Interviewee: Nusrat Ameen
Interviewers: Priscilla Li, Mai Ton
Date/ Time of Interview: May 29, 2018. 11:00AM
Transcribed by: Mai Ton, Priscilla Li
Edited by: Brianna Satow (6/18/18)
Audio Track Time: 1:28:13

Background:
Dr. Nusrat Ameen is originally from Dhaka, Bangladesh, and moved to Houston in 2006 where she worked as a visiting scholar at Rice University. Ultimately, by following her passion to help victims of abuse and her scholarly work on domestic violence, she began working as a staff member at Daya managing the transitional housing for clients. Since joining Daya to present day, she has built a legal services references list for Daya clients to use, led trainings for cultural competency in interacting with south Asian domestic abuse victims, and has done advocacy work at the national level. During the interview, she talked about her passions in domestic violence work, and in using legal means and policy level means to combat domestic violence at Daya.

Setting:
The interview was conducted on May 29th, 2018 at 11 AM at Daya’s office. The goal of the interview was to understand Dr. Ameen’s involvement with Daya and her views on the organization and the social issues it addresses. The interview is one of several interviews being conducted by HAAA to research Daya, as it is a part of the Indo-American community in Houston.

Key:
NA: Nusrat Ameen
PL: Priscilla Li
MT: Mai Ton
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop
…: speech trails off; pause
Italics: emphasis
(?): preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview Transcript:

PL: So today is May 29th, and we’re here at the Daya office interviewing uh Nusrat Ameen. Um my name is Priscilla Li.

MT: And I’m Mai Ton.

PL: Okay, and we’re interviewing Nusrat Ameen for the Houston Asian American Archive. Um so we’ll get started in um the background of Dr. Ameen. Um so how did you uh well let’s just say uh where did you grow up in or…
NA: So I grew up in Dhaka, Bangladesh. [PL: Mhmm] Um yeah.

PL: Okay. Um and how was like the culture in y— in where you grew up, like your childhood I guess considering like um the social culture? Like was your father the main person of the household or your mother? Um yeah so stuff like that.

NA: So I do come from a uh culture of collectivism. [PL: Mhm.] A culture of, you know, patriarchy. Um male dominance. Uh gender rules are very strictly adhered to. But fortunately, the family that I grew into uh is very liberal, so we did not see any type of discrimination uh amongst us. You know we had three siblings um, um my elder sister, my brother, and myself. We all studied um we never seen discrimination between us. Sisters and my brother, which um is normally seen in South Asian cultures, giving males the more preference. We haven’t seen that so I’m lucky in that way.

PL: Mhmm okay, great. Um and so how did you initially get into law and then um what prompted you to get a PhD?

NA: So that’s a great question. Um…since childhood I always thought of making a change, you know. I used to sit a-at the window sill, looking at uh—on a rainy day looking at the uh the rickshaw pullers going by or the females carrying you know the bricks um or you know something ov-over their head. I would look at them and I would see if I can change their lives. I always had this uh you know making a change in my- from my childhood. And when I grew up um and I was you know I got married really early. It was an arranged marriage. Um that’s a concept in the South Asian culture, to give you know the children into marriage by-by the guardians with their consent. I-I doubt how much consent I had at the age of 17 or eight— you know, just started 18 and I got married and I… it-the marriage was um a disaster and um I became a survivor. And that prompted me uh to do you know something um that can have an impact on the survivors and I thought of studying law and that’s how you know I you know, I thought of studying law and the other reason for my studying law was I have uh an uncle who’s a barrister from UK. You know Bangladesh is a commonwealth country right? So we uh follow the common law. And my uncle is a barrister from London UK. So that was another reason for me to study law.

PL: Um so that was your undergraduate degree, was it—

NA: Right, [PL: Okay.] and then you know because I was a survivor, [PL: Mhm.] and um when I was given the opportunity uh when I studied law, and um I joined the faculty as a lecturer. I got an opportunity to do a PhD in UK London. Um at that point, I thought you know I-I want to do a PhD on domestic violence and law because Bangladesh does not have any specific law at that point when I was doing my uh you know PhD. And I was thinking if I can do the PhD and uh change the law and have a specific law on domestic violence, that would change many lives. Um many survivors to get the justice so that was my reason of uh being a survivor to make a change.

PL: Okay, great. Um and so your PhD was specifically on gender rights/domestic [NA: Absolutely, absolutely.] violence. Okay and what was like your life main course of I guess research in your PhD?
NA: So um it was empirical based research. So I actually lived in the lives of hundred women uh and I worked with six nonprofits in Dhaka. So I—from London, I came back for field research um and worked with six nonprofits and just working on domestic violence and I lived the lives of hundred women who I interviewed. And uh so it was not only legal but to see the social aspect, the cultural aspect, the economic aspect. So it was more of all of that uh i-in my legal research to see whether there is a need of a specific law or not or whether th-th-the current law at that point uh was official. And I—that was my hypothesis, right? Then, I uh came uh out uh you know saying that you know because of the absence of any laws specific law on domestic violence, there was misuse of law. Uh because of many of the clients were going and uh you know uh had filing cases on dowry which was not a case. Because there was a uh you know law on dow-dowry. So there was be—misuse of law and it was very—it was—because it was so specific so women were not even coming out uh and speaking about domestic violence. It became an unrecognized uh you know offence.

PL: Okay, so while you were in Bangladesh, did you see any that like progress while you were there?

NA: Uh yes. So I uh—because I worked with the six non- profits, I uh tried to do some advocacy. That's one of my um passion, also to do advocacy uh in the policy level. So I tried to get everyone on one platform to come to the uh point that we need this law. And I advocated for that and we all advocated for that um and law commission uh took my book on domestic violence um as a platform and uh you know we were trying to you know draft a law and everything. Unfortunately, uh you know after that I came here in 2007 but the law was then um uh formulated a-and was enforced uh um in 2010 or 11 but I was already here by that time. But I started the movement, I you know of h-having the you know a specific law on domestic violence which we have now

PL: Oh okay, great. So do you keep tabs with the - I guess what you did in Bangladesh now or like keep up with the news there?

NA: That's one of my dreams. [PL: Mmhm.] Maybe I you know um my publishers actually said that you need to um do an ebook now because everything is going electronic. And actually I only came to know like 3 years back uh that they're not going to republish, reprint my books because they want to uh do an ebook. And to do the ebook, I need to do a lot of research there and then do it. Um a-at that point I had you know I had a um student who is doing PhD from uh university in Australia somehow came to know uh that I-I was associated with Rice a-and then Daya so they came back to me and they said we don't have that book. So I actually gave one of the books I had you know um I have few books s-still I had I had like few extra books and I actually sent them. So at that point I connected uh with uh my publisher to say that why can't we reprint because the demand is there and you know people are doing research all over the world and th-they need this book. So they said you have to do some—One of dreams is to you know do that but I'm not getting time with a full time job here with my taking care of my son and doing all of that it’s it’s you know it’s, it’s you know it’s very difficult to do research. Um and I need to go back to my home country to do the research and things like that. Um so that's one of the dreams that I want to do, you know.

PL: Okay, great. Um we'll definitely want to talk more about like the books you've uh published and everything. Uh-
NA: Rice has that [PL: Rice has that? Okay.] I have given Rice uh my books.

PL: Okay, great. Um so how did you come to the United States? You said...

NA: Um... so that's a long story. My um brother uh who's a US citizen uh had applied for us way back I don't know when. Uh [laughs] it takes like 14 years or something. In 2005 uh January 1st, um we get this letter that you know you uh have you know y-for the citizenship you know. You have [PL: Mhm.] the green card processing and I was like, “Oh my God, now what to do?” Because I was like doing very well there. I was uh very recognized. Um anything regarding domestic violence um, I would be there. I would go as the keynote speaker, I would do a lot of um I was doing a lot of consulting to the UNDP, UNICEF, um many other uh you know uh NORAD Norway (?). Many other deified like all the uh embassies you know. They were working in all the countries based i-in Dhaka. They were doing a lot of gender incorporation. And I was really working very hard doing uh gender incorporation in many of the like for th-the non profits and um even for the government servants. So they have uh gender development manual where you know where the government servants when they uh do their trainings that's mandatory uh, uh you know topic that they have to um in their curriculum and I developed that too. So I was doing very well and I was not sure whether I can come here and start again. Um but then my husband said, "Ok. Let's go and do some adventure. Your brother has missed uh you know—he went to USA when he was only um in 11 or 12th grade and all you know so he's missed all the families. Let's go there and stay for few years, we'll see.” So that's how I uh ended up coming to USA in 2006. Uh I came here. I got my green card. I went back. I had to settle some things at the university and you know some personal stuff and then came back again uh permanently in 2007, um end of May, kind of this time.

PL: Okay, and you came to Houston?

NA: Yes, I came to Houston [PL: Okay.] because my brother was uh working as uh Senior Director at HP, Hewlett Packard [PL: Oh okay] at that time.

PL: Uh and then when you came to Houston, did you look around for like organizations that matched what you want.. you're passionate about?

NA: Yes it was quite frustrating because I didn't—so before I came I had met um uh with Rice University you know the director at the Center for Women, Gender, and Sexuality. So I came with the visiting scholar uh you know position at the Center um but that was not—that would not feed me. So I had to look for a you know job job you know that—Uh so I was looking—uh because academia wa-is my passion, right? Doing research is my passion. Um doing policy work in that way is my passion. Uh so Rice could only give me um a position as a lecturer uh at the center to uh uh to offer Gender in Islam. But that was uh very um you know part time position, like in an adjunct position um you know for the full semester but it would not carry on like every time like if someone you know um is not teaching that then I am being able to teach that. So I was looking for something full time. And I one day I you know I was still living with my brother um and I get this newspaper the Houston Chronicle and th-this flyer comes out of that about Daya. [PL: Oh okay.] That's how I came to know about Daya. So I call them and um I ask them about their work. Because I thought "Okay this is something close to my heart because domestic violence...
and my PhD is on that. So let me just uh find out who they are and let me see if I can you know work with
them or volunteer. And so I volunteer. I did volunteering and I did the you know the uh training that is
mandatory uh for anyone to be in the you know domestic violence uh organization and uh at that point
they were looking for someone um to look after the transitional house because they were just opening that
and uh that's how I got uh the you know my first job uh full time job in the USA, was uh coordinator
transitional home um for Daya. [PL: Oh okay.] That's how I started the journey [PL: Mhm.] with Daya.

PL: And the training was the 40 hour training?

NA: Yes th-the crisis intervention training.

PL: Okay, great. Um and then what kind of classes besides the Gender in Islam class did you teach at
Rice?

NA: I did not teach any other classes [PL: Oh mhm.] but I did go and talk uh at the colloquiums. [PL:
Mhm okay.] Uh I last year also I went and spoke at the uh Wellness Center on sexual assault and the
challenges faced b-by the South Asian immigrant community. So I am um you know uh you know related
to Rice in somewhat in different capacities. I spoke at uh the global conferences uh on domestic violence
and about that - services community you know services. I um spoke I was a panel at another uh
conference uh where you know the Muslims to speak out. Uh th-they had this - they invited me to speak
uh so [PL: Mhm okay.] I was speaker there. So I keep on getting these invitations and I love to go to Rice
and-

PL: Okay, going back to Bangladesh I forgot to ask but you did teach at the University of Dhaka?

NA: Yes, yes.

PL: Okay, and what was your position I guess, um there?

NA: So I was associate professor.

PL: Okay uh and what kind of classes? Did you teach classes?

NA: So I um at that point we did not have uh we were trying to introduce the gender subjects um the
curriculum in the LLM and actually we were working on that curriculum but when I joined there um you
know I-I was teaching um company law. I was teaching company law [PL: Okay.] Mhmm. I was teaching
business law. [PL: Okay so—] Totally unrelated. Before I went for my PhD, I started teaching that. And
then—when I did my PhD and I started working on uh developing a curriculum [PL: Mhmm.] on uh you
know gender rights to be offered to the masters level and— but uh you know before that I came here.

PL: You came here, okay. Okay um and then so with your first position as like the manager of the
transitional housing, um what was that like?
NA: It was very fulfilling because when I joined Daya, I came to USA, I was soul searching about something that would really give me that you know that passion that I worked with in Bangladesh and to be related to the DV world, right? Because I was doing a lot of policy work over there. But when I was trying to get into something that would give my soul the satisfaction that I always looked for to help survivors to make that change and when I joined Daya, I had that vision that I will be able to you know fulfill that passion. And when I started working as the manager of the transitional home, I-and-I used to look at the transformation of all the clients when they would come in the beginning with the very low esteem self esteem and totally under control pow- you know of the abuser even if they are doctors, engineers, and all. And then the transformation that they go through through our services you know. We have uh direct services where we have licensed counselors. Uh we do case management. Uh we do lot help with skill building through our outreach. We do a lot of um you know preventive work. So we do a lot holistic work at Daya. And when I see the transformation and smile in the, in the clients, I used to feel that satisfaction, that core satisfaction, right? Uh we had so many clients in our transitional home that were um you know success stories, of clients who would come here um you know on a dependent visa. You know how immigrants can be trapped when they are in a dependent visa, they are not being able to work like H4 visa holders.

We had a client in our transitional home uh who was a pharmacist and yet she could not work because she was on an H4 visa, dependent on the spouse and unable to work here. Many of the H4 visas don't have social securities. I mean all of them don't have social security. Many of the states don't even allow them to have driver’s license let alone work authorization so at Daya we also do advocacy. I'll talk about that later, but this client in the transitional home uh she was so frustrated because there was um you know trauma of her being physically, sexually, uh emotionally, financially abused on top of the fact that she could not work here, right? She did not have the work authorization so that was the added trauma that was the added abuse on top of all the abuse. And we helped her through the new visa uh to get her um you know the green card. It's a very long process. It takes al- it takes almost five to seven years to get the green card. Um and so she got the work authorization and uh she recently - we helped her to get the green card and that's you know that was very you know successful story. She's working in CVS now. Um so she has a son who was born in the US. That was another thing that held her leaving the relationship because her abuser would always take immigration as a tool to suppress her and said, that “If you leave the relationship, you will be deported to India whereas our son who is a US citizen, will stay with me.” So that was like a trump card to use against her and which we see on you know on a regular basis of the clients who are on the dependent visa.

PL: Okay, so do you see like um I guess like intervening through legal means as like the main solution?

NA: Absolutely. So and that is where the policy le-level advocacy comes in, right? And uh as you know Daya is a very small organization. Recently we turned into a staff lead organization and we have seven full time staff lead by an executive director. Before that when I joined, it was only three people. I was the third one was you know employed, and because I always had the passion to do the advocacy, I started doing advocacy at the local level and have all—and go into the meetings and all the local um uh—with all the l-local non profits and then I went nationally to work with So-South Asian American Leading Together, uh Tahirih Justice Center. Um those are the ones we do a lot of advocacy with and as non profits, we do have restrictions as well as lobbying and all of that, right? So when I started doing the
advocacy around H4 visa holders way back in uh 2008 January 1st when I started at Daya, um I used to—I went to there uh to Washington, D.C. to do the trainings of how to do the advocacy, how to do the tools and they taught us all the tools and how to do the advocacy and we collected stories and we uh had—used to have regular um talks with the White House initiatives. We used to go regular basis to the Congress, meet the caucus, give our petitions, and that is how collectively and we became a member of um—we started you know uh the NCSO which is uh, uh National Organization for South Asian uh— National Coalition for South Asian Organizations, NCSO. And um now there are 62 organizations in NCSO. We started with 42 organizations way back in um 2008, so every other year we would go to the caucuses, you know give the petitions and with all these organizations and the work with the White House initiatives, give our stories and everything. And we saw a change in 2015 of H4's getting work authorization.

So now some you know uh you know clients who are in a EAD level like has been here for sometime around 10 years, they use—they started getting the work authorization but not the ones who just came in so it is—at least it was one step you know to get the work authorization. Many of our clients who are at that position of EAD got work authorization and they could start working um but recently that ha—memo has been rescinded and so in last 2 weeks span, I went again with the NCSO and give petitions to all the caucuses to see if that can be stopped you know because H4 visa holders are already trapped uh because they cannot work, right? They already um here as uh you know uh like a subs—you know without any you know like um not illegal but not legal, you know. [PL: Yes midway.] In the midway, right? They have the legal status through their husbands but if they're independently, they don't have that legal s-status where they can work and imagine it is so trauma-traumatizing if you are in - a professional back from uh India, Bangladesh, any of the South Asian countries and you cannot work here, right? That is already traumatizing. On the top of it, if your spouse is an abuser, you are doubly trapped. So this law does not even you know uh give authorization to anyone. They are only given to specific and even that is being rescinded. That memo is being rescinded. So we are still working, uh advocacy never ends, right? [PL: Yeah.] So we are still advocating for that law not to be rescinded.

PL: Okay, great. Um when you came to Houston, did you see any like um—did you have any uh culture shocks with like how domestic abuse and uh domestic violence was viewed and like handled in like United States versus Bangladesh?

NA: So not really you know uh because domestic v-violence cuts across the boundaries or race, religion, ethnicity, and culture. Um the only difference that I saw um in the domestic violence survivors is uh at Daya uh the clients that we s-saw and see, the two unique challenges that we see that uh clients face is um immigration abuse and um the in law abuse. Of course there’s cultural norms and everything that you know is every bit there in the South Asian countries as well as here in the US.

PL: Okay um can you walk us through like the positions that you've held at Daya?

NA: So I was the—When I started, I started as the coordinator of the transitional homes, so I used to manage it. I was the manager of the transitional home and um and then I became the director uh of the case management—I was doing a lot of case management here, so I became the director for case management and the transitional home. So I used to do both. It was like 24 hours 24/7 transitional home, on top of the case management. And because I came with the legal background and started Daya, I felt
that there has to be a structure in the you know how we help the clients with legal resources. It was not structured at that point so my colleague, Maliha and Meghna and I, um we star- we thought of uh a structured way and because I had the legal experience, I was more focused on having the structured uh resources that we can refer our clients to.

So we started uh with uh seven attorneys, private attorneys and to whom we were referring our clients to. They were very limited, only family and immigration. Because immigration was one of the factors that we were seeing you know in our clients, on top of the divorce and custody and property division, cps involvement and all that. And we partner with pro bono organizations. So I started building a legal clinic where it was consisted of two components. One is the private attorneys and the other one is the pro bono services. So I started building resources like making connections with the private attorneys, uh making uh relationships with the pro bono um you know agencies uh and uh we um pr-presently we have uh 35+, 40—actually, w-we ended up in 2015, uh ‘14 with 55 private attorneys. Many of them actually left the state, Houston you know moved out you know and also now we are revamping our um uh legal clinic and we have active uh like 30+ private attorneys and we have um more than like uh 14 pro bono organizations that we'll refer our clients. So it depends on the eligibility of the clients so for example if a client is not eligible to go with a private attorney, we would refer her to the pro bono organizations. If the client can go with a private attorney, uh we would connect them uh to know their rights and once they have an informed uh you know uh information, they can make an informed decision [PL: Mhm.] and they can you know go with a private attorney and then it becomes uh you know a contract between the private attorney and it worked out very well. Um many times we see our clients are you know sure with their divorce and they come to us at the last minute. At that point even if she is not uh you know eligible to go for the private attorneys, Daya usually pays the returner fees to start the process and then the private attorneys give her subsidized rate or payment, makes a payment plan so that they can pay uh with the you know from the settlement or to through the work uh you know they pay so that's how we're helping our clients

PL: Oh okay, um were there any like...how did you go about like finding these attorneys in Houston?

NA: Ooh I - I just you know anywhere I go uh you know any conferences, I meet people. Attorneys are you know— I Google. I look at the local newspapers and that's how I started building my - you know uh mostly through outreaches. I had built this uh you know the database.

PL: Okay, I know like they had the transitional homes but then they stopped it after a while, um is it because uh there weren't as many people using the homes I guess?

NA: So that's a great question. Um we um it was uh going very successfully as far as you know as far as the client uh stories go but then at one point we were seeing uh many of the clients who had children who were above the age of 10. Because our uh age limit to take the client uh client with the children were 10 and below, because we did not have full time counselor there. Uh it was like um um single story um house with the alarm system and uh like you know so we never used to take any clients who had imminent danger. We used to only take clients who had protective order and everything you know they need to be secured so if they were in imminent danger, we would recommend them to go to shelters. [PL: Mhm.] From the shelters once they're have all these settled, they're secured. Then they used to come to the transitional home and stay for 6 months and many of our clients stayed more than a year like for
example the one that I just quoted. The H4, she stayed over like 15 months um because the process was going on. It all depended case by case we used to do.

The j- uh the federal trend also changed in the meantime and um you know show that if you are having the survivors stay in a geographical limit with all these jurisdictions, because transitional homes you have to have um rules and regulations and policies uh so you know you're doubly traumatizing a survivor so then we thought that let’s go for a supportive housing um program rather than um a you know restricting clients in a geographical limit because many of our clients who were in the Sugar Land area or Missouri City or you know Clear Lake area would not want to come and stay in the geographical limit because maybe they had their children going to a school which they don't want to disrupt. Maybe they had job that they cannot you know commute so far. Maybe they did not have transportation to go to their job from you know uh southwest Houston to Clear Lake or Sugar Land because in Suga—many places don’t have the public transportation right as you know uh with Houston being so big and not hav—being you know public transport friendly. So all of that together, uh we thought of going uh closing the transitional home, selling it, using the proceeds towards supporting housing. So we have a program where we do short term, mid term, long term supportive housing for our clients and after we closed our um transitional home, we also got a rapid re housing grant where as a culturally specific organization, we get this grant to house our clients for a year. So we have these two housing uh you know options that we can offer uh apart from the transitional home that we closed so we are doing good in that. [PL: Okay great.] We haven't absolutely closed our transitional you know housing. [PL: Okay.] We do have a better uh you know housing program where we can uh actually house more clients now you know [PL: Mhm.] without any restrictions of age limits, geographical limits, etc etc.

PL: Okay, um and then when did you start your work as senior manager or senior dir—?

NA: So I started uh um you know as a senior director for legal services because that was you know when Daya had st-strategic plannings, over and over again, it showed that legal need is number one you know apart from the mental health counseling and uh and I was managing that very well so you know so that's how I became the the main person to do the legal service, handle the legal services through the legal clinic um and I was also doing a little bit of outreaches on trainings so I'm also like education. I'm doing—I love—Because I have an academic background. I love to talk. I love to go and you know do trainings. So I'm in—I also do that. I go and do lot of cultural competency trainings, sexual assault trainings to the first responders, to the to the community partners, um you know to the hospitals, um to all the you know universities. I've been to Rice, I've been to U of H, um different colleges um and I do a lot of trainings on these subjects. Um so on sexual assault, Title IX etc. You know how you all can use um in your um uh you know when you are a student to know about all these rights.

PL: Okay, and so that's considered community outreach?

NA: That's commun—that's considered as commun— I don't do the community outreach but I do the trainings part. I do the education part. [PL: Okay, okay.] Right, right. A-An-And that doing that, you know I realized that uh because we are culturally competent organization, um it is very important to let others know how to be uh culturally competent when you're serving clients from different uh you know communities. Uh for South Asian client, you have to be a little creative because if you tell a client uh go
to the counselor or go to the psychiatrist, th-they are going to you know shun. Th-they are not going to you know follow up because going to the counselor going to a mental professional is a stigma in South Asian communities, right? So you have to be creative and say that you need to go to someone who would listen to you instead of using the term psychiatrist or using the term counselor, right? So how you can be creative so how you can um ha-have the client come to you and not sh-shut down on you because you are giving a solu—you are giving an option which will not be solution for her but rather will isolate her from the community like understand her in the emotional level she is like how we do our work because we understand the culture - all of our counselors, the case managers, everyone of us are culturally competent to deal with the South Asian client or a Muslim client or you know any client who come through our doors. To know and to meet them at the emotional level that they are at. So when we are giving options we know that we are not shutting them down. You know we know that at that point they will take that. They will understand that because we understand them, right? So, so if you—if for example if you tell a client who calls on the first instance and say that she comes from a Muslim community and advocate immediately makes an assumption oh she will be abused because that's the culture, you're already shutting the door for that client not to make the next call to you, right? So that is what is called cultural competency. That you need to be culturally competent not to be making assumption not to be judgmental and listen and give solutions give options what they need so you need to understand that your client knows best and you know give options accordingly. So that's how you are being a culturally competent organization and that's the training that I give to all the you know first responders, law enforcement and everybody. [PL: Oh.] Yeah...

PL: Um and do most employees at Daya are like Sout—of South Asian descent?

NA: Not everybody. [PL: Not ev—] Uh we try to make our uh you know organization diverse so we have um staff from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, and we have uh African American uh office manager so we we are inclusive. We have everybody you know from different. We see a lot of our non South Asian clients are going up because they browse the uh you know internet and see domestic violence organization. In Houston, Daya's name come up first. Uh they are referred by the uh DA's office, by the law enforcement, by the hospitals, you know a lot of uh clients from Iraq, Iran, you know Middle East um and Arab speaking clients are referred by the mainstream agencies to us thinking that we have the similar kind of culture. So we don't turn them away. If we speak— if they speak English, we definitely give them our services. If they don't speak English, we refer them out to appropriate agencies. Um uh you know so but our main mission is to you know help and assist the survivors from South Asian communities.

PL: Mhm okay and uh what are some examples of I guess like uh domestic violence organizations that cater towards the Middle East?

NA: What are the organizations?

PL: Yeah, what are some?

NA: So um there are few. If you go to our website at www.dayahouston.org there is a resource list there and you can see all the organizations uh that work and there's AVDA, Aid to Victims against Domestic
Abuse. Uh there's BPSOS, Board People SOS. There are allies. Many of the organizations who work with
the greater uh Asian population the API population and you know also the Arab population, the Middle
Eastern, and yeah. [PL: Okay.] But there is those specific like Arab center. There is an Arab center there
but they don't have a holistic services.

PL: Okay, um and through your experience working uh especially working in the transitional homes and
then the supporting homes, uh what are some like I guess, it could be a general example, like success
stories and also uh stories where you wish Daya could have done more or where Daya reacted, um to
improve?

NA: So I’ll tell you about one story that has really touched my heart. I mean all our— As I said making a
change transforming lives is my passion from childhood. And when I see I you know while I was here
from 2008 to um April, I have seen more than 3000 cases right, and that's the statistics but some of the
cases are like imprints you know so touching. So there is this um client uh who was married um by
same— you know by misrepresentation. The...when she came here, she found that the husband was a
bipolar. He was hospitalized. He was, he was in the mental health uh institution. She did not know
anything of that. They were mis-you know-guided. I think I used the word arranged marriage in the
beginning of my you know interview, that I had an arranged marriage. So that's very common in the
South Asian cultures. So she— there was an arranged marriage and the parties who arranged that also did
not know about this um mental health illness. So when she came here, um she found that. And um she
was continuously harassed, physically, sexually by the abuser and the mother in law said, you know, “We
have brought you to the dreamland. You should be happy you are in America. What else do you want and
yes I need someone for my son to make him sexually happy. If he wants that, whatever way he wants that,
you have to do that.” So he would continuously watch porn because he was not working. Everything that
they said was lies. So he was not working he would watch pornography. He would sexually assault her.
Um he would take Viagra and then he would do stuff you know without her consent.

Um and she did not know where to go and in South Asian cultures you know y-you grow up with the,
with the notion that your body belongs to your husband so he can do whatever so it's very difficult for our
clients to to to relate the abuse that they are going with the definition of domestic violence or sexual
assault. So at one instance, there was a lot of physical abuse. I think the neighbors called the police. That's
when she came to know about Daya. She came to Daya and she uh said that she was sure with the divorce
by the time she came to Daya and she showed the paper. I looked at that and I said oh my God this is not
a divorce paper fi- petition. This is an annulment and I just looked at her and I thought oh my God now
they are being so vindictive because police were called that they want to annul the marriage which should
not be the case. It was a marriage, arranged marriage. There was social function. It was a totally bonafide
marriage and now they’re wanting to turn the marriage. They want to nullify the marriage just because of
the fact that she is dependent on him and if they nullify the marriage, she's going to be deported and she
will not be able to stay here.

So I took that very personally and I said, “We have to do justice to this client.” Because of no fault of her,
she landed in a land of dreams where the dreams are shattered and became a nightmare. We need to do
something and we need to help her. So we connected her to Lone Star Legal Aid who took her case. They
did a fabulous job of helping her pro bono but it was a very complicated case so I got Tahirih Justice
Center help her with the immigration and then they also felt the heaviness of the case because it was a you know case to annulment. There was immigration involved, time sensitive, all of that. They got Baker Botts involved. So in this one case we had Daya help her with the mental health, case management. I was coordinating with Lone Star Legal Aid, Baker Botts, Tahirih Justice Center to help her with the family case and the immigration. Every time there would be a date, the opposite party would just you know either no show or you know just extend it. So it would just be extended and she was a suicidal client so then I would be calling her in the evenings. We have the support group where you know where she knew others who were in the support group. I would tell the support group, other clients living near her, “Why don't you go and stay overnight with her making sure she is fine? The counselor will sit with her and do the counseling,” so we were on top of her all the time to make sure that she's safe and she's you know fine and she's, she's not doing any harm to her and it took her- it took- it was- the case was in- on the docket for more than two years and finally you know the judge uh you know averted divorce and not annulment and that was a victory for, for ourselves you know of course the client.

Her life could not be given back the years that she was in the abuse could not be given back but at least you know it was not an annulment. It was a divorce and now we were okay that okay, we can help her with the immigration part. Guess what? She goes to the immigration court, following her uh you know interview with Baker Botts uh attorney, finds out they applied saying that the marriage was a fraud so she has come here just to get the US citizenship. That's how vindictive our abusers can be for Daya clients and so the Baker Botts attorney said look if it was a fraud, the family could not not have given a verdict, they would have annulled the marriage. This is not the case of fraud. So they said, “Because the opposite party, the party who has applied for her immigration because she came as a derivative, she came as a dependent on him, we have to investigate.” So again, there was a backlash for her, so it went back like six months. And then she got finally she got her immigration. She's a citizen now she's living in California, living her dreams. She's married and she has a baby boy now but she keeps in touch with us and that's the beauty of Daya's work where we have seen our clients who even if they are done with our case management, their case is closed, they still keep in touch with us. They let us know how they are doing in their lives and they you know call us on occasions, wish us or they want us to wish them luck. So that's, that's the beauty of Daya.

52:38

**PL:** And that’s what you really found your passion in?

**NA:** And that’s, that’s why I you know love my work. I um you know I am - I’m still in touch with all these clients way back in 2008 ‘til now. They call me, they let me know how they are.

**PL:** Yeah, uh yeah I guess you brought up a really good point with how especially with immigrant - South Asian immigrants to the United States, how uh there’s like in-law abuse and how definitely um they can abuse the victim with like saying how grateful they should be to be in the US. Um do you find
that like I guess a major like - I guess how would Daya combat that like cultural problems like that with in-law abuse and also like um being – like growing up in a society where your body is your husband’s?

NA: So we constantly educate our clients - not only our clients we also keep on doing a lot of outreaches. We go and do preventive works, we have seminars, we have film viewing, we have you know um talks where we talk about all these uh stigmas all these needs, all these you know um how you can uh you know break these cycles of abuse um and when the clients come and say that to us, all our counselors, the case managers, we ourselves, we’re all culturally competent to walk her through the stage right?. To make her understand that no culture, will or no religion - because religion you know sometimes you know they could take stuff out of the context, and to justify abuse. So we talk about religion, we talk about you know uh you know the - uh you know self confidence, the self esteem because that’s where the abusers really want to work, right?

To say that you know, by religion, y-you have to obey me. But no religion gives uh you know asks for abuse. No religion uh justifies abuse. And so we con-constantly educate our clients because see when you grow up in a culture, where you don’t talk about certain things, and you internalize it, if and that’s the reason they’re not being able to equate the abuse with definitions, so our role is to educate them. So in Daya, we developed um a tool where when we do the intake, we sit with the client, and go through the abuse - it’s not only you know in broader perspective, spectrum you see, physical, sexual, you know emotional uh abuse. There are so many layers between these. Uh non sexual sex is also sexual abuse, right. Physical abuse is not only beating but throwing objects at you, banging the door. Those are physical abuse; they don’t understand those, right? So people generally across the spectrum of race, religion, ethnicity, and culture, they equate domestic violence with physical abuse. However, domestic violence can be more penetrating when it is emotional abuse, psychological abuse, you know. This immigration abuse, is a kind of you know emotional abuse, right? You know, sometimes clients will call in and say, I don’t have any domestic violence but I just need some to know my rights, and that’s a red flag for us. Why are you calling a DV organization right? So when we talk, we are um trained to ask certain questions, to know that they are at - what is actually happening. And then we find out that she doesn’t have any access to her account, they don’t even have a joint account. They uh - she doesn’t have uh, even if she has a work authorization, she’s not allowed to work. She’s isolated, she’s not allowed to talk to her parents. Uh she’s not allowed to use contracep- all this things are abuse right?. She’s not being able to pinpoint those. So we are culturally competent to have that conversation, to make her understand that yes there is abuse. So we have this extensive, five-page, you know abuses list. When clients come, and they see, and they check mark so many of them that they never thought would come within the definition of abuse.

PL: And that um that intake form was developed throughout the years?

NA: Throughout the years, throughout the years, we developed it. And it’s, it’s a you know work in progress. Every time we learn, and uh for myself, I’m constantly learning. I’m learning everyday. We keep on you know adding to our policies, we keep on adding. Right now, I’m working on a policy on legal you know how to ask a client whether she has a legal needs. Because maybe for a client
point, housing is the most important need that she has. She needs to have a roof over her head. So that is the only focus she has. But she may have immigration needs, she may have other legal needs that she’s not talking. So the advocates need to ask the correct questions so that at the end of the day, we don’t lapse in giving our services, because she may fall within that crack and not apply for immigration while she had that chance right. So we have to be very cognizant about what we are asking, what type of questions we are asking you know? To know that we are giving a holistic service. Even if she’s not asking for that legal service, she may have the need that she’s not understanding at that point. So we are constantly you know, developing our policies, working on that, and you know trying to uh see whether we can you know give effective um you know service to our clients.

PL: And so how do you divide up your time and energy in Daya like with legal affairs and everything?

NA: So one has to remember that you know what are- is - your expectations from the work, and what you can give and what is the expectation of the organization from you, right. When I joined Daya, it was only three, three of us, right, as I said in the beginning. And now we are seven. Um and we are also looking for, we are advertising for two more, but you know, in small organizations, you wear a lot of hats. It’s just you have to be very strategic, and I think I feel that of course I can do a lot more in the policy level if that was the only thing I was doing. But I’m doing legal services, which is almost direct services, where we’re connecting the client to the legal services, assessing their needs, uh you know talking about their legal rights, giving them that information so they can make an informed choice, um and 90% of our clients, need legal services. So all the advocates (?) and the counselors, you know combined, their cases come to me because it’s like 90% have legal services needs. So you have to be very structured. So I - I think, that’s one thing that you need to be is very structured, very strategic, what you are doing um and then as I said, I you know I uh partner - I started doing a lot of advocacy in the local area. So we are a part of uh HILSC - Houston uh Immigration Legal Services Coalition. We are a partner of ECI - Emerging - uh Empowering uh the Communities Initiative which is a API, is a broader spectrum of not only South Asian, but also Asian Pacific Islanders. Uh we are uh partners. I am you know uh actively engaged in Forced Marriage initiatives, which is you know through Tahirih Justice Center. So I do and I – nationally you know, is that the Forced Marriages, and then with the south, the South Asian Americans Leading Together, and the NCSO, which is uh National Coalition of South Asian Organizations. I do policy level work on immigration, with Tahirih I’m doing policy level work on forced marriages. But I’m doing as a group, I’m I you know I’m uh member of the tas- of the national advisory board of Forced Marriages Initiatives, a member of NCSO, you know as I said, we go there uh and do our petitions.

You know, so there are like pockets that I do like with the HILSC, when uh we started doing advocacy you know in uh I think it was uh 2013 or so. Uh we realized that there is a lot of need of legal advocacy and resources to come together uh to address the legal needs of the south Asian - the Houston community uh everyone, inclusive you know not South Asian. Everyone. Because Houston is a is growing rapidly so there’s a lot of need for DACA - the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Many of the nonprofits were closing their doors to small profits like us. So when we were sending our - referring our clients to - you remember the, the pro bono organizations list that I had? So when I was sending my clients to Tahirih Justice Center, to YMCA, to Catholic charities, they were not taking the cases because they were very involved with the DACA. Because DACA need was enormous at that point of time. So what happens to our clients? Where do they go right? So we try to address that in the coalition. And we came up with a
solution um of having the BIA you know the representatives you know Board of Appeals representatives, uh you know uh accredited representatives who can do immigration. Uh after they’re certified. So Daya was also one of the organizations uh you know we were very happy that you know we wanted this to happen and it happened through our advocacy. You know thr-three years of advocacy ended up in having that BIA accreditation and at Daya we took that you know two of us took that BIA um certification exam you know course. And, and the exam is kind of like a mini bar so we took that and I am one of the uh accredited representative also have the capacity of doing the immigration cases. So that is one of the results of that advocacy right. So that advocacy - this is one of the results that we had. And that advocacy actually won a national recognition through SAALT last year when we got a national award for doing this advocacy in getting this BIA program incorporated in Daya.

PL: Oh okay.

NA: So the advo- my passion you know the doing advocacy got this BIA which is now called DOJ uh Department of Justice and the H4 work authorization we got through our advocacy which is now being rescinded but we are still working on it - I am positive, I am always a positive person so we are doing a lot of advocacy around all the immigrant, you know the roadblocks that the present administration is having. But we are working and with all these organizations, locally, nationally to you know to address those. So that’s how I’m you know trying to manage being a little structured, strategic, and being a part of this organization so that independently you can do a lot, but because I have other roles, so and I love doing advocacy so I’m doing my part through these - like we are doing civic engagement with the ECI which is uh the Empowering Communities Initiative, which is a broader spectrum of the API community. And we are doing a lot of civic engagement, water rights, uh because you have to voice what you want and vote is the only way of voicing that. So we need to encourage our API community, the south Asian community to come out and vote. So that we have a voice in the policy. So you know we are a part of all this, you know advocacy.

PL: Mai, did you have any questions?

MT: Oh um I wanted to ask about how - I know that Daya deals with both male and female uh victims. But I was wondering like how the types of abuse differentiates between like the two like different genders.

NA: That’s a great question, and I’m glad that you asked about that. So we are gender neutral right? uh, uh we say that on our presentations, we always encourage you know uh and say that we uh you know gender neutral and we help uh both the genders and we have seen the same kind of abuse that the our female clients go, the male clients also go through that. For example, if the male clients uh come under uh the immigration you know as a derivative of a citizen or a green card holder, um the same kind of abuse that the female clients we see that immigration is taken as a tool to oppress, we see in the male clients. And we have had helped male clients get their green card through VAWA - Violence Against Women Act. Because if you are married to a citizen or a green card holder and the person is abused, she or he can apply under the Violence Against Women Act. It doesn’t discriminate against the gender and we have helped male clients get green card through the VAWA. So we see this similar kind of abuse - that power control, that isolation, that financial abuse, that emotional abuse that we see in our female clients.
MT: Um also uh do you guys do like uh outreach programs where you do like seminars to educate the greater community? Do you get a lot of people who come to you afterwards - after going to those seminars and realizing that they face a lot of the abuse that you talk about or-?

NA: So there are um you know few answers to that. Not - we don’t see we normally don’t see clients who come out and say that, “I’m being abused. Can you help me?” Because maybe she has gone with her family there right. So maybe she would just - that’s why we have poster sized big so that they can take a picture or they can just memorize the number, name or something and later on get in touch with us. It’s not you know - we have seen people who have come and taken our cards, but they would say, “My friend needs uh advice,” uh and you know maybe she’s the person but she would not say at that point. Because she wants to build that rapport with the advocate when she would call in later. We also get anonymous calls, we get calls where the client will not tell their names at the beginning. But later on they give it out - or they would say their first name, but not the last name, but later on they would once they grow that rapport between the you know himself or hers- the client they would give. So and then they would be community members who would you know come to us and say, oh you know, “I know such and such went through abuse and I would like to have your card,” so we can connect. So uh we – th-that’s the reason - we want always to be out there, to have the people, the community know that we exist and we provide that holistic service that is so meaningful for survivors to know and come forward.

So we constantly do outreaches, for example we have um meeting booths at different events: cultural events, um from different south Asian communities. So if Nepalis have something going on, then we would go there. If Bangladeshis have something, we would go there. If Indians have something, Pakistanis have something - so we would go to their you know events and uh have a booth there with all our materials and everything there. Uh we also you know all of our events are public events, uh and they’re free of charge mostly - filming, educational seminars, uh book uh reading. So we have different kind of you know events all through there and I think I did not mention this but we have um you know young professionals who are also helping us. Young professionals rising for a cause - YPAC, uh who consist of uh you know very young professionals who just came out of the school and working you know kind of. And they come up with very creative uh ways of raising funds for Daya. So that they are also advertising in their professional uh field in, in the communities so that people come to know - through cooking, through you know whatever they come very you know creative ways of you know attracting people to come. So that you know uh they know about Daya. We have had lot of uh outreaches at Rice University also. We have participated in the events, uh the students organized uh events, uh we are also the outreach director is also in communication with all the student bodies at Rice at U of H and at other universities. So that whatever is happening culturally or any events that you know Daya can go and Daya can present. We’ve had Rice students uh do mini fundraiser through henna - you know putting henna. Uh also we constantly there in the community to let people know that we exist.

PL: Um and I kind of looked over you guys’ uh 2017 annual report. Um I saw that you guys like have more clients - would you contribute that to like - I mean I know that this is a hard question, but um contribute that to people being more open to seeking help or also your outreach - the success of your outreach programs?
NA: That’s a very uh that’s a great question, but uh very um uh you know it’s a relative term whether uh awareness or whether [inaudible] is reducing, it’s difficult to say, right. I mean we feel that we need to be out there more to make people aware that we exist. Now people are coming to us - now if you’ve seen the ratio of uh you know of the clients from 2005 when we first started out as a uh staff based organization, the clu- calls started going up because then you have someone to talk to. Before we were, we started in ‘95, ‘96, we started as a uh 501(c). But we were volunteers until 2000. So it started going up. So now it’s very difficult to relate the two to see whether it is more - that’s why it’s coming up, or because we are visible you know. But as I said, domestic violence cuts across the boundary of race, sex, religion, ethnicity and you know culture, so there is domestic violence, there was domestic violence, we hope there will not be domestic violence in the future. We have you know - our vision is not to have domestic violence, stop domestic violence in the south Asian community, I hope it stops, but we want to be visible so that we can help more clients with our service.

PL: Do you see that most of these are immigrant uh south Asian immigrants, or could there be like several generations of having lived in the United States?

NA: There are both. Majority of our clients are first generation immigrants. Um who have come here with abuser. But there are clients who are also second generation, who have who were born here or have grown up here. We do see them. Uh and it’s growing.

PL: Um how do you see like uh de-stigmatizing domestic violence, like talking about it in the community? How do you see Daya going about that, um-?

NA: We do have our challenges, but I think uh we want to take that challenge because there is more satisfaction of doing work when you have challenge, right? So we go into the faith communities, we talk about domestic violence. Um we are working with the uh Islamic Society of Greater Houston, ISGH, uh working on a curriculum on domestic violence so that all the imams have that. Uh and they can you know train their imams, their other imams and everyone so that they can give a unified message of what domestic violence is and how Islam looks at domestic violence. Whether the Quran approves it or not, of course it does not. But there are a lot of misinterpretation of religious texts, right. And people take on a quote uh you know the worst out of the context and justifies it. But we are working to have that unified voice that all the imams will have. So it is challenging, it is very challenging to have that. We are trying to go into the mosques, uh the gurdwaras, we go and make uh presentations there. We go to the churches, we go to the uh temples. The temples are very restrictive, but we try to you know overcome and try to be representative there uh we haven’t made any presentations yet. We did do one presentation in uh in a temple in uh Woodlands, which was well received which was a very good success. Because all these years we were having all these challenges so it is good to have that challenge, then you want to work more towards that right. So yes, yes we do face challenges.

PL: So um with the temples, are they not very welcoming because they think that they can serve their uh their members well through religion or like or are they just not receptive to the idea of seeking I guess like mental counseling or something? Or why do you think that-
NA: Because there’s the stigma right? And because all the communities, uh especially the minority communities, they want to show that they are the perfect, the model minority myth that exists. That we are perfect, there is nothing - no domestic violence within our community. So that is one of the things that uh you know shuts them and you know organizations like us to go in and make the presentations. But as I said we go into these temples - we, we are very receptive in masjids for example. You know. We never had trouble to go into masjids. We always - I even took my Rice students to masjid you know just for a field trip to show uh how they - their social work you know uh programs there. And they actually met with the imams, and they had questions, they had questions like uh LGBTQ, they had questions - so many questions they had. And they were answered by the imams. So I, I think you know mosques are more welcoming, which is good, but then we have to see the end result whether they are delivering that message. So that’s why we are now working on a curriculum with you know the imams, the main imams so that you know, so that - you have to be creative to go into different uh you know sectors uh and then try to do a little bit - one step at a time. And…So we don’t give up that’s the good part [PL: Ok great um.] you know.

PL: So what do you see uh the like uh Daya in the future, in five years, like ten years, where do you see Daya or hope to see Daya?

NA: I would like to see Daya in an international level. Um we are you know we have the capacity uh we have amazing team uh who are all very passionate about the cause. They have - they are working here not to, not only for the career, but to, but to address the cause. Um so I, I am sure that and I feel confident that you know, now that Daya is well recognized locally, nationally, also as I said, we are partners, partnering with so many national organizations, I am sure we can also be international also because we get a lot of international calls. We get calls from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, other places. Uh and we want to you know go you know structurally internationally you know. So at this point, I am working with the Indian consul general uh to work with the Indian um uh Women’s Ministry, an overseas ministry, uh and the law ministry to channel all the international cases through the consulate uh to us and to the U of H. Because U of H, the University of Houston has a legal clinic so we are trying to structure something where the you know there are a lot of transnational abandonments happening. Where we see our clients are taken to their home country, left there, or maybe they were married there and never brought here. So there are a lot of transnational abandonments that’s happening and we need to address this. And I’m working in that, and I feel that you know maybe we can do that. And if that works maybe we can replicate it in other countries also to see whether we can go international. And you know that’s my dream.

PL: Okay great, is there anything you’d like to add and um we probably haven’t like asked the right questions or anything, but is there anything you’d like to add that you haven’t said before in the interview?

NA: Um I think I uh you know you asked all the right questions. Thank you for all your research to ask all the right questions, thank you for all you do for the research. Uh I hope uh you know my interview and my uh you know the work will help the researchers uh to do, you know work in the community that they are researching. I think you know, thank you for having me today.
MT: Um I actually have one more question, uh I know that under like the like Trump administration, there’s been like stricter views on immigration and stuff like that, and I was wondering like how the new administration has like impacted your client base or your advocacy work and stuff like that under Daya?

NA: Um so without going into very political, um I just want to answer the perspective of how Daya’s plans have been impacted. Yes, uh when the present uh administration came about, um we were worried that our clients would not come forward, especially when uh the ASB was enforced in Texas, like in September 1st 2017, we were afraid that uh many of the clients would be afraid to come. It impacted the Latino community a lot because we have seen the statistics. Uh we haven’t seen a decline in our clientele, but we are always you know making sure our clients are well informed. We do the safety planning, the immigration safety planning. We do the know your rights, we work with the HILSC, the legal immigration coalition that we work with. Um and work on the know your rights, we make sure we talk about everything so that they have an informed, you know, make an informed decision through all the information that we give them. A lot of things are happening on the ground like I said, the H4 is being rescinded. Uh a lot of other things are happening on the um immigration field.

Uh but we are trying to have our clients informed, so that they can make an informed choice, make an informed decision. And because - most of our clients come here legally, they are either married to uh person who holds a legal document, they come here uh and then because of the abuse, they lose that status right? And then we help them through VAWA, through uh you know through new visa, through asylum, and all to have the status now. Uh asylum is also in question, they are trying to take that DV part out of the asylum. That is going to impact a lot of our clients who come from countries where there is political you know situations, uh and we’re not able to help them uh under the asylum because new visa takes a lot longer years, right, and then you have to cooperate with the uh police, if the abuse happened in the country that she was, you know he was in. Then we cannot help her if we cannot help her through the asylum, how we cannot help her through the new visa, because you have to cooperate with the police right. So that component will be absent here and we cannot help her because the you know everything happened, happened in that country, and that’s how she you know fled from there and come here. Um so we are again doing advocacy so that it doesn’t happen. We are keeping our fingers crossed that it doesn’t happen um and as I said I am very positive. So we will keep on doing our work to see that our clients are not impacted.

PL: Okay, great. Thank you so much for letting us to interview you today.

NA: Thank you so much.

[interview ends]