



## Faith-Based Initiative

What are the key issues for survivors of domestic violence in relation to their faiths? Women we serve often find their strength and comfort from their religious faiths during times of darkness as well as face barriers in seeking support from their religious communities. Sakhi's Faith-Based Initiative examines how religious organizations and communities can address domestic violence as one avenue of providing support for survivors and their families. This groundbreaking initiative within a community-based organization has already helped to shape dialogues within the South Asian community, the women's rights arena, and the anti-violence movement.

Sakhi's innovative Faith-Based Initiative focuses on three arenas: research and resource compilation of faith-based programs, leaders, and resources; data collection of survivors' beliefs and perspectives on issues of faith; and, cultivation of partnerships and collaboration within different faith communities.

In 2006, Sakhi conducted a survey of our constituents on the role of faith in their lives as women who had experienced domestic violence. A significant number of survivors —53— completed the survey, making it one of the most popular surveys the organization has sent out to our survivor pool.

### Key findings from the survey include:

- Only 10% of respondents confided in their religious communities/leaders about the abuse they experienced even though 76% said they relied on their faith as a source of strength.
- When asked if Sakhi does faith-based work, two responses demonstrate the spectrum of perspectives:

*"I've attended a few [Sakhi] support groups where women were talking about how their religion has been their biggest strength amidst all the violence. Sakhi has provided the tool for women to talk about the strengths in their lives."*

*"I believe Sakhi shouldn't get involved in religious communities. Sakhi should make its own secular community where everyone will be above the religion. I believe humanism is more than religion, casteism and racism. Sakhi should continue its work as [it is] doing everything, above everything."*

As a secular organization serving survivors from many faith communities, including Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians, Sakhi values perspectives across religious lines and has played a pivotal role in facilitating unique partnerships to strengthen our communities.

In the past year, Sakhi has also facilitated three focus groups with survivors to gain more detailed information about survivors' experiences with faith. From these focus groups, Sakhi hopes to develop a clear understanding of how faith does or does not provide survivors with strength and healing. We seek to craft tools and enable dialogue that will enable faith leaders and faith communities to better respond to domestic violence.

The range of survivor responses and reactions during the focus group discussions revealed key points for further study and work.

For instance, survivors expressed a clear need and desire for support within religious communities:

- *“A community is a place where I can go to pray at a mosque. It’s some place where people can go to for services. If someone needs help, they can go to that community.”*
- *“I don’t have any friends or family here, so I feel very alone. When I go to the gurudwara, I feel very good about myself because there are people. I feel like I belong there.”*

However, some women also noted areas that are in need of improvement with respect to religious communities' responses to domestic violence situations:

- *“I didn’t want to talk to them about [abuse] because I never felt comfortable talking about it since it was never brought up in my gurudwara. Even I talk about it, they will criticize me.”*
- *“Community and religious people believe that you should live under your husband. They all question why we wouldn’t accept the situation. They are not going to understand me. They are going to try to stand away from you. They are going to treat women bad. Our religion never says this. It doesn’t say to hit women. It’s society...it’s man that says and does all these things.”*

In 2007, to raise awareness of survivor perspectives, Sakhi presented on its Faith-Based Initiative at the National Network to End Domestic Violence conference. Sakhi explained its survey results in detail, discussed our outreach work with secular and non-secular agencies on the issue, and conducted small and large-group activities on the connection between spiritual needs, faith communities, and domestic violence.

Sakhi aims to build on its survey and focus groups by producing a full report in 2009 detailing the data and recommendations arising from this unique research.

Currently, as part of this initiative, Sakhi is conducting outreach work in the faith community and among survivors in Richmond Hill, Queens. In addition, Sakhi is conducting weekly support groups on the intersection of faith and women's issues that are open to all South Asian (including Indo-Caribbean) women in the Richmond Hill community.

In early 2009, Sakhi will also be co-sponsoring a series of Arts & Empowerment workshops in Richmond Hill along with the local Indo-Caribbean group, the Jahajee Sisters. These workshops will combine artistic expression, domestic violence awareness, and faith-related discussion.

For more information on the Faith-Based Initiative and Sakhi's current programming in Richmond Hill, please contact Domestic Violence Program Advocate Fatma Zahra at [fatma.zahra@sakhi.org](mailto:fatma.zahra@sakhi.org).