

Debate paper

Arranged marriage: a dilemma for young British Asians

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ABSTRACT

The tradition of arranged marriage has operated successfully within many communities and countries over a long period of time. However, this tradition has come under challenge especially by the younger generations, because of the increasing incidence of forced marriages taking place both here in the UK and back in the Indian subcontinent. There is a fine distinction between forced and arranged marriage. Arranged marriage takes place only with full agreement and consent from both parties, whereas in forced marriage, one or both spouses do not consent to the marriage, and an element of duress, physical, emotional or both, is involved.

This paper seeks to support a better-informed discussion about the reportedly 'increasing problem' of forced marriage, and to clarify the tradition

of arranged marriage, since confusion over these two different approaches has led to increased tension between British and Asian cultures.

The UK government made a proposal to make forcing someone to marry a specific criminal offence. Unfortunately, it was felt that criminalisation would not provide an effective intervention into this problem. Instead, the use of existing laws with better support for the victims would better address the wrongs involved in forced marriage cases.

This paper closes by highlighting the responsibilities of young British Asians as well as health and social care professionals to help combat forced marriage.

Keywords: arranged marriage, Asian brides, forced marriage, honour killing

Introduction

Arranged marriage has been a long-standing tradition which has been passed down over many generations within Asian cultures, and is also known in other societies. The institution of arranged marriage is much respected in South Asian communities both in the UK and abroad, particularly by members of the older generations (Grewal, 2002b), but it has come under challenge especially in the Diaspora. Young people in Bangladesh and Pakistan, for example, still largely rely on and trust their parents to search for and find them a suitable partner, while 'western' Asians nowadays increasingly want to choose the person with whom they will settle down (Choudry, 1996). This paper seeks to support a better-informed discussion about the reportedly 'increasing problem' of forced marriage, and to clarify the tradition of arranged marriage, since confusion over these two different approaches

has led to increased tension between British and Asian cultures.

Traditionally, arranging marriages has been considered as an important role for parents and close family members, who regard the fulfilment of the arrangement as a matter of great family honour (see Box 1). Usually, once a proposal has been received from either side of the family, a formal meeting is arranged to introduce the prospective partners and their families to discuss wedding arrangements and dowry. Dowry is a strong South Asian tradition, whereby both families discuss the amount of items and gifts to be exchanged between the families of the bride and the groom; for example the groom's family may offer gold, land or money, whichever is convenient to the bride to keep. Historically, the dowry (*daj*) has been seen as a form of financial protection or

Box 1 Differences between arranged and forced marriage

Arranged marriage	Forced marriage
Mutual agreement and consent from both parties	Force to enter marriage
Said to be happier/healthier, more likely to last	Women feel trapped, family/community pressure to stay within the marriage
Dowry is mutually agreed	Dowry can be used as a bribe
In accordance with the Shari'ah	Against the Shari'ah, marriage is not valid
In accordance with UK and other national law	Could constitute a criminal offence
If well organised, can ensure selection of partners with compatible attitudes and expectations or interests	Forced consummation of marriage equates to rape
Partnership can work out well and result in many years of happiness and pleasure	Domestic violence a strong possibility
Lonely individuals may welcome arranged marriage	Self-harm/mental health problems
Support for community cohesion	Control of female sexuality
Increased support from family members at times of trouble and conflict	Unhappiness
	Abuse of basic human rights
	Refusal to enter a marriage is seen as an insult to the head of the household

insurance for the bride (Bhachu, 1985). The bride's family usually gives furniture, jewellery and household items to take with her to her husband's house, although this tradition is now changing. People prefer to accumulate possessions themselves rather than have them provided by parents. Once the initial meeting has taken place, time is given to both parties, and a decision is expected from both the boy and the girl if they are happy for the arrangements to go ahead.

There is a fine distinction between forced and arranged marriage. Arranged marriage takes place only with full agreement and consent from both parties, and thus the marriage is valid according to the Islamic Shari'ah (Sarwar, 1987). Prospective partners are introduced to each other, and the families have the opportunity to explore each other's background, and educational abilities, and look to see if the couple will be compatible with each other. In this process, the prospective partners are allowed to spend some time with each other, but not alone, and usually within family gatherings. There is absolutely no duress involved, and the individuals are free to make their own decisions (Samad, 2003). In forced marriage, one or both individuals do not consent to the marriage, and an element of duress, physical, emotional or both, is involved. Any matrimony without the full consent and agreement of both parties is invalid according to both the Islamic Shari'ah and the British law (Bibi, 2003; Home Office, 2005).

Forced marriage

There are growing numbers of reports of forced, or rather coerced, marriages taking place, especially involving British Asian girls with boys who are usually close family members back in the subcontinent (Home Office, 2002). The marriage is arranged without consultation with the girl, who is usually told that a relative is getting married or a grandparent is seriously unwell and a visit back home is urgent, only to face a totally different picture once there (Choudry, 1996; Home Office, 2005). Some rigid practices such as arranging marriage at birth still exist in some parts of the subcontinent, when parents later feel compelled to keep their promise. Forced marriage is not confined to Bangladesh or Pakistan alone, although media reports give the impression that this is more prevalent there. In fact it exists all over the Indian subcontinent, the Far East, Africa and the western Balkans.

There are many motives for arranging a marriage with a family member back home, including parents' desire to control unwanted behaviour and sexuality, preventing a relationship outside ethnic, religious, cultural or caste group, or ensuring land, property and wealth remain within the family and assisting claims of residence and citizenship here in the UK (Samad, 2003). The most valuable incentive in the latter case is the bride's British passport, a vehicle

through which, once married, the groom enters Britain. It appears that much value is placed upon family honour and maintaining a close family bond, both here and back home, paying little attention, if any, as to whether the boy and girl will get on or whether they are in any way compatible. While the motivation involved in forced marriage is complex, Samad's research (2003) shows that the most common motive for a forced marriage is to prevent (or is initiated upon discovery of) female liaisons with the opposite sex.

Forced marriage, therefore, is a form of social control. It is a control by family of female sexuality, and to protect family honour. It is about power relations between men and women, and the power of parents over their children, especially daughters.

In Britain it is reported that some 1000 girls are forced into marriage every year. In the past year the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU, which specifically deals with cases of forced marriages both in the UK and abroad), based at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, dealt with nearly 250 cases, which is regarded as only representing the tip of the iceberg (personal communication, Abigail N, National Consultation Co-ordinator, Home Office, London, 2006). Eighty-five percent of those forced into marriage are women with an average age of between 15 and 21 years (www.fco.gov.uk). More locally, Southall Black Sisters deal with around 1000 cases of forced marriage every year (Musella and Pai, 2005). Home Office figures show that the number of Pakistani men using their wife's status to gain entry to the UK rose from 1740 in 1995 to 3510 in 1997. The High Commission in Pakistan issued 225 visas to spouses in 1998, and this rose to 1132 in 1999 (Grewal, 2002a). Forced marriage is not confined to women alone: men also may get forced into marriage with equally disastrous results. Approximately 15% of all cases reported to the FMU are from men (Weaver, 2006).

Arranged marriage

While there is a great deal of scepticism surrounding arranged marriage, some of which is partly due to confusion with forced marriage, some individuals who do not get the opportunity to meet prospective partners (being busy with career or education) may welcome the opportunity to have their marriage arranged, and trust and rely upon family members to look into the background and character of the prospective partner (Gill, 2003; Samad, 2003). There are various forms of arranged marriages, and the social class and educational backgrounds of parents are closely linked to the degree of choice that is offered to children.

While many arranged marriages do work out well, the sad truth is that many do not. The couples often do not get along due to differences of outlook in life, interests, ambitions, or simply the way they have been brought up. The woman may want to work, delay having children or socialise with friends outside of the home, while the man, or rather his family, may want her to stay home to pursue traditional family roles such as looking after the children, doing the housework and performing religious activities. Simply wanting change causes conflict between the couple, which is further complicated by the involvement of the extended family members (Modood and Beishon, 1998).

Should forcing marriage be a criminal offence?

The literature seems to suggest that children often surrender to the demands for marriage simply to please parents and extended family members. British Asians need to take responsibility to help combat this problem. Simply saying that parents forced them to enter a marriage can no longer be acceptable. If people suspect that travelling back to the subcontinent for a holiday will result in forced marriage, they should refuse to go. It is also up to individuals to make it clear to parents that if they are forced to enter a marriage, every effort will be made to bring about criminal convictions. Law enforcers both here in the UK and back in the subcontinent need to make it crystal clear that prosecutions and convictions will follow any attempt at forced marriage.

British government initiatives to increase awareness of the illegality of forced marriage through national press and radio advertisements will only do so much. Parliament has been debating whether forcing people to marry should be made a criminal offence (www.publications.parliament.uk (columns 334WH, 335WH, 336WH)). The Home Office launched a consultation document in 2005, *Forced Marriage: a wrong not a right*, to prompt public debate on whether the criminalisation of forced marriage would help to combat forced marriages in the UK (see Box 2). The outcome was that criminalisation would not provide an effective intervention into this problem. Existing criminal offences such as rape, murder, torture, kidnap, abduction and assault, together with a stronger emphasis on the Human Rights Act, which forms the practical application of the principles enshrined in international covenants, the provision of more effective outreach services for women at risk, and a culturally sensitive dialogue with the communities, would better address the wrongs involved in forced marriage cases (Home Office, 2005).

Box 2 Arguments for and against criminalisation of forced marriage (Home Office, 2005)

For criminalisation

It could empower young people with more tools to negotiate with their parents, and in some cases with parents facing pressure from relatives.

It will make people think before they force people into entering a marriage.

Primary legislation could change public opinion, and thus perception and practice.

It could simplify and clarify matters for public sector employees tackling this issue.

It would make it clearer what steps can be taken, and make it easier to take action against perpetrators.

It will send a clear message about individual rights and the consequences for those that violate them.

While some people may not wish to prosecute parents, there are some who clearly do.

Against criminalisation

There is a risk that parents may take children abroad, and marry them off or hold them there, at an earlier age, to avoid increased risk of prosecution in Britain.

It can dissuade victims from seeking help because they would fear their parents being prosecuted.

There are already sufficient criminal offences and protective measures that can be used.

If the proposal was to go ahead, the government could expect to see about 10 cases a year to go to court. However, if it were difficult to mount a successful prosecution the offence might be routinely flouted with impunity.

The new offence would significantly impact on black and minority ethnic communities, and might be misinterpreted as an attack on those communities.

Families concerned may not feel implicated by such an offence, because many may believe their children did consent to the marriage, even though the consent was obtained under duress.

Implementing a new offence would be expensive, and the funds might be better spent on improving support for those at risk.

Risk or threat of prosecution would make it harder for victims to reconcile with their families.

The Muslim Council of Britain argued that criminalising forced marriage was not the solution, as it would lead to children having to take their parents to court (Scranie, 2005). However, even when cases come to light, the police often struggle to press charges, while women who dare to rebel and run away typically become outcasts, often pursued by professional bounty hunters hired by furious families (Hickley, 2006). The government seems to have ignored the views of the victims of this abhorrent practice. Although some people may not wish to prosecute their parents, there are some young men and women who do wish to, and at least they should be given the choice to do so. In passing up this legislation, young British Asians have lost the chance to send a clear message about the rights of individual choice.

Intergenerational issues

The struggle for choice by young British Asians and the unquestioning compliance expected by parents highlight on the one hand the changes that have

occurred among different generations. On the other hand, the rigidity that still exists among Asian communities shows that the older generations are not changing; they are neither accepting nor willing to adapt to the changes that are taking place. Hence, the intergenerational and interpersonal conflicts are causing a great deal of distress that might explain the increased rate of actual and attempted suicides among young Asian girls.

Epidemiological studies (Soni-Raleigh and Balarajan, 1992; D'Alessio and Ghazi, 1993; Marshall and Yazdani, 1999) exploring the causes of depression among Asian women in Britain have revealed a high incidence of anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-harm, poor self-esteem, and poor self-confidence in young Asian girls, some as young as 12 years of age. Intergenerational and family conflicts, together with pressure of marriage, were identified as significant contributory factors in the above studies. It is also shocking to discover the high incidence of attempted and actual suicides through hanging, burning and particularly self-poisoning among young Asian Muslim girls (Hodes, 1990; Ghaman, 1999).

In most Asian families, children are brought up to be obedient and respectful of their elders in the family and community round them. Through a variety of obvious and subtle methods and interactions, children are taught and brought up to be 'interdependent' with the family and the wider community. Parents often fear that, for children, diverting away from Islamic and cultural traditions may be seen as easy and a sign of independence in a western world where freedom of choice and independence are exercised. Therefore, any attempt to make independent choices by children is seen as a sign of rebellion against family, religious and cultural values and traditions (Modood and Beishon, 1998).

Religion is often used as an excuse for placing strict control on children, particularly girls, by restricting further education beyond compulsory school age, and keeping a watchful eye on their social interactions. This is mostly done because of fear of children going astray through western influences, and a perception that the only way of keeping them functioning in a way that is acceptable to parents is through the expressed fear of God. Islam as a religion does not allow western-style free mixing of grown-up boys and girls, nor does it approve of the boyfriend/girlfriend system (Sarwar, 1987). This is said to prevent the escalation of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies and the portrayal of western norms of socialisation, which are largely frowned upon as immoral and unacceptable forms of behaviour. The reality for many British Asians, especially those living away from home, is that they are engaging in sexual relationships (Ghaman, 1999). This is kept a secret from family members because of the fear of consequence and shame. In the UK, there have been cases where girls have been murdered, usually by their father and older brothers, when family members discovered that they have been engaging in sexual activity or have rebelled against family wishes for marriage (Gill and Hussain, 2003). This is usually done in the name of family honour.

While Islam advocates choice and mutual agreement between potential partners, it only goes as far as to allow individuals to say no to a marriage proposal. This is done to preserve the innocence of the unmarried female. Muslim parents are usually most reluctant for girls to engage in any kind of contact with males before marriage, fearing their innocence may be lost which will cause problems with future marriage proposals. It is not uncommon for the mother in law to check the sheets of the marital bed the following morning to find evidence of pure virginity (The Women's Network, 2003).

There also seems to be an attitude that it is acceptable for men to engage in sexual relationships before marriage. Furthermore, in a society that prizes virginity and purity of the bride on the wedding night, some Asian men prefer to marry back home as family

are reassured that girls in the village would remain virgins until marriage (Samad, 2003). Another reason for marrying from the subcontinent is the perception that western Asian girls are too independent, and hence pose a threat to the male status as they have much higher expectations. While in the subcontinent, families, especially poor ones, with girls want the best for their children, and hence parents search for partners who are financially well off. However, these girls are usually uneducated, and when they arrive in the UK, with little or no ability to speak English, they are totally dependent on their husbands and the in-laws. In this process, the female stays home to pursue traditional family roles, and the male retains all the control, thus conforming to the dominant male status in the Asian culture (Gill and Hussain, 2003).

While sex before marriage is acceptable in the western world, it is still considered (by observant Muslims at least) as filthy and impure for a Muslim to engage in such activities before marriage. This may not be applied so strictly to a British Asian girl, as people 'back home' may deliberately overlook it, valuing their son coming to Britain as more important and thus benefiting the whole family. For a girl in the subcontinent, a marriage proposal can be turned down if a rumour says that she is impure.

Women within the Indian subcontinent

Muslim parents may regard the west as decadent, but in the author's view it is time to take a long hard look at what is part of daily life back in the subcontinent. There is ample evidence that women within the subcontinent do not have, whatever the constitutions of their country may state, the most basic human rights. A rumour of sexual promiscuity can result in the murder of a girl without any attempt even being made to establish the facts (Home Office, 2005). The tradition of *sati* among the Hindu community, although now illegal in India, is the practice through which widows are voluntarily or forcibly burned alive on their husband's funeral pyre, and still exists in some remote parts of the country (Bhugra, 2005). Women cannot even wait for a bus without the fear of molestation, which goes unchallenged by the authorities (Breaking the Silence, 2003). In its extreme form, women are burnt with acid for refusing unwelcome advances from males. Many girls, especially those forced into marriage, are essentially raped on their wedding night (Price, 2003). Tribal courts have ordered gang rape of females, where a male in the family has committed a crime in the village or been seen talking to another female (Gill and Hussain, 2003). In some

states of the subcontinent, there are virtually no rights for women. Children are routinely sexually abused by family members and religious persons, which parents never get to hear about, and if they do they will usually beat the children and accuse them of telling lies (Breaking the Silence, 2003). These examples are well documented, but no effort is made to bring about change. In certain parts of Bangladesh, drug abuse is at an all-time high (Begum, 1992; Rahman, 1992; Islam *et al*, 2000). People have multiple sexual partners of either residential or commercial category. There has been an increase in sexual diseases and blood-borne viruses (Hossain, 2000). The above studies have speculated that the patterns are consistent among all social groups to varying levels; however they were only able to recruit individuals from lower socio-economic groups (long distance truck drivers, rickshaw pullers, manual workers). Therefore, it seems that whatever constitutes decadent behaviour in the west is also prevalent in the Asian subcontinent, but it is not spoken about, and is vigorously denied in an effort to maintain and preserve honour and dignity (*Izzat and Sharam*).

The influence of western media

Attitudes reflected by the media seem to indicate that western societies have great misgivings about arranged marriages. Firstly, this is perhaps a reflection of the lack of knowledge, awareness and respect for this tradition. Secondly, there is the confusion caused between arranged and forced marriage. Thirdly, the media never concentrate on the successful marriages, but cover failed marriages, and this feeds into the stereotypes held by the wider western society. David Blunkett's proposals in *Secure Borders, Safe Haven* (Home Office, 2002) are interesting, and some of the recommendations should be welcomed; for example, immigrants should learn to speak the English language. However, the proposal that families should find partners within the settled communities here in Britain caused an uproar among the older-generation Asians in Britain, yet it was interesting that the views of the marriageable population, arguably from the ages of 16 onwards, were largely absent from the tabloid newspapers.

Preventing forced marriage

A number of documents have been published jointly by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Home Office and Department of Health, offering guidance to police (2004a) and health and social care professionals

(2004b) on the best ways of dealing with reports of forced marriage. However, it is questionable how many professionals are aware of these guidelines. While attempts have been made through conferences and the media to highlight the severity of this problem, there is still a long way to go before any real changes can be seen. It is certain that greater efforts need to be made to understand the complexities of this problem. Government initiative has always been to communicate with Asian community leaders. This needs to be reassessed, because most honour family tradition more than the needs of individual women (Teare, 2001).

Youth workers should not contact the police or the social services immediately, as this will portray a stereotypical impression to the older-generation Asians and further intensify their feelings that the western world does not understand their culture and is trying to turn their children against them by enforcing western values. Instead, time should be taken to fully understand the situation, which should be approached in such a manner as to help both the person in need and the family.

There needs to be greater understanding of how Asian families operate and function in the UK and back home, but it should not be used as an excuse to turn a blind eye to the problem of forced marriage. There is no doubt that parents want the best for their children, but sadly they can lose sight of reality in seeking to get them settled. While respecting the cultural and religious traditions, parents need to be made aware that times are changing. Young British Asians have rights in this country, and taking these away is contrary to Article 3 of the Human Rights Act (1998).

Youth and homeless hostels are hardly a sanctuary for young vulnerable girls who run away from home only to face even worse situations involving drugs, stealing and prostitution. The provision of crisis or safe houses for Asian women is very limited.

There are examples of initiatives that help both male and female survivors of forced marriage and domestic abuse rebuild their lives: Southall Black Sisters, Apna Ghar (Newham, London) and Karma Nirvana (Derby). There is an urgent need to look into this provision in order to protect young vulnerable people.

Health and social care professionals have key roles to play in helping young people to avoid forced marriages (see Box 3). All professionals who have contact with young people need training on how to deal with cases of attempted suicide by young Asian girls presenting at the accident and emergency (A&E) department. Time should be taken to explore the circumstances leading up to the incident, most importantly away from family members, where the individual will feel safe and comfortable to disclose

Box 3 Recommendations

The role of health and social care professionals

- Mandatory awareness training on forced marriage for all health and social care professionals.
- Inform all pupils and students of the British Consulate, British Home Office and the role of the FMU.
- Focus on safety of the individual and establish full details of the situation.
- Take all reports of forced marriage seriously.
- Report all cases to the FMU. At least it can be investigated.
- Be aware of support services that are available locally, and keep supplies of information to pass on.
- Support and reassure, but do not make decisions for the individual. It is not your role to advise an individual to leave home or take a particular course of action, as this may lead to further problems.
- Always see the individual away from family members. Do not rush the person to reveal all the information at once. Genuine support, understanding and the desire to help should encourage the individual to open up.
- Explain the limits of confidentiality.
- Be aware of signs of domestic violence. Refer to the Department of Health (2006) guidelines for combating domestic violence.
- Do not stereotype, and use a non-judgemental approach. Help combat stereotypes.
- Practitioners should be aware of their own safety needs. Discussion with management and clinical supervision will provide a framework for support.
- Work in partnership with other agencies to share knowledge and information.

information. Often in such situations, family members insist on being present at the interview, and in the case of females who are not able to speak English properly, family members insist on doing the translation. In such cases it is of utmost importance that discussions are facilitated through suitably qualified interpreters. The use of nurses trained in psychosocial assessment within A&E departments has proven effective in ensuring that clients can be assessed and referred to the appropriate services efficiently and expediently (Morgan and Coleman, 2000; Eastwick and Grant, 2004).

There needs to be better follow-up procedures to include counselling, therapy, self-help courses, supervision and protection of all those who present with self-harm and suicide attempts at A&E departments, with government legislation similar to the care programme approach (CPA) and supervised discharge for people suffering with mental health problems. Knowledge and awareness of the particular problems faced by young British Asians, especially forced marriages and how to deal with such reports, should be incorporated into all mainstream training courses, just as child protection training is mandatory for all health and social care professionals. Teachers and school nurses are in an ideal position to help tackle this problem, as it is often youngsters in this age group who find themselves under pressure to enter forced marriage. Portraying empathy and understanding should encourage young people to come forward and seek help and advice early.

About five years ago, the UK Foreign Office produced a leaflet for Asian men and women on how to avoid forced marriages when on holiday. This was criticised for lack of details and sensitivity on the topic.

Some felt that the only impact this kind of leaflet could have was to raise children's doubts about their parents' intentions behind a planned holiday, and exacerbate the tensions that already exist between generations in a family (Teare, 2001). However, those young people who find that they have been tricked into entering a situation designed to force them into marriage need to be able to find help quickly. It is questionable how many young people in such a situation would know how to contact the British Home Office or the British Consulate from the sub-continent, or what the roles of these organisations are. It makes sense to give all school-age pupils details of these offices, and to teach them how to make contact in an emergency. There should also be national campaigns to raise awareness of the existence of these organisations. However, for a girl stuck in the middle of a village in Bangladesh with no telephone facility or opportunity to go out of the house, and under the constant watch of the family, this strategy is ineffective. If, before they leave England, all girls are reminded to take a mobile phone or pager with them to keep in contact with friends and relations here in the UK, this could make all the difference.

The UK Muslim Parliament has made proposals to launch a legal document to be signed by both partners before every Muslim marriage, agreeing that their partnership is consensual. The signing process needs to be carefully thought through. It should be done before wedding arrangements are made, and independently at a venue away from home and family members. This proposal is still in its infancy. It remains to be seen what impact it will have in the future (www.muslimparliament.org.uk).

Conclusion

Forced marriage is a local, national and global problem that has finally made it on to the government agenda. Ministers are debating as to why people have to be taken back to the subcontinent to find a partner. Currently the age of a spouse coming into Britain has to be 18 years; debate is under way to increase this to 21 years. Following a national consultation process, the government has decided not to make forcing someone to enter a marriage a separate criminal offence, but to use existing laws to bring about prosecution.

Many cultural, religious, family and societal expectations and pride govern the tradition of arranged marriage. Arranged marriage can result in many years of mutual support and pleasure. Unfortunately, this is confused with forced marriage. Times have changed, and young Asians nowadays want choice; it is their human right and so they should be allowed to exercise it in who they marry and settle down with. The Asian culture needs to gather pace. There is no doubt that this tradition will continue, as marriage abroad largely remains in the hands of the parents and relatives. It is evident that marriage within the Asian culture is as much an individual life event as it is a contract between two families, but forced marriage needs to be stamped out, and every effort should be made to prosecute those who instigate it.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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