

# imkaan

“A colleague of mine, who was talking to me about BAMER men, he said, you black people are just violent in your nature, in your tradition. We white people are not just like that.”

“Going around Britain, when you see the commercials, you don’t see any other race but British. They’re all like, ‘oh, put the tea on’ or stuff. Because you’re a different race... does not mean you’re like half a British stereotype. Just because you’re a different race doesn’t mean that you can’t have been born in England and be totally English... and totally love being English. Then when someone sees you, they call you ‘Paki’ or something, even though you’re born in London.”

“I didn’t expect this. No one’s asked me these questions before. Thank you”.

## Dispelling Myths | Speaking Truths

Focus Groups Findings on the Experiences, Needs and Aspirations of Young BAMER Women Living in the UK

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## Dispelling Myths | Speaking Truths

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES, NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG BAMER WOMEN LIVING IN THE UK

### WHY FOCUS GROUPS ON BAMER YOUNG WOMEN?

Imkaan decided to run a series of focus groups with young BAMER women to begin to address a gap in policy and service planning frameworks that reflect the voices and needs of young Black Asian Minority Ethnic Refugee (BAMER) women.

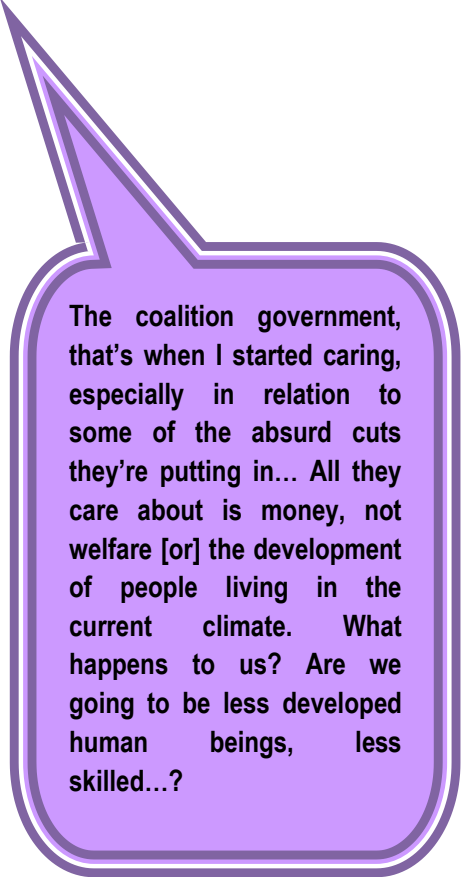
The discussions were based on a semi-structured questionnaire, drafted by two young BAMER women. The focus groups were organised and facilitated by young BAMER women. A total of 46 young BAMER women were consulted and 44 young women took part in seven focus groups. The meetings took place between September and November 2010.

### Where Do Young Women Fit Into Big Society?

The issues arising from the focus groups provide valuable data that will be beneficial for professionals who are already supporting or who wish to engage more effectively with young BAMER women. The focus groups provide a much needed insight into young women's experiences, opinions, and needs. Young women also spoke about the problems they face, the changes they would like to see particularly in relation to how they are perceived, represented and treated by agencies and wider society.

This piece of work is timely especially following, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's introduction of the notion of *Big Society* (localism and community ownership and engagement). At the same time, an outcome from the Spending Review (October 2010) has concentrated on financial cuts to public services and undoubtedly some of this has affected services for young people. The government states that its notion of 'Big Society' is divided into five strands, and plans to (1) give communities more powers; (2) encourage people to take an active role in their communities; (3) transfer power from central to local government; (4) support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises; and (5) publish government data (see <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf>). The coalition government's vision for society is a much more de-regulated state, run by local government, in partnership with local people, supported by civil society organisations that will also act as citizens' advocates. The government completed its consultation process in relation to the public sector equality duty in November 2010.

The Government has already started the process of implementing the notion of Big Society through the Single Equality Duty (November, 2010) and the Health White Paper (September 2010). A key component of the White paper is on how power would be devolved from the government to professionals and patients in relation to the NHS. It is difficult at this stage to comment more about Big Society bearing in mind that the concept is



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## Dispelling Myths | Speaking Truths

### EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES, NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG BAMER WOMEN LIVING IN THE UK

currently being developed.

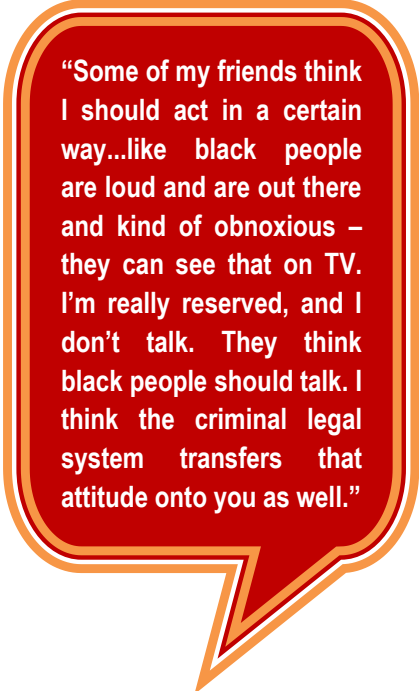
However, the major cuts to public spending recently announced in the Spending Review are already having a deep impact upon the third sector. A number of community groups and non-governmental organisations are expected to be the local people's advocate, whilst experiencing budget cuts. The government approach contradicts the notion of Big Society, which is reliant on the existence of the voluntary sector in ensuring that civil society has both a voice and access to support services. During difficult economic times the need for services will also increase.

The erosion of services is taking place at a time when many of the young BAMER women who have been consulted are due to start their working life, pursue higher education or live independently.

Changes to social housing mean that new social housing tenants would have to pay higher rents whilst reductions in housing benefit are being applied through a cap on the maximum amount of benefits a household can claim. Furthermore, the maximum period for an employment and support allowance claim is twelve months. The spending for education has been reduced by 3.4 per cent and universities will be able to charge higher tuition fees.

In practical terms, these issues will have a disproportionate impact on many young BAMER women. It will be much harder for young BAMER women to access social housing. In addition, anybody who is under the age of 35 will only be able to claim housing benefit for a room rather than for an entire property. Young BAMER women who are in need of support will experience hardship following a twelve month claim of employment and support allowance – the maximum time the benefit can be claimed. Finally, many young BAMER women will be denied a university education. Currently, one in 5 young people aged 18 to 24 has no job, training place or education beyond school (9000, 000 in England). A further 88,000 people who are aged 25 and over could potentially become homeless due to the housing benefit changes and a shortage of private shared accommodation (see Kevin Curley, NAVCA Annual Conference 2010, [www.navca.org.uk/event/pastevents/conference2010.htm](http://www.navca.org.uk/event/pastevents/conference2010.htm)). Overall, there is likely to be an increase in homelessness, destitution, poverty, fewer life opportunities and access to support services, and many of those affected are likely to be young women.

A crucial question that arose as a result of the discussions and will need to be addressed during this 'age of austerity' is how the current situation will impact on the future life opportunities of young women in general, let alone young BAMER women.



“Some of my friends think I should act in a certain way...like black people are loud and are out there and kind of obnoxious – they can see that on TV. I'm really reserved, and I don't talk. They think black people should talk. I think the criminal legal system transfers that attitude onto you as well.”

# Dispelling Myths | Speaking Truths

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES, NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG BAMER WOMEN LIVING IN THE UK

## Focus Group Themes

Imkaan wanted to acquire an understanding of how young BAMER women are represented, and viewed by society. In the process of gathering information, the young women were asked a series of questions about the types of services they interacted with and how comfortable they felt about engaging with health, education, and the criminal justice system. The core question that concerned young women was whether the services that ought to be serving them are doing so, and if not, why they are not? A total of ten topics were discussed and these were the media, safety, the criminal justice system, health, disability, immigration, government, relationships, sexuality and higher education. Given that the participants were all BAMER women, immigration and culture were also central to the focus group discussions.

The findings of the focus groups discussions have been divided into four main areas:

1. Rights and justice
2. Health and well-being
3. Engagement and representation
4. Relationships


## Rights and Justice

Significantly, the majority of the women would not contact the police for assistance, and would only do so as a last resort. In general, there was a perception that the police did not do their job properly, and that the system of reporting and appropriate police action was overly bureaucratic. One of the women, who was interested in working within the criminal justice system (CJS), voiced concerns over whether she would be accepted within the system because of her BAMER identity, she states:

“Will I be accepted, how will I be viewed? - they might think you are less capable than a standard British person.”

The majority of the young women believed that the current image of the CJS was not inclusive or relevant to their experiences. They stated that the views of the CJS were “based on stereotypes”, and one commented that the CJS was “overpopulated with old white men that don’t have a clue about what BAMER women have to go through.”

Young BAMER women reported that they were less likely to contact the police unless they were seriously injured including being subject to a sexual assault or rape. Of the young women who tried to seek help from the



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## Dispelling Myths | Speaking Truths

### EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES, NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG BAMER WOMEN LIVING IN THE UK

police, the majority of them did not find the police helpful. One young woman was physically attacked by an older white man in what she believed to be a racially motivated attack. In the discussion, she further emphasised that the perpetrator was with his friends, who were about the attacker's age, while the young woman was with her friends who were of a similar age. Her experience of reporting to the police highlighted that she felt that the older white man was believed and that her own experiences were marginalised by virtue of her age. There is also a perception that the police treat BAMER women differently from the indigenous white population. This experience of disproportionality in police responses meant that some women would prefer to resolve their particular situation(s) through family members rather than report the matter to the police.

BAMER women felt that the term 'immigrant' was immediately isolating and did not make them feel part of society – and this was also expressed as a key concern for young people from second or third generations within the UK. One young woman stated:

“It makes me feel that I'm not a part of a nation – not even in my own home – like here. It violates you. Makes you feel as though you're not a part of anything. You're an immigrant. Always mentions it. Sounds like a bad thing.”

Many of the young women felt that the prevailing mentality of 'you come over and take our jobs' is linked to the term immigration. Yet, the response from many of the BAMER young women is that it is because BAMER people apply for the (poorly paid) jobs – probably many of the jobs the local people would not want to do anyway – that they get them, “people say all the foreigners are taking our jobs, but immigrants work really hard. Immigrants won't get good jobs. They work so hard because they need their jobs so badly. So people exploit them.” The young women felt that the treatment given to 'immigrants' is different – akin to something like 'if you're not British and white, you're just treated differently.' Young women felt that the media also contributed to the negative portrayal of immigrants.



## Health And Well-Being

The responses were varied, with some women feeling able to talk to their GP about health problems – this was the case, particularly if the GP was a woman or the GP was young, “Every time you call, they always ask you which one you want to see and I always go to the female ones. I feel comfortable.” Many did not feel safe and confident to talk to older male GPs, particularly if they were from within the community or if they were a family friend. Most had a preference for talking to their parents or sisters, or friends about their health problems. Others used the internet, the NHS helpline or consulted the nurse. It is apparent that seeking the help of a GP

## Dispelling Myths | Speaking Truths

### EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES, NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG BAMER WOMEN LIVING IN THE UK

was the last resort.

One young woman commented that each time she did see her GP; she was only advised to eat more green vegetables, drink more water and to go to sleep on time. Another participant stated that she would see her GP if she did not have to “go through a lengthy process of booking an appointment, sitting there in the waiting room. If it just wasn’t so awkward and then when you get there it’s not patronising... If you could relate to the doctor a bit more.” Finally, one participant remarked that health care is accessible although “it’s not that good” and “how much they do for you is what they decide. It’s not what you want. It’s what they want at the end of the day.” For one of the women, “Sometimes, although I feel that if you have a concern, for example, I have really painful migraines but when I ask to be referred for a scan, it’s ‘no!’”

One young woman, who was being physically abused by her husband, confided in her GP. Unfortunately, her GP then informed the young woman’s family, which resulted in her father-in-law physically abusing her. Her father-in-law questioned her about discussing the abuse with her GP, and she herself then felt that she had acted wrongly by consulting her GP about her husband’s abuse towards her. This raises a clear concern about GPs breaching patient confidentiality which in turn increases the risk of further violence for women.

## Engagement And Representation

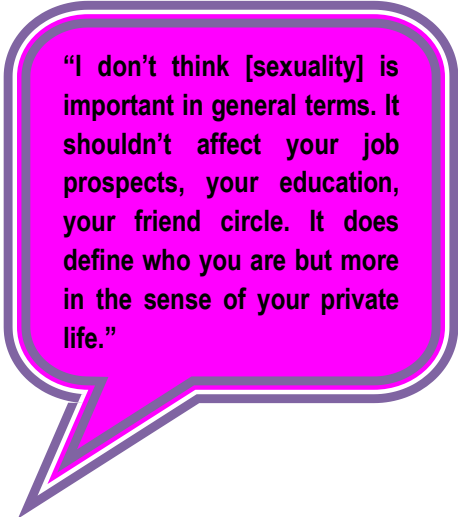
- **Identity**

Some BAMER young women talked about strongly held views from within the white indigenous population about any difference in appearance among BAMER young women leading to a presumption that she must be from a different country. For young BAMER women, they felt that people frequently equated their identity(ies) with difference, as in ‘foreign’, whilst not understanding that a BAMER woman could be born in the UK, speak fluent English and be ‘totally English’. A difference in appearance also attracted verbal and racial abuse and for some women this included physical assault whereby some of the BAMER young women experienced having objects thrown at them.

One young woman commented, “I think there’s a stereotype for everything for ethnic minorities, and people just judge others on the stereotypes when they don’t know or they just judge on what they see in the media.”

- **Media**

The majority of the women felt that they were not represented in the media, in terms of the nature of commercials being shown. However, one woman



“I don’t think [sexuality] is important in general terms. It shouldn’t affect your job prospects, your education, your friend circle. It does define who you are but more in the sense of your private life.”

## Dispelling Myths | Speaking Truths

### EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES, NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG BAMER WOMEN LIVING IN THE UK

stated that as the majority of women are white British, it makes sense that the advertisements are aimed at the white customer. In addition, when BAMER communities are depicted in television they tend to be stereotyped, one young woman commented, “In soaps, they always use Pakistani people because they associate all Asian people as Pakistanis...” The discussions also highlighted the over-sexualised images of young BAMER women in music videos, including a lack of role models for young BAMER women. There are more role models in the United States than in Britain.

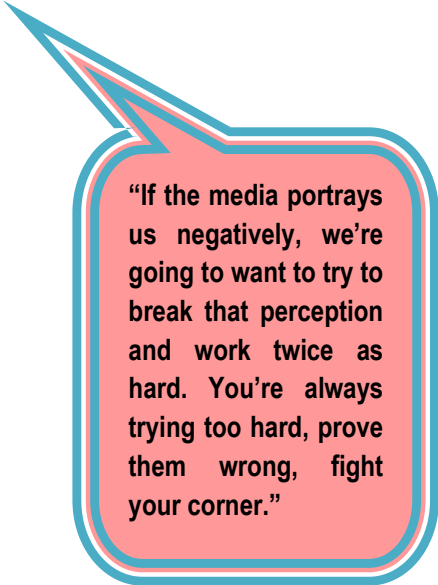
In general, the media tends to portray BAMER people negatively, and in a manner that does not display much understanding of BAMER communities. Women felt that whenever a BAMER person becomes a news item, this is because he or she is connected with or has been charged with a crime – the news tends to focus on negative portrayals of BAMER people, when there could be greater coverage on the achievements. “They should make people more aware of people with different ethnicity, who are migrants and who are doing things for society, and the issue shouldn’t be ‘oh those jobs have gone.’” One commented that, “If the media portrays us negatively, we’re going to want to try to break that perception and work twice as hard. You’re always trying too hard, prove them wrong, fight your corner.” Conversely, a few women commented that some BAMER people try to fit the stereotypes, with one participant commenting that some BAMER people “do bad things when they should be aiming high because they have really great potential but some of them are wasting it due to the influences around them and because you face it every day, you just think it’s normal.”

The media tends to portray migrants as illegal, and at the same time, there is some misunderstanding among some of the women in relation to the term ‘immigrant’, which could have been the result of the nature of media portrayal. Yet, one woman pointed out that “a lot of people don’t... know the definition of an immigrant... but they think they know it because of the media. They just read a report and say ‘it’s so true’ when they don’t know...”

- **Education**

In terms of education, much of the comments centred on the lack of access, with a major issue being unequal access to higher education.

Young women highlighted the negative stereotyping of young BAMER men. BAMER women in the UK have often had to manage their positions around gender and race – this has often meant seeking commonalities with BAMER men around challenging racism whilst working with white women to challenge misogyny. This is reflected by one of the young women about the way in which young black men are viewed, “partly to do with teachers and partly as a young black man you’re trying to find yourself in society where there’s nobody to support you. So you turn to the streets... people on



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## Dispelling Myths | Speaking Truths

### EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES, NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG BAMER WOMEN LIVING IN THE UK

the road, and you form a sub-culture and when you're rejected by the mainstream culture, you try to get these goals, money, regardless of how you do it and then you become a stereotype."

#### • Government

In relation to the government, the main problem is that the majority of the young women felt that the government did not represent them, and that the public spending cuts would have a negative impact. One young woman commented, "The government... don't understand or represent us." One participant crucially stated that, "The coalition government, that's when I started caring, especially in relation to some of the absurd cuts they're putting in... All they care about is money, not welfare [or] the development of people living in the current climate. What happens to us? Are we going to be less developed human beings, less skilled?"

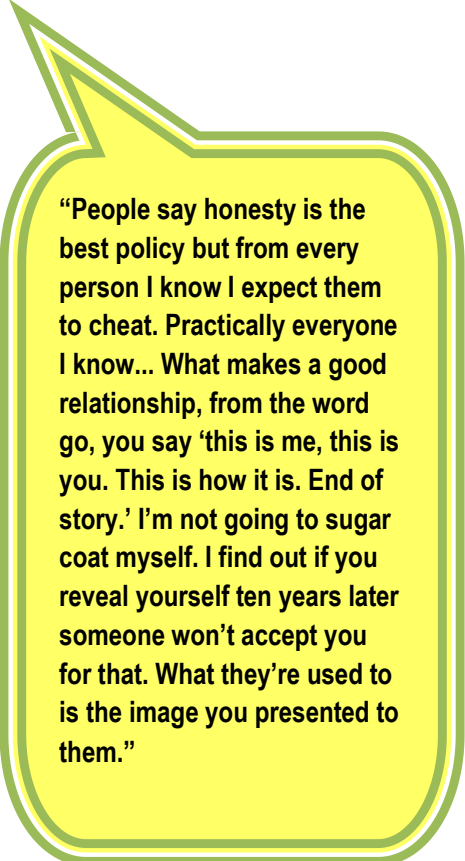
#### Relationships

In general, the young women appeared to know what makes a 'good' or a 'bad' relationship, and there seems to be a general consensus that physical or verbal abuse is not acceptable. Good relationships meant that there was love, trust, equality, being fair, respect for each other, honesty, the need to "reveal yourself" at the start of the relationship, an understanding of each other, being non-judgemental and having fun. For women whose religion was an important part of their identity, their partner needed to be of the same religion, and for one woman, as long as her partner practised the same religion, it did not matter whether or not he was of the same culture. One young woman also mentioned the need for her partner to have a good job.

A definition of a bad relationship would include manipulation, a lot of indecision, a lack of communication, "when you're afraid to ask him a question in case he flips", lies, jealousy, being hypocritical, controlling.

The notions of 'honour' and 'shame' generated much discussion, with some of the women commenting that sometimes their parents would be more concerned about what extended family would think, even if their parents might be more liberal. Comments were also made by some of being treated differently as a young woman within the family and that this was unfair.

Many of the women appear to believe that it is not possible to be a Muslim and be gay at the same time. In terms of the discussion centring on sexuality, the views of the young women varied from "If I was a lesbian, I wouldn't tell anyone. No one would want to know you;" to "I don't think [sexuality] is important in general terms. It shouldn't affect your job prospects, your education, your friend circle. It does define who you are but more in the sense of your private life."



"People say honesty is the best policy but from every person I know I expect them to cheat. Practically everyone I know... What makes a good relationship, from the word go, you say 'this is me, this is you. This is how it is. End of story.' I'm not going to sugar coat myself. I find out if you reveal yourself ten years later someone won't accept you for that. What they're used to is the image you presented to them."


## Dispelling Myths | Speaking Truths

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES, NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG BAMER WOMEN LIVING IN THE UK

### CONCLUSIONS: THE FUTURE FOR YOUNG BAMER WOMEN

It is clear from the focus groups that young BAMER women do not feel that they are currently represented by the government, while they are misrepresented by the media, which continues to promote racial stereotypes, and the news, in the main, tends to portray BAMER people negatively. Many of the young women are concerned about how they are also stereotyped by the white indigenous population who often have difficulty in understanding that they too are British, and feel British, that this is also their home.

It is far too early to comment fully on the impact Big Society will have on young BAMER women bearing in mind that the notion is currently being developed. However, for Big Society to have a positive impact on young women the government needs to consult young BAMER women, to ensure that their voices, needs and aspirations are heard and that this is followed by a real commitment to address young women's needs.



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don't understand or  
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