

# The Impact of the FRAGILE project

2020/2021

MWC Think + Do Tank Report

## Background

The way we do research to inform policy isn't working. Today, most community based/'led' research is done through collaborations between large science or specialist research institutes partnering with local organisations beyond their institutions. Whilst this is an attempt to enrich the quality of research and of bringing wider social benefits, it still lacks the true representation of the communities they are trying to help. Where such partnerships are formed the experiences are not always productive or conducive to drawing on the knowledge and expertise of all participants, as they remain the subject not the co-authors of the research.

There is a need for a process that places these individuals and communities as the authors of research that considers the issues they face; and develops practical responses and recommendations from the ground up. There is a need for a radical shift and movement in how authentic data and insights are collected from women of Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

In response MWC have developed an approach that focuses on the delivery of authentic and appropriate research to create better policy and practice that drive practical solutions that address women's health and wellbeing.

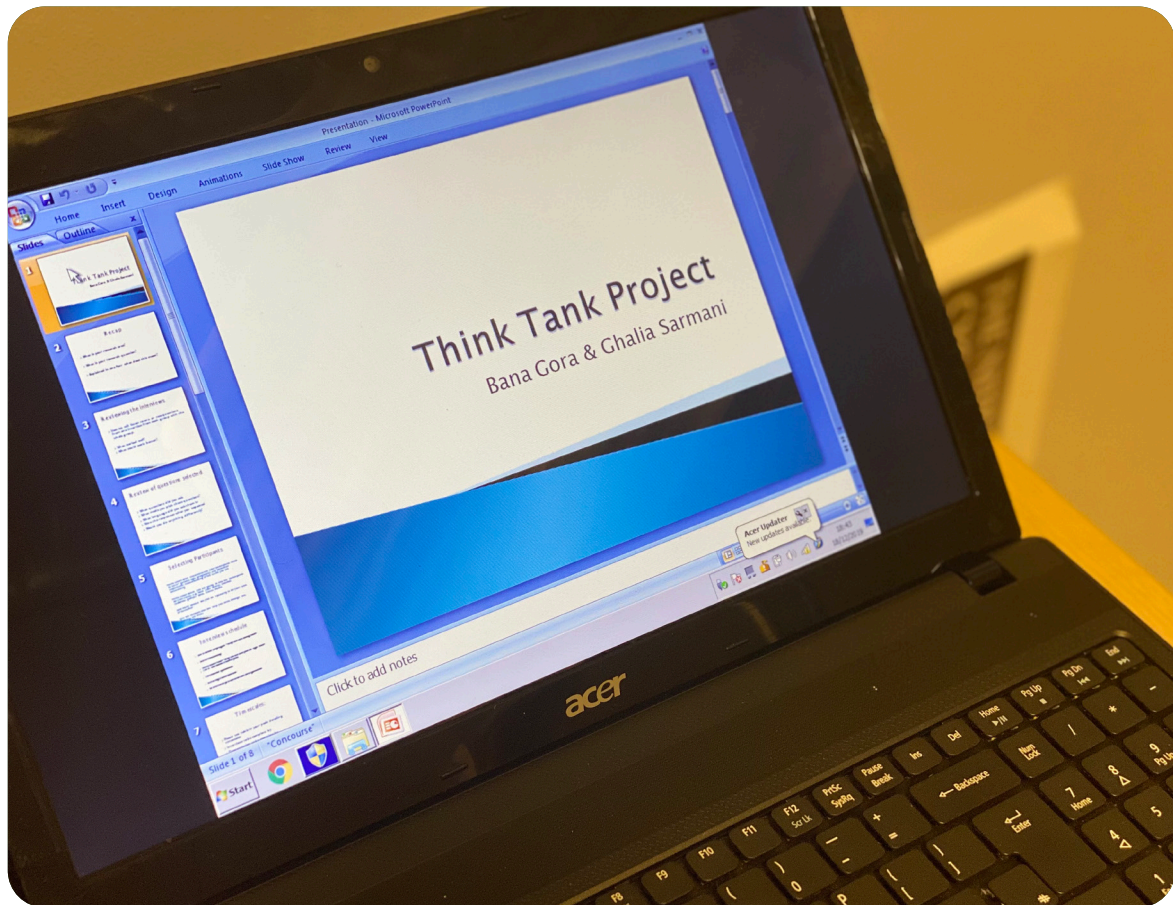
## Think + Do Tank

With the support of Wellcome Trust, Smallwood Trust & Friends Provident Foundation, we hope to reverse the current trend of Muslim males and non-Muslims researching and advocating on behalf of Muslim women, especially regarding issues of health, wellbeing and bioscience.

Our approach will straddle the 'Think + Do Tank' between both policy and beneficiaries (Muslim Women) and will offer authentic insight and appropriate solutions, as it will be led by the beneficiaries. We focus on the relevance, credibility, legitimacy and utility of the research we do, ensuring that we position our research for use.

We focus on Muslim Women from Bradford and surrounding areas. Within this group there is a climate of misogyny and patriarchy fuelled by public stereotyping and male-dominated interpretations of women's roles and positions. In short, society is denying these women their ability to think and act independently or contribute to the creation of health, wellbeing and bio-science policies and practices that affect them and their community.

For example, Muslim women have not been engaged as contributors to research and policy reflective of them. It seems that most research is a male bastion, which undermines their effectiveness and puts them at a disadvantage and impacts on how they research and present the needs of women. This project will be women led and women governed, therefore putting these women at the heart of the research.



## **What This Study Covers**

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a type of sexual abuse, when a child or young person is exploited and enticed into engaging in sexual activity in exchange for gifts, drugs, or money by the person who is perpetrating or facilitating the abuse (NSPCC).

Over the last 10 years this issue has been reported nationally and highlighted in the media. Many local authorities were brought to trial over the mishandling of the cases in certain towns. Many of the highlighted cases involved Asian men and white victims, such as in the Rotherham, Keighley and Rochdale cases.

In an independent report by Professor Alexis Jay, it was estimated that around 1400 children were sexually exploited between 1997 and 2013. The report looks into the systematic failures of statutory organisations such as the police and the local authority. The report highlighted the fact that the perpetrators were from the town's Pakistani-heritage community.

Keighley and Bradford were also under investigation for grooming gangs. This created a clear divide in the community. Hatred built up and discussions started to take place in community centres. The parents of the victims were questioning the Asian community and demanded answers as to what action they were taking to address and tackle the situation.

The FRAGILE project was set up in 2016 by Muslim Women's Council to attempt to tackle the issue of CSE locally. FRAGILE is an acronym for Forced, Raped, Abused, Groomed, Illicit, Lured, Exploited. CSE has always been a taboo subject and we felt it was about time that members of the community started to have conversations about this rather than ignoring it or hoping the issue will just disappear.

FRAGILE was one of the first projects to tackle such a sensitive issue within the Bradford community. Due to the nature of the topic, it was agreed that issues relating to unhealthy controlling relationships would be introduced in the project to start the discussions, rather than tackling the issue head on.

FRAGILE was a two-year pilot that was set up to challenge the cultural norms linked to Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) in South Asian communities. Delivered in Bradford, it engaged 152 men, women and young people in a structured 40-hour programme of discussion looking at topics such as religious, cultural and traditional attitudes to women, sex and ethnicity, family structures and power hierarchies in South Asian homes, perceived impunity to the law on certain issues, gender roles within the home, gender norms and acceptable behaviour, the impact of some parenting styles in South Asian homes, challenging traditional/cultural/faith perceptions of the above and identifying early warning signs in victims and perpetrators.

Overall, the project's objective was to identify ways to move the community culture away from denial to reflection, self-vigilance and open dialogue to protect young people from abusive relationships and equip young people to protect themselves and others.

Following on from the FRAGILE project, we established an 'Aunties Network' to support and respond to women and girls facing CSE issues.

This project recruited and trained local Muslim women from across Bradford to establish a network of trusted 'Aunties' who other women/girls can go to regarding concerns of child sexual exploitation. These women were recruited based on their critical role in family structures and community relations. They have a strategic role in addressing and responding to CSE issues faced by women/girls.

The network helped hold 'front room conversations', to raise awareness within Muslim homes, informing and enabling mothers and daughters to benefit from greater awareness of signs, dangers and to empower them with a voice that can be heard. They support women/girls to engage with specialist agencies, rather than trying to solve the situation.

The Aunties Network encourages and enables women/girls to come forward early and without fear. In many cases early is as soon as they can, which could be after many years of abuse. By having local women at the forefront we hope that two things will happen, firstly early engagement and also a communal strength to challenge at scale the current situation.

While our project focuses on women/girls, we do not exclude men/ boys who come to us as victims of CSE.



## Key Findings

- The groups that participated in the project had limited knowledge around CSE. The only awareness they had was from how the media has portrayed the issue. Many believed that only females were victims.
- Around 65% of the adult participants lacked awareness of the online dangers of grooming.
- 70% of the participants lacked understanding around appropriate relationships. For example in the Asian culture the terminology used out of respect puts a relationship into a different context. E.g calling the next door neighbour uncle or brother where in fact there are no familial ties. This can confuse children from a young age into forming inappropriate relationships.
- 89% agreed that if it was not for the FRAGILE project they would not discuss this issue in their own homes. It is still seen as a taboo subject.

## Key Findings Expanded

Changes in awareness: The project offered everyone something new. Monitoring data from 27 participants found that 63% (17) said they had become more aware of the situation and the support networks that were available. 20% of the participants spoke about incidents relating to CSE where they knew the victim.

- Superficial awareness – Facilitator feedback and session evaluations show that adults and young people involved had some superficial awareness of CSE mainly linked to the recent CSE scandals in Rotherham and Keighley, but overall they demonstrated relatively low levels of knowledge about the risks of CSE in their own community or how culture and traditions are increasing risky behaviour.
- Just a White issue – Most participants had not considered that Asian young people of both sexes could equally be victims or that perpetrators could, and often are, people who are known and trusted by victims and families. Focus group discussion showed that the sessions had used a range of case studies to effectively debunk these myths and also dealt with the understandable frustrations stemming from the constant media portrayal of Asians as the only perpetrators. A Home Office report published in 2020 states that the majority of child sexual abuse gangs are made up of white men under the age of 30.

- Awareness of online dangers – Facilitators reported that the young participants as with many communities, were much more aware of the potential for online danger and how to protect themselves than the adults. All were aware of the dangers of ‘sexting’ and hidden identities.
- Appropriate relationships – Participants’ session evaluations showed all ages and genders shared common understanding of what appropriate relationships were in terms of respect, possessiveness, financial control, verbal or physical violence. Facilitators reported that young women in particular wanted additional time to explore the nuances of relationships where one partner exploited the other, first discussing risky behaviour in White cultures and then applying this to their own communities. They partially questioned what level of male control is acceptable and appropriate within their own culture. They extended these discussions to ideas around arranged and forced marriage and honour violence/killings.

Within the safety of the group settings participants were very willing and comfortable to discussion the impact of cultural nuances. Here are some comments from the discussion:



*“FRAGILE put things into perspective. I realise now it can affect any community”*



*“I understand the related issues, like social media, parenting styles”*



*“I have learnt the difference between love marriage, arranged marriage and forced marriage”*



*“I have learnt that there is a big difference between culture and religion”*



*“I understand how culture rather than religion helps define what behaviour is acceptable for girls and boys”*

Data from young people's groups in particular showed they were questioning inappropriate behaviour from male members of their families, the practical impact of some community values on young people's safety and the difference between cultural and religious values.

Differences in gender expectations- Facilitators commented that the structure of group activities made transparent the real difference boys and girls/men and women had and generated some thought-provoking discussions.

Boys in particular were forced to think past 'traditional' justifications, particularly when peers from single parent families spoke particularly about the competence and effectiveness of their mothers in managing home and work. This helped to break down the stereotypes about the traditional role or proper behaviour of women which in turn led to questioning about others. Facilitators reported that adults felt strongly that inappropriate dress might make girls vulnerable to abuse. They laid the fault for abuse firmly with the abuser but struggled to absolve the female victim of all responsibility where they felt she had behaved in risky ways. They struggled at least initially to identify that much abuse takes place within the home with known adults and as such tended initially to see other communities more at risk than their own. However, case studies and statistics helped broaden our conversations. Adults recognised the double standards they were operating in 'condoning' their sons having white girlfriends in the full expectation that they would eventually marry a Muslim girl. They could see that this behaviour pushed their young men to hold negative views of some young women.

Taking the discussions outside the programme - Post course monitoring with 27 participants of all ages showed that generally participants now thought they would find it easier to speak about CSE. However, survey and focus group feedback showed that few adults had taken discussions beyond their closest family members and few planned to do so. It was not that they thought that this would be no value and could identify that their failure to do so was due to impact of cultural taboos on discussing sex and CSE, but felt unable to break these taboos. Most were concerned what others might think about them if they did. No parent reported having direct conversations with their children about CSE though several commented that they had thought more about when their children might be at risk in light of FRAGILE teaching and had changed some of the things they did. About 80% of adults all said they would take action if they felt a child was at risk, though this action was not defined. These findings shows the considerable power community expectations have on behaviour despite an in depth programme and gives insight into the level of work needed to deliver change.

By comparison facilitators report that young people of both sexes were motivated to commit to taking action to protect siblings and other young people they knew. The programme has made them more cautious about what they do on and offline. It's also given them confidence to identify when they or others might be at risk and what to do.

Facilitators report that they also have a clear expectation of what options are available to the adults they talk to and have discussed what they could choose to do if they feel they are not being taken seriously or silenced. Feedback from evaluation activities showed that about 21% (6) had spoken to their parents about an element of the course content, and one young woman had spoken of her concerns about being forced into a marriage, 75% (15) had talked to close friends, 18.5% (5) had joined in conversations being held by others about an element of programme content. All said they would support a friend to take action if she or he was in an inappropriate relationship. Perhaps not surprisingly, post course young people score changes in their attitudes higher than the sense of their ability to talk to their family or challenge family behaviour on project issues, as this may involve challenging power dynamics with the family.





## **Key Recommendations**

It is clearly evident from the findings that the Muslim community are very forthcoming to tackle this situation. There needs to be a safe and a culturally sensitive forum where this can take place.

- The Aunties Network has proven to be a success, however, there needs to be a continuation of the project to enable more members of the community to be a part of it so that the awareness can reach a level where the issue is no longer a taboo. The first cohort of trainers delivered the sessions in their homes, this will encourage some of the other participants to become trainers and start to have these conversations in their own homes. The goal is to create awareness amongst as many members of the community as possible and roll out the initiative to other towns and cities.
- To set up a confidential support service that is culturally sensitive. This will encourage the members of the community to make disclosures. The support service should specialise in outlining the procedure of the court processes and the options available once the disclosure has been made. Many community members are oblivious to the support and processes, and they are discouraged due to the shame it may bring on the family.
- A dedicated support line for victims and their families to receive telephone support anonymously. This will encourage members from the Asian community to come forward and seek help or support for themselves, family members or friends. Many victims choose to stay anonymous until they receive the appropriate support.

## **Further Considerations**

Once the FRAGILE project had been completed it was evident that there was much more work to be carried out in the community. On evaluating the outcomes, it was clear that the women struggled to get out of their homes and attend regular sessions in a community centre or mosque. The FRAGILE project brought to light that there needs to be work done in an informal setting to be able to create awareness inside people's homes. This will then encourage the community to speak about the issue, share experiences and build a support network.

The beneficiary group of women we work with are marginalised and excluded, who face a continued conflict of trying to fit into the Western community without being marginalised by the Muslim community; the stereotypes and discrimination towards them; the limited rights in a marriage, impact of polygamy and the sexual harassment. Furthermore, within a climate of Islamophobia fuelled by public stereotyping and male-dominated interpretations of Islam from within Muslim communities or assumptions made by non-Muslims, there seems to be a growing need to regulate Muslim women's bodies either because these women are seemingly unable to distinguish what is good for themselves, or because they have been somehow brainwashed and cannot see their own suffering. In short, society is denying Muslim women their ability to think and act independently. Within this climate, veiled Muslim women's bodies have been labelled as either oppressed or a perceived threat to national identities. The subject of sexual violence, abuse and exploitation has been met by a cultural wall of silence due to the so called 'taboo' nature of the subject.

There is a disappointing failure of local men to prevent such abuses; and local women are perhaps for the first time recognising their ability and right to lead and make change. They have become fed up respectfully waiting for men to resolve local issues. The idea of the Aunties Network came from the passion some women had to tackle the issue within their communities.

Influential women from the community were recruited and trained by Barnados. They then started to have informal conversations within their own homes with their family members, extended family members, family friends and so on. This enabled them to reach out to many more women within the community. The project was a great success and many women came forward to participate.

The women were trained to recognise signs of CSE, online grooming, how to deal with a disclosure and all the support networks that were available within the Bradford district.



## Quotes



*“I was really interested in being part of the Aunties Network. I worked in a school that was at the heart of the community and CSE is an issue that many women talk about but not openly. When the issue hit the media, I had some women whose sons were involved in the trials and they struggled to understand the concept. I felt I could make a difference in the community by creating awareness. Once I had the training through the Muslim Women’s Council I was able to address the issue within my own home. We would get together regularly on an evening and discuss the topic in an informal setting. Many of the women would ask questions and it would open up other debates surrounding the issue such as cultural values, expectations from certain genders and appropriate relationships”.*

*(Hifsa, Aunties Network)*



*“I was asked to attend a friend’s house for a cup of tea in the evening and I took my teenage daughter with me. Once we were there, I knew most of the other women as they were from my local street. It was just like any other gathering, very relaxed and informal. We discussed various issues such as child sexual exploitation, forced marriages, online abuse. My daughter’s friends were there, and they all joined in the conversation. We all spoke about our own experiences and the experiences of others. I felt safe and comfortable to speak about this. I was glad my daughter was involved as she was able to build up a support network. I feel that young girls would not discuss this issue with their own parents, but this informal setting opened up a safe space so if they did need to discuss anything they could do so by approaching one of the other Aunties that were present”.*

*(Nazreen, Participant of the Aunties network)*

## Case Study

Samina lived with her mother, younger brother and two older sisters. Her sister got married to a man in Pakistan. Her sister's husband came to live with them. Samina was only 9 at the time. Five years later Samina started to display some behaviour problems.

She started to isolate herself at home and avoid the family. Her dress sense changed, she started to wear more revealing clothes. Even at school she started to rebel and tried staying out late. Her mum was a single parent and was struggling to keep on top of everything. Samina started to miss school and her mum was called in on many occasions to discuss her behaviour.

Samina's mum had spoken to her and told her off on many occasions, however the situation was getting worse. Samina's mum spoke to a friend of hers who was attending the Aunties Network. She spoke to one of the Aunties to get some advice. At this point Samina's mum was unsure of what the issue was and just thought her daughter was getting influenced by the wrong crowd.

A Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) was carrying out some youth work in the area and was well known in the community, as she has been carrying out various projects at the local community centre. She knew of Samina's family very well as she supported her mum to access local groups. Samina's mum approached her as she was a white lady and wanted her to have a word with Samina.

The PCSO started seeing Samina on a regular basis at the community centre and Samina disclosed that she has been sexually abused by her brother-in-law for two years when he first came to live with them. Samina was unable to tell anyone as he would constantly tell her that no one would believe her and that she would ruin the family and her sister's marriage.

Samina's mum is now one of the Aunties and is heavily involved in creating awareness. She supported Samina and the case went to court. The perpetrator was sentenced to eight years.

At that time Samina was too young to understand. She was always told that he was like her brother.



## **Conclusion**

There is a long way to go in order to tackle the issue on a national scale. However, the Muslim Women's Council has been able to create awareness locally. The continuation of these projects will enable the community to become more aware and strengthen the will to fight all the way and bring justice to the victims without them having to bear the burden of shame.

This is an issue that needs to be tackled within Asian culture. Children need to be aware at a young age that certain relationships that are given a name out of respect are not always safe. There needs to be some work done within the Asian culture where the next-door neighbour may be addressed as an uncle or like "my mum's brother" whereas in actual fact they have no familial relationship and the child needs to be aware that this relationship may not be safe.

It is evident that CSE in the Asian culture usually takes place within the home and by a family friend or relative that has regular contact with the child to be able to form that bond. The Aunties Network is committed to tackling these issues.

**Report created by the Think + Do Tank  
participants supported by the MWC team.**