

## Spotlight on Apna Ghar: Home, Gender-Based Violence, and the “Perfect Storm” of a Pandemic

| Dec 16, 2020 | COVID-19, COVID-19 Stories, Member Spotlights

*Note: This spotlight discusses domestic violence at large as well as its relationship to COVID-19.*

When Apna Ghar first started more than 30 years ago, the organization staffed a 24/7 crisis line and operated emergency shelter for women and children. They have grown immensely over the years, though they have not strayed from their mission of supporting people experiencing gender-based violence with a focus on immigrant and refugee communities. Today, the Chicagoland nonprofit also provides transitional housing, case management and social services advocacy, counseling, legal advocacy, supervised visitation and safe exchange services (SVSE), and other programming. In addition to direct service and intervention, Apna Ghar also continues to expand research and thinking about gender-based violence by creating intersectional frameworks that center cultural humility, trauma-informed healing, and policy reform.



*Apna Ghar staff members in the kitchen of a safe house, built with support from Design for Dignity.*

**Neha Gill** joined the organization in 2003 and became Executive Director in 2013. She has seen Apna Ghar expand and adapt to fit the needs of their clients, and she views a framework that Apna Ghar developed through a research partnership with the Center for Urban Research and Learning as a key turning point for the organization. “It’s a socio-ecological framework that shows the interdependence of individuals, families, communities and systems,” Gill explains. “Employing this framework, we have expanded our understanding of gender-based violence to include many forms of gender discrimination and oppression as all as various ways they could be experienced.” Apna Ghar’s approach to achieving gender justice also takes into account “racial and immigrant justice, economic justice, (including housing and food insecurity), reproductive justice and healthcare as a human right, as well as issues of environmental justice.”

While not everyone may understand the relationship between housing and reducing gender-based violence, Gill explains that housing has always been an integral part of Apna Ghar’s mission: “Apna Ghar means ‘Our Home’ in several South Asian languages, so the concept that housing is a human right is foundational to our organization...In the beginning, [our] services and our understanding of cultural humility and all of our guiding principles and values were all built around housing and keeping survivors safe.”

Like many organizations, Apna Ghar's programming has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has created what Gill refers to as "perfect storm" for those experiencing violence in their homes. According to the [New England Journal of Medicine](#), risk factors that compound Domestic Violence (DV) include loss of income, increased time spent in the home, limited access to community support, limited access to technology, fewer in-person interactions between survivors and their support systems including their families, medical professionals, social workers, increased household stress, and travel restrictions—all of which have increased during COVID-19. "The pandemic has really exposed the magnitude of violence in homes, and the resulting housing, economic and healthcare insecurity," Gill states. "It also exposed the need to have equitable access to technology."

Gill says that the challenges of the pandemic have pushed Apna Ghar to work even harder. "I am [ ] constantly inspired by our program participants—their resolve, courage, resilience, and ability to rise above their circumstances is really the guide for us, and we are privileged to play a role in ensuring their success even in these extremely challenging times."

Although 2020 has been a difficult year for Apna Ghar, as it has been for the entire country, Gill says there are many things she is looking forward to. One of those is a new medical advocacy and community health project Apna Ghar just launched to "ensure access to quality healthcare in the short and long terms." Apna Ghar has also expanded their housing options, as well as their cultural competency training to providers across the state, which builds "more sensitivity and understanding around the needs of immigrant and refugee survivors."

When asked what she wants more people to understand about Apna Ghar's work, Gill says, "It is intersectional, survivor led and solutions-focused. Our program participants lead full and complex lives, and they are so much more than their experiences of victimization. Our focus on services, outreach and advocacy is an effort to create meaningful and lasting change."

If you or someone you know is experiencing violence at home, please consider reaching out to one of the following numbers:

**Apna Ghar 24/7 crisis line:** Call at 773-334-4663 or text at 773-899-1041

**IL Statewide Domestic Violence Hotline:** 877-863-6338 (877-TO END DV) & [Live Chat Support](#)

**Crisis Text Line:** text HOME to 741741

**National Parent Hotline:** call 1-855-427-2736

**Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline:** visit <https://www.childhelp.org/childhelp-hotline/> or call 1-800-422-4453

**National Domestic Violence Hotline:** visit <http://thehotline.org> text LOVEIS to 22522, or call 1-800-799-7233

**Futures Without Violence:** visit <https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/resources-events/get-help/>