

### *Dr Karen Harrison*

is Senior Lecturer in the School of Law at the University of Hull, UK. She has published several articles on the use of pharmacotherapy with high-risk sex offenders, is the author of *Dangerousness, Risk and the Governance of Serious Sexual and Violent Offenders* (2011) and is the editor of *Managing High Risk Sex Offenders in The Community* (2010). Dr Harrison is an editorial board member of the *Journal of Sexual Aggression* and the *Prison Service Journal* as well as associate editor of *Sexual Offender Treatment*.

### *Professor Aisha K. Gill, Ph.D. CBE*

is Professor of Criminology at University of Roehampton, UK. Her main areas of interest and research are health and criminal justice responses to violence against black, minority ethnic and refugee women in the UK, Iraqi Kurdistan and India. She has been involved in addressing the problem of violence against women and girls/ 'honour' crimes and forced marriage at the grassroots level for the past eighteen years and has published widely in both policy related and refereed journals on the murder of women in the name of 'honour', femicide, early/child/forced marriage, child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse in South Asian communities, female genital mutilation and sex-selective abortions.

# POLICING SEXUAL ABUSE IN SOUTH ASIAN COMMUNITIES\*

Dr Karen Harrison  
Professor Aisha K. Gill<sup>1</sup>

## *Abstract*

This briefing paper explores the low level of British South Asian women's sexual abuse reporting. It focuses particularly on how four British police force areas currently respond to sexual abuse incidents where the victim belongs to that community. In addition to evaluating these police responses, we explore what else the police and other organisations might do to increase the sexual abuse reporting rate by this and other ethnic groupings.

## *Keywords:*

sexual abuse reporting rates; South Asian women; police practice

## *Rape reporting behaviour*

Multiple, complex and differing factors may deter individuals from reporting sexual abuse to the police. These include finding reporting 'embarrassing', thinking that the police will do little to help and believing that the incident is 'too trivial or not worth reporting'. Others may view the offence as a 'private/family matter and not police business' (Ministry of Justice,

Home Office and the Office for National Statistics 2013: 6). Hohl and Stanko (2015) state that barriers to rape reporting include: a lack of trust in the criminal justice system and the police; a fear of not being taken seriously or being believed; and a fear of 'feeling "raped all over again" by the way the police question both the victim and their account' (Hohl and Stanko 2015: 327). The Stern Report (Stern 2010) and other academic studies (Brown 2011, Myhill and Allen 2002) document similar findings. Evidence also suggests that it is not uncommon for women to delay reporting sexual abuse (Adler 1987, Ellison 2005) and that a traumatic event, such as rape, can actually impair rather than enhance the performance of memory (Tromp *et al.* 1995). In addition, it is worth noting that not all victims find it necessary to report their abuse to the police in order to move forward. As mentioned above, some may feel that the criminal justice system will simply re-victimise them, while others may believe that they can best gain help through counselling and other support services.

In terms of South Asian women's rape reporting behaviour, Ahmad *et al.* (2009) found that delayed help-seeking was common among South Asian immigrant women in Toronto, mainly due to 'social stigma, rigid gender roles, marriage obligations, expected silence, loss of social support after migration,

\*Full article reference based on this briefing: Harrison, K., Gill, A. K. (2017) Policing the Culture of Silence: Strategies to Increase the Reporting of Sexual Abuse in British South Asian Communities, *Policing and Society* <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10439463.2017.1405958?journalCode=gps20>. 1. Corresponding author: a.gill@roehampton.ac.uk

limited knowledge about available resources and myths about partner abuse' (Ahmad *et al.* 2009, p. 613). Other reasons for this phenomenon include South Asian women's economic dependency on the abuser/s, fear of deportation (Lee and Hadeed 2009, Mirza, 2016), and the cultural concepts of honour and shame (Gill, 2010). Anitha (2011: 1276) found that South Asian women's reluctance to discuss sexual abuse was related to 'their understanding of dominant moral codes within their community which seldom blamed men for their abuse and for fear of being disbelieved or the shame a disclosure would bring on *themselves* [original emphasis]'. Research has also examined why victims withdraw from the criminal justice process once a report has been made. One Home Office report indicates that the two most frequently-cited reasons are that the victim does not wish to attend a court hearing and/or simply wants to move on (Feist *et al.* 2007). Other factors contributing to such a decision include: whether or not the victim has been injured; the victim-offender relationship; and, the police area in which the offence was committed, with some police areas being more successful than others in reducing the likelihood of a victim's withdrawal (Feist *et al.* 2007). Furthermore, Hohl and Stanko (2015: 327) state that trust between the police and victim is easily lost when officers 'communicate disbelief and disrespect or when the victim loses faith in the police' in terms of the latter's investigative ability. Here again issues of trust and confidence in the police are significant.

## Methodology

This research had two aims: first, to discover why British South Asian victims fail to report sexual abuse and, second, to evaluate what more could be done to encourage reporting. The data collection was carried out between May 2013 and June 2015. To gather general opinions, we first held four focus groups with a total of 85 women living in British South

Asian communities (two in the Midlands, one in the North of England and one in the South of England). Not all participants spoke but, given the extremely sensitive nature of the subject matter, some lack of participation was understandable and expected, thereby justifying the use of larger than normal groups. While some women spoke more than others, no one individual dominated any discussion. All four focus groups contained a representative mix of women in terms of age, generation, ethnic origin (Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi) and also of those who had been born in the UK, had arrived with their spouse, or had entered on spousal visas.

The focus group participants came from four groups that already met regularly and had agreed to speak to us. Two were community-based groups (a knitting group which met at a local library and a women's group which met for weekly coffee mornings) and two had been formulated by women's support charities (NGOs) to offer support to the survivors of sexual abuse and with which we were working on a larger project. The NGOs, therefore, arranged all the focus group meetings. The participants were not asked to state whether or not they themselves had been a victim of sexual abuse, although their responses did reveal that this was the case for several individuals. Although the NGOs had explained our project to the focus group members in advance, we outlined it again at the start of each focus group session. Any disclosures of unreported abuse during our discussion were made in the presence of NGO workers, thus ensuring that support could be offered where appropriate.

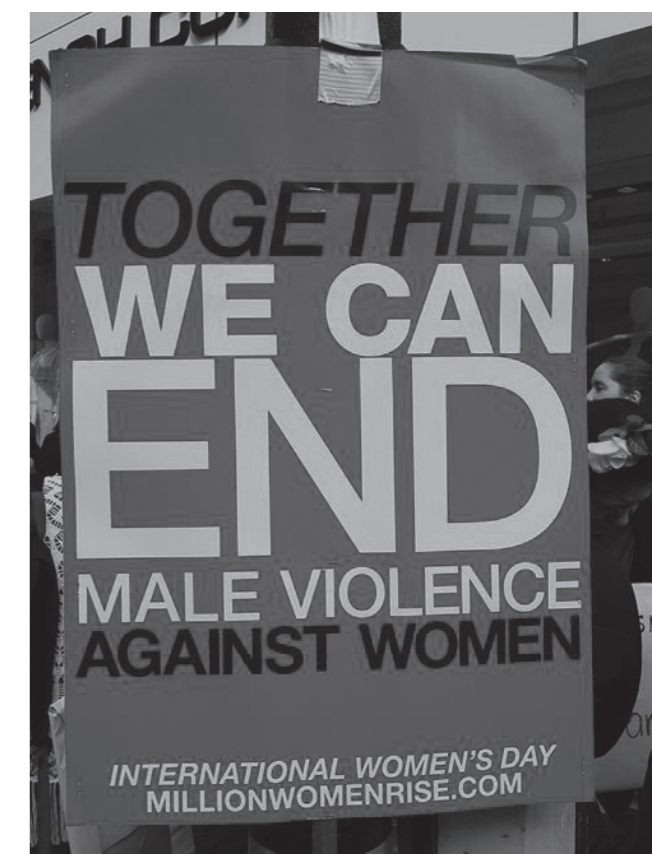
To supplement these general opinions, we also interviewed 13 British South Asian survivors of sexual abuse, 13 NGOs working with the survivors of sexual abuse and 13 other professionals from the criminal justice agencies and government departments. Police data were collected through interviewing nine police officers from four police areas, all with relatively

high South Asian populations, the group upon which this article's analysis focuses. To supplement these responses, a Chief Prosecutor, a senior civil servant (with responsibility for protecting vulnerable adults and children) and a policy officer were also interviewed. While acknowledging that this small-scale study cannot be considered as fully representative of the police's views in general, it does offer a snapshot of a few professionals' views at a specific time. To ensure confidentiality, the police areas and ranks are not reported. For the purpose of the research, the term 'South Asian' was used to refer to: (i) people born in the Asian sub-continent (i.e. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh); and (ii) people of South Asian heritage born in Britain. To acknowledge that these groupings belong to the British community while still being connected to their original, historic roots, the phrase 'British South Asian' is used throughout.

## The underreporting of sexual abuse in British South Asian communities

From the outset, this study was predicated on the assumption that significant numbers of British South Asian women fail to report sexual abuse to the police. Our first task was, therefore, to collate data to test this supposition and evaluate whether it was correct. Government reports and statistics proved unhelpful here, as, while the offender's race is recorded therein, the victim's ethnic background is not. Consequently, the conclusions presented here rely largely on evidence from police officers and the women in the focus groups. While this approach may raise questions of validity, our findings do support those of other similar studies (Bauer *et al.* 2000, Bui 2003, Lee and Hadeed 2009). During the focus group sessions, the participants were asked whether they thought that women

from their communities would report sexual abuse to their family, friends or the police. The majority answered 'no', and particularly emphatically with reference to the police, a view that was echoed by the 13 interviewed survivors, 12 of whom had reported their abuse to either family or friends but only two of whom had involved the police.



The police painted a similar picture, with a general consensus that reports of sexual abuse by British South Asians were rare. One claimed that there had always been 'underreporting from the South Asian community' and that the local Sexual Abuse Referral Centre had also identified 'huge discrepancies'. Another officer noted that there was 'very little reporting within domestic relationships' in his/her area and went on to describe reports from the Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian communities as 'negligible'. Another said that he/she did not 'think a lot of people come forward from South Asian communities' and that sexual abuse was 'massively underreported'. This belief was shared by other officers, who spoke of 'less referrals from the South Asian community',

with one officer describing sexual abuse within British South Asian communities as a 'blind spot'. Despite this dearth of reporting, all the officers noted that sexual abuse was occurring within their South Asian communities, with one officer stating: 'It's as prevalent as it is with any other community'. Another argued: 'We know it happens. It happens in the family, it happens online, it happens in institutions, places of worship, it happens in the street...I have no doubt that it is as prevalent in Asian communities as it is in any other'. The research assumption that British South Asian women were unlikely to report sexual abuse, especially to the police, therefore, appeared to be correct.



## Reasons for underreporting

Having established that a problem existed, the next step was to discover why sexual abuse was not being reported to the police. The focus group discussions revealed that the reasons were linked mainly to the women's perceptions of the police, a finding which ties in with the trust and confidence issues cited in

the literature above. The women's perceptions centred on three areas: 1) who the police were; 2) misunderstanding culture and cultural needs; and, 3) trust.

## Who the police are

One of the commonest viewpoints held by the focus groups was that all police were male. Although the police in England and Wales fail to reflect the general population in terms of gender or race, not all police officers are men and, of interest, eight of the nine officers we interviewed were female. In the year to March 2016, 28.6% of all officers were female. Furthermore, 31.2% of all new recruits into the force were female. For the same time period, 5.9% of all officers were BME, with a 12.1% BME representation in terms of new recruits (Home Office, 2016). Nevertheless, the officers understood that many female victims would assume that the police were male: 'I can understand that they see men. The police are mainly men; it's all men in their family, so that's what they expect'.

## Understanding culture

Another barrier cited during the focus group discussions was the belief that the police did not understand British South Asian culture. This perception was tested by asking the officers why they thought that underreporting by this community was so prevalent. Many of the interviewees appreciated that a number of factors may contribute to underreporting, although, in contrast to the focus group participants' perceptions, the police officers cited culture as the most prevalent factor influencing it. Culture was also cited by another officer, who mentioned that 'for certain communities, including the Asian [ones], their culture, their tight-knit family background – almost the Victorian ethos – is their Achilles

heel'. This point was neatly summed up by another officer: 'It's a culture of silence... They'll never say anything'.

All the police officers interviewed recognised the existence and importance of both honour and shame as key factors in the women's failure to report sexual abuse. One officer explained how 'issues of honour and shame clearly play a part...[they] are ingrained deeply in the South Asian communities particularly...[and these] are significant barriers'. Another spoke of how the issue of honour is so deeply-entrenched that mothers think: 'My reputation – the reputation of my family – is dependent on not reporting this matter'. One officer acknowledged the threat of shame:

**Their culture is about shame and dishonour and it's shameful even [to] talk to the police, let alone describe what's happened to them.**

## Family and community

Acknowledging that the family and community both play a significant role in the culture of British South Asians, many of the police officers in this study recognised that this cultural aspect prevented some victims from coming forward to report abuse. One officer commented that British South Asians often 'keep it within the family' and that 'very strong family ties' made some victims reluctant to pursue criminal convictions. This unwillingness to speak out was associated with a concern that, should they put pen to paper, they would become instrumental in convicting their husband, uncle or second cousin. Thus, it was recognised that, driven by cultural values and family pressure, many British South Asian victims merely kept their abuse to themselves; furthermore, many victims simply did not know where to go to get support. As one officer put it:

**There'll be families, won't there, who are ostracised and don't know how to... They can't just pick up the phone, can they? They might not be allowed out of the house. They might not know how to tell anybody; [they] just don't know where to go and where to seek that advice from.**

In addition to family pressure, fear of the consequences of going against the family's wishes and reporting sexual abuse to the police may be another reason why British South Asian victims choose to remain silent. As one officer pointed out, speaking out can result in 'physical risk – and so why would she [report]? Why would she put herself at even greater risk?' Another officer emphasised the role of consequences, describing what he/she regarded as the difference between white and British South Asian communities:

**The distinction I make, and it might not necessarily be right, but people tend to fall out over matters within the white British community, or whatever you call it, but don't tend to take any retribution, in my experience, whereas I tend to find there's a very real live threat of retribution within the South Asian community.**

Retribution of this kind can include ostracism from the family and community, reduced marital prospects, or, at the other end of the spectrum, forced marriage and HBV (Gill, 2004; 2015). Pressure can be exerted by the community at large as well as the family. One officer recounted a case where the offender's family knocked on the door of the victim's family and said: 'Tell your daughter...not to continue. You know this'll be sorted within our community'. In this particular case, the police

also thought that a local councillor assisted in keeping the matter from the police.

## Trust

Mistrust and a lack of confidence in the police, which are prevalent in BME communities, were reported as the final factors that prevented victims from reporting their abuse. All of the police interviewed were aware of such perceptions, although they did not always accept that responsibility for them might lie with themselves. One officer, for example, questioned whether this mistrust was a result of 'British policing' or 'confidence in policing from Pakistan and Bangladesh'. The lack of faith in the police might also, according to this officer, have been implanted in the victims' minds by their families which, if true, might be linked to the element of control mentioned previously. Nevertheless, it is also possible that such views reflect the general distrust of the police felt by the South Asian community in general. Trust and confidence in the police must be earned, so it is interesting that the police who participated in this study were aware of both the concerning facts and figures related to sexual abuse reporting and the need to build trust and confidence in the police among British South Asian women. A key concern of this study is, therefore, to encourage better relationships between the police and BME women in general and to provide recommendations on how this may be accomplished.

## Recent improvements

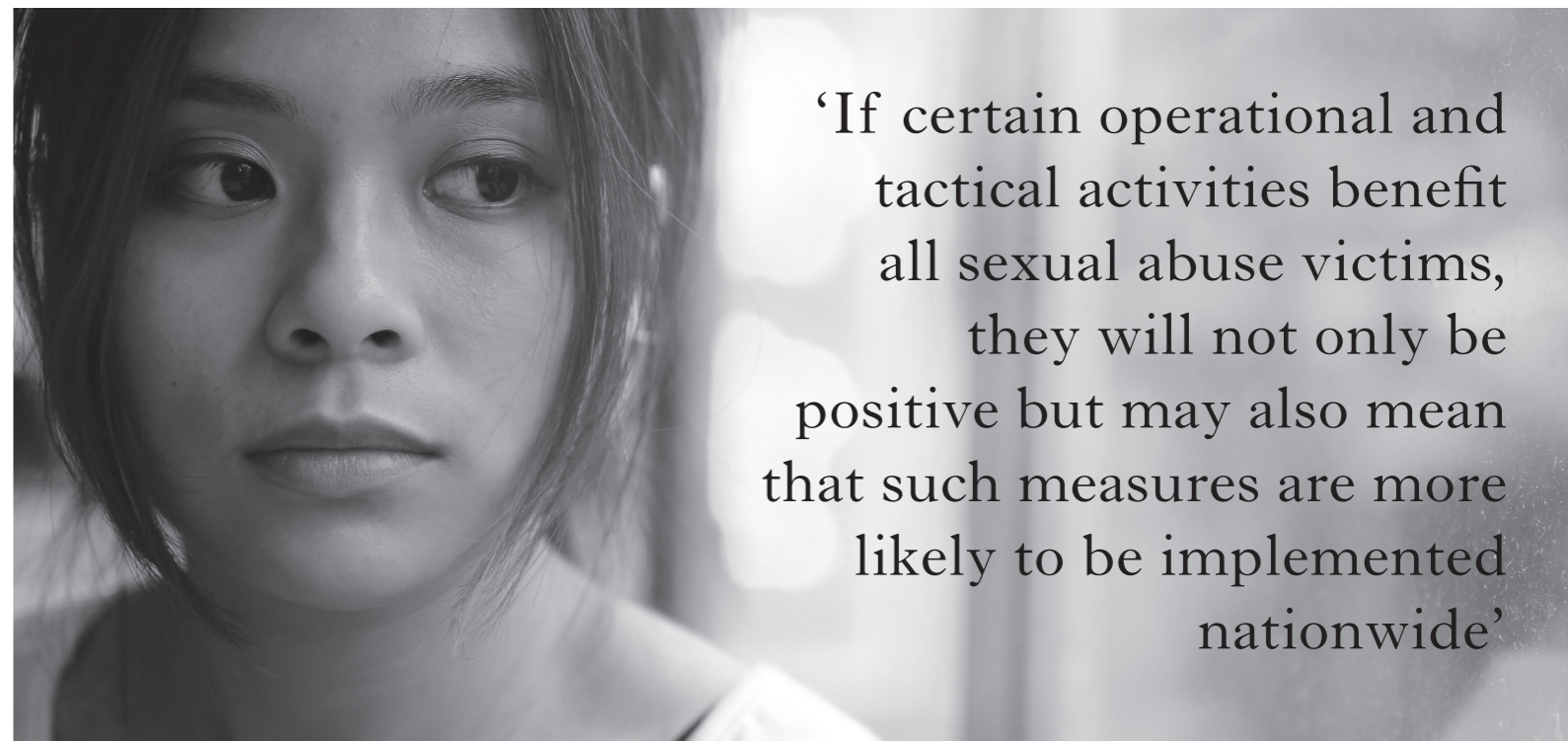
There was a common perception across all four police areas that much had changed over the past few years with respect to police practice, officer demographics and cultural understanding. One officer, for example, explained that his/her unit was now 65% female, something which

would previously have been unheard of, and which appeared to conflict with the focus group participants' assumption about the police. Nonetheless, the police interviewees were aware that a lot more work was required:

**To come into contact with somebody from the South Asian community, you've got a whole raft of learning to do, very quickly, which probably isn't going to happen... You're likely to lose your victim quicker than you are going to learn about that community and [then there's] all of the added pressure on top of the – "I've been raped" – you know, the family issues and the HBV concerns – so, as XXXX police, I think we're very good at it. As a police force [in the] UK, I think we're better at it than we used to be and I'm sure there are forces doing it better than others [and] forces that do it worse, but I think, collectively, we've still got a lot of learning to do.**

Another officer was using social media (Twitter) to try and break down barriers between the police and the community by informing residents exactly what to expect if they made a sexual abuse complaint. The officer also shared the profiles of the staff who would be working with them, an important step in dispelling the perception that all officers are men. This strategy was not aimed at the South Asian community specifically, however, and so it reflects how the police are trying to encourage more sexual abuse victims in general to come forward and so prevent a cycle of victimisation. If certain operational and tactical activities benefit all sexual abuse victims, they will not only be positive but may also mean that such measures are more likely to be implemented nationwide. Another force was also using technology; in that case, information about

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support for the victims of sexual abuse was provided on its website. Again, although this strategy was not aimed specifically at British South Asian women, it did cover information relating to historical abuse, relevant support services, persistent victimisation and the situation where English was not an individual's first language. Importantly, the website outlined the physical and mental factors associated with situations where the abused person is in a domestic relationship with the attacker. Rather than having specific information for specific ethnic groupings, this force ensured that its general information was broad enough to cover the cultural needs of as many communities as possible.

## Training

It is widely known that understanding a community comes from either being a part of the community or from instruction. Although some of those we interviewed were British South Asian, the vast majority were not and despite all the police officers demonstrating some awareness of cultural issues, only one of the four policing areas had a sound training process in place, a finding that was disappointing, given that all four areas had high South Asian populations. When asked

about the specific training for officers, Area One stated: 'They' have had diversity training, but it's going to be pretty basic...it's not going to be in-depth', while Area Two explained: 'There's obviously diversity training that they do as part of their initial course, but that's about it, if I'm honest'. Area Three's situation was described as follows:

**OFFICER 1: We used to get diversity training. Does that still happen? I don't even know if it still happens.**

**OFFICER 2: I think you get it when you join but I don't think you... have to keep redoing it. Once you've had your initial kind of training, that's it really, though, isn't it?**

Organised cultural diversity training in these three of these areas was, therefore, non-existent. Although the interviewed officers displayed a good level of cultural understanding, this appeared to be to the result of their personal endeavours rather than the outcome of a force or national edict. In fact, one of the officers confirmed that gaining cultural understanding was up to the officers themselves: 'It's down to

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individual officers...Some might understand the concepts better than others’.

When asked whether more training was required, particularly with regard to South Asian culture, one officer stated: ‘I think that’s the bit that we miss...You get a little bit [in diversity training] but you won’t get a great deal’. Another agreed that: ‘We probably do need to invest more for that [good] level of understanding’, arguing that enhanced training would lead to a greater ‘understanding of the risk and the issues that they face’.



The fourth area differed from the other three in that it was not only providing in-depth training but also sharing this best practice with neighbouring forces. The impetus for and emphasis on cultural training had, however, come from the bottom up, again emphasising the element of personal endeavour. One officer stated that she/he had undertaken a lot of research, reading books and reports, while another pointed to knowledge gained from practical involvement with the issues: ‘It has been hands-on and wanting to know. And we want to know’. These officers initially arranged

for an NGO which supports British South Asian victims to speak to their colleagues to explain fully the concepts of honour, shame and HBV, freely acknowledging that diversity training ‘wouldn’t help with HBV’. This initial training was then replicated internally and provided to all front-line officers to ensure that, as first responders to a complaint, they would know what to look for when entering the women’s homes and be aware of the cultural mores. When asked why this level, and breadth, of training was important, one officer explained that it was impossible to work with British South Asian women without understanding these issues.

The officers learnt from the training, for example, that interviewing a complainant at home might prove counter-productive, especially if she lived with her husband’s family, and also about the signs of an imminent forced marriage, such as a girl’s continued absence from school. While all the officers we interviewed possessed this knowledge, many stated that, realistically, it was unlikely that the first-response officer would have it. Given that the behaviour of the first-line officer has a major influence on whether or not a British South Asian woman continues with police involvement, it is imperative to improve police officers’ cultural knowledge.

## *Change and responsibility for change*

To provide a better policing experience and consequently better protection for British South Asian women, all the police we interviewed acknowledged that some level of change was required. However, when questioned further, few accepted that the responsibility for such change lay with them. One, for example, attributed this responsibility to the British South Asian community:

**It’s got to start there and, if it’s religious, it’s got to start with imams coming out and saying: “This shouldn’t be tolerated”. It’s then got to start with the communities themselves... I think then... it’s got to be law enforcement agencies, police, CPS, [the] judiciary. It’s got to be health, doctors and it’s then – almost that cherry on the icing – support from the third sector agencies.**

This view was reiterated by another officer: ‘The people in the temples, gurdwaras and mosques and the people in local clubs... They’re the ones that could be doing a great deal more’. The civil servant also mentioned the role and influence of faith groups. However, interestingly and in direct contrast to the criminal justice responses, he attributed ultimate responsibility to the police:

**I still see it as police... the police have to take responsibility for working out who are the right supporting mechanisms, because we’re talking about crimes and their core business is crime, so I’m quite clear [that] they can’t see this as being a sort of community-led process. I think they**

**and other people, like me, definitely have a role in trying to work out ways of empower people to do that from within the communities, but [the police] have to be the trigger.**

The officers were also asked whether they thought they should be doing more to dispel some of the well-known perceptions that British South Asian women held about them, such as engaging in more outreach work within the community. Some said they were already working with schools and engaging in training events, but the vast majority did not see community education as their job. One argued that, while they could get involved, ‘at the end of the day, we’re police officers’. Others added: ‘Why does it always have to be police?’ and ‘That’s not what I’m paid to do’. These responses indicate a lack of clarity and consensus regarding who should lead and be responsible for change. Until resolved, this issue will serve as a stumbling block to reform. Implications for policy and practice

While some of the policy and practice initiatives outlined below are specific to British South Asian sexual abuse survivors, others will help to tackle sexual victimisation across all Britain’s communities.



## Education

The most important change we suggest focuses on education and awareness-raising. Effecting change must include educating those living within British South Asian communities and encompass not only potential offenders but also community representatives and faith groups that hold power. Education programmes must, therefore, aim to dispel the shame associated with sexual abuse reporting. It is also imperative that all women become better educated regarding what is un/acceptable in terms of interpersonal relationships (through school, specialist NGO and community programmes, Authors 2017), as well as the level of service and support they can expect from the police. The latter should be delivered by the police themselves, regardless of whether or not they believe that their role includes community education, and by female officers, to dispel the misconception that the police are ‘all men’.

## Advocacy networks

It is also crucial that survivors of sexual abuse receive better support from both the police and other agencies, possibly by establishing an advocacy network of impartial people who speak the languages and dialects found in British South Asian and other BME communities, given that language is often a huge barrier to BME.

## Community multi-agency forums

Our final suggestion is that police forces, NGOs, religious organisations, community representatives, schools, local authorities and health workers should work together. One officer suggested the use of multi-agency community forums to promote co-operation between these groups. These forums would enable interested parties to come together to discuss the issues that currently protect perpetrators and prevent women from reporting sexual abuse; moreover, their aim would be outcome-focused. For multi-agency



cooperation to succeed, both men and women with influence in the community would need to be involved, and have the appetite and energy to effect real change. The key to meaningful change, therefore, lies in the continuous, committed engagement of all involved. The suggested forums could collectively deliver education programmes and religious sermons, produce relevant literature and, as outlined above, establish an advocacy network. Collaboration on this scale will initially need a forceful driver, and we suggest that this task should initially fall to the police. We have seen innovativeness and creativity at work in terms of officers engaging with this particular ethnic group and proving a force for good in challenging victimisation and vulnerability, and so we believe that the police have the ability and passion to effect this much-needed change.

## Next steps

Police policy needs to focus on: improving cultural and linguistic understanding across the entire force; tackling the reasons behind British South Asian women’s culture of silence; sharing exemplary work practices; and, creating multi-agency community forums. The police should lead these forums initially; they should include all the agencies

actively seeking to provide better education and awareness-raising programmes and a network of advocates should be established. It is hoped that these initiatives will not only enhance police involvement with Britain’s South Asian communities but also spread beyond them and also benefit other BME communities. Anything that can be done to increase the protection of those who have been abused or who are at risk of abuse, regardless of gender or race, must be considered worthwhile, and so we hope that this study may act as a catalyst for such change.

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