



CRASAC
COVENTRY RAPE AND SEXUAL ABUSE CENTRE



THE PRICE OF HONOUR:

Exploring the Issues of Sexual Violence
within South Asian Communities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*"They were keen to
protect our family's
reputation and forced
me to keep it secret.
Now I am unable to take
the burden of guilt and
shame."*

Dr. Manjit Rehal and Sylvia Maguire
February 2014



CONTEXT

Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (CRASAC) is a specialist service that has provided support to victims and survivors of sexual violence for more than thirty-two years. Five years ago CRASAC began to provide support in community venues specifically for women and girls from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. Within this outreach setting we have received many disclosures of sexual violence, particularly from women from South Asian communities. Yet, despite this need, we have subsequently found that many of these victims and survivors have not felt able to access the dedicated support and counselling available to them from within CRASAC's centre.

The aim of this research was, therefore, to understand the discrepancy between the help South Asian women and girls were asking for within community settings in Coventry and the relatively few who went on to access our main support services. We wanted to listen to these women and girls to understand and to highlight what barriers there are for them in accessing much needed help and support.

Sexual violence and abuse is taboo in all communities but because of wider religious and cultural attitudes and expectations of women and girls in many Asian communities, it can be particularly difficult for women to raise the subject for considered discussion. In the absence of informed debate, those suffering very real traumatising abuse are doing so in unsupported silence, their hurt unspoken and out of sight.

As a result CRASAC believed it was also important that, as part of this research, we met and discussed these issues with local community members and religious leaders to support and develop debate and discussion. In listening to these individuals and to victims and survivors we believe that this report has helped us to highlight some of the key challenges and possibilities in effecting change and enabling South Asian victims and survivors of sexual violence and abuse in Coventry to get the support, protection and justice they deserve.

74 people were interviewed as part of this research. 13 of these were victims and survivors of sexual violence, 37 were women attending local community groups, 12 were religious leaders and representatives and 12 were professionals working within the community.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

From women & girls who have been victims of sexual violence:

- There is pressure to conform to notions of 'respectability' which can result in sexual violence being deliberately hidden or ignored by families and by communities.
- The pressure of avoiding shame and preserving honour serves to further silence victims and absolve perpetrators resulting in victims having to cope with the impacts of their trauma alone.
- When victims do disclose they can be made to feel responsible for the sexual violence they have experienced and for the loss of their honour and that of their families.
- Fear of reprisals, revictimization or rejection from the family, the wider community and within relationships prevents victims from disclosing.
- The stigma attached to sexual violence has stifled open discussion and created low levels of awareness about what sexual violence is, allowing it to continue unchallenged and often unnamed.
- Many victims, who are already isolated and disempowered, can be either unaware of or lack the confidence to approach existing services which are likely to be compounded by language barriers.
- Support provided within communities was considered essential for victims to help them more effectively respond to and to deal with the impacts of the sexual violence.

From Community members and religious leaders

- Community members, religious leaders and key professionals who took part were all aware of the negative attitudes and responses that victims faced and feared.



"... I wish I could have known before there are agencies available for help. I didn't have to put up with the situation I went through. I could see only dark and had no shoulder to cry on."

- Community belonging and acceptance, alongside issues of honour and shame, are crucial factors in understanding the impacts on victims and the responses of others.
- Communities have a significant role to play in addressing religious cultural and social attitudes that perpetuate and hide sexual violence.
- The deeply embedded stigma attached to sexual violence makes it a taboo subject that is difficult to bring out into the open for discussion.
- Community members, religious leaders and key professionals were all positively receptive to making changes in their attitudes and responses towards victims of sexual violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Working in partnership to raise awareness

- Awareness raising by the specialist sexual violence sector, alongside communities is needed in order to de-stigmatize sexual violence and to address embedded 'victim-blaming' attitudes.
- Long-term partnership work is needed with religious and community leaders who can help shape opinion and whose views carry weight in order to promote real changes in attitudes and responses.
- Partnership work is needed with specialist sexual violence services and specialist BAME services who understand the specific forms of violence BAME women experience as well as the wider context of BAME women's lives in relation to racism, discrimination and gender issues.

Community based support

- Proactive and flexible ways of delivering services within communities is recognized as essential to access, and to deliver to victims and survivors the appropriate confidential support and justice that is their human right.
- The provision of specialist community based support enables disclosures as well as the opportunity to provide dedicated follow up support to victims and survivors within safe neutral community settings which enables them to access that support in confidence.
- Peer support and positive role models can be powerful methods of encouraging and supporting disclosures and care pathways for victims and survivors.

Accessible services and responses

- Support and information provided to victims needs to be linguistically accessible and culturally sensitive.
- Specialist sexual violence services have a significant role to play in helping to address this complex issue via awareness raising, community based services and partnership working, which builds the trust and confidence of isolated and disempowered victims and survivors.

Further research

- This research was a pilot study within Coventry, which has a significant South Asian population. However, more in-depth national research is essential to more fully expand on the issues faced by the women and girls within these communities who have experienced sexual violence. This will enable us to better understand how the intersection of gender based violence and racial inequality impacts on South Asian women's experiences of abuse and their ability to disclose sexual violence and obtain the justice that is their right.

CONCLUSIONS

The South Asian women from Coventry who took part in this research clearly articulated the considerable challenges they faced in disclosing their experiences of sexual violence and gaining support. The challenges and concerns described were faced at a range of levels, from the reaction of immediate family, and the impact on the family's reputation within the community to the inaccessibility of support services and criminal justice agencies.

Some of these concerns related to specific forms of gender inequality within these women's own communities, for example a woman's marriageability being adversely affected by rape or sexual assault. Other concerns however arose from the marginalisation which BAME women experience from support services and wider society. It is therefore essential that South Asian women and girls own concerns and views are listened to rather than assumed because the ways in which discrimination and marginalisation operate are complex and contextual.

The provision of specialist sexual violence community based support has been effective within Coventry in enabling victims and survivors to disclose in a way that reduces their fears of exposure and empowers them to access much needed help and support. The women who were interviewed as part of this research all believed that it was community-based support that had helped them break the isolation that the abuse had created in their lives and helped them to counter feelings of guilt and shame. Many interviewees also spoke of the importance of peer support and positive role models in raising awareness of sexual violence and how victims can gain support but acknowledged that services must be linguistically and otherwise accessible in order for this to be effective.

Participants of this research felt that changes in attitude were ultimately required in order to effectively counter sexual violence and abuse and this was echoed by the professionals and faith leaders that were also interviewed. The religious and community leaders, from Coventry who participated, were receptive to working in partnership with agencies, including CRASAC, to raise awareness of the myths within their communities and support awareness raising on sexual offences.

If religious and community leaders listen to women and girls experiences of sexual violence, deliver non-victim blaming messages about sexual abuse and take action against perpetrators it will help to reassure victims and survivors from their communities that their disclosures will be taken seriously and that they will not be blamed and judged. It is essential however that these religious and community leaders are not assumed to speak for all South Asian women and girls in Coventry or that they encompass the diverse identities that these women and girls hold. To this end the provision of specialist BAME women's services is essential in order to provide safe spaces for women to seek support and have their views and opinions heard. Further research on a local and national level is also needed to further explore and identify the issues faced by South Asian victims and survivors.

This research was a pilot study on issues relating to sexual violence within South Asian communities in Coventry. Although it only provides a small insight into these issues participants overwhelmingly felt that sexual abuse was a serious crime that did affect South Asian women and girls within Coventry and that it was a crime that had real and lasting impacts on their lives. Participants were also clear that more had to be done to prevent this abuse, enable disclosure and make support accessible for South Asian victim and survivors of sexual violence.



Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (CRASAC)
Helpline: 02476 277777
Office: 02476 277772
www.crasac.org.uk

© 2013 CRASAC Ltd. Any reproduction should use the following reference: Rehal M, Maguire S. The Price of Honour: Exploring the Issue of Sexual Violence within South Asian Communities. CRASAC, 2014