

The Right Honourable David Cameron MP
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

Friday 25 November 2011

Dear Prime Minister,

Regarding forced marriage, 'honour-based' violence and female genital mutilation of women and girls in the UK

Imkaan is a national organisation. We work with Black, Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BMER) violence against women and girls (VAWG) services that assist BMER women and girls who are experiencing, or at risk of, gender-based violence.

As part of London's own VAWG Strategy the Mayor of London this year commissioned Imkaan in partnership with Equality Now and City University, to conduct a study of prevalence, needs, the incidence of, and responses to forced marriage, female genital mutilation and 'honour-based' violence. The study reveals that despite the Home Office's intention to 'see violence against women eradicated in the UK', there are some startling gaps and failures in policies and procedures. As a result, women and girls are left in life-threatening situations. We are certain that you share our concerns and we therefore write to you today, to highlight our findings and recommendations, including the need for a co-ordinated action plan. We have enclosed a copy of the report.

The findings of the study fall under five overarching themes:

- Although the UK has a well developed child protection system, which is automatically initiated in other cases of child abuse and neglect, professionals with a mandate around child protection do not routinely utilise existing safeguarding policies and procedures to protect girls from forced marriage and female genital mutilation.
- Although prevention and early intervention are both more effective and less costly strategies, they are ignored in favour of reactive approaches. The result is a lack of identification, and too few cases come to the attention of key professionals who are in a position to support women and girls. Very little work is carried out consistently in both primary and secondary schools.
- Rather than these issues being addressed within a context of VAWG, there is an excessive focus on 'culture' and religion. As a consequence, training is not mandatory across local authorities, and local authorities do not consistently include these issues as forms of VAWG. The chance of receiving a good quality service, which can assess need and risk, and intervene early to protect girls, is often reliant on the enthusiasm of individuals who have personally sought relevant knowledge and skills.
- There is a lack of understanding, investment in, and recognition of, the work of specialist voluntary women's organisations with expertise in forced marriage, female genital mutilation and 'honour-based' violence. Yet the study reveals that these are the very services that women and girls are more likely to approach for help.
- Racism and cultural assumptions are still present in the practice of some professionals. There can be a reluctance to intervene **because** of a perception that these issues are about culture rather than violence against women and girls. This often leads to inappropriate responses by professionals.

Women and girls that were consulted during the study want the government to take more decisive action in responding to female genital mutilation, forced marriage and 'honour-based' violence; they stated 'be culturally sensitive but either it is a human rights violation or it is not'. They want safe spaces to engage with their peers, share their concerns and fears, access support and encourage greater awareness. Although there are differences of opinion about whether a separate piece of criminal legislation is required to address forced marriage, there is consensus among survivors and practitioners that women and girls need high quality specialist support.

We are encouraged that the government's Call to End Violence against Women and Girls Action Plan specifically addresses forced marriage, 'honour-based' violence and female genital mutilation to a certain extent. To help make this call a reality we need a more focussed and joined-up approach. In particular we make the following recommendations:

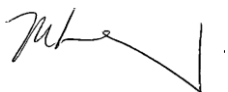
- Female genital mutilation, forced marriage and 'honour-based' violence need to be dealt with as part of a mainstream agenda on child protection and violence against women and girls.
- Consistent training for all frontline professionals with child protection and / or VAWG responsibilities.
- Work with teachers and pupils at primary school stage should be prioritised. Girls are likely to have had female genital mutilation carried out by the time they reach secondary school, and some girls as young as nine years old have been reported as being at risk of forced marriage. It is not enough to include references to these issues in the secondary school PSHE curriculum, especially given that this is not compulsory.
- Longer-term investment in specialist BMER VAWG organisations that support women and girls to deal with the physical and emotional impact of violence.
- Consistent community engagement to encourage more women and girls to come forward for support, raise awareness of the law and challenge the attitudes and values that underpin these forms of violence.
- Consistent data collection on the prevalence of female genital mutilation, forced marriage and 'honour-based' violence.

We do hope that you are able to discuss the findings and recommendations of our report with key Ministers, and that you will develop the existing VAWG action plan to improve the UK's response to these forms of violence so that we might reasonably achieve the goal of eradicating them in the UK.

We would like to request to meet with you, and / or your advisors at your convenience to discuss ways forward. We look forward to hearing from you soon. London's Deputy Mayor for Policing, Kit Malthouse, has also written to Theresa May in support of many of our recommendations along with a copy of our report.

Please note that this is an 'open letter' and will be made available to members of the press. We may also make any response from you available to them.

Yours faithfully,



Marai Larasi MBE, Imkaan



Efua Dorkenoo OBE, Equality Now