

Manavi

Manavi struggling to save the Safe House for battered women

By Ela Dutt

Manavi, a tax-exempt New Jersey-based women's rights organization to fight violence against South Asian women in the United States, is struggling to find rent money for its Safe House that has provided yeoman service to battered women over the years.

"Our biggest need is rent for our Safe Home. Starting now from Jan. 1, we are not covered for rent," Maneesha Kelkar, Director of Manavi, told *News India Times*. "We had a grant that was funding it last year, now we don't have anything."

The rent for the home which houses a maximum of nine women, is \$2,000 a month. Drumming up that money will eat into Manavi's donations that help it meet the needs of more than 300 women a year - women needing counseling, legal help, job searches, training, and myriad other types of support. (For more information on Manavi, visit www.manavi.org)

Asked if the South Asian community was a major source of support, Kelkar acknowledges that over the two decades there had been a greater 'acknowledgement' of the problem of violence against women, but emphasizes that it has not translated into donations to the organization.

"The difference I see between then and now, is a lot more acknowledgment from the community about the existence of the problem of violence against women. That has definitely grown, and over and over I hear this from the community - 'Yes, yes, I know someone.'"

That is a result of Manavi volunteers pounding the pavements with brochures and flyers in all South Asian areas, putting up stalls at festivals and meetings through the months of September to December - starting with Ganesh Chaturthi, going through Eid, Navratri, and on to Christmas

"The big leap is from acknowledgement to funding for the problem. They are reluctant to fund it," Kelkar says. While Manavi has its standard donors, some giving through payroll deductions and some reliably handing over a check at the end of the year, "I haven't seen either of these groups grow in leaps and bounds. So we are really hurting for these."

Government grants are tied to specific activities which makes it impossible to redirect funds



Women's rights activists from Manavi march in a demonstration against violence towards South Asian women in a New Jersey neighborhood.

(Photo, as it appears on manavi.org)

where needed. And staffing is dependent on funded projects so that no one is able to remain long with the organization.

Started in 1985, by a group of passionate women like Shamita Das Dasgupta and Sujata Warrior, on the premise that South Asian women in this country were falling through the cracks of the support structures and systems, Manavi has made its presence felt.

It grew from being just volunteers, to having one staff worker in the early 1990's, to seven full-time staff today. It has been a long journey through providing actual services that are dependably available - solid programs including legal services and the most important Safe House.

"Things developed piecemeal. The organization evolved organically. We knew what we wanted eventually, and the needs of the women," she recalls as Manavi moved from a loosely structured organization to one with a director on 2004.

"It had reached a stage where it really needed to be brought together. In the last three to four years, what I have tried to do is pull together the organizational structure. But we still function on

a consensus basis because we feel Manavi's philosophy rests around 'full inclusion'. So the youngest staff person is also considered to have a stake in the organization and therefore a voice. That brings a vibrancy to it and that is something we will always continue"

"The biggest challenge today is sources of constant funding," Kelkar reiterates. "Every staff position is grant funded. It is really precarious. What we need is fund-raising on a larger scale, and we just don't have the means."

Staff members are overworked providing services including accompanying battered women to the courts, connecting them to legal clinics and pro-bono lawyers.

"Counseling is a large part of it because a woman who calls needs to tell her story. She needs someone who can listen and say, 'I will support you whatever your needs.'" We never close cases, not like a case manager. This has been our pride and joy."

But some additional and very significant frustrations while helping women revolve around larger policy issues.

"Once the woman is past counseling and a free legal clinic, a stay in a safe home - all

bandaids - after that comes real life," Kelkar says, "The woman has to become completely independent ... We help them with their resumes, clothes for interviews. Finally, it is a matter of finding a job that will give stability," and that's a tough one.

"Lot of women are able to get hourly-wage jobs. But the three biggest challenges are helping a woman find affordable housing, affordable healthcare, and affordable childcare, in that order of priority."

In 2007, for which numbers are still being tallied, Manavi helped more than 300 women. It has revenues of roughly \$350,000, and Kelkar wishes it could hit at least the \$1 million mark so an endowment could be established to reliably fund the Safe Home. "I feel it is a travesty that we have to worry about paying rent for a Safe Home." A new issue that has cropped up for organizations like Manavi is helping women who have been abandoned in India by men who married them and brought them to the United States on an H-4 visa. "Abusers who put their wife through abuse here, then take her back to India and then just leave her there, very cleverly, just days before her visa is to lapse." Then they put through divorce proceedings here and give an *ex parte* divorce to the woman in India who is not able to attend court proceedings here because her H-4 visa is not renewed. "Currently, we call it the worst form of abuse," Kelkar said. Manavi is working with organizations in India and also in the process of establishing a coalition in the United States to fight the matter at the policy level. "But like so many larger projects we undertake, it is not funded, but we go ahead and do it anyway," Kelkar notes.

Donations can be in cash or kind. Checks can be mailed to the address below. Contributions in kind include items listed on what Manavi calls its Ashiana Wish List - Phone cards, movie tickets, gift cards to shop at the malls, free dental and medical checkups.

Contact

Manavi
P.O. Box 3103
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Phone (732) 435-1414
Fax (732) 435-1411
Email manavi@manavi.org

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