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Building Towards Transformative Justice at Sakhi for South Asian Women

Soniya Munshi, Bhavana Nancherla & Tiloma Jayasinghe*

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I. CONTEXTUALIZING SAKHI’S APPROACH TO ANTI-VIOLENCE INTERVENTIONS

Sakhi for South Asian Women is a South Asian women’s anti-violence non-profit organization working with survivors of domestic violence in the New York metropolitan area. Sakhi was founded in 1989, and over the past two and a half decades, has worked in the areas of direct service provision, community outreach and mobilization, and policy advocacy.¹

In its work, Sakhi walks the line between meeting a need for culturally competent services for South Asian survivors, while also furthering the idea that domestic violence is not unique to South Asian communities. In other words, Sakhi simultaneously identifies the

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¹ SAHKI FOR S. ASIAN WOMEN, <http://www.sakhi.org/about-sakhi/mission-and-history/> (last visited Sept. 5, 2014).

complex, culturally-specific needs of survivors of domestic violence in South Asian communities, while also resisting cultural racism that attributes the roots of this violence to culture. As one of the first South Asian Women's Organizations (SAWOs)² in the United States,³ Sakhi's approach is an example of (and perhaps helped define) the model of anti-violence work in the South Asian community. Most SAWOs follow a two-pronged approach of providing culturally-specific services to survivors as well as conducting community outreach and education about gender-based violence.⁴

Survivors in need of assistance reach out to Sakhi to access legal and/or immigration support, social and emotional support, access to social services, and help in meeting other needs such as health services or economic empowerment through skills-based trainings. In providing these services, Sakhi focuses on meeting these needs within a culturally appropriate frame, with multi-lingual support for survivors with limited English proficiency, and on addressing the manifestations of violence that emerge from patriarchal dynamics in South Asian communities.

Within and across various South Asian diasporic communities, Sakhi also functions to grow awareness that domestic violence exists across class and community, and that community members can play a role in preventing and addressing this violence. Sakhi's engagement with community outreach and mobilization exists both to support its services in reaching more survivors, and as programming in its own right with an aim to shift commonly held beliefs about domestic violence. This latter work understands awareness as the first step towards action, and community members are thus encouraged to support survivors by directing them to Sakhi or other service-based entities for assistance.

Sakhi's existence as a non-profit anti-violence organization has been influenced by the growth and direction of the broader anti-violence movement during the past several decades. Through legislative acts such as the Violence Against Women Act, domestic violence has increasingly been recognized as a crime and, as such, responses that have emerged to

² See generally Margaret Abraham, *Ethnicity, Gender and Marital Violence: South Asian Women's Organizations in the United States*, 9 GENDER AND SOC'Y 450, 450 (1995) (The abbreviation for South Asian Women's Organizations (SAWOs) was first coined by Margaret Abraham.)

³ See generally Margaret Abraham, *SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE: MARITAL VIOLENCE AGAINST SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES* (Rutgers University Press 2000) (providing a fuller history of Sakhi's founding).

⁴ See SAHKI FOR S. ASIAN WOMEN, <http://www.sakhi.org/resources/sawos/> (last visited Sept. 7, 2014). Currently, there are close to thirty anti-violence groups based in South Asian American communities. Almost every metropolitan area in the United States houses a South Asian women's organization (SAWO). Many South Asian women's organizational websites make a national list of groups available as a resource.

address domestic violence engage the criminal legal system. Anti-violence scholar-activists have shown that this approach limits the scope of domestic violence interventions, and that legal remedies produced through the criminal legal system can be dangerous for survivors of violence who are in precarious relationships with the state.⁵

For South Asian women, engagement with the criminal legal system can be complex and harmful for reasons ranging from fear, language barriers, and misunderstanding of legal rights, to structural vulnerabilities that are produced through the relationships between immigration enforcement and law enforcement. Survivors belonging to communities that are vulnerable in their relationship with the state are especially at risk for harm when interacting with the criminal legal system; for Sakhi, then, the need to offer alternatives to legal system strategies has been a concern for some time.

Specific conversations with survivors indicate a desire for interventions that do not require the involvement of the state. Throughout Sakhi's history, survivors have often requested assistance in the form of conversations with the individual and/or family members who are causing harm. Sakhi's model of support has not included engaging with abusive partners/family members. The organization understands itself as a set of outsiders to a power-imbalanced relationship, which does not position it well for motivating individuals causing harm to change their behavior. Survivors coming to Sakhi also name wanting greater support from their communities; many survivors who come to Sakhi lack community support, and often have no one else to turn to. Sakhi's desire for a possible means of intervention that exists outside of state systems and engages more actively with a survivor's individual community (or potential community) is grounded in the needs of survivors seeking resources and assistance via Sakhi. These goals are articulated explicitly by survivors reaching out to Sakhi for support and by advocates who

⁵ See generally Anannya Bhattacharjee, *Whose Safety? Women of Color and the Violence of Law Enforcement* (Justice Visions, Working Paper, 2001), available at <http://www.safetyandjustice.org/story/whose-safety-women-color-and-violence-law-enforcement>; INCITE! WOMEN OF COLOR AGAINST VIOLENCE, *COLOR OF VIOLENCE THE INCITE! ANTHOLOGY* (South End Press 2006); MARIE GOTTSCHALK, *THE PRISON AND THE GALLOWS: THE POLITICS OF MASS INCARCERATION IN AMERICA* (2006); Statement from INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence and Critical Resistance, *Gender and Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex* (2001) available at http://incite-national.org/sites/default/files/incite_files/resource_docs/5848_incite-cr-statement.pdf; Mimi E. Kim, *Challenging the Pursuit of Criminalisation in an Era of Mass Incarceration: The Limitations of Social Work Responses to Domestic Violence in the USA*, 43 BRIT. J. OF SOC. WORK 1267 (2012); BETH RICHIE, *ARRESTED JUSTICE: BLACK WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND AMERICA'S PRISON NATION* (2012).

have noticed these needs over time, sometimes as unnamed requests and/or through community silences.

In prioritizing the realities of survivors needing alternatives to criminal legal solutions to domestic violence, Sakhi finds itself caught at the intersection of two conflicting approaches: 1) a culturally-specific service model that generally aligns with mainstream anti-violence models, which rely heavily on criminal legal system and other systemic interventions to respond to domestic violence, but with a focus on making them more accessible (e.g., through language access, or know-your-rights education); and 2) a transformative justice approach which envisions and builds responses to domestic violence outside of state engagement and punitive strategies, based in communities instead of professional experts, and concerned with increasing safety and wellbeing for survivors, people who cause harm, and communities overall.

The other conflict that Sakhi finds itself in is the tension of time. A lot of the work that Sakhi does is in support of survivors needing immediate assistance to address a crisis or urgent situation of violence. Like many anti-violence organizations, Sakhi needs to both respond to the immediate needs of survivors, and build capacity for long-term change; with limited resources, the immediate issues often take priority at the expense of the social change vision.

II. FINDING OPPORTUNITIES IN CONFLICTS TO DEVELOP A PROCESS

We stepped into this process with Sakhi as individuals familiar with anti-violence movement building, including through past experience as staff members of SAWOs, and a strong commitment to the need for alternatives to criminal legal solutions to domestic violence.⁶ We arrived at Sakhi with a shared analysis of what a transformative justice approach might include, as well flexibility and openness as to what this might look like in the context of Sakhi's work.

Our first step was to better understand how Sakhi was positioned in its values, vision, and practical strategies for moving towards community-based responses to domestic violence that do not engage the state. We found that the organization was clear that it wanted to develop responses to domestic violence that offered survivors alternatives to the criminal legal system. It was unsure, however, about whether it was

⁶ Both Soniya and Bhavana are familiar with the internal workings of SAWOs, having each spent time working within various organizations. We have continued to be involved in anti-violence movement building, and have engaged in different types of community-based and/or transformative justice work through these efforts.

moving towards a restorative justice model or a transformative justice model.⁷

Restorative justice approaches to domestic violence generally work within criminal legal responses.⁸ Transformative justice, on the other hand, seeks safety and accountability without relying on punishment-based strategies or systemic violence, including incarceration, policing, and other criminal legal responses.⁹ In other words, restorative justice models usually work as alternatives within criminal legal processes whereas transformative justice approaches work outside these systems. Additionally, through some initial training on restorative justice with the Center on Violence and Recovery at NYU, Sakhi had begun to explore the possibilities of holding Healing Circles with survivors, thus introducing work in the realm of healing justice as a part of their desired model.

At this early stage of the project, it was tempting to dismiss these distinctions as semantics to work through later. However, the tensions that emerged here were instructive, as they revealed crucial differences in perspectives across program areas and/or staff positions. For example, staff members who provide direct services are generally working with survivors who have little or no community support; this is often a factor in why survivors come to Sakhi for assistance. This experience informs their perspective on the needs of survivors and the role that community plays (or does not play) in supporting them. In comparison, staff members working on community engagement see an opportunity in the willingness of community members to learn how to respond to violence. These differences, grounded in experience, impact the broader vision for possible interventions, and whether these strategies can exist within or beyond the criminal legal system. In its efforts to address the need for a wider array of responses to violence, Sakhi simultaneously holds different political visions and philosophical commitments for the

⁷ CTR. ON VIOLENCE & RECOVERY, *What We Do*, <http://centeronviolenceandrecovery.org/our-activity.php> (last visited Sept. 7, 2014). Sakhi began this project by exploring restorative justice models, such as the Peacemaking/Healing Circles developed by the Center on Violence and Recovery at NYU. This approach brings together the person who has caused harm, family and community members, and a facilitator to create different dynamics within the family. Sakhi was working to integrate some of the healing justice elements of these circles into its work, while still holding an organizational boundary against working with people who cause harm.

⁸ See RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (James Ptacek ed., Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁹ SARA KERSHNER ET AL., GENERATION FIVE, TOWARD TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE: A LIBERATORY APPROACH TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND OTHER FORMS OF INTIMATE AND COMMUNITY VIOLENCE (2007).

pragmatic realities that immigrant women face while experiencing violence and then interfacing with systems.

At this point, the organization faced some fundamental questions exposing disconnections between their everyday practice and their broader hopes for utilizing a transformative justice approach. First, how does Sakhi strike a balance between providing services to immigrant women whose struggles for everyday survival often require them to interface with the criminal legal system, and offering an approach that eschews systemic solutions? At the heart of this conflict is the question of what role community can play in this balance. Broadly generalizing, in the mainstream anti-violence approach, communities are at worst a part of the domestic violence problem, or at best, allies in enabling access to resources, provided by an entity that exists outside the community (e.g., the legal system). Many organizations like Sakhi have a similar analysis of community, as it was the lack of community attention to domestic violence that led to their organizational founding in the first place. “Community” has generally been seen as a barrier rather than a resource. Transformative justice, on the other hand, re-envisioning the scope and possibility of community as both a space and active agent for addressing violence within itself. Sakhi’s ability to envision beyond state-based interventions arises from an active reexamination of how community might play a greater role in resourcing survivors.

Additionally, how does Sakhi maintain its historical focus on the needs of survivors when strategies that approach violence in a more holistic manner include engaging the people who cause harm? Underlying this question is the issue of gender. As a self-identified South Asian women’s organization, the survivors that Sakhi works with are generally cisgender women.¹⁰ If the majority of people enacting violence in intimate relationships are men, and men are not included in the scope of the organization, is there an inherent limit in Sakhi’s ability to build a transformative justice approach? These questions expose productive tensions between the assumptions of the anti-violence movement and transformative justice frameworks.

After several meetings with the staff as a group, and separate informational interviews with program and administrative staff, we came to a working agreement that a transformative justice framework, with its critical understanding of the criminal legal system and its attention to responses that center safety and healing without engaging the state, could best respond to the needs and desires of Sakhi’s constituency. Given the role that Sakhi plays in offering services support to survivors,

¹⁰ We use cisgender here to mean people whose gender identity and/or gender expression is aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth.

envisioning concrete, realistic strategies to implement this broader political vision would be essential for moving forward.

We then proposed a deeper engagement with the points of disconnect between Sakhi's existing approach and one grounded in a transformative approach. Our interest in working in the space of conflict was to allow us to first build a transparent analysis and shared values that could move into possibilities for criminal legal system alternatives. We wanted this deeper engagement with the disconnections to explicitly map the current work that Sakhi was doing, in terms of how it relies on the assumptions of the mainstream anti-violence approach, where Sakhi already departs from this approach, where and how Sakhi engages with community, and what more might be needed to move away from criminal legal solutions and towards community-based ones. To do this, we implemented a series of discussions that integrated both political education and organizational development goals. In these conversations, we aimed to build a deeper understanding of transformative justice and the context through which it emerged as a current strategy, to create a space for Sakhi to solidify its political values and vision, and to develop explicit, implementable strategies for moving the organization towards a transformative vision.

A key strategy here was building upon Sakhi's existing work to forge a path towards a transformative vision, while also recognizing the complicated ways that Sakhi's work is currently entangled with the legal system. This required an understanding that a shift away from this approach might need to occur at a gradual pace. While political commitments inform and guide our efforts, we understood that this work occurs in a broader context of an anti-violence movement that has effectively instilled criminalization as the dominant strategy for responding to intimate violence. As a non-profit organization that provides supportive services to survivors of violence, Sakhi's work is not fully determined by this broader context, but it is located within it and constrained by the structural relationships between the criminalization of domestic violence and social services/resources that are facilitated by an engagement with the criminal legal system. How to draw the lines of where to shift away from this engagement, and where to remain engaged for the sake of the resources it facilitates, is an important question. As such, we wanted to interrupt the potentially unproductive dichotomy of criminal legal models and transformative justice models as mutually exclusive, even as we understand the underlying political values and vision of these two models as fundamentally incompatible because of their differing understanding of the role of the state (as a site of protection or as a site of violence). We hoped to develop a long-term vision of transformation that still accommodates the current realities of the criminal legal system's role in creating access to systemic services

for survivors of violence. By doing this, we hoped to create short-term strategies for Sakhi to implement that begin to disentangle the work from a reliance on the legal system, through the slow building of community capacity to address violence without engaging the state. Our work is heavily influenced by the efforts of Dr. Mimi Kim and Creative Interventions, a resource center to create and promote community-based interventions to interpersonal violence.¹¹ The framework of community-based interventions is critical to Sakhi's process, because it contextualizes the concrete practices Sakhi wants to develop and implement within a political analysis about the limits of criminal legal solutions.

III. ENGAGING CONTRADICTIONS THROUGH POLITICAL EDUCATION

We were able to distill three areas of conflict between the culturally-specific advocacy model that Sakhi has cultivated over the past twenty-five years and the community-based intervention strategies that work outside of state responses. Our work, then, became an exploration of these tensions and holding space for actively engaging with these contradictions. These explorations centered on finding values and practices that: 1) challenge the dominance of criminalization as a strategy to respond to violence by building and supporting community-based solutions that work beyond the state; 2) challenge the individualization of violence by situating survivors within communities; and 3) challenge gender (and other) binaries that produce heterosexist and other dominant ideas about violence and relationships. Additional principles we addressed here included holding multiple truths at the same time, the impact of trauma, taking risks, assessing the role that confidentiality plays in our work, and thinking intentionally about safety. We held three political education sessions to take a deeper look at each of these areas of conflict. Although each session had a distinct focus, the discussion and emergent questions were overlapping and interconnected.

Our first session focused on the historical trajectory of the criminalization of domestic violence and the impacts of the dominance of these responses.¹² We looked specifically at Sakhi's work to ask: Where

¹¹ Creative Interventions, *Creative Interventions Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Violence* (July 2012), available at <http://www.creative-interventions.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CI-Toolkit-Complete-Pre-Release-Version-06.2012-.pdf> (The toolkit is a model for violence intervention, and offers information, worksheets, and case studies of community-based interventions.)

¹² See generally *supra* note 5.

does Sakhi's work challenge the values and use of the criminal legal system already? Where does Sakhi rely on the criminal legal system? Where are the possibilities/openings that would occur if we move away from these strategies? What are the challenges in moving away from these strategies? Moving forward from the challenges, we asked, how could Sakhi start not to use these strategies in the short-term? How else could Sakhi fulfill these needs? We used this series of questions in all three sessions to help identify short-term steps that Sakhi could take to build from its existing work towards growing greater community capacity to respond to violence.

The discussion that came out of the first session underscored that Sakhi experiences contradiction in its daily work. Staff reflected how engaging with the criminal justice system consistently complicates the lives of survivors, such that they feel as though they are punished instead of the person who committed harm. Direct services staff members noted how their work is about preparing survivors to offer their lives as proof towards evidentiary requirements, because this is one of few pathways to accessing numerous public benefits. Sakhi staff named a strong commitment to the idea of resource creation: what they wanted to move towards is creating more options for survivors, but they were also nervous about moving away from a criminal justice approach if this would remove one option for addressing survivors' needs.

In this discussion, a question emerged about how to define the concept of resourcing. For example, given the hostile climate for immigration, the criminalization of domestic violence offers some opportunity for survivors to recast themselves, legally speaking, from undocumented immigrant (who has perpetrated an illegal act) to a survivor of violence (who is the victim of a crime). In our current environment in which immigration is criminalized, this recasting, through tools such as the U visa, becomes one of few means to access to documents for undocumented survivors. The criminalization of domestic violence may be offering a pathway to more secure immigration status, but criminalization (of immigrants) is what curtails access in the first place, and criminalization (of domestic violence) only re-grants partial access on the basis of merit; this is not a resource, so much as a gatekeeping device.¹³

¹³ Rupaleem Bhuyan, *Disciplining Through the Promise of "Freedom": The Production of the Battered Immigrant Woman In Public Policy and Domestic Violence Advocacy* (Jan. 1, 2006) (unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Washington (on file with author); Susan Berger, *(Un)Worthy: Latina battered immigrants under VAWA and the construction of neoliberal subjects*, 13 CITIZENSHIP STUDIES 201 (2009); Lee Ann S. Wang, *Ethnographies of Inclusion: Protection, Punishment, and Legal Fictions of*

The second session focused on the individualization of anti-violence interventions, as contrasted with community-based approaches to violence. Here we asked: if we understand domestic violence to be a social problem, why do most of our responses treat violence as an individual problem? We first traced the history of neoliberal transitions in social welfare that have emphasized personal responsibility and individualism, and the growth of professionalized social services through non-profit organizations that utilized measures of eligibility of survivors in order to distribute resources.¹⁴

We also looked more carefully at Sakhi's work to explore how the organization has related to the idea of "community"¹⁵ On the one hand, Sakhi is a community-based organization, founded by and for South Asian women, but, on the other hand, the founding of the organization was premised upon the idea that "community," more broadly, is unsupportive of South Asian women facing violence in their relationships. Meanwhile, South Asian women are heterogeneous and internal power dynamics of class, religion, caste nationality, and sexuality, and other social positions also reveal the uneasy terms upon which we aim to build community. Furthermore, Sakhi itself as a community is not monolithic; survivors, staff, volunteers, Board members, and funders all exist in differentiated roles from each other; these roles have evolved as consequences of professionalization, protectionism, and other mechanisms that configure relationships.

Historically, Sakhi's relationship to community included a great deal of tension. When Sakhi was founded, the scope of its work was broad to address all forms of gender-based violence that occur within the domestic sphere, including intimate partner violence and abuse faced by domestic workers. In Sakhi's earlier years, the organization utilized different strategies to address violence, including direct actions to protest the abusive actions of community members. Public shaming, which was primarily deployed to address situations of labor exploitation, was a tactic that engaged community members to take a stand and bring visibility to issues that are otherwise silenced. Over time, Sakhi was unable to hold the diversity of strategies it employed and its internal

Asian Immigrant Women (2012) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan (on file with University of Michigan).

¹⁴ INCITE! WOMEN OF COLOR AGAINST VIOLENCE, *THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE FUNDED* (2007); KRISTIN BUMILLER, *IN AN ABUSIVE STATE: HOW NEOLIBERALISM APPROPRIATED THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE* (2008).

¹⁵ In this discussion, even though we use the singular "community" we always mean the heterogeneous, plural South Asian diasporic communities in the New York metropolitan area, and understand that these communities extend beyond Sakhi's constituency.

political conflict resulted in a commitment to a narrow focus on intimate partner violence; another organization, Workers' Awaaz, was founded to take on the issue of domestic workers' rights.¹⁶ This decision was an important fork in the road, at which Sakhi chose an anti-violence response that aligned with the mainstream anti-violence movement in the strategies it employed, and in how it understood the state as a site of resources. What remained, however, was an approach that saw the community as a potential site of harm, and distilling the ally potential of the broader community is still an ongoing negotiation.

Sakhi has also repeatedly challenged the stigma and prejudice that survivors of violence face at the hands of their community through publicly speaking in support of women's rights and about violence, often a taboo topic. When Sakhi was first permitted to walk during the India Day Parade, it held the duality of taking an unpopular stance vis-à-vis its community by bringing the specter of domestic violence to the public eye, and, at the same time, having tacit community support through its public presence in a community event. Across a span of two and a half decades, this relationship has grown to gain some trust from the community for Sakhi as a service provider, but Sakhi's trust of community is limited; while Sakhi seeks to engage with community in challenging violence, the role it has asked for from community is one of referral and not necessarily a deeper trust to be able to do much more.

As of now, Sakhi seeks to leverage twenty five years of community service and the respect it has gained in the South Asian community and the larger domestic violence community for its work. Sakhi seeks to implement creative approaches for engaging community in ways that genuinely reflect the complexity and nuance surrounding the issue of intimate violence and the role of "community." Sakhi's history with South Asian diasporic communities reflects an understanding that has developed through both challenges with community as well as collaborations, producing a need to engage intentionally with community.

¹⁶ See generally MONISH DAS GUPTA, *UNRULY IMMIGRANTS: RIGHTS ACTIVISM, AND TRANSNATIONAL SOUTH ASIAN POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES* (Duke University Press 2006) (discussing this time at Sakhi in more detail); see also Linta Varghese, *Sites of Neoliberal Articulation: Subjectivity, Community Organizations, and South Asian New York City* (Dec. 2007) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin) (on file with author) (offering a critical analysis of the conflict in part based on the first-hand accounts written by Anannya Bhattacharjee); ANANNYA BHATTACHARJEE ET AL., *FEMINIST GENELOGIES, COLONIAL LEGACIES, DEMOCRATIC FUTURES* 308–327 (M. Jacqui Alexander & Chandra Talpade Mohanty eds., Routledge 1997); MARGARET ABRAHAM, *SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE: MARITAL VIOLENCE AGAINST SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES* (Rutgers University Press 2000).

In shifting towards a model of community engagement that seeks to build the capacity of community members to address violence, the question of the anti-violence movement's assumptions of confidentiality emerges. In this exploration, we understood that there are circumstances that dictate the need for confidentiality as a safety measure; the question was about why we operate from an assumption that this is always the case. For example, Sakhi's offices are in a confidential location, which restricts who can access the office, including people who may want to offer support to their loved ones and community members at-large who may want to support Sakhi's work. Confidentiality as a pre-requisite strengthens the idea that violence is an individualized issue by offering an illusion of information security between the survivor and the advocate. The reality, however, is that in order to access services, information about the survivor's situation is shared between agencies and systems through police reports, immigration applications, affidavits, medical records, restraining orders, and more. Above all else, confidentiality maintains boundaries between professional experts and non-professional community members. What would look like to move from a survivor-centered approach to a community-centered approach? What do we gain and what do we lose if we move into an understanding of intimate violence as a collective problem?

In this discussion, Sakhi staff commented that individualization occurs both on the level of isolation from community, but also from a larger sense of not connecting with the universality of experiences of violence and oppression. As an organization working with survivors, Sakhi has an opportunity to connect survivors with information for getting their needs met, and also to contextualize the issues survivors are facing by raising survivors' awareness about larger political/social/economic systems. Making connections between one's individual story and the larger forces that produce the conditions within which one's story takes place can be a healing process. Political education can be a tool to counteract the structural ways in which domestic violence is cast as an individual issue.

Our last session looked specifically at how gender binaries operate in anti-violence work, and in Sakhi's work more specifically. Here, we were interested in the heterosexism and genderism that assumes a violent relationship to be made up of an abusive man and a victimized woman, and also ascribes certain characteristics and qualities to masculinity and femininity. We want to maintain a feminist analysis of intimate violence as gender-based violence, but we also want to expand our gender frameworks to allow for the multiplicity of gender expression and gender identity in our communities. This expansion requires a more complex engagement with gender and violence to allow for both the ways in

which women are violent, and in which men are harmed by violence. We need to recognize the ways we perceive violence/aggression to be rooted in expressions of gender; and then also be identified with that gender. Gender-roles in community are cast as binaries with specific tasks, so we are also challenging that through this discussion. For community-based interventions to effectively transform the dynamics of violence, a holistic engagement with the members of the community (including the person who caused harm, bystanders, and others) is ideal; a demarcation based on gender is in tension with such an engagement.¹⁷

We asked staff: how does Sakhi's work challenge the gender binary? Staff reflected that it only does so minimally, primarily as a strategy for expanding resources (such as in its economic empowerment work, to build the capacity of women to earn outside of the home). In the context of relationships, Sakhi staff remarked that state interventions demand an understanding of survivors wholly as victims, as a means to accessing resources. This also upholds a binary on what behavior defines a good victim versus a bad victim—women who react outside of what defines a good victim (with violence of their own, etc.) are bad victims, and are resigned to less success in accessing resources via a state solutions approach.

This discussion also engages the issue of building community within the organization itself, as well as with welcoming greater community responses—in order to actually hold space for all South Asian women, who may, in relationship with each other, have a range of power dynamics in play. In other words, building a fuller understanding of community disrupts essentialist assumptions about the universal experience of women, and better holds the complexity of multiple layers of difference (i.e., class, caste, religion, ethnic background, national origin, sexual orientation, role, experience, and yes, gender identity) within Sakhi's constituency.

IV. TAKING SOME FIRST STEPS TOWARDS ALTERNATIVES

Through these three political education sessions, we developed tangible next steps that came directly out of the existing work that Sakhi already does. The goal was to make small but foundational moves towards a transformative approach, collect information from these interventions, and evaluate their impacts for further growth in this direction. One set of short-term strategies, for example, was to focus on

¹⁷ Gita Mehrotra & Soniya Munshi, *Shifting the Frame: Addressing Domestic Violence in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer South Asian Communities*, MANAVI OCCASIONAL PAPER, No. 7 (2011).

obtaining more information from survivors and community members about how and where communities are already providing support to survivors. The longer-term strategy that this serves is to build community capacity to respond to violence by both deindividualizing violence and de-centering Sakhi's role as a primary responder to a facilitator of community-based interventions. This is the shift from community education that informs the community of Sakhi as a resource to one that informs (and in fact, expects) the community to be active in supporting survivors of violence directly.

Other examples of these concrete and foundational steps include:

- Make adjustments to the intake form to ask survivors who contact Sakhi about ways that they have accessed (or could access) community for support. When communicating with survivors, encourage them to identify individuals within their communities who can support them—and create space for these supporters to be part of resourcing process that Sakhi holds.
- Strengthen the building of social/community networks within support group spaces by serving as a facilitator for these connections.
- Incorporate more political education conversations in support group spaces to de-individualize violence by building connections at the structural level, and by making political structures visible.
- Hold focus groups in community spaces to reflect on how individuals approach communities for support around intimate partner violence, and in order to identify effective strategies that communities may already be using to address violence without involving the state.
- Train community members who are already involved in supporting survivors in their communities, and integrate political education about the larger context of anti-violence work (including policies) in the United States. A starting point here could be with those people who call Sakhi on behalf of survivors who are experiencing violence.

Sakhi is beginning to implement some of these strategies and will see where they lead; it is our hope that engaging with these short-term steps will illuminate other steps in a path forward in line with a transformative vision.

V. CONCLUSION

Sakhi's engagement with a transformative justice approach is an ongoing process, with long-term outcomes that will eventually look very different from their current approach. Arriving at a model that holds less contradiction and more fully embodies the values of transformative

justice will be a long-term process. We are reminded of the work of Generation FIVE, which “seeks to end childhood sexual abuse in five generations, through survivor leadership, community engagement, and public action.”¹⁸ Generation FIVE’s work prioritizes a transformative justice approach in their movement building, and the long-term envisioning acknowledges that profound change takes significant time, and that taking steps at the current moment is a part of this process.

Some of the crucial milestones in the building of a transformative justice approach include the identification and building of community capacity to serve as a resource in addressing instances of violence, and disentangling the relationship between social welfare and the criminal legal system. This relationship will present an ongoing challenge as long as Sakhi is facilitating resources and social services for survivors of violence. Regardless of Sakhi’s organizational analysis and experience of these connections, the continued structural links that position survivors seeking assistance as vulnerable to the power of the criminal legal system will be a barrier to a transformative vision. This is an issue beyond individual groups or communities but one for the anti-violence movement to collectively engage and change, and one that is also tied to interrupting the funder-driven pressures and restrictions on non-profit organizations.

Sakhi is also beginning to work on the identification of community-based resources. Engaging with this process will continually lead to further conflicts, albeit productive ones, especially as the organization starts to use strategies that begin to show active contradiction with its current programming. It is an open question as to how this process will evolve towards a firm and consistent grounding in the values of transformative justice. In this work, Sakhi seeks connections with others who are challenged by similar contradictions, other efforts that offer direct support to survivors of violence who are also seeking to grow options that are located beyond the state.

¹⁸ GENERATION FIVE, <http://www.generationfive.org/about-us/> (last visited Sept. 7, 2014).