

Reclaiming An Identity



MANDRIKA RUPA WAS BORN IN THE GUJARAT IN INDIA. SHE CAME TO NEW ZEALAND WHEN SHE WAS FOUR, AND LIVES IN AUCKLAND. MANDRIKA RECENTLY SPENT THREE MONTHS ON A PLACEMENT AT THE ASIAN WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE (AWRC) IN BRENT, NORTH LONDON AS PART OF HER SOCIAL WORK COURSE AT AUCKLAND COLLEGE OF EDUCATION. SHE SPOKE TO JESVIER SINGH:

THE AWRC provides information, advice and support for Asian women. The advice ranges from immigration and nationality information to housing, welfare rights and matrimonial law. The centre includes a resource library. It is run by a collective and members have a common political perspective. The workers share their talents, skills and resources, and participate equally in work, decision making and responsibility.

It was important for me to work with other Asian women who lived in a crosscultural environment and shared a similar perspective. I needed confirmation that I wasn't way off-beat. Through Black women's feminism I was really aware I had become pseudo White. Pakeha culture had become so much a part of my environment. I needed to reconnect with my own roots. It wasn't possible to get my needs met here in New Zealand because the Asian community is very small, isolated and reactionary.

I married outside of my culture and have a child from that marriage. I am now divorced and a single parent. I was ostracized from the Gujarati community and that broke my heart. These people were my people yet they were pointing the finger at me, saying "You've been a naughty girl — you're not going to organise with us".

The women at the resource centre also suffered from that isolation. They have been labelled as prostitutes and

Mandrika Rupa and daughter, Mandy

Photo: Gill Hanly

homewreckers by the "leaders" in the Asian community in London who felt that their position was being undermined.

It was important for me to link up with these women. I've come back with a clearer sense of my identity. Whether my community likes it or not I am a Gujarati woman. That's where I belong and they will just have to put up with me!

The members of the AWRC organise autonomously as Black women. They state, "we feel that as Asian women we best know our particular position in society and, therefore, are best able to tackle issues affecting us.... Organising autonomously... does not mean that we have stopped fighting against racism or stopped taking up women's issues in general. We are fighting at many different levels — against racism, against sexism and against class exploitation and oppression.... When we define ourselves as Black people we do not merely refer to the colour of our skins.... As Black people, that is of Asian and African descent, our histories of indentured labour and enslavement have put us in a unique position of oppression. Therefore, while acknowledging and respecting our language and cultural differences, we must be united in order to be effective in our struggle against racism."

The AWRC was set up five years ago to deal specially with Asian women's problems. Here Asian women could meet their needs in a feminist, political context. There are five work areas; youth, employment, health, children and care, and the community. The centre is open three days a

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week for women in the community. A file is opened for each woman seeking help and advice, and their needs are met. We were there to empower women, so the women in the community directed us on what they wanted.

Often people wait until they can't take any more before they look for help — they're driven by desperation: for example, a woman may be living in a bad housing estate where the neighbours are bashing her children and calling them "Pakis". We would go to the council and challenge them. The centre never turned away Asian women. If the centre couldn't deal with someone's problem they would be referred to people who could help.

I helped Pravina, the youth worker, set up an Asian girls' group. We went to the local school and approached the headmaster. We said we wanted to teach self-assertion so it wasn't seen as threatening or radical. The headmaster thought it was wonderful for "these poor downtrodden Asian girls." We used posters to attract girls and sent letters to parents in Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi and Urdu explaining the group. We worded it in terms of "keeping our cultural identity" and stressed no boys giving the parents what we thought they'd want to hear. We included Moslem girls who were not necessarily Asian because they suffer from religious oppression and so would identify closely with us. Pravina also helped organise a curriculum review support unit to get schools to recognise the need for time on the curriculum for Asian girls. Another aspect of her job is helping young women who are homeless, victims of incest and domestic violence, or pressured into arranged marriages.

Harbhajan, another worker at the centre, is researching Asian children in care, looking at causes and effects. Little information is available and most people are unaware that Asian children go into care. The research aims to highlight the experiences of Asian children in care and form recommendations for improvement of social services.

MANY Asian women work under horrific conditions in factories and are ignored by their unions. Our purpose at the Resource Centre was to help these women stand up for their rights — empowering them by saying, "Hey! Don't put up with this. Look, these bastards are treating you badly".

Bindu, the employment worker, carried out a case study on homeworkers (women who do piecework in their own homes). She discovered that Asian women resort to homework because they cannot find outside work or leave outside jobs because of exploitative working conditions and racial harassment. Yet their conditions as homeworkers are no better. They work long hours, are badly paid, subjected to monotonous work, are isolated from each other with no job security and are dismissed without redundancy pay.

Housing and homelessness are also a problem. Housing estates are real death holes. They consist of high-rise, concrete council flats, often damp, with no recreational facilities. They're often fenced in and a perfect breeding ground for racial and sexual harassment and attacks. The Brent Campaign against Racial Attacks has challenged the council to improve conditions and safety on the estates.

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Our community worker, Tahira, set up meetings with the community to involve people. Day trips and social gatherings were organised. The centre had language classes in Gujarati, Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi. But the classes fell through because of conflict amongst religious groups. The teachers were very traditional and did not have the awareness to challenge kids on their differences.

The whole Asian community in Brent wasn't involved in the centre. It was the working class who had the strongest needs; although incest, alcohol and battering cross all classes. Asians are divided along both caste and class lines.

A new position at the centre covered Asian women's health, for example, looking at why so many Black women were considered mentally unstable and by whose definition. We also challenged the Asian Mother and Baby Campaign. This was a campaign that arose from concern on the part of health authorities that Asian mothers weren't looking after their babies properly and had no knowledge of mothering. We challenged them: "What do you think you're talking about — we've managed to bring our children up so far". They emphasise Asian women as the problem rather than their inadequate services. Because some of us don't speak English they see us as totally stupid and unable to take care of our children. They want to teach us how to be "White mothers".

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We also began to receive letters from Asian women in prison asking us to visit them. Women had been picked up at Heathrow airport for possession of heroin. They were being set up by drug syndicates in India. Most of the women were very poor, single parents and had children starving in the streets of India. They were desperate. We challenged the disparities in sentencing. Organisers of these syndicates received light sentences of one to two years whereas these poor women who were victims of circumstances received seven to nine years. A support group was set up for them. They were often bullied by White women in the prisons who saw them as quite passive. In fact, they were totally powerless in a strange country, unable to speak the language and not understanding what was happening to them.

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THE areas of work at the centre overlap each other. Sickness, work stress and burn out are high. The workers were always doing too much and had difficulty setting limits, but they couldn't turn women away. A support group of five unpaid members helps construct policy, make decisions, hire staff and are active in the centre. They challenge the council, attend community meetings and support women in the community. Workshops are also set up for Asian women on counselling, setting up a crisis line and welfare rights.

Although we had contact with other Black groups such as Southall Black Sisters, there are a lot of divisions between Black groups in Britain. But it is important that these divisions are not seen in the wider community because they are used against us. These tensions come from our differences in culture, experience and politics. We need to accept these differences and organise together against those who oppress us.

Differences also exist amongst Asian women. There are many professional women who are very reactionary and give no priority to Asian women. Within the White community these women have status and credibility but they don't necessarily have our community's best interests at heart. They're not politicising with Asian women at a grassroots level. They regard themselves as professionals and therefore best equipped to speak on behalf of the rest of the community, but their perception of the Asian community cannot be correct since they're so far removed from our day to day lives and struggles.

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community to set up similar structures to those in Brent. I would like to finish my social work course and come out with more skills. I'm hoping to work in an environment where Black politics are active. I would like to use the experience I had in London and see how groups are set up and organised here.

I have this vision of what I'd like to do here but I have to get my head out of the clouds and come back down to reality. At a grassroots level it means going into the Gujarati community and feeling out the situation. My daughter goes to language classes each Sunday at Gandhi Hall. I'd like to use their facilities to set up a group for young women from the ages of 12 to 15. I would need the approval of the parents and committee members (it's a very patriarchal structure). It's difficult to convince them that something is needed just for girls. They are very conservative and have no concept of women needing their own space. It will mean applying particular strategies.

There are more girls than boys at the language classes. It's clear to me the girls have more energy, commitment and willingness to learn and develop. Young people within the community are quite aware of sexism and racism. We need to bring these things out and talk about the issues that affect us as Asians — what it is like for them in the school structure, how they get on with the indigenous people and ethnic minorities, and how they cope with their own culture. The girls would pinpoint and deal with their own problems. I just see myself as a resource person — I want to give them the structure and means to find their own answers. □