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I laughed off talk of arranged marriage at 15, but at 16 I had a husband

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The first time my mum had a conversation about marriage with me was when I was 15. I was studying for my exams when she came into my room. She said somebody had spoken to my dad about marrying me. I laughed it off. I didn't take it too seriously, I just took it as a joke. At school, other girls would talk about having crushes on boys, but none of them ever got married. "I'm far too young," I said.

I sensed that my father wasn't happy with my reaction. I realised I had said something wrong. My mum said that he was disappointed that I had refused to get married.

Then when I was 16 she brought it up again. She said there was someone else who wanted to marry me. In that moment you just feel that if you don't do this thing that everyone around you is doing, then it's wrong and you're going against what you should be doing. I said to my mum: "Just do as you please." The next thing I knew, I was engaged and then married.



Payzee with her husband on their wedding day

I wouldn't quite describe it as a forced marriage, because no one explicitly said to me: "If you don't do this, there will be consequences." It was very subtle. I thought: "I just have to do this at some point because everyone around me is doing it." I saw my older sister Banaz get married at 17, which meant that I was next. When I go back to my community now, all the women my age are married with four or five children.

I was born in Iraqi Kurdistan during the Iran-Iraq War. My family fled to Iran, where I grew up with my four sisters until I was about 11. My father moved to the UK for work and then brought us over in 1998.

We had to try so hard to stay within our culture while living in Morden, south London. Everything was so different to us. We had lived in a modern society for only a few years. When I was about 12, my older sister Bekhal left the family home. She was feeling conflicted between her roots and her life in London. We never saw her again.

I think that's why me and my sister Banaz were married off so young, to try to reverse the "damage" that Bekhal had caused the family honour. When we got married my dad got praised for it so much. People in the community said he had brought up his daughters in the best way possible.

I met my husband only briefly before the marriage. He was 28 or 29. He seemed so serious and grown-up and I felt like such a child next to him. He just wanted somebody to cook and clean for him.

My family took me wedding shopping, buying an expensive dress and jewellery for the big day. I took no interest in it. I had a traditional Kurdish wedding and the most exciting thing about the whole thing was seeing my friends there.

During our marriage I got pregnant straight away. I hadn't even had sex education and was shocked by my husband's direct approach to me, thinking, naively, that we could be friends first before having sex. When I suggested that, he took me back to my parents and suggested I might not be a virgin, which is a huge thing in my community.

He never used contraception because he said a husband and wife don't need to use such things. I didn't want a baby, especially not with him. I think that's because I knew deep down that I would escape him at some point. I didn't even realise at first that I was pregnant because I'd never had any education about this. I was still learning English at school.

But my mum recognised the signs. I told my family I wanted an abortion, which, as strict Muslims, they were against. My husband begged me to keep it, insisting he would be a good father and husband after that. When I had an appointment with the nurse, I asked her how I could get rid of it. She didn't pick up on any signs that I was in an abusive marriage. It didn't ring alarm bells with her. I just wonder how many other girls have been in that situation.

I had the abortion. I just knew in my heart I didn't want the baby there was no convincing me otherwise. In my culture it's not something you do, no matter what you just have the baby. Being married at that age put me in situations that stay with me even now. It left me feeling guilty for so long. But I just had to do it. I had no choice.

I begged my husband to let me go to college and he said yes, providing that I wore a hijab and modest clothes. I was always into fashion, especially coming from a country where I saw only traditional clothes. I loved stiletto heels, but he didn't want me wearing them because, at 5ft 9in, I was taller than him. I grew up in the era of Britney Spears and her low-cut jeans were very popular at the time.

My husband, however, just wanted a traditional Kurdish wife. I've always had acrylic nails and he hated them. He said: "You look ridiculous, you look like a child." And I would think: "But I am a child!" He kept trying to change me. We had nothing in common.

I didn't realise it at the time for what it was but I feel it was mental abuse that stayed with me for many years. I felt like he was my second dad — just another grumpy old man I had to listen to. He would use my age against me and said I was too young to make my own decisions.

I started spending a lot of time with my parents, particularly after Banaz went missing — at that point I didn't know that she had been murdered in the way she was, despite what she had reported to the police. At one point, I thought maybe she just got on a train and got lost. I just never thought what happened to her was possible. I didn't realise she was also in an abusive marriage. It was only when she was staying with me at my mother's house and I saw the bruises. We took pictures to show the police and she reported what was happening several times — but that still didn't help her.

A family liaison officer from the police [who was on the case to find Banaz] asked me about my own safety. As I was concerned about my relationship with my husband, she gave me a panic alarm to put in the house. My husband asked me what it was and he asked if there were cameras in the house. I lied and said yes. It scared him. From that point on I used it against him.



Payzee, left, with her sister, Banaz

I kept asking him for a divorce and I would often go to my mum's house for weeks on end. I'd gone past the point of return. We called an imam and he was trying to convince me to stay. He just said: "You're a woman, you have to be patient and wait for him to change."

After the divorce, in one way, I felt like I started living again, like I'd pressed play on my life. Just having him out of my life felt like a relief. It took a year for a civil divorce to finally go through. He accused me of being unfaithful and wanted everything on paper. I knew I would wait for ever if I challenged so I just took everything he threw at me.

Sometimes men in the community will use this as a weapon against women. If they put accusations like this on paper it can ruin a woman's "honour" and it's an effective way of compelling them to return to their husband.

When I go back to my community now they like to throw my ex-husband's "achievements" in my face. They say: "Look, he's happy and married with kids and you're miserable and divorced."

Banaz got married a year before me, when she was 17. When you're in an abusive situation, you go through it silently. And when we visited each other we'd be surrounded by family so often that there wasn't an opportunity to talk openly.

She changed a lot when she got married, she became more "grown up". Before that she used to be so bubbly and very talkative. She loved socialising and she was very family-oriented. She would do anything for those she loved. After marriage, it was like she was almost dead inside. Her whole demeanour changed and she started dressing like an "adult".

If Banaz had not been married she would have been able to grow up and understood the concept of danger. But she was so naive; she didn't believe anyone could hurt her, least of all her family. She told me that she had told the police everything, and that no one could do anything to her now.

On the day she was found, our family liaison officer came to the house and said we needed a translator for my mum. She sat us all down in the living down. They

told us how they had tracked her down and examined a body, found in Birmingham, and they matched it with Banaz's dental records. Even to this day it's still so surreal. It was worse than the day when the men were sentenced for her murder.

Her murder is the big elephant in the room. It's like, "it happened, let's move on". It's like [the community] is on mute. I always speak to my mum about it. It's weird. She talks about how much she misses her, but not the circumstances in which she died.

During the trial, I was studying criminology and psychology at London Metropolitan University, but I had to drop out. I just couldn't concentrate on what was going on as I was going to court every day. Although I'm working in fashion I would still like to go back into education one day. I have a huge interest in child psychology.

When I go back to my country now, Iraqi Kurdistan, I see some changes have happened. Female genital mutilation, which was once normal, is now illegal. I speak to my female relatives and they would never dream of doing it to their daughters now. After my divorce I tried to run away from my culture but now I love so many aspects of it, like the food, the language and the clothes. I just reject the bits that are harmful.

But still, here, my community needs to move forward. We're still not talking about these issues. Our community needs to change and change the way we look at these things. It's affected so many people. People have lost their lives. Banaz's boyfriend [Rahmat Sulemani] took his own life years later.

This is why it's effective for us to campaign about it, because it's a hidden problem.

You can't drink at 16 so why can you get married at that age? And usually, in my community, it's older men getting married so they can have control over girls. At that age you don't know what you're doing. Families are marrying them off at 16 so they can stay under the control of the adults.

The reason I want to shed light on my story and my sister's is because it is a topic that is still taboo. Not just within my community and others but also among authorities like the police, healthcare and education.

I am 100% backing changing the age of marriage because I can confidently say it was not an experience for a 16-year-old to go through. I have lifelong emotional scars from it and we need to put a stop to any more young women having their lives controlled like this.
