

EXCLUSIVE: I helped jail the grooming gangs raping young girls in Rochdale – now things have got worse

From the Daily [Mail](#)

Former police officer Maggie Oliver is angry. Twelve years ago she famously turned whistleblower to expose the horror of young girls being sexually abused by gangs – losing her home and coming close to a breakdown in the process. But since then, far from getting better, things have got worse. . . ‘ I never imagined that these gangs would still be getting away with ruining children’s lives all these years later.’

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These days, she hears victims' stories first-hand through her work running her charity the Maggie Oliver Foundation, set up in 2019 to support all survivors of sexual abuse.

From the 13-year-old girl who, for two years, was trafficked to men in northern towns, to the 12-year-old who killed herself after she was raped and blackmailed then ignored by police, Maggie is aware that children are still being horrifically exploited.

'I'm told by many victims and survivors who come to us for help that the situation is now even worse,' she says.

Previously, gangs tended to prey on the most vulnerable children in our society – many were in care or from disadvantaged homes – but now no child with internet access is safe. Most secondary school-aged children now have smartphones and social media accounts, so paedophiles can access them anywhere, any time, online

for the things to look out for, the first contact may come in the form of a private message on Snapchat, Instagram or another social media app.

Usually it's from a man who may pay the girl exaggerated compliments, giving the impression they are interested in a loving relationship, before asking her to send photos of an increasingly explicit nature.

Then comes the blackmail – threatening to share images with her family, or even set the family home on fire – before 'selling' her on to other abusers. Children soon feel terrified about the consequences of confiding in parents, so Maggie advises making it clear to them that they can always tell us what's going on in their lives, without fear of being 'in trouble'.

There were attempts, from the highest ranks within the police force, to discredit me because people didn't like me drawing attention to it.'

She believes this is partly due to a skewed notion of preventing racial disharmony, because the gang members in Rochdale – and indeed grooming gangs in other northern towns – were predominantly men of Pakistani origin.

But misogyny was surely at play, too: she says young girls trapped in appalling abuse were written off as troublemakers by police

Maggie, who still struggles to comprehend how millions of pounds of taxpayers' money was granted to convicted child rapists to fight against extradition to Pakistan.

'Many of them argued they had children themselves and were entitled, under human rights laws, to a family life,' she says. 'In my view, a man who rapes a 12-year-old child is an animal, whose human rights should never come before those of his victims.'

And yet still the crimes mount up.

The Mancunian grandmother of three is so overcome with emotion that she has to pause several times while recounting the tragic story of one 12-year-old girl, whose family contacted her charity last year. 'It's an ongoing case, so I can't say much about it,' says Maggie. 'But this little girl was groomed online and then raped and blackmailed, with threats to tell her family and school friends. The police were informed but took no action and in the end, she took her own life.'

Then there's the 11-year-old girl whose father got in touch with the charity in 2021 after checking his daughter's phone and discovering, on Snapchat, messages from several men who had coerced her into sending 'inappropriate images' of herself, and were blackmailing and threatening her. This 11-year-old girl was, thankfully, rescued.

Others have been less fortunate. The family of one girl who, from the age of 13, was groomed by a man online and then sold for sex to many other men throughout the north of England, turned to The Maggie Oliver Foundation in desperation in 2020, when police failed to act..

Her father reported the child missing at least 56 times but, far from this leading to an investigation, he was himself arrested on one occasion for trying to stop his daughter leaving with her abusers.

As well as horrific sexual abuse, on one occasion her throat was cut, leading, mercifully, only to superficial wounds. On another, her coat hood was set on fire.

When the teenager finally plucked up courage to talk to police, she received death threats and was thrown in a canal by her attackers. 'The girl is now 19 and feels so totally let down by the system she's no longer prepared to engage with police,' says Maggie

A group of young women from Manchester contacted Maggie's charity in 2021 alleging they had been raped and exploited by the same gang of adult men since their early teens.

Despite producing a significant amount of evidence, including phone messages and photographs of injuries, they were told it did not reach the 'evidential threshold for prosecution'.

Following publicity generated by Maggie's foundation, the investigation was reopened. However, three years later, still no charges have been brought.

It is the trauma inflicted on girls that keeps Maggie speaking out about this abuse. She believes grooming gangs operate predominantly in the north of England

Because it's happening in the north it often doesn't make national news headlines, which means many people don't realise it's still going on.

: 'These investigations can take years, so if police can discredit the victims in some way, usually by claiming they have perverted the course of justice or told 'lies', they can justify dropping the case on the grounds that the Crown Prosecution Service won't be able to prove 'beyond reasonable doubt' that their abusers are guilty. The only way that is going to change is with greater police resourcing and better understanding

Maggie, disillusioned after contributing evidence to public reviews into child grooming which, she says, 'only lead to recommendations, not obligations', isn't holding out much hope.