

SAWERRAA

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Domestic Violence Destroys Families

Four year-old Rishi* pressed the buttons on the telephone.... 9..1..1. Terrified, he watched his father beat his mother. The police came and arrested Rishi's daddy, urging Sita* to press charges. At first, she resisted. Then, fear rising as she thought of what her husband would do to them when he came back, Sita agreed.

"I had an idyllic childhood," says Sita. Raised in a large and loving joint Bengali family, Sita and her sisters were encouraged to be independent and self-reliant. Given much more freedom than other girls their age, they moved about the city without a chaperone and even played competitive sports, like cricket¹ and badminton. She loved her life so much that she sought to re-create it in her marriage. Even though her parents had a "love marriage", Sita asked them to find her a husband who lived in a joint family.

Sita and Ramesh* were married within a few days of their first meeting. Ramesh returned to Missouri soon afterwards. Sita followed seven months later – to discover that her new husband had been laid off from his job.

Ramesh, in the US, seemed very different from the man she married in Kolkata (Calcutta). He was unsympathetic when she missed her family and forbade her to call them. "Why do you need your parents when you have a husband?" he said. He swore at her when she accidentally broke a 25-cent glass. He controlled every penny, refusing to allow Sita to spend even the money she earned herself. When she became pregnant, Ramesh decided they could not afford to have a child yet and took her to get an abortion. She was devastated when he told her, later on, that he had \$40,000 in his bank account.

He blasted her verbally and emotionally for five years, until she became pregnant again. Then the abuse turned physical. While she was pregnant, Ramesh strangled Sita and threatened to kill her. Over the years, her personal items began to disappear – things like her wedding jewelry (kept in a safety deposit box) and irreplaceable antique quilts from her grandmother. Sita was infuriated and started to look through his things. At that point, Ramesh beat her severely, causing permanent injury to her neck. Little Rishi watched in fear. Hands trembling, he picked up the telephone....

Life after divorce is hard. Financially, Sita is struggling. Even though she has a full-time job and caters dinners to supplement her income, she is heavily in debt due to huge legal and medical bills. Sita is diabetic and suffers from the injury to her neck.

Rishi also has his hard times. Money is scarce for extracurricular activities. He stays with his mother during the school year, but must spend summers with his father. "I don't want to go," Rishi says. "Mummy divorced him, I want to divorce him, too." He can't wait until he is old enough to petition the courts to be legally emancipated from his dad. He longs for a father figure in his life, just not the biological one.

Sita and Rishi are survivors. Sita persevered, even when she felt abandoned by the Indian community. One 'friend' told her, "dhapad hi maraa hai na, maar to nahi diya hai na!" ("he just hit you, he didn't kill you!"). Rishi is a hero. He protected his mother when nobody else would.

Sita's advice for other victims? "Time Heals. Talk to someone. You never know where help comes from."

*Names in the stories have been changed to maintain confidentiality

¹ Cricket is generally considered a male sport

Kids exposed to violence seem to have more ailments

A recent study published in Journal of Pediatrics, from University of Michigan, indicated nearly one third of children exposed to violence of one degree or another suffered from allergies, asthma or attentions deficit hyperactivity disorder. Violence ranges from one incidence of beating or chasing to severe violence such as witnessing rape or shooting, to experience domestic violence and maltreatment. Children with any one of the above health problems were significantly more likely to have been exposed to violence within the family and had shown signs of traumatic stress.

▶ NO ONE DESERVES TO BE ABUSED ◀

WHO ARE THE ABUSERS:

Spouse	Father-in-law	Uncle	Boyfriend
Children	Mother-in-law	Aunt	Girlfriend
Mother	Brother-in-law	Cousin	Roommate
Father	Sister-in-law	Close family friend	Neighbor
Siblings			Coworker

SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT REGIONAL ASSOCIATION

24 Hour Helpline
Emergency Assistance
Counseling
Language Assistance
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Helpline: 1-877-SAWERAA

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