



FEMINISM

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## It's not enough simply to get women out of forced marriages

A few arrests, a good news story here or there...but all too often when it's over, the survivors are left to fend for themselves.

BY [EMILY DYER](#)



Channel 4 will tonight air a documentary about a subject which remains a big problem in this country – forced marriages. ‘Forced Marriage Cops’ shows the significant progress being made by the police in identifying victims and therefore preventing further abuse and murders. The very fact that the programme is going ahead shows the great strides that have been made in raising awareness of the issue. Yet, while progress is being made, there is still much more to be done in providing support for victims.

In 2013, the government’s Forced Marriage Unit gave support or advice related to a possible forced marriage to more than 1,300 people. Last year, Karma Nirvana – a national charity that supports all those affected by ‘honour’ abuse – received over 8,268 calls to their helpline, the majority of which were from victims themselves. Yet, given the nature of this vastly underreported crime, the numbers of individuals at risk are likely to be far higher.

Forced marriage is part of a wider pattern of ‘honour’ abuse, whereby victims often suffer years of emotional, physical, sexual and/or financial abuse at the hands of those closest to them – their family members. This makes forced marriage and ‘honour’ abuse unique, in that the perpetrators are almost always those who make up their support network. Choosing to leave the abuse behind means choosing to leave everything else behind too.

There have been too many occasions when victims have found the strength to leave everything – their community, friends and family – only to be met with nothing. As part of my latest **report**, *Britain's Forgotten Women: Speaking to Survivors of 'Honour'-Based Abuse*, survivors opened up about their experiences of forced marriage and 'honour' abuse. One common theme that came across was the lack of support after they had left home and the subsequent feelings of isolation which, in some cases, drove them to return home or attempt suicide.

Take Saliha, who left home because of the daily emotional abuse from family members. Her blindness had been used by them as an additional way of controlling her every movement. When she finally gathered the strength to leave, the police took her to a refuge. Here, she was put in a room with no access to a phone or internet access. No one came to ask how she was coping. She quickly became suicidal and was taken to hospital. Only then did a social worker come to visit. Saliha now identifies her time in the refuge as when she felt most isolated and alone – feelings that drove her to return home to her abusers.

In order to fill this gap in support, police officers and social workers need to have a basic knowledge and understanding of 'honour' based abuse and forced marriage in order to gain the confidence and ability to assess risk appropriately and support victims accordingly. They should have the confidence in identifying 'honour'-based abuse and forced

marriage when carrying out a risk assessment or determining whether a child is eligible for foster care. While there is currently statutory guidance for agencies such as police, education and social services, basic training is still optional rather than mandatory. As a result, victims are still being let down by services that are supposed to protect them.

Individuals leaving their families behind need a new support system. Foster placement should be considered a first option for young people affected by forced marriages and honour abuse. Social workers need to understand the risk involved of not placing a young person in foster care and must prioritise their safety over cultural considerations.

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Survivors need engagement, encouragement and to have their voices heard. There is the need to develop a survivor network, support groups and helpline specifically for those that have left home and some of whom have been disowned by their family. The development of a confidential survivor