

Til death do us part: forced marriages in the UK

Esther Efemini tells the stories of survivors of forced marriages.

Pinkie (not her real name) had just finished her degree in Psychology. She was looking forward to starting a job as a research assistant for the British Medical Association. An emergency call from Bangladesh regarding the ill health of her grandfather meant that the whole family had to travel to Bangladesh.

Once in Bangladesh Pinkie soon realised this was not the case. Pinkie was forced to marry a man she met on her wedding day. She returned to England three weeks later. Her husband joined her a year later. Cases like this are now commonplace in the UK and are on the increase. The Forced Marriage Unit reported receiving 770 calls so far this year, up 16 per cent on 2008 (Casciani, 2009). The Honour Network Helpline, launched in 2008, reported that in the first five months they received 6,702 calls. However, these statistics only represent the number of incidents that are reported and may represent only a partial picture of the problem (Casciani, 2009).

By definition 'force' may include emotional and physical pressures and abuse, threats to hurt or actually hurt the person emotionally or physically, emotional blackmail, deception false imprisonment, unreasonable restrictions on letting the person go out or taking the person abroad for the purpose of marriage against their wishes (HMSO, 2005). The majority of victims of forced marriage are often female and aged between 11–39, with a high percentage of forced marriages occurring in the 16–24 age group. However, research has

indicated that a small percentage of victims are also male (Choudhury, 2009).

Forced marriages are prevalent in many parts of the world – East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and many parts of Africa (DVHCT, 2007). Many victims who enter a forced marriage talk about the detrimental effects that it has on their lives. Remi, aged 67 from Nigeria, whose ambition was to become a nurse, fell in love with her brother's best friend. Her father was against their relationship; then Remi became pregnant. Her father decided that she marry Fola, a man of his choice, after her baby was born. Remi was forced to leave her daughter with her mother and join her husband Fola in England. Once in England her husband took her passport so that she could not return to Nigeria. She still wanted to pursue a career as a nurse but her husband was against this for the fear of her gaining too much independence. Through the help of her sister-in-law, who persuaded her husband that Remi could gain a qualification, she managed to train as a cook. Remi suffered over 20 years of domestic violence, often fleeing with her four children to live with friends and at refuges. Remi finally left her husband with the help of her family doctor. She has since remarried. She says sadly at the time she felt she had no choice in the matter, despite her mother's intervention. She stressed that individuals should be free to make a choice of whom they wish to marry.

In another harrowing story, Sophia (16), a bright student, tells of the impact a forced marriage had

on her health and her studies. Sophia had started at her local college in the September studying A Levels; her attendance in the first term was 95 per cent. Sophia informed her tutors that she would be travelling to Pakistan for Christmas and would miss the first week of term. Her tutor agreed that it was OK because of her good attendance so far. Concerns were expressed by Sophia's tutor when Sophia failed to attend her classes after the second week of term. A letter was sent home asking her parents to get in contact with her tutor. Sophia returned to college the following week; she had lost weight and looked distressed. In a meeting with her tutor and a Tutor Support Worker they found she was forced to marry a man old enough to be her father. Sophia was very reluctant to get her parents involved, citing that there would be repercussions if they were. Sophia's attendance became erratic, dropping to 61 per cent by Easter, she failed to submit course work for her subjects, and reported that she felt suicidal. She was referred to a counsellor as a result of her disclosure to the Tutor Support Worker that she was self-harming. Sophia was referred to the Forced Marriage Unit and has since left her family. She intends to undertake an access course and go on to university. She plans to use her experience to help raise awareness of forced marriages. Although she is free and rebuilding her life, the downside is that she does miss her family and is very worried that her two younger sisters will face the same fate as she did. She is still having counselling after 18 months. Sophia is one of the lucky ones; many of the victims never come to the attention of the professionals.

A common theme running through the survivor's stories is conflict with their culture many bow to pressure and cite family honour as the main reason for entering a forced marriage. Other reasons include controlling unwanted behaviour and sexuality, particularly in women, responding to peer group or family pressures.

More needs to be done when tackling forced marriages. At present,

the government has tackled the issues of forced marriage through the setting up of the Forced Marriage Unit, a designated unit to provide advice and guidance on forced marriage. In November 2008, the government implemented the Forced Marriage Protection Order (FMPO). The order protects someone who has already been in a forced marriage, and prevents any steps being taken to force someone into marriage. The order may contain such prohibitions, restrictions, or requirements, and such other terms, as the court considers appropriate. So far, to date 70 FMPOs have been implemented. In July 2009, the government implemented new guidelines for doctors and social workers to identify early signs (Casciani, 2009). A report conducted by the Forced Marriage Unit identified that schools play a crucial role in tackling forced marriage. However, this presents a number of problems with increasing classroom sizes and workloads. Teachers may not see potential warning signs or indicators may go undetected. In addition, in these financially challenging times priority may not be given to certain training budgets. Others may feel that they

are out of their depth and it is not in the place to intervene.

From November 2009, local authorities have been identified as relevant third parties (RTP). This means that local authorities can apply on behalf of the victim for the FMPO without the need to ask the court for the permission first. Relevant third parties can also apply for a forced marriage order without being too closely connected to the victim (Choudhury, 2009). However, in order for local authorities to apply for a FMPO they will have to have training. However, this begs the question should training be voluntary for local authorities or should this be compulsory? Studies on domestic violence among ethnic minority communities have shown gaps in service provision among these groups.

Campaigners such as Southall Black Sisters, a women rights group, have argued more must be done to support victims of forced marriages. With the imminent closure of The Honour Network Helpline as a result of a lack of funding, thousands of victims of forced marriages will lose a vital lifeline, says Jasvinder Sanghera, a forced marriage survivor

and founder of the helpline (Talwar, 2009). She argues that schools need to be more vigilant in monitoring the attendance of students that they feel are vulnerable or those with a high percentage of absenteeism. Forced marriages should not be deemed as culturally acceptable but unacceptable (Casciani, 2009). In terms of raising the awareness on forced marriage, training should be taught in the context of human rights. ■

Esther Efemini is an independent researcher.

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