

Casey review

Response from Apna Haq

Apna Haq is a specialist women's BME organisation that is committed to supporting vulnerable women, particularly from marginalised backgrounds. Apna Haq works within the Asian community to educate on domestic abuse and raise awareness of the effects of domestic abuse on both women and children within the community and the community itself. Campaigning for, and delivering training to BME women, we create space for Asian women to their develop skills and confidence to enable them to define their experiences, take ownership of their lives and have their voices heard.

Apna Haq welcomes 'The Casey Review: a review into opportunity and integration' and recognise the work that has been done by the government to support communities to integrate. However, Apna Haq would like to raise concerns around some of the points made in the review, particularly around the issue of Muslim women.

A critical way that Apna Haq operates is to create a space where our service users have a voice. We therefore ensured that our response highlighted the actual views and lived experiences of women accessing Apna Haq's services, and our response has been informed by them. In order to collect service user feedback, a focus group was set up on the 13th December 2016 where women were consulted about their views in relation to the Casey Review.

Apna Haq recognise that the Muslim community have a level of responsibility to take around the issue of integration. However, we challenge the notion that this responsibility lies completely with us. We believe that negative generalisations and assumptions have been made about the Muslim in the Casey review which do not fully reflect the diversity of the community, nor show it in a positive light. We challenge the way in which The Casey review has focused on and represented Muslims in the report, and believe that it stigmatises the Muslim community.

Specialist organisations such as Apna Haq have worked for many years to support the community it serves; educating and empowering Muslim women to make informed decisions that will impact their lives positively and support social cohesion. We are therefore disappointed to read in The Casey review that statements to the contrary have been made. Although Apna Haq recognise that there are issues in relation to how some members of the Muslim community integrate, we reject the notion that the onus of responsibility to integrate into British society, is ours alone.

There are many reasons as to why some members of the Muslim community face challenges in integrating. However, there must also be recognition of the barriers that the Muslim community face that makes social cohesion difficult. In this response, we hope to raise some of those issues.

Last year, Apna Haq lost its funding from Rotherham Council, which has had a detrimental effect on the way in which women are able to access its services. Many Muslim women are being referred to a generic domestic abuse agency, where their needs are not being met. Apna Haq have been told by women that they are being

referred to generic services, where they might not be allocated a bilingual worker and there is no understanding of cultural issues that affect them. No meaningful support is being offered to Muslim women, and they are beginning to disengage from services as their needs are not being met. The consequence of this is that these Muslim women are now finding it difficult to engage in their own community and are becoming more isolated, which is a barrier to promoting social cohesion. Organisations such as Apna Haq, offer specialist support to Muslim and marginalised women enabling them to engage in support services and learning skills which can help them to integrate. When women feel able to develop and utilise their skills, they become empowered to make informed choices and are made able to participate in societal work and shape their own community.

Organisations such as Apna Haq not only provide advocacy support, but also psychoeducational work, befriending and training. Some of the training that Apna Haq offers have been ESOL and stress management, which have been held at its offices. Women have used Apna Haq offices as a community base where they are able to meet other women and attend courses. Women are able to access a safe space where they can discuss their experiences and receive holistic and practical support, which helps to support them to address their needs. Subsequently, women become empowered to speak out about the issues that affect them, take ownership of their lives and integrate better in their communities.

We asked women who accessed services at Apna Haq about their experiences and this is what they had to say.

“Mentally, emotionally and financially. I did not know about school, benefits or mortgages. Any problem I had I came to Apna Haq and share. They have been like a mother to me. I went on trips/classes.... My confidence has grown, I made a CV. I did a catering course and became self-employed for a while. Apna Haq helped with leaflets – always provide and encourage to say you can do this. We can share experience with friends”

“They understood our needs. They spoke our language and understood our culture”

“Here we know about our Islamic Rights. My husband has never liked my cooking, before he has hot me over it. Now I refuse to cook for him- I said, “If you don’t like my cooking, then cook for yourself”

“Now I have become strong and independent. I have my own life and I tell this to me husband”

“I am not dependent on my husband.”

It is clear from speaking to women who access services at Apna Haq that they see it as a vital support line that not only provides practical support, but enables women to become empowered and exercise self-determination, support the lives of their children and help them integrate. The Casey review has unfortunately placed much focus on the way in which it incorrectly believes all Muslim women present, namely that they are oppressed and passive, and has made assumptions about them and their so called failure to integrate.

It is important to state that Muslim women are not a homogeneous group, and it is unfair to label all Muslim women as fitting into a certain stereotype. Muslim women come from different backgrounds, cultures, have different interpretations of religion and identities. Although, Apna Haq provides support to marginalised women who are in crisis and have experienced abuse from their husbands and/or families, we recognise that this is not the experience of all Muslim women. We are disappointed to read that the Casey review has made this assumption about Muslim women per se and that we are all somehow abused and controlled by Muslim men in our communities. We challenge this view and are concerned that this stigmatises the Muslim community.

Another issue with The Casey review is the idea that Muslim women in particular are less likely to attempt to learn English and that this is another reason for their failure to integrate.

As stated above, Apna Haq has provided free ESOL classes to women. However, with cuts being made to ESOL courses there is not enough funding or resources being invested into courses that will support BME women to learn English, which in turn will help them develop skills to integrate more into the community. However, having said this, many 1st and 2nd generation immigrant women who came to the UK previously, did not learn to speak English, nor did they have the opportunity to do so, but they were still able to raise and educate their children, many of whom are now successful professionals. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be acknowledged in the review which is disappointing. As a service user stated after:-

“If a mother can be strong, her children will be strong”

Apna Haq are not stating that there is no importance of learning English, but simply that learning English in itself is not a reason for the apparent lack of integration from Muslim women.

Apna Haq recognises that it offers a life line to marginalised Muslim women, enabling them to access support and learn skills that generic services are not able to reach out to. It is essential that for any effective change to take place, it must come from a grassroots level. However, if marginalised women are not able to access support, women cannot engage in their communities and it would be impossible for any meaningful change to take place. A service user stated:-

“I had been taught that apart from breathing, I had no rights to do anything, but now I know my rights, I have educated my daughters and friends now”

Following the Jay report, Apna Haq has worked with Muslim men in Rotherham who have facilitated workshops with young men/boys, to create a safe space for open discussion to take place around issues affecting them and their community and encouraging them to take positive steps and take action to identify and challenge negative and abusive practises against women and girls. It is clear that an organisation such as Apna Haq not only reflects and works for the women of its community, but that it also reaches out to Muslim men, working in partnership with them to educate

and help people integrate, yet The Casey review does not acknowledge that these initiatives take place.

Muslim women in Rotherham have participated on local radio shows to raise awareness of issues affecting their community and campaigning for local services to be funded. With regards to the Jay report, a service user said the following:-

“When the news came out about child abuse, we all found out about it, but no one wanted to acknowledge that it had happened. Our Imams, husbands, grandfathers can be abusers. How can something like this that is contrary to Islam be allowed to happen? Once I learnt about the abuse, I educated my girls to interact differently with men.

I took part in a play about CSE. I felt that I needed to speak out against it. I also did a radio interview in Urdu, which went across South Yorkshire and went on demonstrations about the closure of Apna Haq. My daughters went on the demonstrations too”

Many Muslim women, particularly those that access specialist BME services, are supported on an individual, family and community level and that the same Muslim women reinvest in the communities in which they live. This clearly illustrates that Muslim women participate in British society and integrate where they are able to.

For integration to take place, the onus cannot lie with the Muslim community and its women alone, society must also take responsibility. The other issue lies in the fact that there is no clear definition of what integration is and looks like. Based on the assumptions that have been made in The Casey Report, it suggests that the many achievements that Muslim women have made, are not recognised as meaningful and that they are somehow incompatible with British values.

Further barriers that Muslim women face when integrating, are due to the way in which new commissioning processes operate, many smaller specialist organisations such as Apna Haq are unable to compete with larger generic organisations that are able to undercut us. Due to austerity, further cuts have been made by the government to statutory and voluntary services such as Apna Haq. This further compounds the issues facing marginalised women who again are unable to access support services that can meet their needs, and unable to engage in services that could support them to integrate. How are Muslim women meant to integrate when no support is offered to them?

UN Special Rapporteur Professor Rashida Manjoo described how BME services were a “lifeline”, but that urgent support and investment was needed for their sustainability.

¹ Furthermore, Lloyds Bank Foundation recommended that the Government urgently support and prioritise the work of smaller charities stating that “these services service

¹ Manjoo (2015) Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences United Nations, Human Rights Council.

those facing multiple disadvantages who are in most need and present the greatest challenge to public service”²

Specialist BME organisations such as Apna Haq are led by and for the women they support. Women who access support at Apna Haq are able to access expert support that is community informed, and many women service users often participate and re invest in the service after leaving. Apna haq, has two ex-services users who are now members of its management board and some women`s adult children have worked as volunteers at Apna Haq, again reinvesting into their community.

Another way in which Muslim women reinvest in their community is around caring responsibilities. It is part of the Muslim Communities belief system to take care of those in need, and it is not uncommon for Muslims to take the responsibility for taking care of their family members and the vulnerable in their communities. This work is often unpaid and again highlights the way in which Muslims take the notion of social cohesion seriously and interweave this into their everyday lives. Furthermore, this community work means that less people are accessing statutory support services, placing less pressure on them and is cost effective; yet this is not acknowledged.

The Casey Review also does not take into account the multiple barriers that Muslim women face such as racism and Islamophobia. Services users at Apna Haq stated that they had faced increase racism over the last few years, and had reported this to the police. However, little action had been taken to protect them and their community.

Rotherham has seen an increased presence from right wing groups such as the EDL and Britain First. Women stated that where they would go for walks at night or go shopping into the town centre, they had been told by authorities that to avoid any harm coming to them, they should not leave their homes and travel. Women stated that they felt that this was inappropriate of the authorities to ask this of them, as it meant that their civil liberties were being taken away from them. The Casey review makes clear that one of the reasons Muslims do not integrate into British society was because the men in the community controlled women`s movements, yet Muslim women at Apna Haq felt frustrated at being told by the police that they should not leave their homes and travel.

Women also stated that they had seen an increase in racist incidents in the community, and were fearful of being in public in case they were attacked.

“Things are difficult. Every night we used to go out for walks, but since the rise of harassment we don`t go for evening walks..... I feel scared for my children”

“For those women who go every week to town, catch buses and buy fruit from the market – lots of women were harassed, had their scarves pulled off, called Pakis and I was with S, a man kept saying, “go back home, go back home””

Furthermore, women felt that the police were not protected them in their own community.

² Lloyds Bank Foundation (July 2015). Expert yet undervalued and on the front line: The views and voices of small and medium sized charities p26.

“We pay council tax- police don’t protect us – why are we paying for them to protect the EDL. We were told to not go out. We are always told to go home”

We are disappointed to read that The Casey review has given little attention in raising and challenging the issues around deep rooted inequalities and oppression that Muslim Women face, that are barriers to community cohesion and that instead it has shifted this blame and responsibility onto Muslim women.

Another issue for BME and Muslim women, is the importance placed on having a visible and cultural identity, a civil right and something that should be supported. However, The Casey Review seems to be eluding that yet again, this is a sign that somehow Muslim women in particular are not attempting to assimilate into British society. It is important that all people to have the right to self-determination, yet when Muslim women do this in a way that is meaningful to them, they are scrutinised on many levels and made to feel that their lifestyle is not compatible with British values, whatever, they may be. Ironically, in order to being seen to integrate more, some women at Apna Haq stated that men in the Muslim community were asking women not to wear headscarves whilst out. However, this was also due to the fear of facing hostility and reprisals from racists.

Apna Haq service users stated that hostility towards them as escalated and that it is becoming increasingly more difficult to live as part of a community due to the racism and islamophobia they face from white people and the authorities. It was not uncommon to hear women state how the way that they were being treated in Rotherham had changed, and that simple acts such as going to a bank/shop and asking for help was challenging. The only explanation that they could find for this was animosity against them, based on their race and religion.

“Every time the EDL come, I notice a change in white people’s attitudes eg when you go into a bank or a shop. The same person who before could understand my English, suddenly says I don’t know what you are saying”

The support Group Tell MAMA has over the last two years, has supported an increase number of Muslim people reporting hate crime, based on Islamophobia, to the police³. This hostility has not appeared out of a vacuum in places like Rotherham. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that racism and islamophobia has always existed in Rotherham, but with recent changes in political climate eg war on terror, Brexit and the rise of right wing politics etc this hostility has come to the surface and has given legitimacy to people right wings views. Unfortunately, for some people, this has gone so far as to legitimise them carrying out acts of violence. Tell Mama state that “The prevalence and severity of online and offline anti-Muslim hate crimes are influenced by`trigger` events of local, national and international significance” and that “Muslim women, are more likely to be attacked in comparison to Muslim men, both in the virtual and the physical world”.⁴

The Casey review fails to acknowledge the impact increased hate crimes against Muslims has. Despite organisations such as Apna Haq working tirelessly to support

³ <http://tellmamauk.org/>

⁴ <http://tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/We%20Fear%20For%20Our%20Lives.pdf> p4.

Muslim women and helping them to integrate, the racist and Islamophobic agenda that are prevalent in mainstream narratives, is a cause of social tensions. This is leading to polarisation between communities, victimisation of Muslims who are becoming increasingly isolated, which in turn is leading to a lack of social cohesion.

In conclusion, Apna Haq challenges some of the statements made about the Muslim community in the Casey Review, particularly with regards to the assumptions made about Muslim women. Apna Haq recognises that the Muslim community has much work to do around the issues of integration, and we are committed to continue working to do so. However, we reject the notion for the reasons stated above, that the burden of responsibility lies with the Muslim community, and that we have failed to integrate, especially when we have been given very little opportunity to do so. It is unclear why the Casey Review has focused so much on the Muslim community and its women, when the UK has such a diverse range of people and communities living in it, many of whom face similar challenges to integration. It is evident that the government on a national and local level, must also take responsibility for its actions, which have placed barriers for social cohesion to materialise. We call for the Government and The Casey Review to re-evaluate its current stance on integration and request that the views of Apna Haq are taken into consideration.