



Invisible Victims: Children and Harmful Practices

This document summarises themes discussed at the Harmful Practices Strategic Partnership (HPSP) conference Invisible Victims: Children and Harmful Practices on 25th February 2025

About the Harmful Practices Strategic Partnership (HPSP):

The Harmful Practices Strategic Partnership (HPSP) is a pan-London, by and for led partnership of statutory, non-statutory and by and for led organisations and other stakeholders. It is coordinated by the Coaction Hub, a partnership project between the Asian Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) and Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse (STADA). The group started as an independent collective of professionals and activists associated with the harmful practices sector who developed a terms of reference that reflected equity and shared leadership.

Introduction:

25 years after the tragic death of Victoria Climbié, we reflect on whether responses to children at risk of harmful practices have changed. Campaigning by specialist agencies and the resulting legislation on female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage and virginity testing has highlighted child safeguarding issues resulting from harmful practices. Despite this, we have seen limited numbers of convictions for these offences. Even with the introduction of mandatory reporting of FGM in 2015 for all regulated professionals we have only seen 3 convictions since it became an offence in 1985. However, safeguarding children is wider than protecting those who have directly experienced physical abuse such as FGM. The introduction of the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) mandated that children in households where there is domestic abuse are victims in their own right. As many forms of harmful practices fit the definition of domestic abuse, this applies to children living in environments where abuse such as 'honour' based abuse, spiritual abuse, dowry related abuse and others are occurring. There is concern that they are being missed in policy and practice decisions. For too long we have heard from practitioners that there is hesitation to act on what is perceived to be 'cultural' or religious practices.

HPSP's conference aimed to ensure that children and young people at risk of harmful practices are not invisibilised in policy and practice. A lack of understanding of these forms of abuse means that limited attention is often given to the specific needs and experiences of children and young people impacted by harmful practices. HPSP are working to challenge stereotypical narratives that position harmful practices as occurring in a small number of communities, when our practice experience indicates that these forms of abuse are much more widespread. Children from some communities may be even more invisibilised due to lack of understanding of the prevalence of abuse in these settings. We remind practitioners and policymakers of their responsibility to create environments where children feel safe to share their experiences, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs are understood. HPSP believe that all children deserve safeguarding.

What Are Harmful Practices?

HPSP define harmful practices as:

Forms of gender-based violence and domestic abuse where escalation of abuse and associated risks happen due to notions of power and control within intersectional contexts of oppression. In these cases, religion, culture, patriarchal codes of behaviour and perceived notions of 'honour' are used by one or more perpetrators as an excuse for coercive control, threats and abuse. While harmful practices are perpetrated disproportionately and primarily against women and girls, men, other genders, and gender non-conforming persons can also be victims.

Often more than one form of abuse occur at the same time, escalating risks and resulting in barriers to disclosure. Forms of harmful practice include but are not limited to 'honour' based abuse, forced and child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), spiritual abuse, virginity testing and hymenoplasty, dowry abuse, reproductive coercion, caste-based abuse, 'corrective' rape and conversion therapy. Harmful practices are under reported and under researched. They are often also ignored or minimised in domestic abuse and violence against women and girls (VAWG) strategies. When they are discussed, they are often sensationalised or used to demonise the communities where they are most prevalent. HPSP are clear that harmful practices are rooted in gender inequality and are a manifestation of patriarchy.

Speakers:

Following the keynote address delivered by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales, Nicole Jacobs, the conference was split into 3 panels, identifying the gaps, responses and good practices in relation to harmful practices and children.

Nicole Jacobs, Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales

Nicole highlighted the importance of collaboration across agencies and the co-ordinated community response (CCR) as an effective model to work together. She identified HPSP as an example of collaborative working and commended the work of Coaction Hub who coordinate HPSP. She spoke about the need for funding for violence against women and girls to be a priority across government departments and for better cross government working.

Nicole highlighted some of the work of her office including responses to police and criminal justice and her upcoming report on babies, children and young people's experience of domestic abuse: Victims in Their Own Right?. The report identifies gaps in provision for children experiencing domestic abuse.

Panel 1: Children and Harmful Practices: Identifying Gaps

Payzee Mahmood Campaigns Manager at IKWRO. *Addressing the Gaps: A Survivor's Perspective*

Asma Ashraf, City St Georges University. *Queer Muslim and Honourable*

Kulsoom Yusuf Pridmore, University of Derby. *Making the Invisible Visible: Critical gaps in Safeguarding Children from Harmful Practices*

The expertise in panel 1 spanned personal experiences, academic knowledge and practice knowledge.

Key Themes and Learning:

- The lack of knowledge of professionals leads to a failure to identify harmful practices in young people, inappropriate interventions, and loss of trust from individuals and communities
- The importance of knowing how to ask about harmful practices, and how to respond appropriately to disclosure in a trauma informed way
- The barriers to disclosure for young people, including shame, stigma, family pressure and lack of trust in professionals
- Agencies are currently working in silos
- Even when education settings provide education on harmful practices, this will be countered by messages being received in the home, leaving young people confused
- There is often an expectation that young people will have to leave their families and communities when they just want to abuse to stop
- The need for better and more widespread routine enquiry

- The need for more, and better funded, specialist by and for agencies who are experts in harmful practices
- The Domestic Abuse Act mandates that children are victims in their own right, but there are gaps in child protection responses
- Policies focus on 'direct' victims, ignoring children who are present in households where harmful practices are taking place
- An understanding of intersectionality is required to address harmful practices. (See Crenshaw's 1989 paper on intersectionality: [here](#))
- There is a need for a better understanding that harmful practices are experienced by a wide range of people
- An understanding of the power imbalances experienced by children is vital to understanding their experiences. Further reading [here](#)
- Children's cultural, social and symbolic capital is impacted by harmful practices. (See Boudieu's theory of cultural capital [here](#))
- Research shows that harmful practices impacts children's education and identity and can lead to high trauma levels
- Our professional roles require us to safeguard children, treat people as individuals and develop our practice – an understanding of harmful practices is crucial to this
- We need to better understand the ways in which children and young people may reach out for support, for example by presenting to health services with non-specific symptoms
- Young people may not have the language to discuss what is happening to them, particularly when this is in translation
- The role of women as perpetrators of harmful practices is often complex, and they may be reinforcers of patriarchal codes and decisions made by male family members
- It is imperative that we understand the intersection of people's experiences, for example that of LGBTQ+ Muslims, who may experience barriers within both the Muslim and LGBTQ+ communities
- Asking about harmful practices is not racist or Islamophobic, and routine enquiry can support with making sure people do not feel singled out

Panel 2: Responses to Children and Harmful Practices

Jaz Simms National FGM Centre. *MOPAC Harmful Practices Knowledge Ambassadors Programme*

Donna Love NHS England. *Professional Curiosity and Harmful Practices*

Jaz shared information on the Harmful Practices Knowledge Ambassadors Programme, a MOPAC funded partnership project led by the National FGM Centre. Partner agencies are: IKWRO, MEWSo, The Sharan Project, Keep the Drums, Lose the Knife, La Fraternite Guineenne, Manor Gardens, and Hawa Trust.

Key components:

- A London wide programme
- A systems change approach
- A multi-pronged approach working with communities, professionals and young people
- A partnership project working with grassroots organisations

Data will be collected to allocated resources across London as well as to refine the work.

Donna discussed a project she is working in within NHS England on professional curiosity and harmful practices. This arose out of learnings from domestic homicide reviews which highlighted the need for improvements within health settings. Their survey with NHS staff found:

- Practitioners felt more confident discussing some harmful practices than others with patients
- Practitioners felt that they had received sufficient training on some harmful practices, but not others
- Practitioners felt that they were most confident discussing FGM, but least confident on discussing virginity testing

In response NHS England National Safeguarding Team are developing resources to support staff with professional curiosity. A virginity testing and hymenoplasty animation for NHS staff has been created.

Dot Pritchard and Rashmi Lokapure, Sundial Centre. *Honour Based Abuse and the Online World*

Key themes:

Research has shown that many children and young people are at risk online, but for children at risk of harmful practices there can be additional barriers. They may feel unable to seek support due to concern that this will trigger abuse, eg a forced marriage.

Triggers to honour based abuse might include any behaviour seen as 'dishonourable' e.g.

- Communicating with a member of the opposite sex, or even just liking their post
- Googling things such as contraceptive information or how to access an abortion
- Posting, or being tagged in a picture which is seen as 'dishonourable' eg wearing make up
- Joking in a group chat e.g. about members of the opposite sex
- The sharing or leaking of online images

Dot and Rashmi highlighted:

- The need for an understanding of these extra layers of risk
- The need for creation of non-judgemental space so young people are more likely to speak about issues
- The need for support in schools and for young people to know how to access support

Panel 3: Children and Harmful Practices: Good Practice

Jamila Dyer, AFRUCA. *Relational Approaches in Safeguarding Children from Harmful Cultural Practices*

Cathal Ryan, London Borough of Hackney. *City and Hackney FGM Protocol*

Naana Otoo – Oyortey, FORWARD. *Sharing Good Practices The Experiences of FORWARD: The Value of Evidence and Community Engagement*

Good Practice Example 1: AFRUCA

AFRUCA work to safeguard children and families across a range of projects, focusing on supporting families, child protection, child exploitation, modern slavery and supporting children returning from foster care. More information can be found on their [website](#).

Jamila highlighted key skills required by practitioners:

- Having cultural humility
- Having cultural curiosity
- Using a relationship-based approach
- Being mindful of cultural relativism

Jamila discussed the need to be aware of power imbalances, understand the belief systems of families, and consider barriers to engagement. This needs to occur in the context of remaining child focused.

Good Practice Example 2: City and Hackney FGM Protocol

City and Hackney re-launched their FGM protocol in 2023 having worked with specialist by and for agencies and statutory partners. This followed the development of the Systemic, Trauma-Informed, Anti Racist (STAR) approach in Hackney's Children and Families Service in 2021 and the development of a DASH risk assessment with anti racist prompts in 2023. Further prompts on disability, LGBTQ+, extrafamilial harm / exploitation and intergenerational abuse have subsequently been added.

The protocol supports practitioners to identify and respond to FGM Concerns. It adds to the statutory guidance on FGM, exploring factors such as systemic racism, protective factors, and challenging assumptions.

Hackney and City have also launched a harmful practices group in March 2024 where cases are reviewed, learning shared, training and campaigns co-ordinated and the FGM protocol amended.

The protocol can be found [here](#).

Good Practice Example 3: FORWARD

‘Communities are the key to change’

Naana discussed three good practice projects carried out by FORWARD focusing on FGM:

- 1) Research with young women and men which led to the [Do No Harm](#) report. This highlighted a lack of understanding amongst professionals of mandatory reporting and the stigmatisation of some communities. This work also highlights the importance of engaging men in this work, a group who are often missing in work around FGM.
- 2) Young Women’s Leadership Programme which illustrates the importance of young women as advocates to change. The group carried out peer research in the UK and Europe.
- 3) Community champions – over 400 community champions have been trained around the country and lead on community outreach and engagement. They received 8 weeks leadership training exploring issues including gender issues, justice issues, rights and empowerment.

Key Messages:

- A holistic approach is needed to end FGM, incorporating systems, community and individuals
- We have a lack of effective data
- Risk is fluid eg the age at which FGM is carried out changes globally
- Victims may not engage with services due to fear
- There is concern that African communities are being singled out and treated differently despite FGM occurring in many communities. There is a risk that certain communities are being stigmatised
- Concern that mandatory reporting is not being used appropriately, with risk of bias
- Importance of engaging community members to lead on this work eg FORWARD’s Community Champions work

Closing Remarks: Natasha Rattu, Karma Nirvana

‘Abuse is abuse and it’s got to stop’

Natasha shared her practice based and personal family experiences of harmful practices. She advised that Karma Nirvana continue to speak to victims and survivors on their helpline who are failed by agencies. Victims and survivors continue to be made to feel that their experiences are too difficult or complex for agencies to provide the right support.

Natasha highlighted the long lasting consequences for children experiencing harmful practices, and concern that the experiences of some children don’t carry the weight of others. She noted the continued hesitation of professionals to intervene for fear of causing offence, and the assumption that harmful practices are tied to culture and therefore shouldn’t be challenged.

Natasha set out a challenge to the participants of the conference:

- Policy makers need to ensure that harmful practices are not sidelined or seen as an ‘add on’ to child safeguarding. They also need to ensure that the engagement of survivors is at the heart of policy
- Practitioners need to ensure that they adhere to the one chance rule and that survivors are believed and validated
- All attendees need to use their influence to change practice and policy – ‘**silence is complicity**’

Conclusion:

The impact of harmful practices on children and young people is an under explored area in research, policy and practice. In this country we currently have a lack of data as to the prevalence of harmful practices, including information around how many and which children are affected. HPSP would like to see more research and data collection in this area to inform policy and practice, as well as an increase in training and awareness raising of the importance of this topic. As part of this work there is a need for a widened understanding of what we mean by harmful practices – to include both abuse which directly affects young people, such as FGM, forced marriage or virginity testing, and the abuse they experience by living in households where harmful practices are taking place. Whilst the Domestic Abuse Act has mandated that children are now victims in their own right if they live in these households, harmful practices have not featured widely in the discussions around what this means in practice. Narratives also persist around who is a victim of harmful practices, including in relation to children, and this needs to expand to include all communities where these forms of abuse take place.

All children impacted by harmful practices deserve to be safeguarded.