The Work of Safe on Our Streets with minority ethnic runaways: an analysis of work carried out with four young women from South Asian, Muslim backgrounds

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Project origins
In the autumn of 2002, the Social Exclusion Unit and the Children and Young People’s Unit announced a short-term development fund for work with young runaways. Projects were invited to bid for funding to provide innovative services to support young people who had run away, been thrown out of home or who were at risk of being in one of these situations. Safe in the City, a Children’s Society project in Manchester, made a successful application and accessed funding to work with young runaways in ‘at risk’ groups.

As part of the funding of the project, there was a requirement that the development project would be evaluated. The Children’s Society’s Research Unit were approached to conduct this evaluation based on their extensive past experience of research into running away.

Safe on Our Streets worked with young people from different backgrounds and aimed to make contact and engage with the young people who were most at risk due to their running away, including:

- young people from minority ethnic backgrounds
- younger runaways
- young people who run away repeatedly
- runaways from the ‘looked after’ system.

Of the nine young people of minority ethnic backgrounds who were referred, during the period of the evaluation the project had initial contact with eight young people and in all eight cases this led to substantial further work. This is a significant success and suggests that the project’s model of access and engagement worked well with this group of young people.

Collecting the Case Studies
This report summary is based on four in-depth case studies collected from 4 South Asian, Muslim, young women aged between 15 and 17 and project workers from Safe on Our Streets for a national DfES- (CYPU) funded evaluation of 20 young runaways’ projects between January 2003 and June 2004. The case studies help to demonstrate what processes worked well, with whom, and in what context. Where possible we carried out interviews with the young person at end of contact, followed by an interview with the project worker and also with a carer or another professional who is involved in the case. In the research design, follow-up interviews were carried out with the same people three months later. The four particular case studies, discussed below however, differ in that they consist of interviews with the young people and project workers only. This is largely because these young women were unable to contact home, and because of safety issues should their location become evident. Further there was a problem with finding other culturally sensitive services which the young women could or would use and this largely precluded the possibility of involvement of other professionals. Lastly because of their isolation from their families, communities and support networks, the work tended to be longer term and ongoing. In order to adapt the methodology to make it more culturally sensitive we
had to accommodate these differences by recognising that we were not able to carry out interviews at ‘end of contact’ as such.

**Referral routes**

The young women who figure in this report had either been referred by project workers from hostels or had self referred through friends, or through having met a South Asian project worker undertaking outreach work in schools.

One young woman, who was being physically abused and wanted to leave home, had contacted the project before she left. In this case the young person needed support in leaving. A common issue for the young women was that they were kept under a high degree of surveillance and it was hard for them to leave:

‘They were strict on picking her up and dropping her off at school...they wouldn’t let her see friends.... She wasn’t allowed to make decisions. She didn’t have any freedom’ (project worker).

When such a contact is made prior to the young person leaving home the project does preliminary work:

‘We often do pre-planned work before they leave home, to try to engage them with appropriate services’ (project worker).

**The context of running away or being thrown out**

Three of the young women had escaped from a situation where they were being pressurised into arranged marriages abroad.

‘They were planning on marrying her abroad so she left home at that point as she couldn’t cope with it’ (project worker).

‘She left home because they were going to take her abroad and force her into marriage’ (project worker).

Two of the young women were pregnant. Because they were pregnant outside marriage they had to leave home and might have to leave the city because of the possible repercussions:

‘In her culture she was the only (unmarried) one pregnant. The shame was crippling her’ (project worker).

Two of the young women had no previous running away history and two of them had been thrown out or run away on a number of occasions:

‘The first time away I moved to a hostel. My sister kicked me out’ (young person)

**Services**

It was difficult to find appropriate culturally sensitive services and the young women were vulnerable because they were isolated from their families and communities. Even though they had to leave they missed their families:
’I would love to be at home and sit down and talk about it and compromise’ (young person).

For this reason, as mentioned above, the project’s engagement with the young person tended to be longer term:

’There aren’t any services and we end up doing the work ourselves’

’We tried to encourage her to go to counselling but she preferred to come to us to talk about stuff. We ended up doing the counselling’

’ She said, “you can’t drop me no-one else will work with me”’ (project worker).

Appropriate, culturally sensitive services were hard to find and there may even have been some problems with services that are geared to South Asian women. For instance ‘F’ was staying at an Asian women’s refuge and the older women kept telling her to go home, even though the women had run away themselves. The South Asian project worker at Safe on Our Streets pointed out how, initially she had to work doubly hard with the young women in order to gain their trust because they fear that South Asian workers might report back to their family:

’That’s difficult when I work with Asian young people, as I have to work that bit extra to build up trust with them. I’ve found this with most Asian young people, particularly women’ (project worker).

However after trust-building:

’I think (being of the same cultural background) that’s helped quite a lot. She (young person) said to me: I find it quite comfortable talking to you as I know you won’t judge me’ (project worker).

’I like working with (project worker) because she understands a lot more [culturally] than other workers. She understands about arranged marriages’ (young person).

Other, mainstream provision could place young women in a situation where they were at risk of racial harassment and with little or no provision for their cultural and/or religious needs:

’I lived in a hostel and they were all being racist and calling me ‘paki’ and all that and fasting came around at Ramadan and the Safe on Our Streets (project worker) was there for me because she is a Muslim herself. I think it was good because I hardly knew any Muslims down in Manchester…’ (young person).

When ‘N’ arrived at the hostel it was Ramadan:

’When I first went to the hostel I was fasting and was on my own. People were smoking around me and it made me want to smoke. I had to cook my own food.’

’I get upset all the time. Other residents don’t understand at all. I miss my family. It is better to talk to someone who understands’ (young person).

Eid, an important religious festival and family celebration, was a time when the young people felt extra isolated:
'On the day when it was Eid she gets really upset and that’s when she wants to self-harm’ (project worker).

The South Asian Project worker visited the young people at Eid and held a celebration for the young Muslim women. This was much appreciated

‘At Eid she took me to a restaurant’ (young person).

The down side was that the lack of other options for support leads to the attendant issue of dependency.

Safety Issues

‘I’ came to Manchester alone from another city to escape a forced marriage. She had no money or possessions. She was hanging around at night with nowhere to go and with no knowledge of the city. She was fortunate to meet an Asian man who had a female friend who could help her. Her situation could have been very different. She did not want to contact the police or social services, as she was afraid they would contact her family. Isolation makes these young women especially vulnerable:

‘When she came to Manchester she had no money, no nothing, so she was hanging around the station. She just got a train and ended up in Manchester’ (project worker).

There is also the likelihood that the young women will be pursued and found by relatives and their contacts. This could have dangerous consequences especially when there is a history of physical abuse. One young person who was pregnant was in danger of being seen at any time by a male relative who was a taxi driver. There are times when the police have returned young people to their family homes only for the abuse to start up again.

Some of the issues shared with young runaways from other minority backgrounds

There are a number of issues that emerge which are shared with other young people from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The first was the reluctance of one young person to engage with social services based on a previous negative experience:

‘I felt she wasn’t on my side. It felt like she was the family’s social worker more than mine. She didn’t help. I didn’t feel I could talk to her’ (young person).

There was also the issue for under-16s who were unable to get any financial support. In the case of a young woman who was expecting a baby she could not gain admittance to a mother and baby unit until she reached the age of sixteen.

Interventions

The project undertook a wide range of interventions with these young people. Below are some of the interventions which have been identified by project workers and minority ethnic young people in interviews:

- Identifying possible sources of funding
- Help with finding long-term accommodation
- One-to-one telephone support
• Holding party at Eid
• Finding young person an Eid outfit
• Long-term support
• One-to-one emotional support
• Counselling
• Advocacy
• Promoting self advocacy
• Linking with other agencies
• Befriending
• Enabling the young person to meet other young women from similar cultural backgrounds
• Help with making application for funds
• Identity work re: dual heritage
• Mediation
• Listening
• Financial and practical help
• Taking young person out to restaurant or shopping
• Referral to other agencies.

**Enabling and hindering factors**

The minority ethnic young people and their project workers were asked to identify factors that had helped or hindered the progress of the work and the outcomes.

Figure 1 shows the enabling factors identified:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 1: Enabling factors identified in the case studies</th>
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<td>• Young person is willing to engage</td>
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<td>• Young person knows the project worker from outreach in a school</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Cultural identity of the worker who understands the issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The ability of project workers to listen</td>
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<td>• Good relationship with project workers</td>
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<td>• Trust building</td>
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<td>• Non-judgmental project workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The opportunity to meet other minority ethnic young women with some shared issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Physical and practical provision</td>
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<td>• A safe space</td>
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As can be seen from this list the particular qualities and approaches of project staff were seen as a crucial enabling factor:

‘She is someone I can talk to about my problems’

‘(She) always has time to listen’.

‘There was time for her (project worker) to build up trust with us’ (young people).

In addition the opportunity to meet other young people and the general facilities of the project were important to young people:
‘She has been able to meet up with other young people who have left home in her situation and got a lot of support from them’ (project worker).
‘There is a room where you can chill out with food, TV and radio’ (young person).

Figure 2 lists the hindering factors identified:

**Figure 2: Hindering factors identified in the case studies**

- The lack of other agency involvement
- The lack of other appropriate culturally sensitive provision
- Young person is resistant to social services through previous negative involvement
- Young person is under sixteen and cannot be housed at mother and baby unit
- Young person is under sixteen and cannot get income support
- Young person becoming dependent on the project
- Young person becoming quite demanding of project worker time
- Initial trust issue and fear of worker reporting back to family
- Self-harming and mental health issues

Many of the hindering factors relate to the lack of other service provision for this group and, as discussed earlier, the resulting potential for dependency on the project staff.

**Outcomes**

Through the intensive work carried out by the project, it is apparent that, despite the hindering factors identified, the project was able to achieve some significant outcomes for these young people:

‘At first the young person was crying a lot and bordering on depression. She now smiles more and it is like a cloud lifted. The more contact we had the more she smiled. She now feels positive about the baby’ (project worker).

‘They gave me support. They have let me know someone cares about me’ (young person).

Outcomes identified by young people and/or staff are shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Outcomes identified in the case studies**

- Young person has a greater sense of her rights
- Young person more able to express her needs
- Young person has baby and lives in stable accommodation
- Young person is happy she kept baby
- The young person is able to self-advocate
- The young person is less depressed
- The young person has been able to communicate with mother
- The young person is self-harming less
- The young person is less angry
'N’, who was very satisfied with the help she received, said: 'They are always there to listen’. It was the first place she got help from. ‘N’ said she would still go to visit the project when she is forty years old.

**Concluding comments on work with South Asian young women**

This particular group of young people who run away are completely isolated from their normal systems of support, and there is a lack of appropriate provision for these young women in mainstream services. Appropriate services cannot altogether be prescribed because although a young person, for instance, found herself in a hostel at Ramadan when she was fasting and met with unhelpful behaviours and racist responses, the provision at the South Asian women’s refuge was not altogether satisfactory either as described above.

The identity of the South Asian worker who worked with these young women was, in this case, experienced as helpful by the young people because they knew she understood the issues and was able to help in informing other services about these issues. However, this puts a great burden on project workers and the young women can become dependent upon them. The young people found the listening skills and the time offered to them very important.

In summary, the key ingredients in the success of the project’s model of work with South Asian young women were: cultural awareness, providing the time to build trusting relationships and a relatively long-term commitment, offering listening support, and flexibility to individual needs.

**Learning from Practice**

The Safe on our Streets project generated important learning points for services working with young people who run away. There was a high level of engagement with young people from minority ethnic groups. Whilst there were necessarily some differences in approach to working with these groups, three of the common ingredients were: a commitment to outreach work in order to receive referrals from these young people; a flexible and individualised approach to the working; and a willingness to provide a medium-to-long-term intervention, which enabled the project to build relationships and trust gradually. In addition, in relation to South Asian young women, the high level of cultural competence of the project staff was a key factor. We need to recognise the diversity that there is among the group that is generally lumped together under the title ‘Black and minority ethnic’. The needs of Black Caribbean and Black African young people may differ widely from these South Asian young women (as well as from each other). There is a need for research and development work on these lines.