



**CRASAC**  
COVENTRY RAPE AND SEXUAL ABUSE CENTRE



# THE PRICE OF HONOUR:

Exploring the Issues of Sexual Violence within  
South Asian Communities in Coventry

*"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



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# FOREWORD

Sexual violence is an appalling crime that constitutes a serious public and human rights problem. It can devastate the lives of victims, survivors and their families and inspire fear in our communities. It has both short- and long-term consequences for victims and survivor's physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing. It also has significant consequences for the public purse and for the economy.

This report highlights some of the key issues that have prevented victims of sexual violence, from Asian communities within Coventry, disclosing or reporting their abuse. In particular it highlights how victims can be silenced by a culture of so called honour and shame. This has resulted in many victims being unable to access support and pursue justice for the abuse which they have experienced.

*"I was afraid of shame brought upon the family and the loss of respect and also afraid of further abuse if I disclosed, more over I was anxious that I might not be believed as a result of the language barrier."*

This report also highlights the necessity of working with and amongst community groups to positively influence any real shift in attitudes and to enable more victims to access appropriate support. This research found willingness of those religious leaders and representatives who took part, from Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities, to work in partnership to raise awareness around this sensitive and difficult issue.

If leaders from within these communities allow and support women and girls to bring this issue out into the open then real changes in attitudes and responses to victims can begin to take place.

*"Any form of sexual violence that happens to women and girls cannot be and should not be tolerated under any circumstances"*  
Imam Iqbal from  
Zeenatulislam Mosque,  
Coventry

It is vital however that above all we prioritise listening to the challenges that women within South Asian communities in Coventry face in relation to sexual violence. All agencies, from both the statutory and voluntary sector should use this research, and the experiences of the exceptionally brave women and girls who took part, to contribute towards a vision of the future where sexual violence is not tolerated and victims are supported and protected.

**Dianne Whitfield**  
Chief Executive Officer  
CRASAC



## CONTEXT

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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

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### 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.

- 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

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### 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.

# THE PRICE OF HONOUR:

Exploring the Issues of Sexual Violence within South Asian Communities in Coventry

## BACKGROUND

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CRASAC is a Rape Crisis Centre, established in Coventry in 1981, that provides a range of services that together form an integrated and holistic care pathway for victims and survivors of sexual violation, from crisis through to sustainable recovery. The whole pathway incorporates a helpline, advocacy support, individual and group counselling and community based outreach services specifically to BAME women and girls. All of these services address the complex needs of victims for support, information and justice and are free to service users. CRASAC supports more than 5,000 victims and survivors through its services each year.

In December 2008, CRASAC began to provide a community based outreach project with the overall aim of helping women and girls, from BAME groups, who had or were experiencing sexual violence, to gain access to support, advocacy, information and justice. This decision to provide support within community settings was a result of a combination of concerns.

Firstly, whilst the problem of sexual violence and abuse, and the fears and barriers that prevent victims from seeking help, exists across all communities, we were aware, from research and from what victims and survivors using our services were telling us, that the experiences for BAME women and girls may differ as they are often dealing not just with their experiences of sexual violence but also with issues of racism and marginalisation within wider society. This is further compounded by issues of gender inequality which can, within Asian communities, manifest itself through, for example, issues around honour and shame and serve to further hide abuse and silence victims.

Secondly, that whilst CRASAC is not a specialist BAME service it is the only specialist sexual violence service available to victims and survivors of sexual violence in Coventry. CRASAC's service data identified low numbers of service users from BAME groups, representing approximately 10% of all CRASAC's clients, as opposed to 33% of the population of Coventry. The need to make changes to its services to make them more accessible and appropriate to BAME women and girls was, therefore, a priority.

CRASAC's community based support has been provided via attachment to existing community groups and activities, held in locations generally perceived as neutral. Through this approach CRASAC has built up trust with victims and survivors over a period of time and we have taken numerous disclosures, safely and confidentially. This support has been consolidated by the training and availability of interpreters, information provided in 6 additional languages to English and awareness raising sessions at community events.

This approach has proven extremely beneficial in increasing access to CRASAC's services for BAME women and girls, with an increase of 24% accessing the counselling service and a 72% increase into the crisis support and advocacy service. The vast majority of these victims and survivors would not have accessed support and protection within CRASAC without the outreach service taking the time to build trust with them first.

However, while an average of 86 disclosures of sexual violence, both recent and historical, are made each year at the outreach locations, of which 90% are from South Asian women, only around 10% of these victims go on to access CRASAC's services away from the community settings.

The reason CRASAC has undertaken this research is to amplify the voices of these victims of sexual violence and abuse and to hear them tell us firsthand what prevents them from accessing their rights to support, protection and justice. The voices of those closest to them can also help us to identify what changes need to be made and who needs to make them if we are to increase access to appropriate support and justice for women and girls from South Asian communities within Coventry who have experienced sexual violence.

## AIM OF THE RESEARCH

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The aim of this research was to explore attitudes and responses to victims of sexual violence, within South Asian communities in Coventry, in order to identify:

- Barriers and fears that may prevent the disclosure and reporting of sexual violence;
- What changes and actions are needed to address the problem and to increase access to appropriate support for victims and survivors of sexual violence.

The research was conducted by CRASAC, an organization that has provided services to victims and survivors of sexual violence for more than thirty-two years. Interviews and group discussions were conducted by CRASAC's Community Outreach Worker and were made possible due to the trust and reputation for confidentiality and cultural sensitivity that has been built up over more than 5 years of working within communities in Coventry. The research was conducted between July and September 2013.

## Definitions

For the purpose of this research:

- Sexual violence was used as an umbrella term to cover the crimes of sexual abuse, rape, sexual assault and assault by penetration.
- South Asian refers to Asian or Asian British women of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or mixed South Asian origin.

## Method

As the research was exploratory it was appropriate to undertake a qualitative approach. A number of methods were employed;

- Semi-structures interviews were conducted with victims and survivors;
- Informal interviews with religious leaders or representatives;
- Group discussions within existing South Asian women's community groups;
- Questionnaires were completed by key professionals

All interviews and group discussions took place either within community locations or within CRASAC's premises. Questionnaires to professionals were sent out via email.

## Research Tool

A questionnaire was devised to structure interviews and group discussions. This questionnaire was also sent to key professionals.

## Participants

All participants involved in the research process gave their informed consent to participate in the research. They were briefed as to the aims of the research and were given an understanding of how the information they shared would be used to inform the research aims.

The identity of all victims/survivors and group members is confidential. All took part on the premise that their identity would be kept in the strictest confidence.

The range of participants was selected to try and ensure a broad and representative selection of views and opinions. 74 people took part in the research.

**13** victims and survivors of sexual violence were interviewed. All of these had or were still experiencing sexual violence within a marital context. 3 of these had also experienced childhood sexual abuse and 2 had also experienced sexual violence from within their extended family. The age range of victims and survivors was between 22 -54 years. 3 survivors were from a Muslim background, 6 were from a Sikh background and 4 were from a Hindu background.

**37** women attending 4 different community groups took part in a group discussion. 95% of group participants were from South Asian backgrounds. Age range of participants was between 20-72 years.

**12** religious leaders or appointed community representatives took part in informal interviews. 7 were from the Hindu community, 3 were from the Sikh community and 2 were from the Muslim community. All were male.

**12** professionals completed questionnaires. These professional were all working directly or indirectly with BAME communities in Coventry.

## Size and scope of the problem

The sexual violence and abuse that is experienced by women and girls in the UK is an extremely prolific and widespread problem.<sup>1</sup> The annual incidence of sexual violence reported nationally to the Police, at just below 55,000, lies between the number of strokes (60,000) and coronary heart disease (46,000). However, the majority of attacks are under-reported with only approximately 15% of victims reporting to the police.<sup>2</sup>

Coventry is an extremely diverse city, with a total population of more than 320,000. People living in Coventry are more likely to be the victims of rape and sexual assault than people living in the rest of the West Midlands and the UK as a whole. The rate of rape and serious sexual offences in Coventry is consistently in the top 3 highest in the West Midlands along with Birmingham West and East making Coventry one of three 'hot-spots' within the West Midlands. It is estimated that approximately 193,000 adults living in the West Midlands have been victims of some form of sexual violence at some stage of their adult lives - over 20% i.e. 42,460, live in Coventry.<sup>3</sup> South Asian women account for 11% of women of all ethnic groups in Coventry compared to 5% across England and Wales. The higher representation of these groups makes Coventry an entirely appropriate location to explore the issues affecting these particular groups of women.<sup>4</sup> Within Coventry women and girls from BAME communities are severely underrepresented within existing statistics on sexual violence as well as within the services available to support them. A range of evidence highlights, however, that the lower rates of disclosure and reporting does not result from any lower prevalence of sexual violence for women and girls in these communities.<sup>5</sup>

## A silent issue

Existing literature shows that social and cultural norms can discourage South Asian women from openly discussing sexual and domestic abuse.<sup>6</sup> As with many or indeed most other cultures sexual violence and abuse it is often 'taboo' or 'hidden' and people are unwilling or unable to discuss it and/or to confront the issue within the family or their community.<sup>7</sup> Indeed in many Asian languages there is not the appropriate vocabulary to describe sexual violence and abuse. In addition, research and services intended to address

sexual violence in the United Kingdom have been focused on the experiences of white, western victims and therefore in the main have not considered the complex ways in which structural inequality and prejudice impacts on South Asian women's experiences of sexual violence.<sup>8</sup> South Asian women may therefore face multiple barriers in disclosing about their abuse and in receiving support and accessing justice.

According to Shaista Gohir, Chair of the Muslim Women's Network and lead author of a recent report about the sexual exploitation of Asian girls:<sup>9</sup>

*"While we must be careful not to provide a false perception that grooming is restricted to Asian communities, cases involving Asian offenders must not be swept under the carpet either. Communities under the spotlight must accept they too have networks of paedophiles operating among them. Silence in the name of avoiding shame and preserving honour is so powerful that it is allowing men to continue operating with impunity and further fueling sexual violence against girls and women."*

From existing statistics it would be easy to collude with a view held by some communities, as found by Gilligan et al (2006) that sexual violence can be construed as a largely 'western' phenomenon, found largely, if not exclusively, in white communities.<sup>10</sup>

## Disclosure

A range of evidence highlights, however, that the lower rates of disclosure and reporting for BAME women and girls are in part a result of the existence of a range of barriers that impact on their ability to seek and to access appropriate help, support and justice.<sup>11</sup>

The experience of sexual violence and abuse are extremely traumatic and often result in feelings of guilt, self-blame, shame, and a host of other psychosocial issues, making disclosure difficult.<sup>12</sup> Research has shown, however, that disclosing sexual violence can help reduce its long-term negative consequences, which include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, social isolation, loss of self-esteem, distrust of others, substance abuse and repeat victimisation.<sup>13</sup>

Research conducted by The Muslim Women's Network, highlights how Asian girls are often reluctant to report or disclose sexual abuse because they fear that they will not be believed or that they will bring shame and dishonor to their families.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, fears about breaches of confidentiality and concern about adverse attention from their wider community are also barriers that silence many Asian victims.<sup>15</sup>

## Under-reporting

The silence surrounding sexual abuse is also attested by Baroness Haleh Afshar, in the foreword to the report: 'Unheard Voices: The Sexual Exploitation of Asian Girls and Young Women,'<sup>16</sup>

*"There has been a deafening silence concerning this group (Asian girls). In all communities victims of such violence find it difficult to report sexual abuse and seek support. Among Asians and Muslims this is exacerbated by a culture of honour and shame that is so powerful as to mask the reality of lived experiences."*

And according to Detective Superintendent David Sandall of Leicestershire Police:<sup>17</sup>

*"When it comes to faith-based communities' sexual abuse is woefully under-reported. We know it is going on but it is difficult to launch investigations when the victims and their families are refusing to talk."*

## Blocks to finding help and accessing services

Many Asian women and girls are not aware of where to go for help, or have found it difficult to access services. These difficulties arise in part from their fears about how agencies will respond and are a reflection of the varied capacity amongst professionals to respond with cultural competence. These barriers are, in turn, frequently compounded by the impact of cultural imperatives.<sup>18</sup>

Too often we 'blame' the victim implicitly for not accessing services when agencies, especially agencies that are not perceived to be 'BAME' specialist, do not

provide the services or indeed accessibility of services that are needed. In a recent report by The Muslim Women's Network, the researchers point out how Asian victims of sexual exploitation are currently being overlooked by front line agencies and little if anything is being done to identify them so they can be helped.<sup>19</sup>

Racism, no recourse to public funds, language barriers and lack of awareness of services all play a part in preventing or blocking BAME victims from being able to access services. Specialist BAME services have a significant role to play in highlighting 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. With reductions in funding, however, the availability and capacity of such services over recent years has diminished making it more difficult for BAME women to have a voice in relation to their lived experiences and needs.<sup>20</sup>

## THE EXPERIENCES AND VIEWS OF VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

13 victims and survivors took part in this research. Whilst this is a small sample it does represent a significant number for a qualitative study and enables a number of common themes and experiences to be identified.

All participants were known to CRASAC via the community based support. Reaching these women and enabling them to speak out with such honesty and courage is testimony to the trust built up via CRASAC's community based work.

### Sexual violence was hidden or ignored by families

**Almost all** (12) of survivor's first point of contact had been within their own communities. All of these said they did not get any support initially from their family. 5 said that they did get support from family at some point.

One survivor said:

*"It is widespread but it is not spoken about and was swept under the carpet by their own family members"*

Another spoke about her friend's experience:

*"Almost 9 years she experienced sexual abuse from her first cousin, who seemed to help her mum in the absence of her dad who used to go out and about for business purposes. She tried to tell her mum about her sexual abuse for several times, her mum did not believe her. She kept it secret."*

### Victims were silenced in order to protect family's reputation

**All** victims/survivors interviewed said that they had suffered in silence for the sake of the family's reputation.

One survivor said how:

*"My own family did not let me disclose my sexual*

*violence from my husband as I was emotionally blackmailed by them saying that I have a big mouth and don't think about their reputation in the community also said that by religion you have to satisfy your husband's needs."*

Another survivor had experienced sexual abuse from her husband, as well as historical childhood sexual abuse. She had sought help from her parents but each time she was sent back to her abusive husband. They would not let her disclose to other agencies or seek any help other than from family. She said:

*"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."*

One survivor told how she had been fearful about:

*"...how it would impact my family. I didn't want my parents to live with that, and had no support for me and my daughter to survive as I was told by my partner that I wouldn't get any financial support. My own parents said they couldn't afford to have me and my daughter."*

Another survivor told how:

*"I experienced sexual abuse from my partner over a long period of time. I never disclosed to anyone, partly because I feared bringing shame to my parents' and my family's reputation, partly because of the stigma of the divorce."*

One survivor spoke about how her friend was blamed for the abuse:

*"one of my friends experienced sexual abuse from her cousin, she tried to tell her mum but never believed rather she stopped going to college as she was told that she cannot follow western culture."*

One survivor identified her fears clearly.

*"My mum was worried about her family and her community more than me."*

### Fear of being rejected or disowned prevented disclosure

**The majority** of survivors interviewed (11) mentioned the fear of being disowned from family and community.

One survivor described how her fears became real when she disclosed her abuse to her family:

*"..I was disowned from my family, my own brothers and mum called me dirty, horrible looking and stupid and blamed me for bringing shame on them. I was living with that label for many years."*

Another survivor also described how she was disowned by her family:

*"I was experiencing sexual and domestic violence from my husband, and disclosed to my mum in the hope that she loves me and will protect me. Instead I was shown the main door and was told that the door is closed for me forever."*

### Victims were fearful of possible repercussions

**All** survivors interviewed were scared about what would happen to them when they disclosed.

One survivor talked about the threat and coercion that was involved in her abuse. Her immigration status was used against her, and owing to the language barrier she was unable to seek help.

*"I was forced to have sex with some of my partner's friends as he had borrowed money from them for my education."*

One survivor told how:

*"My father-in-law sexually abused me for several times and tried to rape me, I told my husband about it, but he did not believe me and as a result he slapped me on my face."*

One survivor described how she was threatened if she disclosed the abuse:

*"I was threatened with being deported back to my country of origin and if I ever try to tell anyone then they would spread rumor back home town that I am characterless and my parents did not teach me how to behave with elders."*

Another shared how:

*"I couldn't gather courage to speak to the police or professionals due to the fear of being re-victimized and experienced almost 8 years of abuse."*

### Victims were not believed or blamed for the abuse

**All** survivors interviewed said how they had experienced disbelief and many had been made to feel responsible for what had happened to them:

As one survivor explained:

*"..It is hidden as the victim is made to feel it is their fault."*

Another survivor said how she was told:

*"I was told it was my fault, that I deserved it that I was a bad omen."*

One survivor who was experiencing sexual abuse from her father-in law, told her husband about it. She wasn't believed rather she was blamed for having a sexual relationship with someone other than her husband and asked to leave.

*"..I knew no one except one of my aunty for help, but no one opened the door for me. I saw my cousins were looking through the curtain."*

### Disclosing abuse can affect marriage prospects

**4** survivors, 3 of whom had experienced childhood sexual abuse, had been worried about not being able to get proposals for marriage.

One survivor of sexual abuse described her fears. She was anxious about:

*"..how it would impact my family. I was told that my sisters will get no proposals for marriage."*

### Victims were not aware of what constitutes sexual abuse or the impact on them

**The majority** of victims interviewed (8) were unable to recognize whether it was abuse and were unaware that the impacts experienced were caused by the sexual violence.

One survivor said she had experienced abuse for more than 7 years, but had not recognized it as abuse until she started to suffer from depression. She said,

*"I learned from my mum that I have to obey my elders and husband, do not ever answer back to them otherwise they will think you haven't learnt how to behave properly."*

Another survivor shared how:

*"I thought of myself that I have to put up with the abuse as no one from my family discussed or told anything about sexual abuse and relationship. I was afraid of the consequences of disclosure on the health of my parents as they will not be able to bear the stigma of divorce."*

### Language was a barrier to disclosing

9 victims interviewed had experienced language as a barrier to disclosure.

One survivor said,

*"I was afraid of shame brought upon the family and the loss of respect and also afraid of further abuse if I disclosed, more over I was anxious that I might not be believed as a result of the language barrier."*

The majority of survivors said they didn't contact any professionals or police for help as they were not sure whether they would be understood.

### Victims were unaware of services

**Almost all** of survivors (11) said they did not know services were available to support them.

One survivor explained,

*"..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."*

Another survivor said,

*"..if I would have known any outreach service available, I did not have to suffer in silence for a long time."*

9 victims/survivors interviewed had not told anyone for more than 2 years before they disclosed and 2 for more than 5 years before they spoke out and 1 survivor had experienced abuse for more than 9 years.

### Support provided within the community helped enable disclose

**All** survivors said that support provided within the community had helped them disclose their abuse and get support.

One survivor said:

*"..I found that out there is a support available within the community and decided to disclose my sexual abuse to an outreach worker. I was living with the guilt and blaming myself for the abuse for a long time"*

One survivor said of her decision to seek help:

*"I said to myself that my situation is never going to change, rather suffering in silence. I recognized my inner strength and decided to fight back. And I got support within the group."*

Another survivor said,

*"It is easy to access support for a victim if it's within the community where victims can speak to the person in their own language"*

One survivor who had experienced sexual abuse over a long period of time and had never disclosed to anyone until recently:

*".. partly because I feared bringing shame to my family's reputation, partly because of the stigma of divorce. I was living with guilt feeling and blaming myself. Now I know from the worker that it was not my fault at all."*

Another said that following disclosure:

*"I am getting my confidence back with the help of community support."*

### Victims believe that change is needed to help victims of abuse

One survivor said that the change must start from home,

*"..Parents should love their children unconditional and if they disclose their abuse they should listen to them, believe them and support them. They should not force them to stay with the abusive partner."*

One survivor who was re victimized by her second partner believed that:

*"..if parents or community members stop thinking as marriage is not the end solution of keeping safe."*

Another survivor said,

*"..divorced women should have same respect like divorced men."*

**All** survivors identified that raising awareness of sexual violence within communities was needed.

One survivor also suggested an accessible helpline would be helpful:

*"..more awareness needed about the services and locally or nationally and language help line for the survivors whose first language is not English."*

**Some** survivors (3) believed that role model or peer mentors within communities would help to support victims and give them the confidence to disclose:

One survivor said:

*"..I never believed before that I can lead abuse free life until I met one of the survivors who shared her experiences and the support she received from appropriate agencies."*

Another said how:

*"Someone who shows me that you can tell and that victims can speak out about their abuse and get help."*

*"My mum was worried about her family and her community more than me."*

## VIEWS FROM COMMUNITY GROUPS

37 women attending 4 different community groups took part in a group discussion. 2 of these participants were community group leaders who were also interviewed individually. 95% of group participants were from South Asian backgrounds. Age range of participants was between 20-72 years.

The group participants identified some of the barriers and fears that they believe are faced by victims and survivors of sexual violence and abuse and that prevent them from getting the help and support that they need. These were identified as:

- Fear of being blamed
- Stigma
- Fear of damaging the family's reputation and honour
- Fear of being disowned, and of subsequent repercussions from the extended family and community
- Worry about the reaction of others
- Fear of not being marriageable
- Feeling ashamed
- Not knowing where to go for help
- Fear of being killed
- Forcible removal of children
- Language barriers effectively isolating the victim and allowing abuse to continue
- Not being allowed to go out without being accompanied by a family member
- Pressure of cultural expectations of appearance and behaviour
- Lack of awareness of services
- Unwillingness to admit that there are problems in a relationship
- Not believed if the perpetrator had status in the community or was a close relative.

One community group participant said that,

*"..to have sex before marriage (even if forced) is a serious crime like murder, so how can victims speak out."*

Nasreen Akter Farid, leader of a Bangladeshi women's group described how:

*"Sexual violence is hidden because people consider it as a taboo and a family matter. And the society we live in often treats abused women who cannot keep the families secret as shameless women. The women are from totally different backgrounds and are frightened to go to new places and ask help, they don't know what abuse is and if it's their right to ask help and support. Also, language is a big barrier which makes more difficult to speak out about their sexual and any other abuse."*

Dr Surinder Basu from EKTA (Unity) group told us how:

*"Victims worry about their safety and suffer sexual abuse in silence as they are afraid of the family and loss of reputation. They are worried about the torture of being outcast from the community for bringing shame to the family and so face more challenges and problems."*

In response to how victims can be supported Nasreen Akter Farid believed that support should be provided within the community:

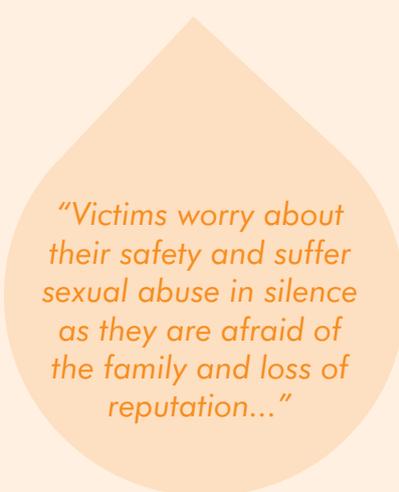
*"Only if we build up trust and confidence through attending groups within the community, where these victims feel safe to talk to and listened to. By providing information about what abuse is and how it impact upon them by trained personnel in the field of sexual and domestic violence, who understand their culture and limitations."*

Dr Basu believed that a combination of actions was needed:

*"Awareness raising within the community groups via media and qualified people around sexual violence and the support available to them. And, of course, education around sexual abuse and its consequences and the long lasting effects. Victims should not be scared of the society and parents should give priority to the children and listen to them and make them feel that it wasn't their fault."*

Dr Basu also stressed the need to empower women and children to face the situation and to discuss the consequences of not disclosing the abuse. Dr Basu wanted to say to victims on behalf of her committee members:

*"Please don't feel ashamed of what had happened to you and come forward for help and let the abusers take the responsibility of the abuse."*



*"Victims worry about their safety and suffer sexual abuse in silence as they are afraid of the family and loss of reputation..."*

## VIEWS OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS/ REPRESENTATIVES

### Representatives from the Hindu Community

Two informal interviews took place with 7 members of the Hindu Temple Society in Coventry. All committee members were male.

The committee members were receptive to discussing the issues surrounding sexual violence and how prevalent it was. They accepted and acknowledged that it was an issue that affected all communities and that sexual violence is 'everyone's problem' and so needs to be addressed. In response to the question of what message they would want to say to their own community about this one committee member (Vic), a representative voice in the group, responded:

*"Times are changing and it is time for us to change. We can't bear this. We can't bear children suffering this [sexual abuse]."*

The other committee members present nodded their agreement. Some of the committee members present had heard about sexual violence and abuse that had happened within their own community and were concerned. Following this discussion they began to discuss and to acknowledge some of the barriers and fears relating to victims not disclosing their abuse. These included:

- Fears of public exposure
- Belief that it is an internal family matter
- Potential problems with a marriage match if virginity of the woman is lost
- Fear of being out cast and disowned from the community
- Non BAME professionals "don't know the culture"

One committee member commented that for some victims:

*"Living without one's community is more difficult than putting up with the abuse."*

The committee group members were very receptive to discussing how this problem could be addressed to

help victims. They made some suggestions that they believed could help victims to disclose their abuse and to get support. One suggestion was that awareness raising and information at different religious and community gatherings could help victims to come forward and that they could help to facilitate this:

*"We have got festivals coming up. We can announce in that day if you want more information on sexual abuse you can contact CRASAC."*

They also discussed how raising awareness could help make community members more aware of this problem and have a possible preventative role with children. In response to the question of what message they would want to say to victims of sexual violence within their community the committee member known as Vic responded:

*"Come forward. Keep family values and customs on the side and come forward. We will try and support you. We can only help when you want to help yourself. We are there to support for good reason and are keen to do something to serve our community"*

### Representatives from the Sikh Community

Two informal interviews took place with the 3 committee members of a Gurudwara in Foleshill, Coventry. All committee members were male.

The committee was very open to acknowledge that sexual violence was a problem experienced across all communities and had seen recent media reports of abuse and of grooming that had concerned them. One member told us how they had shown a BBC documentary around South Asian girls being groomed at a seminar the previous Sunday in an attempt to raise awareness around the issue within their community.

They spoke about the barriers that existed within their community that they understood would prevent victims from speaking out. The particular barriers they highlighted were:

- The impact on their marriage proposals in the future (for young women)
- Family reputation
- Stigma
- A taboo subject that is not really discussed

One committee member voiced how victims,  
*“particularly from the Indian continent carry shame.”*

In response to the question of what message they would give to their community around sexual violence one member responded:

*“Keeping it a secret makes the problem worse. It can make you sick and make it worse for the girls, don’t let them suffer. We are here to help, and so is the community, the police and CRASAC are here to help.”*

In response to what message they would like to give to victims, one committee member responded:

*“You should come forward, contact the temple, contact us. We will not disclose your name. It will be confidential. We will try and help.”*

The committee members offered to support CRASAC in raising awareness around this issue and that doing this during religious gatherings when a lot of people attended would be an opportune time. The offer of taking part in a discussion on to one of the dedicated Sikh television channels was also offered in order to raise awareness of the problem.

### **Representative from the Muslim Community**

Informal interviews took place with Hafiz Ahmend, a spokesperson for the Muslim Support Unit in Coventry and with Imam Iqbal from Zeenatulislam Mosque in Coventry.

Mr. Ahmend spoke about how ‘everyone knows that it exists’ and in relation to victims disclosing:

*“It is nothing to be ashamed of or to be scared of. Face up to it with your courage and spirit and tell someone.”*

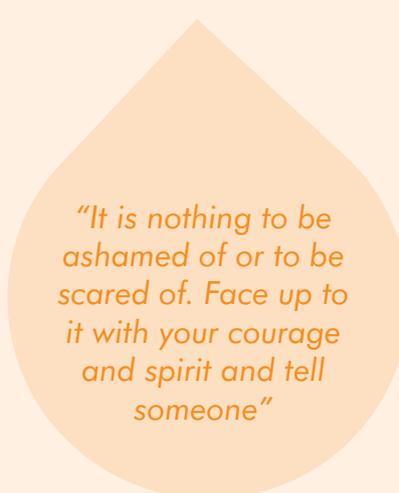
Mr Ahmed acknowledged, however, that there was still a lot of stigma attached to sexual violence and that women may still be viewed negatively as a result of being victims. He suggested that raising awareness amongst young people is needed and that schools are the best place for this to happen. He also suggested attendance at Muslim women’s groups to raise

awareness of issues and support available would be beneficial.

*“Attitudes do need to change – education can change your attitudes.”*

Imam Iqbal said in response to what message he would like to give to victims:

*“Any form of sexual violence that happens to women and girls cannot be and should not be tolerated under any circumstances. Victims should be given easy access to support without being victimized themselves. Confidence needs to be built within victims in order for them to seek the required support correctly.”*



*“It is nothing to be ashamed of or to be scared of. Face up to it with your courage and spirit and tell someone”*

## VIEWS OF KEY PROFESSIONALS

### Identifying the problem

**12** professionals completed and returned questionnaires.

7 professionals who took part in this research agreed there was a problem of sexual violence within South Asian communities that is largely hidden. 5 professionals said that sexual violence is as prevalent in Asian communities as in any other community.

One professional said,

*"It is very much prevalent but it is difficult to know to what extent as it is never vocalized. Victims are worried about the confidentiality to seek further support."*

One professional believed the lower reporting was due to a number of factors including lack of awareness of what constitutes sexual abuse:

*"Sexual abuse is often underreported due to stigma and lack of full understanding in these communities of what constitutes sexual abuse and there is a very little transparency."*

Another professional pointed out how the silence around abuse reflects cultural imperatives that relate to women's honour and respectability:

*"In a culture where there are traditions of female chastity and to be talking openly about sex is seen as a dishonorable thing and tars a woman's respectability and how she is viewed by the community."*

This was also highlighted by another professional who pointed out how victims can be blamed for the abuse and it can impact negatively on their reputation:

*"Fear of being blamed, especially if you are a woman. It will be viewed as though the victim had put themselves in that position. It could also be that as we live in a western society where many behaviors are viewed as immoral then revealing sexual abuse can be viewed as though one has taken on western values."*

One professional pointed out how victims can also be silenced through fear of reprisals and not being believed:

*"...being told not to tell, sworn to secrecy. The victim then feels ashamed, feels it is their fault, If the perpetrator is known to the victim and if the victim discloses, there is the fear of being further abused, and of not being believed as the perpetrator may have status in the community or may even be a close relative."*

Another professional also commented on the risk of further abuse if the victim discloses:

*"..the perpetrator is known to the victim and if the victim discloses."*

### Professionals views on how to address the barriers

In relation to how to address the barriers around sexual violence within South Asian communities all professionals believed that raising awareness was needed within communities.

All professionals mentioned speaking to community groups about what sexual violence is and what support is available:

*"Speak to more community groups, and make clear the concept of what constitutes abuse. Reassure them of support available.... "*

Another professional suggested a number of approaches:

*"Prevention is better than cure so we need to find out the root cause and raise awareness through parenting, talk to the boys about respecting girls and women, set up completely separate help-line of different languages and victim focus group."*

Another professional said,

*"The best solution would be for those previous victims to speak out. With the recent Jimmy Saville and other cases this is very current. Debates should be encouraged amongst women in outreach work to talk about the Rochdale and Oxford cases. Facilitation of support groups for young women in University and*

*schools to talk about the issues and understand the consequences and ask them what they think would change attitudes."*

Another professional said,

*"Start sex education and accept the fact that it wasn't their fault and tell the dangers of keeping sexual abuse secret and support them, listen to them."*

Overall professionals noted the need for more information about reporting and available services in a way that would offer victims protection from stigma associated with sexual violence.

One professional identified the need for a

*"..good support network where the victim feels it is safe to talk and where she knows that she will be listened to, and there will be confidentiality, and reassurance given that something will be done and it is not their fault. There is a need for regular support."*

What is needed according to another professional is,

*"Educating people through media, role plays within small groups in the community where people feel safe and belongingness—do talks at family events about sexual abuse and awareness."*

Almost all professionals mentioned the need for culturally and linguistically sensitive services which would help women to feel safe and understood.

*"One area I feel is missing is how agencies may not be meeting what is necessary for these women to come forward and get the support and services they need."*

4 professionals recommended that the victims who have moved on to lead successful and independent lives without fear and abuse could be role models for the victims who still are living with guilt and self blame. These role models could be very effective in empowering victims and in demonstrating there is a way out of their difficulties.

One professional commented:

*"Let them meet a few people who have received support and are now leading an abuse-free life. Get such role models to share their stories, giving others*

*in the group the confidence to speak up and seek support."*

Some also pointed out the value of the presence of representatives from respective agencies at community based events, with easily understood information, posters or leaflets in places where most women go frequently – for example beauty parlours and women's toilets.

Christine McNaught from Foleshill Women's Training Centre (FWT) summarized what they believed in their experience would be beneficial to victims:

*"There is a stigma in some BME communities around various issues, so much remains hidden and isolated. Domestic violence and sexual violence fall into this category. If women are already isolated, hidden and disempowered, it is a huge journey for them to be in a position to develop the confidence and acquire the knowledge of where to go to speak out. If women are engaged holistically into a women only, non threatening environment, they are more empowered to build the confidence to discuss issues, and to develop skills to take control of theirs and their families lives. Having peer support workers who are representative of them also helps with engagement."*

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

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### 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.

- 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

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### 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 document the issues faced by the women and girls within these communities in the UK 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.

*"... 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."*

# CONCLUSION

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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.

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