Background:
Meghna Goswami was born in Shalang, India and moved to Houston in 2003 with her husband. Due to her immigration status, she was not able to work, and instead volunteered her time working with Houston Area Women’s Shelter and various non profit organizations. Having previous academic experience and expertise in New Delhi studying social work, she got her license to practice social work in Texas and was hired to be Daya’s first full time staff member. During her time at Daya, she helped build Daya’s intake form and build their referral list, reaching out and forming connections with various organizations in Houston.

Setting:
The interview was conducted on May 25, 2018 at the Houston Endowment Office. The goal of the interview was to understand Mrs. Goswami’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:
MG: Meghna Goswami
TH: Tian-Tian He
PL: Priscilla Li
—: 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 we’re here on May 25th uh 2018, interviewing Meghna Goswami at the Houston Endowment Office um my name is Priscilla Li.

TH: My name is Tian-Tian He.

PL: Um, and this interview is done - being done by the Houston Asian American Archive. Okay um so Ms. Goswami uh can you tell us more about like how your childhood was like and where you grew up?

MG: Sure, sure, um I was born in India uh I was born in a small town called uh Shalang uh which is in the northeast part of India, so it’s in the hills and it’s right below the Himalayan Mountains. Um my mother taught at a college when I was growing up uh at the local university. And my father who’s an engineer kind of traveled quite a bit. Um, so - and we had three sisters, so I’m the second child. So it was a pretty strong um I’d say women-led household [laughs] with my mother being the center of the household and then the three of us. Um so - and uh Shalang where I grew up - Meghalaya where I grew up where I was there until I was 16, is uh unique in the sense that it’s one of the only - one of the very few matrilineal cities in uh our, our states, in uh in India. Uh and as a community in the – people from Meghalaya are called Khasi and uh in, in, in their community the lineage goes from women to women. So I grew up in a community where women, as it is, had very strong roles to play. Um and uh yeah so I was
there til I was 16, and then um my mother got a job at a university in another state called Assam. And that’s where my grandparents lived uh as well as our extended family lived. So we moved to Assam when I was uh when I had just graduated from my 10th grade. Um so I was in Assam for two years and I’d say, culturally, it was very, very different just because like the rest of India, Assam is also very strongly patriarchal. I’d say it’s - probably better than - at least uh the role of women are better in Assam than they are probably in the northern part of India, so you’d see a lot more women who are independent. But I’d say it was a big change for me coming from uh Shalang. So I was there for two years. Uh and then I moved to New Delhi, where I did my Bachelor’s degree in economics, um and then to Bombay where I did my master’s degree in social work.

PL: That’s very interesting, um the culture where you grew up.

MG: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

TH: So um before you were 16, when you were living in the matrilineal society [MG: Yeah.], were you aware it was different from like the rest of India?

MG: I’d say I was uh just because we’d go to visit our cousins in uh Assam, which is where my family originally comes from and I’d see how um girls uh I, I’d see how the roles that girls played were different than what I was used to seeing when I was growing up. Uh my father’s side of the family is also very traditional, and I would see in my - especially in my paternal uh cousin’s places, I’d see how um, um men, traditionally played a very dominant role, and for various small things. Uh you know, boys had a lot more freedom growing up than girls had, which was very different from the way I grew up. So I definitely noticed that. Uh say, when I’d go - we had longer because we - I grew up in a colder place. We’d have three months of winter vacation which we’d spend at my grandparent’s, and cousin’s, and other places, and I definitely noticed that difference.

PL: Okay, um so how did you become interested in economics, and then eventually social work?

MG: Yeah. I uh so when I - in my 11th and 12th grade, I studied economics, and I was always interested in uh developmental economics, just figuring out what are the systems that kept um certain communities or families um under resourced, as compared to others. Uh so I think that was my primary motivation beside you know behind me doing my graduate degree in economics and as I was um studying throughout my graduation I noticed that - I, I just felt that I needed to be a lot more hands on and practical in, in crafting uh solutions for communities. And uh I learned from a common friend about uh Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Bombay where I ended up doing my Master’s in social work. That’s the oldest social work school in India and uh it has a really strong social justice orientation to the work that happens. Uh so a lot of the movements around women’s rights, around labor rights, actually emerged - many of those leaders came out from that institute. So I was very, very inspired to try and get admission there. Um I wasn’t sure - the seats were limited and it’s a very competitive process, so I wasn’t sure how that’d go, so I was happy to get in. Yeah.

PL: So I guess like, what did you - what were like some of the like really big things that you learned when you were…?

MG: Yeah, um I think I learned a lot about theories behind uh, uh whether it was issues around patriarchy or around uh um uh you know uh social mobility and what makes it difficult for families to move up ladders. Um I think I learned a lot about that. I also our - uh the focus of my studies was urban and rural community development. and part of the work – uh part of my studies concentrated on um uh just community organizing and community mobilizing which was really, really helpful. Um I - it was - now
when I think about some of the work that I'm doing at Houston Endowment, which involves bringing different stakeholders across sectors around an issue to collectively think how can we change the things that are going on and how can we put in place new systems to address issues, I think a lot of the skills I learned was from when I studied social work. Around how can we be mindful - how can we be mindful around who are those important stakeholders that need to be a part of a conversation when you're talking about systems change. So uh I think that was really helpful. Uh I also think uh I made some great friends there, I mean beyond um what I learned as a student, I also met some really passionate people who uh who studied social work because they wanted to be a part of broader movements to bring about changes for communities. And I think it was always very, very inspiring to be a part of those uh forums yeah.

PL: So you saw like many - there are many um I guess patterns that overlap, whether you're in India or here in Houston, like in the United States?

MG: Yeah. Oh and many what, sorry?

PL: Oh like patterns. Like-

MG: Yes. Yes. I'd say uh a lot of the issues whether it's here in the United States or India, are same. Um I also think that in the US we also - we have certain systems in place so whether it's policies, or laws, or practices that are in place, um in India, um I know many of the policies are still nascent, so people are still trying to build up policies around various issues. Um and then even when you have uh laws in place sometimes they're not implemented as well. So I think that’s, that was something that I saw. So just to give you an example, um when I was in India, some of the work - so I used to work for - so right after when I graduated from uh um uh from university when I did my master's in social work, I - I had a fellowship for a year where I worked around low cost housing and community organizing. And then for the next two years, I was with this organization called Northeast Network uh which worked on gender equity and women's rights. And uh India at that point didn't have a unified law protecting victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. So you had different, smaller laws so there was something for women who were harassed due to [inaudible] for dowry, there was something else for women who uh who were beaten, but there wasn't anything that was unified. So uh the organization that I worked for uh was part of a larger collaboration of organizations in India that were fighting for uh uniform law for women. Uh and that was something that came through a few years later. Uh so I think it was really, really exciting to be a part of just movements when you're trying to build policies and procedures and laws to protect uh just vulnerable communities across the country. Yeah.

PL: So you worked in like a - like an organization that was kind of similar to Daya?

MG: That's right, yeah.!

PL: In India?

MG: Yeah and I'd say uh it was similar in some way, but was a little different so the organization – um so unlike the US where you have uh really formal services for victims of domestic violence. So you have set shelters, and you have a hotline that women can call into if you have any issues. In India, many of these networks are still informal. Uh the organization that I worked for did a little bit of that. There was a violence against women unit, where women could call in when they were victims of abuse and they could get help. There aren't as many shelters. So much of the work we did was trying to find out if she could be protected and safe in her house and if we could kind of intervene and uh see what kind of intervention could be done with the abuser at that point. Um I'd say what was different - in India was, we were doing a lot of research and policy work, uh at least the organization that I was engaged in.
So um Northeast Network um was one of the organizations that uh, uh was responsible for providing input to um uh it's called a shadow report for the UN. So uh India is a signatory to what is called - uh it's the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women - it's CEDAW. And almost all the nations in the world - I think US and a couple of others are the only ones who are not signatories. And what CEDAW basically does - is it's a UN convention which holds countries responsible for protecting women and children. And uh it basically states uh so what the government is supposed to do every few years is to report back to the UN and say over the past few years, these are - what are the things we've done to protect women, and different country delegations can ask you questions. Often what the government does, is they provide this really rosy picture, they say saying, "everything is good that you know, we've done all of this." And NGOs, non-profit organizations they are responsible for presenting what is called a shadow report, which basically provides the counter view. They say, "yes you've done this, but these are the gaps we see in the community and these are the recommendations the government needs to follow on." So um the organization I worked on was uh one of the organizations that was responsible for uh coming up with recommendations for the shadow report.

Uh the other thing is uh Assam, where I lived - around where our family moved to, is also a state where especially when I was growing up, there was an armed conflict going on. So you had um groups of indigenous folks that were kind of fighting for independence against - uh from India. And um often uh when there were clashes between uh the Indian army and uh individual groups uh the army would call them militant groups. Uh there were common people who were caught up in the crossfire of all that. And one of the research projects that I was involved in along with my colleagues at the, at the organization, was to look at how women were impacted by violence um in Assam. And that was really interesting work because some of our findings that we found out was uh that one is uh often the military - the Indian army was using women as uh as a means to get militants out. So for example, if somebody's brother was part of the insurgent group, the Indian army would come in and kind of get hold of the wife, or the sister, and then you know to kind of flush them out. And then on the other hand, between insurgent groups, often rape was used as a way to subjugate women. So for example, there were a lot of ethnic clashes between different communities and we would see one community kind of um raping women from the other community because it was seen as a dishonor to the whole community if a woman from that community was raped. So that was part of the work that I was doing.

So I think the work was different in the sense that um a lot of the work I did then, was I’d would say it - was a little bit at a higher level, it was research and policies that could inform how uh laws as well as um you know implementation of laws could change. At Daya what I was doing I’d say was more micro level work, which I think was as impactful, but much of the work that we did was um I’d say traditional work done by domestic violence agencies. Which is having a hotline um and insuring that women who call in receive counseling and case management and legal services, and all of the social support work that needed to happen to help them be safe. And I thought that what Daya did really really, very well was um have a good understanding of just cultural issues that women from south Asia face, as well as being linguistically competent. Some of the women that we worked with did not speak English and the fact that between the staff and volunteers that Daya had, we spoke so many languages it was easy to kind of support women and help um empower them so that they were able to uh be in a safer situation so uh yeah.

PL: Um so before we go more into like [MG: Yeah.] Daya, um I wanted to ask uh like how did you come to Houston [MG: Yeah.] - was Houston your first stop I guess?

MG: Yeah. So I uh so I was in India 'til 2013. So I had just graduated from my social work school and I was working for three years in India. And then I got married so in December 2013, I got married. My um husband is an architect that's based in Houston. Um and I had known him for a long time - we grew up
together. His father worked for the same engineering firm that my father did, so um so but he - I mean I knew him as I was growing up and then he's three years older, and I think that as we were growing up, that seems like a big age difference, and then he went off to Singapore to, uh to work and then he moved to the US and uh when I got married - when we got married in uh in uh 2003, December, that's when he was based in Houston which is when we moved to Houston.

PL: Oh so 2003.

MG: What did I say?

PL: You said 2013?

MG: Oh wrong, wrong, wrong. It is not 2003! [laughs].

PL: Okay.

MG: Yes, yes I was in - let me rephrase it. So I was in India 'til 2003, so after I graduated from my master's in social work in 2000, and then stayed there for three years and worked. And in 2003, December is when I moved to Houston. [laughs]


PL: Oh oh okay.

TH: It's fine, it's fine.


MG: You have to erase that [All: [laughs]]

PL: Okay so then because your husband came, for work, you also - you followed him.

MG: That's right. So he - my husband moved here from Singapore and he did his Master's in Architecture from A&M, and he got a fellowship to work in an architectural firm in Houston. Uh so that's when I moved. And when I moved here in my mind I thought it was a temporary move. I mean I thought uh I mean I was engaged in really exciting work in India, and I just thought that this would be maybe a two year term. I don't know why I thought that, but I thought that maybe just uh few years then I'm coming back and go back. Uh but it's been a long time since we moved [PL and MG: [laughs]]. So almost 15 years.

PL: Oh, so you came to Houston and then how did you specifically go to Daya? Like get involved with Daya?

MG: Yeah so I uh so I moved in December 2003, and I knew I wanted to do work somewhere. I mean I just I've always grown up having - my mother who was working and I couldn't imagine being economically dependent or otherwise dependent on my husband. Um so the only issue that I had was I was on a dependent visa. So my husband was on what is called an H1B visa, so it's. It's a work visa. Where you're allowed to work. I think but the spouses of H1B’s are given something what are called an
H4 visa. Which at that point, did not come with a work authorization so uh so I the only way I could get my - start working, was if he got his green card which was a long way off. Just because for people from India, there's a long waitlist to get your green card and um, or if I had gotten my H1B visa sponsored, which I understood that in the social work sector, it's not as easy to get. So I - I actually didn't understand this very well when I got married and came. I just thought I'll come here, and I'll start working. You know I know what I'm passionate about and I soon realized that it was really, really difficult to get a job where they would be willing to sponsor my H1B. So I started volunteering. I actually – I mean within two weeks of coming here, I had I'd started exploring a little bit, trying to figure out what are those organizations that are working um in, in the field of gender based violence and gender equity. So I reached out to Houston Area Women's Center, uh to Daya, I mean as I was doing an Internet search, Daya came out - to Daya and uh a couple of other organizations. Um Houston Area Women's Center was very structured, so they said if you want to volunteer, come in and do a 40-hour training. Uh which was really, really helpful for me. So that’s a 40-hour training that is administered. It's run by the Houston Area Women's Center, but the guidelines of what needs to be in the training, is provided by the DA's office. And it's um it was really helpful because I - I think a lot of my understanding of laws around domestic violence as well as the support systems that were available for victims was very uh, uh India-centric and it was really helpful for me to go through that training and um it was over a month. I think it was over a month, period, where we go in once a week for the training and it was really helpful to just get an understanding on what are the laws that impact victims of domestic violence, as well as the abuser. What are those systems - whether it's the shelter systems, or the law enforcement systems, or others that can impact women. Um as well as just other things related to that. So that was really helpful so I did that. And then they had an advanced uh um uh training option where I could do some additional training and be part of their hotline as well as do counseling for individuals. And again, under supervision. So I kind of did that. Um I also started uh volunteering at some of the other smaller nonprofits. So Daya would have a lot of - Daya didn't have a full-time staff member at that time, so when I reached out to Daya, uh Lakshmy Parameswaran, who's a board member and one of the founding members reached back. And uh she basically invited me to a couple of outreach events um at Daya, such as booths that they had at temples and other places that I was happy I was able to participate in.

Um and then there's this other organization called Family Services of Greater Houston uh who were, who were amazing to work with. So I went to them, met with their leadership, and I said, "how can I help?" I said, "I don't drive, but I can take the bus." And you know I can, I can volunteer so they had this really cool program in Field Elementary School, which is a school in the Heights where um where they had programming for uh mothers who were immigrants, mainly Hispanic speaking mothers, teaching them uh English classes and it was mainly experiential learning. So it's how do you have a conversation, how do you go to the bank, how do you get a bus to go around, so while their kids were attending classes. And many of these mothers had younger children so they were looking for volunteers to uh just um teach these little kids - whether it was reading to them or teach them um how to read and write and do some basic sums, math. So that's what I did, so I volunteered for them, for almost a year, which was really great. Um and then in the meanwhile, I also knew I wanted to get my license in social work because I knew that would be very helpful if I ever wanted to get my H1B sponsored. So I got my degree accredited to a master's degree in India and then I started studying for my social work licensing exam um and then uh in June 2000- uh I moved here in 2003, so June of 2005 is when I got my social work license. And at the same time, I reached out to Daya, and I basically - they at that point - they were trying - they were kind of thinking of having a full-time staff member at Daya to help with their work. Um and I said, you see, you know that I was available, and I had, um I had my license which would allow me to practice as a counselor uh as a case manager in Houston. And uh so they opened up a search and then I started working with them in June of 2015. Oh, 2005! Yeah [All: [laughs]] I keep saying 2015.

PL: Um, okay great. Um, so what was your position at Daya?
MG: So I was the client services coordinator at Daya.

PL: Coordinator? Okay. And during your whole time at Daya you had the, it was the same position?

MG: It became a client services manager at some point [laughs] yeah, yeah.

PL: Um and how long - from what years did you work for Daya?

MG: So I was there from 2005 to uh June 2005 to September 2010.

PL: Okay um, and so what was like your - I guess your job description kind of?

MG: Yeah so I did a little bit of everything because I was the first staff member - full time staff member there [PL: Oh okay.] So uh we were - officing out of a donated space, it was called Sara International. Um in Harbin, Hillcroft - in that area in Har- in southwest Houston. And they had an electronic showroom below and they had uh just nonprofit space upstairs that uh the company had donated. So there was a small room for Daya and then they had a slightly larger space for another organization called Pratham that works on education in India. So they fundraise in the US and send money to educated especially low income families in in India. So um although I was the only employee it was helpful to have - to know other folks around -uh to have others folks that I could talk with so that was really helpful. Uh so what was good - so when I, before I started Daya, Daya had a hotline where women would call in and basically leave messages and say what they were going through. And then we had uh Daya’s board members who were actually pretty hands on and active, who would kind of listen to the message and call back.

And before I joined, they also had a part time person who would come in a couple of hours every few days to kind of make sure that there were no more messages, and if there were messages just [inaudible], check the mail and stuff like that. Daya was not getting as many calls, and I think one of the big reasons for that is uh especially with the South Asian community because the community is relatively small. Uh I can imagine that there would be a fear in somebody just calling a blank number, not knowing who's going to be on the other side, who will you know will actually respond to the call. And just leaving a message, "I'm in a situation of abuse and this is my husband and this is what he's doing." So uh so when I joined Daya, um it was really helpful to have a live person on the other line, somebody who could kind of immediately respond when somebody is in a situation of abuse - I thought that was really helpful. I also greatly relied on just my volunteer experience that I had at Houston Area Women's Center, so I reached out to them and said, "What are your intake forms? Can I just borrow it for Daya?" Um so that was really helpful um and we kind of enhanced it a little bit because a lot of the women we dealt with just had uh just a lot of immigration-related issues. So whether it was just visa issues that they were concerned about or others. The other thing that was pretty common was just abuse by in-laws that they faced, although it was remotely so you may have - they may have had um their in-laws still in India, or Pakistan, or some other country, but uh uh you know often women would say, "Every time my husband would talk to my mother in law, father in law, on a Sunday morning, the moment he keeps down the phone, uh his attitude towards me changes." So I think uh you know there were just special things or, unique things that um immigrant women from South Asia were facing. Which, it was helpful for us to kind of have special information around that. So um, so yeah that’s what I did, I kind of built out our intake form. We- the other thing that we did, was um just try and build up a really good referral list.

So what we were able to provide at Daya was counseling, uh case management uh help with accessing law enforcement. So sometimes accompanying the woman to the police station or going to the court with her as she had a hearing. What we didn't have as much was uh eh you know some of the other things. So
for example, if someone needed access to a food pantry or somebody needed um employment training. Or just other things that might help stabilize her life. Those are things that we didn't have in house. So part of my work was going to various forums, meeting with other nonprofits, building connections, and then trying to build out that list of extended support where we could kind of do a warm handoff to individuals who were facing issues that they were. Um the other thing that I did a lot of in my initial days at Daya was uh just a lot of presentations and outreach in various community forums. So going to temples, and mosques, um talking with HPD - the police department. Um going to uh various other - so Houston Women Area's Center and others. And what we did was - when it came to addressing the South Asian community, what we did was we tried to convey that domestic violence is something that the whole community should be responsible for and that they are - uh I mean anything around domestic violence prevention is something that they need to have action around.

Much of our work in the community forums would be sharing stories - at least the kind of stories that we see women face. And talking about practically what we were saying, for example, when I was at Daya, it was really common for - so if a woman and her husband and the children went to a particular temple or mosque, and if the husband was abusive, often after she left him or after they separated, he would continue going to that temple and mosque, or have his own you know support systems and friends and family, and she would become really isolated. And one of our asks to religious uh uh officials as well as other community members was the importance of standing by the victim as well as the importance of holding the perpetrator accountable. I mean that it's not alright – that no religion says that domestic violence is alright. The other thing that we talked about was how that in - in a lot of people's mind, domestic violence only is physical abuse. They don't think about emotional abuse and mental abuse and others as uh as, as part of domestic violence. And our point was that it's a whole spectrum and uh it doesn't need to be that bad. It doesn't need to be as bad as somebody getting killed for it to be domestic violence. You need to be kind of uh, uh paying attention to what somebody's going through. And the other thing that would always strike me when we leave those forum was how many people that would come to us and say you know if only I had known about you guys, and then they'd say you know I have a sister, or I have a neighbor, or cousin, or somebody who has gone through this and I am so happy I have come to know about this.

So I think throughout my over five years that I was at Daya, I think that was my only thing that I wished we had - I wish we could find a way by which a lot more people were aware of Daya services, so that people you know could come and reach out for help. So I did a little bit of education and outreach and then uh grant writing, because it was important to kind of get financial support. Uh to carry out the work that we were doing uh so that's the other thing that I did. So I think it was a little - initially it was a little bit of everything. Just um, right - from client services to grant writing to administrative work, um uh and then we were lucky because a year later, we had enough resources to get a full time person to do the education and outreach work. Uh and her name was Maliha Imani and she was absolutely fantastic. She was so good at going out to the community and talking about Daya and talking to mainstream organizations about what would it - how they need - how people needed to respond when you came across a South Asian victim of domestic violence so her conversation with the police was don't ask her whether she was a victim of abuse, if her abuser is just standing next to her, and uh you know just, just things. And if she doesn't make eye contact, it's not like because she's telling a lie, but because it's seen as a sign of respect. I mean, just training such as that, she did a really good job. The other thing that she did which we're really proud of, was um she helped start um uh this event called One Voice Against Domestic Violence. And it was uh - it was an event in Hillcroft where you have a lot of the South Asian stores, and uh it, it kind of became like this carnival kind of thing. So initially it started off really small, where we had Daya volunteers and staff and board members, kind of hold hands and stand and kind of have a human you know chain and hold placards against domestic violence. And over the years, we were able to
involve a lot of the neighborhood stores. So it became this - , and there’ would be music, and there'd be food, and there'd be

you know different community members also come in with little kids and with youth, all standing together um for gender equity and against domestic violence. So that was really exciting. So we had her come in a year after I joined [coughs] and then we had our third staff member join in, um, I think it was 3 years after I joined. And um she was - by then, Daya had opened up a small transitional housing facility, just because we were seeing a lot of women who needed a place to stay temporarily, till she was able to find out a long-term um house for herself, and because the shelters across Houston are often so full, the domestic violence shelters, uh we thought it might be helpful to have a small place, um and Nusrat Ameen who joined um then, at that point, was able to kind of coordinate the housing services, um, for Daya, so.

PL: Um, because you have like experience with uh, gender-based violence in India [MG: Yeah.] and also Houston, uh, what do you see the diff' - what kind of differences and similarities do you see?

MG: Yeah. I'd say... one of - in terms of what is - what worked in the US, I'd say that we had really clear systems in place, um, so when a victim was identified as a victim of domestic violence, um it was easy to go to the police and help them um you know file a case against the abuser. It was relatively easy to um - uh there were already systems in place where at Daya, she could come in and access counseling services and case management services and others, which I think in India it's not as clear, I remember when I was in India, the domestic violence cell that we had within the organization that we worked in, often had - had to do a lot of advocacy with the police before they were able to - before they were willing to register a case of domestic violence against an abuser. Um and again, I think um, um you know things are not as formalized.

What I see as barriers in the US, and I think that's true for a lot of immigrant women, is just the lack of social safety nets or social support, um, for, for the victims of domestic violence that we were seeing. Uh and if that person was in their home country, I think it would have been so much easier for her to just go off to her parents’ place, or a relative’s place, or a friend, or others. Here, typically, many of the women that we saw, uh the way the immigration story worked was many of them um, many of them came here after they got married to their husband and their friends were often their husband's friends, and many of these women, because of the nature of abuse, were not given the freedom to have their own friends, um they did not have - either because of their visa status or because um, because it was just a way for the husband to have control over her, often they were not allowed to work. So they were so isolated from other communities that when they reached out to Daya and we'd ask them "Do you have any friends you can go to or do you have anybody else you can reach out to?" they had nobody they can, they could think of. Um, so I think just the lack of support system was a huge thing. The other thing was I think just immigration status itself was a big thing. Um, many of the women we worked with were not US citizens, so they were either on a dependent visa, which is an H1B visa - sorry, H4 visa - or they were on other forms of visas.

We also had cases were the women got married to US citizen husbands, and the husbands would refuse to file papers to kind of help them get their uh legal status, and um I think that was a huge barrier, just you know trying to work with the system so they got um the right to stay here. The other thing that - that um, that I saw a lot which kind of um, was very difficult to see was, um, especially for women on an H4 visa, if she went through a divorce process - and it's still true even now - if the husband is on an H1B visa and is based in the US or if the husband has a green card and is based in the US, and she's on a dependent
visa, um, if they go through the divorce process, and even if the child - if they have children - even if they get joint custody of the child, um... and because her visa may be dependent on his, or - or dependent on them being married, the moment the divorce comes through her visa becomes invalid, so she becomes undocumented, but she cannot go back to her home country because the judge will basically say that, you know, the moment you leave, you cannot leave with the child, and the moment you leave you lose custody of the child. So it was just this whole complex thing where women wanted to go back to their home country because they would, you know they didn't have legal status here and they couldn't work or they couldn't study or they couldn't do anything, yet they wanted to be close to their child. And it was just this whole - and I think it just shows you the flaws that we have in our current system, where um, you know your family law - laws do not interact with immigration law and there’s just all these biases. Um, so I'd say in general, I'd say um much of the barriers that I saw in the US uh were probably, I'd say would probably be true for many first-generation immigrant families or women who are facing violence when they're coming into a new country.

**PL:** Um going back to uh, when you're talking about your role in Daya, [**MG:** Yeah.] um, what exactly are the intake forms?

**MG:** Well, so an intake form is when a woman first comes in, we meet with her and uh try and understand her history and her situation so we can kind of make a plan for her to, to remain safe and to get out of the abuse, and an intake form is a form that most um social service agencies fill in whether - when you're meeting face-to-face with that person, so it's basically a history of that person's record. It's um, you know it'll have information like your name, um your age, your immigration status - in our case we had immigration status - what kind of abuse is that woman facing, what kind of help does she want, uh what kind of resources does she need. So it's uh, it's a document that we have, it's a lot more - because the first interview, um, or the first meeting with the woman tends to be uh, a comprehensive meeting where we're trying to understand where she's coming from and what her needs are. Um, all of that would be documented in that form, and then in subsequent meetings you kind of just add on case notes as they come.

**PL:** Okay. Um so after clients like come in, does Daya keep up with them or -?

**MG:** Yeah, I think that's one of the really great things about Daya, is because um the number of clients they serve are not as big, um, it's really - at least when I was in Daya - it was really easy to keep up with women over a period of time. Um, so that was really unlike - that was unique, I'd say unlike a lot of the other bigger domestic violence service providers, uh where you know you handle so many calls on a daily basis and you see so many women that it can be a little impersonal, once the woman leaves - finishes the counseling or leaves the shelter, you don't see them, in Daya, I think you keep in touch. The other thing that I've often heard Daya clients talk about is how Daya becomes like an extended family. Often they're so isolated that it becomes like a second home, and Daya's been really great about also making their office space like a home, so it's - it's very bright, and it's cozy, and you know it's very welcoming and uh, I think um it's easier for women to kind of relate to it and um, yeah, I'd say there's a lot of follow-up happening and women usually keep in touch over a long period of time.

**PL:** So is it um - do you put like the responsibility on the organization to keep up with the clients, or for the clients to like keep up with you guys?

**MG:** So, I think it depends on which issues. So as somebody - as a funder sitting on the other side, I'd say the responsibility is on the organization to keep up with the client and figure out how your services have been impacted over a period of time. I think with domestic violence there is an exception, just because um, there are many times where the woman goes back to the abuser, and often it can be really unsafe for
an organization to reach out to her and for the abuser to get to know that she's been in touch with the social service agency; often that can be one of the most dangerous times for her.

Um, [coughs] but I think in Daya, we did um - because uh a lot of these relationships tended to be beyond just formally meeting people in a r - in an office and doing counseling. [coughs] People had a really good gauge of how they were situated, so it was easier for the organization to call back to ask questions, but I think in cases where there were doubts of whether someone - [coughs] - sorry, can I just get some water?

PL and TH: Yeah. Yes please.

[recording stops and restarts at 46:30]

MG: Yeah, so as I mentioned I think Daya does a good job of um reaching out to clients, especially when they think that that client is in a safe space, and in times when you're not very sure whether somebody is back with their abuser, or in situations that are a little unsafe I think it becomes difficult for the organization to reach out, um and to follow up to see how that client is doing.

PL: I see. [to TH] Did you have a question? Do you wanna ask a question, like this one?

TH: Oh, yeah, sure. Okay, um so, I read once that like sometimes uh violence against women can be sort of excused as part of a culture, so have you ever seen it happen - [MG: Yes. [laughs]] um, and are there some behaviors that you think might really - might be considered abusive in one culture but really they're not in a different culture?

MG: Yeah, I mean I - I remember when I was in India, um, there used to be a survey done, and I think it was done by uh one of those UN agencies, um I don't know whether it was UNDP or one of those agencies, where it was a perception survey around what constitutes domestic violence. And I remember every time I read it, it would just shock me so much because there would be questions around, if your wife forgot to put salt in the food, is it okay to um, shout at her, or is it okay to beat her? And the number of people who'd say yes, I mean it would just shock me. Um, or if your um, uh if your wife um uh didn't keep the house clean, is it okay to um, to be abusive towards her? Um, so I'd say that uh, definitely in certain cultures, um it is just assumed that it’s okay to be uh - for, for men to be uh, to be abusive to women in certain circumstances. Um, and I think that's also changing, just because culture evolves over time. I know in India, when I think about my um paternal grandparents' house, and uh just the roles that men played and women played, um and the um, the restrictions that women had, throughout the, throughout their life, as compared to what's happening now, I think that has evolved quite a bit as well, so I think it's ever-changing. But I think culture and religion is often used by many communities to kind of condone what's happening within the household. Um, the other thing that I've heard in my years at Daya, I've heard people say, is that it's a private matter, we don't want to interfere - I mean often when we'd have conversations in the community, we'd say things like, do you know of anybody who's in a situation of abuse? And they'd say, “yes, I know a neighbor, or I have a family friend or somebody,” and we'd say, “have you thought of intervening? Have you thought of kind of holding the abuser accountable?” And they'd say, “well, it's a private matter, we don't want to interfere.” So I think [sighs] I think often communities use various uh excuses to not get involved, and um, at least at Daya, our stance had always been that it's not just the woman's issue, or it's not just the abuser's responsibility, it's our community's responsibility to hold the abuser accountable and to make sure that uh, no relationship is unsafe, that everyone kind of is safe in their relationship.
TH: So why do you think people are so reluctant to admit what's going on?

MG: Are you saying the abuser? Do you mean-

TH: Just like the community wanting to excuse behavior.

MG: I think it's um, it's often easy for communities to not talk about things that um can be seen as negative to the community. So when I think about uh - so I - I initially at one point shared about how we had done the One Voice Against Domestic Violence, that whole um, it was a community event in Hillcroft where we spoke out against domestic violence, and one of the initial reactions when we kind of proposed that to the community, was, "Oh, you know, but that will negative - have a negative perception on our community. We are all - many of our childrens are - children are doctors, and engineers, and they do well in school, and that's what we need to be highlighting, we don't need to highlight that there are issues of domestic violence in our um, in our families." So I think in the US, especially with - uh, I'm - I, I'm sure that across different communities, but my experience at that point was with the South Asian community - there was this huge resistance to highlight anything that would uh, that they thought would bring negative - you know? [laughs] - publicity or would show the community in a bad light. So I think that was one of the big things, yeah.

TH: Okay. So they're wanting to represent themselves to like, mainstream America, as -

MG: As, yeah, as uh, as a community that's peaceful, that's successful, and uh, good [laughs] at being good members of the community. And I think part of our conversation that we had with them is, we are not isolating this community, we are not saying that domestic violence is only an issue of the South Asian community. It's an issue across communities, and our point was that how can we, as a South Asian community, be you know responsive and take steps to prevent domestic violence, so.

PL: Um, from your like over 5 years' experience as a client services manager, [MG: Yeah.] um can you give us like one or two examples of like um, like cases in your opinion that you thought Daya didn't like accomplish its uh, mission, and then some cases where you wish Daya could've done more?

MG: Yeah, I'd say in many of the cases, um, Daya did a really good job. I uh, I - you know when I was working at Daya sometimes people would come up and say that you know this must be really hard work and how do you feel? And I'd say, I - I would feel so um grateful every day that I was working there, just because it's so amazing to see these strong women come up and share what they are going through, these are deeply personal things, to come up and share that and to say I'm ready for - for - to make a change, and I'm ready to um leave a situation that's making me unsafe and my children unsafe, I thought that was so powerful. So there was something I learnt from the women I met on a daily basis. Um, I thought across the board, in - in many cases, Daya, did a really good job of understanding where women came from, um of - of providing uh them with options, of not pushing, because I think sometimes, the tendency can be when you're seeing someone in a really bad situation and she's not ready to leave, the tendency can be to just say, "Just leave and we'll give you the resources," and I think Daya has always done a really good job of um being there for them and basically saying we - these are the options and this is what we can do to keep you safe, and we want to - you to uh make the move when you is right, and these are the risks associated with it, letting them know if they are at risk in a situation of abuse, and of letting them know what the options are. So I thought Daya has always done a really good job of doing that. Um, in terms of um, what Daya can uh - cases where we didn't do as well, um... I think every time a woman left her husband and for some reason or the other she decided to go back, personally I would feel like I failed at some level. And I know that um - and research shows that it's not the failure of the nonprofit, or people trying to help, it's just the nature of abuse. Um, there are studies that show that women leave an abusive
relationship anytime - anywhere from 5 to 7 times before they have the confidence to, or the resources to leave them finally. Uh but I think it was hard, just seeing - many of these women work so hard at leaving an abusive relationship and trying to take those steps and, and kind of make it, and then go back - I mean it wasn't - I wouldn't say it was very often we saw that, but when we saw that it would be really hard.

**PL:** And usually the reason why they would go back is because of immigration, or like children?

**MG:** I'd say it would be a mix of other things. Um I had a woman one day tell me that um, if she didn't love her husband, it - it wouldn't have been - I mean it would have been much easier to leave him, if she hadn't loved him so much. So many of the women still think they are in love with their husbands, and often, at least the way the cycle of abuse is, the woman - when a women leaves the husband, often the husband will come and say, "I'm sorry, and you know, I'll make changes, and come back to me," and like you were saying, when there are children involved and when you don't have the support system, and... in a South Asian culture where often, at least the clients that I worked with, they would say things like, "You know, my parents are so worried because now my younger sister will not get married if I - if I'm divorced, or if I'm separated." Um so often they were not thinking about just themselves, they were thinking about their children, they were thinking about extended families, what would it mean for their parents, and just shame on their parents and their extended family. So I think just the sense of shame was so huge, uh shame associated with someone who was separated or divorced, that some of that would make them go back um.

**PL:** So there's more of a stigma [**MG:** Yeah, yeah.] around marrying.

**TH:** Have you ever seen um, an abuser actually have a change of heart and really change his ways?

**MG:** Yes. So um, Daya worked very closely with this group called AVDA, it's called Aid to Victims of Domestic Violence. And they have something called a batterer intervention program. And um, it's different from an anger management program because I think anger management often doesn't get to the root of domestic violence, right, because you - the thing that we would often tell clients - so when somebody came in and said you know, "Oh he gets angry at me, which is why he hits me." And we would say, "But is he angry to his boss and does he hit his boss?" So he's making a conscious choice that she's the one he should be abusive towards, right? So batterer intervention kind of deals with broader issues around um, around what it means to be having the power - what - what it means when you think you have the power over another being and what does abuse look like. Um, so where we saw batterer intervention - so the two ways - they get referrals in two different directions. One is sometimes courts force men to go through that program, and many of our clients who were forced to take that program, I'd say I didn't see much change. [laughs] But there were men who were really um, remorseful about what they had done, and they would come and say, "Can you tell us what options there are and what can I do to do (?) ?" And when it came from within them that they wanted to change and they did the course, you could actually see a difference. Um, the other place where I'd say I'd notice differences was, when the community came and took a stand against the abuser and supported the woman, so um, you had a couple of religious leaders who were really strongly supportive of victims of domestic violence, and they would kind of publicly um, shame uh, abusers. And I think just holding them publicly accountable also helped um, check - check their behavior.

**PL:** Um, so this is like kind of a - I think you kind of already addressed the question [**MG:** Yeah.] but um, using like your two different hats, like as a so- social worker and then as um, a person working at the Houston Endowment, um how can you see Daya improve in the future?
MG: Yeah. Um I mean I think Daya does actually a really good job, uh across the board of um addressing domestic violence. Um a space - and I don't think it's specific to Daya, I think it's across all domestic violence agencies - I think something that we have to figure out as a community is how to do prevention really well, uh because there are studies that show that - I mean nobody is born an abuser, nobody is born thinking that they are superior to their spouse or they're superior to anybody else. And um, I think it's getting - it's how do you educate children when they are little, around what healthy relationships look like, what does it mean to be in respectful relationships, and um, and, and what does it mean to be in um, in a society where everyone is equal, where women and men are equal and men are not perceived as having power over women. So I think uh that whole thing around prevention, around how can we change perceptions and attitudes right from when children are small, um I think that's something that needs to be addressed and I don't think it's - that burden should be only on Daya, I think it's across the board, I think as a community we need to kind of figure that out.

PL: Oh and uh, what made you - you went straight from Daya to Houston Endowment? [MG: Yeah.] Okay, um, did you - were you okay with like leaving Daya and the micro - you said there was more micro-level stuff versus-?

MG: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah I share this with everyone, about how um, in my first um year at Houston Endowment, I was uh - I think I just missed being a lot more hands-on in the work; here, I think you do things from a little bit of a distance. Um, and I think over the almost 8 years that I've been here, I've also come to recognize, um that it's a place of privilege, to be able to see just the big picture of what's happening in the community, and to be able to see intersections between different issues. Um, so I think that's been really helpful, so uh, yeah.

PL: Um, and did the office seek you out from Daya? Or did you...

MG: Um [laughs] so there was a position that was open, um at the Houston Endowment, and the program officer I was working with kind of um encouraged me to apply. [PL: Oh okay.] [laughs] And when I applied I - I mean I applied - I wasn't looking to move, I think I just loved my work at Daya, I felt comfortable, and I keep telling friends that I think it made my um... my integration into Houston easier, because I was still - a lot of the women or individuals I was talking with were first-generation immigrants, and just you know, it helped me transition better into the US. I was really proud of the work that we had all achieved at Daya, and I loved that. Um and um, I - when I look back, I think I'm happy I made this change, just because um, I think it just gives me a different levels of - level of experience that I wouldn't - that I wouldn't have had if I had stayed on, so.

PL: Yeah. Yeah I really like how you um, like throughout your career, from like social work in India which is kind of the policy level [MG: Yeah.] and then you came to Daya working like hands-on, and now at the Houston Endowment. I think it's pretty cool.

MG: Yeah, yeah.

PL: Um I guess uh, growing up in India, were you aware of like the domestic violence issue in general? Was it kind of also not really talked about?

MG: Yeah, it wasn't as talked about. So I think - when I think about it, when I was - I, I cannot remember when I first was aware about domestic violence, when I was very little, I wasn't. I'd say I grew up in a pretty protected environment and protected household. Um, and I grew up in a space where my mother was a strong figure and she was always independent, so I didn't see it immediately. But I think, I'm sure through media, through newspapers and uh news and other spaces, I kind of became aware that it is a
huge problem in India. And uh, I think just gender discrimination is such a huge - and it's so apparent in India. Uh, right from uh... and I'd see this in our relatives' house and our friends' house, where boys had - were allowed to stay out for longer, girls had to come back earlier. Um, and I didn't see this immediately but I was aware that in some families, the food that boys got was different than what girls got. Um, in some of the villages, women - um, girls were not allowed, once they kind of uh had their period, when they became mature, they were not allowed to go to school. Um so, I mean it's just you read about it all the time in India, it's so um, overt, the level of gender discrimination. So it's - it's hard to stay - I mean it's hard to be insulated from it when you are kind of growing up in the midst of it. Um I think in the US, it is very there but it's also very - it's not as apparent, it's also subtle and hidden, um, so.

PL: [to TH] Did you have any questions?

TH: Um... uh, I guess like, I can move on to the concluding type questions.

PL: Um yeah.

TH: Okay. Um, do you have any advice for young people today [laughs] that you would like to share?

MG: Um, I would say - so I have two boys. [laughs] Who are - so uh, I have two little boys, one who is in pre-kindergarten and one who is in 4th grade. And I remember, so when I was um, we are three - three girls, and when I was pregnant with my first child, I was so sure I was having a girl, just because I didn't know what it was being around boys. [all laugh] And then when I got to know I would have a boy, a piece of me was really scared, because I was thinking how do I - it's such a big responsibility to raise a boy who is loving and caring and who’s sensitive [laughs] and who respects women, and it's just that whole burden that I felt. And he's grown up to be all right, he's 8 years old [all laugh] now and I think he's doing fine. And I think, I know how um, and this is my perspective of having grown in India and I see him grow here, I think sometimes um, life can be a little um insular, where you're a little disconnected from other people and what their experiences are here. And uh I think for young people I'd say just be aware of what's happening around, and uh get engaged in the community, uh just volunteer and um, and uh try and, whether it's - it could be small things, it could be volunteering, it could be voting, it could be getting engaged in student associations or other spaces, um, I think it's important for young people to have a sense that whatever's happening politically at the state or national level, that you are in charge of your futures and you can bring about change in the community and you can kind of uh, make it a positive experience for everyone around you. So I think that would be my advice, just be engaged, yeah.

PL: There was another question I had...um... [pause] Okay, yeah. Just the last question, um, is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to bring up? It could be about Daya, or like um, the social aspects of gender-based violence, or anything...

MG: Mm, I'd say that um, so a lot of the spaces that I'm working on right now at Houston Endowment or that I'm passionate about, are spaces that I was aware of once I started working in Daya. So right now some of the work that I'm engaged in is um, looking at domestic violence, or how are the sys - what are those big systems that respond to domestic violence and how can we change some of that. The other thing is immigration, um so how can uh, how can we make sure that low-income immigrant families have access to the resources needed to um uh, you know get the immigration status that they are eligible for, as well as how can we make immigrant communities aware of what their rights are. Um, and then the third piece is work around civic engagement, how can we ensure that um Houston has a - becomes a vibrant community where everyone, right from youth to others, are, are engaged in the issue. And then the other thing that we - we've just started working on is around hate incidents and hate crimes, so we've seen um, an increase in hate incidents and crimes in Houston over the past uh couple of years, and it's a coalition
that's working and immigrant groups are a large part of that coalition, but it's also - you know, we have African-American communities and other communities represented, LGBTQ communities and others, and they are looking at collectively uh coming together to have a - for Houston to have a plan, um, to fight back against hate and bias. And I think a lot of the spaces I work on, I um, I was influenced by my work at Daya, I got to know about how um, you know there were systems that interacted with victims of domestic violence that um, that, that were dysfunctional and didn't help uh women feel safe, or that there were immigrant laws that were so - immigration laws that were um actually harmful for victims of domestic violence, and in their ability to be safe for themselves, or I was aware of certain communities that were being targeted as victims of dome - of you know hate or bias. So I think a lot of my work that I'm engaged in now, was informed by my early experiences at Daya, so I'm always grateful for that. Yeah.

PL: That's great. [to TH] Um, so do you have any more questions? Okay, well thank you so much Ms. Goswami for letting us interview you.

MG: Aw, thank you! [laughs] Thank you, thank you.

[interview ends]