



# Ministry of **JUSTICE**

**ForcedMarriage.net Launch – 30 April 2009**

## **Speech for Bridget Prentice**

### **Introduction**

1. Thank you very much for that kind introduction, Lord Bhatia ... I'm delighted to be here today celebrating the work we are all involved in and committed to - ending the appalling practice of forced marriage.
2. It's always wonderful to come together with so many of our partners – from the voluntary sector, government and statutory agencies - on occasions like this when we are celebrating an initiative which will provide valuable support and assistance to victims and survivors of these outrageous practices.

3. One of the challenges for all of us is to ensure that we not only provide the information and help that people need, but that we also keep pace with the technological changes of this highly digital age. We have to harness all of the opportunities there are to ensure the right information gets to potential victims and survivors of these abuses at the right time.
  
4. And I have a personal concern to make sure that information about forced marriages reaches the public – particularly those at risk - and brings about change. To this end, I am pleased that the Ministry of Justice and its work on forced marriage has a presence on this fantastic website, [ForcedMarriage.net](http://ForcedMarriage.net).

## **Background**

5. Forced marriage is an intolerable form of domestic violence that denies people the right to choose how to live their lives.
  
6. It has been a momentous year for those of us working to combat this. The Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007 came into force on 25<sup>th</sup> November last year and is a powerful additional tool that can be used to offer protection to those at risk.
  
7. The Act sends out a clear message that forced marriage will not be tolerated. The courts have a wide discretion to issue Forced Marriage Protection Orders which deal flexibly and sensitively with the circumstances of each individual case of forced marriage.

8. I am delighted that 20 Orders have already been made under the Act and that it is being used to offer real protection to victims. We have been made aware of teenagers being taken overseas by their parents to remote regions to be married and threats of violence that were so extreme that victims have had to be rescued from the family home. We have heard about the intimidation and fear inflicted by those entrusted with their protection and safety. In these cases, Orders have been made stopping victims being taken abroad, ordering victims' passports to be surrendered and prohibiting family members from harassing and threatening violence.

9. To protect vulnerable people such as these, local authorities will also be able to act as relevant third parties for victims from the autumn. This means that they will be able to make applications to the court on behalf of victims without needing first to get the permission of the court. We are also going to take this further by piloting a scheme in the voluntary sector which will look at the support Independent Domestic Violence Advisers can offer to victims as cases progress through the courts.

10. This scheme will help to ensure that people who cannot, or are less able, to protect themselves are not left by the wayside, but are given every opportunity to gain the protection of the court.

11. I am not suggesting that legislation is the panacea for the many issues associated with forced marriage...that would be too simplistic and only serve to undermine the complexity of forced marriage and the difficulties encountered by victims even after they have taken the brave step to say "No." But the Act does offer extra protection for victims alongside the work of the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Forced Marriage Unit and the many statutory and voluntary agencies that work in this arena.

## Partnership working

12. As a Government, we have a responsibility to send out a clear signal to society that, as with other forms of domestic violence, forced marriage and honour based violence will simply not be tolerated. Through our *National Delivery Plan*, our aim is to ensure that all forms of domestic violence are being tackled through mainstream services. As we have heard, and will hear through the rest of the morning, these commitments are being developed and delivered by a number of government departments and agencies, many of whom are also here today.

13. There is still more that we must all do. But this cannot be achieved by Government alone. Everyone – practitioners at the frontline, forced marriage support organisations, refuges, women’s organisations, religious organisations, and members of local communities – needs to work together to help ensure forced marriage is consigned to history. We need to make sure that we maintain a multi-agency approach to end such practices which destroy lives and take away the freedoms and choices that many of us take for granted: the right to an education, the right to marry whoever you choose, the right to live meaningful lives without fear and abuse and the right to simply say “No.”

14. In the spirit of using every possible route to send out these messages, the Ethnic Minority Foundation’s website stands as an exciting initiative that puts partnership working – between Government and the voluntary sector – at the heart of its mission to help victims of forced marriage. It is the outcome of many months of joint working and research into the needs of forced marriage victims.

15. I was privileged to be a keynote speaker at the stakeholder seminar held in the House of Lords last year where this idea emerged. The website goes a long way to address the concerns raised at that event – that there was a lack of accessible and readily available information for young victims, grassroots organisations and the general public, particularly in online media. By raising awareness of the issues, I am sure that it will also encourage greater discussion and reporting of instances of forced marriage.

16. And it is only with the help of the voluntary sector that legislation can truly be connected to communities and positively impact the lives of those it is intended to protect.

## Challenge

17. The challenge for us now is to instil in those around us that forced marriage isn't something which doesn't happen in the UK or which is confined to rural communities in faraway lands.
  
18. For many children and young adults growing up in our communities, the reality of forced marriage is all too stark: the excitement of going on a family holiday abroad only to discover that plans have been made for you to marry someone you've never met before and that you have no choice in the matter; being robbed of your independence and the opportunities afforded by education because those who you trust have set a different path for your life instead – a life all too often characterised by abuse, violence, self-harm and depression. Indeed, the harsh reality is that for too many living in our communities and in our neighbourhoods, suicide seems preferable to a life shrouded in fear and isolation.

19. We know that the issues are countless for those who make the choice to get out: finding housing and employment, re-entering the educational system, the psychological and social effects of estrangement from family and community and the task of finding one's identity again.

20. But with the help of legislation to protect them, such as the Forced Marriage Act, and through the support of the statutory agencies and organisations that many of you represent, these young men and women can begin the process of re-building their lives, putting the pieces back together and finding hope for the future.

## **Conclusion**

21. So I wish to thank you for your work in helping the victims of forced marriage and honour based violence. Without this work, legislation would be meaningless.

22. None of us can achieve the goal of ending these practices alone and we need to utilise fully the skills, experience and knowledge of others working in our field to effect change and save the lives of the victims of these practices.

23. But together **we can** and **we will** bring about that change.

24. Thank you for your time.

END

