

Abuse and violence against women manifest themselves in different ways – from physical violence and sexual assault, to emotional abuse & neglect, to financial repression & control. The statistics are absolutely frightening and it is almost a pandemic that has spread through the world. It knows no caste, no religion, and no economic boundaries. I spoke to Purvi Shah, Executive Director of Sakhi, a community based organization in the New York area that is committed to ending violence against South Asian women.

# Need a Sakhi?

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Photo : Sakhi for South Asian Women

**What is Sakhi's mission? What kind of help do you provide to women?**

A. Sakhi for South Asian Women works to end violence against women of South Asian origin. Sakhi, which means "woman friend" in a number of South Asian languages, provides comprehensive service to survivors of domestic violence; education, awareness-raising and engagement with community members to shift attitudes that perpetuate abuse; and policy advocacy to ensure institutions – particularly the courts – respond effectively to survivors of violence.

In addition to offering such direct services as support groups, computer classes, financial literacy workshops, and referrals for legal assistance, healthcare, and shelter, Sakhi routinely speaks in the community and participates in community events in order to raise awareness and dialogue. In the past 5 years, Sakhi has seen a remarkable increase in demand for our services. Our new requests for support have more than tripled. In the first six months of 2007, 11% of Sakhi's new requests were from men looking to access support and resources for women they care about – sisters, nieces, aunts. The fact that women and men are reaching out to Sakhi shows that our work is having community-wide impact.

**Can you give us an idea of the prevalence of abuse against South Asian women?**

A. Violence happens, unfortunately, in all communities, countries, and social strata. While there is very little data on the prevalence of abuse within South Asian American communities, one public health research study by Anita Raj and Jay Silverman demonstrated that more

than 40% of the 160 South Asian women they surveyed in the greater Boston area had experienced intimate partner violence. That is at least 2 out of 5 women – a significant segment of our community.

In all its forms – physical, emotional, sexual, and financial – and in every situation, abuse is inexcusable and we should work actively to end it.

**Is the violence more prominent in any particular social or economic classes?**

A. Sakhi has worked with survivors who are doctors, lawyers, computer professionals, homemakers, store clerks – the whole gamut of our society. People often believe that violence happens more in lower socioeconomic groups. In fact, many survivors we work with are themselves shocked by having to confront abuse since they too assumed it did not happen amongst families with a certain level of education and social standing.

Furthermore, immigrant survivors with degrees from their home countries may not be certified to work in the U.S. or

face spousal control in doing so. Women may not have access to their own income or assets due to spousal control. They may also face another barrier in being disqualified from services available to low-income survivors such as specific legal and economic remedies. While women with more limited means more often reach out to organizations such as Sakhi and more often stay connected, this may be because they need ongoing culturally-specific assistance, language support, and information on local laws and social service systems.

**Do social and economic factors prevent women from taking steps like walking out of an abusive marriage/relationship?**

A. We all need support when making big decisions or taking risks in our lives. This is true for survivors of violence who exhibit tremendous courage in pursuing safety and a better life – in whatever choices they make.

We all know that without money, we do not have options. Similarly, without family or community support, women are isolated. This is why Sakhi works not only to serve survivors of violence in our community but does so holistically through programs that focus on economic empowerment and community change and dialogue to end violence.



Sakhi's volunteers contributed more than 100 hours of service to supporting survivors and mobilizing our communities to respond to violence.

## Joy of Giving

To help enable women's self-sufficiency, Sakhi offers financial literacy workshops, computer classes, small educational grants, and a host of services.



Photo : Sakhi for South Asian Women

Sakhi's Economic Empowerment program grew out of our conviction that all women deserve to be self-sufficient. To help enable women's self-sufficiency, Sakhi offers financial literacy workshops, computer classes, small educational grants, and a host of services to support women's ability to make choices for their safety and the well-being of their children.

Are volunteers a big part of Sakhi? What projects do they help with?

A. Sakhi could not be where it is today without the support of volunteers and community members. Just in the past three months, Sakhi's volunteers contributed more than 100 hours of service to supporting survivors and mobilizing our communities to respond to violence. Sakhi began as a volunteer-based organization and today we rely on volunteers to extend our reach and impact. In order for violence to end, we must all get involved. We each have a role to play in ending violence – whether it is supporting a survivor, speaking to community members, donating professional expertise, or giving a donation.

What advice do you have for women to take the first steps towards preventing abuse?

A. The onus of preventing abuse should be on the abuser and our community—not women facing abuse. It is this fundamental shift in who is to blame for abuse that we as a community need to recognize and address.

Women who experience abuse should reach out in order to access support, resources, and gain a sense of the options



Photo: Sakhi for South Asian Women by Jacques Cornell

Sakhi survivors not only seek legal, medical, and economic assistance, but also emotional support.

available – and to know they are not alone. In addition, all survivors should develop a safety plan since domestic violence can be a life or death issue. For more information tailored to survivors based in the New York City area, feel free to visit our website at : <http://www.sakhi.org/gethelp/index.php>

Why is faith important to survivors of violence?

A. In Sakhi's experience with working with survivors, we have seen successful support for survivors manifest in different forms. We find that Sakhi survivors not only seek legal, medical, and economic assistance, but also emotional support. Advocates, family, friends, and community members are some of the main sources of emotional support, but we have observed that faith and spirituality play an integral role for many survivors seeking hope and strength.

Sakhi recently conducted a survey to assess the role of faith in survivors' lives. Fifty-three survivors responded – about a-third of our ongoing mailing list, demonstrating that faith is a very important issue for our constituency. Of the survivors who responded, 76% answered that they used their faith as a source of strength but only 10% confided in their religious leaders or communities about their experiences with violence.

In the course of the next year, Sakhi will be gathering additional information on the role of faith and spirituality in the lives of domestic violence survivors. Through surveys and focus groups, Sakhi intends to grasp a deeper understanding and knowledge of the issue. The organization hopes to understand more ways to support survivors and spark dialogue on the issue with communities of faith. Together we can create change and work towards ending violence towards women. ●