The child sexual exploitation of young South Asian women in Birmingham and Coventry
Exploring professional insight into young women’s hidden journeys, silence, and support

November 2017

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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction - The Child Sexual Exploitation of young South Asian women</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 The Children’s Society’s work and this research study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.1 Aim of this study</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Methodology</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Important considerations for the findings</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Underpinnings: Shame (sharam) and honour (izzat)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Findings</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Perpetrators</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Identifying young women to exploit</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Grooming young women</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1 Discourses of shame (sharam) and honour (izzat) in the grooming process</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2 Normative gender roles and the grooming process</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.3 Approaches to sex and relationships, and the grooming process</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 The nature of child sexual exploitation</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1 Online tools of exploitation</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 CSE, other forms of abuse, and forced marriage</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 The impact of abuse – the loss of ‘bodily honour’, feelings of shame and difficulties of disclosure</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.1 Poor mental health and CSE</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 Parental, familial and community responses to disclosure and methods of support</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8 Presenting to support services in crisis</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9 Local system responses to young South Asian women’s experiences of CSE</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9.1 Identifying and supporting young women at risk</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9.2 Working with parents, families and communities</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Recommendations</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword

This short exploratory research study sought deeper understanding of the experiences of young South Asian women who have experienced child sexual exploitation (CSE). In particular, it aimed to shed light on the hidden and highly stressful journeys these women undergo in the run-up to presenting to support services. By focusing specifically on the perspectives of professionals who work with these women, the study reveals the complex reasons why they remain silent about CSE. Notably, the study found that their disinclination to report is rooted in an attempt both to ensure the unity of their families and to maintain their own izzat (honour). The study’s preliminary results not only suggest that South Asian women and girls silently endure acts of CSE, but also that there is a general reluctance in South Asian communities to engage with the underlying cultural issues inherent in a patriarchal social structure based on male hegemony and the privileging of male sexuality (Harrison and Gill, 2017) and their links to CSE. Thus, this study’s findings concur with those of the previous studies into sexual abuse in South Asian communities with which I have been involved for the last few years. For example, the need sexual abuse survivors have to speak out about their abuse does not arise solely from the violence and abuse they have suffered, nor their desire for justice, nor even the human need to speak out in itself. Whilst these are essential, the survivor also needs to be a subjective agent, whereby she sees her experiences as a source for truth and interprets what happened to her through a dialogue with her resources. When we look at how young women’s bodies have become a space of control and regulation – and, more specifically, the violence and trauma that this subjugation creates – we can also see how women are resisting and transgressing the restrictions placed upon their bodies. Thus, how sexually abused women navigate such boundaries provides both the foundation for their survival and the potential to turn dishonour on its head.

That said, survivors face real barriers that cannot be ignored, because they contribute to their further marginalisation and victimisation. It is, therefore, important to address factors such as honour and shame, victim blaming and structural concerns that inhibit South Asian women’s reporting of sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. Tackling these issues would help them to obtain effective outcomes when rebuilding their lives. Consequently, it is imperative to use culturally tailored and community CSE interventions designed specifically for members of South Asian communities, as it has been suggested that these address the unique backgrounds of South Asian women and acknowledge their distinctive barriers to reporting; as a result, those interventions are more successful (Harrison and Gill, 2017). Furthermore, given the continued aversion of many South Asian women to involving external authorities such as the police, a multi-layered approach that involves all community members as active agents will be necessary. By encouraging individuals in need to recognise and take account of both child exploitation and sexual abuse, such an approach will help to tackle the prevailing culture of silence that surrounds it.

Professor Aisha K. Gill, Ph.D. CBE
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University of Roehampton
Executive summary

Child sexual exploitation can have devastating and long-term consequences for those who experience it. Powerful grooming strategies, social stigma around reporting abuse, and difficulties in identifying young people at risk all conspire to make ascertaining the scale of CSE and supporting those affected very difficult.

The Children’s Society’s frontline work with young people experiencing CSE in Birmingham and Coventry has revealed in recent years even greater challenges to supporting young South Asian women (YSAW) at risk of CSE in the region. Thus, the aim of this short exploratory research study was to:

▪ Understand the experiences of YSAW who have experienced CSE in Birmingham and Coventry, and shed light on their hidden journeys before they present at support services in high distress.

▪ Understand why YSAW may be under-represented in services, relative to local demographics.

▪ Identify opportunities to address and remove barriers to YSAW and their families and communities accessing support.

▪ Offer transferable insight to frontline practitioners, managers and commissioners across the sector for use when working with YSAW and other BME young people around CSE and other forms of sexual violence.

This study drew upon the professional insight and experience of expert local practitioners – it did not engage YSAW directly as it would not have been possible to guarantee their safe and ethical involvement within the short project timescales. Any future research should centre on the voices of YSAW themselves.

Key underpinning principles

▪ CSE is one dimension of sexual violence that occurs within a wider context of violence against women and girls (VAWG).

▪ Any child or young person can be at risk of experiencing CSE, irrespective of gender, age, ethnic or racial background, religion, dis/ability or sexuality. CSE may take place in any community, and perpetrators may come from any background.

▪ Responsibility and guilt for abuse and exploitation always lies with the perpetrator, never the survivor.

▪ In any system response to CSE or VAWG, safeguarding young people is of the utmost priority, regardless of their background or context.
Key findings

The exploitation of young South Asian woman

- Experts recognise that many of the risk factors, presenting needs, grooming methods and types of CSE experienced by YSAW are the same as those commonly characterising the exploitation of young people from all backgrounds. The increasingly online nature of CSE across nearly all CSE cases they work on was of significant concern to professionals.

- However, most professionals reported that they often also witnessed specific nuances in the nature of CSE in Birmingham and Coventry when YSAW were targeted, particularly in relation to the grooming and blackmailing strategies employed by perpetrators.

- Conceptions of shame (sharam) and honour (izzat) emerged as strong influences in the everyday lives of some YSAW, and appear to have a significant role in experiences of, and responses to, exploitation.

- Whilst CSE may be perpetrated by people of all backgrounds, professionals reported that majority of perpetrators of CSE towards YSAW that they knew of were also South Asian, indicating ‘intra-community’ abuse.

How perpetrators identify and groom YSAW

Perpetrators appear to:

- Target YSAW they perceive as: vulnerable or ‘naïve’; unhappy at home; subject to social conservatism or high levels of supervision; experiencing poor mental health; or at risk of forced marriage or so-called ‘honour-based’ violence.

- Exploit conceptions of shame and honour, and normative gender expectations of YSAW, in order to silence and threaten them.

The impact of CSE on YSAW

Professionals said YSAW:

- Often describe a sense of loss of bodily honour after abuse, and feel shame upon themselves, their families and communities.

- Worry about family repercussions, or ‘tarnishing’ their wider culture and community reputation, if they disclose abuse, and so often remain silent until crisis point.

- Often experience a decline in mental health after abuse, including displaying symptoms associated with trauma.

Parent, familial and community responses to CSE

- Professionals report that many parents are supportive of YSAW when they disclose abuse; however, parents are often unaware of how best to help.

- Some families may be inclined to first seek support from within their community if they feel suspicious or unsure of statutory support services.

- Families – and mothers in particular – may feel subject to the same community pressures and discourses of shame and honour as their daughters, feeling conflicted or constrained in their options for action.

- For some families, fear of shame and ostracisation from the community can be so strong that daughters are offered an ultimatum: to not disclose the abuse further, or to be disowned or punished by the family.

- There is a growing willingness from some communities to acknowledge and address these issues.
Service and system responses to the CSE of YSAW

- Professionals report many of the same challenges when working with YSAW as with other young people experiencing CSE.

- They report specific considerations for YSAW, particularly around the need to understand the roles that shame, honour and community dynamics play in exploitation, disclosure and support.

- Staff face difficulty in meeting and exploring sensitive issues with young women who are highly supervised, or in encouraging them to attend formal or identifiable social care settings due to the fear of being seen.

- Staff face considerable challenges in balancing their response to CSE with wider safeguarding protocols around protecting young women from so-called 'honour-based' violence and forced marriage.

- Staff may fear being viewed as culturally insensitive or racist when investigating concerns of abuse, and so may not act in the same way as they would if concerns arose in other communities.

- Existing systems may not be structured in ways that support effective engagement with BME communities to improve awareness and accessibility of services.

- Professionals highlighted a range of ways of building relationships and improving engagement with YSAW and their communities, including: recruiting frontline workers from those communities; using culturally relevant language and discourses to convey information, and embedding and resourcing outreach support within communities.
Recommendations

These recommendations aim to support frontline staff, managers and commissioners to design and deliver CSE support services that are effective and relevant for young South Asian women and their communities.

- If concerns exist about a young person’s safety, professionals must follow all appropriate and necessary safeguarding processes, regardless of a young person’s racial or ethnic background.

- Managers and commissioners should make time and resources available for staff to receive in-depth training on working confidently and sensitively with diverse communities, and on the law and their safeguarding duty of care.

- Alongside their child protection mandate, professionals should acknowledge and honour the resilience of the young women who present at their services. An exploration of their strengths as well as their needs should form a core part of any assessment.

- Professionals should be aware of how particular local geographies and community dynamics may result in nuances to the strategies employed by perpetrators and the experiences of particular young people.

- Extreme care should be taken, specialist advice sought, and procedures carefully followed, when so-called ‘honour-based’ violence or forced marriage are identified as risks.

- Young women should have the choice about whether they seek support from wider or universal CSE services, or specialist ones that have a specific focus on supporting BME women.

- Services in diverse areas should implement a communications and engagement strategy that specifically targets so-called ‘hard-to-reach’ communities.

- Commissioned services should include resources to provide outreach, and commissioners and providers should be aware of specific local population needs.

- Families and communities should be supported to understand how they can help their children and young people if they disclose abuse.

- Professionals should engage community leaders in order to reach communities, and embed self-sustaining practices in communities that protect young people from harm.
Acknowledgements

Many people contributed their time and insight to this study. Firstly, many thanks to the staff at The Children’s Society’s Streetwise projects in Birmingham and Coventry, whose expertise and experience of working with young people experiencing child sexual exploitation forms much of the basis for this report.

Many thanks also go to colleagues at Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (CRASAC) whose knowledge of working with survivors of sexual violence and outreach work with South Asian communities form important framings for the study. Thanks to both Lynette Reid (Child Sexual Exploitation Coordinator [East Birmingham], CSE Team, Birmingham City Council) and Natasha Stirling (Senior Practitioner, CSE Horizon Team, Coventry City Council), who provided detailed and specialist insight from social care perspectives on how CSE manifests itself and is responded to in Birmingham and Coventry.

Thanks to Simran Chawla, whose detailed peer-review and expert contributions to the report offered important groundings, particularly around shame and honour. Thanks also to Professor Aisha Gill whose review of the report and foreword have provided an even deeper framing for these complex issues. Thanks to other colleagues at The Children’s Society who supported the project and reviewed the report, including Bali Hothi, Kerry Boffin, Philip Lund, Nicola Sugden and David Hounsell.

Finally, a huge acknowledgement goes to the young South Asian women whose cases informed this study. This report is dedicated to them and other young people who experience CSE or other forms of sexual violence. It is the hope that, by shedding light on their hidden journeys, this study can contribute to the development of systems that are better able to tackle CSE across a variety of contexts so that other young people may be protected in the future.

Contributors:
Dr. Caitlin O’Neill Gutierrez conducted the research and authored the report. Simran Chawla peer-reviewed the report, contributed to the sections on shame, honour and forced marriage, and supported the development of the recommendations. CRASAC contributed the section on South Asian women’s experiences of wider forms of violence.
1. Introduction – The Child Sexual Exploitation of young South Asian women

‘Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.’

Department for Education 2017: 5

Through our work at The Children’s Society supporting young survivors of child sexual exploitation, we know that CSE can have a devastating impact on all young people who are subjected to it.

Any child or young person can be at risk of experiencing CSE, irrespective of gender, age, ethnic or racial background, religion, dis/ability or sexuality (National Working Group 2017). CSE may take place in any community, and perpetrators may come from any background (OCC 2012). The responsibility and guilt for child sexual exploitation always lies with the perpetrator – young survivors are never at fault of, or deserving of, being exploited.

In addition to its ‘transactional’ or ‘exchange’ nature, we know that CSE is often closely connected to other forms of abuse, including physical, psychological and financial abuse, and other forms of sexual violence (Beckett et al. 2017). It is crucial that the sexual exploitation of young women, including South Asian young women, is understood as part of a continuum of violence against women and girls (Imkaan 2017). The actions and mechanisms that enable CSE and perpetuate it are firmly located within the systems of violence and oppression that constitute and uphold unequal gender relations (HM Government 2016, UN Women 2013, World Health Organization 2009).

It is difficult to know how many young people are at risk of or have experienced CSE. The following factors conspire to make measuring the scale of CSE very difficult:

- The varied forms that CSE and child sexual abuse (CSA) take
- The social stigma around talking about abuse
- Low levels of reporting
- Inconsistency in professional recording of the nature of abuse
- A lack of wide-scale research or methodologies to capture the scale of CSE

Based on data about young people presenting with multiple risk factors that could be indicative of CSE, recent conservative estimates have suggested around 17,600 children (DfE 2016) and 16,500 children (The Office of the Children’s Commissioner 2012) could be at risk of CSE. However, it is widely recognised that official estimates are under-representative of reality, and many more young people are likely to have experienced or be at risk of experiencing CSE. Very welcome research recently published by Kelly and Karsna (2017) sets out the complexities of estimating the scale of CSE and CSA, and by reviewing a range of evidence sources, says that:

‘Taking into account the variations in the prevalence studies for England and Wales, the data suggest that
some 15% of girls/young women and 5% of boys/young men experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16, including abuse by adults and peers.’

(2017: 16)

Whilst in the last decade or so studies have started to explore how CSE manifests itself in the lives of young people and the impact it has on them (OCC 2013, Kennedy 2016), few have explored the experiences of CSE of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) young people, including South Asian women (Chase and Statham 2005, Ward and Patel 2006). Notable exceptions include the valuable work done by the Muslim Women’s

Network UK (MWNUK) in their report ‘Unheard Voices: The Sexual Exploitation of Asian Girls and Young Women’ (2013). Other very valuable and related work has focused on other forms of violence against South Asian women, and is explored shortly in the section on Shame and Honour.

The lack of work around young South Asian and other BME women’s experiences of CSE can also be framed in relation to wider trends in recent years where multiculturalist approaches may have impacted upon the social care sector’s ability to deliver support that takes race, ethnicity and faith-based structural oppressions sufficiently into account (Lavalette and Penketh 2013). For example, there has been a reduction in specialist services that support BME women in relation to wider forms of violence (Imkaan 2016), and as brap highlight, ‘recent high-profile safeguarding reports are curiously lacking in any analysis of the role that "race" might have played in the interaction between parent, professional and child' (brap 2011: 6).

Working effectively to support young people and tackle CSE requires an acknowledgement that every young person’s experience of CSE is unique and takes place in a specific context. It is therefore crucial to understand how the multiple dimensions of young women’s lives – including race, ethnicity and faith – intersect in ways that influence their experiences of exploitation (Imkaan 2017).

1.1 The Children’s Society’s work and this research study

The Children’s Society provides confidential and independent support and advice for children and young people who are at risk of, or experiencing sexual exploitation. Our CSE service model contains a number of elements that form a ‘ladder of support’ through which young people can scale support up or down as required, including:

- One-to-one intensive support
- Therapeutic services
- Group work
- A variety of prevention and awareness-raising services for both young people and professionals

Through the Streetwise programme in Birmingham and Coventry, we support young people who are at risk of, or who have experienced CSE. We also support young people who go missing from home – an issue closely linked with CSE (APPG Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and APPG Looked After Children and Care Leavers 2012). In recent years, practitioners in both services have witnessed changes on the ground in relation to the profile and experiences of the young people they work with. An initial analysis of professional insight and local data highlighted several patterns relating to CSE in Birmingham and Coventry. The specific experiences of South Asian young women – those identifying with an Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi background – emerged as significant and under-explored. It appeared that:

- Young South Asian women were presenting to services in very high levels of distress and at serious risk of harm.
- That they presented to services at very late stages in their journey, when their situation was very serious.
- They and their families tended to have very little or no, previous social care involvement prior to presenting in high distress.
There were at times links between young women’s experiences of CSE and going missing from home, and to other forms of abuse or oppression such as forced marriage and so-called ‘honour-based’ violence.

These factors presented challenges to professionals in how they could identify and most effectively support young South Asian women at risk of CSE, as well as prevent other young women experiencing similar abuse in the future.

Of additional concern for staff was the under-representation of young South Asian women in their services. Birmingham and Coventry are ethnically diverse cities, with people who identify as South Asian making up 22.5% and 12.7% of the cities’ respective populations, compared with 5.5% of the population across England (Coventry City Council 2011, ONS 2012).

Indeed, professionals from each of the services consulted during the study – The Children’s Society’s two Streetwise services, the CSE Social Work teams in both cities, and Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre – all reported that young South Asian women were considerably under-represented as a proportion of their service users, relative to the demographics of Birmingham and Coventry.

It is highly unlikely that young South Asian women are not at risk of or experiencing CSE. Lower presenting rates are more likely a result of institutional and societal barriers to enabling reporting and accessing support (Gilligan and Akhtar 2006, Harrison and Gill 2017). As CRASAC have previously noted, ‘a range of evidence highlights...that the lower rates of disclosure and reporting does not result from any lower prevalence of sexual violence for women and girls in these communities’ (Rehal and Maguire 2014: 8). Professionals wanted to understand more about why these young women were not accessing services so as to proactively reduce the barriers to support.

1.2 Aim of this study

This short research study has sought to explore in more depth professional understandings of the experiences of young South Asian Women who are at risk of CSE – particularly shedding light on young women’s hidden journeys in the run up to presenting to support services in high levels of distress.

This study also sought to:

- identify opportunities to address and remove barriers to them accessing support.
- understand why young South Asian women may be under-represented in services.
- identify opportunities to address and remove barriers to them accessing support.

It is the hope that an improved understanding of these hidden journeys may enable professionals to identify earlier and more tailored opportunities for prevention, intervention and support for young South Asian women experiencing CSE. The report closes with a series of recommendations for how professionals may be able to better engage and support these young women and other young people.

The study seeks to contribute to the growing national and international dialogue around how to tackle CSE and wider forms of violence against women and children. It aims to build upon the work done by the Muslim Women’s Network UK and CRASAC around South Asian women’s experiences in particular. By exploring the nature of CSE in a local area, the report also hopes to highlight the local geographies of exploitative networks, and the important role that local partners can play in together tackling CSE.
The child sexual exploitation of young South Asian women in Birmingham and Coventry
Exploring professional insight into young women's hidden journeys, silence, and support
2. Methodology

This short exploratory study was conducted between November 2016 and February 2017, and by employing a range of methodologies sought to begin to shed light on the experiences of young South Asian women who have experienced CSE in Birmingham and Coventry. It focused on harnessing the professional insight, expertise and experience of specialist staff in Birmingham and Coventry who regularly work with young South Asian women experiencing CSE. In doing so the study sought to recognise and harness the extensive tacit knowledge, practice wisdom and critical awareness of experienced social care professionals around an under-explored, complex and ever-evolving issue (Cheung 2016, Sheppard 1995).

Due to the short, time-bound nature of the project – and the requirement to prioritise safety, informed consent, and ongoing support for potentially vulnerable participants when exploring such a sensitive subject – we did not seek to engage young South Asian women themselves as we usually would in a project of this kind. With more time and resources, enabling young South Asian women to share their own stories would have brought a deeper insight into their experiences.

In order to understand these issues in greater depth, more work is needed that directly engages young South Asian women and their communities.

The researcher:
- Conducted in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups with 16 local professionals, made up of:
  - Five Interviews and two focus groups with project staff and managers at Streetwise
  - One interview with a Senior Practitioner in Coventry City Council’s CSE Horizon Team
  - One interview with the Child Sexual Exploitation Coordinator (East Birmingham) in Birmingham Council’s CSE Team
  - One focus group with outreach workers and the Outreach Services Manager at Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre
- Analysed six young South Asian women’s case files supported through Streetwise around CSE. This analysis provided important context, but individual cases have not been used as case studies.
- Conducted a desktop review of recent local literature and resources relating to CSE, and wider resources around CSE, VAWG and BME communities.
- Conducted a brief analysis of local and national quantitative data relating to CSE, with a focus on gender and ethnicity.
2.1 Important considerations for the findings

The findings in this report represent the views and expertise of those professionals consulted, and are not representative of all professionals working in CSE, nor of all young South Asian women’s experiences of CSE across the country, or all wider South Asian community and service responses to CSE and other forms of abuse. To avoid misrepresentation, we have tried to corroborate all evidence through other sources, such as through analysis of the wider literature, case files, interviews, or quantitative data. It is important to note that although the report refers to ‘South Asian’ young women and communities, they are not understood to be homogenous. Instead, there are a diverse range of experiences, identities and practices across South Asian communities, which may relate to nationality/ethnicity (Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian) and/or religion (Muslim, Sikh, Hindu). The nature of data collection via professionals and not young women themselves meant that it was not possible to ascertain the exact national, ethnic or religious backgrounds of all of the cases referred to, hence the use of ‘South Asian’. Where specific dimensions of identity were known and relevant to the point being made, these have been included in the text.

The research did not explore the experiences of young South Asian men, or young people of other ethnic and racial backgrounds, so the report is unable to offer robust comparisons across groups. Where comparisons are drawn between groups, these are the views of individual professionals based on their recent work and experience only.

It is important to remember that CSE and abuse occurs in every community, and any child can be at risk of CSE. Although this report focuses on young South Asian women, these are not issues that affect the South Asian community alone, and all efforts have been made in the report to avoid culturally deterministic language. It is also important to note the positionality of the researcher. Dr O’Neill Gutierrez is mixed British-Mexican and is not from a South Asian background, and as such does not have personal experience or knowledge of some of the common cultural, religious or ethnic discourses and practices that emerged through the research. To ensure a correct framing of such underpinning elements, the researcher took care to consult professionals from South Asian communities, and also worked closely with Simran Chawla, an expert on South Asian communities’ access to support services in relation to health, sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse.
3. Underpinnings: Shame (sharam) and honour (izzat)

Conceptions of shame and honour emerged in the research as strong influences in the everyday lives of some young South Asian women, and appear to have a significant role in experiences of, and responses to, exploitation.

Previous research has also highlighted the important role of shame and honour in the construction of some individual and collective South Asian identities, and social practices within some communities. An understanding of these dynamics provides important context for the wider findings of this research.

Honour (most commonly translated in South Asian communities as ‘izzat’) and Shame (‘sharam’) are intrinsically linked concepts (Soni 2012). Broadly speaking, ‘Honour’ derives from adhering to actions and behaviour that are commensurate with what your community expects of you, and which are beneficial to the community (Stewart 1994). ‘Shame’ is the consequence of breaching these codes, and the impact of this can be wide-ranging and catastrophic.

Gilligan and Akhtar (2006) use an anthropological paradigm that describes Asian and Muslim (not to be seen as overlapping or indeed homogenous) societies as ‘high context’. That is, societies that emphasise the collective over the individual, while European and North American societies may be perceived as more ‘low-context’ that emphasise the individual, rather than the collective. An individual’s safety, self-worth and value in a high context society may be determined by their conformity to collective values such as around shame and honour.

For some, honour and shame are omnipresent influences that inform an individual’s actions and choices throughout the course of one’s life; they do not operate in isolation or selectively, and can also be a source of community cohesion and pride (Soni 2012).

At the same time, in some communities upholding honour is the upmost priority – perhaps more than life itself. This is why violence or murder in the name of honour (and to absolve shame) may be considered by some to be righteous and courageous, even though it results in actions that are usually human rights abuses (Imam 1999, Rahim 2000).

Honour, shame and womanhood

While they provide a framework for all members of a group, in most patriarchal communities, however, ‘honour’ is disproportionately located within the context of women’s bodies, their behaviour and their choices (Singh et al. 2014, Stewart 2012, WLUM 2017):

‘Both men and women are supposed to uphold family and community honour, but the responsibility tends to fall mostly on women; they retain their honour through conforming to prescribed roles and practices and may attain dishonour through their "transgressions".’

Izzidien 2008: 21

The onus of preserving or ‘ruining’ family honour is therefore commonly placed on the woman. This in turn may become an extremely potent tool for controlling women’s autonomy and their sexuality but also their choices – or lack thereof – in relation to education, travel or other aspirations. In addition, shame and honour can become mechanisms through which abusers control their victims in order to protect themselves from potential disclosure (Haider 2003).

As Chew-Graham et al. explain in relation to focus groups they conducted with South Asian women’s groups in Manchester:
‘The groups…proposed that izzat was given precedence over the care and happiness of children in some families. The groups also theorised that izzat could be misused to reinforce women’s roles in family life, often to coerce women into remaining silent about their problems. Izzat was described as all pervasive, internalised and reinforced by women, preventing other community members from listening and getting involved. The groups thought that the burden of a family’s izzat was unequally placed upon the women of the family.’

Chew-Graham et al. 2002: 341

It is important to note that notions of honour – or acts of violence or crime carried out on women in order to protect honour – are not restricted to any particular religion, culture or community. Indeed, women’s experiences of honour and shame vary greatly, as Gill explains:

‘The oppression that women face as a result of honour systems takes different forms depending on their location, the regional culture and their family’s socio-economic status. For example, in some South Asian families, women’s participation in professional and/or academic pursuits contributes to the family’s honour; in others, a sister or daughter who works outside the home is a source of shame. Hence, gender-role expectations vary widely, ranging from the extremely patriarchal to the comparatively egalitarian.’

Gill 2014

Honour and shame in post-migrant South Asian communities

Constructions of honour, shame, gender and identity, when juxtaposed with the post-immigrant experience, can create an even more powerful set of social drivers – particularly because gender relations are often transformed in the migratory and resettlement process (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992). These can be simultaneously positive as well as negative in the impact they have on individuals and post-migrant families living in a new country.

Most patriarchal cultures, by definition, value constructions of masculinity more than femininity. This inequality, Akpinar suggests, is further reinforced when women, in the post-migratory context, are ‘deemed to be the carriers and bearers of ethnic (group) identity, which makes them responsible for the transgression of group boundaries, whilst men of a given ethnic group are held culturally responsible for the definition of gender norms’ (Akpinar 2003: 428). This can result in women being expected to perform an idealised version of ethnic womanhood as a means of retaining connection to a ‘homeland’ or culture that has been left behind in migration.

In addition, experiences of prejudice in a new society – including, but not limited to, racism – can lead to individuals feeling ‘othered’ or identified as different, such that one’s own group or community symbolises relative safety and familiarity. This can render it increasingly difficult to speak out against abuse or exploitation when perpetrated by members of that same group. It may even be seen as ‘dishonourable’ to speak out against such violations, for risk of fuelling negative public feeling against one’s community.

These processes create an important context for abuse, including CSE, because of the role they can play in reinforcing power structures along gendered lines such that women may be subordinated, silenced, and experience a systematic erosion of their own agency.

Other research, for example, has shown that concepts of honour and shame may limit South Asian women’s feelings of being able to disclose problems in their lives, or seek help (Chew-Graham et al. 2002). In some cases, the mental and emotional toll of being subjected to such discourses, particularly when abuse has occurred, has been linked to incidences of self-harm and suicide amongst South Asian young women (Bhardwaj 2001).
The implications of shame and honour for young South Asian women in the UK

Previous research has shown that constructions of shame and honour can have strong influences on the lives of young South Asian people growing up in the UK (Izzidien 2008, Soni 2012, Toor 2009). In particular, children – both girls and boys – may be socialised to believe in and reproduce patriarchal norms, including those around notions of female ‘virtue’, upholding family honour, and experiencing or projecting shame when virtue and honour are deemed to be lost (Eisner and Ghuneim 2013, Gill 2014).

Young South Asian women might be seen to be transgressing rules or expectations of them and ‘dishonouring’ their families and communities in a number of ways, such as by:

- Defying parental authority
- Breaking the religious code
- Smoking/drinking/using drugs
- Having sex before marriage
- Becoming ‘Western’ in attitude/behaviour/clothes/friends

Gossip or rumours about an individual displaying these kinds of behaviours may be enough to cause damage to honour and result in shame, even if they are untrue.

Every young woman’s experiences of navigating these discourses in their everyday life will be different, and will come into play with other social dynamics such as individual family and peer group relations. Because shame and honour emerged in the research as such strong influences in the lives of young South Asian women, the following sections build upon these underpinnings to explore how they manifest themselves in particular cases in relation to CSE.
The child sexual exploitation of young South Asian women in Birmingham and Coventry

Exploring professional insight into young women's hidden journeys, silence, and support
4. Findings

Whilst many risk factors, indicators and types of CSE are common across young people and communities, its exact nature varies from case to case, and place to place. Perpetrators of CSE exploit the specificities of local places and contexts in order to reach, groom and abuse young people (CEOP 2011, Willis et al. 2015).

This study found that many of the risk factors, presenting needs, grooming methods and types of child sexual exploitation experienced by young South Asian women are recognised as commonly characterising the exploitation of young people from all backgrounds, social groups and places across the UK. As one practitioner explained:

‘Risks and experiences of CSE are similar for all young people no matter what background. It’s just huge concern for all young people.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

However, most professionals reported that they often also witnessed nuances in the nature of CSE in Birmingham and Coventry when young South Asian women were targeted, particularly in relation to the grooming and blackmailing strategies employed by perpetrators.

Consequently, our findings are structured along the ‘hidden journey’ of exploitation that a young woman might be subjected to, in order to illustrate how CSE can evolve before coming to the attention of support systems. Each section highlights the common factors associated with CSE that professionals report as being present across cases of young women from all backgrounds. Each section also includes a more in-depth exploration of the ways in which young women from South Asian backgrounds may experience these facets of CSE in particular ways.
4.1 Perpetrators

Feedback from consulted professionals was that work around CSE tends to focus on young people and their experiences, with less emphasis or focus on the role of perpetrators despite them being the instigators and enactors of abuse. This focus is somewhat understandable as little research has focused on or engaged perpetrators, and reporting and conviction rates remain low. However, many professionals wanted through this study to demonstrate how at every stage, it is perpetrators who employ particular strategies to abuse and manipulate young women and community dynamics for their own gain. These professionals also wanted to emphasise that experiencing CSE is never a young woman’s fault, even if some actions appear consensual. We hope the language used through this report makes this clear.

Although identification and conviction rates of perpetrators of violence against women and girls, including CSE are rising year on year (CPS 2016), they remain relatively low compared to the numbers of instances of abuse estimated to take place, and so a detailed national and local profile of survivors and perpetrators is difficult to achieve. What is known is that the vast majority of the perpetrators of CSE are male and are from a range of ethnic backgrounds (OCC 2012), although women may also commit CSE (HM Government 2015), and that ‘perpetrators of child sexual exploitation are found in all parts of the country’ (DfE 2012:1).

The majority of professionals consulted in the research reported that in their experience of working with young South Asian girls in Birmingham and Coventry, perpetrators that they as professionals had knowledge about had tended to also be from South Asian communities and were often but not always from the same ethnic or religious group. The Muslim Women’s Network UK found similar models of ‘intra-community’ abuse in their own research with South Asian women survivors of CSE and sexual violence (2013).

This is not to say that all perpetrators of the sexual exploitation of young South Asian women or other young women in Birmingham and Coventry are from South Asian backgrounds – perpetrators of abuse come from all backgrounds and target young people of all backgrounds – but that this relationship was witnessed by professionals when the identity of the perpetrator had been disclosed to them.

Professionals emphasised that in many ways the background of the perpetrator played little role in the nature or severity of CSE. However, they said it could be important to consider in relation to grooming and blackmail strategies because it could mean that perpetrators who had knowledge of concepts such as shame and honour could employ them to facilitate the abuse of young people in their own communities.

Furthermore, professionals emphasised that acknowledging the profile of perpetrators in research such as this was important because – as Rehal and Maguire (2014) also highlight – it enables the evidence to challenge the ‘view held by some communities, as found by Gilligan et al (2006) that sexual violence can be construed as a largely “Western” phenomenon, found largely, if not exclusively, in white communities’. In addition, this research challenges conceptions that emerged through media coverage of recent high profile exploitation cases such as in Rochdale, which framed South Asian male perpetrators as ‘folk devils’ who target only white young women (Gill and Harrison 2015).

As this research demonstrates, young South Asian women – like many other young people from different backgrounds – are unfortunately targeted for exploitation by those within and outside of their communities. However, their presenting rates are likely to be even lower due to a range of barriers to disclosure and reporting (and not because CSE is not happening to them).
4.2 Identifying young women to exploit

Targeting ‘vulnerability’ and ‘naivety’

Child sexual exploitation, like much abuse, relies upon perpetrators seeking out young people who they believe they can control, manipulate and abuse by exerting power over them (National Working Group 2017). A key mechanism employed by perpetrators in the sexual abuse of children is the exploitation of their perceived vulnerability, naivety, automatic adherence to authority, and relative lower levels of awareness around the appropriateness of relationships due to their developmental stage (Tutty 1994). Other research has highlighted that young women are particularly likely to be victimised for emotional abuse, manipulation and sexual abuse (Barter et al. 2009).

Some professionals consulted were concerned that young women may be identified and targeted because they are perceived as being relatively ‘naïve’, ‘sheltered’ or ‘cosseted’, and unaware about the dangers of communicating and meeting with strangers:

‘It feels like they’re being targeted. At school, for example, guys drive past and young women are given a phone number. The girls appear naïve, flattered. If an older male pays them attention, some of them are going and following it up, without knowing it might lead to being raped. They’ve not had the understanding. It looks like they [young women] answered the [perpetrators’] phone calls willingly, but there’s no concept of risk. They seem to pick on them because of that.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

Some young women may be perceived by perpetrators as having less awareness of societal risks outside of the home or safe community spaces, or awareness of their local geographies and how to get around their cities safely by themselves on public transport, for example.

Some professionals reported that perpetrators are aware that some young women may also be expected by their families to perform normative age and gender roles around appropriate girlhood as they grow up (explored in more depth shortly), These roles could involve spending time primarily at home, experiencing high levels of supervision, and socialising in family and community spaces – not necessarily spending free time outside in wider public spaces with their peers. Of course, it is to be expected that many younger teenagers will have higher levels of supervision and less awareness of potential external risks posed to them, due to their age and developmental stage (JRF 2005). However, staff highlighted that where some families may enact a stricter or more conservative approach to supervision, these young women may be particularly unaware of external dangers should they then find themselves subject to them – a dynamic that perpetrators may be aware of and deliberately exploit.

Indeed, professionals said it was important to frame these young women’s experiences in relation broader understandings of adolescent development that include normal developmental desires to try new things, learn about risk and safety, and explore new friendships and relationships (Leather 2009). Young South Asian women, like all young people, go through these natural developmental stages to varying degrees – unfortunately, there appear to be predatory men seeking to exploit this process and target young women whilst they are in this stage of development.

In some cases where young South Asian women were not commonly found hanging out in more public and socially visible places such as restaurants, parks or shopping centres – places that are common sites or ‘hotspots’ of grooming (Barnardo’s 2012, NHS England 2017, Research in Practice 2015) – they were instead encouraged by perpetrators or their associates to get into cars with them for a lift from school, for example, and taken to more private places to be groomed or abused. Professionals observed that these practices can lead to the movement and
exploitation of these young people being more hidden from view than may otherwise be the case, making identification and disruption also much more difficult.

Professionals also suggested that perpetrators may target some young women they believe to be experiencing difficulty negotiating the balance between perceived ‘Westernised’ school and social lives, and more ‘traditional’ home lives. Whilst most family and personal situations are unlikely to resemble an over-simplified or culturally deterministic ‘Westernised/traditional’ binary, some professionals had witnessed a possible confusion or misunderstanding around social behaviours that could be exploited by perpetrators:

‘Where cultures clash, it can make the risks worse. Because if young women, quite young, quite protected, then if someone says “drive with me, have a party”, they just go, they think it’s exciting. Young women don’t understand it. They think the grooming activities and sex and CSE is just a Western different life.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

This normalisation of sexualised behaviour is not unique to young South Asian women who experience CSE, as other evidence has shown that young people are often made to think that the abusive or exploitative practices they are engaging with are ‘normal’ or to be expected (Young 1997). However, professionals displayed concern that perpetrators may play upon or magnify cultural differences to get young women to do what they want them to, or to minimise the abuse by explaining it away as ‘normal’ in a ‘Westernised’ setting. They reported that if young women believe that what they are engaging in is normal or just how relationships and sex should be, however uncomfortable or distressing for them, it may hinder them from disclosing the abuse. Frontline professionals also spoke about the dissonance between young women’s theoretical awareness of exploitative or abusive behaviour on the one hand and a hesitance or inability to recognise abusive characteristics in their own relationships, on the other. This can play out in complex ways, including in the conflation of controlling behaviour with ‘love’. The steady normalisation of control and violence underscores the narrative that these are normal in adult relationships, thereby blurring the lines between coercion and consent (OCC 2013).

Targeting young women who face challenges at home

In professionals’ experience, young women perceived by perpetrators to be unhappy or frustrated at home may also been seen as vulnerable to exploitation, particularly if they display signs of poor mental health, as one professional explained of a particular case involving a young woman and her friends:

‘Men had picked [the young woman] up on the phone [through social media or an app]. There were girls getting in cars. One of the others was higher risk in CSE — [the perpetrators] took her in their car because...she was struggling with her mental health. Perpetrators think young women like her are more susceptible to try cannabis, to forget everything. Then they’re more at risk of CSE. Young women “chill” in cars, and could escape the forced marriage [risk] and arguments at home.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

In addition, staff were concerned that perpetrators may also target particularly vulnerable young women who were at risk of forced marriage or so-called ‘honour’-based violence in the home. As will be discussed shortly, in a number of CSE cases noted by professionals there were concerns about or evidence of forced marriage or so-called ‘honour-based’ violence towards young women. In some young women’s cases, professionals understood forced marriage as a disciplining strategy if there are disagreements between them and their parents around perceived freedoms and behaviours:
‘At age 17, young women are reaching independence and want their freedom, so they want to break out. Parents become aware of this acting out, and the issue of forced marriage arises as a response.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

Where tensions exist around a young woman feeling at risk of being forced into a marriage that she is unhappy about, she may be considering seeking support or an alternative relationship outside of the home, or running away from home as a coping or reactive strategy to exit her home situation. Professionals reported that if perpetrators are aware of some of these dynamics, they may target young women they believe to be at risk of forced marriage or so-called ‘honour’ base violence and offer them a way out:

‘Some young women have to choose between forced marriage, and so-called ‘honour based’ violence at home, or you have to go onto the streets where you’ve got a few more days to live but it’s very unsafe. Perpetrators exploit this situation, and maybe provide accommodation.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Forced marriage will be explored in more depth later in this report.

4.3 Grooming young women

Once perpetrators have identified young women they believe to be vulnerable to exploitation, practitioners report that they employ a range of grooming methods to engage and meet with them. These are common practices across CSE cases, and can include:

- Perpetrators inviting young people to connect with them on online social networking sites or phone apps (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat), using messaging apps to communicate with young people, and encouraging them to meet up in person.
- Perpetrators picking young women up and driving them around in cars, offering them mobility, apparent freedom, and access to lifestyles otherwise not available to young women.
- Perpetrators grooming young women in and through groups of other young people and peer networks. For example, young women being encouraged or told to bring friends with them to ‘parties’, or being told that being away from home with friends is ‘safer’ or likely to draw less suspicion from parents than if a young woman goes by herself.

In addition to these grooming methods commonly characterising CSE, young South Asian women were reported to be subjected to grooming strategies that exploited social discourses particular to their South Asian communities. These include around shame (sharam) and honour (izzat), normative gender roles, and approaches to sex and relationships, which will now be explored.
4.3.1 Discourses of shame (sharam) and honour (izzat) in the grooming process

Professionals reported that perpetrators of the same background often appear to use their knowledge about common discourses in South Asian communities of girlhood, family, shame and honour – for example in order to more quickly and effectively groom or manipulate young women.

‘Perpetrators are often from the same community. They hold so much power over the young women. They can threaten them, “you could lose your family”.’
‘These young women are especially vulnerable, and less likely to speak out. Abusers, often people close to them – like in most abuse – know this, and exploit it. They understand the culture, so young women are easy targets.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Grooming for any kind of abuse often involves convincing a victim that there will be severe and negative implications for them (and possibly people close to them) if they disclose the abuse to anyone (Bennett and O’Donohue 2016). As will be discussed shortly, in the case of young South Asian women there can often be a strong fear that if word of a young woman’s abuse becomes public, high levels of shame and dishonour will be brought upon her and her family, possibly resulting in disownment from the family, or estrangement from the community. The Muslim Women’s Network UK similarly found that perpetrators from South Asian communities themselves admitted that they relied on such fear of speaking out to enable their grooming and abusive practices (2013).

4.3.2 Normative gender roles and the grooming process

In addition to shame, honour and a fear of disclosure, professionals suggested that whilst wider norms around appropriate or expected gender roles are not negative in and of themselves, power imbalances between men and women could be exploited by perpetrators for abuse.

This relationship between gender and abuse is not unique to South Asian communities – abuse and violence against women commonly takes place in and through patriarchal structures existing across different societies. Professionals described how the specific gendered dynamics present in some South Asian communities could create a context that may be exploited by perpetrators:

‘Male family members are dominant through a system of patriarchy. Asian boys in contrast, for example, when we worked with them at a local school, the value they place on girls, including South Asian girls, was very limited.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

‘Girls are supposed to be "pure". Brothers are acting how they want to act, it’s ok for males to be promiscuous and have girlfriends. They’re not supposed to smoke or drink, but they turn a blind eye. But girls can’t break the rules. There is a lot of internal pressure. When young women find a boyfriend, how are they able to try and deal with the relationship? They are under pressure to keep it secret. Guys know that pressure exists, so they abuse that power. The girls are effectively blackmailed. A community of silence. It’s all about power dynamics.’

Practitioner, Streetwise
The Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organisation (IKWRO) has noted similar gendered dynamics at play in some Muslim communities and how these can relate to very different, and at times extreme, responses to young women’s behaviours and choices, when compared to men. As discussed in the previous section on shame and honour, this may include so-called ‘honour-based’ violence. For example, Payton (2010) highlights these in the case of Banaz Mahmod who was murdered in 2006 by her father, uncle and other male family members for having escaped an abusive arranged marriage and subsequently having a boyfriend of her own choosing. Banaz was perceived by her father as having behaved dishonourably, thereby bringing shame upon the family – her brother on the other hand had previously been imprisoned for drugs offences but was not subjected to such gendered judgement.

Normative beliefs held by some families about how young South Asian women should behave, particularly that they should not have boyfriends or close male relations until marriage, were cited by some professionals as possible reasons why young women may feel they need to hide relationships they have during adolescence for fear of it being deemed inappropriate by their parents or family:

‘There is a lot of pressure on South Asian girls – layering on girls. If they have boyfriends, they can’t share this as it brings dishonour.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

‘Peers are often from the same community. So even amongst peers, young women may be keen to make sure none of their friends find out that they’re dating, as they’ll be worried it gets back to someone. Everyone often knows each other, or is distantly related, so there is even more secrecy. On the other side, they want to show everyone, "I’m in a relationship, he’s great with me". So they’re in an awkward position. Girls in younger years may be trying to distance themselves from their culture, they were born here. Relationships outside of marriage is normal, but they still have to be very careful about the information not getting back.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

‘One young woman was meeting with inappropriate peers, and had an older boyfriend. She was worried her dad would kill him. She was very cagey about telling me any detail.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

Professionals suggested that if young women feel inclined to keep what may be appropriate, safe or positive relationships hidden, for example, they may also be even more compelled and expected (by their peers and/or abusers) to not disclose potentially inappropriate, unsafe and negative relationships. As will be explored further later, this ‘community of silence’ noted by the professional above, may also extend to other sensitive or ‘taboo’ matters such as wider violence against women or poor mental health – both often closely related to CSE.
In addition to normative gender roles, social discourses about sex and relationships – particularly around consent – are important contexts for how all young people frame and may be able to respond to exploitative relationships that they find themselves in. Some professionals cited beliefs in some South Asian families around not openly discussing sex and what can constitute ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy’ relationships as important contexts in relation to young people’s own beliefs and practices when faced with opportunities to engage in relationships and sex:

‘In some communities, the word "sex" is treated like a swearword. In many South Asian families, relationships aren’t really talked about, you just get married and get on with it.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Wider literature around sex and relationship education has highlighted the potential, albeit unintended, impact of the absence of discussion about sex – in conjunction with wider narratives around gender and sexualisation in school and peer groups (increasingly informed by pornography, for example) – on young people’s abilities to make informed decisions about their relationships and personal safety (Coy et al. 2013, Horvath et al. 2013). These tensions emerged in one of the focus groups:

CRASAC: Boys are all learning about sex and relationships from porn and hip-hop. In our work in schools, boys were genuinely shocked that porn isn’t real and it’s acted. This results in huge conflicts in relationships with different expectations between girls and boys.

Interviewer: Another professional told me about some young South Asian women being told it’s ok or better to have anal sex as it maintains their chastity and virginity, so it’s seen as ‘safer’, have you heard of this?

CRASAC: Yes, but it’s because they’re not understanding relationships and sex. So because of pressures of chastity they end up engaging in even more extreme sex. It’s still a very common myth that if you don’t bleed on your wedding night you’re not a virgin, and you will have to face the consequences.

We worked in a school with pupils all from one ethnic group from South Asian communities. Some boys left the room quite abruptly when we showed a film about grooming. They said it didn’t fit with their cultural beliefs, so if their parents found out then they’d be reprimanded. They were worried, so ran out.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

Other research has found similar relationships between discursive practices within South Asian communities and women’s experiences of gender norms and sexual abuse, as Cowburn et al. explain:

‘Cultural dynamics have a significant impact on how sexual matters, including sexual abuse, are discussed in British South Asian communities. The ways in which these communities talk about sexual violence often reinforce patriarchal norms and values, especially those concerned with honour and shame. As a result, victims are either silenced or the blame for the sexual violence they have suffered is laid at their own feet.’

(2015: 4)
This is not to say that social conservatism around talking about sex necessarily results in abuse, but it may contribute to a silence or lack of awareness around the issue, disparate expectations about sex between young women and men, and young women feeling unable to disclose sexual activity – whether abusive or consensual.

4.4 The nature of child sexual exploitation

It emerged in this study that most young South Asian women appear to professionals to experience the same forms of CSE as other young women, including:

- Young women being encouraged and/or forced to send sexually inappropriate or nude photos of themselves (‘selfies’) via mobile phone or sharing them on social media profiles.
- Being raped or sexually assaulted, sometimes by more than one perpetrator.
- Being forced by one perpetrator to engage in sexual activity with others for money.
- Using threats, fear or manipulation to force young people to continue engaging in exploitative activities, or to silence them and reduce the likelihood of disclosure after abuse.

Similarly, professionals reported that the signs or indicators that a young south Asian woman may be experiencing CSE are often comparable to other young women, and can include:

- Young people staying out late with friends and groups of older men
- Taking much longer than usual to travel home after school
- Becoming withdrawn or disengaging from school
- Being absent from school for parts of the day or the whole day
- Going missing from home

4.4.1 Online tools of exploitation

All professionals emphasised their concerns of the increasingly online nature of CSE across nearly all CSE cases they work on, including perpetrators using online methods to:

- Identify vulnerable young women
- Groom and arrange to meet them
- Sexually abuse them through online means, for example sending or sharing sexually explicit photos without consent
- Silence them and continue to manipulate them after abuse through blackmail

Other research has highlighted how communication technologies are becoming a core tool that perpetrators regularly use to enact various types of sexual violence (Bluett-Boyd et al. 2013). One practitioner highlighted the strong influence of online communication on the nature of CSE they were seeing:
There isn’t really any difference between the CSE that’s happening in Coventry and Birmingham. It comes down to online stuff. It’s always been online, with social media there’s the pressure to have all these friends and meet up with people you don’t know, to be liked. That’s across both cities.’
Practitioner, Streetwise

The pressure to perform carefully-curated public identities, and the risks of being connected to people unknown in real-life, were cited by professionals as being factors that could be exploited by perpetrators to groom and abuse young women. In addition, some professionals said that because many of the young South Asian women they had worked with had experienced high levels of parental supervision at home, some perpetrators, knowing this, had utilised online methods to communicate with young people on their phones whilst at home. They also said that because some parents do not speak English or may be less aware about the risks of online communication, that they would be less able to spot exploitative behaviour and intervene.

4.5 CSE, other forms of abuse, and forced marriage

It emerged in the research that some young women’s experiences of CSE were closely tied to the risk of experiencing other forms of violence and human rights abuses. These could include domestic violence, sexual abuse, so-called ‘honour-based’ violence, and forced marriage. Not all young people identified as at risk of CSE were also at risk of other violence or forced marriage, but practitioners believed it was important to be aware of signs and indicators of these other issues so that a case could be most safely and effectively supported. Professionals found that CSE was at times linked to the presence of domestic violence in the home, whether directed at young women themselves, or towards other women in the household. In particular, they highlighted how witnessing or experiencing domestic violence could influence young women’s understandings of what constitute healthy relationships, and indeed also link to the wider normalisation of abuse in some communities:

‘We’re seeing a lot of violence in cases, including domestic violence. There is a strong link to domestic violence [in the family]. So young women may not know what a good or healthy relationship looks like.’
Practitioner, Streetwise

‘Sometimes we have parents where they’re supporting their child to disclose, and then they themselves disclose abuse. Many older women come from countries where sexual violence is commonplace and normalised. Many women have experienced it but never told anyone.’
Practitioner, CRASAC

One practitioner also explained that young women experiencing an abusive home environment, may be more likely to engage in relationships outside of the home as a form of exit or coping strategy, and some of this relationship may be exploitative. This aligns with other evidence that shows that young women experiencing abuse at home or with disorganised attachment are more likely to be at risk of CSE (Research in Practice 2015).

If girls are also being abused at home, then they’re sometimes more likely to run away to be with boyfriend.
Practitioner, Streetwise
In addition to domestic abuse, there were some cases noted where there were concerns of so-called ‘honour-based’ violence being inflicted on young women or other women in their households. One practitioner explains this in relation to rituals that a young woman’s sister had been subjected to before undergoing a suspected forced marriage:

‘Police interviewed the other sister and she talked about rituals when she got married, something about getting the soul out of her. She also had CSE concerns. Having evidence from the older sister was enough to get something done about the younger sister.

Professionals emphasised that in some cases the risks of CSE, forced marriage and other forms of violence were often very complexly intertwined and hard to separate from one another.

**CSE and forced marriage**

In some young South Asian women’s cases, there may be other risks like forced marriage or so-called ‘honour-based’ violence, for example, that may not be present for other young people:

‘It makes it really difficult to support. A worse situation can emerge from CSE – they come out of forced marriage but go into CSE, or vice versa, it’s very difficult.’

Professionals highlighted two ways in which CSE could be related to forced marriage for some young South Asian women. It is important to note that not all young women who have experienced CSE are at risk of forced marriage, and not all young women who have been forcibly married have been at risk of CSE. It is also very difficult for professionals to identify the real risk or prevalence of forced marriage as young women or their families rarely openly talk about it:

‘Of all the young South Asian women I’ve worked with there are a few cases that come to mind with possible forced marriage in them, but often it’s an underlying factor, so you don’t definitely know, as it’s hidden. There have been some big, very complex cases, where it was very apparent. Those cases did cross new areas of work for all professionals involved.’

**Previous evidence has demonstrated the links in some young South Asian women’s lives between experiencing discriminatory gender norms, sexual abuse or violence, forced marriage and so called ‘honour-based’ violence (Gill and Harvey 2017, HM Government 2014a).**

As Gangoli et al. explain:

‘A forced marriage is defined as a marriage where one or both parties do not consent freely to the marriage; entry into such a marriage is accompanied by physical, mental and/or emotional duress and coercion from family members.’

(2006: 3)

As noted earlier, the first link between CSE and forced marriage is that perpetrators may target young women they believe are trying to extricate themselves from the risk of forced marriage at home. Secondly, some professionals spoke of young women who had disclosed their CSE to family and as a result had been subject to so-called ‘honour-based’ violence or forced marriage as a way of disciplining the young woman, or attempting to salvage some ‘lost honour’ through marriage:

‘Forced marriage is a crime. It is a form of violence against women and men, domestic abuse, a serious abuse of human rights, and where a minor is involved, child abuse.’

(2014a: 8)
‘If parents know they might emotionally blackmail young women, saying “you’ll have to leave”. They issue ultimatums such as either you’re forced into marriage — as because of the shame and dishonour, you’re no longer an eligible match — or you leave and don’t come back.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

Some professionals spoke of cases where they have initially been involved to support the young woman around CSE concerns, but it had then transpired that there were wider risks around the young woman being taken abroad as a form of discipline or to be forcibly married:

‘In one case, the family indicated that they’d like the girl with mental health problems to go abroad and spend time with an aunt, as they thought it was a way to take her out of the area, out of contact with males. But underlying was the history with the older sister [who had been subject to a forced marriage]. The underlying concern from us was that she would be abroad and married with a husband so she wouldn’t need to or be able to go out with boys and be exploited.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

For some families who become aware of CSE having taken place, forced marriage may appear to be a viable strategy to minimise the risk of their daughter experiencing further exploitation:

‘We’re seeing crossover cases, starting with CSE and ending up with forced marriage. There is some concern that forced marriage is a strategy used by some parents as a way of exiting CSE by marrying their daughter off, as she then won’t be targeted by perpetrators.’

Child Sexual Exploitation Coordinator, Birmingham

It emerged that professionals find it very challenging when working with young people where a risk of forced marriage has been identified, as the situation must be handled extremely carefully in order to ensure the young person remains safeguarded. They emphasised that it is critical to adhere to the statutory guidance (HM Government 2014a) and multi-agency practice guidelines (HM Government 2014b), and seek support from the government’s Forced Marriage Unit or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) if ever unsure of how to work with these kinds of complex and high risk cases.
Survivors of sexual violence in South Asian communities in Coventry

This section has been written by our colleagues at the Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre. They have extensive experience of working with survivors of sexual violence in Coventry, and our organisations wanted jointly to emphasise how young women’s experiences of CSE and abuse sit within women’s wider experiences of violence in the local area.

Due to Coventry’s demographics, a considerable proportion of our work has focused on providing support to South Asian women and girls who have experienced sexual violence and abuse. South Asian communities in Coventry are diverse and so a survivor’s experiences will depend on a number of factors, not simply ethnicity alone. However, through our outreach work and research project The Price of Honour, survivors across South Asian communities identified common themes about what has prevented them from disclosing previously or what has prevented their disclosure from being heard, believed or acted upon. It is important to note that many of the issues raised are found within most if not all communities but taken together these themes may have implications for the way in which we understand South Asian girl’s experiences of child sexual exploitation. The research report The Price of Honour (CRASAC 2014) outlines survivor’s concerns in more details but some of the issues raised include:

- Survivors being expected to conform to community ideals around behaviour or appearance to ensure their family are seen to retain respectability within the wider community.
- A lack of awareness about sexual violence meaning sexual abuse may be conflated with infidelity or ‘dishonourable’ behaviour.
- A high risk of community and familial disownment after disclosure, meaning many survivors do not disclose their abuse through fear of being ostracised.
- High levels of fear about reprisals against them or their family if they do disclose sexual violence and abuse.
- Families and communities not believing or silencing survivors who disclose when the abuse is perpetrated within the family or by someone respected within the community.
- Marriage and female chastity being highly valued meaning that abuse can impact on marriage prospects for survivors and their siblings or that survivors feel compelled to remain within abusive marriages.

The Price of Honour research highlighted that these issues can create environments where secrecy thrives; resulting in survivors being more easily silenced, more vulnerable to repeat abuse and at crisis point earlier because of the perceived risk that disclosure poses to their and their family’s community belonging and acceptance. Organisations who wish to provide interventions should ensure that they have a full understanding of these issues and view survivors’ responses through this context. They should listen to what survivors themselves say they need in order to develop services that can offer effective access to safety, support and justice for all survivors of sexual violence and abuse.

About CRASAC: The Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre has been supporting victims and survivors of sexual violence, abuse and exploitation since 1981. In 2008 it began to deliver outreach support specifically targeted to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Communities in Coventry. This support has grown and developed and CRASAC now provides dedicated community-based support via outreach workers who speak six languages.
4.6 The impact of abuse – the loss of ‘bodily honour’, feelings of shame and difficulties of disclosure

In all conversations with professionals, the concept of ‘honour’ came through strongly for how young women articulate both their own sense of self and value, and also that of their families and communities. Experiencing sexual violence often has a deeply physical and mental impact on survivors, and for young South Asian women, transgressions on their body can result in a sense of ‘lost honour’, as one professional explained:

‘izzat’ is honour. Women often talk of "lost honour" when they have experienced sexual violence. But it can be difficult getting to the core of what has happened to a woman, because there isn’t the terminology there, it’s very generalised. In some languages there is no word for "rape". Women often say "my bodily honour is gone" or "I have lost my honour" when they refer to sexual abuse. They often talk about honour, and might emphasise it relating to their "body".'

Practitioner, CRASAC

‘In many South Asian communities, sexual violence is a taboo, they don’t talk about it at all.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Many young women that professionals had worked with cited fears around disclosing abuse because of the perceived views of their own lost bodily honour, and the potential damage to the family and community sense of honour:

‘There is a lot of worry about family repercussions. Young women worry that if they tell their parents they’ve been abused, then they won’t be able to get married. Some women go their whole lives without telling anyone about their abuse.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

As discussed in the section on shame and honour, the shame and dishonour of rape and abuse is commonly located in the woman’s body, despite her being the victim of a perpetrator’s transgressions – making her responsible for the collective shaming of the community if she were to disclose the abuse. As a result, some young women may feel a pressure not to disclose their personal experiences of exploitation to protect the reputation of the community as a whole.

Perpetrators are likely to be aware of these social pressures upon young women, and the high social stakes they risk if they disclose, and are able to take advantage of this to blackmail young women with the ‘information’ they hold on them to stay silent after the abuse has taken place:

‘I’ve worked with Asian girls and families for years and the issues are similar – young women having abortions in secret, or being blackmailed because men have "information" on them. Now it’s digital, so young women have a fear of images of them being shared online.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

Some young Muslim women may also feel that to shed public light on abuse within their community could negatively impact on the wider community, especially at a time when Islamophobia and xenophobic violence towards Muslims is on the rise in the UK:

‘People are concerned that "if I am Muslim, and I disclose, it will tarnish the wider Muslim culture and reputation". In many communities there isn’t a sense of "I look after myself". That is seen as very selfish. It’s all about the community as a whole.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Practitioner, CRASAC
Indeed, as noted above in relation to the growing role of online mechanisms for abuse, the added dimension of easily acquired and shared digital ‘evidence’ of shameful or dishonourable behaviour, can leave young women feeling even more trapped and unable to seek support.

4.6.1 Poor mental health and CSE

For all young people who experience CSE or other forms of sexual violence, there are strong links between abuse, displaying traumatic symptoms and poor mental health (Luke 2017). There are often gaps between young people’s mental health needs and the therapeutic support they receive – whether that be because of difficulties in identification, disclosure, meeting service thresholds, a lack of local service provision, or not being deemed in a stable enough place to engage safely and effectively in therapeutic interventions (The Children’s Society 2015).

Young South Asian women experience the same barriers to support as other young people, but may also find themselves facing some additional ones. Professionals in this study raised concerns that in addition to the trauma caused by the abuse itself, the burden of staying silent about abuse in order to protect one’s bodily and family honour was such that young women’s mental health suffered even further. Other research has illustrated how social pressures to conform to normative expectations of them can result in South Asian women experiencing high levels of mental ill-health (Bhardwaj 2001, Chew-Graham et al. 2002, Gilbert et al. 2004).

In addition, one professional highlighted the ways in which poor mental health may be seen as a taboo subject within South Asian communities, possibly increasing the likelihood of young people’s support needs going unmet:

‘The influence of poor mental health is really strong for many of these young women we see. There is also little understanding or awareness in the community about mental health or well-being. Some families we’ve worked with think the young women are possessed, or are just acting out, but in fact they have poor mental health. Some families don’t deal with it, and instead might say that a good holiday abroad will solve it. It also sometimes leads to ritualistic processes, and the girls being “treated” to correct their behaviour.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

Whilst it is difficult to know the scale of mental ill-health for young women, all professionals consulted said it was present in the majority of cases they had worked with, and that working with families and communities around this issue presented a challenge. They suggested that, as with some other sensitive issues, being identified as having a mental health problem could be viewed negatively, and result in a social pressure to hide the problem from public sight. Some professionals also spoke of family or community strategies to deal with young women’s mental ill-health or distress, including sending them away to stay with family members on the Indian subcontinent, and having them undergo alternative forms of ‘treatment’ administered by other community or religious figureheads. In some cases, these may include further sexual assault, resulting in heightened levels of trauma and poor mental health. In the case of one young woman who was experiencing CSE and regularly going missing from home, for example, the public exposure of her experiencing an episode of mental distress had significant social ramifications, not only for herself, but for her family who feared they were ‘shamed’ as a result:
The young woman had mental health concerns and was going missing. The whole community knew. The family felt shamed, so they said "let's try going to a different country". It shows how things can build.

Practitioner, Streetwise

As a result, many young women may feel compelled to hide their mental or emotional distress from their family or communities, and find other ways of coping with pain or trauma, including for example, through self-harm:

"Self-harm is a big problem as well amongst this group. The incidences are very high. It focuses on the inward/internalising nature of coping with the issues they’re facing. It's a coping mechanism."

Practitioner, Streetwise

Other research has also highlighted the issue of disproportionately high self-harm and suicide rates amongst BME women, and that the underlying reasons behind these have not been sufficiently explored or acted upon (GVAWP 2008, Raleigh and Balarajan 1992).

4.7 Parental, familial and community responses to disclosure and methods of support

Parents, carers and families are often critical in supporting survivors of CSE to disclose CSE and then heal after abuse (Pace 2014). When young women do feel able to disclose child sexual exploitation to their parents, families and communities, professionals emphasised that many families, whatever their background, are supportive of their young women and seek out other support.

They highlighted that many parents are unaware that their children may be at risk of abuse, or unsure of what constitutes abuse, particularly in the context of rapid digital and online change:

"Many of families are naïve when it comes to the internet. They think their children are safe — "we drop them and pick them up from school, so they must be safe". But they don’t understand that sexual violence can happen at school, and it can be facilitated by the internet."

Practitioner, Streetwise

Like many families of young people who experience abuse, professionals find that parents may feel their own sense of guilt and shame upon disclosure, and are often unsure of what to do or where to seek formal support (Pace 2016):

"Last year I worked with three South Asian families. In all the cases, the parents wanted to do as much as they could. [When compared to non-South Asian families], looking back over 12 years, they’re all similar, similar issues, nothing stands
out that’s different. All parents requested having support, and have been on board. Initially they blame themselves, but then turn around to understand that it’s the perpetrator who is controlling. Nothing is different.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

Professionals reported that some young women are able to access support from wider family members in addition to their parents:

‘One family did have supportive aunties and uncles, that young person went to them when needing some space. Supportive family and friends to rely upon, it’s a real resource for help.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

Specific considerations for South Asian families and communities

In addition to the commonalities of working with parents and communities generally, professionals said there were some additional dimensions to working with South Asian families. They reported, for example, that some South Asian parents may seek support from within their community first if they feel suspicious or unsure of statutory support services, an issue dealt with in more depth shortly in the section on system responses:

‘We need to build confidence in statutory services amongst the communities. They are very reluctant for any social care involvement — social care is a scary word. They avoid it at all costs. They worry it says that "you don’t know how to look after your kids". If they have a problem they’ll probably speak to their community and friends, but not services.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Professionals also underlined that some South Asian parents and families may feel subject to the same community pressures and discourses around shame and honour as their daughters, so they may be conflicted in terms of their options for action or support:

‘Our research highlighted that many parents lack an awareness about sexual violence and what to do about it. They are also subject to strong ideas and pressures from the community. It’s the structures of the community that impact on both parents and young people.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

In some cases, parents had reported to practitioners that they feared being viewed negatively by their community if it came to light that one of their daughters had been abused. They worried about how it may reflect on their parenting skills or ability to control their children. This was something that other parents may also fear, but which professionals said could be further complicated for South Asian families by pressures to uphold notions of shame, honour and gendered expectations of girlhood:

‘Two of our more recent young people we’ve worked with, we haven’t worked with their families, as there was a fear of being labelled. But that’s common with all parents, the fear of being labelled as bad parent.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

‘There is also the possibility of strong community views of the family — "why is your daughter having boyfriends?"’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Some professionals believed that there were cases where parents who might originally have been supportive of their daughter might feel compelled to change their response because of how they fear their community will respond. They also highlighted that this kind of secondary disclosure (of sharing the news of someone else’s abuse), could be especially difficult in the context of wider silence around sensitive issues within the community, and a suspicion of statutory systems outside of the community:
‘Some parents want to help their daughters, but they also face a lot of community pressure, so the parents sometimes back down. Many South Asian mothers do not have much support in the house. Or in statutory services. There is a mistrust of social care and the police. They think the police are corrupt, and that social workers are going to take their other children away if one is found to be being abused. So they have no support from either inside or outside the home. If police come to the house, that would be a loss of honour and shameful in the community. Families worry about their reputation. Sometimes it would be better to disown one’s daughter and kick her out of the house, because then the community will say "well done for getting rid of the badness, who did it to herself". This is why so many women won’t come out, they’re silenced. There is so much secrecy. Children might tell their mum that they have been abused, and a mum might say "don’t tell anyone". Some children have had to live with their abuser their whole lives, but they’re not allowed to talk about it. They are living with that guilt. And fear of their reputation. It’s a horridous cocktail of abuse.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Practitioners reported particular concerns around how some mothers they had worked with appeared to feel powerless in the sense that if they challenge the perpetrator – especially if he is a male within the family – the mother could also be discredited or ostracised from the community. This may be deemed especially risky if she has no resources of her own and is financially dependent on the men of the family. If she finds the courage to break away, she may experience additional shame associated with being a woman who has left her husband, because, as explained previously, in some families a woman’s ‘honour’ is strongly rooted in one’s relative position as a daughter, wife or mother (Akpinar 2003, WLUMIL 2017).

Similarly, in some cases parents and families may feel that they have to prioritise the strong pulls of community over a young woman’s individual decision to disclose, as parents may be frightened of the potential ramifications – including their family being ostracised from the community:

‘Feelings of community belonging are very strong – it’s, "we all need this". One family who supported their young person and spoke out in the community were ostracised from the community and mosque, they ended up leaving Coventry. Even neighbours sometimes feel worried about disclosing or raising concerns for fear of how the community will respond to them telling. So there are direct and indirect pressures that also result in silence.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

‘Professionals said the resultant approach in some communities could be one of denial and self-preservation of the whole: Communities are often in denial – “it doesn’t happen in our community”.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

‘It’s a protective thing, if it doesn’t come out then we as a family can’t do anything about it. We don’t have to face up to it as a community.’

Practitioner, CRASAC
Similarly to how young women have reported to professionals that they fear the reputational impact of disclosure on other Muslim communities, parents and communities may also feel the same anxieties. Strategies for differentiating one’s community from other South Asian groups and displacing the risk of abuse onto other groups, might enable some to feel like they can protect their own reputations:

‘CSE and racism in the public domains has impacted on the communities. We have to remember that South Asian women are very different, it’s not a homogenous group. So there are differences and sometimes divisions between groups of Muslim women — Somali and Pakistani women, for example. And Hindus and Sikhs are very different.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

However, all professionals emphasised that with appropriate and sensitive engagement from professionals who understand their concerns, community engagement in responding to exploitation and abuse is possible:

‘But we are seeing change. Many of the communities received our report well, some community members came to the launch event and came to visit the service. Although we still go to the community spaces to meet with women, they don’t tend to come to the office. Some of the communities have been keen to respond to concerns around online safety, so they have asked us to go and in and do some awareness-raising around CSE and online concerns. Part of this is also having to acknowledge that "yes, this is our issue too, it’s not just a white girl issue".

Practitioner, CRASAC

The need to work closely with young people and their communities around these sensitive issues emerged as crucial, and the challenges and opportunities of doing so are explored towards the end of this report.

4.8 Presenting to support services in crisis

Through our work with young people experiencing a range of risks and challenges, we know that those who experience abuse are often very resilient, and develop a range of strategies to cope with, manage or resolve the challenges they face. Many factors can influence the stage at which a young person will become to known to, or present at, support services.

Cases that present in high distress and late on the journey, like many of the young South Asian women worked with by professionals in this study, may appear to us to have ‘escalated rapidly’, but it is likely that young people have been coping and managing for a long time before they need to seek help at the final stages of a crisis. Many of the contextual factors highlighted in the report so far also explain why some young women only appear to services late on:

‘By the time they express calls for help, they’re at the end of the line.’

Child Sexual Exploitation Coordinator, Birmingham

‘There is a lot of wider context to why you don’t see girls until a crisis. They have so much to lose. There is so much pressure on them to keep quiet.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

One of the practitioners explained young South Asian women’s experiences in the context of other young people they tend to work with:
‘It’s a shame, what we [see at Streetwise in Birmingham] are the extreme cases, that escalate quickly in short timescales. There will be other cases that are less extreme that are known to social care or the school, but often I think this group [young South Asian women] don’t come on to the radar until quite late, which presents a difficulty for knowing how to identify these young women, and therefore prevent these problems.’

‘And whereas for some other young women, CSE risk factors might more visibly collide with a whole range of other problem areas in life, such as long-term social care involvement, worklessness, addiction or poverty, for lots of these young South Asian women, poverty isn’t necessarily an issue, so it’s hard to identify them with external or objective measures. In some other families, there are often other indicators of young people being at risk — in South Asian families, they often go under the radar.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

In addition to young women’s resilience, and the many factors that may preclude them from disclosing abuse or seeking support, as professionals we must be aware of the ways in which systemic approaches in responding to CSE may or may not readily facilitate young women’s engagement with support. Difficulties around identification and limited engagement between social care and some communities, for example, are challenges that must be faced and addressed by the system.

4.9 Local system responses to young South Asian women’s experiences of CSE

The complexity of CSE and how it plays out in local contexts presents a challenge to professionals across the statutory and voluntary sectors. Previous work has illustrated how, despite professionals’ high levels of commitment and expertise, existing safeguarding and child protection systems can at times struggle to effectively protect young people from harm when they are at risk of, or experiencing, CSE (O’Neill Gutierrez 2016).

Professionals in Birmingham and Coventry reported a range of challenges and opportunities for identifying and supporting young people experiencing CSE. Many of these are common across cases of CSE, and some were more specifically around engaging young South Asian women and their communities.

It is important that the specific needs, wishes and context of any young person – including their family and community dynamics – are understood in order to ensure that any support is as effective and easy to engage with as possible. In the cases of Birmingham and Coventry, a critical need was identified for tailored approaches to working with South Asian survivors of abuse or violence and their communities, and this is something other organisations have previously highlighted for working with other Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups (BAWSO 2016, brap 2011, CRASAC 2014).

The findings in this section describe some of the challenges, opportunities and promising practice that professionals witness when trying to support young people. These, along with the insight into young South Asian women’s hidden journeys explored previously, directly inform the recommendations which follow.
4.9.1 Identifying and supporting young women at risk

Identifying any young person who is at risk of or experiencing, CSE can be very difficult due to a range of issues:

- Social and cultural stigma around disclosing abuse
- The lengths perpetrators go to discourage disclosure
- Young people not recognising what they are experiencing as CSE or abuse
- Challenges in assessing and recording risk
- Sharing information and concerns about CSE between support agencies
- Real and perceived barriers to approaching services for support

Even when a young person at risk of CSE has become known to professionals, the complexity of individual cases means that responses must also be multi-layered and require a lot of time and resources:

‘CSE cases take a long time to work with — they’re never simple.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

Some young people will already be involved with other support agencies, but others — including many of the young people whose cases informed this report — may be unknown to social care, and present for the first time in high distress, indicating a high level of as yet unmet need. In these cases, workers face the challenge of assessing, prioritising and referring young people for acute support within very tight timescales in order to effectively safeguard them.

This may be especially difficult as young people become older teenagers of 16–17 years of age, as one practitioner explains:

‘Age is an issue. At age 17 workers see a real drop off in the support offered to young people, and the urgency and seriousness with which they are treated. Once a young person is 17, action is sometimes limited and there is less response, despite very high concerns.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

This chimes with our previous research (The Children’s Society 2015) that highlighted that this is a key transitional stage for many young people, but that this age group often face:

- Having their disclosures of CSE or sexual abuse and assault being treated less seriously because they can consent to sex aged 16 and above
- Being seen as being involved or complicit in their abuse or problems due to their ‘risk-taking’ behaviours
- Being seen as more resilient and able to cope by themselves than younger children
- Having their cases assessed as lower priority
- Workers feeling restricted as to what in-depth support they can offer because young people’s eligibility for support will change when they turn 18 years old

As young people get older, workers face the challenge of balancing between implementing appropriate child protection procedures and offering support relevant to young people in their stage of adolescent development.

Nearly all professionals said that the key to working effectively with young people facing CSE was to remain child-centred in their approaches, and put the individual young person first – whatever their
The child sexual exploitation of young South Asian women in Birmingham and Coventry
Exploring professional insight into young women’s hidden journeys, silence, and support

background. Core elements of this approach include:

- Listening carefully and not pre-empting what a young person might say or shutting them down
- Being non-judgemental
- Displaying warmth, care, and empathy
- Being reliable, available and persistent, including in the face of repeated disengagement
- Being honest and clear about what the next steps are in someone’s case (for example, if safeguarding procedures need to be triggered)

This alternative lens is arguably particularly useful when it comes to CSE because so many of its components are hidden and hard to identify – often individual agencies will only see one dimension of a case, so bringing together a variety of agencies can shed light on the bigger picture, and ensure that young people’s views and own interpretations of their experiences remain central.

Specific considerations for young South Asian women

As noted in the introduction, all services consulted said that in addition to wider challenges, additional ones appeared to be resulting in the under-representation of young South Asian women in their services:

‘Birmingham is really diverse, but we’re not seeing as many young South Asian women in our services as we would expect, although numbers are increasing.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

‘We have experienced a marked increase in engagement and disclosures since we started our outreach work within South Asian communities, however, we are still not seeing representative numbers in within our services. We’ve still got so much more to do.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Once young South Asian women are known to services, some professionals believed there were additional considerations and actions they needed to take in order to effectively safeguard these young women, and support them to remain in contact with services:

‘There are extra layers of safeguarding when it comes to these girls. How do we provide them with the extra reassurance that “it’s not your fault, guilt or shame?”’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Most professionals highlighted that deeply engrained social and cultural discourses around honour and shame require staff to have specific knowledge and strategies available to them to sensitively counter these narratives at the same time as they employ their more standard or generalist CSE responses.

One area that was highlighted by professionals as being particularly difficult in terms of engaging young people in support was around being able to meet them in quiet, confidential and safe places. They said that for some young women who experience a high degree of parental supervision, understanding the complete picture of exploitation and enabling a full disclosure could be hard:

‘Ideally I would have met the two girls outside of the home. But they were only...’

Practitioner, Streetwise
allowed out to college. Their attendance fell so much, they were excluded, then the family found out. It was hard to find any space to speak to the young people. The family were quite controlling.'

Practitioner, Streetwise

Practitioners find that one way of mitigating this challenge is to meet and arrange support for young people in more neutral spaces, or places where they are permitted to go independently, such as school:

'The young woman wanted to speak to Karma Nirvana [a charity supporting victims of so called 'honour-based' abuse and forced marriage], but she didn’t have a phone. I had to ask the school to help her make a call without parents knowing. We managed to get her to have a conversation with Karma Nirvana to find out more about her rights. Schools are important. We need to work with schools as they’re in between home and "out there". It’s somewhere safe.'

Practitioner, Streetwise

Furthermore, meeting in what are perceived to be visible social care or ‘help’ settings, such as service provider offices, can be daunting or alienating for many young people, and perhaps more so for those groups who have traditionally been wary of social care involvement:

'We found that the building itself was a huge barrier. "Society can view me coming here". One woman didn’t want to come into the building because she saw some South Asian men in reception and she was worried they would know her. We meet women in neutral places, not home. So like libraries, children’s centres where we book rooms and do one-to-ones. We also now deliver counselling in the community, not just in our offices.'

Practitioner, CRASAC

Professionals emphasised that it was especially important to work to build trust with young people and ensure a young person is reassured that the worker has an understanding of their specific context. They also said that where possible, specialist services aimed at young South Asian women would be ideal to ensure their needs are most effectively met, a finding corroborated by other research:

'Research has consistently shown that a significant number of South Asian women prefer specialist support services which are sensitive to their issues, as well as address the cultural and structural constraints or barriers they face.'

(Thiara and Gill 2009: 24)

Whether delivering specialist services is possible or not, professionals highlighted that taking a culturally aware and non-judgemental approach was crucial, as was not forcing young people into particular courses of action if these were deemed culturally inappropriate by the young person. This is particularly important if actions could potentially result in placing the young person at greater danger, for example, by putting them at risk of so-called ‘honour-based’ violence if a disclosure is not handled carefully enough.

Indeed, as Walker explains, for example, practitioners must be acutely aware of the nuances of working in communities where disclosure can have dangerous ramifications for women:

‘What are the implications of such total disclosure for women from communities where absolute confidentiality has been key to enabling them to speak, let alone to crafting effective safety strategies? What about women for whom gossip and carelessness can literally place their life and potential future at risk?’ Do
we really know that Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference [MARAC] members understand these differential potentials for minority women, and take the precautions necessary?"

(Liz Kelly foreword in Thiara and Gill 2009)

At the same time as taking these considerations into account, professionals stressed that they knew they had to remain acutely aware not to let cultural relativism impede upon their professional judgement, for example, by thinking that a particular behaviour is ‘normal’ or ‘accepted’ in a community, or by thinking that it is too difficult or dangerous to challenge the behaviour. To do so could result in inadequate responses to exploitation or abuse, ultimately safeguarding young South Asian women to a lesser degree when compared to other young women. Practitioners articulated a sense that they viewed abuse as abuse, whatever community it is happening in, and that they as professionals need to feel confident at taking necessary steps – safely – to ensure every young person is protected from harm, whatever their background.

4.9.2 Working with parents, families and communities

Because of its multifaceted and complex nature, responding to CSE requires a holistic approach that involves working with a range of people who young people exist alongside in their local contexts. This includes parents, families and communities.

Working with parents and communities around sensitive topics such as CSE can be difficult across all parts of society. Despite these issues being difficult to talk about, many parents worry about them, and want support and education from professionals about how to protect and help their children:

‘Parents worry. At Streetwise that’s what we do, we get in earlier, and do short term work before the long term work is needed or in place. It’s really useful. Parents appreciate the support early, to stop escalation. It’s someone to listen without being labelled. Parents have gone away learning something, for example, how to control settings on the computer or iPad, accessing support online, or numbers to call for advice, reporting concerns via those avenues.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

Professionals said that having a specific dimension of a service that supports parental engagement was crucial, particularly if parents did not initially appear to wish to be involved in supporting the resolution of their child’s case. Professionals found that there were additional considerations to take into account when engaging South Asian parents and communities. One of the key factors that arose as a barrier to engagement was the possible disconnect between statutory and voluntary support services working on CSE, and local South Asian communities. Professionals commonly spoke of the importance of building good and trusting relationships between support systems and communities and individuals, particularly for maintaining an open dialogue, enabling disclosure and supporting around sensitive issues such as CSE.

They noted that barriers to engagement were twofold:

- Existing systems may not be structured in ways that support effective engagement with BME communities to improve awareness and accessibility of services.

- Some communities are wary of engagement with social care, are unaware of the support available to them, or choose not to take up opportunities for support for a variety of reasons.
As one professional explained:

‘We try not to talk about these communities as being “hard to reach”, but emphasise that as professionals we haven’t yet done enough to reach out to them. There is worry about the response that communities get from statutory professionals. Some people have a distrust of professionals, and they often see them as all the same. We need to make sure all services people might come into contact with are done sensitively and appropriately, otherwise it puts people off all services and stops them engaging, even around very important issues.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Engaging young people and their communities carefully, but also confidently, is crucial – particularly when the issues at hand are as sensitive and high risk as CSE, so called ‘honour-based’ violence, or forced marriage. As the ‘One Chance rule’ recognises, professionals may only have one opportunity to connect with and successfully engage a young person – if this opportunity is missed or not capitalised on, there is a risk that the individual will be lost not only from one service, but from all services in the future:

‘All practitioners working with victims of forced marriage and HBV [so called 'honour-based' violence] need to be aware of the "One Chance" Rule. A professional may only have one chance to speak to a potential victim and have one chance to save a life. This means that all practitioners working within statutory agencies need to be aware of their responsibilities and obligations when they become aware of potential forced marriage cases. If the victim is not offered support following disclosure that one chance opportunity may be lost.’

MSAB & MSCB 2016: 14

In addition to potential hesitancy from communities, professionals noted that a lack of confidence around cultural competency (Cowan 2009) among some staff that could present barriers to engagement. There were concerns, for example, that (as explored in this report) some staff may not be aware of the social discourses present in some South Asian communities, and therefore may have less confidence around addressing CSE in relation to these contexts. This may be because they are not from the communities themselves, because they have not yet built relationships with communities, or because they have not learned about or been trained in these contexts.

Professionals also noted that some staff may fear being viewed as culturally insensitive or racist when investigating concerns of abuse, and so may not intervene or act in the same way as they would if concerns arose in other communities they more commonly work with:

‘Professionals are also worried about racism and being accused, so some professionals also don’t speak out when they have concerns. We were in a forum of professionals who didn’t challenge community leaders when they said that CSE didn’t happen in their community, because of the fear of being labelled racist, so we had to say something. But some professionals are good about it. The police have done some good work about having these difficult conversations.’

CRASAC

These fears may be rooted in an awareness of previous approaches by other professionals which may have been inappropriate or counterproductive:

‘[Prejudiced] attitudes about some communities might still exist amongst a minority of professionals. As soon as you start doing that you miss young people, because you’re only looking in one place, and you alienate people. It’s completely flawed. It should be about the long game instead, building trust.’

Practitioner, Streetwise
Professionals suggested that building strong relationships with communities was a key part of overcoming these difficulties, particularly because trust may enable mutual learning and allow difficult conversations to take place in what become supportive and safe spaces. Indeed, Gilligan and Akhtar emphasise that ‘culturally competent practice and respectful dialogue are essential to the protection of children’ (2006: 1361).

**Overcoming barriers to trust and engagement with South Asian communities**

It is important that community engagement is done in a culturally sensitive manner (Gangoli et al. 2006, Samad and Eade, 2002), particularly when trying to act upon such difficult issues as child sexual exploitation. Professionals acknowledged that building meaningful relationships with communities takes time, patience, consistency, and an on-going supportive presence:

‘We have spent a long time working in and with some communities. Six months, for example, and then the trust is built gradually. You need a while for things to make a difference.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

At the same time, professionals said that protecting time and resources to build and maintain these relationships can be difficult, especially in the context of short funding cycles and a range of other contractual deliverables.

In addition, two key areas and approaches emerged as crucial in overcoming barriers to building trust and engagement with South Asian communities – language and outreach work.

**Language**

One of the most commonly cited practical barriers to engagement was around language and approachability, as one professional explains:

‘Some barriers…the parents didn’t have the confidence to call college or the social worker — they rely on me. I pushed to empower them to do these things themselves. They wouldn’t respond to text messages, only the phone. Language was a barrier. We [professionals] can often use jargon that confuses people. It’s knowing what to say to get point across. No slang words. Pick up on body language, when people haven’t understood. Rephrase things a lot. Have a longer explanation. Use visual aids and activities. Leave things to digest in their own time.’

Practitioner, Streetwise

Professionals suggested that ways of overcoming these language barriers may include:

- Recruiting frontline workers who speak the languages of the local communities
- Offering access to translators and interpreters (in person or via telephone) who have experience of working with sensitive issues such as CSE
- Taking more time to explain any information or advice
- Rephrasing content to avoid using jargon
- Supporting young people and families to communicate with professionals in the ways and places that they are comfortable

**Outreach work**

A number of professionals said that the most effective community engagement occurred when they were out in the local communities and meeting with people face-to-face. Other work has highlighted the importance of a flexible approach to where services are delivered for engaging under-represented communities around sensitive topics such as CSE (Bovarnick et al. 2016).
‘BME is our core outreach service. We have other funding for it. As long as we have CRASAC we will have outreach, it’s integral, not an add-on. For many other services, if they have their funding reduced, it’s the outreach services that get cut, but we know from the challenges of reaching BME communities this has to be outreach based.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Professionals said it was important to take support and information to locations and settings where people are comfortable, especially if they would otherwise be unlikely to engage. Many said that before, or in addition to, direct work around topics such as CSE could be broached, it can often be useful to explore community members’ wider views on contextual topics, such as gender and perceptions of violence:

‘We knit with groups, and bring up items in the news, such as CSE or victim-blaming, and then start to gently explore their conceptions of these.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

Professionals said that engaging community leaders was crucial in enabling access to communities, and changing wider views on and approaches to issues such as CSE. Doing so can aid quicker connection to the community and trust-building, sponsorship and reassurance that the service is ‘safe’ to engage with without resulting in shame, and access to existing groups of women who meet regularly, for example. They acknowledged that there are a range of challenges to doing this (Dhaliwal 2015), particularly that community leaders are often male, and going through them may reinforce existing systems of power. Professionals recommended that having female staff from those communities who could identify key female community leaders to engage was a way of mitigating this, and accessing networks of women outside of the formal community apparatus.

Professionals said that they needed to think creatively about ensuring the tools and aids they used in outreach work were stimulating and culturally relevant:

‘We use culturally relevant tools to aid and prompt discussions with women. There’s a view that girls who grow up here are more westernised and sexualised. We take tools to people to ask them their thoughts, and “do you see these attitudes in your own communities?” For example, there is an Indian film we took to show them that dealt with some of the issues, and we also discussed the mass sexual assault that happened in India at new year. We also try and help according to the religion. For example, by using teachings in Islam we will prepare knowledge that we can gently challenge their views with. We try and talk to people about their attitudes.’

Practitioner, CRASAC

They said it was particularly important to make information as relatable as possible, as quickly as possible, or enthusiasm for engagement would soon reduce.

In addition to working with BME communities, practitioners highlighted that it was important to be proactive and conduct wider awareness-raising activities in young people’s spaces such as schools, focusing on CSE and how it relates to norms around gender and sex in youth culture. They found that engaging young people directly and universally through schools not only facilitates education around the issue, but also demonstrates to young people who they can reach out to for local support if they find themselves subject to CSE or other forms of violence.
5. Recommendations

Context and professional understanding

- Child sexual exploitation should be seen as one element of a wider system of abuse and violence against women and girls. Young people are never at fault of being abused or exploited – the responsibility always lies with the perpetrator.

- Conceptions of shame and honour should be understood as playing a strong role in relation to the child sexual exploitation of young South Asian women, and are likely to be stopping or delaying many women from coming forward to disclose abuse.

- Support services should be underpinned by feminist and anti-racist frameworks, where all staff have an understanding of, and commitment to, dismantling the discriminatory systems and structures that facilitate the abuse and exploitation of young women.

- CSE should be understood as affecting young people in similar ways, whatever their background, but professionals should also be aware of how particular local geographies and community dynamics may result in nuances to the strategies employed by perpetrators and the experiences of particular young people.

- All staff, particularly those working in racially and ethnically diverse areas, should have an understanding of the key social, cultural and religious issues and practices that are present in local communities. Service managers and commissioners should make time and resources available for staff to receive in-depth training on working confidently and sensitively with diverse communities.

Practice priorities

- Children under 18 must be treated as such and have their safety and human rights protected.

- Protecting young people from harm is paramount and safeguarding must always be the priority. If concerns exist about a young person’s safety, professionals must follow all appropriate and necessary safeguarding processes, regardless of a young person’s racial or ethnic background. Child abuse and exploitation is wrong, and must be challenged – this point takes precedence over concerns around cultural relativism or being perceived as racist.

- Alongside their child protection mandate, professionals should acknowledge and honour the resilience of the young women who present at their services. An exploration of their strengths as well as their needs should form a core part of any assessment. It is likely that young women have been managing to cope with extreme levels of abuse and exploitation during their ‘hidden journey’ before presenting at services.
Young people’s accounts, views and wishes should be listened to carefully and sensitively. Workers need time to build trusting and reliable relationships with young people.

Extreme care should be taken, specialist advice sought, and procedures carefully followed, when so-called ‘honour-based’ violence or forced marriage are identified as risks. Government guidance and guidelines should be followed by all agencies involved.

Young women should have the choice about whether they seek support from wider or universal CSE services, or specialist ones that have a specific focus on supporting BME women. Services should be able to accommodate young people who wish to talk with someone from their own background, and those who would prefer not to.

Services should be supported to explore and understand what ‘safe spaces’ look like within and outside of (their communities, and then supported in the provision of these services. This understanding and provision must be user-led as women’s definitions of safety and risk are informed by complex dynamics and individual needs. Services should provide access to interpreters and translators who have specialist knowledge in interpreting for confidential and sensitive cases.

Working with families and communities

BME young people and communities need to know that support services exist, and are approachable and relevant to them. Services should implement a communications and engagement strategy that specifically targets so-called ‘hard-to-reach’ communities.

Offering outreach support to local communities who have low levels of representation in services should be strongly considered as a core part of any service offer. Bids and tenders for services should aim to include resources to provide outreach, and commissioners should be made aware of specific local population needs if these are not already accounted for.

Professionals need to consider how to engage community leaders in order to reach communities, and embed self-sustaining practices in communities that protect young people from harm. They should also think carefully about how to do this without reinforcing existing unequal power structures, and get to know who might be the community advocates for young people and women.

Families and communities should be supported to understand how they can help their children and young people if they disclose abuse. Services need to consider how they communicate key messages and learning to young people and their communities – including what language and formats to use, where to place information, and what methods of communication with the service are offered.

Services should consider how they engage with young people and their communities in proactive ways that build positive and informative relationships before specific cases of CSE emerge. Through these, preventative work around abuse, exploitation and how to respond to these problems can take place.
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Too many children and young people in this country don’t feel safe, loved or able to cope. Together we can change their lives.

The Children’s Society is a national charity that runs local services and campaigns to change the law to help this country’s most vulnerable young people.

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