

For release on 14th July 2022

“Honour”-based violence charity across the UK calling on victims to spot the signs and report the crime

A survivor of forced marriage has said she had to endure horrific abuse “with a smile on her face” because she was so scared of her husband.

Sophia*, 37, is a survivor of forced marriage, and is now determined to support others through her campaign work with rights-based charity *Oxford Against Cutting*.

Covering ‘honour’-based abuse (HBA), female genital mutilation (FGM), and forced marriage, Oxford Against Cutting works to end harmful cultural practices suffered by girls and women living in the Thames Valley, by providing education and support services.

At 15 years old, Sophia was taken by her family from her home in the UK to Bangladesh and was forced to marry a man twice her age.

Forced marriage is just one example of honour-based abuse, where individuals are pressured into marriage without consenting. Religion is often used as a justification, despite forced marriage being widely condemned by every major faith.

After arriving in Bangladesh, Sophia fell pregnant within months, and became depressed, lonely, and desperate to escape her situation.

However, Sophia was terrified of what might happen to her if she tried to flee.

In the lead up to the National Day of Remembrance for Honour Based Violence (July 14th), a leading National Lottery funded charity, *Oxford Against Cutting*, is now calling on victims to spot the signs, report the crime and get the right support they need.

Sophia said: “I had to take my personality out of my body and become a shell. It was the only way I could function because I was so petrified of being locked up and being abused.

“I went along with it, even though [my husband] raped me every single night to get me pregnant. I had to make sure I had a smile on my face.”

HBA, although not defined in law, refers to where the concept of ‘honour’ has been used to carry out an offence, such as FGM, forced marriage, or honour killings.

HBA is misunderstood and underreported, meaning that hundreds of victims are not being helped and perpetrators are escaping justice.

Eventually, Sophia made it back to the UK, escaped her forced marriage, and gave birth to her baby daughter.

Despite her trauma, Sophia now wants to play a part in combating the abuse she experienced.

“I’m speaking for all survivors who have gone through these taboo experiences,” she said. Sophia is particularly passionate about the work HBA charities do to spread awareness and share the stories of survivors from different backgrounds.

Registered Charity Number 1161597
Email: news@oxfordagainstcutting.org
Website: www.oxfordagainstcutting.org

According to Sophia, there is often a misconception that HBA and forced marriage do not happen to British-born women like herself.

“These charities know what honour-based abuse and forced marriage is,” she said. “They've got survivors on board to input on the educational aspect of it and train police officers.

“They are saving lives. They are giving us the opportunity to expand our awareness on honour-based abuse and honour killings that are happening under our noses.”

National Lottery funding has given *Oxford Against Cutting* a larger platform to highlight impactful stories such as Sophia's.

“Without National Lottery funding, we can't save people's lives,” Sophia said. “It is literally life and death.”

Sophia shared a message for other HBA survivors: “Reach your hand out. Speaking out is going to save your life. You must put yourself first.”

Journalist and broadcaster Samira Ahmed, who has long been a supporter of projects tackling HBA, said: “Throughout my career, I've always had a special interest and concern in violence against women, particularly honour-based violence against women.

“Honour-based violence has always been there, but we didn't always call it honour-based violence. The word 'honour' is controversial - some people feel it shouldn't ever be used in the context of violence against women - but it struck me that the problem was never going away, that there were always accusations of racism if people tried to talk about it, and women were being silenced.”

Mrs Ahmed acknowledged HBA continues to be underreported and under acknowledged by the wider public, partly due to these difficulties associated with labelling and discussing it.

She added: “I've been really struck when I've gone into some communities, and spent time talking to people, police, social workers, women's groups, about how much pressure there is to not talk about honour-based violence, because somehow it tars a whole community and that it suits racists to talk about it.

“That's been the real challenge as a journalist: finding that balance between being scrupulously fair and not feeding racism, but also just calling a crime a crime.”

To find out more about Oxford Against Cutting and the work that they do, visit <https://www.oxfordagainstcutting.org/>

National Lottery players raise more than £30million a week for good causes, making projects such as this possible. Find out how your numbers make amazing happen at: www.lotterygoodcauses.org.uk

*Details of Sophia's identity have been changed to protect her identity as a HBA survivor