

A stylized illustration on the left side of the page shows a woman's eye with long, dark eyelashes and a brown iris, looking towards the right. A large, dark grey speech bubble tail extends from the eye towards the center of the page, where it points to a white speech bubble containing the title.

Girls' talk

Sue Kenten describes how her service is helping to empower young Asian women in east London at the same time as celebrating their identity

DASL (Drugs and Alcohol Service for London) is a community-based service in London's East End, and during its 25-year history our trademark has been reaching out to those groups who traditionally find it hard to access services – both adults and young people. Starting with pilot initiatives, usually funded by charitable trusts, DASL has then gone on to integrate provision into its mainstream services, an approach that has been used successfully over the years with gay and lesbian groups, a wide range of black and Asian groups, people from Central and Eastern European communities and those affected by domestic violence.

One such initiative is Girls Talk, which supports the physical and emotional wellbeing of young Asian – predominantly Bangladeshi – women in east London boroughs through interactive group work and structured workshops. Many young Bengali women are not able to make healthy lifestyle choices or sensible decisions about alcohol, drug use or sexual health through lack of confidence, education or communication skills. There are also cultural and community restrictions that prevent young women from accessing support.

Within the Bangladeshi community, there are high levels of mental illness, domestic violence and – with younger women – self-harm. The Girl's Talk project has provided a positive example of how young Bengali women can be part of the solution, working with women from some of the poorest boroughs in London – places where work with young men around drugs, drug-related crime, gang culture and anti-social behaviour is often prioritised over that with young women, as they pose fewer immediate problems.

Many young Asian women grow up in a context of familial conflict, with clashes between family expectations, honour and duty, and in a western society that offers higher levels of aspiration within the context of a different moral code. Opportunities can be very limited for these girls, and it may be difficult for them to develop to their full potential.

Girls Talk is designed to create a supportive and interactive context of learning which enables young people to explore their experiences and concerns, and address their physical, sexual, emotional and social wellbeing in their transition from girl to young woman growing up in an inner city, multi racial area.

It was initially funded as a pilot project by the Tower Hamlets Children's Fund. Working with young Bengali women, the project facilitated closed group sessions, lasting for 90 minutes in 'neutral' school spaces, and run over an eight or 12-week programme during the school term. It used the topic of alcohol to signpost other areas of concern for the girls and allow more open discussion about taboo subjects.

Since then the project has developed and now includes a wide range of topics according to identified needs, with schools, former participants and commissioners all helping to shape new and different programmes. Workshops explore identity, personal development, self-esteem, relationships and friendships, female roles and community expectations alongside substance misuse, domestic violence, communication skills, stress management and coping strategies.

While recent reports have shown that, overall, drinking rates among young people may be starting to fall (*DDN*, 18 May, page 5), there seems to be an emerging trend of young people from second and third generation black and Asian backgrounds presenting at services where historically they would not have done so. Research suggests that there is a shift in attitude to the use of alcohol among this cohort and, as there is a direct correlation with patterns of young people's use and problematic use in adulthood, this group needs particular attention. Cultural pressures to control use or be abstinent are changing, so programmes like Girls Talk provide an important forum to discuss these changes and how they are influencing behaviour and norms.

The delivery of the project is flexible and has been adapted to cover new or emerging areas of concern. One area is that statistics for Bengali women entering higher education or meaningful employment continue to be poor. According to Sarah Glynn's report for the Institute of Geography, *Playing the ethnic card - politics and ghettoisation in London's East End*, 'Bengali ghettoisation has seemed only to increase....and, of course, many Bengalis do not have the resources, financial or cultural, to move away. For a small minority of their children, the frustration of limited prospects can be expressed as racism against others over whom they see themselves as superior, such as 'white trash' or Somalis.'

According to data from the Office for National Statistics in 2004 a third of Muslims of working age in Great Britain had no qualifications – the highest proportion for any religious group. They were also the least likely to have degrees or equivalent qualifications (12 per cent). Among women, Bangladeshi and Pakistanis were the least likely to have a degree, at 5 and 10 per cent respectively.

The Girls Talk programme responded by exploring roles and routes into employment, examining concepts of self confidence, self worth and independence. Although many young women in the group placed great emphasis on love and marriage, young women were encouraged to aspire to jobs that allowed them more freedom and control over decision making and relationships at home. Young women understood that they needed to demonstrate behaviour that would allow their parents to trust them by becoming more focussed on studies and future plans.

Many young women were not aware of the amount of choice and opportunities available to them – in many cases, not enough time, thought or resources are put into exploring higher education options or careers that will allow them to have the economic independence and self confidence to deal with family expectations and conflict. Girls Talk offered this time, working with those most at risk of exclusion or poorly performing. With teenage pregnancy rates high in east London, DASL has also delivered a Girls Talk teenage pregnancy programme funded by Tower Hamlets PCT, giving young people the information and support they need to delay early sex and to use contraception effectively when they do become sexually active.

Young women are given the opportunity to explore sexual health, relationships, marriage and decision making, with an emphasis placed on respecting their own bodies and in turn an expectation that partners or boys in general would do the same. Although many women in the Year 9 group said they were not having sex and had no intention to, for religious or cultural reasons, it was important for the programme to

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explore the pressures that young women face with new freedoms, such as when leaving school. The group acknowledged that although sex before marriage is a taboo issue for this group, many were having sex.

To give a flavour of what the workshops involve, here's an example of an exercise designed by participants from previous Girls Talk sessions. They chose to use an exercise that involved a shopping analogy, with young women asked to think of shops where people buy their clothes. There were a range of responses including Primark, the market, Peacocks, H & M, River Island, New look, Zara, Selfridges and Harrods. Participants then went on to list why different people shop at particular shops, with concepts like 'easy', 'cheap', 'expensive', 'quality' and 'classy' as well as the need to travel further for clothes that were harder to get. They then made links to how young women should respect themselves physically and emotionally and how people may see them if they acted a certain way. The group also explored 'precious' products like diamonds, things that were hard to obtain, and the idea of comparing this to ways of looking at virginity.

Opening up discussions in a way that is relevant and designed by the girls themselves, in their own language, is a major strength of Girls Talk; another is that a Bangladeshi female worker runs it. To sum up, it's about being young, female, Asian and living in east London... sharing experiences, knowledge, fears and aspirations as well as being happy, healthy and celebrating identity.

We've had an extremely positive feedback from teachers, pupils and commissioners alike. Teachers tell us that their girls get a lot out of the programme, that they already see a difference in the attitudes of some, and how it helped for them to have someone else to talk to – they all want to know when we're running the next programme. But we're not stopping there – we've already got two spin-off projects, Boys Talk and Parents Talk, designed and ready to be piloted, along with a Girls Talk smoking cessation project.

www.alcohol-east.org.uk

Sue Kenten is chief executive of DASL.

suekenten@dasl.org.uk