

**RACE**

**A Gendered Perspective**

**Device(ive)**

Although the idea that institutional racism exists in Britain has become widely accepted over the past decade, in no small part due to the discussions that followed the MacPherson report into the Metropolitan Police's handling of the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence, the idea that there is institutional sexism in Britain today has barely been mooted in the public arena let alone accepted. Despite a 2.5% conviction rate for rape in Scotland, the economic disparity that endures between women and men and the higher incidence of women imprisoned for non-violent crimes by the Courts (to use but three examples of institutional sexism in practice) the idea prevails that sexism is in decline and our institutions do not practice or reinforce discrimination against women. The attitudinal changes towards the overt expression of racism and sexism are arguably more closely aligned, with the more direct expressions of both racism and sexism less tolerated, but the idea that sexism is a systemic and institutionally supported construct is not widely accepted in the mainstream. Why this is so is obviously very complicated, but it could be argued that one of the reasons why the fact the existence of institutional racism has been accepted but institutional sexism has not, is rooted in the success of a key challenge to racism. The idea that race is determined biologically has been successfully scientifically discredited, and with it the idea that there are biologically determined racial characteristics that make some races superior to others. Yet women are still judged under the context of being biologically the inferior of the sexes. It seems that sexism is tolerated to a greater extent because many people still believe that there are biological differences (other than the differences in reproductive function) that make men superior to women. Whilst this belief persists it seems that differences in the treatment of men and women will be masked as institutional responses to the different characteristics of women and men; women make men rape them by behaving promiscuously, we pay women less in the workplace because they are unreliable and are unable to commit to jobs in the way that men do, and women who come into contact with the Courts are behaving in a way unbecoming to their sex and need to be taken in hand more firmly than men. There is an obvious need to use the work done on understanding, acknowledging and challenging institutional racism to begin a discussion about

institutional sexism and how it is best recognised and challenged. It also seems that as a group BME people in Scotland are more attuned and aware of the systemic nature of the racism that they face, yet for women (of all races) facing systemic sexism, the awakening is a much more individual process if it even happens at all. The women's sector might find direction on how to raise awareness of the systemic nature of sexism from work done in the race sector.

There also seems to be the understanding that real sexism, the real oppression of and discrimination towards women happens 'over there' in far away countries that are not as culturally enlightened as ours. The sexism faced by women in Scotland is not as bad because it is better than some of the things that happen to women in other countries. Female genital mutilation is often held up as the most abhorrent manifestation of sexism and patriarchal society, but it is short sighted and unhelpful to see this issue as anything other than a particularly abhorrent cultural manifestation of the oppression and abuse of women worldwide. The violence towards, sexual abuse and undervaluing of women in the home and the workplace that is part of the existence of many women in Scotland today is no less oppressive for being hidden away behind a culture of silence and covert collusion. No act of violence or discrimination perpetrated against women should be held up as a measure against which other abuse can be graded; all abuse and oppression of women needs to be seen as the product of a global system that oppresses and abuses women. To discuss and understand sexism as something that happens elsewhere has been used as a way of legitimising racist assumptions (and interventionist racist regimes), but it has also become a way of using smoke and mirrors to deny and hide the extent to which the lives of women in this country are affected by and limited by the sexism that underpins our society. It is therefore of benefit to the challenging of both racism and sexism in Scotland to challenge the damaging and stereotypical assumptions that lie behind these kinds of assertions.

As this kind of cultural double standard is used support the idea that sexism is not a big problem for women in Scotland, it is also used to support the continued oppression of women elsewhere in the world. The

treatment of women within different cultures and how we respond to it can be obscured by debates around what constitutes a human rights violation and what constitutes a cultural practice. The implication is that if women are oppressed or disadvantaged by a cultural practice, we need to privilege the cultural expression of another race over the equal treatment of women; not to do so would be racist. For example, courts in Britain have defined some 'honour killings' as cultural issues that have to be treated differently from other murders in order to respect the culture of the victim and her murderer. Issues of cultural and racial respect cannot come before the human rights of women and a dialogue is needed between the two different equalities strands to negotiate this area.

The mistreatment of women in other cultures has also been used to justify the oppression of and aggression (both militaristically and culturally) towards certain countries and cultures. One of the main critiques of the Taliban regime was its treatment of women, and a lot of that discussion has been distorted to express Islamophobic ideas in the mainstream. In this way the treatment of women by men in other cultures seems at best a secondary consideration to the real agenda of such criticism and action. This seems to be reflected in the increased levels of violence and oppression faced by women and children in areas of the world that have experienced the imposition of rule from outwith their borders. Countries like South Africa and Namibia show the negative effects that the destabilisation of the patriarchal hegemony by the oppression and emasculation of black men from an oppressive racist regime have on the lives of women children and subaltern men from 'lesser' ethnic groups, and speak clearly to the relationship between racism and sexism. The emasculation of black men by the white state means that they have to prove their masculinity in other ways, so violence towards and sexual exploitation of women (and children) and the development of ethnic hierarchies becomes a more predominant expression of masculinity and therefore power. Oppression driven by a racist agenda that creates the widespread emasculation of a country's men results in a double discrimination for women; they are oppressed from without their community because of their race and from within their community for their gender. This is

also linked to the increased use of rape as a weapon of war, where women are violated by the opposing faction as a 'message' of emasculation to the men of their community. The forced rape of daughters by their fathers, mothers by their sons etc is used in the same way, as a tool of emasculation to undermine the patriarchal hegemony.

The racial hierarchy that privileges white men over BME men is also apparent in power relations between white women and BME women, and the voice and position of BME women in the women's movement has reflected this. BME women have felt marginalised both by the terms of the discussions and in how women have organised themselves in the feminist movement. White middle class women have been the most powerful activists and as such have created the terms of their own liberation and the liberation of BME women. The increasing numbers of white women in positions of power in Scotland is not mirrored in the BME community, and this illustrates how one aspect of progression in the equalities can be used to effectively gloss over the enduring discrimination of other groups. The progression of white women into positions of power means that the lack of BME women in these roles is not questioned – for example whilst there have been between 39% and 33% of white women elected to the Scottish parliament since its inception in 1999, there has only been one BME person elected, unsurprisingly a man. This means that BME women in Scotland remain unrepresented. Sexist assumptions that privilege men over women, racist assumptions that privilege white women over BME women and sexist assumptions that privilege BME men over BME women collude to support the continuing discrimination against BME women. The identity of BME women is subsumed by white women to indicate progress against sexism and BME men to indicate progress on race, without garnering any direct improvement to their own treatment. The answer to sexism is not to get white women into power and the answer to racism is not to get BME men into power, it is to get an ethnically (and other isms) reflective group of women working at all levels and in all areas of the power structure, and work undertaken by and between both equality areas needs to be reflective of this.

The trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation in the West relies on the abuse of women from less powerful racial communities; it relies on racism and sexism for the covert collusion of individuals and states that allow it to happen. Many of the women and girls trafficked are vulnerable because they are poor and belong to racial groups that are discriminated against within the countries from where they are trafficked, or in the countries to which they are trafficked, or frequently, both. The trafficking of women for sexual exploitation has been dubbed 'the white slave trade' because of the number of women abused in this way who originate from Eastern Europe, and it is important to note the commonality of experience between women who are bonded into sexual slavery and those black people historically enslaved in the labour market. Both forms of slavery require that groups of people are dehumanised using an existing system of discrimination (race and/or gender) in order to justify and perpetrate the abuse of slavery and ease the guilt of enslaving people for financial gain. The need to address the rising numbers of women abused in this way indicates a clear strand of work that needs the expertise of both the race and gender equalities sector working together.

Women and BME people do not numerically form a minority, but together form a considerable majority over the white men who are privileged by the distribution of power and money in our society. The challenge to the status quo presented by the growing call for an end to discrimination by women and BME groups, and the consequent discomfort this causes is reflected in the growing idea that Scotland and the world is subject to more violence and instability because of the

disintegration of society. Single mothers, the growth of gang culture, especially amongst BME teenagers, and the falling birth rates of white Western women are all pointed to as examples of this disintegration. This suggests that the 'disintegration of society' is as much to do with the loss (and potential further loss) of power over women and BME people as challenges to racism and sexism begin to redress the systemic inequalities for both of these groups. Any progression to real joint working between the race and gender equality sectors would create a considerable challenge to the continued ruling of women by men and of BME people by white people.

Although birth rates are falling amongst white Western women, they are rising amongst many BME countries throughout the world, so the argument seems to be that not enough white babies are being born whilst too many black babies are. The link between racism and gender is typified in the Swedish example; Sweden has much more favourable rates of maternity leave and pay for women. Although it looks like a more progressive pro-women in the workplace policy on first examination, it came about because a declining birth rate meant that Sweden either had to allow for greater immigration or find ways of encouraging more women into work whilst increasing the birth rate. The policy was born out of racism and the benefits to women in the workplace were secondary to the aim of economic growth and limiting immigration to Sweden. Again, this highlights the need for both sectors to actively look for the commonality of cause that they share to ensure that racism is not disguised as pro-women thinking and vice versa.

