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“Muslim Girls do Not Get Groomed”: the continued invisibility of British-Pakistani girls ten years on from the Rotherham grooming scandal

written by

Fiona Sheil & Zlakha Ahmed
on behalf of Apna Haq





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1. Introduction

‘When it came to the media stories it wasn’t shocking to women. It wasn’t shocking to the girls – to the girls I went to school with. Because these were the same men who would approach us on the way home from school’

– ‘A’, who was aged eight when the Rotherham grooming scandal made headlines in 2011

In 2011, media reports of an expansive child sexual exploitation grooming ring in Rotherham first surfaced. What became known as the Rotherham grooming scandal exploded into international headlines. An estimated 1,400 children were abused in the town between 1997–2011 (Jay 2014). The perpetration was one of the most extensive known cases of child sexual exploitation in modern British history. The Rotherham scandal – in tandem with similar abuses in Rochdale, Debry, Oxford, Preston, Telford and Middlesbrough – proved a watershed in British public awareness and policy around child sexual exploitation¹.

Yet ten years on from the independent inquiries² and media coverage that followed the abuse, British-Pakistani girls in this South Yorkshire town are still growing up in an atmosphere of sustained sexual targeting. Their adolescence and experience of the world is shaped by determined perpetration and co-ordinated and insistent coercion. After a decade in which their community has been in the spotlight, British-Pakistani girls remain invisible and their protections inadequate.

This paper asks why British-Pakistani girls are still systematically at risk and what is needed to create permanent, positive change to their safety?

Based on the insights of nearly thirty years’ work in Rotherham by Apna Haq, we explore these questions, considering how British-Pakistani girls’ lack of safety to speak out has been shaped since the scandal by racialised

and Islamophobic narratives. Examples of harm experienced by girls in the town show how community and professional-held attitudes of victim-blaming have disbelieved and isolated girls, making them vulnerable to perpetration.

When we consider why a decade has passed without effective, sustained responses to girls’ victimisation, we find that the empowerment of women and girls in the community has never been centred in attempts to address the abuse of causal issues. In fact, the years since have seen grassroots British-Pakistani feminist work defunded in Rotherham – a pattern repeated across towns and cities in the UK. In 2024, Apna Haq, the Rotherham organisation *by and for* Black, minoritised and migrant women that works to end violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Rotherham, has found itself starved of funds. Yet as we show, it is exactly the survivor-led, lived experience leadership of women like Apna Haq’s Zlakha Ahmed, and ‘A’, Apna Haq Young Women’s Worker, that catalyse real, lasting change *within* communities.

This paper is a call for change. The last decade has failed British-Pakistani girls. We ask: what can we do better in the next?

Methodology

This paper is a snapshot, intending to highlight the issues surrounding the victimisation of British-Pakistani girls in Rotherham and similar towns. It does not make claims to be a representative sample.

This discussion is based on interviews with Apna Haq. Apna Haq’s organisational memory of the grooming period and decade that followed the scandal have been told through the sharing of contemporaneous materials and through a series of semi-structured in person and telephone interviews in summer and autumn 2023 with Apna Haq CEO, Zlakha Ahmed MBE.

This paper focuses on the testimony of ‘A’, Young Women’s Worker at Apna Haq. ‘A’ was aged eight when the scandal broke in Rotherham. She grew up around Apna Haq where her mother was first a service user and later a trustee. ‘A’, like Zlakha Ahmed, has first-hand experience of targeted perpetrations and the impact of access to safe, empowering spaces. ‘A’s testimony was gathered through a series of semi-structured telephone interviews in summer and autumn 2023.

About Apna Haq

Apna Haq has been working to end forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Rotherham for nearly 30 years. It was founded in response to the lack of representation and failure to protect girls and women in Rotherham. Apna Haq has been active before, during and after the period of the grooming (1997-2011) and its aftermath (2011-2015 primarily). Apna Haq was cited and consulted for its expertise in response to the abuses.

Apna Haq works through long-term, needs-led intersectional advocacy, community building, professional training, and strategic change work nationally and internationally. Apna Haq is regarded as a leader in practice addressing ‘honour’ based violence and sexual violence within Black, minoritised and migrant communities. The organisation has developed several unique contributions in training and practice specific to anti-racist, intersectional feminist outcomes.

About the authors

Zlakha Ahmed, Apna Haq’s CEO, founded Apna Haq in 1994 and has been awarded a MBE for her work in community development. Zlakha is an outspoken survivor of childhood sexual abuse and her lived experience has informed Apna Haq’s groundbreaking intersectional advocacy and sexual violence approach. Zlakha represents survivors and practitioners on the Advisory Group role at the Centre of Expertise on Child Abuse, co-Chairs the South Yorkshire VAWG Forum, is on the Board of Women’s Aid Federation England, and is co-Vice Chair of the European Network Against Racism.

Zlakha’s co-author, Fiona Sheil, is founder of Heard Consulting and a researcher and strategist specialising in gendered abuse and systems of gendered oppression. She is a former commissioner. A supporter of Apna Haq, Fiona has undertaken this research in recognition of the impact and power of Apna Haq’s activism and the example set by Zlakha, ‘A’, and the Apna Haq advocacy team.

About the artist

Sarbjit Johal is an activist and self-taught artist. Sarbjit has worked alongside Apna Haq for 10 years, capturing the struggles the organisation has faced. The paintings kindly included within this report are from Sarbjit’s exhibition, No More Home - Work, which explores issues the experiences of South Asian families in Britain, the forces shaping family structures, and the struggles facing women and girls.



¹ In 2015 the then Prime Minister declared child sexual exploitation to be one of three national threats (Prime Minister’s Office et al., 2015) and the government launched funded national programmes to tackle child sexual exploitation (HM Government, 2015).

² Most well-known is the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham known as the Jay Report (Jay 2014) The other inquiries included the Inquiry into Child Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2012); Child Sexual Exploitation and the Response to Localised Grooming (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2013); Reflections on child sexual exploitation (Casey 2015); An Independent Review of South Yorkshire Police’s Handling of Child Sexual Exploitation 1997-2016 (Drew 2016).

2: The Rotherham Abuses and the Aftermath

Rotherham has a population of over quarter of a million people. It is a minster town between Doncaster and Sheffield in South Yorkshire, hard hit by de-industrialisation and ranked 45th most deprived local authority area in England (Rotherham Data Hub 2024). According to the Rotherham JSNA, women in Rotherham earn roughly 76% of the national average weekly income (Rotherham Data Hub 2024). The British-Pakistani community in the town is small but established, with around 5% of Rotherham's population identifying as Muslim or British-Asian (Rotherham Data Hub 2024). It is a community subject to a widening ethnic poverty gap: British-Pakistanis are 2.7 times more likely to live in relative poverty than White people in the UK (Edmiston 2022).

When the grooming scandal broke in 2011-15, it exposed a 14-year period from 1997 in which child sexual exploitation was systematically co-ordinated by a ring of perpetrators in Rotherham. An estimated 1,400 children were abused. The abuse was horrifying in its scale, its co-ordination, and severity of abuse. It operated by building trust and isolating children, then breaching that trust to normalise sexually harmful behaviour. Victims were then silenced by threat, coercion, fear, and self-blame. Many victims were coerced into the abuse of other children; many perpetrators themselves had been groomed. The prevalence of sexual violence in Rotherham was such that one victim told the Jay Report that ‘gang rape was a usual part of growing up in the area of Rotherham in which she lived’ (Jay 2014).

After the abuse many victims struggled in their recovery. The trauma led some to suicide, and a disproportionate number became homeless and suffered family breakdown, going on in adulthood to be at greater risk of domestic abuse, problematic drug and alcohol use, and to struggle to safeguard their own children (Jay 2014). The children who were targetted were often already vulnerable. A third were already known to children's social care, and nearly half (46%) came from homes with domestic abuse (Jay 2014). Zlakha Ahmed, and whistleblower Jayne Senior, estimated 10% of the 1,400 victims were British-Pakistani. At the time, Apna Haq estimated one in four British-Pakistani victims had been subjected to other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) including forced marriage, and physical and sexual abuse.

The National Crime Agency identified around 300 suspects in Rotherham. The ringleaders included brothers operating together. Many of the perpetrators were serially criminal, highly dangerous men with extensive criminal histories including gun crime, robbery, and other serious criminal offences. The perpetrators maintained control and silence through abuse so extreme and retaliatory that children and their families and care givers felt that no one could protect them. They were terrorised into silence by perpetration defined by its viciousness and the impunity in which perpetrators acted. How did this impunity arise?

Services and system failure

The Rotherham abuses took place amidst catastrophic safeguarding failure. Although some grassroots services in Rotherham were highly praised for their advocacy, systemic failings across public services responsible for safeguarding were detailed in a series of independent inquiries published from 2002 onwards, including the Jay Report and the Drew Review of South Yorkshire Police's response to child exploitation (Drew 2016). These inquiries found systemic failings across the authorities responsible for protecting children, including social care and police. The failures were permitted by poor governance and ‘invisible’ senior management in children's safeguarding (Jay 2014); and in policing, opportunities to identify and address child sexual exploitation were ‘regularly missed’ (Drew 2016). The safeguarding system operated with poor oversight, inadequate professional standards, and its ability to protect was undermined by dismissive attitudes towards evidence on the scale and severity of abuse. The Jay Report concluded that Rotherham local authority was ‘not willing to face all of the problems it had and was ultimately ‘not fit for purpose’; the policing review said it would be a ‘generous interpretation [...] to say that senior command lacked professional curiosity’ about child safeguarding (Drew 2016).

It was in this context of ‘contemptible attitudes’ (Cockbain 2020) towards victims and with those who advocated for victims dismissed as ‘professional gossip’ (Jay 2014) perpetration grew. The lack of acknowledgement and legitimacy afforded to victims’ experiences came from a culture of misogyny and hierarchy at the very top of Rotherham's safeguarding authorities. The culture of the council was ‘macho and sexist’ and ‘not an appropriate climate in which to discuss the rape and sexual exploitation of young people’ (Jay 2014). Councillors were repeatedly discovered to be accessing pornography on council computers, and subjected senior female staff to demeaning, sexualising commentaries (Jay 2014). The result was a toxic culture unable to safeguard children and what the Jay Report identified as a culture of silencing manifesting as ‘denial’, lack of ‘self-awareness’ and not wanting to ‘rock the boat’ (Jay 2014).

Interwoven with this misogyny was a commonplace racism further oppressing victims and representatives from Black, minoritised and migrant communities. The concerns of British-Pakistani women and girls were continually pushed out or shut down. Previously a youth worker at the council, Zlakha Ahmed, Apna Haq's CEO, recalls being labelled a ‘troublemaker’ for challenging racist remarks towards colleagues and the labelling of all Muslim men as perpetrators. Zlakha's attempts to call attention to stalking and harassment of girls at the school gates – of which she had lived experience from her own girlhood in the West Midlands – were dismissed. In 2015, Apna Haq were reprimanded and decommissioned after speaking out against racism by a senior council officer. This treatment of Apna Haq – which has not been commissioned by the council since – demonstrates attitudes towards British-Pakistani women more generally.

Shutting out the representation and lived experience of British-Pakistani girls and women has impacted directly on safeguarding. Safeguarding is contextual: it requires contextual knowledge to work. The independent inquiries noted how poorly safeguarding authorities understood the context and dynamics of abuse for British-Pakistani girls. The Jay Report criticised lack of representation of British-Pakistani voices, noting that ‘with hindsight, it is clear that women and girls in the Pakistani community in Rotherham should have been encouraged and empowered by the authorities to speak out about perpetrators and their own experiences as victims of sexual exploitation, so often hidden from sight’ (Jay 2014). Similarly, lack of reliable data about victimisation of Black, minoritised and migrant children has left British-Pakistani girls out of the narrative. Even today the rough 10% estimate of how many British-Pakistani girls were victimised remains a best-guess because the routes for their disclosure were so weak. As one community representative woman remarked to BBC File on 4 in 2015, British-Pakistani victims were always going to be left out of both analysis and narrative:

‘the Pakistani girls are not going to be part and parcel of this report. There’s no record of what happened to them’

(BBC 2015).

What little communication was had between safeguarding authorities and the British-Pakistani community about child sexual exploitation in Rotherham was routed through male community leaders. The Jay Report criticised the lack of involvement of the British-Pakistani community by safeguarding authorities³. The Apna Haq advocacy team, which includes survivors including Zlakha herself, while consulted nationally, were afforded only reluctant acknowledgement at senior levels in Rotherham. Zlakha’s attendance at a senior meeting in Rotherham was queried on one occasion by a police chief inspector because it was his view that ‘we have already dealt with the forced marriage issue’: the message being British-Pakistani women and girls experienced no other gendered harms of relevance and had no right to a seat at the table. On another occasion, another senior police officer indicated that because no Asian women and girls reported sexual violence to South Yorkshire Police, they were not being victimised or raped.

These examples show how poorly safeguarding authorities understood the context and dynamics of abuse of British-Pakistani girls, and arguably what little interest there was to address this. British-Pakistani lived experience and survivorship was marginalised, its centrality to reducing victimisation, missed. Underlying this seemed to be a belief that with their intersectional identifies, British-Pakistani women and girls occupied an ‘othered’ space where responsibility for their safety lay not with the authorities, but beyond, in the community. This is not an attitude that would have been levelled at a White-British community.

The aftermath

From the moment the Rotherham grooming scandal made headlines, it was exploited, coopted to create the clamour of a moral panic targetting the British-Pakistani community. The academic, Ella Cockbain, has detailed the context and purpose of this Islamophobia⁴. Headlines exploded not only in the UK, but around the world. From the beginning media coverage of 2011⁵, the abuses were told through the lens of race and religion – characteristics made to seem causal to the perpetration itself. As recently as 2023, Rotherham has been cited at the highest levels of government in crude attempts at Islamophobia and race baiting . Five years before that, in 2018, UKIP appointed violent offender, Tommy Robinson, as ‘special advisor to rape gangs’ (Cockbain 2020).

Racialisation by the media and political framing of the Rotherham abuses focused on the trope of non-White males harming White children. Perpetrators were identified primarily by their racial heritage and religion, described through a ‘narrow lens’ ‘fixated on the ‘uniquely dangerous’ masculinities of Muslim men’ and ‘hyper-simplistic and inaccurate understandings of how and why abuse occurs’ (Cockbain 2020). This, despite contemporaneous police data showing two thirds of child sexual exploitation perpetrators in South Yorkshire were White⁷ (Wilson 2018). As the NSPCC has noted, the narrow focusing on the race of victims and perpetrators creates ‘blindspots which prevent victims from being identified’ (Walker 2023). The racialisation ‘occupies the frame’ so entirely it falsely makes child sexual exploitation appear specific and ‘abnormal’ (Tucker 2022) and obscures the fact child sexual abuse is so endemic in the UK that an estimated 15-20% of girls are victimised and 7-8% of boys (Cockbain 2020).

The Islamophobia ignored the ‘complexity and heterogeneity’ of the Muslim identity (Brubaker, 2013) and sought to lay blame for deviant, criminal male behaviours on the whole British-Pakistani community.

‘The Jay report was the 9/11 of Rotherham. After it came out there was a deafening silence from both the Council and the police. That silence was filled by the far right. They set the narrative. They came into Rotherham with the slogan, ‘Justice for the 1,400’

Rotherham resident, Abrar Javid (Wilson, 2018)

At the peak of the scandal Zlakha Ahmed gave 30 media interviews and in 29 was challenged as to why the community as a whole didn’t stop the abuse. A White community would not have been asked this. This racialisation deflected responsibility from the many failures that took place in Rotherham (Tucker 2022) and instead targetted the community. Because it didn’t serve to focus on the gendered power dynamics of the violence and the patriarchy that enabled it, gendered analysis was largely ignored by the coverage. By creating a narrative that ethnicity and religion were causal of the abuse, the complex interplay of patriarchal power and violence which enabled the targeted and silencing of victims has gone unaddressed. (Perhaps nothing better illustrates this absence of real reckoning than the role given to Tommy Robinson.)

‘Racism is not only about race but is configured through the denigration of our culture. Particular public narratives by those in power create moral panics’

Zainab Rasool and Zlakha Ahmed (Rasool, 2020)

The racialisation of blame was immediately felt in Rotherham’s streets. The far-right seized the racialised and Islamophobic narrative to exploit tensions and create division in Rotherham – a town with a history of racist violence⁸ and far-right political representation – exploded. Over fourteen months the far-right ran fourteen marches through the town centre. Racists stalked and beat to death 81-year-old grandfather, Mushin Ahmed; a young British-Pakistani woman was shot at in her car; a British-Pakistani man was set upon with a meat cleaver at a petrol station. The community was terrified. The police responded by telling Asian women to stay indoors.

‘Every time the English Defence League come, I notice a change in White people’s attitudes. The same person who before could understand my English suddenly says, ‘I don’t know what you’re saying’’

Rotherham resident (Apna Haq 2016)

The effect on the lives and safety of British-Pakistani women was immediate. Hate crimes against Muslim women in Rotherham increased (Wilson 2018). The effect of police telling women to stay at home only confirmed British-Pakistani girls’ and women’s suspicions that they had no right to safety. The violent, racialised aftermath attempted to push the British-Pakistani community into the margins – literally out of public life and protection. For British-Pakistani victims, the backlash of racist violence raised the stakes on the repercussions of reporting abuse, deepening their silence, and empowering perpetrators. At a time when assurance was most needed that everyone – particularly girls and women – had a right to be safe, the exact opposite took place.

³ The Jay Report recommended that: ‘recommendation 12: there should be more direct and frequent engagement [...] with women and men from ethnic minority communities on the issue of CSE [child sexual exploitation] and other forms of abuse’ (Jay 2014) of Child Sexual Exploitation 1997-2016 (Drew 2016).

⁴ Ella Cockbain, Associate Professor at the Department of Security and Crime Science at UCL has published extensively on the actual data about child sexual exploitation perpetrators and has published a series of articles in The Guardian debunking the racialised narrative (The Guardian 2024)

⁵ The first headline appeared in The Times on January 5th 2011 written by Andrew Norfolk, accompanied by an editorial (Norfolk 2011)

⁶ In April 2023 then Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, made claims that Pakistani men were predominantly responsible for child sexual exploitation that were later ruled to be misleading by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (BBC 2023). In making these comments the Home Secretary was supported by the Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak.

⁷ In the two years from January 2014, Police data showed that 67.5% percent of child exploitation perpetrators in Yorkshire were white, opposed to 19.1 percent Asian origin (Drew 2016). Across 172,000 perpetrators convicted in England and Wales in 2016, Asian men and women were not over-represented (Cockbain 2020).

⁸ Contemporaries of Zlakha who grew up in Rotherham recall far-right activity including windows being smashed and British-Pakistani men assaulted.

3: The Impact of Victim-Blaming and Racialisation

‘One of the things that I’m forever challenging is the concept of which children get abused. Child sexual exploitation can affect all children – regardless of gender identity, sexuality ethnicity, faith or economic background. If they can abuse someone and get away with it, that’s what they’ll do’

– Zlakha Ahmed (Siddique 2019)

Understanding why British-Pakistani girls in Rotherham are still subject to systemic targetting means understanding how girls have been silenced by entrenched attitudes of victim-blaming, which themselves have been sharpened by the racialised, Islamophobic narrative in the ten years since the scandal broke.

Victim-blaming has historically been a part of the framing of child sexual exploitation across different cultures, from labelling children as consenting prostitutes to ideas of moral pollution (Cockbain 2020). Victim-blaming articulates the lack of status with which victims are viewed and which made them vulnerable in the first place. It shifts responsibility from perpetrator to victim, obscuring accountability and critical analysis of the power dynamics at the centre of all patriarchal abuses. Victim-blaming induces self-blame in the victim. This impedes their ability to seek safety and recovery, and is ‘consistently associated with higher levels of dysfunction for a range of psychological and emotional difficulties’ resulting from abuse (Alderson 2021). Feminists have had to fight over decades to have child sexual exploitation correctly reframed as the result of gendered inequality and abuses of power rather than children’s own choices (Tucker 2022). What continues to occur today in Rotherham however are victim-blaming attitudes that underpin the low status and ostracization of British-Pakistani girls, and therefore their vulnerability to abuse.

The victim-blaming in Rotherham is an attitude taken by the community and by professionals – the latter widely condemned for these attitudes in the independent inquiries. Within the British-Pakistani community of Rotherham, victim-blaming is generated by the entrenched social code of ‘honour’. This so-called code of ‘honour’ makes perceived reputation more important than individual need or experience, and projects blame and accountability for perceived breaches of honour onto women. The so-called ‘honour’ code holds women responsible for all supposed transgressions of patriarchal social norms, such as around sex and sexuality, while men are not. Even in cases where women are victims, they are blamed and can be subject to punitive consequences, while the perpetrator faces no or little repercussion. As, Apna Haq’s Young Women’s Worker, ‘A’, describes,

‘honour is held by girls in the family. It’s a control factor. They talk about it like it’s a real thing, but it’s a concept. It just appeals to the men. It has nothing do so with women. It massively links to gender inequality. It’s a way for men to control women, because men aren’t linked to honour but women are’.

As ‘A’ articulates, the ‘honour’ code is a tool of coercive control and deeply embedded, supporting a reductionist view of girls in which their autonomy and safety are secondary. In the context of gendered abuse, ‘honour’ means victims are often subject to blame when they should be given safety and support and empathy.

This transference of responsibility without power from men to women generates very real threats. Within the examples discussed in the research of this paper, consequences for girls known to ‘A’ who have been judged to breach ‘honour’ have included ostracization, physical and other punishments including loss of rights such as access to life in England or to education, the threat of retribution and violence from perpetrators, and even homicide. While ‘A’ was at primary school, her seventeen-year-old neighbour was murdered by a man she was sleeping with, because they were sleeping together and others found out.

Victim-blaming is shaped by gossip, which upholds and repeats norms, and deters girls’ from speaking out about abuses. For girls already victimised by perpetrators, the risk of revictimization by wider parties causes girls to remain silent. In a context where girls may be blamed rather than be believed and comforted, speaking out becomes associated with further harms and loss of power, not as a route to justice. Without confidence external powers will safeguard them, overwhelmingly, British-Pakistani victims in Rotherham chose – and still choose – to remain silent.

Having grown up with a victim-blaming social code and witness to its consequences, British-Pakistani victims in Rotherham need the confidence and belief of seeing alternative, empowering and safe outcomes for speaking out. However, the racialisation and violent backlash aimed at the community in Rotherham did the opposite be demonstrating the very worst outcomes would be brought down on victims and the whole community.

The intensity of media coverage imprinted the racialised narrative on public consciousness and remains core to public perceptions of what constitutes grooming, and who is identifiable as a victim. It affects the victims’ own self-identity, as ‘A’ explains:

‘A lot of ethnic girls were groomed, and especially now. Young White girls are very aware of grooming because of how it was portrayed in the media. But Pakistani girls don’t see it like this. They don’t see it as grooming. This is the damage the media did: they think grooming just doesn’t apply to them.’

In Rotherham this external, racialised definition of victimhood has had a very real impact: ten years on, victimised British-Pakistani girls routinely do not identify as victims. This prevents girls recognising the harm in their experiences and seeking protection and support. The dominant narrative has excluded British-Pakistani girls from their rightful place in the narrative, and with that, their ability to contextualise their rights and experiences.

Safeguarding responses have perhaps failed to understand the misogynistic impact of ‘honour’ because of their own prejudices. Apna Haq’s Zlakha Ahmed points to the widely held stereotype that British-Pakistani girls are passive agents in their own lives and the world around them, with forms of victimisation a natural extension of this passivity. Zlakha has encountered these attitudes in safeguarding professionals – even now, this idea of passivity can determine responses to victims and critiques of their choices and behaviours. In a recent example, a Pakistan-born mother was for four years dismissed as non-compliant and ‘mute’ by social care; yet within weeks of engagement, Apna Haq had discovered her non-compliance was a deliberate strategy of control for a woman who felt she had only one route to keep her children safe and was consistent and deliberate in employing this strategy.

Narrow, tired prejudices are rarely challenged by actors outside the female Muslim community. British-Pakistani girls are rarely platformed or heard. Uncorrected stereotypes perpetuate, denying the lived complexity of British-Pakistani girls’ intersectional experience, and the myriad ways they hold their beliefs and cultural identities. This reductivism contrasts to the dynamism of their adolescence, ignoring the complicated, evolving relationship adolescent girls have with their own agency and vulnerability and developing identifies and sexuality. By not making space and standing up for British-Pakistani girls and sidelining those who represent them, safeguarding authorities reduce the safety and confidence with which girls step into adulthood and have their own opportunity to contribute and drive change.

‘They marry their perpetrators. They [the men] abused them, even raped them – but they [the girls] don’t blame them. As a young girl you assume your parents would be the ones to protect you, but when your family are saying ‘you ruined our honour’, and the guys is still saying ‘I love you’, the perpetrator looks appealing, its two evils – but one is in a sparkly jacket’
– ‘A’

4: The Dangers facing British-Pakistani Girls in Rotherham Today

'This is still going on today. This culture. It is skin crawling. It reminds me of Animal Planet. These girls are so young, so vulnerable. My closest friends went through some horrific times with men so much older. And the boys in our year were learning from older men: they didn't just think of it, it was taught'

– 'A'

The targetting of British-Pakistani girls remains endemic in today's Rotherham. Below, we give examples of the types of harm that are normalised and recurrent. Ten years on from the headlines, the independent inquiries and the peak of the racist violence, systematic hunting of British-Pakistani girls in Rotherham continues. As increasingly digital lives broaden the public spaces in which girls find themselves, so their exposure to perpetration increases. Meanwhile, the threat of 'honour' based consequences remains constant and perilous. Apna Haq identifies three common modes of child sexual exploitation they encounter in Rotherham:

'Boyfriend' – perpetrators claiming to seek emotional intimacy and trust and partnership, while actually seeking to abuse and exploit girls through this trust;

Revenge porn – threatening and exposing girls' sexuality online as a means of control and punishment in the context of the high consequences of a victim-blaming 'honour' culture;

Trusted adult – abuse by a trusted adult who has access to girls, such as a relative, neighbour, or Imam (we do not discuss this in this paper).

The restricted freedoms given to many British-Pakistani girls limit perpetrators' physical access to them. This makes the most common access to girls either online or via girls' daily journeys to and from school. Men drive up and down the roads to schools and colleges in Rotherham harassing girls and attempting to coerce them into cars. This is predation with a long lineage: Zlakha recognises it from her own girlhood in



‘At college a lot of men older than us would drive up and down the same road of the college.’

the West Midlands, and again as a Rotherham youth worker in the 1990’s. It is so common as to be an expected part of growing up for girls in Rotherham, as ‘A’ recalls from her own girlhood,

‘At college a lot of men older than us would drive up and down the same road of the college. We knew there was no reason for them to be there except us. Me and my friend from primary school were walking home – we had been through a lot of these incidents together – and a car stopped and said, ‘get in’. It was a group of Asian guys. We were in our school uniforms. So they knew we were definitely very young. We rush home and we tell her mum, and her mum calls her dad and gives the number plate. The dad says, ‘we’re not going to the police - we’ll sort this out ourselves’. When the dad spoke to the man in the car, he replied, ‘I didn’t know that was your daughter’. But it doesn’t matter whose daughters we are!

‘Another time, other guys stopped and tried to get us into their car. We said, ‘no’, but they would not leave us. Later, we told my friend’s older cousin. She said that man was known to be a rapist, but those rapes are not reported.’

‘A’s experience illustrates how insistent this abuse is, and how high the risk is – schoolgirls harassed by a known rapist. This behaviour has the confidence of habit and impunity. Whatever shifts have happened around children’s safeguarding in Rotherham in the last ten years, this street-hunting of girls remains. Something is failing when this daily, visible predation is not treated as a form of grooming.

Street predation also illustrates the literal and figurative limits of girls’ safety ending with the promise of education and at the school gate. Perpetrators patrol this boundary. When we contrast the inexperience of girls with the determination of these perpetrators, we see why perpetrators are so frequently successful, fuelling further attempts. ‘A’ describes how this street predation curbed her own freedoms by directly disadvantaging her with peers outside Rotherham,

‘It’s like a curfew. It’s the simplest of things – you can’t walk to the shop to get food when its dark. When I look at someone growing up somewhere else, safety is not so paramount. They have more hours in the day than me. If you’re a young girl in Rotherham you don’t have twenty-four hours in a day: you have from sun up to sundown.’

As ‘A’ goes on to describe, ‘time is one of the main things girls have’ and perpetrators are stealing their safe hours. For ‘A’ this disadvantage affected her career as a young athlete: she was unable to train the same hours as her competitors who lived in greater safety elsewhere.

Insistent perpetration on the streets – and online – turns visibility as a female into a risk. It teaches girls to be fearful and that the world is a threat. It pushes girls out of public spaces, setting up self-policing and marginalising behaviours that may carry across to work, home and education, affecting the confidence with which girls move through their lives and the choices they feel empowered to make.

Perpetrators are weaponising the tensions within British-Pakistani girls’ intersectional identities in Rotherham. Academic Zainib Rasool describes, as second, third and fourth generation South Asian Muslim women in the UK, the girls’ ‘lives are far more complex, contingent on hybrid or in-between spaces of multiple influence’ (Rasool 2020). Girls’ intersectionality spans gender, class, religion, sexuality, ethnicity and dual nationality. This complexity isn’t understood by external actors and the girls themselves are caught navigating their adolescence in a western context while carrying the impossible burden of ‘honour’. This create a precarity in which girls can be exploited for the choices they make, or the identities they hold, and emotions they explore. To be empowered girls need a safe space to explore that tension for themselves, free from external judgement and consequence. Zlakha has previously written of the need for Black, minoritised and migrant women and girls to have access to shared spaces to ‘establish and sustain networks and connections with each other’ (Rasool, 2020) set apart from the racism and exploitations of the outside world.

‘A’ illustrates the precariousness of girlhood in today’s Rotherham through her friends’ experiences. One girl was stalked by a security guard at her university halls of residence, and was unable to disclose to her family because she feared they would blame her for his actions. As a result she had to endure her powerlessness and fear for her safety as he repeatedly broke into her room. In another case, ‘A’ found a nightclub bouncer insulting her friend and filming her friend without consent. He himself was British-Pakistani and when ‘A’ challenged him, he sought to leverage religious identity to shame the girls. Within the gendered double standards of the ‘honour’ code he tried to locate his power, attempting to justify his behaviour by calling the girls ‘bad’ Muslims. (‘A’ subsequently pursued a complaint against him until he was sacked. ‘A’s confidence – shaped by a lifetime’s access to the safe spaces of Apna Hag – made her able to halt and create consequences for perpetration, providing a safety for herself and her friend.)

The ‘boyfriend’ perpetrator using digital coercion

A schoolfriend of ‘A’ was fifteen and had a ‘boyfriend’ over a decade older. It was a relationship of practiced coercions: love bombing followed by withdrawals; demands contingent on her sexual acquiescence even though she was uncomfortable and aware of the risk to her ‘honour’ of being sexually active.

The ‘boyfriend’ pressured the girl to share a nude image of herself. When she refused, he increased the pressure. Eventually, after a sustained campaign by the ‘boyfriend’ she sent him a photo in the hope that would cause him to stop. The opposite happened. The ‘boyfriend’ escalated the sexual coercion, threatening to send the photo to her father if she did not comply.

Bravely, the girl refused his demand. She blocked the ‘boyfriend’ on all social media. The ‘boyfriend’ responded by carrying out his threat: he posted the nude picture to her father two months before her GCSE exams.

What followed was what the ‘boyfriend’ wanted. His power had been built on the threat of backlash to her, not to him. Instead of being consoled and protected, the girl was punished. Her father beat her and stopped her from attending her last weeks of school before exams. The perpetrator succeeded in co-opting in another trusted male to humiliate and abuse the girl, and put the future freedom promised by her education in jeopardy.

The girl was punished for asserting her rights and her boundaries against the men in her life who feel entitled to assert patriarchal dominance, no matter the cost to her.

This example (above) illustrates the revenge porn identified by Apna Haq as a common mode of abuse. In the decade since the scandal, online harms, particularly revenge porn, have proliferated; for girls in Rotherham they have become normalised. Internet and social media have added speed and breadth to the tools available for perpetrators to exploit and punish. The imagined physical safety of the school gate is gone.

The perpetration online is anticipatory, planned and widespread. ‘A’ describes how the online grooming works:

‘They will be waiting for girls to turn a certain age so they’re [the perpetrators] not in trouble. People post on their birthdays and if a guy who is older sees it, he messages her. I remember when I was sixteen being worried. And again when I was eighteen. You know even if you don’t know these men, they know you. I was getting messages from men who were a lot older than me. They would ring friends of mine and ask. I know there is no law against this but there should be some consequence: it is grooming’.

The grooming witnessed by and targetted at ‘A’ was a joint endeavour, perpetrated by multiple men, and normalised enough to engender fearful expectation across ‘A’s peers as they grew into an increasing threat of sexual violence. ‘A’ refers to ‘countless girls in my year who had images sent to the whole year and rumours spread about them’. There were ‘a lot’ of times in which fake accounts were set up to share with girls’ private images. What had been consensual sex would be made into non-consensual videos and circulated. In the context of ‘honour’ these were seen as transgressions for which girls were punished by social ostracization – and far worse consequences if the rumours reached home.

In the decade since the Rotherham scandal broke established abuses and underlying inequalities have been joined by new harms: ‘boyfriend’ and street perpetration joined by online abuse; the silence of victim-blaming joined by the marginalisation of Islamophobia.

Girls have become less visible to the wider world and more visible to perpetrators. Cuts to grassroots feminist activism which drives change means generation after generation of girls are growing up under the pressure of active perpetration. If this is the case in Rotherham, it is likely repeated elsewhere.

What is the opportunity to break this silence and challenge these norms?

‘A’: the new generation of British-Pakistani feminist changemaker

Forged in feminism

‘A’s mother suffered with mental illness and was the victim of domestic abuse. ‘A’ credits Apna Haq with enabling her mother’s safety and recovery, and with enabling ‘A’ herself to develop self-protections and have the confidence to advocate for other girls. ‘A’ says,

‘I do count myself as one of the luckiest ones. I say my experiences are small, but they’re not small – we were just made to feel that they were small. Altogether, the incidents I lived through made me see the bigger picture. Speaking to women at Apna Haq I started piecing together how complicated it [gender inequality] is, and how it all links together.

‘I would ring Zlakha very often and say, ‘there is this issue, please can you help me work out what to do?’ I learned how to navigate and how to speak my own mind. It gave me protection because the men know that if something happened, I wouldn’t stay quiet about it’.

In common with the children of other service users, ‘A’ grew up experiencing in Apna Haq a safe space where women’s rights and power were normalised and articulated. For ‘A’ growing up in poverty and stigmatised for being the child of a single mother coping with mental illness, Apna Haq was a place without judgement; a place of community, bonding, exchange and acceptance.

Stepping into power

In time, ‘A’s mother, like many Apna Haq users, transitioned from service users to trustee. Using her own experience of sexual violence – stalking, threats and coercion – ‘A’ throughout her adolescence called out and challenged male abuses against her and her peers.

‘A’, now aged 20, has gone to set up projects for girls and for young mothers, tackling gendered norms by creating peer-led spaces for disclosure and reflection. ‘A’ sees in activism the same collective power that gave her and her mother strength and safety in her girlhood. She says,

‘When you’re an activist you’re not just one single activist. You stand up for a hundred more women than you think you do. You don’t just get the opportunity to stand up for yourself, you stand up for all women.

‘Everybody brings a different perspective, everybody stands for something different. Otherwise it would be like cooking with just one ingredient. With us as young Muslim women, we understand the links. We dissect them and we know what work needs to be done’.

5: Solution and recommendations

‘Abuse will stay as long as the silence is there. Your experiences are your experiences and you have a right to voice them. Speaking out enables people to make different life choices, and those choices are about safety and freedom and the ability to live your life the way you want to’

– Zlakha Ahmed, Apna Haq

What took place in Rotherham during and after the scandal – both the causes of perpetration and the silencing of victims that followed – was never well understood. The causal power dynamics were never sufficiently explored. This is why, a decade after the headlines, abuse and silencing continue.

The independent inquiries highlighted the central importance of women and girls’ own organisations. The Jay report said,

‘We recommend that the relevant agencies immediately initiate dialogue about child sexual exploitation with minority ethnic communities, and in particular with the Pakistani-heritage community. This should be done in consultation with local women’s groups, and should develop strategies that support young women and girls from the community to participate without fear or threat’ (Jay 2014).

However, this external interest was short-lived. Within a year of the Jay Report recommending close working with British-Pakistani women and girls, Apna Haq had been decommissioned. So began a financial instability led to Apna Haq being reduced to just a third of its income in 2024.

This precarity reflects the position in which

British-Pakistani women and girls are held. It shows how volatile their protections, and how little understood the collective power of a community who have built Apna Haq over 30 years as their vehicle for representation, activism and change-making. After many generational cycles of disempowerment and abuse, ten years after the Rotherham scandal external parties should be building girls’ power, not dismantling it.

Below we set out our recommendations for solutions to be put in place to create safety and equality for British-Pakistani girls, and make specific recommendations to funders.

Solutions

Break the silence on victim-blaming, sex, and sexual violence

Fundamentally undermining the protection of British-Pakistani girls are taboos around sex and sexuality, and the silence and denial around sexual violence. These denials are held up by victim-blaming inherent to the ‘honour’ code and by professionals believing in the inherent otherness of intersectional experience.

Breaking the silence means working with women and girls to break norms. It means introducing and upholding girls’ perspectives and supporting girls to unpick negative internalised beliefs from their own identities.

Build community advocacy and develop contextual safeguarding.

Silence and victim-blaming are broken by building girls’ and mothers’ skills, knowledge and confidence to challenge norms and speak out about abusive behaviours and gendered inequalities. Self and communal advocacy is a

learned skill. It requires opportunities to learn in safe spaces and to share and identify with peers’ experiences. This work includes the passing down of skills and insights between generations, building collective resources for all women and girls to resist and counter harms.

Skilling up is also needed across safeguarding professions. Often the knowledge, approach and confidence to effectively prevent and address victimisation of British-Pakistani girls is insufficient. Amongst professionals representation and attitudinal change is needed to make British-Pakistani girls and their experiences visible and valued.

Create choice and opportunity for girls.

Girls are more vulnerable because they are unequal. The power and position of British-Pakistani girls needs to be shifted and their intersectional identities appreciated as a strength and social dexterity. Work with girls must enable them to access better futures for themselves, whether through personal resilience, education, or access to fulfilling occupations and independence.

‘Empowering mums matters so much. It is massive because mothers often cannot say anything to protect their daughters because they also have no power in the dynamic of the house.’

– ‘A’

To break the intergenerational cycle of harm and inequality, mothers need to be afforded the opportunity to bring their girls up in safe environments. This involves preventative and reparative work (including refuge, advocacy, recovery support) to ensure the adult relationships and domestic environments

surrounding girls are materially and emotionally safe for them and for their care givers.

Sustain the transfer of anti-racist, gendered activism across generations.

For groups subject to repression it takes a determined energy to break through. Apna Haq is a case in point, operating for 30 years in a context hostile to the change it represents and aims to enact. Zlakha Ahmed is a British-Pakistani Muslim women who has chosen to speak out about her own experiences of child sexual abuse in order to break the silence. ‘A’ is an example of young woman shaped into activism by synchronous experiences of inequality and what equality would look like. This generational transfer of energy and knowledge between activists like Zlakha and ‘A’ is the foundation of change-making. It is individual leadership, forged in collective spaces, that spearheads change.



Recommendations to funders

'Ten years down the line grooming doesn't just disappear. There needs to be consistent funding. For us to look to the future we need to be on solid ground. You can't build a building on sand and not expect it to sink.'

– Zlakha Ahmed, Apna Haq

Funders have a powerful role to play in creating change. Form follows funding: the approach funders take affects the work done on the ground. For activists and change-makers on the frontline, funders can be a source of energy, legitimacy, resources, and friendship. In the hard work of change-making, funders play a unique role in enabling and amplifying the impact of activists like Zlakha, 'A', and the advocacy team at Apna Haq.

It can seem that funders struggle to address violence in intersectional communities: perhaps a political sensitivity in calling out behaviours in communities who have been disproportionately and unfairly subject to blame, as happened during the scandal in Rotherham. But for funders wanting to address the inequalities affecting child sexual exploitation in British-Pakistani and other marginalised communities, collaboration with grassroots activists and organisations is essential to affect change.

We recommend funders adopt the following approaches:

#1 Empowering

All work with and about girls should be empowering in every aspect. Funding should mirror this quality by behaving in ways that empower the activists and organisations doing the work. Where funding practice is experienced as disempowering it needs to adapt.

The work ‘A’ has designed and led around sports, sexuality and young mothers’ peer groups, are all examples of empowerment work *by and for* girls.

#2 Centring the lived experience activist

Creating girls’ safety is the responsibility of everyone but it cannot happen without the pioneering, day-in-day-out work of activist community leaders who are prepared to challenge injustice and harm at all levels. The deep work of sustained change relies on these individual change-makers. Funders can be a part of this change by recognising these individuals, and supporting their resilience, practice, and the structures they have built. Specifically, we recommend funders:

Fund: Focus funding attention on the exceptional activists, like Zlakha and ‘A’, who are leaders and change-makers and represent communities of experience rarely heard; and who are credible and trusted to create change within communities; Recognise that as activists they may be excluded from other forms of funding because they challenge the status quo, or are made more reliant on a smaller pool of committed funders;

Prioritise continuation: Ensure that expertise isn’t lost through funding cuts and service closures, but continues and has routes to be passed down to younger generations;

Understand: Invest in better understanding activists’ impact and the enablers and barriers to achieving their impact;

Develop: Give activists access to the skills and support needed to continue their work, recognising their time and access to these resources may be unjustly limited by their location at the margins of wealth and power;

Amplify: Amplify the influence and impact of change-makers across wider systems.

3# Long-term (matching the time needed to create change)

None of the work needed to be done to change the abuses in this paper is short term. The current funding paradigm of constant cliff-edges is not fit for the purpose of meaningful change in community attitudes and gender relations and the inequality and violence it produces. We recommend funders:

Intergenerational, long-term: Recognise the causes and harms of violence against girls has roots deep across generations, and the work of changing communities’ relationship with these factors will take long, consistent work. Funding strategy and the availability of funding needs to match this timeline;

Commitment: Activist work challenging accepted norms can be exhausting and destabilising. Funders can add value by committing to support activists’ work and vision, helping legitimise and energise their efforts in the face of challenge and erasure.



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