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ACTing against abuse

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NEW GUIDANCE TO PROTECT PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES FROM FORCED MARRIAGE

Sara, aged 24, had learning disabilities and was forced to marry. She was ignored by her husband and family, and was even locked out of her home.*

To mark International Day of Disabled Persons, new guidance to prevent people with learning disabilities being victims of forced marriage has been launched by the Forced Marriage Unit. The guidance was developed in conjunction with learning disability charities the Ann Craft Trust and the Judith Trust. New research carried out by the charities suggests that people with learning disabilities are at risk of being forced into marriage, and are less likely to report the abuse.

The new guidance for frontline workers – police, children and adults social care services, health and education professionals, care workers, and the voluntary sector – will raise awareness of the issue and help practitioners spot the warning signs of this complex and often hidden practice.

Each year, the Forced Marriage Unit deals with over 1600 reports of forced marriage. Since August 2009, at least 58 cases have involved people with learning disabilities.

Jeremy Browne, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister for Consular Policy, said:

“This new guidance helps provide vital support to some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Evidence shows that in cases of forced marriage involving people with learning disabilities, it is much more likely that a friend or professional will report the abuse, rather than the victim themselves. This means that the emphasis is on professionals to act to safeguard people with learning disabilities from this type of abuse.”

Lynne Featherstone, Home Office Equalities Minister, said:

“Forced marriage is a form of violence against women and men, and should not be tolerated. When it involves people with learning disabilities the problem needs to be taken even more seriously.

“This new publication offers clear, step-by-step guidance to front-line professionals. By working together we can ensure that victims of forced marriage with learning disabilities receive effective support.”

Rachael Clawson, Ann Craft Trust, said

"The impact forced marriage has on people with learning disabilities is serious and severe. Forcing someone to marry when they do not want to, or when they do not have the capacity to understand the commitment or give their consent, is abuse.

Often, the forced marriage is organised by family members, the people who the victim trusts the most.

We are pleased to work with the Forced Marriage Unit to help professionals protect people with learning disabilities from forced marriage and the harm and distress it can cause"

The Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office run the Forced Marriage Unit which works with UK nationals in this country and abroad to provide advice, prevent forced marriage and help victims.

***Sara's story**

Sara was doing a textiles course at her local college; she called us after talking to the college principal about her problems at home. She told us that she had been forced into marriage in Pakistan two years earlier. She had then been forced to sponsor her husband's visa into the UK and he had been living at her family home since then. Sara's parents favoured her husband over Sara, and often treated her like a second-class citizen in her own home. She had to eat her meals upstairs by herself and they'd make her stay out of the house all day until it was dark. She explained that she didn't have any support or friends outside of the family home. After talking with an experienced forced marriage caseworker about her options, she decided that she would like to go into a specialised refuge, and continue a college course. She is currently settling in to the refuge in a new area and has cut all ties with her family.

Notes to Editors

1. The Ann Craft Trust works with staff in the statutory, independent and voluntary sectors to safeguard and protect people with learning disabilities who may be at risk from abuse.
www.anncrafttrust.org.
2. '*Forced Marriage and Learning Disabilities: Multi-agency Practice Guidelines*' is available at:
www.fco.gov.uk/forcedmarriage.
3. This guidance builds on the easy-read booklet aimed at people with learning disabilities '*Am I being forced to marry?*' available at www.forcedtomarry.com published by the charity Respond and the Forced Marriage Unit.

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