



Ascent

imkaan

Good Practice Briefing

safe pathways?

exploring an intersectional approach to addressing
violence against women and girls



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Introduction

ASCENT - Support services to organisations

Ascent is a partnership within the London Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Consortium, delivering a range of services for survivors of domestic and sexual violence, under six themes, funded by London Councils.

ASCENT – Support services to organisations, is delivered by a partnership led by the Women’s Resource Centre (WRC) and comprised of five further organisations: AVA, Imkaan, RESPECT, Rights of Women, and Women and Girls Network.

This second tier support project aims to address the long term sustainability needs of organisations providing services to those affected by sexual and domestic violence on a pan-London basis.

The project seeks to improve the quality of such services across London by providing a range of training and support, including:

- Accredited training
- Expert-led training
- Sustainability training
- Borough surgeries
- BME network
- One-to-one support
- Policy consultations
- Newsletter
- Good practice briefings

Good practice briefings

The purpose of the good practice briefings is to provide organisations supporting those affected by domestic and sexual violence with information to help them become more sustainable and contribute with making their work more effective.

For more information, please see:

www.thelondonvawgconsortium.org.uk



**London
VAWG
Consortium**

Imkaan



Imkaan is a London based Black and ‘minority ethnic’ women’s organisation. We are the only UK based, national second tier women’s organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and ‘minority ethnic’ (BME) women and girls. The organisation holds nearly two decades of experience of working around issues such as domestic violence, forced marriage and ‘honour-based’ violence. We work at local, national and international level, and in partnership with a range of organisations, to improve policy and practice responses to BME women and girls.

Imkaan works with our members to represent the expertise and perspectives of frontline, specialist and dedicated BME women’s organisations that work to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. Imkaan also delivers a unique package of support which includes: quality assurance; accredited training and peer education; sustainability support to frontline BME organisations; and facilitation of space for community engagement and development. Our research activities support the ongoing development of a robust evidence base around the needs and aspirations of BME women and girls, as well as promising practice approaches to addressing violence.

Imkaan is at the forefront of programmes and initiatives relating to forms of violence that disproportionately affect BME women and girls.

This briefing

This good practice briefing has been prepared as a follow-up to an Ascent Special Event held in November 2016, which included a session on intersectionality. It is not written to be an “intersectionality ‘how to’ guide”. It has been written with a view to provoking thought and dialogue within and between organisations and individuals, with the hope that this will improve policy and practice in our work to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls.

Violence against women and girls

To begin to explore an intersectional approach to addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG), it is important to first recognise that VAWG is both an equality and a human rights issue. In an international human rights context, violence against women is often referred to as gender-based violence, and this is defined in some of the following ways:

'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life'

(United Nations General Assembly, 1993)

'Gender-based violence is violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately.'

(Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 1992)

Further

'violence against women and girls is rooted in historical and structural inequality in power relations between women and men, and persists in every country in the world as a pervasive violation of the enjoyment of human rights'

(UN Women, 2013)

'Violence against women and girls is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality'

(HM Government, 2016) (World Health Organization, 2009)

The United Nations and Westminster Government position reflects some of what we know within the ending violence against women and girls sector i.e.

- Violence against women and girls is gendered.
- Women and girls are disproportionately affected as victims / survivors (both quantitatively and qualitatively)
- Men are disproportionately represented as perpetrators (both qualitatively and quantitatively) and when women perpetrate violence against women

and girls, including in cases of child sexual exploitation and female genital mutilation, we cannot separate it from a wider patriarchal context

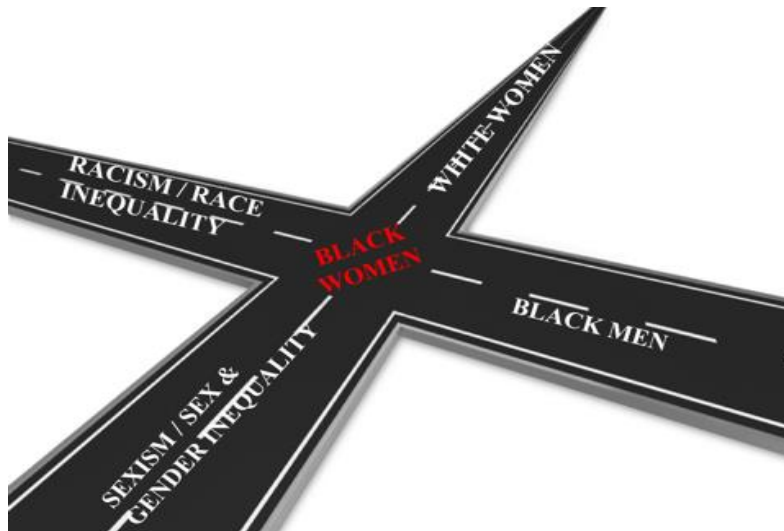
This acknowledgement of violence against women and girls as a gendered issue has been critical to feminist anti-violence organising, resistance and analysis across the world. In the UK, it is from this position that we have developed services from women's outreach programmes to rape crisis centres and women's refuges. Yet should we be only talking about gender? Many of us would argue that a gendered analysis on its own does not offer a sufficient picture of the reality of our lives. *Women and girls are not all the same* i.e. linked by biology and at the effect of a single patriarchy. Many of us are required to navigate other systems of inequality based on phenomenon such as 'race', class, disability and sexuality; and this has an effect not only on how we experience and understand violence, but also how and where we access support and justice. Thus, while a gendered analysis is fundamental to the work we do as service providers, strategic advocates, activists etc. we also need to consider how gender intersects with issues such as 'race'. Indeed, a failure to recognise these different intersections can result in a 'one-size fits all approach' from practice through to policy.

Intersectionality

'There is no such thing as a single issue struggle because we do not live single issue lives'

(Lorde, 1984)

The concept of intersectionality was first coined in 1989 by Black feminist activist and academic Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw offered intersectionality as a tool to contextualise the specific ways African-American women were being subjected to both sex and race discrimination, and the barriers they faced when trying to seek redress around this. She argued that the existing frameworks did not recognise that Black women's experiences of inequality occurred at the intersection of racism and sexism; that the systems which had been developed to challenge sexism were constructed around white women, and that those which had been developed to challenge racism had been designed around Black men.



In 'Mapping the Margins' (1991), Crenshaw used intersectionality to sharpen the focus on how violence against women of colour was being addressed (or not), within services and policies, political movements and within wider discourse. Crucially, 'Mapping the Margins' highlighted the ways that both the feminist and antiracist movements had failed to address the specific experiences of, and challenges faced by women of colour who had been subjected to domestic violence and / or rape.

From the outset, Crenshaw noted,

'Nor do I mean to suggest that violence against women of color can be explained only through the specific frameworks of race and gender considered here. Indeed, factors I address here only in part or not at all, such as class or sexuality, are often as critical in shaping the experiences of women of color. My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed'

(Crenshaw, 1991)

It is important to note, that while Crenshaw introduced the term intersectionality, her work on the specific concerns of Black women / women of colour was not new. Her analysis built on the work of Black feminist activists and theorists, who had for decades struggled against the oppression and marginalisation of Black women, which was being enacted even within the social justice movements that they were a critical part of.

'However, our concern here is to show that white, mainstream feminist theory, be it from the socialist feminist or radical feminist perspective, does not speak to the experiences of Black women and where it attempts to do so it is often from a racist perspective and reasoning'

(Parmar & Amos, 1984)

'we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.'

(The Combahee River Collective, 1977)

Intersectionality was therefore not new, it simply provided a way to conceptualise and articulate the ways that oppressions converge, to subjugate, suppress and silence whole groups of women.

However, intersectionality itself, and the broader Black feminist call for a more integrated, intersectional feminism has not been without its contestations. While this paper will not explore those contestations, it is important to acknowledge that they have been an important aspect of the evolution of intersectionality itself. It is also critical that debates on intersectionality do not occur in ways that further silence the women whose voices intersectionality seeks to hear and amplify.

For Imkaan, an intersectional analysis has been fundamental in our work to end violence against Black and 'minority ethnic' women and girls. Intersectionality has provided the most useful framework for 'capturing' and understanding our individual and collective experiences. It has also been an important as a mechanism to ensure that our activities are always located in a broader struggle for social justice. For example, our commitment to 'by and for' dedicated, specialist Black and 'minority ethnic' women's organisations is rooted in an understanding that as minoritised women and girls experiencing multiple, intersecting inequalities, we have the right to organise and resist in ways that are defined by us, for us and with us. We see Imkaan and other 'by and for' organisations as 'safe spaces'. As Patricia Hill Collins notes,

'Safe spaces are "social spaces where Black women speak freely". These safe spaces are of course common occurrences for all oppressed groups. In order for an oppressed group to continue to exist as a viable social group, the

members must have spaces where they can express themselves apart from the hegemonic or ruling ideology’.

(Hill Collins, 1990)

Violence against women and girls and intersectionality

Imkaan’s position is that an intersectional approach is necessary in all areas of work relating to ending violence against women and girls. As former UN Special Rapporteur Rashida Manjoo noted,

‘lack of attention to intersectionality not only inhibits policymakers from assessing inequalities between women and men, but also inhibits their ability to assess how differently positioned women experience discrimination and violence. The Special Rapporteur considered how violence is contingent on women’s material conditions, individual attributes and social locations, and recommended a holistic approach that addresses systematic discrimination and marginalization’

(Manjoo, 2014)

Crenshaw, writing over twenty-three years earlier, also stated,

‘Where systems of race, gender, and class domination converge, as they do in the experiences of battered women of color, intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles’.

(Crenshaw, 1991)

What is required then, in order to ensure that policy and practice approaches are intersectional? Where do we begin to look? In any equalities work, the temptation is to look in the first place ‘over there’ to identify what is ‘wrong’ and how to fix that particular ‘social problem’. At different points this can involve scrutiny of ‘the other’, benevolence and even resentment and blaming. Women from marginalised groups thus find their specific concerns either ignored, rendered invisible or hyper-visible, with ongoing questions about [our] abilities and professionalism. As Amos and Parmar note of white feminist approaches to Black women,

‘While one tendency has been for Black women to have either remained invisible within feminist scholarship or to have been treated purely as women without any significance attached to our colour and race, another tendency has been the idealization and culturalism of anthropological works. ‘

(Parmar & Amos, 1984)

A more reflective approach would be to look more broadly and deeply, including at one’s self (in relation to status, power, values) as well as at the organisations / institutions that we work for or movements we are a part of. One approach is to consider the following:

- The broader context of structural inequality (including changes such as the rise in Xenophobia)
- The victim / survivor journey and experience (impact of structural inequality on her)
- Individual practitioner approach (impact of structural inequality on attitudes, behaviours etc.)
- Policy and programming context (impact of structural inequality on everything from policy to commissioning)

It is important to consider the motivation for strengthening an intersectional approach. Is this for practice / social justice reasons, or to simply strengthen the ability to win contracts and compete against small, specialist providers? It is not sufficient to think about ensuring that services appear to be delivered more equally. It is important to recognise that good equality approaches should also involve reflections on staffing, governance and partnerships as well as service delivery.

The broader context matters

Unfortunately, violence against women and girls occurs routinely and systematically in our society. While it is not ‘normal’ in the sense of being acceptable, in many ways violence is constantly being normalised. An intersectional feminist approach demands that we centre our thinking not just on how women as a social class are positioned, but that we also attend to other inequalities in order to ensure that all women have a voice in the struggle. For example, if we ignore disability discrimination (including routine exclusion and barriers to access), or place it outside of violence against women

and girls, then we will not take note of, or respond to the experience of disabled women and girls. We will not consider the different 'sites' of victimisation and vulnerability and the lack of adequate provision for disabled women and girls. We will also overlook the right of disabled women to organise and resist violence and to deliver autonomous 'by and for' provision.

When policy makers / commissioners fail to adopt an intersectional approach, this can have serious impact on women and girl's lives. For example, this can affect decisions about the kind of services that are funded and that women are able to access. As Crenshaw noted, of the experiences of women of colour seeking refuge,

'In most cases, the physical assault that leads women to these shelters is merely the most immediate manifestation of the subordination they experience. Many women who seek protection are unemployed or under-employed, and a good number of them are poor. Shelters serving these women cannot afford to address only the violence inflicted by the batterer; they must also confront the other multi-layered and routinized forms of domination that often converge in these women's lives, hindering their ability to create alternatives to the abusive relationships that brought them to shelters in the first place'.

(Crenshaw, 1991)

Although 'Mapping the Margins' was written in the USA and is over twenty-five years old, Crenshaw's reflections are echoed here in the UK and in particular among specialist BME led ending violence against women organisations.

'Women come in with a range of things they need support on. You have to spend time on immigration, mental health, children, etc. you cannot just refer them'. (Imkaan Member)

(Imkaan, 2016)

The pressure faced by organisations, delivering services around a broad range of intersecting issues, when they are also the only 'safe space' for a woman is enormous. Yet policy and commissioning decisions rarely reflect this. Commissioning approaches which favour low cost models, rather than meaningful transformation, cannot deliver the best outcomes for women and girls more broadly – but are even more likely to fail those women who are most marginalised.

Reflective practice as routine, intersectional inquiry

Reflexivity should be an important part of ending violence against women and girls work. For practitioners, this often requires examination of power along the axis of the worker – client relationship. Intersectional reflexivity pushes this process further, supporting interrogation along the lines of:

- What 'truths' are held in this organisation about some groups of women and girls (and some men)?
- How does that influence what is asked / delivered / assumed?
- What 'truths' do I hold about X group?
- How does this influence my practice?

For organisations seeking to strengthen their intersectional approach, it is important to consider behaviour and approach within the organisation as well as within partnerships and multi-agency structures. Potential questions could be:

- What does training / change look like in this organisation?
- Is power discussed / explored through an intersectional prism?
- Are systems / structures truly accessible?
- What data is being collected? Why? How do we use that data?
- Is information-sharing reducing or increasing risk?
- Where do we position ourselves in relation to autonomous, independent organising by women from marginalised groups? i.e. are we allies, partners or competitors.
- Do our behaviours reinforce structural inequalities or offer challenge?

For those in policy and commissioning, the questions may have a different dimension:

- To what extent are issues such as ethnicity, faith, sexuality etc. a core part of local VAWG strategies (or not)?
- What is purchased / commissioned at local level?
- Is there recognition of the importance of specialist, dedicated 'by and for' provision?
- What kind of language is used (i.e. are some groups more likely to be defined as social problems / more patriarchal etc.)?

Reflexive practice, on its own, will not lead to improvements. Individuals and organisations have to be willing to take action which disrupts their own power. It is not sufficient to simply be aware that we hold more power, or that we are discriminating; we also need to take action. This has implications in terms of time, resources, existing structures, representation, leadership, sharing of space etc. *However, we cannot address inequality while the more / most powerful cling on to that which they already have.*

Final Reflection

When we think about designing services and interventions, the temptation is start at the place where there is more familiarity and less challenge. While this approach will secure support for many women and girls, there are still many others that will be excluded. If we build from the place of the intersection, this has wider impact. If we build from a single pathway, only those that are already seen, known and valued will have access to safety, support and justice.

Conclusion

At Imkaan, our work is necessarily intersectional. This is in no way a complete project. Intersectionality itself has evolved and expanded and as such none of us cannot be complacent. We believe that if we are to eliminate violence against ALL women and girls we must first acknowledge, understand and respond to the differences between us as women and girls. We must resist the urge to oversimplify in ways that reinforce oppressive practices. We must be willing to have those difficult conversations.

Intersectional work is not easy work – but for some of us, existing in the reality of those intersections, it is a matter of survival and resistance.

‘Our anti-racist struggles are as important to us as our challenges to patriarchy. This is as important to us as challenging homophobia or class discrimination or disability discrimination and other oppressions. As Audre Lorde said “There is no hierarchy of oppressions”. We refuse to choose our womanhood over our Blackness as they are always interconnected. We see our Black feminism as ‘holding difference’ and as pushing the boundaries around a single gender equality agenda. In accepting that violence against women and girls is linked to gender inequality; we understand the different ways that gender inequality is

'performed', sustained and experienced. We also understand the different ways that we must resist this. Black feminism provides us with a foundation and guides how we frame our work, how we challenge oppression and how we imagine and work towards an equal world...for all of us'.

(Larasi, 2015)

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