

❧ Executive Summary ❧

Painful Secrets is a qualitative study that aims to understand the issues impacting on the emotional well-being of young women and the coping strategies they employ to deal with their emotional distress. In addition, this piece of work also aims to determine whether there are any key differences in the issues impacting on young South Asian women compared to their non-Asian counterparts. The research was conducted across five East London boroughs: Newham, Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest, and Redbridge and Ilford to assess if there were any significant differences in issues across boroughs.

The impetus for this piece of work came from research conducted by Newham Asian Women's Project (NAWP) in 1998, looking at the mental health needs of young South Asian women in Newham. Issues leading to distress were identified as including the pressures of conflicting roles and living dual lives, transitions to different life stages, domestic violence, a lack of freedom at home, an absence of avenues in the family to communicate distress, racism and bullying at school (*Newham Inner-city Multifund and Newham Asian Women's Project, 1998*). The research also suggested that self-harm was a hidden coping strategy for many young Asian women, although for others it did represent an actual suicide attempt.

NAWP's experiences of providing support and services to young women in difficult situations, including those who escape domestic violence and who may be self-harming, combined with epidemiological studies suggest that young South Asian women between the ages of 15 and 35 are two to three times more vulnerable to suicide and self-harm than their non-Asian counterparts (Merrill and Owens, 1986, Soni-Raleigh, 1991, 1996, Bhugra and Desai, 1999, 2002). This presents a strong case for attempting further to understand if and why young South Asian women are in fact a population at higher risk of self-harm.

Although our expertise lies in working with young South Asian women, our investigation was expanded to include all young women so as to develop a holistic understanding of the issue of self-harm among young women. In addition, by comparing the experiences of South Asian young women with young women from other ethnicities, we can plan and develop appropriate support services that meet the gaps in current service provision.

❧ Definition of Self-harm ❧

Self-harm is the deliberate injury of the body, as a method of managing emotions that are too painful to express in words. It is not associated with an intention to commit suicide and covers a range of behaviour. For the purpose of this study, self-harm was never defined as any particular behaviour, in the belief that many young people may not be aware that they are self-harming. In addition, self-harm is often defined on the basis of what is considered socially unacceptable, and this may have influenced respondent's accounts.

❧ Methodology ❧

Sixty-nine young women were consulted for this study. Of these, nine young South Asian women with a history of self-harm were individually interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured and in-depth. Seven focus groups of a semi-structured nature were held. In addition, 51 professionals were consulted.

Participants opted in to the research, and were given the option to take part in either a focus group or individual interview. The project was publicized through professional networks as well as through extensive outreach work.

☘ Key Findings ☘

Based on these interviews and focus groups, we found that a variety of environmental and personal factors impacts on the emotional health of young women between the ages of 11 and 25. These included domestic violence, racism, bullying, family and home life, education, work/employment, sexual abuse and the experience of being a refugee. Family and home life, education, work/employment and racism were the most common factors amongst the sample group - testimony to the difficulties these issues raise for adolescents and young people, regardless of class or ethnic background. There were no key differences in the issues raised across boroughs.

While the issues impacting on the emotional well-being of young women were not significantly different between ethnic groups, the research findings do show that young South Asian women face a number of barriers that make accessing support increasingly difficult. The male privilege within South Asian communities, the significance of being part of a tight community and family honour or izzat were identified as playing powerful roles in young South Asian women's experiences.

These additional pressures impacting on young South Asian women make non-fatal deliberate self-harm one of few accessible options in the management of their distress, allowing them to maintain privacy while providing a method of release.

☘ Key Recommendations ☘

- **Availability and access to culturally specific mental health services.**

In order to provide appropriate support to an otherwise out-of-reach population, respondents felt that culturally specific mental health services are necessary. This could mean ensuring services employ a range of staff that reflects the local community and who speak the languages of the local community. This is especially important in places like A & E which are often the first point of call for young people who are self-harming.

- **Cultural awareness training to be made mandatory for school staff, youth workers and parents.**

This was identified as a key measure to raise awareness around mental well-being and to improve communication between generations – thereby increasing the avenues available to young women for accessing support. The training must cover a range of issues from confidentiality, child protection, self-harm to cultural awareness.

- **Mainstreaming of effective early intervention and prevention services.**

To address completely the high rates of self-harm among young women, it is also crucial to mainstream effective early-intervention services. Respondents suggested that schools and after-school youth groups adopt programmes of a preventive nature that raise awareness, build confidence and self-esteem in young people, allowing them to find positive coping strategies.

- **Transforming notions of patriarchy and assigned gender roles at the community level.**

If young Asian women are to access support, it is necessary that notions of patriarchy and femininity that exist within their communities are challenged. Community-based women's organizations are in prime positions to do this work, alongside faith and other community groups. Continued funding and support by local authorities and other stakeholders is important for the overall impact of this research.