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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 Tuesday the 17th December 2019 and I'm with Pragna Patel, one of the founding members of the Southall Black Sisters, set up to meet the needs of Asian and African-Caribbean women. Pragna is sharing her experience of working in the women's voluntary and community sector and campaigning for women's rights for the 'Sisters Doing It For Themselves' archive. So, Pragna if you can begin by saying how you got into doing this work.**

Pragna Patel: Okay. So, I think one of the first things that I should say is that the founding of SBS is slightly more complicated in the sense that I didn't found the original campaigning group, which was established in 1979 under the shadow of Thatcherism. Thatcher had just come into power and it was a time of chronic industrial decline: racism was rife, fascism on the streets in the form of the National Front, unemployment was high. So, it was a time of huge political change and shifts, economic shifts. In Southall, 1979 saw the first race riots, or rather uprisings. This was after the National Front, which was like the English Defence League now, in those days it was a fascist organisation, that tried to organise a public meeting in Southall, which was seen as very, very provocative. Southall's a largely migrant population of South Asians and the community came out in defence of Southall. And in the course of that, many, many young Black men and women were involved in defended themselves from the racists, from the fascists. Many were criminalised. It was interesting because although it was the National Front - young, white fascists who were marching through - the only people that were criminalised were the young Black youth who were defending themselves, defending the community.

And, of course, you had the seminal moment when Blair Peach, who was an anti-racist activist, was killed by the Special Control Group, which was a militarised arm of the police. His killers have never been brought to justice, even now. So, it was very, very in the heat of that kind of anti-racist activity, Southall Black Sisters was group of young Asian and Afro-Caribbean women who were part of the anti-racist defence of Southall who realised that there was a need also to set up a women's campaigning group that met the specific needs of Black and minority women. And in those days, 'Black' was very much seen as a political term, a unifying term, a term that signified a commonality of struggles against racism, against colonialism. So, it involved women from African, Caribbean, Asian, Middle-Eastern backgrounds coming together on a united platform. Of not just challenging racism but also challenging patriarchal control, gender inequality, and that's what was so unique about Southall Black Sisters. It was trying to be both anti-racist and feminist. So, like many Black activists in those days, adapted the term 'Black', it was a secular term, it was a unifying term. Very much borrowed from the American Civil Rights movement, Black Power in America, and the original members of Southall Black Sisters were very much interested in examining and exploring and analysing and acting against racism and sexism. Sexism both within community as well as in the outside society.

And they felt very much that Black women were falling between the stools. So, in the anti-racist movement there was no question or examination of gender. And in the women's movement there was no examination or

question of race. And so Black women were very much kept invisible. So, Southall Black Sisters was set up to look at the specific experiences of Black women. And you know, at that time, there were a lot of feminist groups that had mushroomed everywhere, consciousness-raising groups. So, for Southall Black Sisters, it was really important to analyse Black women's position in society. What were the factors that led to the kind of discrimination and inequality specifically faced by Black women? And so, in a way, that was the beginnings, that was the campaigning, and a lot of the campaigns that Southall Black Sisters in the early days were either initiating or involved in, involved looking at the ways in which immigration/nationality laws were racist, joining campaigns against deportations of Black people. Being involved in movements for access to justice, being involved in challenging gender-based violence. There are all sorts of ways in which Southall Black Sisters - also within the community - were challenging community norms and values that led to violence against women. Or led to other forms of inequalities and so on.

When I joined, I'd come straight out of college in 1982 and I really was attracted to a space where I felt really politically and personally at home. Because as a young Black woman growing up in the UK in the 60s and 70s I'd gone through and faced a lot of racism, you know, in schools. My parents faced it in employment, they faced it when looking for housing. And then also as a young Asian woman, I had no role models because my parents were first generation migrants. We never saw Black people on television, and what we did see was very negative, crude stereotypes and so on. I never saw Black women models. And in school we were never taught these things, we were never exposed to these kinds of things. So, for me, I mean my life having been shaped so far by racism, but also within my community, women weren't encouraged to have careers, to be independent, to choose their own lives. So, that also left a huge impression on me. So, when I sort of came across Southall Black Sisters as a campaigning group I very much felt at home. But when I finished college, Southall Black Sisters had already kind of disbanded. All the members who'd been there from 79 to about 81, 82 now, by 82 everybody had left, they'd gone on to form other careers or go back to education or do other things. But I was so thirsty or so hungry to have a political home.

Because I'd spent all my life feeling negative about myself as a migrant woman, this kind of felt very positive and safe, so I decided that I needed to resurrect Southall Black Sisters. That's what I mean by it's kind of a complicated history of foundation because I kind of re-resurrected it and started it up again. And involved new members, new women who shared the political vision that I had in running an organisation formed by and about Black women. And although some of the political analysis blueprint was already there, I very much kind of took it and then ran with it. And set up the advice advocacy centre that we now operate, and, at that time, the funding came from the GLC. In those days, unlike now, there was only one or two sources of funding. It was very easy in that respect. So, the GLC that funded women's projects funded lots of other projects that were kind of progressive. So, they funded Southall Black Sisters. We began with just two workers and then it's grown over the years and developed and changed over the years. But that's the kind of foundations of Southall Black Sisters.

**Moderator: So, you've mentioned the riots and you've mentioned your own politicisation (TC 10.00). And from what you've said it's almost as if there was a shift from the original Southall Black Sisters, which was a campaigning group, to an organisation that also provided direct services. Was there anything, an event or - what triggered your decision that it had to have a service delivery?**

Pragna Patel: I think what really triggered it was the view that there was no space for women. There was no space in the community for women. So, women were very invisible even though they took part in the anti-racist struggles that when that was over, it was like, go back into the homes and behind closed doors. And the fact that there was no space and therefore no visibility of women was important. But also, it was clear from the kind

of activism, that there were many women that faced all kinds of issues that were just not being addressed or challenged or confronted. Issues of violence in the home, issues of forced marriage, issues of, sort of, being restricted in terms of going on to higher education and so on. So, there were these issues in every home that were, kind of, being played out and yet there was no public acknowledgement of any of this. So, having a centre that also met women's daily need. Also, women had employment issues. It's a working class area, many women worked in factories. Employment, discrimination, unequal pay, these were all part and parcel of their experiences. Discrimination and facing racism when trying to seek housing from the local authority. In all sorts of ways women were not being addressed. There were a lot of women's organisations but they were run by men, all men. They were patriarchy who run it, both of the right-wing variety but also the left-wing variety, but they were all patriarchy.

And so having a centre was about giving women a voice, visibility, a stake in the community. I knew then that we wanted to provide front-line services because meeting people's daily needs is something that has always been important to me as a political thing to do. It's not just about campaigning, it's not just about standing on a platform and speaking out. What is that based on? What are the realities for people? How do you articulate that reality? How do you meet the challenges? And so, for me, it was also the inspiration that came from the burgeoning Law Centre movement. Because the Law Centre movement was a grassroots movement, committed lawyers and legal practitioners who decided that if anything needed to be rooted in communities, it was meeting the daily material needs of people. People who were poor, dispossessed, discriminated against, were unemployed or who were ill. And so, for me, it felt like they were amazing, committed, unsung heroes working in Law Centres and places meeting these needs. And so it felt like an advice advocacy, almost like a Law Centre for women, was really important. And that then to feed into campaigns. How do you know what to campaign around if we don't know what the daily realities are?

So, in a way that model has remained, whereby the front-line work very much influences and drives the campaign/policy side of our work. And the policy and campaigning side of our work. So, the front-line work feeds directly into the policy/campaigning work and the policy/campaigning work then reflects that experience and that's really important to us. It's really also that kind of that's how we began to work out what it is that we needed to address as a priority. Because when we set up the centre we had no idea what women were going to present with. It could have been employment matters; it could have been to do with health. But actually, women after women after women came to us with histories of violence and abuse. And that's, kind of, dictated our agenda ever since. The demand has not gone down, if anything it has gone up and that may be for a number of reasons, but it now means that we have the time-, sorry what I was trying to say was the time, when women were presenting with violence and abuse it started dictating the kind of campaigning work that we went on to look at, which was around the homicides of women, the suicides of women, the neglect from, sort of, statutory organisations, the indifference or suppression of these issues from community organisations.

The need to support women to protect themselves was our daily front-line work, but then campaigning for change in relation to policy and law. Don't forget, I mean, you're talking about the 1970s. The refuge movement has just got going, police didn't understand domestic violence, it was seen as a domestic. Right, they used to offer reconciliation and mediation. There was no awareness of these issues, so these were all kind of, very path breaking areas of work. Unknown actually. We had no idea where it was all going to lead to. But that's how we began to focus on violence against women or gender-based violence issues, because that's what women were presenting with, and then associated with that: issues of mental health and trauma, housing and homelessness, insecure immigration status, destitution and poverty. These are all associated with that experience of violence in the home. So, supporting women became important for us, helping them to access services, health services, legal services, welfare services was really, really important as a way of providing women with alternatives to

staying in violent situations.

**Moderator: Did the first refuge have any impact on you?**

Pragna Patel: I'm not sure it did, to be fairly honest, to be very honest with you. Because, when the first - the first - refuge, I am aware that round by, that there was a refuge in Chiswick, but it had very little connections with us. We were working with Black and minority women, so it didn't feel like, maybe subliminally there might have been some, but explicitly very little connection. I have to say, by the time we set up the front-line services - we're talking about the early 1980s - by then, Black women projects were developing in other parts of the country and we had more connections with that because it was part of a wider political movement, a Black feminist movement about what are the issues facing Black women. So, that was, there were more connections with that really than there were with the first refuge that was set up.

**Moderator: Moving on to.**

Pragna Patel: Does that noise bother you? It's fine, okay.

**Moderator: Moving on to leadership, who inspired you and inspires you now, and how and why?**

Pragna Patel: Do you know, it's a very difficult question to answer. I don't know if it's just one who-, I said to you that when I was growing up, we were devoid of role models, that's very true. Given my background, my working class background, there weren't women in my immediate family or community who had gone on to have careers, or public lives of any kind. In fact, if anything, I was reacting to the fact that nobody did, that people were kind of, women were just expected to get married and have children. I grew up at a time when racism was kind of, quite, entrenched in institutions. There were no Black faces in education, there were no Black faces on television, so you didn't have any steady stream of role models. I think I drew on Mahatma Gandhi the most, because my father and his relatives were, the men primarily, would often at family gatherings have, you know, the men would talk politics (TC 20.00) and women would always be in the kitchen cooking. Men would talk politics and I used to hang around because they'd have these very passionate and very animated discussions about India, about the partition of India, and whether Gandhi did right or wrong. And so, there would be these really, kind of, quite animated discussions so that's when I first heard of Gandhi.

To be honest, I then, I remember at school at the age of about fifteen, so desperate to look around for role models, although I didn't articulate them as role models, but so desperate for positive images and positive stories about Black people. Don't forget, in school, you didn't, there was no Black History Month, there was no histories of, you know, Black people. It was incredibly indifferent to the, you know, migrants' histories and colonialism and all of that. So, I kind of looked for books in the library and came across books on Gandhi, and that really inspired me and made me feel really good about myself because he was Indian, he fought the British Empire, he fought on values of truth and principles of truth and justice and non-violence. That was my first real inspiration, I think. After that, of course as I became more politicised, my inspiration was actually second-generation Asians in this country, who were beginning to fight back, unlike the first generation who tolerated violence and racism and abuse. So, the second-generation Asians who were standing up to authority and who were almost living the idea of Empire strikes back was really, kind of, eye-opening for me and made me want to join them and be like them and turn this kind of, entire formative negative experience that I had growing up in this country into something really positive.

So, to that extent, being politicised, waking up to the Anti-Racist Movement, which themselves borrowed from the Civil Rights Movement in America, was key. Seeing and hearing about activists here challenging immigration laws, challenging, you know, discrimination from the police, challenging stop and search practices was critical to my development. So that was a source of inspiration. The third, perhaps, source of inspiration was the Law Centre movement, I thought it was, and I still think it's such an unsung area of social justice movements where the idea was to meet peoples' daily realities, meet the material needs, without which none of our politics and activism is meaningful. And so, meeting those needs through Law Centre Grassroots movements from bottom up, and seeing how you could, you didn't have to have fame and glory to practice law. That this was real human rights work going on, on a daily basis, by people who were committed but who didn't necessarily get the recognition was also really, really inspiring because they provided the blueprint in terms of how to run an advocacy advice centre, and do it properly, and do it with commitment. Passion, yes, but also professionalism. You know. These were, kind of, all the, I suppose, if I had to identify sources of inspiration.

**Moderator: How do you approach leadership, and what do you think a woman's approach to leadership looks like?**

Pragna Patel: Do you know, the question of what a woman's approach to leadership looks like, I think is an impossible question to answer. I really do because I don't think there can be a stereotypical approach to leadership.

**Moderator: Do you think, women and mens' leadership is similar?**

Pragna Patel: It can be, and it's not.

**Moderator: Could you expand?**

Pragna Patel: So, there are women who are able to be, perhaps, less adversarial, perhaps, less more collaborative in their leadership qualities. But on the other hand, there are also women who, Thatcher for example, who perhaps because she had to survive in a man's world, but who displayed the very opposite of what one would expect a woman leader to display in terms of qualities. It was a very masculine leadership, it was a very adversarial leadership, it was a very unsympathetic leadership. It was devoid of compassion; it was devoid of any kind of humanity. Whether that's deliberate because she was trying to survive in a man's world is a debatable question. So, there are women, in a way, who can lead in that way. If you think around the world, Indira Gandhi was another example. Now, one wouldn't have expected her to go on to try to destroy the kind of very democratic constitutions and structures of the country when she declared an Emergency in India in the 1970s, you know, or 1980s, sorry. So, these are quite iron-fisted women. Do we know women who perhaps, can lead in a different way? I don't know enough, but maybe the Premier of New Zealand, is perhaps an example of someone who might be going about things in a slightly less adversarial, more inclusive way. But I'm very cautious about saying there are feminine ways and there are masculine ways. I think a lot depends on the people.

**Moderator: Can you describe your leadership style, and how you developed it?**

Pragna Patel: My leadership? I've not really ever thought about it, to be honest. I guess what leadership means

to me, more than anything, is about laying the foundations and values of an organisation. If you're thinking in terms of all the skills, then I can't, I don't possess the skills for leadership entirely on my own, it's a collective effort. So, to that extent, there are other members of the organisation who provide skills, who collectively enable leadership to take place, if you see what I mean. I might be the face of it, but I don't possess all those leadership qualities that others bring. So, that is very much a collective effort. Where perhaps I, perhaps I'm best at, is the steer that I can give to the organisation in terms of the political direction it should take, the values that we work by, the principles that we work by and how, perhaps, now with lots of experience to approach the problems, challenges that we face. So, I'm very unsure about how to describe my leadership except to say I'm best at being able to, perhaps, set down some kind of vision of the organisation, and to be able lead the way in terms of acting on that vision. But it's a collective leadership that's required because it's impossible for one person to be able to provide complete leadership. I think a lot depends on people who are often behind the scenes, doing a lot of that work to keep the leaders in the position that they're in.

**Moderator: Can you give an example of leadership in action at Southall Black Sisters?**

Pragna Patel: So, let me give you an example of that in terms of my own leadership, was when, in 2008 and 2009, we were beginning to see austerity, it's just you know, been introduced and that's filtering down into communities. One of the first signs of that was the way in which austerity combined with more of a shift to right-wing politics. A kind of break from the multicultural consensus (TC 30.00) was this idea that everybody should be integrated, migrants need to integrate, need to display more allegiance to the government, to the state, need to, you know, declare British values. There was that kind of shift, together with austerity. That meant that there was a Commission for cohesion that was set up. Part of that was this, kind of, real backlash against specialist organisations and the existence of specialist organisations, particularly BME organisations existing. The chair of the Commission for integration was also the Chief Executive of Ealing Council. So, the commission for integration was basically saying that we have all these specialist organisations, but they're actually causing division in society. We don't need them anymore. What we need is integration. So, as the Chief Executive of Ealing Council, SBS became his experimental ground.

He decided to withdraw funding from Southall Black Sisters. We were being funded, not entirely, but, you know, there's a large pot of money that we received from Ealing Council, and the justification was that Southall Black Sisters represents a specialist organisation that's no longer needed because we're in a post-race, post-feminist society. We've achieved equality, and now the emphasis is on integration, and that means we only will fund generic services. So, they withdrew our funding, and it was core funding, so although we receive funding from elsewhere as well - there were other funding streams - it's just this represented a significant funding stream for us. So, losing it meant that we lost a large part of our funding, which threw us into jeopardy in terms of our existence. So, at that point, we had to make a decision. What were we going to do in the face of this? The Council said we will have a pot of money and we'll fund generic services. So, we said, "But how do you meet the needs of Black minority women?" and the council said, "Well, generic service can meet the needs of specialist groups as well as generic." Despite us providing statistics and evidence to show that BME women preferred specialist organisations where they felt more secure, more confident, the fact that we could address their needs better and so on, despite providing a lot of evidence, a lot of statistics, case work and so on, the Council didn't budge.

So, then we had to take a decision. My gut feeling was that it was discriminatory and what was happening was highly discriminatory and so we had to make a decision whether to challenge the Council by taking the Council to court. Now, as someone who is leading this, the question was, 'Am I right in taking the Council to court? What if we lose?' We could possibly lose funding for the rest of our lives because the Council will never forget

the fact that we took them to court. We may lose reputation, a little bit. Should we be accepting the economic reality, which is what other women's groups were telling us to do, that we were being unrealistic, this was now the new culture, we had to work within it. My view was no, this was discriminatory. I sought some legal advice and was told that we had an arguable case on the basis that this was discrimination, but there were risks. There were immense cost risks if we lost. Apart from all the other reputational aspects of it, we also would be out of pocket by a considerable amount of money. So, there were lots of doubts in my head. Were we doing the right thing? We tried to negotiate with the Council, the Council wouldn't have it. In the end, I, kind of, argued and persuaded others in the organisation that we had to challenge the Council. What persuaded me was a number of things.

First was the injustice of it, which could not and should not go unchallenged. The second thing was that, as an organisation, we, although we're still a small organisation, comparatively speaking, we had a reputation as a leading organisation. It felt to me, like, if we weren't able to challenge, then how would others who are smaller than us, who are less able to challenge, mount such a challenge? So, then it felt to me like this wasn't just about our survival, it was about the survival of the whole of the specialist sector, you know. So, it felt like we needed to show the way and to mount this challenge on behalf of everyone, because if we lost, they would lose, because councils up and down the country would be able to do exactly what Ealing Council was doing to us. We felt that at the heart of it was the struggle for equality itself. What is equality if it isn't about levelling the playing field, and to level the playing field to provide funding to those organisations so that the very people who have faced inequality and discrimination are made more visible, are given the tools of empowerment? So, for all those reasons, it felt like, although I had sleepless nights and I thought about the immense risks that we were taking, I'd persuaded everybody. But that didn't stop me from thinking, 'My God, is this the right thing we're doing to go to court and to challenge and to fight it out instead of accepting the decision and walking away and finding other sources of funding?'

I'm so glad we did because we went to court, a two-day hearing. By the second day, Ealing Council backed down and we had said, 'Where is your Equality Impact Assessment?' Now, in those days, nobody had heard of Equality Impact Assessments. We weren't using them in our work. SBS was one of the first organisations that popularised the use of Equality Impact Assessments as a tool for challenging austerity and public sector cuts in the women's sector. So, you know, the Council had not done an Equality Impact Assessment and when it did, because it realised it had to, it was, kind of, retrospective to justify its decision to us. When we got to court, by the second day, the council backed off. So, they caved in, but we said to the judge, 'We still want a written judgement, because why we came here is to stop the council from doing it again, but also to let others know.' So, the judge, Lord Justice Moses, gave a wonderful judgement in which he reaffirmed the concept of equality as a transformative concept, and the need for specialist organisations to achieve equality, and the need for councils to do Equality Impact Assessments to inform decisions, not to justify decisions. That was an amazing victory. Apparently, I had no idea, but so many people around the country were following that case, were waiting for the outcome of that case.

After we'd won, so many groups up and down the country would write to us and call us and say, 'How did you fight your battle? We need to fight our battle because we're facing the same thing in our area.' Afro-Caribbean elderly day centres, Asian women's centres, other groups, you know. So that felt wonderful because the reverberations of that victory were really, really widely felt. And after that, my God, we were invited to meeting after meeting after meeting by unions, by community groups, by many people saying, 'Come and tell us how you've fought that victory.' We even developed a toolkit to help women's organisations to challenge their local government using equality impact tools and became quite popular. People realised and woke up to the fact that these are tools that we've not used enough of to challenge austerity and things. So, I know that that's an example

of how, you know, you have to provide that leadership, but it doesn't come without its doubts and (TC 40.00) sleepless nights and things, but I'm so glad that I did.

**Moderator: So, what motivates you as a leader? You've touched on this, but what would you say motivates you?**

Pragna Patel: Anger. If I wake up in the morning and I'm angry about the world then I want to do something about it. The fact that I can walk into Southall Black Sisters and use it as a vehicle to channel that anger is what makes me motivated. I have a vehicle, you know. If you're an individual and you're angry, you're sitting there going, 'Where do I start? Where do I go to because I'm so angry about this?' To be able to come to work at SBS every day, 'I'm angry about this. What are we going to do about this?' is great. It just means that all that work to have created this vehicle, to channel that, is great but I think, probably, what motivates me most is waking up and seeing, hearing, or thinking about injustice, you know.

Yesterday, one of my colleagues sent an internal email saying, 'We must, in the New Year, challenge the fact that Legal Aid Agency have refused legal aid to a young woman who is destitute.' The fact that she is destitute should entitle her to legal aid. I don't know the full circumstances to challenge, to go to court and challenge a decision or maybe to get protection. This young person is a migrant woman. She is destitute. She cannot rely on public funding. Because she is destitute, we as a charity are giving her some money through our 'no recourse to public funds' pot of money that we've got, to help support women who are destitute, who otherwise are homeless and have no food and no basic means of survival. Because we have given her something like £30 a week to live on, and because we've provided her with paid-for accommodation for a matter of six to eight weeks, the Legal Aid Board have said she's not destitute. My colleague said, 'We must challenge this,' and I said, 'Yes, of course, we must challenge it.' That's just one story and there are thousands of those stories. So, as long as you're feeling angry about it, then that is what motivates. That's certainly what motivates me. The day I stop feeling angry is the day when the world will be a better place anyway, so then there'll be no need for any of this.

**Moderator: You've also touched on this, on the issues that are dear to your heart. If you can talk just a little bit about them and how you think you could then influence change, or you and Southall Black Sisters influence change.**

Pragna Patel: There are so many issues dear to our hearts but one of the most important issues I think is the fact that when the women who first started Southall Black Sisters in 1979, they were very secular, right? This was not about identity. It was very much about challenging structures of power that were interlinked: race, class, gender, you know. I think over the last 40 years, we have seen a shift towards identity politics and that has really, really paralysed our ability to come together in the way that we intended all those years ago, to come together on common platforms. I am so proud of the term 'Black' still in our name, at a time when it's become unfashionable, because what's fashionable is to call yourself Muslims or Hindus or Sikhs, right? That's how the state would like it and that's how community leaderships would like it, but we have continued to call ourselves Southall Black Sisters. 'Black' because it's still relevant to us as a political term. It's about unifying, no matter what our backgrounds, on the basis of experiences of racism. 'Sisters' of course is about our feminist politics, and I think the need to assert that kind of secular, anti-racist, anti-fundamentalist politics is now more important than it ever was.

Before, we took our secularism, inclusivity, anti-fundamentalist politics for granted. Now we're in a climate of



deep austerity and division and inequality, but on top of that, in a climate where most politics is being fought through the prism of identity politics, and there's a race to the bottom. The more you can show you're a victim, the more I think paradoxically you adopt a privileged position where nobody can say anything. Now if you say anything that's critical of religion, you're affecting critical religious sensibilities, you're offending religious sensibilities. Everyone's quick to, you know, announce that they're hurt because of religion. We're seeing politics through the prism of religion. Religion has always been problematic for women, at its heart it's patriarchal and discriminatory. But we've also moved to the right with religion, fundamentalism, right-wing religion is dominant and that brings with it a really, really reactionary agenda around women's issues. Women are encouraged more and more to go back into the home, to accept the family is the key unit of survival, to preserve family values, whatever that means, accept, sort of, patriarchal values. And all of that, particularly for minority women, we've gone backwards. We're no longer Black. We're Muslims, we're Sikhs, we're Hindus, which means that we're dividing ourselves, we're fragmenting our struggles as women.

And one of the things about Southall Black Sisters - it's a secular space, it's a space where you can be Hindu, Christian, Muslim or none of these things, but you come together on the basis that as women we have a lot in common than we have differences. It's a secular space, it means you can be religious if you want in your personal life or you can be non-religious in your personal life, there is no judgement. But we do insist on separation of religion and the state. Some of the most important challenges and campaigns that we have waged recently have been around the increasing encroachment of fundamentalist values in community and women's lives. Gender segregation, the adoption of parallel legal systems in the law, the imposition of strict dress codes, all of this is about reinforcing a very patriarchal view of women as secondary, as subjugated. And so, these are some of the most important challenges that we face at this moment. The rise of fascism, I think globally we're on the cusp of an era of fascism, and we have to be alert to that. Some of this stuff that's going on now, the propaganda, the language, the terms of the debate, remind me of 1930s Nazism. Really, the censorship, the violence, the demonisation of migrants and those who are the 'Other'. These are all global phenomenons, we are seeing criminals elected as leaders around the world, austerity in the Neoliberal Project.

And the dismantling of the welfare state, probably one of the greatest ideas humanity has ever had, you know the welfare state and the NHS, that dismantling of that is critical, it's critical to challenge all of this. With the recent elections in the UK, we are in a very difficult space at the moment, a really challenging space. Things have got a lot worse. I think the 80s weren't exactly a great moment for us, we had the election of Thatcher and we had all that that brought, but what we perhaps took for granted was that there was a welfare state. And that safety net is disappearing, and it's not you and me, it's the dispossessed who'll particularly be impacted by all of this, more than us. Us too, perhaps our next generation, but you know those who are poor, really at the bottom, and marginalised. So, for me, some of the most urgent campaigns Southall Black Sisters is waging at the moment is, in many directions at the same time, is challenging austerity, is challenging the rise of fundamentalism, is challenging the rise of racism and fascism. These are all connected, (TC 50.00) and that just makes the struggle that much more difficult.

**Moderator: How has your involvement in this sector impacted on you at a personal level?**

Pragna Patel: I've grown. I think it's more positive than negative. I mean, you know, of course one works hard, one works all the hours. There isn't a clear demarcation between political struggle and career, and a job. When those of us who began in the 80s got into this kind of work it was never as a career move, it was just what we wanted to do, and I've been fortunate enough to get paid for doing what I want to do. So, the negativity of long hours and weekends and all of that, I'd be a fool not to say that it hasn't impacted personally and in family terms, perhaps I could have seen my children more than I have. I've tried to strike the balance, I'm sure they

might have another story to tell. But the positive aspects of this outweighs any negativity because the positive is that I have a political home, I have an identity, I am really proud of who I am, and nobody can take that away from me. Whereas growing up until my mid-twenties I felt insecure, I didn't know who I was, I didn't know what I was capable of, I didn't feel wanted, I didn't value myself because of racism. And so much negativity in terms of, you know, my childhood and the landscape that I inhabited. So, Southall Black Sisters has given me an identity to be really proud of.

**Moderator: How do you think the women's sector as a whole, and also Southall Black Sisters, has influenced and changed women's structural position in the UK?**

Pragna Patel: Oh, immensely. Let's celebrate the achievements that have been made by the women's sector. Without it, we would not have protection for women facing gender-based violence, we would not have had the various laws that have come into place to protect women, we wouldn't have had the awareness in the criminal justice system around battered women who kill. Some of the cases we fought, Kiranjit Ahluwalia, and other women centre justice for women around Emma Humphreys, around, you know, Sara Thornton and others. We've brought about huge shifts in changes in policy, in law, in shifts in peoples thinking around these issues. They've all be absolutely immense. So, you know, it's not a linear progress, we have made progress as feminists, we cannot take that away, and that line goes right back to the Suffragettes, right? We worked on and we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, and hopefully we'll have a legacy to leave behind for those to come next. So, for me it is part of that one movement, we've taken it in different directions, we've raised consciousness around race as well as gender, around disability, around sexuality. We've shown what alternatives are possible, refuges have been set up as alternatives, women's centres, forced marriage legislation, legislation to protect migrant women who face violence and who are trapped in violent relationships because of their insecure status. We've brought about changes to laws that allow migrant women to leave a violent relationship. There's so much that's positive. Equal pay is not there yet, but there is better pay for women, conditions of work. We've also, you know, ourselves benefited from other social justice movements who've tried to improve conditions for working people. So, I see an immense contribution made by the women's sector on a whole range of issues connected. I've seen us benefit from those who came before us, from other social justice movements, and we in turn are benefiting those. So, it's part and parcel of a jigsaw puzzle as far as I see, all the pieces have to fit, and we're just one piece, but an important piece.

**Moderator: What do you think are the greatest achievements of women's collective action, and what do you think still needs to be done?**

Pragna Patel: In terms of women's collective action, I think it's presenting alternative visions of how to be women that is vital, okay? It's vital for our daughters, it's vital for all the girls out there who have no idea or don't know, who, like me when I was little, had few role models. It has created alternative spaces for women, you know, it's giving glimpses of alternative worlds where women can take centre stage. That is key. That I think is probably the greatest contribution, that you can imagine alternatives and realise alternatives, flawed as they might be. And what was the other part of the question?

**Moderator: What still needs to be done?**

Pragna Patel: Everything. Everything needs to be done, because we're in this really strange place at the moment where not only are we having to campaign to make progress, but also to hold onto the gains we've made. To hold onto our histories even, when they're in danger of being erased. So, everything needs to be

done, we need to fight everything again, and then fight a little bit more. So, for me, we're in a very dangerous place at the moment worldwide. I am struggling to find world leaders that I can call role models. There was a time in the 70s when there were a few that you could roll off your tongue, now I struggle to see where those role models are in terms of global leaderships. There are lots of unsung heroes everywhere, but on the political stage I think we struggle to find anyone. And that must tell us something about the place we're in at the moment. So I do fear. I fear for what the future brings. But as with everything, it's also about hope, and being able to rein in that fear and still construct a kind of politics of hope. And the only way to do that is carry on fighting, because if you carry on fighting, you'll give someone some hope, somewhere.

**Moderator: And, you know, we've spoken about this actually, but what are your thoughts on the future for women's rights?**

Pragna Patel: Oh, I think I've, kind of, covered that, haven't I? I, sort of, said what I think my fears are. I think the one thing I would say is that there are people struggling around the world everywhere, standing up to tyranny and censorship and dictatorship and corruption. That has to give us hope - that although we cannot find leaders on the world stage with integrity and that you can look up to, nevertheless there are struggles going on around the world, from Lebanon, to Chile, to the Middle East, to wherever, where women are going out on the streets, are challenging rape, are challenging violence against women, challenging extra-judicial killings, you know, of journalists who happen to uncover the truth. All these things are going on, so that also is a matter of celebration.

**Moderator: Thank you. And that's us finished, unless you have something to add?**

Pragna Patel: I don't think so, I think that we've covered a lot of ground.