

MEDIA STATEMENT

2nd January 2019

MWNUK Renews Call to Abolish FCO Forced Marriage Repatriation Fees

Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK) are pleased to see attention being given to the Foreign Office's repatriation policy which requires victims of forced marriage over the age of 18 to meet the costs of their rescue. We have been campaigning for a change to this policy for over two years and hope that we can finally see its end in 2019.

MWNUK first raised this issue in 2016 after a call was made to our MWN Helpline by one such victim who had been required to sign a loan agreement to enable her escape back to UK after a forced marriage. Our campaigning led to a partial change to the policy in 2017 so that British citizens under the age of 18 (irrespective of whether they were victims of forced marriage or not), were no longer required to meet the costs of their repatriation. However whilst we welcomed this change, we have also been urging the government to end this draconian charging policy altogether.

Executive Director Shaista Gohir commented:

"Regardless of their age, we are talking about victims who have been taken abroad either by force or coercion or under false pretences and then have been forced into a marriage. They may have also faced various other forms of abuse. We know many victims are held captive with their passports taken away and their movements restricted so that they cannot escape. The individual we helped had to wait a very long time for her opportunity to escape and in the meantime, had suffered a terrible ordeal. In fact, as she was sitting in the Embassy seeking help, her husband was waiting outside with a gun! What choice do victims have in that situation? Either agree to pay your way back to freedom, or go back to your abuser and perhaps facilitate his entry into UK on a spousal visa. We do not understand why such individuals are being treated in the same way as holiday-makers that have are stuck abroad for whatever reason and cannot make their way home due to a lack of travel insurance. Forced marriage is a recognised criminal offence and it is wholly unconscionable that victims are being penalised in this way."

In our November 2016 letter to the Foreign Office, we reminded them that forced marriage victims are often young and vulnerable. We stressed that victims can struggle financially and emotionally upon their return to the UK; they may be feeling isolated due to being disowned, dealing with mental health issues due to the trauma or even living in fear of honour based violence. They may be feeling isolated, disowned by family and even at risk of honour based violence. To ask such individuals to then meet the burdens of their repatriation costs – costs which were incurred through no fault of their own – is morally wrong and also counter-productive. The policy is likely to put off victims from seeking help and it is unacceptable that a victim may have no other option than to remain in a forced marriage because he or she cannot afford to pay for their escape. It could also make them vulnerable to returning to their families and living with the abuse for the rest of their lives.

Executive Director Shaista Gohir added:

"The cost of providing emergency loans to victims of forced marriage has been something in the region of £8000 over the last two years, which is a very small fraction of the department's overall budget. On the other hand, a debt of £700-800 can be a real burden for an individual, particularly if they have had to start their life again without any support. It will be a cloud hanging over their heads, stopping them from moving forwards. This is especially so where passports have been retained as leverage, which may restrict their ability to seek employment or pursue further studies".

If the government is serious about ending forced marriages then they must start by ending this charging policy immediately. 2019 has to be a year of action, not just discussions.

Ends

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Muslim Women's Network UK (www.mwnuk.co.uk) is the national leading Muslim women's charity working to improve the social justice and equality for Muslim women and girls.