

What Will People Say? Project

Key Messages



What Will People Say? Project Report

South Asian Women Survivors of Sexual Violence

Key Messages

What will people say? is a project that Greater Manchester Rape Crisis (GMRC) ran from autumn 2019 to spring 2023. It explores the life stories of South Asian women affected by sexual violence and was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

As well as recording the life stories of a small group of individual women known to GMRC, the project ran workshops to explore older women's views of sexual relationships more broadly, talking to South Asian women aged 55 and over.

We want the project's findings and key messages to inform both communities and professionals in order to promote learning and awareness raising, community conversations, and better professional practice.

Key messages

1. *Impact of Sexual Violence*

We have captured the experiences of five South Asian Muslim women about the prolonged, extensive and shocking sexual violence they experienced and have survived, and the long term deep and enduring impact on their health and well-being and their lives overall, as well as those of their children and sometimes their wider families.

2. *Culture and Faith*

We have learnt how the cultural and religious norms, expectations and behaviours in South Asian communities for sexual relationships, especially marriage, have made it extremely difficult for women to talk about or leave sexually violent relationships

3. *Resilience and Support*

We have heard how the five women have survived their experiences of sexual violence through a combination of their own personal resilience alongside external support from both professionals and their personal networks.

4. *Developing professional practice*

We have heard of some good practice by the professionals supporting South Asian women with sexual violence. We have also heard how poor or uninformed practice has sometimes hampered good outcomes for women and their families.

These key messages need to be understood in the overall context of our work. Whilst the five women who have been interviewed are all Muslims, Greater Manchester Rape Crisis knows from experience that sexual violence occurs in all communities, including South Asian communities, irrespective of ethnicity, religion and class.

The 'What Will People Say' Project website has all of our project films and reports:

<https://www.manchesterrapecrisis.co.uk/services/what-will-people-say/>

Key Message 1

Impact of Sexual Violence

We have captured the experiences of 5 South Asian Muslim women, talking about the prolonged, extensive and shocking sexual violence they have experienced and survived and the long term deep and enduring impact on their health and well-being and their lives overall, as well as those of their children and sometimes their wider families.

Although each woman's experience is unique to them, many themes have been highlighted within their experiences. Some of the key themes are sexual and physical violence, domestic abuse, psychological abuse, long term journey, insecure childhoods, parenting children, individual and collective honour and shame. The work has highlighted that the impact is severe, far reaching and largely underestimated. It takes a huge toll on mental and physical health.

Domestic violence

Domestic violence has been part of every story including all other forms of aggression and abuse. This has included marital rape, physical, emotional, verbal, psychological & financial abuse and coercive control.

Long term impact

For all of the women, the sexual and domestic abuse happened over a long period. The significant trauma arising from this abuse has had a long term, deeply rooted impact on their lives. The participant's past traumas remain with them and fluctuate from being at the forefront, centre point or background of their lives. This affects their feelings, mental and physical health and relationships within and outside of their families. The damage is far reaching and there is a sense of years of the women's lives being lost.

Mental health and psychological impact

The women experienced a loss of sense of self, feelings of intense shame, fear and shattered trust in other people. The ongoing impact on their mental health resulted in depression, breakdowns, flashbacks, panic attacks, episodes of profound distress and crying, nightmares and feeling disconnected from their bodies. Two participants displayed some of the symptoms of DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder). For some this led to self-harm, suicidal thinking and suicide attempts.

Ongoing physical health impact

There was evidence that indicated there was long term physical ill health due to their past experiences of sexual abuse. The physical symptoms included severe migraines, back problems, mobility issues, nerve /neurological damage, chronic fatigue, unhealthy relationships with food, One survivor was diagnosed with complex PTSD and most of the others believed they had undiagnosed PTSD. Most of them have learned to adapt and recognise their triggers and contain the extent and depth of their symptoms.

Parenting and impact on children -

The impact on the women's parenting of their children has been ongoing. Their confidence and understanding of boundaries and rights has been massively impacted which carries through into their parenting. They have experienced deep seated trust issues and have been hyper vigilant for the safety of their children and very protective of their children. Most of the children have witnessed the perpetrators physically abusing their mothers and some of the children were the recipients of physical abuse by the same perpetrators. Despite all the children now being in safe and loving home environments, the impact of the damage from the past is still present to various degrees.

Accessing support late

When support comes very late, the impact can be devastating. The women have lived for years and years trying to hide what's happened to them because of the shame and not knowing how to get help or help themselves. They lost the ability to function well at a day to day level.

Key Message 2

Culture and Faith

We have learned how the cultural and religious norms, expectations and behaviours in South Asian Communities for sexual relationships, especially marriage, have made it extremely difficult for women to talk about or leave sexually violent relationships.

Culture of silence and fear of talking about experiences

The women's stories highlight that the South Asian community does not openly discuss sex, sexual abuse or rape. Marital rape in particular is often not recognised. There are also differing views of the rights of women and the hierarchy of men and women. The fear of being stigmatised or rejected by the community is very strong. Shame and embarrassment about disclosing or talking about the issue has been one of the factors stopping women asking for help. The concept of honour also functions to prevent women from reporting abuse and destroys their sense of self. As part of this, many of the women were told to stay silent about sexual violence by other women in the community.

Family dynamics and the impact of reporting

The extended family system in the South Asian community makes it very complicated to disclose and creates a fear to report. The reason for this is that the perpetrator has usually been a close family member or closely connected. Reporting or disclosing would impact many connected to both the perpetrator and the victim. The women have usually opted for keeping the wider family together rather than report, in many cases the impact is too huge and women have often felt it not worth it. In one woman's case there is also a child born from incest which would impact the child massively.

This family dynamic system also impacts on recovery and some of the women cannot get complete closure as the perpetrator is still within the family networks.

Lack of knowledge and confidence

The women have identified that not being informed about sex, sexual violence and their rights denies them the knowledge and ability to protect themselves. This is damaging to both them and their children. Women can be very vulnerable in marital relationships because they don't know if what is happening is healthy or safe.

Islam used to justify unacceptable behaviours

Four of the five women are South Asian Pakistani and living in a Pakistani household after marriage. They are all practising Muslim women. It is common in the Pakistani South Asian community for culture to override religion in many aspects of life. Not consenting or disagreeing is viewed as not conforming to the norms and therefore causing problems in married and family life. Society and family are powerful, so identity and being connected to them has overridden the women's personal choices and beliefs. This has come at a huge cost to the individual women.

In one of the cases Islam was used and misinterpreted to justify sexual violence. It is clear from scholars and text that this is completely unacceptable and not part of the Islamic faith. There is a common hadith (saying and actions of the holy Prophet Muhammed) quoted to control and justify forced sex especially in marital situations. Many women have believed this to be true and conformed to keep the peace and unwittingly not go against their faith.

Islam and talking about sexual relationships

The women reported that talking about sexual relationships is viewed as crass, immodest, shameful and unacceptable behaviour. This goes against authentic Islamic advice. There is a lack of awareness and knowledge within the community about what is acceptable and what is not from a faith perspective. There is a confusion about modesty and explicit unacceptable discussion and behaviour. We have identified the importance of awareness about the difference between being explicit and asking for help. Shame and modesty has its place in Islam but not at the cost of the health and lives of women.

Islam and marital rape

The women have reported many years of living with regular and brutal marital rape. They often thought this was their husband's right within the marriage, and there was no challenge to this within their close circles, usually the opposite. It is clear that Islam does not condone any form of sexual violence. Every text related to women and how to deal with them indicates that no harm should come to them. Like many other issues in faith, some people have misinterpreted texts to justify their behaviour. It is then perpetuated because of a lack of knowledge and awareness on the part of the victim. Alongside this where long term abuse has taken place the victim often loses their sense of self and the confidence to be able to challenge any of these incorrect messages/behaviours.

Key Message 3

Resilience and Support

We have heard how the five women have survived their experiences of sexual violence through a combination of their own personal resilience and faith, alongside external support from both professionals and their personal networks.

Faith as a supporting factor

Faith has been the ultimate supporting factor for many of the women. It provides a spiritual guide and a secure base. This is despite that within the women's experiences faith has been misused to perpetrate sexual abuse and poor marital relationships.

Children as a supporting factor

Children have been the driving force for the survival for the women. As parents they have the universal desire to have the best for their children. In addition, through their experience, they have either been left to support their children alone or recognised the danger they are in of being abused themselves, which has mobilised the women to stop history repeating itself.

Men being supportive

Although we know that most perpetrators of sexual violence are male, conversely, there have been good examples from the women's families of male family members – for example brothers and cousins - being supportive. When they have become aware of the violence they have helped to remove them from the situations and pay towards solutions. The supportive males in the families may well have also felt dishonoured but felt more that they wanted to protect their female family members from the abuse.

Two of the women have remarried, one told her new husbands of the prior abuse. The new marriages are proving to be more supportive and healthy relationships for the women.

Family upbringing as a supporting factor

For some of the women, their early experiences of living in physically and emotionally safe family environments has given them a sense of security that they bring to their survival. This helps them to also forge new supportive relationships with friends and neighbours. 3 out of the 5 women grew up in safe homes

Good professional support

The women had good support from a range of professionals including from the NHS (including mental health services and GPs), the police and charities (including Women's Aid). The support, counselling and group support they have received from Greater Manchester Rape Crisis were key elements in positively changing the trajectory of their lives. (See Key Message 4 for more details.)

Key Message 4

Developing professional practice

We have heard of some good practise by the professionals supporting South Asian women with sexual violence. We have also heard how poor or uninformed practice has sometimes hampered good outcomes for women and their families.

Fear of going to professionals

Some of them women were uninformed about UK social work and legal practices and were fearful of seeking help in case their children were removed from them.

Examples of poor practice

Some examples of poor practice once a women had disclosed abuse include:

- A range of professions, including counsellors and GPs, pushing the woman to report the abuse to the police. Not understanding why a South Asian woman culturally would not wish to do that.
- Lack of appropriate housing being provided by statutory services for the woman and her young children – a nine year wait.
- Police not using interpreters correctly to gain correct and full evidence, leading to a very long drawn out and delayed court process against the perpetrator.
- Insufficient professional legal support available out of office hours

Helping one woman effectively has far reaching effects: it helps her children, her family and the wider society. There is a lack of knowledge within services and the community about how to respond to disclosures of sexual violence and support survivors appropriately.

Good practice examples

Some examples of good practice once a women had disclosed abuse include:

- Practical support from Women's Aid and the Iris Project, including home visits
- Sensitive support from GPs including monitoring correct levels of anti-depressant medication and referrals to support projects
- Ongoing relationship with one professional, for example NHS mental health support worker
- Police acting quickly in response to ongoing need for them to be called
- Counselling at GMRC from someone who understood the woman's religion and culture

GMRC South Asian Women's Group (SAWG)

All five women felt their lives had been transformed by attending the SAWG, which was facilitated by GMRC staff from the South Asian community. For years, maybe decades, each woman had thought they were the only one to have been sexually violated as they had not met any other known survivors at all, or not outside their immediate family circle. The SAWG (which ran from 2012 to 2019) provided the survivors with a confidential and safe space for them to be their authentic selves and be accepted for the women they were. They received and gave individual and collective understanding and support, and listened and shared without any judgements. Being part of group with people of similar backgrounds and tacit understanding helped them to talk about their cultures, religion, thoughts and feelings. They all felt the group was sensitive to their histories, current circumstances and their ways of thinking and processing. The women said that attending the group helped them to learn, grow and heal themselves, in addition to assisting other group members to heal.

Within the group, the women also undertook the *Sexual Violence Recovery Toolkit* (SVRT). This is a group programme that uses a trauma informed and a psycho-educational approach to enable people to move forward from the trauma of experiencing sexual violence. It supports participants to develop positive lifestyle and coping strategies, restoring a sense of safety and enabling people to return to active citizenship. GMRC used a linguistically and culturally adapted version of the SVRT. The women said it helped them to grow into independent, confident, assertive and empowered women who were living and thriving to various degrees. They saw it as a vital component in assisting them on their recovery journeys.