



**WHAT IS  
FORCED  
MARRIAGE?**



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# WHAT IS FORCED MARRIAGE?

**Any person may be forced into marriage – this includes people of all ages, genders, ethnicities and religions.**

A forced marriage is where one or both people do not or cannot consent to the marriage and pressure or abuse is used to force them into the marriage. It is also when anything is done to make someone marry before they turn 18, even if there is no pressure or abuse.

Forced marriage is illegal in the UK. It is a form of domestic abuse and a serious abuse of human rights.

**Forcing someone to marry isn't always physical, but it is always against the law.**

The pressure put on a person to marry can take different forms:

- **physical pressure** might take the form of threats or violence (including sexual violence)
- **emotional or psychological pressure** might take the form of making someone feel they are bringing shame on their family, making them believe that those close to them may become vulnerable to illness if they don't marry, or denying them freedom or money unless they agree to the marriage

But when the person who is to get married is aged under 18, doing anything to make them marry is a crime - it doesn't have to be pressure.

In some cases people may be taken abroad without knowing that they are to be married. When they arrive in that country, their passport(s)/travel documents may be taken to try to stop them from returning to the UK.

## **WHAT IS CONSENT?**

For a marriage to be consensual, it must be entered into freely by both people getting married. You should feel you have a choice.

Legally, people with certain learning disabilities or severe mental health conditions are not able to consent to marriage, even if they feel the marriage is what they want.

## **WHAT IS AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE?**

When it comes to the marriage of adults, an arranged marriage is not the same as a forced marriage. In an arranged marriage, the families take a leading role in choosing the marriage partner, but both individuals are free to choose whether they want to enter into the marriage.

When it comes to the marriage of children (up to 18), there is no distinction between arranged marriage and forced marriage. Doing anything to cause a child to get married is a forced marriage - and a crime.

**If you consent to marry, but later change your mind – yet still feel that you will be required to go ahead with the marriage – that is a forced marriage too.**

# WHAT CAN I DO?

If you are in immediate danger call the police on 999.

If you or someone you know is being forced into marriage either in the UK or abroad, you can contact the Forced Marriage Unit.

## WHAT IS THE FORCED MARRIAGE UNIT?

The Forced Marriage Unit provides support and advice for victims, those at risk and professionals.

The Forced Marriage Unit can provide advice and assistance both before and after you report to the police, and also if you choose not to report at all. The support offered ranges from providing information and guidance to helping British victims overseas return to the UK.

Caseworkers have experience in dealing with the cultural, social and emotional issues surrounding forced marriage.

The Forced Marriage Unit can offer advice and support to anyone who is in the UK, regardless of nationality. Overseas, our British Embassies, High Commissions and Consulates can provide consular assistance to British nationals (including dual nationals), and in certain circumstances to a Commonwealth national.

**Call:**

(+44) (0) 207 008 0151 Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm

(+44) (0) 207 008 1500 Global Response Centre (out of hours)

Email: [FMU@fco.gov.uk](mailto:FMU@fco.gov.uk)



# YOU'RE NOT ALONE

It's not unusual to feel isolated if you or someone you know is being pressured into marriage. But you're not alone. Each year, several hundred cases are reported to us, from women and men of all ages, ethnicities and religions, including from the LGBTQ+ community. Still, many people do not report what is happening to them, or what they might think is happening to someone they know.

These real-life stories show that forced marriage can happen to anyone, regardless of age, gender, religion or ethnicity – and that reporting it can save lives. (The names given are not their real names.)

## AISHA'S STORY

“ I was 15 and just about to finish my GCSEs when I realised that dad was planning to send me abroad to marry my older cousin. Dad was angry all the time and sometimes hit me and my mum. Mum didn't want me to get married so young, but she was too scared to say no to him. I thought dad might trick me into leaving the country and then take my phone off me so I couldn't ask anyone for help. ”

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Aisha told a teacher at her school, who called the Forced Marriage Unit. The Forced Marriage Unit worked with children's social care to obtain a Forced Marriage Protection Order, which was served on Aisha's dad. The order prevented the forced marriage from taking place as Aisha's father was unable to take Aisha out of the country and could not apply for a passport on her behalf. Aisha was scared to stay at home so was given a safe foster placement temporarily. Aisha's mum worked with children's social care and was supported in leaving Aisha's father. Aisha now lives safely with her mum and younger brothers and was able to finish her GCSEs.



## SYED'S STORY

“ I was 25 when my parents took me to Pakistan for a family wedding. When I got there I discovered it was me who was getting married. I did not want to but my mum has lots of health problems and everyone said I was making her ill by refusing. After days of saying no I finally gave up and submitted to my family's will. When I got back to the UK, I just tried to forget about it and get on with my life. Then my wife's family started pressuring me to put in a visa application for her to come to the UK. They would call me and threaten me. ”

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Syed called the Forced Marriage Unit at the earliest opportunity and the Forced Marriage Unit were able to explain how they could assist him as he was a reluctant sponsor.



## KHADIJA'S STORY

“ I used to get into trouble at home a lot, for wearing make-up or wanting to stay out late with my friends. My mum didn't like it and we argued a lot. When I was 19, she told me we were going on holiday to visit my grandmother in Somalia. When I got there, my mum dropped me off at a boarding school and told me I had to stay there until I learned to be a good Somali daughter. She took my passport and left me there. The school was really bad. They used to beat us and told me that if I wanted to leave then I had to marry one of the guards. ”

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Khadija had kept a secret phone hidden. She told her boyfriend what had happened and he called the Forced Marriage Unit. The Forced Marriage Unit worked with police in the UK to get a Forced Marriage Protection Order, which instructed Khadija's mum to return Khadija's passport, permit her to leave the school and book her flight back to the UK. The Forced Marriage Unit helped Khadija find short-term safe accommodation when she arrived back in the UK. She is currently living in a refuge and receiving support from specialist professionals to rebuild her life independent from her family. (The British Embassy Mogadishu does not provide consular services. If you are in Somalia or Somaliland you can contact the British High Commission Nairobi.)



## MANDEEP'S STORY

“ Last night I heard my parents talking about our trip to India this summer and their plan for my brother Mandeep to get married while we are there. My mum said they're getting too old to look after him so thought it would be best for him to have a wife to do so. Mandeep suffers from severe learning disabilities and he is reliant on mum and dad for even the most basic tasks. I really don't think he understands anything about being in a marriage. ”

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Mandeep's sister contacted the Forced Marriage Unit to highlight her concerns about her brother's situation and his ability to understand what was about to happen to him. The Forced Marriage Unit made a referral to the local adult social care team explaining the situation and asked if a Mental Capacity Assessment for Mandeep could be completed, ensuring the source of information remained anonymous. Mandeep was already receiving support from the learning disability team, but they were unaware of the upcoming marriage. Through the assessment, they found that he lacked the capacity to consent to sex and marriage. Through the advice of the Forced Marriage Unit, a safeguarding plan was put in place, including a Forced Marriage Protection Order. The learning disability team then worked with the family to explain the risk of marriage to Mandeep and explore other options for his long-term needs.



## MALCOLM'S STORY

“ I'm Susan. Malcolm is my dad. He is 75 and over the last 5 years has become very ill with Alzheimer's disease and his dementia is severe. He cannot remember even the most basic things like where he lives or how to make breakfast. Last summer I was told by his neighbour Pamela that she had booked a holiday for them and they are in love and are planning to get married when they get back. I couldn't believe it. When I asked dad about the situation he couldn't remember saying yes to a trip but thought a holiday might be nice. When I mentioned marriage, he didn't seem to understand. ”

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Susan wasn't sure this would be defined as a forced marriage so she called the Forced Marriage Unit to ask. They explained that if Malcolm does not have capacity to consent to marriage, it would be a criminal offence for him to be married. A capacity assessment was carried out immediately by adult social care. It determined that Malcolm didn't have capacity to consent to marriage and the decision was made for the police to take action to prevent this from happening.



# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## **What happens when I call the Forced Marriage Unit?**

You will speak to an experienced caseworker who will listen and offer you support and information tailored to your individual circumstances. They will give you information on your rights and the services available to you. We will not contact your family.

## **Are calls to the Forced Marriage Unit anonymous?**

You can remain anonymous if you want but this may limit the amount of support the Forced Marriage Unit is able to provide, so they will often ask for details such as your age, location, and nationality. Any information you share with us will be treated in confidence, unless you are under 18 or there is an imminent risk of harm.

## **Can you guarantee my safety?**

While we cannot guarantee your safety, we can put you in contact with agencies who can help safeguard you. You should always call the police on 999 if you are in immediate danger.

## **What should I do if I decide to leave home?**

Safe accommodation at a refuge may be available to victims of forced marriage and specialist services exist for people from different backgrounds. A refuge is much more than a safe place to sleep. Specialist staff will provide you with the building blocks you need to begin a new life.

## **What happens if I'm abroad and manage to run away, but I don't have enough money to fly home?**

If at all possible, try to take some local currency, a mobile phone with international credit and a copy of your passport (and if you have residence or immigration documents from another country, take these too). But we can help replace UK travel documents if necessary. Make sure you keep these items safe and hidden.

We can provide advice and help you explore a number of options regarding your return to the UK. A Forced Marriage Protection Order can also be used in certain circumstances to help cover the costs of your repatriation.

## **How long will it take before I can come back to the UK and where will I stay while arrangements are being made?**

We will try to make arrangements for you to come back as soon as possible. However, if you do have to stay abroad for any length of time, we will try to help you find a suitable safe place to stay.

## **If I am abroad, what will happen if I don't have my passport?**

Provided you are a British national, we can issue you with an Emergency Travel Document, once we are satisfied of your identity. If you are not a British national the Forced Marriage Unit would advise you to also contact the nearest Embassy of the country whose nationality you hold to seek help with getting a new travel document.

## **I got married overseas, is my marriage valid in the UK?**

If your marriage is seen as legally valid in the country where it took place, in many cases it will be valid in the UK. You must talk to a solicitor, regardless of whether you had a religious or civil marriage. Religious divorce is not legally valid in the UK.

## **Can you still help me if I'm under 16?**

Yes we can. Please call the helpline to discuss your options.

## **If I am not a British national can you still help me?**

The Forced Marriage Unit can provide support and assistance to anyone in the UK at risk of a forced marriage but we can only provide consular assistance to British nationals (including dual nationals) overseas.

## **Can I get legal protection to prevent the marriage?**

Yes. Forced marriage is a criminal offence in the UK. If you are being forced to marry you can seek legal protection through the civil courts and/or the criminal justice system.

When considering how to protect yourself you can choose whether to take the civil route to seek a Forced Marriage Protection Order, or to go to the police and pursue a prosecution through the criminal court, or both. You can also choose to do neither of these things. The Forced Marriage Unit can help you explore all of the options.

Forced Marriage Protection Orders can be used to prevent someone from being forced into marriage or to protect someone if a forced marriage has already taken place. A person may be arrested if they breach an order. For more information about these orders you can call the Forced Marriage Unit or go to [www.gov.uk/government/publications/forced-marriage-protection-orders-fl701](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/forced-marriage-protection-orders-fl701)



# HELP AND SUPPORT

Police in an emergency	999
Police in a non-emergency	101
Ashiana Network (London) – specialist refuge, advice, support and counselling services for black and minority ethnic women and girls aged 14+	0208 539 0427
Childline	0800 1111
Imkaan – Black feminist organisation addressing violence against Black and minoritised women and girls	020 7842 8525

IKWRO – Women's Rights Organisation (East London) – helps Middle Eastern and Afghan women and girls living in the UK	0207 920 6460
Forward (North London) – African women-led organisation working to end violence against women and girls	0208 960 4000
Freedom Charity	0845 607 0133
Karma Nirvana 'honour'-based abuse/forced marriage helpline	0800 5999 247
London Black Women's Project	0208 472 0528
Men's Advice Line	0808 801 0327
National Domestic Abuse Helpline	0808 2000 247
Respond – for victims with learning disabilities	0207 383 0700
Samaritans	116123
Shakti Women's Aid (Edinburgh)	0131 475 2399
Sharan Project – charity providing support and advice to vulnerable women, particularly of South Asian origin, who have been or are at risk of being disowned due to abuse or persecution	0844 504 3231
Shelter – housing advice	0808 800 4444
Southall Black Sisters – an all-Asian organisation offering advice, counselling and other support	0208 571 9595
Stonewall Housing – LGBT housing advice	0207 359 5767
Switchboard LGBT+ helpline	0300 330 0630
Throughcare Housing and Support (Birmingham)	0121 554 3920
True Honour	07480 621711

