

My name is Sandeep Bathala. I am the Director Services Director at Sakhi for South Asian Women. Sakhi is a community-based organization in the New York metropolitan area committed to ending violence against women of South Asian origin. South Asian refers to people who originate from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, India, Nepal, Pakistan & Sri Lanka. Recognizing oppression based on class, immigration status, religion, & sexual orientation, we work to empower women, particularly survivors of domestic violence. Sakhi strives to create a voice & safe environment for all South Asian women through outreach, advocacy, leadership development, & organizing. We use a two-pronged approach to address violence within the South Asian community: 1) we provide a safe place, support, friendship, & a full-range of culturally-sensitive, language-specific services to South Asian women facing abuse in their lives; &, 2) we work to inform, actively engage, & mobilize the South Asian community in the movement to end violence against women forever.

Women who come to Sakhi for assistance have often been victim to an array of physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuses. Over its 17-year history, Sakhi has worked with survivors that have been burned, severely & methodically beaten & raped, economically controlled, & emotionally manipulated by their husbands.

Sakhi has also responded to the growing need for **culturally-competent** and **sensitive** mental health care services for South Asian women:

- Sakhi works to educate and inform survivors as well as healthcare providers on the effects of violence on women's mental, physical, & sexual health.

- We help the women we work with access healthcare and learn about health issues through one-on-one support, workshops, support groups, & public education materials.
- Through our Health Provider Network, we provide access to a core group of mental health providers and physicians that speak South Asian languages and can serve the needs of survivors through low-cost or free consultations and exams.

Sakhi is honored to participate in this critical public hearing to explore the high rates of suicide among Asian women. My comments are more specific to the experiences of South Asian women - a population which is often underserved and difficult to understand how best to serve given the paucity of disaggregated data.

The impact of migration may contribute to a sense of chronic ongoing difficulty and act as a potential stressor. A sense of alienation from one's own culture may reduce a woman's sense of belonging and acceptance and influence her self-esteem, which may produce an affective reaction. A study on South Asian women in the diaspora indicates that high rates of self-harm could arise due to a number of precipitating factors. These factors can range from social, political and economic pressures to racism, poverty, language problems, isolation, health issues and familial problems.

One major precipitating factor in South Asian Women who harm themselves is marital problems. A few of the women in the study reported that their husbands demanded them to behave in a less westernized fashion. Also, they reported that their mother in laws

interfered with the way they ran their lives and marriages. Such factors, along with arranged marriages, rejections of arranged marriage proposals and other marital problems place pressure on South Asian women, and thus were reported as precipitating factors for self-harm by the participants.

The concept of “izzat” (honor/respect) in South Asian family life also led to increased mental distress. The women in this study saw self-harm as a way to cope with their mental distress. The concept of izzat (honor/respect) is a major influence in South Asian family life. It is very important that behavior is ‘good’ according to the community since it is essential in gaining status and prestige for the family. The burden of izzat is unequally placed upon the women in South Asian families and as a result this creates hard-to-achieve high expectations of women as daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters, wives and mothers. Therefore, many women in the study felt as though they had nobody to trust and would not speak to anyone in the community. This led to an increasing sense of isolation.

Furthermore, the women felt as though they would be judged by mainstream health providers who had fixed views about the South Asian community and that they would offer simplistic yet unrealistic solutions like ‘leaving the family’ without understanding the complexity of the situation – this was among South Asian women who knew where to go for help or who to ask – many do not. It is important to note that South Asians in New York come from a wide range of communities with different religions, languages &

beliefs. And within each community, people will vary as to their social, financial & educational backgrounds.

Sakhi's 17 year history illuminates additional precipitating factors which may include a lack of culturally-sensitive mental health service providers, stigma associated with accessing mental health services especially within the South Asian community, & South Asian womens' desires to put their family needs before their own – including any mental health needs they may have.

There is an urgent need for all those concerned with the mental health services for ethnic minorities to take positive action and eradicate the barriers that prevent South Asians from seeking help. Once again, Sakhi appreciates being part of this critical public hearing and hopes for increased funding to continue our important work.

Sakhi has assisted thousands of survivors of domestic violence since its inception. Our direct services include

- Crisis Intervention;
- Ongoing emotional support;
- Monthly support group;
- Assistance in accessing legal representation, health services, public benefits, and housing

- Accompaniments to courts, public benefits/welfare agencies, and during healthcare visits;
- Translation assistance.

We have provided to over 600 survivors thus far this year. I specifically use the word survivor when I refer to these amazing women – some of whom were suicidal when they reached out to use. I have a quote from one such survivor who regularly attends our support groups,

*“If I were to describe how I felt during my darkest times living under abuse, I would say I felt helpless and became mute. When you are carrying the burden of silence and pain, the nightmare continues to erode your soul and life. It is only through beacons of hope such as SAKHI that I have been able to steer clear of the prison I was in.”*