

“People don’t talk about it”: Child sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities

Executive summary

June 2020

Disclaimer

This research report has been prepared at the request of the Inquiry's Chair and Panel. The views expressed are those of the authors alone. The research findings arising from the fieldwork do not constitute formal recommendations by the Inquiry's Chair and Panel and are separate from legal evidence obtained in investigations and hearings.

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“People don’t talk about it”: Child sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities

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Introduction

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (‘the Inquiry’) has been tasked with considering the extent to which state and non-state institutions in England and Wales have failed in their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation, and to make meaningful recommendations for change.

Child sexual abuse and exploitation affects all communities,¹ however less is known about how it affects those from ethnic minority communities.² The aims of this research were therefore to explore:

- how ethnic minority communities perceive and experience barriers to disclosing and reporting child sexual abuse;
- their experiences of, and interactions with, institutions in relation to child sexual abuse; and
- the nature of support victims and survivors receive.

We engaged with a range of ethnic minority communities, particularly from Caribbean, African and predominantly South Asian³ ethnicities, including victims and survivors.⁴ This small-scale, qualitative research provides a contemporary insight from people in these communities and amplifies their voices and experiences.

Methodology, ethics and limitations

We used focus groups to explore the research aims. We commissioned the Race Equality Foundation to assist with recruitment and to facilitate the focus groups. The Inquiry’s Research Ethics Committee approved the research in April 2019 and the project was subject to rigorous ethical scrutiny throughout.

We talked to 82 people in 11 focus groups which were carried out across six regions in England and Wales. There were seven participants on average in each group. Three groups were with victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and the remaining eight groups were with members of the public who had no known experiences of abuse, recruited through organisations that work with people from ethnic minority communities. As male voices tend to be underrepresented in research on child sexual abuse, we carried out a male-only focus group to ensure their inclusion.

1 We recognise that the term ‘community’ means different things to different people and this is further explored in Chapter 4 of this report.

2 The phrase ‘ethnic minority communities’ is used as an umbrella term to refer to specific ethnic group categories such as ‘black’, ‘black Caribbean’, ‘Asian’, ‘Indian’ (Office for National Statistics, 2019).

3 We use the term ‘South Asian’ to refer to the Indian subcontinent. In our sample, participants from South Asian ethnic groups included individuals with Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani ethnicities.

4 The term ‘victims and survivors’ is defined in this report as individuals who have been sexually abused as children. Please see Appendix B: Glossary for more information.

The majority of participants were female (83 percent). The age of participants ranged from 19 to 74 years old. Nearly half of participants were from African, Caribbean or other black ethnic groups (49 percent), with a third from Asian ethnicities (33 percent). Ten percent of participants reported mixed ethnicity and seven percent reported ‘other’ ethnicity, with one percent unknown. Although the sample is diverse, there is a lack of male Asian voices in the cohort – in particular all the participants in Wales were female – and we were unable to engage with organisations that could ensure the safe participation of children in the research, so all participants were over 18 years old.

When discussing people’s ethnicity and communities we recognise that the categories used can be contentious and that not everyone will identify with them. Furthermore, ethnic minority communities are heterogeneous, and some perceptions and experiences of child sexual abuse vary greatly both between and within communities. While some of the themes discussed in the research were shared between several ethnic minority communities, these often manifested in different ways both between and within ethnic minority communities. Other themes are or could be equally applicable to all communities and ethnic groups, including white ethnic groups and it was not our intention, nor is it possible, to make comparisons between ethnic groups based on the research. The research findings instead aim to draw out how ethnicity, community and culture help shape people’s understandings and experiences of child sexual abuse, without framing people’s experiences solely in terms of these characteristics.

Seven key research findings

1. Cultural stereotypes and racism can lead to failures on the part of institutions and professionals to identify and respond appropriately to child sexual abuse. They can also make it more difficult for individuals in ethnic minority communities to disclose and speak up about child sexual abuse.

Racism and cultural stereotypes were a consistent theme running through the discussions. Participants saw these as having an impact on many areas of how child sexual abuse is understood, identified, disclosed and responded to.

There are two broad mechanisms through which this can operate. First, through stereotypes and misconceptions about what is ‘normal’ or ‘acceptable’ for certain ethnic groups. These can lead to child sexual abuse going unrecognised or professionals taking no action in response. Secondly, the broader context of racism in society can make it harder for individuals in ethnic minority communities to speak up about child sexual abuse out of concern for reinforcing negative stereotypes. In addition, this can lead to institutions and professionals failing to intervene for fear of being labelled ‘racist’.

2. Some professionals only see a person’s ethnic group rather than the whole person.

The research highlighted the extent to which the experiences and treatment of ethnic minority people affected by child sexual abuse could be shaped by assumptions and stereotypes made by others based solely on their ethnic group.

Participants highlighted the importance of institutions and professionals seeing the whole person when responding to child sexual abuse. While important to some participants, others emphasised qualities such as being non-judgemental and appropriately trained above having professionals of the same ethnic background.

3. Shame and stigma were frequently mentioned by ethnic minority participants as leading to a code of silence.

While shame and stigma surround child sexual abuse across all communities, participants identified this as a specific factor influencing how child sexual abuse is responded to within ethnic minority communities.

Participants from a range of ethnic groups described how shame and stigma associated with child sexual abuse contribute to a code of silence on child sexual abuse within their communities. Shame and stigma can act as drivers of responses to child sexual abuse that seek to preserve honour rather than to meet the needs of the victim and survivor.

4. Child sexual abuse can have a serious impact on victims and survivors’ sense of identity and belonging within their communities.

For many victims and survivors in the groups, their experiences of abuse had a significant effect on their sense of identity and belonging in the community they grew up in. Following experiences of child sexual abuse, some participants had been ostracised from their communities, others had no longer been safe within them or had chosen to leave. The risk of being cut off from their families and communities could act as a barrier to victims and survivors disclosing abuse.

While participants had developed their own supportive communities of partners and friends, this isolation from family and community may have an impact on the support needs for victims and survivors from ethnic minority communities. In particular, participants identified peer support from others with similar backgrounds who had experienced abuse as beneficial.

5. The way that child sexual abuse is seen and responded to in ethnic minority communities is linked with expectations about gender within those communities.

There were clear gender differences across many of the topics discussed across the research. For example, participants discussed boys and men feeling less able to talk about child sexual abuse, and child sexual abuse being seen as having a specific negative impact on marriage prospects for girls in some South Asian communities. Such differences have an impact on: how children are protected from child sexual abuse; how child sexual abuse is identified; and how comfortable boys and men are disclosing – or even discussing – child sexual abuse; through to how child sexual abuse is responded to.

6. Participants’ perceptions and experiences of institutions in relation to child sexual abuse were mixed but tended to be negative.

Both specific experiences of racism and the context of wider relations between certain institutions and minority ethnic groups influenced how participants felt about approaching institutions about child sexual abuse. Some participants perceived institutions, such as the police or children’s social care, as ‘white’ and considered that a lack of cultural diversity in institutions is off-putting to members of ethnic minority communities and hampers the ability of institutions to respond. Participants described negative experiences and perceptions in relation to responding to child sexual abuse across a range of institutions, though not all related to racism. In among the negative accounts there were also some participants with more positive ideas about institutions and participants acknowledged the important role of institutions, particularly schools, in responding to child sexual abuse.

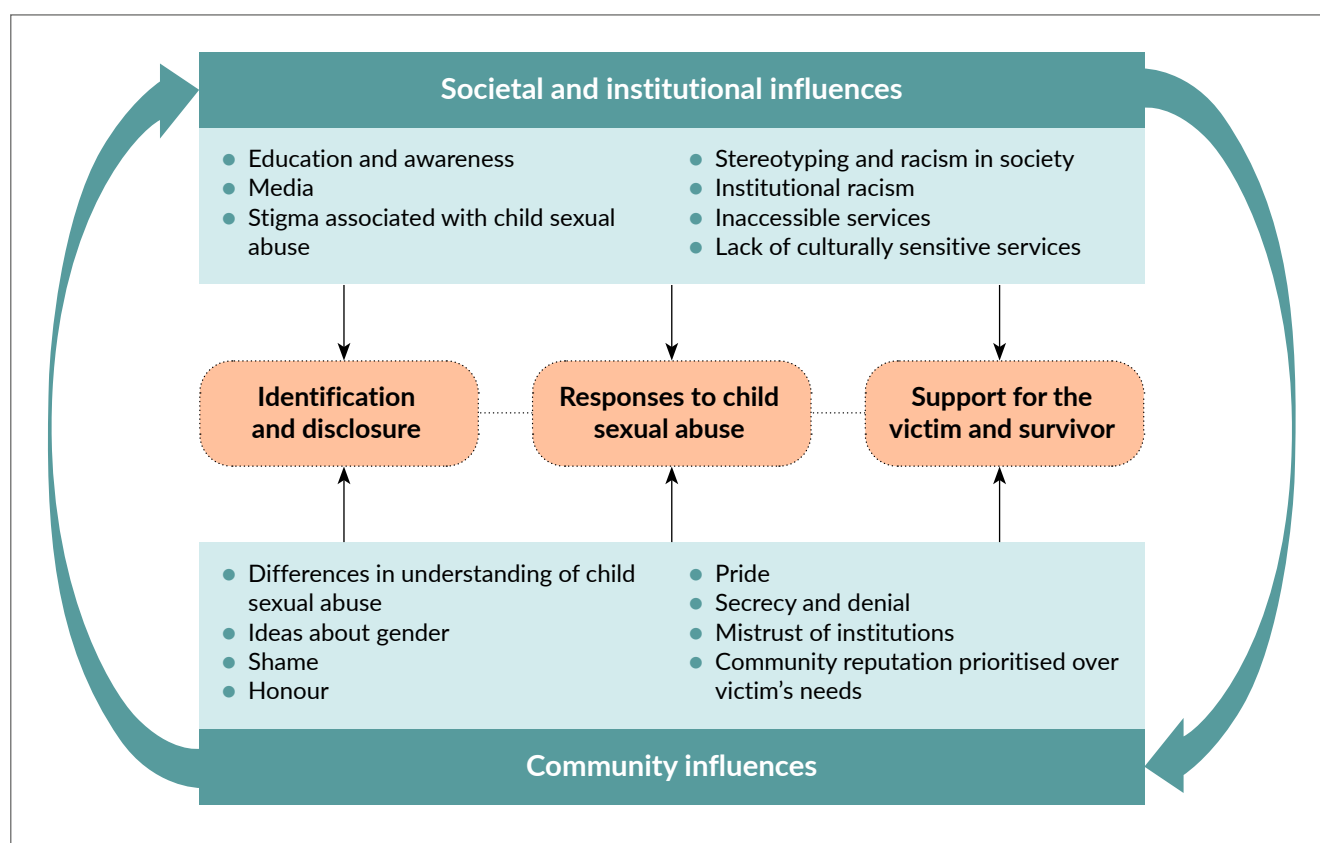
7. Although better than in the past, more can be done to raise awareness, remove barriers to disclosure and improve responses to child sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities.

Across the focus groups, participants expressed the view that there was more awareness of child sexual abuse and that both institutions and communities were responding better than they did in the past. Some participants also compared the situation in England and Wales favourably with the countries they or their parents came to England and Wales from. Participants thought that these improvements in awareness are driven by education (eg in schools) and media coverage. Despite these improvements, participants felt that there remain barriers to disclosure and other problems in the awareness of and response to child sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities.

Research summary

The research considered three areas: barriers to disclosure; experiences of institutions; and support for victims and survivors. As context to these areas we also considered understandings of what constitutes child sexual abuse and wider attitudes to child sexual abuse among ethnic minority communities. The research findings are set out under these four headings below. In reality, we found these areas to be strongly linked together by underlying themes that we have characterised as relating to society and institutions, and to communities and culture. These reinforce each other and influence how child sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities is identified, disclosed and responded to and how victims and survivors are supported. Figure 1 illustrates these links.

Figure 1: Influences on child sexual abuse disclosure, responses and support



Understanding of child sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities

Participants generally agreed with the definition of child sexual abuse presented to them in the discussion. While participants identified features of child sexual exploitation that distinguish it from child sexual abuse, they questioned the need for a separate term for child sexual exploitation. Some participants referred to cultural understandings of what does or does not constitute child abuse (including sexual abuse) differing between countries and communities. Participants also described how cultural norms and practices relating to children, relationships and sex could influence how child sexual abuse is understood and responded to.

Child sexual abuse was considered to be a taboo subject in participants’ communities. The shame and stigma attached to child sexual abuse across participants’ communities further contributed to secrecy around child sexual abuse. The discussions highlighted gendered understandings of child sexual abuse and participants both challenged and reproduced the assumption that all perpetrators of child sexual abuse are male and that all victims and survivors are female.

Participants identified sex education in schools as an important way to educate children about child sexual abuse. However, participants were aware that many parents in South Asian communities in particular objected to sex education in schools and some participants in the groups had withdrawn their children from sex education lessons. The media was also identified as having a key role in raising participants’ awareness of, and shaping their understanding of and attitudes to, child sexual abuse. Participants felt that awareness and understanding of child sexual abuse in England and Wales had increased over time and between generations, driven by education in schools and increased media coverage of child sexual abuse.

“Yeah, for those who grew up here [England], I think they would find it a lot more easy to talk about it, because it’s been taught to them right from a younger age, but those of us who actually grew up wherever we came from, from Africa. I came here – I just came here a few years ago. I still find it very difficult to talk about it.”

Female focus group participant

Barriers to disclosing child sexual abuse

Participants described a wide range of barriers that victims and survivors face when disclosing child sexual abuse, many of which could be equally applicable to all communities and ethnic groups, including white ethnic groups.

Recognising when child sexual abuse has taken place can be challenging for victims and survivors who may not recognise that the behaviour they have experienced constitutes abuse or that the behaviour was wrong. Not knowing the right words to describe what is happening and uncertainty regarding what behaviours are ‘normal’ are contributing factors. Attachment to the perpetrator can also lead to children misinterpreting the behaviours as expressions of affection or love.

Victims and survivors spoke about the fear of not being believed if they disclosed child sexual abuse and in some communities there can be denial that child sexual abuse occurs at all. More commonly, child sexual abuse appeared to have the status of an open secret, where people know that it occurs but it is not explicitly acknowledged and little or nothing is done to address the problem.

Not knowing where to go to report child sexual abuse, and fears that nothing constructive would happen if it was reported, have prevented some victims and survivors from disclosing their experiences. Responses to child sexual abuse are often inadequate or even detrimental; the victim and survivor may be blamed for the sexual abuse or concerns about the impact of disclosure on family members may be prioritised over the victim and survivor’s needs. These responses can inhibit further disclosure, or fear of such responses may prevent disclosure in the first place.

Participants described how a particular concern among some ethnic minority communities can be the impact of disclosure on the reputation of the family and community, the victim and survivor, and the perpetrator. Among some black communities, experiences of racism and stereotyping in mainstream society can create fear that disclosures of child sexual abuse will result in members of the community being stigmatised and the reputation of the community being damaged. Among some South Asian communities, child sexual abuse may not be disclosed due to the perceived dishonour it would bring on the community or family, the individual victim and survivor, particularly girls, and the perpetrator, particularly those in positions of power and influence.

“In our community, if it’s a girl, then we have to keep these things secret because if the other people knows when the girl is the age of they’re getting married, it’s going to be really hard for her.”

Female focus group participant

In some cases, victims and survivors of child sexual abuse may be ostracised from their family or community. Some victims and survivors chose to distance themselves from their communities due to unhelpful or damaging responses to their experiences of sexual abuse.

Given the concern regarding the impact of disclosures of child sexual abuse on communities, many participants expressed concerns about how disclosures might be escalated, with victims and survivors saying they feared losing control over how their information would be handled and passed on.

Experiences of institutions in relation to child sexual abuse

Overall, participants tended to hold negative perceptions of institutions, particularly the police and children’s social care, and there was a general sense of mistrust and lack of confidence relating to institutional responses to child sexual abuse. This was often underpinned by a perception, often based on direct or indirect experience, that statutory institutions and some professionals within them hold racist views and cultural stereotypes regarding ethnic minority communities:

“The social worker was white, okay, and she said to me, ‘This is not sexual abuse. This is your culture’. Even today, I’m so traumatised by this.”

Female focus group participant.

There was also a perception among some participants that institutions were too ‘white’ and lacked cultural diversity. Some participants, especially victims and survivors, believed that some professionals and institutions were influenced by a fear of being perceived as racist, which was seen as leading to non-action or inappropriate action in response to child sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities.

Participants recognised the police, schools, courts, children’s social care services, religious and health organisations as having a safeguarding role in responding to, and protecting children from, sexual abuse. However, there were mixed views about which institutions participants would report child sexual abuse to, and there was not one single institution that participants across all the focus groups consistently stated they would report to. Participants’ level of knowledge and understanding of safeguarding processes in the UK varied, with some being very clear about where they would report to, while others were unclear of where they should or could report to. Several participants said they would not report to statutory institutions, or would be reluctant to, and many of those participants tended to say they would go to voluntary sector organisations or their own community.

Impacts of child sexual abuse and support for victims and survivors

Victims and survivors reported a diverse range of adverse impacts as a consequence of child sexual abuse. These included emotional and mental health difficulties, problems with education and employment, relationship difficulties and drug and alcohol use. Some participants reported an impact on their identity and a sense of loss following separation from their community and culture.

Many victims and survivors did have some experience of either seeking out, or accessing support, but reported experiences of not knowing where to go and sometimes finding that support was just not available. The need to be able to share the experience of child sexual abuse with someone who understands and is not judgemental was cited by many participants as the most important support need for helping victims and survivors to recover.

Victims and survivors revealed that finding non-judgemental support was challenging, both from services and from informal family and support networks. In particular, a lack of understanding from family and community members highlighted the importance of access to appropriate statutory and voluntary support organisations.

Many victims and survivors expressed a preference for receiving support from someone similar to themselves. For some participants, this meant people with similar experiences of abuse. For other participants, this meant being from the same ethnic group or gender. Peer support was suggested as an effective means of providing support, when it is underpinned by adequate training and resources.

“She understood not only as a black woman being abused, sexually abused. She ticked all my boxes. Everything I said she got me. And I realised how important, how much I needed that. Someone that I could look at, I recognised, but understood me.”

Female focus group participant

Reference

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2019). Ethnic group, national identity and religion. Measuring equality: A guide for the collection and classification of ethnic group, national identity and religion data in the UK. ONS. [Online.] Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/measuringequality/ethnicgroupnationalidentityandreligion> [Accessed 25 July 2019].