

B R A V E H E A R T

FILM

Attiya Khan confronts her abusive ex-boyfriend in her new documentary A Better Man, which aims to prevent domestic violence



“Labels can reduce people’s entire identities to their experience of violence (victim/survivor) or their use of violence.”



IT’S HARD TO SHAKE OFF SOME LABELS. It has been over 20 years since Toronto-based Attiya Khan escaped from an abusive relationship, but her bio still reads “intimate partner violence survivor”. It’s fitting, though—it’s what shapes her work as an advocate and counsellor for abused women and children. And it’s what led her to make her new documentary, *A Better Man*, which recently premiered at the Hot Docs 2017 festival in Toronto. The film sees her confront her former boyfriend who violated her—physically, emotionally, sexually—for two years when she was 16, and he 18. Khan and Steve (whose last name remains undisclosed) walk through the corridors of their school, visit the apartment they once shared, and explore their contentious past both with and without a counsellor. “You were terrified of me; you thought you were going to die,” says Steve, at one point in the documentary, wearing glasses and a hoodie. It’s a powerful narrative, one that shifts, or rather broadens, the conversation on domestic abuse by including the perpetrator. And yet, this is a story told almost entirely by women—barring co-writer and co-director Lawrence Jackman, the entire crew is female. Here, Khan speaks to *Bazaar* on finding the strength to relive her past, learning from the experience, and finally moving on.

What prompted you to confront your ex?

Every few years I would see him in Toronto. I remember being terrified the first time, and I would be affected in negative ways after each encounter. I would have nightmares, panic attacks, and a heightened sense of fear. But, over time, these feelings decreased—he never followed me (which was

one of my fears), I had completed university, I had a lovely partner, I had a great support network, and I felt good about myself. I noticed that he seemed deeply unhappy and did not look well. I started to wonder if the abuse he had inflicted on me had affected his life. Did he live with the painful memories from our past? These questions stayed with me and I craved answers. The idea came from a gut feeling that a lot could be learned from the challenging conversations we would have. I also started to think that there would be value in talking with people who have used violence to learn ways to prevent it.

How do you tap into the strength for a project like this?

After each conversation, both Steve and I would need space from each other so we could process and take care of ourselves. Allowing myself the freedom to feel a range of emotions towards Steve was helpful in getting through them. I got to a place where I let go of the pressure to feel only anger towards him. I was then able to also feel sadness, kindness, frustration, happiness, and empathy. It was empowering to have Steve listen while I explained how his abuse has affected me. Before each conversation, I increased my self-care routine. I exercised more, went to acupuncture, got massages, and meditated.

Were there any apprehensions on Steve’s side?

His immediate response was that it felt like the right thing to do, but that he needed to think about it. He also said that if he could help one man change his path and not choose violence, then it would be worth it. He (and I) definitely had

some worries in terms of how people would treat him once the film was released. Since so few people take responsibility for using violence, we were unsure of how people would react to Steve being accountable in such a public way.

What were the ramifications of this intense, difficult relationship?

It held me back in many ways. It was difficult to get to school everyday because of the daily abuse he inflicted on me, and it took me an extra two years to graduate. One of the ways Steve had control over me was by isolating me from my friends and family. This left me without support. It also prevented people I loved and cared for from seeing what was going on. Once I left him, I had to make new friendships and was unable to save some of the important ones I had lost. Since I left him, I’ve dealt with PTSD, nightmares, panic attacks, a constant fear of being hurt, memory issues, insomnia, and a chronically sore neck and shoulders. But my past has also affected my counselling and advocacy work with women. It helps me understand how complex the issue of intimate partner violence is, and how important it is to be empathetic and listen without judgment.

Those who have endured abusive relationships are often called victims or survivors. Do these terms play a role in how you perceive yourself?

I do not use the term victim for myself. I sometimes identify with the term survivor because I like how strong it sounds, but I usually describe myself as someone who has experienced violence. Labels can reduce people’s entire identities to their experience of violence (victim/survivor) or their use of violence (abuser). When we avoid labels, we allow space for personal growth and change.

What is your biggest learning from this film?

That for some people it can be incredibly helpful to have the person who harmed them take responsibility. I was no longer just coping with the trauma of his violence, I was starting to heal. After each conversation, I felt better, I felt lighter. I started to sleep better. I no longer had nightmares. I’ve let go of some of the fear that I have been holding in my body, I’m not always looking over my shoulder wondering if he is following me or expecting danger. I do still have anger, but I feel a sense of calm that I hadn’t felt since I escaped from him. And I feel so much happier.



Jessie Lehail



Saji Sahota

ALL OF ME

CULTURE

The Kaur Project celebrates the individual journeys of Sikh women, transcending the one label that unites them all

A Canadian, South Asian, and Sikh, Jessie Kaur Lehail is familiar with the struggle to belong. To identify with the labels that define her. Which is why, together with photographer Saji Kaur Sahota, she founded The Kaur Project. An online series of portraits with accompanying text, it gives Sikh women the opportunity to explore how they see themselves.

“Usually they have no idea,” says Lehail, who conducts 20-minute telephonic interviews with each person they feature. By the end of it, though, they have their answers. On their website, along with the names and photographs of Sikh women across ages, you’ll see pithy descriptors that highlight their diversity: Poetess, Healer, Purpose Seeker, Challenger, Refugee, Baarwaali, among others. They may all be Kaur, but they’re certainly not homogenous.

“After 9/11, Sikh men, especially those wearing turbans, were misidentified and subjected to hate crimes. The women decided to rally around their brothers, fathers, husbands. But in that vein I think they forgot about themselves. It was obviously for a good cause, but they lost their voices,” says Lehail, who is based in Vancouver and has studied cultural geography, political science, and public relations. In an interview that lasted well over 20 minutes, she described herself in many ways—someone who wants to “give a voice to the voiceless”, address domestic abuse, discourage cultural appropriation. But she summed it up nicely: Feminist.

Lehail and Sahota met at a women’s conference in March 2015, where they happened to discuss the early beginnings of The Kaur Project. Within a week, they had mapped out a methodology, referencing and adapting cross-cultural theories to determine how they conduct interviews or take images. “Feminist theory, for instance, typically focuses on mainstream white women,” says Lehail, “and there is no theory build for women of colour, for Sikh women. We wanted to be consistent with how we’re conveying our women and their stories, with no variables or outliers.”

To date, they have photographed and interviewed 84 women, with many more in the works. Some, women from their own community, and others through word of mouth, all photographed at Sahota’s studio in Surrey, 20 minutes from Vancouver. While few came forward initially, they’re now fielding requests from across the world—the chance to finally assert themselves too powerful to ignore. ■