

PATIENT CARE

FORCED MARRIAGES

STAFF are being asked to recognise the early signs of a forced marriage and potentially save victims from a lifetime of physical and emotional abuse.

The Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) was formed in 2005 by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office specifically to offer help and advice to people, as young as 11, who find themselves faced with the prospect of a loveless and often violent and suffocating marriage.

A forced marriage must not be confused with an arranged marriage.

Head of the FMU, Wayne Ives, explained: "The issue of consent is what separates forced marriages from arranged marriages. In arranged

marriages, although it might be set up by the parents, both parties will have a say, whereas in a forced marriage consent is gained under physical or emotional pressure."

The unit deals with up to 400 cases each year and 27 per cent of all calls it has received since the start of the year have come from London.

Despite a publicity campaign by the FMU, forced marriages remain very much a taboo

subject, but that is slowly changing according to Wayne.

"It is still quite an

underground issue and just isn't talked about much," he said.

"Many professional people are not even aware of the problem. There seems to be nervousness about getting involved in such issues, which are

perceived to be community-specific issues."

The majority of cases of forced marriage in the UK involve South Asian families, however, there has been an increase in the number of cases involving families from East Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa.

Those affected include people of all ages - the majority are younger women, but 15 per cent of all cases that come through the Unit are men and 30 per cent of cases are minors under the age of 18.

Some victims of forced marriage seek help themselves. For others aid comes from concerned friends, sympathetic relatives, police officers, social workers, doctors or other health professionals.

"The key thing is to be able to recognise the signals," said Wayne.

"This is where ambulance crews can help. If they are suspicious of something they should call us right away. It is vital cases are taken seriously from the outset because it is quite common that victims will only ask for help once.

"If a victim of a forced marriage is in an ambulance and away from their family it might be the only chance they get to tell someone about their situation and ask for help. If this does happen it is the responsibility of the crew to take it seriously immediately and make sure the victim is in a position where they can talk to someone on their own without the family around.

"They should not under any circumstances send them back to the family and should not try to mediate between the victim and family. Then staff should call the Forced Marriage Unit for advice or their local police station who have specially

trained officers who will be able to help.

Often the victim of a forced marriage will show physical and/or emotional signs of anguish, which is where

staff can help.

Some health-related warning signs can include self harm, attempted suicide, eating disorders, depression, isolation and substance misuse. Of course, some of these warning signs could be indicative of other forms of abuse or neglect.

"It is vital that staff recognise that victims facing forced marriage or trying to exit their situation may be exposed to an increased risk to their safety or indeed to their life."

The facts about forced marriage

- A forced marriage is where people are coerced into a marriage against their will and involves duress – physical, emotional or financial
- It is an abuse of human rights and cannot be justified on any religious or cultural basis. It can affect children, teenagers and adults from all races and religions. Every major faith condemns it.
- Some forced marriages take place in the UK with no overseas element, while others involve a partner coming from overseas or a British citizen being sent abroad
- Forced marriage is primarily an issue of violence against women. Most cases involve girls and women aged between 13 and 30, although evidence suggests up to 15 per cent of victims are male
- Parents who force their children to marry often justify their behaviour as protecting their children, building stronger families and preserving cultural or religious traditions.

For the victims of forced marriages, who often become prisoners in their own homes, getting help early is the key.

NEWS

By Jenny Round
Communications Assistant

MARRIAGES



FORCED

YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO CHOOSE...

If you or someone you know is being forced into a marriage, contact the FORCED MARRIAGE UNIT.

Call 020 7008 0151 between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday
Email fm@fco.gov.uk

The forced Marriage Unit offers confidential support and information.

If you would like to know more about the work of the Forced Marriage Unit before you call us, log on to: www.fco.gov.uk/forcedmarriage

Confidential advice is also available from a large network of support groups, including the Police, the National Domestic Violence Helpline, and women's refuge organisations.

Wayne added: "The later it gets, the more their options are reduced. The longer they have to think things through and enable them to make the right decision the better. We can also put them in touch with the right people."

Being pressured into an unwanted marriage can have a devastating impact on the victims.

"The women are often regularly raped by their husbands and sometimes held in another country until they are pregnant," explained Wayne.

"A lot of victims are held against their will, and many are beaten by their families. Others can endure cruel emotional pressure and it's quite common for the mothers to say their own husbands will leave them unless

their daughters agree to get married and they really pile the pressure on.

"Victims are often frightened of a community backlash and there is a real sense of fear of being cut off from the family and completely isolated."

Despite a slow and steady increase in cases being recorded, it is thought thousands more go unreported.

Further information

If you would like information or advice call the Forced Marriage Unit on 020 7008 0151 during office hours or out of hours call 020 7008 1500 and ask to speak to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Response Centre.

Alternatively, email fm@fco.gov.uk.

If you require any more information, please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service on 020 7887 6678.

Guidance for healthcare professionals on forced marriages can be found by visiting www.fco.gov.uk and typing "Guidelines on forced marriages" into the search facility.