

GATEWAY DOCUMENT 4.9

Violence towards women, especially when given a religious justification

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

The expression 'violence towards women' has become a term with a particular meaning since December 1993 when the General Assembly of the United Nations published a resolution, 'Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women.'

This UN resolution defined the term thus:

'Violence against women' means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.'

Although use of the term can therefore be wide-ranging, this Gateway document will confine itself to three particular examples of violence against women, 'honour' crimes, female genital mutilation, and forced marriage. These three manifestations of violence against women are ones that are known to affect some students in English and Welsh secondary schools, and attempts to justify them sometimes lean on religious arguments that RE teachers need to be able to counter.¹

The following overviews of 'honour' crimes, female genital mutilation, and forced marriage provide a starting point for exploration of the issues.

'Honour' crimes

By definition, these are crimes committed to restore the honour of a family or a community that is held to have been dishonoured by a member having engaged in unacceptable

¹ There is no suggestion here that all schools will want to address all of these topics; any or all will be more relevant to some schools than others, depending on the make-up of the school's population. Schools are most likely to focus on teachings about gender roles in religions being studied. This particular Gateway, on the other hand, will be of relevance in schools where any of the forms of violence described here are of concern as a potential safeguarding issue, or where recent cases locally or nationally have made the issue one of direct concern to students. It is unlikely that a school would want to teach about violence against women as a standard part of its RE curriculum.

behaviour. The victim of an honour crime is the person or people who are believed to have brought the dishonour; the victims are overwhelmingly women.

In these cases, female victims are deemed to have brought dishonour to their families by their behaviour; for example, through refusing a marriage partner, committing adultery, or being in a relationship that displeases their relatives. 'Honour' crimes have various levels of severity. At the extreme end of the scale, these crimes include 'honour' killings and other forms of extreme violence. In Britain, 'honour' crimes are usually associated with families of Middle Eastern, North African or Asian backgrounds and therefore there is an easy assumption that they are condoned or required by the religions of Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. This is not the case. Indeed, there is no sanction in any major religious tradition for so-called 'honour' killing.

Female genital mutilation (FGM)

The term 'female genital mutilation' has widely replaced the expression 'female circumcision' in order to emphasise the near universal condemnation of the practice.² However, some who work with communities where the practice is common prefer to use the more neutral term of Female Genital Cutting (FGC), as they wish to recognise that families which continue the practice do it without malice and in what they take to be the best interest of their daughters. This is an ancient practice that appears to have developed in tribal societies of North East Africa and then spread. The reasons for the prevalence of the practice are generally assumed to relate to men's concern to control women's sexual behaviour.³ FGM 'refers to the partial or complete removal or modification of the female genitalia for cultural or religious reasons...FGM can be seen as an attempt to prevent female infidelity and sexual independence by reducing a woman's sex drive.' (Centre for Social Cohesion, 2010, p.65).

Forced marriage

A forced marriage is when '*one or both spouses do not (or, in the case of some vulnerable adults, cannot) consent to the marriage and duress is involved. Duress can involve physical, psychological, financial, sexual and emotional pressure*' ('The Right to Choose: Multi-agency statutory guidance for dealing with forced marriage' – see *Signposts*).

Laws to prevent forced marriages and provide a way out for those already in forced unions were introduced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in November 2008. In dealing with this subject in the classroom it is important to emphasise that forced marriage is not a teaching of any religion. The position of Islam, for instance, is set out on the website of the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain where it is written that, 'A forced marriage may be defined as a marriage without consent and is unacceptable under both UK and Islamic

² For more information see <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/index.html>

³ 'Female circumcision is currently practised in at least 28 countries stretching across the center of Africa north of the equator; it is not found in southern Africa or the Arabic-speaking nations of north Africa with the exception of Egypt. It occurs amongst Muslims, Christians, animists and one Jewish sect, although no religion requires it'. (Althaus, F., *Female Circumcision: Rite of Passage or Violation of Rights?* <http://www.alangutmacher.org/pubs/journals/2313097.html>)

law, where mutual consent is a prerequisite to any marriage'.⁴

An 'arranged marriage' is not usually the same thing as a forced marriage, but rather a situation when families seek to introduce a couple to each other but where the marriage taking place depends on the freely given consent of both parties. The term, 'assisted marriage' is also used to describe this situation in which family, and perhaps friends, help seek potential partners and arrange an introduction but where there is no coercion.

KEY QUESTIONS

Why is this a contentious topic?

This topic deals with contentious issues in religion, such as:

- the relationship between religion and culture;
- the evaluation of sources of religious authority;
- the rights and roles of women in the home and in wider society.

Religious traditions exist in and are shaped by a variety of cultural contexts. This may provide a number of positive benefits, such as providing a sense of identity, belonging, community, and purpose in life. However, there are also sometimes negative effects, such as when violence towards women is justified through an extreme interpretation of a religious tradition. This topic requires a critical examination of both sources of religious authority and the relationship between culture and religion.

This type of violence towards women is placed within the personal, family sphere of people's lives, which means that it often remains 'hidden'. The real extent of the problems is only gradually becoming apparent. In addition, specific acts of violence identified in this gateway are addressed in UK law. These two factors mean that the topic has the potential to have major repercussions on family life. Therefore, sensitivity is required on the part of the teacher as well as an informed awareness of responsibilities and roles.

Why is RE relevant to this topic?

Effective religious education should challenge learners to explore religious beliefs and practices critically, ask fundamental questions, and respond personally to the issues raised. In this process both positive and negative effects associated with aspects of religion emerge.

In terms of violence against women which is given a religious justification, religious education provides an opportunity to engage with diversity within individual religious traditions (including the influence of 'culture' and contemporary religious perspectives which challenge traditional beliefs and practices). It also provides an opportunity to engage with a variety of sources of religious teaching and authority.

⁴ <http://www.muslimparliament.org.uk/marriage.htm>

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- As with same sex relationships (Gateway 4.6) this topic has a direct bearing on the classroom in the sense that there may be members of the class who are personally affected by the issues. In the case of this topic, some or all students in the class may be female and be affected by the issues under discussion or have particularly strong responses to them. Exploring the role of women involves them considering their own identity and possibly addressing potential conflict, especially those who come from certain religious backgrounds. What students are told in PSHE might be at odds with religious teaching in the home about, for example, menstruation or sexual behaviour. This could lead to some students leading a double life as they negotiate their way through at least two sets of sometimes conflicting cultural assumptions. It is important for teachers to address issues sensitively to avoid unnecessary conflict with learners and parents, but that should not mean avoiding the issues. It is every bit as important for boys also to engage with ideas and beliefs about gender roles.
- Both boys and girls may have very strong views on this subject on the basis of their religious or non-religious backgrounds or where the family holds firm opinions about the role of women. The teacher has to balance cultural and religious sensitivity alongside the need to encourage reasoned enquiries and discussion that take all points of view into consideration. This may lead to some students questioning what they have been taught at home, especially when this is at odds with mainstream culture. Some students may hold strong atheist and/or feminist views and take a very negative view of the way women are treated in some religious contexts.
- Assumptions may be made about a teacher's' views based solely on his/her gender and/or any outward signs of religious faith, for example, a female teacher wearing a burka/hijab or a visiting speaker wearing a clerical collar. For many students and adults these issues are very much to do with personal identity, unlike some contentious issues which can be viewed 'from a distance'.
- The topic of violence against women set within a religious context may uncover female (and male) learners who have been or are at risk of being victims of this type of violence, and there is a need to deal with this appropriately using the school's safeguarding procedures.

How can teachers address such challenges?

Students need to have access to a wide range of views on the subject and, as with all contentious issues, be given the opportunity to explore their views and develop reasoned arguments to support them.

There is sometimes a fine line between expressing a strongly held view and being openly sexist. The teacher has to make professional judgments about this. This topic requires skilful teaching in relation to different religions, denominations and interpretations. What must be avoided is an acceptance of a stereotyped view that says, for example, that

women belonging to a particular religion are all oppressed. This view can most easily be countered by the teacher's provision of materials which give voice to the perspectives of women who are both religious and independent. (See *Signposts for further resources* below.)

Learners also need to understand that within any religious tradition there are many ways of interpreting teachings and therefore a similar diversity of belief and practice exists amongst adherents. In addition, teachers should not avoid raising and exploring the issue of power in religions, particularly in traditions with strong patriarchal influences, where beliefs and practices have an impact on the independence of women, their roles in the family and society, and their access to recognised human rights.

Schools need to be aware of their responsibilities in promoting strong female role models and in taking sexism seriously by dealing with incidents promptly and decisively.

Schools also need to ensure that they have appropriate policies in place for dealing with females (or males) who are believed to be victims (or at risk) of violence of this nature (see *Signposts for further resources* below).

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Sharma, A (2007) *Fundamentalism and the Position of Women in World Religions*, Continuum.

UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, General Assembly resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993 www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/reports.htm

Signposts for further resources

'Sisters in Faith' programme in 'The Best of British Islam' DVD set (2010), Gazelle Media. Illustrates the diversity of Muslim women in Britain today and includes a short section on forced marriage but also presents a very positive view of women and Islam. DVD set available to any school free of charge from info@religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk

www.internetjournalofcriminology.com/ijcprimaryresearch.html Khan, R (2007) 'Honour related violence in Scotland', in *Internet Journal of Criminology*.

http://www.socialcohesion.co.uk/files/1229624550_1.pdf Crimes of the Community (2010), Centre for Social Cohesion.

http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/h_to_k/honour_based_violence_and_forced_marriage/ Honour based violence and forced marriage (2010) Crown Prosecution Service.

For Honour and Love – DVD – information and report <http://www.kmewo.org/>

Health and Social Services page of the website of the Islamic Cultural Centre and London Central Mosque <http://www.iccservices.org.uk>.

A number of reports and resources produced under the previous government to give support and guidance on forced marriage have been archived. To see what is available, go to www.education.gov.uk and type 'forced marriage' into the search bar.

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/crime/call-end-violence-women-girls/vawg-paper?view=Binary> Links to further information and government policies on force marriage and female genital mutilation.

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/childrenyoungpeople/publications/righttochoose/?lang=en> The Right to Choose: Multi-agency statutory guidance for dealing with forced marriage.

Signposts for further action

Apply strategies such as those outlined for Gateway 3.1 to enable students to explore the issues and learn how to agree to disagree.

The topic could usefully be covered in an RE day, where female speakers from different religions could be invited to give their views – possibly through a panel format.

Consider whether school policies need to be reviewed to make provision for any of the issues raised in this document.