

Forced marriage in Britain: It nearly happened to me

A new Channel 4 documentary shows how police in Manchester are investigating families who force girls into marriage. It makes painful viewing for Shaheen Hashmat



Shaheen Hashmat, 29, escaped her family and the risk of a forced marriage aged 13 Photo: KATE PETERS



Feminist quotes that have fuelled the debate

Often challenging, sometimes notorious, well-chosen words hit the target and serve the cause

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By Shaheen Hashmat

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Last year in the UK, 1,267 people were assisted by the government's Forced Marriage Unit. Add to this the number of people supported by specialist independent charities, as well as local police forces up and down the country, and you have a figure running well into the thousands. In Channel 4's powerful documentary *Forced Marriage Cops* (going out this evening) director Anna Hall and her team follow the work of police officers in Greater Manchester as they investigate 250 cases of forced marriage over the course of 12 months.

This wasn't an easy programme for me to watch. It's been almost 20 years since the police and local authorities helped me escape from my family because of abuse and the threat of forced marriage. So much time has passed now, and it's more than jarring to see past experiences reflected so powerfully on camera in the lives of other women like my siblings and I. *Forced Marriage Cops* focuses on the stories of several women, and each one illustrates the different ways that victims can be affected by forced marriage.



Sajida was trapped for more than a decade in a violent relationship. Photo: CHANNEL 4

Sajida was trapped in a violent marriage for 13 years after being forced into it by her family when she was just 16. Rukhsana's father beats her and threatens to stab her to death if she refuses to marry a relative in Pakistan. Aisha is horrified to discover that a family party is in fact an engagement celebration held in her honour,

and that she is booked on to a flight to Pakistan to be married the very next week. When police investigate further, they discover another 15 children and young people in urgent need of protection within the same family.

Like Aisha, I know people who were tricked into marriage after a lifetime of violence, exploitation and psychological abuse. They were in their teens when they were flown to Pakistan on a 'family holiday'; had their passports confiscated, and were shown photographs of the men they were made to marry the next day.

If they had disappeared altogether, no one would have known, and no one would have asked questions. I didn't suffer to anywhere near the same extent as they did, although I did experience and witness things that I am likely to never share. I got out because I could see that abuse towards me was escalating, and that there was every chance I'd be made to suffer the same fate they did.

Thankfully, when these women I knew contacted the police - they were taken seriously. And in terms of my own escape - I received legal aid and appeared in front of a Children's Panel to answer questions about what was happening in my home. The matter of who my new legal guardian should be, as well as that of where I should live if not in the parental home, were all discussed. I'm extremely lucky - unlike most of the women in the Channel 4 documentary, I had the help of more than a few siblings to support me. While all these arrangements were being made, I smuggled what few possessions I could out of a back window and into a waiting car over the course of a few weeks so as not to arouse suspicion.



Manchester police arrive at a house in *Forced Marriage Cops* on Channel 4 Photo: CHANNEL 4

As I watched *Forced Marriage Cops* and saw Rukhsana gather her belongings in a bin bag under police escort, I recognised the unbearably heavy weight of the choice she was making. When it comes down to it, you either have to obliterate every aspect of life as you know it, or you must sacrifice yourself and any chance of survival you may have had.

Things have changed a lot since 1995. It's gratifying to see dedicated teams led by officers who understand how to provide specialist protection with full awareness of the severity of the threat faced by victims. However, experts agree that consistency throughout the country is lacking among police forces when it comes to training and adequate enforcement of the law. A Forced Marriage Protection Order (FMPO) should mean that victims are known to police in case of a breach, and that their families are prevented from travelling abroad. But as Halima's story demonstrates, this doesn't always happen - despite being issued with an FMPO, her family simply acquired another passport and managed to get past border controls with no questions asked.

Authorities still don't know enough

The Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO) is one of the UK's leading charities that specialises in supporting victims of forced marriage and honour abuse. Executive director Diana Nammi tells me: "FMPOs are a great idea in principal, but at the moment they are not being adequately enforced. Civil courts issuing the orders often don't communicate the action they've taken with local police forces, and there is nowhere near enough funding being directed towards adequate training." Although there are some areas of the country where the issue is dealt with effectively, there are too many others that are simply failing in their duty to protect those at risk. Nammi adds: "The approach should not be piecemeal. At the moment we've got a few people in some small pockets of the country who are going above and beyond to do the work that's needed - but they're stretched to capacity and too often they work alone. What happens when that person's not there on the day a victim's family decides to escalate things?"



Director Anna Hall and her team have followed the work of police officers in Greater Manchester as they investigated 250 cases of forced marriage over the course of 12 months Photo: CHANNEL 4

There is also increasing concern about the lack of convictions for forced marriage since it was entered into criminal law in June 2014, and opinion remains divided on the way forced marriage cases should be handled legally. I wholeheartedly believe that criminalisation, as well as forced marriage protection orders, are both crucial measures that authorities should have at their disposal when supporting those at risk.

As DI Tanya Kitchen of the Public Protection Team leading part of the investigations on Forced Marriage Cops say: “You’ve got to get out of the mindset of what you perceive to be a good result. It may not work out totally how you want it to be.”

The priority should always be ensuring that the victim is kept safe and protected from harm, and police should be able to do that most of the time using civil protections – but criminal action is also needed to protect the most vulnerable individuals facing threats of serious violence and even murder.

While debate continues on the efficacy of legislation, focus should also remain on the fact that too many victims of forced marriage return to abusive situations because they receive little to no support with rebuilding their lives after escape.

Government cuts to refuges, rape crisis centres and mental health services, as well as the elimination of legal aid, must be reversed immediately to protect the lives of some of the most vulnerable women and men in society. Only from a place of real safety can they truly begin to believe in their ability to survive away from the harm posed by their families.

In the meantime – allow me to suggest some advice to any readers at risk of forced marriage:

Emergency support:

If you need emergency support, getting yourself to a place of safety should be your top priority. If you believe that you are in immediate danger, please call 999 or contact IKWRO.

It may take a while for you to decide when you should leave, if at all. In any event you should pack a bag containing all of your essential personal documents, from passport and driver's license to any paperwork relating to bank accounts, mortgages, car ownership, insurance etc. I've come across cases where families have forged signatures and taken on victim's identities to deny them rightful ownership of their possessions.

Agree an emergency plan with someone you trust. This could consist of checking in at regular intervals with a friend, who might inform the police if they don't hear from you when expected, for example. It's best to contact a specialist organisation like IKWRO to help you develop the most effective plan of action, especially if you have children.

And for longer term support - click here for a list of organisations that can help.

Advice for longer term recovery:

If you do decide to leave, know that things may not improve immediately. This doesn't mean you've made the wrong decision – it just means that building a new life on your own takes time, and progress is often slow. But the relief of finally feeling safe and able to make to your own choices in life is invaluable. Things do get better.

Know that you're not alone. The pain of becoming estranged from the people who are supposed to love and care for you, and with whom you might share some wonderful memories as well as the bad, may feel too overwhelming to bear at times. There are many others who have had similar experiences to you, and it really helps to connect with them.

Consider speaking to a mental health professional. Whether you've already been forced into marriage, or have escaped the threat, or even if you have decided that now isn't the right time to leave, talking about your experiences with someone qualified whom you trust can prove to be an enormous source of strength while you deal with your situation. Your GP or the organisations linked above will be able to help.

Forced Marriage Cops is on Channel 4 this evening at 10pm