

For release on 7th October. Interview with Rubie Marie available. Contact Sobia Afridi sobia@oxfordagainstcutting.org 07443 869 376

A survivor of honour-based abuse and forced marriage, Rubie Marie, calls for more support for young girls ahead of International Day of the Girl.

Trigger warning: mentions of suicide, physical and mental abuse

Overview:

Influencer Rubie Marie tells her story as a survivor of honour-based abuse and forced marriage, to encourage others to listen and support young girls who come forward with their calls for help. With International Day of the Girl on the 11th of October, we need to bring our focus back to protecting girls at risk.

This comes after ITV's crime drama 'Honour' aired on national television on 28th and 29th September 2020, based on a true story of a young woman called Banaz Mahmud who was aged 20. She reported to police on five different occasions in fear of her life. She stated that she was being abused by her own family in 2006 and if she went missing it would be at the hands of her named uncles which she gave to the police.

Banaz was forced to marry a man who raped her and abused her. She managed to get a divorce which left her family bitter as this was deemed shameful to the family's reputation, particularly the men in the family. The named men plotted Banaz's murder as she fell in love with a man called Rahmat.

Banaz was tortured, strangled, raped and murdered by her family members. Buried in a suitcase underground, this act of murder is known as 'honour killing'. These barbaric acts were not identified as criminal offences until June 2014.

Rubie shares her harrowing story which lasted 12 years, her trips to Bangladesh and how she was tricked into leaving the UK. She eventually found a way out. Many others aren't so fortunate.

Rubie's story:

The reason for experiencing honour-based abuse and forced marriage

I endured the horrific taboo experiences of honour-based abuse myself in 1998/9 when I was 15 years old (I'm now 37). I was taken abroad just after my sister ran away from home. She was 18 years old and very much in love with her boyfriend. Brave as she was, she confronted my father to get married. This was not approved and she endured honour-based abuse to the point she had no choice but to leave the city.

All eyes turned on me, just as Banaz's family's did after her sister took the same path to flee for her life. I had a secret boyfriend who my family found out about and they thought I would make the same choice to leave although that was not my plan.

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The Plan

The uncles and my father had endless meetings after restaurant hours at my home, always talking over each other. It was always about my sister and arguing. It felt like the uncles had more of a part to play than my father –I'd always had a good bond with him until he got married again when I was 9 years old. He then changed. Life started to go downhill. Social services were always at my home as my mother was subjected to domestic violence. We were known to the services.

Summer holidays were approaching, and the community was looking down on us as a family. We would be spat on as we walked past them in the streets. They said we were a disappointment to society and that the honour for our family and extended family, even to family friends, had been damaged. It was the ripple effect of the 'honour' system.

They tricked me to leave to go Bangladesh but little did I know what was planned. "We must get away from the family for a while," my father kept on repeating. I thought this was a great idea as I never been abroad as we were a poor family, so why not?

I was 15 years old and I never thought of marriage or it even being considered as I was so young. Time went by, one, two, three, four months in Bangladesh. When I asked about school, my father simply said that we'd spent our money and couldn't afford to go back. Eventually my father disclosed the true plan as I sat eating dinner: I was going to be married. I couldn't comprehend being married and to someone I didn't love. My nightmare began.

I got married to a man twice my age, I was 15 and he was 30. I was given the birth control pill by one of my younger uncles before the wedding so I wouldn't get pregnant. But then one day, after the wedding, the husband's sister went through my belongings, found them and disposed of them. I was raped every day as he wanted me to be pregnant as a guaranteed visa for him. Weeks went by and I soon became pregnant.

Fortunately and unfortunately, at the cost of my unborn daughter's health we became sick from a virus the husband passed on to me called CMV (cytomegalovirus). The doctors advised me to get back to the UK otherwise I and my unborn child could die, it was life threatening. I needed to come back home to Wales. The 'husband' wanted me to stay in Bangladesh until I gave birth and then to come to the UK as a family, but his concern for the risk of losing his visa if we died was greater and so he needed to let me return.

Home

At this point, I felt suicide was my only option. I didn't want a child conceived through rape. I didn't want to be married. I was tired and sick of everything; I couldn't see a way out. I was taken to hospital after taking a tub of paracetamols. The nurse asked me in private if I wanted an abortion, I consented. Then I saw my baby's heart beating and I didn't have the heart to go through with it. I focused on my baby and she gave me a will to live, even though I wasn't allowed to work, go back to education, mix with friends or even with cousins. I couldn't care less at that time as my life was a nightmare; all I could think of was living in this darkness, with this beam of light coming through my stomach. "This life inside me will guide me" - my daughter gave me hope to carry on.

When my daughter was born "handicapped" as the doctors said, I didn't understand what it meant, I kept asking the hospital "What does it mean?"

"Time will tell," they told me. I knew I had to do something. I was so angry with everyone, as they all blamed me for my daughter being born with severe special needs.

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The husband's extended family only came to see my baby twice. She was seen as "tarnished" as she had a disability and it seemed his family wanted to dispose of her, like they had disposed of my birth control pills.

If we were to stay in Bangladesh, I think my child would have been thrown in the streets like rubbish - used and most likely sexually abused.

Leaving Home

I couldn't take what was happening to my life and where it was heading. Soon the family wanted me to move to Bedford - they wanted to give me a house so I could set it up for sponsoring the husband to come with a visa. I really didn't want to become a housewife cooking and cleaning for this man. What could I do?

Later I met a man who seemed like he could give me a way out. I left Wales to come to the Midlands.

They Found Me

Bangladeshi communities know other Bangladeshi communities; people know people and are so tight-knit. My family found where I was hiding in the Midlands. They went to the new boyfriend's home and told his family everything. I was a "shameful whore to society" and they belittled me as "damaged goods". The new boyfriend's family told me to leave their house and so I did. I felt every letter to the names they said I was. I was devastated.

The Second Plan

I went home but 'home' wasn't a 'home' anymore, it became a prison. I wasn't allowed to go anywhere and my family wanted to know what I was doing at all times - they even had a lock on the outside of my room door. My mobile phone sim was scratched and I was looked at in disgust. I was treated as someone who had dishonoured the family name and committed adultery. I was seen as a whore, prostitute, good for nothing. We are Muslim and I understood that my family thought I was going to hell. I already felt like I was in hell.

They asked where my passport was, I told the family I didn't know. They found it in my belongings that I took to the Midlands and they were looking at dates and times of when to take me back to Bangladesh. They tried to sugar-coat it and say my cousin was going for a few weeks and I could go with her and get a quick divorce. They tried to lure me back into this spider web. I feared for my life. I didn't know what to think. As appealing as it sounded to get a divorce, I knew I would not come back to the UK ever again.

Police

A few days later, I fled out of the house after a massive argument with my family. I left my child in the crib and ran to the phone box to call my new boyfriend and inform him on how I was being treated but couldn't reach him. I then saw my Welsh best friend just across the road and I ran to her.

I told her everything, even though I hadn't seen any of my friends for over a year because each time they came to my house to see me, they were sent away. I went with her to her home and informed her parents, whom I have known since nursery and played a big part in the community. The police came the day after and they did not know what to do. I think my family knew I would come back because of my baby. My father played a big role, saying how I was just "a silly girl having a tantrum". There was a South Asian police officer and my father played him like a charm. My father seems so

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modern and educated and only missed a few points off being a judge. He did interpretation work for the police.

I told the police I wanted to leave. I don't even know if they documented it but it was reported when my friend's parents called them to assist.

Six hours went by and none of the police knew what to do! It seemed that they had never come across a situation like mine before. All I kept on repeating was "I want my baby and I want to leave. Simple!!!"

Midlands

I ended up in a five-year relationship shrouded in domestic violence. I wasn't allowed out, abused every day, even throughout my second pregnancy. I was told I was ugly, a whore, a nobody. I was choked, beaten, strangled with my headscarf until I lost consciousness. I was beaten with hairdryer cables, put in cold baths, made to wash clothes with my bare hands. I was held captive by this perpetrator with no protection from police, social workers or doctors. I had left Wales with my baby and no one in the Midlands followed up to check on my welfare. My family should've taught me to look out for perpetrators yet I just fell into another one's arms. When I finally escaped this relationship, I had a son to raise, at the same time as coping with five years of stalking. I felt this drowned me. After countless court attendances he was never put in jail.

Feeling dysfunctional for over a decade, disowned by my family, I had no one. I always sought out a man who would protect me, not realising it should be me to protect myself and my children. I was 27 when I first started to get to know myself again.

What We Can Do

I have recently joined a charity, Oxford Against Cutting, as an Ambassador and Facilitator to help services understand the signs to look out for and help young women at risk of these crimes.

Summer holidays are vital times as some students go missing and never come back. We need to educate people in all areas of the education system.

This torment of young people, being forced into marriage, experiencing honour-based abuse, child abuse, human trafficking and being raped to becoming pregnant, needs to stop. These criminal acts are being driven by the hands of our very own communities - victims' own families and extended families. The people that we thought we could depend on and trust unconditionally, are tearing lives apart. We need to have input from community leaders and work with them to bring an end to the suffering.

We are blessed to live in a diverse society and we need to understand different cultural practices, the harmful, as well as the non-harmful. I frequently hear questions asked like "Isn't it just their 'culture' or 'religion'?" but in fact "honour-based abuse" is simply 'abuse' and is very much disguised with many layers.

These abusers are ruining many of our British girls' lives, leaving many suffering with mental health issues from the traumas they've experienced. Some even take their own lives or are killed by their family, just as happened to Banaz. Many will run away from their own families for safety. Many cases have had professionals involved who have missed key signs that could have saved the victim. We need aftercare services put in place to help support young people who have experienced

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honour-based traumas. Let's give our young girls the lives they deserve to live, with education and dignity. This is the least we can do for International Day of the Girl.

Rubie will also be taking part in an Instagram Live session with Oxford Against Cutting on Thursday 8th October at 8pm, @oxfordagainstcutting.

Forced marriage and anti-FGM training can be booked by contacting info@oxfordagainstcutting.org or through our website: www.oxfordagainstcutting.org.



Image of Rubie Marie, survivor of honour based abuse and domestic violence.

Helpline numbers are:

Karma Nirvana supports victims of honour-based abuse and forced marriage.

National helpline, Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm: 0800 5999 247

The Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) offers advice and support to victims of forced marriage as well as guidance to professionals.

Tel: 020 7008 0151

Email: fmu@fco.gov.uk

NSPCC

0808 800 5000

IKWRO

Mon to Fri 9.30-5.30 0207 920 6460

For out-of-hours emergencies call

Kurdish / Arabic/English: 07846 275246

Farsi / Dari / English: 07846 310157

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) – 0345 050 7666

Adult Social Care – 0345 050 7666

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(Emergency Duty Team – 0800 833408)

Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Services – 0800 731 0055

Police – 999

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