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Moderator questions in Bold, Respondents in Regular text.

KEY: Unable to decipher = (ia + timecode), **Phonetic spelling** = (ph + timecode), **Missed word** = (mw + timecode).

Moderator: It's Wednesday 20th October 2019 and I'm with Sarbjit Ganger. Sarbjit is director of the Asian Women's Resource Centre, a specialist women's organisation based in Brent providing holistic, independent support services to black and minoritised women and girls experiencing abuse. Sarbjit is sharing her experience of working in the women's voluntary community sector and campaigning for women's rights for the Sisters Doing It For Themselves archive. Sarbjit, if you can tell us what influenced you to work in the women's sector.

Sarbjit Ganger: Okay, it seems such a long time ago, about twenty years ago, I remember one thing quite vividly actually, I was working in a different borough, I was working in Ealing at that time, and I remember that there was this campaign that was being held in Brent. And it was about a woman called Balwant Kaur who'd actually been killed at one of the refuges here in Brent and I remember thinking, 'Oh my goodness, this woman has just been killed by her husband and she's got three young children.' And there was a public meeting that was being held in Brent at that time and I felt that I really wanted to go to that, you know, I had nothing to do with that sector at that time, I was you know, I was working within Ealing Youth Services and I went along to that meeting and I remember when I went along to that meeting it was the first time that I saw a room full of women, all different colours, shapes, sizes but what they'd come together for, it was about this one woman whose husband had followed her in the refuge after he'd, kind of-, she took her children to school, he followed her from school and then he got himself into the refuge and killed her, cold-blooded, at that time. And that meeting, public meeting, was the first time that I came across the words 'domestic abuse' and actually also the impact of Asian women at that time and I remember you know, there were some public speakers at that time and you know, they were just talking about all sorts of issues around domestic violence, they were talking about confidentiality and how we can actually protect women even further, so that was the first feeling that I got to say you know, I would really like to find out more about this area and I would actually like to work more. So when a job opportunity came up at the Asian Women's Resource Centre and this meeting I went to you know, several years prior to any jobs coming here and that's when I applied and I actually came here in about 1990, so almost, you know, over twenty years ago.

Moderator: So it was this personal interaction with a group of women that developed your passion, I suppose?

Sarbjit Ganger: And they were like no other women, they were amazing women, they were articulate women and they had what I would say a bit of fire in their belly about trying to

address this whole issue around domestic violence and not only just addressing it in terms of within their own community, because at that time in the seventies you know, it wasn't talked about. The kind of statutory service at that time were not really taking the whole issue seriously so from that point of view I could really get a sense of what the women at that time, the women that I was speaking were trying to do and I felt that that was something that I would really want to try and support in whatever little way I could at that time.

Moderator: As you probably are aware, the first example I suppose of collective action was the Women's Refuge, did that have any influence on your decision making?

Sarbjit Ganger: To be honest, I didn't have that level of awareness about what was happening in the violence against women sector at that time. It was only much later that I found out about the very first refuge in Chiswick, but that was when I kind of started to work for this organisation that I became more and more aware of it. But in terms of that, I don't think that was something that I knew about, I only found out more about that much, much later on really.

Moderator: And you said that you decided that it was attending the meeting about the woman who had been murdered by her husband and an Asian woman that made you, that fired your belly I suppose. Can you describe how that changed you, how being at that meeting changed you?

Sarbjit Ganger: I think there was a huge amount of empathy there at that time and one thing that I remember is that she had three young daughters and at that time what happened, those daughters ended up into foster care and I remember one of the other questions that were being considered by the meeting is what would happen to those children, because actually this woman that was concerned didn't really have very much, she was quite isolated. So I remember that was quite, I felt quite touched with that really about what had happened to those children you know who, no fault of their own but actually now were completely on their own, completely left motherless. So from that point of view I remember that really did change me in the way that I felt I think it was more empathy, I would say, that's the word that I would use, it was more empathy and I felt that actually, deaths like this shouldn't be happening. Didn't know how I was going to be part of it, how I was going to contribute but I knew that I wanted to do something, even if it was listening more about what the issues were you know, what needed to be done, that's where I was twenty years ago when I saw this I think.

Moderator: And you said you had a couple of years between attending the meeting and applying for the position at the Asian Women's Resource Centre, what did you do in that intervening period?

Sarbjit Ganger: The thing is at that time I remember growing up it was in the kind of like seventies, there was also a, kind of, bit of a hostile environment. There was a rise in, I mean certainly the area that I lived in, I lived in Southall, so there was a real kind of rise in racism and I remember at that time like in the media as well there was like you know, racist was coming to Southall and you know, there was some kind of like activism riots happening, so in a way I was being kind of politicised as to you know, the kind of discrimination that

minoritised communities were feeling at that time. So the stuff that I heard in Brent was about domestic violence but there was also other things that I was hearing about how you know, we should be kind of coming together, we should be organising against these kind of threats, so there was also that happening as well so, it was, kind of, like feeding my curiosity and I wanted to be part of those structures where we could kind of organise and collectively make some action. So that's where I was at that time. So although when the job did come up at the Asian Women's Resource Centre I wasn't very confident that I would get it but one thing that I did want to do was actually you know, focus on Asian women at that time. And when I did apply for it I did get it and then you know, it kind of like really opened up doors in terms of the issues around violence, especially around young people as well and so yes, I guess my learning kind of started then and my thirst to find out more and to do more and to help more came in.

Moderator: And which leads us nicely into leadership. Who inspired you then and now, well who or what? Actually we do know the what, it was attending a meeting that inspired you (TC 00.10.00), who inspired you? Who then and now?

Sarbjit Ganger: I think I met quite a, I mean I don't think I could put my finger on and say it was one person that inspired me. I think a series of people inspired me. I kind of remember reading 'Finding a Voice' by Amrit Wilson and you know, learning the importance of a voice. Why would a voice be important for you know, say somebody like me, an Asian woman who in a way you know - it was just learning how it was important to have a say. And nothing was too big or nothing was too small in terms of what you thought, you had a contribution to make. It was just learning that I had a contribution to make. So I think it was a series of people, it was individual women that were working in the voluntary sector at that time who were at the meeting, it was the braveness of you know, some of the women that put their head above the parapet and said, 'No more,' to domestic violence, I remember thinking, 'Oh my God, you are so brave, there you are you're talking about domestic violence, you're talking about it within the local community, you're challenging the local community in terms of how women are being treated within the Asian community, but you're also challenging the wider society about not doing enough for Asian women.'

You know, not doing enough for the fact that they can't speak languages, the fact that every time they went into mainstream organisations that their needs were never kind of like looked at, it was always looked at a very kind of generic point of view, or from a man's point of view, it was never done from a woman's point of view. So I think it was a series of women you know that, kind of, like inspired me and also people like my mother as well. You know I know that at that time my mother made me more aware of my own mother and you know, the sacrifices that she'd made for all of us and what she'd done just to kind of make us be, so a number of women I think inspired me I would say.

Moderator: But no one woman comes, or a group of women come to mind?

Sarbjit Ganger: I think that you know, one of the women that comes into mind was - it was another campaign that this organisation was involved in which was the Grunwick Strike. I remember one of the women who I've recently started to kind of like look into a little bit more was Jayaben Desai. Jayaben Desai who led the Grunwick Strike in the 1970s and that

was about you know, one of their colleagues was wrongfully dismissed and it was like, she then kind of took on her employers at that time and said actually you know, these conditions that we're working in are really bad and the way that you're treating colleagues and the way that you're treating us because the majority of them were Asian women at that time. She basically really started on her own okay and then that movement when she started to raise awareness of it, it ended up hundreds of women and not just women but everyone that felt that the injustices of what was happening at that factory and the way that people were treated were kind of being discriminated against. So people like Jayaben who were obviously you know, she didn't look very modern she was wearing a sari, she was out there in the picket line so you know, people like Jayaben Desai I think inspired me.

Moderator: Can you describe your leadership, your style, your approach to leadership?

Sarbjit Ganger: I think that my style to leadership is that, I think that I am very privileged to lead an organisation like the Asian Women's Resource Centre and I work with amazing women and I think that they are, the recognition that these women are leaders in their own right is the way that I work. The way that I feel is that you know, women have a lot to give, they have experience in their own right and actually with the support and the right support they are leaders in their own right. So it's basically more of a kind of, whether I can use the word 'collective' you know, based on the fact that we're very equal you know, it's not about policing women, like watching them all the time to see whether they're working and stuff but actually just that recognition that we are women in our own rights, we have our own skills and actually, and women, if they're left to work you know, they achieve amazing things. So I think that would be my style of leadership really, it's about talking to women, it's about knowing that four heads think better than one, recognising people's experiences, valuing people's experiences and knowing that collectively we are much stronger.

Moderator: How would you say women's leadership is different to men's leadership, men's approach to leadership?

Sarbjit Ganger: I think, again, working in a women's only organisation which started off as a collective, by the way. It started off as a collective that everybody was, kind of, equal, everyone was paid the same, everybody kind of like had the same roles. It was only until the funders said to us well, you know, within a collective there's no accountability line. So, if we were going to fund you then you better have a hierarchy kind of thing, so we do have a hierarchy but I think that you know, for us, for me it's about having those safe spaces for women, I think it's about having the same kind of vision about what we feel about violence. It's about having those kind of frank, open, honest discussions as well, which sometimes you can't always have if you're talking about sensitive issues like violence against women to have that with men, because obviously sometimes it is a gendered crime. So from that point of view I think that you know, for us to have that safe space to explore and to be who we are and actually recognise our journeys of our struggles to achieve women's equality I think it's been really, really important and valuable for us.

Moderator: What motivates you as a leader?

Sarbjit Ganger: I think what motivates me is when I see a smile on a woman's face. When she says 'Sarbjit, if your organisation hadn't been here then I would have still been stuck with being beaten up by my husband, you showed us an alternative' and actually seeing that and seeing that women strive and seeing them become independent and leading independent lives, I think there is no better reward I think for us.

Moderator: You've touched on this, what issues are dear to your heart and what are the issues that are dear to your heart and how do you think you have influenced change?

Sarbjit Ganger: I think again, I talked about Balwant Kaur, I think domestic abuse is very dear to my heart. It's dear to my heart and I always say who feels it knows it and I think sometimes if you can walk in a woman's shoes or you've had your own personal experiences, you're much more empathetic, it's not cold, we're not robotic, we can really you know, support individuals. I think that there is still so much to do. I do feel that as a sector the challenges that we had twenty years ago are there but I think that they're much more, they're still very much there and I think that we can't get complacent. There are still you know - you open up the newspaper and you see again women being killed or somebody making a really derogatory comment about say for example, a woman is experiencing violence because (TC 00.20.00) she was nagging her husband, you know-, so you've still got those very negative attitudes about women and just the lack of understanding around what violence against women is, lack of understanding around power and control, how that manifests. So, I think there is still quite a lot of work to do in kind of furthering and influencing the agenda around VAWG going forward.

Moderator: What gains do you think have been made?

Sarbjit Ganger: I think there are many, many gains that have been made, I can't say that there've not. Women have got the right to vote and, you know, there are many women that have died before us, actually, who have paved the way for us for having a voice. Now, women are going out to work. Sometimes, you know, it was very much that women were at home. They were looking after the children and there have been some slow steps. Women are in influential positions. So, I think from that point of view, there have been a lot of gains. But there are still things that we need to be doing, like women are still not paid the same and we still haven't got many women in very high positions. So, you could look at it in both ways.

Moderator: Going back specifically to leadership, what do you think are the specific characteristics of being a leader in the women's sector?

Sarbjit Ganger: I would say it's really important to be inclusive. It also is really important to be aware of, you know, how we are dealing with issues like racism or caste or evaluating our work all the time. For example, you know, this is an Asian woman's organisation but actually, are we doing enough for women who have got disabilities? Are we doing enough work with women who are from a different community? So, you know, I think that it's really important to be aware of those things and be aware that it's not a one-sized fit approach, just because we're running a women's organisation that the services that we offer are going to reflect and serve the needs of all South East Asian communities. But I think it's evolving. It's changing. I

think it's about looking at what some of the gaps are, looking at how we can respond to some of the gaps, and actually how we can make our services more accessible but also, I think, have some of those difficult conversations as well. Maybe in being honest and have those difficult conversations in the things we are not doing so well, and how we can actually better in doing those.

Moderator: Can you give me an example of how that's happened, how your practice has changed?

Sarbjit Ganger: I think one of the things that I can talk about is women, you know, who experience discrimination due to their caste, the family that they've been born into and as a result, they've been discriminated just because of where they were born. So, I think that, you know, for us, it's about trying to raise awareness around that. I mean, I come from a quite low caste myself so I know what it's like to be discriminated against by, not just the Asian community who thinks fairer is much more beautiful, you know. Somebody who is actually from a bigger, higher caste, then you can get married to a much better person, kind of thing. So, there's very much that discrimination. I've experienced that myself but I think that it's about breaking up some of those kinds of attitudes that people have and looking at it from a human point of view and actually challenging those things. I think it's really important. So, for us, in terms of practice, I think it's about being aware of that, it's about raising awareness of that, it's about making sure that there's that equality of access to services for all women, to making sure that we're looking at how we're reaching out to those women and what were we doing to reach out to those women.

Moderator: And how has your involvement in the sector impacted on you personally?

Sarbjit Ganger: You know, that's a really interesting question and it's something that I don't reflect on very, very regularly. It's something that I don't focus on, like, myself, but I think for me, it has built up my self-esteem and confidence as an individual. It's made me a little bit more confident in saying what I feel and, sort of, also being aware that in some situations I'm very powerful but in some situations, I'm invisible. I'm not seen at all. Let me give you an example of that. I was at, kind of, an event, a really big event in central London and I remember going into a women's workshop. The person that was chairing the event actually asked for questions from the floor and she said, 'Okay, I'll go around once but I'll come back.' So, I put my hand up, and the first round of questions I felt I was invisible, I mean I wasn't seen. The second time, I put my hand up again, and again I was not seen. It was only until, actually it was a man that was sitting next to me, sadly, who said, 'Hang on. This person has had-', pointing to my head, 'This person has had her hand up. You know, could you pass the mic?' It was only then that, Helen, the mic came to me and I was able to ask the question about the absence of-, the whole thing was around Me Too and it was about how far women's equality had come. Then I was able to actually raise the issue around how important it is for, sort of, organisations to have their separate spaces. You know, not all of us are that comfortable. Because the people on the panel were saying, 'Well, we don't need separate spaces. We feel quite confident to say what we need in any forum.' And I was trying to say that, you know, for the women and the issues that we deal with, it's still very important to have those safe spaces and it's really also raising the issue of VAWG. But it was then I realised that that time, in that place, I didn't have any power. And I think that's what it's like

in certain situations, I am very powerful, in certain situations, I'm still very not. And it just made me more aware of that.

Moderator: Can you give an example of when you felt that you did have power and you could influence?

Sarbjit Ganger: I do feel very powerful when I am with women. And that might seem very simplistic but when I'm with minoritised women, when I am with women, I feel very powerful. I feel powerful because I think something and another woman has said it, and I can immediately relate to it. And I feel very powerful in that the kind of, you know, the confidence. Not so much confidence, but you know that kind of, passion. Passion. That's the word. Passion that we collectively have in coming together to try and, you know, create change. I think I feel very, very powerful at that time. I can't describe to you how that is and I've not got that anywhere else.

Moderator: How has the Asian Women's Resource Centre and the sector as a whole influenced and changed women's structural position? I suppose for you it's in terms of minoritised women as well as women generally, and there is still a disconnect.

Sarbjit Ganger: You know, the way that I would answer that question is through my direct experiences of actually leading BME partnerships. So, we're a very small organisation and sometimes a forgotten organisation as well, in lots of respects. There are lots of women's organisations that are small, doing fabulous work, but sometimes don't always get that recognition. (TC 00.30.00) So, I think that for us, it has been, kind of, developing those partnerships with other BME minoritised women's organisations that I think we've seen a little bit of influence in terms of reaching out to our own communities, collectively coming together to try and influence change. I think that would be how I would describe it, is those partnerships that a very small organisation that we thought we could never do, is lead and develop. And I think that the Women's Resource Centre also played a very, kind of, supporting role within developing us as the Asian Women's Resource Centre, and getting us to the point where we felt confident to lead partnerships, which we're very, very grateful for. Because if that hadn't been done or if people didn't believe in us, from the Women's Resource Centre, that wouldn't have happened. We wouldn't have felt confident to do that. And I think through those partnerships, you know, we've developed and we've really been able to address some of those issues from a grass-root point of view but also from a government point of view where we've collectively given our voice to influence change. So, I think partnerships would be a way which has driven us to create change.

Moderator: And what change have you, as a partnership, achieved?

Sarbjit Ganger: I think the first thing I would say is that, you know, we've been able to support hundreds of women experiencing forced marriages, honour based violence, domestic and sexual violence. We've been able to provide that support. Through the funding, I mean, you know, we needed that but we've actually saved many lives through the work that we've done. We are continuing that work within the communities, making sure that we're raising awareness of those issues. We're not complacent. You know, it's still affecting one in two women. Two women are killed, one in four women are affected. So, there is still a lot of work

to do but I think for us, working within, you know, a minoritised organisation, the approaches and strategies are different in terms of trying to create that change. So, from that point of view, I think that we have, you know, created change.

Moderator: You talked about different strategies. Can you expand on that? How do you work differently?

Sarbjit Ganger: I mean one example is, you know, specialist organisations. There are many women who are more likely to come to a specialist organisation than go to a generic organisation. For example, the police and social services. You know, women are very sceptical about going into those sort of organisations. Understandably due to maybe repercussions, further reprisals of violence, so I think to have those safe spaces where they can go to a women's organisation without being judged and who they can feel comfortable in talking to someone from their own background, their own language, somebody who understands some of the kind of barriers as well that they may be going through. For example, issues around shame and honour. So, I think that that is very important in that they're more likely to come to us and that's how we're different as well in terms of the support we provide.

Moderator: What do you think are the greatest achievements of the sector and of your organisation?

Sarbjit Ganger: Well I'm very proud to say that our organisation is coming up to 40 years next year and I think that is a historical achievement in itself given the, kind of, current climate of austerity, the move towards less recognition of specialist women's organisations. I think that that is an achievement in itself. This organisation started almost, like, 40 years ago as a refuge and a resource centre and so we hope that we're going to be having a series of celebratory events just recognising that historic milestone. So, I think that is the first thing that comes into my head when I think about some of our achievements.

Moderator: What do you think still needs to be done?

Sarbjit Ganger: I think we still need women in positions of power and influence, maybe, you know, government. I think that we still need champions to take up the banner of addressing violence against women and girls. It's really important. I think it's important to have black women in those positions as well. So, we can have role models as well and actually, you know, just to have spaces to talk about our journeys, our lived experiences. Just very basic things like that. And keep having those conversations about issues. Maybe have those, like I said, difficult conversations about how we can do things better. But also supporting one another. I think one of the things is women's leadership can be a very isolating place as well when you're having demands on, you know, the requirements for funders, the demands of just running organisations, fundraising, sustainability, staying alive. I think that sometimes that can be quite isolating and so maybe just having more of those networks as well for us so we can feel, in a trusting environment, you know, that we can actually gain strength when one another share experiences, and feel less isolated.

Moderator: And what are your thoughts on the future for women's rights?

Sarbjit Ganger: I'm very positive. I have seen such amazing examples of women delivering services, having positive impacts on the women that we're trying to serve, you know, the discussions, the debates, the learning and sharing that learning. And I'm very positive about that. There seems to be this renewed vigour to walk through the next stages of the women's movements' developments. I think that despite everything that's going on outside, there still is that same level of passion, that same level of dedication, and commitment to try and, you know, further the agenda of women's equality.

Moderator: What do you think has been the impact of austerity on the sector?

Sarbjit Ganger: I mean, the impact of austerity has been that, you know, as a result of austerity, our sector has gotten smaller. And if you're looking at the BME sector, it's gotten even smaller. And that is about, kind of, not valuing the women's sector and thinking that maybe some of the larger, generic organisations can do that work. But actually that is not the case, you know. These spaces that were created almost, like, twenty years ago, were created because of that recognition that there wasn't that space and the mainstream organisations weren't supporting our work. And now to suddenly say that that's not necessary or it's not needed anymore, and that we all need to be integrating, I think that that's not my reality. I think it's really important that we have those spaces where we can gain strength, be honest, talk about what our realities are, what our journeys have been, our struggles have been, and actually then come to, kind of, a shared consensus about how we're going to be moving forward. (TC 00.40.00) So, from that point of view, I think it's important that we still preserve these very precious, I would say, spaces for women. And I would also say, women for and by women's organisation. It's very, very important that we retain that as well. Again, because of austerity, people have started to kind of think about who they started to serve and actually start thinking about widening. No, you know, we will retain who we are and we think it's really important to retain those spaces.

Moderator: Thank you. And finally, is there anything else that you would like to say?

Sarbjit Ganger: I think I've covered most of the things in the questions that you've asked and I feel very, you know, humbled and privileged to be part of this piece of work by the Women's Resource Centre so I thank them very much for that.

Moderator: Thank you very much.