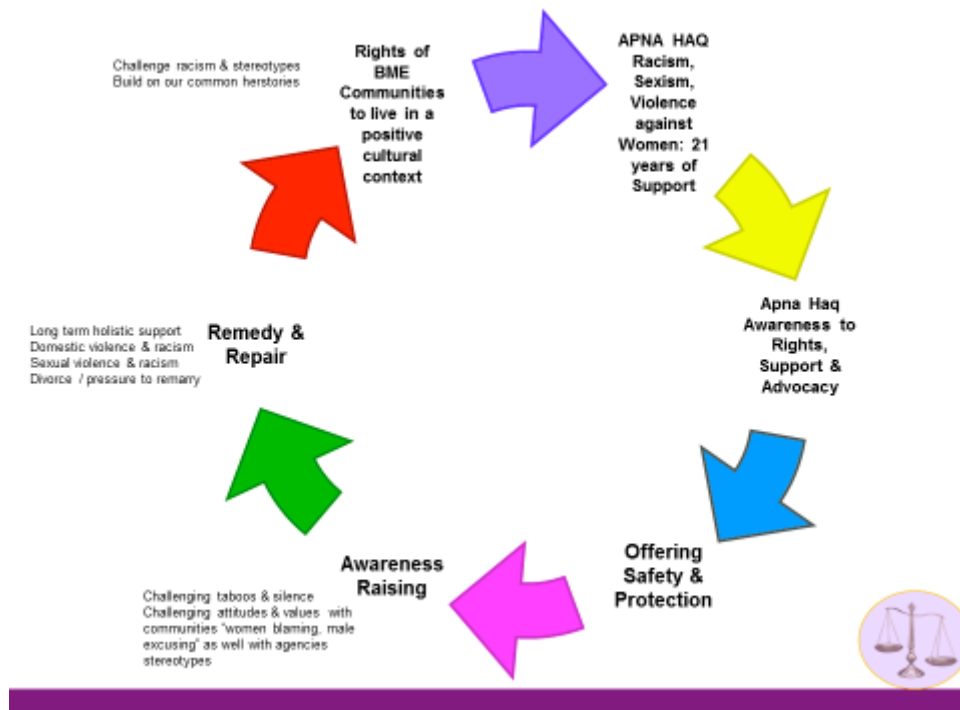


Tell me about the work you do at Apna Haq.

I set up Apna Haq in 1994; it's an organisation that provides early intervention and prevention support on issues of violence against black and ethnic minority women and girls in Rotherham. On average we support around 34 women a month, receiving about 7 monthly referrals. The majority of the women are self-referrals or family friends, women who would not approach generic services. We have become a nationally recognised black feminist organisation fighting for women's rights led by Muslim women. This diagram illustrates the holistic and specialist nature of the work we undertake.



What inspired you to set up this organisation and go into this area of work?

Having been treated differently at school due to being an Asian girl, feeling uncomfortable with the restrictions that were imposed on me and not my brothers at home, experiencing sexual abuse as a child and then sexual harassment in one of my placements whilst at Polytechnic, I was quite aware of how issues such as sexism, racism, and sexual harassment/abuse can impact on the life of women and girls. Through a range of jobs as a business and ESOL development worker, careers officer and youth worker early on in my working life in both Sheffield and Rotherham, I came across numerous young women who were going through issues of domestic violence and wanted support, but there was nowhere appropriate to refer them to that had an understanding of cultural and religious needs and their impact on these women. At the time I didn't feel I could do anything about the sexual abuse of children, but thought that if I could help mothers leave a violent relationship that would contribute towards children being safeguarded.

I was fortunate to attend a conference in Leeds where a group of South Asian women had come from India; they spoke about the work they did with women suffering domestic violence and talked about the need to offer holistic support in order to ensure that the women are able to survive once they moved away from the violence. Alongside this I had

read up on Southall Black sisters, a London based black and ethnic minority women's organisation and thought "Wow, how fortunate Rotherham would be if we could ever have an organisation like that!"

With the blessing of the Almighty, Apna Haq is known not only regionally but nationally and European wide as being a women's rights organisation, so I felt God has made that wish come true.

Initially I applied for funding from a local community police initiative where I said I would set up a steering group, we would recruit a worker and then have a conference for the South Asian women to ask them if domestic violence was an issue, and if so what support they wanted. That was 24 years ago, and as an organisation we have gone from strength to strength.

In 2016 in the New Year's honours list I received an MBE for services to women's rights and community cohesion and Apna Haq has established itself as a strong leading women's rights organisation amongst the feminist and domestic/sexual violence sector in the UK.

What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?

I have often been asked by non-Muslims in particular how do the men/community react and see your organisation, do they not make life difficult? A few years ago, some people saw us as 'home breakers', with some wives and daughter in laws leaving their family, but the length of time we have been operating has meant the women and children have been able to thrive and lead safe productive lives. This has gone a long way to challenge the myths that women leave for no reason and that it is not good for the children, thus Apna Haq is now viewed differently.

Since 2011 I have had to become vocal on the issues of child abuse and sexual exploitation of Asian/Muslim girls/children. I have found over the past 2 years that as well as my own childhood experiences, God keeps bringing this issue back to me, in terms of the need to break the silence on these issues, and for services to be taking a proactive stance on enabling young Asian/Muslim female victims to come forward. Too many young girls are still being targeted on a regular basis where they are being gang raped and the abusers are relying on the concepts of secrecy from the parents and 'honour' and shame to get away with these crimes. My view is if God brings this issue to me again and again, I have a duty to raise it no matter how uncomfortable many community members may find it.

Another element has been the increase in local racism, particularly due to the way that the issues of grooming have been reported on. Apna Haq and I have had to become very vocal and challenge this racism and thus defend men in the community. This has resulted in a lot more families understanding that Apna Haq as an organisation works for and stands by human rights principles, something which people have come to admire and support.

What are the 3 most important things you've learnt throughout your career?

The most important things for me is putting trust in God, and listening to the women to set up services that meet their needs holistically, even if this means that you are at odds with other organisations. I have never thought of this work as a career but as being able to change vulnerable women's lives. Recently, a local MP Sarah Champion, the shadow minister, said of our work 'Apna Haq is boldly unapologetic' in speaking out and championing women's rights. This is a part of my personality and has become a part of my

character over the years, with thanks to God. The final thing I would say is believe in yourself and say how you feel, and build alliances that recognise the same issues, thus giving you more strength to voice your opinions. Always remember that we have a duty to help the oppressed, through reporting and locking up oppressors, and doing early intervention work to stop these crimes from taking place.

Who has been your biggest inspiration/role model to date?

I wouldn't say it was one person - initially it was my husband, as I saw him as having this personality that was able to always say how he felt no matter who he was with. Because of my upbringing this was something I had struggled with. But through our relationship, it was the first time that I could be myself and stand my ground even if that meant that we ended up arguing. I suppose through my marriage I eventually built on my confidence and stood firmly for what I believed. Within a few years of marriage I also discovered my faith, Islam. I always loved reading any way, and with Islam now I had a new found love. The more I read and understood, the stronger I became in my philosophy of life. I read about the Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) and the famous companions; they were all very strong people who stood up for what they believed.

My mum and my aunt, who was also my mother in law, both who have passed away now, have been and will always remain role models for me. They were both very strong women and did an incredible amount to support their families and communities, both having become widows at very young ages. Thus when I come across an obstacle I think of the strength they had in the way they lived their lives and do whatever I need to do.

Initially my role model as an organisation had been Southall Black sisters, as I said previously I had come across their work before I set up Apna Haq and felt it would be a dream come true to have an organisation like that in Rotherham. However, with our achievements over the years, I can honestly say that Apna Haq is now a role model for others.

Working to support victims of domestic violence is no doubt an extremely rewarding, but challenging role. What advice would you to give to anyone wanting to go into this as a career?

Surround yourself with friends who understand your work and challenge you as an individual; this leads to growth as a person and strengthens your ability to challenge others around you.

Seek out appropriate support and allies and build on that - we are blessed in the UK to have Imkaan, which is a black feminist organisation. Although Apna Haq is a secular organisation, they know that the majority of us workers and service users are Muslim. In 2016, we were threatened with closure due to having lost our contract with the local authority; we did a petition that people from all over the UK signed, we then held a rally in central London and handed the petition to 10 Downing Street. One of the Imkaan workers sent an email out to all the UK members to say that they needed to attend the rally to 'support our Muslim sisters'. On the day we had over 250 women of different nationalities and backgrounds, from different towns and cities join to support us; the rally firmly put Apna Haq on the UK's feminist organisations map. A short film of the rally was produced by Dorette Jones and has been shown at the recent glitch film festival in Edinburgh, creating lasting feminist history.

Also, in November last year we held our first UK national conference on feminism, faith and spirituality, particularly to counter some of the black and ethnic minority women's anti-religious discourse that is around. Imkaan were integral in helping us to facilitate and get key messages out - especially that as Muslim women, faith does play an active role in our lives through choice and that service providers need to take this on board through their policies and procedures.

Thus seek out organisations that are willing to understand the support needs of women with faith, and volunteer or gain work with them, in order to develop holistic work that makes a real difference to our communities.

In your view, what remains the biggest barrier and obstacle to women, particularly in the Asian communities, receiving the support that they need?

Within our communities, there is still a lot of misunderstanding around domestic and sexual violence and why it happens. All too often the blame is placed on women and girls while excuses are made for the men, i.e. she provoked him (whether domestic or sexual). This in reality is no different to what happens in all communities i.e. male excusing, woman-blaming attitudes. However due to the internal lack of awareness and recognition, coupled with agencies not producing culturally appropriate messages or support, the reality is that far too often silence surrounds both of these issues. Women are made to feel that if they report they will be losing the family 'izzat' (honour), and that it is better for mothers to remain in marriages so that the children have a father while growing up, and better for girls to keep quiet to any sexual abuse, both of which need to be overcome.

However even when a woman has had the courage to seek support, often that support is not culturally and religiously appropriate so many women end up not taking any steps to change their situations. As communities we need to ensure that our women and children have the right to access specialist organisations that are able to offer them appropriate support so they can live their lives free of violence and intimidation. This will only happen if the specialist organisations are funded and money is not targeted just towards generic organisations as is being done currently.

Many funding decisions and government policies do not take into account the needs of BME services when commissioning services. This means that services like ours may end up closing and result in 'generic' women's organisation delivering the service. What we know is that often this prevents women from accessing these at the same rates, thus more women stay within violent and abusive relationships. Within our first few years of operating, as we could see the impact of the local and national policies leading to very stark choices for BME women, we realised that as well as providing advocacy we would also need to get involved with lobbying and campaigning to get laws, local & national policies changed, so that women receive the support that they need.