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Cultural barriers to the disclosure of child sexual abuse in Asian communities:

listening to what women say.   Philip Gilligan with Shamim Akhtar

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Abstract

There is an apparent under-reporting of child sexual abuse in Britain's Asian communities and a very varied capacity amongst professionals and agencies to respond with cultural competence. Professional approaches to child protection originate in cultural contexts, which are different to those of most British Asians. A qualitative study in Bradford used discussion of a locally produced multi-lingual booklet as a catalyst for discussion of responses within Asian communities to child sexual abuse. Analysis of notes and transcripts of discussions with groups of Asian women identified common and contrasting themes. Prominent amongst these were a general acknowledgement that child sexual abuse occurs within Asian communities; that it is a problem which needs to be addressed by all communities and that those affected may find it difficult to access services even where they are available. In particular, there was recognition that difficulties which arise, in part, from fears about how relevant agencies and professionals will respond, are frequently compounded by the impact of cultural imperatives arising from '*Izzat*' (Honour / Respect), '*Haya*' (Modesty) and '*Sharam*' (Shame / Embarrassment). These appear to determine how women in particular will behave. A review of similar studies, in the fields of 'domestic violence' and mental health, reinforced the conclusion that, if practitioners and policy makers are to succeed in increasing the proportion of children and non-abusing carers from Asian communities who access relevant services, they need to develop much better understandings of the cultural imperatives which determine behaviour in those communities. Culturally competent practice and respectful dialogue with Asian communities is essential to the effective protection of children.

Cultural barriers to the disclosure of child sexual abuse in Asian communities: listening to what women say.

CONTEXT

This article seeks to contribute to an understanding of particular issues relating to Asian culture and child sexual abuse. It will explore results from a qualitative study analysing discussions with Asian women in Bradford of a multi-lingual booklet about child sexual abuse and feedback from a consultation event involving predominantly Asian female workers from local agencies. Whilst doing so, the authors wish to emphasise three points. Firstly, individuals within all cultures have individual needs, motivators and experiences. They need assessments and interventions, which take sufficient account of their culture rather than ones based in any preconceived ideas of what their culture means for them. Secondly, Asian culture is varied, fluid and dynamic. The particular impact and meanings of the concepts discussed here will vary, amongst other things, with gender, class, education, religious beliefs and age, as well as the geographical origins of individuals, their parents and grandparents. Thirdly, any increased understanding of other cultures by practitioners and policy makers does not remove their obligation to apply critical understanding their own. In particular, it does not remove the need to reflect on eurocentric and racist aspects of cultures from which most social work theory and practice originates. Alongside, a developing understanding of Asian cultures and their impact on individuals' lives and behaviour, professionals need to review the extent to which their own practice and policies may deter people from accessing relevant services. Those attending the consultation event repeatedly emphasised the need for agencies to develop more flexible and sensitive responses to disclosures.

Social work and culture

Cheetham (1982) warned that "social workers are doubtful about their ability to judge needs and problems in unfamiliar cultures" (P143), while O'Hagan (1999) identifies "neglect of" and "negativity towards" culture amongst child and family social workers. (P279) They certainly seem to see their insufficient understanding of Asian 'culture' as a major difficulty in the delivery of effective services to Asian families. (Barn et al, 1997; Brophy, 1999a; O'Neale, 2000) The vast majority of child and family social workers are non-Asians. In the authors' experience, their confidence is frequently undermined by a sense of dealing with lives, which are bound by cultural and religious imperatives they struggle to comprehend. This can result in unrealistic, and for some Asian service users unwelcome, policies of trying to allocate work with Asian service users only to Asian workers. More often it has, rightly, led to a desire to gain an increased understanding of Asian cultures. However, O'Neale (2000) in her inspection report on services for ethnic minority children expresses concern that "the religious and cultural needs of Asian children were misunderstood and therefore not adequately met". (P38) It, arguably, remains true in the context of working across cultures that "Social workers need practical help as well as exhortation" (Cheetham, 1982, P144).

Contrasting Cultures?

The training and values of the British professionals dealing with child sexual abuse are overwhelmingly rooted in western cultural traditions. 'Sexual abuse' remains a

concept, constructed through discourses which have usually been in English and which have generally explored the experiences of white children in North America, Western Europe and Australasia, rather than those of children in Asia, Africa and South America or in minority communities in the west (Kenny and McEachern, 2000; Futa et al, 2001,).

In contrast, the attitudes and responses of most members of Asian communities in Britain are rooted in cultural and religious traditions, which they or their parents or grandparents have brought with them from Pakistan, India or Bangladesh. Whilst migration has been a force for cultural change as well as cultural conservatism and whilst many have argued convincingly in favour of understandings based on 'hybridity', 'diaspora' and 'new ethnicities' (Hall 1992a; Hall 1992b; Gilroy 1993; Brah1996; Back 1996; Werbner and Modood, 1997), there is also much evidence that Britain's Asian communities are actively maintaining and interpreting the cultural and religious values of earlier generations. (Darr, 2001; Drury, 1996; Ghuman, 1999; Lewis, 2002; Cressey, 2002). There is some evidence of family systems adapting, but research also demonstrates that most Asians in Britain remain committed to the traditional system of a joint and extended family in which power is distributed according to age and gender. (Warrier, 1994; Dosanjh and Ghuman, 1996; Modood, 1997; Anwar, 1998)

In anthropological terms Asian, and Muslim societies especially, tend to be categorised as 'high-context'. They emphasise the collective over the individual, whereas 'low-context' societies, in Europe and North America emphasise the

individual over the collective. (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000; Hall, 1976). Hofstede (1984) reports that British culture emphasises rapid change and a limited need to reduce uncertainty in the context of relative political and financial stability, whereas Pakistani culture is conservative in an attempt to reduce uncertainties of life in a more turbulent and vulnerable context. At the same time, while Islam expects individuals to satisfy their needs and interests, it require them to do so without hurting the group or community. The interests of the individual and the group are seen as mutually reinforcing (Al-Radi and Al-Mahdy, 1989; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000).

Under-reporting and lack of access to relevant services

Information regarding the 'prevalence' of child sexual abuse is difficult to establish with certainty (Ghate and Spencer, 1995), while many researchers suggest that attempts to calculate 'incidence' on the basis of what is officially identified under-estimate the number of cases in the population as a whole (Finkelhor, 1986; La Fontaine, 1999; Corby, 2000) Stuart and Baines (2004) suggest that fewer than one-in-50 sexual offences results in a criminal conviction and that, 7 years after the publication of *People Like Us* (Utting, 1997) there are still gaps in the information available to parents and children, which would help them recognise abusive behaviour or know where to seek help.

Government statistics for 'children in need' offer limited information about numbers from different ethnic groups. Those for 2003 suggest that the proportion with 'ethnicity other than white' is "between 1.2 and 1.7 times the national average". However, whereas 'children of a black or mixed ethnic identity' are over-represented, 'children of an Asian ethnic identity' are under-represented (National Statistics /DfES, 2004, P6). Data regarding children registered on child protection registers also indicates that, while 'Black or Black British' children, children of 'mixed race parentage', and children from 'other ethnic groups' are over-represented amongst those receiving formal child protection services, by a ratio of almost 2:1, 'Asian or Asian British' children are under-represented, by a ratio of 1:2 (DfES, 2004). Several studies report low levels of self-referral by Asian families seeking help from social services (Barn et al, 1997; Qureshi et al, 2000), while Asian children also appear to be under-represented in figures for 'looked after children' (O'Neale, 2000).

Research, focused on Asian children who have been sexually abused or which has disaggregated data according to ethnic origin suggests a consistent pattern of Asian children being under-represented amongst both those registered because of 'sexual abuse' and amongst those receiving relevant services and interventions. (Gibbons et al, 1995; Moghal et al, 1995 ; Monck and New, 1996 ; Barn et al, 1997; Bradford FSU, 1998; Brophy et al, 1999b)

Bradford FSU (1998) reported that agencies emphasised the very low take-up of their services by Asian families and that many offering therapeutic services had little experience of working with Asian children who had been sexually abused. In 2002,

only 7% of allegations of child sexual abuse investigated by the Bradford Police related to Asian children and the police reported that many allegations were withdrawn at an early stage. The limited data available suggests that approximately half the number of cases is reported than might have been expected in Bradford, if it is assumed that the prevalence of child sexual abuse is similar in Asian and white communities. This assumption cannot be conclusively validated in the absence of other data, but is supported by other studies in Leeds and London. (Moghal et al, 1995; Patel, 1991; Bernard, 2001)

Others have noted the lack of sufficient evidence about the black, Asian and ethnic minority experience of the child protection system. (Barter, 1999; Alexander, 1999) They have suggested that one reason why research has failed to focus on this area may be elements of racism within the research process itself. Others have, meanwhile, emphasised the difficulties experienced by Asian children and young people in contacts with agencies such as the police and social services. (Humphreys et al, 1999; The Children's Society, 1999; Race 1999; O'Dell, 2003)

Bradford's Asian Population

Bradford, like many places in Britain has a rich ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. In 2001, its Asian population comprised 18% of the total. These communities are predominantly Muslim (16.1%) and largely of 'Pakistani' origin (14.5%). (See National Statistics, 2003 or Gilligan, forthcoming, for further details.) The 'Pakistani' communities remain concentrated in the inner wards of the city, where they often live amidst 'a relatively self-contained world of businesses and

institutions, religious and cultural, which they have created to service their specific needs' (Lewis, 2002, P203.) As elsewhere, Bradford's Asian population is relatively young compared to the majority white communities. (National Statistics, 2003) They also tend to be located in areas facing relatively high levels of deprivation and disadvantage. (Cantle, 2001; Denham, 2001; DETR, 2000)

THE STUDY

What was done?

A total of twelve group discussions were facilitated at community centres and similar places in Bradford District, during winter/spring 2003-2004. An interview guide was used, but the direction of discussions was allowed to follow themes initiated by participants. Five groups gave consent to at least some of the discussion being recorded. These recordings were transcribed and translated into English. Notes, in English, were taken during the remaining seven discussions.

Women in the groups were invited to give feedback on the multi-lingual booklet *Protect Children from Sexual Abuse* (Bradford FSU, 2003), which they read or had read to them by the facilitator (See Gilligan, forthcoming for a full English text of the booklet) It includes the following inset

> *Alia was abused by her uncle, from the age of 5. She told her mum when she was 11, but her mum asked her not to tell anyone else, and told Alia, "Just keep out of his way when he visits." Alia's mum felt that she couldn't ask her brother-in-law to stop contact with the family because everyone would know why? She thought that, if people found out, this would bring shame and*

dishonour on the family. She was also afraid that Alia's father would believe

his brother, if he denied what her daughter had told her. Meanwhile, Alia was

very frightened that her uncle would carry on abusing her. She did not feel

safe or protected and finally told a friend's mother who was able to help her

contact the police.

What do you think Alia's own mother should have done? Did she protect

her daughter?

(Bradford FSU, 2003)

The 'work in progress' was presented to a consultation event in Bradford in September 2004, where participants gave feedback from group discussions. This was recorded and transcribed in English.

Who participated?

Discussions with community groups involved 130 women, aged between 20 and 60 years. Discussions took place in Urdu, Punjabi, Bangla and English. 90% of participants were from Urdu / Punjabi speaking communities. The remainder were from Bangla (12), Pushto (1) and Gujarati (1) speaking communities. All appear to have been Muslim, but participants were not asked for individual information. Forty people attended the consultation event, from twelve organisations. The majority were Asian women. Three group discussions were conducted in English and another in Urdu. Three groups were 'women only'. The fourth included the three men attending the event.

The fact that these discussions were confined almost entirely to adult women obviously means that the results obtained cannot fully represent of the views of the whole community. Indeed, many participants in these discussions stressed the long-term need to involve more men in consultations and outreach work. Group X, at the consultation event reported,

> *We did … mention that we are giving education to mums and kids, but its really important that dads are aware of it, because if mum is and we give a her a leaflet and she knows what Child Sexual Abuse is then she feels she can't actually talk to her husband or say anything to him … If she feels he doesn't have that concept, doesn't understand what Child Sexual Abuse is, she knows that she can't tell him, they can't talk about it. If he does know as well then she has a starting point with him, they can talk about it. But if it's such a taboo and she knows he really doesn't have a concept, doesn't understand, she's too scared to even approach her own husband, so it's important that men are aware of issues and are told the basics.*

However, it is nevertheless, arguably, essential to give immediate priority to outreach work with women, in light of research evidence that children frequently disclose sexual abuse to mothers, but rarely to fathers. (Monck et al, 1995; Monck and New, 1996) At the same time, contacts with 5 local imams resulted in positive responses to the outreach work and agreement to make copies of the booklet available to men attending mosque.

What did women say?

The immediate responses of women in group 'A' to Alia's story were particularly instructive to a non-Asian professional reading the transcript,

Most of the women in the group: *No she didn't protect her daughter.*

Woman A3: *When her daughter told her about it she should have done something.*

Woman A4: *She probably felt helpless thinking Alia's father won't believe her and her uncle will deny it.*

A few women at once: *Yes no one admits to anything like this but its wrong and something should be done about it, she probably thought of lots of different potential problems and kept quiet.*

Women A5 & A6: *Look poor child being abused till she's eleven and mother thinking about izzat of the family and feeling she can't do anything because she wants to protect family honour.*

Woman 7. *Yes you can understand about family izzat but you have to think how the little girl would be affected, her whole life and personality could be affected. It is wrong after all, and she would always be scared and lack confidence. You have to protect the children*

Gilligan (forthcoming) has already reported on the outreach and consultations, which led to production of the multi-lingual booklet used as a catalyst for discussions. That earlier piece of work confirmed the impression that, in Bradford, at least, child sexual abuse remains under-reported in Asian communities and that Asian children and their carers are less likely than their white counterparts to access appropriate services. It also confirmed that many people within Asian communities acknowledged the facts of child sexual abuse and shared the view that it must responded to.

However, these earlier consultations also suggested that progress was hampered by many factors, including:

- Lack of basic knowledge about child sexual abuse,
- Lack of awareness of the existence and nature of the services available to respond to it,
- Fear of public exposure, if child sexual abuse is disclosed and
- Fear of meeting culturally insensitive responses from professionals.

and

- Cultural factors, which appeared to impede individuals' and families' willingness to disclose child sexual abuse.

The current study added detail to an impression that cultural imperatives arising from concepts such as 'Izzat' (Honour / Respect), 'Haya' (Modesty) and 'Sharam' (Shame / Embarrassment) are, for many in Asian communities, crucial determinants of behaviour in response to incidents of child sexual abuse. They appear to both heighten

other barriers and to contain some of the potential means to overcome them. As before, all groups indicated that child sexual abuse is generally not acknowledged or talked about in their communities. Once again, participants were generally aware of the issues. However, a minority expressed shock and surprise on learning that child sexual abuse is perpetrated against younger children as well as adolescents, against boys as well as girls and by fathers and relatives as well as 'strangers'. However, only one participant suggested that "*it happens in white society and not in Asian*".

Some women sympathised with Alia's mother, saying they could "*understand why she kept quiet*". In group 'B', 2 of 7 women commented that, while they knew about child sexual abuse, they had *never* discussed it in group situations or with relatives. There was a general tendency for younger women to express greater willingness to discuss the issues and to agree to distribute the booklet to others, but in group 'C' with 6 women under 30 years, 2 said they were too embarrassed to take a copy of the booklet even for their own use. However, others took extra booklets to distribute. In group 'D', whilst there was consensus that Alia's mother "*should have been supportive*", the discussion also highlighted "*how it could have been difficult for her …… as she would have been scared of her husband*".

Izzat was mentioned by name in Urdu/Punjabi in 3 (25%) of the groups, as were *Haya* and *Sharam*. Associated concepts and equivalents in English were mentioned with much greater frequency.

Group E suggested,

the community will keep sexual abuse undercover because of izzat. Such cases are not discussed so easily and openly.

its difficult to go to someone outside including services for help as this would show that family in a bad light and it could also get out in the community bringing shame to the family

it won't be easy to talk to people about this kind of things, only with certain members of the family i.e. those from the same generation and in certain contexts such as when it actually takes place. ……it'd be difficult to talk to the elder generation about this.

The sequence of a discussion in group 'F' was again very instructive to a non-Asian reader:

SA (Facilitator) *Do you know about child sexual abuse?*

A few women (quietly) *We know. Heard about it.* (Silence)

Woman F1. *You might have read it in papers or heard from somebody as these things happen all the time. It doesn't just happen in other communities and cultures.*

Woman F2. *Well it is well hidden, and we keep it hidden. How can anyone know?*

SA. *Why do you think it's hidden?*

Woman F3. *Because of izzat obviously and also fear of not being believed*

Woman F4. *You'd want to protect your daughter's izzat because people talk and gossip*

SA later asked the same group, "*Why should the child or their family feel it is their izzat at stake? …. they've not done anything wrong. It should be the perpetrator.*" Woman F4 replied:

As if they know the concept of izzat. If they did, then they wouldn't do things like this.

Woman H12 responded to Alia's story by saying:

Her mother is feeling helpless too because of her izzat and her family's izzat, who's going to believe her daughter. Mother believes her, but who else would believe them or support them? This could cause major family feuds, and instead of dealing with Alia's issues it would create other problems.

There was agreement in group 'H' that "*it is difficult to discuss child sexual abuse with others, as it is too embarrassing*" and, whilst there was general consensus that Alia's mother should have involved the police immediately, one woman said she

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"*could sympathise with Alia's mother as her marriage could break up because of this.*"

Izzat, Haya and Sharam: Impact on responses to child sexual abuse.

'*Izzat*' is usually translated into English as 'honour' or 'respect', but there are clearly many pitfalls inherent in such translation. *Izzat* is a complex concept, consistently reported as a major influence in Asian family life. It has a long history and a diverse and changing set of meanings for particular cultures, communities, groups, households and individuals. NCCR / UNICEF (1999) note that in the context of Puktoon society, for example, *izzat* is "Honor, not so much as what is honourable, but in terms of community standing", while *sharam* is "Shame" defined "not so much as what may be deemed as wrongful (or even sinful), but by behaviour and conduct which brings shame to the family and community as a whole." (P12) They note that

> "The boundaries will shift and change according to 'visibility'. Honor or
> "Izzat" is a possession, not a quality. Shame is an expression of honor being
> removed. …… If the behaviour is not visible, then it doesn't exist." (P 12)

In light of this, it seems pertinent to recognise that despite, professional attempts to safeguard 'confidentiality', disclosure of sexual abuse is often experienced by victims

and non-abusing carers as a very public event. Group Z, at the consultation event, commented,

> *if you've got white social workers turning up at the door all the time …… its really hard then to keep it within that family to deal with it because the word kind of gets out in a community and you have to start explaining what's going on*

Such feelings are likely to be heightened for children who continue to view themselves as being responsible for abuse perpetrated on them by others and those who are not believed or supported by carers. (Monck et al, 1995; Corby, 2000) At the same time, although studies consistently demonstrate that most children welcome the outcome of disclosure and intervention, they also note that these processes are often traumatic (Roberts and Taylor, 1993; Berliner and Conte, 1995).

Other studies clearly support the conclusion that *izzat* and *sharam* are crucial to understanding the experience and behaviour of people within Asian communities. Chew-Graham et al (2002) from a study of Asian women in Manchester report that,

> The groups proposed that *izzat* was given precedence over the care and happiness of children in some families. The groups also theorised that *izzat* could be misused to reinforce women's roles in family life, often to coerce women into remaining silent about their problems. *Izzat* was described as all pervasive, internalised and reinforced by women, preventing other community members from listening and getting involved. The groups thought that the

burden of a family's *izzat* was unequally placed upon the women of the

family. (P341)

They also note that the differing lengths to which a family might go to protect their *izzat* depended on exactly how they defined the concept, in terms of personal or family honour or as prestige and status in the eyes of the community.

In the context of 'domestic violence' and mental health, Gilbert et al (2004) concluded from their study in Derby that maintaining the good name of the family was essential to all generations and that, where individuals ignored *izzat*, they knew they would suffer the consequences of being cast out and disowned.

Other discussions of gender-based violence suggest that for all black and ethnic minority women, the experience is intensified, not only by the additional pressures of racism, language barriers and immigration issues (Avan, 1995; Debbonaire, 1998), but also by "pressures within some communities to uphold family honour", which act as further impediments to accessing support (BEMWS, 2002).

In the context of so-called 'honour killings', campaigners have again emphasised that for some *izzat* takes precedence even over an individual woman's life. Gill (2003), following interviews with Asian women in London concluded that " issues of shame and honour were central to whether women stayed or left a violent relationship." (P 23) She cites Amnesty International (1999), in support of her view that

In the concept of izzat, it is incumbent upon women to maintain and increase

the male or family honour. Any digression from this code, whether real or

alleged, bears grave consequences for the woman – from gossip, to her chances of marriage being ruined, to being beaten or killed by her immediate male kin" (P 23)

She notes that "Inherent in the code of honour is a constant effort by individuals and groups to maintain honour and to avoid the state of shame (sharam) at all costs." (P23)

The women interviewed by Chew-Graham et al (2002) also emphasised the extent to which the experience of migration may heighten difficulties by adding to competition between families and to pressures to be seen to be 'doing well' in the eyes of relatives in Pakistan. They noted, in particular, that the 'good' behaviour of women is seen as adding to status and prestige. Meanwhile, what constitutes 'good' behaviour is very clearly stated, especially for Muslims. Sexual activity in particular tends to be prescribed within moral limits. These clearly forbid the sexual abuse of children and promote their protection. However, they also require behaviour which maintains *haya* (modesty) to an extent that many individuals and, women in particular, find extreme difficulty in discussing matters relating to sexual activities both within their own families and with those outside.

Maududi (1987) notes that as an Islamic term, *Haya* implies the kind of shyness which a wrongdoer feels before his own nature and before God and stresses that "The moral teachings of Islam aim not only at awakening this dominant feeling of shyness in human nature but also at trying to develop it as part of man's mental makeup so that it may serve as a strong defence against evil inclinations." He quotes the *Hadith,*

which says "Every religion has a morality, and the morality of Islam is *Haya.*" Meanwhile, Islam offers believers very clear rules for almost all associated aspects of their lives, all of which tend towards the promotion of *haya* and the creation of a social environment, which is kept "as clean as possible of all sorts of sexual excitement and stimulation" (Maududi, 1987)

Understood through the filter of cultural conventions current in most of Britain's Asian communities, such rules clearly reinforce other barriers for members of those communities both in disclosing child sexual abuse and in discussing appropriate responses. The women in Bradford generally recognised the need to educate children about the risk of child sexual abuse, but also noted difficulties in doing so. In group E, one woman noted,

> *as they get older and go into their teens we won't be able to talk to them as openly as we'd like to because of our cultural practice haya (modesty) and sharam (shyness/embarrassment). Haya / sharam will act as a barrier and will not allow us to talk to our children freely.*

Another suggested that parents do damage,

> *because we tell our children not to talk about anything sexual, which leads them to believe any sexual act is shameful and this prevents them to talk about any wrongful incident such as sexual abuse*

Chew-Graham et al (2002) also note that in relation to 'women's sexual health, reproduction or family planning' the women in Manchester said that they would be loath to speak in front of interpreters because the issues are "too personal". (P344)

Bhardwaj (2001) suggests that cultural beliefs, such as *izzat* and *sharam*,

> can be described as a double-edged sword, they persistently legitimise gender violence and oppression and further silence women from being able to discuss, seek support or challenge such oppressions, for in doing so it is deemed as bringing further shame and dishonour to the family and community. ………. Patriarchal power dynamics within the family and community setting serve to contain issues likely to bring dishonour, but in doing so they limit the expression and, therefore, the support of external structures including service interventions. (P56)

However, she also notes that "Asian families have nurtured their own solidarity and community autonomy in direct response to the hostility of a racist British society." (P 56) and suggests that community insularity frequently ensures protection for individuals and groups.

At the same time, some women in Bradford suggested that the cultural and, more particularly the religious imperatives of their communities provide important possible foundations for appropriate responses to child sexual abuse. Their comments, arguably, reinforce arguments in favour of giving religious issues greater prominence in qualifying and other training for professionals. (Gilligan, 2003) Group X, for

example, at the consultation event, stressed the potential usefulness of increasing consciousness of "*how sexual abuse is wrong and that there is a punishment for it, Islamically.*" Group Y, at the same event, suggested the inclusion of "*sanctions from the Koran and other holy books*" in leaflets so that the information has "*a religious sanction which makes the information more acceptable for people to actually do something about.* ", while group Z reported that

> *there's a positive shift by the younger generation in Asian families, not just the females, but the males as well …… to more Islamic values rather than cultural values and that's leading to them challenging and questioning traditional cultural norms and making them more outspoken*

Woman A5, meanwhile made two important and challenging statements, in response to discussions about the impact of *izzat* in cases such as Alia's*,*

> *I don't know why people hide these things. OK, its about izzat, but you have to see the injustice done to the child. You have to speak out about something like this. Definitely*
> *We should not hide these things. Fear of losing izzat; that's true as well, but would you not protect your child because of izzat?*

IMPROVING SERVICES

This article has sought, in part, to give voice to the views of ordinary Asian women and of frontline Asian women workers, in the context of discussions around child sexual abuse. These included ideas for improving relevant services, which can be presented in 3 overlapping categories:

Outreach and education

Almost all participants welcomed the fact that outreach work on the issue was taking place. They offered many practical suggestions for written materials. For example: the inclusion of more 'stories' like Alia's; a smaller, single sheet format; distribution in 'maternity packs', at nurseries, etc. They also offered ideas for extending the scope of the work. For example: including child sexual abuse within parenting training provided by Sure Start projects, social work students on placements undertaking projects, etc. Many also emphasised the importance of targeting both children and men in future outreach work. They suggested that this be done in schools and through existing men's groups and mosques.

Regarding themes to be included in such work, many judged that parents and carers would be encouraged to take the issue seriously, if they were given information which raised their awareness of "*the emotional and behavioural issues that the child would be going through in sexual abuse and after disclosure*" and of the impact on children of not feeling heard. Others stressed the need to highlight the view that 'good' parents protect their children and to underpin this message with religious and cultural injunctions

Training and support for practitioners

Practitioners involved in the consultation event were particularly keen that they should receive more training in how to deal with disclosures and that there should be a more readily accessible network for advice and consultation. They saw this as combining the experience of some in dealing with sexual abuse with the expertise of others on their own cultures.

They also recognised the importance of colleagues becoming familiar with and sensitive to particular aspects of Asian cultures. These included, not only cultural imperatives such as *izzat,* but also issues, such as the need for professionals conducting investigations to respond sensitively to women who don't like to say their husband's name and to children who may not know their father's name.

Flexibility in service provision

Many participants emphasised the need for professionals to have sufficient discretion and to develop sufficient confidence to allow them to respond flexibly to people making disclosures. This reflected a perceived need for families to feel they are in control of the process and of the pace of events. It connects with the views expressed by at least one group at the event. They noted that, if professionals wish to help people to overcome barriers to disclosure, they need to recognise that what may most concern them are "*the consequences of disclosure*". They emphasised the need to talk with families about what would happen if they did disclose and about the processes

involved. In relation to children, they noted the need not only to advise them about what will happen, but also to give them confidence to feel that disclosing will actually make things better. They commented, "*some children in some families think that if we disclose life is going to be a lot worse. We need to empower them to feel that no, its going to be better*."

Participants urged agencies to give families choice about the identity of their worker. Group Z, again commented, "*Some people think yeah they prefer an Asian worker, an Asian female or Asian male but maybe some families might think hang on a minute, an Asian worker, they may know all my community and they won't keep the confidentiality, so they might feel a lot happier having a White worker. So we need to think about that and give them that choice*." They emphasised the desirability of families having only one or two professionals to deal with and the need for service users to be reassured that interpreters will maintain confidentiality.

Others pointed to the need for non-abusing carers to be able to access advice, without other family members knowing that they are doing so. They suggested that 'drop-in' sessions could be provided at agencies such as Sure Start, but again recognised that workers in such sessions would need confidence, discretion and adequate support to make judgements about whether they needed to immediately alert investigating agencies to incidents of sexual abuse or whether such a decision could be left in the control of service users. They noted that children will be better served, if service users are able to talk anonymously, before reaching a point where they feel comfortable in taking matters forward, than if they cease to co-operate having felt "*pushed into accessing Police or Social Services*."

CONCLUSION

In all communities, it remains difficult and frequently traumatic to disclose sexual abuse. In many Asian communities, some cultural imperatives appear to make it even more difficult. Cultural beliefs and values may also impact on the effects of abuse. (Fontes, 1995) Professionals must, therefore, take full account of such issues in both in designing services and in responding to service users. At the same time, we need to avoid practice, based in generalised assumptions about ethnicities, cultures or religions (Ahmad, 1990; Carby, 1992; Robinson, 1995) We must recognise and respect the uniqueness of individuals and families, including those aspects, which are rooted in culture and religion. In doing so, we need to listen carefully to what members of different communities tell us and to engage in respectful dialogue about what will be effective in meeting individual, family and community needs in the context of the sexual abuse of children.

As noted in more detail elsewhere (Gilligan, forthcoming), Cameron et al (2001) point out that policy and practice with regard to the protection of children is frequently based in an Anglo-American paradigm, underpinned by a rugged individualism. They note that, 'Other settings have constructed quite different responses reflecting their own priorities and desired outcomes.' (P1) Such a recognition that professional responses to 'child protection' issues are socially and culturally constructed must, arguably, be central to ongoing discussions of how we make responses to child sexual abuse more culturally competent. We need to develop policies and procedures, which can respond to specific cultural contexts. At the same time, we need to maximise the protection of children. In doing so, we also need to ensure that individuals who need therapeutic services feel able to disclose their abuse, in the first place. Only culturally

competent practice, which facilitates and empowers children, young people and non-abusing carers to seek relevant services will provide effective protection for them.

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