



Jasvinder Sanghera's parents tried to lure her into marrying against her will. Jasvinder ran away to avoid an arranged marriage but her sister Robina was not so fortunate. To escape her physically abusive husband, she set fire to herself



RIGHT HERAT, AFGHANISTAN 19-year-old Zarah prays at her mother's home. She set fire to herself at the climax of an argument with her husband three months into their marriage. She said her husband was beating her for disobedience and she wanted to prove to him that she didn't want to live with him. Zarah is now divorced and living with her mother (Photo Paula Bronstein)

BELOW A traditional Hindu wedding in India



MARRYING INTO *Misery*

For some communities, arranged marriages are a traditional method of match-making, but for a shocking number of young women in Britain, it's a path into torture, repression, and even death, at the hands of their family

FEATURE Louise Hall PHOTOGRAPHS Neelakshi Vidyalkra

Despite her desperate pleas, 15-year-old Jasvinder Sanghera's parents tried to lure her into marrying against her will in Germany – to a man she didn't know. Distraught, she finally ran away. Derby-born Jasvinder's plight began the previous year. One day, after returning home from school, her mother presented her with a photo. 'That's the man you're going to marry,' she said to Jasvinder in a jokey manner, but she was deadly serious.

From that moment Jasvinder's life changed beyond belief. 'It was expected of me to marry whomever my parents chose,' says Jasvinder, now 38 and a mother of three. 'My parents had an arranged marriage, so did my sisters. That was the way it was. They probably thought that I wouldn't oppose it, but the part of me that was saying it was wrong was greater than the bit of me that was saying it was right.'

One of seven siblings of Sikh parents who arrived in the United Kingdom from the Punjab area in Western India in the 50s, three of Jasvinder's six sisters had already been

married abroad at a similar age. In each case, their husbands were then 'sponsored' to live and work in the country. 'My parents said that if I didn't go ahead with it I would be dishonouring my family,' she explains.

A keen student, faced with the bleak prospect of abandoning her studies to enter a loveless marriage against her will, she took a paracetamol overdose. 'I attempted to commit suicide but it was more of a cry for help. I wanted to show how unhappy I was,' says Jasvinder. However her family merely mocked her and, at times, locked her in her room to stop her from running away.

Eventually, to spare herself more physical and mental abuse, Jasvinder relented. 'I agreed to the marriage to buy time while I organised an escape plan,' she explains. 'Then, out of the blue, my parents announced the wedding was to take place in two weeks.' Wasting no time, she packed her bags and fled.

'That night I lowered two suitcases through a bathroom window at 3am,' she recalls. 'A friend's brother came and took them. A week later I saw an opportunity, when the front door was left unlocked and ajar. I just ran to where he worked and persuaded him to leave right that minute. It was too dangerous to stay.'

'I shut my eyes, put my finger on the map and it landed in Newcastle, so that's where we went.' The pair lived in a bed-sit and worked around the clock to earn enough money to survive. They later married and had a child, however Jasvinder's family were against the union because they had run away together and he was of a lower Asian caste than their family, which meant he was frowned upon.

By running away and rejecting everything her family stood for, Jasvinder was disowned. 'When I contacted my parents my mum said, "You're dead in our eyes." For the next three years I called home most days begging to be allowed back home.' She never set foot inside her family home again. Instead, she's had to live

with the fact that her family are no longer part of her life.

'My life was mapped out for me,' she says. 'My childhood was aborted, robbed from me... I have always loved my parents and always will, but in their eyes, and in the community's eyes, I had done something dishonourable. They see me as a woman that has no honour, but I do, I have self-respect.'

Jasvinder's painfully aware of the depth of misery that can be caused by forced marriages. Her closest sister, Robina, who was 18 months older, repeatedly approached her family seeking escape from a mentally and physically abusive husband, but to no avail. Eventually, she set light to herself, suffering fatal 80 per cent burns to her body.

In 1994, determined to help others in a similar situation, Jasvinder set up Derby-based Karma Nirvana Refuge. The shelter, which is run by donations, local and national funding, offers safe-housing for women and children, receives 40 calls a month and helps 500 people each year. Part of the national charity Refuge, its aim is to support women in abusive relationships and act as a lobbying platform for change.

'What I see at the refuge is the extreme end of forced marriages, but I also see women who are going through arranged marriages, or are trying to escape them and are clearly feeling the pressure,' says Jasvinder. 'They may be coping by self-harming, drinking, or be living a dual life by changing into western clothes and going out partying.'

Apart from self-harming, the suicide rate among young Asian women in the United Kingdom, aged 25 to 34, is double the national average. This figure rises to three times the national average in the 15 to 24 age group.

A survey undertaken by the Karma Nirvana Refuge said that 90 per cent of the women it approached had suffered abuse on a daily or weekly basis. Of these, 67

“ I ATTEMPTED TO COMMIT SUICIDE BUT IT WAS MORE A CRY FOR HELP. I WANTED TO SHOW HOW UNHAPPY I WAS



LEFT DHAKA, BANGLADESH Reba, a 19-year-old woman suffering severe burns from a battery acid attack, rinses her wounds with the help of family members. Reba was attacked on her wedding day. The battery acid was thrown by her former lover

BELOW & RIGHT The colourful sights of a Hindu wedding performed in Trinidad and Tobago



BELOW IRAQ Nineteen-year-old Fatima was shot in the legs by her husband in front of his family and their neighbours in 2003. Fatima told us, 'He was very angry and took his Kalashnikov. The neighbours said "Leave her alone" ... but he shot my legs. I couldn't feel them, they were numb. I said to the men: "I don't want to die."' Married at the age of 12, Fatima was treated as a servant and regularly beaten in her husband's family home. Despite the number of eye-witnesses and the seriousness of the crime, neither the family nor the hospital reported the case to the police and her husband was not arrested. The family said it was a matter to be solved within the tribe. Fatima returned to her father's house after she left hospital

ARRANGED MARRIAGE WORKED FOR ME

Anita*, 26, married her husband Pujya in 2003. They have been happily married for nearly two years

Asian marriages are quite complex. I'm Hindu so I wouldn't really be allowed to marry a Muslim, for example. For me, finding the right partner, and an accepted marriage, is all about where I'm from in India. I come from the Gujarat region, but within that, I'm a 'Lohana', which is a type of caste, or class. Your caste relates to whatever your ancestors were. For example, they may be bricklayers. Lohana means 'warrior' because my family descends from warriors.

I married a Lohana, because that's what's expected of me. We met through mutual friends and my husband is a good friend of my brother. We went out for a year before we got engaged and then married in India, but Pujya had to speak to my dad and tell him what his intention was after just two weeks of us going out. It's part of our tradition that we can't get married until both families have given their blessing.

My parents made it very clear that if I didn't marry the right person, and within the right time-frame, it would have personal consequences within their marriage and within our extended family.

I did have a Punjabi boyfriend before, who I went out with for two-and-a-half years, but my parents didn't know. If I'd married him my parents would never have accepted it, nor would his, because we weren't from the same area in India. It was a real issue. It put a great strain on our relationship from the start.

Both of us came from religious families and were close to our families, so it would have been difficult to choose between them and each other. Also, his parents didn't speak any English and were very traditional, so I'd have had to learn Punjabi as well as try to integrate into his life. Nevertheless, it seemed clear that I would never have been accepted – in Asian cultures, tradition and family is everything.

Obviously, this put a great strain on us as a couple and it wasn't long before we went our separate ways. I guess I was kidding myself in thinking it could have worked and I eventually had to accept the reality of the situation.

Since meeting my husband, who is of the same religion and from the same community, I've seen the difference between going out with someone from a different religion and going out with one from the same religion. Life just seems so much easier now I'm with someone from the same background as me.

Before, I had to keep explaining things to my partner as he didn't relate to them. It was tough, especially as Gujaratis have many religious and social events and rituals – all things he couldn't understand. I also came to realise that some things would have caused real issues in the future. For example, in the Sikh Khalsa tradition, a boy mustn't cut his hair and wear a turban. However, in the Gujarati tradition, it's one of a boy's most important moments when, at the age of three, he has his hair cut.

Now, being married to a fellow Gujarati, a lot of things have fallen into place. There's a greater understanding between us and I appreciate the way he has been accepted by my family, and *vice versa*.

Some of my friends have had 'introduced' marriages, where they meet a boy that a relative or a close family friend suggested and then they get married. In our community, you rarely hear of complete arranged marriages where the boy and girl don't meet at all and just see each other on their wedding day.

To aid the marriage situation, many communities have their internal 'matchmakers' that keep an eye out for who's eligible and then introduce them to each other. There are also many dinners and dances held for single couples, along with organisations and websites that help young people find their prospective partners if they don't find them themselves.

*Names have been changed



FAMILY HONOUR MAY BE PUT BEFORE A WOMAN'S BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS

THE FACTS

Arranged and forced marriages, along with 'honour' crimes are not confined to any one community or religion. The concept of the freely given consent of both sexes is central to Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh marriages alike.

- Almost 1000 cases of suspected forced marriages have been dealt with since 2000, mainly involving links to Asian countries, however there are also cases involving families from the Middle East, Europe and Africa.
- The child abduction charity Reunited estimates that the real number of forced marriages in Britain is nearer to five times this number – equating to some 1000 cases each year.
- The situation is the same overseas. In India, the British High Commission have seen a doubling of cases in the last five years.



per cent had contemplated suicide and over half of these women had waited five years before seeking help. 'This is how horrendous the picture gets at the extreme end of the scale,' says Jasvinder. 'We have to ask, "Why is that?"'

The answer, it seems, is shame, or 'izzat'. 'Every woman who comes to us, of whom 80 per cent are Asian, has a problem with shame linked to family honour,' says Jasvinder. 'It's a form of social control which oppresses Asian women and suppresses their ability to speak out.'

The survey reports: 'All generations agreed that maintaining the good name of the family was essential. If they ignored izzat, these women knew they would suffer the consequences of being cast out and disowned.'

By speaking out, Jasvinder hopes that people will begin to tackle the stigma of shame, and begin to realise that forced marriages are a form of human rights abuse.

In 1999 the Home Office established a Working Group to investigate the problem of forced marriages in England and Wales and to make proposals for tackling forced marriages effectively. By listening to the victims of forced marriage, their families and friends, it concluded that forced marriages are 'primarily an issue of violence against women' rather than a reflection of religious attitudes.

It also found that family honour may be put before women's quality of life – reports of beatings, scalding and burning in these forced unions are not uncommon. 'We're talking about domestic violence against women and, in extreme cases, murder – the excuse is honour,' says Hannah Siddiqui from the Middlesex-based women's help group Southall Black Sisters.

These deaths, known as 'honour killings', occur when the fear of shame leads family members to murder their own blood. 'Honour killings happen when women are seen as better-off dead than alive,' says Jasvinder. 'In other words their lives are worthless.'

In recent years there have been a number of high-profile 'honour killings' in the

United Kingdom. Among them was 19-year-old Rukhsana Naz, from Derby, who was murdered by her mother and brother, four years into a forced marriage, because she had fallen pregnant through an extra-marital affair. Rukhsana's mother Shakeela Naz, 46, sat on her daughter's legs while her son, Shazad, strangled Rukhsana with a length of electric cable. They were both given life sentences.

Police nationwide say they have received thousands of complaints from Asian women who are being abused for refusing to have an arranged marriage.

Leicestershire Police, for example, now deal with one case a day – compared to one complaint a month in 1999.

Jasvinder is adamant that this issue has barely been addressed. 'One clear change is that, compared to when I was 15 years old, there's a lot more support and understanding out there,' she says. However, even with more help available than ever before, supply is not meeting demand. Last year, a further 120 women needed help that Karma Nirvana Refuge couldn't provide.

'These things I speak about have nothing to do with my religion or culture,' says Jasvinder. 'I'm proud of being Asian but my life has been impacted upon by first-generation parents. However, it's not just a first-generation problem.

'I want my kids to wear Asian dress and enjoy our rich cultural heritage. My children can marry a black, white or Asian person, whoever they choose, just as long they're valued and respected,' she says, 'but I was condemned by my parents for that. It's a myth to say that when the older generation die, everything will suddenly be okay. It won't, but I'm confident that in time the situation will change.'

■ Contact the Karma Nirvana Refuge on 01332 604098. www.refuge.co.uk 24-hour domestic violence freephone helpline 0808 200 0247. To make a donation, call 020 7395 7772

ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS Getty Images/Rex Features/Lonely Planet/Amnesty International/Corbis