Domestic Harmony Foundation fills gap for violence victims

Shaida Khan receives Long Island Women of Distinction award

BY ELA DUTT

The South Asian Muslim community has enough to contend with fighting the stereotyping in a post-9/11 world.

So efforts to combat regularly occurring domestic violence against women have been sidelined or shelved.

But Shaida Khan, executive director of the Long Island-based Domestic Harmony Foundation, is not going to let that happen. She recently won the Long Island Women of Distinction award for her work with battered women.

The DHF of New York (www.dhfny.org) provides a hot line for victims of domestic violence, focusing on Muslim women and now women of South Asian descent as well.

The organization recently registered as an independent nonprofit, no longer under the umbrella of the Islamic Center of Long Island.

"We see an increase in domestic violence, but it could also be because of more awareness. These women and families are coming forward now," Khan told News India Times.

In a month, the hot line gets anywhere up to 20 calls. And not all are directly related to domestic violence, but they are related either in terms of financial help because of abuse, or legal aid.

When women call in, the volunteers at DHF talk to them and get all the information in order to figure out what help they need.

"It can be financial abuse, sexual abuse, abandonment -- Muslim men go back to their home country and remarry in their own countries. These women are left with no food, no rent and no pay," Khan said.

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) passed during President Clinton's tenure in the White House, she said, has been the biggest help in securing support for victims.

"A lot of them are immigrants and in most cases we have to get a lawyer for them, to help them self-petition under VAWA Act," Khan said.

Men have often used the threat of not getting a green card or other visas as a way to control their spouses.

"If we can prove that there is violence in the home, then they can self-petition. But each case is very different, we need to evaluate each one and find their options," Khan said.

"But we never tell them to leave their marriage unless they are in immediate physical danger. Then we refer them to a shelter. We do not have a shelter.

She is hoping that with the nonprofit status, the organization can seek funding from the government and foundations.

"Individual donations are our biggest mainstay, however," Khan emphasized.

At an April 25 fundraiser, she says, they raised a decent amount. In the near future, she expects to hire paid staff. Meanwhile, the eight or nine women volunteers, most of them professionals such as psychiatrists, lawyers, doctors, give of their time along with their work schedule and have been doing it for 15 years now.

Khan, a graduate of the Sophia Polytechnic University in Mumbai, has a bachelor's degree in hotel administration and food technology. She began working actively at the Islamic Center of Long Island when she came to the U.S. more than 22 years ago.

For information, visit www.dhfny.org. Hot line number: 1-516-942-2081.