**Southall Black Sisters**

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**Who we are**

Southall Black Sisters (SBS) was set up in 1979 as a specialist centre for black and minority (BME) women, especially for those fleeing gender-based violence. BME women represent some of the most marginalised and therefore ‘hard to reach’ groups in our society. Our aim is to empower women and assist them in overcoming obstacles that hinder their right to equality, human rights and freedom. We are well known nationally and internationally for our work which includes advising, representing, counselling and providing practical support to BME women and campaigning on their behalf. Although based in West London, we have a national reach.

What we do

SBS provides holistic specialist services by combining advice and advocacy work with ongoing support such as counselling and psychotherapy. We combine crisis intervention work with long term advocacy and policy and campaigning work that stems directly from our frontline experience and is conducted at community and state levels. Essentially, through our advocacy work, we assist women to access relevant services that are needed for their protection and redress; ranging from accessing safe housing, the police, welfare and mental health services, to the legal system.

The issues that SBS deals with include: domestic violence, rape, sexual abuse, “honour” crimes, forced marriage, dowry-based violence, homicide, suicide aggravated by domestic violence and other forms of familial abuse including imprisonment, restriction of movement, abandonment, abduction to countries of origin and denial of education and independent careers. These issues are very much interrelated with other matters such as homelessness, immigration, mental health, criminal and civil issues, destitution and poverty. Our casework also has an international dimension (e.g. honour based violence, threats to abduct or take women and children abroad, forced marriage and transnational marriage abandonment). Our work by its very nature addresses issues of multiple or intersectional discrimination, involving the simultaneous experience of race, gender and other forms of inequality.

Since 1979, we have helped thousands of women facing violence and abuse at home. The campaigns that we have waged have sought to highlight and bring about changes in the social, political, economic and cultural constrictions that have led women to our door. We have sought to liberate women from these constrictions and help them to assert their individual freedom and rights. Our services are in high demand and although based in West London, we have a national reach. On average, we deal with over 3500 cases and enquiries each year. Our experience and expertise on the needs of South Asian and minority women has led to national recognition.

**Campaigns and Policy Work**

For example, we have lobbied and undertaken policy work on domestic violence, honour based violence, forced marriage, mental health, the position of women in the criminal justice system and of migrant women trapped in violent relationships due to their insecure immigration status. As a direct consequence of our policy and lobbying work, we have secured critical reforms that have advanced the cause of gender equality, justice and human rights for BME women and more generally for all women. Some of our most high profile achievements are the following:

* + The pioneering Kiranjit Ahluwalia policy and campaign work which involved considerable lobbying of politicians and state officials but which ultimately contributed to the reform of the criminal law on the defence of provocation and raised awareness on domestic violence;
  + Our lengthy 20-year proactive lobbying and campaigning work with MPs and the Home office that led to the introduction of the ‘Domestic Violence Rule’ and the ‘Domestic Violence and Destitution Concession’. These developments represent significant reforms of immigration law and policy, enabling migrant women on spousal visas to exit from an abusive marriage without fear of being trapped in violence or of being deported;
  + Our proactive lobbying and campaigning work with MPs and peers from the House of Lords that led to the introduction of legislation on forced marriage - the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007 - and statutory guidance on honour-based violence and forced marriage;
  + Over the years, our parliamentary briefings on a range of issues from access to justice to forced marriage and the human rights of BME women have sometimes been provided on request and at other times initiated by us. They have been very well received and praised for raising awareness and contributing to relevant debates by various parliamentary committees, including the Home Affairs Select Committee and the Joint Committee on Human Rights;
  + Our policy work on legal aid has helped to ensure continued access to legal advice and representation for abused migrant women and highlighted the disproportionate impact of cuts to specialist services on BME women;
  + More recently, based on our frontline experience, we have begun working on the emerging phenomenon of transnational marriage abandonment (TMA), which is a new form of violence against women.

After 40 years, SBS continues to be at the forefront of struggles against violence and discrimination against women in the UK, both through working with individual women and in national (and international) initiatives.