

# Criminalising forced marriages

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**On Wednesday 29th June, the European Foundation for Democracy organised a Hearing at the European Parliament on the criminalisation of forced marriage at EU level, co-hosted by Members of the European Parliament Diana Wallis (ALDE, UK) and Jean Lambert (Greens/EFA, UK). The event was attended by sixty participants, including representatives from NGOs, MEPs, other European Parliament staff and European Commission officials.**

The panel, co-chaired by the two MEPs, included the activists **Jasvinder Sanghera** (Karma Nirvana, UK), **Ahmad Mansour** (Heroes, Germany) and **Anna Rinder von Beckerath** (Sweden). The Hearing began with a screening of the BBC documentary screened on national television in the UK on 25<sup>th</sup> March “Shame Travels” and was followed by a panel discussion and a questions and answers session with the audience.

**Jasvinder Sanghera** briefly presented the work of Karma Nirvana and the legislative situation on forced marriages in the UK. Forced marriage does not for the moment constitute a criminal offense there. Noting the lack of successful prosecutions in this area, she stressed the need for specific legislation on forced marriages as well as an EU-wide campaign speaking out against this practice. She called for a European Parliament Public Hearing to take place later in 2011/early 2012 where many different stakeholders as well as representatives of the Commission and EU member state governments would have the opportunity to have comprehensive discussions on the issue of forced marriages, with the press and public present, agreeing on specific actions at EU level with the objective of outlawing the practice in Europe.

**Ahmad Mansour** presented his organisation “Heroes” in Berlin which promotes equality between men and women and works against oppression carried out in the name of honour. He noted that until 2005, no laws against forced marriage existed in Germany and that forced marriage itself only became an explicit crime three months ago. He stressed the need for a debate on this issue at both national and EU level.

**Anna Rinder von Beckerath** shared her experience as a Swedish social worker who was involved in establishing two “Heroes” projects in Germany and Sweden. Referencing “Heroes” recent expansion to Duisberg and Munich, she said that with EU funding a Heroes-type organisation could be replicated in other EU member states such as the UK and Belgium.

**Diana Wallis** MEP noted that the current Hearing was a more formal meeting following on from a strategy session with six MEPs and a number of honour crimes/anti-forced marriages European activists from UK, Belgium, Germany, Sweden and the UK that EFD organised in November 2010. This strategy session highlighted that forced marriage and honour crimes are pan-European phenomena and identified a number of potential suggestions and solutions to implement at EU level by the MEPs and activists working together. She explained that a dual solution was necessary, coupling a change of mentality towards forced marriage with concrete legislation at EU level. Stressing that much work still had to be done, she said “obviously our laws are not managing to get to grips with this issue.”

The floor was then opened for questions, with **Edit Bauer** MEP (EPP, Slovakia) suggesting that the recent EU “Trafficking Directive” could be particularly instrumental in tackling this problem. She also expressed her support for an oral question to the Commission with a debate. **Teresa Jimenez-Becerril** MEP (EPP, Spain) promised to raise the issue of forced marriages as a member of the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs and Women’s

Rights and Gender Equality committees as well as through her membership of the Human Rights Subcommittee. She also noted the importance of preventative work which intervenes before a forced marriage occurs.

**Jasvinder Sanghera** responded that whilst she was for effective legislation, over 80% of “forced marriage protection orders” issued in the UK culminated in the victim being returned to the perpetrator. **Ahmad Mansour** highlighted the need for a major EU-level study to understand the extent of forced marriages within Europe’s borders. He added that working to stop honour crimes was not about attacking a particular religion, but rather about dismantling the structures that support this crime. Similarly, he stressed the importance of changing the culture of fear in certain communities which promotes the premise that the family is more important than the individual. In order to change these attitudes, he said, it is key to highlight the importance of the individual.

**Roland Freudenstein** from the think-tank “Centre for European Studies” expressed his support for the work being done by the activists on the panel, stressing that the human rights at stake in this debate were not simply “Western” values, but were, in fact, universal. **Malin Björk**, GUE/NGL group advisor for the Women’s Rights and Gender Equality committee noted that more legislation was needed and stressed her view that a stricter immigration policy would not help to tackle forced marriages in Europe. European Commission representative **Ingrid Bellander-Todino** outlined the legislative situation in EU member states, noting that forced marriage had been criminalised in six member states and was covered by civil law in four member states. She also explained that a Heroes-type project could be eligible for the “DAPHNE” funding programme.

Concluding, **Diana Wallis** MEP proposed bringing together the issues raised in the Hearing in a more focused way, suggesting as an appropriate immediate next step a debate in the plenary session of the Parliament with the European Commission later in the year.