

Forced Marriage

Source: Forced Marriage Unit (FMU)

What is a forced marriage?

A forced marriage is where one or both people do not (or in cases of people with learning disabilities, cannot) consent to the marriage and pressure or abuse is used. It is an appalling and indefensible practice and is recognised in the UK as a form of violence against women and men, domestic/child abuse and a serious abuse of human rights.

The pressure put on people to marry against their will can be physical (including threats, actual physical violence and sexual violence) or emotional and psychological (for example, when someone is made to feel like they're bringing shame on their family). Financial abuse (taking your wages or not giving you any money) can also be a factor.

Statistics

In 2013, the FMU gave advice or support related to a possible forced marriage in 1302 cases.

Where the age was known, 15% of cases involved victims below 16 years, 25% involved victims aged 16-17 and 33% involved victims aged 18-21.

82% of cases involved female victims and 18% involved male victims.

The FMU handled cases involving 74 different countries, including Pakistan (42.7%), India (10.9%), Bangladesh (9.8%), Afghanistan (2.8%), Somalia (2.5%), Iraq (1.5%), Nigeria (1.1%), Saudi Arabia (1.1%), Yemen (1%), Iran (0.8%), Tunisia (0.8%), The Gambia (0.7%), Egypt (0.6%) and Morocco (0.4%). The origin was unknown in 5.4% of cases.

Signs and indicators

Both men and women facing forced marriage may become anxious, depressed and emotionally withdrawn with low self-esteem. They may come to the attention of practitioners for a variety of reasons.

There have been occasions when women have presented with less common warning signs such as cut or shaved hair as a form of punishment for disobeying or perhaps "dishonouring" her family. In some cases, a girl may report that she has been taken to a private practice to be examined to see if she is a virgin. There have been reports of women presenting in the NHS with symptoms associated with poisoning. In certain communities, it is considered important that women undergo female genital mutilation (FGM) before being able to marry.

Additional indicators for schools and education settings may include:

- Persistent absence or requests for extended leave
- Failure to return from visits to country of origin or fear about forthcoming school holidays
- Surveillance by siblings/cousins at the school
- Being withdrawn from school
- Decline in behaviour, engagement, performance or punctuality
- Sudden announcement of engagement to a stranger
- Not allowed to attend extracurricular activities
- Prevented from going on to further/higher education
- Mental health issues such as attempted suicide, self-harm, depression, eating disorders
- Female genital mutilation
- Early or unwanted pregnancies
- Domestic abuse
- Missing from home/running away
- Knowledge of police reports within the family for violence, rape, kidnap, shoplifting
- Knowledge of a family history of forced or early marriage.

Consequences of forced marriage

Women forced to marry may find it very difficult to initiate any action to end the marriage and may be subjected to repeated rape (sometimes until they become pregnant) and ongoing domestic abuse within the marriage. In some cases they suffer violence and abuse from the extended family, often being forced to undertake all the household chores for the family.

Victims frequently end up trapped in a relationship marred by physical and sexual abuse. The impact this has on children within the marriage is immense. Children may learn that it is acceptable to be abusive and that violence is an effective way to get what you want. They may learn that violence is justified, particularly when you are angry with someone. Children witnessing abuse can be traumatised because witnessing persistent violence undermines children's emotional security and capacity to meet the demands of everyday life. Children's academic abilities can be affected. Witnessing violence as a child is often associated with depression, trauma-related symptoms and low self-esteem in adulthood.

Both male and female victims of forced marriage may feel that running away is their only option. For many of these individuals, especially those from black, minority ethnic and refugee communities, leaving their family can be especially hard. They may have minimal to no experience of life outside the family, so seeking refuge elsewhere may mean that they will lose their children and friends. For others, finding accommodation for themselves and their children can also be very difficult – especially for those who do not have leave to remain and therefore do not have recourse to public funds. UK Visas and Immigration has developed a scheme to strengthen the way in which domestic violence cases are considered enabling those victims who are vulnerable to access additional support. This is known as the Destitution Domestic Violence Concession.

Living away from home with minimal support can make a person, particularly a woman, more isolated, thus making it more likely that they will return to the abusive situation. In addition, leaving their family (or accusing them of a crime or simply approaching statutory agencies for help) may be seen as bringing shame on their 'honour' and on the 'honour of their family' in the eyes of the community. This may lead to social ostracism and harassment from the family and community. For many, this is simply not a price they are prepared to pay.

Those who do leave still often live in fear of their own families, as they will go to considerable lengths to find them and ensure their return. Families have also been known to solicit help of others to find victims who have run away, or involve the police by reporting them missing, or on occasion falsely accusing the victim of a crime e.g. theft. Some families have also traced individuals through medical and dental records, bounty hunters, private investigators, local taxi drivers, members of the community and shopkeepers or through National Insurance numbers, benefit records, school and college records. Sometimes having traced them, the family may subject them to further violence or abuse, or at worst resort to murder claiming it to be a so called "honour killing".

Women trapped in a forced marriage often suffer violence, rape, forced pregnancy and forced childbearing. Many girls and young women are withdrawn from education early. Some are taken and left abroad for extended periods, which isolates them from help and support – this limits their choices so that often they go through with the marriage as the only option. Their interrupted education limits their career choices. Even if the woman manages to find work, however basic, they may be prevented from taking the job or their earnings may be taken from them. This leads to economic dependence, which makes the possibility of leaving the situation even more difficult. Some may be unable to leave the house unescorted – living virtually under "house arrest".

One chance rule

All professionals working with suspected or actual victims of forced marriage and honour-based violence need to be aware of the "one chance" rule. That is, they may only have one opportunity to speak to a victims or potential victim and may possibly only have one chance to save a life. As a result, all professionals working with in statutory agencies need to be aware of their responsibilities and obligations when they are faced with forced marriage cases. If the victim is allowed to leave without the appropriate support and advice being offered, that one chance might be wasted.

Further advice and support

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www.gov.uk/forced-marriage