



Forced Marriage: Service User Consultation Report

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Background to the issue of forced marriage

Forced marriage is a gross violation of women's human rights. It is a form of domestic violence and/ or child abuse. A distinction must be made between forced marriage, where there is a lack of free consent, and an arranged marriage where consent is given freely by both parties. Although men can also be forced into marriage, research indicates overwhelmingly that forced marriage affects women and young women adversely. In forced marriage situations there can be a number of influencing factors for example, emotional blackmail, social pressure, threatening behaviour, abduction, imprisonment, physical violence, rape, sexual abuse, suicide and even murder.

An example of a tragic case which received a lot of media coverage was that of Rukshana Naz, a 19-year-old Asian woman from Derby who was killed by her family for refusing to stay in a forced marriage. Rukshana Naz was strangled by her brother while her mother held her down by her feet; the family stated that the reason for killing Rukshana was because she shamed the family by refusing to stay in a forced marriage.

Although the issue of forced marriage has been highlighted amongst women from the Muslim communities, cases have also been reported in other religious groups such as Sikh, Hindu and amongst different ethnic groups from the Middle Eastern, East Asian, Turkish and African communities. Forced marriages may also exist within other tight knit orthodox communities such as Chinese, Japanese and Jewish.

Forced marriage cannot be regarded as a cultural practice that is respected or tolerated because it is a violation of human rights. Nor is it sufficient to allow the various communities, where the practice exists to police themselves. Forced marriage like domestic violence and racism must not be tolerated. All women must be able to make free and informed choices about their lifestyles.

There are no comprehensive or official statistics on the scale of the problem. Most agencies do not keep records on forced marriage. Even where statistics on domestic violence or child abuse are collated, cases of forced marriage are rarely identified and categorised.

Forced marriage user consultation

A service user consultation involving 38 women was held on September 21st, 2005 at the Asian Women's Resource Centre, in partnership with Brent Women's Aid and Brent Domestic Violence Forum. This consultation was supported by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Forced marriage Unit.

Aim & Methodology

This consultation aimed to gather views from women with an awareness and/or experience of forced marriage and specifically on whether Forced Marriage should become an offence. The women broke up into two groups and were asked to brainstorm and consider the following questions:

- What is your understanding of forced marriage?
- Would you know where to go for support
- Were you adequately supported, what do you think are the gaps in service provision?
- Should forced marriage be a crime?
- How would women like to be consulted for any future consultations?

Below are the issues which emerged through the workshops :

Forced marriage

What is your understanding of forced marriage?

- Parents arrange marriage for young boys and girls to marry without involving couple
- Young people manipulated into marriage when they don't want to
- Property within the family can be kept in the family through forced marriage situations
- When consent is not given by couple to marry
- May not see the partner till after marriage
- To keep business relationships parents of young people do not care what young think of marriage
- Young girls married to older men for man's money as poverty in girl's family
- Parents think life will be better for children if they marry a rich man.
- It's a cultural requirement. At times certain needs ex. Rich people who may contribute to the buying of poor people's dignity. Threats are used.
- Unable to refuse parent's request daughters in law tends to suffer at times of marriage leading to harm, beatings, post marital abuse is inflicted by in laws. Girls get blame for all misfortunes by both parties i.e. Parents and in laws.
- Boy and girl have not met. They have no choice in the matter.
- Women's freedom constrained

Would you know where to go for support?

- Women's centres
- Specialists women's groups
- Voluntary agencies
- police stations
- Other women friends - neighbours/family – not men
- Not sure how to access or reach solicitor/ police and help – also have children with them
- To Asian Women's Resource Centre and Brent Women's Aid

Were you supported adequately? What do you feel are the gaps in existing services?

- Lack of advocacy services to accompany women to court and to interpret accurately – a female interpreter
- Want a specific worker to support women to attend solicitor/court with adequate training
- Other agencies – statutory / police need training and to provide services / signpost. Their duty through legislation.
- Good support from police – felt supported
- Domestic Violence Support Service (Asian Women's Resource Centre and Brent Women's Aid) support adequate
- Need more resources for women centres to serve women
- Inconsistency in services – need to monitor standards
- Help came too late, too little: really suffered in the meantime – didn't know what to do
- Did not know what to do – where to get help? Pressure from family –
- Services that have understanding of the risks i.e., when reporting to police not be sent back home. Language barrier to accessing Services.
- Limited language support
- There is no distinct service for women of non Asian origin
- When arriving in the U.K. women are not aware of facilities provided
- Information is not available to women when arriving to the U.K. i.e. Immigration office, airport, Home Office
- Very little support in non-Asian areas.

Should forced marriage be a crime?

- Yes - it affects the children of forced marriage as they witness fighting and this creates unhappiness in parents. Can become generational and should be stopped
- Yes - young people are forced into marriage before they finished studies or mature into adults, this takes away their freedom
- Yes - taking children rights of freedom.
- Yes – couple are not suited and this may lead separation.
- Yes- If it were made a law it would stop people from doing it.
- If it were made a crime then all agencies will be clear on what support to provide.

How best can we consult you in providing services for women experiencing forced marriage?

- To go to religious places for advice – Mosque, etc.
- Questionnaires or writing letters

- Leaflets
- Through Helpline/ blind point
- Outreach/ contact from women centres at GP
- Women should be informed at consular centre in foreign countries
- Leaflets should be explained in the language of the country prior to entry in the U.K.
- Prior to marriage women should be made aware of the immigration services, their rights and laws of the U.K.
- For consultation on this agenda we would like to be contacted by telephone, group work, local paper, leaflets, support workers, middle persons contact.

Conclusion

Women felt overwhelmingly that forced marriage should be made a crime and that if it were made a crime it will have a strong deterrent affect on perpetrators. They also felt very strongly that the issue of forced marriage needs to be dealt with very sensitively. Furthermore they felt that a public awareness campaign needs to be mounted in the same way as with domestic violence cases to ensure that safety is paramount for women and girls experiencing forced marriage. Women also pointed out that some agencies are still not aware of what to do in forced marriage situations. If forced marriage were made an offence, there may be more clarity around roles of agencies in providing support.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PINK GROUP

DID YOU KNOW WHERE TO GO FOR SUPPORT WHEN YOU EXPERIENCED DV?

- Phoned police – DV unit – women’s group
- Through GP. No information on where to turn to, then GP has no idea then she felt depressed
- Police women’s Aid
- Friend
- No idea where to go
- At first you feel alone

were you supported adequately? What do you feel are the gaps in existing services?

- Support with getting legal services. Accompaniment to court events.
- No recourse to public funds – got no help
- Need response to access again
- Decisions have to be made on your own.
- Felt supported in making choices – (at refuge)
- Need support after leaving refuge. Support with:
 1. housing
 2. school
 3. self esteem issues
 4. help with pressure and life
 5. Men with dependant’s immigration should be pulled into account.

3)

How best can we involve you and your children when planning/designing services?

- Drop in Centre
 - Activities for children/ counselling
 - Outreach for children
 - Should be able to access other centres
 - Need a centre for our communities in Brent
 - These services should be open to our women including “ No recourse to public funds”
- A) Group consultation = meeting
B) Networking
C) Family days –
More support for children who feel stigmatised by being in single family.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Green Group

1) Did you know where to go for support when you experienced DV?

- Unaware of support and services available for a long period found support from Asian women
- Lack of support from police and social services.
- Places that should support aren't giving.
- Feelings of being unheard.
- More "Debbies"
- More child facilitations

2) How best can we involve you your children when planning designing services in Brent.

- Support 4 women with little/no income
- Support 4 mothers and children
- More consultation/planning meetings with all women regardless of culture.
- Continuous support from workers (No change at last minute).

3) Were you supported adequately? What do you feel are the Gaps in existing services?

- Lack of support workers.
- Interpreters (Lack of).
- Lack of advocacy
- "Why do the men always get believed and the women don't".
- More Asian advocates needed.
- Lack of faith with support services and criminal justice.