

Prevention of child sexual abuse in British Muslim Communities

Written by: Zakia Ahmed

(please note that this article is an adaption of a PhD proposal reviewed by a number of scholars)

Child sexual abuse is a taboo in a majority of migrant Muslim communities in the UK. In most cases, Muslim parents will not discuss any sex related issues with their children regardless of their children's age. In some cases, parents ask their children to withdraw themselves from sex education classes in schools in the UK. The immigrant parents find it hard to accept and address the challenges that western society presents to their traditional parenting style.

As a result, children do not have the confidence to disclose any sexual abuse they experience. In a number of cases, the perpetrator is either a family member or a close friend; making disclosure even harder. Children are often not believed in case of disclosure. Consequently, the child will suffer significant physical and psychological harm.

Child sexual abuse is an extremely complex issue and requires a sensitive approach from parents, agencies and society. In the UK, there is very little research carried out within the ethnic groups to suggest the prevalence of child sexual abuse. A little body of research believes that the officially recorded incidents underestimate the number of cases in the Muslim population of the UK. Government statistics 2004 offer limited information about the numbers of incidents of sexual abuse for the ethnic groups which came to the attention of the social services. .

In 2002, the Bradford Police investigated only 7 percent child sexual abuse allegations related to Asian children and many allegations were withdrawn at an early stage. The limited data available suggest that the incidents of child sexual abuse are under reported in the South Asian communities of Bradford, Leeds and London.

Why do we hide child sexual abuse?

Universally, it remains difficult to disclose sexual abuse regardless of age and gender. In many British Muslim communities, some cultural imperatives appear to make disclosure even more difficult. Research suggests that cultural imperatives act as hampering factors when it comes to deal with child sexual abuse within Muslim families. These cultural factors include honour and modesty. Honour is regarded as IZZAT and modesty is SHARAM in the South Asian languages. These terms are so precise in their cultural context that these terms are adapted as such in the western research.

Izzaat and Sharam are reported as hampering factors in assessing support in case of domestic violence, forced marriage, child marriage and child sexual abuse. It is reportedly believe that the Muslim communities will keep child marriage and sexual abuse undercover because of izzat. Pressures to uphold

family honour act as further impediments to accessing support in addition to immigration issues, language and cultural barriers.

Legal responsibility towards protecting the children

A majority of the Muslims in the UK lack awareness around child sexual abuse policies and procedures. The reasons may well be due to language barrier and other factors such as fear of being discriminated by the agencies.

It is important for the Muslim communities to raise awareness about child marriage. In West, child marriage is considered as child sexual abuse and is investigated under the Children Act 1989 in the UK. Parents have been prosecuted for taking their children abroad for matrimonial purposes and can face serious charges as a result.

Social services also have responsibility to investigate the cases of child marriage and child sexual abuse. Children are put into foster care, if parents fail to protect their children from sexual abuse.

Research suggests that the professionals often lack knowledge regarding the cultural imperatives that determine the behaviour of women in the wake of abuse. It is also pivotal to remember that most social work theories and practices are Eurocentric and do not specifically address the needs of the Muslim communities in the UK. Muslim communities will benefit from the services that are cultural sensitive.

There remains need for agencies to develop cultural sensitive approach in order to promote adult responsibility in prevention of child sexual abuse. The Muslim communities do not often have access to information available in languages or to workshops that enable them to recognize the signs of sexual abuse experienced by their children. The communities do not know where to turn for help.

In order to promote anti-oppressive practice, the practitioners must develop an understanding of the Islamic way of life and its impact on individuals' lives and behaviour. In addition, Practitioners should review the extent to which their own practice and policies may deter people from accessing relevant services. Fear of meeting culturally insensitive responses from professionals discourages the families to disclose child sexual abuse.

Role of Islam in prevention of child sexual abuse

Research suggests that religious education can also play a role in prevention of child sexual abuse. For example, Islam clearly forbid the sexual abuse of children and promotes their protection. Some Muslim women in Bradford suggested that the religious imperatives such as leaflets quoting sanctions from Koran may provide important possible foundations for appropriate responses to child sexual abuse.

Cultural sensitive methods can assist the adults taking the responsibility for preventions of child sexual abuse. For example, reaching out to the religious leaders and identifying the role of religion, in prevention of abuse. Islam attributes responsibility to each individual to stop abuse. It is also important to recognise the behavioural patterns by the adults and children, which can be used as clue if sexual abuse was happening.

Professionals must, therefore, take full account of such issues both in designing services and in providing response to service users. At the same time, practitioners need to avoid practice based in generalized assumptions about ethnicities, cultures or religions. They must recognize and respect the uniqueness of individuals and families, including those aspects that are rooted in culture and religion. In doing so, we need to explore the views of British Muslim communities and to engage them in a respectful dialogue. The dialogue will promote effective practice in meeting individual, family and community needs in the context of the sexual abuse of children.