Podcast: OAC, Elmore in conversation with Breaking the Silence – power & gender dynamics

Podcast duration: 31 Minutes

Hosts: Monica Majumdar & Kate Clayton-Hathway

Guest: Imran Manzoor (Breaking the Silence)

Kate: Hey everyone, I'm Kate.

Monica: I'm Monica and this is the Empower & Enable podcast by Elmore and Oxford Against Cutting.

Oxford Against Cutting, also known as OAC is a rights-based charity working to end harmful practices suffered by girls and women. These include female genital mutilation (FGM), 'honour'-based abuse (HBA), early and forced marriage (EFM) and female cosmetic genital surgery.

Tom: Hi, Tom here - CEO of Elmore. Elmore is a complex needs, mental health, and domestic abuse charity in Oxfordshire, working with vulnerable people experiencing several overlapping challenges at the same time. Elmore is delivering the victim and perpetrator programmes as part of Oxfordshire's new Family Solutions Plus service, funded by Oxfordshire County Council. This podcast has been made possible by funding by the Thames Valley Police Crime Commissioner.

Kate: In today's episode, we are going to be talking about Gender-power dynamics and Socialisation within diverse communities. We are in conversation with Imran Manzoor of Breaking the Silence.

Monica: Before we kick off, please note that this episode covers topics of a sensitive nature including childhood abuse, trauma, domestic abuse and faith abuse. This podcast is age-appropriate for 16+

Monica: Imran, thank you so much for joining us today and giving up your time. I'm going to hand the mic over to you, so if you could just tell us a little bit about yourself, what you do and your role; that would be fab.

Imran: Well, thank you very much for having me. As you said, my name's Imran. I'm from the north of England, in case you haven't guessed from the accent. I run a service, have done for several years. Engaging South Asian male survivors of childhood abuse. It commenced in 2012, as a service specifically for childhood sexual abuse, because of various young men who had been referred to my service.

I worked as a therapist and psychologist, and there was an increase in young men due to various political events taking place at that time, sort of early 2000s. Across the board, these are young men in the criminal justice system. For the most part, or known to the criminal justice system. There was incidents of childhood abuse, where these individuals had just in the odd instance, they had reported it maybe to the school or people in the prison system. The general attitude was let's refer this to community leaders, let's not deal with it.

Of course it was in the interest of these unelected community leaders to bury the issue and to make sure nothing was done. Actually it ended up with young men disappearing, sent to Pakistan or India or Bangladesh, some were sent to military schools; with the idea being that, sort of Western liberal excess had overcome them. They needed some stern education, that their parents had endured and that would straighten them out.

In other instances where it was suspected that the young man was gay. The idea was, well we can't get away with the level of violence needed here, so let's take them to Pakistan and punish them into heterosexuality. Often that included forced marriage.

We were set up with the intention of only working with a handful of men. I think the target was 15 men per year. Over three years, we actually ended up working with just over 100 men and now nearly ten years later we have worked with, well, just in the last year alone since lockdown, we've had over 1000 callers. The service has expanded. We've gone from working with just childhood sexual abuse, to just making that slightly more generic childhood abuse, physical, emotional trauma.

We do various things, including training on spiritual abuse, on race, the intersection with masculinity, and a host of other things that we're now delivering. The service has really expanded. We have a helpline, in addition to a three stage therapy programme for those who want to take that step. Most of that now takes place online because of Covid.

Monica: Thank you Imran and it does sound like a fantastic service and also one that's been needed for many many years. One that I hope expands actually, continues to grow. What you're doing is an outstanding contribution to the community. I really just wanted to touch on.

Imran: Thank you.

Monica: You're very welcome. The differences between the way girls and boys are treated growing up.

That maybe through your work that you've picked up different ways of being or ways of behaving or even for your own cultural background. If you could just refer to… I know you can't speak on behalf of the girl community or women, but I'm sure you've picked up differences growing up as well.

Imran: Yeah, I mean for observation, I'm from large Asian family from north of England, but also sort of observation of clients and we do a lot of psycho-educational stuff; so we do a lot of stuff on patriarchy, masculinity, the role of men in modern society.

It's really interesting because one of the things that I the threshold is much higher for what boys can get away with growing up, whilst it is his job to one day uphold the honour of the family. There's a patriarchal dividend, I think that's what Maz called it *(Reference to OAC's Perspective's Podcast, Episode 3 – Reclaiming the word shame – HBA & Men's voices)*

He gets all the benefits of authority, and respect, and institutional power within the limited setting of his own community and culture; but he's got a lot more freedom to violate. There's far more tolerance for him misbehaving sexually. So, even if he gets married, it's kind of accepted if he's going to have a partner on the side, it's tolerated and in some instances it's almost defended.

I put some of these questions too some of the young women that we worked with. I wanted to get a better understanding from young women's perspective and I was kind of blown away with some of the answers. A couple that really do stick out was there's a heightened emotion around girls' honour, young women's honour, because women are the so called repositories of honour.

That's not something they can be entrusted with themselves. It's actually a man's territory, and these young men, who were born and bred in Britain, really do buy into this idea that he needs to protect his little sister. They're constantly told that and also not just protect; part of that is control his sisters.

I think, in so doing, there's multiple issues around that whole sense of protectiveness and what that means. Interestingly, from the young women that I spoke to, they said girls are not allowed to go out because boys are on the street. The boys are all taken out. They are allowed their days out with their friends. They are allowed to go to University/ College.

Some young women are not, depending on their particular social class and cultural background, or when there's a family event, the boys are all allowed to go out and young women aren't even allowed. This isn't a gross generalisation, I hope. They don't have the right to do that, and they're not allowed to foster interests in things the way that young men are allowed to foster interests in things.

The young women that I spoke to said rather than teaching the boys etiquette and respect for women, is to tell young women, they can't go out. They can't go out and enjoy themselves. Their enjoyment must take place within the strict confines of the family home. Some of it came as a shock. I guess, I maybe came from a slightly different family where my sisters were enforced to go to university. There was very limited choice in that, you know, you had to achieve academically.

There is another sentiment, which is that boys will be boys and therefore young men are afforded this licence to be disrespectful to women. In some instances, unfortunately, the families sort of tell these young women well, it's just what girls go through. Accept it for the family honour's sake.

Another thing that was really interesting, and I contrasted with the young men that we worked with, was the importance of marriage. The young women were told from a very young age, that the idea of marriage and sanctity, and preservation of their honour was such an important thing that they were pushed into at an early age, and it certainly isn't the case for the boys; there was no thought about their marriage at this point. It was an interesting contrast, in terms of how we, as a community socialise young people into their gender roles.

Kate: Could I ask a question at this point, just to expand on that? I was really interested in this idea of patriarchal dividend and that the boys have all these freedoms when they're younger. I wonder if at some point that it could be seen either by them or by their families and turn almost on its head and become a patriarchal penalty as such. At what points, if ever this need for them to control or take care of the women actually becomes a burden for them and they are forced into this particular type of masculinity?

Imran: Well, it's a very important question because I think times are changing and there's a significant break for a lot of young men between cultural expectations and their own kind of desires for what they want in their life.

More and more young men will say, well, it's my sister's choice to do what she wants to do. I'm not going object, I'm not going to interfere, it's her life. I think we see that, so I'd say that men and boys are also harmed by patriarchy. Upholding the family honour often can involve an in some cultures, forced marriage or arrange marriage; that you have very limited choice over and also involves responsibility for extended family.

One thing that we learned in Covid, it is that you know generally South Asian people live in multigenerational housing, which was one of the reasons why covered spread so rapidly among South Asian communities. Then that comes with an additional responsibility for multiple people that you have to care for. It becomes a penalty, also in that these two conflicting worlds. There's a conflict of the world at home, and the conflict of trying to adapt to a society where you're not really acceptable.

You don't have all the privileges of patriarchy, so whilst you have the dividend here in this one particular context, which is frankly quite a limited context, once you step outside your door, you lose that very quickly. I think that becomes a burden as well, because, well, I'm supposed to be a man. I'm supposed to have all of these privileges and yet every time I have an interface with police or social services or education or employment I'm reminded that I'm not a man.

Monica: I think it's so interesting because manhood and that sense of control, almost sometimes disappears.

It's very obvious that if the girl was being the ideal daughter, daughter in law, you know she does this around the house, she's this, this, this – you amplify that power to her, or that her standing in the community. She now wants to go to University, well, why does she need to go to university? But, again, that woman is made powerful if one of the sons is out of line. So, oh yeah, yeah we will get her married to someone back home.

She can really reign him in, she can really keep him under control. We'll give her whatever she wants. She can have money, she can have bags, whatever; so you pick and choose and it comes down to that whole thing about honour again, doesn't it?

Where you've mentioned that whole protection from shame. We'll amplify the woman's voice, the girl's voice when it comes to protecting. But it's that role isn't it, you are born, and then you seen to be a daughter, daughter in law, mother, mother in law, grandma.

The way you shift between those roles aren't that different because you are perceived to just protect and protect yourself. You know you could speak out of line because your husband's beating you up but no, no, no - you need to protect his *izzat,* like his honour.

Imran: Yeah, and I think that that works both ways, doesn't it? In some instances, men are almost encouraged to behave that way as a means of upholding the family's honour.

Monica: Yeah, yeah.

Imran: As a way of denigrating someone who's from, say, a lower caste or from family, who isn't quite as powerful in the clan. It's a way of exerting power, and unfortunately, in some of those instances, women are involved in upholding that patriarchal structure in the extended family structure.

Something we've witnessed where in marriage situations, where it's fallen upon - almost horrific to say it this way - but it's almost fallen upon some of the women in the family to administer control over a so called daughter in law who isn't subserving enough.

We run a centre for women. Part of our project falls under that umbrella. It's a by-product of the work that we do. That's far too common, especially where the women are transnational spouses and they have very limited familial power here. They come from lesser families abroad and they're stripped of their dignity, stripped of their passports, stripped of all sense of control, sometimes kept without the English language, because there's the potential that that gives them access to an escape route.

Monica: I really I just want to ask where you and your personal opinion think that so it derives from? I come from a Muslim background and it's very much what I interpret the Quran and what's been taught to me, is that actually; it's very equal for men and women.

In some cases, women are given more rights in Islam, and I've even seen quite a few post recently during Ramzan (Ramadan) about girls now being a bit more vocal when it comes to, like the time of the month and how they had to hide it because you 'wouldn't want the men to know that you're on your period'. Now lots of girls on Tik Tok, not saying everyone but a lot of

them, have been like no actually in Islam. Islam recognises that this is a period where I don't have to fast, Allah recognises this. It's not to diminish the power of women. Actually, this is a medical condition. Long story short, the way I see Islam is very liberating for both men and women.

So, where do you think this comes from? This whole idea of we have to keep the women under control. There is a huge power dynamic difference, isn't there? I'm sure that plays in both ways. Male may say different to me, but in your opinion, where do you think it comes from I guess.

Imran: Well, I guess a part of the problem with that is that there's no uniformity in religion. Religion is interpreted by based on culture. It's what I think in Islam is called an *Urf* or it's to be interpreted by the culture, and I think if you look at these Sharia courts, it's one of the issues that comes up there. How wide array of opinions there are amongst Sharia courts, they are never uniform, because they are often influenced by the ethnic origin of their members; therefore culture influences ruling.

I personally find that culture is often to blame. A culture that upholds because once upon a time, it had to, because you were dependent on the men to be able to go out and work, to have job roles that women just were denied in South Asia. In particular during British rule.

I think we were coming out of that now, we have a female led mosque in Bradford. There's Muslim feminist writers and increasingly popular among young women, increasingly unpopular amongst young men. I think they're calling out a lot of things, so that women can just talk about things. Owning sexuality, I think that idea that women are the repositories of honour. Women are trying to reclaim the power from that. What it means and calling men out for their own hypocrisy.

I don't think it's changing fast enough, but it is changing, but for me I think much of it lies in culture and I don't think it's necessarily just a South Asian thing. I think it's a worldwide phenomenon. I think it's the inequality between the sexes is certainly not limited to one particular culture, and I think it's dangerous to racialize it like that.

Monica: Definitely in agreement. I don't think it's religion, it's the way it's interpretated. It's also the way culture perceives the situation at the time. The reason I mentioned situation, is because a lot of it is people do pick and choose when they want to reference religion when they don't want to reference religion, when they want to reference politics and it all intertwines. It's funny, because Kate and I had a conversation. I think it was a couple of weeks ago about how these power dynamics and gender dynamics exist in almost everyone, like whether it's subliminal or very apparent. Actually, you could be from a mixed race family, you could be from South Asian family. You could be whatever race, you name it. Actually there will be one member of the family that feels that way because of their gender, because of their sex. Kate, I don't know if you wanted to add anything from your perspective.

Kate: I mean what I always think when we have these discussions and have these, we start to talk about culture, this recognition that I think is as useful for us to recognise that cultures, where masculine behaviour is to have some kind of ownership, or some kind of oversights and right to dictate what happens to women's bodies. Those cultures, they're universal. Talk of abortion, and what women have the right to do with their bodies. So, we can look at somewhere like United States where is very much taken as a religious discussion. That abortion is a sin and being banned, and but also through to countries like Poland, and that are pretty different from the US, but nevertheless, the thread that joins them is this idea that women's bodies belong to society, belong to men, and they have the right to dictate what they can do with it.

Imran: They can be legislative. Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Kate: I think that thread runs through that patriarchal ownership of women's bodies. You can find that, or that kind of a version of that in most cultures and in most societies, unfortunately.

Imran: One more thing, I want to add and that is about a colonial hangover, and I think you know it's really important to note that we are a post-colonial society, where we are former colonial subjects, because really the 1948 Nationality Act, that eventually ended up here in the so called Mother Country. There's a historical narrative which goes back to the Indian Mutiny period of rebellion against British rule, and there was more conservative elements in British India. Certainly amongst Muslim factions who determined that actually British education and the British language needs to be banned, because it is leading to, it's a deliberate attempt to undermine India or so called India potential possibility for forming a nation state.

We need to very much stand firmly against British rule and British colonial thinking, so it was quite a poor decision. It was a form of anti-colonial thinking and I think that narrative fed into a very conservative form of Islam and it very much that form of Islam that informed some of the culture that now exists around women and women integrating.

Ultimately women integrating and going to university and things like that; there's a fear.

There's a fear of what that integration means, and much of that stems from a time when you certainly couldn't trust British colonial officers or the image of a British officer or a colonial subject from Britain was quite a scary and terrifying image, and it was a threat. Your daughters were potentially going to be the victims of extreme sexual violence, and I think that sense fed into that narrative, that now informs some of the ideas behind this extreme cultural conservatism.

Kate: That's a really interesting idea, and I completely, completely agree with this description you show of a kind of hangover, colonial times, and particularly, I think that the type of influence that you're talking about on extremes of religion. Also, this need to protect from individuals that were portrayed, actually as a kind of a saving glorified force coming in, but actually were quite the opposite. I think the other thing that colonial history has given us also, is this idea of categorising people and having sort of, drawing a line around a certain group of people and saying you belong in this part of the world. You have this label, and then you belong in this part of the world, and kind of particularly the British are very guilty of that categorising people.

Really comes down to racism to labelling people and categorising them because they were seen as inferior and seemed to be studied, as subjects to be studied rather than human beings with very complex cultures. That we couldn't possibly have understood just by going in and ruling for like for 50 years or 100 years. So, I completely agree with you on that.

Imran: Oh, absolutely. I think the division of Indian to Dravidian, an area in the Aryans are given more access to capital. They are kind of child-like but Aryan. Therefore, they need the firm yet benign hand above the upper class white British male to kind of control them, so you know British rule but we'll give them certain administrative role.

Which is why the Gurkhas and the Punjabs were accepted into British into the military establishment, they were given military roles, whereas the Bangladeshis were considered far too intellectual and there were darker skins, so they are Dravidians, so there consigned to a lower part of this sort of racialized hierarchy in India.

All of those things inform how we perceive people, I think Monica can certainly speak on this more, but the colonial hangover there is how we perceive ourselves as well. In terms of our

skin colour and that obviously informs culture, it informs domestic violence, informs so many other things.

Kate: Absolutely. So, our next question, what ways do you think of best for opening up a conversation about some of the issues we've discussed, Imran?

Imran, Well, I mean this is the $1,000,000 question. I think some of these conversations are taking place in social media and various other formats. It's just who's partaking in those conversations? I did a couple of events online with a social media forum. The topic was masculinity, race of interfaces, intersections.

I asked this question to the young women who I was engaging in a session the other day. One of the young women said, I'd rather die than sit down with him and talk about gender inequality. Really does tell you quite a lot, really in terms of where we are.

Some people say conversations need to happen at school life. I think a lot has been politicised in the schooling system, of late. That has alienated communities that really we need to be engaging better with. I think on an individual level it's important for people to kind of have the courage to speak and meant to be invited to speak. Actually, you know, hold people's opinions.

Kate: Obviously you can't read somebody's mind, but what barriers were felt to be there to be discussing this? Was it felt to be a shameful thing to discuss? Was it felt that boys and men wouldn't listen? Wouldn't take one seriously? I'm curious as to what the reasons would be.

Imran: I think that's part of it. Yeah that they wouldn't be taken seriously, but I think there's a much more fundamental thing about being able to speak, have conversations. I know from my work the older generation, find these conversations incredibly difficult. Not just these conversations, conversations generally. This is a generation who have been told masculine ideals of, hide your private experiences remain stoic, avoid conflict, expressed pride. So, having a conversation with someone who feels that that's what masculinity is. Telling them they have to be, is incredibly difficult.

We sometimes have to go round about the houses. May start with a political issue and then you start to dissect it and start discussing. For example, at the moment Palestine and Israel. It's something that's being discussed all the time by everybody I know, but it is an interesting one to pull out. Issues around identity, sexuality, gender. There was a young woman shot in the back today in the neighbourhood.

It's horrific full stop, but it's particularly horrific to people because, women are those repositories of honour and therefore how dare they do this to 'our' women. It's really interesting to dissect that, because, well, what does that mean our women, how it's based on what faith, how it's based on identity, how it's based on culture. You know it's not necessarily a bad conversation, it's just interesting to dissect that.

I think it's a route in to broader conversations, but it is very difficult because the older generation is a generation who came solely with the intention that they were going to work, and that's all they did. Especially working class South Asian people were never given that ability. If you are middle class and you from an educated family, which is very rare in Britain, if it was true of your family that they weren't in Bradford. They might be in New York or somewhere in the United States. Where the old peasants from feudalism, they're the people who were given passports and told to go to Britain. Discussing your emotions and your feelings or talking about complex ideas, well, that's not in your remit.

Kate: This idea of being stoic. I think it is very much a generational thing. I completely agree in other cultures as well. Like you said, get your head down, just get on and get on, work hard, build something solid and don't complain, I think.

Imran: That's right, yeah, the maxim is, you know, strengthen is silence. Where is the new generation is like - no, I'm going to complain. My dad used to say, you know, turn the other cheek, whereas we grew up at a time where we were so sick of turning the other cheek. Racism was a constant challenge and we got tired of it; our generation fell back. A consequence of that, is that younger people now are entertaining new ideas because they can, because we fought our way out of the restricted professions, the restricted geographical locations that we could live in, the experiences we could have. I think as long as people are expanding those experiences.

So that's about social mobility. Then people are far more perceptive to new ideas. That's not to say that people from working class backgrounds don't have the capacity for this, they do. They are denied it because no one ever gives them that chance.

Kate: You do sound hopeful about the future. You do sound hopeful about the changes happening.

Imran: Most definitely. I'm inspired every time, I say it with young men and women. Whether it's complex philosophy discussing Hegel or trying to understand what their position is in society. Everything from gender norms to politics, what side of the bench they sit on.

Those conversations are happening, but again, you know, I think social mobility, unfortunately plays a huge role in that. Class unfortunately does restrict people.

Kate: Class, we could have a whole podcast on class as well, couldn't we? That really leads to the final question. What sort of thing can you suggest in terms of seeking help or support?

Imran: Now that's a question. If you want to restrict that to my field which is around mental health and I would say people still maintain mental health is informed by culture. Which in turn is often informed by religion, so they have culturally specific understandings of their mental health issues. It's not something they feel that mainstream services will ever understand. They fear that they will be ridiculed.

Often, they will turn to non- scientific methods, should we say, to find a cure to help them? First point of call would sometimes be somebody in the service of the mosque, so religious authority. What we've found in the research, is that generally South Asian people come to the attention of mental health services 13 years later than their white counterparts. 13 years, that's a long, that's a lot of damage that can be done. Often they will come in a far more severe state.

We need services, frontline services to improve, improve their engagement with people, show people that actually South Asian communities, black communities that services are for them as the experience of racism and inequality is always re-traumatising; and it's constantly there. It's constantly on your mind. A lot of people are conscious of it all the time and I think whilst that is true, very difficult for people to trust the people who are offering help to believe that actually “this is for me”. To say that this service has legitimacy.

I think our communities, our charities need to be putting their hands in their pockets creating more services. We have mental health professionals, doctors, professionals who could really do with thinking about how we set up services within our communities. To better serve the needs of communities.

We have one of the highest rates of sexually transmitted infections in the North, amongst South Asian communities. Very high rates of terminations and much of this has to take place in secret because, well, you can't tell your family.

We need services that they contend in the community that are safe, confidential where they can get the right help, rather than getting help that isn't going to be good for their physical health. Also, not good for their emotional health, and part of that is it educating themselves on practises that they have, that actually shut the doors to a lot of people.

Kate: I mean, that's partly a rallying cry for mainstream services to improve what they do and to learn more about specialised services. A little bit too about trying to breakdown some of the taboos of approaching mental health services; recognising that they're needed.

Imran: Most definitely recognising as well that there is a perception that mental health is better dealt with, because it's mental health. It's therefore spiritual. It isn't true of everybody, but there's a significant portion who think - well, if it's a mental health issue, it can be cured through a spiritual means.

Basically, secular scientific methodology is ineffectual and it won't work because also with scientific method you have to confront pain. You have to confront trauma. You have to confront uncomfortable memories, sometimes in some methods and that can be quite difficult.

Whereas the belief is the Spiritualist will just remove it from my head and cleanse me of it. We as a community need to work towards offering better services.

I work with men who have been the victims of trauma from childhood and I would say to them, one that the shame doesn't belong to you. The shame belongs to the perpetrator, the person who did this to you. So reach out, get help. There's some fantastic organisations up and down the country. Obviously I would plug our service which is Breaking the Silence www.breaking-the-silence.org.uk for men who are looking for support. There's Survivors Manchester. There's Safe Line.

There's a number of organisations who do some incredibly powerful work. I'd recommend you speak to them and get the help that you need.

Monica: It's very present and actually we're kicking off that conversation. We are not saying what exists is completely wrong, but actually we just need to question those practices are causing harm on identity, on individuals, on their self-esteem, on their well-being. Imran, I just really want to say thank you, for just bundling that all up and just making sense of it, I think that's quite difficult as well. So yeah, thank you, it's been fantastic.

Tom: As our podcast comes to an end we hope that we've helped increase understanding of some identities and behaviours which do not serve us well. For professionals working with minority communities, it's also useful for you to understand the strongly internalised nature of certain beliefs and practices and how this can affect people's choices and actions.

Monica: Thanks for listening! All the resources and service provision discussed in this podcast will be listed in the description.

Kate: If you enjoyed this episode, please share it with others and post about it on social media. Keep an ear out for our other podcasts. Until then stay safe, join the conversation and help raise awareness.