

• Premium

• News - Politics

Raise marriage age to 18 to stop forced nuptials, say MPs



Save 97



Sarah Champion

Follow

By Charles Hymas, HOME AFFAIRS EDITOR
4 OCTOBER 2019 - 8:27PM

The minimum age for marriage should rise to 18 to protect children from forced nuptials, say MPs.

Investment management

Financial planning

Tax

MORE STORIES

- 1 The Brexit blame game: how frantic 24 hours put Ireland and Germany in the line of fire over...
- 2 Brexit latest news: EU prepared to...

Follow

By **Charles Hymas**, HOME AFFAIRS EDITOR

4 OCTOBER 2019 - 8:27PM

The minimum age for marriage should rise to 18 to protect children from forced nuptials, say MPs.

Sarah Champion, Labour MP for Rotherham and leading campaigner on child abuse and forced marriage, is jointly heading a cross party campaign to close a loophole that can lead to children being pressured or coerced into a marriage.

The current law allows child marriage under 18 through the "legal exception" of parental consent. The onus is on the child to protest if they feel the marriage is forced but it is rare for them to report it to the authorities as most are still at school and just 16 or 17.

"Child marriage is child abuse," said Ms Champion, who is backed by leading Conservative and Labour MPs. Priti Patel, the Home Secretary, publicly supported a bill to raise the age to 18 when she was a backbench MP last year.

It was also supported by Sir Graham Brady, chairman of the powerful 1922 committee of Conservative MPs who said this weekend there was "a case for a single age of majority for everything" although the detail of any legislation would need to be studied closely.

Forced marriage survivor tells how she was let down by criminal justice system

Ayesha Khan* is a survivor of forced marriage who claims she was failed by the criminal justice system after she tried to bring charges of attempted murder against her family.

She was first threatened by relatives at the age of 18 when she left home against her parents wishes so she could "lead an independent life".

Ms Khan, who grew up in Scotland was coerced into returning to the family home and soon after received a visit from her uncle.

He squeezed his hands around her neck and warned her: "I'll happily do 20 years for doing you in for bringing shame on this family."

Her family later took her to Pakistan and forced her into a marriage with her

Now & When

Start preparing today

Capital at risk

Smith & Williamson

MORE STORIES

- 1 The Brexit blame game: how frantic 24 hours put Ireland and Germany in the line of fire over...
- 2 Brexit latest news: EU prepared to make major concession on Boris Johnson's deal
- 3 Extinction Rebellion: police accused of 'losing control' of protest as government urged to step in
- 4 The EU has negotiated in bad faith all along

Her family later took her to Pakistan and forced her into a marriage with her father's cousin. She described being raped on her wedding night as "an indication of what was to follow over the next four years."

Ms Kahn recalled: "I was too scared to do anything about it. My family had already proved the lengths they would go to to get me back home so I put up with years of rape, physical abuse and mental torture."

After becoming desperate she made an attempt on her own life and it was only when a friend offered to help her escape that she decided to flee her marriage and cut ties with her family in order to start a new life. But before she had the chance to leave her home in Scotland her uncle and husband tracked her down and blocked her path as she was being driven by a friend.

A high-speed pursuit ensued as they chased her in separate cars "like something you would see in the movies."

"We were doing about 65mph and I was on the phone to police shouting 'they are trying to kill me,'" she said. "They eventually boxed us in and forced us off the road before my husband started ramming us repeatedly with his car."

After the pair managed to escape and call the police officers from the CID were assigned to investigate and Khan's uncle and husband were arrested in dawn raids the following day, charged with attempted murder.

She said: "The initial police response was excellent. I spent eight hours giving a statement and told them all about the forced marriage and the abuse I had suffered." But two weeks later police dropped the charges of attempted murder and informed her that instead, only her husband would be charged for culpable reckless driving.

She explained: "My family told police I had been kidnapped by the white guy driving my car and they had been trying to rescue me. They denied the abuse and said I was in a happy marriage. At that point I realised it wasn't going to go my way."

She added: "I don't think the [Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service] believed there was enough evidence to prosecute because my family were denying everything. I felt failed as a British citizen when all I wanted was to feel safe."

Ms Khan says more needs to be done to support victims of honour-based abuse to help them bring prosecutions.

"I wanted my uncle to suffer and my ex husband to suffer because they tried to take my life. I wanted to prosecute them. I think more needs to be done to bring justice without people having to stand in court and look their family in the face."



MORE STORIES

- 1** The Brexit blame game: how frantic 24 hours put Ireland and Germany in the line of fire over...
- 2** Brexit latest news: EU prepared to make major concession on Boris Johnson's deal
- 3** Extinction Rebellion: police accused of 'losing control' of protest as government urged to step in
- 4** The EU has negotiated in bad faith all

*not her real name

The Ministry of Justice and Home Office said it was aware of the arguments on the issue and were keeping it "under review."

Writing in The Daily Telegraph, Ms Champion said it was wrong for the onus to be placed on the child to have to report and recognise coercion in order to get justice.

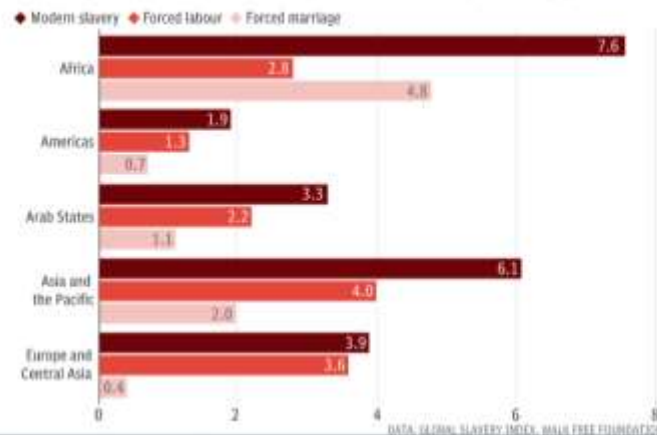
"It should be a crime to marry anyone under the age of 18, regardless of whether the marriage takes place in the UK or is officially registered," she said.

"Children, of course, would be exempt from prosecution but parents and faith leaders who sanction child marriages should be held culpable.

"This would send a clear message that marriage is a solemn undertaking between two consenting adults and that it is not possible for a child to consent to such a bond."

Modern slavery and forced marriage are most prevalent in Africa

Regional prevalence of modern slavery by category, 2016 (per 1,000 population)



Now & When

Start preparing today

Capital at risk

Smith & Williamson

MORE STORIES

- 1 The Brexit blame game: how frantic 24 hours put Ireland and Germany in the line of fire over...
- 2 Brexit latest news: EU prepared to make major concession on Boris Johnson's deal
- 3 Extinction Rebellion: police accused of 'losing control' of protest as government urged to step in
- 4 The EU has negotiated in bad faith all along



Critics question how children can legally be allowed to have sex at 16 but not be able to marry. However, supporters argue that they are still legally children until 18, and therefore should not be able to enter into a lifelong contract that lasts their entire adult life.

There were 3,354 marriages involving 16 and 17 year olds in the ten years to 2016 although figures do not include non-registered or cultural marriages or marriages abroad. Additionally, the Home Office's forced marriage unit dealt with 574 cases involving children aged 17 and under last year.

The minimum age of 16 was set in 1929 when living together or pregnancy outside marriage was socially unacceptable but Ms Campion this was now "out of date and in need of revision." She plans to table an amendment to the Government's domestic abuse bill enacting a new minimum age of 18.

She cited the case of Sophie, 16, who was threatened with an arranged marriage and surgery to restore her virginity after her parents discovered she had a boyfriend. She told police but withdrew the complaint after pressure from her family and panic attacks.

"The legal exception of parental consent allows coercion from a child's family and community to go unchecked and, as a result, children are forced into marriages against their will."

Among other supporters are Pauline Latham, who presented a private member's bill enacting the change last year and Chris Philp, Parliamentary Private Secretary to Chancellor Sajid Javid.

Ms Latham said: 'Unicef believes that marriage before the age of 18 is a fundamental violation of human rights - I agree and I believe it should be banned in this country.'

She has urged Boris Johnson to include the proposal in the Queen's Speech and is planning a Westminster Hall debate on the issue.

Related Topics



MORE STORIES

- 1** The Brexit blame game: how frantic 24 hours put Ireland and Germany in the line of fire over...
- 2** Brexit latest news: EU prepared to make major concession on Boris Johnson's deal
- 3** Extinction Rebellion: police accused of 'losing control' of protest as government urged to step in
- 4** The EU has negotiated in bad faith all along
- 5** Man raped woman he met on dating site after she rejected him for being 'morbidly obese', trial told

