

THE  TIMES

Imams say abuse 'disgraces Islam' as child agencies deny a race link



Child protection agencies continue to deny the relevance of ethnicity to a pattern of grooming exposed by The Times. Paul Rogers for The Times

Andrew Norfolk

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British Muslims are rounding on men who are “disgracing Islam” by their participation in the grooming and sexual abuse of girls in parts of the North and the Midlands.

The move by leading imams to confront what many consider a crisis comes as police and child protection agencies continue to deny the relevance of ethnicity to a pattern of grooming exposed by *The Times*.

Lone white offenders are responsible for most child sexual abuse in the UK, but men from ethnic minorities are significantly over-represented in cases where girls, typically aged 12-16, are targeted by criminal networks.

White British, Kurdish, Afghan, Bangladeshi and African Caribbean groups have all been linked to such crimes, but in 18 child sexual exploitation trials since 1997 involving two or

more defendants, most of the convicted men were of Pakistani heritage.

Some young teenagers, lured by alcohol, drugs, car rides and gifts, were taken to parties or hotels to be passed around between gang members, friends, relatives or colleagues.

One religious leader has now warned of a battle to reclaim a generation of young Pakistanis who have abandoned Islamic morality for the “nasty, wicked” temptations of a drug-dealing “lifestyle . . . which treats women as nothing other than sex objects”.

Alyas Karmani, an imam, academic and former head of race equality for the Welsh Assembly, told an audience of fellow British Pakistanis in West Yorkshire that they were “in denial of the fact that widespread sexual indecency is going on in our community”.

Mr Karmani, who runs a project for Muslim ex-offenders, said: “We have our kids who are wannabe gangstas . . . and the people see them and they think this is Islam, that Islam is selling drugs and pimping women and grooming girls and going out with 12 or 13-year-old girls

“How have we adopted such a despicable and such a reprehensible . . . culture like this? We need to stand up and say. ‘Not in Islam. This is not what Islam teaches.’”

In Rochdale, Greater Manchester, another imam, Irfan Chishti, told worshippers that he had wanted “to dig a hole and die” after reading a newspaper account of three British Pakistanis aged in their 30s who were jailed for the rape of two 16-year-old girls.

“What has happened to us as a community when we have Muslims who kidnap young, innocent lives and who rape them and pillage them, crimes that we can’t even define in the limits of the Koran?” he said.

Ajmal Masroor, a London imam who is also a relationship counsellor, suggested that many British Pakistani men had “an unhealthy attitude towards sex and sexuality”. “People are forced . . . or emotionally blackmailed into preserving their family honour by marrying their cousins,” he said. “And many young people do exactly that. They get married to their cousins while they retain their girlfriends.

“Some . . . are thinking to themselves, ‘I don’t want to do rubbish in my own front yard, so I’m going to go and find white girls.’ That attitude, that they’re perhaps cheap, perhaps valueless, is very wrong. We are all human beings, not cheap meat.”

In January, the Government ordered the [Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre \(CEOP\)](#), to lead a six-month national assessment of street grooming in response to *The Times*’s findings. Its remit was to identify “any patterns of offending”.

The report, published in June, did not draw conclusions about ethnicity, saying that the data on offenders was “too inconsistent”. Yet within CEOP’s own figures was the statistic that in a country that is 88 per cent white and 6 per cent Asian, of 753 identified street groomers whose ethnicity was recorded, 49 per cent were white and 46 per cent Asian.

Of 78 identified single-ethnicity “perpetrator networks” known to have been operating between 2008 and 2011, 53 per cent were Asian and 46 per cent white.

Without making any link to ethnicity, CEOP noted that many offender groups “were related to each other in some way, either as friends, family members or work colleagues”.

It also recorded that “in cases where offenders worked together, the place of work was either a takeaway restaurant or a taxi firm”.

The perceived inadequacy of its data led CEOP to “pass the baton” to the [Office of the Children’s Commissioner](#), which this month announced its own two-year inquiry into child sexual exploitation by street gangs.

Against that backdrop, Muslim youth workers in Keighley, West Yorkshire, have launched their own initiative by arranging a series of sex grooming “workshops” designed to challenge attitudes among Pakistanis aged from their late teens to their late 20s.

Shakeel Aziz, 28, who will be leading the workshops, said that it was impossible to grow up in the town without becoming aware that as many as one in five young Pakistanis was involved, to a greater or lesser extent, with the inter-linked crimes of drug dealing and child sexual exploitation, which were associated with gang membership.

“It’s only seen as a hidden problem if you’re not out there, interacting with them,” he said. “It’s crazy how open all this has become out there on the streets.”

Mr Aziz said that he was trying to reach “young lads who don’t come to the mosque and whose families have no control over them”.

“The young lads involved in sex grooming have dehumanised these girls. We’re going to be talking to them about their perception of women. It’s important to understand that many of these lads have themselves been groomed and led into such crimes by older men.”

Mr Aziz said that he had been criticised by some Pakistanis for “attacking the community” but felt that it was important to “stand up firmly for justice” for the benefit of “the whole of Keighley”.

“If young British Pakistanis aren’t going to deal with this issue in our communities, no one will,” he said.

Networks of child sex groomers are the subject of two documentaries, both presented by British Pakistanis, to be broadcast within the next month.

· Channel 4’s *Dispatches: Britain’s Sex Gangs* is at 10.30pm on Monday and *Exposed: Groomed for Sex* will be shown on BBC Three in early December.

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