

## Asian Women Writers' Collective

The Asian Women Writers' Collective (AWWC), formerly known as the Asian Women Writers' Workshop, was formed in 1984 in London by the writer and activist Ravinder Randhawa, author of novels, 'A Wicked Old Woman' and 'The Coral Strand'. The aim of the AWWC was to promote creative writing by Asian women through a supportive environment and make their writing more accessible to publishers. As a result, the AWWC provided a platform for many Asian women writers who later became established authors such as Randhawa herself, Meera Syal, Leena Dhingra, Tanika Gupta, Rukhsana Ahmad and many more.

The AWWC was initially supported by Black Ink and funded by the Greater London Council (GLC) which was abolished in 1986. It continued to receive funding at a later stage through Greater London Arts Association and Lambeth Council. Initially made up by a core group of 8 members, the AWWC grew to forty members in the later years of its existence. Members came from diverse backgrounds and ranged from those who had little or no experience of writing to those who were more established authors. They participated in weekly meetings, took turns in running workshops, which consisted of creative writing exercises, shared their works with the rest of the group and in turn received constructive feedback. The group also invited guest writers such as poet, Suniti Namjoshi to talk about their work and lead workshops structured around particular themes. Before formal posts were created, key members such as Ravi Randhawa, Rukhsana Ahmad and Leena Dhingra helped organise these workshops.

The group became an official organisation and changed its name to the Asian Women Writers' Collective in February 1987. Changing the name from workshop to collective, however, sparked a few political debates. Some members felt that the term 'black' should be included in the name to show affiliation with Afro-Caribbean communities, while others felt there was no forum for Asian women in Britain who wanted to write and although the term 'Asian' was retained, they pledged to continue working closely with Black women's groups.

In addition, membership during the early years mainly consisted of women from South Asian countries. When Asian women from different backgrounds wanted to join, the AWWC had to re-examine their objectives. As stated in their Introduction to 'Flaming Spirit', "*...not much attention was paid to the definition of the term Asian...When challenged by an Iranian woman seeking membership, we had failed to broaden the definition in a meaningful and practical way*". In July 1992, the collective re-defined the word 'Asian' to include women who came from countries beyond South Asia such as China, Japan, Turkey and the Diaspora. As a result, membership grew to include Chinese and Korean women who became active members of the organisation and their contribution and involvement was seen as a particular strength of the group's identity.

The publication of their first anthology, 'Right of Way' in 1988 by The Women's Press, a publisher of feminist fiction and non-fiction, was an important breakthrough for the Asian Women Writers' Collective as it not only increased their visibility but also allowed members who were previously unpublished to develop and promote their own style of writing. It also provided a foundation from which some members were able to launch their own careers in related fields such as journalism, film and theatre. The second anthology, 'Flaming Spirit' was published in 1994 by Virago and the AWWC also produced three small in-house publications, 'Read On', 'Read On 2', 'When I Say No' and a newsletter, 'Chitti', which began in 1991 and continued to circulate until 1993.

The AWWC lost its funding from the Greater London Arts Association in 1991 and was forced to rely on support from Lambeth Council. When Lambeth Council initiated a series of gradual cuts in funding in 1996 it became difficult for the group to maintain weekly meetings at its regular venues and hold outreach events and programmes. Meetings were therefore held in members' homes and funds were barely available for one part-time worker. Although an exact date is unknown for the demise of the Asian Woman Writers' Collective most of the members feel that it ceased to exist after early 1997.