Viewpoint: Children's Rights

We must speak out in Shamima Begum case

The government’s treatment of teenager who left the UK to join ISIS was contradictory and undermined children’s rights, says Robin Sen

Much of the commentary on Shamima Begum emphasised her responsibility for leaving the UK to join ISIS. This was in contrast to how teenage victims of sexual exploitation are now (officially at least) viewed in the UK.

Undoubtedly there are differences, but what is striking is the denial of the similarities. Grooming is based on the premise that through earlier development and lesser experience and power inequality young people are not able to make the same agentic choices as adults, and are thereby more susceptible to manipulation by them. This concept appears highly relevant to understanding how Begum was persuaded to leave an outwardly comfortable life in the UK at the age of 15 to join an international terrorist group, in a war zone, in a country she had never visited — and then almost immediately marry a man in his 20s whom she had never previously known. Had she entered a similar relationship in the UK, by law she would have been considered a victim of sexual exploitation, not only at age 15 but possibly until the age of 18.

The view of Begum maintained by Home Secretary Sajid Javid and in much of the media also appears to be accepted by a majority of the UK public — nearly 80 per cent voiced support for Javid’s decision to strip her of her citizenship in a national Sky News poll. This view is rooted in a tendency to place children and young people in one of two binary categories. The first is as victims who have no agency and who need adult protection. The second as threats who are beyond help due either to intrinsic evil, as in the case of Jamie Bulger’s killers, or, as in the case of Begum, an exalted agency: she must have been fully aware of what she was doing in joining ISIS and therefore deserves her fate.

Both elements of the binary unhelpfully serve to obscure the way in which human decisions are the outcome of a complex interplay between individual choice, character, development, capabilities and environmental contexts.

If Begum’s situation may be morally complicated then that of her son, Jarrah, was not. He could not be held responsible for the perilous situation he was born into, and he remained a British citizen even after Javid had revoked his mother’s citizenship. Since the Tory party’s return to power in 2010 it has argued for government intervention in the lives of vulnerable children. In a speech to the NSPCC in 2013, Michael Gove lamented: “We have not intervened to rescue those children who have been suffering the most in our society.”

Why did this principle not apply to Jarrah? Save the Children did call for the government to do what it could to facilitate Begum and Jarrah’s return to the UK, and criticised the failure to do so after Jarrah’s death. But, despite the case’s prominence, it is hard to find other national children’s charities who did similarly. I can, for example, find no comment on the Begum case from the NSPCC, despite it currently running a high profile #WildWestWeb campaign calling for social media regulation which highlights the dangers of online grooming. This seems a missed opportunity to try to influence public understanding of the case. The charity’s logo states ‘Every Childhood is Worth Fighting For’. It could be inferred from the silence that Jarrah’s was not — a view which I am sure the charity does not actually hold.

Beyond concern for the individual welfare of Shamima and Jarrah Begum there are two wider reasons I believe social workers should question the government’s handling of the issue. Firstly, the removal of Shamima’s citizenship, and the seeming widespread support for this action, reflect a framing of her and her child as undeserving of the protection of the British state. This is problematic as it reflects and reinforces what the Windrush scandal previously illustrated — that those who are first and second generation immigrants to the UK can be deemed less than fully British when it suits.

The far right must be delighted that the ambitions of our Home Secretary, himself a second generation immigrant, are aiding its work. Secondly, the government’s actions serve to undermine the basis for children’s rights and for human rights. For if these are to be meaningful concepts they must apply not even to the most difficult, troubling and marginal cases, but especially to them.

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