



Client: C4 National Press
Source: The Observer
Date: 27/09/2015

Keyword: Forced Marriage Cops
Page: 14
Reach: 187143
Size: 545
Value: 9526.60

Schoolgirls need protection from forced marriage, Ofsted warned

Campaigner says inspectors should be trained to check that pupils are being safeguarded

by Maggie Brown

The founder of a charity that offers helplines and refuge to women escaping from forced marriages has called on Ofsted inspectors to focus on the issue when visiting schools where girls may be at risk.

Last week, an inquest heard how model Nadia Menaz, 24, was found hanged in her home in Oldham. The mother of a three-year-old, she had feared being forced into an arranged marriage by her devout Muslim parents and had taken out a forced marriage protection order against them.

Campaigner Jasvinder Sanghera, who set up the charity, called Karma Nirvana, told the *Observer*: "Education is at the heart of prevention. We would like this abuse to form part of the Ofsted framework as a safeguarding issue. We need inspectors to be trained to identify how schools are safeguarding children at risk of forced marriage."

Sanghera said there should also be a much tougher system of penalties to ensure that all public bodies covered by

the statutory guidelines on forced marriage, introduced in 2008, are responding properly. The guidelines state that

forced marriage is an abuse of human rights, a form of domestic abuse, and where it affects children and young people, child abuse. It is a criminal offence.

On schools, she added: "This goes across all religions, not just Islam. That counter-message has to be in school: you have to get into education. Young people, not just those affected but their friends, have got to hear that this is against the law in Britain.

"It should be mandatory in schools. Child protection is an issue for all children. Somehow when it's about these issues it gets watered down. We are treating it as if it's cultural – we don't want to offend people – and that is wrong."

Pointing out that numbers of teenage girls disappear every summer from British schools, Sanghera said that Karma

Nirvana had recently written to every school in West Yorkshire inviting them to a free educational event, but that only two schools turned up.

"One of the biggest challenges is the



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lack of community leadership. I've had a real death threat, and been in conferences and had people point me out as someone who has shamed her community. Politicians within these communities, what are you saying about these issues? My belief is that they don't like to raise their head above the parapet."

Sanghera, who ran away from her Sikh family 36 years ago when

she was faced with a forced marriage, said doctors, nurses and midwives now needed to be more involved. "A lot of young girls end up in a GP practice. We need health to come on board."

She said that sometimes GPs who come from the same Asian background as their patients allowed parents into consultations when, because of patient confidentiality, they ought to be a safe place for victims.

This week Channel 4 will screen a groundbreaking documentary that will include interviews with girls fleeing forced marriages. *Forced Marriage Cops* follows two girls who flee their families but eventually return to live with them. Another case involves two families with 15 children between them and results in forced marriage protection orders being placed on all the youngsters.

Sanghera noted: "This is the only specific injunction where we are returning the victim to the perpetrators, closing the front door and acting as if this order is going to change generations of behaviour."

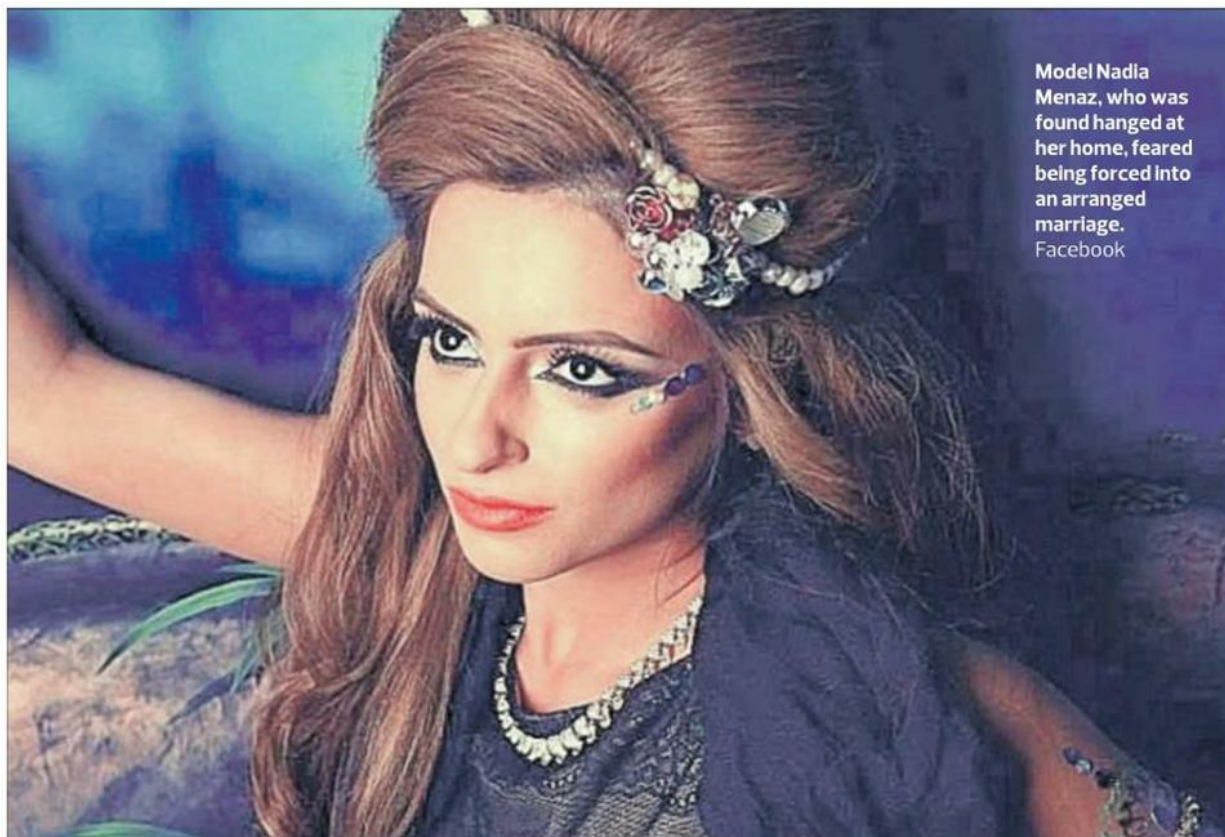
Detective Chief Superintendent Vanessa Jardine of Greater Manchester police, which gave access to the documentary team, said: "We are not seeing anything like the reality of the situation. There will be many more victims in the community. We are really on the precipice of the situation. My hope is that victims sat at home will see this film and think, 'I am not alone, there are people out there who can help me, and I have somewhere to turn.' That is my reason for making this film – educating people out there that this is happening."

Forced Marriage Cops will be screened

on Channel 4 on Wednesday at 10pm

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DS Nita Jhanji-Garrod, left, and DI Tanya Kitchen in **Forced Marriage Cops**.