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Shelter a safe haven for Asian and Pacific Islander women

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Where Lakshmi comes from in India, calling authorities for help is an alien concept.

"There's no 911 in our country," Lakshmi said. "No one call the cops."

When she was escaping an abusive husband who had brought her to the United States, she didn't know whom to turn to or where to go.

Lakshmi is not her real name. She chose to use it for this article; The Bee is not identifying her because she is a victim of domestic violence.

Lakshmi eventually found My Sister's House, a shelter that caters primarily to battered Asian and Pacific Islander women and children.

The 9-year-old nonprofit organization is the only one of its kind in the Sacramento region, its staff and board members said. It's also one of the few shelters that specializes in helping Asian and Pacific Islander women.

In a 2000 National Violence Against Women Survey, about 15 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander women who participated said they were victimized by an intimate partner. The number is lower than for other races, but researchers said the that may be due to underreporting among Asians.

Nilda Valmores, executive director for My Sister's House, said the six-bed shelter in Sacramento offers victims another choice when seeking refuge.

Beth Hassett, executive director of WEAVE, agrees that smaller, more specialized shelters can provide something different. Hassett added, however, that WEAVE trains its staff to be culturally sensitive and has a team of translators that speaks 16 different languages.

WEAVE, or Women Escaping a Violent Environment, is the primary provider of services for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault in Sacramento County.

In September, Volunteers of America opened a safe house for abused seniors. Christie Holderegger, vice president of development of the nonprofit's Sacramento chapter, said seniors need a place where they can relate to people in their own age group. She said the

safe house is the only one of its kind west of the Mississippi.

The basic dynamics of an abusive relationship transcend culture and other factors, and trained therapists at any shelter should be able to address the core issues, Hassett said. However, she said she can understand that some victims may feel more comfortable at a place that has staff and fellow victims who look more like them.

"It's the little things" that help victims cope, said Sitra T. Rajah, My Sister's House manager.

Inside the shelter – a house in a residential neighborhood – the living room is decorated with ornaments that reflect different Asian cultures. A green porcelain statue of the Goddess of Mercy sits on a shelf; a Japanese doll sits on another. Embroidered cushions with Oriental patterns line the couches. A picture of a phoenix, sewn with colorful silk threads, hangs on a wall.

One client who believes in feng shui – an ancient Chinese system of balancing "energies" of a space to improve the fortunes of its occupants – placed small round mirrors throughout the house.

Also, being able to cook food they are accustomed to helps victims feel more at ease, Valmores said.

Lakshmi, who first went to a San Joaquin County shelter after escaping her husband, described My Sister's House as "my first home in America."

Lakshmi, who is in her late 20s, grew up in India and married her husband in an arranged marriage in 2007. He then he brought her to the United States.

She was isolated from the outside world as soon as she arrived. Her husband deprived her of all financial means and transportation. He called her names, hit her and sexually abused her, she said.

"How he kept me was like a servant," Lakshmi said, choking up from time to time as she spoke.

At the San Joaquin County shelter, Lakshmi said, the other women were shocked that she never called 911.

A victim trying to explain herself while going through trauma can feel overwhelmed, Rajah said. Coming from a reserved culture, Asian women like Lakshmi often are also reluctant to talk with strangers about personal matters, Rajah said.

Another victim of domestic abuse said she wanted to talk about her problems with an Asian, even though she's fluent in English. The woman, whom The Bee also is not identifying, said she found the right person through My Sister's House and by participating in its Women to Work program, which helps survivors of domestic violence – of all ethnicities – find jobs.

The woman said she met her former husband on a dating Web site. An outgoing woman, she said she had considered running for public office in her native Philippines. She was married in 2006 in the United States. But her husband began to control and abuse her, eventually breaking her spirit, she said.

It took time, she said, but she found healing through My Sister's House peer counseling program.

Now she works as a recreational leader at a Sacramento after-school program and is taking sociology and legal studies classes at local community colleges.

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