Unseen? Overlooked? Stigmatised? The role faith organisations can play in tackling child exploitation

Introduction

Lucie Shuker and Rehana Faisal have both been heavily involved in the work carried out by **Faiths Against Child Sexual Exploitation (FACES)**. Rehana is a Trustee and co-chair and Lucie is part of the Leadership Committee. The organisation helps faith communities become better equipped to prevent, recognise and respond to child sexual exploitation (CSE). They believe that faith communities have a key role to play in protecting children and young people and tackling CSE. FACES highlights the fact that media reports of CSE often 'racialise the issues and create an "us vs. them" narrative'[1]. FACES works to highlight the ways faith communities can address this. This interview focused on how racialisation and prejudice can negatively impact on our ability to keep young people safe. It also explored how faith communities could be utilised more effectively when tackling CSE.

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1. **https://faces.org.uk/about/**

1. Faith communities are seen only as part of the problem

When tackling CSE, Rehana Faisal and Lucie Shuker argue that faith tends to be seen as part of the problem and rarely as part of the solution. Shuker notes that in public discourses around CSE, faith is often spoken about in a very 'reductive and problematic light'. Consequently, faith organisations are not always given a seat around the table within safeguarding partnerships. Faisal and Shuker both noted that in public discourse around CSE, this negative light is shone disproportionately on the Muslim community. To understand why, it is necessary to consider issues relating to racism and racialisation.

Media coverage of CSE has heavily focused on 'grooming gangs' made up of men of British Pakistani origin. Faisal points out that this has been conflated with and interchangeably referred to as 'Muslim grooming gangs'. The media portrayal of CSE suggests that the most prevalent form of this type of abuse is perpetrated by Muslim men. Rehana Faisal says this cannot be separated from historical and entrenched perceptions of Muslim men that are hard to dismantle. These narratives are built on the premise that Muslim men are 'highly sexualized, highly violent, misogynistic, and therefore more prone to this type of behavior' says Faisal. Shuker agrees – arguing that the CSE cases highlighted by the media (such as Rotherham and Rochdale) became 'lightning rods for racism and Islamophobia'[2].

So whilst the reality is that victims, survivors and perpetrators of CSE are found in many different contexts, the public have mainly read and absorbed this version of the story, despite it being a small part of a far bigger picture. These damaging and racist narratives impact our safeguarding system and limit our ability to tackle child sexual exploitation effectively: we are less likely to see other forms of CSE or perpetrators if they do not fit these narrow representations. Furthermore, faith organisations continue to be viewed suspiciously and are not utilised as a resource and ally in the fight against CSE.

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2. See for example **Cockbain, E; Tufail, W; (2020) Failing victims, fuelling hate: challenging the harms of the 'Muslim grooming gangs' narrative. Race & Class, 61 (3), 3-32**

2.   Failing to see or acknowledge all victims of CSE

Shuker and Faisal call attention to the fact that many victims of CSE are absent from mainstream narratives. The perception of victimhood within CSE has been very narrow, with the media and statutory organisations focusing on white girls. Boys and girls who are not white (including Muslim girls, black girls, and girls of South Asian heritage) have been obscured or extracted from the story. Rehana Faisal says, 'They were literally whitewashed from the narrative because there was a particular story that [society] wanted to tell.'

Consequently, a key focus of FACES work has been to prompt discussions on the children that we don't see in relation to CSE and why we don't see them. FACES have identified a critical need to shine a spotlight on the fact that racialisation, prejudice and bias can affect the safety of young people, because they are not being seen as potential victims of particular forms of harm. Faisal asks, 'How do we illuminate the experiences of young people who are not white, heterosexual, Christian, or of no faith? How do we look beyond our immediate assumptions of what a quote-unquote "victim" looks like?'

Faisal and Shuker both highlighted the example of Shamima Begum to illustrate how children from minoritised backgrounds are portrayed by the media. Despite being a child in need of protection from exploitation, this is not the lens through which Shamima Begum's story is seen. Shuker states, 'There's loads of structures and frameworks we could bring to bear on this that would see victimhood present in [Shamima Begum's] narrative. But in a lot of that public conversation it is just not there at all... Is it that for a girl in a headscarf we are not going to look through the lens of exploitation, even though she was a child?' Shamima and her friends had been in contact with 'extremists' online before they left the UK. Given her age, Faisal says the argument that she was groomed can be made quite convincingly. Both interviewees noted that despite a lack of evidence that Shamima Begum committed any crime (other than travelling as a minor to Syria), her faith and ethnicity combined with her proximity to ISIS have made her victimhood invisible.

Faisal remembers waiting for organisations working on behalf of children and young people to step up and intervene following government and media reactions to the Shamima Begum story. But no one did. Whilst some progress has been made to safeguard rather than criminalise children being groomed or coerced, Faisal laments that we appear unable or unwilling to do that for certain 'racialised children'. She notes that Begum's case was a stark reminder of how politics can affect our notions of victimhood and diminish our ability to safeguard all children.

Rehana Faisal contends that the safeguarding risks associated with young female Muslims, such as forced marriage, honour based violence and female genital mutilation, are also often racialised. It is often only through the lens of these racialised forms of violence that professionals are able to see and accept victimhood. Faisal and Shuker suggest that because young people are often stereotyped according to certain characteristics, some forms of harm, such as CSE, are missed. Rehana Faisal asks whether safeguarding professionals need to question their use of 'initial perceptions and gut instincts' which can inadvertently embed racism, islamophobia and prejudice into practice.

'We will all have perceptions about people who don't look like us and if we constantly act on this gut feeling, we are embedding racism within our practice. So I think more and more, what we have got to say is, "Don't jump to conclusions, don't respond immediately to your gut. Take a step back and look at this more rationally..." we need to move away from this response to your gut, the idea that your instincts are always right, because your instincts can often be sexist, misogynistic, racist, or Islamophobic.' - Rehana Faisal

3.   What impact does this have on the safety of 'racialised children'?

The way that children are seen, heard and spoken about by professionals in the safeguarding sector has a significant impact on young people's sense of identity and safety in that space. Narratives around faith, culture and race within schools, the media and wider society lead to many young people feeling as if their identities are constantly under attack. This inevitably impacts upon their ability and willingness to disclose any experiences of harm and abuse.

Faisal and Shuker argue that there is a gap in understanding the lived experiences of racialised children. As such, this has become a predominant focus for the work FACES do. They have recently completed some research exploring how young people of faith, particularly Muslims and Christians, experience relationships and sex education (RSE) in schools[3]. The research explored religious identity in RSE and the wider school culture by asking young people how they felt religion was perceived within school and RSE, and how they feel about RSE taking religious beliefs into account. Faisal and Shuker highlighted some of the findings that were particularly relevant to our discussion:

> >   Young people identified a range of (mostly negative) assumptions that were made about them based on their religious identity.

> >   Young people sometimes experienced staff or pupils interacting with them as though they are representatives of their entire community of faith.

> >   Muslim young people in particular described assumptions being made about them that suggested they were seen as having 'risky identities' rather than being young people 'at risk of harm'. Faisal surmises that one reason for this is that the counter terrorism strategy has been conflated with safeguarding strategies within schools. As such it can feel as if schools have demarcated certain students as being 'at risk' or 'risky'.

> >   When Muslim young people are seen as being at risk, it is generally in relation to very racialised forms of harm – such as radicalisation, honour based violence, forced marriage or female genital mutilation.

3. This research will be published autumn 2021 on the FACES website **https://faces.org.uk/research/**

Faisal notes that the way that many of these racialised forms of harm are spoken about in schools is akin to performative colorblindness, as described by Tarek Younis[4]. On the one hand, schools say they are not talking about Muslims, but on the other, the racialised examples used often make it clear that they are.

Faisal argues that, when forms of harm are racialised it can feel to young people like their identities and lived experiences are being attacked, diminished and dismissed, which she describes as acts of emotional violence. Both Shuker and Faisal state that young people are acutely aware of these perceptions and regulate what they say and how they behave as a result. This is particularly the case for young people from minority ethnic groups. Shuker says that the research highlighted examples of young people 'anticipating how you are different and how that difference is not acceptable, then using intuitive and instinctive self-regulation to make sure that parts of your identity, whether that's religious or racial or sexual, do not s how up so much that you will be judged or excluded or misunderstood.'

So what does this mean from a safeguarding perspective?

Both Shuker and Faisal believe that these experiences negatively impact upon young people's willingness and confidence to discuss their lives, articulate their concerns, or disclose any experiences of abuse or exploitation. Shuker notes that to disclose experiences of exploitation, a young person must trust that the people they disclose to will hear, understand and protect them. She adds, 'If your identity is in question, if your humanity is in question, or the complexity of who you are is in question, if you think you're perceived in this reductive way, will you have confidence [to reach out to someone and disclose] or will you think, "I can manage this myself?"'

Shuker also emphasizes the conflicted position that young people who are victims of CSE find themselves in when their perpetrator shares some aspect of their identity – like their faith or culture. Shuker says 'if you perceive that the value of your religious identity is in question or that it is not understood, then you are very conflicted. You want this to stop, but you absolutely do not want people to think that this has happened because this person is Christian, Sikh or Muslim'. These harmful and reductive narratives about faith can discourage young people from disclosing abuse, because of the fear that their faith or culture, and therefore their own identity, will be further discredited and stigmatised as a result.

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4. Younis, T., 2020. The psychologisation of counter-extremism: unpacking PREVENT. Race & Class, 62(3), 37-60.

Rehana Faisal explains that self-regulation is a rational response to the current safeguarding system due to the structural racism present in society. If young people are made to feel as if they are a danger to others because of their race or religion, rather than being seen as children in need of protection, it is rational for them to decide that it is better not to speak up. Faisal suggests it is therefore unfair to ask children to be bold and stand up and bravely be themselves. It is society that must change first.

4.   How to utilise the faith community in the fight against CSE

Lucie Shuker and Rehana Faisal argue that faith communities represent a valuable resource for keeping children safe and can offer a positive contribution to both the prevention of child exploitation as well as to recovery. However, because faith and culture are often seen as risk factors in the contact of safeguarding, it is an uphill battle to convince professionals of the protective role that faith communities can play. They often remain on the outside of local safeguarding partnerships, at best being asked on an ad hoc basis to provide pockets of (unpaid) consultation work. As such, faith communities remain an underutilised and undervalued resource.

Shuker notes that few civic spaces remain where groups of people voluntarily self-organise to 'uphold a shared community life' and create such strong support networks. Faith communities can be close knit, intergenerational, orientated inwards and outwards beyond their own community boundaries, and exist in many of the spaces outside the reach of statutory services or schools. Communities of faith can also provide practical, financial and emotional support to their members. Shuker draws attention to the role that the Muslim community played in Luton during the pandemic, raising money and providing many forms of support for members of their own community and far beyond. Faisal also attests to faith communities' knowledge and expertise about individuals and communities, and their understanding of the contextual complexity and nuance around safeguarding and protecting young people.

Strong networks of individuals within a community setting that are able to provide such wide ranging forms of support are critical when it comes to safeguarding and the prevention of CSE. Shuker refers to her own community of faith and her reassurance that there are a wide group of adults who know and care about her daughter. She knows that there are many trusted adults in her daughter's life who might notice if she needed help, and whom her daughter could turn to for support and guidance.

Both Faisal and Shuker highlight the role that faith communities can play in recovery for victims of CSE. Shuker notes that faith and spirituality have a long history in the recovery movement 'when it comes to integrating experiences of trauma and finding a new way of being yourself.' Faisal says that faith and culture can offer young people 'the opportunity to heal within the safety of community'. Despite this, the value of faith and spirituality is often overlooked and rarely utilised in secular environments, including statutory services working with young people who have been exploited. Rehana Faisal adds that because faith and culture are often framed as being risk factors when it comes to CSE, not only are these factors not utilised but a child protection plan might often involve disconnecting them from a victim's lives. This could include removing them from their local community, or not providing appropriate space for prayer or involvement in religious festivals. Faisal argues that this amounts to stripping away an integral part of someone's identity, leaving them further exposed when they are at their most vulnerable. Can we not support young people to rebuild themselves without asking them to negate their culture, values and beliefs in order to recover?

5. Experiences of community leaders and volunteers from faith communities

Rehana Faisal and Lucie Shuker drew on their own and their colleagues' experiences to reflect on what it can be like to be a person of faith working in the safeguarding sector. Shuker highlighted the tension between viewing your own faith as something that can enrich, nourish and protect the lives of young people, and working in a space that views faith with suspicion and might see it as a risk factor. Professionals of faith perceive that the secular sector at large does not see the 'faith or spiritual perspective' as a valuable asset or having a contribution to make to conversations about CSE. Shuker suggests that some secular colleagues may believe people of faith have a hidden agenda to control and convert. Consequently, people of faith may feel pressured to hide their spiritual identity in their professional role, and disregard any potential insights, knowledge or expertise it may bring.

Rehana Faisal spoke about her own professional experiences as a non-white Muslim woman working in safeguarding and speaking up about issues such as the racialisation of young people. She draws attention to the risks for practitioners who are racialised themselves, when they speak up about these issues. These professionals can face a lot of backlash and abuse, and feel extreme pressure to not say anything at all. Commenting on her decision to write a blog piece on the Shamima Begum case, Faisal says 'I'm acutely aware of how I look, how I am racialised, my personal identity, and how, when that piece is written by somebody who has my name and who has my personal characteristics, how that will be perceived.' A prevalent message from professionals within faith communities when FACES published the blog on Shamima Begum was how grateful they were. They completely agreed with what was

said, but felt unable to talk about it themselves. Faisal comments on the importance of having white colleagues at FACES to back her up when she speaks out, which acts as a protective layer that unfortunately feels vital in the face of likely responses. She says, 'I wish it didn't have to be that way, but there is a protective factor of having white people, who will stand by you, because they recognize what will come when you say those things.'

Rehana Faisal also draws attention to how many professionals within faith communities are not only underutilised, but also under paid. Not only is the typical ask to consult or present on an ad-hoc basis, but they are expected to carry out this work for free. Rehana says that within her own mosque community, individuals provide hundreds of hours every year in unpaid consultancy. 'Nobody ever says, "Can you come and deliver to our conferences and we'll pay you a stipend?" No, it doesn't happen.' Community leaders from faith organisations continue to do the work unpaid, because they know that if they insist on their expertise being properly acknowledged and valued, the invitations to speak would cease.

Faisal does not view the collaboration between the safeguarding sector at large and faith communities to be an equal partnership. When the safeguarding sector (which includes statutory organisations, the third sector and schools) ask individuals or organisations from faith communities to partner up on work, a significant power imbalance exists that must be acknowledged and addressed. Faisal gives a recent example to illustrate. A women's organisation run by white women received funding to carry out FGM training within Somali communities. They asked a group of Somali Muslim women to attend a training session delivered by them, and to then deliver that training within their own communities. Faisal highlights several problematic issues:

> The white women did not understand that the Somali women had far more experience around FGM than they did because they did not ask. Not only did they have a better understanding of the practice itself – but also understood the diversity of FGM practice on the ground and the relevant psychosocial factors.

> The Somali Muslim women were not paid for their time or expertise, and all of the funding went to the white women who delivered the training to the Somali women who already knew more than they did about FGM.

To Rehana Faisal, this is just one example of many that illustrates how white supremacy and institutional racism are an inherent part of any partnership work between the safeguarding sector and communities. It is part of an old story - a civilising mission where white people think they know better and tell non-white people what to do and how to do it.

Too often, the expertise and knowledge of people within these communities is not acknowledged or valued and results in an unequal partnership. They are getting neither the funding, the power to drive or make decisions, nor the opportunity to share their expertise and knowledge. Those with power and privilege must be prepared to concede some of their power to enable meaningful community partnerships to develop. Organisations and professionals within the safeguarding sector need to engage in deep reflection and uncomfortable conversations in order for this to happen. Only when this takes place will faith organisations reach their full potential and be able to effectively tackle child sexual exploitation within their communities and beyond. Until then, Faisal argues that the valuable contribution faith communities could make to tackling CSE will be lost.

> *'We need true partnerships. We need true co-creation where both parties are equally valued, in every way, on every level, and that means making adjustments to ensure that power and privilege within those dynamics are overhauled.'*
> - Rehana Faisal

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