

The great witch stitch-up



'HEALERS' CONNING ASIANS OUT OF THOUSANDS

by NADEEM BADSHAH

DOZENS of British Asians are being abused and conned by bogus spiritual healers, experts have claimed.

Many victims who approach a healer to solve a problem or "cure an illness" are terrified of reporting them to the police, support groups say.

This summer, training events are being held across Britain to highlight the abuse linked to families who believe in spirits and witchcraft.

In 2009, a pregnant woman from Birmingham, Naila Mumtaz (right), was murdered by her husband and in-laws because they thought she was "possessed". Four people were jailed last year.

Gary Foxcroft is the executive director of the Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network which has been running the events. The next event is in Leeds next Monday (19).

Foxcroft said authorities, including the police, need to improve their understanding of such cases. He told *EE*: "Authorities across the board lack awareness and understanding on these issues."

"For many of them they are seen as 'other-worldly' and may not sit comfortably with their world views."

"Frontline staff such as police, social workers and safeguarding officers may also be afraid of being accused of being racist or anti-religion, which is also a significant obstacle in upholding human rights."

"We have held meetings with the Project Violet team at the Met and are looking at ways in which we can collaborate, most especially in terms of sharing some of our resources."

"However we would like to see more police, including those outside of London, receive training in these important areas of safeguarding."

Foxcroft has held training events in London, Birmingham and Manchester in recent weeks.

Among the most vulnerable are people sent to a healer to help "cure their disability or mental health problem".

Foxcroft said: "Numerous practitioners will be working on cases where people believe their mental health problems are caused by jinn [spirits mentioned in the Quran] or that their child disabilities are a sign of possession by jinn."

"We don't have any numbers and practitioners are bound to keep cases confidential, which means that we only find out about the most horrific ones such as [Mumtaz]."

One person who claims he was the victim of a healer is divorcee Naveed*.

He said: "I used to hear voices and I refused to seek medical help. One day at the mosque I met a friend who introduced me to this pir."

"I was told that I had bad spirits and I paid £1,200 for the spirit to be removed, but this did not work and I became very depressed."



"I am still rebuilding my life. I lost everything, my home, marriage, I no longer see my kids. I was on benefits and struggling to make ends meet."

Mandy Sanghera, a human rights activist and government advisor, has dealt with several cases like Naveed's.

She said: "Many are scared to come forward as they believe the pir will put a spell on them. I have dealt with about 30 cases over the years."

"Many vulnerable and desperate Asian families are paying thousands of pounds to fake 'healers' because it's more acceptable to be possessed than to have a mental illness."

"Desperate people will do desperate things, (but) this doesn't mean others have the right to exploit them."

Research by Warwick University last year found that some Asian communities blame the supernatural for mental health problems.

A Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) spokesperson said it was part of the National Action Plan to tackle faith-based child abuse through the working group chaired by the Department for Education.

She added: "The CPS has worked closely with other agencies to highlight the measures which might be employed to provide protection and support for victims who are prepared to support criminal proceedings, including anonymity, use of pseudonyms, and special measures at court."

"Whilst there are no specific crimes of witchcraft and spirit possession, prosecutors are aware of the behaviours experienced by children branded as witches or possessed by evil spirits."

"This includes knowing about identifying who the perpetrator might be, possible criminal offences which might be disclosed and what evidence would be required to support a prosecution."

* Name has been changed to protect identity.



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