Brent Asian Women’s Refuge and Resource Centre

The Asian Women’s project in Brent, run by Asian women for Asian women, consists of a resource centre and a refuge for Asian women who have suffered violence in the family.

The Asian women’s refuge and the resource centre are both run on the principle that Asian women organize autonomously, in their own right. This is based on our understanding that it is Asian women who best know our particular position in society, and thus are best able to tackle issues affecting us. The project is structured so that Asian women direct the work, as well as run it, without control being exercised from outside, be it the Council, caste leaders or other organizations.

The Resource Centre

The work of the resource centre is to provide facilities, advice and information to women living in the community. We give advice to women on a number of issues — housing, immigration and nationality, welfare benefits, education of their children, etc. We have two language classes for children to teach them Gujarati and Urdu. There are approximately one hundred children attending these classes.

An important area of work at the resource centre is campaigning on issues affecting Asian women and the Black community. We have been involved in campaigning against racist practices such as passports being demanded of Black people when using the National Health Service or when claiming welfare benefits; sexist immigration laws which do not allow Black women to pass on their rights of settlement to their husbands or give independent status to Black women apart from their husbands and so force women to remain in violent domestic situations. The Resource Centre also produces information and educational material in various Asian languages for the use of Asian women.

The Refuge

In the last five years or so, we have seen five Asian women’s refuges set up as well as the development of numerous Asian women’s groups and centres all over London and throughout the country as a whole. These facilities and provisions have been slow in coming and where they do exist, have been the result of long struggles against racism, particularly the racism of the local state. In addition, there have been cries of outrage from Asian community ‘leaders’ who feel that the needs of Asian women are adequately met by existing agencies and who fail to recognize that traditional values within the Asian community can be oppressive to Asian women. The Asian family system is beleaguered and under attack from all sides, from extreme right wing organizations, stricter immigration controls which have split up families, and the fear and insecurity of living in the present political and economic climate in this country. This climate has ensured that for the Asian community to survive at all, it had to survive as a well-knit, tightly organized community. It is extremely difficult for Asian women to achieve and lead independent lives apart from their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons.

There is also the fear of being accused of divisiveness in the struggle against racism when we talk of the specific ways in which we as women are affected by racism. We have been silenced by our brothers, fathers, husbands, mothers and sisters, by
tradition. This tradition which says that women are subservient to men, that women must be 'dutiful' and 'suffer' at whatever cost, to preserve the family's 'izzat' — simply because we are women. Therefore, for us the decision to leave a violent home might mean having to break from the community we are born and brought up in. Often the isolation caused and the stigma attached to leaving a violent and unhappy home is worse than continuing to stay in such a situation. But as more and more women leave, we have been able to build support networks, exchange ideas and experiences, and provide strength, support and courage to others to show that they are not alone.

An Asian women's refuge has been operating in Brent since 1981. There are only two Asian women's refuges in the whole of London, the other being in the London Borough of Southwark. The need for an autonomous Asian women's refuge, run for and by Asian women arose out of the experiences which Asian women had when they used women's aid refuges, where often they had to put up with a lot of racism. The last thing a woman wants when she seeks shelter in a refuge is to have her cultural traditions and values attacked by women who feel they know and understand what is best for her. The experience of being subjected to violence by men, although unifying women, can also form the basis for racist assumptions and stereotyping about men in general and black men in particular. Thus, the experience of Asian women in some of these refuges led us to campaign for the setting up of autonomous Asian women's refuges, as these are better placed to support and understand Asian women, in terms of family ties, customs and traditions and the structure of the Asian community in Britain.

Once women arrive at the refuge however they are still confronted with a mass of bureaucracy, of state institutions, racist laws and attitudes of the officials at local housing departments, Department of Health and Social Security offices, and courts. This starts from the first day of arriving, when the local DHSS office is contacted for women who are not working and those who had to leave their jobs in order to come to the refuge. The women are often interrogated about the intimate details of their personal lives. The kind of questions asked reflect the racist and sexist stereotype officials have of Asian women. It is assumed that it is the husband who is responsible for maintaining the wife, women are seen as mere appendages of men. At every step there is a fight to obtain the benefit women are entitled to, be it a clothing grant, furniture grant or other type of benefit. Sometimes in order to obtain benefits passports are demanded to prove that Asian women have a right to be in this country. It is not therefore merely a question of fighting against male violence or traditions in our community. These have to be put in a particular political context. Asian women have to fight on a number of different fronts simultaneously. Many women who use the refuge are fighting deportation. They are abandoned by their husbands who have failed to legitimize their status in this country and consequently end up struggling against both the local and the national state. Not only do they have to fight for the right to remain in this country, they also have to fight for adequate housing in areas where they are not the focus for racist and sexist attack and may have support systems and networks established. The day-to-day reality of these women's lives reflects the harshness of patriarchal oppression linked to the oppressive practices of the British state. Their lives are structured in terms of different elements of oppression and it is by coming together that Asian women have gained the strength to overcome these difficulties.

Asian women's refuges have to work in a framework where policies and practices, regulations and laws are tilted in favour of white people, particularly white, middle-class men. In one case a local court judge made women undertake 'not to molest, harass or otherwise interfere' with their husbands against whom they had applied for an injunction. Even where an injunction is granted they do not necessarily provide protection from violence because the police are loath to interfere in 'domestic matters'.
If the injunction is breeched the onus is on the woman to go to court, thus making it quite ineffective. And of course there is the issue of racism. Asian women are all too conscious of the ways in which the police abuse their powers in their efforts at controlling the Black community and this extends to their treatment of Black men whom they will beat up and keep overnight in police custody for the flimsiest reasons. The setting up of an Asian women’s refuge is just the first step towards challenging male structures and dominance both in our own communities and in the wider society. The refuge gives a positive alternative for women who have survived violence in the home and challenges the terms in which women have been conditioned to think of themselves as powerless to have any say in their lives. It gives them an opportunity to share their experiences with other women, something which they do not often have an opportunity for in the outside community. The strength and confidence thus gained makes it possible for women to fight back.

Asian Women’s Resource Centre, 134 Minet Avenue, London NW10, telephone 01-961-6549. All Asian women interested in helping with our work are welcomed.