



COVID 19 AND IMPACT ON BLACK CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Domestic Violence in Black Families Before and During COVID 19 Pandemic

**AFRUCA Briefing Paper 3: COVID 19 Series
September 2020**

About AFRUCA

AFRUCA – Safeguarding Children is a national charity with offices in London and Manchester working to address child protection issues in Black and minority communities in the UK. We provide prevention and early intervention services to address child abuse issues, working with families and communities. We also provide educational services, working with practitioners in different fields to improve their skills and enable better intervention in families.

Since the onset of COVID 19, AFRUCA has experienced increased referrals into our child protection early intervention services from local authorities across the country. This shows an increasing number of children referred into the care system due to a variety of safeguarding reasons.

Our Child Protection and Social Work service aims to help reduce the number of children from BME communities in the child protection and foster care system. We provide a tailor made, culturally appropriate, intensive one to one training and support service for parents in the child protection system. We work objectively with families, ensuring parents receive new skills so they can provide a positive home environment for their children, free from abuse, exploitation and harm.

AFRUCA has developed a set of briefing documents to help draw attention to the range of child protection issues exacerbated by COVID and the impact on children in Black and other minority communities.

This short briefing paper explores domestic violence in Black families and the impact on children generally and during COVID, with instances drawn from community intelligence, AFRUCA case work, media reports and other sources.

1. Introduction

Domestic violence occurs in many BME families in different ways. This has been exacerbated by the COVID 19 lockdown with families spending a lot more time together indoors. Both cultural and religious beliefs and practices can influence relationships within families, affect how spousal abuse occurs in the home and viewed in different communities. Women and children are more affected by domestic violence in many ways. Cultural and religious barriers as well as immigration status can dictate help seeking attitudes. The dearth of specialist support services for women and children fleeing from domestic violence, lack of availability and access to appropriate, non-oppressive mainstream services for victims from Black and Ethnic Minority backgrounds can affect the ability of victims to escape domestic violence situations.

2. How Culture and Religious Beliefs and Practices Can Influence Domestic Violence

- Patriarchy is a dominant factor in domestic violence in many BME communities across the UK. It is important to highlight the place of female subordination, the role and power ascribed to men in many Black and Minority ethnic communities. This power dominance is based on the political, economic and social structures, including the family structure being controlled by men. In essence, the man is regarded as the head of the family with the woman in a subordinate role, subject to the supremacy of her husband. Sometimes, it is acceptable for this superior role to be enforced through the use of violence.
- Female subordination can occur in different ways based on cultural, traditional and religious practices that dictate the socialisation of women and their roles in society. An example is the practice of Bride Price, in which prospective grooms pay a cash price or property to the family of intended bride is common in many communities. Critics of the bride price system have argued that this creates a buyer/good dichotomy in which some husbands might regard their wives as “property” or “chattel” to be controlled and abused and with no voice within the family or in the community. The bride price system is very prevalent in some African, Middle Eastern and South East Asian communities in the UK.
- Another example is the Dowry system in which the prospective wife and her family pays the family of the prospective husband a payment in cash or property before marriage proposals are finalised is another system seen as promoting the subjugation of women. Critics claim this can result in violence perpetrated

against women within families. The Dowry system is very common in some Asian and Northern African communities in the UK.

- The subordinate position of women in the house-hold and generally in the community can promote the view of the woman as a sexual object to provide sexual satisfaction for her husband as he wishes. Hence, certain communities might be of the view that the consent of a woman is not required for sex to occur and sexual intercourse within marriage might be seen as implying matrimonial consent.
- Economic abuse can occur because the man, as the head of the family, controls the family income or is the sole provider in the family. The woman might be unable to engage in activities that promote her economic well-being or improve her capacity to advance her skills for employability. A good example is women in migrant communities who are unable to undertake English Language ESOL classes so live in the UK for many years without being able to communicate in English.
- The inability of many women to communicate in English excludes them from education and employment opportunities. This helps to perpetuate the high level of poverty among many BME women in the country and leaves them prone to financial abuse in as much as there is complete dependence on the husband to provide food, pay the bills and meet the family's financial needs.
- Violence against women in marriages also includes emotional or psychological abuse with instances of verbal aggression, threats of force, intimidation, harassment, persecution, threats to take away custody of the children, surveillance, isolation and humiliation.
- In some communities where the family lives with extended family members, especially the parent in-laws, the woman might be exposed to different forms of abuses from these family members and might not have the capacity or wherewithal to defend herself against intimidation and coercive behaviours.
- Honour based violence might occur when the woman is blamed by the family as the cause of the problems in the marriage. Her own parents might blame her for bringing shame and dishonour on them by "misbehaving" in her matrimonial home and not fulfilling her role as a "good" wife.
- Accusations of witchcraft by family members can be a form of domestic violence. It can be a serious form of emotional abuse leading to women abused in the home in different ways, including physically and "spiritually". Faith leaders

can be involved in efforts to “deliver” or exorcise the individual and this can compound their abusive experiences.

- Faith organisations can also be complicit in the domestic violence experienced by women through use of the scriptures to discourage them from leaving the abusive situation or by emphasising the notion of “respect” for the husband by the abused woman.
- Social ostracization and isolation is an additional problem for women who experience domestic violence and who are unable to access help and support, especially where there are language barriers and a lack of social networks.
- Domestic violence can impact victims in many ways including mental health problems – depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self esteem and self confidence, depression, anxiety, fear, feelings of anger, humiliation, shame and self blame, eating and sleeping disorder as well as suicide ideation. It can lead to physical health problems including high blood pressure, various physical injuries and in many cases, death.
- Women who are fleeing domestic violence can be subjected to a high level of community and family stigmatisation. They could be ostracised for bringing shame on the family and the community, including faith community. They might also face threats of harm and abuse due to accusation of bringing the family to dishonour by reporting to the authorities.
- Language difficulties, illiteracy and lack of immigration status can lead to victims being fearful of seeking help and support. This can compound their experiences and put them at further risk of harm. For these reasons, it is possible that cases of domestic violence in BME communities are very under-reported.

3. Domestic Violence in BME LGBT Families

- Domestic violence in BME LGBT families can include financial, emotional, physical and sexual abuse in many ways as described above. Victims might especially find it difficult to seek help and support due to social stigma, ongoing ostracization and isolation by family members and lack of access to specialist support.

4. Child To Parent Abuse

- We have worked on cases during COVID where parents were subjected to abuse by their children. A parent who is experiencing child-to-parent abuse within the household might fear reporting cases of physical, mental, emotional, financial and sexual abuse to the authorities out of fear their abusive child might be subjected to criminal proceeding or conviction.

5. How Children Are Affected By Domestic Violence

- In the past, focus on the impact of domestic violence on children has been limited to the impact that witnessing the abuse of one parent by another can have on children. However, the effect of domestic violence on children is manifold.
- Exposure to domestic violence can include seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of others and is an indication of a risk of harm to children. There is added trauma caused children witnessing the abuse of someone loved or close to them which is a form of emotional abuse.
- Children themselves might be a direct victim of domestic violence when they experience physical abuse at the hands of their parents. Female children might be at additional risk of harm and honour based violence as they might be seen as mirroring their mother's behaviour of a "bad woman" or "disobedient woman".
- Female genital mutilation is also a form of domestic violence in as much as children are mutilated as a way of controlling their sexuality or as preparation for marriage.
- Children whose mothers are accused of witchcraft can themselves end up being stigmatised as witches and subjected to harmful exorcism rites.
- Cultural and religious adherence can lead to families covering up domestic violence situations, thereby having a seriously negative impact on children.
- When parents are in conflict in the home, this can affect children as they might be more concerned about their own affairs. This can lead to child neglect and compromise the parents' ability to meet the needs of their children in different ways.

- Parents who have been victims of domestic violence might be emotionally disconnected from their children as they struggle to deal with the impact of the abuse suffered.
- Domestic violence can impact significantly on the mental health of children and have long term consequences on their physical health.
- Domestic violence is a form of adverse childhood experience that can lead to negative long-term physical and emotional outcomes.

6. Access To Specialist Support

- Evidence from AFRUCA service users show that some mainstream services for victims of domestic violence, including shelters, can be racist and discriminatory in providing services for victims from BME backgrounds. This is especially the case where language barrier and immigration status are present. Access to housing for BME victims can be difficult, and where available, can be of a lower quality or sub-standard. A recent AFRUCA service user referred to a shelter in the South West of England during the lock-down not only experienced racist behaviour by shelter staff, she was provided with sub-standard accommodation and refused financial support.
- It is important that specialist services that can meet the specific needs of BME and BME LGBT women affected by domestic violence are established across the country. This will help to ensure that victims do not suffer in silence or struggle with accessing inappropriate services that can exacerbate their already fragile situation and put them at risk of further harm. Referrals to AFRUCA Child Protection Service can be made via our website at www.afruca.org.

7. References:

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Publisher: AFRUCA – Safeguarding Children

Date: September 2020