

# Summary of Specific Issues for Asian Girls in relation to sexual exploitation

From: **Unheard Voices, The Sexual Exploitation of Asian Girls and Young Women, Shaista Gohir MBE (2013) Muslim Women's Network UK**

1. **Withdrawal from sex education:** it is common practice to withdraw Asian / Muslim girls from sex education lessons at school. This has two key consequences:
  - a) The girls have reduced capacity to understand the significance of consent to sexual activity, and
  - b) The girls are not being made aware of the predatory nature of some men and boys and the consequences of being lured and enticed by them.

2. **Strict upbringing and/or an arranged or forced marriage:** this has three key consequences for the process of grooming and sexual exploitation of girls:
  - a) 'Older boyfriend' model of grooming - as majority of girls targeted for sexual exploitation are 13 and 14 years old, and, due to strict cultural norms, Asian / Muslim girls at that age are less likely to go out in the evenings, attend parties or hang out in parks etc. Asian / Muslim girls are therefore targeted indirectly via schools.

The most common grooming models observed were the 'older boyfriend' and 'peer pressure' models. These two models appeared to be closely connected. For example, the early stages of the grooming may have been started by peers (male or female), similar in age to the victim. In some cases this progressed with the victim being introduced to her 'older boyfriend' who then sexually exploited her.

The 'older boyfriend' model of grooming girls for sexual exploitation is most prevalent (34% of cases). It appears that for some girls finding their own partner is a way of escaping a harsh, conservative and controlling environment and/or an arranged or forced marriage. As the girls have little opportunity to meet boys (due to the cultural restrictions or strict backgrounds), they readily get into relationships.

*"Marriage is a big thing for young girls." Another said: "The prospects of either an arranged or forced marriage means they are rushing to date the first boy that gives them attention".*

- b) 'Peer pressure' model of grooming - male peers use sexual harassment to give the girl a 'bad reputation' amongst her friends and other peers. This results in the victim becoming isolated and grateful for attention from the abuser, who can then pass her on to an 'older boyfriend'.

Female peers appear to be a relatively easy way of accessing new vulnerable girls. This is because they were more trusting of female friends and siblings. One police force also provided an example of this:

*"An Asian girl was involved in sexual exploitation - intelligence suggested her older sister was arranging it and there were several other high risk female individuals also involved."*



c) Online grooming - early signs are that because Asian / Muslim girls are hard to reach outside of school and their family home, social media will play an increasing role in the targeting of them for sexual exploitation.

3. **Shame and family dishonour silencing girls:** as sex before marriage is regarded as sinful in Asian culture and Muslim faith, girls did not want their families to find out that they were engaging in sexual activity. They feared repercussions linked to honour-based violence and forced marriage. The offenders often exploited this fear. A recurring theme was the 'boyfriend' raping the victim and photographing or filming it and then threatening to show the photos or film to the girl's family, not only in the UK but also overseas.

4. **Shame and dishonour silencing families:** it appears that families prefer to hide the abuse because they are more concerned that shame will reduce the future marriage prospects of their daughters. Another issue raised was the possibility of parents not reporting that their daughters had gone missing because they did not want members of the extended family or the community to find out.

5. **Lack of understanding about sexual exploitation:** there seemed to be little or no understanding among such parents about what sexual exploitation involved and there was probably a tendency for them to think the girls were choosing their particular life style rather than being manipulated.

6. **Shame and dishonour silencing communities:** there is a tendency to prioritise protecting the honour of the community over the safeguarding of vulnerable girls. During interviews, the extent of denial within families and communities regarding child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation was raised as quite a major concern. The "cover up" culture of "sweeping taboo issues under the carpet," and therefore allowing them to continue was partly blamed for what appeared like an increasing problem.

Some within Muslim communities felt this denial was connected with not wanting to damage the reputation of Muslims: "*They feel under attack after being demonized and targeted with the terrorism legislation*". This meant prioritising the 'honour' of the community over the safeguarding of vulnerable girls and women.

7. **Victim blaming:** many respondents to the project felt that girls are not protected because there was a tendency to blame the female victims rather than the male offenders. Girls were being regarded as "tempresses" and views in the community (even by mothers), which expressed ideas such as, "*She tempted the boy and he couldn't help it*" were no uncommon. Victim-blaming was also evident in the research. When girls did disclose to their families, they were re-victimised by being blamed and punished.

8. **Second generation issues:** the tensions between strict cultural upbringing and traditional practices such as, arranged or forced marriage is highlighted in point 2. Along with this in the case of Muslims victims, those considered 'bad' were usually the ones who did not wear the headscarf and therefore were not thought of as victims but as 'bringing it on to themselves'. Interestingly the victims in the case studies came from a range of backgrounds and included those who wore the headscarf and those who did not.

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9. **The double standards in attitudes towards boys and girls:** the different attitudes towards boys and girls and their treatment was heavily criticised by our informants and some believed this made some men think they “*can get away with rape*”. Families were making assumptions about the lifestyle of the victims, that they were choosing it and completely failing to recognise they were being manipulated and exploited by predatory boys and men.

Making excuses for men’s behaviour and blaming girls was a recurring theme. One person who was trying to raise awareness of sexual exploitation and rape within Asian communities was told that the local men who had been arrested on suspicion of being members of a sex abuse gang, were not to blame. She was told: “*They (accused offenders) did not know what they were doing and were probably possessed by jinn (spirits).*” A comment made to another informant of this research was: “*Girls with bad characters are tempting our sons – it’s not their fault.*”