

Sonya Pelia



My name is Sonya Pelia. I was born in India in the state of Himachal Pradesh.—My parents and I are Punjabi Sikh. My dad moved around; when I was about a year old, my dad became an army officer. I went to school all over India. My favorite memories are from Calcutta (Now known as Kolkata). I went to Loretto for a year there, and then I went to St. Teresa’s. We moved to Jammu, to Jalandhar and Lucknow and I ended up finishing schooling in Pune. From there, I went to college in Punjab because my dad was very close to retirement then and he wanted to settle down. My college in Punjab was called “Kanya Maha Vidyalaya”, (High School for Girls); it is the oldest women’s college in Punjab.

I became a fierce feminist at age 14. I didn’t know these words, of course, when I was growing up. I actually encountered the word feminist when I was 17. And I said, “Oh! There is a word that describes who I am”. I was so happy with the word feminist. My father was a very fierce feminist and I

asked him once before he died “What made you a feminist? You’re a man, you’re a traditional Punjabi man where patriarchy is so strong”. And he said, he just thought it was crazy that women and men were not treated equally. So when I was born and my sisters were born, my father insisted that we get every opportunity that he didn’t get because he was among the youngest of many siblings. And despite sometimes, the push back from family members – not my mother, other family members saying “Your daughters go to the army club with you”, “Your daughters know how to dance – western dance”, “They go to private schools, what a waste of money on women!”. And my father said, “No! I want my daughters to have everything”. So, this is how my story unfolded. My mother is also a feminist but she wasn’t fierce like my father. My father, if you ever met him, was the gentlest and kindest person. He was a lawyer. He always believed in conciliation but he was a fierce feminist. He thought women should do, they should and can and must do whatever they want to do and accomplish. So when I was 14, both my parents are from an army background, they had had amazing friendships with people from every other community. I think if you’re raised with the idea that you are a human being and you have intrinsic worth, you can fight with your parents or the community, whatever. You have a sense of solid belief.

I moved to the U.S. when I was 22 years old. I had done a degree in Psychology, English honors, and Economics. And when I first moved to the Bay Area, and (pondered) what do you do here with a degree in social sciences (English etc.). I met somebody who was becoming a technical writer and she said “Oh you should check this out!”. I went to San Jose State and I got a certificate program in technical writing and I met my first computer

and I fell in love with it. So I am not techy, I am not an engineer but I became a technical writer for many years. And now I am on my 1...2...3, third career in tech. I just started a consulting company - a startup, with a friend. We are trying to scale revenue for women-founded start-ups in San Jose because they don't get any support, they don't get funding - a very big challenge in the start-up world.

Would I have gotten the same opportunities in India? The same kind of freedom to do whatever I want to do? I am not sure. I am not sure really at this point, I do feel that the privileges I have had here have been just extraordinary.

I used to go around telling people I am a fierce feminist. People would look at me strangely and then, I met Maitri. I read an article in India Currents magazine about Maitri. I called the number and I said I want to volunteer. Chitra Divakaruni, the acclaimed writer called me back and said, "Come meet us". I went to her house and I met her and said, "I want to do this".

I met my people, I met my tribe. I remember that after my first meeting, I couldn't sleep at night, I still remember that drive on 101. My brain was like "Oh, these are the people. This is what I need to be doing".

In 1993, I started volunteering for Maitri. So, I found Maitri, Chitra, Romadi, Anjali. I was maybe the fourth or fifth volunteer. My parents were really proud of me. After I joined Maitri, I would go back home, my dad would call every newspaper in Jalandhar - where they lived, and the TV station and get me a news interview talking about the problems of immigrant women from South Asia. Every time I did an interview or I did a TV episode, we would get 50-60 letters. My dad was so passionate. He

would help people pro bono from there so I would connect the Maitri client with my father in Punjab and my dad would give advice:, “this is what you need to be doing”, “This is what you can file”. He pushed for the NRI cell to be formed in Jalandhar saying “Women are suffering there; we need to take care of our community”. He was very much, both my parents actually, were very much supportive.

I remember one time we were standing in a booth for six hours at the Gandhi Mela in SF. Not one person, not one person (came to our table), they all looked and walked away. Then another time, a volunteer and I were standing and this guy comes up and he said, “Oh so you divorced lesbians are out there to break homes.” the volunteer who was standing next to me, said, “Yes thank you! So what is your point?” He didn’t know what to say because we were like “okay? Tell us more, what can we do?” But I think this work is not for the faint of heart. This is a cause, it’s a mission. You can care in a different way like you can support by money, you can support by spreading the word but it is a mission-oriented cause. I think of the funders we have who joined us in the early stages. They gave us money despite every opposition they received in their social circles. Either you buy into this mission or you don’t. It’s alright, we need everyone to change but we can make the change with a few committed people.

When I joined Maitri, we were very small. We did a small peer counseling training. It transformed me. I thought I had really thought about gender equality but the kind of sustained training you get to be a peer counselor shifts your thinking. So, it’s just your thinking from being a rescuer and the injustice to becoming an empowering peer counselor. Many times I worked with five, six, or seven clients and I am being very honest about this, that I

took jobs where I would have a lot of freedom. I decided that Maitri was a passion for me and I couldn't quit and I couldn't do this full time because we didn't have money at that time for staff. So basically I took jobs where I could do my job three-quarters of the time and spend the rest of the time at Maitri. I even went into a consulting company for five years. I consulted so that I could spend 30 hours at Maitri every week and 30 - 45 hours at my job. At that time, we didn't have a lot of money. Anjali also did this, she was a CPA and she started her own business. I think one of the things I realized was that as immigrants, time is of the essence. You can lose your children, you can lose your support and this is from pre-internet days so there was no easy way to communicate except letters and very expensive phone calls.

For me, the most valuable thing to me has been being a peer counselor but I also became the General Secretary right away. We were so small and I still remember that I was in my first meeting and Jaya Chatterjee said, "Somebody should take notes". I was the type who always raises her hand and so I raised my hand and said "I can take notes!" and she said, "Okay! Then you are the General Secretary". Then, I was the General Secretary for four years and Chitra was the President, Romadhi was the Vice President and Anjali was the Treasurer. Chitra's husband then got a job in Houston so they left and I remember, we were all devastated. I thought to myself "Who is going to be President now?" Chitra said, "You will be the President" and then I became the President of Maitri. I have been the President of Maitri for a total of 21 years now out of my 28-year tenure. But, I did take a break for 4 years helping one of my sisters who moved here. I have never taken the position of President as a status position. I have decided that if I

believe in this cause, I will do what is necessary so if I have to be the President and have to show up somewhere, I will do that. For me, it's not the status or the title that matters but it's the mission, and the future of Maitri has always been front and center.

I have always done client work; I deal with women who speak Punjabi specifically and also men who call us for help. There has been one other volunteer who helps and supports men. But to me, this is a cause where you have to change individual lives. You can't take a recipe and say, "This is what you need to do; you need to understand, you need to be empathetic, you have to help them achieve what they want to do." I have had people stay in our house for months. That's when we realized we need a transition home. Anjali has had people stay at her house, so did Chitra and so did Romadi.

I have experienced a radical difference in terms of community attitude over the years! First, it was all about: "You people are giving the South Asian Community a bad name", "You are creating problems where there are not", "You are encouraging women to get divorced" or "You are breaking up families". But now people call me up and say, "My friend's cousin is suffering, what can we do?" or "My acquaintance that I met, how can I put her in touch with Maitri?" I get at least one or two messages a month, like this.

I also now get messages from somebody saying, "You know you didn't help my friend" and we take all complaints very seriously. I immediately get on it and say, "I am so sorry to hear this! I want to know what happened so we can fix it." This means people feel comfortable enough to complain that

we didn't help them. Most of the time the story turns out to be not that we didn't help them but we could not give the kind of help they needed. We are also limited in what we can actually do.

For example, if somebody wants me to call their boss and say, "Please fire this guy", Maitri cannot do that. Also, if somebody wants us to do a morcha (procession) in front of somebody's office, we cannot do that. We are activists in changing and empowering but that is just not a part of our mission. I feel happy that people even call to complain because they feel this organization is there and is safe to complain. They don't keep it to themselves, right? I am happy to answer any questions and we all should be, we have a public charge and we have said that this is what we are going to do. The best thing is now when we go to public events or I go somewhere and I don't like to toot my own horn, I feel very shy about that. But if somebody is standing next to me, a friend or something, everyone knows I am very Maitri driven in the community, they don't know my tech career. Most people say, "You work in tech?" and I go, "Yes! That's how I support my life". They will say, "Oh she is very involved in Maitri" and you know what's the most gratifying thing? It is for the person to say, "I have heard of Maitri, they do amazing things." What more of a character certificate do we need?

I want to say to the community that each of us needs to stand up against injustice. If we don't, we can't change our own community, let alone the world. The only way we can change the world, and right the wrongs, is to care and engage and say this is not right. Everyone has a role to play.