

“I AM TALKING ABOUT IT BECAUSE I WANT TO STOP IT”:

child sexual abuse and sexual violence against women in British South Asian communities

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Abstract

This briefing paper explores the role of socio-cultural factors in violence against women and girls, focusing on child sexual abuse (CSA) and sexual violence (SV) in British South Asian communities. Using examples from thirteen in-depth interviews with survivors, the researchers examine (i) how abusers gain access to their victims, (ii) family and community responses, and (iii) the role of cultural factors in concealing CSA/SV. The interviews demonstrate that British South Asian survivors are extremely reluctant to disclose SV/CSA due to factors that other groups of victims usually do not face, including a general taboo about discussing sex and strong cultural norms around notions of shame.

Violence against women in South Asian communities

‘Sexual violence’ is often used to describe both sexual assault and sexual abuse, whereas ‘sexual abuse’ refers to any form of coerced or forced sexual interaction between an individual and another person or group. It includes any sexual act committed without the victim’s consent, even if she unwillingly submits to that sexual act and/or the perpetrator is unaware that she has not consented. While men and boys are also victims of SV and CSA, this study focuses on women and girls, who comprise the majority of victims. Between April 2016 and March 2017 it is estimated that there were 138,000 sexual assaults against men in the UK. In the same period, the number of sexual assault against women was 510,000. Thus, 73% of all estimated sexual assaults were perpetrated against women (Office for National Statistics,

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2018). While the full extent of CSA remains unclear (Radford, 2017), British crime figures for the year to March 2017 show that of the 121,113 sexual offences recorded by the police, 46,947 were committed against children (Office for National Statistics, 2017). Factors such as the secrecy that often surrounds abusive situations, the shame felt by victims, the chance of not being believed, and the low likelihood of prosecution (let alone conviction) mean that few victims come forward. Furthermore, it is widely recognised that crime statistics significantly underestimate the scale of the problem: an issue that is compounded in South Asian communities.

Despite increasing social and professional interest in addressing SV and CSA in South Asian communities, data on their prevalence remains limited. In relation to women's rape-reporting behaviour, Ahmad, Driver, McNally and Stewart (2009) found that delayed help-seeking was common among South Asian immigrant women in Toronto, mainly due to "social stigma, rigid gender roles, marriage obligations, expected silence, loss of social support after migration, limited knowledge about available resources and myths about partner abuse" (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009: 613). Other reasons for this phenomenon include victims' economic dependency on abusers, fear of deportation (Patel, 2013), and cultural concepts concerning 'honour' and 'shame' (Walker and Gill, 2019). *'Honour', socio-cultural norms in South Asian communities and sexual violence*

Defining 'honour' is not as simple as it seems because it means different things in different contexts (Walker and Gill, 2019). 'Honour' is usually regarded as an unwritten cross-cultural social value that limits women's psychological, sexual and physical freedoms by seeking to control their behaviour and constrict their choices (Gill, Cox and Weir, 2018; Patel, 2017). As Payton (2017) suggests, in most patriarchal

societies the concept of honour is based on unwritten codes that promote men's control over women under the guise of respectability and protection. Thus, with regard to South Asian cultures, scholars generally define 'honour' as a family's standing within the community, as viewed through the lens of the family's control of 'their' women (Meeto and Mirza, 2007; Payton, 2017) due to the fact that the actions of one member of the family are seen to reflect on all its members in collectivist societies. As women's conduct, especially with regard to issues concerning sex, is considered the main source of potential 'shame', there is a strong association between a woman's behaviour and



her whole family's honour. Thus, guilt, honour and shame are intimately connected; hence, if women transgress boundaries in the eyes of others, they are often considered shameful, guilty and dishonourable (Walker and Gill, 2019). Families provide a sense of belonging so it is not just men but also women who have a stake in preserving these bonds, even in the face of contradictions between the putative goal of family protection and the reality of violence. When 'decency' is equated with remaining 'virginal', this complicates the situation of CSA and SV survivors (Baxi, 2014), especially in communities where SV is sometimes re-cast as sexual infidelity or promiscuity – both of which are considered justification for so-called 'honour' killings (Phillips, 2010; Patel, 2017). Thus, a woman is seen to risk her family's good name by reporting CSA/SV in that she is seen to have acted in a shameful manner in making

the report, as well as in being a victim in the first place (Shah, 2017).

Methodology

This paper draws on a larger research project that aimed to explore why British South Asian victims often do not report CSA/SV and, thus, to evaluate what more could be done to encourage reporting to the police. The larger study took a mixed-methods approach involving the use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews, with data gathered between May 2013 and June 2015. The project began by collecting general opinions on CSA/SV from women living within British South Asian communities (Harrison and Gill, 2017). There were four focus groups (two in the Midlands, one in the north of England and one in the south) involving a total of eighty-five women, as well as interviews with thirteen national grassroots organisations working with

victims of SV, and a further thirteen interviews with other professionals from criminal justice agencies and government departments.²

Thirteen in-depth interviews were also conducted with British South Asian survivors³ to explore the nature of their SV/CSA experiences and the impediments to disclosure in their situations. It is this last category of data that is the focus of this paper. While this is a small sample, its size demonstrates the fact that it was extremely challenging to identify potential participants and to get them to agree to take part in research of this nature because of the sensitive – even dangerous – consequences of speaking about this kind of abuse within South Asian communities.

Sample characteristics

Eight of the women interviewed had been subjected to CSA and five had endured (or continued to endure) SV as adults. Nine

Table 1

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Site:	England and Wales
Total:	n = 13
Mean age in years (range):	38 (25-50 years)
Religion:	Sikh [n] = 6 Muslim [n] = 6 Hindu [n] = 1
Ethnicity:	Pakistani [n] = 6 Indian [n] = 7

² These included nine police officers from four areas with large South Asian communities. Two of the officers were black minority ethnic (BME). The other participants included a chief prosecutor, a high-ranking civil servant with responsibility for protecting vulnerable adults and children, a local policy officer, and a policy leader in national government.

³ The terms ‘victims’ and ‘survivors’ are used interchangeably below to acknowledge that, despite the stereotypical, colonial framing of South Asian women as in need of being saved by others (Spivak, 1994), many fight against violence in their communities (Patel, 2017).

Perpetrator:	Boyfriend [n] = 1 Brother [n] = 2 Cousin [n] = 1 Friend [n] = 1 Husband [n] = 4 Religious leader [n] = 2 Uncle [n] = 2
Marital status:	Separated [n] = 4 Married [n] = 3 Divorced [n] = 4 Single [n] = 2

had experienced either SV, ‘honour’-based violence, or a combination of the two. All the participants were of Indian or Pakistani descent. Interviews were conducted in three languages: Urdu, Punjabi and English.

Recruitment and consent

Multiple methods were employed to recruit participants, including using existing connections with specialist NGOs across England to encourage their staff to participate and to enlist their help in identifying and inviting potential interviewees. In other cases, participants were found through personal contacts and social media. Potential participants were notified about all aspects of the project, including its purpose and the safety measures employed. They were also assured that the services they received from the NGOs involved in the research would not be affected by either their participation or a refusal to participate. Prior to participating in the study, interviewees were asked to give their verbal consent to the interviews’ being recorded and to extracts being published.

Findings

Difficulties in discussing SV/CSA

A recurrent finding across all parts of the study was that British South Asian women and children found it difficult to discuss their experiences of SV/CSA. One of these difficulties related to language and terminology. Although the SV literature focused on British South Asian women is limited, it does demonstrate the difficulties associated with the use of English terms such as ‘rape’ and ‘sexual violence’ when working with this group. Many South Asian languages do not have analogous terms for such acts (Ahmad, 2016; Dutta and Sircar, 2013). Indeed, one study of South Asian women showed that respondents encountered significant difficulties locating adequate language to frame their responses to experiences of unwanted sexual behaviours and/or coercion (Poore, 2007; Dutta and Sircar, 2013). They knew what rape was in theory, but, as their experiences did not neatly fit common narratives about rape (e.g. that it is only rape if a victim fights with all her strength, but is unable to get away), they struggled not just to identify and describe its effects, but also to make sense of what had happened to them (Mandal, 2014; Poore, 2007). For instance,

although all thirteen interviewees spoke of their feelings of dread and helplessness during the abuse, none could/would name the sexual acts they had been subjected to precisely. For example, Kuljit, who was abused by her uncle from the age of nine, resorted to the euphemisms “the physical thing”, “that” and “it” when describing what was done to her.

A further complicating factor is that, within the cultural framework of South Asian communities, women’s sexual agency is suppressed through social norms relating to sexual desire, agency, blame and stigma. In addition to the shame and stigma associated with CSA and SV, this taboo often serves to prevent women from disclosing, or even finding the language to describe, their abuse (Ahmad, 2016). This issue was raised by one of the police officers, who saw the need to use such vocabulary, especially in court proceedings, as a limiting factor for British



South Asian women. As a result of suppressing more open discussion of sexual matters, CSA and SV are both obscured and perpetuated by unquestioned, culturally-informed beliefs and assumptions about women’s bodies and roles, especially in relation to men and wider society (Ellis, 2016). Contextualising SV and CSA within a broader spectrum of relevant behaviours and customs is, therefore, necessary

in order to understand how interpretations of these experiences are influenced and informed by cultural messages about gendered roles and what constitutes ‘normal’ sexuality (Ahmed *et al.*, 2009).

Cultural inhibitors in South Asian communities

A culture is a highly complex system of meanings that is shared and transmitted through intergenerational channels within a society (Anthias, 2013; Garland, 2001). Such meanings are often manifested in a set of norms and beliefs that provide individuals in the relevant society with a behavioural blueprint; thus, reactions to stressors can be shaped by the values of the culture to which a person belongs (Lee, 2016). While attitudes towards SV and CSA among South Asian communities shape individual responses, those towards sexuality in general are equally important. Hina’s interview poignantly captured this point: “I was raised with ‘Sex is dirty. Sex is not something that we [choose to do] – it’s something you *have* to do.’” Similarly, Kuljit described how

things like that are classed as dirty. If you have a boyfriend, it’s dirty [and] if you fancy somebody, it’s dirty, so I knew for a fact that that [the abuse] was going to be classed as dirty ...

Alia, who was abused from the age of five to fourteen, also described the effects of her upbringing on how she experienced and responded to CSA:

I was really young. I didn’t know what was happening at all. I had no idea, but I knew it was wrong. But I think the reason I knew it was wrong was because a typical South Asian family

[is] very conservative... I knew this was something I couldn't talk about at all, because it was a sin. It was against the culture, against religion, against everything, and something bad would happen to me because I was the girl.

Coercion in CSA and SV can be implicit, as in Alia's case, or explicit, as in Kuljit and Hina's cases, but often cultural factors are at play in how coercion is framed and enacted. In Kuljit's case, the abuse began two weeks after her father's death. Her uncle had come from India for the funeral and, within three months, had married her mother.

It went on for seven years, but it wasn't just the physical thing, because, obviously, we were scared of him ... His threat was that "I am going to kill you all", but that we were going to stay alive for three days, and I used to really worry about what would happen to me in those three days. I used to think that I would rather die with everyone else because I didn't know what he would do.

Similarly, as a child Hina was threatened with sexual violence if she did not comply with the wishes of her mother's abusive partner. When she left school, she was coerced into marriage and subsequently subjected to rape by her husband over several years:

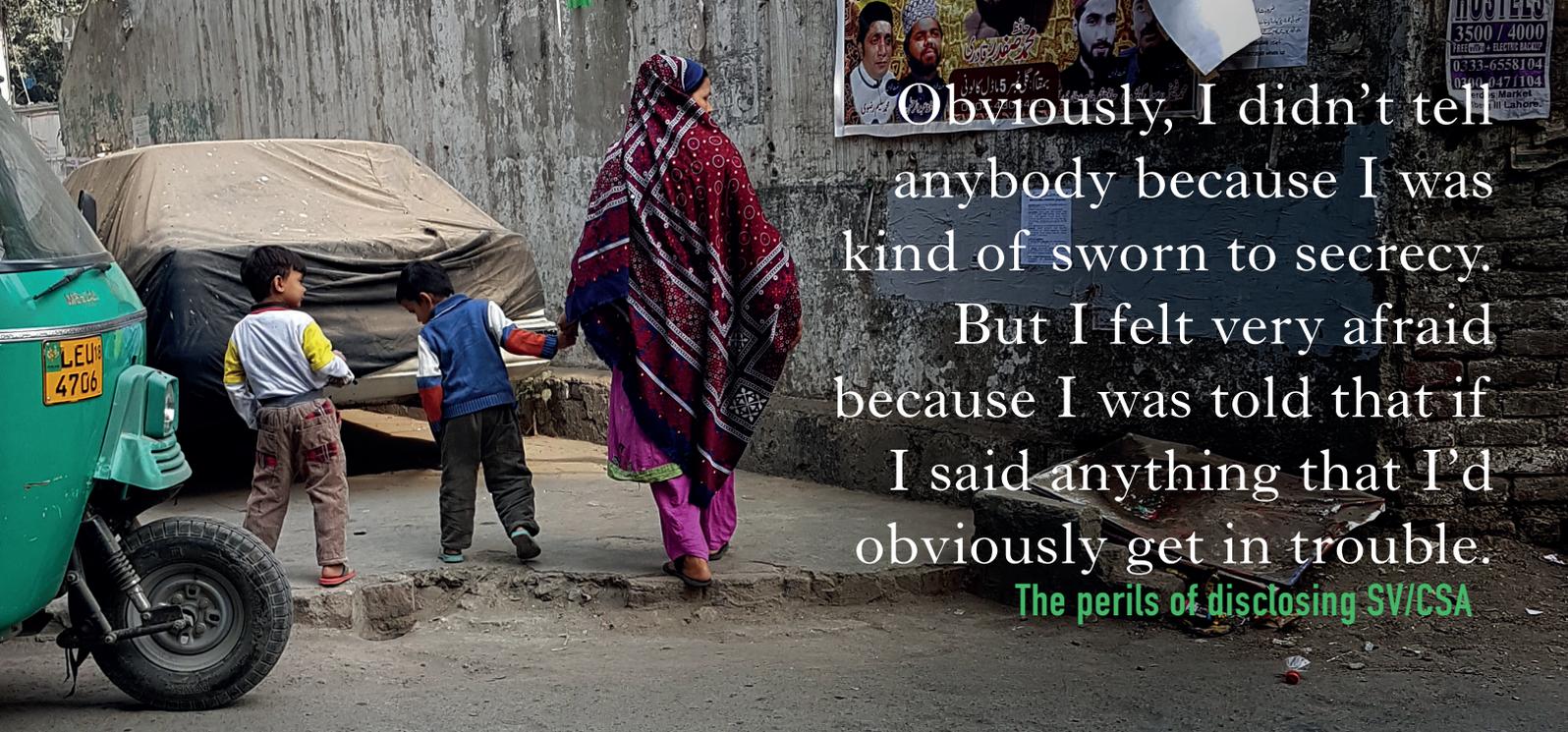
He raped me, perforated my eardrum because he hit me so hard and then raped me both ways, which was horrendous. I never told anybody about the rape. I didn't confess.

Hina's use of the word "confess" suggests that she felt somehow responsible for the acts of violence committed against her. While self-blame is common among victims of SV across all ethnic and social groups (Gohir, 2013), this may have been exacerbated in Hina's case by cultural forces, as individuals often take cues from their social-cultural context about how to feel about abuse (Baxi, 2014; Singh and Hays, 2008).

Moreover, as Hina's case demonstrates, it is not only men who expect women to be sexually subservient but also other women, especially older women; it is common for older female relatives to encourage younger women to accept SV uncomplainingly for the sake of family harmony. Against a backdrop of such constraints, some interviewees found it safer to remain silent about their abuse for fear of also being abused by other members of the family. Rajinder's experience of being abused reflects this:

The abuse started when I was around seven. It was three people that were involved and one of them was my uncle, my aunt's husband. The other one was my cousin ... [and his] youngest brother. And the most extensive experience of abuse was with the youngest brother.

These findings are in line with previous research in demonstrating that traditional, rigid familial structures in South Asian communities discourage disclosure of SV and CSA, both within and outside families. Survivors often experience self-blame and shame, and engage in forms of justification to try to rationalise the abuse (Ahmed *et al.*, 2009) rather than risk dishonouring or disrupting the family system by revealing it (Parpart, 2010). For



Obviously, I didn't tell anybody because I was kind of sworn to secrecy. But I felt very afraid because I was told that if I said anything that I'd obviously get in trouble.

The perils of disclosing SV/CSA

instance, paralleling Hina's use of the word "confess", Alia described how the potential negative consequences of revealing her abuse were bound up with the fact that she "was the girl". Linguistically, both interviewees implied that they were somehow the cause rather than the victim of the abuse. Naturally, such beliefs exacerbate the difficulties of speaking out and the fear associated with the possible consequences of doing so.

Many of the survivors interviewed had been blamed for the CSA/SV they had suffered, with much of this blame centring on the belief that the survivors had brought the abuse on themselves, as Shazia described:

Obviously, I didn't tell anybody because I was kind of sworn to secrecy. But I felt very afraid because I was told that if I said anything that I'd obviously get in trouble.

The perils of disclosing SV/CSA

The silencing of SV and CSA survivors in South Asian communities is also linked to cultural expectations regarding a woman's

sexual status prior to marriage: a woman's 'purity' before marriage is not only a societal expectation, but one held in the highest regard (Gohir, 2013; O'Neill-Gutierrez and Chawla, 2017). The 'loss' of a woman's virginity before marriage, even if this is through CSA/SV, results in shame for her personally and loss of 'honour' for her family (Carline, 2011) to the extent that it may affect the marriage prospects of her siblings.

Revealing CSA/SV can, as Zakar, Zakar, and Abbas (2015) note, threaten or disrupt the unity and maintenance of the family. Here, South Asian notions of collectivism can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the realisation that a family member has experienced CSA/SV can mobilise considerable loyalty and support from other family members; on the other, the victim may be blamed, punished or ostracised (Baxi, 2014). Thus, the victim may feel obliged to sacrifice herself by concealing the abuse in order to avoid 'dishonouring' the family.

The social stigma around the subject meant that eleven out of thirteen interviewees initially either tried to deal with the abuse on their own or believed that doing so was their

only option; they were disinclined to seek help and support if doing so meant revealing their abuse, as they considered this too dangerous in terms of the potential consequences, including gossip within the wider community, stigma and ‘honour’-based violence.

Many victims are also afraid of condemnation from their wider community. For instance, Sukveer’s account of CSA by a *granthi* (Sikh religious leader) at her local *gurudwara* (Sikh temple) reveals the complex, intersectional reasons why she felt unable to speak about the abuse:

If it was known that it was a priest, then it would have been even more of a big thing. He used to actually live at the temple, so he was very well known. People used to be very respectful of him, so for me to tell anybody, it would have been big; so, I made excuses that it didn’t happen. As I got older and I looked back at what happened, [I knew] what happened was abuse, but back then I used to just think that it was me making it up in my head and that it didn’t really happen.

Anticipated or actual disbelief from adults has a profound impact on victims (Voogt and Klettke, 2017) across all socio-cultural groups, but may be compounded by the socio-cultural context in South Asian communities (Ahmad *et al.*, 2009). For instance, Kuljit described how

In the Asian community, they don’t talk about it. They don’t even think that it exists. What they say – which I can’t believe – is that “It doesn’t happen to

us; it happens to white people, because that’s what they are like. It doesn’t happen to Asian people – no Asian person ever gets abused.”



The significance of identity formations around ‘them’ and ‘us’, and a belief that sexual abuse is a problem within other cultures, should not be underestimated in terms of its impact on a victim’s beliefs about the consequences of seeking help or reporting CSA/SV. These beliefs centre on the notion that in South Asian communities it is not acceptable to be a victim of SV/CSA, as seen above in Hina, Alia and Kuljit’s interviews. Although such abuse is not condoned, it is usually kept hidden in practice and, thus, perpetuated through a culture of shaming, victim blaming and coercion concerning the possible consequences of speaking out (Smith, 2017).

Who to tell

Many of the participants' narratives indicated a general lack of supportive people to whom CSA and SV survivors can turn in South Asian communities, as Bushra's case illustrates:

I just remember my dad's face and he never really looked at me again ... I never thought that my dad would sit down and talk about this. I thought that my mum might have asked more questions, but she did not but I do not know what they knew. All I know is that they sent me away and then when I came back I obviously started high school and that was that.

These findings support previous studies in other contexts, including research by Robertson, Chaudhary and Vyas (2016) involving 425 South Asians living in the United States, as their study also demonstrated that disclosure of CSA was impeded by cultural and familial stigma. The complexities of seeking help in response to CSA/SV can be likened to an intricate labyrinth consisting of forces that are intertwined and interdependent, yet conflicting (Smith, 2017). For many survivors

these conflicting, and often negative, forces make them feel helpless in terms of finding a way to disclose safely.

Given the risks of speaking out, minimising or ignoring the existence of SV/CSA or delaying its disclosure can be viewed as a coping mechanism for victims (Voogt and Klettke, 2017). However, Alia's experience shows that families who respond positively can be a powerful source of support in terms of challenging notions of shame around SV/CSA:

When I first told my Dad, [he] walked out of the room and then I thought, "God that's it, that's it. I'm going to be booted out of the house now. I'm going to be homeless." I was thinking the worst-case scenario and then a minute later, [he] came back and put his arm around me and basically said: "I believe you."

The number of barriers to disclosure are demoralising for those who wish to name their abuse, shame its perpetrators, and/or seek some sort of redress and closure (Beckett *et al.*, 2016). When discussing the lack of professional support services for SV and CSA survivors, all thirteen interviewees spoke at length about the changes needed.



Lessons need to be learned about how to enable more victims to seek and access support – and even play a role in bringing about the wide-scale changes necessary to eradicate SV and CSA. Empowering survivors to be part of preventive efforts is an important aspect of recognising their agency and helping them regain a sense of personal power. Indeed, Sukveer told us that she took part in the study to be an agent of change and offered an insight into how progress might be achieved:

The reason that I am talking about it is because I want to stop it. More people should come out with their stories and [having] more people come out with it [will mean] the people who are doing it will be more hesitant, because, in our culture, they know that nobody talks about it.”

Conclusion

The finding that there is a perception among British South Asians that SV and CSA ‘doesn’t happen in our community’ calls for further research regarding the links between such attitudes, understandings of identity, and everyday forms of violence. A key question for this research is whether acknowledging SV and CSA in British South Asian communities would result in a seismic shift in how these communities, and the individuals within them, view themselves and their respective cultures.

Ultimately, effective prevention of CSA and SV in British South Asian communities depends on addressing the cultural circumstances that perpetuate them, including through enabling them to remain hidden. Thus, addressing CSA and SV means confronting the use of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ to control women’s behaviour, as well as the widespread narratives that lead to victim blaming, both about SV/CSA and about

disclosure. Support services also need to play a role in addressing the specific socio-cultural and intersectional context of CSA/SV in British South Asian communities. A multi-layered, integrated approach is necessary to help victims rebuild their lives; however, this will necessitate involving the broader community in combatting the causes of SV and CSA. This shift is only likely to happen if more survivors, like the brave participants in this study, speak out.



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