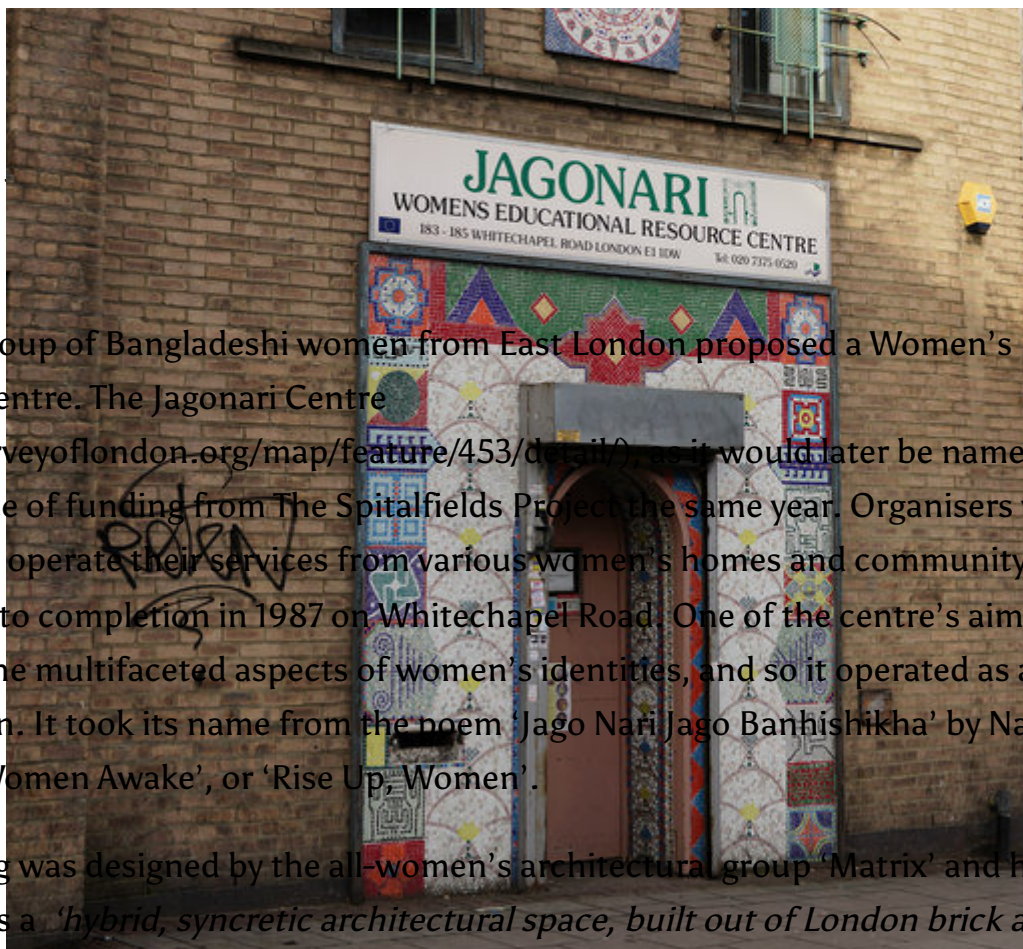




'JAGO NARI, JAGO BANHISHIKHA': A SHORT HISTORY OF THE JAGONARI CENTRE IN WHITECHAPEL

2 September 2020 (</blog/2020/9/2/jago-nari-jago-banhishikha-a-short-history-of-the-jagonari-centre-in-whitechapel>) · Asian history (</blog/category/Asian+history>), East End London (</blog/category/East+End+London>), Migrant (</blog/category/Migrant>)



In 1982 a group of Bangladeshi women from East London proposed a Women's Educational Resource Centre. The Jagonari Centre (<https://surveyoflondon.org/map/feature/453/detail/>), as it would later be named, received its first piece of funding from The Spitalfields Project the same year. Organisers would continue to operate their services from various women's homes and community hubs until it was built to completion in 1987 on Whitechapel Road. One of the centre's aims was to recognise the multifaceted aspects of women's identities, and so it operated as a secular organisation. It took its name from the poem 'Jago Nari Jago Banhishikha' by Nazrul Islam, meaning 'Women Awake', or 'Rise Up, Women'.

The building was designed by the all-women's architectural group 'Matrix' and has been described as a *'hybrid, syncretic architectural space, built out of London brick and containing a mosque-inspired courtyard and south asian style decorated window grilles and railings'*. The need for a large space was pressed by one of the Directors Shila Thakur: *"We wanted to have this big open place where women could go, and cafe-like kitchens."* This 'hybridity' ensured the centre would be welcoming for women of all cultures and backgrounds.

The scope of the centre's work was outstanding; with services based on the needs of local women in the area, including childcare, training, offender programmes and support for victims of domestic violence. These provisions were essential (though not exhaustive) and often interdependent; in 2012 The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/dec/07/mosque-against-domestic-violence>) spoke with the Director at the time, Nurjahan Khatun, who had established one-stop shops for the victims of domestic violence to offer legal, emotional and housing support. She made the point that language training was also an important element of this service as: *"If you have no English that makes you more vulnerable."*

Another Director, Shila Thakur, also highlighted the importance childcare provided in tandem with training in an interview with the Swadhinata Trust in 2006:

"What we wanted to set up was something that involved child care with training. You can't have training without child care. And that was something that we knew back in the early '80s... So we set up a central place where there could be lots of different kinds of training, and place as a meeting place, somewhere you could go."

The centre was therefore an indispensable base that was in-touch with the needs of local women. It continued to reinvent itself to suit those needs. For example, in 2013 the centre offered a musical summer project to help children transition between nursery and primary school. Alongside this, they delivered a series of singing workshops to women who encountered the criminal justice system or were at risk of offending. The aim of which was to *'offer a safe environment for women in the community to develop confidence through music and benefit from group singing as a cathartic release.'*

The Jagonari Centre certainly didn't appear from a vacuum. Historically, the 1980s was a period of significant politicisation for the South Asian community in the East End following the racially motivated murder of young Altab Ali Baig in 1978 as he was walking home. According to cultural historian Sander L. Gilman, the action following the murder *"came to represent a watershed moment in the self-organisation of the community."* You can find the park named in his honour on Alder Street, White Church Lane. From this point on, we see the second generation of Bengalis shift their focus away from political struggles in Bangladesh towards activism in the UK. Racism, social deprivation and unemployment were also factors contributing to the growth of local political action from the Bengali community. This change was reflected among the local women with the establishment of Newham Asian Women's Group in 1981, the East London Black Women's Group in 1979 and The Jagonari Centre.

Unfortunately, in 2015 The Jagonari Centre closed after experiencing financial difficulties. The building still exists, but is now used for commercial childcare provision. For nearly thirty years, it offered crucial support and education for local women and represented part of the wider, collective action of the Bengali community in Tower Hamlets. Research Associate Nazneed Ahmed, who worked with the Jagonari Centre running local history walks for Bangladeshi women, summarises significance of the organisation wonderfully:

"The Centre's training projects, integration work, domestic violence initiatives, and substantial involvement in local, national, and European social networks demonstrate the ways in which Bengali Muslim women have made an enduring impact upon the social and physical landscape of east London."

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Sources:

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