

Lanterns in the Dark

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There are certain aspects of arranged and forced marriages that need to be understood if change is to come from within our Minority Cultural Groups (MCG).

Questions in the Public's Mind

Why is there this custom of arranged marriage in the first place and why is it held tenaciously by certain communities? Why in a number of cases an arranged marriage becomes a forced marriage leading in some instances to the murder of a daughter by a family member, or her estrangement from family, culture and community, for life?

What initiatives have been used in the UK to assist with this grave problem? Which ones are more likely to enable the Minority cultural Groups (MCG) to bring about change? Which ethno-cultural group has made substantial strides in reducing significantly the number of arranged marriages?

The Custom

The custom of arranged marriage exists because there was a time when it had to be; the society had confined its women to the home while offering little opportunity for men and women of marriageable age to become acquainted. In the west, however, an unspoken practice was, that friends and family 'would help things along,' by another type of arrangement—inviting the young to tea, parties, picnics etc.'

A problem arises however, when families emigrate from a place and time where an arranged marriage is the norm to—a rapidly changing, fast moving, developed society where it is not the custom of the majority culture.

In such a social climate, children of immigrants are daily exposed to a culture that caters to its youth in a most seductive way. In the talk at school, in the playground, shops and cinemas, and the media within our homes, in the streets, on spreading billboards and in the glossy magazines of every Sunday newspaper, they are being shown how to dress, walk and talk, what to think about and what they need to have.

And there is that— not to be underestimated – intense peer pressure to conform. We all want to belong, especially so if we are perceived as an outsider. However, unlike strong families from the

majority culture, the immigrant population takes time to acquire the tools of discernment, i.e. what aspects of this new culture should be embraced and what to leave.

Individualism

In addition, for the very first time in the history of civilisation, all children are offered a new path to run on. It is called a greater freedom for the individual. Individualism crashes into the well ordered, age old priorities of every culture. It places the needs, desires and wishes of an individual above those of all others – parents, family, community, the Church, the State.

Its main monotonous mantra is attractive: ‘This is my life to do with as I so please.’ It is understandable that such a seductive, attractive thinking should be gathered up by children of Minority Cultural groups (MCG) and taken to their homes.

Parents' Voices

In the meantime the elders and parents of MCG have been moving under the umbrella of their community where daily reassurances in the old customs are to be had and where the comforts of traditional ways are extolled, while the daily newspapers talk of the social problems that come with a greater freedom in life styles their children are enamoured with: Binge drinking, abusing and bullying at school, racism and hooliganism at football matches, drugs and drug related crimes, one night stands with all their associated risks, a dependency mentality on the state, a loss of respect for the old and a loss of discipline at school, the highest teenage pregnancies in Europe to mention a few at random.

One should also not forget that parents feel that they are being forced to accept another way of living, another way of making a most important decision – choosing a life’s partner for their children. This is heart rending to them, especially when they can see that western ways of choosing a spouse have numerous imperfections and are failing many: one in three marriages end in divorce or separation. They ponder upon why a commercialized dating system—an arrangement—is approved, while what is frowned upon is caring parents with an understanding of life, preferring to rest a marriage not on ‘sweet nothings’—romantic love – but on the serious, strong attributes of duty and obligation to a partnership, loyalty and responsibilities to the home, in the hope that two people from similar socio-economic backgrounds and with the blessings of both families will in good time come to appreciate and have a deep affection one for another. This philosophy of marriage forms the thinking of many amiably arranged marriages that have withstood the test of time for generations.

The Ugly Reality for Many Others

The reality, however, is that in certain families and communities, parents, as well as a few religious leaders see their former authority, or standing which came with directing young lives to the traditional paths – now lost, unravelled before them—while having nothing of equal worth to enhance their own self esteem. Often it is this threatened loss of face that hardens their resistance to change. And where it is felt that the conduct of their daughters will cross the custom-made threshold of honour, forced marriages take place with all their ugly, inhumane consequences.

However, where parents and community leaders are educated, skilled men and women with happy, busy lives, robust children of their own and where communication between the generations comes

easily, such homes are in a better position to make this adjustment. In fact many welcome it, seeing an opportunity opening before them to pursue an interest long held.

Problems of an authoritarian system and those of unbridled freedom and liberty

When the custom of parents move on the wheels of an authoritarian system, it fails in Britain because its pivot of movement, lies in the belief of its own divine right to make the large decisions in the home, such as marriages and careers. At the same time parents are blind to the changes that are taking place all around them – changes that provide new opportunities to enlarge their thinking, to reassess the old beliefs, to rethink what valuable contributions to the society, immigrant children can make and are already making in every field.

There are times when parents would need to fold neatly and with respect, put aside the once useful, but now worn thin, ‘clothes’ and old ways, to further enrich their lives and those of their children by taking their own large, profound experiences of living, to face the difficult challenges which they and their children must cope with daily.

Lanterns in the Dark

A rapidly evolving change is taking place more dramatically in Britain among Hindus than in any other group. For example, a survey carried out in the mid-1990's show that only 20 % of Hindu women under 35 and 18% of younger Hindu men have said that their parents decided their marriage partner. The comparative figures for Muslim women under 35 is 67%. When one considers that the survey also reveals that 74% of the Hindu women over 50 had had their parents deciding on their marriage partner, this drop from 74% to 20% shows that there are many lanterns lighting a path upon which a stream of footsteps are fast flowing.

Along with this trend, has come the realisation by these very families that with educating their daughters as well as their sons, come benefits to themselves, the community and the society at large. It is not two fold but a hundred fold, for the stimulation and enterprise that burst from an enriched husband and wife team knows no bounds.

Three main initiatives

The three main initiatives used in the U.K. on Forced Marriages are:

1. Regulation
2. Dialogue
3. Exit

These are all helpful and should continue to be used with skill and care. There are however a few provisos:

1. When regulations are being imposed it should be made clear to the general public that there are vast differences of behaviour and beliefs within communities and families and that pressurised parental control is not the norm for many families. This should go some way in reducing the demonising and stereotyping of ethnic minorities in certain quarters.
2. Knowing who to speak to is important. Often a leader or a family is not at all sympathetic to another understanding of living, and is ill at ease with one that strengthens the independence of their women by reducing the disadvantages they face, while offering still greater opportunities to the further enhancement of their lives.
3. In certain circumstances, exit is the only choice that the female victim of a forced marriage has. But since it also means that in so doing, she cuts herself off from her family, culture and community, it is imperative that other measures be considered where the loss is not so devastating.

Personally, I would advocate that where families have succeeded in making the transition from parental control to children choosing for themselves, and where the outcome has been a happy one, the experiences of all the participants, complete with the difficulties and pitfalls they encountered, should be better known, so that the community may benefit. In instances where the outcome has not been a happy one, the community also learns much.

Preparing our young to live with large freedoms

In order to encourage parents to release their control, they must see it as beneficial to the family. It is important therefore to be fully aware that when our youths are given a wide range of freedoms and they do not have the tools to enable them to choose wisely, they are likely to go under, for the freedoms of our society are highly seductive with the power to destroy lives. It may be likened to offering a ten year old the freedom of the wide open oceans without the skills of swimming, diving, sailing, nautical engineering, understanding charts; and when the compass fails and the engine stops, knowing how to fish, to read the skies and stars.

Finally parents ought to be aware of how great a loss it is to themselves, to their children as well as to the majority culture if they continue to tie the hands and feet and thinking processes of their children. One cannot have in the making, compassionate, discerning, able, thoughtful policewomen, teachers, civil servants, judges, accountants, solicitors, statesmen, who will readily marry someone they cannot abide because their parents say it must be so.

A rich inheritance

Let us not forget that minority cultures hold a great deal of what is worthy and is of immense value to living; so when parents estrange their children and by association their grandchildren too, they are denying them a substantial part of their grand inheritance. They are curtailing an opportunity for their offspring to carry forward to the next generation, the riches of a culture, which when it is at peace with itself, is a delight, generous and affectionate to a fault. I am also referring to its delicious mouth watering foods, the warm sensuous appeals of its scents, silks, songs, jewellery, sculpture, painting, its

serious classical music and dance, sacred chants, entrancing ceremonies and celebrations, its rich epics, sacred texts, fables, plays as well as uplifting, wholesome, humane philosophies of how men should live.

The Metropolitan Police Service is to be greatly commended for this Forced Marriage Conference. It brings together courageous, able men and women, working in the field, with different perspectives and experience. They have come with the sole purpose of enabling us all to have a better understanding of how best to resolve this complex human problem.