



Web Café winter series: October – December 2021 Let's talk about 'honour': November – December 2022 Summary evaluation report

#OACWebCafes
#SpeakUp
#SmashTaboos
#JointheConversation
#WebCafe
#OACevents

Prepared: March 2023
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Against Cutting
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“As more and more communities meet regularly online, our Web Cafés have been a comfortable, safe space to talk about some of the most taboo subjects on harm to women and girls. We have delivered an extensive, rich series of Web Cafés, covering topics from intimate relationships to sexualised body alterations, to explore how we can tackle feelings of shame and pressure. Web Cafés have now become a core part of our work, as we continue to push boundaries of conversation and change.”

Kate Agha, CEO, Oxford Against Cutting

Introduction

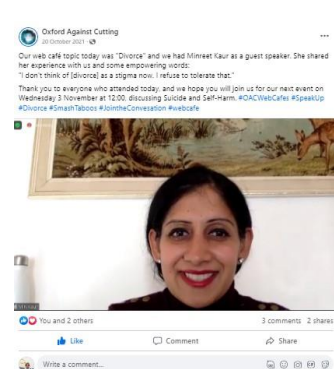
Oxford Against Cutting (OAC) is an Oxford-based charity working to end harmful practices suffered by girls and women living in the Thames Valley. These include female genital mutilation (FGM), 'honour'-based abuse (HBA) and early and forced marriage (EFM) and female cosmetic genital surgery. Our mission is to end practices that harm girls and women by providing education, supporting survivors, raising awareness of support services and empowering young people to champion initiatives against harmful practices. People from affected communities and young people are at the forefront of our activities.

This summary report describes and evaluates a series of web cafés. These have their roots in our 2020 'Webinars for Women', which responded to the restrictions in place due to COVID-19. We are very grateful for the support of Oxfordshire County Council in funding this work, and to all of those who took part and made it such a rich and positive project.

Our web cafés

These ran as two series, during October-December 2021 (series one) and November-December 2022 (series two)¹, and covered:

- **Abortion** (13/10/21)
- **Divorce** (20/10/2021)
- **Suicide and self-harm** (03/11/2021)
- **Conception** (10/11/2021)
- **Intergenerational trauma** (17/11/2021)
- **How 'honour' affects people from queer and trans communities** (10/12/2021)
- **Honour based abuse and forced marriage** (04/11/2022)
- **What does Islam say about 'honour'** (11/11/2022)
- **Virginity testing and hymenoplasty** (25/11/2022)
- **Should adult women be able to consent to genital alterations?** (02/12/2022)
- **Responses to domestic abuse** (09/12/2022).



The names of facilitators and guest speakers relating to each session are listed in Annex I, along with a breakdown of attendee numbers.

Planning & development

Prior to each series, a core planning team met to discuss potential topics and the structure of the web cafés. The agreed key aim is to keep the webinars relaxed and informal, supported by a structured 'template' with principles to ensure consistency and that participants have clarity around safeguarding and respect for their anonymity/confidentiality.

Our standard risk assessment procedure and previous webinar series have shown us that the sensitive nature of these types of subjects can lead to possible negative psychological triggers. Our set of principles therefore includes:

- A written outline of the web café structure as well as a 'script' that explains the 'ground rules' of the session.
- Reassurance for participants about the informal nature of the sessions and their right to leave at any time without giving a reason;
- Instructions to avoid mentioning other people's names when discussing issues and that summary anonymised notes will be taken which we use to record key themes arising.



¹ For series one, the web cafés ran on Wednesdays, in preference to Fridays (used for previous programmes) which many Muslim families dedicate to prayer time. However, this did not lead to noticeably higher attendance numbers, so we reverted to Fridays for series two.

- All sessions are moderated by experienced OAC staff.

Each session was run in English by an experienced facilitator supported by the moderator, with other OAC staff present as participants to provide additional support and expertise (including support with languages other than English if needed). All project facilitators are DBS checked, complete Level 3 safeguarding and understand the principles of maintaining a safe space.

The first part of each session (i.e., discussion between the presenter(s) and facilitators) is recorded to keep any useful material to feed into future projects or publicity. The second half of the session is not recorded, to allow participants to speak freely.

Participants are also given the opportunity to communicate solely with facilitators if they wished to raise a point away from the group.² Facilitators are available at the end of the meeting to provide support to participants if needed (and generally remain online for 10-15 minutes to debrief). During series two, additional independent sexual violence adviser (ISVA) support was made available with either Elaine Savage or Sam Colella of Victims First Specialist Services (VFSS),³ whom the facilitator introduced at the start of the session. Contact details were put into the chat to enable participants that wished to speak with the ISVA privately, along with a link to the OAC rescue and helplines page.

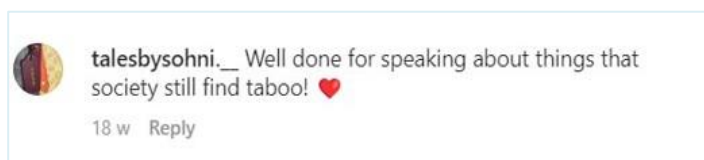


For each of the individual sessions, 3-5 questions are prepared in advance to ask participants and guide the discussion. Examples of some of the questions asked are provided in Annex II. These were finessed and finalised in consultation between facilitators and the web café team. Questions were developed to elicit discussion that highlights key issues, exploring ways that things might be changed and identify sources of information and support.

Where appropriate, the OAC team are sent briefing materials to help them prepare for the sessions so they could contribute positively, e.g., Sahar Zand's film on Britain's virginity clinics and publications from Dr Brian Earp.

During the sessions, notes were taken by volunteers Emma Woods, Olivia Barton and Keisy Lin Fong,⁴ with Tanya Vyas, Dot Pritchard and Keisy acting as moderators.

In addition to notetaking to record key ideas, the chat function was actively used to engage with participants, encouraging them to submit questions throughout and enabling prompt responses to questions (for example, explaining unfamiliar words or acronyms).



Once the content and timetable for this programme was developed, drawing on ideas from our team based on their knowledge of relevant topics, learning from previous webinars and availability of selected speakers, a set of flyers was developed for dissemination. The web cafés were advertised and the Zoom link shared via flyers⁵ using OAC's social media channels, i.e. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram. They were also shared through OAC facilitator personal networks including direct approaches to other community groups and via WhatsApp networks.

Project outcomes

Over the course of these web café sessions we engaged with 170 participants, averaging around 15 participants per session (excluding OAC representatives). The most highly attended sessions were

² At this stage, attendees were also informed of OAC's legal obligation to pass on any information about a child or vulnerable adult who may be at risk of harm.

³ Our CEO Kate Agha had previously dealt with two safeguarding issues during the "Honour"-based abuse and forced marriage' session. VFSS attended later web cafés and dealt with any safeguarding issues directly.

⁴ Streamlined notes for the sessions are available in Annex III.

⁵ See front cover and social media examples in this report.

entitled 'Honour-based abuse and forced marriage', and 'What does Islam say about honour?' (each with 33 attendees). The success of the web cafés was demonstrated by:

Positive feedback from our participants, via email, WhatsApp messages and LinkedIn. Where this contained learning points we take these on board, either immediately within the team if appropriate, or feeding them into subsequent OAC activities. Some are shared as quotations throughout this report, with others in Annex V.



Impact on affected communities, through offering an outlet for discussion, signposting to support networks and organisations and ensuring safeguarding.

The number of organisational benefits, through which our wider work was enhanced and enriched and include:

- Engaging with and further developing our relationship with the amazing young people who volunteered and benefited from taking part.
- Increased knowledge through session notes and the recordings which will allow us to watch back and offer an opportunity to share some of the learning from the sessions, perhaps from the use of clips.⁶
- Sharing tips and resources such as websites and helplines, in addition to amplifying the work of practitioners operating in this space.
- Strengthening existing contacts and expanding into new networks and areas which, for this programme, has included academics, journalists and charity leaders, connecting with thought-leaders such as Dr Brian Earp, and Abdelhamid Chachi, along with impressive activists such as Nina Aouilk.

Learning points

Where sessions were less well attended this may be attributable to series one starting up after a gap in time, and that it takes some time to re-establish an audience. The better-attended sessions tended also to be the well-established topics, with the more controversial, less discussed topics (abortion, queer and trans communities and virginity testing) taking some time to open up and still being an extreme taboo subject for many from affected communities. Some new ideas were tried, such as an 'add to calendar' button in mailings and encouraging sharing on personal social media. The team discussed ways to improve numbers, and continued to share and publicise the web cafés which showed an improvement in numbers as the series progressed.

Those on subjects related to 'honour'-based abuse, particularly around EFM and relevance within Islam were particularly popular. Discussion with participants was generally lively, though to ensure that the sessions ran smoothly and to encourage debate, some included a paid expert, usually an OAC team member whom we agreed would ask specific questions and also bring additional learning to the session, e.g. expanding on understanding of Islamic texts. This worked well and is a feature we would include again.



⁶ The full recordings are available on our website at [OAC \(oxfordagainstcutting.org\)](https://www.oxfordagainstcutting.org)

We also received valuable feedback from guest presenters, who suggested that those who are not well-practiced with web cafés might benefit from some clarity on how it will 'look' and the structure, perhaps with an invitation to another session beforehand, to alleviate any anxieties. Again, this is something we would take on board going forward.

Summary

These sessions built on our existing successful webinars and web cafés, and remain an important way for our charity to stay connected with affected communities and their allies. We were able to raise awareness amongst these groups, enhancing networks and information-sharing, and provide some alternative avenues of support. Moving forward, this continues to open up new possibilities for engagement and connection. The knowledge shared and debated between participants and presenters helps us as an organisation to stay in touch with current debates and changing attitudes and needs. Being at the forefront of discussions 'on the ground' in this way supports open and honest conversations, amplifying lesser-heard voices and encouraging others to join in our mission to end harmful practices.



Madelyn Wellstead · 3rd+
Law student at Bournemouth University

+ Follow ...

4mo · 🌐

Yesterday, I had the privilege of attending a webinar event on Honor-based abuse. The guest speakers Nina Aouilk Fellows RSA and Sanjit Flora gave insight into their experiences and explained the ways in which we can help other survivors of this horrific abuse.

This event highlighted the importance of recognising honor based abuse as a present issue rather than just an issue of the past.

I will be using the information I learnt today during both my placement year and in the future.

Thank you to Oxford Against Cutting for organising this event. I look forward to the further events in your webinar series.

Annex I - Web Café programme

Date	Topic	Non-OAC participants	OAC participants	Lead facilitator	Guest speaker(s)/organisation
13/10/21	Abortion	2	8	Sobia Afridi	N/A
20/10/21	Divorce	7	8	Sobia Afridi	Minreet Kaur, Journalist
03/11/21	Suicide and self-harm	10	8	Sobia Afridi	Neelam Heera (Cysters), Sunita Thind, Nikhvat Khan Marawat (The Delicate Mind)
10/11/21	Conception	8	7	Sobia Afridi	Sunita Thind, Monica Majumdar (OAC)
17/11/21	Intergenerational trauma	10	8	Sobia Afridi	Jaspreet Kaur (Behind the Netra), Dr Shabnam Berry-Khan (Personal Injury Psychologist), Dr Geeta Ludhra (Dadima's CIC)
10/12/21	How 'honour' affects people from queer and trans communities	13	9	Dot Pritchard	Shelina, Founder & Chair of Hidayah
04/11/22	Honour based abuse and forced marriage	33	7	Sobia Afridi	Nina Aouilk (End Honour Killings Org) and Sarnjit Flora (Advocate of domestic violence awareness and prevention)
11/11/22	What does Islam say about 'honour'	33	7	Sobia Afridi	Abdelhamid Chachi (Head teacher, independent school Leicester)
25/11/22	Virginity testing and hymenoplasty	19	8	Sobia Afridi	Sahar Zand (Journalist)
02/12/22	Should adult women be able to consent to genital alterations?	24	7	Dot Pritchard	Dr Brian Earp (Senior Research Fellow, University of Oxford) and Dr Fuambi Ahmadu (Women's Rights Advocate)
09/12/22	Responses to domestic abuse	11	6	Sobia Afridi	Panah Shelter, Karachi

Annex II – Examples of facilitator questions

Session: Responses to domestic abuse (9/12/22)

- Please can you tell us a little bit about Panah Shelter? How many women do you help every year and what kinds of abuse are they fleeing?
- How long do the women usually stay with you (longest and shortest time)?
- What happens to the women after they leave your shelter?
- Are there any situations when you would consider it too dangerous to mediate?
- How can people in the UK help? Is there anything other than donations that will support your work? How do we make donations?

Session: HBA – Forced marriage (4/11/22)

- What might be red flags for someone at risk of HBA?
- What might be the barriers to leaving a situation where HBA is at play?
- How can bystanders help someone experiencing or at risk of HBA?
- What tools and techniques have helped you in your individual and continuing journeys to recovery?

Session: Virginitv testing and hymenoplasty (25/11/22)

- Please can you tell us a bit more about the impact this film had in effecting change?
- Please can you tell us a bit more about the change of law since the film was created? Has it gone far enough? Are there any loopholes? Is the law having an impact?
- Do you become emotionally affected by the subject matter you investigate?
- What are your views on best practice reporting of sensitive issues that involve abuse, trauma and specific communities?
- How do we end the practices of virginitv testing and hymenoplasty?
- I imagine you become emotionally affected by the subject matters you investigate. How do you look after your own wellbeing?

Session: Should adult women be able to consent to genital alterations? (2/12/22)

- Do you think adult women should be able to consent to genital alterations?
- In what ways can we argue that FGM/C and FCGS are the same (and therefore adult women should be able to consent to FGM/C) and in what ways can we argue that they are different (therefore a reason to argue that adult women should not be able to consent to FGM/C as they can with FCGS)?
- Why might an adult woman choose to undergo/re-undergo FGM/C v FCGS?
- How could UK laws reflect your views on this issue?
- Would you consider 18 to be the appropriate age for consent? Would this assume that girls/women at 18 know their bodies, identity and sexuality well enough to be able to make an informed decision that is likely to have life-long consequences?
- How do you think your views and academic work impacts affected communities?

Session: Intergenerational trauma? (17/11/22)

- Please explain what inter-generational trauma is?
- What kind of traumas can communities affected by honour-based abuse subconsciously pass on to their children?
- What are the symptoms of inherited trauma?
- How can we prevent trauma being passed on to future generations? Is it also important to keep the memory of trauma alive in some way?
- Where and who can someone talk to if they have suffered inherited trauma?

Annex III –Note summaries

Abortion

- There is undeniable shame in talking about abortion across society, regardless of religion and laws of country. However, South Asian women seem to feel significantly more shame when it comes to discussing or having abortions.
- Stigma surrounding abortion seems to link to wider themes of shame in discussing sexual health/sex in general. Sense of 'turning a blind eye'/idea that getting pregnant must happen 'properly' and therefore why get/need an abortion?
- There is a need for health professionals, eg: school health nurses, to be made aware of issues facing all students, either through more diverse nurses or education/training in-depth about these issues. Also, more support for South Asian women specifically before they get an abortion. Dopo (the name of an international support cooperative) is a good example.

Divorce

- South Asian women often feel like a 'burden' when returning to the family home after a divorce; this may stop them from leaving a marriage.
- Gender inequality in Asian households; culture of parents spoiling sons even if they do not receive the level of support as they receive from their daughters in return.
- South Asian women may remain in unhappy marriages since they feel there is no other choice; no financial independence, no career, no housing, etc.

Suicide and Self-Harm

- Self-harm doesn't look the same for everyone; speaker described pulling hair out, starving herself, and scratching her arms until she bled. She didn't feel like this was self-harm as it's not how self-harm is typically perceived/portrayed. Another speaker mentioned that self-harm doesn't have to be physical, it can be through habits (eg: smoking).
- South Asian women are statistically more likely to self-harm. They are generally not encouraged or taught to love themselves, or talk about mental health. Not as praised as white women and have to work twice as hard to get to where they want.
- Speaker described putting 'purpose to pain' after brother's suicide. Founded organization supporting Muslim communities in mental health.

Conception

- Infertility is often seen to be the woman's fault, even though men can have fertility issues.
- Stigma around struggling to conceive is especially prevalent in South Asian communities, where the general expectation for a woman is to get married and immediately start having children.
- 1 in 7 couples have difficulty conceiving.

Intergenerational Trauma

- Parents who have been through trauma, eg: migration, are busy trying to survive and didn't have the luxury to reflect; healing is a painful, long, privileged process.
- When people enter privileged positions they have a duty and responsibility to support others in the community.
- Migration as result of partition was largest migration in history; why don't we talk about it? Education/healing has been denied to South Asian people by western culture and silence has been imposed on them by wider society.

How 'honour' affects people from queer and trans communities

- Honour is steeped in culture/cultural practices rather than religion.
- Central to the idea of honour is that actions of one member affect the reputation of an entire family. It can be good: showing strength of character and pride in roots. However - it has been twisted into something used to perpetuate abuse and violence.
- Speaker felt that homophobia is intensified in South Asian/Muslim communities by added stigma and lack of open discussion about mental health.

What does Islam say about 'honour'

- There is no justification for FGM in Islam. Islam gives rights to women, eg, for sexual gratification which contradicts FGM as this can reduce libido, etc.
- There may be reasons that Imams do not speak out against FGM, eg, because of concerns that this might lead people to go to a different mosque.
- Under Islam, murder is punishable by death; leniency for 'HBA' can be traced to European laws which allowed mitigation for a 'crime of passion' which would not be acceptable under Islam.

Virginity testing & Hymenoplasty

- Women's "worth" depends on "purity"; an oppressive system of honour that controls women; speaker from Iran, but this is also in other cultures, eg, Africa.
- This affects women who don't have a voice. The problem is not discussed in the mainstream because of sensitivity and political correctness. Girls fear for their life if they speak out.
- We need to stop honour-based abuse by hard work and persistence of raising awareness, though it is a long term fight. Virginity testing and hymenoplasty are now banned in the UK, however, it doesn't stop the mentality or change the belief that put the girls in that situation; concern that backstreet clinics will be set up now virginity testing and hymenoplasty illegal.

Should adult women be able to consent to genital alterations?

- One argument is yes as a strong supporter of bodily autonomy. Women should be able to choose for both sociocultural or aesthetic reasons. It is a human right and should be upheld for all women irrespective of culture/ethnicity etc.
- Other argument is needed to recognise under certain conditions it is not possible to give consent due to coercive background pressures. Belief systems can constrain choices. The threshold should therefore be defined, and it must be applied to everyone equally in society. There should be no double standards for white women and ethnic minority women.
- Questions about how the law distinguishes between FGM & FGCS and what the difference is. Legally it is hard to make a distinction. Is 18 an appropriate age to allow types of modification, what other bodily practices do we allow at what age?

Responses to domestic abuse

- Refuge able to take in 35-40 women and 10-15 children at a time; 300 women per year – only criteria is that they are a victim of violence and need a place to stay. Many women are under threat as are staff.
- Sindh province is the only one ending EFM and with a DV act; majority of women suffer abuse in Pakistan.
- Stay for 3-6 months, and have support with divorce, child custody, counselling, etc; can stay longer when there's a criminal case. Women often return home because of family promises to resolve issues, but they often do not and there are high numbers of readmissions.

Annex IV – Meet the team

Sobia Afridi – Anti-HBA Facilitator



Sobia is Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Lead for Oxford City Council. Prior to this she worked in education, for Oxford Brookes University, for over 26 years, supporting under-represented groups to access higher education. She is passionate about tackling issues that some South Asian families consider “taboo” subjects, including forced marriage, first-cousin marriage, fertility, disability and adoption, and has a degree in International Relations.

Keisy Lin Fong – Body Image Facilitator and note-taker



Keisy is passionate about the power of consent, female sexual liberty, and bringing about equality for the BAME and LGBTQIA+ community in all sectors of society. She was introduced to Oxford Against Cutting through volunteering to join an open conversation on the sex education system in the UK and discussing ways to improve it for future students going into secondary school. Since then, she has helped share messages against harmful practices.

Monica Majumdar-Choudhary – Anti-HBA Facilitator



Monica Majumdar-Choudhary is a Facilitator for Oxford Against Cutting, with expertise in body image and social media. She is currently the Marketing Manager for Retail Market Group and is pursuing a PhD at Queen Mary University of London, specialising in the psychological impact of skin lightening products for South Asian women. Monica is passionate about fighting stigmas in South Asian communities and empowering women and girls.

Dot Pritchard – Operations Manager



Dot is Operations Manager at Oxford Against Cutting, working to raise awareness of female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage and issues around body image through education and conversation. Dot co-facilitates safeguarding training for teachers, as well as workshops for young people on FGM, forced marriage and body image. Dot was previously a mentor with Refugee Resource and a trustee for The Young Women’s Music Project. Dot holds a BA in Philosophy.

Tanya Vyas – Social Media Communications Coordinator



As a Sikh woman born in Kenya who has lived in the UK, Tanya has three cultures which she intertwines in her daily life. She has a passion for raising awareness of inequality issues affecting women and the LGBTQ community. Tanya has a BA. Hons in International Marketing and Business and achieved a 'First' for her Masters in PR Management.

Emma Woods – Body Image Facilitator



Emma is a Body Image Facilitator with Oxford Against Cutting, having started as a volunteer with the charity in 2021. She has previously organised fundraisers for the charity Anti-Slavery International. Emma is currently studying A Levels in Politics, History, and Law at The Henley College and hopes to go on to study Human, Social, and Political Sciences at university.

Annex V – Additional participant feedback

Hi Kate,

Just wanted to say thank you to your team for running the current series of webinars. They are such a fantastic resource and always so enlightening and informative to listen to. You always get such fascinating speakers and a great conversation on each topic.

Thank you muchly! Keep up the excellent work 😊

All the best,

Kat

Kat Moore (she/her)

Service Manager

Elmore Community Services

13 October 2021

➔ Forwarded

Hey! That was great thanks. Shame we didn't quite have enough time for your last questions which was about how we can tackle the stigma or overcome the barriers.

15:04

Feedback on Abortion web café

20 October 2021

➔ Forwarded

It was brill.. can't wait for the next one

13:42

Feedback from today

13:42

➔ Forwarded

I thought was really good - talked a lot about what the issues are

13:44

Feedback on Divorce web café

4 November 2021

➔ Forwarded

Hi Sobia, just wanted to say how well you led the meeting and how interesting and important it was to hear from those with lived experience in the South Asian community. I was wondering whether the webinar is going to be available online as I would like to send it to people within the suicide prevention community who I have worked with.

08:20

Feedback on suicide and self-harm web café



Feedback on conception web café



Feedback on intergenerational trauma session



OxfordAgainstCutting

ProtectingGirls&Women

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Oxfordshire County Council for supporting these web cafés. Thanks also to all of those who spoke, facilitated or took part in any way and contributed to the discussions, in particular our note-takers and Elaine Savage and Sam Colella from VFSS.

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If you have any further questions about this report, please contact kate.clayton@oxfordagainstcutting.org