

Cohesion, Faith and Gender

A report on the impact of the cohesion and faith-based approach on black and minority women in Ealing



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Community cohesion policy, which has now become the dominant framework through which race relations are managed in the UK, has not been assessed in respect of its impact on gender inequality within minority populations. With support and funding from Oxfam,¹ the goal of this project was to assess this impact and, in the process, to bring the severely marginalised voices of women from ethnic minority groups within the UK into the debate on community cohesion. In essence, it represents a case study of the local impact of the national reorientation of policy on race relations.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative analysis of the impact of cohesion and faith-based approach on the lives of ethnic-minority women drawn from one-to-one structured interviews with 21 women from South Asian or African-Caribbean backgrounds, who have suffered domestic violence or abuse. Southall Black Sisters (SBS) approached its current and past users to participate in the study.² The participants were drawn from different generations and religious backgrounds to ensure a suitably diverse cross-section of ethnic-minority women. A day-long workshop for all the participating women was held before the interviews to explain the aims and objectives of the study and the meanings of specific concepts and terms used, such as cohesion, integration

etc. The interviews were conducted by Pragna Patel and Udit Sen in Hindi, Urdu and in English. They were transcribed for the purpose of analysis. This report is based on a qualitative analysis of the interviews.

AFTERWORD

Since the completion of this research, an election in May 2010 brought in a new coalition government, committed to tackling poverty³. One of the flagship programmes is a plan for the 'Big Society'.⁴ Local communities, voluntary groups and citizens – including faith-based organisations – are to be encouraged to take over tasks currently performed by local and central government. However, the 'Big Society' proposal is silent on how poverty and the social exclusion of the most marginalised and vulnerable will be tackled.

The findings of this research demonstrate no evidence that religious leaders and organisations have made inroads into reaching the most deprived or making a positive impact on the lives of vulnerable women. Moreover, the research shows that poverty, discrimination and social exclusion are as relevant to the idea of the 'Big Society' as to previous government's focus on the idea of social cohesion – and just as urgent to unpick in respect of its impact on the vulnerable women who are the subject of the study.

KEY FINDINGS

- There is little awareness of the term cohesion amongst the black and ethnic

minority women interviewed. Though most were familiar with the concept of multiculturalism and coherently expressed their views on racism, every single respondent struggled to make any sense of cohesion as a policy. This lack of knowledge is significant; since the study goes on to reveal how the shift in government policy from multiculturalism towards community cohesion has wrought changes in the day-to-day lives of the participants which have been detrimental to their well-being.

- There was no evidence to suggest that the black and ethnic minority women who use SBS are a homogeneous 'single-identity' group. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that SBS promoted any kind of alienation or segregation amongst women who used its facilities. The study thus illustrates how Ealing Council's projection of SBS as a 'single-identity' group was based on a flawed representation of the categories of 'black' and 'ethnic minority' as a single identity.

- For the interviewees, SBS provides a space where they can reach out to other women belonging to ethnic minorities across divisions based on culture, religion, language and national identities. This is partly why many of the respondents had actively protested against the threatened closure of SBS which Ealing Council had sought to justify using a rhetoric of community cohesion.

- The women privileged lived experience over and above ascribed

attributes, such as race, culture or religion, as the main components of their identity. Their sense of identity was fluid, and they spoke of various factors, such as country of origin, culture, language, gender, and religion on one hand and racism, poverty, sexism or religious prejudice directed against women on the other. The latter were seen as major factors in their lived experience of inequality.

- The respondents were acutely aware of the gender discrimination perpetuated against women in the name of tradition or religion. Many had personally suffered discrimination on the grounds of their gender identity from religious leaders and institutions. All the respondents shared a deep mistrust of religious leaders, who they believed were corrupt and self-serving. Therefore, most felt threatened by the emphasis on 'faith' within the cohesion agenda.

- The vast majority of the respondents were believers but preferred to approach religion or faith as a matter of personal conviction rather than as community identity.

- All the respondents were against the spread of faith-based schools as they believed that such schools promote social segregation and intolerance.

- There is a gap between the nature of the social lives of the respondents and the lives they aspire to. Their aspirations of belonging to broader society, interacting widely with people, especially women from diverse backgrounds, and contributing

through social work are left unfulfilled by a number of social, economic and personal obstacles.

- Lack of knowledge of English is a major obstacle. Poverty, lack of affordable childcare and irregular working hours deprive women of the opportunity to learn English. For the particular group of women surveyed, the experience of domestic violence and abuse had often led to loss of self-confidence and mental health issues, which prevented them from learning English.
- Poverty, which is often an added consequence of domestic violence, restricted the choices available to the women interviewed. For example, most respondents could not afford the money for childcare or travel – essential pre-requisites to the kinds of voluntary service recommended by the state for migrant communities.
- Most women strongly felt that the current asylum and immigration system discriminates against migrant women, especially wives, in favour of the men. The ‘conditional’ stay granted to women enables abusive men to consolidate their power over the bodies and minds of women by subjecting them to a range of mental and physical torture under threat of deportation.
- Racism is a lived reality faced by black and ethnic minority women. The fear or actual experience of racism encouraged them to settle in familiar landscapes and amongst communities

who can speak their mother tongue.

Two women reported being pushed out of more diverse or predominantly white British areas by racist abuse. Community cohesion’s emphasis on faith fails to address the primary factor promoting social alienation amongst the women interviewed.

- The most significant impact of racism was seen in the sphere of employment. Institutional racism in the labour market and within professions trapped women in low-paid and junior roles.
- Many of the respondents revealed a disturbing pattern of being trapped in a cycle of poverty within the formal and informal labour market. Their experiences were characterised by a lack of unionisation and insecurity. This is one of the prime reasons for lack of contact with ‘white’ British society.

SUMMARY

The most significant finding of this study is that there is a considerable disconnect between the government’s cohesion and faith-based agenda and the lived reality of the women interviewed. Most aspired to a more equal society which formed the basis of their understanding of the term ‘cohesion’, but insisted that the responsibility for this lay with the government and not with so called religious or community leaders. The perceived racism and injustice of the immigration and asylum system, poverty and homelessness as a result of domestic abuse, non-unionised

and insecure work, inability to access better education or learn English were highlighted as major obstacles. The findings starkly illustrate how the cohesion and faith-based approach ignores the lived reality of racism and poverty and the needs and aspirations of ethnic minority women. Instead, it has paved the way for the subjugation of women to the gate-keepers of religious tradition and allowed orthodox male leadership to define and represent their needs.

The findings presented in this report provide compelling evidence that the project of cohesion is based on a fundamentally flawed assumption – that black and ethnic minorities naturally or unproblematically belong to faith-based ‘communities’. Community Cohesion policies are based on fixed notions of identity and community – assumptions which women have resisted in the course of their very personal struggles in their families, communities and the wider society. To impose faith-based belonging upon women undermines their struggles for fundamental freedoms and for equality achieved in solidarity with each other. It undermines the anti-racist and secular spaces, such as SBS, that enable women to negotiate their differences and develop universal values based on a shared common humanity predicated on notions of justice and equality. SBS believes that the cohesion and faith-based agenda needs to be reviewed in the light of the adverse impact it has on women of all faiths – Hindus, Christians, Muslims and Sikhs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We call on the government to recognise that:

- the discourse of community cohesion largely ignores the wider social, political and economic circumstances in which people live and debilitating experiences of poverty, racism, discrimination and inequality, which limit the basic freedoms of the most marginalised in society
- the cohesion approach with its dangerous and narrow assumptions about identity and ‘community’ reinforces racist, exclusionary and divisive practices, cultural conservatism and religious fundamentalism. It prevents a secular, rights-based and democratic public culture from emerging
- encouraging faith-based groups, educational establishments and leaderships intensifies gender discrimination and inequality within minority communities. It undermines the fundamental human rights of minority women and heightens their sense of disempowerment
- racism – both of the institutional and everyday variety – is central to any understanding of how inequality and marginalisation are experienced

We urge the government to provide:

- specialist services for women and other marginalised sub-groups within minorities as well as the wider society, as a vital mechanism for achieving

substantive equality including tackling poverty

- funding for free English classes and for specialist support services to ensure that all obstacles to learning English are removed, especially for minority women who face considerable internal and external barriers to their participation in civil society.

We urge the government to:

- privilege an equality agenda which addresses poverty as experienced by different groups in society, including minorities and women
- mitigate the ways in which the immigration and asylum system contributes to the perpetuation of racism and racist attitudes towards minorities. Special attention is required to tackle the ways in which the immigration and asylum system disempowers women through regulations such as the 'two year rule' and the 'no recourse to

public funds'. These reinforce women's economic dependency on men and trap them in cycles of violence and destitution

- adopt a human rights and equality based framework to race relations which creates the conditions for mutual respect and allows for civil society to be reinvigorated as a common space where human rights values can be negotiated.

- develop a framework for the distribution of resources based on inequality and need rather than one based on religious or cultural identity

- develop effective enforcement mechanisms that build on the Race Relations Amendment Act to tackle substantive racial discrimination and behaviours and attitudes that foster a racist culture

- strengthen the Single Equality Act 2010 by ensuring that tackling socio-economic inequality by public bodies is a legal duty and not merely an aspiration.

SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of a small-scale research project to map the impact of community cohesion policy on the lives of ethnic minority women. It focuses on a particularly marginalised group within ethnic minorities – women who have survived domestic violence and abuse. The participants of this study are ethnic minority women who have used the services provided by Southall Black Sisters (SBS). Through interviews, it investigates the impact of cohesion policies on their day-to-day lives. This is significant since SBS was one of the organisations threatened with withdrawal of funding by Ealing Council, who cynically used the government’s guidelines on cohesion to justify their actions. The possibility of the closure of SBS was the single most obvious way in which the lives of these women were impacted by the reorientation of policy and funding around the theme of community cohesion. Given the multiple meanings of the term ‘cohesion’ and the existing confusion regarding its interpretation and application, the threatened closure of SBS provided a concrete instance of the implementation of community cohesion around which a pilot survey could be organised.

This report is divided into two sections. The first section outlines the aims and objectives of this study and locates it within the ongoing debates regarding the emergence of community cohesion as the new framework of government policy towards ethnic minorities in the UK. The second section details the methodology of the study,

the profile of the respondents interviewed, the findings and recommendations.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The goal of this pilot project was to assess the impact of community cohesion policy on black and ethnic minority women. Community cohesion policy, which has now become the dominant framework through which race relations are managed in the UK, has not been assessed in respect of its impact on gender inequality within minority communities. The proponents of this policy, as well as some of its critics, have tended to treat minorities, in particular Muslims, upon whom the focus has been particularly intense, as an undifferentiated bloc. This pilot study places gender at the centre of our analysis of the cohesion agenda. We examine to what extent, and if at all, the cohesion agenda benefits minority women.

Within a small pilot study, it is difficult to achieve any sort of quantitative enumeration of gendered impact. This report has relied largely on the qualitative analysis of one-to-one structured interviews with women from ethnic minority backgrounds. One common sentiment expressed by the majority of the interviewees was that both state and non-state actors who have a say in framing policy, do not consult or take into account their opinions or needs. Therefore, this report has also taken on the broader objective of bringing the severely marginalised voices of vulnerable women from ethnic minority groups within the UK

into the discussion on community cohesion.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This pilot research project came about soon after SBS won an important victory in court against Ealing Council's decision to withdraw funding from the organisation. (See below for further details) Discussions with Oxfam immediately after this success led SBS to reflect upon the impact of the funding 'crisis' on its users – black and minority women who are the main recipients of a range of services. While the women were directly affected by the threatened closure of SBS and actively protested through letters, demonstrations and deputations, few understood the links between the government's implementation of the cohesion agenda and the closure of SBS. Ealing Council justified its decision to withdraw funds from SBS by arguing that since SBS drew its clientele largely from ethnic minorities, it ran counter to community cohesion and the equality principle. The women who use the services of SBS are largely residents of Ealing. An overwhelming majority of them have faced considerable domestic violence and abuse and other related social problems and relied on SBS for a number of tangible benefits, such as counselling, alternative accommodation and legal support, as well as the more intangible sense of belonging to a broader community or group through SBS. Unsurprisingly, they became centrally involved in the campaign to prevent the closure of SBS. The real significance of Ealing's cynical interpretation of the cohesion agenda was that it highlighted the need to examine closely the notion of

'cohesion' and its impact at the local level. This is where this report seeks to make an intervention.

FROM MULTICULTURALISM TO COHESION: A BRIEF HISTORY

Multiculturalism

Until the social and racial disturbances in Oldham, Burnley and other northern cities in 2001, multiculturalism was the dominant conceptual framework for managing diversity in the UK. It emphasised tolerance and respect for diversity, but was in fact a vast and contentious discourse and an even more hotly contested practice. At its high point, at least in theory, it was seen as a strong liberal model which distinguished between valid cultural demands and those that undermined individual fundamental rights and principles of liberal democracy.⁵ However, in practice, the British state's approach to multiculturalism was to see it as an end in itself. It became reduced to recognising and tolerating difference rather than being seen as a necessary component in dismantling institutional racism. In the process, multiculturalism was divested of all that was progressive about the concept.⁶ It degenerated into perceptions of Britain's migrant population as separate ethnic and cultural enclaves; the assumption being that meeting their cultural and religious needs was sufficient in addressing the problem of racial inequality. This was nowhere more evident than in the way in which debates on the education of minority children developed.⁷ Multicultural education placed emphasis not on racism but on the need to

‘respect’ different ethnic cultures. Minority populations were therefore being defined solely by their culture and religion.

The multicultural approach that was prevalent in education was also accepted as a tool of national policy across a range of issues at the local and national levels.⁸ However, it lost its progressive edge and lapsed into a form of identity politics which actually drew upon and gave political life to very conservative ethnic and religious identities. This development coincided with the entry of more and more black people into the race relations industry both within and outside the state (leading to the expansion of the voluntary sector and the establishment of race units and race relations councils). By the 1980s, local authorities such as the Greater London Council (GLC) funded minority groups not to address structural inequality but to reflect cultural or religious diversity irrespective of whether such groups had any commitment to social justice or equality.⁹

Whilst there was much criticism of the multicultural approach and the degradation of the anti-racist struggle, black feminists, in their struggles for self-determination, offered their own critique of multiculturalism and that form of anti-racism which glossed over other divisions within minority communities based on unequal gender and class relations. Even the most liberal concept of multiculturalism did not address the fact that notions of ‘community’ and ‘liberal democracy’ with its checks and balances (primarily in the guise of a fair and just legislative system) did not give or protect the rights of the more marginalised sub-groups such as women. By situating themselves

within the anti-racist struggles, many black feminist activists were calling for a more progressive definition of multiculturalism and anti-racism which neither shied away from addressing institutional racism or other forms of disadvantage.¹⁰ In a now well-established critique of multiculturalism, black and minority feminists argued for the need to analyse various forms of oppression through a framework which interrogates the intersection of race, gender and class power.¹¹ Groups like SBS were critical of the ways in which the theory and practice of multiculturalism homogenised minority communities: fixing and reifying ethnic identities; and entrenching the power of community leaders who were almost always male, conservative and often against social justice but who, nevertheless, were allowed to speak on behalf of entire communities. The critiques that were offered were borne directly out of grassroots experiences which saw that state intervention in the ‘internal’ affairs of the community was severely circumscribed by the self-styled community leaders who controlled voices, especially dissident voices, by arguing for the need to respect cultural differences.

Following years of criticism and struggles by black feminists and anti-racist activists, two important events appeared to shift the practice of multiculturalism towards a more progressive direction. First, in the debates on forced marriage in 1999 and 2000 held by the Home Office Working Group on forced marriage, the then Home Office Minister, Mike O’Brien, acknowledged that multiculturalism cannot be an excuse for moral blindness. Echoing the concerns

of groups like SBS, he advocated a 'mature multicultural' approach which demanded that violence against women and other oppressive restrictions on women needed to be understood as violations of women's fundamental human rights, irrespective of the cultural or religious contexts in which they occur.¹² Secondly, the murder of Stephen Lawrence by a group of white racists and the failure of the police to investigate it as a racist murder led to a major campaign for justice by his family. This eventually culminated in an inquiry led by Sir William Macpherson which recognised, for the first time, the reality of institutional racism – a reality that had hitherto been denied in official multicultural discourse.¹³ This recognition also led to the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000) which placed a positive duty on all public bodies to promote race equality.

Both developments were however short-lived as they were soon replaced by the cohesion strategy which has become the new paradigm on race relations.

Cohesion

The Commission on Cohesion and Integration has defined cohesion as the 'process that must happen in all communities to ensure that different groups of people get on well together'. Integration is defined as 'the process that ensures that new residents and existing residents adapt to one another'.¹⁴ However, like all words which become shorthand descriptions of complex rationales and practices of governance, cohesion too needs to be understood in the context of its formulation and implementation.

The government's cohesion strategy

can be traced back to the July 2001 civil disturbances in the northern UK cities of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford. The uprisings took place in seriously deprived areas where there is considerable segregation between different communities. This is born of the specific local history of the collapse of the textile industries and the failure of the state to step in to provide adequate social support, or to frame policies which ensured the fair distribution of resources. It is a region characterised by poor social housing, segregated education and widespread racism. The result was simmering community tensions between white British and Asian British youths, in particular, who fought each other and the police in street battles, often fuelled by inflammatory right-wing organisations and the media. However in the aftermath of the disturbances, only the Asian youths and communities and their perceived lack of 'integration' remained in the spotlight whilst the involvement of white youths and questions of historical and structural patterns of poverty, years of industrial decline and entrenched racism and the attendant phenomenon of 'white flight' were ignored.

A series of enquiries and reports have followed after the disturbances in Bradford and other cities. Of these, the Cantle Report was the most influential. Although reports on race relations in the area preceded the disturbances of July 2001, little action was taken. This reflects the long history of government inaction on this issue and it is worthwhile to summarise the findings of one such report on race relations in Bradford led by Sir Herman Ouseley¹⁵ before moving on to

the Cantle Report which set the stage for the emergence of the official cohesion policy. The Ouseley Report preceded the racial disturbances and came about as a result of Bradford Council's decision to review race relations in the area. It pointed to racism and racial discrimination in the labour market and in the workplace in particular and to structural deprivation. This, combined with cuts in public spending by successive governments over the past decades, had led to deep divisions. Mill closures and the general decline in manufacturing left a legacy of high unemployment in Bradford, like in many other British towns and cities. 'White flight' and middle-class movement out of the city left behind an underclass of relatively poor, white people and visible minority ethnic communities. As a result, the Ouseley report argued that Bradford had been 'fragmenting along racial, cultural and faith lines' for some time, creating a 'climate of fear'.¹⁶ The report stated that various regeneration schemes aimed at selling the city as a 'uniquely' multicultural centre had been undermined by the growth of social and racial tensions. The Report argued that young people across all cultures saw no future for themselves and as a result many became involved 'in anti-social behaviour, harassment, intimidation, violence, criminal activity and the illicit drugs trade. This is particularly so of young men of all cultural backgrounds.'¹⁷

In other words, the findings clearly suggested that Bradford's problems were fundamentally rooted in widespread poverty and the social disadvantages faced by working-class families and youth of all racial

backgrounds. It had little to do with issues of faith or cultural tolerance. The fact that these problems have come to be seen in racialised terms is largely the result of the policies of the government and the local authorities. For example, instead of addressing deep-rooted poverty and racial tensions, the Blair Government actively promoted single-faith schools. Bradford became the home of Britain's first state-funded Muslim secondary school. Single-faith schools have of course existed for many years in Britain, particularly for Catholic and Jewish children. However, it is difficult to see the rationale of promoting it in Bradford, when, according to the Ouseley report, single-faith schools contributed 'significantly to the "polarisation" of the "community" and created a system of educational apartheid in the state sector, in which schools are increasingly "mono-cultural", either all white or all Asian. Whilst children in the state schools were taught more about different religions through multi-faith classes, there was barely any mixing between the cultures'. Sir Ouseley complained that little had been done to confront 'all white and/or Muslim schools about their contribution, or rather lack of contribution, to social and racial integration'.¹⁸

The Ouseley report was also scathing about both community and political leaderships which it described as 'weak' and more interested in maintaining power bases and the status quo rather than in representing the people they claimed to represent. 'Political leadership has been weak in kowtowing to community leadership and operating within a 'doing deals' culture to avoid "disturbances" and

to “keep the peace”. So-called “community leaders” are self-styled, in league with the establishment key people and maintain the status quo of control and segregation through fear, ignorance and threats.’ The Ouseley report, therefore, placed racism and racial discrimination and problems of inept and corrupt leadership at the centre of trying to understand how self-segregation of the various communities had come about through a specific historical process. The Report also touched on the themes of gender inequality within the Asian community and the invisibility and powerlessness of Asian girls in particular. Yet all these aspects of segregation were completely ignored by the chair of the Commission for Cohesion and Integration and subsequent government policy. Indeed policy has gone in the opposite direction by encouraging faith-based organisations, including schools and academies, to flourish and by empowering religious leaders to determine the agenda for ‘their’ communities.

The Ouseley report clearly connected the lack of racial integration and understanding to racial hatred and discrimination but this was decoupled by the media whose focus was on ‘white middle-class political correctness’ and the failure of the Asians or Muslims to integrate, in other words the failure of multiculturalism. Politicians such as Anne Cryer MP attacked the practice of arranged marriage and immigration – again focusing only on migrants – leading to the government introducing a range of solutions ostensibly about preventing forced marriage but clearly aimed at stemming migration from the Indian

sub-continent in particular. The myriad of interrelated factors that Ouseley identified in his report have since been forgotten.

The Cantle report

Of the series of reports that followed the disturbances, the most influential was by Ted Cantle.¹⁹ Cantle argued that, although the area was diverse, the separate and parallel lives led by the British white and Asian ‘communities’ in the absence of shared values had become entrenched. He identified social segregation as the primary factor in eroding community cohesion. Implicit in his report was the view that ignorance and fear of the ‘Other’ was the product of long segregation and was rampant amongst both communities. Although social and economic inequalities were touched upon, the focus of the inquiry was largely on the cultural manifestations of segregation rather than structural inequality. Indeed Cantle’s report marginalised the short-lived recognition of the reality of institutionalised racism.

A series of explicit and implicit assumptions about multiculturalism were also made in the report which the media, in particular, was quick to seize on. The focus on the cultural aspects of segregation was highly influential in popularising the view that multiculturalism had gone too far since the social policies that flowed from the ‘tolerance’ of difference appeared to encourage divisions in society and created tensions particularly amongst Muslim populations who were deemed to be less integrated than other minorities. Much of the official, and indeed, popular response to the riots laid the blame on the failure of the

Asian (described as Muslim) 'communities' to integrate. This view did more than anything else to discredit the multicultural approach. Concerns about multiculturalism and the lack of social cohesion were also expressed, some more trenchantly than others, from differing perspectives. Two critics of multiculturalism were particularly significant – David Goodhart and Trevor Phillips.

Goodhart argued that it was the fact of immigration and the resultant diversity of the UK population that made it difficult to sustain the welfare state and eroded solidarity.²⁰ Trevor Phillips, on the other hand, argued that multiculturalism had made a fetish of difference and that the country was in danger of 'sleepwalking into segregation'. He stated that it was time to move on from mere celebration of difference and advocated integration and the adoption of shared common values as British citizens.²¹

The then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, accepted the findings of Cattle's report but used the opportunity to suggest that the problem also lay with the failure to 'manage' immigration into Britain. In doing so, in policy terms, he made an explicit link between immigration and the erosion of cohesion. Popular anxieties about refugees, asylum seekers and migration including migrant workers from the accession states in particular, led to the government's desire to address the newcomers and their supposed demands on already overstretched public services. This has remained the dominant view despite the fact that much of the anxieties about newcomers have been challenged by various commentators and by research.²²

The government's immigration policies that followed have simultaneously aimed at deterrence and restriction as well as promotion of cohesion and assimilation of minorities. They are also reflective of a wider European agenda. For example, in 1998 the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation 1355 on 'Fighting against social exclusion and strengthening social cohesion in Europe'. Significantly, social cohesion was advocated as a vital requirement of an enlarged Europe.²³ Blunkett introduced measures to promote shared citizenship which were all aimed at new and settled immigrants. He attempted to forge a sense of loyalty to the nation, including a requirement that all immigrants must learn English before being granted citizenship, and denounced practices such as forced marriage which were seen as symptomatic of backward minority cultures rather than as a site of struggle for female self-determination.

In sum, therefore, the explicit promotion of cohesion as a policy objective is characterised by three factors: the adoption of an assimilationist stance on migrant integration; the creative diminution of policies on material welfare for migrant communities; and the decline in state institutional responsibility.²⁴

The War on Terror and the faith-based approach

The state's cohesion policy objective was given further impetus following the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in September 2001 and the London bombings in 2005 which became the context for the 'War on Terror'.

The need to address Muslim terrorism and public disorder became the overriding objective. However, as commentators have argued, the change in policy must also be placed in the context of the other overarching themes of governance at the time – decentralisation, devolution and the attempt to increase community engagement in order to promote citizen participation.²⁵ This is achieved by directing local services to make arrangements for the involvement of service users or residents – in hospitals, schools, social housing and policing – in the delivery of services. On the question of the engagement of minorities however, at the national and local levels, it is now evident that this participation has been reduced to a question of engagement based on faith identity alone, especially ‘Muslim’ identity.

In 2005, the government had set up the Preventing Extremism Together Working Groups which emphasised the need to combat at a local level the drivers that lead a person to violent extremism. Four key themes were identified: decision making and community engagement; deprivation and inequality; identity and debate/discussions of the teaching of Islam and Islamophobia; and hate crimes. In 2007, the government launched the Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) Pathfinder programme to fund projects that encouraged local ‘Muslim communities’ and members to reject the ideology of violent extremism and identify themselves as part of British society. The rationale behind this was the view that local authorities have a vital role in strengthening communities through PVE under the auspices of the PREVENT strand of the government’s counter-

terrorism strategy (CONTEST). This initiative was backed by considerable funding from the government: in 2007, six million pounds was made available and a further 45 million was given to local authorities from 2008 to 2011.

The PVE agenda has therefore become an increasingly important part of the core services delivered by local authorities and appears to be closely connected to and often merges with local cohesion and faith-based agendas which encourage local engagement to take place on the basis of faith identities. Increasingly, the state sees civil society split into two groups – those which are faith-based and those which are secular. There is a growing belief in official policy that the experiences, resources and networks of people based on religious identity have been neglected. Therefore, programmes are developed to give ‘faith communities’ a fuller opportunity to participate in society because they are increasingly identified by the state as important sources of social capital (vital sources of civic mobilisation and social campaigning).²⁶ These strategies and programmes include setting up regional interfaith networks and various arts and cultural activities aimed at supporting dialogue and social action. However, in practice, under this approach religion and religious values are mainly attributed to the so-called minority communities whilst secular values are attributed to the so-called majority community.

The view taken by all leaders of the mainstream political parties is that there is a need to address Muslim disaffection, and to increase religious understanding

between Muslims, in particular, and the rest of society, often expressed as the need to create and promote 'religious literacy'. Government policy follows a twin track approach: one which, on the one hand, focuses on reigning in the 'hard core' Islamist elements through tougher criminal sanctions such as the hurriedly introduced terrorism legislation and policing practices and, on the other hand, by appeasing elements of the Muslim communities through amongst other things, special funding, concessions and provisions. At the same time, the state seeks to promote integration and cohesion by developing a common set of shared values and understanding of common citizenship, at least, in relation to the occupation of public spaces. Evidently, therefore, there has been a shift from multiculturalism to multi-faithism i.e. the recasting of minority populations along religious lines and addressing their needs largely through a faith-based framework.

In August 2006, the government announced the launch of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion (CIC) to identify the ways in which local areas can foster cohesion. The chair of the Commission, Darra Singh, was also the Chief Executive of Ealing Council in the SBS funding affair. The report of the Commission, *Our Shared Future*, published in June 2007 did not address structural inequality or, more pertinently, the contradictions of promoting a faith-based agenda. Whilst there was acknowledgement that the disturbances in the northern cities in 2001 were, in part, a reflection of deprivation and industrial decline, it nevertheless focussed on the need to develop locally

based cohesion work largely through cultural or religious exchange networks. It gave guidance to local authorities to avoid funding single-identity groups such as women and ethnic minority groups. It is also important to note that funding that was made available at local levels did not necessarily represent new funding but merely redirected funding allocated to race and equality work.

In 2008, the Communities and Local Government (CLG) issued a consultation document 'Guidance for Funders' which formed an important part of the government's response to *Our Shared Future*. The Guidance set out the government's intention to advise funders on 'practical ways in which local authorities could help build strong communities by promoting cohesion and integration locally'. Following the report, the Guidance also placed conditions on the funding of single community groups defined as third sector groups providing targeted support for single issue/identity based community activity. These groups include black and minority groups and other equality groups including women's groups, gay and lesbian support groups, age and disability groups and service providers. The view, despite misgivings from some, including Hazel Blears, was that local funding should not be made available to single group projects if it 'builds resentment in others'.

It was this aspect of the policy that formed a part of Ealing Council's rationale to withdraw funding from SBS. The council stated that the very existence and constitution of SBS – which focussed on meeting the needs of black and minority women – deterred

white women from seeking help and therefore contributed to segregation and breached race equality principles. In other words, it produced 'unequal' outcomes for the majority population.

Criticism of the Cohesion and Faith-based Approach

The promotion of cohesion and the faith-based approach as policy objectives has not, however, been without criticism. Significant amongst these is the view that cultural segregation, in the context of the disturbances in the northern cities of the country, is not a cause of a lack of cohesion but a symptom and that the roots of social disorder and segregation lie elsewhere – largely to do with socio-economic and gender inequality. It has been argued that

*'What such an analysis fails to acknowledge is not only the material roots of the disorders but also the degree of cultural assimilation by second generation Muslim young men into a consumer culture that has raised aspirations and into a masculine culture that valorises violence.'*²⁷

rather than being a positive force capable of reducing inequalities, cohesion is more of a description of how communities respond to their deprivation and the impact this has on community relations.

Research by Professor Richard Wilkinson also provides empirical evidence to show that lack of cohesion has more to do with levels of poverty and deprivation. A citizenship survey conducted on behalf of CLG in 2006 concluded that '...as deprivation increases, there is a fall in the number of people who agree that people from different

backgrounds get on well together; and a fall in the number who agree that residents respect ethnic differences between people'. Wilkinson suggests that low status and a lack of control over one's life have a dramatic impact on health and well-being, especially when coupled with inequality. He states that socio-economic conditions are also a major determinant of relations between new immigrants and the receiving populations. The evidence suggests that community tensions do not necessarily arise as an inevitable consequence of new immigration or increased ethnic diversity, but rather from high levels of deprivation. Such deprivation increases the competition for scarce resources and fuels animosity between local people. He concludes that it is not poverty *per se* nor local neighbourhood inequalities that have the most detrimental effect on a nation's well-being, but rather the scale of inequality across the whole country, where income differentials determine the size and importance of social class differences. Low status and wealth inequalities also reduce participation in civic and local democracy.²⁸

Wilkinson's views have been echoed by others. For example, b:RAP²⁹ argues that the focus of cohesion has been largely on the interaction between people of different backgrounds and omits other factors such as class, wealth, gender and age in dividing communities. The emphasis on different backgrounds rather than equality has the effect of reinforcing difference and casting minorities as the 'other'. The public perception that equality and cohesion strategies have been primarily concerned with addressing the needs of

black and minority (BME) people at the expense of white British people has played a significant part in further eroding cohesion and causing inter-community tensions. Others have criticised the CIC for failing to focus on substantive policy areas such as social housing, faith schools, privatisation of education and the Iraq war, all of which contribute to social disharmony and lack of cohesion.³⁰

Criticisms about the lack of focus on economic deprivation have, to some extent, led to public policy taking account of poverty as a factor in addressing lack of cohesion. Nevertheless, the ‘remedies’ continue to be aimed primarily at Muslim groups prompted by the desire to address radicalisation and extremism. Dr Derek McGhee, of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Southampton, argues that the principle aims of UK cohesion policies have more to do with containing extremism amongst Muslims than with revitalising citizenship and civil participation. ‘The cohesion debate revolves around a new discourse of what constitutes “Britishness”. But as a means of defining values that we share and around which society can cohere, “Britishness” is at best a blunt – and at worst a discriminatory – concept. This makes it harder rather than easier to reinvigorate a civic space in which potential conflicts and disagreements can be “defused” through discussion, mediation and negotiation.’³¹

Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF) also makes the point (in answer to Goodhart and others) that the underlying assumption of the cohesion discourse, that the immigrant population have values that

are intrinsically opposed to the so called ‘British’ way of life, is disturbing.

New Labour politicians such as Blunkett, Brown and Blair, have often referred to the values of human rights, democracy and fair play – the basis of shared British culture. Immediately the assumption is that there are a set of fixed and given ‘British’ values that are superior and to which all those who enter the country must subscribe. While these values are certainly important, they are by no means exclusively British, or even western, nor should they be seen to be so. Otherwise they become markers of exclusion rather than of inclusion. This then generates the view that it is the immigrant communities with their negative and alien values that are responsible for divisions and are harmful to the stability and ‘cohesion’ of the country. The discourse and assumptions around immigration and asylum has(sic) always started from this premise.³²

WAF makes the point that the relatively narrow definition of cohesion that has emerged is mainly due to the failure to address the limitations of two decades of multicultural policies and criticisms which they and others have made.³³ WAF argues that the new cohesion and faith-based approach goes one step further in reinforcing the tendency to value ‘cultural conservatism’ often imposed by powerful, illiberal and even fundamentalist religious forces within minority populations. They therefore criticise the faith-based perspective for its failure to acknowledge the lack of ability and the absence of social ‘permission’ for the more vulnerable to exercise choice in determining their cultural affiliations, practices and identity.

More significantly, perhaps, WAF has also been highly critical of the faith-based objective and its assumptions about ‘community’ and ‘community representation’ which it regards as highly problematic in

respect of gender inequality within minority populations. WAF makes the point that not all minorities belong to a 'community' since boundaries are fluid and contested often on the grounds of inequality and undemocratic representation by 'leaders' who are more often than not, self-styled, authoritarian, patriarchal and unaccountable. Their power has been further entrenched by the rise of religious fundamentalism³⁴ in all religions and the subsequent adoption of the faith-based approach to social relations which has been particularly detrimental to the struggle for sexual and gender equality.³⁵

Ealing Council's cohesion strategy

Ealing is a mixed London borough with a population which, in 2007, was estimated to be around 305,300.³⁶ It is recognised as having the fourth most ethnically diverse populations of all local authorities in the UK. Figures from the 2001 census reveal that 55 per cent of Ealing residents were from ethnic minorities who did not classify themselves as white British. This definition of ethnic minority includes white ethnic minorities such as people from Irish, Polish or South African backgrounds. Forty one per cent of the population were not white, including Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Africans and those from the Caribbean.³⁷ It has the largest Indian (Punjabi-Sikh) population in the whole of London. Statistics also reveal that Southall, with its large non-white population, is one of the two most deprived areas in Ealing with high rates of unemployment.³⁸

Following national policy and guidance on cohesion, Ealing Council,

like most other boroughs, developed a local cohesion strategy that is inextricably connected to the preventing extremism agenda. In August 2007, Ealing Council undertook a communities survey intended to inform its cohesion strategy and action plan for the borough.³⁹ Reflecting the national discourse on cohesion, the borough's survey carried out mainly via face-to-face interviews on the street asked questions that are increasingly regarded as the main indicators of cohesion: ascertaining perceptions of 'integration'; and concentrating largely on how people viewed each other. They focused on the following areas: how neighbourhoods are changing; degrees of understanding and tensions between different demographic groups; how respectful and welcoming places are; what kinds of actions or activities help people to mix. Significantly, issues of poverty, deprivation and inequality were not covered by the survey.

Of the interviewees, 54 per cent of the total were classified as 'indigenous' groups (those who have lived in the UK all their lives – which appears to refer to those who largely identified as white British or English or Scottish or Irish or Welsh). All others were classified as non-indigenous. Implicit in this demographic division is the view that all non-white minorities (visible minorities), irrespective of their histories of settlement from the 50s and 60s are still regarded as 'non indigenous' and therefore 'outsiders'. Another significant problem throughout the survey is that 'Muslims' are the only 'religious' category that is mentioned when responses are outlined. All other minorities

are referred to primarily in relation to their ethnicity. Also, missing from the analysis is a gendered analysis of the responses.

The outcome of the survey suggested that youth crimes and intra-community gang crimes feature prominently as issues of concern to many residents, especially those of Southall, who have witnessed tensions between Somali and Asian male youths. Other areas of concern reflect the dominant, national discourse on cohesion with its preoccupation with the 'immigration problem'. White British people or people who had lived in the UK were more likely to disagree that different people get on well together in their neighbourhood and to disagree strongly. Immigration, lack of integration, cultural differences, religion and language barriers were blamed for tensions between people from different backgrounds. This view emanated particularly from areas of the borough that are known for having a higher incidence of racism towards non-white minorities although, in the survey itself, this significant point remains unremarked.

Groups that were most likely to feel discriminated against were black residents. Interestingly, in contrast to the cohesion and faith-based discourse, the majority of Muslim residents felt discriminated against, not on the basis of their religion but, on the basis of their ethnicity. Locally, minority ethnic groups were less likely to feel that race relations had worsened compared to white British or 'indigenous' populations. In respect of solutions advocated, the single most frequently suggested solution to integration was learning the English language. Other solutions posited included

exchange of cultural understanding through the staging of festivals and fairs and visiting different places of worship.

Following the survey, and despite some of its findings, Ealing Council developed its cohesion strategy for Ealing, *Shared Future Integration and Community Cohesion Strategy 2007-2011*, which does not address racial inequality. The strategy and the funding that flows from it focus exclusively on ways of strengthening interfaith cultural exchanges and on 'Muslims'. Ealing's cohesion strategy is also dominated by the need to encourage faith-based groups – Muslim groups – to emerge. By focusing on Muslims, it reflects the main priority which is to prevent Muslim extremism. For example, the following objectives, which are by no means exhaustive, dominate the cohesion strategy:

- Work with faith-based groups
- Publish a faith directory
- Hold inter-faith conferences and improve inter-faith working
- Deliver Ealing Muslim Community engagement project by working with Muslim children and young people on issues, problems and social tensions affecting Muslims and how to engage Muslim communities in the formation of public policy
- Deliver a faith volunteering project for schools, hospitals and the police targeting Muslim volunteers
- Provide conflict mentoring training for young Muslim children and people
- Hold a conference that will emphasise a scholarly interpretation

of Islam that supports integration and citizenship

- Launch a Muslim network
- Build the capacity of third sector organisations that explore the values of Islam
- Develop a questionnaire to gather the views of Muslims.

Ealing's PVE strategies also reflect a major preoccupation with engagement with Muslims only. Of the £45m made available for 2008-211 to local authorities to tackle extremism amongst Muslims, Ealing Council received a total £205,000 for 2008-9, rising to £225,000 and £286,000 for 2009-10 respectively⁴⁰.

Ealing's PVE agenda reflects its cohesion strategy. Its stated aims are to 'gather greater understanding of the issues/concerns facing our Muslim communities; provide space for greater dialogue and discussion around Muslim identity and understanding of Islam; provide more opportunities for engagement with the wider community through volunteering; and establish greater support networks for Muslim women'. Under the theme of engaging with Muslim women, the council has made a grant of £35,000 available to the local Acton Community Forum and Southall Community Alliance to 'foster in young Muslim women a greater willingness to express their own views and decisively influence their local community, a greater awareness on how to access public services offered by organisations such as the council, and a greater awareness on how to become involved in local decision making processes'. Youth services have also been

provided £10,000 to engage with Muslim girls in secondary schools through lunchtime sessions to discuss their concerns. Whilst Ealing Council maintains that the PVE focus complemented the 'emerging borough Integration and Community Cohesion' strategy, developed in 2007, in practice, the council's PVE and Cohesion Strategy are indistinguishable.

One direct consequence of Ealing Council's approach to cohesion was the attempt to withdraw funding of organisations like SBS, the only BME women's group in the borough that has successfully worked across religion and ethnicity within minority communities. At the same time the council has encouraged the development of faith-based initiatives, including setting up two Muslim women-only projects, in parts of the borough where there is considerable deprivation faced by many women across various ethnic and religious lines and even though there is no visible demand for such faith-based organisations.⁴¹

Since 1981, SBS has worked with women and children across all the main minority religions, precisely because they are amongst the most marginalised in Ealing and unrepresented by the majority of so-called 'community' or 'religious' leaders and institutions. The women who campaigned to prevent the closure of the SBS centre had firsthand experience of the impact of the cohesion and faith-based approach on their lives.

AFTERWORD

Since the completion of this research, a general election in May 2010

swept a coalition government made up of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties into power. One of the flagships of the government led by Prime Minister, David Cameron, is the launch of a plan for the 'Big Society'.⁴² Under the plan, the aim is to allow local communities, voluntary groups and citizens to take over tasks currently performed by local and central government. The plan is perceived as a radical and dramatic redistribution of power and control from the state to the individual by encouraging greater volunteering and philanthropy at the local level. David Cameron has described how community projects will be established in different parts of the UK in an effort to 'turn government completely on its head'. The project includes buying out rural pubs, creating a Big Society Bank, developing local transport and building volunteering programmes and so on. It is hoped that such projects will work closely with experts, advisers and the Department of Communities and Local Government to take over the delivery of a range of local services.

The idea of the 'Big Society' has however met with considerable scepticism from a number of quarters, including trade unionists, social analysts and commentators across the political spectrum. The most voiced criticism is that it is seen as a convenient cover for spending cuts, particularly as the government's overarching aim is to implement massive cuts in public sector services. It is also seen as a return to Thatcherite anti-state populism, even though the idea is articulated in the language of people empowerment and community

engagement.⁴³ The notion of the 'Big Society' remains silent on how questions of poverty and the social exclusion of the most marginalised and vulnerable (perhaps the greatest obstacle to civic participation) in our society will be tackled.

The aim of handing power to local communities is not new. The previous government's attempts to impose social cohesion was also concerned with empowering local, largely faith-based institutions. However, whether in the guise of 'Social Cohesion' or the 'Big Society', such initiatives raise many questions as to who holds power at the local levels, how it is used and to what purpose? There is nothing in the notion of the 'Big Society' which hints at how power relations which cut across both state and community institutions perpetuate discrimination and social exclusion, will be addressed. Findings from this study, for example, show that black and minority women are acutely critical of tradition or religion which perpetuates gender inequality and discrimination and they reject the emphasis on 'faith-based organisations' and 'religious leaders' as key agents in the regeneration of local communities. Yet spokespersons of the new government have endorsed the previous government's policy of encouraging faith-based projects and leaderships to play a key role in shaping policy and in service delivery on a range of issues at all levels of society.

In a speech at a dinner organised by the international charity Muslim Hands on 23 June 2010, Baroness Warsi, the Minister without Portfolio in the Cabinet Office, outlined the importance of religion in

combating poverty.

The UK government recognises the distinctive role that faith-based organisations play in helping to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 through their global networks of faith groups both in the developing countries and in the UK. These networks rival those of the government and private sector for their unique ability to reach the poorest and most vulnerable people. As faith is part of individual and group identity, faith groups inspire confidence and trust and because they are deeply involved and committed to the local community, they can get to the roots of society quickly and meaningfully...it is not just vital humanitarian relief that faith organisations provide – it is basic public services.

Elsewhere, Baroness Warsi has condemned ‘rising secularism’ in the UK and has stated that a Conservative government will need to ‘reverse the damage done by the results of Labour pursuing a secular agenda since 1997.’⁴⁴

The findings of this project show that in the London borough of Ealing, with a high percentage of ethnic minorities in the population and enclaves of entrenched poverty, there is no evidence to suggest that religious leaders and organisations have made

any significant inroads into reaching the most deprived or making a positive impact on the lives of vulnerable women. Far from inspiring ‘confidence and trust’ faith groups evoked a range of fears amongst ethnic minority women who suffer violence and abuse in the family. The respondents of this study clearly cherish services provided by the government and secular organisations, which help them to assert their fundamental human rights and freedoms. Yet the ‘Big Society’, much like the ‘Social Cohesion’ project before it, threatens the existence of the voluntary sector and especially groups like SBS that seek to empower the vulnerable and encourage a sense of belonging. The findings also show that questions of poverty, discrimination and social exclusion are as relevant to the idea of the ‘Big Society’ as they are to the notion of social cohesion.

SECTION 11

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative analysis of the impact of the cohesion and faith-based approach on the lives of ethnic minority women. Since it focuses on women who have suffered domestic violence, the methodology of the study was designed keeping in mind their vulnerability and severe social marginalisation. The backbone of the study consists of one-on-one interviews with 21 women, conducted by two interviewers, Pragna Patel and Uditi Sen. SBS approached its current and past users and requested them to participate in this study. The respondents were in a sense self-selected as they consisted of those clients who agreed to take part in the survey. Nevertheless, the attempt was to interview women from different generations and religious backgrounds in order to ensure that the selected group represented a suitably diverse cross-section of ethnic-minority women.

Each interview was divided into two sections. The first section dealt with factual questions regarding the marital status, education, employment and immigration status of the women. A fact-sheet on the respondent was prepared at this stage. (See appendix 1). The second section consisted of a conversational interview, loosely structured around clusters of questions, and designed to map the impact of the cohesion and faith-based approach on these women's lives. Low levels of education and writing skills amongst many of the respondents ruled out a written questionnaire. Given the vulnerability of the women and their history of abuse it was felt

that it would be counter-productive to impose a rigid structure on the interview process. However, both the interviewers conducted the sessions using the same questionnaire (see appendix II) to ensure consistency in the interview process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants (See appendix III). All the interviews were conducted in the office of SBS and the respondents were remunerated for their time and their travel costs. All participants were also assured anonymity and their names were changed. However, the pseudonyms were chosen to reflect their ethnicity.

Most respondents had not heard of community cohesion, or understood what it meant. It was left to SBS to explain its significance. This was extremely challenging as the term does not translate easily into South Asian languages. Part of the problem lies in the fact that 'cohesion' is not an ideological concept in the sense that multiculturalism was, but merely a management tool in addressing race relations. It makes sense only when understood as a shift away from multiculturalism and when located within the socio-political context of the 'War on Terror' in which combating security threats originating from migrant groups has become a primary concern of the government in UK.

Prior to the interviews, two introductory group meetings were held to explain the purpose of the research and to introduce the respondents to the concept of 'cohesion'. Given the critical stand of SBS on community cohesion, this posed obvious methodological problems. If the women

relied on SBS for their understanding of cohesion, there was a very real risk that their responses would merely reflect the organisation's stand. In order to solve this problem, the interviews placed little emphasis on the respondents' direct response to 'cohesion'. Though the women were asked to explain their understanding of and views on cohesion, this was done merely to ascertain their awareness of current policy. In order to map the actual impact of this policy shift in their lives, the study broke down the broad notion of community cohesion to its constituent elements, chief goals and major policy changes, such as social integration, the issue of belonging and its relationship to faith, opinion on religious leadership, government funding for faith schools and religious organisations, etc. The interviewees were asked to respond to these themes and issues rather than directly comment on 'community cohesion'. The study thus attempted to map whether eight years of community cohesion had any positive impact on the lives of these women in terms of social integration. If not, what were the perceived obstacles to integration?

The women were also asked to respond to specific policies implemented under community cohesion. Here, two concrete government policies were identified: the current policy of privileging religious affiliation as the primary identity of minorities through support for faith-based schools and organisations; and the threatened closure of SBS. Some of the interviews were conducted in English, while others were conducted in Hindi and Urdu. In

writing this report, we have summarised the opinions of the interviewees, occasionally quoting them verbatim. Wherever required, the responses have been translated from Hindi/Urdu into English.

PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

The twenty-one respondents who participated in this study were between 25 and 60 years old and from South Asian or African-Caribbean backgrounds. In terms of education, employment and immigration status, there were wide variations amongst the respondents. The details have been presented in a table below. All but one of the respondents described themselves as believers of different religions. There were four Sikh, four Christian, seven Muslim and six Hindu women. However, the majority saw religious affiliation as a matter of personal choice or interpretation and were ill at ease with the notion of *belonging* to a faith-based community.

All the respondents had suffered from domestic violence or abuse. For many, the breakdown of their marriages had led to related problems of an insecure immigration status, poverty, homelessness, destitution and depression. Some of the respondents were older clients who had succeeded in rebuilding their lives to a certain degree and therefore spoke with greater coherence and the advantage of hindsight. The majority, however, were still battling the multiple consequences of domestic violence, including an insecure visa status.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
	Sarah	Gurinder	Seeta	Shahida	Shalini	Nafisa
Name						
Age	52	32	25	48	40	40
Country of origin	Syria	India	Mauritian Indian, but born in France	Pakistan	India	India
Year of arrival	1997	1998	1989	1998	1994	Not Sure
Immigration status	Insecure	Insecure	Resident of UK with French passport	Indefinite Leave to Remain on compassionate grounds	Insecure	Became a British citizen in 2008
Marital status	Separated	Married	Single	Separated	Divorced	Divorced
Children	None	None	None	None	None	3 boys and 1 girl
Religion	Muslim (Believes in Allah and the Quran)	Sikh (Not Religious)	Hindu (Non-practising but believes in God)	Muslim (Believes in the Quran, not mauvi's interpretations)	Hindu (Belief is Personal)	Muslim (believer who follows rituals)
Knowledge of English	Good	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Good	Very Poor
Education	Masters degree, obtained in France	Up to the tenth standard in India	BSc. in biotechnology from Kings College, London	BA and MA in Islamic Studies from Pakistan	Up to 12 th standard in India	Up to 7 th Standard in India
Employment status	employed	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed, at times teaches Arabic to school children	Undisclosed income as a beauty therapist	Unemployed
Whether in receipt of benefits	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Table 1: Profile of respondents (continued)

	VII		VIII		IX		X		XI		XII	
Name	Leelaben	Simran	Kirandeep	Ophelia	Grace	Farida						
Age	28	51	29	59	38	60 (approximately)						
Country of origin	India	Kenya	India	West Indies	Kenya	Pakistan						
Year of arrival	2006	1976	2006	1970	2002	1969						
Immigration status	Indefinite Leave to Remain	British Citizen	Indefinite Leave to Remain	British Citizen	British Citizen	British Citizen						
Marital status	Separated	Divorced	Separated	Divorced	Separated	Divorced						
Children	None	2 girls	None	1 son and 1 daughter	1 Boy	4 children (who are now adults)						
Religion	Hindu (Believer)	Sikh (Believer)	Sikh (Non-believer)	Christian (Believer, Apostolic Church)	Christian (Believer)	Muslim (believer but non-practising)						
Knowledge of English	Adequate	Excellent	Poor	Excellent	Very Good	Adequate						
Education	BCom from India	Completed Schooling in Kenya	Up to 12 th standard in India	Degree in Nursing from School of Nursing in Cornwall	O Level Diploma in Secretarial Work from Kenya	Educated up to BA degree level; stopped studies after marriage						
Employment status	Line leader in a pizza factory	Receptionist on partly paid and partly voluntary basis	Permanent job at the Colleenbrook Food Factory	Unemployed since January 2008 due to injury	Employed as a Receptionist	Unemployed (previously worked in clothes factory and did sewing from home to balance working with child care)						
Whether in receipt of benefits	No	Yes	No	Not Known	No	Yes						

Table 1: Profile of respondents (continued)

	XIII		IV		XV		VI		VII		XVIII	
Name	Florence	Ramaben	Amrita	Usha	Wahida	Rashida						
Age	50	38	33	60	49	47						
Country of origin	Kenya	India	India	Uganda (Indian Origin)	Pakistan	Pakistan						
Year of arrival	2006 (February)	2007	1996	1972	2000	1980						
Immigration status	Insecure - application for Asylum pending	Indefinite Leave to Remain	Exceptional Leave to Remain on Grounds of Compassion	British Citizen	Indefinite Leave to Remain	British Citizen						
Marital status	Separated	Married (2 nd time)	Married (2 nd time)	Married	Divorced and remarried	Divorced						
Children	4 children (now adults)	None	Two children, under 11 years old.	3, all adults	1 – adult now	One fifteen-year old and four adults						
Religion	Pentecostal Christian (practising)	Hindu (practising)	Christian (practising)	Hindu (Practising)	Muslim (Practising)	Muslim (Practising)						
Knowledge of English	Good	None	Good	Poor	Poor	Poor						
Education	Completed under-graduate education	Educated up to the twelfth standard in India	Completed schooling, discontinued BA due to marriage	Went to school until the age of 15	Educated until the age of 17 and then stopped due to marriage	Up to GCSE						
Employment status	Unable to work until asylum claim is decided	Working in low income and insecure jobs such as cleaning, catering etc.	Worked in retail store for two years but unable to work now due to problems in obtaining childcare	Unemployed for last ten years. Worked at newsagents before	Unemployed, in the past worked as beautician from home	Occasional casual work in kitchens and factories, mainly sewing from home to earn money						
Whether in receipt of benefits	No – applied for NASS Support	No	No	Yes	Yes	No						

Table 1: Profile of respondents (continued)

	XIX	XX	XXI
Name	<i>Kavita</i>	<i>Aziza</i>	<i>Gurpreet</i>
Age	27	38	53
Country of origin	India	Somalia	Malaysia (Indian origin)
Year of arrival	2007	2000	1974
Immigration status	Insecure	British Citizen	British Citizen
Marital status	Separated	Married	Remarried after divorce
Children	None	Four children, all under 5	Two, both adults
Religion	Hindu (practising)	Muslim (practising)	Sikh, but became a practising Hindu
Knowledge of English	None	Poor	Excellent
Education	Up to age of 16	Civil war in Somalia interrupted college	Diploma in nursing
Employment status	Irregular and informal employment as cleaner, in laundries and food factories	Unemployed, but worked as casual labourer in warehouses before marriage.	Worked as state registered nurse and owned a band-B business
Whether in receipt of benefits	No	Yes	No

FINDINGS

1. Cohesion: the myth and the reality

Lack of awareness

The immediate and most obvious finding was the massive lack of awareness regarding cohesion amongst the interviewees. Ironically, though many had participated in the campaign to prevent the withdrawal of funds from SBS by Ealing Council, which was justified by a cynical interpretation of community cohesion, there was no awareness of the term or the fact that ‘community cohesion’ had displaced

multiculturalism as the official social policy in the management of race relations in the UK. The inability to grasp the significant impact that policies of cohesion had on their lives suggested a gap between the government’s rhetoric on community cohesion, which constructs religiously defined ethnic communities as a homogenous whole and their faith-based leaders as the main participants and beneficiaries of the policy, and the lived reality of ethnic minority women. Much of the interviews focussed on exploring the nature and content of this gap.

The interviewees had no awareness of how their supposed community leaders shape the cohesion agenda and implement

policies on their behalf in collaboration with the government. While Wahida had never heard of it,⁴⁵ Florence admitted to first hearing the term when she had gone to court with SBS.⁴⁶ Ramabehn declared, 'I have not heard of cohesion. I only watch Indian programmes.'⁴⁷

The almost complete lack of awareness of what cohesion means amongst the group studied indicates that the cohesion discourse does not reach the most vulnerable within migrant communities, in this case women who have faced domestic violence and abuse but who are often prevented from seeking redress by cultural and religious norms. Amongst the respondents, this lack of awareness cuts across all ethnic and religious backgrounds and wide variations in levels of education. It was equally true of women who had no working knowledge of English and women who were well educated and fluent in it. This indicates significant failures on the part of the state as well as religious leaders within minority communities with whom the state works to deliver results. However, this lack of awareness cannot be equated to lack of impact on the day-to-day lives of the group studied.

Every single respondent had felt the impact of the policy shift towards community cohesion, which was brought home to them dramatically through the threatened closure of SBS. In such situations, lack of awareness of official policy and lack of access to the discourse promotes incomprehension of local 'cohesion' initiatives and further marginalises already vulnerable groups. Many of the women were intimately involved in the campaign to save the centre

from closure as a result of Ealing Council's decision to withdraw funding. The campaign was fought on the basis that denying vital services to some of the most 'hard to reach' groups would result in greater inequality and segregation. Many of the women would not, for instance, be able to participate in the wider society because of lack of access to state support. The study clearly illustrated that it is organisations like SBS that provide the space and tools for empowerment which contribute to the moulding of values – the glue – with which to bind society. Yet, paradoxically, these very organisations are threatened by the cohesion agenda.

Cohesion's reliance on faith and alienation of women

The respondents, who had little or no information regarding the policy of community cohesion, nevertheless articulated a commonsense understanding of cohesion. Though Gurpreet had not come across the term before, she interpreted it as 'a better and safer community and working and learning together' and felt that racism was the major obstacle to achieving this. 'They are creating anger and hate between the communities and putting pressure on all the black and ethnic minority families and their children. What I have seen is pressure – racism.'⁴⁸

The sole exception to this pattern was Shalini, who had come across the term independently of SBS while preparing for the 'Life in Britain' test as a part of her application to remain in the UK indefinitely. She had merely memorised 'community cohesion' in preparation for the Citizenship

test without actually engaging with the concept. During the interview, she equated cohesion to a cohesive society, which in her mind was a mixed society, where people of different cultures, communities and faiths lived together without any division. She thought that this was the ideal society, but took a very negative view of official policies promoting cohesion, 'They are dividing people in the name of cohesion – they are going to gurdwaras, to temples, to mosques. Why? Go to the people!'⁴⁹ For Shalini, the government betrayed its rhetoric of building an equal and cohesive society by supporting faith-based groups and religious leaders. This was cause for a sense of alienation from the state and a deep distrust of the new policy initiatives amongst a number of the interviewees.

Simran saw a contradiction between her understanding of cohesive society, which she described as a 'kind of united' society and the promotion of religious leadership. She saw religion and racism as deeply divisive forces and said that the government should focus on human rights instead. She clearly believed that secular law and not religious law should be the binding glue of society and wondered whether the current focus on religion was an attempt by the government to shift responsibility.

In a united front there should be no discrimination ...there should be no racism. And that's how I feel...I think with religion we are going to cause a lot of cracks in the community...they won't be united at all... If we are bringing religion and cohesion together we are moving away from human rights. Definitely. We are not looking at human rights at all. ...But why? Why...I don't understand. Why is the government going along with religious laws? Do they not have the power...or is it a break of communication...or is it saying let's take this off our backs and hand it down? ⁵⁰

Several respondents associated a perceived injustice with current government policies towards migrant groups, which was further heightened by the cohesion agenda. Grace, Usha and Sarah felt that it was unfair to expect migrant people to carry the lion's share of the load of social integration. According to Farida, 'integration means being able to visit each other, to learn together. Everyone has to make an effort. If I come to your house, you have to come to mine.'⁵¹ Sarah stressed the need to focus on education regarding diverse cultures and societies amongst the white British as most ethnic minorities already knew at least two languages and are often, through global media, much more aware of British culture than 'white-British' people are of other cultures.⁵² For Simran, the focus on promoting knowledge of British values amongst migrant groups to achieve cohesion was discriminatory and made no sense. She doubted whether white British people, born and brought up in the UK, have a sense of what 'Britishness' means.

I mean...there are people...English people who've lived here. They don't even know where Buckingham Palace is, who the premier is and they are asking other people to learn about the British... what the British history is? The British themselves don't know what British history is... So how dare they impose this on people who are coming from the outside? I think that it's wrong.⁵³

It is clear from this study that the current focus on involving religious leadership as spokespersons of minority communities alienates ethnic minority women and leads to negative perceptions of the motives and goals of governance. This is

not surprising since emphasis on faith is born less of a felt need amongst ethnic minorities and more of the government tendency to combine community cohesion policies with the preventing violent extremism agenda. As a result, cohesion is integrated with a 'faith-based' approach to understanding social diversity that encourages the construction of projects around religious, especially Muslim identity. This has seen increasing consultation between the state and 'religious leaders' in shaping the cohesion agenda. The assumption here is that religious leaders can effectively represent the needs of, or integrate all or most members of their communities. This view is deeply flawed due to several factors. Firstly, a strategy which relies on non-elected leaders for outreach is bound to be inherently undemocratic in its impact. This study demonstrates that the religious leaders do not effectively reach ethnic minority women who suffer from domestic violence and abuse and that there is, in fact, a deep distrust of religious authority of any description by such women. This is further discussed in the section on religion. Secondly, the focus on 'community' as the category through which citizens are viewed is problematic since communities have always been divided along a number of power axes. The cohesion and faith agenda fails to recognise that there are deep structural inequalities within communities based on differences in class, caste, gender and even different interpretations of the same faith or religion. Instead, it perpetuates the myth of harmonious and homogenous communities. Whereas previous policies of multiculturalism cast

minority communities as separate cultural enclaves, cohesion has recast minorities as separate religious enclaves – so called 'faith communities'. Such a strategy runs the risk of reinforcing the marginalisation of the weakest individuals, alienating women, and promoting segregation and competition between different groups of people. The respondents of this study are not only alive to these pitfalls, but go on to vividly describe how the cohesion agenda, by privileging 'faith-based organisations' and 'religious leaders' replicates and often accentuates the discrimination and inequalities suffered by women within their respective populations.

2. Cohesion and belonging

Cohesion policies are the state's attempt to impose on minorities a specific politics of belonging to the nation state and to their 'communities'. In relation to the nation-state, the current policy seeks to impose belonging by invoking the need to share 'British values and social norms'. These are not clearly defined but assumed to mean 'tolerance', 'equality' and 'respect'. The idea that such values are exclusively or even primarily 'British' and external to immigrant groups is both problematic and historically untenable. In relation to communities, the approach constructs all minorities as belonging to 'faith-based' groups. What is clear is that both approaches assume that notions of belonging are natural, fixed and unchanging. It commits the cardinal blunder of conflating a constructed politics of belonging with far more organic feelings of belonging.⁵⁴ Rigid, exclusive and faith-based notions of belonging were found to

have little resonance with the lived reality of the women interviewed. The study revealed that the feelings of belonging amongst ethnic minority women were far more complex and had a richness which was severely distorted by the dominant politics of belonging promoted through policies of social cohesion.

Belonging to the 'family' of SBS

Significantly, the majority of the respondents described SBS as a 'family', thus suggesting a strong sense of belonging to the organisation as opposed to an ascribed religious or ethnic 'community'. The women's description of why they saw SBS as a very important part of their identity illustrates how the government rhetoric of cohesion failed to take into account existing progressive and secular spaces of belonging. If anything, it threatened such spaces, compounding the marginalisation of already vulnerable women.

Most of the interviewees felt that they belonged to SBS, describing it as their home and their source of strength at an emotional, social and political level. Belonging for them was thus about occupying safe spaces; where they felt respected and where they could give something back in return. A number of respondents stressed being 'heard' or being able to 'talk freely' and being 'valued' for what they are as the reasons for this sense of belonging. Unbeknown to each other, the term 'family' was used to describe their sense of belonging again and again by almost all the respondents.

This sentiment stretched far beyond the women who participated in the study.

During the 'Save SBS' campaign, which was launched in 2008 to protest against Ealing Council's decision to withdraw funding from the organisation, numerous past and present users of SBS wrote expressing support. Testimony from the women's letters was presented to Ealing Council. Some of these letters are worth citing in this report as it reveals how strongly women felt about SBS as their alternative 'home' and 'family'. 'Please do not cut their funding because if their activities are cut then I will feel imprisoned within my home with nowhere to go', pleaded Sumitra while Radha claimed that 'they supported me like a family, they helped me and it felt to me as if I had come to be with family members... in this country, women like us need such an organisation. We need a family like this.'⁵⁵ Several Pakistani women reaffirmed the sentiments of these Indian petitioners. For example, Ayesha declared that 'without SBS there are lots of women who would have nowhere to go – they need help and support, so where will they go? SBS are their life support – without them, their lives will be nothing.' Mixed with these sentiments of belonging was gratefulness and a clear consciousness that SBS fulfils a vital role for victims of domestic violence by giving them the means to live with dignity. Shazia declared that 'the name of Black Sisters will be in my veins forever. I pray to God that the Black Sisters will survive indefinitely so that women who are less fortunate like me get help.' A similar urgency can be felt in Zoya's plea:

It is due to this agency, that because of their unrelenting help and support I have my identity back. No other organisation would have done this. Because of them I learnt again what it is to speak, laugh and play.... SBS should not close down, because where would women like myself go? Because of SBS our voices are heard today.

These quotes are relevant not only because they demonstrate the women's strong sense of belonging to the Centre, but also because they illustrate that for ethnic minority women, belonging becomes meaningful only when their voices are heard and their needs are addressed.

The women professed values of equality and tolerance, shaped by the fact of their co-existence. How are such values generated? What is evident from the findings is that by sharing the space that is SBS, by supporting each other, women have come to develop values which they think are important to bind them together. These values are not imposed but have developed through co-existence in circumstances where all are treated equally. Women value the need to share their experiences and to learn to respect and support each other through friendships and interaction. For example, Wahida loves coming to SBS because, 'If we have any problems we can come here. We can meet together and we can share each other's problems and experiences. We can go on picnics, celebrations, dancing and singing.'⁵⁶ The values that bind them are also about understanding differences and commonalities. For example, Rashida explained why she would be happier in a broader context of belonging.

*I feel happy in any community. I talk to people. I don't want to live in just one type of community. If you live in a mixed community, know about each other's cultures, religion, you know more about life.'*⁵⁷

Doing things together in a shared space, such as sharing food across religious and cultural divides repeatedly came up as examples of a way forward. Farida, a Muslim woman, clearly described her vision of a shared space and life:

*I think we should live with love. No one is Sikh or Muslim or Hindu. This is inside us. There is only one God. Isn't it better to pray together? I have never felt hatred for anyone. I go to Gurdwara and temples. There is a Gurdwara up the top of my road. Sometimes, Sikh women will knock on my door and say there is saag and roti'⁵⁸ come let's go and eat together.'*⁵⁹

Most women associated religious spaces as segregated spaces and many, such as Farida, spoke of transcending them:

*But how will we integrate if we are segregated? We will become full of hate as there is in India and Pakistan. I don't want to live like this. I go to the Gurdwara and eat rotis. I go to temples and I like to sit with everyone. Even Allah can't be happy that people live segregated lives according to their religion.'*⁶⁰

Besides valuing SBS as a shared space, many interviewees, such as Simran, saw it as a 'bridge' between vulnerable ethnic minority women and larger society.⁶¹ They felt that the organisation's support and 'safe' space provided women with the necessary confidence to interact with others. Some of the users of SBS had an expectation of cultural understanding and empathy for problems arising out of racism or specific cultural expectations which drew them to SBS. For example, Sita who was not aware of the controversy surrounding the closure of SBS, was directed to SBS by her therapist who was counselling her regarding problems she was facing with her parents:

She was an English lady, she didn't know too much about the culture I was dealing with... I felt because I was Asian I did not have the right to leave (my parents). My therapist could not understand this because in her opinion I had to leave because the way I was being treated (at home) was not fair. I could not bring myself to do it. So she suggested that if you want to talk to an Asian person or organisation, you can talk to the SBS It was good to have the encouragement, (to know) that I have a way out from an Asian person because they can understand the need to stay with your family... and to hear them say that you are not doing anything wrong by leaving was very encouraging for me.⁶²

Sita was a graduate in bio-chemistry from a reputed college. Yet, her Asian background left her feeling different, and barred from exercising the option of leaving home. This was born of cultural and social expectations from her family in particular, and her community in general. The role played by SBS actually facilitated her ability to question these norms.

Many women felt that belonging was about giving something back to the community from which they draw support and respect. Farida described how on the day of their support group meeting, she got together with some of the other clients of SBS to organise a soup kitchen, 'Me and some of the other women got together and cooked. We are women from all different backgrounds... We really enjoy that.'⁶³ Unlike Farida, most were unable to undertake voluntary work, due to depression, mental health problems, financial difficulties, lack of English, childcare and, in some cases, problems with meeting basic accommodation and living needs. Nevertheless, the strong desire to help other women in similar circumstances, *irrespective of their backgrounds*, was a recurrent theme. This could be read as a desire to make the

leap from being victims to survivors – an essential pre-requisite to feeling a sense of belonging. The official discourse of social integration by demanding 'voluntary' work from migrants who aspire to citizenship, on one hand, assumes the absence of such desire, while on the other hand ignoring the very real practical obstacles which might prevent ethnic minority women from acting upon their wishes. For our respondents, the lack of opportunity and the resources to participate often compromises their ability to belong. Particularly poignant was Florence's response, who is an asylum seeker and feels all her attempts to belong are thwarted by a hostile immigration system:

I have stayed here for long but I feel that I should be given a chance. I would like to help in the community. I would help people with parenting. I like to work in the community. I do feel equal but I am not treated equally because I don't speak English well. I am a law-abiding citizen and I want to help build (?) a nation together. I have not reached retirement age. I am not useful. This is the time when I can still work. I am not treated equally.⁶⁴

Clearly, the need to take responsibility at the same time as asserting rights is not a New Labour or even New Conservative idea. Powerless people who are assisted to overcome the obstacles which prevent them from being able to live in dignity or peace often express a strong desire to help others in the same predicament. However, the practical obstacles which thwart their intentions are inadequately addressed by the government.

The women thus regarded received ethnic or religious identities, as superfluous to, or actively harmful to their sense of belonging to wider society. They articulated

a desire for a shared space which would acknowledge the specificities of the social problems faced by ethnic minority women. They were wary of the imposition of gendered roles and expectations leading to women being treated as second-class members of religious or ethnic groups. Their felt need was to transcend such norms and boundaries through sharing. Though inchoate in her expression, Simran's awareness of gender discrimination within communities comes through very strongly.

There's so many groups out there... I'm looking at women from all over the world basically... Their voices need to be heard... because what's happening in some places is that the women who've come from... the women who have not been allowed to do certain things. You keep undercover all the time.⁶⁵

At the same time, they also wanted recognition for the racism they experienced in wider society, which is discussed in detail below. Thus, belonging, for our respondents was not about social categories, but conditional to being heard and included. Disenfranchised by gender discrimination, caste, class, racism, language and lack of state welfare support, what SBS usefully does for its clients is to give them access to the state support to which they are entitled. Therefore, it is not surprising that so many of our respondents describe SBS as one of their primary spaces of belonging, as 'family'.

Belonging and attachment to Southall and the UK

Some respondents told us that they actually felt that they belonged in Southall – a locality that has a mixed population of several ethnic minorities and religious

groups. They talked about how they moved with ease between different ethnic and religious groups when not monitored or dictated to by influential and conservative members of their family or community and religious leaders who sought to enforce the boundaries of community. The respondents described how they enjoyed crossing ethnic, religious and caste boundaries. The cohesion agenda, while giving prominence to 'faith-based' communities, has failed to take on board the gate-keeping roles of religious leaders. It thus runs the risk of reinforcing segregation between different minority communities. The interviewees who lived in Southall generally conveyed a preference for flexibility and freedom to choose what to take and what to leave from the various cultures around them. While they were not against religious festivals or observances *per se*, they did not want to see the creation of separate religious enclaves as primary spaces to belong to as they felt that this would segregate the multi-faith and multi-lingual community of Southall.

Wahida's description of her life in Southall clearly demonstrates that it would be a mistake to view the inhabitants of this region of high concentration of migrants from South Asia as an internally homogenous group, or as a 'single identity' group:

I love living in Southall. We have Indian culture here – sometimes Diwali,⁶⁶ sometimes Eid.⁶⁷ I also have English friends and love going to Christmas parties. We often meet at each other's homes and we have dholak,⁶⁸ Gujarati, Punjabi, Pushto and Arabic dancing. I love Arabic dancing. We chat and gossip. We have food, dancing and singing. We often stay up until 2am. We can celebrate moonlit nights, henna nights, Dussera,⁶⁹ Christmas, Diwali, Vaisaki⁷⁰ and Eid.⁷¹

Southall's celebration of various South Asian cultural festivals, the availability of traditional food and clothing and the presence of people who could also speak their mother tongue were all factors which provided a sense of familiarity and belonging for our Indian and Pakistani respondents.

However, reinforcing this sense of belonging to the familiar were negative experiences of isolation and racism faced in other regions and from wider society. Some of our respondents, such as Gurpreet, were literally driven out of predominantly white areas by their experience of racism. Gurpreet faced intense hostility and racism when she attempted to start afresh outside Southall by opening a bed and breakfast in a predominantly white area. The experience has left her feeling quite bitter about issues of belonging.

I don't feel like I belong in this country. I felt that when I had my first experience of racism at the age of 18 and now I am 53 – and race is always an issue and yet I am intelligent, educated and can speak English. This proves that the problem is major. So someone who doesn't speak English and is not educated – what the hell must they be going through? It is a big problem and I don't think it will ever go away.⁷²

In fact, the vast majority of our respondents lived on the margins of wider society. Their marginalisation was not just the result of their experiences of domestic violence. The actual experience or fear of racism led many women to retreat from broader social interaction. Racial discrimination, especially institutional racism, which trapped them within an insecure immigration status and pushed them into low-paid, informal and insecure jobs reinforced their social

isolation. Despite such negative experiences, many women positively valued belonging to Southall, and through it to UK, largely due to the much greater freedom it offered them from gender-based discrimination.

While the women enjoyed the sense of belonging provided by familiar cultural motifs, they were clearly not interested in recreating the moral mores or gender roles common in their respective homelands or communities. Several interviewees equated belonging with the sense of being free from gender-based abuse and oppression. Women like Wahida felt that the UK is where they belonged because here they were able to assert their rights as women and live in safety from immediate domestic violence:

I am so happy here. I love living here. There is value on women but there is no value on women in Pakistan... I love it in the UK – this is my watan (homeland). We are not in danger of being killed here. My son and I can live safely here.⁷³

Rashida echoed Wahida's sentiments,

I belong here... I am really happy here. I have been saved because I am here. I have a roof, money - they make me deal with my life, my skills to come out. Women are treated equally. They give women rights.⁷⁴

It is not difficult to see how this fragile sense of belonging can be severely harmed by religious male leadership standing in as community leaders to speak on behalf of all ethnic minorities, including women whose lives have fallen foul of the specific cultural ideals of womanhood.

Belonging and faith

Religious institutions featured regularly as a part of the daily lives of the

women interviewed. However, all but one respondent were adamant that they did not wish religious authorities to shape their lives. They wanted religious institutions to remain places of worship where they obtained 'peace of mind' and spiritual sustenance, but they did not want to see religious institutions as arbitrators. For example, Usha derives an immense sense of value from visiting temples, but largely because she can interpret religion in her own way:

I go to all the Hindu temples, I go for peace of mind. I feel refreshed and light. But I believe from the inside and no one can throw that away. I like to sing bhajans⁷⁵ which people appreciate and meeting friends. I lead the bhajan singing in the temple and people respect me. I get a lot of respect unlike at home where I feel completely degraded and useless. My Hindu centre is everything, friends, family and home. I don't go there because of God because God is everywhere.⁷⁶

When it came to personal problems, they looked to non-religious organisations where they could unburden themselves and to the state and secular courts for justice. The respondents' clear separation of spiritual needs from social needs is further discussed in later sections.

Belonging by default

Some women expressed belonging in negative terms, by asking the interviewers 'where else do we belong?' They expressed an inability to 'belong' in a positive sense as in the UK they felt 'othered' by their experiences of racism. At the same time, they did not have the option of returning to their country of origin due to their personal circumstances. For example, Aziza's experience of racism when trying to enrol her five-year old daughter in school left her feeling uneasy about where she belonged, 'I

don't feel that I belong to the UK, but don't know where to run because of what happened to my daughter. I don't feel comfortable with the police or teachers. Most of the white people gathered together.'⁷⁷

Because most of our respondents had faced abuse and chosen to lead single or unconventional lives, they did not have the option of returning to their countries of origin. Their chances of being accepted as divorced and separated women were slim. Thus staying in UK became a compulsion and brought with it a sense of belonging by default. This complex position is articulated clearly by Kavita, who still struggles with the stigma of having a broken marriage:

I cannot speak English, I don't feel that this is my country because I can't answer back. Now I am here, I feel that this is my country and they can't throw me out. I can't go back because I am ashamed, I fear what people will say. I feel that this is where my house is. I live here and so I feel this is my home. Even in India, I could be treated badly.⁷⁸

Summary

Belonging, for the respondents, was not based solely on their particular ethnic or religious groups. The description of SBS as a 'safe' place and as 'family' to belong to was based on the positive evaluation of support. This suggests that the sense of 'belonging' was not a given, but continuously negotiated in response to immediate events and daily struggles for dignity and equality. By contrast, the cohesion discourse tends to assume that people from ethnic minority backgrounds 'belong' to their respective 'communities', thus privileging a notion of belonging which

has little relevance in the day-to-day lives of the respondents.

Many long-term users valued SBS for the diversity of its users and a space which allowed them to interact with women from different religious or ethnic backgrounds. Contrary to the dominant assumptions of the cohesion discourse, women of ethnic minority already inhabit a world which is mixed in terms of religion and ethnicity, where they feel far more secure than in faith-based enclaves. For the interviewees, belonging evolved organically out of sharing of common spaces and experiences, irrespective of ethnic backgrounds

The women actively resisted the threatened closure of SBS since it impacted negatively on their ability to access broader society. Through the threatened closure of SBS our respondents felt the impact of a 'politics of belonging' played out by the state through its cohesion and faith-based approach even though they did not recognise it as such. By occupying spaces across difference and by being involved in the campaign to defend that space, many women were asserting their individual rights as well as the values of tolerance, respect and equality, which they saw as integral to their own identities. Moreover, through co-existence, they defined core values of citizenship for themselves.

Some women expressed belonging only in negative terms since marginalisation from deeply patriarchal cultures on one hand and the experience of racism on the other hand left them unable to interact positively with broader society.

This section provides a striking

illustration of the disjuncture between the terms of reference/ assumptions of the cohesion discourse and the lived reality of the women interviewed. The controversial government recommendation to avoid funding 'single identity' groups rests on the assumption that such groups are inimical to social integration or intermixture. Most respondents are also opposed to being defined in terms of their religion and being boxed into single-faith spaces precisely because of its inimical impact upon social integration. Yet, paradoxically, current policy *promotes* single-identity spaces based on religion, while cutting back funding from secular and mixed spaces, such as SBS, by wrongly representing them as single-identity groups. It is clear from the interviews that the women do not see the users of SBS as a homogenous group. To them the opportunity to interact with people from different, albeit ethnic minority, backgrounds is an important reason for their attachment to the space provided in SBS. The space which is described as 'single identity' in cohesion discourse, is perceived as a bridging space bringing together women of different faiths and ethnicities. Far from encouraging segregation, it is seen to enable broader networks of interactions and therefore, a wider sense of belonging based on mutual respect, equality and justice.

3. Lack of English and social isolation

Our findings showed that while marginalised and vulnerable ethnic minority women did profess aspirations for interaction with broader society, in practice, this was often absent from their day-to-day lives. The

study revealed a variety of factors which led to a majority of the respondents having little or no contact with white British society. Most women realised that their lack of English was an important factor in the isolation they experienced. Many, such as Wahida, also expressed a desire to learn English if given the opportunity and time:

I did study in English in Pakistan. I just need practice. I now want to start my English studies so that I can talk freely. At the moment my grammar is not good. I love speaking in English. I can explain things to other women in English. I want to help.⁷⁹

The provision of free English classes was vital to the empowerment of the women interviewed as most were too poor to pay for lessons.

I have joined classes in English at Southall College so that I can speak to everyone. SBS told me to go to College because it is important to speak English. They said you don't need to rely on anyone. I want to study, learn English.⁸⁰

Though all women expressed the desire to learn, few actually managed to do so. The compulsion to deal with more immediate problems of surviving without familial support and with inadequate or no state support meant that learning English was often put off.

The obstacles which prevented interviewees from learning English arose out of their severe social marginalisation and poverty. Depression, severe trauma and other mental health problems usually arising from experiences of domestic violence led to a loss of confidence in personal abilities. Homelessness and destitution, often linked to their insecure immigration status, and

lack of affordable childcare were further problems. Ramaben's experiences illustrate how women are forced into situations of social isolation. She arrived as a newly-wed bride in the UK and was subjected to severe abuse and violence by her husband and in-laws who used her as a domestic and sexual slave. Eventually, she found herself facing deportation when her husband decided that he no longer wanted her and told the Home Office to remove her from the UK. Her husband contacted the police who, with immigration officers, raided her place of work and took her to a police cell where she stayed for two days and then to an immigration detention centre where she stayed for three months. With the help of other detainees, she made contact with SBS and was finally released and assisted with her immigration problems. Due to her experiences of abuse and detention, she suffers from acute depression and panic attacks. Given her fragile state of mind, she does not feel able to attend English classes:

I have been here 10 years. I don't have the confidence to learn English. I don't understand it at all. I am frightened to say anything...I was alone until recently. I haven't made any friends, especially after what I went through; I was embarrassed and ashamed about being alone.⁸¹

While women who have suffered abuse, like Ramaben are acutely aware of the role played by their lack of English language skills in their social marginalisation, their inability to learn it is a symptom of the severe trauma they have faced, not the expression of cultural particularism. It is also the result of structural obstacles which ethnic minority women are powerless to remove on their own initiative,

without the active intervention of the state to create the necessary conditions for learning.

4. Gendered poverty – a major obstacle to integration

Since most of the migrant women in our study live on low incomes or no incomes, poverty played a massive role in reinforcing their 'ghettoisation'. It led to a disjuncture between the aspirations the interviewees had for broader social interactions and their day-to-day reality of a limited and isolated life. The poverty they experienced was linked to personal misfortune, such as servitude and violence in the home, separation and divorce. Some women, like Rashida, were forced to carry the double burden of earning and bringing up children by their husband's alcoholism and gambling habits. Rashida's husband was on income support but he gambled the benefits that the family received, forcing her to work from home so that she could earn and work around the extended family and the children's needs. She worked after 9 pm when the children were in bed until 2-3am and then rose with them in the morning to cook and clean.⁸² Ironically, the impact of such personal tragedies is compounded not only by social disadvantages to which most migrant women are subjected, such as lack of skills, education and English language, but also magnified by current government policy towards migrant spouses. The gendered impact of certain policies, such as the two-year probationary spouse visa, denies women of Asian and African origin access to state funds and traps them in violent and potentially life-threatening situations.

The paradoxical role of the government in perpetuating the severe inequalities faced by ethnic minority women is evident from the lack of affordable childcare and insecure immigration status that blights the lives of the vast majority of our respondents. This section explores how the various factors impoverishing our respondents were interconnected and mutually re-enforcing, and how they inhibit broader social interaction.

Poverty and English

The inability to speak English, which has already been highlighted as one of the major factors contributing to lack of social interaction, is also an indicator of poverty and social disadvantage in the country of origin. In the case of Gurinder, Nafisa, Kirandeep, Ramaben, Kavita, Rashida, and Wahida this initial social disadvantage translates into inability to interact broadly. It is significant that in South Asian societies, knowledge of English is often indicative of the class background of an individual. Moreover, within poorer families, the education of a girl child has been traditionally viewed as unnecessary and wasteful expenditure. Once in the UK, their lack of English pushes these women into irregular, low-paid and menial jobs. They get trapped in a mutually reinforcing cycle where lack of English keeps them in poorly paid jobs, which in turn denies them the time or resources to learn English.

Women's position in the workplace

One striking aspect of the economic position of the women interviewed was that the majority were not really integrated into

the formal economy. The few who were part of the formal economy were nevertheless dealing with non-unionised and insecure work places. For a variety of reasons, most of our respondents were severely economically marginalised and working in insecure, exploitative, informal sectors as cleaners or factory workers without any prospect of being able to exit from a cycle of poverty. These workspaces exclusively employ newly arrived immigrant labourers, and routinely exploit their social insecurity and insecure immigration status to impose upon them appalling labour conditions.⁸³ This perpetuates a vicious cycle of segregation and lack of contact with more settled and/or white British society.

For some women, lack of skills combined with mental health problems, often a result of their family circumstances, meant a lack of opportunity to work. Even those who could find casual work struggled to make ends meet at the rates offered. The need to address poverty was their top demand from the government:

*I would like to find work. I am looking for work but there are no vacancies. I would be willing to do anything. Everything is too expensive and the hourly pay is not keeping up, making it very difficult to survive. The government should do something. I don't have enough to live on. I can't save and I can't eat properly. We have to survive on my husband's pay and he gets about £170 per week depending on overtime. He is not in a permanent job and we fear that he may lose it. We can't sleep at night because many people at his work have been laid off.*⁸⁴

In order to find employment, the women largely relied on word-of-mouth news, or on private and dubious employment agencies. Their reliance on other migrants arose partly

out of their inability to communicate in English. This reinforced their socio-economic marginalisation as people from similar backgrounds were invariably in the same position: working in the informal sector and subjected to low pay and exploitation.

*I found work through a contact at SBS. She helped me make contact with an employment agency which found temporary workers. Sometimes I would work 12 hours and sometimes there would be no work. The agency would phone me every day to tell me whether there was work that day. In one factory because all the other workers were Punjabi, I talked in Punjabi only... I have worked in the laundry for a year but it can be insecure especially if you are new. Many have been given holidays to deal with the recession. There is not enough work.*⁸⁵

The segregation of the labour market with migrants concentrated in the informal and low-paid sector is in effect a double-edged sword when it comes to issues of social integration. The pattern is no doubt the result of the migrants' lack of English language skills and inability to communicate. However, this also meant that they were deprived of any opportunity to converse in English or be exposed to interaction with the host population at the work-place. Employment agencies and particular employers reinforced this trend by recruiting people exclusively from certain migrant backgrounds. None of the respondents had found work officially through job centres or as a result of any government schemes, which further reinforced their marginalisation.

Given the fact that economic marginalisation is a root cause of social segregation of migrant workers, it is doubtful how far policies focusing on cultural and religious attributes to promote social

cohesion can have any real impact. For example, in Ealing, regeneration support for women's projects like SBS which can help them to alleviate their marginalisation is non-existent. Instead, cohesion policies and the PVE programme in Ealing reflect funding imperatives that are reinforcing cultural and religious identity while failing to redress structural inequality.

Immigration and asylum policies as a cause of poverty and marginalisation

For the women interviewed, poverty was often compounded and sometimes caused by their insecure immigration status. Inability to claim any benefits from the state is only one aspect of this. The fear of deportation forces many women to live socially isolated lives. It not only pushes them into the illegal and marginal workforce, but also makes them vulnerable to gross economic exploitation. Many have faced betrayal from people of their own backgrounds, who have used the knowledge of their insecure immigration status to blackmail or exploit them. A number of women felt that the current immigration rules perpetuate a gross injustice against migrant women. It is true that the regulations which make spouses dependent upon their British partners for their right to live and work in the country in effect reinforces the power of men over their wives. When combined with a situation of domestic abuse and violence, the marginalisation of ethnic minority women becomes extreme.

Shahida, Kirandeep and Gurinder recalled how their abusive husbands used the 'two year' probation period to blackmail

them with sending them back to India or Pakistan. This was not an option for a number of the women who would be rejected by their own families based on cultural mores which looked down upon women with failed marriages.

Either ban men from bringing wives from India, or give the woman access to benefits or right to stay immediately. To even weather the two years' time period becomes difficult for migrant women where their husbands can use the threat of sending them back to India to gain control over the woman's life.... These two years are a prison sentence for a woman.. I have weathered this, so I am saying it.⁶⁶

The state's immigration and asylum policies, by disenfranchising women from secular spaces, often drive them to seek help from faith-based organisations. Far from being an active choice based on religious convictions, this is often an act of desperation to meet immediate needs for food and housing. However, this in turn creates a series of other problems. The experience of Florence, who turned to her local Pentecostal church for support, illustrates how such dependence can lead to subtle forms of exploitation, which are difficult to identify or redress. Florence was forced to flee her native Kenya in order to escape forced marriage with an HIV positive man, which was justified in the name of tribal customs. In the UK, she is unable to work while her asylum claim and application for NASS support is pending. She is homeless and penniless and depends on a local Pentecostal church to provide her with a roof over her head and food. In return, Florence undertakes voluntary work for the Church. While she is very grateful for the help that she receives, she is also ambivalent

about her relationship with the church and its congregation. She has been moved from member to member in respect of her accommodation needs and at times feels exploited because she is made to do all their cleaning and cooking and other domestic chores for the people who put her up:

The pastor helped me when I was crying and said that I had nowhere to stay and he announced in church and a sister agreed. I have kept moving because they can't keep me for long because they have families. They take advantage of me — doing the house chores and you have to do the cleaning and shopping and sometimes you are tired but you just have to go because you are at their mercy. You just can't let them down. Sometimes, I am not in the mood for cooking but just have to do it because you are in their house.⁸⁷

There are no safeguards against such exploitation since those subjected to it have no access to other essential support. For Florence, her excessive dependency on the church has also contributed to social marginalisation as she has little or no opportunity to interact beyond this single congregation.

Thus, in extreme cases, harsh immigration and asylum policies can encourage a culture of dependency on religious organisations, forcing women to adopt religious identities and lead more segregated lives than they would have otherwise. We believe that our findings reveal a disturbing fall-out of neo-liberal policies⁸⁸ which roll back what were once essential functions of the state. The role of religious institutions is reinforced as far more than just places of worship; the already marginalised lead more segregated lives within the ambit of a single faith. Florence clearly rues her forced segregation.

If I had my own accommodation and was working — I would still do voluntary work in Church but I wouldn't be as dependent on the church. I would prefer to volunteer in the community — to reach out to all the people not just in the church. I wouldn't be so religious, because I don't want to block people from reaching me and I like to be integrated with all.⁸⁹

A related issue is the fact that religious institutions are seldom up to the task of providing the support ethnic minority women require in negotiating complex family and immigration problems and the attendant trauma. In Florence's case, although the church offered her accommodation and food, it did not consider offering her assistance to address her immigration problems:

The church didn't offer to help me with immigration — they know but they didn't take me anywhere for advice because they were thinking they would have to pay. They told me that it is very expensive... They didn't show me SBS. I got it from the internet.⁹⁰

For asylum seekers and refugees, such ineptitude can extract a high cost since failure to conform to the requirements of the immigration system can lead to deportation to potentially life-threatening situations.

It is clear from the responses that poverty is a key factor in the marginalisation of minority women and a major cause of their segregation. Regeneration policies in boroughs like Ealing acknowledge considerable deprivation in areas such as Southall and Acton — both with high migrant populations and higher than average unemployment rates. The links between poverty, racial discrimination and migrant communities are now well recognised, although both central and local governments have had little or nothing to say on these links in respect of their cohesion policies, despite talk of promoting equality. What is even more glaring is that even where there is

some recognition of the connection between poverty and minority populations, there is no proper recognition of the gendered dimensions of poverty and racism as experienced by women in their daily lives.

Summary

Women's experiences of poverty are the result of a combination of factors both internal and external to their communities: on the one hand, patriarchal dynamics of family and community give them little control over their lives, but on the other, lack of skills, insecure immigration status and racism push them into insecure low-paid jobs. The failure of cohesion policies to focus on poverty – a vital component of segregation in society – impacts not only on how poverty and well-being are experienced and tackled but also diverts attention towards superficial cultural manifestations of segregation in society. This approach obscures another overarching aim of the state which is to cut back the welfare state and shift responsibility for economic well-being onto communities themselves, thus sowing the seeds of further discord between different groups competing for scarce resources.

The vacuum that is created by the failure of the state to give adequate support to those who are destitute, especially migrants and asylum seekers who are unable to work or claim benefits to meet essential living costs, is increasingly filled by religious organisations. However, this does highlight significant contradictions in the cohesion rhetoric since it perpetuates exclusionary practices within the state and in community organisations because religious

organisations are encouraged to provide welfare services on the basis of religious identity and membership and not need. This creates and reinforces segregation and division along various axes of power such as age, gender, caste, class, sexuality and so on. Ethnic minority women who already have the least socio-economic and political power within and outside of their communities bear the brunt of such segregation, resulting in further marginalisation, disadvantage and disempowerment.

5. Racism

Experiences of racism, ranging from the extreme to the more subtle, continue to have a profound impact on the day-to-day lives of our respondents and the spaces they choose to occupy. Women who had been subjected to unequal treatment had strong perceptions of racism being the root cause. Simran, for instance, received very little or no support from the police when she reported her husband's near fatal attack on her:

Because of my skin colour the police let me down... when my incident took place the police should have come and questioned me...taken a statement from me...which they didn't do. I was chucked out of court with the case and I was hammered...there was not enough evidence provided to the prosecution to say what this woman has been through.⁹¹

Gurpreet felt that the police failed to take her case seriously because she was an Indian woman:

If it had been a white woman they would have acted. They gave all sorts of reasons including that they couldn't find me after I had been hospitalised. I think it was racism, definitely. Stabbing is a very serious offence so why was my case not followed up? I needed major surgery – I had a wound to my neck, so how come my case was not taken seriously by the police? I had to chase them to take my statement and to press charges.⁹²

Significantly, women who had better education, greater knowledge of English and greater interaction with broader society, had more experience of racism than those who spoke little English and had little opportunity of wider social interaction.

Feeling safe in familiar landscapes

Most women preferred to live in areas where they were familiar with the cultural and linguistic landscapes mainly because they felt safe from racist attacks. Gurpreet, for instance, left Southall and set up a bed and breakfast business in Blackpool but was forced to give this up due to the combination of racism from a number of quarters, including her neighbours.

Neighbours say we are not the racist type, but if anything goes wrong, they blame me. That is another reason why I don't go out. I don't feel that I belong in Blackpool. I would belong more if I came back to Southall because of the smells, temples, people milling about and living their lives – the hustle and bustle of it – the Asian people... I feel safe in a community where you have a few extra voices and in a group you have more strength and power – you feel protected – all the whites support each other. I have not been able to click with white people.⁹³

Thus, cultural familiarity and clusters of people from similar backgrounds become markers of safety from racism.

Everyday forms of racism

Interestingly, most respondents described low-level, everyday forms of

racism as having a corrosive impact on their social lives. This contradicts the popular view of post-racial Britain, where it is often declared that racism is no longer a general social problem and confined to a minority constituted by far-right white groups. The women's own words can best describe how racism fractures people's experience of public spaces and work-place. Rashida describes how, 'My children get called blacks and Paki. I have been called this. On the bus, somebody behind said 'Paki'. I ignored it but I was scared inside. But because I was in public, I was ok'.⁹⁴

Sometimes the experience of racism is so subtle that it leaves little room for redress:

One time I was sitting on a train and...this girl she came and sat next to me and on the phone I was speaking in my language and she looked at me with so much disgust and she moved and went and sat somewhere else and you know I just thought ok, what was that all about?⁹⁵

In Kavita's case, her inability to understand the abuse thrown at her increased her discomfiture:

I was working in a hotel as a cleaner. I wanted to get some chips and nearby there were 12-year-old white boys who were abusing me. I didn't understand but they singled me out. I didn't feel that it is right for young children to abuse me. Once I tried to buy some croissants and I asked if it was vegetarian. The woman who served me was rude and treated me badly. I feel that they don't like Asians.⁹⁶

Since such everyday forms of racism were experienced in conjunction with institutional racism, taken as a whole racism emerges as a major obstacle to social integration.

Institutional racism

Institutional or structural racism was experienced by both members of new and settled migrant groups. Some of the interviewees had come to the UK under previous waves of migration to address labour shortages in certain industries, such as nursing. Some of their earliest experiences were of institutional racism at the workplace. Some, such as Ophelia, expressed a certain resignation towards structural racism by philosophising about the nature of human beings:

Integration is practiced in the workplace but somehow there are always invisible barriers – nobody can understand why these barriers come up – culture/race/religion – but sometimes don't want to admit it. Invisible barriers of racism will always be there. Integration should be about harmony, understanding and love for one another. Appreciation and respect – simple basics that we teach our children. But if our own kids don't have respect – harmony breaks down and that is what is happening outside in this world... People are just so ignorant. All people are the same. Over the years in my nursing profession, I was always discriminated against.⁹⁷

The study revealed that institutional racism continues to be a problem for newer migrants, often replicating the experiences of those who came to UK in the 50s and 60s. Gurpreet, whose business and personal confidence suffered extensively due to racism, does not, for example, believe that it is a problem which can ever be completely solved. Once Gurpreet regained her self-confidence after the break-up of her relationship, she moved to Blackpool to set up a bed and breakfast business and begin her life afresh. On her street, all other B&Bs were owned by white English people who

began a racist campaign against her to force her out. The walls of her hotel were often smeared with dog excrement and it was also pushed through her letter box. Her keyholes were super-glued and her windows were smashed on two occasions. On one occasion armed policemen with dogs barged into her home to investigate a false allegation of illegal activities. Gurpreet also became aware that whenever an Asian family knocked on the door of the other B&Bs, they were refused accommodation and re-directed to her as the 'Paki' B & B:

I also know that one white hotelier sent a note around in the neighbourhood, when I moved in, which said - a Paki has moved into our street and that will affect our business. These remarks were made openly but when I started going to the police, they started watching their step.⁹⁸

Since the police failed to take any positive action to redress the racial abuse that she was suffering, Gurpreet tried to survive by taking direct action to defend herself:

In Blackpool, when I talk about racism, they avoid it – they make it out like it is my imagination. I used to type letters saying 'racism will not be tolerated' and display it on my window and post it through the neighbours' letterboxes. I also spoke to a local councillor. Eventually she came to see me and said that she had never had to deal with the problem. She never came back.⁹⁹

Eventually, lack of effective police action and her intense feelings of isolation led her to return to Southall – a place where she felt she belonged.

Grace complained of structural racism at her workplace where she felt black women were not allowed to advance beyond a certain point.

I feel like I belong here in a way. But...sometimes you know it just occurs when certain things happen then you realise that you actually don't really belong here. I'll give you an example. At my place of work... there are certain jobs if you apply for it is well known that you will not get it as a black person. It is there, it is there in the ...you know it is not said but you feel it you know because ...you know...you are the better qualified than somebody...you've got all the right papers and everything but they give to a white person. But I don't have anything against them you know. They kind of try to make it like when you are here but you don't really belong here something like that...the top management is...is ninety per cent...you know...white. Now I've had experience where you know black people tried to apply for those positions. But...it doesn't really happen. Even if you go you will find the new manager is going to be a white person ... when it comes to nursing...ward manager that's the farthest that a black person will go.¹⁰⁰

Her son was born in the UK and she cannot think of any other place as home. Her tone is unsure and ambivalent, as if she feels the pressure to say that she belongs here but cannot bring herself to do so with any confidence, largely due to the feeling of exclusion prompted by institutional racism.

Racism after 9/11 and 7/7

The changing face of racism after the London bombings has had a profound impact upon women of Asian origin. Wahida found herself lying about her country of origin in a futile attempt at self-protection:

I have sometimes felt that they hate us because we are Asians. Once I was asked where I came from and I said, Pakistan. They said 'terrorists'. I felt the colour drain from me out of anxiety. Me and my friends had to say that not all of us are terrorists. We are good as well. Not everyone is bad. Now I never tell people I am from Peshawar because of what people will think.¹⁰¹

Rashida recounts similar experiences of racism, and displayed a similar pattern of

attempting to avoid and destabilise the stereotypes that were being pinned on her, 'I heard children saying 'what are you doing in this country' after the London bombings. My daughter was told this by white boys and I have heard this. They make faces.'¹⁰² Significantly, such racism was not confined to Muslim women; it also affected those belonging to other ethnic minority groups, such as Gurpreet who is Malaysian of Indian origin.

I was given dirty looks and when I walked about with a rucksack, twice in a shopping area, I was stopped by security guards. Once in a pound shop I had an old ladies trolley due to arthritis and was wearing glasses to read the labels. Suddenly everything went quiet and there were two security guards. I was so embarrassed. After that they followed me into Superdrug. I felt so inferior.¹⁰³

For a number of women, the racism they faced post 9/11 played a decisive role in their decisions to move to areas dominated by ethnic minorities. Nafisa moved to Southall from Hackney as she did not feel safe in her previous locality. She wears a headscarf and suffered repeated abuse on public transport after 9/11. She described one incident of a young man tipping burning ash from his cigarette on her son's head. Her sense of victimisation was further compounded by her lack of English which rendered her incapable of seeking redress.¹⁰⁴

Summary

Our findings show that minorities continue to experience racism at both the street level and within institutions in old and new ways since 9/11 and the London bombings. When asked about where they preferred to live, many women preferred to

live in landscapes that were familiar to them and where they felt safe from racism. Some, who had ventured out of the comfort zone of such environments, were in fact forced to return by the racism that they experienced. Everyday forms of racism which appear to be more widespread than is acknowledged and the more institutional variety continue to make minorities feel insecure about their sense of 'belonging' in the UK. Gurpreet, for instance, gives a very graphic account of how corrosive racism remains, especially in the northern regions of the country, outside the more cosmopolitan cities. Racism and racial violence continue to divide neighbourhoods and yet the cohesion and integration agenda is silent on this. Indeed the cohesion rhetoric reinforces racist assumptions about minorities as 'outsiders' threatening social cohesion. By shifting the responsibility for 'integration' onto the shoulders of minorities, the cohesion approach allows racism and racist exclusion to thrive unchallenged.

6. Religion and identity

A key component of community cohesion policies is to emphasise the role of religious leaders and their institutions as effective 'community representatives' with whose aid the greater integration of minority communities can be achieved. As the majority of the respondents reside in Southall, it is likely that their responses to government support for religious leaders and organisations - one of the most visible elements of the community cohesion agenda - is an indication of how the policies are implemented by Ealing Council.

The interviews with women from

different religious backgrounds call into question a key assumption of current policies of community cohesion: that religion or faith is the main basis of belonging to a community, or of expressing identity. Seen from the perspective of the women who participated in the study, this is revealed to be a deeply problematic assumption. The respondents were not only critical of religious leaderships but also of the government's tendency to treat their identities as fixed and unproblematic, which allowed religious leaders to exert power over their lives. This is especially pertinent because many of the women are at the forefront of personal and political struggles to redefine their identities and their environment in a positive way. Instead of this being valued and used as the basis for creating a more harmonious and just society, the effect of the cohesion policy is to create ossified and reified religious identities. Given that the pressure on women to conform to gender roles is often justified in the name of religious belief, the empowerment of religious leadership inevitably leads to greater marginalisation of abused women and other vulnerable groups, whose life circumstances do not confirm to approved cultural and religious norms.

Faith as personal belief and not a social identity

Of the 21 women interviewed, all except one professed to some form of religious belief. Most were practising believers and some passionately so. However, none of the women expressed any sense of belonging to a faith-based community. All viewed religion as a matter

of personal choice or belief, rather than the basis of a social identity. Simran, a deeply religious person who eschews institutional rituals and faith-based identity, felt that her religious belief was a personal matter:

I feel that religion is in my heart. Religion is my personal relationship with God. What I have been through... I see them talking about me in the temple or preaching and passing remarks about my daughters...I feel you should have freedom of religion, that's why I once again say religion to me is my relationship with God. How, I feel, how I communicate with Him...I feel Sikhism is in my heart. I don't go to the temple. But I communicate in my own way with God.¹⁰⁵

Simran's approach was echoed by most respondents who stated that they were observant. For example, Wahida refused to equate her personal belief with religious prescriptions of a particular lifestyle, especially for women.

*There has to be freedom. Our children need freedom. Women need to be given freedom. How will we live? It is not a question of wearing *purdah*.¹⁰⁶ There should be *dil ka purdah* (*purdah* of the heart) Wearing *purdah* is nothing. But if our heart is clean we can mix freely with any culture. In our religion we don't drink. I don't look down on other Muslim women who drink. Everyone has to answer for themselves. I am religious but I do what I feel is right.¹⁰⁷*

The respondents made a clear differentiation between believing and belonging to a 'faith community'. None privileged faith as the primary or even a significant aspect of their sense of belonging. The majority identified their social selves with their present locality such as SBS, Southall and London, or spoke of an identity based on country or region of origin, such as Africa or India. Only one woman, Nafisa, chose to describe herself as a Muslim over and above other notions of identity. Many described themselves, above

all, as a woman or a mother, thus drawing attention to their common humanity.

Moreover, most respondents, such as Kavita, instinctively recognised the potentially divisive impact of religion. This only strengthened their desire for inclusive and secular spaces, such as SBS.

Shakila my caseworker is Muslim but I have never been made to feel that I was from a different background. I never feel that religion divides us... Everyone should be together. At this centre, everyone comes and everyone is treated equally and talked to properly.¹⁰⁸

Thus the central assumption of the government's cohesion agenda, that those who have no interaction with broader society identify with their particular faith-based communities, does not hold true when it comes to ethnic minority women who are already marginalised. To the contrary, every single woman interviewed was well aware of the gendered impact of religious dogma. Their wariness and distrust towards faith-based leadership is discussed further in the section dealing with gender. It was clear from the interviews that ethnic minority women do not want to be boxed into specific official identities that are not of their making. In other words, faith-based communities, which include all or most believers of a faith, do not exist on the ground.

Response to faith schools

The proliferation of faith-based schools, often equated with support for faith-based communities within the cohesion agenda, signified nothing more than segregation on religious grounds for the women interviewed. Grace, for example, emphatically rejects the idea of sending her

son to a Catholic school, although she is a practising Catholic herself:

No, no I would not...I would not because it tends to ...you know close up people. Like, ok, this is a Christian school. All they will learn is about Christianity. They are going to be brought up the Christian way of life. So when will they ever learn about other faiths? ...Ok I am a Christian but...as much as possible I would like my son to grow up as a Christian. But I would not want to keep him away from the rest of the world.¹⁰⁹

Simran echoed Grace's objections to faith-based schools.

I think this is one of the biggest mistakes that has been made in schools for different sects...I feel it's going to create more problems...you'll get extremism...it's going to cause more discrimination, more racism in the community... And it's nice for children to learn different festivals for each religion...so I feel it is totally wrong to have different schools for Sikhs, for Hindus, for Muslims...there are fanatics in these schools preaching their religion.¹¹⁰

Gurinder, a Sikh woman, described boys educated in such schools as 'live bombs' ready to explode at the slightest provocation.¹¹¹

Thus, in the sphere of education there seems to be a complete dissonance between the thrust of government policy i.e. increasing funding for single-faith educational institutions, and the aspirations ethnic minority women have for their children's education. Amrita, who was brought up as a Christian and wanted to send her daughter to a Christian school, was the sole exception to this pattern. However, her choice was based entirely on the fact that it would enable her daughter to attend a better school, rather than any wish to ensure proper religious

instruction.¹¹² The conviction that single-faith schools encouraged intolerance and fundamentalist opinions cuts across the different religious affiliations of the respondents. Far from achieving a cohesive or inclusive society, Shalini and Kirandeep felt that such policies would increase division by encouraging competition between different religious groups.¹¹³ Shahida pointed out that faith-based schools can fail in teaching the most essential lesson for today, that of a shared humanity.¹¹⁴ Every single respondent failed to see how promotion of faith-based schools could in any way contribute towards a more cohesive society.

Syncretic traditions and inclusive identities

A striking feature of the lived reality of many of the respondents was the ease with which they moved within and between different religious and cultural traditions and their ready acceptance of each other's backgrounds. This showed that their religious practices are syncretic and undogmatic. Moreover, this ability to freely share their diverse traditions, including diverse religious festivals, was a source of happiness in otherwise relentlessly difficult circumstances. Wahida cherished her ability to freely choose the celebrations she took part in, even when they contradicted the injunctions of Islam.

Tomorrow I go to celebrate Valentine's Day. Islam says we shouldn't dance. I used to get awards for dancing. I love celebrating Valentine's Day. I will wear red clothes and red lipstick and get a red rose from my husband. I wear lots of makeup and perfume. I also love celebrating Christmas and Easter. These are small pieces of happiness.¹¹⁵

However, this did not amount to a rejection

of Islam and complete ‘assimilation’. Wahida worked as a ‘healer’, using verses from the Quran as part of the healing process. She talked about how women from many different religions sought her out when facing problems. The fact that such healing was rooted in Islam seemed to be of secondary importance to both Wahida and the women she treated. As she explained, ‘I have often used the verses to ‘heal’ women from all religions. I even give blessings of food and water using the verses – this way we help each other.’¹¹⁶

The findings show that belonging and identity cannot be contained within exclusive enclaves of particular religions, even for believers. Most women’s lives straddle a range of religious and cultural traditions. This was particularly true for migrants from the Indian subcontinent. An attempt to make them belong exclusively to any single religious or cultural tradition would in effect constrain their ability to interact across religious and cultural differences. For example, Kavita is a Punjabi Hindu by birth but grew up visiting both Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples and does not see why she should be restricted to one or the other. She was saddened and angry about being made to choose one or the other by the politics of those who ran the religious institutions – in other words of being made to belong exclusively. She articulated

how such practices exclude and disempower women like her: Usha, another

*Although I am a Hindu I often go to the gurdwara. I tried to vote in their elections. They said I can’t vote as it was only for Sikhs. I felt bad because I wanted to be a part of the community. But when it came to voting they only wanted Sikhs. They also charged £5 for voting so other women didn’t vote either.*¹¹⁷

Hindu respondent, expressed similar eclecticism,

I go to all the mandirs (temples) Swaminarayan,¹¹⁸ Jalaram.¹¹⁹ I also go to the gurdwara – sometimes I just feel like going to the Valmiki gurdwara. I get a chance to sing bhajans and they like it. They like to listen. In Tanzania, I used to go to the Christian Mission Church.¹²⁰

These accounts suggest that ethnic minority women prefer porous boundaries when it comes to cultural and religious groupings. They appear to reject aspects of their own cultural and religious identities which constrain their individual freedom and at the same time borrow from other traditions, religious or otherwise, in order to cope better with their immediate problems. In the process they define their own identities.

Most respondents professed a sense of belonging which operated along multiple axes and felt that the imposition of identities based on religion threatened their flexibility to simultaneously negotiate multiple identities. Wahida, for example, described herself as both a Muslim and a citizen of the UK and objected to being boxed into any one category:

*I am a UK Muslim. I am from the UK but my religion is Muslim. But as I told you we mix together. I couldn’t live with Muslims alone – too strict. They would be telling us to spend all our time in the mosque – I can’t do that day and night. They would tell us we can’t do this, we can’t do that. Can’t be doing hanging around with *maulvis*¹²¹ all the time.¹²²*

The wish to transcend strictly defined religious boundaries was expressed by the respondents in multiple ways. Kavita spoke

of her visits to other religious spaces and intermingling with other religious groups, 'It is not important to me what religion. I am a Hindu Punjabi but for my own peace of mind, I go to the Gurdwara and the temples.'¹²³ Shahida reserved the right to question Islamic law regarding marriage and gender relations, while at the same time, resorting to Islamic cultural motifs and traditional proverbs to express positive values of tolerance and diversity:

Islam does not force anything on anyone so why should those who live within it force others? I want my children to know what it says in Islam. The main principle is to live by humanity. That they should not look at colour. The poet Iqbal¹²⁴ – our greatest poet said, whether black or white, poor or rich, old or young, we should all obey Allah. If there is no difference for Allah, why do we bring about difference? I like his (Iqbal's) idea of unity for all humans.¹²⁵

A common theme in the diverse articulations was that of valuing humanity over and above religious belief. A large number of women explicitly chose to assert their common humanity before anything else. Such a response is perhaps not surprising when placed in the context of women's experiences of abuse which had left them feeling stripped of their humanity. Kavita says this clearly when she declares that 'first of all, I am a human being. Every other identity comes from being within this community'.¹²⁶ For many respondents, such as Rashida, being human meant being positively valued as women:

I love to help other women whoever they are because I know what I have gone through... There are different beliefs but God is the same in all religions... Men and women are physically different but no one is more powerful than the other. Both have the same rights.¹²⁷

They did not articulate this in the formal language of human rights but their sentiments clearly referred to their desire to assert their rights and to live with the values of friendship, solidarity, respect and empathy. These values were being forged from the shared space that they occupied with others who faced similar life experiences; they were not regarded as 'western' or 'alien' concepts. This is precisely why all the women wanted to ensure that spaces like SBS remain available for women from all backgrounds. In Usha's words, she enjoyed coming to SBS because 'when I come to SBS, I feel like a human being... Everyone hugs each other. What we get here, we never get in society.'¹²⁸

The study shows that ethnic minority women locate themselves at the intersection of multiple axes of difference such as age, gender, ethnicity, and nationality. Religion, far from playing a dominant role, seldom made it to the top three aspects relevant to their sense of self. For example, Ramaben clearly privileged being Indian over being Hindu. She even advocated the rejection of Hindu traditions which discriminated against women:

Being Hindu is not as important as being an Indian. Being Indian is more important because I was born there. I am Hindu because my parents are Hindu. I wouldn't want to change to another religion. What is Hindu? I feel it is important to respect parents and husband and elders and look after in-laws like your parents. But I don't think you should adhere to Hindu culture if facing problems. Better to get out of an abusive marriage, for instance. A woman has to live her own life. Hinduism that imposes things should not be tolerated.¹²⁹

However, this should not be read as an outright rejection of religion. What

the range of responses illustrates is how the interviewees are struggling to define themselves in ways that are meaningful to them as women and as human beings, which often included values of universalism, tolerance and positive affirmation drawn from specific religious traditions. This study reveals that far from being an obstacle to social integration, marginalised groups, in this case migrant women, can show the way forward by their creative ability to mix and match cultural and religious traditions, striving to take the best and most progressive from all that they encounter.

Memories of religion and politics back 'home'

Every single woman interviewed, irrespective of her particular religious beliefs, expressed very strong mistrust and alienation from faith-based leaderships. This was often based on their own or others' experiences in their countries of origin. In response to questions about religious identity and needs, quite a few of the respondents echoed Farida's retort: 'If they want to be bound by

religion and religious laws and want all this, then they should go back'.¹³⁰ When expressed by ethnic minority women, this sentiment is not an expression of xenophobia but

indicative of their hopes and aspirations regarding life in UK – safety, the fulfilment of personal desires and equality. It also suggests what they are happy to leave behind – gendered, caste-based and religious discrimination. The official discourse on cohesion equates the positive valuation of faith to the positive valuation of

ethnic minorities, thus completely ignoring women's negative experiences of exclusion, discrimination and gender-based prejudice, which are frequently justified in the name of faith. Their memories of the divisive impact of religion in India, Pakistan and elsewhere should not be underestimated in how women viewed religious leadership.

For a number of Muslim women, such as Wahida, prior experience of faith-based leadership constituted first-hand knowledge of the Taliban's activities in Afghanistan:

I have been to Afghanistan about 20 -25 years ago before the war. The women were very beautiful. They used to wear short skirts. Now the Taliban have taken over. We used to go and see Hindi films. Now we can't go, they beat us now. How is the Taliban Muslim? Our religion doesn't tell us to kill others. We are against what the Taliban do.¹³¹

Significantly, Wahida made a direct link between her husband's personal suffering at the hands of the Taliban and his greater tolerance for secular and feminist spaces, such as SBS:

My husband doesn't say anything because the Taliban killed his family – wife and children in the bombings. He hates the Taliban with a passion. He used to cry a lot when he first came here. He hates the Taliban because innocents die. Now in Peshawar, children disappear and are held to ransom, especially if they are from the UK. No one is happy with the Taliban. They hate them, even in Pakistan. They cut the TVs. They closed schools. These are all wrong.¹³²

It would be a mistake to dismiss this antipathy towards religious leadership as confined to the Taliban. Wahida explained how women also bore the brunt of the imposition of Islamic orthodoxy in Pakistan:

*Women need to educate themselves so that they can stand on their own two feet.... I am lucky. My son and his friends don't ask about my lifestyle. In Peshawar, women have strict divisions between men and women. Even sons keep an eye on their mothers. I know of sons who keep their mothers in *purdah*. But in the UK, I am so happy my son is not like that. He is not distanced from his religion. He is polite, respectful and prays once a week.¹³³*

The respondents' awareness of the threat posed by religious leadership to women's rights is discussed in detail in the next section.

Some respondents, such as Farida, drew attention to how religion had been used to replicate in UK/Southall bitter ethnic rivalries that had scarred South Asian politics:

There used to be trouble with radical Sikhs and Muslims – there used to be big fights. They used to fly the Pakistani or Khalistani¹³⁴ flags and used to throw beer bottles at people. They used to show their nationalism. This was not good because they caused fights. I don't know why they need to show off. Used to be a bigger problem about 5-6 years ago. The nationalist marches were going on a lot. The people who were Pakistani nationalists used to come from outside Southall. People used to just stay in their homes. But now it is better, it is not so obvious now in the celebrations for Diwali, Vaisaki and Eid.¹³⁵

Farida based her opposition to faith schools and faith-based social identities on her knowledge of the divisive impact of religion in South Asian history.

We came to educate our children but if we have our own separate schools then we will fight on the basis of faith. This is what has happened in history. Our leaders have separated India from Pakistan. The poor have suffered. Look at the state of the countries – India, Pakistan and Iran – this is terrible! We will have segregated communities. They should just go back if that is what they want.¹³⁶

Given the fact that South Asia still bears the scars of a partition along religious lines, it is hardly surprising that progressive South Asians are opposed to giving too much importance to religious identities. The cohesion discourse, while harping on religious identities, fails to appreciate its potentially alienating impact not only upon women, but also upon secular and progressive migrants in general.

Religion and gender

The fact that gender was often the most important determining factor in how the women saw themselves, placed them at odds with religious institutions. For 18 of the 21 women interviewed, it was common knowledge that women were discriminated against within faith-based organisations. 'They will always side with the men', was a common complaint.

Many respondents recounted how they struggled to break the stranglehold of unequal gender roles imposed upon them. Florence, for example, initially turned to religion because she felt that she was becoming 'too assertive'. Turning to religion thus helped her to reconnect with traditional gender expectations. In order to positively assert her rights as a woman, she had to go against the advice of her church, thus questioning her religion.

Gender is the most important identity to me....I am a woman and from the Luo tribe and this disadvantaged me.... If I had a problem in life, I would choose SBS because I have seen the direction they are taking with my problems and feel more comfortable with SBS than the church. I would ask them to call SBS because I belong to SBS more than the church, even though I am religious and a member of the church. Because SBS has helped me emotionally. I don't trust the church in the same way.¹³⁷

Amrita who was brought up a Christian, felt that any kind of support from her local church was conditional on regular attendance. Her second marriage to a Hindu, (who did not want her to attend church) together with added responsibilities of motherhood, made it impossible for her to continue regular attendance at her local church. As a result, the pastor refused to recommend her daughter by her first marriage to a Christian school. This left Amrita feeling discriminated against.¹³⁸ Her experience also illustrates that support from religious leaders or access to faith-based organisations is often conditional upon individuals meeting the expectation of the leaders or the community.

Gender discrimination and the lack of equal rights was the main reason for women's rejection of giving social roles to faith-based institutions or adopting religious laws in the UK. Grace, despite her regular attendance in church, refused to approach it for support when it came to addressing personal problems.

They have fixed beliefs like you know when you're married, you're a woman you have to obey your husband, that's it. Whether you're being beaten, whether you're being...it doesn't really matter because that is part of the belief...I wanted somebody who would look at it from another point of view. Who would just see me as a woman going through domestic violence...I'm thinking you know if I report this to my religious group (they would say) oh ok maybe he got some demon or something just we do prayers for him. (Laughs a bit) But then you know it is not solving the problem.¹³⁹

Wahida's expression of her sense of oppression was much more stark.

Because of izzat (honour), I was not allowed to live in Pakistan. I was told to get married. Because of izzat, I was told to sacrifice myself for the sake of the family. What am I, a sacrificial goat? They told me it was my religious duty.¹⁴⁰

Aziza, a devout Muslim, would not force her children to wear the head scarf or subject them to the practice of FGM. However, she can only justify her choices in a non-religious language of free choice and humanity:

My daughters wear scarf sometimes. If they want they can but if they don't want to, I don't force them...We have FGM. I was circumcised but I wouldn't do it to my children because it is very bad.¹⁴¹

Clearly, religious beliefs and institutions severely constrain women's choices.

Women's rejection of faith-based leadership was reinforced by actual experiences of being let down by religious leaders in the UK. Shahida's experience of looking for help from the Mufti (cleric) of a mosque illustrates the problem. It left her convinced that Muslim women would never get justice from the religious leaders or *maulvis*. She sought *talaq* (divorce) at a local mosque as she thought this would be less time-consuming and cheaper than divorce proceedings. She also wanted a divorce according to sharia, so that 'he (her abusive husband) can't claim me as his wife in the future.'¹⁴² The Mufti who was Arab in origin and far removed from her direct cultural upbringing refused to grant her a *talaq* in the absence of her husband, claiming that in Islam women did not have the right to initiate divorce. Based on her Masters degree in Islamic studies, Shahida knew that this was a misrepresentation of Islam.

He said that this was not possible. So I said why is it not possible? So then, I spoke to him in Arabic as I knew he was an Arab. For three years if a man does not cohabit with his wife, according to Allah, the marriage is over. When he has not kept any contact, not given me any money, not even asked after me, how can he still be my husband? I did not say it openly, but I was hinting at the fact that we had not even shared a bed, how can it still be valid? In such cases, the marriage is automatically over – after seven years it is anyway void. But I just want a paper, to show to the world. Just give me a piece of paper. But he said, no and then started saying ‘haram haram (forbidden, forbidden)...What standing does a woman have to demand such things of men?’¹⁴³

Shahida’s attempt to complain against the abusive behaviour of the cleric was ignored by the administration of the mosque. She bitterly concludes that ‘men never bring Allah’s law. If there are four elements, they will mix two from there (the Quran) with two of their own benefit.’¹⁴⁴ Being a believer and confessing to such sentiments was extremely difficult for Shahida, and in the absence of the years of trust built up by SBS, it is unlikely that she would have been so open. The cleric’s response in Shahida’s case also points to the grave dangers that exist in recognising religious leaders as the custodians of religious values and customs, since most promote very narrow, politicised and conservative notions of religious identities that do not accord with the reality of the people on whose behalf they claim to speak.

The opposition of the women became even more vocal when it came to the question of religious laws. Most interviewees made the obvious point that the concept of religious law is inseparable from its execution by religious leaders who were more often than not deeply conservative and even sexist when it came to women’s rights.

*In Islam women have the right to divorce but **maulvis** won’t give them a divorce. The question just doesn’t arise – they will send them back. They will connive with the husband to kill women but they will not help the women. In the Regent’s Park mosque, the **maulvis** are rough and rude and bad. I needed to get a fatwa. I asked about something and I went with a Sikh gentleman. But when we got there, a **maulvi** gave me a copy of the Qu’ran and when I was alone, he said who is this man? He said ‘you have come with a Sikh?’ I said ‘yes, he’s human’. The **maulvi** grabbed the Qu’ran back from my hands. The Sikh man was listening. How bad is that – he was a Justice of the Peace! This is London! He was so rude and ill-behaved. The Qu’ran is supposed to be a holy book but he grabbed it back. I never went back after that.’¹⁴⁵*

Shahida makes a similar distinction between her faith and the men who abuse that faith:

I believe in our religion, I don’t believe in the men who run it. I hear things. Men say women don’t have a right to divorce, only men. Our prophet says women can divorce so how they say she can’t? My sister went to the Regents Park Mosque for divorce for her friend. She wanted an Islamic divorce. They couldn’t get it. They kept questioning her. They said Sharia does not give right for women to a divorce. This put me off.’¹⁴⁶

However, women’s objection to religious laws was not based on their mistrust for religious leaders alone. All the respondents believed that religious laws were inherently discriminatory against women and could never guarantee their well-being in the way civil law could.

A selection of quotes from the interviews can demonstrate in no uncertain terms the opposition of ethnic minority women towards religious courts and the stranglehold of religious institutions. Farida expressed her fears through a comparison with Pakistan:

*I don't think even in Pakistan, they have sharia laws. There is a state law for divorce even in Pakistan. I didn't think women would have their problems resolved. There is no value for women in Pakistan. If we went to a *maulvi* there, we would be beaten with shoes and told to go back home... It is not right. No one is going to adhere to sharia law. Husbands will oppress women. This will cause loads of problems. Better to have state laws.*¹⁴⁷

Ramaben and Kavita, both frequent visitors to the gurdwara and the temple for peace of mind, were horrified at the prospect of religious laws.

*I would not think about Hindu laws because the laws here are better. Hindu culture binds women and ties them down and harasses them.*¹⁴⁸

*There is no need for religious laws. Because if you look at the Hindu religion, we had things like *sati* (immolation of widows). Everyone has the right to live. Hindu religion will never treat women equally. Hinduism says a husband is like a God and not to answer back.... Not right. Everyone should be treated equally in law.*¹⁴⁹

According to Florence, religious traditions *per se*, whether they be Muslim, Christian, or tribal, hinder women's quest for equality and justice.

*I would not like to see religious laws. They (women) will be a target. They are made to give man an upper hand on women. In some religions women are not supposed to be heard only seen. If there are more laws, women would suffer more without nowhere to go...I would go to a court of the country, not religious courts. Because religious courts say...religion says never leave your husband till death do us part — so women's can't leave even if they are battered. Even in Luo tradition, you are bound. Better you go to court.*¹⁵⁰

It is striking that while framing a policy of cohesion around faith-based communities, the policy-makers have completely ignored the simple fact that religious values and cultural traditions frequently sanction the treatment of women as second-class citizens. However, severely marginalised women do not have the luxury to overlook this aspect of faith.

Respondents from Hindu and Sikh backgrounds questioned the wisdom or fairness in allowing male religious leaders to have power to mould the social and personal lives of women. Gurpreet clearly articulated the need for women to represent the needs of women:

*I would like my views represented by women not by community and religious leaders. What would the others know about women's issues? We are struggling to fit into this country and this community. If religious leaders bring their laws where can we run to? There will be more suicides, depression, castaways, conversions. It would be the biggest disaster.*¹⁵¹

Strikingly, a number of the respondents recounted cases where religious authorities had abused their positions of power. A particularly common fear that emerged was the fear of being sexually abused by figures of religious authority.

*In Lahore I went to a Pir (a Sufi master) to get a *taveez* (religious amulet). I was 17 years old. He told me that the woman who accompanied me had to leave. He was trying to marry me even though I saw his wife. I dropped the *taveez* and ran thinking the Pir is after me.*¹⁵²

Thus, far from inspiring trust, religious authority provoked multiple fears of discrimination and harassment.

Another fear, often expressed strongly by the respondents was the fear of confidentiality being breached by religious institutions if they took their personal problems to them. They felt that faith-based institutions were part of the problem of living in a community in which family and community norms devalue them, dismiss their concerns and stifle their aspirations. Religious institutions were part of the community collusion that they experience when addressing problems of violence and abuse. Usha expressed this fear most coherently, though it could also be discerned in the responses of other women:

I would never go to a temple or gurdwara for help. I wouldn't feel happy about talking about myself. I feel they will judge me. They would say that I am not happy at home so why am I roaming about. I don't feel that I can rely on them. Confidentiality will be a big thing. I couldn't trust them to keep things confidential and this would have repercussions especially for me as my daughter is already being harassed by her in-laws and is ill and she would worry about me...I come to SBS to share my innermost feelings. I have never been anywhere else. I couldn't go to a gurdwara or temple or masjid. I would rather die than go there.¹⁵³

Gurpreet levelled similar accusations at Sikh institutions: 'If they want to help why don't they start centres like SBS? They would never run centres like SBS but even if they did, I wouldn't go to them – no confidentiality for a start.'¹⁵⁴ Farida's reservations about mosque-run services for women echoed these fears:

I don't know if there is a ladies group at the mosque but I don't think they would allow them to come forward. I would never join, even if there was one. I don't like it. I don't trust them. They would just gossip. I would run away from that.¹⁵⁵

This is why most women preferred centres

like SBS with its mix of women because it granted a degree of anonymity to them and afforded them a little distance from the oppressive aspects of their communities. This was common even amongst those women who had strong religious affiliations or were driven to religious organisations as a result of destitution.

Thus, contrary to the popular view promoted by state and religious leaders that women feel the need to be 'deferential' to religious leaders, and want some form of religious laws, our respondents demonstrate that once women are assured anonymity and feel safe to express themselves, they have no problems in critiquing the idea of religious laws including sharia. The reality of women's lives means that in their quest for gender justice and equality they have to, more often than not, break with cultural and religious norms that not only stifle their aspirations but actually pose a threat to their lives. By collapsing faith and community together, the current cohesion policy makes it significantly harder for believing women of various faiths to pursue a life of dignity.

Religion and politics

All the respondents were clear in their refusal to approach faith-based organisations for support in addressing their day-to-day needs or resolving personal problems. A vital reason for this was their view of religious institutions as corrupt and unaccountable places. Many stated that these institutions are rife with the petty and grasping politics of the administrators. At least seven respondents explicitly alleged that community leaders are corrupt,

misogynist or interested in aggrandising their own faith at the expense of social cohesion. Many spoke of fights between different rival factions of trustees seeking to assert their authority and/or interested in financial gain. Many also talked of religious, class and caste divisions and discrimination within such institutions. The lack of transparency and accountability of religious institutions only increased their general distrust of faith-based organisations. In Kavita's words, 'those who run organisation on the basis of religion will discriminate against the poor and won't treat people equally.'¹⁵⁶

Some respondents' mistrust of religious institutions was linked to their experience of domestic abuse at the hands of violent and abusive men who used a public display of religious values to build an image of respectability. Many questioned the motives of so-called representatives of religion in strengthening the social respectability of abusive partners. Simran's experience is particularly telling. She suffered years of serious abuse at the hands of her husband, who was a devout Sikh. Following a particularly life-threatening episode of violence by her husband, she decided to press charges for grievous bodily harm. Her husband, however, was supported by Sikh 'leaders of the community' who attended court to testify on his behalf, claiming that he was a 'humble', 'mild', 'upright' member of the community. These so-called 'leaders of the community' had never met Simran's husband prior to this. His eventual acquittal led Simran to question the motives and nature of faith-based leadership:

When the incident happened, I was shocked, because in the court, he was actually given references by the religious leaders... who did not even know him... They were the leaders of the gurdwara, the priests of the gurdwara, the treasurers, the secretaries... They gave him a character reference – saying this is a man who is very attached, a very humble person, who would not lift a finger, very sweet and mild, he is in a profession which commands service to the community.¹⁵⁷

Herself a devout Sikh, Simran felt 'disgusted' and not a little betrayed by such blatant corruption and collusion.

Being Sikh continues to be a vital part of Simran's identity. But she is against allowing religious leaders to play a prominent social role. Highlighting rampant caste divisions and absence of women's voices within most religious organisations, she insisted that her mistrust of religious leaders is not based on her personal opinion alone. Acknowledging that 'in recent years' a handful of women can be seen to participate in the administration of temples, she nevertheless doubted whether they had any real authority. More importantly, the close contacts abusive men often maintained with religious institutions often results in entire communities pressurising women to keep silent about their experiences of abuse at home. Simran knew numerous women who had been silenced by these links:

I have so many friends who are suffering situations very much like myself, but are unable to do anything because their husbands are charity type workers in the temple, and their (the women's) voices will not be heard.¹⁵⁸

She was clear that if religious leaders or those running religious organisations were allowed to speak on behalf of women, 'women will not have a leg to stand on. There will be no voice left for the women at all.' Simran had been able to fight for her rights only

by creating some distance from her cultural values and religious upbringing. She hinted at the need for secular spaces as only these can adequately address the question of equality, especially for women.

I mean how many times in a temple would you see a notice board with an alcohol leaflet or a domestic violence leaflet... you don't see. Now these are the places where these leaflets need to be placed...and you don't hear of them...I have my doubts of the religious leaders. I think all these issues should be left with the British courts...Because a British court is a court of equality.¹⁵⁹

Like most interviewees, Simran is a believer and does not find it easy to express her disenchantment with religious leaders.

There are many more examples of deep mistrust of faith-based leaders from women who are religious and describe themselves as from Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian backgrounds. For Farida, religious leaders were nothing but money-makers:

They are only there to make money – trustees and priests – all out to make money. They have not done anything for the public. In fact, women end up in the kitchen washing and cleaning whilst men feed themselves. It would be the last place that I would go to for personal problems.¹⁶⁰

For Gurpreet, the very nature of faith-based leadership was suspect:

Doesn't make a difference if there are men or women trustees – they feel superior to devotees. If you go to a mandir, (Hindu temple) the trustees talk down to people – don't know why they have to feel so superior. It is the public that gives them their status. The politics of these places are very dirty. Very corrupt – that's the word – corruption. If anyone rebels against their ideas they would be against that person – they never encourage women to divorce until it happens to their own daughter.¹⁶¹

From our respondents, it is clear that it is common knowledge that self-appointed leaders use religion to derive political power and status. Significantly, although many women were practising believers, none were involved in the decision-making process of the religious institutions that they attended. None occupied positions of any note or power, nor knew of any women who did. Most of their involvement, if any, was confined to attending and occasionally leading the singing, or cooking and cleaning. Their lack of power perhaps explained their scepticism about religious institutions which many saw as corrupt and exploitative places.

It is vital for policy-makers to pay attention to the negative opinion of religious leadership and their association with corrupt practices which is evident in these interviews. Far from gaining from its association with faith-based leadership, it seems that the government stands to lose the positive evaluation of British justice by the respondents.

Summary

By virtue of their complicated family histories and vulnerable positions within their communities, the women we interviewed straddled a range of identities across many different cultural and religious traditions. Yet precisely because of this, they were more likely to fail to meet the expectations of religious institutions. The respondents combined the apparently contradictory feelings of devout belief on one hand and alienation from faith-based institutions on the other. Their reasons for mistrust of religious leadership are

frequently tied to negative experiences of sexist and misogynistic discrimination, corruption and petty politics. Many women raised a principled objection to religious leadership being given a larger role within ethnic minority communities, pointing out that these so-called representatives were un-elected, unaccountable and seldom committed to values of social justice, equality or genuine social cohesion.

When asked to think of measures which would promote greater social cohesion, every single woman spoke of equality, respect and positive appreciation of difference. However, none asked for a greater role for religion or faith-based groups in public life. Every single woman was firmly against the proliferation of faith-based schools or faith-based laws and institutions as they believed that such developments would have a divisive impact upon society.

CONCLUSION

This pilot survey brings to light the voices and experiences of black and ethnic minority women who have survived or seek to survive domestic violence and who have been marginalised in multiple ways. The most significant finding of this study is that there is a considerable disconnect between the government's cohesion and faith-based agenda and the lived reality of the women interviewed in this study. By virtue of their experiences of being part of minorities who are also subject to abuse and violence in the family, they are one of the most marginalised sections of society. Yet precisely because of their extreme marginalisation, they provide a critical yardstick for measuring the impact

of the government's cohesion and faith-based approach to the management of race relations in the UK today.

Every single woman interviewed was not aware of the cohesion policy and yet had been profoundly affected by it. Most aspired to a more equal society which formed the basis of their understanding of the term 'cohesion' but insisted that the responsibility for this lay with the government and not with so called religious or community leaders. The women expressed a need for better policies promoting equality and social security. The perceived injustice of the immigration and asylum system, the poverty faced by women rendered homeless by domestic abuse, inability to access better education or learn English due to limited means and racism faced in day-to-day life were highlighted as major obstacles. Faith-based organisations and religious leaders were seen to compound the problems of social inequalities and divisions.

The findings starkly illustrate that the government's approach to social cohesion has little or no relevance to the lives of ethnic minority women. The approach is based on several assumptions regarding belonging, community life, social values and religious belief. This study illustrates that none of these assumptions derive from the lived reality of ethnic minority women. Instead, they largely draw sustenance from a flawed discourse of essentialised differences reminiscent of the colonial mindset. As a result, women experience such policies as alien measures and external impositions.

Firstly, the discourse of the cohesion agenda privileges the disjuncture between

settled 'white' British society and migrant populations as the primary fissure in British society. The orientation of the policy merges with other overarching aims of governance: preventing violent Muslim extremism and shifting responsibility for economic and social well-being onto local communities. In doing so, it focuses on working solely with migrant communities, especially Muslim groups. This suggests that these communities are the 'cause' of divisions and constructs minorities, their faith or culture, as the problem, rather than focusing on the structural obstacles faced by these groups. This runs the risk of being perceived negatively by minorities, and promoting a sense of further alienation from the state or broader society.

Secondly, the cohesion strategy of reaching or 'integrating' minorities by enlisting the active collaboration of religious leaders does not address issues of gender and other forms of discrimination within the minority populations, or the fact that women often have a deep mistrust of religious leadership. Indeed, cohesion policies are being implemented in ways that privilege and legitimise cultural and religious conservatism and fundamentalism to the detriment of women's rights. This has paved the way for the subjugation of women to the gate-keepers of religious tradition within their respective communities. The respondents are acutely aware of the risks of allowing faith-based male leadership to represent their needs. Their fears are more often than not substantiated by negative experiences of corruption, power politics and even sexual harassment faced within religious institutions.

Thirdly, the entire project of cohesion is based on a fundamentally flawed

assumption – that black and ethnic minority women naturally or unproblematically belong to faith-based communities. The respondents of this study come from a range of religious backgrounds and the majority described themselves as believers. Yet, every single woman refused to be defined in terms of their faith. The fixed notions of identity and community, which cohesion policies are based on, have no relevance to their lives. In fact, these are the very assumptions which women have resisted in the course of their personal struggles for equality and justice within their families, communities and in wider society. Their co-existence across religious, ethnic and national boundaries shows how counter-productive it is to impose 'cohesion' policies from above because it undermines their struggles for fundamental freedoms and for equality achieved in solidarity with each other.

Fourthly, the dissonance between the lived reality of ethnic minority women, and the essentialised and ossified identity that policies of social cohesion project on to them exposes the colonial mindset¹⁶² behind notions of cohesion and integration. The policies not only privilege faith, but are also predicated on fears of a 'clash of culture'. Women's responses show that there is no 'clash of cultures' in their lives. Their identities are constantly being negotiated and contested in ways that are meaningful to them. This study vividly illustrates that ideals of humanity and human rights are neither 'western' nor 'alien' to ethnic minority women.

Above all, this study illustrates how the cohesion and faith-based approach undermines existing secular spaces within the voluntary, statutory and legal sectors which enable them to negotiate their

differences and develop universal values based on a shared common humanity that is predicated on justice, and gender and racial equality. SBS believes that the cohesion and faith-based agenda needs to be reviewed in its entirety in the light of the

adverse impact it has on women of all faiths. In the face of this evidence, a refusal to overhaul cohesion policies would amount to government collusion in the oppression and marginalisation of black and ethnic minority women.

FINDINGS and RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- There is practically no awareness of the term cohesion amongst the black and ethnic minority women who were interviewed as part of this pilot study. This indicates the failure of the discourse of cohesion to reach marginalised groups within ethnic minorities.
- Ealing Council's projection of SBS as a 'single-identity' group was not only based on a flawed representation of the categories of 'black' and 'ethnic minority' as a single identity, but also clashes with how its users view the space. The reduction of such a diversity of cultural, religious, linguistic and national identities to a single ethnic-minority identity makes no sense to the women. For them, SBS provides a space where they can reach out to other women across these cultural and religious divides.
- All the women are acutely aware of the gender discrimination perpetuated against women in the name of tradition or religion. Therefore, most felt threatened by the emphasis on 'faith-based organisations' and 'religious leaders' in the cohesion agenda.
- The women surveyed did not feel their sense of belonging could be reduced to any one inherent or ascribed attribute, such as race, culture or religion/faith. Their sense of identity was much more fluid, and they spoke of various factors, where country of origin, culture, language, economic status, gender, faith and ethnicity all played a role.
- All the women interviewed privileged lived experience over and above fixed cultural markers as the main components of their identity. Therefore, they privileged their identity as women over and above other categorisations. Here, SBS played a critical role in encouraging a sense of belonging through discussion and empowerment. The lived experience of inequality, due to racism, poverty, sexism or religious prejudice directed against women were highlighted as major obstacles.
- Racism and the specific cultural expectations from women in Asian communities led some of them to articulate the need to organise themselves to tackle specific forms of racial and gender discrimination within South-Asian communities.
- The cohesion and faith-based approach runs the risk of replicating and accentuating the discrimination and inequalities suffered by women within their respective communities.
- There is a gap between the actual lives of the respondents and the lives to which they aspire. At the level of aspirations, they want to belong to broader society, interact with people, especially women from diverse

backgrounds, and contribute through social work in its broadest sense.

- A number of social, economic and personal obstacles, such as poverty and lack of childcare, prevent interactions with wider society. Many of the women who participated in the survey revealed a disturbing pattern of being trapped in a cycle of poverty within the formal and informal labour market; their experiences were characterised by the lack of unionisation and insecurity. This is one of the prime reasons for lack of contact with white-British society.
- Lack of knowledge of English is a major obstacle faced by the women surveyed. A number of factors, the most important of which are poverty, lack of affordable childcare, the absence of accessible and affordable English classes, and irregular working hours, deprive women of the opportunity to learn English. For this particular group of women, the experience of domestic violence and abuse with the consequent trauma, loss of self-confidence and mental health issues are additional factors.
- The problems posed by lack of English are further compounded by hostile responses from the wider society, and absence of properly qualified translators and interpreters within the statutory and voluntary sector.
- Most black and minority women strongly felt that the asylum and immigration system discriminates against migrant women, especially wives, in favour of the men. The 'conditional'

stay granted to women enables abusive men to consolidate their power over the bodies and minds of women, who are subjected to a range of mental and physical torture under threat of deportation.

- Racism is a lived reality faced by black and ethnic minority women. While some narrated banal instances of everyday racism, institutional racism in the labour market and within professions had far greater economic consequences.
- The fear or actual experience of racism encourages women to settle in familiar landscapes, where they can derive strength from people who speak their mother tongue and the security of being part of a community. At least two women narrated being pushed out of more diverse or predominantly white British areas due to racism.
- The vast majority of the respondents were believers but preferred to approach religion or faith as a matter of personal conviction rather than as community identity.
- All the respondents shared a deep mistrust of faith-based leadership, as they believed them to be corrupt and engaged in power-politics.
- A number of the respondents narrated experiences of discrimination on the grounds of their gender identity from faith-based leaders and institutions.
- All the respondents were against the spread of faith-based schools as they believed that such schools promote social segregation and intolerance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The government should recognise:

- the wider social, political and economic circumstances in which people live and in which they experience poverty, racism, discrimination and inequality. These are debilitating conditions which limit the basic freedoms of the most marginalised in society
- that the cohesion approach with its dangerous and narrow assumptions about identity and ‘community’ reinforces racist, exclusionary and divisive practices, cultural conservatism and religious fundamentalism which perpetuate unequal power relations within and between minority and majority communities
- that the faith-based approach to cohesion, with its goal of encouraging faith-based groups, educational establishments and leaderships to emerge, will encourage gender discrimination and inequality within minority communities
- that the faith-based approach undermines the fundamental human rights of minority women and heightens their sense of disempowerment
- that the promotion of a cohesion and faith-based agenda is preventing a secular, rights-based and democratic public culture from emerging which impacts on the ability of the most marginalised sections of society to participate in civil society on equal terms.

The government should:

- replace the cohesion agenda with a properly resourced equality agenda which is based on a more inclusive approach to poverty as experienced by different groups of society, especially minorities and women
- recognise that the immigration and asylum system contributes to the perpetuation of racism and racist attitudes towards minorities and creates destitution and divisions
- tackle the ways in which the immigration and asylum system disempowers women. The ‘two year rule’ and the ‘no recourse to public funds’ actually create women’s economic dependency on men which on the one hand, traps them in cycles of violence and on the other, exposes them to destitution, enhances their dependency on strangers and even religious institutions and leads to further discrimination and exploitation
- recognise that racism – both of the institutional and everyday variety – is central to any understanding of how inequality and marginalisation are experienced. Effective enforcement mechanisms need to be developed that build on the Race Relations Amendment Act to tackle substantive racial discrimination and behaviours that foster a racist culture
- recognise the need for specialist services for women as well as other marginalised sub-groups within minorities as well as the wider society,

as a vital mechanism for achieving substantive equality

■ make funding available both for free English classes and specialist support services to ensure that all obstacles to learning English are removed, especially as minority women face considerable internal and external barriers to their participation in civil society. For example, more counselling, support services and safe housing options should be made available so women can learn English.

To conclude, we would urge the government to move away from the current

cohesion approach to race relations and instead adopt a human rights and equality based framework which creates the conditions for mutual respect, gives voice to people of all backgrounds including the most marginalised in our society, and protects core freedoms such as the right to health, education, housing, employment, legal and social justice and the right to enjoy private life without violence, fear and intimidation. The government should consider the need to nurture and promote human rights values associated with an 'open' community. This would allow civil society to be reinvigorated as a common space.

Appendix 1

Guidelines for interviews with selected respondents

Instead of a formally structured interview or questionnaire, we have opted for an informal interview format carried out conversationally. Based on our past experience, this approach was deemed to be best suited to extract the maximum possible information from the target group – women from minority communities. Each interview will consist of a two-to-three hour, one-on-one conversation between the interviewer and the respondent. To ensure that no leading questions are asked and there is a consistency in questions asked, the interviewer will be expected to ask the following sets of questions.

Identity

- Please introduce yourself briefly
- Would you identify as any or all of the following:
 - Black, a mother, Asian, British, a Resident of Southall, a woman, a wife, a sister, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Jewish, African, White, Mixed race, a Londoner, an African, a daughter.
- From the above list, choose three or four which you feel are most relevant to your day-to-day life
- Grade them in order of importance in your day-to-day life.

Belonging and participation

- Do you feel a sense of belonging in your community? If not, why?

- Do you feel a sense of belonging to the locality where you live? If not, why?
- Where else do you feel you belong? (formal or informal groups, organisations, country, community etc.)
- Do you look for groups of people of same gender/race or ethnicity/religion? If so, why?
- Have you ever experienced racism and racial discrimination? If so, how?
- Do you feel like you belong to the wider society? If not, why not?
- Should different people from different backgrounds/communities live and work together?

Group membership/participation

- Are you a member of any religious or faith-based organisation? How important is it to you to belong to a religious group? What do you get out of such participation? What kind of needs does this group meet – social, religious, economic?
- Are you part of/in contact with any group or organisation of single ethnicity or race? How important is it to you to belong to such a group? What do you get out of such participation? What kind of needs does this group meet – social, religious, economic?
- Are you part of/in contact with any women's only group or organisation? How important is it to you to belong to such a group? What do you get out of such participation? What kind of needs does this group meet – social, religious, economic?
- Do any of the organisations listed below help you to belong to wider

society? How?

- a. Faith-based organisations/
religious leaders
- b. Ethnic minority organisations
open to men and women
- c. Women's only groups open to all
ethnicities
- d. Women's only ethnic minority
groups

Needs and services

■ Which of the following organisations would you go to for help in your daily life? Why?

- a. Faith-based organisations/
religious leaders
- b. Ethnic minority organisations,
open to men and women
- c. Women's only groups open to all
ethnicities
- d. Women's only ethnic minority
groups

■ Which organisation would you approach for advice and help in case of a personal emergency? Why?

- a. Faith-based organisations/
religious leaders
- b. Ethnic minority organisations
open to men and women
- c. Women's only groups open to all
ethnicities
- d. Women's only ethnic minority
groups

■ Do you agree that there should be more faith-based organisations and schools for all the religious groups in society?

■ Do you think faith-based or religious groups should represent your needs and concerns? If not why not?

■ What do you feel about attending a

religious or faith-based court or support organisation in the face of domestic violence and abuse?

■ Would you like your problems to be addressed by religious laws? If not, why not?

Policy awareness

■ Have you come across the notion of community cohesion?

■ What does community cohesion mean to you?

■ How relevant is it to you and your immediate experiences?

■ What does integration mean to you?

General awareness and experiences

■ What is your vision of equality?

■ What is your vision of social justice?

■ Do you feel like an equal member of your community?

■ Are there barriers to achieving justice and equality within your community? Explain your experience of such barriers and how you have negotiated them.

■ Do you feel like an equal member of larger society?

■ Are there barriers to achieving justice and equality in broader society? Explain your experience of such barriers and how you have negotiated them.

SBS specific

■ How long have you been associated with SBS?

■ What role does it play in your life?

Appendix 2

Factsheet of respondents

(Information provided here will be kept confidential. The final report will ensure the anonymity of respondents when quoting their views and summarising their experiences)

Name:

Address:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Religious background (Please state if non-believer):

Marital status:

Children:

Education:

Current employment:

Immigration status (Include brief history: how long in the UK, how arrived, how gained settlement?):

References

- 1 Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme was set up in 1996 to tackle poverty and deprivation in the UK, using approaches from international development. Its programme focuses on tackling gender and race inequality and improving the livelihoods of people experiencing poverty.
- 2 SBS set up an advice, advocacy and resource centre for black and minority women in 1982, although the organisation has been in existence since 1979.
- 3 The Coalition: our programme for government
- 4 Speech delivered by the Prime Minister, David Cameron in Liverpool. July 19 2010. See <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/07/big-society-speech-53572>
- 5 See for instance C. Taylor and A Gutmann (eds.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, 1994; Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, 1996 and Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, 2005.
- 6 A Sivanandan, 'RAT and the Degradation of Black Struggle', *Race and Class*, Vol. 26, Spring 1985.
- 7 Inquiries such as the Swann Report in 1985 did at least attempt to refer to both minority and majority children participating in shaping society as a whole within commonly accepted values and argued for the need for ethnic minorities to be helped to maintain their distinct ethnic identities within this common framework. However this was translated into the practice of helping minorities to preserve their cultural and religious identities.
- 8 G. Sahgal and N. Yuval-Davis, *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*, 1992.
- 9 F. Anthias, N. Yuval-Davies and H. Cain, *Racialised Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the Anti-racist Struggle*, 1992.
- 10 See Southall Black Sisters, *Against the Grain*, 1990.
- 11 See for example. Southall Black Sisters, *Ibid*, and F. Anthias, N. Yuval-Davies and H. Cain, *Racialised Boundaries*, 1992.
- 12 Hannana Siddiqui, 'It was written in her kismet: forced marriage' in Rahila Gupta (ed.), *From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers*, 2003.
- 13 *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*, Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny, The Stationery Office, February 1999.
- 14 Commission on Integration and Cohesion, *Our Shared Future*, Communications and Local Government Publications, June 2007.
- 15 *Bradford Race Review: Community Pride, not Prejudice, Making Diversity work in Bradford*, Bradford Vision, 2001.
- 16 *Ibid*.
- 17 *Ibid*.
- 18 *Ibid*.
- 19 T. Cattle, *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team*, Home Office, 2001.
- 20 David Goodhart 'The Discomfort of Strangers' *The Guardian*, 24 February 2004.
- 21 Trevor Phillips, 'After 7/7: Sleepwalking to segregation', speech given by CRE chair Trevor Phillips at the Manchester Council for Community Relations, 22 September 2005.
- 22 See for example research cited in Asif Afridi 'Community Cohesion and Deprivation.', b:RAP, HMSO, June 2007
- 23 See for example Roger Zetter, David Griffiths and Nando Sigona, *Immigration, social cohesion and social capital – what are the links?*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006.
- 24 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006
- 25 See for instance the government White paper on 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' DCLG 2006. The mechanism for increased citizen participation included, for example, the role of Local Strategic Partnerships, Neighbourhood forums, local involvement networks set up by local hospitals, GPs, housing associations that have resident engagement committees etc. See also the Commission on Community Cohesion and Integration.
- 26 See for example Department for Communities and Local Government, *Face to Face and Side by Side: A Framework for Partnership in Our Multi faith Society*, 2008.
- 27 Andrew Pilkington: 'From Institutional Racism to Community Cohesion' 2008 www.socresonline.org.uk/13/3/6.html
- 28 See A. Afridi 'Community Cohesion and Deprivation.' 2007, *ibid*
- 29 b:RAP is a Birmingham based strategic agency working on equalities issues.
- 30 Pilkington 2008, *ibid*
- 31 Quoted in A. Afridi 'Community Cohesion and Deprivation.' 2007, *ibid*
- 32 See the joint submission made by WAF and SBS to the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, January 2007, www.womenagainstofundamentalism.org.uk.
- 33 See for example the work of Anthias, F and Yuval Davies. Nira, (1992) Southall Black Sisters (1990)
- 34 We adopt the WAF definition of fundamentalism which refers to modern political movements that use religion to gain or consolidate power. This is

- distinguished from mere religious observance, which is seen as a matter of individual choice. See info@womenagainstofundamentalism.org.uk.
- 35 See WAF/SBS submission to the Commission for Integration and Cohesion. 2007
- 36 Office for National Statistics 2001 census
- 37 *ibid*
- 38 readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/pre2005/.../london-west-ealing-profile.pdf
- 39 Ealing Communities Survey. A Summary. 2007 www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=8916150
- 40 Previously Ealing Council along with other west London boroughs had undertaken joint PVE work under the West London Alliance but a decision was made to discontinue such work in favour of locally based projects.
- 41 See Ealing's Shared Future Integration and Community Strategy, 2007 - 2011. There is no recognition that such faith-based organisations may actually adopt discriminatory religious frameworks for addressing needs which seek to reinforce rather than challenge gender inequality and discrimination.
- 42 Speech delivered by the Prime Minister, David Cameron in Liverpool. July 19 2010. See <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/07/big-society-speech-53572>
- 43 Steve Richards: 'But what if the Big Society doesn't work?' *The Independent* 20 July 2010.
- 44 Speech given by Baroness Warsi at the Conservative Party conference in Manchester. 5 October 2009
- 45 Interview with Wahida, Pragna Patel (PP), 13/2/2009.
- 46 Interview with Florence, PP, 18/2/2009.
- 47 Interview with Ramaben, PP, 16/2/2009.
- 48 Interview with Gurpreet, PP, 18/2/2009.
- 49 Interview with Shalini, Uditi Sen, (US), 13/2/2009.
- 50 Interview with Simran, US, 13/2/2009.
- 51 Interview with Farida, PP, 16/2/2009.
- 52 Interview with Sarah, US, 12/2/2009.
- 53 Interview with Simran, US, 13/2/2009.
- 54 For a theoretical discussion on the politics of belonging see Nira Yuval Davies 'Belonging and the politics of belonging', *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol 40, No. 3, 2006
- 55 All the names have been changed to maintain the anonymity of the letter-writers. However, the names chosen maintain parity with the professed ethnicity of the women.
- 56 Interview with Wahida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 57 Interview with Rashida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 58 *Saag* is the generic name given to cooked mustard leaves in South Asian cuisine while *roti* is the traditional flat bread. The combination is a staple of Punjabi food.
- 59 Interview with Farida, PP, 16/2/2009
- 60 *Ibid*.
- 61 Interview with Simran, US, 13/2/2009.
- 62 Interview with Sita, US, 11/2/2009.
- 63 Interview with Farida, PP, 16/2/2009
- 64 Interview with Florence, PP, 18/2/2009.
- 65 Interview with Simran, US, 13/2/2009.
- 66 Diwali or Dīpāvali is an important 5-day festival in Hinduism, Sikhism and Jainism, occurring between mid-October and mid-November. It is the principle festival in large parts of North India, where it also marks the beginning of the new year.
- 67 *Eid ul-Fitr*, often abbreviated to *Eid*, is the most important of all Muslim festivals that marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting (*sawm*). *Eid* is an Arabic word meaning 'festivity', while *Fitr* means 'to break fast'; and so the holiday symbolizes the breaking of the fasting period.
- 68 The *dholak* is a North Indian, Pakistani and Nepalese double-headed hand-drum. It is mainly a folk instrument, and is widely used in communal singing during festivals, such as in *qawwali*, *kirtan* and various styles of North Indian folk music. To 'have a *dholak*' here means to have a session of singing accompanied by the *dholak*.
- 69 Dussera is a pan-Indian Hindu festival which is celebrated in different ways in different parts of India in the lunar month of *Ashwin*. In Gujarat and the South, it marks the tenth day culmination of the ten day festival of *Navratri*, in Bengal it centres around the adoration of goddess Durga for her victory over the demon Mahishasura, in large parts of North India, it revolves around a commemoration of the exploits of the mythic hero Ram. It is the largest festival of Nepal, celebrated by Hindus and non-Hindus alike, where it is known as Vijayadashami.
- 70 *Vaisakhi* is an ancient harvest festival in the Punjab region, which also marks beginning of a new solar year, and new harvest season. It is an important festival and the most significant holiday in the Sikh religious calendar. It commemorates the establishment of the *Khalsa* at Anandpur Sahib in 1699, by the 10th Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh and corresponds to April 13 in the Gregorian calendar.
- 71 Interview with Wahida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 72 Interview with Gurpreet, PP, 18/2/2009
- 73 Interview with Wahida, PP, 13/2/2009
- 74 Interview with Rashida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 75 A devotional song within Hindu tradition which has no fixed form.
- 76 Interview with Usha, PP and US, 10/2/2009.
- 77 Interview with Aziza, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 78 Interview with Kavita, PP, 10/2/2009.
- 79 Interview with Wahida, PP, 13/2/2009

- 80 Interview with Kavita, PP, 10/2/2009.
- 81 Interview with Ramaben, PP, 16/2/2009.
- 82 Interview with Rashida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 83 Our respondents provide further corroborating evidence for the broader trend revealed by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Inquiry into recruitment and employment in the meat and poultry processing sector: Report of the findings and recommendations*, 2010.
- 84 Interview with Ramaben, PP, 16/2/2009.
- 85 Interview with Kavita, PP, 10/2/2009.
- 86 Interview with Gurinder, US, 12/2/2009.
- 87 Interview with Florence, PP, 18/2/2009.
- 88 We refer to neo-liberalism as an economic and political ideology that advocates the supremacy of the market over all other social arrangements in the allocation of resources and especially dismantles the role played by the state.
- 89 *Ibid.*
- 90 *Ibid.*
- 91 Interview with Simran, US, 13/2/2009.
- 92 Interview with Gurpreet, PP, 18/2/2009.
- 93 *Ibid.*
- 94 Interview with Rashida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 95 Interview with Grace, US, 20/2/2009.
- 96 Interview with Kavita, PP, 10/2/2009.
- 97 Interview with Ophelia, 20/2/2009
- 98 Interview with Gurpreet, PP, 18/2/2009.
- 99 *Ibid.*
- 100 Interview with Grace, US, 20/2/2009.
- 101 Interview with Wahida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 102 Interview with Rashida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 103 Interview with Gurpreet, PP, 18/2/2009.
- 104 Interview with Nafisa, US, 20/2/2009.
- 105 Interview with Simran, US, 13/2/2009.
- 106 *Purdah* literally meaning ‘curtain’ is the practice of preventing women from being seen by men. This can either take the form of physical segregation of the sexes or the more familiar form which requires women to cover their bodies and conceal their form. It exists in various forms in the Islamic world and among Hindu women in parts of India.
- 107 Interview with Wahida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 108 Interview with Kavita, PP, 10/2/2009.
- 109 Interview with Grace, PP, 20/2/2009.
- 110 Interview with Simran, US, 13/2/2009.
- 111 Interview with Gurinder, 12/2/2009.
- 112 Interview with Amrita, PP and US, 10/2/2009
- 113 Interview with Shalini, US, 13/2/2009 and interview with Kirandeep, US, 11/2/2009.
- 114 Interview with Shahida,
- 115 Interview with Wahida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 116 *Ibid.*
- 117 Interview with Kavita, PP, 10/2/2009.
- 118 The Swaminarayan faith is a modern sect of Hinduism. It is a form of Vaishnavism most popular in Gujarat.
- 119 Jalaram was a Hindu saint from Gujarat, born in 1799. He was a devotee of Lord Ram.
- 120 Interview with Usha, PP and US, 10/2/2009.
- 121 Literally meaning a highly qualified Islamic scholar, it is often also used to denote orthodox religious leaders.
- 122 Interview with Wahida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 123 Interview with Kavita, PP, 10/2/2009.
- 124 Sir Muhammad Iqbal was a poet, philosopher and politician who wrote in English, Persian and Urdu. Educated at Cambridge, Munich and Heidelberg, Iqbal was a leader of the Pakistan movement. He is best known for his poetic works, including *Asrar-e-Khudi*—for which he was knighted—*Rumuz-e-Bekhudi*, and the *Bang-e-Dara*, with its enduring patriotic song *Tarana-e-Hind*. In India, he is widely regarded for the patriotic song, *Saare Jahan Se Achcha*. In Afghanistan and Iran, where he is known as *Eghbāl-e-Lāhoorī* (*Iqbal of Lahore*), he is highly regarded for his Persian works. He is officially recognized as the national poet of Pakistan. His birth anniversary, November 9, is a national holiday in Pakistan.
- 125 Interview with Shahida, US, 12/2/2009.
- 126 Interview with Kavita, PP, 10/2/2009.
- 127 Interview with Rashida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 128 Interview with Usha, PP and US, 10/2/2009.
- 129 Interview with Ramaben, PP, 16/2/2009.
- 130 Interview with Farida, PP, 16/2/2009
- 131 Interview with Wahida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 132 *Ibid.*
- 133 *Ibid.*
- 134 The Khalistan movement reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. It was a popular political movement to create a Sikh homeland, often called *Khālistān* (The Land of the Pure), in the Punjab region of India and Pakistan. Harking back to the 18th century Sikh Empire, the envisioned Sikh state would include all Punjabi-speaking areas in Greater Punjab.
- 135 Interview with Farida, PP, 16/2/2009.
- 136 *Ibid.*
- 137 Interview with Florence, PP, 18/2/2009.
- 138 Interview with Amrita, PP and US, 10/ 2/2009.
- 139 Interview with Grace, US, 20/2/2009.
- 140 Interview with Wahida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 141 Interview with Aziza, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 142 Interview with Shahida, US, 12/2/2009.
- 143 *Ibid.*
- 144 *Ibid.*
- 145 Interview with Farida, PP, 16/2/2009.
- 146 Interview with Shahida, US, 12/2/2009.
- 147 Interview with Farida, PP, 16/2/2009.
- 148 Interview with Ramaben, PP, 16/2/2009
- 149 Interview with Kavita, PP, 10/2/2009.
- 150 Interview with Florence, 18/2/2009.
- 151 Interview with Gurpreet, PP, 18/2/2009.

- 152 Interview with Wahida, PP, 13/2/2009.
- 153 Interview with the Usha, PP and US, 10/2/2009.
- 154 Interview with Gurpreet, PP, 18/2/2009.
- 155 Interview with Farida, PP, 16/2/2009.
- 156 Interview with Kavita, PP, 10/2/2009.
- 157 Interview with Simran, US, 13/2/2009.
- 158 *Ibid.*
- 159 *Ibid.*
- 160 Interview with Farida, PP, 16/2/2009.
- 161 Interview with Gurpreet, PP, 18/2/2009.
- 162 By this we mean the ways in which the British state has approached questions of migration and

identity by constructing ethnic difference in a stereotypical and essentialist manner, fixing and reifying boundaries of community affiliation. The more 'different' an identity is, the more authentic it became. In many respects, this approach draws on previous models of British colonial rule whereby the indigenous laws of the colonised country were codified with reference to religious texts but without reference to changing customs, practices and interpretations. See for instance Gita Sahgal in *Refusing Holy Orders* (1992) *Ibid.*



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