

# **“I am talking about it because I want to stop it”: child sexual abuse and sexual violence against women in British South Asian communities**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the role of socio-cultural factors in violence against women and girls, focusing on child sexual abuse (CSA) and sexual violence (SV) in British South Asian communities. Using examples from thirteen in-depth interviews with survivors, the researchers examine (i) how abusers gain access to their victims, (ii) family and community responses, and (iii) the role of cultural factors in concealing CSA/SV. The interviews demonstrate that British South Asian survivors are extremely reluctant to disclose SV/CSA due to factors that other groups of victims usually do not face, including a general taboo about discussing sex and strong cultural norms around notions of shame. These findings are contextualised in relation to a larger study that also involved community focus groups and interviews with professionals in relevant fields. Moving forwards, new culturally-specific support pathways for British South Asian victims must be developed that take account of the role that victims and their communities must play if CSA and SV are to be effectively combatted.

## **Introduction**

While black and minority ethnic (BME) women and children are just as likely as women and children from other ethnic groups to be victims of child sexual abuse (CSA), sexual violence (SV) and domestic violence, prior research (Gill, 2013; Patel, 2013;) shows that BME women, located as they are at the intersection of numerous structural inequalities, face additional issues and pressures that compound their situation. There are important differences in their experiences of abuse, and these differences influence both their responses and those of service providers. For instance, BME women and children are more likely to suffer abuse not only at the hands of partners but multiple family members (Gill, Cox and Weir, 2018). They are also more likely to experience inappropriate professional responses from statutory and voluntary agencies, including a lack of co-ordination, failures in multi-agency co-operation, high levels of stereotyping and racism, and even a reluctance to engage for fear of appearing racist (Izzidien, 2008). Misunderstanding or essentialising cultural norms, traditions and values can lead professionals to pathologise BME families – an issue that has been discussed for some time in social care literature (Qureshi, Charsley and Shaw, 2012). Indeed, professionals widely report that problems in effective service delivery for such communities are often the result of inadequate understandings of cultural features (Qureshi *et al.*, 2012).

Examining the available literature and analysing thirteen in-depth interviews with survivors of CSA/SV from British South Asian communities demonstrates that key differences in SV and CSA in these communities must be centred if support mechanisms and preventative efforts are to be more accessible and effective for these victims. Critically, support-workers

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must recognise that in South Asian communities abuse is (i) often perpetrated by a larger number of family and community members than is the norm, (ii) notions and values concerning ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ shape victims’ approaches to reporting and seeking help, and (iii) this also impacts the wider community, encouraging a culture of silence on the issue and rendering preventative efforts ineffective. Culturally-specific work that recognises these patterns is needed to better support and empower victims and their communities.

### **Violence against women in South Asian communities**

‘Sexual violence’ is often used to describe both sexual assault and sexual abuse, whereas ‘sexual abuse’ refers to any form of coerced or forced sexual interaction between an individual and another person or group. It includes any sexual act committed without the victim’s consent, even if she unwillingly submits to that sexual act and/or the perpetrator is unaware that she has not consented. While men and boys are also victims of SV and CSA, this study focuses on women and girls, who comprise the majority of victims. Between April 2016 and March 2017 it is estimated that there were 138,000 sexual assaults against men in the UK. In the same period, the number of sexual assault against women was 510,000. Thus, 73% of all estimated sexual assaults were perpetrated against women (Office for National Statistics, 2018). While the full extent of CSA remains unclear (Radford, 2017), British crime figures for the year to March 2017 show that of the 121,113 sexual offences recorded by the police, 46,947 were committed against children (Office for National Statistics, 2017). Factors such as the secrecy that often surrounds abusive situations, the shame felt by victims, the chance of not being believed, and the low likelihood of prosecution (let alone conviction) mean that few victims come forward. It is widely recognised that crime statistics significantly underestimate the scale of the problem: an issue that is compounded in South Asian communities.

Despite increasing social and professional interest in addressing SV and CSA in South Asian communities, data on prevalence remains limited. In relation to women’s rape-reporting behaviour, Ahmad, Driver, McNally and Stewart (2009) found that delayed help-seeking was common among South Asian immigrant women in Toronto, mainly due to “social stigma, rigid gender roles, marriage obligations, expected silence, loss of social support after migration, limited knowledge about available resources and myths about partner abuse” (Ahmed, Reavey, and Majumdar, 2009: 613). Other reasons for this phenomenon include victims’ economic dependency on abusers, fear of deportation (Lee and Hadeed, 2009; Mirza, 2016), and cultural concepts concerning ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ (Walker and Gill, 2019).

In the Western media, violent behaviour on the part of South Asian men is frequently portrayed as a result of the backward, fossilised communities that they are socialised into and, thus, as concomitant with their ethnicity (Ellis, 2013; Shah, 2017). This serves to marginalise all members of South Asian communities (Shah, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 2010), complicating efforts to support victims and tackle perpetrators. Nevertheless, there are differences between SV/CSA in British South Asian communities versus other British groups that must be understood if support and prevention are to be effectively delivered in these communities.

When violence occurs within South Asian families, the perpetrator is often not the victim's spouse but rather other family members and it is more likely that there will be multiple perpetrators. Also in most cases the violence is primarily aimed at asserting control over a woman's behaviour (Baxi, 2014). Patriarchal attitudes reflected in culturally-specific norms – such as arranged marriages (Meeto and Mirza, 2007), in which it is not uncommon for the bride to leave her own family and move into her husband's (and often her in-law's) home (Qureshi *et al.*, 2012) – make it difficult for victims to seek external assistance when subjected to abuse (Aghaie, 2017). In such circumstances many fear that seeking help may make their situation worse (Horvath and Brown, 2009). In these multi-generational households, while all men hold power over women, it is common for women in positions of authority (usually the mother-in-law, by virtue of her higher status in the familial hierarchy) to exert power over younger women, especially in-laws, given their status as 'outsiders' (Menon, 2009). Thus, CSA/SV is both an individual and structural form of violence in British South Asian communities in that it is for structural reasons that CSA/SV often goes unpunished: key among these structural reasons are patriarchal cultural norms, traditions and values.

In many contexts and communities, including British South Asian communities, the discourse on violence is "inextricably intertwined with constructions of sexuality and gender" (Sielke, 2009: 11). According to Brah and Phoenix (2004), a person's multiple identities are neither discrete nor explicit, but inseparable: each identity has its own unique, related form of oppression or dominance that alters when it intersects with another identity. For example, minority women face the differing oppressions that stem from being women and being from an ethnic minority. Feminism has always recognised the role of different forms of power and, importantly, the interplay between them (Anderson and Collins, 2001; Yuval-Davis, 2010). For example, feminist thinking has helped unpick both the notion of heteronormativity, which is often inherent in discourses on gender, and the ways socio-economic status can be not only a source of oppression for women but also a privilege reserved for certain women at the expense of others (Anderson and Collins, 2001). This understanding has led some feminists to explore how issues of violence that disproportionately affect BME and refugee women and girls are often treated as separate (and as somehow different) from violence against women across the rest of British society (Ferree, 2011).

As ethnicity, class and gender form the basis of systems of power and inequality; these identities affect not only individuals' lives and group interactions, but also the ability of oppressed groups to access power and privilege (Anderson and Collins, 2006). Ignoring intersectionality by emphasising only one particular identity (e.g. ethnicity), or neglecting identities altogether, does not offer a holistic understanding of lived realities. Such partial understandings also assume that groups of individuals are homogeneous: adopting a universal approach to understanding multiple forms of discrimination assumes "sameness or equivalence of the social categories connected to inequalities" (Verloo, 2006: 211). This is problematic because it masks the actual diversity of individuals and experiences evident in SV and CSA literature, as this paper shows. When examining British South Asian women's understandings and experiences of SV and CSA particular attention must be given to the intersecting socio-cultural forces at play (Anthias, 2013; Patel, 2013).

*'Honour', socio-cultural norms in South Asian communities and sexual violence*

Defining 'honour' is not as simple as it seems because it means different things in different contexts (Walker and Gill, 2019). Some academics argue that this renders it all but analytically meaningless (Oprisko, 2012), while others have claimed that it represents "ideological leftovers in the consciousness of obsolete classes" (Berger, 1970: 340). However, the importance of the notion of 'honour' is not declining in societies around the world (Walker and Gill, 2019). As an evaluative term, it can be applied (at least to some degree) to any society (Pitt-Rivers, 1966), but over time its meaning has largely become assimilated into, and its usage replaced by, alternative words, such as reputation, honesty, virtue, chastity, chivalry and bravery (Walker, 1996; 2003). The problem of defining 'honour' for academic purposes is exacerbated when it is examined in terms of how it operates across cultural, spatial and temporal boundaries. The renewed academic focus on the concept, as a consequence of an emergent awareness of the practice of so-called 'honour'-based violence (Sen, 2005), has caused interpretations to be framed primarily within cultural and spatial confines, leaving the concept largely divorced from its broader historical context. Moreover, despite feminist theorists' attempts to redress the issue, historical interpretations have primarily been constructed from a male perspective (Gill, 2013; Walker and Gill, 2019).

These definitional obstacles notwithstanding, 'honour' is usually regarded as an unwritten cross-cultural social value that limits women's psychological, sexual and physical freedoms by seeking to control their behaviour and constrict their choices (Gill, Cox and Weir, 2018; Meeto and Mirza, 2007; Patel, 2017). As Payton (2017) suggests, in most patriarchal societies the concept of honour is based on unwritten codes that promote men's control over women under the guise of respectability and protection. Thus, with regard to South Asian cultures, scholars generally define 'honour' as a family's standing within the community as viewed through the lens of the family's control of 'their' women (Meeto and Mirza, 2007; Payton, 2017) due to the fact that the actions of one member of the family are seen to reflect on all in collectivist societies. As women's conduct, especially with regard to issues concerning sex, is considered the main source of potential 'shame', there is a strong association between a woman's behaviour and her whole family's honour. Thus, guilt, honour and shame are intimately connected: if women transgress boundaries in the eyes of others, they are often considered shameful, guilty and dishonourable. This prompts dichotomised thinking in terms of what is acceptable and what is shameful (e.g. 'virgin' versus 'whore'), often leading to masculine and feminine stereotypes being encouraged in an attempt to control sexual behaviour (Baxi, 2014; Walker and Gill, 2019).

However, families provide a sense of belonging so it is not just men but also women who have a stake in preserving these bonds, even in the face of contradictions between the putative goal of family protection and the reality of violence. When 'decency' is equated with remaining 'virginal', this complicates the situation of CSA and SV survivors (Baxi, 2014), especially in communities where SV is sometimes re-cast as sexual infidelity or promiscuity – both of which are considered justification for so-called 'honour' killings (Phillips, 2010; Patel, 2017). Thus, a woman is seen to risk her family's good name by reporting CSA/SV: she is seen to have acted in a shameful manner in making the report, as well as in being a victim in the first place (Shah, 2017). Indeed, family members often fear that a daughter's

'ruined' reputation following disclosure of SV/CSA will remain an ongoing threat to their familial honour (Phillips, 2010), especially since community ostracism and family shame often transcend international boundaries (Twerski, 2015). Thus, real fears over alienation, isolation and vilification shape how South Asian women interpret their experiences of CSA and SV, and to whom they dare report these experiences. The fact that reporting is mediated by cultural variables (Ahmed, Reavey and Majumdar, 2009; Ellis, 2013), presents major obstacles in identifying victims; this, in turn, makes gathering information on SV and CSA in these communities challenging.

## Methodology

This paper draws on a larger research project that aimed to explore why British South Asian victims often do not report CSA/SV and, thus, to evaluate what more could be done to encourage reporting to the police. The larger study took a mixed-methods approach involving the use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews, with data gathered between May 2013 and June 2015. The project began by collecting general opinions on CSA/SV from women living within British South Asian communities (Harrison and Gill, 2017). There were four focus groups (two in the Midlands, one in the north of England and one in the south) involving a total of eighty-five women, as well as interviews with thirteen national grassroots organisations working with victims of SV, and a further thirteen interviews with other professionals from criminal justice agencies and government departments.<sup>1</sup>

There were also thirteen in-depth interviews with British South Asian survivors<sup>2</sup> to explore the nature of their SV/CSA experiences and the impediments to disclosure in their situations. It is this last category of data that is the focus of this paper. While this is a small sample, it was extremely challenging to identify potential participants and get them to agree to take part as a result of the sensitive – even dangerous – nature of speaking about this kind of abuse within South Asian communities. However, small samples, when doing in-depth, qualitative research to understand lived experiences (Sandelowski, 1995) are sufficient for detail-rich descriptions of complex phenomena, especially when there is a high level of coherence and agreement between participants. While a larger sample might have revealed a greater diversity of views and experiences, examining outliers is not one of the objectives of this research. Instead, the focus in this paper is to identify and explore key socio-cultural patterns

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<sup>1</sup> These included nine police officers from four areas with large South Asian communities. Two of the officers were BME. The other participants included a chief prosecutor, a high-ranking civil servant with responsibility for protecting vulnerable adults and children, a local policy officer, and a policy leader in national government.

<sup>2</sup> The terms 'victims' and 'survivors' are used interchangeably below to acknowledge that, despite the stereotypical, colonial framing of South Asian women as in need of being saved by others (Spivak, 1994), many fight against violence in their communities (Patel, 2017). Indeed, two of the survivors interviewed had gone on to help and support other sexually-abused women.

that hold true across the sample as these patterns can be used to inform efforts to support victims and develop more effective preventive strategies. Less detailed research with a larger sample would help establish the reliability and validity of these findings, but this study provides the in-depth exploration necessary to develop hypotheses worth testing further: by requiring less detailed – and less personal input – these future studies might well be able to recruit bigger samples.

To add greater analytical power, the findings of the broader study are used to contextualise the interview data, demonstrating the significant overlap between these in-depth accounts and the more general patterns revealed across the different groups of participants in the study as a whole.

### *Sample characteristics*

Eight of the women interviewed had been subjected to CSA and five had endured (or continued to endure) SV as adults. Nine had experienced either SV, ‘honour’-based violence, or a combination. All participants were of Indian or Pakistani descent. Interviews were conducted in three languages: Urdu, Punjabi and English.

Table 1

### *Demographic characteristics*

<b>Site:</b>	<b>England and Wales</b>
<b>Total:</b>	n = 13
<b>Mean age in years (range):</b>	38 (25-50 years)
<b>Religion:</b>	Sikh [n] = 6 Muslim [n] = 6 Hindu [n] = 1
<b>Ethnicity:</b>	Pakistani [n] = 6 Indian [n] = 7
<b>Perpetrator:</b>	Boyfriend [n] = 1 Brother [n] = 2 Cousin [n] = 1 Friend [n] = 1 Husband [n] = 4 Religious leader [n] = 2 Uncle [n] = 2
<b>Marital status:</b>	Separated [n] = 4 Married [n] = 3 Divorced [n] = 4 Single [n] = 2

### *Recruitment and consent*

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

Prior to participating in the study, interviewees were asked to give their verbal consent to the interviews being recorded and to extracts being published. Verbal consent was used to ensure that there was no paper-trail that could link a participant's name with the study, protecting their anonymity. As a result, pseudonyms are used in the analysis section. Participants were offered a copy of the consent form and were informed about the security measures for protecting recordings.

An inherent risk when working with participants who have experienced trauma is emotional discomfort for both participants and researchers: there is always a risk of causing unintentional harm when participants are discussing painful memories, often related to significant relationships. Therefore, to safeguard participants' well-being all interviewees were provided with a list of community resources and BME support services to which they could turn if needed. This was important with regard to ethical responsibilities, but also, in the context of feminist activism-oriented research, to ensure that participation had as many positive outcomes as possible, both in terms of supporting the participants' recovery from abuse (and, for those still in danger of SV, helping them understand their options for support) and in terms of empowering them with information about wider efforts to tackle SV and CSA.

### *Qualitative measures and analysis*

The in-depth interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured guide. Key interview topics included (i) the context of SV and CSA in British South Asian communities, (ii) who the perpetrators were in relation to the survivors (e.g. husband, family member, religious leader), and (iii) the barriers to reporting SV and CSA in British South Asian communities. Particular attention was paid to understanding how SV and CSA in these communities is perceived and responded to by victims, perpetrators, and the community.

The English-language audio recordings were transcribed by a certified transcription company and all the transcripts were entered into NVivo for coding. The first author translated the interviews conducted in Urdu and Punjabi and transcribed them for coding purposes. A grounded theory approach was used to allow an in-depth, inductive exploration of emergent themes, then codes based on the topic guides, the research aims and objectives, and the results of the grounded-theory analysis were applied to each transcript to allow content to be sorted. Open interpretive coding was then used to identify and analyse themes, both within and across topic areas.

Given that the study's core aim was to garner an in-depth understanding of experiences of SV and CSA, the analysis adhered to feminist research principles. As Hesse-Biber (2009) argues,

research as a feminist endeavour promotes “an understanding of women’s lives ... along with an appreciation of social justice and social change and a mindfulness towards the researcher-researched relationship and the power and authority imbued in the researcher’s role” (Hesse-Biber, 2009, p. 117). For these reasons, qualitative methods are often used when a more involved approach is required on the part of researchers in order to develop a better understanding of participants’ worlds. As Corbin and Strauss state, “qualitative researchers want the opportunity to connect with their research participants and to see the world from their viewpoints” (2015, p.15). Thus participants were encouraged to focus on what they believed was important, rather than being asked to respond only to predetermined questions. This provided a rich dataset (Corbin and Strauss, 2015) and allowed participants to guide the interview process and tell their stories in their own words.

## **Findings and discussion**

### *Cultural factors in reporting SV/CSA to the police*

Based on the literature, this study was predicated on the *a priori* hypothesis that significant numbers of British South Asian women and girls do not report sexual abuse to the police or other services. Our first task was, therefore, to collate data to test this supposition. Government reports including *Crime in England and Wales* and statistics from the Crown Prosecution Service are not helpful here, as, while the offender’s race is recorded, the ethnic background of the victim is not. As part of the focus group sessions, participants were therefore asked whether they thought women from their communities would report CSA/SV either to family, friends or the police. The majority of the women answered ‘no’, especially with reference to reporting to the police: this finding is echoed in the survivor interviews. While most (twelve out of thirteen) eventually reported their abuse to either family or friends, only two had involved the police, with one waiting until her parents had died before she did this. During the larger study, nine officers from four police areas were interviewed: all agreed that reports of SV/CSA from British South Asians were rare.

One barrier to reporting cited by the focus groups was a widespread belief among their communities that the police do not understand British South Asian culture. This perception was tested by asking the nine officers why they thought underreporting from this community was so prevalent: six out of nine felt that a number of factors were likely at work. However, in contrast to the focus groups, the officers cited culture as *the* most prevalent and important factor in underreporting. The focus groups also felt that the police do not understand the context-specific needs of victims from their communities. For instance, many of the women in the focus groups believed that because there are so many male police officers, they were likely to side with the men in the community, instead of believing victims’ reports (authors, 2016). This echoes the findings of other studies: a lack of culturally- and linguistically-appropriate services, language barriers and being unfamiliar with legal rights have variously been cited as reasons why South Asian women do not report abuse (Belur, 2008; Lee and Hadeed, 2009; Robertson, Chaudhary and Vyas (2016). Thus, greater community-engagement on the part of police, especially if centred on two-way communication to



improve understanding on both sides, could have a significant impact on reporting and also the general perception of the police in British South Asian communities.

### *Difficulties in discussing SV/CSA*

A recurrent finding across all parts of the study was that British South Asian women and children found it difficult to discuss their experiences of SV/CSA. One reason for this concerned language and terminology. The SV literature focused on British South Asian women is limited but demonstrates the difficulties associated with the use of English terms such as ‘rape’ and ‘sexual violence’ when working with this group. Many South Asian languages do not have analogous terms (Ahmad, 2016; Dutta and Sircar, 2013). Indeed, one study of South Asian women showed that respondents encountered significant difficulties locating adequate language to frame their responses to experiences of unwanted sexual behaviours and/or coercion (Poore, 2007; Dutta and Sircar, 2013). They knew what rape was in theory, but, as their experiences did not neatly fit common narratives about rape (e.g. that it is only rape if a victim fights with all her strength but is unable to get away), they struggled not just to identify and describe its effects but also to make sense of what had happened to them (Mandal, 2014; Poore, 2007). For instance, although all thirteen interviewees spoke of their feelings of dread and helplessness during the abuse, none could/would name the sexual acts they had been subjected to. For example, Kuljit, who was abused by her uncle from the age of nine, resorted to the euphemisms “the physical thing”, “that” and “it” when describing what was done to her.

A further complicating factor is that, within the cultural framework of South Asian communities, women’s sexual agency is suppressed through social norms relating to sexual desire, agency, blame and stigma. In addition to the shame and stigma associated with CSA and SV, this often serves to prevent women from disclosing, or even finding the language to describe, their abuse (Ahmad, 2016). This was raised by one of the police officers who saw the need to use such vocabulary, especially in court proceedings, as a limiting factor for British South Asian women. As a result, CSA and SV are both obscured and perpetuated by unquestioned, culturally-informed beliefs and assumptions about women’s bodies and roles, especially in relation to men and wider society (Ellis, 2016). Contextualising SV and CSA within a broader spectrum of relevant behaviours and customs is necessary to understand how interpretations of these experiences are influenced and informed by cultural messages about gender roles and what constitutes ‘normal’ sexuality (Ahmed *et al.*, 2009).

### *Cultural inhibitors in South Asian communities*

A culture is a highly complex system of meanings that is shared and transmitted through intergenerational channels within a society (Anthias, 2013; Garland, 2001). Such meanings are often manifested in a set of norms and beliefs that provide individuals in the relevant society with a behavioural blueprint; thus reactions to stressors can be shaped by the values of the culture to which a person belongs (Lee, 2016), as discussed by one of the women from the focus groups:

*Basically once you are married you have to listen to what the husband's side of the family say. You have to sort of give yourself to the family more or less ... it's not said but you know what's expected of you ... so if they turn around and tell you anything, you tend to give into it, you think that's the way it's supposed to be, it's a cultural thing, it's sort of expected, it's not actually taught, it's just there.*

While attitudes towards SV and CSA among South Asian communities shape individual responses, those towards sexuality in general are equally important. Hina's interview poignantly captured this point: "I was raised with 'Sex is dirty. Sex is not something that we [choose to do] – it's something you have to do.'" Similarly, Kuljit described how

*things like that are classed as dirty. If you have a boyfriend, it's dirty [and] if you fancy somebody, it's dirty, so I knew for a fact that that [the abuse] was going to be classed as dirty ... I felt embarrassed and ashamed of what was going on as well and I thought that everybody would look at me and say "Look at her".*

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

*I was really young. I didn't know what was happening at all. I had no idea, but I knew it was wrong. But I think the reason I knew it was wrong was because a typical South Asian family [is] very conservative. Neighbours comes on TV and the channel gets flicked over when ... there's a kissing scene. And [you're] just told that in the way you dress, you have to cover up, because everything's sexual. ... it's almost like you're brought up to be very de-sexualised but maybe hyper-sexualised at the same time, even as a very young child. So even as a five- [or] six-year-old, I knew those things ... It was really bizarre, so when the abuse started ... I knew this was something I couldn't talk about at all, because it was a sin. It was against the culture, against religion, against everything, and something bad would happen to me because I was the girl.*

This fear of speaking out was also emphasised by women from the focus groups. When asked what would happen if a woman did speak out, one explained that

*then you're an outcast. Basically you'd be stigmatized. People will point their finger at you ... you're just classed as "oh you know she's the 'rundee' [prostitute]". You know they'll just say things if you try and stick up for yourself.*

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

*It went on for seven years, but it wasn't just the physical thing, because, obviously, we were scared of him ... His threat was that "I am going to kill you all", but that we were going to stay alive for three days, and I used to really worry about what would happen to me in those three days. I used to think that I would rather die with everyone else because I didn't know what he would do. He was dead controlling [and] abusive to my mother as well, hitting and stuff like that, and my sisters ... I turned 16 in the March and by [the April], I just needed to*

*get away. I would never have opened my mouth when I was in the house. He was violent and my grandparents used to just say, "Forgive him, forgive him" all the time, so I saw no way [out].*

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

*He raped me, perforated my eardrum because he hit me so hard and then raped me both ways, which was horrendous. I ended up taking time off work, because my balance went [and] I couldn't stand up straight. I never told anybody about the rape. I didn't confess.*

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

*I didn't tell my mum that he raped me. ... He told my mum that "She won't let me anywhere near her". And my mum turned around and said to me that "a woman, a wife, is a man's mattress". Those were her very words to me: "You are his mattress, you will do as he wants". And that was my mum. She goes: "You've made your bed, you lie in it ... You – you are his mattress".*

In South Asian communities, gendered socialisation centres on the notion that men's sexual needs are 'natural' and that women are obligated to fulfil their husbands' physical desires. This facilitates the belief that forced sexual access to a woman is acceptable (Aghtaie, 2017); thus marital rape is often normalised, misunderstood and/or condoned, making it especially hard for survivors in these communities to discuss their experiences (Baxi, 2014; Chhabra, 2008). This point was emphasised by women in the focus groups: one told us that "a husband can do whatever he wants in the context of marriage, it's not considered a rape", while another said "it is not rape, it is a husband's right". Moreover, as Hina's case demonstrates, it is not only men who expect women to be sexually subservient but also other women, especially older women; it is common for older female relatives to encourage younger women to accept SV uncomplainingly for the sake of family harmony. Against a backdrop of such constraints, some interviewees found it safer to remain silent about their abuse for fear of also being abused by other members of the family.

Instances of CSA between children raise further questions about the possible behavioural impact on sexually curious children of suppressing discussions of sexuality in South Asian families. Many of the participants who had experienced CSA were abused by older children: it was the combination of their age and vulnerability that made talking about it difficult for them. Shazia, for instance, was abused by her older brother, but lacked the confidence to articulate and come to terms with what had happened to her until she was in her thirties. Such cases demonstrate that traditions of silence about everything to do with sex distort both girls' and boys' understandings of what is normal and healthy in terms of sexuality (Lee, 2016).

Moreover, the patriarchal nature of South Asian communities means that adult men's actions often influence the behaviour of the younger men and boys around them (Ellis, 2016; Payton, 2017). Rajinder's experience of being abused reflects this:

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

These findings are in line with previous research in demonstrating that traditional, rigid familial structures in South Asian communities discourage disclosure of SV and CSA, both within and outside families. Survivors often experience self-blame and shame, and engage in forms of justification to try to rationalise the abuse (Ahmed *et al.*, 2009) rather than risk dishonouring or disrupting the family system by revealing it (Parpart, 2010). For instance, paralleling Hina's use of the word "confess", Alia described how the potential negative consequences of revealing her abuse were bound up with the fact that she "was the girl". Linguistically, both interviewees implied that they were somehow the cause rather than the victim of the abuse. Naturally, such beliefs exacerbate the difficulties of speaking out and the fear associated with the possible consequences of doing so.

Female survivors of CSA and SV are not only faced with the task of navigating what has happened to them but are often forced to endure the refusal of members of the wider community to accept some forms of CSA/SV as abuse and/or to acknowledge the actions of abusers (Baxi, 2014). Many of the survivors interviewed had been blamed for the CSA/SV they had suffered, with much of this blame centring on the belief that the survivors had brought the abuse on themselves, as Shazia described:

*Obviously, I didn't tell anybody because I was kind of sworn to secrecy. But I felt very afraid because I was told that if I said anything that I'd obviously get in trouble. And then my mum found out, because she walked in. I think at the time he got a good hiding, and I could hear them shouting at him. And then I got a good hiding as well, and it was really twisted actually, which is how I feel about it now. Because my mum basically became very, very ... nasty and she used to say to me, even though I was that age [four or five], that it was my fault, that I did something bad and I was dirty.*

The same patterns regarding both self-blame and fear of the consequences of disclosure held across the four focus groups. One woman told us how "women have to do what they are told; if they don't do as they are told all of the consequences are their fault".

#### *The perils of disclosing SV/CSA*

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

While great emphasis is placed on the importance of disclosure of SV and CSA to the police, partly to bring perpetrators to justice, potentially preventing future crimes, and partly as a form of empowerment and healing for victims, disclosure in itself can become a source of trauma or exacerbate existing trauma (Ullman, 2010). CSA and SV do not end with the abuse itself because revelation and concealment both carry consequences. Revealing CSA/SV can, as Zakar, Zakar, and Abbas (2015) note, threaten or disrupt the unity and maintenance of the family. Here, South Asian notions of collectivism can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the realisation that a family member has experienced CSA/SV can mobilise considerable loyalty and support from other family members; on the other, the victim may be blamed, punished or ostracised (Baxi, 2014). Thus, the victim may feel obliged to sacrifice herself by concealing the abuse in order to avoid ‘dishonouring’ the family. As one of the charity workers told us during the interviews with professionals, “revealing SV is like squeezing out toothpaste. Once it is out it will never go back in”. It was partly for this reason that Harminder did not disclose her experience of CSA to her family but to a teacher and then to social services.

*Two social workers came over to the school [after the teacher reported the abuse to them]. They were really lovely. ... I think they said: “You’re over 16 but you’re under 18 so obviously we’ve still got a duty of care, but you’re old enough to think about how you want to talk to them [her parents] ... We think it would be safer if we didn’t tell them anything right now, because we don’t know what the housing situation’s like there.” Because my [cousin – the abuser] ... and his wife were living with us as well. They then went to see Mum and Dad [and] didn’t tell them anything and I think my teacher went as well and, actually, social services then came back with a bag because they basically told me that “We’re going to take you into foster care for a little bit ... of respite.”*

As Harminder’s case shows, even social services can be reluctant to disclose CSA to the victim’s family, often for safeguarding reasons. While the majority of the interviewees decided not to reveal the CSA/SV they had experienced to their parents, it is worth noting that some parents who were told ensured that the abuse stopped, though all stopped short of reporting the offender to the authorities. As South Asian girls and women are socialised to value an idealised notion of women as silently self-sacrificing, participants across the range of ages represented in the study said victims from their community were unlikely to seek help from the police in relation to CSA and SV.

The social stigma around the subject meant that eleven out of thirteen interviewees initially either tried to deal with the abuse on their own or believed that doing so was their only option; they were disinclined to seek help and support if doing so meant revealing their abuse, as they considered this too dangerous in terms of the potential consequences, including gossip within the wider community, stigma and ‘honour’-based violence. Another factor was the possibility of family members disbelieving them, with one woman from the focus groups explaining that

*If you say that something like this has happened with, for example, your father-in-law, then no one can believe this, because this is a respectable relation. Our community is such that they will not believe in such an occurrence. It would result in the breakdown of the marriage.*

Such concerns were prevalent for both CSA survivors and women who were sexually abused as adults. All the women who took part in the study were deeply concerned about anonymity and asked for their identities to be disguised so that there could be no association between them and the experiences they were recounting. Such concerns about anonymity are warranted, as Harminder's interview revealed:

*Even if there was a South Asian women's organisation ... I'd be scared of going there, 'cause ... somebody might know me – know my family – so [for] reporting things, there was a real issue of confidentiality. In my head, there wasn't such [a] thing as confidentiality.*

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

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

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

*In the Asian community, they don't talk about it. They don't even think that it exists. What they say – which I can't believe – is that "It doesn't happen to us; it happens to white people, because that's what they are like. It doesn't happen to Asian people – no Asian person ever gets abused."*

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

Although Kuljit yearned to make her mother aware of the sexual abuse to which she was being subjected, she felt incapable of speaking out. This silence took a considerable toll on her; she went on to confide in her interview that she began rebelling and even thought about suicide when she became overwhelmed with difficulties after leaving home. Although there was no consensus among participants regarding mothers' reactions to disclosure, the negative effects of disbelief have been documented elsewhere (Plummer, 2006). Being believed is often found to be the most important issue in disclosure to loved ones: a negative reaction often results in a strained or even estranged relationship (Plummer, 2006). However, several

factors influence the level of support a mother can offer in South Asian communities. For example, there may be a lingering ambivalence about the perceived acceptability of SV/CSA, particularly if the larger familial and/or community system espouses more conservative values (Valentine, 2017). One of the women in the focus groups explained that if a woman spoke out about SV then the community would think that her mother had not raised her properly; thus, mothers often encouraged silence about abuse not just to protect their daughters' reputation, but also their own. Similarly, a victim's likelihood both of reporting this kind of abuse and of seeking help may be influenced by values and opinions regarding what constitutes SV/CSA, what influences it and what 'justifies' it.

### *Who to tell*

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

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

These findings support previous studies in other contexts, including research by Robertson, Chaudhary and Vyas (2016) involving 425 South Asians living in the United States; this study also demonstrated that disclosure of CSA was impeded by cultural and familial stigma. Thus, when asked what reaction women would receive if they did tell someone, the focus groups largely argued that "[it] may be she will get told off by somebody, why you telling somebody, this does not look good for our family" and that "People will raise questions about the attitude and the character of the girl as well".

These issues regarding who to disclose to are complicated by those concerning physical location, which can be a major barrier to accessing support. For example, one NGO staff-member interviewed as part of the broader study described how she had gained the trust of a victim, but when she made an appointment for the survivor to come to the NGO's offices, she said she could not go because a male relative lived close by and would tell the rest of the family. Other charity-worker interviews explored the fact that many women were restricted in terms of the buildings they were allowed to frequent. Moving forwards, best practice and policy documents must recognise that the physical location of support services is a key factor in whether a woman is able to seek help.

The complexities of seeking help in response to CSA/SV can be likened to an intricate labyrinth consisting of forces that are intertwined and interdependent, yet conflicting (Smith, 2017). For many survivors these conflicting and often negative forces make them feel helpless to find a way to disclose safely. For instance, Bushra waited until her parents died to disclose the CSA to which an *imam* (religious leader) had subjected her:

*It's only been in the last two years that I have reported it. Because I've had the love and support of my partner now. He obviously believed me and encouraged me to go to the police.*

*First, he wanted me to get help, to get counselling. Afterwards we talked about going to the police and it was only because I had his support. If I never had his support, then I would never have done it.*

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

*When I first told my Dad, [he] walked out of the room and then I thought, "God that's it, that's it. I'm going to be booted out of the house now. I'm going to be homeless." I was thinking the worst-case scenario and then a minute later, [he] came back and put his arm around me and basically said: "I believe you. You don't have to tell us anything." And it was just obviously that shock. I wasn't expecting that at all.*

The number of barriers to disclosure are demoralising for those who wish to name their abuse, shame its perpetrators, and/or seek some sort of redress and closure (Beckett *et al.*, 2016). When discussing the lack of professional support services for SV and CSA survivors, all thirteen interviewees spoke at length about the changes needed. Many talked about the importance of emotional, financial and material aid from family members and the larger community, echoing findings from the focus groups and interviews with professionals. However, there is a real tension within British South Asian communities between the postcolonial critique of how British statutory services sometimes seem to conceptualise their work with regard to South Asian victims as "saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1994: 93) and the values of the communities within which 'brown women' live in terms of who victims feel they can safely disclose to. While British South Asian survivors may be reluctant to disclose their abuse to 'outsiders', it is sometimes equally or more problematic to go to a community-run organisation because of fears that confidentiality will be breached, as Harminder argued. Although several participants echoed Alia's belief that it is imperative for survivors "to have a voice to speak out themselves", the difficulty is in making that possible given all the barriers to disclosure that South Asian women and girls face.

Despite these very real pressures, some of interviewees who disclosed to their families, including Bushra and Alia, were eventually given the support they needed to rebuild their lives. Lessons need to be learned about how to enable more victims to seek and access support – and even play a role in bringing about the wide-scale changes necessary to eradicate SV and CSA. Empowering survivors to be part of preventive efforts is an important aspect of recognising their agency and helping them regain a sense of personal power. Indeed, Sukveer told us that she took part in the study to be an agent of change and offered an insight into how progress might be achieved:

*The reason that I am talking about it is because I want to stop it. More people should come out with their stories and [having] more people come out with it [will mean] the people who are doing it will be more hesitant, because, in our culture, they know that nobody talks about it. They know that they won't say, so they take advantage of this. They know that the position*



*that they are in [means] no-one is going to question them and they can turn it around and say “I know who they are going to believe.”*

## **Conclusion**

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

As the findings of this small-scale exploratory study indicate, many British South Asian women and girls chose to remain silent about CSA and SV. This decision is primarily motivated by a desire to ensure family unity and to maintain their family’s and their own ‘honour’. This concurs with the findings of the broader study and with the literature to date. However, the fact that South Asian women often do not disclose in order to avoid the stigma associated with ‘going public’ frequently causes further marginalisation and victimisation. If CSA and SV in British South Asian communities is to be eradicated, rather than covered up, it is important (i) to identify ways to help survivors overcome barriers to support, both within the family/community and the charity and statutory sectors, and (ii) to understand best practice for providers working with these communities to maximise the effectiveness of protection, prevention and support efforts. Simple measures like considering the physical location of support services will go some way towards this, though there are also complex challenges like fostering two-way communication between South Asian communities and the police to improve understanding on both sides.

Ultimately effective prevention of CSA and SV in British South Asian communities depends on addressing the cultural circumstances that perpetuate it, including through enabling it to remain hidden. This means confronting the use of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ to control women’s behaviour, as well as the widespread narratives that lead to victim blaming, both about SV/CSA and about disclosure. One of the NGO staff-members interviewed in the broader study gave examples of how to achieve this, including holding pre-marriage meetings with couples and sending charity staff-members to speak in Friday prayers and sermons (Harrison and Gill, 2018). Support services also need to play a role in addressing the specific socio-cultural and intersectional context of CSA/SV in British South Asian communities. A multi-layered, integrated approach is necessary to help victims rebuild their lives, but this will necessitate involving the broader community in combatting the causes of SV and CSA. This is only likely to happen if more survivors speak out, like the brave participants in this study.

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