are already suffering some of the worst outcomes of the pandemic.

Over the last few days, we have been witnessing further marginalization particularly of South Asian communities as the blame for contracting and transmitting the virus is being shifted to the victims and their cultures. It is vital to understand why South Asian communities are being infected with the virus at a higher rate than other communities. To do that, we need to look at outcomes for South Asian communities in the labour market, health, housing, access to services, poverty rates, etc. South Asian communities in Canada are overrepresented in low-paying, precarious work that are at present considered front-line and essential including in health care,

farms, grocery stores, public transportation and factories. Systemic racism in the labour market ensures many racialized, immigrant and migrant workers are disproportionately in precarious employment. Workers are hired through temp agencies, subcontractors and labour brokers and conditions include no paid sick days, low wages, no health benefits, high rates of injuries and insecure hours. Many medical officers and now elected officials are calling on the Ford Government to ensure paid sick days so that workers do not have to choose between their health and putting food on the table. South Asian communities have had lower health outcomes for decades in this country. South Asian communities are overrepresented in hidden homelessness and precarious housing. South Asian communities, especially those who are immigrants, have greater barriers to accessing services due to language and transportation challenges.

Communities where South Asians live are also inflicted with dramatic inequities when it comes to provincial health care funding. For example, the inequitable funding levels in places like Brampton, Rexdale and Malton are less than half of the Provincial average and this greatly impacts about half a million taxpaying South Asians. Any additional Federal health resources given to the Province should be priority directed to these highly impacted areas.

When we look at the impact of COVID-19 on South Asian communities, we have seen these outcomes worsening. South Asian communities have the second highest unemployment rate (second to Indigenous communities) at 17.8% compared to the national unemployment rate of 10.9%. According to a national survey by the Association for Canadian Studies which ranked economic vulnerability by ethnicity, 75% South Asians respondents reported the economic crisis was a major threat to their personal finances, 53% indicated they had trouble paying bills and 65% indicated they suffered income loss directly related to the pandemic. In a different study, South Asian communities in Canada reported lower levels of mental health compared to all other racialized communities during the pandemic.

As community organizations and activists, we knew when the pandemic hit, the systems currently in place would result in disproportionate impact on the marginalized and racialized communities. Many South Asian-serving agencies, including the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians, Tamil Canadian Centre for Civic Action, Punjabi Community Health Services, South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario, Bangladeshi Canadian Community Services, and South Asian Women's Rights Organization have been working double time, through a COVID Response and Recovery Initiative, in order to provide language appropriate and culturally tailored COVID relief information and services to South Asians with language and technology barriers. We have been running programs and campaigns to provide language-specific COVID relief information through Helplines, developing infographics on health and safety, legislative changes, government benefits, etc., organizing virtual events and forums for the communities to learn and engage, providing virtual counselling services, supporting shelters and those who are precariously housed, and providing food to those who are food insecure. Despite our best efforts with the limited resources we are provided, COVID continues to rage on within our communities.

There are almost 2 million South Asians living in Canada, many are struggling to make a decent living, working in unsafe conditions, and supporting front-line services during this pandemic. They are under-served, under-resourced, and targets of systemic racism. Media

perpetuated rhetoric is a breeding ground for racists, colour-blind organizations, and individuals to single out South Asian communities, their cultures, and their behaviour without contextualizing the root cause of the negative outcomes they experience.

As organizations serving South Asian communities, we are calling on the federal government to create a national table focused on the advancement and wellbeing of South Asian communities and for the development of strategies to combat systemic racism faced by our communities. We welcome any opportunities to meet and provide guidance based on our collective expertise.

Signed,

Samya Hasan, Executive Director, Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA)
Neethan Shan, Executive Director, Urban Alliance on Race Relations (UARR)

On behalf of:

Dr. Sudip Minhas, Executive Director, Settlement Assistance and Family Support Services (SAFSS)

Baldev Mutta, CEO, Punjabi Community Health Services (PCHS)

Praney Anand, Interim Executive Director, Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention (ASAAP)

Aftab Khan, Action for Healthy Communities (A4HC), Alberta

Nasima Akter, ED, Bangladeshi-Canadian Community Services (BCS)

Gurpreet Malhotra, CEO, Indus Community Services

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Satbir Singh Cheema, President & CEO, Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society (PICS), Surrey, British Columbia

Deena Ladd, Executive Director, Workers' Action Centre

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Sultana Jahangir, Executive Director, South Asian Women's Rights Organization (SAWRO)

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