

A Black Feminist's Dilemma

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Me, Myself as a Black Feminist

My politics are rooted in anti-racism and black feminism. Pragna Patel articulates and emphasises the origins and use of the political term 'black' to represent the solidarity amongst Asian and African Caribbean people and other minorities in resisting race and gender oppression in the UK (Patel, 1997). Heidi Mirza points out that, as British black women 'we as racialized, gendered subjects can collectively mark our presence in a world where black women have for so long been denied the privilege to speak' (Mirza, 1997). I am considered to be a member of the Indian Sikh diaspora within Britain, the country of my birth. I have never identified solely as a Sikh woman as I have never analysed my oppression entirely on my faith. Although I identify a Sikh heritage in conjunction with my ethnicity and diasporic experiences of my family, my perceptions of my experiences of prejudice and discrimination have always been as a result of any one or a combination of my race, class, age and gender. I therefore identify as a black feminist. Within this article I refer to Sikh, Black and Asian as appropriate to give meaning and context to the social locations and not as mere interchangeable labels where meaning is irrelevant or 'ethnic neutral'.



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Invitation to Community Resilience Forum

This explanation of my identity is required in order to explain my positionality with respect to an invitation I received to join a Sikh Community Resilience Forum for Coventry at the end of 2014. A third of Coventry's population is categorised as Black and Minority Ethnic with 5% of residents defining Sikh as their religion (and 7.5% as Muslim and 3.5% as Hindu). This proportion is higher than the national average. I received the invitation as a member of the 'Sikh community' in the city. The aim of the forum was to engage in on-going dialogue between the City Council and the Police to ensure communication between these two statutory agencies and Sikhs for the benefit of the 'Sikh community'. The forum was initiated by the Police to communicate messages to the 'Sikh community'. Membership was by personal invitation. The objectives were to discuss how to achieve an improved way of working together so that communities can be safe and ensure sensitive issues and concerns, which may impact on cohesion in the city, would be raised and discussed. Attendees would need to be prepared for 'difficult discussions'.

Margaret Harris et al. (2003) has charted how interest in faith-based organisations grew at the beginning of the 21st century with the advent of the New Labour government and its interest in faith based organisations providing social welfare and service provision alongside voluntary organisations and charities. New Labour also facilitated the expansion of faith-based schools in the UK. In my view, government interest in seeking

the opinions and engagement with so called 'faith communities' has grown.

As a feminist activist in the city I have raised issues on race and gender and this brings me to the attention of a number of local agencies. It was this activism that led to the invitation - although they did also admit they "wanted a woman" on the forum. It is of course flattering to receive a personal invitation, where your opinions are sought but the invitation left me with a black feminist's dilemma: should I join this forum and advocate on behalf of Sikh women in the city or should I politely decline the invite and therefore not utilise the opportunity to give a 'voice' to Sikh women in the city?

Intersectionality and the Faith Agenda

Intersectionality is a term first introduced by the African American Harvard law professor Kimberle Crenshaw in 1991. She looked into how African American women were excluded from the white feminist movement and similarly from the anti-racist movement that was dominated by and for the interests of African American men. She argued that race and gender inequality 'intersect' to represent the full experiences of African American women and cannot be separated out into constituent segments of inequality. Intersectionality has been used to refer to the intersections of inequalities that are reflected through

combinations of women's experiences including faith, gender, race, class and sexuality.

The need for feminism to research women's subjectivity within the context of race, class, gender and sexuality has long been advocated by black feminists (**Davis, 1982; Crenshaw, 1991; Brah 1996**). British South Asian women's lived experiences follow numerous dimensions and reflect multiple axes of everyday racism, gender inequality within family and society and class status. Intersectionality uncovers how British South Asian women are negotiating and navigating through power relations of race, gender (familial and intimate relationship) and class (access to social and economic capital) to ensure that the aggregate of these social locations are not only understood but acted on.

My major difficulty with the invitation was the framing of dialogue entirely on faith lines. For me, discussion should rather focus on the shared experiences of discrimination and abuse as a diasporic group within the city. This would share histories and diasporic experiences incorporated within not only faith lines (Sikh, Hindu Muslim, and Christian) but also shared ethnicity, immigration, colonial history, culture or nationality (such as South Asian, African Caribbean, African or Polish). For me, issues of community cohesion are best raised and resolved within the shared experiences of being a minority 'other' and not solely as the faith 'other' as it's the former that shape our lives and the discrimination we receive as a collective.

Heidi Mirza writes 'A very basic reality is that the forces of structural racism and sexism are always shifting, creating new forms of 'othering'' **(Mirza, 2014)**. For example recent research on the impact of the spending cuts on Black and Minority Ethnic women revealed one participant's view about further education for her children. She stated 'My husband has lost his job and we don't have much money and so we are only thinking about now sending our son to university and not our daughter' **(Sandhu, Stephenson and Harrison 2013, 42)**. If this sentiment bears fruit then issues of gender inequality should not be regarded as a subservient issue to other forms of inequality including those of race and religion nor by faith groups. The research uncovered how, as Black and Minority Ethnic women, we are being disproportionately affected by the spending cuts, from non-dependent deductions¹, to the Benefit Cap² and loss of jobs in the public sector including the NHS. It is the intersection of race, gender and class that determine the reality of our lives as women and as Black and minority ethnic.

Multiple identities take form for South Asian women at birth. To explain this, I use the analogy of 'default,' a computing term. In computer science a 'default' is a setting that is automatically assigned to a computer program such as the size of font or number of characters allowed in a first name **(Christensson 2014)**. It can also be called a preset as it is automatically assigned before a user or a programmer has changed it. Using this analogy of default, at birth, South Asian women in the UK inherit multiple axes of inequality and so are defined by the intersectional default

of gender and race. We inherit this multiple intersection 'automatically' and as we go through life the default changes to accumulate other axes such as age and disability. Nira Yuval-Davis highlights 'People who identify themselves as belonging to the same collectivity or social category can actually be positioned very differently in relation to a whole range of social locations (e.g., class, gender, ability, sexuality, stage in the life cycle)' **(Yuval-Davis 2006, 281)**.

Black feminists have charted black women activists' resistance to gender based violence and other injustices in the UK **(Patel 2003; Wilson, 2010)**. Furthermore, solidarity came from Asian and African Caribbean women's struggles in their joint fight against racism and their exclusion within the white women's movement **(Mirza 2014)**. However, in recent times, as Patel points out, the defining marker for minority communities has become faith and this is a problem because it 'confines identity as well as communal institutions, within narrow, static categories that neither reflect nor serve their constituent members, especially vulnerable sub-groups such as women and sexual minorities' **(Patel 2013, 41)**. Feminists have charted the reduction in secular spaces as faith based leaders combined with the state's faith based approach has led to a reduction in women's spaces and the erosion of women's rights **(Patel and Siddiqui, 2010)**. Encouragement from the government and local councils means that, where alliances were once built between Asian, African and Caribbean people across the spectrum of shared experiences of racism, sexism and homophobia, the result now is more fragmentation, resulting

in ‘a host of ethnic identities all competing with one another for recognition and government funding for their own pet projects – not on the grounds of what they do but on who they claim to represent’ **(Chakraborty, 2014)**.

However, Yuval-Davis points out feminist activists have no more of a mandate to speak on behalf of the women they are representing than anyone else. She points out that as activists and advocates feminists are often not from the same social position as the women they are representing and counsels ‘Feminists and other community activists cannot (and should not) see themselves as representative of their constituencies’ **(Yuval-Davis 2006, 282)**. She advises activists to advocate on behalf of others with reflexivity and an awareness of people’s multiple social positionings.

I come from a similar background, social class and heritage to Sikh women in the city. Parents and other members of my family arrived from India as immigrants in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. I possess a privilege borne out of a university education and social capital resulting from professional networks. My personal and professional experiences with faith leaders do not lend themselves to a belief that women’s interests are at the heart of their concerns. I have never felt an equal in the gurdwaras as I watch men perform the major ceremonies, have prominence over women and preach sermons. Their privilege shines above everything else. I do not believe that men with such privileges and experiences will advocate for women. As Black feminists, we argue that white feminists do

not necessarily advocate for issues that are not in the realm of their everyday experiences (Mirza, 2014). But as Yuval-Davis points out my social and political values may differ even amongst a shared portfolio of Sikh heritage. I do not claim to be the “authentic voice” (Yuval-Davis 2006, 282) but I do claim a voice is more likely to represent the interests of women over and above community leaders. It was the need to vocalise these intersectional experiences that leads me to question the authenticity and depth of knowledge of community leaders’ interests and concerns. Moreover even if the concerns are present, I believe the depth of knowledge and networks required do not exist to ensure that women’s inequality is raised and dealt with.

A Black Feminist’s dilemma

My dilemma was whether or not to become part of the Community Resilience Forum or to make a feminist stand for secular spaces and discourses. I had never advocated for or on behalf of Sikh women. My activism has always been rooted in Black and Minority Ethnic networks and organisations. And yet there was an underlying assumption by the Forum that my identity and activism prioritised my religious rather than racial identity. Sikh women’s lives, like many other women of other faiths, intersect primarily on axes of race, gender, class and sexuality. By participating in the forum I would be projecting faith over other social relations and categories and giving credence to this new form of ‘othering’

which does not bear witness to my experiences as the 'other' dictated by my gender, class and race. By attending the forum I would have been denying the other axes of inequality that I and other Sikh women face and cannot separate out from. All these axes of inequality would be collapsed into one with the label of 'faith'. This would have verified the assumption by the Forum that religion was a priority over my identity and activism.

However, it is important that women's voices and experiences are heard in discussions and debates of living safely in the city both in the public and private spheres. As the sole woman representative, I would certainly not shy away from ensuring women's rights were at the forefront by pushing for focus on domestic and sexual violence, caste discrimination and the right of girls to an education. I would have ensured that Sikh women's voices, in the context of lived experiences as BME women, were heard in the discussions and debates. There are not many outlets where experiences specific to BME women, albeit Sikh women, are sought and heard in the city. This was a rare opportunity and not one to miss or indeed take lightly. Furthermore it was unlikely that other representatives on the forum would advocate a feminist position and so the omission of a feminist perspective in such important discussions added to the dilemma. Although I acknowledge limited opportunities to voice experiences specific to Asian women, I wondered whether there are experiences related to community safety that are / can be specific to faith. And if so, is this best fought separately or in collaboration with other groups?

While considering my decision, I was reminded of Southall Black Sisters' (SBS) stand to defend its beliefs and principles. SBS³ is an internationally renowned women's organisation that provides advocacy and support to women who are experiencing familial and intimate partner violence. They have campaigned on issues such as forced marriage, no recourse to public funds and honour based violence.

In 2000, the New Labour government established a Home Office Working Group on Forced Marriage with a remit to look at forced marriages within South Asian diasporic communities in the UK (**Home Office 2000, 28**). This was in response to a debate in Parliament in 1999 and a seminar held jointly by SBS and Institute of Public Policy. Following the seminar SBS called for a Government Inquiry into the issue of forced marriage (**Siddiqui, 2003**). SBS were invited to join this working group. They had some reservations that the membership was being formed as a result of faith. SBS emphasised its secular position and 'that people should be invited on the basis of their expertise rather than their religious group' (**Siddiqui 2003, 9**). But these concerns were not addressed. There were differences of opinion which centred on the fear that exposing all attributes of forced marriage would lead to subsequent backlash in communities. There was also difference of opinion as to the influence of community leaders in tackling forced marriage effectively within the communities and in some cases their acts of complicity in the subjugation of women (**Siddiqui, 2003**). SBS's position was that the state needed to protect women and not leave them in the hands of community leaders.

After much debate, SBS felt they had no option but to resign and did so on 24 May 2000, just before the report was due to be published, because mediation was put forward as an option for minority women experiencing domestic violence. SBS contended the serious nature of safety for women if this is seen as a viable option **(Siddiqui 2013, 176)**.

Similarly, I believed that taking up the invitation to represent Sikh women at the Community Resilience Forum would endorse the faith-based approach. It would endorse the claims that such community leaders speak for the communities. It would endorse my role in de-secularisation, which has seen the erosion of women's spaces and rights. As Patel argues, 'The space to manifest religion has grown but the space to be free from religion, especially within social institutions from which the most vulnerable sub groups seek guarantees of liberty and equality, is shrinking daily' **(Patel 2013, 45)**.

To be a black feminist means building alliances to fight gender, homophobic and race discrimination but not to forsake one vulnerable group over another. I therefore declined the invitation albeit with the dilemma lingering. As Yuval-Davis reminds us, 'Core of emancipatory feminist values should not be up for negotiation' **(Yuval-Davis, 2006, 290)**.

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Notes

¹ Housing Benefit is reduced at source for claimants where people living in the same house over 18 and considered to be non-dependent, such as an adult son or daughter.

² Benefit Cap is a limit on the combined total of benefits that working-age people can receive amounting to:

- £500 per week for couples and lone parents regardless of the number of children they have.
- £350 per week for single adults with no children or those whose children do not live with them.

These amounts will be reduced further in April 2016

³ Southall Black Sisters, 'About SBS', <http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/>, Accessed 4 September 2015.

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