

Article for World Council of Churches, 16 Days of Activism Campaign to stop Violence Against Women, November 2016

The three most important events in your life are arguably your birth, your death and your marriage. Most of us do not have much choice about our birth or our death but who we marry should be our choice. However for millions of girls (and some boys too) that choice is taken away from them. Girls are either married at a young age, when they are not old enough to give consent or in other cases girls are coerced into marriage. This coercion can include threats of the consequences if the girl does not marry the person chosen for her, or she may be physically beaten, locked away, drugged or emotionally blackmailed. She may also be ostracised from the family, as in my case, or in worse case scenarios, killed in so called 'honour killings' for bringing shame on the family, and destroying the family's reputation and standing in the community or "izzat".

For many Asian Indians the birth of a girl is not normally a time of rejoicing. Having a girl is synonymous with having an economic burden on the family. The family must feed, clothe and educate her only for her to then move on to her rightful place with her husband and in-laws, taking with her the dowry the girl's family must provide. Thus, a girl is a temporary addition to the family and a constant source of worry to ensure that she will transit her adolescent years without succumbing to sexual relationships or pregnancy outside of marriage, which would bring shame and disgrace on the family and lower their community standing. In my case, I was prevented from mixing with English and other school friends in case their western views contaminated my thinking. So, I grew up across two cultures and lived two separate lives. At school I spoke English, wore English clothes and ate English food. When school finished at 4pm my life changed to that of a 'typical' Indian girl; I was not allowed to listen to English music, nor bring any English friends home, and had to cook and eat Indian food.

Around the age of 15/16 my family found a boy for me to marry. Despite telling them I did not want to marry this boy they paid no attention. They said that they knew what was best for me. A few years later, I noticed that my family suddenly began buying large quantities of alcohol ready for my engagement party, which I knew nothing about and had not agreed to. Apparently, my intended husband had graduated from University, so was now ready for marriage. I was shocked and frightened by this news and felt I had to speak out or I would be married off. The response from my family was an ultimatum to either marry the young man they had chosen for me, or to leave home and never return. I chose to leave home. I packed my suitcase and left for University. Luckily, I had an inquisitive mind and a desire to learn so a university education became my escape route. My story did not take place in a rural village in India but rather in a large city in the East Midlands in England in the late 1970s.

That ultimatum still stands in my youngest brother's mind. He has not spoken to me since the day I left home, despite meeting him three times at family funerals in the last few decades – once at my father's funeral, when I was told not to attend as I was not welcome, once at the funeral of one of my three older brothers and again at the funeral of my little great niece.

My freedom and escape as a teenager from an intended forced marriage came at a high price. I lost my identity as well as contact with my immediate family and wider community. As years have turned into decades, I have learned to forgive my family as I realise that what they did to me was driven by ignorance, fear of losing their cultural identity and protecting their reputation in the Asian community. Despite forgiving them, I believe any form of coercion is unacceptable in the 21st century. Culture, religion and tradition should no longer be used as a veil to mask and excuse the

horrors of forced marriage. It leaves a lifetime of mental scars that take much longer to heal than physical ones from the trauma of severed family ties and going through life without family and community support. As far as my family was concerned, I was dead to them. I cannot find the words to explain that sense of loneliness and loss yet at the same time the relief of having escaped a different potential nightmare.

As a teenager I was unable to make any sense of my life let alone to speak openly of private family matters that went on behind closed doors. As a youngster I did not know that I had any rights let alone how to exercise them. This Pandora's Box of experiences and emotions had to be kept hidden and locked away in the back of my mind as it was too painful to open and confront. I felt ashamed and that I was betraying my family by telling anyone outside. I was not able to speak about it. Many women who suffer violence take their experiences to their graves without ever telling anyone. I could easily have done that. But life chances brought me to Geneva and slowly I became involved with women's human rights organisations. After realising that, despite the lapse of time, this was still a huge world-wide issue and women were still not speaking about it, I felt compelled to do something about it. I hope sharing my story can give other girls and women the courage and strength to realise that they are stronger than they think and that they can overcome any adversity life may bring. In my case, education was my saviour as I was able to learn to think for myself and question and challenge the status quo. After all, we were six siblings and all of the others had quietly accepted an arranged marriage. Why should I be any different? Decades on I still cannot answer that question, but I am just glad that I followed my instinct, my own path, and did what I thought was right.

Sharing a painful story is not easy - it makes you feel vulnerable and exposed. But knowing that it could give other girls and women courage to stand up for what is right, even if it means making huge sacrifices, it is worth it. To change such deep-seated traditions, change must come from the community level. We have to challenge suppressive societal structures which men have used for centuries to control our sexuality and our lives and to mould our behaviours and expectations of ourselves. The time has come to take back our autonomy, be the masters of our own destiny and exert our human rights. It will not be an easy ride but, then again, anything worth fighting for never is. I consider myself one of the lucky ones. I escaped a forced marriage, gained an education and a professional career and have now set up an NGO to fight against child, early and forced marriage.

I am honoured to have been invited by the World Council of Churches in Geneva to share my story with you during the 2015 '16 days of activism against violence against women' campaign. To bring change we must work at the grass roots community level to end all forms of violence against women including child, early and forced marriage. As Eleanor Roosevelt famously said

"Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world."

Mohinder Watson, PhD wears three different hats. She escaped entering an arranged marriage as a teenager, has recently founded an international NGO based in Geneva called Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage and is an academic currently researching child, early and forced marriage across the world. If you are interested in our work or supporting our mission, please contact

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