

**MUSLIM WOMEN'S NETWORK UK
WRITTEN EVIDENCE:**

**INQUIRY INTO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LEGISLATION FOR TACKLING
CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND TRAFFICKING WITHIN THE UK**

January 2014

Introduction

1. Muslim Women's Network was formally established in 2003 with the support of the Women's National Commission (WNC), to give independent advice to government on issues relating to Muslim women and public policy. In 2007, Muslim Women's Network decided to establish itself as an independent organisation to ensure its autonomy from Government. We renamed the group 'Muslim Women's Network UK' (MWNUK) and became a Community Interest Company in 2008. In December 2013 we formally became a registered charity¹.
2. Our aim is to gather and share information relevant to the lives of Muslim women and girls in order to influence policy and public attitudes, to raise the profile of issues of concern to Muslim women and to strengthen Muslim women's ability to bring about effective changes in their lives.
3. At the time of writing, MWNUK has a membership of 500 that includes individuals and organisations with a collective reach of tens of thousands of women. Our membership is diverse in terms of ethnicity, age, religious backgrounds, lifestyles, sexual orientation and geographic location. Members are also from a range of employment sectors including: higher and further education; voluntary sector and support services including services workers; health and legal professionals; the police and criminal justice sectors; and local and central government. Our members are mainly Muslim women living and working in the UK while our non-Muslim members work with or on behalf of Muslim women.
4. Supporting actions to addressing child sexual abuse is one of our seven current priority areas. As the only national Muslim women's organisation in the UK we have been very aware of the issue of child sexual abuse and exploitation within the Muslim and Black Minority Ethnic (BME) communities and in 2013 we launched a pilot study led by Chair Shaista Gohir to uncover the hidden experiences of Asian and Muslim girls and young women in a bid to aid further understanding of issues and development of preventative strategies. Our report entitled "Unheard Voices: The Sexual Exploitation of Asian Girls and Young Women" was launched at the House of Commons on 10th September 2013; hard copies can be acquired by contacting our

¹ Charity Registration Number: 1155092

office whilst electronic copies are available online at our website:
<http://www.mwnuk.co.uk/resourcesDetail.php?id=97>.

Summary

5. Current legislation, including the Sexual Offences Act 2003, is generally fit for preventing and tackling child sexual exploitation and trafficking of children within the UK. However, its effectiveness is being undermined due to a lack of proper utilisation.
6. Similarly, current legislation is also generally suitable for the varied forms of sexual exploitation. However, there is a need to keep the suitability of such legislation under constant review so as to ensure that all dynamics are covered.
7. There is a disparity between incidents of child sexual exploitation and prosecutions due to a lack of proper training and understanding, particularly in regards to BME victims. Legislative changes will not necessarily assist in securing prosecutions of perpetrators without a collective understanding by all frontline service providers, including the police, and a unified multi-agency approach towards tackling child sexual exploitation generally and within the BME and Muslim communities. In this regard it may assist to highlight within training for the police how existing offences relate to the various models of grooming and sexual exploitation and how prosecution can be achieved in such cases.
8. In a similar vein, whilst legislation may be a useful tool by which to require specialist sexual violence support and advocacy for sexually exploited child witnesses before, during and after their time in court, this will not be effective without a proper understanding of the vulnerabilities of BME and Muslim victims. In this regard it is vital that all service providers, including health officials, social services and other local agencies, work collectively to protect victims and prevent exploitation. Proper information sharing and early identification of child sexual exploitation will only be achieved with proper training and procedures put in place between all service providers.
9. It is likely that proper scrutiny and vigilance of current missing and absent categories used by the police are capable of identifying risk/experience of sexual exploitation. To this end, such vigilance should be demonstrated by other agencies including schools and colleges.

Evidence

10. MWNUK's constant concern has been that whilst child sexual exploitation is a complex and widespread issue prevalent in all communities, the needs of BME victims of such sexual abuse are at particular risk of being overlooked by service providers and support agencies. Our report, which includes 35 case studies of victims, has highlighted these issues in detail and several more cases have been brought to our attention since the launch of the report; we hope these are taken into consideration

during your investigation into the effectiveness of legislation for tackling child sexual exploitation and trafficking within the UK.

11. It is our opinion that whilst there is generally sufficient legislative measures available by which to prevent and tackle child sexual exploitation and trafficking of children within the UK, its effectiveness is limited due to a lack of proper utilisation in the first instance. We also consider that there is generally sufficient legislation available which can be relied upon in order to combat the varied forms of sexual exploitation and grooming. We would ask however that suitability of legislation be kept under constant review in order to ensure that any new models that come to light can be accounted for and tackled; the new offence to combat sexual offences involving the internet was a welcoming introduction given the frequent occurrence of this model in case studies in its various formats.
12. It is also vital to understand the specific dynamics of each individual case and appreciate that there will be differences even where the same model of grooming is being utilised. For example, within the “older boyfriend” model uncovered, whilst there was a pattern of providing gifts to victims, in an overwhelming majority of case studies a particular point of exploitation for BME victims were promises of love and marriage, which could act as a means of enticement due to a desire to avoid an arranged or forced marriage. Moreover, blackmailing on the basis of shame and honour was a threat used to control and continue exploitation. This highlights the need to understand the specificities involved, and vulnerabilities of, BME and Muslim victims of sexual exploitation. It is our opinion that it is this lack of awareness and understanding of BME and Muslim victims which reduces the effectiveness of available legislation in tackling child sexual exploitation and trafficking. This in turn becomes the reason for the disparity between incidents of child sexual exploitation and prosecutions.
13. To repeat the findings contained within our report, there was a general consensus amongst those interviewed during our pilot study that front line professionals, including the police, were failing to identify many cases involving BME victims².
14. We have found that despite police involvement at some stage, victims continued to remain within the circle of exploitation and abused. In one example, following police involvement the case was taken to court and one of the perpetrators deported but the victim remained in fear of the other men involved who continued to threaten her. In another, despite reports being made to the police no concrete actions were taken which meant that two sisters in the same family became victims of sexual exploitation with a third moving cities in order to protect herself from the perpetrators. The police were also accused of being reluctant to intervene in suspected cases involving Asian and Muslim victims due to cultural sensitivities.

² Unheard Voices: The Sexual Exploitation of Asian Girls and Young Women, Muslim Women’s Network UK, September 2013, page 94

15. We submit that any such reluctance, and lack of awareness of the wider situation in terms of the victim's safety whether from perpetrators or even own family members, only leads to worsening a difficult situation for victims where there are already various barriers to reporting including blackmail involving shame and honour, threats of violence, guilt and drug and alcohol dependency. To then not assist those who take the steps to come forward results in a further barrier that silences. We would also ask that provisions be put in place by which protection can be provided to victims such as safe and supported accommodation with proper account being taken of any additional perpetrators, or supporters of perpetrators, being involved.
16. Moreover, whilst we acknowledge that the ability to prosecute can be hindered by the unwillingness of victims to report crimes, it is our opinion that better investigatory techniques and evidence-gathering would in many situations resolve the need for the victim to come forward and provide a statement. We have an example of a case where an immediate relative wished to report that a girl under the age of 16 was being sexually exploited but the police refused to take this further without the victim herself giving evidence. In another case, the under-age victim was found in cars and properties of older men and sexual exploitation was strongly suspected and even reported by relatives and yet nothing was pursued as the victim would not cooperate despite ample avenues available to at least protect the child from any further contact. This approach is unhelpful and greatly hinders tackling child sexual exploitation given that the very nature of crimes are based upon silencing a victim, particularly where the victim is BME or Muslim. We strongly urge that this blatant barrier to prosecution and prevention of child sexual exploitation be given due consideration and changes be made, whether through policy or practice, so as to allow cases to be taken further without requiring such heavy reliance on the victim alone.
17. In a similar vein, it was highlighted that health practitioners, schools, colleges, children's social services and Local Safeguarding Children's Boards were also failing to recognize risk indicators. There were cases where victims had suffered health problems and visited health professionals for example, and yet risk indicators were not being used perhaps as BME and Muslim victims were not considered vulnerable to sexual abuses. There was also a fear in approaching children's social services that the victims would not be believed or even blamed; actions such as assigning social workers only to girls and not boys when sexual activity is suspected would suggest this to be the case, with a culture of holding girls responsible. Moreover, whilst some schools are carrying out work to identify offenders and victims, the pressures of the school curriculum and the lack of appropriate training has meant that both victims and offenders have fallen through the detection net.
18. A further failure by schools and other organisations was the inability to establish the patterns of victims going missing; some schools did not report missing or absent students early enough or were dismissive of the absences; there is a lack of understanding that truancy may not just be due to a lack of commitment to education but due to being exploited. Moreover, given that our report found that schools were a way to find and exploit Asian and Muslim girls due to the fact that such victims would be unlikely to be out at evenings, it is worrying that schools have not been proactive in protecting victims and highlighting perpetrators.

19. This highlights the fact that information sharing and identification of child sexual exploitation is certainly not being carried out effectively by local agencies and related organisations despite the fact that proper vigilance and a multi-agency approach could assist in the prevention of sexual exploitation and trafficking and not just prosecution. In our opinion, additional legislation will be irrelevant without a proper action plan and effective policies and procedures in place which allows notification and early identification.
20. Similarly, whilst we would welcome any legislation which may allow specialist sexual violence support and advocacy for sexually exploited child witnesses before, during and after their time in court, this will not be effective without a proper understanding of the vulnerabilities of BME and Muslim victims. Victims have expressed how frontline professionals did not understand the severity of the situation for them; there was a lack of understanding of the fact that they were not only in fear of the perpetrators and their associates for the purposes of the case but also potentially from own family members and wider community worried about honour and shame. There was also a lack of understanding of the guilt or emotional attachment that may be felt. Adequate training on cultural and/or faith factors relative to BME and Muslim victims is required in order to ensure proper support and advocacy is being provided; without this, legislation will only act as a tick-box exercise which may end up doing more harm than good in the sense it would deter victims from coming forward due to the apathy shown.
21. In our opinion, proper scrutiny and vigilance of current missing and absent categories used by the police are certainly capable of identifying risk/experience of sexual exploitation and indeed it came to our surprise that despite such records in some cases police were still unable to identify patterns. It would be of great assistance if police forces analysed their data of missing Asian and Muslim girls, investigated how these cases were categorized and attempted contact to ensure they are now safe and not being exploited.
22. We would add further that such vigilance should be demonstrated by other agencies including schools and colleges which would allow for early intervention as well as prevention for other potential victims.
23. It is apparent from our experiences that there have been constant failures by generic and statutory organisations in identifying BME and Muslim victims which has greatly hindered prosecution and prevention. We would ask that rather than merely concentrating upon legislative measures, it is vital that resourcing and funding for culturally appropriate frameworks be considered a priority as without proper training and understanding to identify and deal with cases, the legislation will remain ineffective.
24. We would ask that child sexual exploitation training be provided to frontline professionals such as police and social workers which allows the development of an understanding of sexual exploitation of BME victims and of the different types of offender-victim models which exist. In this regard it may also assist to highlight how

existing offences, such as offences against persons with a mental disorder impeding choice³, relate to the various models and scenarios of grooming and sexual exploitation and how prosecution can be achieved in such cases.

25. We further recommend that police and local authorities, and in particular Local Safeguarding Children's Boards, work in partnership with local community organisations, such as women's groups and religious institutions, to raise awareness of child sexual exploitation and establish prevention and protection strategies amongst BME communities including parents and young people. This is especially vital to consider given that issues of honour and stigma make it difficult for such community members to deal with such crimes, whether in terms of prevention, initial disclosure or proceeding through court, without additional support.
26. We would also ask that pragmatic approaches are taken in pursuing prosecutions so as not to place sole reliance upon the evidence of the victim. We would also ask that consideration be given to alternative means by which to give victims the opportunity to come forward; a victim may not be willing to talk to the police for example but may be willing to speak to an individual through a culturally and faith sensitive specialist helpline which may assist in the victim eventually being able to come forward and provide evidence.

Final Comments

27. As a point of clarification, given we have referred to the need to consider the vulnerabilities of Muslim victims or alternatively have provided examples of case studies of Muslim victims when discussing the need for faith sensitive support mechanisms, we must explain that our comments and examples have been limited to BME and/or Muslim victims due to the nature of our organisation and its work. As a national Muslim women's organisation our work predominantly deals with Muslim and BME women albeit we also work with individuals of other faiths and are therefore also aware of issues of relevance to other faith communities. In turn we wish to clarify that where we ask for faith and culturally sensitive support packages and mechanisms we do so on behalf of victims of all race, ethnicity, religion and faith.
28. Similarly, where we refer to case studies or examples relating to female victims or alternatively male offenders we do so as a result of the work that has been undertaken by us. We fully appreciate that boys and young men can become victims of child sexual abuse as well and similarly appreciate that offenders can be both male and female.
29. As a national women's organisation committed to combatting child sexual abuse, Muslim Women's Network UK would like to express its willingness to assist through training, support, information or advice or any other means in order to ensure that cases are prosecuted accordingly and preventative measures put in place for the future.

³ Sections 30 – 33 Sexual Offences Act 2003

30. We would like to thank you for providing us with the opportunity to respond to your Inquiry and hope that our evidence proves to be helpful in your considerations.

**On behalf of Muslim Women's Network UK,
Nazmin Akthar
Vice-Chair**

5th January 2014

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