What steps must we take to eliminate harmful traditional practices?

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British Asian communities collectively form the largest ethnic minority group in the UK (Official for National Statistics, 2011). Though they are often discussed and presented as a single, homogenous community, the term British Asian denotes people of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage (Peach, 2006). Within and across these groups there exists wide diversity in terms of religion, culture and language, illustrating that identities amongst these groups are nuanced and complex (Poole, 2002). Concurrent to this difference and diversity runs a thread of similarity based on shared cultural imperatives, including shame ('sharam') and honour ('izzat'). For the purpose of this paper, these concepts will be framed in the context of child sexual abuse (CSA), with a wider discussion of how they act as barriers to disclosure and ways in which these harmful traditional practices can be mitigated against.

The construction of public discourse on British Asian communities is primarily driven by political and media narratives that perpetuate stereotypes of Asian communities as culturally primitive, backwards and criminogenic. The political spotlight on British Asian communities has historically revolved around integration, assimilation and cohesion. New Labour's multiculturalism agenda for example, was underpinned by the belief that ethnic minority communities needed to integrate more with their white British counterparts. David Cameron's coalition government firmly rejected the multiculturalism doctrine, arguing that the push for a multicultural society had contributed to extremist ideology, beliefs and practices, including forced marriage, that are incompatible with British values (Wright, 2011). The wider implication of political scrutiny on minority communities that already live on the fringes of society is that they are ultimately responsible for community separatism. This is amplified by media representations of British Asians that reproduce racist and culturally essentialist stereotypes that serve to exclude these communities further (Manzoor-Khan, 2018). Furthermore, newspaper headlines concerning British Asians over the past two decades

have centred around three overarching themes; terrorism, honour-based violence and grooming gangs (Sian et al, 2012; Gill and Harrison, 2015; Cockbain, 2014). Whilst there is no attempt here to deny the existence of social problems prevalent in British Asian communities, a conversation around the trajectory of British Asian communities in political and public spheres is necessary in acknowledging the overwhelmingly negative dialogue around these communities that has allowed these harmful traditional practices to thrive.

One such problem in British Asian communities is child sexual abuse (CSA); child sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in contact or non-contact based sexual activities (NSPCC, 2017). There has been a wealth of academic literature over the last two decades that has explored this phenomenon in great depth, including the psychological and physical impact on victims and barriers to disclosure. One area that is yet to develop is the extent of this problem in Asian communities, with a multitude of reasons proposed as to why there is a lacuna in the research and why reporting rates across these communities are low. 'Cultural barriers' were cited as a significant reason by Gilligan and Akhtar (2006) in their study of barriers to CSA disclosure in Asian communities across Bradford. Cultural barriers more specifically referred to izzat (honour), sharam (shame) and haya (modesty). Across many parts of the Indian subcontinent, particularly Northern Pakistan and India, the term izzat stretches beyond the corresponding translation of honour and embodies a cultural code that transcends linguistic interpretation (Shah, 2009). In western discourse, the term honour has become synonymous with acts of harm and violence overwhelmingly perpetrated against women in Asian and Arabic communities for ostensibly violating a cultural norm or custom. This includes (but is not limited to) refusing an arranged marriage, having sexual relations before or outside of marriage, interfaith or intercommunity marriage or disclosing LGBT sexuality (Gill, 2014; Oppenheim, 2019; SCS, 2019).

Shame is a powerful and enduring emotion that is commonly experienced by a large number of sexual abuse survivors regardless of cultural background (Negrao et al, 2005). Shame or 'sharam'

within Asian communities symbolises a gendered 'cultural institution', which largely hinges on the behaviour and conduct of women (Takhar, 2013) but is increasingly recognised as also impacting on Asian men (Mansoor, 2015). In high risk domestic situations where help-seeking would ordinarily be expected, Asian people can face the pressure of remaining silent in order to avoid the consequential 'sharam' and risk compromising the 'izzat' of the family unit (Gilbert et al, 2004). In cases of child sexual abuse, Asian victims have reported shame as a considerable barrier to disclosure (Gill and Harrison, 2017; Begum, 2018).

An initial step that needs to be taken to eliminate these harmful practices begins with reconstructing the meanings and values attached to honour and shame. For second and third generation British Asians, it involves reimagining a future that isn't weighed down by restrictive, cultural baggage that can shape major life decisions, such as abuse disclosure. This involves intensive work with individuals, families and communities to challenge the status quo around what is deemed to be 'culturally' acceptable.

Gilligan and Akhtar's (2005) work with Asian communities in Bradford aimed to raise awareness of the issue of child sexual abuse, and in doing so carried out consultations with local groups and organisations. They established a rapport with Asian women which began with denial of knowledge around issues of abuse, and slowly unravelled to a much more open discussion whereby the women vigorously acknowledged that abuse needs to be addressed by Asian communities. They expressed fears around family and community reactions to a child disclosing abuse as well as anxieties surrounding institutional responses from police and social services. Such consultations are useful as they allow researchers, practitioners and policymakers to gain first hand perspectives from communities that are otherwise self-contained (Lewis, 2002). This type of approach could be adopted on a wider scale, with constructive and meaningful dialogue established at a community level, particularly with older generations for whom honour and shame hold greater significance (King, 2009).

O'Neill Gutierrez and Chawla (2017) in their report of child exploitation of young Asian women found that parents and families expressed worry and wanted support and education from professionals to help and protect their children. Reaching out to parents in Asian communities and educating them on how to prevent, identify and respond to sexual abuse would be a progressive step in eliminating the harmful traditional values that have upheld the current way of dealing with abuse.

Policy responses to honour-based crimes have been slow and fragmented, as honour has traditionally been problematised as a cultural issue that communities internally deal with (Eshareturi et al, 2014). The most visible government response has been the establishment of the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) in 2005, followed by the criminalisation of forced marriage under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act in 2014. These interventions go some way in empowering young people to challenge and resist harmful practices underpinned by harmful ideology, evidenced by an increase in reports of forced marriage cases to the FMU in recent years (Grierson, 2019). This provides a semblance of hope that the barriers faced by sexual abuse survivors across Asian communities will also dissipate in a similar manner if harmful, honour-based practices continue to be recognised as such on a policy level.

A final suggestion of how we can address and eliminate harmful traditional practices that affect CSA victims is by turning our gaze towards professionals who work in the remit of child protection. The NSPCC (2014) reports that children from Asian ethnic backgrounds are disproportionately underrepresented on child protection registers, within the care system and in children in need statistics. Some of the main factors that have contributed to this include racial discrimination, language barriers, cultural/community norms and practices, and a lack of appropriate services, particularly services which do not take action for fear of upsetting cultural norms. Mental health professionals in the UK draw stereotypical constructions of South Asian communities as fixed and immutable, which position them as inferior, repressive, patriarchal, and

the antithesis of western liberal ideals (Burr, 2002). It is incumbent upon professionals to respond in 'culturally competent' ways (Gilligan and Akhtar, 2005) that avoid 'othering' problems presented by Asian people and risk alienating them further. The insulated nature of Asian communities combined with Eurocentric and racist social work practices has compounded processes of disclosure and help-seeking amongst these communities (Furness and Gilligan, 2010). The challenge for policymakers, practitioners and communities is to dismantle these barriers and ensure that future generations are safe from harmful, traditional practices.

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