

imkaan

From Resistance to a New Economy: what should feminist economic activism look like?

by

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Thank you for inviting Imkaan to participate in the panel discussion today. Imkaan is a UK-based, black feminist organisation representing black and minority ethnic (BME) women's services that work to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. Our approach is rooted in an understanding not only of the gendered nature of violence against women and girls (VAWG), but also the way intersecting factors such as age, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability can affect girls' and women's journeys and experiences.

I would like to begin by setting some context with a case study. Eki¹ is a young woman I supported five years ago in a refuge project. Eki is a survivor of violence and also had insecure immigration status. At the time of referral, Eki had multiple symptoms of physical and mental ill health and frequently expressed a will to end her life. Eki was referred to us by the psychiatric nurse at a nearby walk-in health centre who suspected Eki was rough sleeping when she had come to them repeatedly for untreated open wounds. Eki moved into our safehouse accommodation and as part of her support, we drew up a support plan and worked together towards Eki's needs and goals. Eki had various health issues so she was registered with the local GP. Over time she developed a trusting relationship with her GP, and was able to have full STI testing and received care at the local hospital. Eki did not feel comfortable or safe to report to the authorities for several weeks, and due to experiences of state perpetrated abuse in her country of origin, was fearful of reporting to the police. As Eki's immigration status was uncertain, she was referred to one of our partner legal firm advisers and received free legal advice to begin the process of regularising her immigration status. Eki was seen by one of our in-house counsellors who was able to offer Eki a space she had not had before; to heal, to learn to trust again and to begin to rebuild her future. Eki was able to access ESOL at the local college for free and was able to pursue her ambition to become a nurse. When Eki's immigration status was regularised, she was supported into social housing and was able

¹ Not her real name

to manage her study and her rent and utilities with her benefits payments. Eki received legal aid to begin the process of bringing her two small children to the UK. Eki's determination, resilience, and ambition, combined with specialist support she received enabled Eki to navigate this complex array of services to heal, recover and create a future for herself and her children.

What would happen to Eki now?

Eki is referred to the local service that is now run by a housing association, as the women's service was de-funded. Her non specialist worker does not have the skills, experience or the time to develop a trusting relationship with Eki as she has many other clients and is not an anti-violence specialist. Eki is taken to the GP but is not able to register as her immigration status is uncertain and the clinic refuses to register her without documentation. Eki is told that she can only remain in the refuge for 2 days before she must consent to reporting to the immigration authorities. She is not able to access legal aid as she does not have a letter from a GP saying she is a survivor of violence. The nearest ESOL course is 75 minutes bus ride away and Eki can only afford to get there once a week. Eki is supported for 45 days and then she is told she must leave as there is no funding for her to remain in the accommodation. Eki returns to the street. In fact, Eki may never had made it to any service as the walk-in centre where Eki was referred from no longer has funding for a psychiatric nurse.

This case study demonstrates the impacts of the cuts as they intersect across sectors and identities; demonstrating the lived impact of the so called 'austerity measures'.

But it is not the full story: we have not looked at the outcomes that were achieved through Eki's supported journey, the potential outcomes of what she would have endured now. What is also missing is the context for how Eki ended up in the walk-in centre in the first place, the contexts in which she experienced violence both in her country of origin and in the UK, and the various ways the UK government is implicated in all of those things.

Drawing from this wider complexity of issues, it may be helpful to look at some of the things that have been challenging/contradictory/frustrating/disquieting around the discourse of the cuts and the questions that arise from these:

Presently, the NHS spends around 1.2 billion pounds a year on health issues related to VAWG, with an additional £176 million a year in mental health services and each rape costs in total around £96,000. Despite this, funds are being withdrawn from prevention work across the UK. A recent research study found that for every independent women's service for each pound that is invested, the return is between 6 and 11 fold. We know, and have the evidence to show, that the cuts are in fact costing us more money than they

are meant to be saving. Yet they continue to be implemented. So, if not saving money, what are the cuts actually about?

When looking at the decrease in funding for domestic violence services we can see it coincides with an increase in funding for both 'troubled families'; a program with many parallels to anti-terrorism surveillance of families, and MARACs; another surveillance and control mechanism.

Another example; there has been a recent increase in government rhetoric around forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and other so called 'harmful traditional practices', however funding for BME services are being rapidly cut, BME women are being disproportionately impacted on by austerity measures making us more vulnerable to all forms of gender-based violence and BME women only services are having to justify their existence. Meanwhile, there is an up-scaling of immigration controls and enforcement, including racial profiling, and a steadily increasing Xenophobic and Islamophobic sentiment in UK society.

It is vital that we make spaces to have this discussion across sectors and movements, to analyse the cuts and accompanying discourse in light of other government agendas to deepen our understanding of the true motivations for the cuts so that we are prepared to resist them.

My role within Imkaan is to support the sustainability and resilience of our member services. I am deeply committed to this work and to the building of a BME VAWG movement; in fact, I relocated across the world for this movement. However, I am also concerned that there are few safe spaces for honest discussion around: what it is that we are sustaining. There needs to be an opening up of spaces to talk about the impacts of the competitive marketplace we have all entered and how much we have been removed from founding principles and aims. There needs to be space for honest discussion around the impacts on women workers who are supporting women through some of the most horrific and unimaginable things people live through, and those workers no longer having access to campaigning and activist spaces as they are overworked, exhausted and the campaigning and lobbying focus of the organisation has been lost in repeated funding cuts.

There needs to be space to talk about the increasing reliance on volunteers; while the move away from statutory funding enables organisations to campaign without restriction, on the other hand we have been fighting for economic valuing of our work for decades and are now creating the very 'Big Society' that we protest so fervently against. To take this a step further; if we provide enough care for each other that the state no longer needs to, what does the state then become? A war machine? A surveillance and control

structure? Should we expect more than our state and our society? Or, in expecting less from the state and creating more for ourselves, will we find freedom? These are the kinds of discussions we are ready to be having.

So, the cuts have brought up some interesting questions. Have there been other positive outcomes of the cuts discourse? Across the VAWG sector there has been a return to, or re-connecting with, our activist roots with a renewed energy. There has also been a strengthened platform for survivor voices; we have seen survivors coming out on the streets to protest and advocating at local government level for ongoing service provision.

Further, as services are looking to diversify funding sources, we have some BME refuges returning to complete non-statutory funding - where many of us started - and they have reported amongst other things; increased freedom around advocacy and campaigning, less restrictions on who they can support as they are not answerable to government departments, and strengthened community structures to promote safety rather than over/misplaced reliance on a CJS system that repeatedly fails women.

So, what could a feminist economy look like?

We need an economy that allocates resources with an understanding of existing gender and racial inequalities and all intersecting oppressions, that values and celebrates the hitherto undervalued work of women in all its forms; domestic labour, caring responsibilities, support working, parenting, and that fully recognises and supports women only services and women only spaces

We need an economy that does not coerce charities and social change organisations into operating as businesses or corporations, that supports independent services and movements to flourish and grow as part of healthy society and that provides an alternative to capitalist oppressive structures.

We need an economy that allows for a parallel approach; working independently to pursue a more socially just economy and society while also working to improve the current situation for all of us

We need an economy that is premised on intersectional analysis and global connection; that understands that social justice is only meaningful when it is inclusive and globally rooted.

We need to create the spaces for the discussions to continue, the connections to deepen and the lens to sharpen, in the words of proud foremother Lila Watson, 'If you have come here to help me, you're wasting your time. But if you've come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together'.