

POLICING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The work of Southall Black Sisters

Southall Black Sisters is a women's centre which has been in existence since 1983. It carries out a wide variety of activities but its main work is giving advice and counselling to women who face domestic violence. Most of the women who are clients of Southall Black Sisters are Asian, as the area is predominantly an Asian area, but we also work with a large number of women from both minority and English backgrounds who use our facilities as the local women's centre. Women also come from outside the immediate catchment area because the centre has acquired a national reputation. Southall Black Sisters has existed as a group from 1979, long before the Centre was established. We have, therefore, accumulated 15 years of experience in intensive advice and counselling to women facing domestic violence. The three workers at the centre have an intimate knowledge of police and judicial procedures, largely in the London Borough of Ealing and in surrounding areas.

Dissatisfaction with the police response

In 1989 and 1990, Southall Black Sisters undertook a detailed survey of 75 women who had faced domestic violence, about their experiences of the police.

For the last three years, Southall Black Sisters has attempted to use the police complaints system by filing a number of formal complaints where we felt dissatisfied with police response to our clients and where we have felt that they were clearly in breach of their duties

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under the law and new guidelines pertaining to domestic violence. We have come to the conclusion that the whole complaints system, including the Police Complaints Authority is deeply unsatisfactory and completely unworkable.

The question of spousal homicide, where domestic violence forms part of the background to the case has occupied us for some time. For a number of years we have fought for convictions of men who have killed women in their families. We have also been involved in the legal case of Kiranjit Ahluwalia who was convicted of murder in December 1989. We took her instructions when the appeal was being prepared. We have also worked with Sara Thornton, also convicted of murder. We have submitted suggestions for changing the law on self defence and provocation so that the experience of violence is taken into account when trying cases of spousal homicide.

A domestic dispute is defined as any quarrel including violence between family or members of the same household. Domestic violence occurs when a person or persons causes, attempts to cause, or threatens to cause physical harm to another family or household member. There is overwhelming evidence to show that violence is directly mainly at women by male partners. The nature of our work and therefore our submission deals mainly with male violence against women.

It is the common sense of the police force that domestic violence is a tiresome issue to deal with because women are liable to withdraw complaints. While this does happen, the experience of refuges and women's centres such as ours also reveals other patterns.

For instance, violence reported to the police is rarely 'a one-off barney' as one WPC said to a woman who had reported her husband's very serious assaults. It is not usually an isolated incident or even a few isolated incidents. Violence in the home is often a series of escalating incidents; and the fear of recurrence affects women's ability to act against it. Paradoxically, it is this fear which often paralyses a woman in taking what to an outsider may appear to be the safest course - that is agreeing to let the police



David Kidd-Hewitt

press charges.

Arguments for inaction

Some aspects of multi-culturalism have the effect of denying women from minorities access to protection from the police. The police are particularly reluctant to intervene in Asian communities because of their perception that the 'community' has its own internal mechanism of policing.

For instance, in Southall, at a multi-agency forum in 1987, the police argued that they had to be careful in their handling of domestic violence cases because of 'cultural differences'. They were reluctant to act for fear of fuelling a negative perception of the police amongst men within the 'community'. Another argument was their perceived need to be culturally sensitive. So Asian women were denied an immediate response because the police felt that their culture demanded from them 'higher tolerance levels'.

For many women, taking action to protect themselves from domestic violence is part of a long, slow process, in which repeated complaints to the police and dropped charges may play a part. The current procedures and agencies cannot continue to fail the many women who ask for help and do not get it.

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