

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Great Britain & Northern Ireland (Europe) > Migrants - refugees, racism (UK) > **UK: 'It was amazing to find sisters': Brixton Black Women's Group on their (...)**

UK: 'It was amazing to find sisters': Brixton Black Women's Group on their revolutionary newsletter

Sunday 5 November 2023, by [THOMAS Tobi](#) (Date first published: 24 October 2023).

Marking 50 years since the influential anti-racist collective formed, a new collection of their writings provides a unique voice from a time of violent prejudice

Fifty years ago, a group of women who were part of the British Black Panther movement were fed up with being ignored. In male-dominated discussions there was a distinct lack of interest in women's issues, and hierarchical structures meant some members felt they did not have a voice.

"We had a women's caucus," but it "was not universally popular with the Panthers", recalls retired academic [Beverley Bryan](#). "Why are these women getting together?" some of the men would ask.

So Bryan and her friends founded the Brixton Black Women's Group (BBWG), which set out to campaign and raise awareness of the issues affecting women of colour across the UK. For example, 1970s Britain saw the trial of the Mangrove Nine and [dozens of women from Indian and Pakistani backgrounds subjected to virginity tests](#) by immigration officials when entering the country according to Home Office documents, while the 80s witnessed the Brixton riots.

"Because of all that was happening at the time we sensed the urgency for a group like this," says Nigerian-British writer Amina Mama, an early member of BBWG. "People were being attacked and locked up, amid a backdrop of the Brixton riot uprisings." The level of violence the group saw spurred them into action: "Women pushing pushchairs [were] being dragged into the back of vans", Mama remembers.

"We arrived in Brixton Black Women's Group hungry for something, but it was also a place where we could come to know ourselves differently", says writer and academic Gail Lewis, another early BBWG member.

Mama agrees - she joined the group having spent the previous four years in Scotland. "I had the same hunger to be among like-minded people. It was amazing finding sisters and having that sense of solidarity."

To mark the 50th anniversary of the group's formation, the writings of the BBWG have been brought together for the first time and published as a book. Described as "unique and essential" by Booker-winning author Bernardine Evaristo, *Speak Out!* is made up of writing from the group's newsletter. Also called *Speak Out!*, the newsletter "was a way to reach out to other women who may have had a similar experience" according to Lewis. It contained everything from reports on the work the group were doing and political explainers to reviews of plays, films and novels.

Milo Miller, the collection's editor, began gathering archive material in 2016, when they came

across the group's work as part of their PhD thesis. One unusual thing Miller discovered was that the articles were written collectively, with no singular bylines used. "The young ones cannot believe it. We had to think about every word and it was a collective," says Lewis.

"I think Speak Out! is a good testament to the ideology of our movement but also to our practice - the very fact that we didn't publish our names on the newsletter really showed how flat and equal and nonhierarchical we were as a group," says Mama. "Having Speak Out! was a really important thing in terms of ideological corrective, as we were a group that regarded ourselves as part of a movement, so this was our tool for outreach and for mobilising other people. You can't have a movement without a communication tool and this was ours".

"The group really honed our abilities to argue, and to discuss what was important"
— Sona Osman

Although the BBWG was only active for 16 years, its legacy as both a community hub and political organisation inspired many other feminist and anti-racist groups in the years after. It was instrumental in establishing the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent, for example, which existed between 1978 and 1982, which was also the first national Black women's organisation in the UK.

But despite its outward focus, the group was seen as first and foremost a community. "The group were incredibly supportive and helpful, and they really honed our abilities to argue, and to discuss what was important" says Sona Osman, a barrister who joined the group in her early 20s. Although modern activist groups are being organised, Osman doesn't think that same sense of community evident in the 80s can be replicated.

"If a group like that still existed I would be there in a heartbeat."

Tobi Thomas

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P.S.

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