



ADULTIFICATION OF THE GIRL-CHILD CONFERENCE REPORT

EXPLORING POLICY AND
PRACTICE RESPONSES TO
ISSUES AFFECTING YOUNG
WOMEN AND GIRLS ACROSS
MANCHESTER

27 APRIL 2023



MANCHESTER
CITY COUNCIL



ABOUT AFRUCA

AFRUCA Safeguarding Children is a national charity based in London and Manchester. We work in UK Black and Ethnic communities to protect and safeguard children from abuse, modern slavery and exploitation. We tackle cultural and religious practices that harm children. The key focus of our work is child abuse prevention and early intervention. You can read more about our work on our website at **www.afruca.org**

CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

Girl child adultification bias has become more pronounced in education, family, community, faith, cultural, child protection, youth justice and other settings across the UK in recent years. This relates to the manner in which underaged Black, Asian and other ethnic girls are regarded as more mature, deserving of harsher treatments than peers from other races. Young women and girls' experiences of discrimination, abuse, exploitation and repression are based on their race and gender, with age often discounted as a protective factor. The story of Child Q who was a 15 year old black girl from Hackney, is the most recognized example of girl-child adultification.

CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

On 27 the April 2023, AFRUCA hosted a major conference to explore the Adultification of the Girl Child across Manchester. The event examined different ways adultification occurs in different settings and the ramifications for the child's protection and well-being, in the short and long term. The conference also explored how statutory agencies, youth groups, communities and faith organisations could work



CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

together to enhance protection for the girl-children across the City, in line with Manchester City Council's Children and Young People's Plan 2020-2024 on prevention and early intervention through a multi-agency approach as well as its commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion in policy and service provision.

We were delighted to have a range of expert speakers presented papers that helped to shed more light on the above, as well as opportunities to share learning and ideas to tackle girl child adultification bias in many ways. We were also delighted to have held a powerful panel of young experts with lived experience of the subject matter to share their views with recommendations for the professionals in attendance.

CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

We are working with Manchester City Council to take forward ideas generated from the conference.



Summary and Conclusions

- As a society, we agree children require help, support and protection yet there are hidden or ignored harm for black girls. This also occurs in Manchester. We must work harder to change this.

The preconditions of adultification are based on various biases which intersect, such as systemic inequalities and where certain children, and particularly those from Black communities are pathologized, and considered an “other”, and therefore not necessarily seen through a lens of safeguarding.

- Adultification can lead to professionals placing a level of responsabilisation on Black children to protect themselves instead of their responsibility to safeguard and protect them
- Young girls in some communities might feel reluctant to disclose abuse and exploitation due the dishonour it would bring to their family and the culture of disbelief or that they would be “married off”. There is the tendency to protect the honour of the community over the safeguarding of vulnerable girls

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Summary and Conclusions

- Serious case reviews show how adultification bias alter the care of black girls in child protection.
- Children are children no matter their ethnicity. All children deserve basic care to meet their needs. Professionals need to not think the young Black person is disruptive, angry, annoying or misbehaving. Focus should be on their history, seeing the world through their eyes to understand their aim. Professionals need to understand they are children and treat them as any other child.
- Professionals must have the cultural sensitivity and understand that sometimes rape, domestic and sexual abuse can be normalised in certain homes. With this knowledge, they can help steer the child away from harm outside the home, including grooming into criminal exploitation or sexual exploitation, gang coercion, death, prison, or the child protection system where they may not be supported, exposing them to further harm.
- Female Genital Mutilation is steeped in adultification in which young girls are seen as sexual objects. FGM is adultification steeped in patriarchy and misogyny
- Professional curiosity is required to assess the impact of racial bias on young women and girls

Key Recommendations

It is essential for all professionals working with children to understand and develop awareness of adultification and how it can affect practice, intervention and service delivery. AFRUCA should roll out conference nationally to help facilitate the skills improvement of professionals around adultification.

- Cultural sensitivity is essential when working with children from diverse communities. Children in Black and ethnic communities are already adultified at home, so there is no safe space for many children. Professionals need to understand how children can be adultified based on how culture is built into their identity, taboos and religion. It is the role of professionals to disrupt the cultural taboos they see in the homes, not to encourage it.
- The use of language is important when working with communities as there are many terminologies which do not exist in many languages – like safeguarding, exploitation, grooming. Using simple language is important when raising awareness with communities.

Key Recommendations

- Practitioners should build up a non-judgemental knowledge of community dynamics which will help to work more positively with specific communities and not use pre-conceived ideas to judge those they work with.
- Setting up services like the **Phoenix Project** with regular and positive conversations with young girls about identity, positive relationships, coercive behaviour and positive self esteem is essential as most will not have access to these conversations within their communities.
- It is crucial for parents to have very early intervention and support so they can protect their children. Child protection awareness is crucial for all parents because many do not understand how their children are or could be at risk of harm – in the home and externally

Key Messages From Presentations



Debbie Ariyo OBE, Conference Chair

CEO & Founder of AFRUCA Safeguarding Children

"We see adultification bias in all aspects of our work with children at AFRUCA - from the range of cultural and religious influences that guide child rearing practices, to adultification bias in schools, on the streets, in the child protection system, when children are involved in the criminal justice system, treated harshly for no apparent reason, or denied support or services because of their race and gender. We have organised this conference to open up discussions on this hidden subject and hope to help galvanise action to address it in the best interests of children."



Kersha Bristol, Opening Speech
(Formerly known as Salimah Khan)
"My Experiences As A Survivor"

"To see so many professionals and survivors in one room listening and learning from one another shows me there is a beacon of light to reach for in terms of understanding the experiences of many young people today but also clearly acknowledging the disadvantages within these situations that many young people face due to their race and gender when being identified as a victim of such exploitation."

Key Messages From Presentations



Paul Marshall, Welcome Speech
Strategic Director of Children's and Education
Services, Manchester City Council

"The data tells us - young Black, Asian, Ethnic Minority boys are overrepresented in our Youth Justice Service and in custody. 35% of children referred to the Complex Safeguarding Hub are girls and risks associated with sexual exploitation.

There is a lack of recognition of their vulnerability perceiving them to be sexualised, more mature and developed than what they are. As a society, we agree children require help, support and protection yet there are hidden or ignored harm for black girls. We will work harder in Manchester to change this"



Jahnine Davis, Keynote Speech
Co-Founder and Director of Listen Up
"Exploring The Adultification of Black Girls"

"If we are not seeing children; if we are not acknowledging the innate vulnerability all children have, if we are dehumanising Black children; professionals are potentially increasing their risk of harm, or the harm Black children are already experiencing.

Adultification Bias is also a combination of structural/systemic racism and intra familial cultural beliefs, generational trauma, gendered norms was poignant. All must be addressed in the best interests of Black girls."

Key Messages From Presentations



Pav Kaur, Presentation

Faith Lead at NWG Network

Adultification, Culture and Religion: Creating Safer Communities

"The media has framed child sexual exploitation as affecting solely White British female victims perpetrated by Asian adult males, suggesting the motivation behind such abuses were to do with race, faith and ethnic culture. Communities felt scared about these assumptions made about them and this impacted on victims and the support they could receive. Practitioners should build up a non judgemental knowledge of the community dynamics which will help to work more positively with them"



**Juliet Oduro Mylov3
Abstract Artist**

"...Speech can be a path leading only to discourse. You are fine just the way you are...When people like you just because you are pretty, who knows what it means...Discontent leads to resentment and discontent is resurrection. Discontentment demands change. Definition of women: subordinate, tenderness, gentleness..weakness. To live is to love, to love is to advance. Who helps the healer who heals?"

Key Messages From Presentations



**Professor Claudia Bernard, Keynote Speech
Professor of Social Work/Head of Postgraduate
Research Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies**

"Intersectionality and Adultification In Child Protection"

"Intersectionality is using an analytical lens for deepening understandings of how oppressions at the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and age significantly shape experiences (Crenshaw 1994). Misogyny contributes to the adultification of Black girls. Serious case reviews show how adultification bias alter the care of black girls in child protection.

This includes: victim blaming, lack of acknowledgement of vulnerability, negation of rights to be protected and negligence of safeguarding duties. Professional curiosity is required to assess impact of racial bias on young women and girls."

Alimatu Dimonekene MBE, Presentation

Women and Girls Rights Advocate. FGM, Campaigner

"FGM As Girl Child Adultification"

"Female Genital Mutilation is a form of gender based violence and does not belong in any religion. It is a form of objectification that can lead to the perception of girls as sexual object. There are many harmful effects of sexualising young girls. FGM is adultification steeped in patriarchy and misogyny."



Key Messages From Presentations



Katrina Alley-Adiat, Presentation

Youth Violence Interventions Worker, Youth Violence Project at AFRUCA Safeguarding Children

AFRUCA's Work on Adulthood and Young Women and Girls In Exploitation

Many young women and girls experience different forms of vulnerabilities that expose them to risks of violence, grooming, gang indoctrination and exploitation.

Funded by Manchester City Council, the **Phoenix Project** aims to work with partners to remove/reduce the risks of harm that young women and girls at risk of exploitation experience and help to make improvements in their lives. The project is funded until 2025 and will work with 30 young people each year – age 12-18 years. The project has four components:

- **One to One Direct Support**, using an Empowerment and Personal Development Approach.
- **Group activities and peer-to-peer support/learning** through the Young Women's Forum and Summer Outdoor activities
- **Skills Building** programme for Professionals
- **Community Education** programme in schools, faith and community groups/activities

A project Steering Group has been established comprising a range of professionals and AFRUCA staff to have oversight of project.

The project is now taking referrals. Referral form can be downloaded on AFRUCA website at www.afruca.org

Young People's Panel

Panellists: Kersha Bristol, Katrina Alley-Adiat, Tia Spencer, Desrie Asomuyide
Moderator: Debbie Ariyo OBE

Young panellists described their childhood and youthful experiences of racism, exploitation, violence in the home, adultification and racism in the education, child protection and criminal justice systems. They explored the long term these experiences have had on them as adults, including as parents.

"Many police officers are there because of the power the role confers on them. How do we teach them to see us as equals when all they want is power?"

"Generational trauma contributes to the lives of many Black people. Unfortunately many children still experience racism from services which will also affect their lives and future."

"Education is key. Education can help to change the negative narrative, if people can educate their family members to stand up and speak up. Without this, it is hard to see change and it can be tiring having to keep talking about these issues"

"Within families and communities, children might not receive positive guidance and treatment, leading to inappropriate behaviours outside the home and then lashing out due to harsh responses."

"Adultification happens in many ways - children are profiled because of the clothes they wear or stigmatised because of their natural hair. Children are sexualised in different ways. People might feel it is acceptable to do things to certain people but that is not the case."

"Racism is endemic and compounds the parenting of Black children. Racism makes parents fearful for their children's well-being and treatment outside the home."

"Children in Black and ethnic communities are already adultified at home, so there is no safe space for many children. Professionals need to understand how children can be adultified based on how culture is built into their identity, taboos and religion. It is the role of professionals to disrupt the cultural taboos they see in the homes, not to encourage it."

"Cultural adultification in the home pushes children into extra-familial harm. Children who are already groomed for roles as wives might be susceptible to sexual exploitation outside the home"

"When children approach professionals for help, it is because they do not feel safe at home."



Way Forward



Julie Heslop

**Assistant Director, Early Help
and Prevention; and**

Susan Butlin

**Assistant Director, Complex Safeguarding, Manchester
City Council**

"Manchester City Council is committed to continue working with stakeholders like AFRUCA to raise awareness and tackle the difficulties and vulnerabilities experienced by children across the borough. The local authority will work to enhance the professional curiosity of its staff through more educative events like this conference. The council will review its work, systems and encourage its staff to examine how its service delivery contribute to the problem of adultification of Black children so that improvements can be made."

Conference Feedback

Here are some comments received from participants about the importance of the Conference

"The conference was so insightful listening to the lived experiences of guest speakers and how they had each successfully overcome adversity but also the long lasting impact of their daily lived experiences had on their emotional health"

"The panel discussion was educational, hearing the perspectives of others, those that had experiences personally was especially powerful."

"It was so interesting to listen to child protection processes from a parent's perspective and the potential injustices they have faced."

"Yes - I learnt about the nuances of family dynamics, differing perspectives of the term 'grooming', importance of advocating for black CYP to keep them safe "

"I learned more about the prevalence of racism, discrimination and oppression in the way that Black and ethnic minority children and young people are viewed and treated. It made me examine my own ideas and values and commit to asking questions (of myself and others). I also appreciated the opportunity to share within the small groups and hear from colleagues. There was a good mix of personal experiences and a wider view, with plenty of critical reflection about how and why things are the way they are."

"The conference helped me to reflect, has given me knowledge to take into practice and learn new things, for example, the history of FGM and the experiences of girls in gangs."





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