Southall Black Sisters

Hannana Siddiqui speaks to Rasna Warah

Southall Black Sisters (SBS) is one of the most vocal and active organisations for Asian and Afro Caribbean women in Britain. In the last 15 years it has conducted highly successful campaigns around discriminatory immigration laws, illegal "virginity" tests at Heathrow airport, domestic violence and other issues that affect British Asian women in particular. Hannana Siddiqui, a longtime member of Southall Black Sisters, was interviewed by Rasna Warah about some of the issues her organisation has been handling.

How and why was SBS formed?

SBS was set up in 1979 at the peak of the anti-racist movement in this country. Asian and Afro-Carib-bean women came together to address some of the issues that affect Black women. We defined ourselves as "Black" in a political sense because we felt that there was a need to unite on a common front against racism, given our common history of colonialism, imperialism andcontemporary racism. A lot of people were coming together on these issues at the time, redefining themselves as Bla ;k and creating that kind of anti-racist political movement. So we came together on the same issues—anti-racism—but also because we felt that there was a need to address issues around the oppression of women because in our own communities these issues were not being addressed. The Asian community, like any other com-munity, is very male-dominated and it wasn't in the interest of the leaders of this community to address the issues that women were facing within the family, the home and so forth.

Aroun<| that time, there was a lot of protest and anger against the Na-tional Front, a fascist organisation which was allowed to march through Southall (an area in the west of Lon-don where SBS is based). The whole community came out in protest. The police attacked the Asian protestors. Many people, including one white anti-racist, were killed by the police. So, there was a lot of anger against racism and fascism at that time.

Around the same time, there was a woman called Mrs Dhillon who, along with her five children, was set on fire and killed by her husband for no other reason except that she had produced five daughters and no sons. There was a kind of silence in the community about her death. It was outrageous because, on the one hand, racism and very active against racism, but, on the other hand, when it came to women' s oppression, they were silent. So there was a need for us to organise as women, as Black women, within the community to address some of these issues which the community did not want to take up.

In the early years we were a campaigning organisation. We campaigned against racial attacks; we worked towards the unionisation of women in the workplace; we

Hanna Siddiqui of Southall Black Sisters

supported Women strikers. We also protested against virginity tests on Indian women that were taking place at Heathrow airport by organising pickets and so forth. That practice was eventually stopped. [In the early 1980s, the British im-migration authorities devised a new scheme to attempt to detect marriages of convenience. They started testing new Indian brides who arrived in Lon-don to join their spouses by checking to see if they were virgins. If they were, they were considered "fake" brides. It was assumed that all unmar-ried Indian women are virgins. The practice caused an uproar among the Asian community in Britain.]

In 1983 we got funding from the Greater London Council (GLC), which was the London regional authority. Later on, when the GLC was abol-ished, funding was taken over by the local authority. As a result of funding, we were able to set up a centre and provide day-to-day help and practical services for women. We now provide an information, advice, resource and counselling centre for women. The majority of women who come to us are Asians because of SBS' location, al-though we help women from all racial and cultural backgrounds.

What are the main problems of the women who come to you?

Domestic violence and matrimonial problems are the main reasons why women come to us. Young Asian girls seek help when they face problems of forced arranged marriages, have restrictions placed on their lifestyles— which can also extend to simple things like not being able to wear western clothes or going out with friends—or are denied careers and education and pressured into marriage instead.

We also deal with a whole range of related problems such as homelessness, childcare needs, social security benefits, claims, problems with debt and immigration problems. There is a rule in this country that if your status is unsettled and you are married to a spouse with a settled status, then you have to stay within that marriage for at least a year before you can get to stay indefinitely. If the marriage breaks down within thatyear, you are liable for deportation. Women who face violence within that marriage are then caught in a life-threatening situation because if they leave the man, they can be deported. Many are from the Indian subcontinent—cultures where they get socially outcast for being divorced or separated—so they are terrified of being deported.

Also, in this country there is a rule that if you leave that marriage, not only are you liable for deportation, but you also can't have recourse to public funds, which means you cannot claim anything from the welfare state—so-cial security, housing and so on. You cannot even go to a women's shelter or refuge because those refuges depend on housing benefits to pay for their rent and so forth. So these women also find it very difficult to find refuge spaces. These women, who are largely Black and migrant women—largely this category has problems of immigration—have no recourse to avenues which other battered women have in this society because they will be breaking the rules.

Their chances of staying in this country are very slim. They don' t have effective rights to appeal. They depend on the decision of the home secretary who exercises his (so far, it has always been a man) discretion on whether to allow them to stay on compassionate grounds. Case after case has been refused. They don't really exercise that compassion in favour of the woman. If they leave, they face all these problems; if they stay, they risk their lives and the lives of their children. The men tend to use that power to control the women, knowing that these women can't go out and get help. A lot of the women who face theseproblemsoftengoback to that kind of relationship because of the fear of being sent back and not having anywhere else to go.

These are problems that occur within the first year of marriage. After the first year are they entitled to stay?

Sometimes the first year gets extended to two years because the husbands haven't gone on to regularise their status or the period has been extended through the Home

Office. When you come into this country, your passport gets stamped immedi-ately saying that you've got one year. Within that year, the Home Office writes to the husband giving him a list of questions to answer, such as whether his marriage has worked out or whether he is still living with his wife. He has to respond to that letter and go back to the Home Office, which then gives the wife indefinite leave to remain.

Often the marriage breaks down within that one year. Men often use that letter as a way of controlling women. The man may refuse to reply to the letter. Thus another six months may go by until the Home Office writes another letter and maybe another six months will go by. The woman can end up living in this uncertain situation for two or three years. We have got women who have been here eight or nine years and their status is still not regularised.

How does the SBS help women in this situation?

What can we say to them? Sometimes, if it's really horrific, we have to try to convince some refuges to take on a woman who has immigra-tion problems. There are very few refuges in a position to do that. Where there are such resources available, we try and get a woman to a refuge and then maybe campaign for her to remain here. Often we ar; put in a situation where we have to say, "Go back and get your stay and ihen move out." We are in a dilemma because we obvi-ously want to help the woman but she has very few options. If she is lucky, she may have relatives here who will help.

We did win one campaign, however. An Asian woman was being deported to Pakistan. She had been raped by a Pakistani man who is a British citizen, but she found it very difficult to go to the Pakistani authorities about it because you need four independent male witnesses to prove rape in Pakistan. If you cannot prove rape, you get convicted on *Zina* laws, the Islamic laws on adultery. She ultimately ended up marrying her rapist because if she couldn't prove rape, she would have been convicted for adultery for which the ultimate penalty is death, hard labour or impris-onment. She was brought into this country by him because he normally lived here. Her husband exploited the situation—he would beat her and of-ten was very violent. She has two children by him. Then when she tried to take some action against him for his violence, he informed the Home Office that she was an illegal immigrant.The authorities then tried to deport her. In fact,on two occasions, she was taken into detention and nearly sent off. We really had to campaign hard for her and her children to" stay on in this country. We were successful, I think, because the British government would have been shown in a very poor light if it sent someone back to a regime like that. However, I think permission to remain here is refused in most cases. Recently we made a representa-tion to the Home Office about the need to change immigration laws—the need to abolish the one-year rule, the need to review all the immigration rules so that these battered women are not denied rights which other women have. The government response has been, "Yes, we obviously don't want any woman to suffer, but at the same time we are not prepared to do much. Each case will be considered on its own merit." In fact, the government has not moved on this is-sue. I think it is a reflection of their whole policy to-wards immigral on as well as disc r i m i n a t i o n against Black people. The government is making very sympathetic noises about domes-tic violence—such as saying that there is a need to improve response to do-mestic violence—and yet they refuse to modify the immigration procedures that discriminate against Black women.

Tell us more about some of SBS' campaigns which have been success-ful.

Since our campaigns are reflective of the experiences of women who come here, most of our campaigns over the years have centred around domestic violence. The campaigns have focused on very tragic cases in which women have either committed suicide or been murderedby theirhusbandsorpartners.

In the early '80s we had the case of Krishna Sharma who hung herself after years of violence. Later on we had the case of Balwant Kaur who had escaped to an Asian women's refuge but was tracked down by her husband and stabbed to death in front of her children. In these cases we tried to highlight the shortfalls within the

The Balwant Kaur campaign

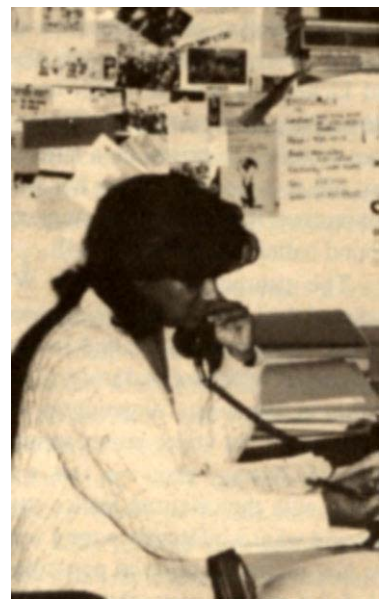
community—the need for exposing domestic violence and refusing to be silent on the issue.

In Krishna Sharma's case, we borrowed from the Indian women's movement. We picketed outside the husband's house and we demonstrated through Southall. These were cam-paigns led by women who had gone through violence themselves. The idea was to turn the concept of shame on its headand say thatit is not dishonourable for women to leave violent partners; it's more dishonourable for a commu-nity to condemn women who try to leave.They are the ones who should be ashamed; they are the ones who should be condemned by our community and society and not the women. Women get shunned and castigated if they leave their husbands because it is seen as a blemish on the honour of their fami-lies. What we are saying is we should condemn the right people. That was the first time in this country that the issue of domestic violence exploded publicly within the Asian communities. Above all, in Balwant Kaur's case, we wanted to make sure that the criminal justice system recognised that this was a crime. Domestic violence is often seen as a private issue in which the husband has a right to do what he wants because his wife is his property. In the case of Balwant Kaur, her hus-band was taken to trial and the defehse argued that it was not as serious as £ny other murder because it was a domes-tic murder. It was an attempt to trivialise the killing as if it was a pri-vate domestic matter and not a crime. Women in this country had been campaigning to get domestic violence recognised as a criminal offence. We picketed the courts to make sure it was recognised as a crime. In that case, we were successful. The husband was convicted of murder.

What was the reaction of the Asian community to your campaign?

The Asian community was very hostile because it felt very threatened about what we were doing. The right-wing sections of the community said that we were home-wreckers, that we were an alien force, that we weren't Asian, that we were westernised, that we were outsiders and, therefore, what we had to say wasn't legitimate to the community.

On the other hand, the more liberal anti-racists would advise us to maintain a silence on domestic violence because if we talked about the issue within the Asian communities we would create a racist backlash. In fact, sections of the left



Meena Patel, a worker at Southhall Black Sisters

group even used some of the rhetoric of the right to condemn us. The Indian Workers' Association, for instance, accused us of being involved in a conspiracy against the very fabric of Asian culture. They tried to close our centre down by trying to persuade the local authority, which was a Labour council at the time, to withdraw our funding. The threat at that time was very real because the Labour council was looking at ways to make cuts. They were under pressure from the central government to keep their rates down. (Rates are a way of raising local money for councils and other local expenses).

Most of the Asian councils were male Asian councils; their views were very much in line with the Indian Workers' Association. The Labour council held the view that they must listen to what the community had to say. It was assumed that there are no divisions within that community and that what the leaders of the community said was what the community wanted. They didn't recognise that there are power divisions, that the leaders are the most powerful, the most conservative, the most patriarchal forces who don' t represent the interests of women and other vulnerable groups.

For the Labour council, it was a way of being anti-racist, a way of being liberal and tolerant of other cultures. This is the multi cultural view—people who say that they are anti-racist and do not intervene because to do so would be racist. They say: "We tolerate and respect your religion and culture. We live in a multi cultural socii ty and we have no right, therefore, to intervene in ycur culture and tell you how to do things. You have your own way of doing tilings." As a result, we often have problems with professionals like social workers who may not want to intervene to help women who are facing domestic violence or who are being forced into arranged marriages.

We mobilised women and showed that there was support for us within the community. The women lobbied the council and said to them, "Where will we go for help? We need the centre. If you are an equal opportunities council, what about your equal opportunities as far as women are concerned?" We then managed to save the centre because it would have been too politi-cally embarrassing for the Labour council to cut us.

Could you tell us about your in-volvement in the precedent setting case of Kiranjit Ahluwalia whomurdered her husband after suffering years of violence?

We met Kiranjit in late 1989 just before her trial. She'd been living in Crawley in West Sussex. Kiranjit's main concern at that time was her children. She was worried about who was going to look after them, their future and so on. One of our main concerns was that she have good legal representation on something as serious as murder. However, we weren't in a position to change her legal representatives at the time be-cause her trial date was very close. She had already changed one set of solicitors and that had taken a very long time so she was reluctant to change them again.

In the trial, obviously, the whole issue of domestic violence—questions such as why it was difficult for a woman to escape, why domestic violence affects Asian women in particular so badly— wasn't well represented by the solicitors. We tried approaching the solicitors to provide support on these issues but they weren' t interested in being briefed by us. So she was convicted.

We then became more involved in her case. We changed solicitors and then worked towards an appeal. At that time there hadn't been any debate in this country about battered women who kill. Certain legal academics had been discussing the homicide laws and the shortfalls within them, but there hadn't been a wide generalised cam-paign around battered women who had been killing their violent partners. There had certainly been debate taking place in other countries like America. We looked towards America for information, for political as well as legal arguments about how to construct her case. We had to reconstruct it because in order for an appeal to be successful and in order for her to win support, we had to build a general consensus. We began that work after her conviction.

Around July 1990 another woman who had killed her husband, Sara Thornton, had gone to appeal and her appeal had been rejected. Just after her appeal had been dismissed, there was a case of a man who had kicked his alcoholic wife to death and he was allowed to go free. And here was Sara arguing in her appeal that she had faced months of abuse and violence but had not been successful in proving provocation. As a protest, she went on hunger strike. The media picked this up. They looked at the injustice of having, on the one hand, a man who had kicked his wife to death being allowed to go free, and on the other, a woman sitting in prison on a mandatory life sentence for killing her violent partner. It added to the campaign around battered women who kill.

The campaign continued. We picketed the Home Office. We joined up with another group called Justice for Women, which formed around Sara Thornton. We were campaigning for Kiranjit and the wider issues around homicide laws—what we felt was wrong with the criminal justice sys-tem and what we felt was wrong with the law on provocation in particular. We felt that a requirement that you've got to respond immediately to an act of provocation was unreasonable. We said battered women weren't in a position to act immediately because they know from past experience that the man is violent. They know that if they act immediately, they can be beaten up even worse or killed. They may respond later, when the man is temporarily notas strong, for example, when he's drunk or asleep. Kiranjit killed her husband when he was asleep; Sara killed her husband when he was dozing and drunk.

Women in America had said that women may respond a little later because they're not in a position to respond immediately—they're cowed down, they're intimidated, they know what the response is going to be. In this country, the law on provocation says that if there's a time gap between the act of provocation and the act of retaliation, then you've had time to cool off, calm down, premeditate. Our argument was that you can become increasingly desperate. The woman may have tried other options. Kiranjit got two court injunctions that didn't work. Sara called the police several times. They had tried other options but these hadn't worked. So when they killed, they killed out of desperation. They had boiled over and not necessarily cooled down. These were our arguments for the reforming of the law on provocati«n.

When the appeal came up, the court quashed Kiranjit's conviction and ordered a retrial. However, she was actually released before the retrial in September 1992 because the Crown Prosecution Service, which is the prosecuting body in this country, used their discretion eventually to accept a plea of manslaughter, which is a lesser offence and which recognised that she killed her husband under mitigating circumstances. She was released on diminished responsibility, which is the argument that she was so depressed that she had not been in full control of what she was doing.

However, we were using a dual defence. We said there was diminished responsibility and there was provoca-tion. What had happened in the Court of Appeal was that the way the Lord Chief Justice made the ruling had the effect of actually reforming the law on provocation. He said that any time gap is not necessarily a cooling off period; it could be a boiling over period and, therefore, one does not have to respond immediately to an act

of provocation.

What we' ve been doing since then is lobbying. We made representations to the Home Affairs Select Committee and various people, saying that now that the change has taken place in the courts and in case law, it should be reflected in the statute—it should be reinforced by Parliament. Although the Home Affairs Select Committee has supported our demand for reform in the law on provocation, the govern-ment is resisting it because they are saying that it will open the floodgates and create a licence to kill—more re-venge killings and so on. What we are saying is that the law should be flex-ible enough to include the experiences of battered women. Men have found it very easy to argue provocation be-cause they are in a position to respond immediately—they are physically stronger. And the courts have been very sympathetic to men when they've argued, "I killed my wife because she was nagging me" or "She was having an affair and I couldn't stand it." Yet when women say, "Well, look, I was provoked and I killed him later be-cause he was battering me," it doesn't get the same sympathy.

Women very rarely kill, anyway. In most cases, they either get killed, they tolerate the situation or they leave the relationship. The figuresof women killing theirpartners is very low. They are not going to rush out and kill their husbands if the law changes. In fact, in New South Wales, where the law on provocation was reformed in 1982, research has shown, among other things, that it hasn't lead to an in-crease in killing; nor are people get-ting off lightly. The government doesn't have any evidence to back up what it is saying.

What was the reaction of the Asian community in this case?

What was interesting this time was that we had far more support from the community than we have ever had. There was an amazing kind of support for Kiranjit. The Indian Workers' As-sociation (IWA), which at one time had wanted to close us down, even held a public support meeting in Southall before Kiranjit was released. Py ara Khabra, who was the head of the IWA at that time, and who is now the Member of Parliament for Southall, actually publicly announced that we need to change the law. I think it was the fact of women campaigning which forced them to acknowledge that domestic violence is a problem. The Asian women's movement has really grown in this country. After Kiranjit's case, far more women have been cam-paigning around domestic violence.

Recent studies in Britain suggest that the suicide rate among Asian women is much higher than itisfor women of British origin. What lies be hind these figures?

Asian women are under a lot of pressure to conform to traditional roles. Then there's a whole range of social pressures or contributing factors such as sexual abuse and violence and the problem of leaving a minority community and going out into a hostile society where they face racism. All this adds to their depression which may make them more likely to commit suicide.

A recent study from Northwest and Northeast Thames Health Authorities reveals that Asian women aged between 16 and 24 are three times more likely to commit suicide than white women of the same age. Between the ages of 25 and 34 the suicide rate is twice as high. Over the age of 34, however, there is almost no difference.

The same study found that Asian women in Britain are nine times more likely to kill themselves by setting themselves on fire. It is believed that these were probably imitations of Sati.

Other studies have shown that a lotof Asian migrantcommunities have high suicide rates. For example, in Fiji, the suicide rate among the migrant Asian community is quite high. A lot of the women who come to us have attempted suicide. Cutting their wrists is a very common way but studies have shown that the two main ways in which Asian women commit suicide are burning or hanging.

***Do you think these are imitations of* Sari?**

Well, it's very hard to give a full explanation as to why they'd use fire but I think it's also linked with the notion of purity. You 'enow the reli-gious concept of purification through fire—the test of fire. But that's theory. We've had a recent case of a woman who threw petrol over herself and killed herself in the bathroom. We just had an inquest into her death and it was found that she was so unhappy in her marriage that she felt that she had no option but to kill herself.

Could these suicides, in fact, be murder, as they often are in India?

You mean dowry deaths? No, in this country we don't have as many dowry deaths, although women do get harassed for dowry. That, however, is often a reason for domestic violence.

Can you explain the whole phenomenon of the "bounty hunter"

and why an increasing number of young Asian women are running away from home?

A man called Tahir Mahmoud, known as the "bounty hunter" because he is allegedly hired by Asian families to track down sisters or daughters who have run away from home.

Among Asian women who run away, the main issues tend to be forced arranged marriages as well as sexual and physical abuse within the home. Then there are young women who want to have their own relationships. For example, a Sikh girl may have a Muslim boyfriend.

There are other kinds of pressures that these women face. One of them is the rise of religious fundamentalism, which puts pressure on women to re-turn to more traditional roles. That's linked to the rise of the phenomenon of the "bounty hunter" which is about gangs of men trying topolice women's lives. They are the moral police. They go and hunt women down, intimidate them and force them back. They get paid or don't getpaid—it doesn 't matter. The point is, they still want to do it because they want to control women's behaviour. I think that's linked to the much wider issue of the rise of religious fundamentalism—if not religious fundamentalism, then the reinforce-ment of very conservative and ortho-dox thinking, which is not only taking place in the Asian communities but is having a much wider effect. You've got the growth of the New Right and the growth of very conservative thinking even among the mainstream British society. Religious fundamen-talism is on the rise internationally and in all religions.

In this country, the Rushdie affair was a kind of symbolic stage in how people were looking to reidentify themselves internally and externally. It's a reidentification along religious lines. Let's say that 10 years ago we may have wanted to call ourselves Black. The pressure now is to identify ourselves along our religious identities, Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Christian and so on. This is a dangerous movement because it means greater segregation and separation and the forma-tion of more bigoted identities along reactionary ideas of what is accept-able behaviour. This kind of thinking is influencing all communities.

The SBS and another group we helped found, Women Against Fundamentalism, which is a group of women of all racial and religious backgrounds who've come together to oppose religious fundamentalism, are looking at the experiences of women in particular. The attack against women is central for all these religions. Women are seen as the transmitters of culture in the long-term, from one generation to the next. Consequently, there's a battle to control women's hearts, minds and bodies.

You've got "bounty hunters" at-tacking institutions that have been set up—like going to refuges and hostels and dragging women out. And there's not just the one "bounty hunter" up in Huddersfield—where TahirMahmoud is based—he also uses networks of mini-cabdrivers, shopkeepers, people working in the social security offices and others to find these women. There are also other kinds of gangs of men like the Shere Punjab in Birmingham which has existed for years. The gangs are very active in the north east of England and in the Midlands.

Then there areother ways in which the fundamentalists' agenda has affected women's lives. They want to take over women's institutions so that they can have greater control. One way is to get funding and take over women's refuges. For example, for the first time, (here is a Muslim women's refuge set up in the east of London. There is also the demand for separate

religious schools. The idea is to segregate girls or take them out of state co-education schools and indoctrinate them from a very young age. One of the reasons behind this is that they are very threat-ened by the women's movement. In their mind, girls from their community are being corrupted by western influ-ences and, therefore, they want to be able to bring them up in their own culture and religion. It is largely women who have taken up this battle against fundamentalism. But again, some of the criticism that is directed against us by the anti-racists is that we are refuelling racism and that Muslims are under attack.

Why don't the women who have been abducted by the "bounty hunters" report their abduction to the police?

The police said they have inter-viewed some of them. However, they say it is very hard for them to pursue charges because they need enough evidence—they need witnesses who will come forward and give evidence in court. A lot of the women are too frightened to do so. You've got to remember these are very tightly-knit communities and it's very easy to find young women and they are very, very frightened.

The TV programme which ex-posed the "bounty hunter" made the situation worse because they presented the whole case only through the eyes of violent men. They only heard what Mahmoud had to say; they listened to what husbands and fathers had to say. The TV programme never got a woman to come forward with her own perspec-tive. Moreover, they never talked about the options available to women who wanted to get away from their families. They made it look as if no matter what you did, you couldn't get away. The programme was very sympathetic to violent men and, therefore, it was irre-sponsible. We had calls from women who were just too frightened to leave because they thought they'd get tracked down. I spoke to a few women who were living in a hostel and who had been harassed by the "bounty hunter". They said they were too terrified to pursue criminal charges. They have enough problems just trying to stay in hiding and keeping away from their families. The programme discouragedthem further from seeking help.

Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of organisations like yours?

I don't know. I need time to think about it. I think the situation is becom-ing worse. Not only are we struggling to get money and funding to keep even basic services but women's lives are becoming harder. People are becoming poorer; there's rising racism and fascism. For the first time this year, we had a fascist councillor elected to the east of London. At present there's a conservative government and the left is in disarray.

The fundamental!sts give hope to people, particularly to young men who are disillusioned and who are facing unemployment and racism.

They may turn to fundamentalism as a solution to negative self-identity. You also see some women take on that identity because they see it as an anti-racist, anti-imperialist identity and something more positive. So I think things are getting worse and they'll get much harder.

What is very encouraging is that while that is happening, there's the resistance movement as well. You've got far more Asian women becoming active around domestic violence, Turkish women taking up issues in their communities, Asian women forming new groups. There's a group in Manchester who have set themselves up as Manchester Black Sisters. So there's a lot happening as well. There's a revival in the movement as well as a backlash. But we've still a long way to go. ❐