



Ending domestic abuse

Spotlight #4: Episode 8

Podcast Transcript

Title: Young people, mental health and 'honour' based violence: what's the connection?

Introduction: Welcome to Spotlights, a series of online events and publications focusing on a particular group of victim/survivors who are often hidden from services. As a part of our Spotlight on 'honour' - based violence and forced marriage, this week my colleague Deidre went to meet with Ariana who works for a black and minority ethnic women's organisation called Saheliya based on Scotland. Following on from our previous podcasts, this week we hear about how mental health, honour based violence and forced marriage are connected, with a particular focus on young people. We hope you find the interview as interesting and informative as we have.

Key

D = Interviewer - Deirdre

A = Respondent - Ariana

D: Can you just start out by telling me a bit about yourself, the work that you do and who you work for and what they do?

A: Okay. My name's Ariana and I work with Saheliya, which is a black minority ethnic women's organisation. We started working with issues connected to mental health, because there was a gap in provision in Scotland, or especially in Edinburgh, it's quite a long history so I'll be brief. But, we've been around for 25 years, this is our 25th year this year, and what we found was that, mainstream services weren't offering, I guess, tailored provision or hadn't an understanding and awareness on mental health for especially black minority ethnic women. And there were a number of issues with that, because there were language barriers, but there was also, I guess, just not an awareness of culture, or how women from black minority ethnic backgrounds might be expressing their experiences on mental health. So, there's a lot of literature that talks about how women from...I'm going to use the term BME from here on, women from BME backgrounds tend to describe their physical symptoms over their symptoms that might be connected with their mental health. So, women would be going in to see doctors and be talking about how they were having headaches or stomach pains or physical pains, or they couldn't sleep, and were usually getting diagnosed because they were describing their physical symptoms, I guess they were being diagnosed with physical ailments. Whereas, actually, a lot of the stuff was connected with their mental health.

So this is where Saheliya came into being. Over the years we've grown from that, because when you recognise that there are issues with mental health, you then start to, I guess, look at why those issues of mental health are happening to so many women, from so many different backgrounds in Edinburgh. What was going on here? And I think what started coming out was a lot of the women were experiencing other issues, some stuff was connected to, I guess, again language barriers, racism, you know, feeling I guess segregated from mainstream society, and additionally issues within their own communities. So, I guess physical violence, mental abuse, you know emotional abuse.

And from that we set up a learning centre. The learning centre offers...a lot of the women, like I was saying, language barriers is a huge issue, and there are women within the communities who just hadn't

learnt...I guess 'hadn't' isn't a fair way of describing it, I guess probably weren't allowed to learn the language. Coming in to learn the language, and then recognising that they could do other things, you know, take other courses. And we also offered a crèche service, which is a major thing, because these women are carers of their children, and they won't be able to leave their children with somebody else, without it being picked up on - you know, you're thinking about yourself, you're not taking care of your kids. So basically Saheliya then offered this learning centre support.

But the women who have been here long enough will end up, at some point, experiencing similar issues to the women we work with in Edinburgh. I work with Young Saheliya, which is a service for young women, young women and girls, aged between 12 and 25, which is quite broad, but it seems to work for us.

D: How do they get referred into the service in the first place? What issues are they having that leads to that?

A: What we find is, so we get young women referred from schools, we get young women referring themselves, we get young women referring their friends and we get young people referred by social work. Sometimes families refer their girls to us, and then we get internal referrals as well from services within Saheliya, so from the counselling service or from the learning centre, etc. Some of the girls will come in with a diagnosis, but other girls and other young women sometimes will be referred by school, and school will say, "This girl is not coming to school, and we don't know what to do about it!" Usually what'll happen is, we'll work with those young people to...you know, even though they're referred for not going to school, or not doing as well at school, which is sometimes how it's described, we'll do our own assessment, and our assessment is quite rigorous. So, we'll ask questions that nobody's ever asked them before so it's just working with them to identify what is actually going on. And that's quite a long process, assessments are an on-going process.

D: Yeah, definitely. So, at the beginning when you were talking about what your organisation does, it sounds like you started from a place of helping women to identify their mental health issues and needs. And then finding that a lot of their mental health problems were linked to issues in other areas of their lives. So it sounds like you've, kind of, developed to meet those needs as you found out more about them.

D: So, for the young people that you come into contact with, how much of it is about their culture and not having language around mental health? or just maybe not having the language around it because you're young?

A: I think it's a combination of things. 'Cause this is the issue that we find, and the young women find within mainstream services because, when they do get referred to, say, an adolescent mental health service, they might not necessarily have the language to express what they're feeling. Because within these communities, and I think it's important to talk about that, is this is not across the board, but what we find is sometimes the young women, if they talk about having mental health issues, sometimes the parents can...because they don't have the language, and they might think it's something else. So, I've worked with young women whose parents think that they've had some kind of magic done on them, and that's why they're not well - so like black magic. So that, I think, can lead to young people being quite hesitant in describing their symptoms, because there's immediately a connection to it being something really negative, and that is viewed as something that is wrong with them.

And, again, I think it's important for me to emphasise that, I know that in western societies that it's changed quite a bit, but I think working with young people, I don't think it's changed as much. What we seem to find is young women come in and they don't have the language to describe what's going on, they only know that they're not okay. And we don't take...like I said, we take a holistic approach, but on top of that, the young person is essential for us, and what they think is the most important thing, 'cause we want to ensure that they're heard. And any support we offer is coming from what they're saying, not us imposing some kind of support on them.

D: That must be a hard balance, if you're trying to help them develop the language around what they're experiencing, without imposing on them and saying, "This is what you have."?

A: Yeah. And often that's what they're getting from mainstream services. So, a common example, a really common example is, this young person doesn't go to sleep at night, because she stays up and

plays on her tablet or her phone all night. And, okay, that's fine, she might do that, but why is she doing that? 'Cause I think I mentioned before that we work with young women who don't have anything else in their lives, like as in, they're living within a family home where they're the girls, where they're not as valued as other members of the family unit. They're expected to cook, clean and take care of that house, they're expected to take care of the people within that home. They might not have their own space, their own physical space. And sometimes what we find is that mainstream services, such as Mental Health Adolescent Services, they recommend that you need to start taking these pieces of technology away from these young people, 'cause that's what's causing it. And that's the issue that we have, where these mainstream services will not look at the context...have an awareness of, I guess, what's going on culturally within that child's life.

D: Definitely, yeah.

A: And then what we find is that, definitely these mainstream services will do a check-box exercise. But they won't actually explore what that means, what that means for that young person. We have a young women's counsellor, and her whole approach is embedded in acknowledging the culture of these young women, and I guess a term we can't avoid is 'the honour', the fact that these young women have to carry the honour of that family. And when they are experiencing mental health issues, they can be viewed as being tarnished and, kind of, reducing that honour in a sense. Am I going off on a tangent?

D: No, no, no. I think it's extremely relevant. Because it sounds like it's almost like a cycle, because this person is experiencing some sort of mental health issue, it can't be identified, it can't be named. And then there's the whole shame of actually having a mental health issue, and what that means for their honour. And if a practitioner who doesn't know about that, doesn't understand that, then they really can't help them address that, I'm guessing?

A: And I think it's terminology as well, because I think it's really interesting you picked up on that it's language and knowing the right language. So, for example, I've been with young people to police stations, to social work offices, where they'll attempt to discuss the issue of honour, or forced marriage with the young women. And they'll use words, like, "Did your family talk to you about dishonouring the family and you have to go into a forced marriage?" These words don't mean anything to them, because those are not the words their families are using with them. The control that the family has over them and the way that control is maintained, is coercive in its nature, and it's not done through someone shouting, "You are dishonouring the family!" they don't use words like that

A: One of the ways of keeping control of the young people is, family members will threaten to kill themselves, mums will threaten to kill themselves. But if you don't ask the young people that, they're not gonna know that that's something that is impacting them. And I just think of young people anyway aside from that, and where they're trying to develop their identity and struggles that come with that in itself. And especially with the pressures that exist these days, from being on social media, being in this world, you know, where there are already major expectations on you by the time you're 12 or 13 as a girl. They'll come home, they'll start speaking to their family, or they'll try dressing in a certain way, and their families are like, "You're looking too western! That's not fair, you can't look like that!" and this will escalate. And the mum will say, "I'm just going to kill myself, because you're ruining our lives!" That's so coercive in its nature.

D: I think that's really important to talk about. In the last podcast that I did, with Dr Sundari Anitha, she was talking about forced marriage, and she was talking about the coercive context of it. It's about when mainstream professionals make an assumption that somebody comes up to you in your family and says, "We're going to take you off, and you're going to be forced into this marriage!" It's not like that often times.

A: No

D: So, I'm guessing similarly for a young person, you're not going up to them and saying, "You're dishonouring the family, this is honour-based violence!"

A: Yes.

A: And it's the other people within the family as well. So, it wouldn't necessarily just be the parents.

D: **No.**

A: If there are brothers in the family, I'm not saying this is always the case. I work with young women who have amazing relationships with their siblings. But we also work with young women who have terrible relationships with their siblings, where those siblings are involved in the abuse that goes on within the family home, and will be a part of it, where they will insult...they'll be emotional abuse going on. And additionally they'll be physical abuse going on. So, when someone's...you, they're physical, your parents hit you, they might not hit you, but other members of the family do, and they don't stop it. I keep coming back to this idea of space, because that's one of the major things that our young women tell us, just not having the space to, kind of, exist. I think it's like a tribe trying to survive, it's a tribe trying to fight, so they put in every effort to maintain that tribe surviving.

So, one of the most dangerous things for a tribe is an individual, because they're thinking independently. And I'm not trying to put down the wonderful things that come from the communities, a lot of it's amazing, but a community that's trying to survive will do a lot to ensure that happens.

D: **That's interesting, because somebody's just written a blog for the Spotlight, and one of the main things that they were saying is that, young people in particular are being subjected to heightened levels of honour-based violence, because of the threat of their westernisation. And almost that the violence and abuse that they're experiencing within their families or the community, sometimes is even greater than they would have experienced maybe in the country that their families come from, because that threat is so real when they're here.**

A: We work with young women who, when they go back to their various countries, where their families come from will experience high levels of freedom than they ever do when they're here. So I think there's a fear of, like you're saying, the fear of becoming westernised, but I think it's also a fear that these communities are trying to maintain something, but they're doing it in a way that's sometimes so violent and so abusive. That I think whatever the beauty of what they're trying to maintain sometimes gets lost.

D: **How many of the young people that you come into contact with, who are referred to your service, have had these adverse childhood experiences? And what do those sometimes look like?**

A: I'd say a lot, a lot of the young people we work with have experienced difficult childhoods. I guess within the family home, it's quite common for the young women to have experienced emotional abuse or physical abuse.

D: **Directly?**

A: Yeah. Sexual abuse as well. And it's so sad to say that it's so common, especially the emotional and physical abuse, I think our service wouldn't need to exist, if it didn't happen, I feel like it's something I talk about so often I've read so many reports on young, black, minority ethnic women, who end up...and this isn't young men, it's just young women, who end up achieving less than their mainstream young white colleagues at schools and colleagues. Because I think so much of the stuff that goes on at home, isn't acknowledged, it isn't picked up.

We're a small service, a relatively small service in Scotland and, you know, when we're making referrals to social work, we'll get in with the social workers and say, "There are indications that this has happened within this family unit, there are still young children in this family home, who would require your support." It's either one of two things happens, either they go in all guns blazing, and they, kind of, remove children from the home. But I want to emphasise that I don't think that happens as much as when they do nothing, where they'll say, "There's no role for social work in this." Because, when they do the assessment, they don't do an assessment which is culturally sound.

And I think it's not recognising the difficulties or the complexity of coming from a different background sometimes think, social workers will see the family unit and say, "Relatively, both of the parents are in the house, there's stuff in the house, the house looks nice, you parents seem loving - relatively it's okay!" But it can't be relatively, because sometimes what's going on within that household, is incredible, it's so...

D: Coercive?

A: ..yeah, coercive, violent. And we, we as professionals, we argue, we'll argue the case for these young people, and that's us as professionals. So, you can try to imagine how difficult it would be for a young person, who's experienced that domestic violence at home... And how would they pass that onto social work? How would social work be able to...how would they argue with them to get support from them?

D: So it sounds like social workers, potentially, not all obviously, go in there with a very, maybe, stereotypical, white British notion of what abusive neglect looks like?

A: Yes. And the thing is, because I think sometimes when you're working within this world, you think it's such common knowledge, like issues with forced marriage, or honour-based violence. FGM as well, because some of our girls have experienced FGM, that's, I'd say...I don't want to put stuff in hierarchy, but a young person's who's experienced FGM, can you imagine the implications that would have on that young person for the rest of their lives? And the trauma that has caused them.

D: This has come up in other conversations that I've had, and it's often times on one side mainstream practitioners not having an understanding or awareness of the culture and how that links to forms of abuse and violence. But also a fear of being culturally insensitive, offending people and not seeing the difference between culture and just plain violence and abuse, and abuse of a girl's rights. And so, maybe, what's your advice to them, the ones going into those situations, and having, maybe, consciously or subconsciously that fear?

A: A mainstream service, especially social work or health, people look to you as examples of how to carry out this practice, how to practice appropriately. So, if you are putting out ideas that in order to do an assessment with the family, you need to work with the community elders. If a young woman from a certain background should be allowed to experience certain things, because that's what happens within the community, but then you are seen as the voice of authority. And I think sometimes that's not acknowledged and recognised by services because other organisations will follow suit, that's dangerous, that's such a dangerous practice.

I guess my advice would be to offer an holistic assessment, offer an holistic service that you would to any child, it doesn't matter what background that child is from. As a social worker, you look at all elements. In social work and education, a bit part of it is, how to do an appropriate assessment. In order to do that, you look at the quality, you look at what goes on within the person's system, within their lives. Nobody's asking every single social worker, or every single health provider, or every single mental health worker to have an understanding or awareness of every single culture there is out there, it's just saying to offer a holistic assessment, so you are taking into account everything. I think the feedback we get from young people is knowing that their experience is not just theirs, that it's shared by other young people. And then being able to see how that is impacted, that is not something that just comes from them, as they're being told, that it comes from something that's wrong with them, but it something that happens due to the structures in society, of what women face overall.

D: It's contextual.

A: Yeah. It's amazing how empowered the young people feel, when they're able to connect with that, because it isn't that they're crazy.

D: So your advice to professionals is to treat this young person like you would anyone else in the extent of your assessment, and what you find to be harmful and unhelpful behaviour? But at the same time, to be conscious, conscientious of the context of their life, whether it's their ethnicity or their culture, or their gender, or their sexual orientation, how that affects their wellbeing and mental health needs, to all be taken into account?

A: Absolutely.

D: Yeah. And it sounds like that's about awareness and training, but also about not being fearful of naming what you're seeing, and not offending any other situation that that person is in.

A: Exactly, no. And I think it's just having common sense, isn't it? Just being aware that this thing is offensive and this thing is not, you know, just having common sense. At the end of the day, we work with such a wide, varied group of young women, they're from so many different backgrounds, so I mean, just being an ethnic minority is not an homogenous thing, you know, you work with people from so many different backgrounds.

D: **What needs to happen through society as a whole? What needs to change so that we're not getting to this point where these women are having these experiences?**

A: I think the difficulty is, issues of honour-based violence are still not widely understood, it's still in its infancy that this is...even that term, 'honour-based violence', is used and recognised by people. One of the ways that I understand honour is sometimes a lack of experience. So, the young women that we work with, the way they've experienced honour-based violence is by not having experience, so not being allowed to do things. Not allowed to go out with their friends, not being allowed to leave the house when they want to, and imagine, how would you tell that to anyone else? How would you say to someone else, "I can't do this because my family wouldn't let me do this!"

D: **Yeah. So, it sounds like what you're saying to an extent is that, they have to somehow become aware of their circumstances, and if they are experiencing abuse, if they are experiencing coercion, how do they become aware of that? And how do they have the chance to come out of that and challenge that?**

A: I think, like you say, issues such as forced marriage, don't happen in a vacuum, they happen from a young person not having access to so many things from a young age, the divisions are there for a long time. If a young girl isn't allowed to speak to boys, if a young girl can't go on school trips, she can't do this - what are those things saying to you? I mean, I think the question is, is that abuse? Or is that a cultural practice? But for me that's a young person who's missing out on an experience, and in the context of what a young child should be experiencing, she's not developing in the way that is necessary for a young person, and inevitably will have an impact on her mental health.

D: **And I think now with the recognition of coercive control, I feel like that opens the door for a lot more understanding of how abuse works, and how it's far less obvious than you sometimes think.**

D: **Have we talked about everything you wanted to talk about and had to say?**

A: I mean, one of the things I do want to say is, one of the fears I have working in the environment I do is, I know this isn't all families, it's not all communities and it's not every young person who has this experience. My worry is, we currently live in a world where the work I do, the work we do with these young women, is sometimes monopolised by the right, where they say, "This is why Islam shouldn't exist, this is why..." you know, "...because this is what they do to their women." But this isn't the Muslim issue, this is an issue that goes beyond...you know, I work with girls who experience honour-based violence who are from Sikh families, or who are from Indian families and from Christian families, you know, or have no religion. I feel like I often have to say it, because sometimes when I'm speaking about this, I don't want it to be a case where I'm blaming a particular community, it's not, it's not that issue. At the same time though, I think it's really important that we do talk about it, because the number of young people and women, who have experienced, young women who will experience issues, their experience of honour-based violence.

I think it's an easy narrative to have, isn't it? The narrative of certain people, to be like: this is what religion does to these women and these girls - but it isn't. Say, look at FGM, it's been widely, widely recognised that FGM is not a Muslim issue, So, it is a similar thing with honour-based violence and forced marriage, it's not connected to Islam, it's not connected to Sikhism, it's not connected to a particular religion.

A: Right, Deirdre, thank you very much.

D: **Thank you as well. I'll talk to you soon.**

A: Okay, no worries, bye.

Conclusion Thank you for listening. If you'd like to find out more about SafeLives Spotlight on 'honour' – based violence and forced marriage, please go to our website [SafeLives.org.uk](https://safelives.org.uk), where we will be uploading new content every week-each exploring a different aspect of 'honour' –based violence and forced marriage. If you'd like to participate in the discussion, you can join in the live Twitter Q&A conversation on June 8 from 10-11am-just go to #YourChoice.