

# Girls not Brides calls for ban on child marriages in Britain

Iram Ramzan

July 7 2019, 12:01am,  
The Sunday Times



Fashion designer Payzee Mahmood's sister was murdered in an 'honour killing' in 2006

RAY WELLS

Share



Save



A global campaign to end child marriage is focusing on Britain, where campaigners say the law fails to protect under-18s.

The legal age for marriage in England and Wales is 18, but children aged 16 and 17 can marry with parental consent. Activists believe consent can mean coercion.

Girls Not Brides, a global partnership of more than 1,000 organisations seeking to end child marriage, is calling for weddings of under-18s to be made illegal. Its proposals would include all cases where either party is British or lives in the UK.

The campaign, to launch this autumn, is being supported by London fashion designer [Payzee Mahmood](#), whose sister Banaz, 20, was murdered in an “honour killing” in 2006. Banaz was perceived to have brought shame on her family after leaving an abusive partner, wed in an arranged marriage, for another man.

Her father, Mahmud Babkir Mahmud, and uncle Ari Mahmud were given life sentences in 2007 for ordering her killing, along with a third man, Mohammad Hama, who carried out the act.

At 16, Payzee was also married off to an abusive man. But the union would not have been classed as a forced marriage as she was willing to do what her family wanted. Her husband was nearly 30.

“The reason I want to shed light on my story and my sister’s is because it is a topic that is still taboo,” she said. “There is still a lack of awareness in the police sector on how to help and support women in these communities and a lack of training on how to deal with a situation such as Banaz’s should they ever be faced with it.

“I am 100% backing a change to 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.”

Karma Nirvana, a charity that raises awareness about forced marriage and honour-based abuse, has seen an increase in the number of under-18s calling its helpline, and has also seen a rise in cases involving Romanian communities.

In 2018 the government’s Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) dealt with 43 cases linked to Romania, compared with a total of 29 across the whole period from 2011 to 2017. Victims in these cases were significantly younger than for other countries, with nearly 80% aged 15 and under.

Natasha Rattu, executive director of Karma Nirvana, believes the figures are the tip of the iceberg. She was told of a case where a girl and a boy, both under 16, were taken to Romania to marry each other. Neither child saw any problem with being married, because they felt it was “part of their culture”.

She said: “Child marriage is a real emerging issue in the UK. This is different to forced marriage in so far as the victims of these marriages, particularly in the Romanian communities, are ‘consenting’.

“Social workers that contact our national helpline feel professionally challenged when using the Forced Marriage Unit’s statutory guidance, as the victims of these marriages are not identifying with being ‘forced’.

“They have been conditioned to believe that marrying young is the norm and associate a stigma with getting married beyond the age of 16. At the end of the day, this is child exploitation and we do not recognise these as legitimate marriages.”

Pauline Latham, the Conservative MP for Mid Derbyshire, put forward a bill last autumn to raise the minimum age of marriage or civil partnership to 18. Although she received cross-party support, the bill wasn’t moved to second reading. She will now work with campaigners on other ways to change the law later this year.

Latham said: “Unicef states that marriage before the age of 18 is a fundamental violation of human rights. How can we, in the UK, hold our heads high by allowing children to be wed?”

“Adulthood is accepted as being 18 in the country and all young people are in school or educational training until then and yet we know of many examples of those under the age of 18 who have been pushed by their parents to be married or even taken abroad for the ceremony.

“We are legitimising this behaviour and setting a very poor example to those in the developing world who see the UK as a barometer for good lawmaking.”

The Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO) assisted a Syrian woman who was married off at the age of 16 to a British Syrian man, 11 years her senior.

When she was 18 she joined her husband in London, who was emotionally and physically abusive. She left him after six months, fleeing to a refuge provided by IKWRO.

Diana Nammi, IKWRO's executive director, said: "In our refuge and advice team, we see first-hand how child marriage is causing lifelong harm to too many children. These girls have no concept of what marriage will mean for them in practice. Suddenly their childhood is stripped away and they bear the full responsibilities of marriage, without having the physical or emotional maturity to handle it.

"The current law is holding back the police and social services from protecting children as it's not fit for purpose to protect children from child marriage here within the UK or to stop men from the UK taking child brides from abroad."

Official figures show the number of 16 and 17-year-old girls getting married fell from 348 in 2006 to 141 in 2016. This does not include marriages that took place abroad.

Many Commonwealth countries follow the legal lead of the UK. In Bangladesh, the official minimum age of matrimony is 18 for women, but a new provision allows child marriage with parental consent and permission from the courts. Lobbyists cited the current UK law as an example.

Last month, Egypt's Al-Azhar University, one of the world's most prestigious centres of Islamic learning, issued a non-binding fatwa (a religious ruling) against child marriage, setting out a minimum age for both sexes at 18.

Diana Nammi, IKWRO's executive director, said: "In our refuge and advice team, we see first-hand how child marriage is causing lifelong harm to too many children. These girls have no concept of what marriage will mean for them in practice. Suddenly their childhood is stripped away and they bear the full responsibilities of marriage, without having the physical or emotional maturity to handle it.

"The current law is holding back the police and social services from protecting children as it's not fit for purpose to protect children from child marriage here within the UK or to stop men from the UK taking child brides from abroad."

Official figures show the number of 16 and 17-year-old girls getting married fell from 348 in 2006 to 141 in 2016. This does not include marriages that took place abroad.

Many Commonwealth countries follow the legal lead of the UK. In Bangladesh, the official minimum age of matrimony is 18 for women, but a new provision allows child marriage with parental consent and permission from the courts. Lobbyists cited the current UK law as an example.

Last month, Egypt's Al-Azhar University, one of the world's most prestigious centres of Islamic learning, issued a non-binding fatwa (a religious ruling) against child marriage, setting out a minimum age for both sexes at 18.

Girls Not Brides, a global partnership seeking to end child marriage, is calling for weddings of under-18s to be made illegal. It would include all cases where either party is British or lives in the UK.

The campaign, to start this autumn, is backed by Payzee Mahmood, a London fashion designer whose sister Banaz, 20, was murdered in 2006 in an "honour killing". Banaz was perceived to have shamed her family by leaving an abusive husband, whom she had wed in an arranged marriage, for another man.

At 16, Payzee was also married to an older man but the marriage would not have been classed as forced as she had been willing to do what her family had wanted. She is now divorced.

Official figures show the number of 16 and 17-year-old girls marrying fell from 348 in 2006 to 141 in 2016, but that does not include marriages that took place abroad.