

**News / Investigations****Forced marriages a hidden problem in Canada**

Ground-breaking study finds 219 reported cases over just 3 years, cutting across lines of culture and nationality. And there may be many more flying the radar.

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DIANA NETHERCOTT /

Sandeep Chand experienced the turmoil of being forced into an unwanted marriage in 2006. She says forced marriage is a global problem, and one more common than most people think.

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**By: Debra Black** Immigration Reporter, Published on Fri Sep 20 2013

A groundbreaking three-year study of forced marriage in Ontario has found more than 200 women who were wed against their will, a practice the report's authors say highlights serious gaps in services.

The first-of-its-kind report, being released at a Toronto news conference Friday, was conducted by the [South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario](#), which questioned 30 social service agencies about the practice.

It found 219 reported cases between 2010 and 2012, with 97 per cent of the victims being women. The survey found the majority of victims, 81 per cent, were between 16 and 34 years old.

The report found that parents, siblings, extended family, grandparents and religious leaders were all involved in pushing individuals into forced marriage. The reasons were mostly cultural (66 per cent), but honour, money and immigration purposes were also behind some forced marriages.

Haya, a woman now living in Mississauga who asked that her last name not be used, was forced to flee when her father decided to marry her off to a cousin. Sixteen at the time, she and her family were deported from Canada to Pakistan four years ago. It was there, she said, that her father announced the arranged marriage.

She was held "prisoner" in her grandmother's house. Her father confiscated her Pakistani passport. Eventually she escaped from Karachi to Islamabad, where she was able to contact Canadian officials,

who gave her a temporary visa to return to Canada.

Now 20, she has applied for permanent resident status. She says she's "grateful" to the Canadian officials who helped her. "I didn't have any status in Canada. Technically, they didn't have to help me. I was a Pakistani citizen."

According to the report, however, most victims were Canadian citizens (44 percent) or permanent residents (41 per cent). Four per cent of cases involved people who did not have legal status in Canada; 7 per cent were refugee claimants, foreign residents or individuals with a visitor or temporary work visa.

The survey found that many victims forced into marriage experienced some form of violence, including threats (68 per cent), physical violence (59 per cent), sexual violence (26 per cent) and stalking (20 per cent).

"The results we got back show that this is an issue across a number of communities in Ontario," says Shalini Konanur, executive director and lawyer at the South Asian Legal Clinic.

"People need to realize that victims of forced marriages are probably some of the most marginalized clients we deal with," she said. "They have very little income, very little power and ability to remedy or intervene on their own."

The largest number of forced marriages was within the Muslim community with 103 victims from more than 30 countries of origin, including Afghanistan, Palestine, Senegal, Swaziland, Turkey and the United Kingdom, as well as Canada. Forty-four were Hindu, 30 were Sikh and 12 Christian.

"It's the tip of the iceberg, because so many cases go unreported," said [Sandeep Chand](#), an outspoken advocate for spreading awareness about forced marriage. she was forcibly married in 2006.

"It's prevalent everywhere," she said. "It's not just a South Asian issue. "It's a global issue; it's a human rights issue."

Forced marriage has become a large problem in the United Kingdom. The government has a unit devoted to dealing with forced marriages, which fielded 400 cases between June and August last year, according to a report in The Guardian newspaper last month. The article cited a charity group that is advising young women at risk of being spirited abroad for forced marriage to conceal a spoon in their underwear, to set off scanners at airport security and give them a chance to safely tell authorities.

Konanur, of the South Asian clinic, defines forced marriage as "essentially where one or both of the participants are entering into the marriage without consent."

Canada has taken a leadership role at the United Nations opposing child and forced marriage, says Konanur. But she wants the government to be as forceful domestically.

Canada has no legislation specific to forced marriage, the report states.

"The Department of Foreign Affairs is doing quite an amazing job with helping Canadians to come back to Canada, but the problem is (there is) no consistency on how they approach these cases from

country to country.”

She would like to see a uniform policy to help government officials understand forced marriage and intervene abroad in the same way, regardless of the country the victim is in.

The report also calls for better training for teachers, guidance counsellors, health professionals and police, and for including forced marriage in the definition of “family violence” when an applicant seeks priority in getting subsidized housing.

It also calls for better protection for persons without legal resident status.

The authors say regulations about spousal sponsorship, which makes attaining permanent residency conditional on living with the spouse, should be changed to allow an exemption for forced marriage, alongside the existing exemption for domestic violence.

Among other findings, the survey found 64 percent of the Canadian citizens forced into marriage had been living here longer than 10 years; 22 per cent had been here between seven and 10 years.

“One day I hope that people will understand more about forced marriage and how common it is,” Chand said, “because it happens in everyone’s backyard. We just don’t recognize the signs.”