

Forced marriage is a form of abuse, widespread around the world

By Arifa Nasim

A few weeks ago I was out shopping for my trip to Vancouver for some last minute bits and pieces when I saw my friend's mother. She stopped to say "hi", and casually mentioned she had just gotten married this morning.

My mind slowed in confusion. I wondered if I had totally missed her white wedding attire? Nope, no dress, or anything white wedding related at all.

In the brief one-minute conversation that ensued, I learned that she had just popped to the shops to make something nice to for their dinner, to celebrate. This was a far cry from the typical Asian weddings I was used to, which usually left a sizeable dent in your bank account. But what screamed out to me was the aspect of choice. They chose this, and more importantly they chose each other.

This is a freedom that is not afforded to many individuals across the world. Forced marriage is when a person is pressured, either physically or emotionally to marry another against their will. This contrasts strikingly to an arranged marriage, though the two terms are often used interchangeably. The latter is where the parents suggest suitable matches and the person questioned has the choice to accept or reject the proposed spouse.

Honour crimes such as forced marriage are shrouded in mystery and are highly taboo. They are silent underground crimes that take place. Most mistake it for being cultural, but forced marriage is not cultural. It is a form of abuse. Many may now be wondering why parents, the two people who are supposed to love you most in the world, would abuse their children in this way.

Reasons vary, from seeing their children become "too western" and the desire to tame them, to "fixing" their sexuality. I interviewed a Canadian Pakistani woman, Naila* who was able to stand up against

her family when they tried to force her into marrying a relative from Pakistan. She recounted the intense bouts of "emotional blackmail", the threats that her mother would die from the pressure of the "shame" she had brought on the family. A particularly harrowing part of the story was the extent of her families' involvement. Naila* flinched as she described how her brother slapped and kicked her when he realized she was backing out of the match her parents had set.

Naila's* story is not unique. I have heard stories of forced marriages that have ended in extreme domestic violence, spousal rape, and even suicide. The ring that is usually a symbol of love and adoration becomes a shackle to an absolute stranger you are then expected to live with side by side.

When I arrived in Vancouver, I started researching the prevalence of forced marriage in Canada. As hard as you may look you will never get an exact figure. Would you admit to being married against your will if the perpetrators of this abuse were your parents? I couldn't myself, despite having campaigned against this atrocity since I was 14.

You see, families from South Asian and Arab backgrounds that force their children to marry usually operate an honour system, whereby the actions of one has the potential to taint and dishonour the entire family and women tend to be the gatekeepers of honour in such systems. Therefore refusing to marry someone suggested by your parents could lead to the entire family being ostracized by the community.

But this is not the only reason. And forced marriage is not confined to a single community. This horrific form of abuse is cross-cultural and cross religious, affecting men and women, from Indian Sikhs to Jehovah's Witnesses.

Increasingly, the prevalence of honour crimes such as forced marriage are being investigated. According to a study conducted

by the South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario, between a two-year period, 219 people reported being forced to marry against their will.

However, until more victims come forward, the full scale of this horrific abuse can never be uncovered. There is a quiet revolution that is occurring; in my native Britain, we are close to unveiling a day for Britain's lost women, those who lost their lives in forced marriages and crimes of honour such as Shafiea Ahmed and Banaz Mahmod. Internationally charities such as Plan are working towards ending child and early forced marriage for good.

Education about such crimes is, as ever, the key to prevention. In our community every one knows someone who was "married off but hardly anyone spoke up or supported them."

The revolution has begun – will you join and speak out for those silenced?

This article first appeared in the *Georgia Strait* and is reprinted with permission.

Arifa Nasim is an activist who works in the UK Labour Party as a volunteer, and is co-founder of Educate2Eradicate. She has been published two times in *The Guardian*.

Continuing the international fight to eradicate FGM

Lower Island News's long-time contributor and reporter, Diane Walsh, is headed to the University of St. Andrews, Scotland.

Walsh has reported for *LIN* at the UN in New York and Geneva in recent years, covering the international campaigns to eradicate the practice of Female Genital Mutilation.

High profile campaigns in western and developed countries have resulted in the criminalization of this abusive practice which mutilates young girls.

LIN is proud to have published Walsh's reports over the past years.

Now we can report that Walsh will continue her FGM research and campaigning at the prestigious University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Her research will further investigation into the most effective methods to combat the practice of FGM globally, and will include contextual studies in related human rights and environmental

sustainability.

She notes that St. Andrews' offer and support of a place, leading to the study of methods to eradicate FGM, is a first for a Scottish university. With recent graduates, including the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, St. Andrews' is well known for its progressive and far reaching international profile.

For readers who may have missed previous references to FGM in *LIN*, Walsh's description on her GoFundMe site, published here, will help inform.

Walsh reports that it has been thanks to so many elements of support, including scholarship funding, private donations and the moral support of so many people, as well as the imagination of the University of St. Andrews, that has enabled the possibility of this opportunity.

Lower Island News looks forward to Walsh's continued reporting about this important and tragic topic. -- JRL

An End to Female Genital Mutilation - A PhD study that matters

International migration, and the import of Female Genital Mutilation practices to Western countries, has propelled the need for the UK, Europe, Australia, the US and Canada to confront the heinous practice of FGM.

To be graphically clear, FGM is the practice of mutilating young girls. Adults hack and irreparably mutilate the genitalia of young girls. These are horrible crimes that are very difficult to imagine, let alone confront.

In countries which welcome and enjoy the benefits of migration and integration, the practice of FGM is too often also introduced into Western society.

Because FGM in modern societies, as a practice and a crime, has been poorly defined and under-exposed, proliferation has occurred "below the radar". There has been little ability or incentive to publicize or prosecute the frequent movement of young girls for the sole purpose of mutilating them.

Publicizing such horror is a thankless task and the messengers are often vilified and sidelined, thus perpetuating FGM practices.

In offering an opportunity and forum for advanced research into Female Genital Mutilation at PhD level, the University of St. Andrews does not shrink from the difficulties attached to research of this nature.

I am honoured to have been accepted into the St. Andrews' research family, especially given the sensitivity of my research subject.

In my work around FGM abolition over the past eight years at UN levels in New York and Geneva, and my involvement in encouraging integration of anti FGM efforts internationally, I've seen directives and mandates censoring and criminalizing FGM practices. See #ENDFGM and #GAFGM on twitter. Also a UN Special Article - one of many articles I've been able to publish.

<https://indydianewalsh.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/un-special-article-by-diane-walsh-foreign-correspondent-fpa-london.pdf>
<http://www.gofundme.com/indydianewalsh-com>

continue or enable mutilation practices, to misrepresent the work of those working to eradicate the practice.

It's a perverse conundrum for anti FGM campaigners. Advanced research is needed to discover effective ways of acquiring strong public understanding of the problem and its scale without such publicity being used to undermine the eradication purpose. Campaigners are almost entirely volunteers. My work has been almost entirely unfunded. It's now time to match St. Andrews' brave offer with proper research funding.

So, to those whose understanding of FGM practices is already enlightened, I respectfully ask for your support, enabling this unique opportunity to add to the international efforts to spare so many millions of young girls from mutilations that bring pain and misery to them and which normalizes a barbaric and criminal practice. Anti-FGM leadership at a university with this level of prestige can have a marked positive global influence. Coupled with the 2012 United Nations resolution to end FGM in one generation, it is in this historically pivotal area that I can and will make a useful contribution. Please consider pledging your support.

Time is of the essence.

It is not me as an individual that you would be helping -- it is about what you would be doing for girls and women in harm's way -- joining together to fight FGM on a global scale. In a global village it is only through an international federated effort that female genital mutilation will be successfully stopped and it is with this objective that I am asking for your financial support.

Remember:

If current trends aren't stopped, as many as 30 million girls are at-risk of being mutilated. Internationally more than 130 million girls and women have already undergone FGM in 29 countries in Africa. However less frequently cited are Egypt, countries in the Middle East, Asia (Indonesia), the Caribbean (Jamaica)...

Please always feel welcome to contact me with any questions.

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