

# The construction of political agency: South Asian women and political activism

Shaminder Takhar\*

---

**Abstract** This article draws on research conducted with South Asian women working in a variety of organizations ranging from those that provide specialist services to training and anti-racist work. It is argued that despite stereotyping, these women have shown agency through involvement in civic organizations which has been crucial in understanding issues that are specifically relevant to South Asian women, for example, forced marriage and honour killings. The article also engages with feminist debates around the construction of political agency and its role in influencing social change and transformation within the South Asian community. The empowerment of women is discussed with reference to its central role in enabling them to take control over their lives.

---

## Introduction

This article aims to show through a gendered lens how South Asian women's involvement in community-level politics is crucial to expanding our understandings of political activism and 'empowerment'. For purposes of clarity, the term 'South Asian' is used in this article to refer to women from Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds. The women are also from different faith groups of the Indian subcontinent: Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. The article is set within the context of the perceived invisibility of South Asian women within civil society. However, South Asian women have been struggling for recognition and to speak for themselves through their involvement in community-based

---

\*Address for correspondence: Shaminder Takhar, Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, London South Bank University, 103 Borough Road, London SE1 0AA, UK; email: takhars@lsbu.ac.uk

organizations. It will be argued that it is important to recognize women's political agency as practised within these community organizations and why it is crucial in the context of social change and transformation. Despite the exclusionary nature of some feminist politics, the issues of rights, equality and agency feature as a major theme in South Asian women's narratives. This article will draw on developments in feminist theory that explore agency and identity using post-structuralist ideas, whilst retaining the need for coalitions based on essentialized forms of identity. This article shows South Asian women's successes through placing women's issues such as domestic violence, forced marriage and honour killings on the political agenda. They have influenced policy by creating a space for political agency, thereby empowering themselves. As a result, they have expanded the boundaries of how we define political activism (Takhar, 2007).

## Methodology

This research focused on those women involved in the work of civic organizations set up specifically or with a brief for South Asian women service users. A total of 21 South Asian women (equal numbers of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh backgrounds) were interviewed in a variety of capacities in a range of organizations, from those involved in training and anti-racist work to specialist service providers. The research was carried out with the women, using in-depth semi-structured interviews that were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes with an *aide-mémoire*, and the participants were recruited using a snowballing method.

## Agency, identity and South Asian women

South Asian women are stereotypically presented as trapped in a perpetual cycle of complacent passivity and victimhood that denies them political agency. However, the research presented in this article demonstrates that South Asian women have been and continue to be politically active – a kind of double recognition is required to understand the women's agency especially in their roles in civic organizations. For South Asian women in the United Kingdom, 'spaces of agency' and 'looking at one another' (hooks, 1992, p. 116) have been constructed through civic organizations created for women by women. These organizations have been prominent

in news coverage of issues related to honour killings and forced marriage (Takhar, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

Within social theory, the concept of 'agency' has become a widely debated issue. With reference to political agency, which is the concern here, it will be shown that South Asian women show the capacity and initiative to use their agency to challenge sexist oppression within their communities and racist oppression in British society. As a result South Asian women have demonstrated that their agency contradicts the stereotypical version existing within dominant discourses. Political agency is therefore central to our understanding of micro-politics 'and how agency's relational nature is embedded in women's lifecycles, everyday practices and cultural expectation' (Ciotti, 2009, p. 113).

McNay has argued that in order for women to be free from oppression, the understanding of agency has to shift from a 'negative paradigm' towards a subject who shows not only resistance but subversion (McNay, 2000, p. 2). Thus, women are seen not as passive victims but as having positive identities and as being actively involved in overcoming their oppression. McNay (2000, p. 2) goes on to argue that we require a 'generative account of subjectification and agency' that takes into account the negative paradigm through three issues: the relationship between the material and the symbolic, an examination of personal identity, and the relationship between the social and the psyche. This means that a subject's agency is not constructed as simply resisting forces but involves active formulation through looking at material conditions, a woman's identity in relationship to the collective and how psychological processes are linked to the social environment.

In connection with McNay's second issue, personal identity, if we accept that identity has the capability of unravelling the complexities involved in the relationship between structure and agency, then we can draw on this to develop an understanding of what is meant by political identity. McNay's (2000, p. 17) focus is a critique of post-structuralist thought on identity and she argues that if identity can be thought of as free-floating and deconstructed, then it follows that, although some forms of identity are more durable, the subject becomes devoid of any history or 'social embeddedness'. She expresses the relationship between the simultaneity of identity and the

---

1 In the United Kingdom, the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) was created with the Home Office. It has given advice to women and men who have been forced into marriage or if they are at risk. In 2009, 86 per cent of 1682 cases involved women. The FMU also works with embassies abroad to provide assistance. Honour killing involves the murder of a woman or man who has brought shame to the family and can include refusal to enter into a marriage or being involved in a relationship that displeases the family. Honour killings are usually carried out by relatives. An example of this is the high-profile British case of Banaz Mahmod in 2006. Legislation in the United Kingdom states that the offence carries up to two years of imprisonment. There has been a gradual rise in such cases.

coherent self as one that moves beyond essentialism. This means that although we have our many types of identity, we can also call upon the idea of the self as identifying through one type of identity. This makes the idea of a collective identity possible without compromising other forms of identity, when required, for example, for political activism. McNay's analysis makes it possible to explore diverse and conflicting forms of women's agency, and to investigate how women construct collective and individual identities. Collective identities, as McNay has conceived them, have been used by South Asian women in the United Kingdom to set up specific organizations to empower women and resist domination (Southall Black Sisters, 1990, 2001, 2002; Davis and Cooke, 2002). However, to recognize how South Asian women's organizations have generated collective identities for political action and supported women's empowerment, we need to have a broader understanding of both agency and political activism.

### **Expanding the boundaries of political activism and agency**

A black feminist analytical approach allows us to move away from a masculinist understanding of political agency, i.e. agency dominated by men in the public sphere of politics, by challenging *who is considered a legitimate political actor* and *what counts as agency and activism* (Mohanty, 1992; Brah, 1996, 2000; Sudbury, 1998). The suggestion made is that political activity that is not included in formal politics needs to be included within what counts as political activism (Sudbury, 1998, 2001; Takhar, 2007). This is crucial to understanding South Asian women's activism which falls within the boundary of the voluntary sector. Research has shown that women are excluded to a greater extent than men in politics (Lambe *et al.*, 2004) and recently it has come to the attention of high profile politicians and researchers that minority ethnic women are under-represented in electoral politics at both local and national levels (Sudbury, 1998; Mackay, 2001; Gervais, 2008). It was only in the 2010 General Election that six South Asian women have finally been elected as members of Parliament for the first time. Due to women's exclusion from the formal political sphere, it is argued therefore that the 'parameters of political participation' should be extended to include those civil society organizations in which South Asian women actively participate (Takhar, 2007).

### **South Asian women's political activism, agency and empowerment**

Although dominant conceptualizations of political activism ignore less visible forms of political agency, South Asian women's community

organizations are at the forefront of empowering women (Solomos and Back, 1995; Sudbury, 1998; Visram, 2002; Werbner, 2002). It is through these organizations that issues which are pertinent in South Asian women's lives have been brought to prominence, often aided by sensational media coverage of honour killings (Hossain and Welchman, 2005; Kelly, Thiara and Gill, 2009). South Asian women's organizations have been active in coalition-building and have promoted a knowledge-based network that has successfully challenged the imprisonment of women who kill their violent partners. The most prominent case has been of Kiranjit Aluwahlia and her appeal against a murder conviction which was led by Southall Black Sisters.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, working against inequalities has meant that women have come together as 'imagined communities of women with divergent histories and locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic' (Mohanty, 1991, p. 4). Organizations such as Southall Black Sisters were successful in introducing the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act (2007). Through resisting dominant discourses, some women have shown political agency and have become empowered. The article will now turn to explore what empowerment means in the context of South Asian women's organizations.

## Power and empowerment

The related terms 'power' and 'empowerment' have attracted numerous debates concerning their meaning and applicability to different social groups. To gain an understanding of empowerment, which has been widely used to apply to women, particularly in development studies, we need to consider what is meant by 'power'. Despite different understandings of this term, it is the 'power over' others which features prominently. 'Power over' implies gaining control over a person or groups of people through overt and covert methods (Dahl, 1961; Bachrach and Baratz, 1970). Having power over another implies that there is a finite sum available and that power can be lost and gained. Therefore the empowerment of women entails loss of power for those in authority. 'Power over' can also

---

2 In 1989, Kiranjit Aluwahlia killed her violent husband after many years of abuse. A campaign run by Southall Black Sisters resulted in her conviction being overturned on appeal in 1992. After a re-trial, Aluwahlia admitted manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility and severe depression. Her successful appeal against a murder conviction has set a historic precedent, which means that women who have experienced domestic violence should not be viewed as murderers. This story has been turned into a film, *Provoked* (2007), with Aishwarya Rai and Naveen Andrews in the leading roles.

be effectively achieved through psychological processes that render other groups powerless. This has been referred to as internalized oppression (Mama, 1995, p. 100) and the development of a 'dependency complex' amongst colonized people (Fanon, 1986, p. 99). In the context of South Asian women, internalized oppression occurs when powerful discourses in society impact psychologically on people to conform to acceptable forms of behaviour. The failure to conform holds consequences such as honour killings and forced marriage. It has been shown that if the oppression becomes impossible to bear, it can result in fatality in the form of suicide, especially amongst South Asian women aged fifteen to twenty-five years (Bhardwaj, 2001; Burman *et al.*, 2002; Raleigh, 2009).

The question is: where do empowering actions that instigate social change occur? For South Asian women, empowerment occurs at the moment when a woman realises her potential to act, i.e. possession of political agency. This is not to imply that empowerment is complete, rather it is a gradual awareness of equality, justice and control over the decision-making process because 'empowerment remains an illusive construct' (Karl, 1995; Collins, 2009, p. 23). Yet there are opportunities to challenge dominant ideologies through empowerment which can range from the micro-level—for example, mothering – to acting collectively in women-only organizations 'to change discriminatory policies and procedures of government, schools, the workplace, the media, stores, and other social institutions' (Collins, 2009, p. 219). The ability to change policies collectively without losing power is exemplified by the work of Southall Black Sisters, demonstrating the generative understandings of power: 'power to', 'power from within' and 'power with'. The participation of women in collective action identifies a powerful form of agency that is required for resisting different forms of oppression. It also implies that personal empowerment in the form of confidence-building, economic independence and gaining educational qualifications can be achieved. However, the state of being empowered, personal and/or collective, is representative of a challenge to male power, dominant ideology and acceptable forms of behaviour within South Asian diasporic communities in the United Kingdom. This is clearly stated in the following narrative:

To be thought of as a homewrecking organization or pulling families apart is completely stupid. We aren't the cause of domestic violence.

(Kanwal, Asian Women's Project)

Organizations such as the one that Kalwant works for provide women with an opportunity to empower themselves personally through education classes. The organization runs classes to act also as a cover for those

women wishing to take advice on domestic violence, i.e. using 'generative power' involving no loss of power for those women running the organization. Some examples of participants commenting on the value of empowerment:

Empowerment is not only education but the women acquiring skills so that they can question society.

(Surin and Maria, Asian Women's Project)

[My job description] says it is empowering young people within a social and recreational context. For example if I am taking a young woman to see a councillor, it is a form of empowerment [...]. From the feedback I get, that's how I evaluate empowerment and say that I have empowered that young person.

(Sonya, Youth Project)

The feedback from those women being 'empowered' relates to how power to achieve a goal is not simply a case of placing trust in another person to act as an advocate, but to take action, thereby generating even more power. This illustrates a parallel process to 'race uplift' through education (Collins, 2009, p. 227). This is illustrated further by two other women who were interviewed:

We aim to change a woman's quality of life. It never ceases to amaze me because when she comes through there, she wants to die. Give her fifteen days and she becomes stronger, some of them go on to have careers. At the end of the day we help them and my job satisfaction is that I have given a woman the chance to change her life.

(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

When I talk about empowerment, it's not about grand conferences and seminars or sending stuff out and asking women to come to the seminars. It's about the little things as well. When we help women fill in forms, I don't do it and just get them to sign it.

(Sofia, Asian Women's Project)

The generative power employed by the women in organizations means that being part of a collective increases the chances of social change and empowerment through exercising political agency. It is the identification with a collective identity which allows for the personal empowerment of both parties in this social relationship. This understanding of power has been described as a 'mode of action upon action', a process that is interactive and never completed (Foucault, 1982, p. 222).

A concept that has been closely associated with power is resistance, which is often placed in opposition to oppression and domination. Opposition to resistance can be viewed in two ways: firstly, acting in the physical world to challenge oppression, and secondly, by raising consciousness, for



example, in the women's movement or civil rights movement. Both involve agency and resistance and together they can challenge authority (Wilson, 1978, 2006; Hall, 1982). Thus it becomes important to look at the process of thinking about alternatives and why 'one needs a community of resistance' (hooks, 1991, 149; Pile, 1997). Both Pile and hooks highlight the necessity of decolonizing the mind of the internalized oppression and colonialism discussed above. The implication is that collective and essentialized identities have been used by feminists to mobilize women politically. Although the use of essentialized identities has been critiqued by feminists for being static, they have provided the opportunity for South Asian women to use their agency in a proactive way to challenge sexism and racism, and to become empowered (hooks, 1991).

The most important underlying objectives of South Asian women's organizations are self-definition, social change and empowerment. This is in stark contrast to the binary of active men and passive women towards the emergence and effective use of proactive political agency. However, even if the boundaries of political activism are expanded, there are some South Asian women who are not politically active. Yet those with political agency have influenced other women in society to fight for their rights.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that in order to recognize South Asian women's agency, activism and empowerment, we need to reconsider what constitutes political activism. When viewed through a gendered lens, it is possible to see that community politics can be regarded as an empowering process. This is particularly important when women organize on the basis of a collective identity that is formed around shared cultural histories. It is an identity that avoids claims of essentialism and allows women to retain a sense of themselves. Furthermore, the concept of political activism can be expanded to include South Asian women's organizations as they continue to build on existing networks and form alliances with other women. In a political environment which does not foreground women, it becomes increasingly important to recognize that an informed understanding of South Asian women's experiences of political activism and political agency is important. Through this, it is possible to excavate and examine the emergence of a collective subject with political agency who can take control of her life and work collectively to instigate social change.

---



*Shaminder Takhar is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at London South Bank University, teaching across a range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses. She also supervises doctoral students, and her research interests and publications are centred around race, ethnicity, gender, sexualities and social justice. She has conducted qualitative research funded by the British Academy on the under-representation of South Asian women in politics in the United Kingdom. At London South Bank University, she is the Convenor of the Gender Research Forum and a member of the Families and Social Capital Research Group in the Institute of Social Science Research. She has held the position of Associate Board Member of the British Sociological Association journal Sociology.*

## References

---

- Bachrach, P. and Baratz, M. S. (1970) *Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Bhardwaj, A. (2001) Growing up young, Asian and female in Britain: a report on self-harm and suicide, *Feminist Review*, 68 (Summer), 52–67.
- Brah, A. (1996) *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Routledge, London.
- Brah, A. (2000) The scent of memory: strangers, our own and others, in A. Brah and A. Coombes, eds, *Hybridity and Its Discontents*, Routledge, London.
- Burman, E., Chantler, K. and Batsleer, J. (2002) Service responses to South Asian women who attempt suicide or self-harm: challenges for service commissioning and delivery, *Critical Social Policy*, 22, 641–668.
- Ciotti, M. (2009) The conditions of politics; low caste women's political agency in contemporary north Indian society, *Feminist Review*, 91, 113–134.
- Collins, P. H. (2009) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, Routledge, New York and London.
- Dahl, R. A. (1961) *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Davis, S. and Cooke, V. (2002) *Why Do Black Women Organise? A Comparative Analysis of Black Women's Voluntary Sector Organisations in Britain and Their Relationship to the State*, Policy Studies Institute, London.
- Fanon, F. (1986) *Black Skins, White Masks*, Pluto Press, London.
- Foucault, M. (1982) The subject and power afterword, in H. L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, eds, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism*, Harvester Press, New York.
- Gervais, M. C. (2008) *Ethnic Minority Women: Routes to Power*, The Fawcett Society and the Government Equalities Unit, London.
- Hall, S. (1982) The rediscovery of ideology: return of the repressed in media studies, in M. Gurevitch, J. Curran and S. Woolcott, eds, *Culture, Society and the Media*, Methuen, London.
- hooks, B. (1991) Sisterhood: political solidarity between women, in S. Gunew, ed., *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*, Routledge, London.
- hooks, B. (1992) *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, South End Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Hossain, S. and Welchman, L. (2005) *Honour: Crimes, Paradigms, and Violence against Women*, Zed Books, London.

- Karl, M. (1995) *Women and Empowerment: Participation and Decision Making*, Zed Books, London.
- Kelly, L., Thiara, R. and Gill, A. K. (2009) *Violence against Women in South Asian Communities: Issues for Policy and Practice*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.
- Lambe, P., Rallings, C., Thrasher, M. et al. (2004) *Gender Imbalance in Representative Democracy: Women and Local Government in London and Birmingham*, Occasional Paper No. 10, Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics, Queens University, Belfast.
- MacKay, F. (2001) *Love and Politics: Women Politicians and the Ethics of Care*, Continuum, London.
- Mama, A. (1995) *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity*, Routledge, London.
- McNay, L. (2000) *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Mohanty, T. C. (1991) Cartographies of struggle: Third World women and the politics of feminism, in C. T. Mohanty, A. Russo and L. Torres, eds, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.
- Mohanty, T. C. (1992) Feminist encounters: locating the politics of experience, in M. Barrett and A. Phillips, eds, *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, Polity Press and Blackwell, Oxford.
- Pile, S. (1997) Opposition, political identities and spaces of resistance, in S. Pile and M. Keith, eds, *Geographies of Resistance*, Routledge, London.
- Raleigh, V. S. (2009) Suicide rates in people of South Asian origin in England and Wales, *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, **194**, 56.7.
- Solomos, J. and Back, L. (1995) *Race, Politics and Social Change*, Routledge, London.
- Southall Black Sisters (1990) *Against the Grain: A Celebration of Survival and Struggle, Southall Black Sisters, 1979–1989*, Southall Black Sisters, London.
- Southall Black Sisters (2001) *Interim Report: Forced Marriage. An Abuse of Human Rights. One Year After 'A Choice by Right'*, Southall Black Sisters, London.
- Southall Black Sisters (2002) Justice for Nazia Bi and Sana Majid Ali, available at: <http://www.mojuk.org.uk/bulletins/sbs.html>.
- Sudbury, J. (1998) *'Other Kinds of Dreams': Black Women's Organisations and the Politics of Transformation*, Routledge, London.
- Sudbury, J. (2001) (Re)constructing multiracial blackness: women's activism, difference and collective identity in Britain, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, **24** (1), 29–49.
- Takhar, S. (2007) Expanding the boundaries of political activism, *Contemporary Politics*, **13** (2), 123–137.
- Visram, R. (2002) *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History*, Pluto Press, London and Sterling, VA.
- Werbner, P. (2002) *Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims*, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, NM.
- Wilson, A. (1978) *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain*, Virago Press, London.
- Wilson, A. (2006) *Dreams, Questions, Struggles: South Asian Women in Britain*, Pluto Press, London.