Policing the Culture of Silence: Strategies to Increase the Reporting of Sexual Abuse in British South Asian Communities

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Abstract

The policing of black and minority ethnic communities have a chequered history, with institutional racism, over policing and under protection being rife. While there have been several studies completed on policing and race, very little has looked at the intersectionality of race, gender and policing. Taking into account relevant literature which suggests that aspects of community policing may still suffer from institutional racism and based on original empirical research, this article attempts to contribute to a small literature base by concentrating on the low level of sexual abuse reporting from South Asian women and in particular on how four British police force areas currently respond to sexual abuse incidents where the victim is a member of the British South Asian community. In addition to evaluating these police responses we explore what more can be done by the police and other organisations to help increase the sexual abuse reporting rates from this and other ethnic groupings.

Keywords: sexual abuse reporting rates; South Asian women; police practice; multi-agency working

Introduction

The number of sexual offences reported to the police in England and Wales, over the last few years, has steadily grown, with consistent increases being seen in every quarterly analysis since March 2013. In September 2015, for example, there was a rise of 36% in the reporting of all sexual offences, with reported incidents rising from 73,003 in 2014 to 99,609 in 2015 (Office for National Statistics 2015). This again rose in 2016, although at a slower rate of 12% to 112,021 (Office of National Statistics 2016). While there is no clear explanation for this growth, possible factors include not only a rise in the reporting of historical offences and an improvement in the way police record crime, but also an increase in the readiness of victims to report sexual abuse (Office for National Statistics 2016). Despite such increases it is nevertheless accepted that only a small proportion of sexual crimes are actually reported. In terms of the most serious sexual offences, i.e. rape, attempted rape and assault by penetration,

it is thought that only 15% of female victims make a complaint to the police (Ministry of Justice, Home Office and the Office for National Statistics 2013). Other reports put the figure between 6 and 18% (Myhill and Allen 2002, Stern 2010). Official statistics relating to the reporting of sexual violence therefore represent only a very small proportion of the abuse perpetrated in England and Wales.

While this limited representation applies across all British regions and communities, this article attempts to contribute to a small literature base by concentrating on the low level of sexual abuse reporting from South Asian women and in particular on how four British police force areas currently respond to sexual abuse incidents where the victim is a member of the British South Asian community. Taking into account relevant literature which suggests that aspects of policing may still suffer from institutional racism, this article explores what happens when the added dimension of gender is also added to the mix. Set against this background we question why British South Asian women do not report sexual abuse to the police and consider what more can be done to encourage increased reporting in this and other black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.

The current literature

In terms of the current literature there are two pertinent areas. The first is the relationship between the police and BME communities and the second is why women in general and British South Asian women in particular fail to report sexual abuse. This will be discussed below.

Policing minority ethnic communities

While there should be no difference between the service the police provide to any citizen, research has consistently shown that those from "Asia, Africa and the islands of the sea" are less satisfied with their experience of the police than those seen to be white (Bowling *et al.* 2008, p. 611). This can be traced back to the police's involvement in immigration checks in

the 1960s and 70s which led to decades of "racism, stereotyping and discrimination" (Phillips and Bowling 2017, p. 198). In 1999 the Macpherson Report (1999) looked at how the police had handled the death of Stephen Lawrence (a black teenager) and labelled the police as institutionally racist. Furthermore in 2014, it was revealed that the Metropolitan Police had used an undercover police officer to 'spy' on the Lawrence family at the time of the Macpherson inquiry (Ellison, 2014). While there have been subsequent changes to policies and practice, areas of concern still include deaths in police custody, especially in relation to black suspects; the inappropriate use of Tasers and restraints; and, the overuse of stop and search powers (Phillips and Bowling 2017). In 2002, for example, Asians were six times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than their white counterparts, with black people 27 times more likely to be stopped (Phillips and Bowling 2017). Such experiences have led to a general distrust in the police, with BME communities often being over policed and under protected. While such tensions may have slightly improved with an increase in the number of BME police officers, a feeling that the police are racist still remains in many BME communities.

To date, most of the literature on race and policing has focused on issues such as stop and search, arrest, racial stereotyping and disparity in sentencing and prison populations (for example see Kochel *et al.* 2011). There has been very little however on how the police work with female abuse victims from BME communities, i.e. the intersectionality between policing, race and gender. The relationship between the police and BME victims and in particular, for this study, with South Asian women is therefore fundamental. With reference to South Asian victims there have been a small number of previous studies but these have largely focused on domestic violence rather than sexual violence (Choudry 1996, Adams 1998). Belur (2008, p. 427) for example, argues that Asian domestic violence survivors 'suffer a double disadvantage – first, inadequate services provided by the police to victims of domestic violence in general,

and second, current policing arrangements [which] are unable to cater to their differing needs on account of their ethnicity'. Moreover Mama, with reference to black women, highlighted three major areas of concern: 1) the women's reluctance to ask the police for help; 2) abusive attitudes displayed by the police towards the women; and, 3) the reluctance of the police to fully enforce the law (Mama 1989 cited Belur 2008). Furthermore, Brown (2000 cited Belur 2008) argues that many male police officers view domestic violence as 'rubbish' work with the perception being that such 'emotional labour' should be carried out by female officers (Belur 2008, p. 429). In short there is a basic lack of trust and confidence in the police with how they will deal with South Asian women with Belur claiming that this is due to a 'combination of possible intentional discrimination on the part of some officers and unwitting racism on the part of the majority' (Belur 2008, p. 430).

Moreover in May 2012, nine men from the Rochdale area of Manchester were found guilty of sexually exploiting underage girls. Similar cases have also been highlighted in Preston, Rotherham, Derby, Shropshire, Oxford, Telford and Middlesbrough, with the media framing these cases as ethnically motivated. While these cases shed some light on the broader problem of child sexual exploitation which is apparent across Britain, they also and importantly, reveal continuing misconceptions that stereotype South Asian men as 'natural' perpetrators of sexual abuse due to culturally-specific notions of hegemonic masculinity (Gill and Harrison 2015). This negative viewpoint has been further perpetuated by recent political focus on rape culture from within the Indian sub-continent which was arguably highlighted by the horrific Delhi gang rape of Nirbhaya in December 2012. The name Nirbhaya, meaning Fearless, was given to the woman by the media as it is against the law in India to name a rape victim. This arguably drew the world's attention to the prevalence of sexual assault in India. These cases may be relevant for two reasons. First they may discourage South Asian women from reporting sexual abuse to the police on the premise that the police are already unfairly

prejudiced against South Asian men and they do not want to further contribute to this unfair image. In this situation it may be that South Asian women, in the face of a stressor event, prioritise their South Asian identity over their identity as women. Second due to the creation of the 'folk devil' image of South Asian men (Gill and Harrison 2015) it creates further distrust of those in authority.

Rape reporting behaviour

With reference to low sexual abuse reporting rates, there are often multiple and complex reasons for people deciding not to report sexual abuse to the police, with these differing between individuals. These include finding reporting 'embarrassing', thinking the police will not do much to help and believing that the incident is 'too trivial or not worth reporting'. Others may view the offence as a 'private/family matter and not police business' (Ministry of Justice, Home Office and the Office for National Statistics 2013, p. 6). Hohl and Stanko (2015) state that barriers to rape reporting include a lack of trust in the criminal justice system and police; a fear of not being taken seriously or being believed; and, fear of 'feeling "raped all over again" by the way the police question both the victim and their account' (Hohl and Stanko 2015, p. 327). Similar findings have also been documented in the Stern Report (Stern 2010) and in other academic studies (see Brown 2011, Myhill and Allen 2002). Evidence has also suggested that it is not uncommon for women to delay in their reporting of sexual abuse (Adler 1987, Ellison 2005) and that a traumatic event, such as rape, can actually impair rather than enhance the performance of memory (Tromp *et al.* 1995). In addition, it is worth noting that not all victims find it necessary to report their abuse to the police in order to move forward. As mentioned above, some may feel that the criminal justice system will simply re-victimise them, while others may believe that they can best gain help through counselling and other support services.

In terms of rape reporting behaviour for South Asian women, Ahmad *et al*. (2009) found that in their study of South Asian immigrant women in Toronto, delayed help-seeking was common with the dominant reasons for this being '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' (Ahmad *et al*. 2009, p. 613). Other reasons cited for South Asian women include economic dependency on the perpetrator, fears of deportation (Lee and Hadeed 2009, Mirza 2016); and the cultural concepts of honour and shame (Gill 2004). Anitha (2011, p. 1276) also explains how in her study South Asian women were reticent to speak out about sexual abuse due to 'their understanding of dominant moral codes within their community which seldom blamed men for their abuse and for fear of being disbelieved or the shame a disclosure would bring on *themselves* [emphasis in original]'.

Other research has looked at why victims withdraw from the criminal justice process once a report has been made. One Home Office report highlights that the two most cited reasons are that victims do not wish to go through a court hearing and/or just want to move on (Feist *et al*. 2007). Other contributory factors to such a decision include whether or not the victim has been injured, the victim-offender relationship and the police area in which the offence was committed, with some police areas more successful than others at reducing the likelihood of a victim withdrawing (Feist *et al*. 2007). Furthermore, Hohl and Stanko (2015, p. 327) state that trust between the police and victim is easily lost when officers 'communicate disbelief and disrespect or when the victim loses faith in the police' to investigate. Issues of trust and confidence in the police are again significant.

Methodology

The fundamental arguments in this article are based on empirical data collected as part of a larger project which looked at the barriers preventing women in British South Asian communities from reporting sexual abuse. The basic assumption was that, despite low reporting rates, sexual abuse in British South Asian communities was occurring but was not being reported to the police. The research, therefore, had two aims: first, to discover why British South Asian victims do not report sexual abuse and second to evaluate what more could be done to encourage increased reporting. Data collection for the project took place between May 2013 and June 2015.

The larger study took a mixed methods approach which involved the use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews. To gather general opinions, we began by holding four focus groups with women living in British South Asian communities. Two were held in the Midlands, one in the North of England and one in the South. Focus groups were selected in the belief that they would not discriminate between those who could and could not speak English and that they would also encourage participation from women who may have been reluctant to be interviewed on their own or who might otherwise have felt they did not have anything relevant to say (Kitzinger 1995). In total, approximately 85 women participated in these sessions. Not everybody in each group spoke. However, given the extreme sensitivity of the subject matter, some lack of participation was understandable and expected; justifying the use of larger than normal groups. While some women spoke more than others there were not individuals who dominated any of the discussions. Across the four groups there was a good mixture of women in terms of age, generation, ethnic origin (Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi) and whether or not they had been born in the UK, had arrived with their spouse or had entered on spousal visas. However, to aid with confidentiality specific details of the women in these groups were not recorded and comments made were not tabulated against

characteristics such as age, generation, family histories of migration or settlement. Unfortunately this suggests a rather homogenous view of the women, even though we know that this is not the case. Indeed the perceived cultural homogeneity of South Asian women has been challenged for some time; with the fact that South Asian women are not all in need of being saved by others evident through activist and support charities such as Southall Black Sisters and Apna Haq (Patel and Bard 2010; Gill 2010).

The focus groups were not set up by us. Rather they were pre-existing groups of women who already met regularly, and who had agreed to speak. Two of the four were community based: one a knitting group which met in a local library and the other a women's group which met for weekly coffee mornings. The other two groups were formulated by women's support charities (NGOs), which we were working with as part of the larger project, to offer further support to survivors of sexual abuse. The NGOs therefore arranged all of the focus group meetings. Participants were not asked to identify whether they themselves had been victims of sexual abuse, although, through listening to their responses, it was clear that indeed several had been. All members of the focus groups had our project explained to them by the NGO contact prior to us meeting them and again by us before we began the conversation. Any disclosures of unreported abuse which were made during our discussions were made in the presence of NGO workers so that if appropriate the women could be offered support.

To supplement these general opinions, we also interviewed 13 British South Asian survivors of sexual abuse, 13 NGOs working with survivors of sexual abuse (Harrison and Gill 2017) and 13 other professionals from criminal justice agencies and government departments. We believe that it is important to refer to these women as survivors of sexual abuse rather than as victims as this conveys a better sense of strength and hope. It also acknowledges that despite the stereotypical and colonial production of South Asian women as in need of being saved by others (Razack, 2004) there are some who are willing to stand up and fight against

patriarchal/male violence from within their own communities (Patel and Bard 2010). Indeed two of the survivors interviewed had gone on to help and support other sexually abused women.

Data from the police were collected through interviews with nine police officers from four police areas, all of which had relatively high South Asian populations, with the analysis in this article focusing mainly on these nine interviews. To supplement these responses, one Chief Prosecutor, one senior civil servant (with responsibility for protecting vulnerable adults and children) and a policy officer were also interviewed. While acknowledging that this small scoping study cannot be considered to fully represent the views of the police in general, it does offer a snapshot that represents the views of a few professionals at a specific time. To ensure confidentiality, police areas and ranks are not reported.

All the focus groups and interviews were recorded with the express permission of the participants. Expert language technicians provided translation when a participant did not speak English. All recordings were transcribed verbatim and the data imported into NVivo 10. The data were coded into nodes and then sub-nodes to allow themes to emerge. For the purpose of the research, the term 'South Asian' was used to refer to (i) people born in the Asian sub-continent (i.e. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) and (ii) people of South Asian heritage born in Britain. To acknowledge that these groupings belong to the British community while still being connected to their original and historic roots, the phrase 'British South Asian' is used throughout.

The underreporting of sexual abuse in British South Asian communities

From the outset, this study was predicated on the assumption that significant numbers of British South Asian women do not report sexual abuse to the police. Our first task was, therefore, to collate data to test this supposition and to evaluate whether our supposition was correct. Government reports and statistics did not prove helpful here as while the offender's race is

recorded in these documents, the ethnic background of the victim is not. Consequently, the conclusions presented here rely largely on evidence from police officers and those women spoken to in the focus groups. While this may raise questions of validity, our findings do support those of other similar studies (Bauer *et al* 2000, Bui 2003, Lee and Hadeed 2009). As part of the focus group sessions, the participants were asked whether they thought women from their communities would report sexual abuse either to family, friends or the police. The majority of the women answered 'no', with this answer coming through more emphatically with reference to the police. The correctness of this opinion, in relation to the police, was also supported by the answers received from the 13 interviewed survivors. While most (12/13) had reported their abuse to either family or friends only two had involved the police.

The police painted a similar picture, with a general consensus that reports of sexual abuse from British South Asians were rare. One claimed that there had always been 'underreporting from the South Asian community' and said that the local Sexual Abuse Referral Centre had also identified 'huge discrepancies'. Another officer noted that there was 'very little reporting within domestic relationships' in their area and went on to describe recording from Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian communities as 'negligible'. Another said they did not 'think a lot of people come forward from South Asian communities' and that sexual abuse was 'massively underreported'. This belief was also shared by other officers who spoke of 'less referrals from the South Asian community', with one officer describing sexual abuse within British South Asian communities as a 'blind spot'. Despite this dearth of reporting, all officers noted that sexual abuse was occurring within their South Asian communities. One officer summarised the situation: 'It's as prevalent as it is with any other community'. Another argued: 'We know it happens. It happens in the family, it happens online, it happens in institutions, places of worship, it happens in the street . . . I have no doubt that it is as prevalent in Asian communities as it is in any other'. The assumption of the research that

British South Asian women are unlikely to report sexual abuse, especially to the police, would therefore appear to be correct.

Reasons for underreporting

Having established that a problem existed, the study's next step was to discover why sexual abuse was not being reported to the police. Discussions held during the focus groups revealed that the reasons lay largely in the women's perceptions of the police; which ties in with the trust and confidence issues cited in the literature above. The women's perceptions centred on three areas: 1) who the police were; 2) misunderstandings of culture and cultural needs; and, 3) trust.

Who the police are

One of the commonest viewpoints held by the focus group was that the police would all be men. Although the police in England and Wales are not representative of the general population in terms of gender or race, police officers are not all men and of interest, eight of the nine officers interviewed were female. In the year to March 2016, 28.6% of all officers were female. Furthermore, 31.2% of all new recruits into the force were female. For the same time period, 5.9% of all officers were BME, with a 12.1% BME representation in terms of new recruits (Home Office 2016). Nevertheless, officers understood that many female victims would assume the police were men: 'I can understand that they see men. The police are mainly men; it's all men in their family, so that's what they expect'.

Understanding culture

Another barrier the focus groups cited was the belief that the police did not understand the British South Asian culture. This perception was tested by asking officers why they thought underreporting from this community was so prevalent. Many of the interviewees appreciated

that a number of factors were likely at work. However, in contrast to the women's perceptions, the officers cited culture as *the* most prevalent factor influencing underreporting.

> They would rather not involve the State; they would [prefer to] deal with it themselves in some way, shape or form. They simply just grin and bear it and live with it . . . If you were forced into marriage, for example, you have a life of abuse and child protection issues, and God knows what you are going to be subjected to. And you are meant to cope with that and live with that because that is your lot. I don't believe any of that, but the point is that's exactly how many communities and family dynamics exist.

Culture was also the reason given by another officer who said that they thought that 'for certain communities, including the Asian [ones], their culture, their tight knit family background – almost the Victorian ethos – is their Achilles heel'. This point was neatly summed up by another officer: 'It is a culture of silence . . . They'll never say anything'.

In terms of culture, honour (*izzat* in Urdu) is arguably one of the most significant facets of South Asian culture with honour generally seen to reside in the bodies of women (Coomaraswamy 2005). In honour-based societies, the husband is defined as the head of the family and defender of its honour. As such, men are expected to protect their family, particularly its female members, against any behaviour that the community might consider dishonourable or humiliating (Cowburn et al. 2015). If this does occur, honour is replaced by shame (*sharam* in Urdu, for more on the concepts of honour and shame see Welchman and Hossain 2005, Husseini 2009). All the police officers interviewed recognised the existence and importance of both honour and shame as key factors behind the failure of women to report sexual abuse. One officer explained how 'issues of honour and shame clearly play a part . . .

[they] are ingrained deeply in the South Asian communities particularly . . . [and] are significant barriers'. Another spoke of how the issue of honour is so deeply entrenched that mothers think: 'My reputation – the reputation of my family – is dependent on not reporting this matter'. Other officers acknowledged the threat of shame:

> I've actively seen where a female is . . . married into a family [and] her whole support system is being catered [to] by that family. The shame that you'll bring on them is immeasurable. "Don't do it" I think is perhaps what they are being told.

> Their culture is about shame and dishonour and it's shameful even [to] talk to the police, let alone describe what's happened to them.

Family and community

Acknowledging that the family and the community both play an important and significant role in the culture of British South Asians, many of the police officers in this study recognised that this cultural aspect prevented some victims from coming forward to report abuse. One officer commented that British South Asians often 'keep it within the family' and explained that 'very strong family ties' led to the reluctance of some victims to pursue criminal convictions. Their reluctance to speak out was also coupled with a concern that if they put pen to paper, they would become instrumental in convicting their husband or uncle or second cousin. Thus, it was recognised that, driven by cultural values and family pressure, many British South Asian victims simply kept their abuse to themselves. As one (South Asian) officer put it:

> It is just expected, particularly the pressure from our parents, [that] even though we might not want to follow [it], the pressure from the wider family [is that we should]

deal with things ourselves and [that] we don't need to do it the British way, which would be, say, through the police.

Consequently, many officers believed that family pressure was one reason why many victims who had initially reported incidents to the police later retracted their statements. The case below demonstrates this belief:

So we have a girl who reports at school that she's been raped and sexually assaulted for many years by her father. Mum knew about it and, in fact, was party to it. Mum and Dad get arrested. Child gets placed with another family member . . . when we go back the next day to do further work, because she's already given a video interview that night disclosing horrendous incidents of assault over many years, family members have been round to that address and spoken to that child who is now saying she wants to retract. She's been approached at school by other family members and told to retract . . . She's been pressurised into saying it should be kept within the family; it's too shameful to be brought outside. And she's been given gifts now, a new Blackberry phone and cash . . . [There are] other cousins and family members who go to that school and her older brother's been seen outside the school gates.

Such findings mirror the work of Yoshioka *et al*. (2003) who found that where South Asian women disclosed abuse to brothers and fathers they were often advised to stay in marriages and keep the matter within the family.

The above extract also provides an insight into the control, noted by many officers, that British South Asian families have over women. This mirrors the findings of Lee and Hadeed (2009). One officer stated: 'They've got no support network; they perhaps haven't got a job;

they haven't got any finances that they can rely on and so what husband says, and what husband's family says, goes'. Another officer spoke about what they termed as the 'real 1950s views around it. I think that's very much in play in South Asian communities, coupled with the fact that they are often so reliant on their sole provider and their families for support, they are not going to say anything'.

Another problem for some British South Asian females was an inability to access support: many victims simply do not know where to go to get support. As one officer put it:

> There'll be families, won't there, who are ostracised and don't know how to . . . They can't just pick up the phone can they? They might not be allowed out of the house. They might not know how to tell somebody; [they] just don't know where to go and where to seek that advice from.

In addition to family pressure, fear of the consequences of going against family wishes and reporting sexual abuse to the police may offer another explanation of why British South Asian victims choose silence. As one officer pointed out, speaking out can result in 'physical risk – and so why would she [report]? Why would she put herself at even greater risk?' Another officer emphasised the role of consequences, describing what they saw as the difference between white and British South Asian communities:

> The distinction I make and it might not necessarily be right, but people tend to fall out over matters within the white British community, or what you might call it, but don't tend to take any retribution, in my experience. Whereas I tend to find there is a very real live threat of retribution within the South Asian community.

Retribution of this kind can include ostracism from family and the community, disadvantaged marital prospects, or, at the other end of the spectrum, forced marriage and HBV (Gill 2004). Pressure can come from the community at large as well as the family. One officer recounted a case where the offender's family knocked on the door of the victim's family and said: 'Tell your daughter . . . not to carry on. You know this will be sorted within our community'. In this particular case, the police also thought that a local councillor was involved in trying to keep the matter away from the police.

Understanding cultural needs

In addition to believing the police would not understand South Asian culture; the focus groups also thought the police would not understand their needs. Lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate services, language barriers and being unfamiliar with legal rights have all previously been cited as reasons why South Asian women do not report abuse (Belur 2008, Lee and Hadeed 2009, Anitha, 2011) and so such a response from the women was not unexpected. The police responses did, however, display some awareness of these issues. For example, some officers cited the issue of language as another potential barrier to adequate reporting. The language issue encompassed victims' inability to speak English and also a disinclination to use sexual terms due to modesty. Modesty is especially pertinent given the women's perceptions that all police are male. Regarding language, two of the studied police areas had officers in place who were able to translate contemporaneously. However, even these areas acknowledged that they could not cater for all of the many languages and dialects in use in their regions. All four areas had access to a national language line, although, as one officer explained, an impersonal telephone voice was ineffective in establishing trust and rapport; factors which have been cited as important in encouraging contact with the police.

Another officer saw the need to use sexual vocabulary as a limiting factor when it came to progressing with a prosecution and giving evidence in court. While they acknowledged that the retelling of a sexual crime is incredibly difficult for all victims, regardless of gender or culture, they thought it could be more difficult for British South Asian victims because 'You've got the added complications of what the family are thinking and all the associated risk that goes with it'. Yet another impediment for some British South Asian victims who do not speak English lies in the fact that there are no equivalent words in Urdu or Punjabi for rape. Unlike an English speaker who can walk into a police station and tell the officer at the front desk (who might be a man) that she has been raped, women who do not speak English are faced with the prospect of having to tell this first line officer the intricate details of what has happened to them. When modesty and shame preclude the telling of such a story, non-reporting may be seen as the preferred option.

Trust

Trust and a lack of confidence were reported as the final factors that prevented victims' reporting their abuse to the police, with these being prevalent factors in the general policing of BME communities. All of the police interviewed were aware of such perceptions although did not always accept that this could had been caused by themselves. One officer for example, thought it was often difficult to ascertain whether this mistrust was a result of 'British policing' or 'confidence in policing from Pakistan and Bangladesh'. This perceived lack of confidence may therefore derive from the recent political focus on the ineffectual policing of sexual assault in India, as cited above. The lack of faith in the police could also, according to this officer, have resulted from a view of the police implanted in the victims' minds by their families. This may be true and if so, it is possible to detect a link to the element of control mentioned previously; but it is also possible that such views were a product of a general distrust of the

police felt by the South Asian community at large. Trust and confidence in the police are conditions that have to be earned. Thus, it is interesting that the police who participated in this study were aware of the need to be concerned not only with the facts and figures of sexual abuse reporting, but also with the need to build up trust and confidence with British South Asian women. One key concern of this study is, therefore, to encourage better relationships between the police and BME women in general and to provide recommendations on how this aim can be accomplished.

Police practice in sexual abuse cases

In order to test the perceptions of the focus group as cited above, it was important to build up a picture of how complaints were dealt with when British South Asian victims of sexual abuse did come forward. This testing of perceptions and reality was needed to ascertain whether a change to current police practices was required or whether there was simply a need to disseminate police practices more widely to British South Asian communities. The interview questions for this part of the study focused on three areas: 1) whether there was specific provision for British South Asian victims; 2) whether there had been any recent changes in practice; and, 3) what training was available to enhance police understanding of relevant cultural issues. While some interesting information was gathered, it is acknowledged that we are only able to report unverified accounts of police practice and that it was unlikely that 'horror stories' were going to be shared. To verify our findings it would be useful if future research could concentrate on the experiences of British South Asian women who have reported sexual abuse to the police and/or an observational study of policing practice with BME women in general and with British South Asian victims of sexual abuse in particular.

Specific provision for South Asian victims

When officers were asked what services were specifically available for women from the British South Asian community, many initially said there was no distinct provision; especially regarding the initial call. They took the view that, at this stage, the emphasis was on securing and preserving evidence and discovering what was needed in terms of the health and wellbeing of the victim. However, as the case progressed it then became apparent that the specific needs of the women were then given some consideration. For example, in all four police areas, if a female officer was asked for, attempts were made to secure one, with this consideration extending in some areas to the ability to provide a British South Asian female officer. All areas acknowledged, however, that it was not always possible to meet such requests, especially when it was a 'response officer who made the initial house call'. Furthermore, displaying a good general awareness of the reservations of some British South Asian women, two of the four police areas realised that some might actually prefer to talk to a white officer due to fears that her story might otherwise get out into her community. This was based on the fear that the cultural beliefs of some South Asian police officers were stronger than 'their job vocational duties'. In an attempt to keep information as confidential as possible, the officers in one area made a point of putting as little information as possible on any police computer that could be accessed by all police staff. Importantly, as one officer acknowledged, '[it is] imperative that we listen to the victim and her needs and try to accommodate them as best as we can'. Accommodating the needs of the victim would sometimes include placing her in a specialist refuge; a facility which all of the areas had. In other cases, officers were well informed about third-sector agencies in their locality which could potentially help complainants, including independent sexual violence advisors (ISVA) and NGOs working to support victims of sexual abuse.

Many of the officers also showed a good level of cultural understanding in terms of the ongoing risks that some of these women might be subject to. It was understood, for example, that most of the reported offences were domestic in nature: 'We [therefore] have to be mindful of the fact that because they quite often know their attacker, the risk factors . . . can be heightened'. Risk factors to British South Asian women included the potential for further violence and HBV. Consequently, officers had to be mindful of the home environment and, furthermore, had to take into account the potential consequences for the victim following the reporting of an offence, asking themselves questions such as: 'What checks and measures have been put in place for her? Do we take her out and put her into secure accommodation? Is there an HBV risk? Could they attempt to intimidate her?' Similar concerns were voiced by another officer:

> . . . If you've got somebody from a South Asian community then I'd certainly think "Is there an HBV risk here?" but also "What risk does the perpetrator continue to pose to that victim?" Whether it's through further domestic assaults, whether it's through sexual assaults, whether it's through intimidation. There could be a lot of things, whether it's through family trying to dissuade the victim from speaking with police or continuing with the complaint.

The potential for intimidation and future violence was additionally noted by another officer when they explained the specific provisions their area had for British South Asian victims. For example, when interviewing the complainant, they would always ensure that the suspect's family were not in the room; their primary aim being to speak to the victim alone, except when a friend or an officially employed interpreter was present to provide specific support. Risk

assessments would also be made on an ongoing basis, with every provision put in place to try and protect the complainant.

Recent improvements

There was a common perception across all four police areas that much had changed over the past few years with respect to police practice, officer demographics and cultural understandings. One officer, for example, explained that their unit was now made up of 65% women which would previously have been unheard of and which was useful for all female sexual abuse victims. Another described how they had gained their cultural awareness in terms of the Sikh faith and the Gurdwara from a newly appointed ISVA, who was based at the police station on a full-time basis. Notwithstanding this, the police interviewees were aware that much more work needed to be done:

> To come into contact with somebody from the South Asian community, you've got a whole raft of learning to do, very quickly, which probably isn't going to happen . . . You are likely to lose your victim quicker than you are going to learn about that community and [then there's] all of the added pressure on top of the – "I've been raped" – you know, the family issues and the HBV concerns – so, as XXXX police, I think we are very good at it. As a police force [in the] UK, I think we are better at it than we used to be and I am sure there are forces doing it better than others [and] forces that do it worse, but I think collectively we have still got a lot of learning to do.

Other officers, especially those who worked to support British South Asian women, talked about improved relationships with NGOs. They remarked that, in the past, there was a feeling that neither really understood what the other actually did but that these barriers were

now beginning to break down. One officer attributed this change to a slight increase they had seen in reporting from British South Asian victims. In their view, NGOs were now better able to correctly state what the police would do if a report of sexual abuse was made to them. The officer, therefore, saw it as important for all agencies involved in a sexual abuse case to 'work that step closer, in order that we know what each other's business is . . . so that we can pass that message to the victim'. This increase in partnership working is a factor which also benefits other sexual abuse victims regardless of race or gender.

Another officer was using social media (Twitter) to try and break down barriers between the police and the community by informing residents exactly what they could expect if they made a sexual abuse complaint. The officer also shared the profiles of the staff who would be working with them, an important step in dispelling the perception that all officers are men. Such an endeavour was not, however, specifically for the South Asian community and shows how the police in general are trying to encourage more sexual abuse victims to come forward and through this prevent a cycle of persistent victimisation. While it may be the case that specific policies are required for specific groupings of individuals if some operational and tactical activities benefit all sexual abuse victims then this can only be positive and impactful on a much greater level. Such endeavours are also more likely to be implemented on a national level if they can be seen to benefit the majority rather than just the minority. Technology was also used by another area which provides information on their website about how victims of sexual abuse can be supported. Again this was not aimed at British South Asian women in particular but covered information relating to historical abuse, relevant support services, persistent victimisation and the situation where English was not an individual's first language. Importantly the information also took into account the fact that the person may be in a domestic relationship with their attacker and that there may be physical and mental fears and consequences. Rather than having specific information for specific ethnic groupings this force

was ensuring that its general information was broad enough to cover the cultural needs of as many communities as possible.

More specific to South Asian survivors, another force was working with mosques and the British South Asian community to promote the fact that sexual abuse is unacceptable and to let women know that if they reported sexual abuse to the police, their complaint would be taken seriously and acted upon. This same force had set increasing reporting from British South Asian women as one of its annual priorities. Recognition was therefore evident that cultural and linguistic understanding was perhaps more important than the gender and/or race of the police officer; a factor which has previously been identified by Belur (2008).

Training

It is widely known that understanding a community comes from either being a part of it or from instruction and, although some of the officers interviewed were British South Asian, the vast majority were not. Although all the police officers in this study demonstrated some awareness of cultural issues, only one of the four policing areas had a sound training process in place. Given that all four areas had high South Asian populations, this finding was disappointing. When asked about the specific training officers would receive, Area One stated: 'They will have had diversity training, but it's going to be pretty basic . . . it's not going to be in depth', while Area Two explained: '. . . there's obviously diversity training that they do as part of their initial course, but that's about it if I'm honest'. The comments below illustrate the situation in the third area:

Officer 1: We used to get diversity training. Does that still happen? I don't even know if it still happens.

Officer 2: I think you get it when you join but I don't think you . . . have to keep redoing it. Once you've had your initial kind of training, that's it really though, isn't it?

Organised cultural diversity training in these three areas was therefore non-existent. Although the interviewed officers did display a good level of cultural understanding, it is thought that this knowledge was connected with personal endeavours rather than being the outcome of a force or national edict. In fact, one of the officers confirmed that gaining cultural understanding was left up to officers themselves: 'It's down to individual officers . . . Some might understand the concepts better than others'.

When asked whether more training was required, particularly in terms of issues around South Asian culture, one officer agreed training was essential: 'I think that's the bit that we miss . . . You get a little bit [in diversity training] but you won't get a great deal'. Another accepted that 'we probably do need to invest more for that [good] level of understanding', arguing that enhanced training would also allow for a greater 'understanding of risk and the issues that they face'.

The fourth area stood out from the other three. Not only was it providing in-depth training, it was also trying to share this best practice with other neighbouring forces. The impetus for and emphasis on cultural training had, however, come from the bottom up, again emphasising the element of personal endeavour. One officer explained that she had undertaken a lot of research, reading books and reports, while another pointed to knowledge gained from being practically involved with the issues: 'It has been hands-on and wanting to know. And we want to know'. These officers had initially arranged for an NGO which supports British South Asian victims to speak to their colleagues to fully explain the concepts of honour, shame and HBV. This information was considered important, as officers freely acknowledged that diversity training 'wouldn't help with HBV'. This initial training was then replicated internally

and provided to all front-line officers to ensure that, as first responders to a complaint, they would know what signs to pick up on when going into women's homes and were aware of the cultural 'dos and don'ts'. When asked why this level, and breadth, of training was important, one officer explained that it was impossible to work with British South Asian women unless such issues were understood. Another stated: 'At the end of the day, if they're brave enough to come to us, then we've got to step up to the mark and make sure they're kept safe'.

Officers learned from training, for example, that interviewing a complainant at home may be counter-productive, especially if she lived with her husband's family. This understanding arguably demonstrated a good appreciation of the risks that British South Asian women may face if they report a sexual crime. Furthermore, officers were also made aware of risks such as forced marriage and the signs that it may be about to take place such as a girl's continued absence from school. While most of this knowledge was evident in all the officers interviewed, many of them also acknowledged that realistically it was unlikely that the first-response officer would have this level of understanding. Given that the behaviour of the first-line officer is a factor that may determine whether or not a British South Asian woman continues with police involvement, it is imperative that the cultural knowledge of the police improves.

Change and responsibility for change

To provide a better policing experience and consequentially better protection for British South Asian women, all police participants acknowledged that some level of change was required. However, when asked whose responsibility it was to make this change, many of the officers cited others apart from themselves. One, for example, believed the responsibility lay with the British South Asian community:

It's got to start there and if it's religious, it's got to start with imams coming out and saying: "This should not be tolerated". It's then got to start with the communities themselves . . . I think then . . . it's got to be law enforcement agencies, police, CPS, [the] judiciary. It's got to be health, doctors and it's then – almost that cherry on the icing – support from the third sector agencies.

This viewpoint was reiterated by another officer: 'The people in the temples, Gurdwaras and mosques and the people in local clubs . . . They're the ones that could be doing a great deal more'. The role and influence of faith groups were also mentioned by the civil servant. However, interestingly and in direct contrast to the criminal justice responses, he thought that the ultimate responsibility lay with the police:

I still see it as police . . . the police have to take responsibility for working out who are the right supporting mechanisms, because we're talking about crimes and their core business is crime. So I'm quite clear [that] they can't see this as being a sort of community-led process. I think they and other people like me definitely have a role in trying to work out ways of empowering people to do that from within communities, but [the police] have to be the trigger.

Police officers were also asked whether they thought they should be doing more to try to dispel some of the perceptions they were aware British South Asian women held regarding themselves. In particular, they were asked whether they thought they could do more outreach work within the community to try to effect this change. Some said they were already working with schools and involving themselves in training events, but the vast majority did not see community education as their job. One argued that, while they could get involved, 'at the end

of the day, we're police officers'. Another agreed, stating: 'Why does it always have to be police?' Yet others said: 'That's not what I'm paid to do' and:

> Other agencies are quite happy to let us do their job for them. There's got to be community workers. There's social workers. There's the schools, you know. It's not always down to police. We're struggling enough.

These responses indicate a lack of clarity and consensus in terms of who should lead and be responsible for change and until this issue is resolved, it will serve as a stumbling block to reform. It is also a disappointing response bearing in mind that the police do have to take some responsibility for the tensions felt between themselves and BME communities as evidenced in the literature base.

Implications for policy and practice

While acknowledging that the research presented in this article is small in scale and, therefore, does not of itself provide a strong evidence base, we nevertheless proffer some ideas on the types of developments we believe are badly needed. While some aspects are specific to those survivors of sexual abuse who reside within British South Asian communities, others would be useful in tackling sexual victimisation in all British communities.

Education

The most important change we suggest focuses on education and awareness-raising. Effecting change must include educating those living within British South Asian communities and encompass not only potential offenders but also those faith groups and community representatives that hold power. Education programmes must therefore be used to dispel the shame associated with reporting crimes of sexual abuse. Change can be effected if the

community stops tolerating this form of violence and offers victims support rather than censure. Such transformation would require a cultural 'sea-change', but notwithstanding this one officer believed this was possible likening such a shift in attitudes to the difference between our current view of the seriousness of drink-driving and that of 30 years ago. For change to occur, community and faith group representatives, therefore, need to make it clear that such violence is no longer acceptable within their communities.

It is also imperative that women, throughout all communities, are better educated regarding what is and is not acceptable in terms of interpersonal relationships. Additionally, they need to be made aware of the level of service and support they can expect from the police. While the former can be achieved through programmes delivered by schools, specialist NGOs and the community (Harrison and Gill 2017), the latter really needs to be delivered by the police, regardless of whether or not they believe that community education is a part of their role. If such events were facilitated by female officers this would also effectively dispel the misconception that the police are 'all men'.

A national police training programme is also required to ensure that all officers, including first-response officers, are equipped with more than a basic level of understanding regarding South Asian and other cultures which exist in Britain today. This cultural education should provide not only preliminary diversity training, but also form part of continuing professional development. British police forces require real knowledge and understanding of the context within which BME women live because, as one already quoted officer put it: 'If they're brave enough to come to us, then we've got to step up to the mark and make sure they're kept safe'. Enhancing police cultural diversity training has often been seen as the answer to policing BME communities, especially following the Macpherson report. Cashmore (2002, p. 327), however, is sceptical of such a policy arguing that it is regarded by many BME police officers as 'window dressing, the policies are not seen as helpful, nor even harmless, but as

pernicious in that they contrive to give the appearance of progress, while actually achieving little'. Others have also shared this view stating that increased training over the past decade has done little to improve relationships with BME communities or improve sexual abuse reporting rates. To avoid such 'window dressing' we therefore suggest that any training should be delivered by or in conjunction with specialist NGOs and other cultural experts who can ensure cultural relevance and quality. This is the practice which was witnessed in the one police area which did have a training plan in place. Rather than reinventing the wheel, a template of this programme should be rolled out nationally which could also include exemplary instances of appropriate and helpful policing, updated on a continuing basis. This would ensure as argued by Cashmore (2009, p. 340) that 'models of desirable policing [are situated] in actual working practices rather than the classroom'. Working with specialist NGOs to develop more culturally aware training programmes could additionally develop into better national guidance on working with all sexual abuse survivors irrelevant of gender, culture or ethnicity. It is worth noting, however, that practices that are developed with the needs of specific communities in mind will often prove to have widespread benefits across the communities, whereas those practices that are developed to be applicable to all communities often turn out to serve the particular interests of none.

Advocacy networks

It is also crucial that survivors of sexual abuse are given better support from not only the police but also other agencies. Improvement could be effected through the setting up of an advocacy network of impartial people who speak the range of languages and dialects found in British South Asian and other BME communities and who can offer real support to sexually abused women from these language backgrounds. When language is such a huge barrier to BME women this is essential. One officer saw such people as champions in the communities: people

who are prepared to step up and let people know they are taking the lead on this issue and declaring this leadership as their role. These people would need to have respect and influence but be discreet in order to gain the trust of community members. These advocates could help to bridge the gap between victims and the police and, in so doing, they could become influential in increasing the reporting rates of sexual abuse in not just British South Asian communities but also other BME neighbourhoods.

Community multi-agency forums

Our final suggestion is to encourage police forces, NGOs, religious organisations, community representatives, schools, local authorities and health, to work together. This advances Macpherson's (1999) suggestion of community consultation as it involves integration and cohesiveness rather than just consultation. One officer suggested multi-agency cooperation could be achieved through the use of multi-agency community forums. The process would involve interested parties coming together and discussing issues that currently protect perpetrators and prevent women from reporting sexual abuse. To be successful, aims would need to be outcome-focused, rather than simply an exercise in 'box ticking'. For multi-agency cooperation to succeed those with influence amongst the community would need to be involved and this would need to include both men and women. Furthermore, participants would need to have the appetite and energy to effect real change. The key to meaningful change, therefore lies in the continuous and committed engagement of all those involved. Forums such as these could collectively deliver education programmes and religious sermons, produce relevant literature and, as outlined above, establish an advocacy network.

Collaboration on this scale will initially need a forceful driver and we suggest that this task should initially fall to the police. Our study has indicated that despite concerns relating to institutional racism expressed in the literature, individual police officers are not passive agents

awaiting the next policy edit on how to police diverse communities and do not act in completely risk-averse ways around BME communities. Rather, we have seen innovativeness and creativity at work in terms of how officers are engaging with this particular ethnic group and how the police can be a force for good in challenging victimisation and vulnerability and, in turn, driving through change. We therefore believe the police have the ability and passion to effect this much-needed change and hope that they will welcome this challenge.

Conclusions and next steps

The policing of BME communities has a chequered history, with institutional racism, over policing and under protection being rife. While there have been several studies completed on policing and race, very little has looked at the intersectionality of race, gender and policing. While small in scale, this study contributes to the pre-existing literature base by looking at policing practice in relation to British South Asian women who have suffered sexual abuse. When comparing our findings to those of Belur (2008), we suggest that some positive changes have occurred in terms of policing practice. These relate mainly to an increase in female and BME officers and the personal endeavours of some committed personnel. Although this is to be welcomed we do not think that this is necessarily the answer to better policing in this area. Rather policy needs to focus on improving cultural and linguistic understanding across the entire force which we believe will more effectively tackle the reasons behind British South Asian women's culture of silence. As highlighted above, this can be achieved through the sharing of exemplary working practices and through the use of community multi-agency forums. Initially, such forums should be led by the police, but all agencies should take an active part in providing better education and awareness-raising programmes and in establishing a network of advocates. If the police become involved in such an activity this may also help them to enhance working relationships with the British South Asian community and its residents.

Rather than just focusing efforts on British South Asian women, however, we believe that the benefits of such initiatives and endeavours would reach beyond British South Asian women to other BME communities. In implementing all of the above, the protection of women must be the key driver. Anything that can be done to increase the protection of those who have been abused or who are at risk of abuse, regardless of gender or race, must be considered worthwhile and as such it is our hope that the results of this study may act as a catalyst for such change.

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