



**Bio:** Navneet Bhalla is the Executive Director of Manavi, an organization that strives to address the issue of gender-based violence, advocating for the survivors through awareness and education.

Prior to her Manavi role, she practiced as an attorney in the United Kingdom for a number of years and gained extensive experience in immigration law, human rights law and employment law. Bhalla, who is fluent in Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Farsi and English, has worked on employment and discrimination litigation, and traveled to Sudan as a legal consultant representing the International Rescue Committee (IRC). She has also lived in Tehran, Iran, for a number of years, enabling her to help affected women overcome linguistic barriers.

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An Interview with Navneet Bhalla

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Conducted by IWL Leadership Scholars Neha Saju and Pooja Sindha, Class of 2021

Edited by Patricia Amarilla

**Neha Saju (NS) & Pooja Sindha (PS): How did you first get involved with your work and why do you stay [in the profession]?**

**Navneet Bhalla:** Basically I've always been passionate about human rights and human rights law, that's really my background. I was born in Iran and I lived there for fourteen years. Then once I moved to England at the age of fourteen, I could see and became aware of really quickly, certain biases and human rights violations that take place in different countries. I like to look at women's rights under the umbrella of human rights. At this point I became, very early on, interested in social justice, equality, and human rights. I compared different regimes, was fascinated by international law, domestic law, and how that interlaced together-especially because I lived in Iran and then moved to England; of course they were two completely different cultures and countries politically, in terms of how human rights are respected or not. I decided to pursue a legal career because I felt that that was the best way to pursue social justice at that time, and then I practiced law at a law firm in London, and I was only interested in immigration law, and even within immigration law, I was only interested in asylum and refugee law. That was my big passion. I think I had about at least, a good hundred asylum and refugee clients from around the world: Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Kurdish clients everywhere. To this day, I find that fascinating and something that is

really important is what the U.N. Convention says, or the countries and their signatories, and you know, seeing if they actually implement and do they really provide the protections that they should provide.

While I was doing that work, I learned various aspects of how women are treated in different countries, especially in terms of gender justice, it was something I was exposed to, as part of asylum and refugee law, and I had many cases where women were subjected to sexual violence as part of war crimes in the countries they were fleeing from. I think gender justice and issues impacting women are something I became very passionate about as part of the overarching theme of human rights. Fast forward, I moved to the U.S. fifteen years ago, got married, and I really pursued international human rights law. I had done my graduate degree and everything in England, and much to my parents' dismay, they were like "You're married, you still want to study more?" and I said "YES!". Then I went to Washington College of Law at American University, where I studied international human rights law. That's what I got my master's in, and I have to say, it was the best degree that I have done. It was something that was very meaningful for me, and I really enjoyed studying it. That then propelled me to apply for jobs at international non-governmental organizations (NGO's) because that's where my heart was really in, you know, the countries and places where you can make the most impact. I applied to the International Rescue Committee; I got that job and went to Sudan for a short amount of time, because I had a small child at the time as well, but I worked with different Sudanese NGO's and their government.

After this experience, I would have to say that even though I am passionate about international human rights law, I realized very fast that you can have much more direct impact at your doorstep. This is where I...came full circle, I came back to New Jersey and I started looking for organizations that did domestic social justice work and women's rights. I applied and worked for SAALT, South Asian-Americans Leading Together, a national South Asian non-profit; they do a lot of policy and reform work. Then I began to look for something more local and found that Manavi and SAALT were partners, so that's how I got involved with Manavi and women's rights work. I still have a very strong passion for human rights, international and domestic, and I feel very strongly whenever we talk about women's rights issues, it's important to frame them as human rights violations, that abuse against women isn't some distinct, separate phenomenon. We wouldn't tolerate human rights abuses against children or men. Women are very much part of that category and so framing it under human rights and also implementing the human rights laws that are already there is important.

**NS & PS: What has been your experience with female leaders who are uncomfortable embracing the word "feminist," especially because internationally, it is considered a taboo subject? Also, do you consider yourself a feminist leader?**

**NB:** Yes I do, and I think Sudan was the country that, whenever I entered the room for meetings while representing the International Rescue Committee, I was part of maybe only one or two women who made up the room, it was all male dominated. This is definitely a challenge and an uphill struggle I think for female activists, but more than anything, I see myself as an activist. Even

though I was a lawyer, I had always tried to pursue that part of my passion and my interest. In Sudan, women who feel strongly about women's rights have a long way to go, but I believe there needs to be a huge cultural shift. I could tell how I was perceived and I definitely had to work harder than my male counterparts to be heard in the room, which meant that I had to be prepared when I walked into those rooms, I needed to make sure that I was heard and taken just as seriously as my male counterparts, as well as for the reason that I wouldn't be disappointed in how I was perceived. I think the key is to project strength and feel empowered, even if I am, and I tell my twelve year-old daughter and my seven year-old son this all the time; even if you are a minority in a room like in school, the key is to believe in yourself and the cause you are fighting for. As far as I was concerned, I thought, the fact that I am here in Sudan in this meeting representing a woman who wouldn't otherwise be represented, is important. I think representation matters and each of us can do our part to make sure we are at the table so that those voices are represented

**NS & PS: Who are your models in life and how have they helped shape your leadership style?**

**NB:** Growing up, my uncle in India was a practicing lawyer and I would hear stories from my father about how my uncle would have a difficult time practicing as an honest lawyer for social justice and fight corruption. He would often be offered bribes to take certain cases and would be told he'd make a lot of money doing so. He went on to become a Supreme Court justice and he is known as the 'green judge' in India. He's retired now, but he was known as an environmentalist, and every time I would read an article about him while in my teens, I was always in awe. My dad would always say that for him to get to where he was, my uncle went through years of struggle. It would have been much easier for him to take the path of least resistance, because he could have taken those bribes, but he chose to do the hard work and be an honest lawyer and fight for social justice causes. My uncle went years without employment and paying the bills, but he stuck to what he believed in, my father shared the same values, and he ultimately said, "You are put on this Earth, not just to look out for yourselves and fulfill your own needs, but we all have a responsibility to, not that you have to fix the world's biggest problems, but take a concrete step towards doing something that will better society."

I am not super religious, but there is a phrase in the Sikh faith, "sarbat da bhala," which means the good of the community, and that's the piece of faith that my parents have always held onto, because they are like me, not super religious. They are believers of giving back to the community, and when I moved to England at the age of fourteen, I went alone without my parents. When I was living in Iran at the time, they were already at war for seven years, and so for them to do that, was the most difficult decision they have made. They sent me with my sister and we lived with my aunt in England. They couldn't move with us and I don't think they wanted to move, but it was the three of us in England. I have a twelve year-old and to think that in two years I'd have to ship her to another country, I can't even imagine it. It's definitely changed the way I see my parents, especially after I became a parent, because so many people in the community would tell my dad, and this is where women's rights were instilled in us, so many people said to my dad, "You're crazy! You're sending your girls to a different country?" He was criticized as a father even though it was acceptable to send your son, but no one sent their young girls to a different country. My

dad's response to everyone in the community, and this was way back when I was young and to this day I am in awe, but he said, "I don't care what any of you think. I have to think what's best for my daughters and I want to give them the same opportunities that I would give my son." His basic response was, "I will do everything to make sure they have all the opportunities, and as women, it is just as important for them to have the same opportunities as my son."

My father, against all that backlash and criticism, stood strong and told us "I believe in you, and I believe you should have the same rights as women," and that's hard. When I think about this, it's like my dad had the whole community against him and "what will people think?" This in the South Asian community is huge and this was when I was fourteen, we are not talking about 2019, this was back in the day. When it comes to women's rights and empowerment, my sisters and I feel this to a large extent because of the values that were instilled in us when we were younger. In my household, my dad did the dishes and he cooked, and he treated my mom with the utmost respect, and those things matter. In between my uncle and the life that he led and my father, as well as my mother, they all made sacrifices against all odds and against what other people thought. My father said he never wanted to feel like he left his daughters behind because of what people might think, and he wanted to push us forward in the same way that society was pushing my brother forward. I look back and think, I don't think I realized the magnitude of that decision when I was fourteen. Now, after my husband and I had our kids, we were both just like "Oh my God," what they did, and also what it must have been to separate. I know it was a very difficult time for my mother, but it would've been easier to just keep their girls at home because that's what everyone else was doing. They kept the girls at home and sent their sons abroad, because the issue was that in Iran, the schools would be Islamic schools. If my father had kept us there, I probably wouldn't have had the same education and access to careers and opportunities, like having the chance to practice as a lawyer, none of those things would have happened. His decision really opened up doors for me.

**NS & PS: How has this opened doors and influenced your leadership style? Do you think it has made you more collaborative? How has it impacted you?**

**NB:** Another thing my father would do was that he was very involved with the community, like the local schools. I remember him one time bringing a refugee home and for him this wasn't a big deal. He would volunteer a lot and he earned his living, but then the rest of time would be spent doing some kind of community service. He led in a way in which he perceived himself as someone who is always serving and I think that the best leaders are the kind who think collaboratively and ...who think of themselves as serving the community and the people. I think in the work that we do here at Manavi, it is really important to listen, the quality to be able to listen to other people is key, as well as to be empathetic, to be present. I've always said to all my staff, even when we do interviews, I never want to work in isolation. I never want Manavi to work in isolation. We are doing something wrong if Manavi is involved in some issue or campaign and we don't have partners alongside us, it means that we have failed in some way, to build those networks and relationships to collaborate. I am a huge advocate for collaboration, in every way possible.

Another organization in New York is Sakhi, and together we are part of a larger national organization called SAWO, South Asian Women's Organizations, and I think it is important for us to move forward collectively and make a difference. It's a mistake to try and do the work that we do in a lateral way. The other piece that I feel very strongly about, in terms of leadership skills, is that as women, I think we all have a responsibility to lift each other up, and that's something we have to be conscious about. It's about making space for everyone's voices to be lifted up, and as South Asian women, and women of color, we have the added responsibility to make sure we lift each other up as female leaders, and that we go above and beyond to empower other women in the room, that we make them feel empowered. If in my lifetime, I can do even 0.1% of that, I would feel that I've done something worthwhile.

**NS & PS: How is the cultural aspect of Manavi different from other women's protection agencies? How do the survivors who come to Manavi feel about this special cultural space that is unlike many other places?**

**NB:** Manavi is the very first South Asian women's rights organization founded in the country in 1985. It is the only culturally-specific South Asian women's rights organization in New Jersey, and we have many sister organizations nationally like Sakhi in New York. What makes Manavi different from other mainstream domestic violence and sexual assault agencies? We are the only one in the East Coast that provides a culturally-specific transitional home called Ashianna, it's the only one of its kind where we provide culturally-specific food and language. Between the whole staff and myself, we speak at least ten, if not more, South Asian languages. The culturally specific piece of it is that, in terms of Ashianna, the language, the food, and counselling and support services we provide, we are very in tune with South Asian culture. When survivors walk in, they feel very comfortable and at ease because they can relate and feel supported within the cultural context. We provide culturally-specific and linguistically-appropriate services, we have counseling and intervention services. Very often, we have survivors who have gone to a mainstream DV (domestic violence) agency and then come to us, and immediately they said that some of the advocates or agencies couldn't comprehend the how and the why, unlike here, where we know about the cultural stigmas, taboos, perceptions of women, and why someone would be terrified of getting a divorce, for example. I think a lot of those basic things we automatically understand and are familiar with because a lot of us have grown up in those cultures, it makes a huge difference in their lives to know that they are in a place where people understand them, where people know where they are coming from and are not being frowned upon. Whereas in other mainstream DV agencies, those assumptions would have made it more difficult to receive the care they need.

**NS & PS: Are there any specific changes that you see in the South Asian community which make you concerned regarding stigma surrounding violence in our community? Are there any changes in the community that give you hope?**

**NB:** Recently, I have been very disturbed with what is happening in India in the course of three or four days. There have been multiple rapes and killings, there's a pattern, all of the victims are being burned alive. Again, it takes me back to human rights and the value of a woman's life. First, it was Dr. Reddy [Dr. Priyanka Reddy] who was raped and burned alive. Then the day after, another woman was burned alive in a different part [of India]. Then another woman, while she was walking to court to report the rape, was burned alive. The rape, in itself, is a human rights violation and a heinous crime. But then, their lives are minimized as if they didn't mean anything.

I was actually sharing this with my daughter and son, in a far more basic way without the details, about how even at their age and at any age, not to be a bystander. My husband and I talk about that all the time with our kids, you see another child being bullied at school, you see someone being picked on, or any of those things. Being a bystander, in my view, is a crime. If you see an abuse taking place in front of you, and you don't step up and you don't speak out, then you are a culprit too. In India, this rape culture has always been there. I read an article that said that 30 plus thousand rapes per year, which amounts to 92 per day, occur. But these are only the ones that are reported, the actual number is much more severe. So bringing it back here to this county, in the South Asian community, some of the concerns that we have are with the political climate of this country, which is a whole different topic.

One of the concerns that I have is with immigration, I think there needs to be significant immigration reform. That is something that I am very passionate about, I used to practice immigration law in England. When I compare the U.S. immigration policy with that of England's, it really makes my blood boil. For our community and the work that we do for our survivors, who have dependent visas, there is a big concern that someone who comes into this country as a dependent on their spouse, will not report because the perpetrator basically says, "I'll get you deported if you report me." Now, it's a real fear. Years ago, [the perpetrator] could say that and you could say to a survivor that that's not something that's going to happen, but now it is being enforced. People are being deported left, right, and center. It's a growing concern, where we are worried, because of the stringent and inhumane immigration policies in this country that our survivors will suffer, they are suffering. A growing disturbing trend that we have seen is that the perpetrators file false allegations in a criminal case against a survivor because once you have a criminal charge, you can be subject to deportation because of it. There are various ways they are navigating the immigration policies in this country, which are totally inhumane and concerning for me.

On the hope side, Manavi for the first time ever, received a grant called "Engaging Men as Allies." Our goal is to engage men and young boys because we went to do work in prevention. We go into spaces so we can talk about why men very much need to be a part of the women's rights movement. They need to be equally involved, be equally engaged, they need to be standing up. We don't want women's rights to be seen as women's issues, it's a man's issue too. This is something in the past that we haven't had funding behind, but now we do. This is something I actively want to push for, to make sure that South Asian men, men of color, and men overall are actively engaged alongside women in the women's rights movement, to step up to take responsibility and accountability.

**NS & PS: What advice would you give to young women and girls about starting this conversation in the community but also within the family? Since sexual health is never really talked about, what advice would you offer?**

**NB:** I think the most important thing is what you started with, having a conversation. Recently, we did a South Asian Youth Summit at Rutgers. One thing that came out was that young women, a lot of the time, were saying that they didn't feel comfortable to bring up those conversations. One thing that we kept repeating was that when there is an article or a scene in a TV show that makes you uncomfortable about sex or sexual violence, remember that you can't talk about sexual violence if the word sex is taboo in your family. Once, someone said that going to a gynecologist was something that they could not even discuss.

The key is for young women, when you're with your mother or father or brother: talk about periods. They're basic things, but they're not. If there is a discomfort in talking about periods or what sexuality means or what sexual orientation means, you are not going to get to the point about talking about sexual violence in a dating relationship. We actually have survivors who are in a dating relationship who wouldn't dream of telling their families or parents. Why? Because telling them about dating in itself is taboo. So how are they going to put themselves in a position to talk about that? My advice would be that, it is really important, even if it is uncomfortable, to be the person in the room to allow for opportunities, talk about a news article that talks about women's health for example. We do that with our kids.

This is a classic example, my daughter came home the other day, she's twelve, and she said "we watched a video about consent," and I said, "tell me what that means, tell me everything," and I had my son in the room. I said [to my son] I want you to sit here and listen, and my husband was in the room, we all as a family sat down and listened to it. The amazing thing was that this was the exact same video that I made a male staffer watch. It's a basic video about consent that is done in a very humorous way. Just go on YouTube, it has a British version and an American version, it's fantastic. It opened up the dialogue and she starts talking to me about it. The way we responded to that makes a difference. My son was kind of unsure, but we had to break it down for him. He said, "well if I want to hold a girl's hand, can't I just hold it?" No. That's what consent means. We had a very meaningful conversation about what [consent] meant and [my daughter] felt comfortable. I think, going back to your question, even if it didn't happen when you were 6, 7, 8, 9, or 12, 13, as a teenager, I think it's important when you're at the dinner table, when you're together, make room for conversation to talk about women's health. You can start in a soft way, "oh I was reading this article the other day about women's health and how it's important to go to the gynecologist," for example. Or having a conversation about rapes in India. What does your dad or brother think about that? I think that's a very valid conversation to have. "What do you think we should be doing as a community? What do you think went wrong? What do you think are the conversations we should all be having with men in the room?"

You'd be surprised how many men...don't fully comprehend the term consent, what it actually means. The reason it's important to have these conversations is first of all to get away from that discomfort. Our biggest problem in the South Asian community is that we have so much

discomfort around these issues. If there's a scene or something on TV, we get the remote and we quickly shift the channel.

**NS & PS:** Thank you so much. That was amazing. We really appreciate it.