

HARMFUL PRACTICES: STEREOTYPES, OTHERING AND RACIST NARRATIVES - A DISCUSSION

Harmful Practices: Stereotypes, Othering and Racist Narratives: A Discussion

The Coaction Hub is a partnership project between Asian Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) and Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse (STADA) which seeks to improve responses to Black and minoritised^[1] survivors of domestic abuse and harmful practices. Since the inception of the Coaction Hub, we have had numerous conversations around how to discuss harmful practices publicly without feeding into racist narratives focused on the communities where these forms of abuse are most often identified. This has sat alongside wider questions around what we mean by culture, who is defined as having a culture, and how this is applied to violence against women and girls.

Societal narratives link violence against Black and minoritised women to culture and faith. Within our sector we regularly see assumptions made that domestic abuse against women from particular communities must constitute harmful practices, most often 'honour' based abuse and forced marriage. This seems to regularly arise in MARAC meetings where actions are offered aimed at minimising the risk of 'honour' without an interrogation as to whether this risk exists. We have also seen this in Domestic Homicide Reviews where assumptions about 'honour' have appeared to go unquestioned and without the expertise of expert panel members who could advise on the related dynamics. There is evidence that this has also been highlighted more widely; in response to a super-complaint from the Tees Valley Inclusion Project, HMICFRS acknowledged that the police have incorrectly flagged sexual violence cases as 'honour' based abuse related, including by making an assumption of ethnicity based on the victim's surname^[i]. This indicates that professionals are linking race and culture to their interpretation of violence against women and girls in a way which does not exist for White British survivors. As Chantler and Gangoli note,

'gender based violence is perceived as a cultural phenomenon in minoritised communities (i.e. as a cultural norm), but constructed as an individual action (i.e. as cultural anomaly) in majority communities' [ii]

[1] The term Black and minoritised is used throughout this paper as a term to refer to all communities who are minoritised within the UK through structural racism and oppression. Although in some contexts the Coaction Hub uses other terminology, primarily Global Majority, the term Black and minoritised encompasses individuals and agencies who have been involved in Coaction Hub projects who would not be considered part of the Global Majority, such as Jewish and Irish Traveller women. However, we understand that using broad terms is problematic and where possible we endeavour to use specific terms to be clear who we are referring to.

In this context, we're conscious that discussing harmful practices as distinct forms of VAWG has the risk of feeding into these narratives and supporting the concept that they are uniquely barbaric actions perpetrated by the 'other'.

We are also aware that the 'protection of women and children' is often used as justification to demonise individuals and communities, as most recently witnessed during the far right riots sparked by the tragic murders of three girls: Bebe King, Elsie Dot Stancombe and Alice da Silva Aguiar in Southport. The cultural and religious framing of the abuse of women and children frequently leads to racism and Islamophobia, and ignores the societal, structural, and gendered nature of violence against women and girls.

At the Coaction Hub we have discussed at length the arguments for positioning 'honour' based abuse as a form of domestic abuse, indistinct from other forms, and of treating individual survivors without labels to avoid this 'othering'. Our concern remains that we need professionals and communities to understand the nuances of harmful practices in order to respond appropriately, and in ways which could save women's lives. When Banaz Mahmod told the police numerous times that she feared she would be murdered, a lack of understanding of 'honour' meant that they failed to view her situation as extremely high risk[*iii*]. Viewed through the lens of standard domestic abuse risk assessment tools, survivors of harmful practices continue to be viewed as 'standard' or 'low' risk. Whilst Eileen Monroe's assertion that the biggest predictor of the future is the past[*iv*] can be applied to domestic abuse, current risk assessment tools don't ask the right questions to understand the complexity of abuse many survivors of 'honour' based abuse will be experiencing. To the untrained eye, in cases of harmful practices there may appear to be a limited past, suggesting a low risk future. These observations have fed into the Coaction Hub's research around risk assessment, which indicates that current, widely used tools are not adequate for safeguarding survivors of harmful practices.

We have picked up some of these discussions with our partners, including those who are members of the Harmful Practices Strategic Partnership (HPSP)[*2*]. One of the reoccurring discussions is around the focus on women from particular communities as exclusively experiencing harmful practices, most commonly Black African communities for FGM and South Asian communities for forced marriage and 'honour' based abuse.

Whilst South Asian communities feature most highly in Forced Marriage Unit statistics[*v*] this may be explained by immigration patterns, with there being a large Asian diaspora in the UK.

[*2*] The HPSP is a pan London, by and for led strategic group. More information can be found here: <https://www.standingtogether.org.uk/hpsc>

It has also been suggested that increased identification of harmful practices in South Asian communities may be in part due to the history of South Asian feminist groups and activists in the UK challenging violence against women and girls^[vi]. Harmful practices are particularly hidden forms of abuse, of which we have limited data, so our knowledge of who perpetrates what to whom is limited. Besides, we are concerned with violence against women and girls across all races and faiths, not just those with larger populations in the UK. Focusing on only certain communities can lead to the under-identification of, and increased risk for, those experiencing harmful practices in other communities.

Our discussions with partners have explored how we articulate what violence against women and girls can look like in different communities and contexts, how to convey these messages without demonising communities, and how to have discussions with and within communities. One approach is to explore what we mean by culture and to create a framing of cultural relativism in order to critically reflect on the different manifestations of the abuse of power and injustice across cultures. The issue of creating discussions within communities has generated interesting conversations with by and for^[3] agencies based on the stage at which they are on this journey. The notion of cultural privacy^[vii] means that agencies and individuals raising issues of abuse towards women and children in their communities can be viewed as working against that community. Many brave activists, both historical and contemporary have been targeted within their communities, including being physically at risk. For agencies and communities who are beginning this journey of public discussion of abuse within their own spaces, this can feel challenging and complicated.

If we consider Chantler and Gangoli's point about cultural phenomenon versus cultural anomalies, we need to explore the mainstream culture in the UK and how it perpetuates the power and control that underpins violence against women and girls. Whilst Black and minoritised communities are viewed as 'cultural', there is a tendency for white, and in particular White British, communities especially those who are middle class to be viewed as 'without culture'. This rhetoric feeds into our perception of cultural anomalies, for example, a rape being viewed as an isolated incident. This ignores our current culture where rape can be viewed as virtually decriminalised, with the majority of rapes not being reported to the police and only 2.6% of reported rapes being charged^[viii].

[3] By and For Agencies are organisations which are run by the community they service. In this report we are specifically referring to Ending VAWG By and For Services run by and for Black and minoritised women. IMKAAN's definition of by and for agencies can be found here: <https://www.imkaan.org.uk/by-and-for>

This leads us to the obvious question – what is a harmful practice? Currently we class types of abuse which we perceive to happen in certain communities as harmful practices, but we could equally consider rape, forced prostitution and other forms of violence against women and girls to be harmful practices.

It is also important to acknowledge that the types of abuse labelled harmful practices can occur and have occurred in White British communities. Whilst harmful practices are frequently associated with Muslim communities, we know of many reports of spiritual abuse being perpetrated against white Christian women. However, for these women faith is often invisibilised and unrecognised by support agencies, suggesting that white women not only ‘do not have culture’, but they also ‘do not have faith’ either. Our sisters at the Faith and VAWG Coalition are working to address this lack of understanding of faith within the VAWG sector, including exploring how this manifests across survivors of different faiths and ethnicities and their work can be found [here](#).

Historically, many White British women have been pressured to marry the father of their unborn child, without this being viewed as a forced marriage. On a personal note, my grandmother (white Catholic) experienced the shame of having a child ‘out of wedlock’ which included sending the child away to live with another family for a number of years. This was not considered a harmful practice, but a cultural norm in the time and place she lived. At the extreme end of the spectrum, ‘honour’ killings are sensationalised within our media. However, ‘honour’ has played a role in British and European law until relatively recently. Julie Bindle points out that the provocation defence used in murder cases in Britain until 2010 amounted to using ‘honour’ as a defence in law^[ix]. The provocation defence was used as a mitigation in murder trials and if successful could convert a murder charge to manslaughter. In domestic homicide cases, ‘provocation’ could include the wife having an affair, or planning to leave. In Italy ‘honour’ was enshrined in law as a defence to murder until 1981^[x].

Many academics have pointed out that harmful practices occur in an environment of collective shame, as opposed to individual shame – that the actions of a women who resists a forced marriage, is pregnant out of wedlock, or any number of other perceived transgressions brings shame on a family, extended family and/ or community. In this environment women hold ‘honour’ through the ‘purity’ of their behaviour. It is important to understand these dynamics if we are to respond to them effectively, whilst knowing that they are not so far removed from the British society that in recent memory prized the virginity of Diana Spencer as a condition of marrying the future king of England.

At the Coaction Hub we have wrestled with these concepts, not least more recently as we have been delivering training on harmful practices to MARAC Co-ordinators. We have been asking ourselves questions about how we convey the concepts around 'honour' without demonising communities. The framing of these concepts through our intersectional feminist lens leads us to articulate these forms of abuse as rooted in patriarchal values, on the spectrum of violence against women and girls, and occurring in conjunction with other forms of oppression. We need professionals to have an understanding of the nuances of these forms of abuse, so they do not turn women away through lack of understanding or urgency. We are also clear on the necessity for greater funding for specialist by and for agencies who hold in-depth understanding of these forms of abuse and how they manifest in different communities. One step towards these goals is the importance of survivors of harmful practices being at the heart of VAWG strategies, not as an add on as is often the case.

Challenging Racist Narratives: Feedback from the World Café

Last year we held a 'world café' event with 25 participants including by and for agencies, large and smaller mainstream Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) agencies, individuals working in VAWG employed by local authorities, and in 'generic'^[4] third sector agencies who have a domestic abuse specialism. The aim of the world café was to support our research, but also to bring together individuals in a creative, reflective space to collaborate, network and share ideas. We were interested in creating discussion around the themes we have been focusing on at the Coaction Hub, including asking the following: *Racist narratives around harmful practices mean that particular communities or religions are associated with specific types of harmful behaviour. Tell us how we could collectively build a counter narrative/ challenge these stereotypes within the multi-agency response?* Responses to the question are outlined below.

Training:

Overwhelmingly participants told us about the need for training and awareness raising. This included for professionals and policy makers, but also within communities, the general public and for women and girls at risk. Whilst some harmful practices training exists, this is not as widespread or as in depth as we would like to see.

[4] The term 'generic' agency refers to an organisation who are not specialists in domestic abuse or VAWG, but who may have been awarded contracts for IDVA work or to manage women's refuges. Examples include housing associations and organisations who work with a broad range of client groups

Currently the government provides free e-learning courses to statutory agencies but this only covers specific harmful practices and is significantly under-accessed. For example, in 2022 only 5209 individuals accessed the training on forced marriage nationally[xi]. It is imperative that this training is provided by experts in harmful practices, such as specialist by and for agencies, and in a way which fosters engagement with the topic, which e-learning provisions do not. Attendees of the world café felt that training should not be confined to focusing on harmful practices but to include anti-racism and unconscious bias training. As well as training professionals, educating young people about VAWG, including harmful practices, and anti-racism is imperative for attitudes to change.

Challenge:

Participants felt that there was a greater need for us to challenge racist narratives on an individual and collective level. This included countering racist comments and attitudes held by professionals and holding each other accountable, as well as reflecting on our own stereotypes and beliefs. This was also framed around the need to use our power within the sector to be heard and to minimise the harm that is being perpetuated.

Community Engagement:

There was suggestion that better relationships need to be built with community leaders. Whilst this was not discussed in depth at the world café, this does raise an issue as to who we mean by community leaders, and who we would wish to engage with around these issues. In some community and faith spaces we are aware that self-defined community leaders are not always willing to engage with issues of violence against women and girls, or indeed in some cases may be perpetrators themselves, whilst other leaders such as female activists are overlooked. Therefore this work needs to be carried out with care. Regarding engaging communities more widely, there is currently limited funding for this work, and we would like to see this expanded.

Research, Policy and Data:

In line with our knowledge around the lack of data on harmful practices, participants identified the need to collect data across organisations, and to use this to identify gaps.

The need for more extensive research was also highlighted, which would complement the data collection. Although attendees noted a need for changes in policy and law it was not specified what this would look like. At Coaction Hub, we support calls within the sector to create a statutory definition of 'honour' based abuse.

Campaign:

A need was identified to work with government departments, and to campaign on specific issues surrounding harmful practices. Social media campaigning was specifically identified. At Coaction Hub, we support Karma Nirvana's current campaign #PushForChange.

Allyship:

Participants identified the need for allyship across agencies, and with experts by experience in order to create change. This included sharing power, and using our power to support others. There was also a clear message that we have a stronger voice by working together. For more information on the world café participant's views of allyship, please see our allyship briefing here.

Conclusion

We agree with our partners who attended the world café event that there is much to be done to challenge the stereotypes and myths around harmful practices that feed into racist stereotypes. At Coaction Hub we have been focusing on creating safe spaces to have these discussions, including the world café event and within the HPSP. We come from the perspective of an openness to learning, sharing knowledge and collaborating, and these discussions have informed our research and training. However, whilst harmful practices sit on the periphery of VAWG strategies, and whilst survivors of harmful practices are 'othered', meaningful change can only be limited. Earlier in the project we held a webinar for London VAWG leads[5] and led a workshop for the STADA CCR Network, both focusing on the need for harmful practices to be a key part of VAWG strategies and local operational work. There remains a need for both the will and the commissioning that supports this work, to fund specialist agencies, but also to create collaborative spaces, such as local operational groups, and to carry out research and collect data.

[5] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvZJLOLAXQI>

[i] HMICFRS (2022) How the police respond to victims of sexual abuse when the victim is from an ethnic minority background and may be at risk of honour-based abuse: Report on Tees valley Inclusion Project's super-complaint. Available at: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publication-html/tees-valley-inclusion-project-super-complaint/>

[ii] Chantler, K., & Gangoli, G. (2011). Violence Against Women in Minoritised Communities: Cultural Norm or Cultural Anomaly? In R. K. Thiara, S. A. Condon, & M. Schröttle (Eds.), Violence against Women and Ethnicity: Commonalities and Differences across Europe (pp. 353-366). Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich. Available at: https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/63386/ssoar-2011-chantler_et_al-Violence_Against_Women_in_Minoritised.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y&lnkname=ssoar-2011-chantler_et_al-Violence_Against_Women_in_Minoritised.pdf

[iii] HMIC (2015) The depths of dishonour: Hidden voices and shameful crimes An inspection of the police response to honour-based violence, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. Available at: <https://assets-hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/uploads/the-depths-of-dishonour.pdf>

[iv] Monroe, E (2002) Effective Child Protection. Sage: London

[v] FCO (2024) Forced Marriage Unit Statistics 2023. Available at : <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2023>

[vi] Chantler, K., Gangoli, G. and Hester, M. (2009) 'Forced marriage in the UK: Religious, cultural, economic or state violence?', *Critical Social Policy*, 29(4), pp.587-612.

[vii] Chantler, K & Burman, E (2005) Domestic violence and minoritisation: Legal and policy barriers facing minoritized women leaving violent relationships. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, Volume 28, Issue 1, Pages 59-74. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0160252704001499>

[viii] Rape Crisis : Rape and Sexual Assault Statistics. Available at: <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/statistics-sexual-violence/>

[ix] Bindle, J (2022) Why Men in the West get away with killing women. Al Jazeera. Available at : www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/10/21/patriarchal-murders-are-a-western-problem-too

[x] Bettiga-Boukerbout, M.G. 'Crimes of Honour' in the Italian Penal Code: an analysis of history and reform in Hossain, S and Welchman, L. (eds) 'Honour': Crimes, paradigms, and Violence Against Women Z Booke: London p 230 – 244

[xi] FCO (2023) Forced Marriage Unit Statistics 2022. Available at : <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2022/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2022>