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The women's refuge as 'homeplace': Black and Asian women's refuges in Britain as spaces of community and resistance (1980–2000)[†]

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ABSTRACT



Black Feminist theorist bell hooks has written of the way in which Black women construct 'homeplaces' as 'spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression.' But what happens when the home is not a place of safety for Black women? Beginning in the late 1970s, groups of Black women in Britain began to establish women's refuges designed to meet the needs of Black and Asian women who were experiencing domestic abuse. In so doing, they were providing an alternative homeplace where women could be safe, not only from abusive partners, but also from racism they sometimes experienced in mainstream women's refuges. This paper argues that specialist refuges were important spaces where Black women could heal from abuse, foster community, and find their political voices.

KEYWORDS

Domestic abuse; women's refuges; intersectionality; Women's Aid; anti-racism; Black Feminism; Women's Liberation Movement; political Blackness

Introduction

In 1987, Shakti Women's Aid (SWA) in Edinburgh and the Newham Asian Women's Project (NAWP) in the London borough of Newham both opened specialist women's refuges. NAWP was originally designed for Asian women and SWA for all Black women. Black feminist theorist bell hooks has written of the way in which Black women construct 'homeplaces' as 'spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression.'¹ Beginning in the late 1970s, groups of Black women in Britain established women's refuges designed to provide accommodation and support to Black women who were experiencing domestic abuse. In so doing, they provided an alternative homeplace where women could feel safe, not only from domestic abuse, but also from racism they faced when seeking help from statutory agencies and, at

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[†]The word 'Black' in this article is used to describe an identity of 'political Blackness' which was used by British anti-racist activists of Asian and African heritage in the 1980s. 'Asian' here refers mainly to South Asian women, particularly those from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, or with heritage from those countries; this was a common usage in Britain at the time. Specialist refuges were sometimes referred to as 'Asian women's refuges.' I have used the term South Asian when this offers more clarity.

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times, within mainstream refuges. By the year 2000 there were twenty-four Black and Asian women's refuges across England, thirteen of these in London, and two in Scotland.²

This article contributes to our understanding of race in post-war Britain by examining a collection of oral history interviews with activists involved in the early years of SWA and NAWP. Furthermore, it sheds light on the political engagement and sense of self-hood of Black women in England and Scotland at the end of the twentieth century. The Scottish perspective is particularly valuable as most previous historiography of Black women's activism in the UK has focused on England.³ Additionally, this article highlights new perspectives on 'political Blackness' by activists who self-identified with this concept. Finally, it explores the ways in which both SWA and NAWP activists forged spaces of resistance in which Black women could heal from abuse and discrimination, foster community and find their political voices.

Women's refuges began to be established in Britain in 1971 with the opening of a refuge for 'battered wives' in Chiswick, London by Erin Pizzey. Many Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) groups across Britain were inspired by the Chiswick refuge and formed Women's Aid groups in their localities. Women's Aid refuges were usually run on feminist principles of collective working and self-determination for survivors. In March 1975, the National Women's Aid Federation (NAAF) was founded to support the work of local groups. Scottish Women's Aid was established for Scottish groups in 1976, followed by Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland in 1977 and Welsh Women's Aid in 1978. In 1980 NAAF became Women's Aid Federation of England.⁴

In the 1970s and 1980s, discussions amongst anti-domestic abuse activists about so-called 'cultural difference' within women's refuges mostly referred to specialist provision for women of South Asian heritage.⁵ In particular, some women found that their requirements for interpreters and dietary requirements (e.g. Halal, vegetarian) were not met in mainstream women's refuges.⁶ These discussions led to the establishment of the first 'Asian women's refuges' in the late 1970s.

Additionally, there was a political aspect to this provision; Black feminist activists and their allies felt that women's refuges run by and for Black women would be better able to appreciate Black women and children's experiences of intersecting forms of oppression. Moreover, research has shown that Black women have experienced interpersonal racism within mainstream women's refuges.⁷ Experiencing racism in addition to the trauma of leaving an abusive partner or relative could be devastating and lead to women returning to their homes. Pramila Sashidharan, who helped to establish SWA, has explained that: 'Separate refuges have allowed black women space to define their own terms in fighting racism and sexism, which would not have been possible in the mainstream women's aid movement.'⁸

Historicising women's refuges: approaches and methods

Despite historian Natalie Thomlinson describing specialist women's refuges in Britain as, 'perhaps the most concrete achievement of Asian feminists in this period,' the lived experiences of the women who established them have not yet been explored by historians.⁹ Certain aspects of this history have been recorded by violence against women sociological researchers and the activists themselves, although these have focused

largely on London.¹⁰ In this article, a London borough refuge will be compared with an Edinburgh one, contributing to a fuller picture of the similarities and differences between specialist refuges across Britain.

The limited scholarship on the history of women's refuges in Britain has focused on Women's Aid as a branch of the WLM.¹¹ However, this approach is not satisfactory for the present study as there were several specialist refuges that were not affiliated to Women's Aid, including NAWP. Moreover, the history of Black and Asian women's refuges does not have its beginnings solely in the WLM. While feminist principles undoubtedly had a considerable influence, their origins should also be seen as rooted in anti-racist activism and thought. Historians Thomlinson and Jessica White have found similar dual histories in their studies of Black women's groups in England.¹²

Unlike some previous studies of the WLM which focused on the 1970s, this article examines the period from 1980 to 2000 to highlight Black women's anti-domestic abuse activism. Past scholarship has dated the decline of the WLM to the final national conference which took place in Birmingham in 1978, due to the conflict which occurred there between socialist and revolutionary feminists about issues surrounding sexuality and violence against women.¹³ However, this interpretation has been complicated by historians such as Sue Bruley, Kristin Hay, Sarah Browne and Thomlinson.¹⁴ Thomlinson has opined that, particularly when centring Black women's activism: 'Feminist activity did not just continue past 1979, but flourished and diversified.'¹⁵ The activism discussed in this article supports this assertion.

The women who founded Black and Asian women's refuges were working in between anti-racist and feminist political movements. Their analysis of violence against women was rarely solely about domestic abuse or patriarchal structures but addressed a range of forms of violence and abuse, using anti-racist, anti-colonial and Black feminist theory. As sociologists Ravi Thiara and June Freeman argued, the challenges raised by Black British feminists about violence against women in their own communities must be understood within the context of 'the prevalence of and campaign against, racism.'¹⁶ In her study of Black women's organisations in the United States, historian Kimberly Springer has spoken of interstitial politics or 'doing politics in the cracks' between the Black Power and Civil Rights Movements and the WLM.¹⁷ In this article, SWA and NAWP activists can be seen to be creating their alternative homeplace between the cracks.

White has opined that: 'Black women's centres provided women with the space and time to nurture their personal experiences of sexism and racism, achieve a sense of self-sufficiency ... celebrate their heritage' and foster a sense of self.'¹⁸ Similarly, Black women's refuges were spaces in which women and children could nurture a sense of an independent and liberated self. From the early 1970s, Women's Aid refuges had been run with an emphasis on empowering and respecting survivors of domestic abuse. Survivors were encouraged to become involved with the running of refuges by attending house meetings and Women's Aid conferences. This feminist praxis was taken forward by the activists who established Black and Asian women's refuges. Furthermore, these groups re-imagined refuges as spaces in which diverse cultural heritage was not just accepted but celebrated.

The concept of 'homeplace' has been described by bell hooks thus:

This task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of black women providing service; it was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination ... It was there on the inside, in that 'homeplace,' most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits. This task of making a homeplace, of making home a community of resistance, has been shared by black women globally, especially black women in white supremacist societies.¹⁹

This article will explore the concept of homeplace as a way to frame specialist women's refuges as communities of resistance and spaces in which to nurture the spirit. Black British feminist theorist Hazel Carby has similarly problematised white feminist critiques of the family, writing that: 'We would not wish to deny that the family can be a source of oppression for us but we also wish to examine how the black family has functioned as a prime source of resistance to oppression.'²⁰ Therefore, while hooks was writing in the American context, a similar idea was permeating in Britain. Expanding the definition of homeplace allows us to appreciate the physical and emotional space created by Black and Asian women's refuges.

This article draws from oral history interviews with three SWA activists conducted by the author from 2021 to 2023, as well as email correspondent with one other SWA activist, and four transcribed interviews with NAWP activists. The NAWP interviews were conducted by the 'You Can't Beat a Woman' project in 2017 and are stored at the Essex Sound and Video Archive. The small sample size allows for a focused and in-depth discussion. The two case studies will be compared, their differences in approach providing important points of analysis.

The method of combining my own interviews with existing ones proved valuable due to the similarity of the interview questions and the focus on the establishment of Black and Asian women's refuges. This made it possible to observe similarities and differences. Naturally, I was occasionally frustrated that a topic of interest to me was not pursued in the existing interviews and it is likely some emotion was lost in the transcription process. Nevertheless, I was deeply moved by the stories told in both sets of interviews. These refuges were established through collective work and so no one person was the 'founder.' However, all the women discussed in this article were involved in the first five years of SWA or NAWP. The analysis of the interviews is supported by evidence from SWA annual reports and feminist and anti-racist periodicals.

Furthermore, these case studies speak to a wider history of Black women's anti-domestic abuse activism in Britain which includes the work of Southall Black Sisters (SBS) (1979), as well as Black and Asian women's refuge groups such as Saheli in Manchester (1976), Roshni in Birmingham (1979), Sahara in Leeds (c.1980), Awas in London (1981), Ashiana in Sheffield (1981), Hemat Gryffe in Glasgow (1982), Sahara in Reading (c.1985), Hadhari Nari in Derby (1986), Roshni in Nottingham (1987), Ashiana in London (1989), Kiran in London (1990) and Amadudu in Liverpool (1992).²¹ This type of activism has been widespread in Britain and it is hoped that this article will act as a starting point for further historical research.

Historian Lynn Abrams has described the oral history interview as an opportunity to 'hear women owning their voices' and 'a platform of the self and beyond that, a self embedded in a bigger story about the progress of women in the post-war era.'²² The interviews highlighted in the present study demonstrate women positioning themselves

within wider histories and articulating a narrative of self-determination in their own lives. Interviewees reflected on their formative years as a time of rapid change and excitement; citing events like the 1976 to 1978 Grunwick Strike and the publication of Amrit Wilson's *Finding a Voice* (1978) as important cultural moments.²³ Some women narrated a life lived 'against the grain' in an unwelcoming society. They also mentioned the pride they felt in their achievements and the sense of belonging they found in activist spaces.

Several women recalled the brutal racism they experienced as young people and reflected on the extent to which the lives of Black women living in Britain have improved. At times they recounted their lives as having diverged from those of their parents, some of whom advised their daughters to keep their heads down, while others mentioned a legacy of political engagement in their families. Some linked this to present day struggles against oppression such as the Black Lives Matter movement, and their children's engagement with this. There were also a few women who were survivors of domestic abuse themselves or had formative experiences of witnessing violence against women, which they felt had motivated their activism.

In what follows there will be a brief background of individual contributors and of SWA and NAWP, a discussion of the debates that led to the founding of Black and Asian women's refuges and, finally, an analysis of the way in which the creation of the space of the women's refuge is recalled during oral history interviews.

Background

Contributors' backgrounds

Those early organisers of NAWP whose interviews have been drawn from for this article include Anjum Mouj, Anita Kirpal, Gulshun Rehman and Susan Paul. Mouj grew up in Bradford and became involved in NAWP in its early years. She later became an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion consultant and has been involved with Imaan Muslim LGBTQI+ group and the Queer Britain museum. Kirpal joined the campaign to establish NAWP when she became aware that South Asian women were experiencing domestic abuse as well as racism, through her work for the anti-racist organisation Newham Monitoring Project (NMP). Kirpal has since become a successful business psychologist and leadership consultant. Rehman, a founding member of NAWP, grew up in a Muslim family in Leicester; she was also involved with setting up an Asian women's refuge in Lambeth, London.²⁴ Rehman has since worked for programmes promoting the rights of women and children in Palestine, Bangladesh and India, and has been appointed the Head of New Business at Save the Children UK.²⁵ Paul, who joined the management committee in the early years of NAWP, was from Kerala originally but grew up in Newcastle.²⁶ She was a lawyer when she became involved, then an employment judge and later a lecturer at the University of Leeds Business School.²⁷

Those who contributed from SWA included Pramila Sashidharan, Uma Kothari, Mukami McCrum and Rowena Arshad. Sashidharan was originally from India and had worked with women in rural communities before she moved to Britain. Sashidharan recalled being the 'only non-white woman' when she first volunteered with Edinburgh Women's Aid and became involved with the establishment of SWA.²⁸ She has since worked as a community development and policy officer for Birmingham City Council.

McCrum is an African woman, originally from Kenya, who moved to Scotland with her Scottish husband in the early 1970s.²⁹ McCrum was another early organiser of SWA and served as its Coordinator until 1991. She went on to become a policy manager in the Equality Unit of the Scottish Government. Arshad was born in Brunei, grew up in Malaysia and moved to Britain for her education as a teenager. Her mother was Chinese and Christian, and her father was Indian and Muslim.³⁰ Arshad settled in Edinburgh and was involved with the establishment of SWA. Since then, she has become Chair in Multicultural and Anti-Racist Education and Co-Director of the Centre for Education for Racial Equality in Scotland at Moray House School of Education and Sport at the University of Edinburgh. Kothari was originally from London; her parents had emigrated from India before she was born. She had moved to Edinburgh to do a PhD in Sociology and Geography when she became involved with SWA. She is now Professor of Migration and Post-colonial Studies at the University of Manchester.

A brief history of SWA and NAWP

In 1981 Newham Asian Women's Collective was established to support the needs of South Asian women in the area.³¹ The Collective identified domestic abuse as a key issue and found that South Asian women faced barriers to seeking support such as discrimination from statutory agencies. In 1987, NAWP was founded to provide support, advice and a women's refuge.³² NAWP received funding from the Newham London Borough Council and support from the Greater London Council Women's Unit.³³ In 2015, NAWP changed its name to the London Black Women's Project and has continued to expand to the present day, opening seven women's refuges.³⁴

In August 1986, the group of women working to establish SWA received funding from Edinburgh District Council to establish an office and a refuge. In June 1987 the SWA refuge was opened in a four bedroom semi-detached house.³⁵ The process to establish SWA began in February 1984 when Scottish Women's Aid held a 'Working with Asian women' day and it was agreed that a refuge for Asian women should be opened near Edinburgh.³⁶ Initially, Joan Robertson, a white woman who volunteered with Edinburgh Women's Aid was important in doing outreach work to put Black women in the area in touch to work on SWA.³⁷ Around a similar time, the Scottish Black Women's Group (SBWG), a group of women of Asian and African descent, began meeting to discuss feminist and anti-racist issues. Several of the women who were involved in this group became active in SWA, including all the women who contributed to the present study. SWA remained affiliated to Scottish Women's Aid and received early support from Edinburgh Women's Aid. SWA is still providing refuge in Edinburgh today and outreach services in Dundee, Stirling and Fife.³⁸

Why establish separate refuges?

Several issues led to the establishment of specialist refuges for Black and Asian women. One reason was to ensure that Black women would be safe, not only from domestic abuse, but also from interpersonal racism from white women staying in refuge. Another factor was to provide women with support to navigate institutional discrimination they faced when engaging with statutory agencies. McCrum first became aware

of the issue of domestic abuse in Edinburgh in the 1980s when she was researching the lives of ethnic minority women living in Scotland. She asked women about their experiences and was shocked to find several of them mentioned 'this problem at home.'³⁹ The women confided in McCrum that their partners were abusive. McCrum recalled in interview that one of the reasons she felt it was important for Black women to have their own space was due to racism:

I mean, we were dealing with racism all the time anyway so there were conversations about our experiences of racism ... but domestic abuse as they call it now would, was not an open subject as such. Within minority communities, Black women tended to be silent about it, which is understandable given the fact that they were a very small population. And as one woman said, when she was comparing racism in the Women's Aid refuge with her home, she said: 'At least I get beaten maybe once a month, whereas, with racism it's every day in the refuge.' So, that comparison was, kind of lives with me, as part of the reason why we were driven to set up something for women who were also experiencing ... It's not just cultural issues but they were experiencing racism.⁴⁰

Kirpal, remembered similar issues in the London-based refuges:

Workers in mainstream refuges knew quite a lot about gender but, but didn't know much about race or cultural awareness. And so, women were finding themselves alienated and quite isolated in what was seen to be a safe space and returning back to violent homes because that felt like the known to them, rather than the unknown.⁴¹

Women's refuges were supposed to be safe spaces, but this could not always be guaranteed. Experiencing racism at any time could have a serious impact on women's mental health and feelings of safety but having to deal with this whilst escaping abuse was too much for many women. In the 1980s, women's refuges usually involved sharing space with other women, and while women and their children would often have their own bedroom, the kitchen and bathroom were generally communal, and this could lead to tensions amongst women. White women's refuge workers were usually well intentioned, but they did not have lived experience of racism and could struggle to understand the intersecting oppressions that Black women were forced to navigate.

Domestic abuse can sometimes take culturally specific forms such as female genital mutilation, forced marriage and 'honour' based crimes.⁴² Although most often perpetrated by a male partner against a female partner, domestic abuse can also be committed by other family members and this is more common in the experience of South Asian women.⁴³ There is now an increased understanding that these forms of abuse should be viewed as part of a continuum of violence against women.⁴⁴ However, at the time at which Black and Asian women's refuges were first established, awareness of these issues was not as high. Due to this, Black women in mainstream refuges at times felt they had to explain their culture and lived experiences to white refuge workers in a way that was not necessary when speaking to a woman of a similar background who understood their situation more intuitively.⁴⁵

Amina Mama was the first to publish extensive research into Black women's experience of domestic abuse, seeking help and staying in women's refuges in Britain in her monograph *The Hidden Struggle* (1989). Mama is a Nigerian-British feminist academic specialising in post-colonial and gender theory. In her landmark study, she interviewed Black women staying in both mixed and separate refuges in England and found that:

In the existing refuges for black women, the atmosphere is one liberated not only from sexism, but also from white racism. This has to be experienced to be appreciated. What it means is that black women are able to derive the valuable support and solidarity that white women perhaps take for granted in white-dominated refuges.⁴⁶

Mama further argued that the focus on ‘cultural difference’ in women’s refuges obscured a more pertinent conversation about racism. Similarly, in 1986, Sashidharan authored an article entitled ‘Needs or Demands?’ for a special SBWG issue of the *Edinburgh Women’s Liberation Newsletter*:

The needs argument has met with favour from welfare agencies, social services, local authorities and some women’s aid groups loosely based on a kind of white feminism. To say that Black women have special needs based on their culture, religion, language ... sidesteps the issue that these needs cannot be met within the mainstream because of the assumption that white, middle-class ‘culture’ is the norm and that other forms are marginal ... The second line of argument, that this is an assertion of Black women’s’ rights which have been denied c[h]oice in the mainstream is one used more strongly by all-Black groups of women who support separate refuges.⁴⁷

Mama further argued that it was more difficult to convince local authorities to fund refuges that supported women of African heritage because they were perceived to be more assimilated to British culture. However, African heritage women still faced interpersonal racism in refuges as well as structural racism when they tried to seek help from statutory agencies and could benefit from specialist refuges because of this. As Mama put it, ‘while many black women may speak English and wear jeans they are not exempted from discrimination in housing.’⁴⁸ These debates played out differently in SWA and NAWP, as we shall see.

‘Political Blackness’ and ‘Working in between’

Both SWA and NAWP can be viewed in the context of broader anti-racist campaigning. In Edinburgh, several of the women who established SWA were part of other anti-racist groups such as the SBWG. Kothari recalled that SWA activists were involved with anti-apartheid campaigns and would sometimes travel to Glasgow for protests.⁴⁹ Kothari had a vivid memory of being officially presented with a cheque for SWA, before rushing to attend an anti-apartheid protest at the 1986 Commonwealth Games which were opened by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher⁵⁰:

We were just absolutely rubbing shoulders with each other in silence and in voice and in protest and, you know, just the fact I remember that day, running down the High Street with a cheque, you know, and, after receiving the cheque for Shakti and running down to make sure we got there before Thatcher arrived so that we could join the protest is very, it’s very visceral.⁵¹

The cheque was presented to Kothari, Sashidharan and McCrum by Labour Councillor Marjorie Bain and a photo of the four women appeared in the *Edinburgh Evening News* in August 1986 under the headline ‘Grant is key to refuge.’⁵² Later, SBWG was involved with establishing Lothian Black Forum (LBF), a Scottish, Black-led group of men and women which rose to prominence through its campaign to recognise the murder of Somalian student Axmed Abuukar Sheekh as a racist crime in 1989.⁵³ Several NAWP activists were also involved with anti-racist organisations like NMP, which campaigned to

change racist housing and policing policies, and the Asian Action Group. Furthermore, some women interviewed had been involved with other Black and Asian women's refuges.

Most of the women interviewed from both SWA and NAWP explicitly identified as Black women or Black feminists, in the sense of political Blackness prevalent in British anti-racist activist spaces in the 1980s. The idea was that shared experiences of racist oppression in Britain and under colonialism could create political solidarity between African and Asian heritage people. For instance, Mouj explained: 'I think it's totally my identity: black feminism ... I'd identify myself as Black. And I'm an Asian woman.' Kirpal recalled during interview that the women who opened the first refuge in Newham had: 'Come from the anti-racist movement ... And so actually it was, it was a natural place to identify ourselves politically as black people, so we stood together as a group in order to tackle the racism.'⁵⁴ Kothari of SWA likewise strongly identified with the term Black:

For myself, for many other people, using the term Black was incredibly important and incredibly political ... It just seemed that there was so much division and diversity that we wanted to all come together and use the term Black with a capital 'B,' that brought together all, everyone, despite our differences in class and location and geography and education, despite all of that, that this one thing brought us together and that was that we experienced racism.⁵⁵

As historian Thomlinson has noted, political Blackness received considerable criticism since the 1990s, as it can be seen to 'impose an unreal homogeneity on the incredible diversity of the British immigrant experience.'⁵⁶ Tariq Modood was a particular critic, arguing that the concept was harmful because it 'suggests a false essentialism' and obscures the specificity of the British Asian experience.⁵⁷ During her interview, Kothari reflected on these changes, explaining that it took her 'a long time to let it go,' as she had so valued the sense of unity she found in the SBWG.⁵⁸

On the other hand, writer and activist Rahila Gupta has argued that: 'Black was not simply a way of describing the experience but it allowed for united action against the state.'⁵⁹ Gupta explained that SBS 'had to fight for the retention of the term "black".'⁶⁰ It is interesting to note that NAWP itself changed its name to the London Black Women's Project in 2015 to emphasise that their services were not just for Asian women. Black feminist researcher Nydia Swaby has further observed that there was something of a resurgence in the use of a feminist or 'gendered political Blackness' in 2014, suggesting the term still has some salience in the twenty-first century.⁶¹

Additionally, most of the women interviewed mentioned that their work was guided by Black feminist theory including an intersectional approach. However, this was not a term they would have used during the 1980s, as Kimberlé Crenshaw did not publish her landmark article popularising the term until 1989.⁶² The term 'triple oppressions' was more commonly used to analyse the relationship between race, gender and class, or at times 'multiple oppressions.'⁶³ However, the ways in which overlapping structures of oppression shaped Black women's experiences of domestic abuse and seeking help was central to their politics.

Despite sharing a similar Black feminist identity and analysis, SWA and NAWP differed in their conceptualisation of who their women's refuges were for. SWA activists were adamant that:

Shakti is for all Black women. The use of the term **black** is one of political choice. It indicates refusal to adopt divisive tactics of the state ... to just cater for the largest ethnic group [South Asian people] is to further marginalise the minority of the minority groups [emphasis in original].⁶⁴

Conversely, Kirpal recalled NAWP activists felt that:

An Asian women's refuge seemed to be very important even though at that time we identified ourselves as black women ... And feminists as well. It did feel that, actually, for the service, it needed to be specialist to South Asian women. Or women who identified themselves as being South Asian. So we wouldn't, we would never turn a woman away, but it was like coming into an environment that was catering for that culture.⁶⁵

In Newham, where people of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent made up a significant percentage of the population (23% in 1991), it can be seen why it would be appropriate to open a refuge specifically for South Asian women.⁶⁶ On the other hand, in Edinburgh, where there was a much lower proportion of Black women, it was felt that if the refuge was specifically for South Asian women there would be nowhere suitable for women of other ethnic minority groups to go. This was particularly the case as the only other specialist refuge in Scotland, Hemat Gryffe Women's Aid, was originally for South Asian women only.⁶⁷ In this way, each group was responding to the needs that were most pressing in their locality.

Nurturing the spirit

Let us return to the idea of women's refuges for Black and Asian women as a kind of homeplace. The activists who established these refuges strove to make them spaces of spiritual nourishment, where women could feel comfortable and safe enough to heal from abuse. It is clear from oral history interviews that the physical space of the refuge was important to the women who created them. Despite limited funding, they made refuges as welcoming and colourful as possible. Kirpal recalled that: 'It was very important that we could create the creature comforts to keep a woman out of a violent home, rather than just simply give them overnight stay and then realise that's not somewhere that's sustainable for them.'⁶⁸ It was integral that the refuge was somewhere that women could feel at home while they reflected on their experiences and decided on next steps.

During interviews, founding members of NAWP reflected with pride on what they had managed to achieve. Rehman described the NAWP refuge thus:

The building had been furnished, brand, spanking new. Lovely, lovely building, newly refurbished. I remember we had a room which was going to be the creche room ... And I remember asking a friend of a friend of a friend if they would come and paint a mural in the creche ... elephant and peacocks on the creche wall. It's just little things like that.⁶⁹

The domestic space of the shared refuge kitchen came up often in oral history interviews as a potential site of tension. Kitchens could be sites of interpersonal racism, as Arshad commented on during interview:

It was something to do with spaces where you could be culturally more relaxed, the food that you were cooking. It didn't matter if the place smelled of garlic, you know, nobody was going to complain, and you weren't going to get racist abuse from someone else.⁷⁰

In both SWA and NAWP there was an awareness of religious and dietary needs which mapped onto the kitchen design as both had designated vegetarian sections. Mouj reflected on this during interview:

We had, not massive spaces. We would set up the kitchens so there was, you know, certainly, a vegetarian cooker and a non-vegetarian cooker. And then we'd have, obviously, the issues of Halal and the issues of, of not eating pork, the issues of not eating beef, the issues of being totally, you know, full vegetarian ... Obviously there were some tensions, because, the issues around food, the issues of what food that you can eat, what food can be in your fridge, the cleanliness ... Those issues are really, really impactful, really important, you know, when you are at your most vulnerable ... We didn't always have the resources to get that right, but we absolutely tried our best.⁷¹

Thus, Mouj and others put considerable thought into making the refuge space suitable for a diverse range of women with varying religions, diets, ages and life experiences. At SWA and NAWP, it was also important that a range of languages were spoken by refuge workers and pamphlets were often translated into several languages. In this way, the practical running of SWA and NAWP demonstrates an understanding of diverse identities amongst Black women.

White has explained that white journalists, researchers and politicians often constructed a 'homogenizing narrative of black womanhood' and how black women's groups sought to counter to this perspective.⁷² Similarly, Black and Asian women's refuges were spaces in which women's diversity could be celebrated. This was part of a wider effort by Black British feminists to counteract the othering and stereotyping of Black women. For instance, Carby's seminal essay *White Woman Listen!* (1982) argued that when white British feminists were not ignoring Black women in Asia and Africa, they were objectifying them as 'victims of 'barbarous' 'primitive' practices.'⁷³ Furthermore, in her 1984 article *To Deny Our Fullness*, Parita Trivedi, highlighted the long legacy of Indian women's activism in order to challenge the stereotyping of South Asian women as submissive.⁷⁴

Comparably, Arshad wrote an article for the *Edinburgh Women's Liberation Newsletter* in 1986 urging white feminists to: 'Listen to our herstories, learn and respect, the African, Asian and Caribbean woman is strong, wilful, courageous.'⁷⁵ Therefore, Black and Asian women's refuges, and the praxis with which they were run, enabled women to nurture and celebrate their sense of selves in their 'fullness,' away from the 'homogenizing white gaze of post-war Britain.'⁷⁶

Creating community

Those involved in SWA or NAWP endeavoured to create communities amongst the women who stayed in refuge. During interviews, SWA and NAWP activists have described their desire to create unity between Black women living in refuge as part of their political ideology. Muneeza Inam, who was involved with the Brent Asian Women's Refuge, has written of the importance of creating alternative networks for Asian women who may face family and community pressure to reconcile with their partners and ostracization when they choose to leave.⁷⁷ During interview, McCrum explained how crucial it was to create spaces in which Black women could share their experiences:

I think to give Black and minority women a safe space, and by safe, I mean where they felt confident to speak about their problems knowing that there are people who care and will do something about it. And also safe in the sense that they were not going to be judged ... their culture is not going to be in question.⁷⁸

A sense of community within the refuge meant that women could share their experiences with one another and feel less alone. This was especially important for women who had been isolated by their abuser.

However, this was not always straightforward; the women who stayed in Black and Asian refuges were a diverse group and, at times, differences could lead to conflict. This is not surprising as communal living is challenging at the best of times, let alone during an emotionally vulnerable time. There were opportunities to resolve disagreements in a constructive manner through weekly house meetings. Mouj and McCrum both reflected on these issues during interview:

Mouj: For the women we were working with, I would say that the divisions were there ... In terms of identifying religiously, absolutely definitely. In terms of identifying across language lines ... I could get that women, actually, you know, sort of moved towards, and had friendships, deep friendships with women who were similar to them ... You know, there's some naivety on our part in terms of creating community. And I think we did actually really well at that as well though ... Women who came into our refuges were finding community, and they found that strength with that community. They are resilient, strong women. Now, I would say we've got thousands and thousands of women that have been through our refuge, that are actually part of this community. And they support one another.⁷⁹

McCrum: It could be said we were naïve—but I don't consider it naivety; I think that we were forward thinking in terms of unity—because we had assumed that people who had a common experience of racism, or any other problem like violence against women, they'd be united and sympathetic and supportive of each other but it was not always the case because personalities, the whole trauma of violence, some age, all those differences came up as issues that we had to deal with in managing conflict.⁸⁰

Mouj and McCrum both reflected on their past selves and whether the ideals they held about creating community had been naïve. However, they both concluded that, while there were complications they had not foreseen, their approach had been a valuable and often successful one.

Despite conflict, research has shown that many Black women who have stayed in a specialist refuge felt less isolated because of the company of other Black women.⁸¹ As well as attention to language and dietary requirements, religious and cultural special occasions such as Eid al-Fitr and Diwali were celebrated.⁸² Moreover, some women enjoyed watching TV or listening to music in a shared language as a way to bond with other women in refuge.⁸³ Those who made friendships often stayed in touch and support groups and be-friending services were set up for women to attend after they had left the refuge.⁸⁴ Thus, the communities that were forged in Black and Asian women's refuges could be enduring.

Being a part of this community was also significant for those who campaigned for and ran refuges. Kirpal recalled during interview that at one stage the NAWP office was located within the refuge itself, which had both pros and cons:

I think it put a lot of pressure on the staff. But at the same time, it just felt like a big extended family to be honest. And it allowed us to build really close relationships and build the trust of the women that were living in the refuge. And I remember at the time, all the workers that worked there, all their languages improved a huge amount. They ended up learning new languages in the same way that the women who came to the refuge learnt new languages just through being with each other and engaging. So it was, it was actually a really nurturing time.⁸⁵

Similarly, Kothari reflected on the space of the SWA office as somewhere she could feel a sense of belonging. The Edinburgh Trade Unions Council offered SWA the use of two rooms in their office building:

Every day I stopped at the Trades Council and I went in and there were just these amazing, beautiful, fantastic women and I learned so much ... and so that was my home and that's where I wanted to be ... So, it was incredibly important to me, so it's hard to let that go when you move away.⁸⁶

Kothari mentioned that she travelled back to Edinburgh every weekend when she first moved away to Newcastle due to the strength of these relationships; explaining that she 'really mourned the loss of that, you know, friendship and collective and collegiality and conviviality from Edinburgh.'⁸⁷

SWA and NAWP refuges, then, were spaces in which women could feel a sense of community through the bonds they made there. Despite some conflicts, the sharing of experiences could be affirming and uplifting. Additionally, those organising refuges found a sense of community, with the refuge and office spaces becoming a 'home' and those in it a 'family.'

Finding a political voice

Several contributors expressed that within the space of campaigning against violence against women they were able to find their political voices and a sense of belonging. This was particularly the case for women who felt disappointed with anti-racist activist spaces and the mainstream WLM. Campaigns to create women's refuges run by and for Asian and Black women faced opposition, or at least a lack of active support, on several fronts. During interview, Arshad remembered the period when SWA was initially set up as 'stormy times' as there were tensions with Scottish Women's Aid, the local South Asian community in Edinburgh and the local authorities:

And so, some money got given to start Shakti. At that time Scottish Women's Aid was quite miffed because it thought that it was taking money from them and it probably was, because the pot of funding was divided even further. And we were under a lot of pressure to make sure that we were part of Women's Aid, that Scottish Women's Aid had a foothold in Shakti, and I remember us fighting quite hard to be Black-led and Black dominated in terms of its management committee. We were not opposed to having Scottish Women's Aid involved but they were not going to take the lead role, the majority role in it, and that was causing friction as well. So, the friction was happening with our own Black Minority Ethnic community people but also with the authorities and the third sector organisation that really should have been representing women in this.⁸⁸

Arshad recalled that members of the local South Asian community viewed SWA activists as 'troublemakers' because they were exposing a hidden problem. According to Arshad,

on this basis the Edinburgh Community Relations Council, which was led by a South Asian man, spoke against SWA's first application for funding.⁸⁹

The activists who established NAWP also campaigned extensively to gain funding and picketed outside the Greater London Council office. Like SWA, they faced opposition from leadership within South Asian communities in Newham. For example, Mouj recalled speaking about NAWP at a local council meeting when: 'every male Asian councillor walked out of that room as I walked in.'⁹⁰ Some members of NAWP even faced harassment, for instance, they were followed, and glue was poured in the lock of their minibus.⁹¹ Kirpal explained this during interview:

I don't think we ever had an Asian male councillor who supported our work. Or, in fact, an Asian religious leader ... We didn't have that support, you know. I remember occasions, we had a red minibus which was known in the area and, you know, we had situations where if we parked the car, the minibus somewhere, there'd be porn magazines put underneath the wheels of it and things, as if to say, you know, to warn us off. So it was, it was quite a scary time.⁹²

These experiences can be situated within the wider history of multiculturalism in post-war Britain. Writers and activists such as Amrit Wilson and Rahila Gupta have both observed that multicultural policies of the 1980s and 1990s were 'predicated on notions of fixed and homogenous (as opposed to dynamic and changing) concepts of minority community, culture and religion' and 'bypasses the need for local democracy because it relies on self-appointed community leaders who historically have no interest in social justice or women's equality.'⁹³

These issues were exacerbated by concerns amongst some Black men and women that exposing violence and abuse in minoritized communities would fuel racist stereotyping. This sometimes led to a reluctance to report or even discuss such issues.⁹⁴ For instance, in her ground-breaking book about child sexual abuse *Crossing the Boundary* (1993), Melba Wilson wrote that:

The fear that I have about saying this publicly is considerable. I worry that this book will be misconstrued and misinterpreted by many in our black communities. Some may feel that I have breached an even greater taboo, crossed a bigger boundary (in their eyes) than incest. By airing publicly some of the uncool stuff that goes on in our communities, I and the other women whose stories are included are exposing the dirty linen that we all know and keep quiet about.⁹⁵

It could be extremely challenging for Black women to confront domestic abuse, as they often did so in the face of opposition on multiple fronts.

Nonetheless, Arshad recalled receiving encouragement for SWA from Black men from the anti-racist group LBF. On the other hand, Mouj reflected on the lack of support NAWP received from male anti-racism activists, commenting that it was an 'autonomous' and 'sometimes very lonely' journey.⁹⁶ Kirpal also remembered being 'surprised and slightly disappointed' by the lack of enthusiasm for NAWP amongst men at the NMP where she worked, who, although sympathetic, wanted to 'just focus on the racism.'⁹⁷

However, despite this element of alienation, Black women campaigning for specialist refuges forged close bonds with each other through activism. When I asked Arshad where she got the strength to continue her activism, she recalled the importance of the connections she made with the other SWA activists, saying: 'We didn't make many

friends, but I don't think we really cared. We had each other and very expensive telephone bills!⁹⁸

During interview Mouj recalled feeling alienated from the anti-racist movement and reflected on the space she found for herself through anti-domestic abuse activism:

That conversation that, 'You know what? We can't talk about violence in the black community, we can't talk about violence in the Asian community because we're a community whereby we've got racism against us. And that's the big thing. That's the thing that we should be talking about' ... And it wasn't a dialogue that I was comfortable with. So that movement wasn't for me. That antiracist movement was broadly there for me, but actually, specifically, it wasn't there for me. What was there for me was thinking about gender and thinking about sexual orientation, and thinking about men's violence to women, and thinking about it within the context of the black and Asian community. That's what was there for me.⁹⁹

Paul recalled that some women were more political or feminist than others, describing herself as 'more practical.'¹⁰⁰ Despite this, Paul looked back on her involvement with NAWP as a time of personal growth: 'It sort of challenged me as well, you know, a lot of my views on gender and relationships and sexuality, they all changed at that time because I was exposed to a whole heap of women who ... my god it was amazing. You know, they were so different to any Asian women I had ever seen or experienced before so it was brilliant.'¹⁰¹

Furthermore, there was collaboration between Black and Asian women's refuges around Britain. As with mainstream refuges, there was a network through which refuge spaces were found for survivors. Furthermore, several women were involved in more than one refuge, and they took inspiration from one another. For instance, Arshad had been involved with an Asian women's refuge in Reading and brought this experience to SWA.¹⁰² Moreover, Sashidharan explained that she 'sought out other Black and Asian women refuges/organisations across the UK' during the process of SWA's establishment.¹⁰³ She found allies in SBS, Saheli refuge in Manchester and the Leeds Black Women's Group who 'were particularly influential as they recognised the multiple factors affecting Black women, including racism and also quite narrow definitions of feminism' and 'were invaluable in their support and sisterhood, personal and political.'¹⁰⁴ NAWP activists also mentioned receiving support from SBS. These national networks were particularly important for specialist refuges like NAWP, as they were not part of the Women's Aid Federation of England network. Although, SWA could draw support from the Scottish Women's Aid network they still highly valued the opportunity to exchange knowledge with Black-led organisations with similar practical and political approaches.

Specific campaigns have also brought women working on these issues nationally together. For example, in April 1991 Vandana Patel was stabbed to death by her husband who police allowed into a domestic violence unit in Stoke Newington Police station in London.¹⁰⁵ Ten Asian women's refuges signed a statement condemning police responses to domestic abuse in South Asian communities.¹⁰⁶ They cited multicultural policies as one reason why police were reluctant to intervene, believing the situation to be due to 'cultural and religious factors.'¹⁰⁷ In this way, campaigns against domestic abuse and homicides, and the way in which the state have failed to effectively address these issues, can be seen as a significant strand

of feminist and anti-racist activism in Britain which brought Black women together in struggle.

Conclusion

The Black British feminist activists who established women's refuges at the end of the twentieth century did so in the interstices between anti-racist and mainstream feminist politics. The case studies of SWA and NAWP demonstrate many similarities, particularly in their self-identification with political Blackness and a Black feminist approach. However, local contexts meant that NAWP felt South Asian women's needs should be prioritised, while SWA sought to provide a service for all Black women. Both groups were part of an informal network of Black-led groups campaigning against violence against women across Britain.

Within the 'homeplace' of these refuges, Black feminist activists and survivors of domestic abuse forged a community of resistance and nurturance. These women supported one another despite the discrimination and lack of support they could encounter in the outside world. This was significant because it gave activists the strength to continue to fight for a better life for themselves and each other. Refuges were not devoid of conflict; differences between women inevitably led to debate. However, they did centre the concerns of Black women and both the women organising and staying in refuges benefited from the community they found there.

This article has focused on a distinct group of activists who were involved in the early period of SWA and NAWP. However, their experiences form part of a wider history of Black British women's political activity at the end of the twentieth century. The black women's centres explored by White offered a similar opportunity to build a sense of self through political engagement within a nurturing space. Activism by and for Black women on the issue of violence against women was widespread across Britain at the end of the twentieth century and warrants further historical research. Other specialist organisations such as Jewish Women's Aid should also be explored. This would allow the experiences of NAWP and SWA activists to be compared to similar organisations, building a clearer picture of anti-racist and feminist political trends in this period.

Today, Black-led organisations continue to build on the pioneering activism discussed in this article by delivering life-saving support to women and children experiencing various forms of abuse and campaigning for improvements in government policy and legislation.

Notes

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