

# This is safeguarding, not a cultural issue

Social work student Kazia\* feared she would be victim of an honour-based killing for refusing a forced marriage. She tells her disturbing story in a bid to raise awareness among professionals



**'On the day he was born and I was four it was decided I would be marrying him'**

then was that you had gone abroad. There were no welfare officers knocking on the door or fixed penalty notices issued if children did not go to school. I always hoped someone would care enough to find me.

Every night of that year in Pakistan I would pray to see daylight, that I would not be killed. After all, who would even know if I was murdered? Honour killings were not spoken about because there was a fear of upsetting predominantly Asian communities. My only saving grace was that the man chosen for me to marry was still only 11.

I did finally come back to the UK. I remember as clear as yesterday landing at Birmingham International Airport and

whispering, "Thank you God, I'm alive, I'm home".

But my nightmare was far from over. After returning to the UK, I went to an all-girls school and managed to pass my GCSEs and A-levels and went onto university.

In the eyes of my family I was now an adult and ready to be married to my cousin in Pakistan. But I was still determinedly refusing to marry someone four years younger, a relative and someone who quite honestly, I could not stand the sight of. All I wanted was a career.

Because of this, I suffered emotional, mental and physical abuse. My size eight frame would be picked up and slammed across the floor as though I was a doll. I was kicked, punched, had my hair pulled out of my head, all in the presence of my two older sisters, who were being reminded to remain silent and conform or suffer. They did conform and are both in abusive forced marriages.

During my final year at university, I worked part time for the police. It was at this point that a very casual conversation resulted in me being saved. After talking to the police sergeant on my team and explaining to him there were meetings taking place at my family home between all male members in my immediate family as well as an uncle, I was advised that my life was in danger.

My mother and brother got my sister to tell me about the plans to murder me as a warning. My family intended to have me killed as I went to university one morning. I later heard a conversation in my house where my mother said: "The devil will never leave her soul, she will survive". My eldest brother replied: "I've told him [the contract killer] to drive over her, reverse over her again and then back over her a third time, she will be finished, do not worry mum."

How can a mother kill her own child?

The same day I was put under police protection. Despite this, I still loved my family and missed them. I missed what was my normality. All I knew was that I had a mum, dad and four siblings and that the moment I left I had nothing.

I questioned who I was, my identity, my purpose in life. I felt like a part of me was dead, and for a long time it was. Eid, Christmas, Mother's Day, Father's Day, my birthday, New Year – they were empty, lonely and emotional celebrations.

Not all Muslims, Pakistanis or those from the South Asian communities would subject their loved ones to such abuse. The community I come from is generally very loving and caring. Islam teaches us to be kind and give charity where possible. I have Muslim and Indian friends who have chosen to marry someone they fell in love with and their families have happily accepted their decision. Some are in inter-faith marriages. There are also those like me who want to be young, free and single.

Many parents who have settled in the UK have accepted diversity and cultural differences. They have embraced the British way of life while preserving their own faith and religious beliefs. They say their child's happiness is more important than cultural expectations, shame and dishonour. I have spoken to people from my community who condemn forced marriage and honour-based violence. That in my eyes is beautiful. Sadly this was not true in my case.

The thing that saved me was that I was believed by the

- Under the Anti-social behaviour, crime and Policing Act 2014 it is a crime to force someone to marry in England, Scotland and Wales, with separate legislation covering Northern Ireland
- The government's Forced Marriage Unit gave advice or support on 1,764 cases in 2018
- This is a 47 per cent increase on 2017
- A quarter of cases involved children aged under 18
- 31 per cent were aged between 18 and 25
- Most – 75 per cent – were women
- Cases handled by the unit relate to more than 110 countries
- Most involved Pakistani families, followed by Bangladesh, India, Somalia, Afghanistan and Romania

agency I disclosed information to. I owe my life to the police. Though at the time forced marriage and honour-based violence had very recently come to the public forefront, the police did not hesitate to understand.

They did not see it as a community issue or worry that they would be upsetting a community by getting involved with a 'cultural thing'.

Domestic abuse charities say on average a victim will be assaulted 35 times before contacting the police or other agency. If we, as social workers, are that first point of contact by someone at risk of forced marriage or honour-based violence, it is an opportunity to intervene that we must not miss.

As professionals we sometimes fail to understand just how much of a difference we can make to someone's life by just listening, believing and acting on the information given to us. We sometimes fail to understand the power we have.

Partnership working is key to safeguard victims of crime. Time and time again we hear it said that "safeguarding is everyone's business". Then why do I sometimes, even now, encounter professionals panicking when they need to understand a culturally sensitive issue?

Professionals need specialist training to enhance their understanding, knowledge and confidence when dealing with victims of forced marriage and honour-based violence.

I believe such training should happen at least twice a year. Every, school, college and university throughout the country should have a specialist dedicated to delivering training. For make no mistake, this is a safeguarding, not a cultural issue.

**'I questioned who I was, my identity, my purpose in life'**

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