

Supporting and empowering victims of racist harassment

A previous JRF study, *'We can't all be white!': Racist victimisation in the UK*, found that generally people felt alone, vulnerable, unsupported and cut off from familiar networks through the experience and disclosure of racist harassment. When reporting to a range of agencies victims were offered little or no practical or psychological support which added to the sense of isolation. This study, by Kusminder Chahal, identified the development and response of community-based racist harassment support projects from across England and Wales and considered how casework-led interventions respond to the needs of victims. The study found that:

-  Racist harassment support projects exist unevenly across the country. Some have developed either as a political response to racist attacks, including murder, in localities where minority ethnic communities live. Others have grown out of a perceived need to better co-ordinate a range of agencies to respond and raise awareness about the issue of racist harassment.
-  Support projects are involved in a variety of activities. Some projects work with local schools and pupils to raise awareness of racism and/or monitor the extent of racist harassment in their locality. A number have developed training and other resource material to challenge racist harassment, and some co-ordinate political campaigns around specific incidents.
-  All support projects provide assistance and support to victims of racist harassment through casework, though the degree to which this is central to their work varies. Such casework has a positive impact on the quality of life of the clients. Caseworkers offer direct support, validating the client's experience and helping to rebuild the confidence of individuals, families and communities.
-  The numbers of racist harassment caseworkers varies project by project. Caseworkers can often be managing over eighty cases at a time. Moreover, support projects experience regular funding crises that often result in reducing or withdrawing from direct casework.
-  The racist harassment support sector could be strengthened by adequate funding streams, recognising the needs of caseworkers for structures of support, and developing community-based solutions to providing support and assistance.

Background

'We can't all be white!' Racist victimisation in the UK (see JRF Findings 679) showed that support from a variety of statutory and voluntary agencies was at best ad hoc and unstructured and at worst non-existent. It seemed that victims were left alone to develop their own route to help and assistance. They felt they had been given little or no practical or psychological support and so looked to their own resources to manage and respond to the victimisation they were experiencing.

The current research aimed to investigate the role, impact and potential of localised racist harassment support projects. The study sought to examine whether projects were effective in addressing these evident gaps and to highlight the potential of projects to develop this role.

Development of the support projects

Support projects have often developed as a direct result of the lack of action in challenging and confronting racist harassment (including in some cases racist murders). However, *how* they have developed beyond this varies. Some projects are clearly client focused and put at the heart of their work victim support and casework; others concentrate more on prevention and monitoring; and some identify themselves as 'political' and are involved in high profile campaigns to pursue justice and/or to challenge organisational decision-making.

Range of activities

The range of activities that support projects involve themselves with has grown. Projects are often asked to provide training on issues relating to racist harassment to a variety of agencies, particularly since the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry reported in 1999. Many also co-ordinate local racist harassment multi-agency forums.

Some projects have education workers and youth workers who specifically work with schools and young people to raise awareness of racist harassment, develop tools for prevention and undertake casework with young people. Campaigns, for some of the projects, are developed through the process of casework. Campaigns against injustice are high

profile events that require dedication and determination on behalf of the project.

Importantly, support projects also offer a unique and dedicated service that enables victims of racist harassment to action a complaint. They provide emotional support and validation of experience and in some cases security equipment, both to families and local businesses, to reduce the fear of attack and intimidation. A number of projects offer a 24-hour service for their clients and potential clients.

Racist harassment casework

A central activity of the support projects is casework with victims of racist harassment. This has grown out of a gap in both service provision for victims of racist harassment and the response and practice of agencies. Caseworkers are able to offer a co-ordinated and dedicated service to their client. This distinguishes them from agency-led interventions that can be fragmented because the primary role of an agency is not to exclusively support or advise the client.

Casework undertaken by an independent support project was seen as adding more weight to a complaint from a victim and this had resulted in *"other organisations responding to our service user needs more effectively"*. Casework is a process driven activity that does not promise to end the racist harassment the client may be experiencing. However, it guides and supports people through a process that can often involve challenging decisions or lack of action by agencies.

Caseworkers viewed their role as a multi-tasked and multi-skilled intervention involving working with victims, undertaking administrative duties connected with a case and actively engaging with relevant agencies to successfully resolve a complaint. Four key tasks were identified as crucial to effective casework – offering help, creating an intervention, reducing the immediate impact of the harassment, and achieving a resolution to the complaint.

Clients who received support from a racist harassment support project were generally very positive about their experience and often compared the standard of service and understanding of their problem between the project and other agencies:

"They [the support project] were different to the police, there was a different understanding in that they were dealing with cases like this every single day and so the understanding that was there took on a different level because there was the compassion."

Empowerment

A central aim of the projects is to empower the client and this is a key theme that emerges from the interviews with people who have used the support projects. This was expressed in a number of ways (see Box 1).

The positive views expressed by clients and ex-clients about the level of service they received from the projects and caseworkers were regardless of whether the actual problem had been resolved or was on-going.

The limits on casework

However, caseworkers were overloaded with cases and sometimes felt isolated and unsupported within a project. Casework is, by its nature, emotionally challenging and many caseworkers expressed a need for access to support such as counselling through which they could express their frustration and anger. Caseworkers also felt that often the skills inherent to the job were not recognised. There was no funding available for caseworkers to access support and training and the sheer volume of cases and the emotional impact of the work meant that caseworkers had little time to consider personal or professional development within their work environment.

Moreover, the commitment of caseworkers and other staff in the support projects has to be set against regular funding crises, particularly in funding

Box 1: Valued attributes of a casework role

- Non-judgemental approach
 - "S.A.R.I. [agency] understood what I was saying. They don't judge you like the guy at the council did."
- Focus and experience of a dedicated agency
 - "I had a caseworker but even if she was not available they [the project] knew about my case."
 - "She [caseworker] gave me the impression she knew what she was talking about. She knew how I felt, you know, what prejudice is like, you know how much it pains. It was the first time I felt somebody was listening, somebody that was taking it in."
- Promoting rights
 - "Once the NMP [agency] got involved we have learned about our rights – the police said we cannot do this or that – NMP said they were wrong. The NMP gave us the right information for us."
- Signposting
 - "The first time I spoke to her [caseworker] she immediately put me in touch with a solicitor and suggested other contacts."
- Emotional support
 - "The worker saw how depressed my mum was and how her health deteriorated because of the harassment. But they picked her up and talked to her on a one-to-one basis and in Punjabi as well."
- Advocacy
 - "They [agency] knew the organisations to contact. They knew what kind of support I needed. I didn't know at that stage what kind of support was even on offer let alone what I needed."
- Accessibility
 - "Anytime we wanted her [the caseworker] to come she would, even the day before court she came and I said 'just go through the notes with me' and she did that."
- Validation
 - "It was nice to have somebody to listen and not butt in and tell me 'No, no, that's not right', you know, and actually give me an unbiased view. They listened to me whether I was the one that was telling the truth or not."

caseworkers. There is no government funding strategy in place that recognises the relevance and importance of racist harassment casework. Many projects depend on short-term funding from charities to support their work.

Conclusion

The research suggests that caseworkers within projects are able to provide a service that takes into account the experience and perspective of those people experiencing racist harassment. They are able to validate experiences of people and offer a route to some resolution. Projects do not say they can end the racist harassment that individuals and families experience but they can offer assistance, knowledge, guidance, reassurance and representation.

The researcher concludes that there are a number of potential developments that could strengthen the sector as a whole:

Funding – Often it is the casework element that is lost when funding is reduced, withdrawn or comes to an end. A long term funding strategy could help prevent this.

Caseworker support – Casework could be improved by developing national guidelines on racist harassment casework, offering an accredited course for existing and new caseworkers, and developing a network of caseworkers to disseminate information and act as a peer support. Both caseworkers and clients might also benefit from access to counsellors.

Community coalitions – Projects could usefully engage those familiar people to whom victims disclose and others in a local community to act as a network of support. Building local coalitions of support has the advantage of offering a community-based approach to victim support, challenging the perpetrator and reducing prejudice in a co-ordinated manner. Given that the victim, the perpetrator and the community are interlinked, support projects could consider expanding their role to working directly in communities in partnership with local people to develop coalitions of support for victims and community-led responses to challenging racist behaviour.

About the project

Eight case study sites emerged across England and Wales through the period of the research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with personnel from each case study site and at every level of the organisation and in-depth interviews with 29 clients and ex-clients of the service. Most case study sites also agreed for the researcher to have access to case files and other documentation relevant to the research. A one-day workshop with caseworkers involved in the research was held to discuss the effectiveness of racist harassment casework and potential improvements that could be made in casework with victims of racist harassment.

How to get further information

The full report, **Racist harassment support projects: Their role, impact and potential** by Kusminder Chahal, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 115 8, price £13.95).

"We can't all be white!": **Racist victimisation in the UK** by Kusminder Chahal and Louis Julienne is also still available (ISBN 1 902633 38 5, price £12.95).

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- **The experience of racist victimisation**, Jun 99 (Ref: 679)

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