

TO FORCE ONE'S HAND

Bharti Dhir

'I am having problems with my daughter and if they continue, she will have to come into your care'. Mrs Kaur had come into the Social Services Office where I worked. She looked angry and upset. 'I don't know why she is doing all this. I just want it to stop. She is making me choose between her or my husband. She is 14 years old and she should think about things. I have two small children with my second husband. The youngest is only two years old, the older one is five years old. My daughter 'Jasvir' is 14 years. In four years, she will be leaving home to get married or to go away to study. If I leave my husband, she has to think who is going to look after me and support me in the care of my children. She won't be around will she?' Mrs Kaur had tears in her eyes. She looked visibly agitated. I asked her what Jasvir was doing. She stood up at that. 'Come round to my house and I will show you. I haven't got time to discuss this now as I only have half an hour for lunch, and I have to go. I need a Social Worker to sort all this out, or Jasvir will have to go...' She left then, looking angry still. The interview had lasted ten minutes only and had consisted of getting the basic details of the family and then Mrs Kaur's views. There had been no opportunity to discuss anything in depth.

I had worked in Social Services as a social worker in a Children and Families Team. Although I had worked in other boroughs, this was my first experience of an opportunity to work with an Asian child. I felt very excited by the prospect of doing some work to use my cultural understanding of the issues being presented and to see if I could make a change to the situation. Before meeting Mrs Kaur, I had worked with Asian women experiencing domestic violence, but I had never worked specifically with a child or adolescent who was 'rebellious' against their parents in any way. It never occurred to me that I was making assumptions about Jasvir or her situation even before I had started working with her. My assumptions were based on the issue of 'cultural conflict' which was a term that had been bandied around in the media and in Social Services circles to explain the phenomenon of young Asians requesting to be brought into care because they felt their parents restricted their 'individuality'. This related to their dress sense, diet, going out, socialising with their friends, music sense etc. They argued that as they were born or brought up in a British, predominantly Western society- their parents did not understand their way of life or their adoption of western values and

beliefs. They felt that their parents' traditional views were outdated and prejudicial to them too. This led to a 'cultural conflict' between the parents and their children. I was confident that I could do this work because I also came from the same cultural and religious background as Jasvir and her family. I may have faced the same issues with my own parents and I felt I could empathise with both Mother and Daughter. Additionally, Mrs Kaur's English was limited and I could converse with her in Punjabi which would assist her in understanding the work I was trying to do.

The work that was required was to prevent Jasvir coming into care by working with Jasvir and her family to resolve the conflict. I speculated that perhaps it was a conflict of cultural expectations between the parents and Jasvir. Perhaps it was difficult for Jasvir to relate to her stepfather and new siblings? Was Jasvir jealous because her younger brother and sister were getting more attention? Maybe Jasvir was jealous because her stepfather had usurped her role of being confidante, friend to her mother?

In subsequent enquiries, I gleaned that Mrs Kaur had been re-married for six years. Jasvir's father had left when she was a baby. Jasvir had been very close to her mother. However, I also understood that Jasvir had been very happy and pleased when her mother got remarried and was ecstatic to have a younger brother and sister, proud to have a sharing role with her mother in the care of the younger children.

When I visited Jasvir at home, she was initially alone. Mrs Kaur was still at work. Jasvir presented as a polite, friendly young woman. She chatted easily about school and showed me photos of her younger sister and brother. She was aware that her mother had asked for a Social Worker to visit, but assured me that the problem was mainly cultural. She told me that she felt the problems mainly related to her stepfather who was more orthodox in his Sikh religion than her mother. She said that her mother was trying to please him. According to Jasvir, he was constantly critical of the way she was bringing up Jasvir. He 'moaned' about Jasvir's clothes, which was western, he 'moaned' about the amount of make-up she wore, and he did not like her going out at all, expecting her to be in the house straight after school.

He was afraid she would influence the younger brother and sister. He saw Jasvir as a bad influence generally. She felt frustrated because she felt she was 'not bad' and there were other young people who did worse things than her i.e stay out late, take drugs, drink. She did not do anything as bad.

Mrs Kaur then came into the house. Jasvir smiled at her mother and mother smiled back. She asked Jasvir if she had offered me something to drink, and ruffled her daughter's hair affectionately. It was clear that there was a bond between the two.

I asked her what the problems were that led her to ask for a Social Worker. Mrs Kaur asked me to look at the make-up Jasvir was wearing. She

then took me up to Jasvir's bedroom. Mrs Kaur was very offended that Jasvir had put photos of various pop stars on the bedroom walls. The pictures of males indicated immorality to mum. She felt a respectful Sikh girl should not have pictures of men in semi-naked poses on the wall or in the room. Another issue she was very offended by was the fact that she had repeatedly told Jasvir that the religious pictures of the Sikh Gurus should not be below the pictures of pop stars. The pop stars' pictures being above the pictures of the Gurus indicated that Jasvir revered human beings over God. Jasvir did not see this as a sign of disrespect and Mrs Kaur saw it as deeply irreverent.

When we came downstairs, Jasvir's stepfather had arrived with the two younger children. From a teasing, mock angry repartee between Jasvir and her mother, the atmosphere immediately became tense. Mrs Kaur lost her smile and looked angry. Jasvir did not smile either. She did not look at her stepfather, but sat on the edge of a settee, appearing withdrawn.

When her younger siblings leapt on her, she smiled and hugged them, but one could see how aware she was of her stepfather's glowering presence.

'Have you shown her?' he demanded. 'Yes I have' responded Mrs Kaur. Mr Singh looked at me furiously. 'What are you going to do about it?' I said I needed to work with them all to address what the problems really were and I needed to look at the following:

a) Could a compromise be reached over the make-up and the pictures, and anything else that was upsetting the parents from a cultural viewpoint?

b) To look at Mr Singh's relationship with his step-daughter and wife and to address any issues were arising from this?

At this, Mr Singh stood up. 'This is nothing to do with me. It's women's problems. My only concern is that my children should not be influenced. If we don't control Jasvir now and she does not show any sense of responsibility towards teaching her brother and sister right from wrong, then she has to take responsibility over what happens in this family'. He walked out of the room and went into the kitchen.

He did not return to the room throughout the time I remained with Mrs Kaur and Jasvir. Jasvir looked at her mother and giggled. Mother gave a half smile but then put fingers to her lips in a 'shushing' motion to Jasvir. This action seemed to add weight to Jasvir's assertion that the reason her mother was upset was because of the pressure from her stepfather.

I left the house advising we needed to work together. I resigned myself to the thought that Mr Singh was not going to be part of the sessions but I had the hope that as things started improving in the family following work between mother and daughter, we could perhaps persuade him to join us in some family work sessions. I was determined that Jasvir was not going to come into care and that we

could resolve the conflict that was occurring between her and her family without resorting to this option. I felt that the problems between Jasvir and her mother were not insurmountable

Several sessions followed. When we looked at the issue of make-up, the aim was to see what mum could cope with and what she couldn't. Ideally, mum did not want Jasvir to wear any make-up at all. I pointed out that this was unrealistic and something Jasvir herself said she would not do.

Eventually, the compromise agreed between mother and Jasvir was that Jasvir would not wear eye shadow unless she was attending a party. She could wear eye-liner and a mascara and a light coloured natural looking up gloss lipstick, not bright lipstick. Jasvir was pleased to be able to wear some make-up and Mrs Kaur was pleased that Jasvir's make-up had been toned down, and in her words Jasvir 'no longer looked like a prostitute'.

When we looked at dress sense, it was harder to reach an agreement. After much discussion, Mrs Kaur agreed that Jasvir could wear western skirts and dresses, but not above knee length. They had to cover her knees. Jasvir's crop tops were a complete no-no, even though Jasvir pointed out that mum's cropped sari blouses were just as 'bad'.

Eventually, it was agreed that Jasvir could wear western skirts and dresses during the day. However when her stepfather was around, she would wear jeans or a salwaar kameez. Jasvir insisted she could

wear jeans, and mother agreed that this was okay, albeit reluctantly.

With the pictures in the bedroom, we looked at length on a compromise. Jasvir was adamant that the pictures would remain in her bedroom. Mrs Kaur's ideal position was that all the pictures including photos of Jasvir with friends were removed from the walls, and that Jasvir should only have pictures of the Gurus on the wall.

Neither mum nor daughter would budge on this issue. Jasvir was asked why it was so important for her to ensure that the pictures of the Gurus were positioned below her personal pictures, when it was offensive to her mother's religion to have this.

The compromise reached eventually was that the Gurus' pictures would be raised in a higher position than all the other pictures, and the pictures of the pop stars would be positioned on another wall.

Personal photos could be positioned below the pictures of the various Gurus. Mother and daughter were not entirely happy with this arrangement, but agreed that this was the best way to keep peace.

Mr Singh never joined any sessions. However, Mrs Kaur started confronting him and persuaded him to see why a compromise on some of the problems that were causing conflict within the family was needed.

He reluctantly agreed to Jasvir being able to come back late from school. Neither parent would agree to Jasvir going out in the evening unless she

was going to a friend's house, where they could drop her off and pick her up. Time of return was to be no later than 8.30pm. At the weekends, Jasvir could visit her friends or vice versa from 2pm to 8.30pm, after she had completed her chores.



After a few weeks of visiting the family to ensure the above agreements were being kept, I was pleased to close the case. The only niggling thought I had was that Mr Singh had never joined us in any session and that there were deep issues of resentment and jealousy which were left unfinished and unresolved.

A month or so after I had closed the case. I received a phone call at the office. It was Mr Singh. This was a

shock in itself as Mr Singh had never called me at the office.

He started shouting 'We have done everything you told us to do. Now come and see the result of your hard work. Come to the house or I am going to kill Jasvir, she has shamed us and you'd better come now'. He hung up.

All calls I made to the home were met with an engaged signal.

I decided it was too risky to leave the situation as it was and I needed to see what was going on.

When I arrived at the house, Mrs Kaur met me at the door, looking distraught. She told me that Mr Singh was upstairs in Jasvir's bedroom.

He wanted me to go straight upstairs. On my entrance, I saw Jasvir sitting on the bed. Next to her was a young man. Both were in their school uniforms. A photo album lay open on Jasvir's knees.

Jasvir looked both defiant and scared. 'See' Mr Singh shouted, 'This is how I found them when I came into the house. I have not let them move. I wanted you to see them in the way I saw them'.

I looked at him inquiringly.

'Do you think it's right that she should bring a boy here? Do you think that it's right?'. He pointed an accusing finger at me and then at the young people in turn. Jasvir and the young man did not look at me or Mr Singh. Both looked at the floor.

I asked Mr Singh if he could leave the room so I could speak to Jasvir and her friend.

As soon as he left the room, I asked Jasvir what she thought she was playing at. She said she knew that what she has done was wrong but she had not expected her stepfather to return to the house when he did. She had intended her friend, Ravi to leave well before either parent arrived. She had not done anything wrong, she insisted. They had been looking at photos and listening to music.

I talked about the inappropriateness of her actions culturally, as she would still be termed as being 'loose' or 'immoral' generally by the Asian community for having brought a male into the house, particularly when her parents were not at home. Despite her protests, I did wonder whether she had intended to be caught and what message she was giving to her stepfather, mother and me.

That evening, a lengthy family discussion took place. Jasvir apologised for her actions and although mother seemed to accept the apology, her stepfather did not respond.

I left with Jasvir agreeing to come into the office the next day to discuss the situation further.

The next day I was surprised to see both Jasvir and Ravi enter the office. They said they needed to talk. Jasvir advised me that the difficulty she had at home was her stepfather's attitude which was hypocritical. She told me that her stepfather had been making sexual advances towards her. She had resisted but was becoming increasingly uncomfortable about being alone in his presence. She had taken Ravi to her home to show him she had a boyfriend who would not be afraid to confront him about what he was doing, and to show him he was a 'disgusting old man' compared to the type of person she would 'fancy'.

She was adamant that she was not returning home as she felt unsafe there. She was equally sure that her stepfather had made advances to her because he did not view her as his daughter at all.

She was afraid of the hurt all this would cause her mother, but felt she needed to be in a situation where she could feel safe to sleep at night, without worrying about being molested sexually.

The work with Jasvir then took on a different emphasis and meaning. Apart from the immediate practical problem of finding a placement for her that would be safe for her, Mother and stepfather had to be advised of the situation and all further discussions and actions needed to be in the context of a child protection investigation. A risk assessment on the younger two children also needed to be carried out.

We explored many issues in the following two years that I remained Jasvir's social worker:

Enabling Jasvir to understand that it was not her fault that she had been targeted by her stepfather. This related also to the guilt she felt that somehow in her clothes and general lifestyle she may have made him feel that she did not have any morals. I worked with Jasvir to show her that she was not to blame at all regardless of what she wore or did.

- ◆ The shame and stigma of sexual abuse from a cultural and religious sense, and how not to succumb to blaming herself for the situation that she was forced into.

- ◆ How to survive in a situation where one has been forced to live apart from one's family.

- ◆ How to retain one's identity after being thrust into care and being placed in an environment that was predominantly white. Jasvir was placed in a Children's home at her mother's request as her mother did not wish her to be placed in an Asian family where her background might become known to the community.

- ◆ How to remain focussed on maintaining a relationship with her mother and half-siblings in the face of opposition from her stepfather.

- ◆ We addressed issues of power and control between men and women and explored how these issues can manifest themselves in every day family situations.

The outcome of taking Jasvir into care was something that I never wanted but was forced into in the end, so that her safety and welfare was not compromised by forcing her to remain at home.

The Outcome

Jasvir's mother rejected her claims on the basis that Jasvir had lied in order to get 'more freedom'. She demanded that Jasvir apologise for her lies if she wanted to remain at home. She also asked that Jasvir admit she had lied about her stepfather. Jasvir in turn, refused to retract her allegation. Jasvir came into care with the voluntary agreement of her mother.

Mr Singh continued to deny the allegations made and banned his own children from seeing her. (Later I found out that Jasvir and her mother were meeting secretly in the park and Jasvir also started seeing her stepbrother and sister secretly too as they got older. They did not tell their father they were seeing her). Eventually, her mother and younger siblings were able to confront Mr Singh. Jasvir started visiting her mother at home and although Mr Singh always retired to another room when she visited, he did not try to stop her seeing her mother or sister and brother.

I last heard that Jasvir had obtained good grades in her GCSE's and A' levels, and had eventually gone to University where she obtained a Degree.

She had separated from Ravi prior to going to University, but he and his family had been a great source of support to her throughout the period she remained apart from her own family. I realised that I had made another assumption here. I had assumed that Jasvir would be automatically ostracised by the Asian Community for leaving home. Jasvir's experience taught me that not all young people can experience such rejection, and that there are families who will not judge children and young people so harshly.

Mr Singh was never prosecuted as Jasvir did not wish to press charges as he had verbally asked her for sex but had not physically threatened or tried to impose himself upon her. She was also very aware of the shame that her mother would experience if this matter went to court and did not want to subject her any further to the distress her mother was feeling already.

At the time of writing, I have been qualified as a social worker for 16 years. I went on to work with many children from ethnic and minority backgrounds looking at issues of identity, and child protection issues relating to sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect. I have never forgotten my experience of working with Jasvir because it was my first experience of working with an Asian child and because of the invaluable lessons I learnt from her and her mother. The whole experience with Jasvir and her family taught me never to accept things at face value, and to be open to the possibility that

whatever is presented at surface level can sometimes mask deeper problems in a situation. It taught me that sometimes things happen that force one's hand and that one should be open to the possibility of changing the original course of action if the situation warrants it.

**(Names have been changed to protect the identity of the case being discussed).*

I am Ugandan/ Asian of mixed race heritage. I came into this country in 1972. My own experiences of being adopted in an Asian, Sikh family have given me a unique insight into the issues of identity and belonging in a particular family or community. I have always tried to be insightful into the identity and self esteem issues affecting children and young people who have experienced racism or any other form of abuse.

I gained a B.A. honours in Social Sciences from Hull University in 1983. I then worked as a Community and Advice Worker in Wolverhampton working mainly with Asian families giving advice on benefits, housing issues and support and guidance to women suffering domestic violence. I left after two years to study for a M.A. in Social Work and a C.Q.S.W. at the University of Leicester.

I obtained these qualifications in 1985 and have worked in a variety of children and Families Social Services Offices since then, initially as a social worker, and as a team manager for at least 8 years.

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