

'Let's stand together to challenge inequities...'

DIVYA KAELEY

KRIPA SEKHAR is executive director of the South Asian Women's Centre (SAWC) and co-chair for the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC). Kripa has been a long-time activist in the women's movement and an advocate against sexist racist oppression. She has made a significant contribution to address issues related to women particularly marginalized women, and has worked closely with the Aboriginal community in Saskatchewan. In a conversation with Generation Next, Kripa relates her struggle and her journey to success in Canada.

1. Tell us something about your journey to Canada. How did you land in community services for women?

I came to Canada along with my husband and two daughters in 1990. We came to join my husband's family and were very positive that we would have no major hurdles in finding suitable employment.

I was an English lecturer for almost 17 years at a women's college, before coming to Canada. I also volunteered actively to help women and children with literacy skills from a very young age. I grew up in a working class family that was very strict and my parents always taught me and my siblings that we must care and share with others. So I was always involved with the community and women's issues even before my journey began in Canada.

2. Being a woman and a highly accomplished individual, how do you relate yourself to the needs of women who visit your centre?

My own lived struggles and challenges have informed me, so I can relate to the needs of others. The work of the centre is to ensure that anyone who comes to the centre and needs help can get

it. If individual women are empowered then the community is strong. Client needs are a priority and SAWC has a very small but very committed staff team, and they stay informed through regular client feedback about client needs. SAWC does not compromise on meeting our client's needs and many clients return with others.

3. Tell us something



about your initial days in Canada? Was it a smooth/bumpy ride? What effort went into the position you are in today?

Of course it was not a smooth ride; it was tough, full of challenges. Like many immigrants I faced many difficult situations like exclusion, finding a job, trying to manage work and home stresses, to name a few. I lived and worked in Saskatchewan for around 14 years, some of that time I spent in the North working with Aboriginal women, and learned so much from this work. My work in Saskatchewan as the Provincial Coordinator of the Saskatchewan Action Committee on the Status of Women provided me a great opportunity to interact with women from all backgrounds. It immersed me in women's equality work and

in 2004 I left Saskatchewan to join SAWC, because I wanted to give back to my community, a community of newcomers and immigrant women, more directly.

4. What kind of issues do you face when you meet your clients?

SAWC has a very dedicated staff team and the centre uses a client-focused model. It is very important

that I learn about client needs and am able to identify the gaps in services based on their feedback. SAWC uses a team approach to problem solving, and has been one of the primary agencies to identify the unique needs of South Asian women to the different stakeholders. There are many issues facing south Asian women and their families that are intersected in gender, race and class. Some issues are unemployment, underemployment, credential recognition, violence and abuse, housing, legal support, immigration status, childcare support, care for senior south Asians, financial support for seniors, suitable health care support are some of the few.

5. What advice would you give to new immigrant women who come to Canada with dreams in their eyes but feel let down with

the initial struggle?

Every immigrant woman's struggle is different, but the issues are the same, so we can help by en-

legal/non-legal- that new immigrants should keep in mind?

The recent changes, both proposed and enacted, to



couraging each other on this journey. So much depends on financial and family situations, on survival, on fulfilling family needs and there is a sense of shame attached to talking about these issues because they are so personal. It

immigration are a real concern at this time. It is not fair that employers may pay temporary foreign workers fifteen percent less than the average wage for a job. The proposed change to create a "conditional" permanent

"Every immigrant woman's struggle is different, but the issues are the same, so we can help by encouraging each other on this journey. So much depends on financial and family situations, on survival, on fulfilling family needs and there is a sense of shame attached to talking about these issues because they are so personal. It is important for all of us to stand together in this struggle and challenge the inequities that create these challenges."

is important for all of us to stand together in this struggle and challenge the inequities that create these challenges. Many immigrant women come into this country with skills and qualifications and are not able to participate fully because they have not been provided suitable opportunities.

6. Any issues -

residence period of two years or more for certain sponsored spouses and partners is very troubling. The proposed change, published in the Canada Gazette, 26 March 2011, states that if the sponsored spouse/partner does not remain in a bona fide relationship with their sponsor during the conditional period, their perma-

nent residence could be revoked. Both these changes increase the vulnerability of newcomer women tremendously.

7. Do you call yourself a feminist? What's your definition of feminism?

I am a strong advocate for women's rights as human rights and therefore have always identified as a feminist. To me feminism means many things, particularly when it is contextualized in a global framework. As a racialised Canadian woman whose struggles have been intersected between race, gender and class facing identity challenges in different spaces. Feminism has also been given a negative profile by those who oppose women's rights as equal rights.

8. How have you seen SAWC growing in your tenure?

SAWC has been through a long history of achievements and challenges. Although the federal cuts in 2010 were a setback to SAWC, looking back it actually served as an opportunity for growth. It is amazing to see how many individuals and networks support SAWC. SAWC has introduced new projects to assist women move forward in their lives, an example of this is the computer literacy training for isolated women 55+. The Canadian Women's Foundation has provided support for a Violence Prevention Counsellor so SAWC can provide enhanced services. SAWC is one of the few agencies providing a year round tax clinic. One of the highlights of the year was the launch of the Training Module which focuses on the issue of Forced Marriage as a form of Human Trafficking.

The work and reputation of the agency to serve clients have increased and SAWC has served a little over 10,000 clients mostly women and children in the past year.

9. Your vision for future...

SAWC has embarked on an ambitious forward looking strategy and is encouraging the south Asian community to come on board to support women and community agencies. SAWC has a satellite office in Malvern and our hope is to serve women in their own neighbourhoods by creating safe spaces for service through strong networking connections.