



Compassion Without Borders: Daya's Emergence as Houston's Center for South Asian Victims of Domestic Abuse.

Anne S. Chao

Abstract

Immigrants to a new land have been known to establish a myriad of associations, partly out of a desire to belong, but mostly in order to satisfy a perceived need in their community. Daya arose from the realization by a group of South Asian women of the need for a culture-specific center for victims of domestic abuse in Houston. This article traces the organization's history, from its beginnings as a volunteer-driven phone hotline, to its current status as one of the nation's top three or four South Asian women's centers, with a budget of \$1 million. Daya's success is a classic example of an organization where all of its constituents work well together to achieve a greater good. Daya also reaches beyond its culturally specific practices to engage and collaborate with key players in the space of domestic violence in the city of Houston and across the nation. Our interviews with board members, staff and a client reveal the positive synergy of strong leadership, deep expertise, high morale, and enthusiastic community support.

Introduction

As immigrants enter American society and search for ways of belonging, they undergo the dual processes of acculturation and assimilation. Acculturation refers to the immigrant's ability to adopt the cultural characteristics of the new society, such as the behavior and values of the mainstream community. Assimilation points to the immigrant's ability to "move out of formal and informal ethnic associations" and to join the "host society's non-ethnic ones."¹ This paper follows the genesis, growth, and impact of Daya, a primary center for South Asian victims of domestic violence in Houston, Texas.² It is a story of acculturation: of how a small group of South Asian immigrants conceived of an idea, garnered community support, and created an entity that incorporated elements from established service organizations of the host society, in order to serve its own community. It is also a case of assimilation, in the sense that the founders of the South Asian organization collaborated with stakeholders in the mainstream

¹ Gans, Herbert J. "Towards a Reconciliation of 'Assimilation' and 'Pluralism': The Interplay of Acculturation and Ethnic Retention," in Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz, and Josh DeWind eds., *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 162.

² There are smaller agencies that serve Asian victims of abuse, such as AADE (Asians Against Domestic Abuse) and An-Nisa, which focuses on the Muslim population in greater Houston.

community to help save the lives of victims of domestic violence, crossing cultural, religious, social and racial boundaries.

It is estimated that one in three women in the world is affected by domestic violence, regardless of their socio-economic, religious, ethnic, or educational backgrounds.³ “Violence knows no boundaries...As an extreme form of coercion...[it] negates [a woman’s] agency,” declared a World Development Report in 2012.⁴ Women are more likely to suffer domestic abuse from an intimate partner than from other people, and they are more likely than men to be killed or seriously injured.⁵ A survey in Brazil reported that 25% of female interviewees had experienced incidences of physical violence by intimate partners, while in Peru, almost 50% of women have suffered such harm.⁶ A study that included 215 women of South Asian origin living in the United States reported that 38% had experienced some form of abuse (psychological, physical, sexual) during the past year.⁷ The author of the same study cited a survey comparing the annual rate of intimate partner abuse among 8,000 women in the general U.S. population with that of South Asian women residing in the U.S., with abuse defined as “rape, physical assault, and threats of harm.” While the general population reported an incidence of 1.5%, the South Asian women population reported a much higher incidence of 18%.⁸ Because South Asian women tend to be less willing to report abuse, the author suggested that the actual rate is no likely to be higher.⁹

How, then, is domestic violence to be reduced, if not eradicated? The World Development Report offers a three-pronged plan of action: first, a nation must generate laws that define the various forms of violence, put enforcement measures in place, and signal its government’s commitment to eradication. Second, norms and behaviors associated with domestic violence must be shifted to a focus on prevention, such as initiating education and awareness programs. Third, society must provide timely and effective assistance to the victims; help in the arenas of policing, law, medicine, psychological counseling, education, as well as in basic housing, food, and financial resources, must be forthcoming.¹⁰ Daya, the organization under study, fulfills the description of the third component in the World Bank’s plan of action, as it serves Houston’s South Asian victims of domestic abuse. But as it has grown, it has moved to activate the first and second steps of the World Bank’s plan, helping to shape laws and policies, and providing education and advocacy related to the issue of domestic violence. We

³ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, HAAA. June 6, 2018. Haaa.rice.edu.

⁴ The World Bank, “World Development Report, 2012: Gender Equality and Development,” (Washington D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/ The World Bank), 20.

⁵ The World Bank, 20.

⁶ The World Bank, 20.

⁷ Neely, Mahapatra, “South Asian Women in the U.S. and their Experience of Domestic Violence,” *Journal of Family Violence*, 27(5), July 2012, 386.

⁸ Mahapatra, 386.

⁹ Mahapatra, 386.

¹⁰ The World Bank, 31-32.

will explore the myriad factors that propelled this organization into becoming one of the nation's top South Asian women's help centers.

From a historical perspective, the development of this "home-grown" organization reveals in granular detail the particular characteristics of the immigrant experience. More than global and transnational institutions, a Houston-centric social entity such Daya offers a tangible case study of the evolution and agency of a local Indian American community. As sociologist Jose Moya has pointed out, this type of organization is "the most common form of immigrant sociability outside of the family."¹¹ Engagement in civic practices, such as participating in voluntary associations for social and cultural purposes, is an effective way for immigrants to establish their multi-dimensional identities, thereby bridging the gap between assimilation and acculturation.¹² Alexis de Tocqueville famously wrote in 1831 that "in no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used...than in America," and scholars of migration studies have also noticed the immigrants' propensity to create social organizations.¹³ Scholars of migration have debated over the factors that contribute to the organizational strength of immigrant communities, and opinions vary, but two factors seem essential for the successful founding of immigrant organizations: the characteristics of the immigrant communities and the political and social opportunity structure of the new society.¹⁴

In this study we ask the following questions: Do pre-migratory social practices and civic engagement influence the behavior of the immigrants post-migration? To the extent that voluntary associations articulate collective identities and interests, do the immigrants develop new agendas and patterns of activities once they arrive in the new country? What sustains the organizations, and what is the motivation for members to join? The information gathered for these organizations has been derived primarily from interviews collected in the Houston Asian American Archive ([HAAA](#)), a research project designed to document greater Houston's Asian American immigrant experience. Specifically, we interviewed two founders of Daya, both of whom later became chairmen of the board (Lakshmy Parameswaran and Vibhuti Shah); the first male board member and board chair (Sesh Bala); the first full-time staffer in charge of client services (Meghna Goswami); the Senior Director of Legal Services and Education (Nusrat Ameen); the first permanent Executive Director (Rachna Khare); and an anonymous client of Daya. These interviews provide powerful testimonials to the immigrants' quest for spiritual and existential meaning in their lives.

The Founding of Daya

¹¹ Jose C. Moya, "Immigrants and Associations: A Global and Historical Perspective," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31:5, Sep. 2005, 835.

¹² Caroline Brettell and Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Civic Engagements: The Citizenship Practices of Indian and Vietnamese Immigrants* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 1. Marlou Schrover and Floris Vermeulen, "Immigrant Organizations," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31:5, Sep. 2005, 823.

¹³ Moya, 833-864.

¹⁴ Schrover and Vermeulen, 831.



When Lakshmy Parameswaran first arrived in Detroit, Michigan, in 1975 with her physician husband, she thought that his appointment at Wayne State University would be a temporary sojourn, and “we would come back [to India] with a lot of stories to tell, nice things, Corning dishes, and some money...and it would be fun.”¹⁵ As she settled into the apartment complex, where many doctors lived, her upstairs neighbor, also the wife of an Indian physician, would visit daily, not going home even after Lakshmy’s husband had returned. After a few months, the neighbor finally confided that her husband was having an affair and bringing the woman home. When she confronted her husband, his answer was: “If you don’t like it, you can leave,” but she had nowhere to go. Lakshmy thought, “At some point, I wanted to do something to empower our women and talk about independence and what you do when the worst thing happens.”¹⁶ Soon the family moved to Flint, Michigan for the husband’s medical residency. With two small children to tend to, and a husband who worked long hours, Lakshmy studied Early Childhood Education at night at the local community college, as she had heard that the field was becoming very popular back home in India. Upon completion of his residency, Lakshmy’s husband was enthusiastically recruited by the people in Sandusky, Michigan, to be the only surgeon at the local hospital. Although the family felt very much at home in Sandusky, they made a “bittersweet” decision in 1981 to leave Sandusky for Houston, where better educational opportunities awaited their children.

Across the country, the Indian American population stands out for its large proportion of highly educated, skilled and well-compensated members.¹⁷ Most Indian American immigrants entered the United States after the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, and their arrival can be divided into three stages. The first stage occurred from 1965 to 1979, when new arrivals, like Lakshmy and her husband, tended to be highly educated and skilled professionals, such as doctors, engineers and scientists. During the second stage, ca 1980-1990, the majority of new immigrants were family members and relatives of the first group. The third stage

¹⁵ Parameswaran, Lakshmy. Interview by Asiya Kazi and Brittney Xu, *HAAA*. June 15, 2011. Haaa.rice.edu.

¹⁶ Parameswaran, Lakshmy. Interview by Asiya Kazi and Brittney Xu, *HAAA*. June 15, 2011.

¹⁷ Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur, and Nirvikar Singh, *The Other One Percent: Indians in America* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 27.

involved those arriving in the mid-1990s, who represent almost three-fourths of Indian Americans in the U.S. today and were known as the “IT Generation.”¹⁸

The success of most Indian American immigrants can be explained in part by the fact that they came from affluent families in India, with access to higher education, especially in the fields of science and technology, and also the wherewithal to immigrate and settle in the United States.¹⁹ Furthermore, the use of English is widespread in India. Consequently, the post-1965 cohort of Indian American immigrants was more or less “selected for success”.²⁰

However, this has not always been the case. The first influx of about ten thousand Indian Americans came to the U.S. to work on railroads and farms during the early 1900s. When the Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed to limit Chinese immigration, the Indians were classified as British subjects and Caucasians, and therefore not immediately the target of legal discrimination. Nevertheless, they were targets of racism on a daily basis.²¹ In 1917, however, the Asian Barred Zone and Literacy Test law banned the entry of certain Asian groups into the US, including those from India. In the Supreme Court case of *United States vs. Bhagat Singh Thind* in 1923, the US government decided that Indian Caucasians were not white, and therefore could not become naturalized citizens.²² The 1924 Immigration Act further limited the number of immigrants from India. These restrictions had reduced the South Asian population to less than two thousand by 1949.²³ It was not until the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished quotas based on national origin, that the door finally opened to a large influx of immigrants from India and other parts of Asia.

An interesting outcome of the immigrant experience in America and elsewhere has been a change in the status of women vis-à-vis their more “traditional” gender roles. Scholars of gender relations in immigration have reached the conclusion that, in general, immigrant women employed in their new countries gain greater personal autonomy. The fact that women are earning a wage and contributing to the livelihood of the family gives them greater bargaining power in family negotiations, including the budgeting process.²⁴ Women are also relied upon for the “transmission of cultural values,”²⁵ although they are empowered to decide whether or not to retain home traditions as survival strategies shift. Nevertheless, studies on women’s changing status in migration reveal a mixed outcome: while women have gained status in mostly household domains, they continue to experience gender discrimination in the

¹⁸ Chakravorty et al., 29.

¹⁹ Chakravorty et al., 27.

²⁰ Chakravorty et al., 27.

²¹ Vinod Janardhanan, “Political Participation of the Indian Diaspora in the USA,” *Journal of International and Global Studies*. 5:1 (Nov. 2013), 16-33.

<https://www.lindenwood.edu/files/resources/16-33.pdf>, accessed 7/2/19.

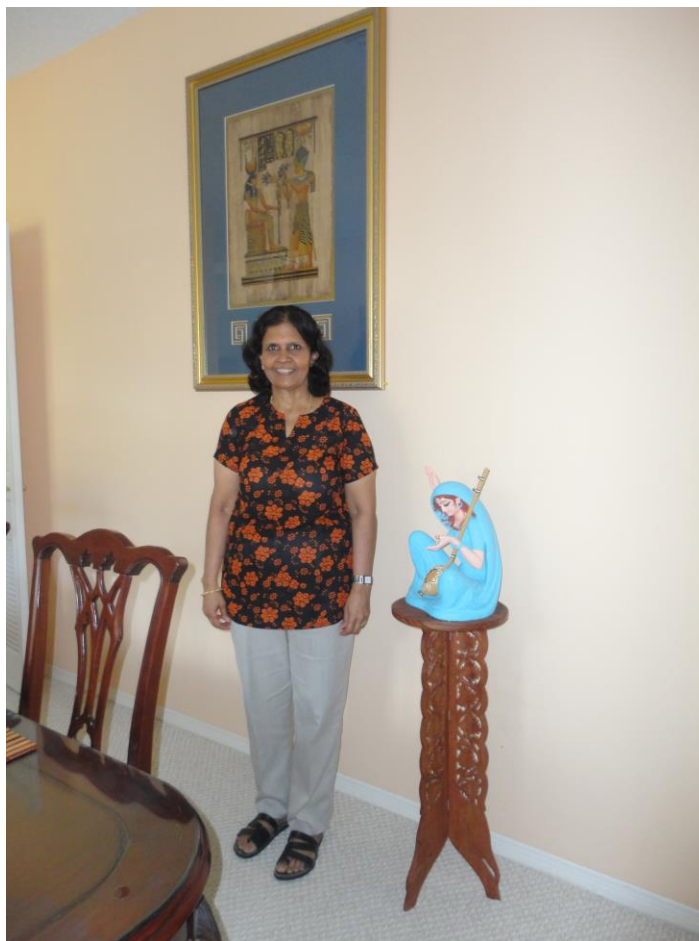
²² <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/261/204/>, accessed 7/2/19.

²³ Tang, Irwin. *Asian Texans: Our Histories and Our Lives* (Austin: The it Works, 2008), 189-214.

²⁴ Patricia R. Pessar, “The Role of Gender, Households, and Social Networks in the Migration Process: A Review and Appraisal,” in Hirschman et al. eds., *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, 63.

²⁵ Schrover and Vermeulen, 827.

workplace and ethnic associations.²⁶ According to Neely Mahapatra, adopting the cultural norms of the country to which they have migrated may allow women a better way of dealing with intimate partner violence. By becoming familiar with a new language and culture and being exposed to the media of a less traditional society, South Asian women may be able to understand their predicament better and to take action to end violence against them.²⁷



In the early years after moving to Houston, Lakshmy focused on settling her children into school and supporting her husband's burgeoning medical career. She joined the auxiliary club formed by wives of members of the Indian Doctors' Club. Informally, she counselled friends who experienced domestic trouble. She recalled, "we have seen several people having a lot of problems and issues...if you get some help unofficially with[sic] a good friend or somebody, it's fine. If not, there is no help."²⁸ Thinking that her community needed a forum to address issues of domestic violence, Lakshmy obtained a master's degree in Family Therapy at the University of Houston, Clearlake, in 1993-4. In 1995, she became the Director of Outreach

²⁶ Pessar, 64.

²⁷ Mahapatra, 382.

²⁸ Parameswaran, Lakshmy. Interview by Asiya Kazi and Brittney Xu, *HAAA*. June 15, 2011.

Services at the Fort Bend County Women’s Center.²⁹ In this capacity, she worked with United Way agencies such as the Houston Child Guidance and the Regional Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, and forged contacts in the legal, medical, financial and vocational counseling communities for the victims.³⁰

A group of her friends in the Indian Doctor’s Club Auxiliary cast about for ideas for a project, and chose to tackle family violence, which was an issue that the community was not addressing. In order to recruit more supporters, she and her friends withdrew from the Auxiliary and invited members of the public to join them in a project to counter domestic violence. They then contacted local women’s shelters, such as the Houston Area Women’s Center (HAWC), and were dismayed to learn that these centers did not have any South Asian clients. But, Lakshmy thought, “personally, every one of us knew some of our friends were going through [domestic troubles] or some of our acquaintances were going through [them].”³¹ The Fort Bend County Women’s Center agreed to give training to some of Lakshmy’s cohort, so a group of ten to twelve South Asian volunteers underwent the forty-hour training. They learned how to handle phone calls, what language to use, and the “do’s and don’ts” of engaging with potential clients.³² Lakshmy started passing out her home phone number to friends. She was the only trained counselor at the time, and volunteers would refer the more complicated cases to her. She would take calls at night and on weekends, as her husband was supportive of her efforts and also too busy with his own medical practice. Lakshmy and her volunteer group started their project as a liaison service, referring South Asian victims of domestic violence to enter Houston women’s shelters.

In 1996, a tragic event rocked the South Asian community when a young South Indian woman shot her husband and her three children, set the house on fire and killed herself. It turned out that she had suffered major abuse at the hands of her husband for over ten years, and had not confided in anyone—even though she would listen sympathetically to her friends as they described their own problems. She was educated, held a job and spoke English.³³ Stunned by this tragedy, Lakshmy decided that a referral service was not enough, as “it was not reaching the right people.” The volunteers transformed their liaison office into a women’s help center, calling it Daya, which means “compassion” in Sanskrit. It serves all South Asians, from

²⁹ “Community News,” *Houston Chronicle*, Mar. 13, 1996. https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.rice.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&t=favorite%3AHOUSTON%21Houston%2BChronicle&sort=YMD_date%3AD&maxresults=20&f=advanced&val-base-0=south%20asian%20domestic%20violence%20fort%20bend&fld-base-0=alltext&bln-base-1=and&val-base-1=1996&fld-base-1=YMD_date&docref=image/v2%3A14DB39C1C40322B4%40EANX-1719A12459F19B49%402450156-17199D7F027D9FFD%40401-17199D7F027D9FFD%40

³⁰ “Community News,” *Houston Chronicle*, Mar. 13, 1996.

³¹ Parameswaran, Lakshmy. Interview by Asiya Kazi and Brittney Xu, HAAA. June 15, 2011.

³² Shah, Vibhuti. Interview by Saniya Gayake and Taylor Ginter, HAAA. March 6, 2018. Haaa.rice.edu.

³³ Parameswaran, Lakshmy. Interview by Asiya Kazi and Brittney Xu, HAAA. June 15, 2011. Daya, website, <http://www.thewayhomehouston.org/daya-houston-bridging-the-cultural-gap/>

Indians, to Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Nepalese, Bhutanese, Sikkimese and Afghans.³⁴ But when the *Houston Chronicle* wrote a piece about Daya and the tragic murder-suicide, some members of Houston's South Asian community grumbled, "Why should the *Houston Chronicle* run this story?...Why aren't they running a story about our kids going to Harvard and Yale?"³⁵

The cultural specificity of Daya as a South Asian service organization fills a need in Houston; its counselors and case managers understand victims at a deeply emotional level.³⁶ They are familiar with South Asian family dynamics and South Asian religious customs. Although Lakshmy arrived in the States in the 1970s at the cusp of the feminist movement, she felt marginalized. "As immigrants, we were not anywhere in this picture. They were talking about white women. Why not African American women? ...Every law applied to white women, and their experience of violence and their experience of family life was different from any other immigrant, or...even African Americans, Hispanics," she recalled.³⁷ Rachna Khare, the current Executive Director of Daya, explained: "There's something really powerful about being a new immigrant or maybe a long-time immigrant and getting help from somebody who has lived your culture, and speaks your language, and [with whom] you can explain your abuse history in your native language." In addition, because Daya's counselors speak many different South Asian languages, the victims did not need to rely on the services of translators. In Khare's words, it is "awkward and weird to have a third person in the room while narrating abuse," and there is also the chance that the translator cannot accurately convey the thoughts of the victim.³⁸

Daya received seed funding from the Indo-American Charity Foundation (IACF). The IACF, a non-profit organization created by Indian Americans, was founded in 1988, and has the motto: "We live here, we give here." Its philanthropic focus is on four major areas in Houston: "Education, family, general welfare and healthcare."³⁹ The seed money was enough to set up a hotline and to have volunteers come in sporadically to check on phone messages.⁴⁰ In its early days, Daya did not receive many calls. "Nobody would come out and say that I have a problem... We used to go to Houston Area Women's Center and wait for somebody to call us. Nobody would call us," recalled Vibhuti Shah, a former board president of Daya. The Indian community was close-knit, and no one wanted to admit openly to having suffered domestic abuse.⁴¹ Another reason is that women who called the hotline and did not hear a person at the other end would be reluctant to leave a message, not knowing who would listen to it.⁴² The training

³⁴ Bala, Sesh. Interview by Taylor Ginter and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. Apr. 23, 2018. Haaa.rice.edu.

³⁵ Parameswaran, Lakshmy. Interview by Asiya Kazi and Brittney Xu, *HAAA*. June 15, 2011.

³⁶ Ameen, Nusrat. Interview by Priscilla Li and Mai Ton, *HAAA*. May 29, 2018. Haaa.rice.edu.

³⁷ Parameswaran, Lakshmy. Interview by Asiya Kazi and Brittney Xu, *HAAA*. June 15, 2011.

³⁸ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

Haaa.rice.edu.

³⁹ <http://iacfhouston.com/about-us/who-we-are>, accessed 7/1/2019.

⁴⁰ Shah, Vibhuti. Interview by Saniya Gayake and Taylor Ginter, *HAAA*. March 6, 2018, and Parameswaran, Lakshmy. Interview by Asiya Kazi and Brittney Xu, *HAAA*. June 15, 2011.

⁴¹ Shah, Vibhuti. Interview by Saniya Gayake and Taylor Ginter, *HAAA*. Mar. 6, 2018.

⁴² Goswami, Meghna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. May 25, 2018.

Haaa.rice.edu

they received specified that unless the victim initiated contact, Daya could not reach out to the victim first. “I would give them a number...If you really want help, call this number,” explained Vibhuti. She added, however, that “if you see people there with black eye, or, you know, bone broke or something, you feel it. But there is nothing you can do about it. It’s not your place...We don’t understand what people go through...”⁴³

The Growth of Daya

In hindsight, Lakshmy wished that she had hired a full-time staff member from the very beginning, as a real person at the end of the hotline could have immediately helped callers.⁴⁴ After five or six years, Daya was able to hire a part-time staff member, and in 2005 raised enough funds for a full-time staff member. After an extensive search, Meghna Goswami became Daya’s first full-time hire in the capacity of Client Services Coordinator.⁴⁵ Her background had prepared her well for this job. Meghna grew up in the Indian state of Meghalaya, amongst the Khasi ethnic community which has a matrilineal system of family descent and inheritance.. Her role models were strong women, and she was acutely aware of the difference in gender roles when she visited her cousins from a patriarchal family in the state of Assam. Interested in issues of patriarchy and social mobility and wanting more hands-on experience with social work, she had obtained a master’s degree from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Bombay. The school is the oldest school in India offering courses with a focus on social work, and was also an incubator for leaders of the nation’s women’s rights and labor rights movements.⁴⁶

⁴³ Shah, Vibhuti. Interview by Saniya Gayake and Taylor Ginter, *HAAA*. Mar. 6, 2018.

⁴⁴ Goswami, Meghna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. May 25, 2018.

⁴⁵ Meghna worked at Daya from July 2005 to September 2010.

⁴⁶ Goswami, Meghna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. May 25, 2018.



Upon graduating, Meghan obtained a fellowship and worked on low-cost housing and community organizing for a year before joining North East Network, an organization that worked on gender equity and women’s rights. In the 1990s, India did not have a unified law protecting victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, although it had laws targeting singular issues: for instance, a law against dowry abuse, and a law against beating women. Meghna did research and policy work to advocate for a unified law against domestic violence. North East Network was also responsible for providing a “shadow report” to the United Nations critiquing India’s performance as a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The “shadow report” cites gaps in the country’s performance in following CEDAW’s guidelines, and provides recommendations for assisting the country’s drive toward gender equity. In Assam during its civil war years, Meghna conducted a study on how women were affected by violence. She soon learned that women were pawns in relation to both sides in the conflict. The Indian government military would kidnap the wives and daughters of rebels as a way to flush them out of hiding. Meanwhile, rival insurgent groups would rape the women from their enemies’ camps, because it was a humiliation and dishonor for the whole community when their women were raped by men from the other side.⁴⁷

After three years at the North East Network, Meghna married an architect based in Houston, and moved here. Due to visa restrictions, Meghna could not work when she first came

⁴⁷ Goswami, Meghna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. May 25, 2018.

to Houston. But within two weeks of her arrival, she began volunteering with organizations that dealt with gender equity and domestic violence issues. She heard about Daya and contacted Lakshmy, and the latter invited her to outreach events. Soon, she agreed to undergo rigorous training at the HAWC, and became part of its hotline and counseling staff. She also volunteered with Family Services of Greater Houston, showing Hispanic parents of public school students how to navigate situations that required speaking English, such as taking a bus, going to the bank, etc. By 2005, Meghna had obtained her social work license and a work visa, and was hired by Daya as its first full-time staff member.⁴⁸ As a way to formalize the documentation of clients, Meghna borrowed the “intake form” from HAWC, which records all the relevant information about an individual—their name, birth and other relevant dates, immigration status and any other facts to help assess their needs.⁴⁹ With the help of the volunteers, Daya provided counseling, case management, and access to law enforcement for the clients. They would accompany clients to police stations or courts. Meghna created a list of referral agencies, such as legal and medical services, to help provide for the various needs of the clients. She also applied to various foundations for grants to assist on the funding of Daya’s expenses. To promote awareness of Daya, Meghna attended community forums, events held at temples, mosques, and even shopping centers frequented by South Asians. She would explain that while domestic violence was not solely a South Asian issue, the whole community needed to be involved in preventing it.

Meanwhile, Daya members held talks with the Houston Police, with HAWC, and with the general public on how to respond when a South Asian victim of domestic violence was involved. She explained that if the victim’s abuser was standing next to her,⁵⁰ then one would not ask if she was a victim of abuse. If the victim did not maintain eye contact, it was because she was showing respect and not because she was hiding something. Eventually, Daya hired a second full-time staff member, who was responsible for outreach and education work. An event called One Voice Against Domestic Violence was held once a year in a predominantly South Asian shopping area near Hillcroft, at which volunteers and staff members formed a human chain and held placards decrying domestic violence. Over the years, this event has turned into a fair, with music, food and festivities.

In addition to working to protect abused women directly, Daya also aims to bring awareness to the victim’s abuser. It therefore works with an agency called Aid to Victims of Domestic Violence (AVDA), in its batterer intervention program. The goal is to approach the abuser and have him reflect on his behavior; some abusers did not realize that their behavior was considered abusive. This program has experienced varying levels of success, Meghna reflected. If the abuser enters the program by court order, his willingness to change is minimal. However, for those abusers who are truly remorseful, the results are positive. It is a great irony, Meghna observed, that the abuser, after separating from his victim, continues to maintain his social standing and his network of friends. Meanwhile, the woman becomes further isolated, not only because her social network was her husband’s, but because of the shame attached to

⁴⁸ Goswami, Meghna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. May 25, 2018.

⁴⁹ Goswami, Meghna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. May 25, 2018.

⁵⁰ While domestic violence is also experienced by men, female victims consisted about 95% of the abused. See Sesh Bala. Interview by Taylor Ginter and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. Apr. 23, 2018.

a woman when a marriage fails. Consequently, Daya stresses to religious leaders and the general community that they should support the victims and hold the perpetrators accountable.⁵¹



In 2008, Dr. Nusrat Ameen was hired as Daya’s third full-time staffer, with the title of Client Advocate and Transitional Home Coordinator. By that time, the organization had developed a more complex structure and was serving more clients. Daya first rented and then, in 2009, purchased a “transitional” house to offer women longer stays during which to put their lives back together, something that emergency shelters cannot do. “So once they take them out of the emergency situation, and if they want to make a better life and not go back to the same situation, we have to provide them something long term... we give them at least six months’ time to work on their job skills, their immigration status, their driving and whatever other legal issues they have to work out...and not have to worry about food and shelter,” explained Lakshmy.⁵² As some of the abused women cannot access their own income, Daya provides housing security. Housing becomes a critical issue, as it is often the case that a woman might leave her husband five to seven times before she acquires the resources and/or the confidence to make the final break.⁵³ Studies have shown that domestic violence is one of the leading causes of homelessness. And, once homeless, it is very hard for a woman to return to the housing world.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Goswami, Meghna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. May 25, 2018.

⁵² Parameswaran, Lakshmy. Interview by Asiya Kazi and Brittney Xu, *HAAA*. June 15, 2011.

⁵³ Goswami, Meghna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. May 25, 2018.

⁵⁴ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

As Client Advocate and Transitional Home Coordinator for Daya, Nusrat Ameen was well equipped for the job.” She was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where patriarchy was pervasive, but was fortunate to have grown up in a liberal family. She went to school along with her brothers, and never felt any discrimination at home. She left a “disastrous” marriage at an early age, and is herself a survivor of domestic violence.⁵⁵ She obtained a Ph.D. in the field of gender rights/domestic violence in England, and returned to Dhaka to do field work with six non-profit organizations focusing on domestic violence. Upon graduation, she was appointed Associate Professor in the Law Department of Dhaka University in Bangladesh, becoming a recognized authority on domestic violence. She consulted with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations’ Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Before immigrating to the U.S., Nusrat worked on preparations for the enactment of Bangladesh’s first law against domestic violence. She left before the law came into being.⁵⁶ She came to the United States in 2005 because, according to Nusrat, her brother had applied for a green card for her. She was invited to be a Visiting Scholar at Rice University’s Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality. She also volunteered for Daya, and found the job rewarding. “When I came to [the] USA, I was soul-searching about something that would really give me that...passion that I worked with in Bangladesh and to be related to the DV [domestic violence] world...Something that would give my soul the satisfaction, the passion that I always looked for to help survivors to make that change,” Nusrat recalled.⁵⁷

At Daya, Nusrat productively drew upon her extensive expertise in advocacy and outreach. She attended training sessions on advocacy in Washington D.C., spoke to members of Congress, met with Congressional caucuses, and submitted petitions to end domestic violence.⁵⁸ In Houston, Nusrat built a network of forty-plus attorneys, experts in family and immigration law, both pro bono and private, to whom Daya referred its clients. Almost all of Daya’s clients needed legal advice on divorce, custody, property division and Child Protective Service issues.⁵⁹ In addition to their need for legal help, almost all of Daya’s clients also required psychological counseling, for many of them suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In the South Asian community, there is a stigma associated with going to a mental health professional, which Daya seeks to overcome. In an effort to educate the public, Nusrat provides a great deal of cultural competency training and sexual assault training to first responders, community partners, hospitals, as well as universities.⁶⁰

With Nusrat on board, Daya has been able to expand its collaboration with other organizations in Houston and across the country. In Houston, Daya works closely with three of the biggest agencies in combating domestic violence: HAWC (mentioned earlier), the Fort Bend County Women’s Center, and Bridge Over Troubled Waters. Daya and all of these organizations fall under the purview of the Harris County Domestic Violence Coordinating Council.⁶¹ Daya also

⁵⁵ Ameen, Nusrat. Interview by Priscilla Li and Mai Ton, *HAAA*. May 29, 2018.

⁵⁶ Ameen, Nusrat. Interview by Priscilla Li and Mai Ton, *HAAA*. May 29, 2018.

⁵⁷ Ameen, Nusrat. Interview by Priscilla Li and Mai Ton, *HAAA*. May 29, 2018.

⁵⁸ Ameen, Nusrat. Interview by Priscilla Li and Mai Ton, *HAAA*. May 29, 2018.

⁵⁹ Ameen, Nusrat. Interview by Priscilla Li and Mai Ton, *HAAA*. May 29, 2018.

⁶⁰ Ameen, Nusrat. Interview by Priscilla Li and Mai Ton, *HAAA*. May 29, 2018.

⁶¹ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

works in partnership with other Asian American organizations, such as the Vietnamese BoatPeople SOS, and the Chinese Community Center. It also coordinates with the Houston Immigration Legal Services Coalition, Catholic Charities, the YMCA and the Tahirih Justice Center. In fact, Nusrat has joined the board of the Tahirih Justice Center's Forced Marriages Initiative. Across the nation, Daya is affiliated with South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), the Empowering the Communities Initiative, as well as the sixty-two-member National Coalition for South Asian Organizations (NCSO).⁶² According to Sesh Bala, a former board chair, there are twenty-five South Asian organizations fighting domestic violence across the United States, and Daya ranks as one of the top three or four organizations in terms of the number of clients it serves. In 2018, Daya helped 462 women and men, with men comprising 5% of the total.⁶³

Initially, Daya's transitional home plan seemed like a good idea, but over the years, its limitations became evident. The home did not accept children over ten years of age, and its geographic location could be far away from the client's place of work or her children's schools. Furthermore, at the end of the customary six-month stay, moving the client out of the transitional home into her own place introduced an added layer of trauma. As a result, Daya sold the transitional home, using the proceeds for the provision of supportive housing. Daya also received a federal grant for rapid re-housing, and began providing rental assistance and utilities for as long as one year to clients who could now choose to live near their work at a cost level that they could afford.⁶⁴ Today 27% of Daya's one-million-dollar budget goes toward housing assistance.⁶⁵

Cultural Factors of Abuse

The Indian text of *Manusmriti* or Manu's code—a Sanskrit legal text that provided the basis for the British-crafted Hindu laws—states that “females must be subservient to males throughout their lifetimes; in childhood to their fathers, in young adulthood to their husbands, and in old age to their sons.”⁶⁶ The culture of male supremacy is pervasive throughout South Asian society, except for small pockets of states where matriarchy dominates. However, this belief is by no means limited to South Asia, as the Chinese traditional dictum of “womanly dependence” also points to her obedience to her father, husband, and son.⁶⁷ In India, rigidity of gender roles and belief in the superiority of male over female are reflected in a survey of North

⁶² Ameen, Nusrat. Interview by Priscilla Li and Mai Ton, *HAAA*. May 29, 2018.

⁶³ Bala, Sesh. Interview by Taylor Ginter and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. Apr. 23, 2018. Haaa.rice.edu, and Rachna Khare. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

⁶⁴ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

⁶⁵ Daya website, “Financial Summary,” <https://www.dayahouston.org/financial-overview>, accessed 7/7/19.

⁶⁶ Sandra L. Martin, Kathryn E. Moracco, Julian Garro, Amy Ong Tsui, Lawrence L. Kupper, Jennifer L. Chase and Jacquelyn C. Campbell, “Domestic Violence across Generations: Findings from Northern India,” *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 2002; 31, 561.

⁶⁷ Richard J. Smith, *The Qing Dynasty and Traditional Chinese Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 188.

Indian men and women, in which the majority of respondents agree that husbands are justified in beating their wives if they have disobeyed their husbands' wishes.⁶⁸ Put into perspective against the findings of the World Bank's *World Development Report of 2012*, in which forty-one developing countries, ranging from Ukraine to Guinea, were surveyed, 29 percent of women agreed that wife-beating was justified in cases where a woman had argued with the husband, 25 percent agreed that it was justified for refusing to have sex, and 21 percent agreed that it was justified for burning food. India ranked in the middle of the countries surveyed.⁶⁹ In India, as in many other countries, the male has the right to control the sexual and reproductive decisions of the wife.⁷⁰ Here, mention must be made of the persistence of the Indian practice of *Sati*, in which the widow is expected to follow her deceased husband to burn to death in the funeral pyre. While the practice is banned by the Indian government, it is still revered and glorified in rural communities.⁷¹

"Culture and religion are often used by communities to condone what is happening within the household," reflected Meghna.⁷² A conspiracy of silence prevents the problem from being openly discussed. "In our community, everything is hush-hush. You're not supposed to let anybody know that you've been abused...It's considered very bad if you talk about your family when you are married...The small, small, verbal, emotional abuse, all the females just deal with it, that's our life," Vibhuti explained.⁷³ Some women internalize the abuse, blaming karma or their actions in a previous life for their misfortune.⁷⁴ Women fear being ostracized for speaking out, or for not being believed, and often for loss of financial support if they walk out of a marriage.⁷⁵ Another reason many women suffer in silence is their fear that a failed marriage would negatively impact their natal family: "My parents are so worried because now my younger sister will not get married if I'm divorced or if I'm separated,"⁷⁶ a client confided to Meghna.

In-law abuse, common in Asian countries with extended living arrangements, is a significant factor among the cases managed by Daya. "Every time my husband would talk to my mother-in-law, father-in-law, on a Sunday morning, the moment he keeps [sic] down the phone...his attitude toward me changes," lamented one client.⁷⁷ A professional woman who has endured physical and emotional abuse from her husband pointed to the harm that her in-laws in India could inflict on their troubled marriage in Houston: "My husband [is] so influenced by his parents. Whenever we are in a good relationship or conflict is resolved, we are again...a happy family. And they know that we are living happily because every weekend we talk to them and they can smell...If they smell that we are really happy...at that point they will bring [up] the

⁶⁸ Martin et al., 561.

⁶⁹ The World Bank, 83.

⁷⁰ Mahapatra, 388.

⁷¹ Martin et al., 561.

⁷² Goswami, Meghna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. May 25, 2018.

⁷³ Shah, Vibhuti. Interview by Saniya Gayake and Taylor Ginter, *HAAA*. Mar. 6, 2018.

⁷⁴ Mahapatra, 381.

⁷⁵ Mahapatra, 388.

⁷⁶ Goswami, Meghna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. May 25, 2018.

⁷⁷ Goswami, Meghna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. May 25, 2018.

same point [of wanting the wife to move back to India with the grandbaby and live with the in-laws—see full explanation in the story of the anonymous client]...making emotional blackmailing. So my husband...started thinking, 'But, oh, you didn't do this, that's why my parents are not happy, it's just because of you...'"⁷⁸

The most prevalent form of violence experienced by South Asian women is psychological in nature. The men inflict verbal abuse, insult women in front of others, ridicule their appearance or their cooking skills, threaten to destroy something that belongs to them, and in the case of immigrant women, berate them for either adopting or not adopting Western norms.⁷⁹ As indicated above, the men involved often do not think that their behavior is considered abusive, and sometimes neither do the women. Daya routinely shows first-time clients a checklist of different types of abuse, and many women do not recognize that they have been experiencing multiple forms of abuse until this point. Vibhuti recalled one situation in which the husband "... did not realize what he was doing was abuse (emotional, physical and verbal)...[because] his grandfather and father did it to his grandmother and his mother, therefore he was following suit."⁸⁰ Victims of such abuse suffer low-esteem, psychological trauma, depression, and PTSD symptoms. In a downward spiral, the victim's behavior might trigger physical abuse from her spouse.⁸¹

Most immigrant women arrive in this country with their husbands, having left behind their own families. Often lacking meaningful connections with the host society, these women may face discrimination from the mainstream culture, and in some cases are prohibited by their spouses from making friends. Their isolation, in turn, increases the spouse's capacity to control them. Complicating their predicament is their lack of immigration status should they seek a divorce. Most of the women are in possession of a dependent H4 visa, which is contingent on being married to the holder of an H1B foreign worker visa. In cases where there are children involved, a woman who divorces will not only end up staying in the U.S. illegally if she chooses to remain, but will also lose custody of her children. Without legal provision to study or to work in this country, and without the means to stay near her children, a divorced immigrant woman is defeated on all fronts.

Meghna has pointed out that there is a lack of alignment between family law and immigration law in the U.S. legal system. In 2015, a ruling allowed H4 visa holders to obtain authorization to work, and Daya helped many of its clients gain employment and independent means of support. Nusrat worked with clients to obtain work authorizations, went to court with them, and helped prepare them for job interviews. However, this ruling is currently in limbo. Congress, which introduced the "H-4 Employment Protection Act of 2018," is at odds with the Department of Homeland Security, which has called for the removal of the work authorization.⁸²

⁷⁸ Anonymous client of Daya. Interview by Anne Chao, *HAAA*. June 18, 2012. Haaa.rice.edu.

⁷⁹ Mahapatra, 387.

⁸⁰ Shah, Vibhuti. Interview by Saniya Gayake and Taylor Ginter, *HAAA*. Mar. 6, 2018.

⁸¹ Mahapatra, 387.

⁸² "H4 EAD: Complete Guide to Working on H4 Visa and Latest H4 EAD News," *STILT*, <https://www.stilt.com/blog/2018/06/h4-visa-ead/>, accessed 7/8/19.

The Strengthening of Daya



Sesh Bala, a retired executive from the IT section of the oil company Shell, was on the board of the Indo-American Charity Foundation when the initial funding for Daya was granted. Soon after, he was asked to serve as an advisory board member for Daya. As he recalls, “It was ... 100% run by women; it’s a women’s organization...and there had never been a male board member before...So they took me in [sic] as an advisory board member because they wanted to get comfortable with...a man being on the board.”⁸³ It was around 2004-2005, and a few months later, he was invited to sit on the governing board. He was elected president of the board in 2016-17, and at the time of writing, Sesh had returned to the advisory board. He brought to the organization extensive experience from the corporate world. But, in order to familiarize himself with its mission, Sesh undertook the forty-hour training course at HAWC, learning about crisis intervention and phone-answering protocols. As a volunteer, he did everything, even using his pickup truck to help clients move furniture.⁸⁴

⁸³ Bala, Sesh. Interview by Taylor Ginter and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. Apr. 23, 2018.

⁸⁴ Bala, Sesh. Interview by Taylor Ginter and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. Apr. 23, 2018.

More importantly, Sesh established a rational administrative structure for Daya. He helped create by-laws, devised means by which the effectiveness of the work being done could be measured, and introduced the idea of keeping a phone log. He showed the staff how to collect demographic data in order to refer clients to the right counselors. “When I joined, I asked them, ‘What’s your budget?’ They said, ‘I don’t know.’ So I said, ‘Do you have insurance?’ They said, ‘Why do we need insurance?’ (...) So I helped.”⁸⁵ Sesh instilled project management discipline and oversaw the strategic planning process. It is critical for Daya, as it grows, to have a road map for its future direction. Two strategic planning sessions have been completed, one in 2014 and the other in 2017, resulting in the approval of services related to teen and young adult education, as well as expansion of the legal services and housing programs.⁸⁶ In addition to being board chair, Sesh has sat on the audit committee and the personnel committee, and has also helped with the writing of grant applications and fundraising. “I came for the organization and stayed for the cause,” Sesh reflected.

Looking into the future, Sesh points to the need to reach more people. “We are not always successful [in] penetrating those temples (...) [They] might say, ‘Oh no we don’t have that problem in our congregation...If we have a problem, we’ll solve it ourselves. Thank you very much.’”⁸⁷ As we shall see below, Houston has over twenty South Asian temples and churches, not counting mosques.⁸⁸ Weekly gatherings at places of worship occupy an important place within the social life of the South Asian community. But because most men would shy away at the mention of domestic abuse, Daya would sometimes offer financial planning sessions, Sesh explained, as a way of attracting more men to its educational programs. Reflecting on his long-time involvement with Daya, Sesh modestly suggested that being a man in an all-women’s organization has some advantages: “Doing things that others can’t do, like move furniture, for example...When we... negotiate for [a] lease...sometimes it’s helpful if there is a guy there.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Bala, Sesh. Interview by Taylor Ginter and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. Apr. 23, 2018.

⁸⁶ Follow up email with Rachna Khare, 7/10/19.

⁸⁷ Bala, Sesh. Interview by Taylor Ginter and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. Apr. 23, 2018.

⁸⁸ “Indian Community Organizations and Select India Related Entities,” published by Houston’s Indian Consulate, Aug., 2018.

⁸⁹ Bala, Sesh. Interview by Taylor Ginter and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. Apr. 23, 2018.



Because Daya has few paid staff members, volunteers are still heavily involved in all aspects of the organization. When Rachna Khare became the first permanent Executive Director of Daya in 2016, the organization transitioned from a board-run model to one in which management was left to the staff and the Executive Director. The board members are now free to concentrate on building community relations, cultivating donors, and deliberating on strategy, as a proper governing board should do.⁹⁰ Rachna came to her executive position with a varied background. She grew up in a home where both parents were highly educated and progressive first-generation immigrants from India. Her father has a doctorate in physics and has worked at Exxon, and her mother is a technician working in cardiology and nuclear medicine. Cultural barriers kept her mother from being able to achieve her dream of attending medical school. Rachna remembers many conversations with her deeply feminist mother about how women are treated overseas, especially in India, and the cultural obstacles they have to overcome.⁹¹ Upon graduation from the University of Texas, Austin, Rachna went into clinical research at MD Anderson. She developed an interest in the administrative side of research, especially on connecting underserved communities to quality healthcare. This interest led to

⁹⁰ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

⁹¹ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

her position as Executive Director of Rice University's Global Health Institute. After three years working in neonatal and maternal health projects, she learned about Daya through the United Way, and found its mission of caring for Houston's South Asian community extremely compelling.⁹²

Under her tenure, Daya grew quickly, the number of clients it served jumping from 286 in 2016 to 462 in 2018.⁹³ Rachna is gratified to see that a greater proportion of the clients who seek help are younger women, meaning that women are no longer waiting until they have been married for thirty years or so before getting out of abusive situations. Correspondingly, the staff also span two generations, from twenty-four-year-olds to women of her parents' generation.⁹⁴ "The biggest lesson that ...I have learned through all of the work is ...the importance of listening," reflected Rachna. "The answers come from everyone around you."⁹⁵ Domestic violence is such a huge public health problem, Rachna explained, that "it takes lots of different minds, and it takes ...putting aside your ego and really, really listening."⁹⁶

It is commonly known that abusers are often driven by their own trauma, and men who witnessed parent-to-parent violence as children are more likely to believe in husbands' rights to control their wives, and to be physically abusive toward them.⁹⁷ This is as true of Indian men as it is of men all across the world.⁹⁸ Education is clearly the best way to prevent domestic violence, especially through efforts to impress upon the young the importance of consent, of having boundaries, of establishing healthy relationships, and of understanding the nature of control and patriarchy. Rachna believes that the Me-Too movement in America has helped increase public awareness of the issue, but that communities of color are often left out of the conversation. Domestic violence offenders serve little to no jail time, and for the victims, having a protection order is often not enough to prevent them from being harmed.⁹⁹ Rachna finds that concentrating on prevention is a much better way to reduce incidences of domestic violence. Interestingly, there is not much difference between the rate of domestic violence among South Asian women born and raised in the U.S. and those who immigrated from South Asia. Rachna attributes this situation to the fact that both sets of women are bound by similar cultural values and that the desire for power and the need to control exist in every South Asian community.¹⁰⁰

Daya implements a three-step program when helping a client: Recognize, Respond, Refer. As a general rule, Daya cannot initiate contact with a perceived victim of domestic abuse. Due to the complex dynamics between abuser and victim, it is difficult for outsiders to intervene without a clear understanding of the situation. Instead, Daya must wait for the client to make the first move. Once the client has made an overture, then the proper response is not to ask too many questions and not to give advice. Daya will present the client with options, and

⁹² Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

⁹³ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

⁹⁴ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

⁹⁵ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

⁹⁶ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

⁹⁷ Martin et al., 560.

⁹⁸ The World Bank, 152.

⁹⁹ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

let her decide. “The last thing you want to be is another person that’s controlling someone who’s already being controlled.”¹⁰¹ Rachna also acknowledged that domestic violence is not a casual argument with one’s partner, “it is about power and control, and it means that one person in that relationship always holds the control... [and uses] that control to abuse.”¹⁰²

In conversation with a client, it is extremely important to stick to simple, but powerful sentences, such as “I believe you...You don’t deserve this...This shouldn’t have happened to you,” explained Rachna. Clients should never be made to feel that they are the ones at fault, so Daya is quick to let them know it is solidly on her side. “We don’t believe that we are here to swoop in and save the day. (...) We always tell our clients, (...) ‘You’re going through a horrible situation,’ and they’ve shown so much bravery (...) and strength in coming and seeking help already.”¹⁰³ Rachna emphasizes the importance of treating clients as partners on a journey together.

Daya is not usually the first place victims turn to; many of them may have sought out people in their “faith communities, their religious leaders, their own families, their social circles. [So] they’ve then heard all this advice...and judgment...At that point, many of them have experienced not only so much trauma from their abusive relationship, but also trauma from the community response to their relationship that now they’re really in a place of (...) vulnerability.”¹⁰⁴ Rachna hopes to make Daya the first place that clients turn to, before their traumatic experience worsens.

In the past few years, Daya has expanded its staff to include nine full-time members. At a time when many non-profit organizations were busy handling DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) cases, Daya found that the usual agencies that helped to represent its clients in court, such as the Catholic Charities, the YMCA and Tahirih Justice Center, were overwhelmed. Instead of waiting for their clients to be served, two staff members undertook training to become certified by the Department of Justice (DOJ). Thus, they are able to represent their clients before the Immigration Courts and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). For incorporating the DOJ program into Daya, and for its proactive stance, Daya has received national recognition from SAALT.¹⁰⁵

The Client

We end our narrative with the story of an anonymous client of Daya. When a young Indian woman was physically assaulted by her husband, she went to a CVS walk-in clinic and told the doctor what had happened. She was referred to Daya, and at the time of her interview was living in Daya’s transitional home and preparing a lawsuit against her husband. She married her husband in India in an arranged marriage, and they moved to Canada, where they lived for five years. In Canada they were happy; she studied and passed the three technically demanding exams to receive a pharmacist’s license. She had a great job and was not dependent on her

¹⁰¹ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

¹⁰² Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

¹⁰³ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Ameen, Nusrat. Interview by Priscilla Li and Mai Ton, *HAAA*. May 29, 2018.

husband's income. They enjoyed their circle of friends.¹⁰⁶ Then her husband's job brought them to Houston, where her H4 visa did not allow her to work. They did not have any friends and she became financially dependent on her husband. Her husband lost his job at the time when their son was born. Her in-laws came to the States for a short time, ostensibly to help with the baby. But instead, they expected to be waited on by their daughter-in-law. Having to take care of her in-laws, her husband, and the newborn baby left the woman physically and emotionally exhausted, but she received no support from anyone.¹⁰⁷ Soon, her in-laws pressured her to bring the baby back to India and live with them for a couple of years, because they missed the baby. Not wanting to leave her husband and hoping to advance her career in Houston, she refused. This became a bone of contention in the marriage.

Then the abuse started; it was emotional, physical and financial abuse all at once. After the first few assaults, her husband would say, "Whatever happened yesterday, it shouldn't happen again. Either by me or either by you."¹⁰⁸ At first, she did not inform her parents, not wishing to burden them. She tried talking to her in-laws, but they accused her of lying. Finally, her parents held several meetings with her in-laws at their house in India. "But every time they agreed that (...) things will never happen again. 'We will (...) convince my son that [he] should not do this, this, and this.' But after [the] meeting is finished, everything will be at the same place [sic], nothing has been changed."¹⁰⁹ In her husband's weekly phone call to his parents in India, each time that the parents sensed that the couple was in a good relationship, they would bring up the point that she had not met their request to move to India.¹¹⁰ Her husband told her that his parents were his first priority and did not believe that they were manipulating him and sabotaging the marriage. After each phone call, her husband would become abusive, blaming her for making his parents unhappy. This continued day after day.

Feeling trapped and isolated, she was sustained by the thought that in Canada, her pharmacist employer had extended a job offer if she ever returned. That is when she approached the CVS doctor to find out how to immigrate back to Canada, and found Daya.¹¹¹ When asked how she had the strength to face her abuser every day, she replied that "prayer was my inner friend."¹¹² At the same time, she had faith in her own intelligence, as only one or two percent of those taking the exams for the pharmacist license in Canada actually passed and obtained certification. At the time of the interview she was pursuing her American pharmacist certification. In addition to enabling her to leave the abusive situation, Daya also helped prepare the lawsuit against her husband. 'Daya, it's really ...a big help for me,' she acknowledged. "Sometimes I think if they wouldn't be there [sic], where would I be right now?"¹¹³

¹⁰⁶ Daya Client (Anonymous). Interview by Anne Chao, *HAAA*. June 18, 2012. Haaa.rice.edu.

¹⁰⁷ Daya Client (Anonymous). Interview by Anne Chao, *HAAA*. June 18, 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Daya Client (Anonymous). Interview by Anne Chao, *HAAA*. June 18, 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Daya Client (Anonymous). Interview by Anne Chao, *HAAA*. June 18, 2012.

¹¹⁰ Daya Client (Anonymous). Interview by Anne Chao, *HAAA*. June 18, 2012.

¹¹¹ Daya Client (Anonymous). Interview by Anne Chao, *HAAA*. June 18, 2012.

¹¹² Daya Client (Anonymous). Interview by Anne Chao, *HAAA*. June 18, 2012.

¹¹³ Daya Client (Anonymous). Interview by Anne Chao, *HAAA*. June 18, 2012.

As Transitional Home Coordinator, Nusrat remarked on the change that comes over the clients once they begin their journey with Daya: “They would come in the beginning with...very low esteem...and totally under control (...) of the abuser, even if they are doctors, engineers, and all. And then the transformation that they go through our services. (...) I see the transformation and smile (...) in the clients. I used to feel that satisfaction, that core satisfaction.”¹¹⁴

Conclusion:

Over the twenty-three years of its existence, Daya has saved the lives of hundreds of victims of domestic violence, the majority of whom are South Asian women, with about 5% being men.¹¹⁵ We began our study with the question of how immigrant organizations arise and evolve, and how they help us understand the history and nature of the immigrant community. In 2017, about 65,500 Indian Americans lived in Harris County, comprising 21.2% of Asian Americans in that county, and about 46,000 lived in Fort Bend County, totaling 33% of the Asians in that county.¹¹⁶ Serving this population are over one hundred associations registered in the 2018 Houston Indian Consulate Directory of “Community Organizations and Select India Related Entities.” The directory reports twenty-two places of worship, seventy-four civic associations and organizations, four student associations, and one chamber of commerce.¹¹⁷ Daya is unique among these organizations because of its specific mission. Since its founding in 1996, it has become one of the most successful South Asian women’s help centers in the country.

How did Daya become so successful? One of the questions we posed at the beginning of the study was whether the pre-migratory social practices and civic engagement of the immigrants influenced their behavior in the new society. The commonality in the background of the founders, board members and staff we interviewed is their shared altruism and desire to bring about social justice. In the case of Lakshmy, Meghna, and Nusrat, all three have advanced degrees, specialized training, and deep, if not personal, experience in the fields of gender studies, family counseling, and domestic violence. Their work in these fields began before they immigrated. In the case of Vibhuti, her involvement pre-migration was with her temple in India, the Pandurang Shastri Athavale, and she met Lakshmy at the Auxiliary of the Indian Doctors’ Club.¹¹⁸ Sesh was a convert to the cause after he joined Daya’s board. Rachna, who was born in the U.S., learned from her first-generation parents about issues of gender inequality, especially

¹¹⁴ Ameen, Nusrat. Interview by Priscilla Li and Mai Ton, *HAAA*. May 29, 2018.

¹¹⁵ Bala, Sesh. Interview by Taylor Ginter and Priscilla Li, *HAAA*. Apr. 23, 2018.

¹¹⁶ Houston Community Data Connections, Kinder Institute for Urban Research. Also: <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-counties/tx/fort-bend-county-population/>. Dr. Stephen Klineberg calculates that one-third of Fort Bend County population is Asian, and out of that one-third is South Asian, see <https://www.texastribune.org/2013/11/25/what-ethnic-diversity-looks-fort-bend-county/>, accessed 7/10/19.

¹¹⁷ “Indian Community Organizations and Select India Related Entities,” published by Houston’s Indian Consulate, Aug., 2018.

¹¹⁸ Shah, Vibhuti. Interview by Saniya Gayake and Taylor Ginter, *HAAA*. Mar. 6, 2018.

in India. Prior to Daya, she gained invaluable experience in different jobs, all of them involving helping underserved communities receive quality care, which is her passion. It seems that half of the people we interviewed were involved in these fields pre-migration, and the other half were not. Daya started off on the right footing with this supremely dedicated and competent group of staff and volunteers, endowed with the right skillset and high morale.

Our second question was whether the immigrants developed new agendas and patterns of activity once they arrived in the new country. When Lakshmy and Vibhuti left India, help centers for victims of domestic abuse were not common.¹¹⁹ Therefore, they created a new entity for their community, learning from American and other Asian-American domestic violence centers. But none fit their particular needs: “We looked into [the] Chinese Community Center and [the] Vietnamese Community Center...[and the] Jewish Community Center...And...there is a religious difference; there is a language difference; there’s a food difference; there’s an attire difference (...) You cannot find what you need.”¹²⁰ As a result, Lakshmy and her friends created their own center to help the South Asian population.

Our third and last question concerned the sustainability of the organization, and the reason why people might want to join this non-profit organization. Daya enjoys strong community support: its annual gala brings in almost one-third of its operating budget, and the other two-thirds come from grants of private foundations and government funding, respectively. People are drawn to the mission of rescuing innocent victims from abusive situations. Sesh’s statement that he came for the organization and stayed for the mission, and Nusrat’s clear sense of satisfaction upon helping a client, are representative of the sentiment of the staff and the volunteers.

Collaboration with other organizations in Houston and across the country allows Daya to stay relevant to its mission and increase its impact. As we have seen, the list of supporting entities includes The Fort Bend County Women’s Center, the Houston Area Women’s Center, the Indo-American Charity Foundation, the Vietnamese BoatPeople SOS, the Chinese Community Center, the Houston Immigration Legal Services Coalition, the Tahirih Justice Center, South Asian Americans Leading Together, the Empowering the Communities Initiative, the National Coalition for South Asian Organizations (NCSO), and many more.

Rachna, the current Executive Director, is constantly searching for ways to connect better with clients, to incorporate new technologies, and to partner with other organizations. She recalled that the founders of Daya were always asking other centers about their best practices, and she still holds regularly phone calls with the executive directors of these organizations.¹²¹ Rachna has focused in particular on reaching previously untapped client demographics (younger clients, men, and LGBTQ individuals); to that end she has created alternative and mobile means to reach clients. As of this writing, Daya has just co-hosted with the Asian Family Support Services of Austin the first joint meeting of culturally specific domestic violence agencies serving the Asian, South Asian and Muslim communities in Texas. It is the first time that agencies such as the Texas Muslim Women’s Foundation, Chetna DFW, and Awaaz

¹¹⁹ Shah, Vibhuti. Interview by Saniya Gayake and Taylor Ginter, *HAAA*. Mar. 6, 2018.

¹²⁰ Parameswaran, Lakshmy. Interview by Asiya Kazi and Brittney Xu, *HAAA*. June 15, 2011.

¹²¹ Khare, Rachna. Interview by Tian Tian He and Chelsey Wen, *HAAA*. June 6, 2018.

San Antonio have come together to explore collaboration and to devise ways to leverage their social and material capital for greater impact.

In short, the success of Daya rests on multiple factors: the expertise and high morale of the staff and the board, the unique cultural specificity of its service, the organization's ability to partner and collaborate with established service centers, the constant search for best practices on the part of its leadership, and the strong support of Houston's Indian American community. One index is the rapidly expanding number of clients served, placing Daya among the nation's top three or four South Asian centers for victims of domestic abuse. The number of clients served is also the number of lives saved: Daya truly embodies compassion without borders.