

Women living under muslim laws
النساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين
Femmes sous lois musulmanes

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Deadly Affair: Pakistanis in England who wed for love

Warren Hoge

Bradford, England — She has had to move 19 times in the last five years. She steps outside her suburban home only after checking the street for strange cars and rehearsing the nearby footpath escapes.

Once back inside, she shoves heavy furniture under the front door handle and places a knife within quick reach.

The British-born daughter of Pakistani immigrants, she is under a death threat from her own father and brother. They have vowed to find her and murder her because she left home rather than give up her studies at 16 and accept an arranged marriage with a man they chose from a Pakistani village.

She is now 25 and calls herself Zena, not her real name. The Englishman she married is 35 and goes by the fictitious name of Jack.

They tell their tale of love, flight, five years on the run and continuing fear for their lives in the same broad-vowelled Yorkshire accents.

Cases like hers are becoming alarmingly common in this part of northern England, which has attracted a high number of immigrants from rural mountain regions of Pakistan that rigidly observe ancient social customs. Their experiences stand out against a broader portrait of Britain as a country where non-white people and ethnic dress and customs are increasingly commonplace and uncontested.

The women are in their teens and 20s, British by birth and upbringing, who want the freedom that their friends and classmates have to continue their schooling, hold jobs and marry people of their own choosing.

But these simple wishes are in direct conflict with their fathers' notions of women's roles — notions so strong that families have commissioned searches by bounty hunters, kidnappings and forced one-way trips to Pakistan.

In extreme cases, the families have punished their daughters by beating them, throwing acid in their faces and burning them to death.

'Up until a few years ago when coroners began getting suspicious, we had a number of 'suicides,' where Asian girls who left home were said to have set themselves on fire,' said Philip Balmforth, the Bradford area community officer of the West Yorkshire Police. 'The families would all tell the same story: She had been sad, she was so depressed, we should have taken her to see a doctor.'

Mr. Balmforth showed a visitor part of a 1992 documentary recording a meeting between Tahar Mahmood, a bounty hunter from nearby Huddersfield, and the husband and father of a young woman he had been paid to find.

'They are so disgraceful, these women,' Mr. Mahmood says on the film. The husband, an arranged partner from Pakistan, outlines the mission, saying: 'We'll get her all right. We'll scar her, throw acid on her face, we'll pour petrol on her and set her alight.'

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Among the many women who have sought Mr. Balmforth's help was Tasleem Begum, a 20-year-old supermarket worker in Bradford who refused the Pakistani partner her family had selected. She was killed by her brother-in-law, Shabir Hussain, who drove his car onto the sidewalk in a residential neighborhood and ran her over.

He escaped to Pakistan the same day on a flight from Manchester but returned to Britain a month later, was arrested and a year ago was convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment.

That is the only case that has led to a conviction, and, according to Mr. Balmforth, a retired police inspector, the police are usually unable to bring a prosecution.

The women who are being pursued cannot identify who is coming after them until it is too late, families will never admit to hiring bounty hunters and the women who are forcibly taken to Pakistan, even if they are English-born, fall out of British jurisdiction once they are back in their parents' native land.

Mr. Balmforth said that he had 742 cases of Asian women from the area who had left home and sought protection from their own families and that the number was increasing each year. 'I have girls in hiding across the country because the murders most certainly happen,' he said.

Piled up in his office were bags and suitcases with belongings for some of the young women he has placed in hostels run by sympathetic Asian women across northern England and Scotland.

Mr. Balmforth said it was policy to help the women find safe lodging. Those families that do get in touch with him are angry with this arrangement but in time, he said, many realize he is the only conduit to a daughter and they will ask him to take belongings and messages to her.

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