

Responding to violence against South Asian women in the British domestic violence movement

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Over the last decade there has been an increasing amount of societal and political attention given to violence against women in South Asian communities in Britain. This mounting interest has mostly been focused on specific forms of abuse – namely honour-based violence and forced marriage – which have been associated predominantly with South Asian, and in particular Muslim, cultures. However, evidence suggests that Western conceptualisations and responses to this violence have been largely informed by simplistic and essentialist notions of culture, leading to stereotypes and misapprehensions of South Asian communities as homogenous, patriarchal and inherently violent, and of South Asian women as passive victims waiting to be rescued by more civilised (Western) societies. To date there is currently little, if any, empirical research that examines how the British domestic violence movement is operating in this difficult terrain. This snapshot outlines an aspect of my PhD research which aims to examine how notions of culture and difference shape movement responses to violence against South Asian women.

Keywords: Domestic Violence Movement, Violence against South Asian Women, Racism, Cultural Essentialism, Intersectionality Theory

Introduction

Issues of racial exclusion and discrimination have long haunted the domestic violence movement. Substantial evidence suggests that racially exclusive practices have affected movement membership and corrupted domestic violence work

for decades, particularly in relation to outreach and support efforts in black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities (Mama 1989; Bent-Goodley 2005). Indeed, during the earlier stages of the movement white radical feminists strategically situated gender inequality

as the sole determining factor of violence against women in order to demonstrate that all women, irrespective of age, class or race, were its potential victims (Russell 1975; Martin 1976; Barry 1979), yet in doing so largely failed to represent the diverse experiences and needs of abused poor and BAME women across Britain (Carby 1982; Hill Collins 1990). However, while recent studies have highlighted the enduring ethnocentricity of the domestic violence movement as a 'white woman's movement' (Lehrner and Allen 2009, 13; see also Macy et al 2010), my research intends to draw attention to rather the opposite occurrence, whereby the increasingly problematic race-focused and Eurocentric gaze of the British domestic violence movement is facilitating a disproportionate amount of attention to violence against South Asian women. It appears that issues of difference and diversity are resurfacing as main challenges for the movement, both in relation to fragmentation between specialist identity groups and organisations (Bent-Goodley 2005), and with regards to responding effectively to the diverse needs of abused women situated at the intersections of race, ethnicity and culture (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005; Motta et al 2011).

This snapshot therefore establishes the importance of empirically examining the extent to which domestic violence activists and organisations in North East England feel

they are responding effectively to all forms of violence against South Asian women. This is especially important to explore in the current climate, which several feminist scholars and activists have argued is characterised by essentialist conceptualisations that tend to link this abuse solely to South Asian cultural practice and traditions, or to notions of 'honour' and 'shame' (Meetoo & Mirza 2007). However, while examples of inadequate state responses to this violence are plentiful (see Gupta 2005 in particular), there is currently very little, if any, empirical research to evidence the challenges and strategies that the domestic violence movement – and in particular activists from non-BAME led organisations – has established when responding to violence against women from different cultures and ethnicities to their own. Considering that domestic violence organisations are usually the first point of contact for victims of domestic abuse, it seems significant to study their understandings of, and responses to, this violence and the implications this might have for the safety and rights of abused South Asian women. I explore these issues throughout this snapshot, and conclude by considering the practicality of intersectionality theory for domestic violence movement praxis: might this positioning help domestic violence activists address the multiple and intersecting factors that condition the experiences and needs of

abused South Asian women, rather than making purely race-focused enquiries that reproduce racism and cultural essentialism?

From ethnocentricity to Eurocentricity

During the 1970s and 1980s the voices of BAME women were largely missing from the domestic violence movement (Naples 1998), but over the last two decades BAME feminists have provided invaluable theoretical contributions that have undeniably transformed feminism as a whole (Crenshaw 1991; Bryson 2003). Making a stand against the ethnocentric (white) interests of the movement, they demonstrated that the power structures which assemble around race and ethnicity interact with patriarchy to condition experiences of violence that reflect the power relations and cultural norms within specific communities and societies (Mama 1989; Hill Collins 1990; Wilson 2006). The importance of claiming a space within the British domestic violence movement was increasingly recognised by South Asian women who were responding to patriarchal gender relations both within South Asia and the South Asian diaspora in the UK during this period (Gupta 2004; Wilson 2006). In particular, South Asian feminists and activists focused on concepts of 'honour' and 'shame', explaining that the sexual purity of South Asian women is often strictly controlled by South Asian men, meaning that ex-

tra-marital relationships, refusal to marry a man chosen by her father, or becoming too 'westernised', might bring 'shame' upon the family and community, which is often enough to justify punishment (Johal 2003; Gill 2004). Today this punishment is often referred to as 'honour'-based violence, which can include physical, emotional, psychological and financial abuse, confinement or imprisonment, being forced into marriage, female genital mutilation and murder (Meetoo and Mirza 2007). Yet before this time, honour-based violence was relatively unheard of in Britain.

However, it appears the ethnocentric gaze of the British domestic violence movement is no longer the main concern of South Asian women, as the global context in which feminists and activists are responding to violence against women in South Asian communities has seemingly changed over the last decade, particularly following the events of September 11. Initially a triumph, the efforts of South Asian feminists to get honour-based violence recognised at a political level has resulted in a dangerous preoccupation with these crimes, which have become synonymous with South Asian culture despite the occurrence of this violence in the Middle East, Africa, Europe and the UK, and throughout different cultures and religions (Welchman & Hossain 2005). Scholars have argued that the current climate is characterised

by heightened societal and institutional racism against the South Asian diaspora (Burman et al 2004; Gill 2004; Patel 2008), essentialist and homogenised conceptualisations of South Asian culture (Volpp 2000, 2003; Wilson 2006) and Islamophobia-fuelled moral panics about the Muslim population (Warrier 2008; Khan 2010), all of which have made it more difficult for South Asian women attempting to challenge violence occurring within their communities. Indeed, there is substantial evidence to suggest that Western responses to forms of violence against South Asian women have been informed by stereotypes and misconceptions of South Asian culture as 'more' violent and male-controlled than Western cultures (Gupta 2003; Gill 2006; Khan 2010) and of South Asian women as homogenous, passive victims waiting to be rescued by the more civilised Western world (Volpp 2003; Sanghera 2009). Sujata Warrier (2008) argues that South Asian women have become hyper-visible in public consciousness due to the discourses of fear and risk that have been imposed on these supposedly alien and backward 'others' in recent years. Similarly, Purna Sen contends that the West's colonial encounters with 'other' cultural practices, such as the dowry, the burka, honour killings and forced marriages, have reinforced within British feminism the 'assumed moral superiority of the West over the rest' (Sen

2005, 43), hence the disproportionate attention being given to forms of honour-based violence.

The complexities of difference

The position of South Asian scholars and activists within the British domestic violence movement has thus largely shifted from their challenging of the ethnocentrism inherent in white feminists' conceptualisations of domestic violence which situated gender inequality as the sole cause of violence against women, to a critique of the increasingly problematic Eurocentric and race-focused interests of the movement which has facilitated a disproportionate amount of scholarly and political attraction to violence against South Asian women. South Asian feminists have expressed concern about the overemphasis on cultural difference and its implications for practice, particularly with regards to the domestic violence movement 'disempowering [South Asian] women still further by reinforcing negative stereotypes' (Thiara & Gill 2010, 48). In their book *From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers* (Gupta 2003), South Asian-led domestic violence organisation Southall Black Sisters have stressed the dangers of the cultural relativist assumption that all forms of violence against women from South Asian communities are related to their cultural codes and practices (i.e. to honour codes). Such outlooks have rendered activists and state agen-

cies reluctant to intervene due to respect for multiculturalism (Mee-too & Mirza 2007), and has also enabled them to overlook poverty, racism, language barriers, insecure immigration statuses, childcare responsibilities, unawareness of UK laws, fear of the police and fear of further violence as common factors that exacerbate or prolong violence against South Asian women (Burman et al 2004; Gill 2004; Sokoloff 2008). In order to effectively respond to this violence, the domestic violence movement as a whole must acknowledge these issues.

As such, my research aims to uncover how domestic violence activists in the North East are articulating and responding to the needs of abused South Asian women in the midst of problematic conceptualisations of this violence. In particular, I am interested in examining how activists might frame this violence in a way that enables them to overcome the prejudice or assumptions that hinder their attempts to effectively support and empower abused South Asian women. The problem, it seems, is that domestic violence activists are currently trapped between two essentialist discourses. To focus too much on the differences between women could lead to stereotyping and 'othering' women and cultures, as well as creating a lack of common ground between movement activists and organisations that represent different social groups, but to focus solely on

gender and patriarchy often means overlooking the ways in which gender intersects with race, ethnicity, culture, religion and other axes of identity to condition diverse experiences of violence. Furthermore, focusing solely on sameness might encourage activists to overlook structural factors, such as racist and classist social policies, and the impact this can have on women's experiences of violence and barriers to justice. It is for these reasons that my research will argue that activists' framings of domestic violence could be advanced by drawing upon intersectionality theory.

Recognising intersecting oppressions

With regards to what constitutes an effective response to violence against South Asian women, scholars, activists and several South Asian women's organisations have highlighted the importance of intersectionality theory to movement praxis (Hill Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991; McCall 2005), and feminist academics Ravi Thiara and Aisha Gill have positioned intersectionality as 'the best hope for a nuanced approach to [violence against women]' (Thiara and Gill 2010, 48). Intersectionality theory advocates recognition of 'how a woman's culture of origin, her place within the social, political and economic world, and within the society's dominant culture, can affect her experience of violence and the options available to her' (Lock-

hart and Danis 2010, xxiii). From this outlook, South Asian women are not viewed as a homogenous group that share the same cultural experiences of violence, but instead transcend this essentialist binary construction to exist as subjective individuals who are affected to different extents by intersecting forms of domination and oppression.

For example, the Western assumption that South Asian women are passive victims of cultural violence is highly problematic because it renders invisible policies that have undeniably made leaving violent relationships significantly more difficult for women from BAME communities in the UK (see Burman and Chantler 2005). State policies and practices, particularly those associated with immigration control, policing and surveillance, multiculturalism and multi-faithism agendas, English Language (ESOL) provision and housing benefits, continue to condition BAME women's experiences of domestic violence in numerous ways. While there is not sufficient space to engage with all of these issues here, a pertinent problem that numerous Black and South Asian-led organisations have been keen to address is the discrimination evident within British immigration legislation, particularly with regards to the Two Year Rule which advocates the deportation of any immigrant with a spousal visa who leaves their partner within two years of marriage. Substantial evidence

has highlighted that BAME women experiencing domestic violence within this probationary period are unlikely to report abuse due to fear of deportation (Gupta 2003). The 'no recourse to public funds' clause attached to the Two Year Rule also increases the likelihood that an immigrant women will remain in a violent relationship because, as a non-British citizen, she does not have access to state funding to pay for housing and refuge needs, or to buy food and pay for transport (Wilson 2006). Recognising forms of 'structural intersectionality' (Crenshaw 1991) is thus essential to understanding violence against diverse groups of women.

Conclusion: unanswered questions

While intersectionality theory has certainly enhanced the study of domestic violence within the academy, there is little knowledge of how this highly complex holistic approach might be, or has been, translated into practice. What strategies have domestic violence activists and organisations in the North East created for themselves, outside of the academy, in order to avoid essentialist and relativist responses to violence against women from diverse cultures, ethnicities and religions? Is a holistic, intersectional approach to violence against women even possible at a practical level? Indeed, that all violence should be explored in relation to wider social, politi-

cal and economic forces that intersect to shape inequalities, heighten the conditions for violence against women, and create barriers for justice, is arguably a rather ambitious goal for domestic violence organisations, especially in the face of recent cuts to domestic violence sector funding, organisation closures and burn-out (Towers and Walby 2012). Furthermore, might too much attention to difference pose a challenge to alliance-building strategies and collective movement identity? Is this already the case? With the aim of producing research of relevance to the domestic violence movement, I seek answers to such questions. After all, while analyses of the theoretical dimensions of cultural and ethnic difference have been enhanced by the concept of intersectionality in the academy, it is integral that we don't overlook the methodology of the movement.

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