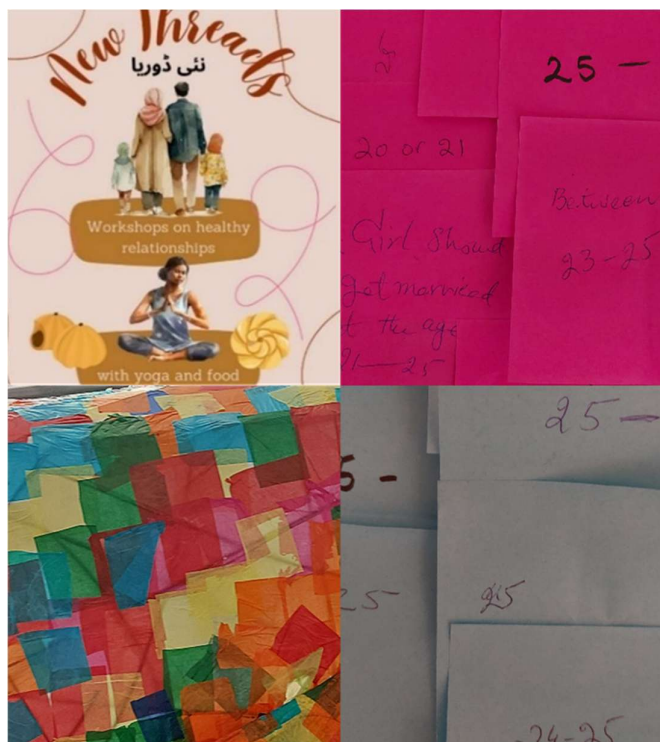


# **‘New Threads’ – pilot sessions**

## Exploring honour, shame and social norms

### Summary evaluation report



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## 1 Introduction and background

Oxford Against Cutting (OAC) is an Oxford-based charity working to end harmful practices suffered by girls and women living in the Thames Valley and beyond. These include female genital mutilation (FGM), 'honour'-based abuse (HBA) and early and forced marriage (EFM) and female cosmetic genital surgery. Our mission is to end practices that harm girls and women by providing education, supporting survivors, raising awareness of support services and empowering young people to champion initiatives against harmful practices. People from affected communities and young people are at the forefront of our activities.

This summary report describes and evaluates '**New Threads**', a pilot community engagement project, which ran from September to November 2023. This project was run in partnership with an Asian women's community group, and aimed to explore aspects of healthy relationships and the underpinning social norms, including conceptions of 'honour' within South Asian communities.<sup>1</sup> The project name was chosen as the women in the group have a passion for sewing which has brought them together, we also aimed for the sessions to lead to some 'new threads' of learning and ideas. The group is led by a volunteer coordinator, and aims to support women through isolation and domestic abuse. They hold events and workshops to promote education, health, well-being, and social integration among Asian women.

The project was designed to fulfil several purposes, namely, to:

- Build capacity as a community group
- Introduce new learning through discussion on issues relating to healthy relationships
- Support the group coordinator's skillset to support new members of her group who may be struggling with cultural pressures and at risk of harmful practices in the future.
- Increase confidence of the participants to talk about tricky issues that can impact their families and communities and may be considered "taboo".
- Empower the women of the group through increasing their knowledge and self-belief, building greater rapport amongst the group.
- Explore an additional aim of increasing the participants' body mobility, confidence and stress management, e.g., through yoga.

We also aimed to use this pilot series to create new workshop material for adaption to other groups' needs, including some use of televised drama and film as a discussion tool.

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<sup>1</sup> Details of the programme sessions are shown in Annex I.

## 2 Project design and development

In preparation for the series, a core planning team met to discuss potential topics and the structure of the sessions. Our sessions involving community members are always planned to be relaxed and informal whilst supported by a structured 'template'. Through this we ensure consistency and provide clarity for participants around safeguarding, and respect for their own and fellow participants' anonymity/confidentiality. Once the content and timetable for this programme was developed, we designed a flyer (see front cover) to 'advertise' the programme to network members.

After each session, the facilitation team held debrief discussions on how things had gone, learning points and assessing whether there was a need to adapt the following session(s). This iterative process means we can adapt 'on the ground' according to need. For the final session, notes from all of the workshops were reviewed to produce a framework around which to draw the key themes and questions. Following this, we held a final structured team debrief session to discuss what had gone well, what we might change and key learning.

### *Format and content*

The initial, core plan for the format of the sessions allowed time for arrival, a 45-minute yoga and relaxation session, time for eating then an hour-long workshop discussion. In reality, this required significant adaptation on the ground, as participants arrived at various times due to their travel arrangements, other commitments and the demands of the group of women they were attending with. Attendance numbers provided us with a significant challenge at times. One reason for this was that several of the women attended in small groups, and if one was unable/unwilling to come along the others did not. The weather can also have an impact, as the women may be travelling a distance and some by public transport. The shape of our sessions had to change somewhat. For example, some gentle yoga was introduced in the first two sessions, but subsequently there was no time for these and instead the time available was used for discussion and food only. The sessions were designed to be relaxed to create a comfortable environment for participants that encouraged discussion and made the sessions enjoyable. Children were accommodated within the group, and food was provided (as well as being brought by the women) to share. Despite the fluctuating membership numbers and attendees, this appeared to work well once the women were 'in the room'. As English is not the first language for many of the women, the group coordinator (and sometimes others) was available to interpret in Urdu for participants who needed this.

Group discussions were mainly led by our CEO, Kate Agha, with support from Operations Manager Dot Pritchard and our Domestic Abuse Specialist and Coordinator Vania Martins. Kate Clayton-Hathway, our Research and Evaluation Director acted as note-taker when needed.

For each of the individual sessions, an outline was prepared in advance with key questions and themes to explore. For each session, in advance we prepared a resource list (post its, handouts, etc) and a general 'script' for the session, which included icebreakers, a series of questions and occasional exercises (e.g., with Post Its or to call out ideas which we would write up onto a flip chart). These were finessed and finalised between the facilitators and group coordinator in advance of each session, based on learning from the previous one.

Feedback was collected about the ideas discussed with evaluation forms, as well as verbal check-ins during the sessions to ensure all were engaged and comfortable with the ongoing discussion.

Icebreakers were used to introduce key themes in **healthy relationships** such as love and family. We provided a coloured envelope for each woman with her name on the front and the chance to say/write *“What I would most like to find in this envelope from someone I love”* e.g. an apology letter, an invitation to a party, money etc, or *“Where would I like to go if there was a flight ticket/shopping trip in my envelope and why?”*

These envelopes were kept by the group leader and handed out each week to support a feeling of continuity and build on ideas week-by-week.

### ***Risk assessment, ethics & safeguarding***

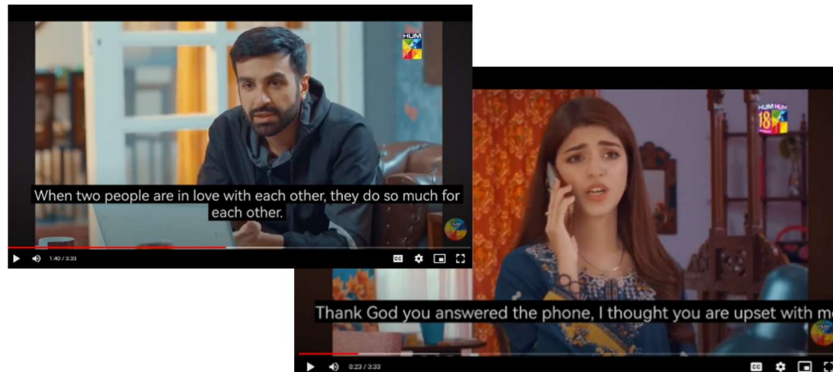
The OAC team met in advance to conduct our standard risk assessment procedure. Working with community groups around potentially sensitive cultural issues such as so-called ‘honour’ brings the possibility of negative psychological triggers. We therefore took time to develop a set of discussion guidelines that created a safe space, e.g., the ability to take time out or speak to a facilitator, ensuring that facilitators have a developed understanding of the issues and taking advice from the community organiser re sensitive, non-stigmatising resources.

We also recognise that attending a meeting to discuss issues around family life and social behaviour may be highly sensitive in some households. To mitigate this in some way, we worked hard to set ground rules, to which we asked everyone to agree. At every session we repeated the need to develop trust in the room, to not take any of the discussions home nor to repeat outside the room what others had said within the confines of the group. From a safeguarding perspective, attendees were informed of OAC’s legal obligation to pass on any information about a child or vulnerable adult who may be at risk of harm. Facilitators and the group coordinator were available at the end of each meeting to provide support to participants if needed, and on one occasion we were able to offer some emergency support.

We completed our organisational planning procedure, during which we ensure our key principles, including the need for participants to fully understand what their involvement entails and informed consent around all aspects of participation, are built into project design and communication.

As we were taking notes on the discussions to develop our understanding of social norms we explained fully the purpose of the note-taking, that everything would be anonymised, and we obtained verbal consent at each of the sessions. Specifically, we did not audio-record any part

of the sessions, and made it clear that no recording was permitted. No photographs were taken that identified any participant.



Televised drama in Urdu was popular as a starting point for discussing 'honour' and shame

### 3 Project review and evaluation

Over the course of project we engaged with 50 participants, most regularly with 6-7 women taking part (excluding the group coordinator). Evaluation forms were distributed where possible,<sup>2</sup> though due to challenges with attendance and timings, as discussed above, it proved difficult to obtain consistent feedback via forms. A small number of participants completed feedback forms on how much they had learned, (6 forms), the **average score was 4.3/5**. Fourteen participants over the sessions completed feedback forms, and scored highly on **how interesting** they had found the sessions (**4.7/5**) and **how enjoyable** (**4.5/5**). As some of the women are not fluent in English, responses to some of the text questions are a little hard to contextualise and less rich than they might be. Some wrote in their own language, and the group coordinator kindly translated for us. Despite these additional issues, through producing a word cloud we were able to see what was of most interest to some of the women, and how they had drawn on the **important themes of healthy relationships** such as kindness, care, trust and recognising vulnerability. It also showed the **popularity of watching a drama** to discuss these issues!



In particular, we felt that the Word cloud shows the impact of the drama, and the possibility for discussion based on a familiar context/discussion around social norms without making it

<sup>2</sup> A sample of the forms developed to obtain feedback from attendees is in Annex II.

personal to one's own family and friends. This can be very powerful as it provides a **safe space** for discussion and exploring differences.

In terms of future learning that interested the women, responses included: "How to help when someone need help", "How to solve problem when you, or someone, facing anything", "Couple therapy", "Children values" and "...more on social stigmas". Several of the requests for future learning centred on gaining the knowledge to help friends or family facing issues at home.

Finally three participants responded to a question about whether the workshops had made them think about anything in a different way, with one saying they had **learned a lot about relationships** and another saying that the sessions had been helpful to her.

#### **4 Exploring social norms**

We explored gender norms in a range of ways designed to engage the group and promote discussion. Within the themes of healthy and unhealthy relationships, topics included such as the impact of domestic abuse on children; the differences between arranged and forced marriages and many other aspects of relationships and "honour"/shame. For some parts of the sessions, e.g., when discussing norms relating to families, we posed specific questions. For instance, we asked participants to write on pink- (for women) and blue- (for men) coloured Post Its the age at which each gender should ideally get married. The average age for girls was given as 23, and for boys 26 (with the oldest being 25 and 30 respectively). This created space for reflection on why girls should be expected to be married at a younger age, and led into more general talk on why boys and girls should be treated differently, e.g. is this because girls mature earlier than boys or are there other reasons?

In later sessions, we explored issues around independence and decision-making to broaden out discussion on how social norms might impact these. These themes were noted, and fed into questions for the final session which included asking the women whether:

- Compared to the start of the series, they feel differently about power and control and who should be in charge of decisions that affect the family?
- There are changes in what they think women should accept/not accept from husbands and in-laws?
- They feel more confident to support/advise a friend or family member who is suffering abuse at home who is thinking of leaving a relationship?

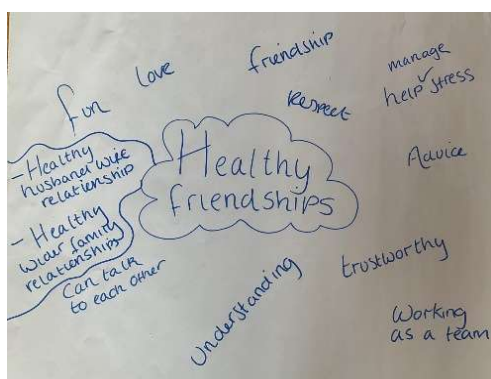
Some **key themes emerging relating to social norms were:**

- Issues of 'blame and shame', where generally speaking in matters of honour " it is always the girl's fault"
- Boys and men not being held to the same standard of behaviour, for example, when it comes to having intimate relationships outside of marriage. Although these things are known to be wrong, why are these norms not enforced?
- Differing responsibilities for men and women, e.g., in terms of domestic work in the home, it was said there's "no swapping", i.e., it is always the woman's responsibility. But what if she's unable to due to illness, etc



- Power and decision-making in the home is often about listening to your husband. There are areas where the women have the final say, e.g., relating to childcare and other domestic issues. Are these open to negotiation, and would a couple admit to doing things differently from others?
- Women and girls having to negotiate and navigate within a limited set of expectations and achievements. For example, it was felt to be important to have confidence and be able to speak for yourself but if you are “too strong” the man can feel overstepped and “things can go wrong”. Women becoming educated is potentially problematic, because educated girls may want someone with higher education.

We did observe some subtle shifts in thinking across the life of the project. One participant, for example initially felt that some of the unacceptable behaviours shown in the film clips were all the fault of the woman protagonist. Later, though, she recognised that the male character’s actions were unhealthy.



**Healthy v unhealthy relationships?**  
Some questions discussed by the women’s group



## 5 Summary and learning points

From the outset, we understood the need for flexibility in the timetable and delivery, and this has proven to be essential in delivering this type of project. Initial topics considered for the sessions included ‘modern life’, exploring social norms, healthy children, healthy self-esteem, conception and modern slavery. Once the sessions commenced, however, it took time to build learning on healthy/unhealthy relationships and discussions to unravel different viewpoints were often lengthy. The decision was made to focus on this rather than try to cover too many areas. Built into this was some work on safety planning, delivered by Vania Martins, which proved to be of great interest to the women, as shown in their feedback.

Care is also needed to manage inter-group dynamics and the wide range of opinions, and at the heart of this it is extremely helpful to have relatable material, such as the film clips, which



were culturally relevant and also allowed for discussion on contentious issues without these being personal. In addition, though activities appear attractive at outset, some, such as yoga, may not be popular in this particular context. Instead, for future sessions we will focus on those that stimulated the most interest, e.g., discussion on a TV drama which would work well with a group meeting to eat and then have a relaxed 'roundtable' discussion.

Our team found this project really enjoyable and also felt that the women who attended got a lot of benefit from the workshops and discussions. The feedback from the women on the value of safety planning, that they wanted to know ways to support friends and family, and that it was possible to provide some emergency support showed the value of having Vania Martins, our domestic abuse expert, on hand. By learning from these reflections and building on the strongest features we hope to run further workshops later in 2024 to continue building these relationships and work with the local South Asian communities to create positive impact.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to valuable insights around power dynamics and gender roles, we are grateful for the knowledge we have gained on working with a women's group that supports our community engagement work more widely. Such work is extremely important if we are to stay connected with our audience, and understand changing attitudes and needs, in particular if there are shifts in social norms and the factors that can elicit positive change. Our aim is to return to the group for 'New Threads #2', built on a developed understanding driven by the interests of the women in the group. At the forefront of our thinking is to do the best for the group to maintain their interest and engagement, as well as supporting their safety and wellbeing. Overall, our emerging understanding of the needs of this group and the accompanying social norms can inform our wider community engagement work to create a wider positive impact.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that at the time of writing this report we have already returned to deliver a successful discussion workshop around conception.

## Annex I – Programme details

Workshop no	Date	Topic
Session 1	20/09/23	Introductory session, rapport-building
Session 2	27/09/2023	‘Modern life’ discussion
Session 3	4/10/23	Relationships and families
Session 4	1/11/2023	Healthy relationships
Session 5	8/11/2023	Healthy relationships + safety planning
Session 6	15/11/23	Healthy relationships + safety planning
Session 7	22/11/23	Healthy relationships + safety planning
Session 8	29/11/23	Revisiting key themes and feedback session

## Annex II – Sample evaluation forms

### Healthy Relationships Evaluation

How much did you learn about healthy relationships today (where 0=nothing at all and 5=I learned a lot)?

☹	0	1	2	3	4	5	😊
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

How interesting did you find the workshop and presentation (where 0=not at all interesting and 5=extremely interesting)?

☹	0	1	2	3	4	5	😊
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How enjoyable was the workshop (where 0=no enjoyable at all and 5=very enjoyable)?


☹	0	1	2	3	4	5	😊
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What was the best part of the workshop?

Did this workshop change your mind about anything?

Is there anything that would make our workshop better?

Many thanks for your help 😊

  
Oxford Against Cutting  
Preventing Gender-Based Violence

### Final workshop - evaluation

How interesting did you find today's workshop (where 0=not at all interesting and 5=extremely interesting)?

☹	0	1	2	3	4	5	😊
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

How enjoyable was today's workshop (where 0=not enjoyable at all and 5=very enjoyable)?

☹	0	1	2	3	4	5	😊
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What was the best part of all the workshops you have attended with us?

Did any of these workshops make you think about anything in a different way?

Are there any subjects you would like to talk more about in a future session?

Are there any activities you would like to do more of in future?

Many thanks for your help 😊

  
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Preventing Gender-Based Violence



## OxfordAgainstCutting

### ProtectingGirls&Women

**Acknowledgements:** Many thanks to the group and their coordinator, who has collaborated with us to run the workshops and contributed so much to their delivery and success. Our charity supported this project from unrestricted funds. Any queries to [research@oxfordagainstcutting.org](mailto:research@oxfordagainstcutting.org).

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