



FIRST PERSON

A Woman Finds a Haven from Violence

A shelter gives women refuge from domestic abuse and protects those who return home



Photo: USAID/Virginia Foley

With her six-year-old daughter Shikha, Rekha Rai fled to Shakti Shalini to escape her husband's family. "Without [Shakti Shalini's] help maybe they would have killed me or maybe I would have killed myself."

By day, Rekha Rai worked as a maid in India's capital, New Delhi. At night, when she returned home from work, her husband's family regularly beat her. Her mother-in-law demanded that Rekha hand over all her earnings, but would not use it to support Rekha's two children. Rekha's husband didn't intervene.

"I've been well brought up," said Rekha, "and I can't bear to be beaten."

When her employer heard about the abuse, he told her about Shakti Shalini, and Rekha fled there with her two children. Founded in 1987 by two women whose daughters died for failing to meet the expectations of their in-laws, Shakti Shalini is a USAID-supported shelter and haven for women fleeing domestic violence and exploitation. Aside from giving abused women a place to stay, Shakti Shalini offers them legal aid, medical assistance, rehabilitation and help initiating police investigations. Its counseling and support services protect women who return home — and the shelter welcomes them back if their return is unsuccessful.

After a month and a half in Shakti Shalini's short-stay home, Rekha returned to her husband and in-laws — but under the supervision of Shakti Shalini. Although her in-laws continue to harass her about money, her husband now comes in to make child-support deposits at Shakti Shalini, despite his mother's protests.

"This second chance is for the sake of my children," says Rekha. "Without [Shakti Shalini's] help maybe they would have killed me or maybe I would have killed myself."