

Witness Name: Karma Nirvana
Statement No.: 1
Exhibits:
Dated: 01/10/2019

THE INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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Witness Statement of [Karma Nirvana]

Karma Nirvana will say as follows: -

1. Karma Nirvana was founded by Jasvinder Sanghera CBE in 1993. Jasvinder Sanghera is a survivor of forced marriage and honour based abuse and set up the organisation following her personal experiences. Jasvinder identified a gap in service provision for victims of honour based abuse and founded Karma Nirvana to bridge that gap. Karma Nirvana started as a community based project exclusively for south Asian women in Derby. Within the first two years of operation, Karma Nirvana became inundated with referrals from both men and women which came from throughout the UK. Through evidence based statistics of support sought from the charity, Karma Nirvana applied and were successful in receiving Home Office funding to set up the first national helpline supporting victims of forced marriage and honour based abuse. The helpline now operates nationally for all victims of forced marriage and honour based abuse, receiving on average 13,000 contacts annually.
2. Karma Nirvana's core objectives are to support, educate and empower those impacted by honour based abuse and forced marriage in the UK regardless of age, background, faith, gender or sexuality. Our vision is to "End honour based abuse in the UK".
3. Karma Nirvana provides emotional and practical support and advocacy for victims of honour based abuse. We also support professionals, including police officers and social workers, who may be support a victim that has disclosed honour based abuse. We also provide training to a multitude of safeguarding professionals to improve understanding and practice of this complex and hidden abuse. Karma Nirvana also proactively lobbying for legal and policy change to ensure all victims are adequately protected. A recent example of this includes the child marriage we are currently bringing into parliament to raise the age of marriage and to eradicate child marriage in the UK.
4. Since our inception Karma Nirvana has endeavoured to work with community and religious organisational leaders to raise awareness and increase reporting from within the community. We recognise that if community and religious leaders spoke out against honour based abuse that this would not only raise awareness from within

affected communities, but it would also increase a victim's confidence to report and to challenge mind-sets. Karma Nirvana have often struggled to get the support of community and religious leaders to speak out against this abuse. We have also struggled to get community and religious leaders to take up or participate in training that we provide. As such our direct experience with religious organisations is limited and based solely on the information shared through service users to our helpline.

5. Our national helpline received over 13,000 calls from the UK last year. Helpline evidence from callers who have either experienced child sexual abuse within a religious institution or have disclosed child sexual abuse to a religious leader have expressed feeling that they were either "not believed" or "dismissed". Many of the callers to our helpline identify "shame" and "dishonour" as compounding their difficulty to speak out. We have also received calls from victims of this abuse who have been silenced by religious leaders on the perception that speaking out will cause "shame". Whilst victims have not referenced structural or organisational features of a religious organisation as making it more difficult to speak about child sexual abuse, they have indicated that they have felt that "culturally" their religious institution has felt it is acceptable to "turn a blind eye".
6. Many victims of child sexual abuse disclose fearing that any information shared may be disclosed to family members and could put them "at risk". They are also fearful that members of the family and/or community are more often than not connected to religious institutions, removing perceived independency to report abuse.
7. The Karma Nirvana helpline has experienced frequent calls from individuals who have accessed the Sharia council service. Many callers accessing this service have expressed their frustration in feeling that they have been treated unfairly or discriminated against based on gender. One of our survivors of child sexual abuse disclosed that she would not have been able to disclose abuse as this would have "brought shame on the family"
8. Karma Nirvana strongly believes that an independent service should be developed to deal with complaints about the response of religious organisations to allegations of child sexual abuse. We believe that this will provide a safe platform for victims to confidently report abuse and to ensure that complaints are consistently dealt with appropriately. An independent service provides a 'neutral' service which the victims will feel reassured is not influenced by any particular 'religion' or 'culture'.
9. Karma Nirvana believe that the same independent service should implement service standards, policies and practice to be adopted by religious institutions. This will enable consistency across the board for all victims that may come forward to report sexual abuse. It will also ensure that religious institutions are suitably qualified and trained to facilitate and respond to disclosures that a victim may make about child sexual abuse, recognising the many difficulties that victims face in speaking out against abuse.
10. Karma Nirvana recognise that child protection can be complicated to navigate and must be approached with both sensitive yet equally robust measures to ensure that every child is afforded adequate protection. We believe a positive step forward could be to impose a mandatory reporting requirement on all religious institutions to report any disclosure made by a child of sexual abuse. Karma Nirvana believe that any

organisation working directly with children (including religious institutions) must be held accountable and regulated by an independent body in the interests of ensuring that every child is adequately protected.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

DPA

Signed: _____

Dated: __21/10/19_____