

David Cameron, PM
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

Friday, 11 October 2013

Dear Prime Minister

Re: Open letter calling for an end to UK Child Marriage

I am the Executive Director of the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO), a registered charity supporting women and girls from the UK's Middle Eastern and Afghan communities. I founded the charity after someone important to me was murdered in an 'honour' killing. I was shocked that this could happen to a woman who lived in the UK. I made a commitment to do all that I could to bring an end to all forms of 'Honour' Based Violence including Child Marriage.

Today on International Day of the Girl I am writing to you to ask for your help to bring an end to Child Marriage. As well as being a major global problem, which we must play our part in stopping, Child Marriage is also happening within the UK. We must not neglect this issue at home. We must do everything that we can to ensure that we protect our children from Child Marriage which is a form of child abuse and is a human rights issue.

According to Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was signed by the UK and came into force in this country on 15 January 1992 '*a child means every human being below the age of 18 years*'. We must not allow this vital period of physical and personal development to be cut short by premature marriage.

I know from the accounts of women and girls whom IKWRO support, that Child Marriage has devastating lifelong impacts. It denies childhood and can subject the victim to a lifetime of rape and other forms of sexual abuse and physical violence, as well as emotional, financial and physical control. It often restricts access to education which curtails financial independence and can result in lower living standards, child pregnancy and associated and other health problems. UNICEF's report '[State of the World's Children](#)' found that an infant born to a mother under the age of eighteen is sixty percent more likely to die in its first year of life than one born to a mother over the age of nineteen. Research from the *International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)* found that girls married before the age of eighteen are more likely to experience domestic violence and depression than those who marry later.

We must ensure that our legal framework prohibits Child Marriage. I support the recommendations of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health which in its report called '*A Childhood Lost*' recommends that the minimum marriageable age is increased to 18 across the UK. Survivors of Child Marriage who we work with have told us that if Child Marriage was illegal they would have been empowered to try to seek help.

Unlike several European countries including Belgium, Finland, France, Germany and Ireland, UK law currently permits Child Marriage. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, a 16 and 17 year old can marry with parental consent and in Scotland the minimum marriageable age is 16. We must abolish parental consent; if an individual is not considered to be old enough to make their own decision to marry, then they should not enter a marriage until they are an adult and are able to independently give informed consent. In Scotland, we must raise the minimum marriageable age to 18 to ensure that everyone who is entering a marriage is mature enough to consent to it and physically ready for its consequences.

Some people might argue that some children mature more quickly than others and should have the opportunity to marry below the age of 18. I say that any frustration that a few might feel at having to wait for a short time until both parties are at least 18 and are able to give their own independent, informed consent, is far outweighed by the need to protect children, who are not ready either physically or mentally for marriage.

The current law on marriageable age is particularly dangerous for 16 and 17 year olds who are at risk of Forced Marriage. Sadly Forced Marriage of children is a significant problem in the UK. According to the Forced Marriage Unit, who in 2012 gave advice or support in 1485 cases related to a possible Forced Marriage, 35% of the victims were under 18 years old. We know that this figure, over 500 cases, is just the tip of the iceberg as many cases go unreported, often because the victims are threatened not to disclose the marriage to anyone.

Another serious problem is religious Child Marriages as highlighted by the recent expose by ITV. When undercover reporters called 56 mosques to ask whether they would perform the marriage of a 14 year old girl, 18 of the respondents agreed.

I commend the strong stand that you have taken against Forced Marriage by committing to make it a criminal offence. I also applaud the excellent work of the Forced Marriage Unit. However we must do more to protect children. Setting the minimum marriageable age at 18 without exception, would be a hugely significant step. It will send a clear message that the UK does not accept Child Marriage, both at home and internationally. We should also ensure that the law being drafted to criminalise Forced Marriage states that a child cannot consent to marriage, recognising any Child Marriage as a Forced Marriage.

Of course, whilst getting the law right is essential, to end Child Marriage we must take a holistic approach through community work, addressing the issue on the national curriculum, tackling unregistered religious Child Marriages including those under Sharia law and ensuring that all relevant frontline professionals receive comprehensive training.

The goal is attainable. We can end Child Marriage both globally and here at home in the UK. Today on International Day of the Girl please join us in committing to make this happen.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Diana Nammi' followed by a flourish and a small symbol.

Diana Nammi
Executive Director
Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation