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[Main](#)
[Writings](#)
[E-mail](#)

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[This Issue](#) | [Editorial](#) | [Feature](#) | [E-mail](#)

Sakhi means “woman friend”

Bix Gabriel and Shivana Jorawar Speak About Domestic Violence Interview

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On Saturday, September 16th 2006 Sakhi held a community mela in Richmond Hill, primarily to draw attention to the plight of abused women. (See page 31) Community Director at Sakhi, Bix Gabriel, and Shivana Jorawar, Development and Community Volunteer, agreed to talk to Guyana Journal about Sakhi and its programs.

GJ: Before going into the Q & A, please introduce yourself briefly and give a background organization, the main personnel, your responsibilities, objectives, your plans.

BG: My name is Bix Gabriel and I am the Community Outreach and Media Director of a community-based organization in New York working to end domestic violence against Asian origin, including the Indo-Caribbean.

Sakhi, meaning “woman friend,” was founded in 1989 by five South Asian women from professional fields to address the silenced subject of domestic violence. Today, Sakhi (one full-time and 2 part-time), several interns and over 40 volunteers who help carry out

SJ: I am a senior at Fordham University majoring in Political Science and am currently interning with Rep. Gregory Meeks whose district includes Richmond Hill. In the past, I held leadership roles in Fordham University's South Asian student organization as well as an annual service trip to Georgetown, Guyana. I started working with Sakhi in January 2006 as a Development and Community Outreach Intern. My work at Sakhi has been largely in Richmond Hill Mela in terms of event structure, volunteer coordination, fundraising, and community contacts.

BG: For specific information on our services, staff, volunteering, internships, program resources, please visit www.sakhi.org. If you are seeking assistance related to domestic violence, call our helpline 212.868.6741 (10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Monday through Friday).

Mission and Vision: From its inception, Sakhi has followed a two-pronged approach to ending violence within the South Asian community:

1. We provide a safe place, support, friendship, and a full range of culturally-sensitive, language-specific services to women facing abuse in their lives; and,
2. We work to inform, actively engage, and mobilize the South Asian and Indo-Caribbean community to end violence against women forever.

After 17 years of working in the community, we at Sakhi know that while services are crucial for them to live safe, healthy lives, domestic violence will continue unless all members of the community – women, men and youth – actively participate to end and prevent it in their circles of relatives, friends and colleagues and in the larger community.

As part of this work of partnering with community members in ending violence, Sakhi launched a campaign in Richmond Hill called Communities Taking Charge (CTC). The mela, held on Saturday, September 16th in Richmond Hill, kicked off the campaign as a means of raising awareness about Sakhi, services available and our community-centered approach to the issue. CTC is long-term and specifically focuses on:

- * Learning about community members' beliefs, feelings, and attitudes toward domestic violence and their own violence in their lives, and the lives of friends, extended family, neighbors, and other community members

of media such as postcards as well as surveys, focus groups, etc.

* Forming a working group that consists of interested community members, faith-based and community and volunteers to discuss and develop best practices for people in the community to use, to intervene violence.

* Creating a physical "toolbox" of "tools" that include ways to recognize and prevent domestic violence strategies, resources available, safety planning techniques, etc. This "toolbox" will be disseminated to as a resource for discussing, intervening, and preventing violence.

We believe that Richmond Hill is an ideal neighborhood for CTC because of its large South Asian population, which despite being underserved has been extremely respectful. We need to end domestic violence.

GJ: Explain for the public and in general terms what domestic violence (DV) really is

BG: Most people tend to think of domestic violence in its physical manifestation. However, violence takes many forms including physical, sexual, emotional, mental, verbal, and in general, one form of abuse is accompanied by other forms. In the immigrant community, abuse based on immigration status. Many immigrant women are here in the U.S. as spouses or partners. This becomes a tool for control and abuse by the abuser. For example, women tell us of how their spouses threaten to have them deported or cancel their applications, if they complain to anyone about the abuse.

Broadly speaking though, domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior which is characterized by a position of power over the other partner through the use of fear, intimidation, and control. To remember is that domestic violence is not an isolated incident. It is a pattern that includes in it phases when there is no abuse taking place, usually accompanied by a continuing undying love and "good" (non-abusive) behavior.

SJ: Domestic violence is generally physical or verbal abuse that occurs between domestic partners. It also happens in other familial relationships.

GJ: What are some of the physical and psychological symptoms/indications of DV? Can you spot it if at all?

BG: People who are in abusive situations as well as their friends and family often find it difficult to identify that they are being abused. There are many reasons for this. For instance, relationships have their ups and downs. This is certainly true. At the same time, a common sign is that it is continually – usually escalating and then decreasing and then starting again. Facing the abuse also get mixed messages: abusers often tell their partners that they are doing it while hurting them, that the control is for their own good or that they are causing it to be for their own good. It's no surprise then that many people don't ever recognize they are being abused. There is much social stigma attached to disclosing abuse that many people never reveal the truth.

However, here are some warning signs provided by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence to watch for in your partner...

- Embarrass or make fun of you in front of your friends or family?
- Make you feel like you are unable to make decisions?
- Use intimidation or threats to gain compliance?
- Tell you that you are nothing without them?
- Treat you roughly – grab, push, pinch, shove or hit you?
- Pressure you sexually for things you aren't ready for?
- Make you feel like there "is no way out" of the relationship?
- Prevent you from doing things you want – like spending time with your friends or family?

Do you...

- Sometimes feel scared of how your partner will act?
- Constantly make excuses to other people for your partner's behavior?
- Try not to do anything that would cause conflict or make your partner angry?
- Always do what your partner wants you to do instead of what you want?

____ Stay with your partner because you are afraid of what your partner would do if you broke-up?
 (For more information, you can visit the Get Help section of our [website](#) OR [website](#)

GJ: To what extent have you seen the incidence of DV in general and in "our" (Indo community in particular)? Is there any empirical (official) data?

BG: The unfortunate reality is that domestic violence exists in all communities – across the world. The Family Violence Prevention Fund, which gathered its information from government agencies and research consortiums, states that "Up to 3 million women annually by intimate partners in the United States". An often used statistic that can be used is: "approximately every 7 seconds a woman is abused in America".

From our end, we have seen that both the South Asian and Indo-Caribbean populations have higher rates of domestic violence than any other community in the incidence or rate of domestic violence. At Sakhi, we receive about 20-22 calls each year from the Indo-Caribbean community over the past three years. There are probably many more women experiencing abuse in the community, but this is not what we conducted a survey of 150 people in Richmond Hill (which, of course is predominantly Indo-Caribbean) and not one single person could list an organization to reach out to, which indicates that we are not reaching the community here. This is one reason why we organized the mela recently. We would know that there are indeed resources available – not only for domestic violence needs (like health care access, etc.)

SJ: My experience as a daughter to Guyanese parents growing up in the Indo-Caribbean community sadly exposed me to several encounters with Domestic Violence. More than a few women have endured all kinds of abuse, as have some of my friends. While conducting surveys of community residents, I was told time after time by everyday passers-by on Liberty Avenue that domestic violence is indeed prevalent in the community. A few of the women were even brave enough to share their experiences with abuse in the community. If these few could come forth and disclose their information to a complete stranger despite the stigma surrounding the issue, how many more women surveyed had been abused or witnessed abuse but chose to remain silent or falsify their responses? It disturbs me to think of how many more sad stories would be told if women did not do so.

GJ: Who are the main victims?

BG: The primary victims of domestic violence worldwide are women. People often ask, "What about abused men?" Certainly, there are men who experience abuse. However, the ratio of women to men abused in comparison to men is far greater – in general 85% of victims are women and 15% are men.

Apart from the primary victims, we believe that domestic violence has a ripple effect on the abused person, but also their children (if any), other family members, and the community.

GJ: How and to what extent are children affected by spousal conflicts? To what extent do these conflicts cause DV?

BG: Children are certainly impacted by domestic violence. One of the most damaging effects is that children who witness abuse begin to believe that abuse is normal, especially when their parents, friends, elders, teachers, and other important figures in a child's life do not talk about the abuse or there are alternatives to abusive behavior.

In addition, children are often used by abusers to manipulate and control their partners. Domestic Violence Advocate at Sakhi explains, "Although many survivors of violence end their relationship with their abusive partners, they are often still forced to be in the relationship when children are involved. Abusers continue to employ mental and emotional abuse to keep their partners in the court system as they request custody or visitation with the children. If either is granted, the abuser can use the children as leverage to control the survivor."

continue the cycle of abuse by contaminating the minds of the children by making I comments about the survivor while also placing children in the middle of the conflic

While there is not enough data gathered, research indicates that many adult abuse abusive behavior as children and therefore learnt at a young age that abuse gets re

GJ: What are some of the main causes of DV in our community?

BG: Domestic violence is not unusual to our community. It happens all over the wo issue where there is no clear cause-effect relationship. While several factors, such as used as justification for abuse, they are not the direct causes. We believe that viole individuals make out of the belief that it is acceptable to use violence (verbal, phys to intimidate, hurt and control another intimate partner. At the same time, society media, social norms, institutions) informs us that the use of violence is okay, accep – either explicitly or by keeping silent in the face of violence. Think of the many tir friends say things like “It’s ok to slap your wife around once in a while.” Domestic v because we do not stand up against it as a society.

Interestingly, things like religion, cultural orientation, spousal infidelity, drugs and or “over-employment”, etc. are all used as excuses for abusive behavior – not only by people who hear about abuse taking place. Each person’s circumstances are uni believe that abuse is justifiable. In fact, one of the biggest myths that exists is that occurs because of a person’s circumstances, such as being low-income, unemploye particular race, religion, etc. – you name it. Yet, in reality, we see that domestic vic the board regardless of the income-level, education, profession, class, race or religi

SJ: Though society as a whole is dominated by men, our community is by and large an escalated level of male chauvinism. In our community, I have found that respec abilities is just short of absent. Where I would expect to feel safe and most at ease people, I have never been more disrespected by men than in the Indo-Caribbean co worth is rarely defined beyond her physical appeal when she is young, and then he when she outgrows her youth. In a world where women are already marginalized, c breeds us not to have the confidence and initiative necessary to excel, but to subcc ourselves as second-class citizens.

There have been no comprehensive studies on the particular origins of domestic vic Caribbean community. However, I would venture to say it is a result of four things: superiority that has withstood time and modernity, passed down from our Indian ar history as an indentured and disenfranchised people, stripped of dignity and effecti Our current state as a new immigrant community with inadequate access to employ higher education, and, subsequently, social mobility; and c) the high rate of alcoho men that may be in itself partially a result of b).

GJ: Are present institutions such police, social services, court, churches, mandirs, r addressing this problem? If yes, how? If not, why not? And what should be done...?

BG: All of the above mentioned institutions have a role to play in ending domestic v courts exist to protect victims of violence. **Most people are unaware of the fact no matter what your immigration status is. Domestic violence is a crime re legal status. You have the legal right to keep your immigration status priva to tell the police or a shelter what your immigration status is.**

Though they provide real resources for victims, certainly at times these systems th they fail the people who turn to them. For instance, lack of adequate and fair interp one challenge that women we have worked with (whose first language is not Englis is the lack of cultural sensitivity to both a victim and abuser’s background. As immi

afraid to turn to the police or seek legal help based on experiences in our home countries. Our legal systems might be corrupt or because the police and courts here in the U.S. can be unreliable. We want to commend the 106th precinct in Queens, which is very proactive in addressing domestic violence.

In reality, there are not adequate services available, which is why community-based organizations like Sakhi need to exist. And while we provide key information and access to services, that is not our work. We do not want to simply be a band-aid solution for domestic violence. Instead, we seek to reduce the prevalence of domestic violence and work to prevent it in the first place.

In this work, social institutions like mandirs, masjids, gurdwaras and churches are important. Leaders in these institutions wield a powerful influence over their members and can help prevent behavior from happening. Unfortunately, we hear of stories where religious leaders are the abusers. We hope to partner with ALL faith institutions so that we can together speak out against domestic violence, support and encourage survivors of violence and ultimately, prevent it.

GJ: What are some of the services your organization offer and plan to offer to victim children in DV cases?

BG: Sakhi works with immigrant and second-generation South Asian and Indo-Caribbean survivors of domestic violence. The Domestic Violence Program at Sakhi provides legal referrals, mental health referrals, shelter resources as well as translation assistance to courts, hospitals, and other public service offices. **All our services are free and confidential.**

We also provide ongoing emotional support to women who call us by continuing to address the immediate needs of a particular case have been served. We believe that ending violence through a client-service short-term relationship. We are not judgmental and we never make decisions for the women we serve. We provide friendship and support through our monthly support group and other activities.

In a nutshell, Sakhi's services in domestic violence situations are:

- _ Translation services (Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, & Urdu)
- _ Monthly support group
- _ Referrals to shelters
- _ Legal referrals related to immigration and family law
- _ Accompaniments to court, attorney offices, public benefit offices, etc.
- _ Legal information and clinics (no in-house Legal Advice)

We also offer several other programs and services to the women that we work with:

- _ Basic and advanced computer skills classes
- _ Referrals to ESL classes and job-training programs
- _ Financial literacy workshops
- _ Information about scholarships to eligible applicants
- _ Assistance to immigrant survivors of domestic violence in accessing physical and mental health care
- _ Health literacy classes on topics such as nutrition, mental health, sexual health, etc.

(If anyone is seeking assistance related to domestic violence, please call our helpline at 1.800.621.HOPE (4673) a.m. - 6 p.m. Monday through Friday). If you are interested in volunteering, please call 1.800.621.HOPE (4673).)

GJ: What other resources are there currently available to victims, batterers and child protective services?

BG: If you are in an emergency situation, you may dial 911. If you are in the New York City area, please call Safe Horizon's 24-hour Domestic Violence Helpline at 1.800.621.HOPE (4673).

Other domestic violence hotlines are:

- The National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1.800.799.SAFE (7233) or 1.800.787.32
- New York State Hotline: (English) 1.800.942.6906 (Spanish) 1.800.942.6908
- New York State Elder Abuse Hotline: 1.800.342.9871
- New York State Child Abuse Hotline: 1.800.342.3720
- New York State Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Information Line: 1.800.342.

Safe Horizon, one of the nation's largest service providers, has a Batterer's Account more information, call 212.577.8236 or 8233.

GJ: Do you have anything else to say? Any general or specific comment?

BG: After 17 years, we at Sakhi know that in order for families to be healthy and h oppression of women must be eliminated at the heart and root of our communities. organizations like Sakhi are the final solution to ending violence against women. In community members themselves must take the initiative, participate in dialogue, e speak out against violence happening around them and teach the next generation r girls and boys in order for true and sustainable change to occur. Our vision of a str healthy community is one without domestic violence. And together, with all commu men and children) we believe that we can transform our community through ending women. Thank you!

For info: Bix Gabriel, Community Outreach & Media Director Sakhi for South Asian ' x 100 . www.sakhi.org

