Rumana's brother deemed it to be a perfect match. After all, Raihan was a professor and owned a house in New York. Raihan had even assured him that he would endorse Rumana's wishes to continue with higher studies.

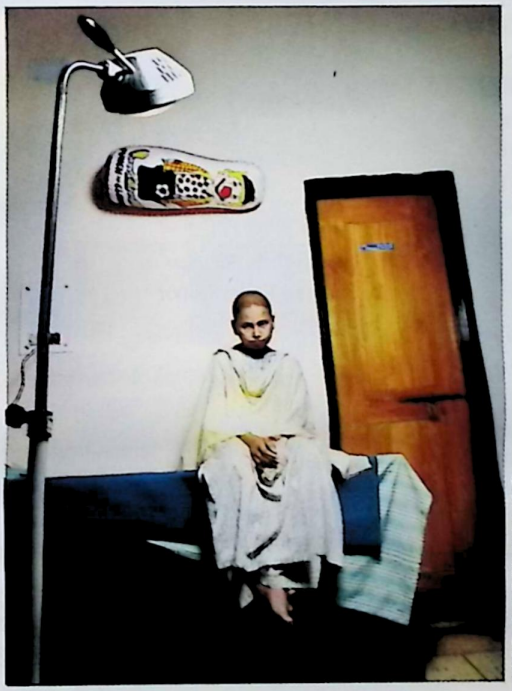
From outside, Raihan's house in Rego Park, Queens, looked decent with a nice-sized front yard. Inside, the house was worse than a shanty. Raihan had cut off the phone lines so he would not have to pay any bills, and nothing in the house had been washed, cleaned or changed in years. Raihan was as mean and miserly as a man can be. He did the groceries himself, and forbade Rumana to have more than one cup of tea a day. She had to have her tea without sugar, because that was one less thing to pay for.

Rumana often went hungry, because her meals consisted of a tiny portion of rice and spinach. She lost about five kilos in one month, and when she asked Raihan about getting a winter coat he gave her fifteen dollars. Rumana stayed home all winter, falling into a deep depressed confusion. Her husband earned a more than decent living, then why this torture? In the spring she reasoned with Raihan. She asked him to let her go back to school, so she could earn a degree and contribute to the household. Raihan laughed at her, long and hard.

He told her that he resented her for all the extra pennies she had already cost him, so going to school was out of the question. Rumana's dream was over. In the months to follow, Raihan revealed more of himself. He openly courted other women, and even brought some of them home in Rumana's presence. He seized all the jewelry that Rumana had received during the wedding, even her wedding ring. He told her that she and her brother were greedy beggars for planning to get a free ride through him, and he had made fools of them. He had married her because he needed a slave.

These stories are not anomalies. Around the world, at least one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused during her lifetime.[1] The Raj and Silverman study[2] of South Asian women (married or in heterosexual relationships) in Greater Boston shows that 41% of the respondents experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. In 2004, Sakhi received 581 new pleas for assistance, out of which 13.4% were Bangladeshi women, the third largest group, after Indians and Pakistanis. In 2006, Sakhi's call volume increased to 685, out of which 18% were Bangladeshi calls, making them the second largest group.

In the ordinary business of life, abusers are ordinary, polite, amicable men. But one must remember that abusers are some of the finest actors around us. "Research studies on domestic violence, and experiences of domestic violence incidents shared by survivors and community organizations, all point to manipulative ways that abusers exercise power and control. By being excessively nice to others, the abusers deflect any suspicion about abuse away from themselves, and can create doubts about the authenticity of the victim's claims," says Abraham. One also wonders why abusers who live away from the homeland go back there to choose a wife, sometimes more than once.



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Sakhi has come across accounts where women discovered that their abusive husbands had been married before, and their divorced wives had been discreetly sent back home. Perhaps these abusers surmise that they have the best chance for deception in communities where they have had least activity. They also know that they run the lowest risk of facing any protest from their freshly-arrived victims, who are alone and totally inept at working their away around in a brand-new system.

Isolation is a key form of abuse for the immigrant woman, who is not only unfamiliar with the system but may be further handicapped by the inability to speak English. For example, even if a woman manages to call the police she is often unable to explain herself properly enough to get help. The abuser, on the other hand, knows the system well and knows how to manipulate his victim into subversion. Abusers commonly use the threat of deportation, or the denial of valid immigration status, to invoke fear in uninformed immigrants like Dilruba and Rumana.

Purvi Shah, Executive Director at Sakhi says: "The immigration reform debates have taken our country by storm lately. But the various positions have overlooked a key section of the population that remains undocumented, through no choice of its own: battered women whose abusive partners withhold valid immigration status as a method of control. In addition to threats of deportation, immigrant survivors may be kept in a limbo status by abusers seeking to manipulate a complex and overburdened legal system."

Families have a pivotal role to play in fighting abuse. While organizations like Sakhi help to inform women of their rights and help them navigate legal and other difficult arenas, they cannot offer women a real home to return to wherein they can start their lives afresh. Only their families can offer battered women this vital link in the process of breaking free. "It is important to include the judicial system in addressing domestic violence, but not to depend solely on the courts. Religious leaders must address the problem, and the media can play a great role in increasing awareness. Change can only happen through a multi-pronged approach," comments Abraham.