

## THE HUNT FOR BRITAIN'S SEX GANGS

# Lifting the lid on sex crimes

Documenting the grooming and exploitation of girls in Bradford for 17 years has had many obstacles, not least officials in denial and fears of race-related violence, says **Anna Hall**

### CREDITS

#### Production company

True Vision

#### Commissioning editor

Siobhan Sinnerton

Length 1 x 60 minutes

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Channel 4

#### Producer/director

Anna Hall

#### Executive producer

Brian Woods

Editor Paddy Garrick

### Anna Hall

#### My tricks of the trade

- Have patience: I was told that we could have robocam footage of the arrests of the main perpetrators, their police interrogations and the victims' interviews during my first phone call. I got my hands on the material two-and-a-half years later.
- When things don't go to plan, never over-promise to your exec or the commissioning editor.
- Don't lie to your subjects about what you want to do. Again, it took me two-and-a-half years to meet the victims in this case – and that was through slowly building up what I needed with the police officers involved.
- I always show my contributors sensitive material concerning them. It reassures people, but I never give away editorial control in the process.
- Don't panic: our film went totally pear-shaped when the trial collapsed. Our schedule went out the window. We made a totally different film and promised not to show a frame of the Telford material until the case was all over. This won us a lot of brownie points in the end because we kept to our word.
- Rejoice in M&S outlets in service stations: at last you can buy something healthy on the road.



**Anna Hall**  
Producer/director

In October 1996, my life changed. In Yorkshire Television's smoky coffee bar, I met Sara Swann, who ran Bradford's Barnado's Streets and Lanes project. Barnado's was interested in making a film to warn teenagers and educate parents about a pattern of child sexual exploitation that Sara had been following for a year.

The story was one that has now become sadly too familiar: men were targeting girls aged 11 and up, giving them phones, taking them out and showering them with attention and affection. After they had sex, the men would introduce their friends to the girls, who would be asked to sleep with the new group of men.

Police seemed powerless to stop it because the girls thought these men were their boyfriends. However controlled and degraded they felt, they were also very frightened. The explosive thing: the girls were white and living in multi-cultural Bradford and the perpetrators were Asian. I told Sara recently that she lit a flame of anger inside me that day that still hasn't gone away.

I tried to get a film off the ground at Channel 4, but other commitments left it on the back burner. In 2002, Peter Dale, then C4's head of documentaries, commissioned me to make three films about Bradford Social Services. The stage was set: I knew about the grooming issue but wanted to remain open-minded about what the series should cover. Yet the exploitation issue kept raising its head. The fire inside me was relit when a senior children's services manager said: "The men are Asian, Anna, but you'll never get anyone on the record to say that."

The words 'red', 'rag' and 'bull' spring to mind. It wasn't whether the guys were Asian that bugged me. What was unbelievable was that men were gang-raping young girls and

everybody wanted to pretend it wasn't happening. All anyone seemed concerned about was the risk of a race riot if we mentioned it.

After nearly two years, I made a 90-minute doc, *Edge Of The City*. We dared to describe the Bradford perpetrators as "overwhelmingly Asian". The film was scheduled to go out in May 2004, three weeks before the local elections in Bradford, where 10 BNP candidates were standing three years after Asian 'youths' were indicted in a 'race riot'.

After the council viewed it, West Yorkshire's chief constable asked for the film to be postponed amid fears of more riots. All hell broke loose. The BNP got hold of the story and used the film as propaganda. Police and social services said nothing. Several small

### 'What was unbelievable was that men were gang-raping young girls and everyone wanted to pretend it wasn't happening'

voices in the Asian press said that if the story were true, it shouldn't be swept under the carpet. It was postponed to August, attracting huge media coverage. Extra police were drafted in that night but no riots occurred.

Few had come to my defence. My 'non-white' friends assured me I wasn't racist and I was right to dare to mention the rather large elephant lurking in the room. But nothing seemed to change. No proactive policing, no voices from Social Services admitting what they had on their hands. Years passed but I remained disappointed that the film had changed so little. I was asked: "Why didn't you go and follow the perpetrators?" I knew that to do this safely and ethically, I'd have to follow the police.

In 2009, some cases started to come to court. I found out about a large police investigation in which they were trying to use trafficking legislation to convict the men, as children were being moved all over the country.

But the legislation also helped with the problem of consent – always an issue when cases filter through to court, where the defence painted the girls as complicit because they didn't say no, casting doubt among the jury.

When I got access to this investigation in June 2010, True Vision was commissioned for a one-hour *Dispatches*. The film we started making way back then, following Operation Chalice, is only just about to see the light of day, because the original trial collapsed in 2011.

### Overtaking controversy

Unable to use any of the material around the investigation (it was still sub judice as the CPS decided whether to go for a retrial), C4 decided we should nevertheless make a film about British Pakistani men grooming white girls and sexually exploiting them. C4 was brave to commission the film after the earlier controversy. *Britain's Sex Gangs* was the first film to directly address the issue, and the first to get the men involved to admit to it on camera. It was shortlisted for a Grierson and nominated for the Prix Europa and the Monte Carlo TV Best Documentary award.

The most important thing for me was not to alienate British Pakistanis – and to give them a voice to express their horror and outrage that the authorities had not acted for fear of being branded racist.

Now, 18 months on, the defendants in the trial that collapsed have all been taken back to court, and the cases completed. Now that reporting restrictions have been lifted, *The Hunt For Britain's Sex Gangs* can tell the story of the police investigation and show how hard it is to get convictions for historic abuse cases with extensive grooming, and how gruelling it is for victims to face endless cross-examination by multiple barristers.

Today, 17 years on from that first meeting, I have two daughters aged 11 and 12 – two beautiful, gullible, innocent girls who think they know all there is to know about how to keep themselves safe. How wrong they are.





Clockwise from top: Operation Chalice in progress; reconstruction of a scene with a victim; police arrest ringleader Ahdel Ali; chief investigating officer DCI Neil Jamieson; reporter Tazeen Ahmad

