

# *What Will People Say?* Project

## Summary Findings of Group Consultation



## Greater Manchester Rape Crisis What Will People Say? Project

### Summary Findings of Group Consultations

#### A Introduction

The project consulted with groups of south Asian women aged over 55 to explore their views of sexual relationships. The initial plan was to consult with 50 women but the Covid pandemic meant that the work was only part completed and had to be stopped in order to protect women's health. At this point three workshops had been completed reaching a total of 23 women aged 55 to 72 years old, using interpreters as required. All of the women had been born on the Indian sub-continent. Follow up conversations with some of the women had been planned – especially about exploring sexual violence - but were unable to take place. The findings presented are as far as we had discussed.

#### *Demographic data:*

	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Group Workshop 1 – 12 participants	55-59: 4 60-64: 2 65-69: 4 70-72: 2	12 South Asian, all born on Indian sub- continent	12 female
Group workshops 2 & 3 – 11 participants	55-59: 2 60-64: 5 65-69: 2 70-76: 2	11 South Asian, all born on Indian sub- continent	11 female

## B Summary Findings

### 1 Early beliefs

We explored how women's beliefs about sexual relationships had been influenced through their upbringing.

- *Importance of family*

This was very strong with the women describing how they lived in joint family systems – all of them did - and so were influenced by parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. People lived nearby and there were also friends from school. This was described as a very supportive environment with strong relationships. They learnt what relationships are and can be like for example: – friendship, understanding, sharing, playing quietly, communication, sense of family, connection with parents and grandparents, sense of unity, follow strict rules, eat together..

'In my family there were 20 children together. We played together all the time.'

'Family is there for you in good times and bad times. That's why you need family.'

'You can tell them anything and it helps you to relax. I can tell my cousins things I wouldn't tell other people. That makes the relationship stronger.'

'Relationships are about sharing sadness and happiness.'

'Spending time together for anything – weddings, Eid.'

- *Happy childhood*

The women gave a strong account of their childhoods having been happy. They enjoyed spending time with their family, and having no stress, and no responsibilities.

- *Education*

There were differing levels of education. A few women had a good level of education. Many of the women grew up in villages where very few girls went to high school.

- *Expectations of marriage*

Women generally expected that they would get married. They would have jewellery, nice clothes, and gifts. The marriage would be arranged by their parents/family members and the women had no choice. This would result in them moving to live with their husband's family who would become their new joint family system. They were taught how to behave at their in-laws and to expect that life would be very happy when they were married. They knew they would have children but not how. Some women were excited at the thought of this new life.

One woman described that as a child she knew of couple who fell in love and when the parents didn't agree to their marriage, they ran away to be together. That happened to a few couples.

- *Knowledge of sexual relationships*

Prior to marriage, nearly all the women were not told about sexual relationships or how babies are made. Brothers shared a room, sisters shared a room. Sex was not allowed to be talked about and there were no books about it. Their expectation was that all relationships would be good and similar to how it was in their families – they would be happy, supported and with people around them. There was some humour at the recollection that they knew nothing about how the relationship would be with their husband.

There were descriptions of how some of them thought that before they got married the babies were already in their tummy.

One woman was told a week or two before her marriage ‘My mum, grandma and sister-in-law told me everything one or two weeks before my marriage.’

One woman described that when she was about 6 years old, she heard that a maulana (Muslim religious leader) was abusing children at the mosque.

## 2 Sexual myths and beliefs

We explored women’s current beliefs. There were differing views and quite heated discussions. This was clearly a topic that the women don’t talk openly about, if at all.

### Rape

There were a range of views about rape and who holds responsibility:

- The majority of rape victims are women. Some women felt it doesn’t happen to men and if it does, those men must be weak.
- Reasons given for men to rape varied: mental health problem; one time consent given taken to mean all time; choosing not to control themselves; lack of conscience; lack of sex in marriage; being stronger than women.
- Many women felt that the responsibility is with the woman for ensuring that her husband isn’t tempted to stray and/or rape.
  - ‘The meaning of marriage is that the wife must please her husband.’
  - ‘Only a wife can stop her husband from straying or raping.’
- A couple of people mentioned that there is no link between rape and religion.
  - ‘Religion has nothing to do with rape’
  - ‘Every religion tells us not to force anyone for sex’
- A few women recognised that rape is not acceptable.
  - ‘No means no, it never means yes.’
  - ‘Just because he didn’t force her doesn’t mean it’s not rape’

## Consent

There was a disparity in views about consent, especially in marriage:

- Many women felt wives have a duty to always have sex. Some believed this is part of their religious teaching as Muslim women. It was suggested that many husbands were controlling and the women's consent wasn't important to them.

Some women were clearer about consent and protective of their husbands

'She should let him even if he rapes her to stop him from straying.'

'Men don't need consent to have sex'

'It's wrong to have rape in marriage as a concept'

'Why should he provide for her if she can't please him sexually?'

'My husband would get upset with me if I was too tired to have sex'

- There was a sense that the idea of choice is not known in their lives. It was not taught to them

- With half of the women, we discussed whether the women went along with how many children their husband wanted or whether they could say no. The women generally hadn't understood enough to be able to stop having children and went with 'what happened naturally'. Some of the women felt that nowadays the idea of consent is right, but before 'It was not done'. There was also a discussion about the religious context in relation to Allah's will. There were different views about this, for some contraception is considered a sin.

'My husband is never forcing me.'

'I told my husband after three children – No!'

'I didn't have any idea about protection, I was so young. Nobody told me about that. I had 4 children. After 3 children I was so fed up I had a nervous breakdown because on my own and without any help I had to look after them myself. My husband was busy with his job. After my third child was born the nurse told me about contraception pills. I took them for three years, then stopped and had my last baby. My husband understood about the pills.'

'If you stop having children there has to be a reason like you're not well. Otherwise you just carry on.'

## Rape/sexual assault victims

We discussed this with the other half of the women. There were quite a lot of views about who was to blame for a sexual assault and whether or not people would be believed:

- For some people only the male would be believed
- There were some perceptions that leant blame towards the woman, whatever the circumstances – e.g. that she was 'characterless' or 'shy and timid'
- There were clear consequences mentioned for survivors of rape – particularly that women may be no longer desirable.

'She has been tainted'

'No man wants a used girl'

‘Those men who are raped or abused in their childhood will either hate sexual relationships or become a pedophile (particularly boys)’

It’s the woman’s fault for not speaking up when it was happening to her but instead she is speaking up later in her life when nothing can be done

There was also a discussion that the women are now hearing more about rape occurring.

‘It scares me when I hear that family members have started to rape their own family members’

### **3 How beliefs have changed**

With half of the women, we discussed how their beliefs have changed with experience. There was a wide range of experience between the women.

The themes emerging from this are:

- *Age at marriage*

This depended on family circumstances. Many of the women got married as teenagers. They did not know their husband previously. For some there was a large age gap.

Some examples are:

Married at 17, came to UK when 19.

Married at 14, husband aged 25.

‘My father died when I was 10 years old. I looked after my mother – I did everything like shopping and housekeeping. My auntie’s husband arranged my marriage to his nephew when I was 13. I had never seen him before. My husband was 42 and his first wife had died. He already had 2 children, I had to look after them. My mother and sister didn’t agree with the marriage but weren’t able to say anything. I have had a very sad life.’

‘I was married at 13, my husband was 25. I had my first child aged 16 and then every year I had another child. I have 8 children. My husband died when he was 42. I was living a hard life with my parents and only came to the UK in 2010. My children have come here at different times and I now live with my son.’

‘If I’d have got married older I would have understood more, that would have been better.’

‘I didn’t even know when I was pregnant. I went to London and in the train and the underground, everywhere, I was sick and sick. I was saying ‘What’s happening to me?’ When we got home my husband took me the doctors. They tested my urine and told me I was pregnant. I had no idea!’

- *Moving to the UK*

Many of the women described how difficult the move to the UK was for them socially – they were lonely and missed their family.

‘When I came to this country I didn’t have anybody and I felt lonely. I was on my own. I was thinking about my parents, brothers and sisters back there.’

‘I didn’t want to come to England. I cried and cried, I didn’t want to leave my family. My husband forced me to come.’

‘Nowadays you can contact and talk to anyone anytime. You can find out if anyone has died or anything within an hour. Back then it was just letters and it was one week to go and one week to come back.’

‘I was stuck in the home all those years raising my 3 sons. I used to say that I wouldn’t see the sunshine of the outside.’

‘Back home, if I’d have had children I would have got all the help. Here I got no help. It was a hard life. I did everything.’

‘I had been studying in the university and everything. When I came here I lost myself for a year. Then I realised ‘Oh my God, where I am?!’ My husband brought me to our community organisation and told me to mix with them and learn.’

- *Developing new networks*

Some women know no-one at all when they arrived in the UK. For some women, their husbands were friends or work colleagues so they became friends with those families and got support. Some had family members already here like a brother. It took a while to get to know people and build friendships – one woman said 5 to 6 years. Now they have friendship networks and for some, that is where they can get support and talk about problems. One person talks only to her daughter about problems.

‘When I came there were only 3 families that I knew. My husband’s friends helped us.’

‘When I talk to my friends about things, then I feel relaxed.’

- *Husband’s attitude*

Some women described having a very supportive husband and a happy life.

‘My husband gave me all the freedom, he didn’t restrict me in any way. He said ‘If I block you then you won’t learn anything’.’

‘I am happy with my children and my husband.’

Several women described their lives as having been very hard, with husbands who were controlling.

‘My husband is selfish. He sits down and doesn’t help. He shouts for me to do things for him.’

‘I never go out, only to our community organisation.’

‘My husband is very strict. My children have a good education and they have to do everything on time to what he says.’

It was generally felt that being a strict parent was a good thing – especially for helping with education and jobs.

- *Arranged marriages*

Nowadays, the women would not force their children to marry someone they weren't happy with, they would be given a chance to meet the new family before marriage to see if they liked them. Children are now given more choice.

- *Same belief systems and values*

For the majority of the women, their belief systems and values were not influenced by UK culture. However they recognised that for their children and grandchildren things are different.

### **3 Messages for the future**

Half of the women worked in groups to create posters that conveyed their messages to future generations based on their learning about marriage and relationships.

The women summarised the poster messages as:

Poster 1:

- good education
- respect your elders and in-laws
- after you get married husband and wife have to respect and understand each other, chat to each other
- mix the different goals of your families
- respect your religion

Poster 2:

- choose the right partner with the consent of both sets of parents
- treat your in-laws nicely
- treat your partner well
- follow your religion
- teach good manners

Poster 3:

- be a good man and woman
- good food gives good health and you will do everything right
- entertainment – visiting friends, holidays, games
- be a good student, then you'll have a good married life
- respect both sides of the family and visit them
- husband and wife need to be trusted as do brothers, sisters fathers, mothers. When you get trust you feel good things to everybody



## **C Reflections on workshop discussions**

Brief reflections were held about the workshops discussions, which raised the following points:

- Nowadays everybody knows everything, but sexual relationships, kissing and contact are not talked about.
- The women felt the future messages are true and needed by future generations
- We don't usually speak up and this has opened up people to speak in front of others. It's encouraging because you can talk to people about whatever you're going through. You don't need to keep it hidden
- Don't assume that schools can teach children everything, parents should tell them too
- I learned from other people about behaviour – it's good for us.