

Maya Acharya

Stanford Center for South Asia Summer Service Fellow 2017

Domestic violence and immigration in diaspora: A summer at Narika

I spent ten weeks from June through August 2017 as an intern at Narika, an Oakland-based non-profit that provides services for South Asian women in the Bay Area who are facing domestic violence. Narika has a small staff, and so we often worked collaboratively on several tasks and projects. Every week, I worked on new projects and met new people who work with survivors in various capacities, including lawyers, researchers, non-profit program coordinators, counsellors and more. In my academic coursework as a History major, I have learned about borders and immigration and their violent impacts on women. Through my work at Narika, I gained a practical understanding of the ways borders continue to enact violence on women, and how this manifests in the South Asian diaspora in the Bay Area.

My main project, which I worked on for the whole the summer, was to assist Narika's SEED coordinator with planning weekly 6 hour workshops for Narika clients. SEED is Narika's Self-Empowerment through Economic Development program. The SEED program I was working on was specifically for survivors of domestic violence. Workshop topics spanned economic development, career development, conversations on healthy relationships and mental health, housing justice and education, and self-care workshops. We kept our workshop schedule dynamic—each week, we would spend time checking in with participants and tailor future sessions to their wants and needs. Many of our workshops addressed issues at the intersection of domestic violence and immigration, an intersection that is particularly relevant for South Asian women in diaspora. For example, we connected our participants with resources at places such as Asian Law Caucus and Asian Community Mental Health Services. Narika also makes an effort to provide language-competent and culturally-competent services to best serve their clients.

In addition to planning and providing aid at all of the workshops, I also facilitated various self-care through arts workshops, including creative writing, painting, and music sessions. During the first SEED session of the summer, my coworker and I co-facilitated a creative storytelling and letter writing session. In later sessions, I led discussions and workshops on using creative outlets as tools for self-care, professional development, and more. During my time at Narika, I also worked on creating meaningful connections with relevant organisations in the Bay Area. For example, I facilitated Narika's sponsorship of SF Women Against Rape's "When Sita Was a Microbe" event. Through this, I was able to meet and connect with South Asian artists who are interested in combatting violence against women in the South Asian diaspora. I also spoke with South Asian students at other universities in California to talk about their experiences in South Asian spaces and learn about the various ways we practice activism and education at our campuses. With these discussions, I gained a better understanding of the South Asian diasporic space I occupy. Knowing these other young South Asian activists will definitely be useful in future endeavours.

Through my work this summer I have learned a lot about various Bay Area non-profits, especially those working with survivors of assault and people of Asian descent. I learned about many issues that come with this work—for example, non-profits like Narika must provide specific support for the ways immigration, power and violence intersect and effect South Asian women, while being cognisant of harmful stereotypes regarding violence in South Asian communities and making an effort not to play into those stereotypes. Navigating issues like this is always an ongoing conversation in spaces like Narika, and those of us working in these spaces do not always agree. Through speaking with coworkers, clients, and other people I met through Narika, I learned how to think more critically about these issues.

I am so thankful that the Center for South Asia's support of my work with Narika this summer. This experience was the perfect complement to my personal and academic experiences with the South Asian diaspora in the Bay Area. I am so lucky to have gotten the chance to know

Narika clients and share creative, healing, and educational spaces with them through the workshop series. Working with this community of South Asian women has left a strong impact on me and will influence my academic and personal work in the years to come.