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# Sexual abuse of South Asian children: what social workers need to know

Understanding what shame and honour mean in Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani communities, and building trust, are crucial to safeguarding work (*published in Community Care August 2020*)

August 20, 2020 in **Children**



*Image: Vanisha Jassal*

**By Vanisha Jassal, senior lecturer, University of Kent**

We know that sexual abuse of children of all ethnicities and backgrounds may remain hidden; children can be silenced into not telling and adults may not recognise disclosures, leaving children at ongoing risk and not supported. But the June report published by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), “[People don’t talk about it](#)”, discusses how children and young people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities can face additional barriers to disclosing and reporting child sexual abuse (CSA).

I have been researching one such barrier for three years, investigating how concepts of shame and honour in South Asian communities can amplify the secrecy of intrafamilial

CSA for female victims from Britain's Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani families. Having interviewed eight adult survivors to date, my research concurs with the IICSA report – certain cultural norms can be a significant impediment to disclosure. Below are some key points and advice to help practitioners, drawn from this research:

### **Develop an understanding of what 'shame' and 'honour' mean to South Asian service users**

Child sexual abuse is deemed shameful and victims/survivors are only too aware of this, as are perpetrators who can use this to their advantage in ensuring children don't tell. Disclosures are consequently not forthcoming and abuse can continue for many years. Perceptions of shame which are also culturally based are likely to amplify these feelings; even though shame is a universal emotion, affecting most individuals, for those of South Asian origin it can take on a greater intensity. Concerns over family reputation and community standing can influence decisions about matters related to the private affairs of one's family. One interviewee spoke about how a disclosure of CSA would have damaging implications for her loved ones:

*I basically don't want any of my siblings at some point in their lives to meet someone and then it doesn't work out because their partner's family doesn't want to get involved with my family because of the sexual abuse."*

Having investigated the origins of South Asian perceptions of shame and honour, I found that ancient, sacred religious texts from the sub-continent have helped shape ideas about family life and honour. These narratives also tended to associate honour with female members of a family who were represented as symbols of purity and goodness. Behaviours deemed as shameful and dishonourable can therefore appear incompatible with these traditional norms and have serious implications for females. With CSA victims predominantly being female, such norms are therefore a critical point of analysis in my research. One interviewee stated:

*"Sharam [shame] it's like, you know, it's a big thing and saying something like this [disclosing sexual abuse] would have been really bad because we are from a strict family...so I'd never have said anything to anyone".*

### **Understand that perceptions of child sexual abuse can be different within the community**

The IICSA report highlighted that there can be a firm belief that CSA does not occur in one's own community. This leads to a direct or indirect denial of the abuse. My interview data revealed that such views existed and discouraged victims from disclosing. One interviewee stated that a cousin had disclosed CSA and was told by her parents not to say anything; their concern being that the family reputation, and the girl's, would be

tarnished. The interviewee therefore felt that her own parents would have the same reaction and never disclosed her abuse.

## **Continue to build trusting and effective relationships with all communities**

Developing cultural competence ought to remain a key priority for service providers, especially due to the continuing inequalities experienced by Black, Asian and ethnic minority children and families across the health and social care sectors. The cases of [Victoria Climbié](#), [Humzah Khan](#), [Khyra Ishaq](#), [Bilal](#) and many more, are a reminder of why professional curiosity around cultural norms, perceived or real, remains vital. Furthermore, Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities often feel that they cannot reach out to statutory sector services as they find them Eurocentric in their models of family intervention and support and don't believe services will address the abuse appropriately or in a culturally sensitive way. This is an additional barrier. One interviewee expressed relief that I was of South Asian origin and so she didn't need to explain to me the influence of shame and honour upon her life. She did not believe that practitioners of non-South Asian origin are sufficiently aware of the impact of these concepts.

However, it is also critical to remember that a child should not *only* be seen through the lens of their ethnicity or culture. Although shame and honour emerged as a theme in my research, it was not the only significant factor when discussing non-reporting of the abuse. Some interviewees simply did not want to disrupt family life; some did not know what to do about the abuse and could not make sense of it; others thought that they were in a meaningful relationship with the abuser. These findings can feature in CSA cases across any ethnic community and so identifying a child solely by their culture can minimise – even fail to recognise – actual risks.

Below are some recommendations to support organisations and practitioners in developing skills and confidence in this area, supporting a concerted effort to try to understand the meaning and implications of shame and honour.

### **Advice and tips**

1. Local authorities are advised to introduce or strengthen workforce development around what shame and honour means for service users, enabling practitioners and managers to feel more confident when responding in relevant cases. This will develop an understanding of the deeply embedded meaning that these norms hold for affected communities and how this materialises in situations of abuse. It will also allow

practitioners to challenge their own biases about these concepts which may seem alien and difficult to comprehend. The charity [Karma Nirvana](#) supports victims of honour-based abuse and also provides training, and is a useful starting point to learn more about the issues.

2. Practitioners are advised to read some of the high profile cases of honour-based abuse which highlight these concepts in a very clear way, and their serious and sometimes tragic consequences for individuals. These BBC news articles provide a brief overview of the cases: [Shafieah Ahmed](#) and [Banaz Mahmood](#). You can also view documentaries on You Tube: [Shafieah Ahmed documentary](#) and [Banaz Mahmood documentary](#).
3. Shame and honour are called 'Sharam' and 'Izzat' by South Asian communities. Listen out for these words in your everyday practice with communities and try to use this knowledge to enhance risk assessment processes and decision-making.
4. Consider carefully how concerns about shame and honour can be exploited by perpetrators of abuse, aware that a victim is unlikely to want to be the cause of family disharmony or dishonour.

The research is continuing for the remainder of 2020 and if you are a female CSA victim/survivor of South Asian origin, over 21, and would like to be a research participant or would like to find out more, please email [sacsauk@gmail.com](mailto:sacsauk@gmail.com) which is a confidential email address for the research. I would also like to hear from social workers who have worked with cases of South Asian origin – further details can be supplied through contacting me at the same email address.

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