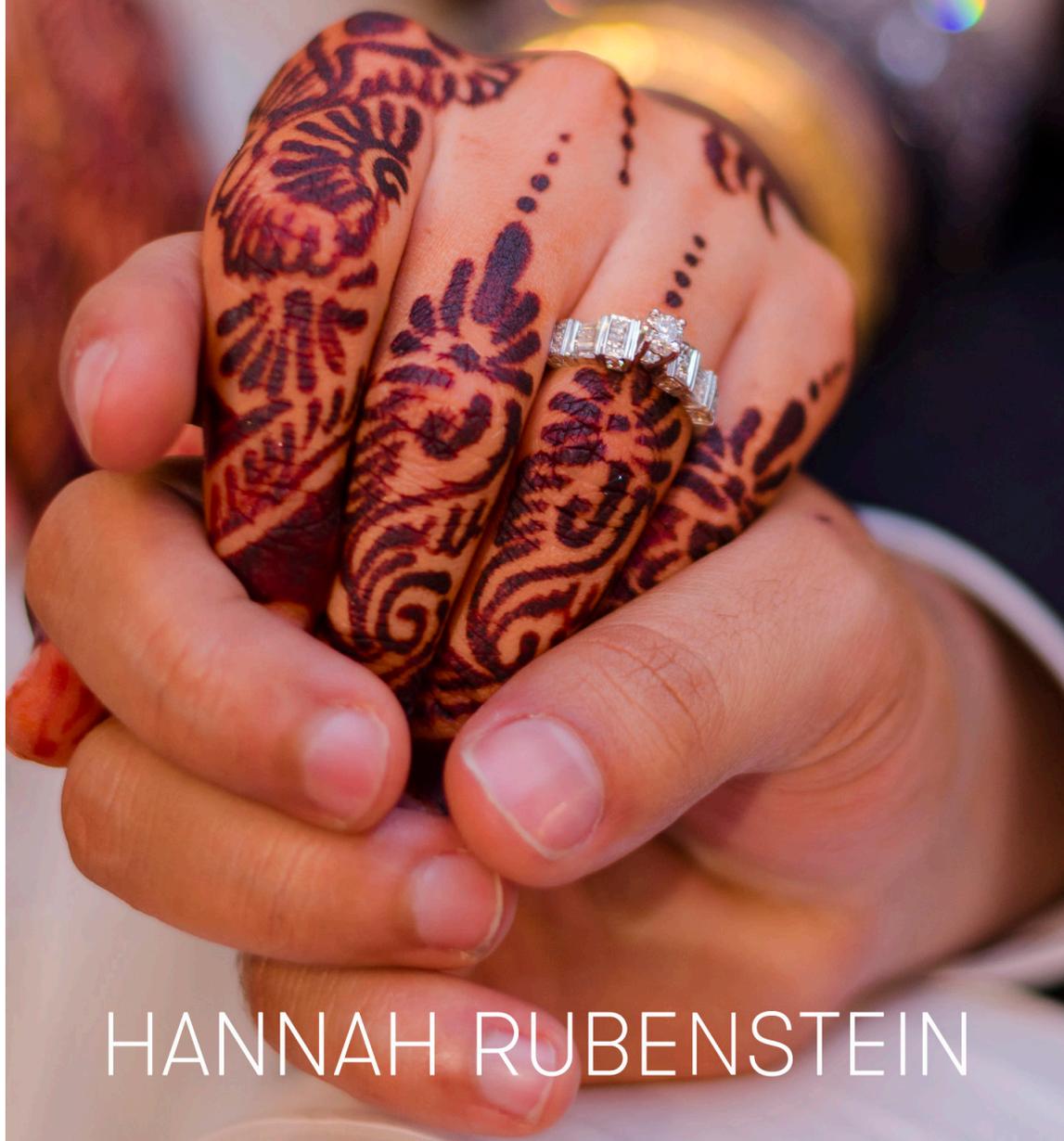


WEDLOCKED

A STORY OF
FORCED MARRIAGE



HANNAH RUBENSTEIN

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A STORY OF FORCED MARRIAGE

By Hannah Rubenstein

BASED ON A TRUE STORY

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of narrative nonfiction. The events contained within are based on the memory of the protagonist as told to the author. Names and other identifying details have been changed in order to protect the privacy of those involved.

For Rafael, who changed everything

PART ONE

KENYA

ONE

Looking back, what Mayah remembers most about that November morning – the morning that separated the time before from what came after – isn't what one might expect. She doesn't remember tiptoeing down the carpeted hallway, hoping that she would be able to hear the sound of approaching footsteps over the staccato pounding of her heart. She doesn't remember sprinting across the gravel driveway and slipping through the gate before the security guards noticed her, or climbing into the backseat of the idling car, flushed and breathless. What Mayah remembers about that morning are snapshots: the way the light spilled over the windowsill in the dining room, staining the rug golden; the aroma of freshly baked *paratha* still lingering in the air from breakfast; the muffled sound of sitar music emanating from the kitchen's tinny radio. These moments are seared into her memory because she knew, once she walked out the front door on that cloudless morning, she could never come home again.

But Mayah didn't hesitate. She had made her decision – marrying Peter was the only way she could break free from the constraints of her family, from their rigid expectations and inexorable judgments, and pursue the life she knew she deserved. Away from her grandmother's rueful gaze and her father's caustic tongue, she might have a chance at real happiness – or at least a chance to discover what her idea of happiness was – on her own terms. Peter had promised to give her the escape she yearned for. Together they could shape a future different than the one her family had constructed for her, with its sharp edges and iron boundaries. For this, Mayah was willing to give up everything.

Sitting in the backseat of the sedan as it wound through Nairobi's potholed streets towards city hall where Peter was waiting, Mayah thought about the night, three weeks

earlier, when a whispered phone conversation ignited the spark that set the plan in motion. After everyone in the house was asleep she had crept down to the women's living room where the ivory-handled rotary phone was kept and dialed Peter's number, careful not to make any noise. The phone rang once, twice, and then she heard his voice, resonant in the darkness.

"Hello?"

"Peter," she whispered, cupping her palm around the receiver. "Hi, it's me—"

"Mayah!" He exclaimed, surprised. "Where have you been? I've been worried about you. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay. Don't worry."

"What happened?"

"I don't have time to explain right now," she said, keeping her voice low. "You know my father." Before Peter could reply, she added, "I just wanted to hear your voice. How are you?"

"Oh, Mayah," The words were tinged with frustration. "I don't know. I've been thinking about something, but you might think I'm completely crazy." He paused, and she could hear him exhale slowly. "It's just that – I love you. I want to give you everything you deserve, and more. I want to fall asleep next to you at night and wake up with you in the morning. I want – I want to marry you." A beat passed. "Will you marry me?"

In the moonlit darkness Mayah felt weightless. Cradling the phone against her ear, she felt her body sway slightly and reached out to steady herself. A sudden dizziness

overtook her and she realized she had forgotten to breathe. Inhaling sharply, she heard Peter's voice in her ear. "Mayah? Did you hear me?"

"Yes, I heard you." Her thoughts were murky and unformed, as if she had woken abruptly and was struggling to capture the remnants of a dream. Could this really be happening? Had he actually uttered those words or had she imagined them? How did—

"So, what do you think? Do you think I'm crazy?" He sounded worried. "Because if you don't want to—"

"Yes," she whispered, a smile spreading across her cheeks in the darkness. "Yes, of course, I will marry you." She could hear him breathing on the other end of the phone and closed her eyes, wishing she could reach out and touch his skin, feel his breath against her neck.

"Little bird," he said, his voice filled with joy and relief, "I promise that I will do all I can in this world to give you anything and everything you have ever dreamed of. You have made me the happiest man on earth!"

Shifting the receiver to her other ear, Mayah looked through the window to where the moon painted silver brushstrokes on the grass. *I am going to marry Peter*, she thought, dipping her toes into the sound of the words. *Peter will be my husband*. A silly image of embossed stationary drifted through her mind: *Mr. and Mrs. Udayar. The Udayars*.

In the silence, a sudden creak of floorboards brought Mayah back to reality. She covered the telephone's mouthpiece with her palm and stood motionless, straining to hear sounds of movement in the corridor. Across the hall an ancient grandfather clock chimed

midnight, melodic bells echoing through the dark house. If she was caught using the phone without permission, late at night—

“Peter,” she whispered, her voice urgent, “How do we do this?”

“Well...” She could picture him pacing back and forth as he did when mulling over a problem. “I think the best thing to do would be for me and my father to set up a meeting with you and your parents. We could invite everyone over for tea and get to know each other, formally. Then, we’d break the news – ‘your daughter and I love each other very much, Mr. Kundi,’ I’d say. ‘With your permission, I would like to make her my wife.’ And that would be that.”

Looking back, Mayah would come to realize that this one moment encapsulated the vast chasm that separated her world from Peter’s. The very notion of sitting together in his family’s house – her mother quaintly sipping tea and her father nibbling on a biscuit as they calmly discussed their daughter’s nuptial plans – would have been amusing if it weren’t so ludicrous. She knew Peter meant well with his straightforward appeal, but the scenario was simply unimaginable.

It wasn’t that Mayah’s parents disliked Peter – in fact, they didn’t even know he existed – but when it came to marriage in the Kundi family there were certain rules that had to be followed. For one, potential suitors must be of Sikh faith; Peter was Christian. Of equal importance was the suitor’s background – his family must hail from the northern Indian region of Punjab like the Kundis; Peter’s family was Sri Lankan. Third, the would-be husband must have been born into the same caste as his future wife – the Kundis were members of the Ramgarhia, or carpenter/blacksmith, caste; as a Tamil from Sri Lanka Peter didn’t belong to any traditional caste system. There were other, unspoken

requirements as well – it was expected that potential suitors possess desirable physical characteristics, light skin complexion being of particular importance. With his dark, cocoa-colored skin, Peter didn't conform to this requirement either. No, Mayah knew instinctively that her parents would never accept Peter's proposal.

Over the past several months Mayah's parents had been conducting interviews with families of potential suitors, hoping to find a match they deemed suitable for their daughter. Now that she had completed her secondary school education, it was the natural order in the Kundi household that Mayah should marry and assume her essential duties as a wife, and, not long after, as a mother. Once her parents selected a suitor – a decision that would be made without consulting their daughter – Mayah was expected to accept the verdict unconditionally.

No Kundi daughter had ever married outside of the Sikh Punjabi community, and Mayah understood, without question, that if she wanted to marry Peter she would have to go it alone.

But on that moonlit night, as the brass clock pendulum swung past the witching hour, there was no time to explain all this to Peter.

"Believe me," she whispered earnestly, "that won't work. You don't understand – my parents will never let me marry you, no matter what we say. The only way we can be together is if we do it on our own. They can't know."

Peter was silent for a moment, considering this. "Okay," he said. "But once we're married your family won't have any choice but to accept it. You'll be my wife, legally. They'll come around. Don't worry – you'll see."

Mayah tried to embrace his easy optimism, but she knew better. Although she couldn't foresee what specific consequences awaited her choice to marry outside of her community and without her family's blessing, she was certain they would be dire. Would they retaliate once they discovered her transgression? She was prepared to accept estrangement and disownment – but would that be enough? Her actions would tarnish her family's reputation and bring dishonor to its name. Mayah understood all this, but she had no choice. This was her one chance to escape.

“You're probably right. Once we're married, everything will be different.”

Sitting in the car watching motorbikes and pedestrians weave in and out of the city's bustling morning traffic, Mayah thought about the rest of that night's conversation – the whispered endearments, Peter's impassioned assurances that everything would work out, her unspoken skepticism. By the time the clock struck one they had concocted a plan: in three weeks' time, once Peter had acquired the marriage license, Mayah would sneak out of her house carrying only a few valuables and clothing she could fit into a small purse to where his sister would be waiting to drive her to city hall. There they would be married and begin the rest of their lives together as husband and wife.

It sounded so simple.

Mayah feared that her decision to elope with Peter would anger her parents. What she didn't imagine were lengths they would go to in order to ensure that she marry the “right” man. She knew that her family expected to dictate her choice of spouse, but the implications of this decision eluded her. What Mayah didn't understand at the time was that she was being subjected to a form of abuse called forced marriage.

Forced marriage affects millions of girls and women from every corner of the globe, from the savannas of Sub-Saharan Africa to the monsoon-soaked mountains of South Asia. They are daughters of farmers and bankers, doctors and taxi drivers. They speak many languages and practice many religions. There is no “average” victim – she is tall, short, rich, poor, educated, illiterate, devout, agnostic, young, old, beautiful, and homely; she lives in a flat in northern England and a tenement in southern Bangladesh; she writes in Farsi and dreams in French. These women share only one trait in common: they are wives who were forced to marry against their will.

The reasons for the marriages are as diverse as the women themselves: some were borne of poverty and desperation; some were brokered to pay back a debt or secure a business deal. Some husbands were selected for their social status, others for their ability to obtain a visa. But the consequences of these unions are all too often the same: physical and sexual abuse, debilitating health, mental illness, social isolation, and curtailed education, to name just a few.

In recent years, thanks in large part to legislative efforts in the United Kingdom, the issue of forced marriage has been tiptoeing out of the shadows of domestic life and into the spotlight of public discourse. Many women who had been rendered silent, threatened by familial and community pressure to accept their fates without protest, have been stepping forward to speak out about the injustice of a practice whose scope and severity is only just beginning to be understood. The questions that swirl around the convoluted issue – what is forced marriage? How is it different from arranged marriage? Why does it occur? What, if anything, can be done? – are multifaceted and exist in a complex space at the intersection of cultural traditions and human rights, gender roles and

globalization. Up to this point the discussion of forced marriage has been under the purview of social anthropologists, activists, and legislators. Although it affects innumerable women each year, most people don't know what exactly forced marriage is, or that it is occurring every day in their own communities. In order to protect victims and prosecute perpetrators there needs to be a universal understanding of what the practice entails.

So what, exactly, is a forced marriage?

At its core the question of whether a marriage is forced hinges on the wills of those involved in the union – did both spouses enter into the marriage voluntarily or not? The British government, which has been instrumental in advancing legislation to combat the practice, defines a forced marriage as “a marriage conducted without the valid consent of one or both parties where duress is a factor.”ⁱ The concept of duress is broadly defined as encompassing physical, psychological, financial, sexual and emotional pressures.ⁱⁱ All child marriages – that is, marriages involving one or both spouses under the age of 18 – are considered to be forced marriages because minors, who as a rule lack “the maturity and capacity to act,”ⁱⁱⁱ are unable to give informed consent to the union.

Going even further in scope, a 2005 Council of Europe study defined forced marriage as “an umbrella term covering marriage as slavery, arranged marriage, traditional marriage, marriage for reasons of custom, expediency or perceived respectability, child marriage, early marriage, fictitious, bogus or sham marriage, marriage of convenience, unconsummated marriage, putative marriage, marriage to acquire nationality and undesirable marriage – in all of which the concept of consent to marriage is at issue.”^{iv} This shouldn't be taken to mean that all traditional or

unconsummated marriages are considered forced, but that the essential factor that determines whether a marriage is forced is a question of consent – did both parties enter into the union freely, or was coercion involved?

Inayah's case, the pressure exerted upon her to marry an "appropriate" suitor, chosen by her family without her consent, constitutes an offense of forced marriage – and her experience is not merely an exception to the rule. But in many instances determining whether duress is a factor in a marriage agreement can be quite complicated. For example: a woman agrees to marry a man because she knows that her parents would be very disappointed if she rejected the match; a woman who would be looked down upon if she married a man from a lower caste weds a peer in order to retain social standing; a gay man marries a woman because his family would be ostracized if he publicly acknowledged his sexual orientation. At what point do accepted social expectations, familial pressures, and community norms become "coercive"? In many cases the line between consent and coercion can be blurry.

In terms of consent versus coercion, there is an important distinction to be made between a forced marriage and an arranged marriage. Arranged marriages, which account for 60 percent of all marriages worldwide^v, are most commonly practiced in Indian, Southeast Asian, and African societies. In an arranged marriage the families of the bride and groom take prominent roles in orchestrating the union, including the choice of potential spouse. The decision to accept the arrangement in an arranged marriage lies with both prospective spouses – if either party rejects the proposed match the marriage does not occur. In direct contrast to forced marriage, agency lies in the hands of the bride and groom, who are free to accept or reject the match without consequence. Inayah didn't

have this choice; at the time of her elopement, her parents were interviewing potential suitors to select a match they deemed appropriate. When they settled on one, their decision would be final – regardless of whether their daughter agreed.

So Mayah undertook the only escape route available to her: she fled, away from the uncompromising edicts of her parents and into the arms of Peter, hoping to erase her fate before it was written.

Nairobi's city hall is not an elegant building. Situated between the office of the president and a congested intersection in the city's central business district, the utilitarian structure is a relic of Kenya's post-colonial era when dozens of drab government offices were rapidly constructed in an effort to embody the newly independent country's motto: "*harambee*," or "let's work together." Inside the building, a labyrinth of identical corridors confronts disoriented visitors, who can often be found walking in circles with dazed expressions, searching for the elusive bureaucratic office that might be able to assist them. More often than not they leave the building with vague instructions, a handful of paperwork to fill out, and an empty wallet.

Behind one of these doors, somewhere in the maze, is the Registrar of Marriages. Furbished with crimson wall-to-wall carpet and bouquets of plastic flowers, the room is more funereal than romantic – but for couples looking for a fast, relatively inexpensive wedding, there's no better option. After providing proof of identification, filling out an assortment of paperwork, and paying the requisite fees, all that's left to do is exchange rings and "I do's."

When Mayah walked into the registrar's office Peter was already there, waiting for her. He rose from a plastic folding chair and walked towards her, lips breaking into a wide smile.

"Hey," he greeted her and leaned forward to kiss her cheek. "You look beautiful. Are you ready to do this?"

For a moment Mayah was taken aback by how dapper Peter looked in his crisp black suit and starched shirt. Most of their dates, if one could call them that, had taken place out of sight at friends' houses or aimless car rides where there were no prying eyes that would report their unsanctioned rendezvous to disapproving parents. They had never been out to dinner in a restaurant together or even to watch a movie in the theater. This was the first time Mayah had seen Peter dressed formally – and he was dashing.

As soon as this thought entered her mind, another less pleasant realization dawned on her: she must look dreadful. She had hardly slept the night before, tossing and turning with the knowledge that it was her last night in the only home she had ever known. In the morning she had been so preoccupied with slipping away unnoticed that she hardly considered her appearance. She couldn't have worn anything resembling a wedding gown – that would have sounded alarm bells if anyone had seen her – but maybe there was something she could do to rectify the situation. It was her wedding day after all.

"Yes. Give me one minute," she told Peter. Mayah pulled a cosmetic compact out of her purse and quickly inspected herself in the mirror, tucking a few strands of windblown hair behind her ears. She snapped the compact shut and regarded her polo shirt, faded jeans, and sandals in the reflection of a filing cabinet. Glancing around the room, she had a sudden inspiration and walked over to Peter's younger sister, Sarah, who

had helped the two of them plan the elopement and was present as a legal witness to the union.

“Sarah, would you mind if I borrowed your scarf?” Without hesitation Sarah unwound the deep purple fabric from around her neck and handed it to Mayah. Mayah thanked her and wrapped the scarf around her shoulders. She adjusted the hem of her shirt, briskly ran her fingers through her hair, and took a deep breath.

“Okay. I’m ready.” She strode over to where Peter was waiting, took his hand in hers, and turned to face the registrar.

Fifteen minutes later they were husband and wife.

As she left the dreary office on that November morning, Mayah allowed herself to hope for one fleeting moment – irrationally, desperately, dangerously – that maybe Peter was right. Maybe, now that she was legally married, her parents would have no choice but to accept her new husband as a member of the Kundi family. The transition wouldn’t be easy, of course – there would be tears and harsh words and undoubtedly they would feel betrayed by her actions – but perhaps these obstacles could be overcome. Once they got to know Peter, once they came to realize what a caring and supportive person he was, her parents would have to welcome him as their lawful son-in-law. This could be a love story with a happy ending. It was possible, wasn’t it?

In her wedding photo Mayah is radiant. Standing proudly beside her newlywed husband, beaming into the camera, she exudes an elation that is almost tangible. In this captured moment, with her eyes sparkling and her lips barely restraining a bubble of laughter, she looks every bit the blushing bride. What isn’t reflected in the photograph –

the only image ever taken of her and Peter together – is any premonition of how ephemeral her joy would be.

Mayah's story doesn't end happily ever after. Although she didn't know it at the time, when she walked out of the dark maze of city hall and into the bright morning sunshine, her husband's ringed finger firmly intertwined with her own, her ordeal had only just begun.

The Kundis' decision to dictate their daughter's choice of spouse – and the lengths they would go to in order to ensure their wishes were fulfilled – put Mayah in the company of women around the world who have been victims of forced marriage. Although exact statistics are difficult to come by, the question remains an important one: how many people worldwide are affected by forced marriage?

To get an idea of how prevalent the practice is, try this: picture a small rural village in South Asia. Monsoon season has just ended and the red clay roads are soft, carved into waves by bicycle tires and cattle hooves. To the east, green oceans of rice stalks rise out of paddies; to the west, merawan trees blanket the hillside. In the center of the village there is a small secondary school – one rectangular room with bamboo walls and a roof of corrugated steel. There is no electricity, but light streams in through the slits between bamboo stalks and spills over open doorways.

Inside this school twenty girls between the ages of twelve and eighteen hunch over lopsided desks, scribbling equations in the Monday afternoon sun. Most are the daughters of farmers and fishermen, but their dreams reach outside the confines of the

village, to lecture halls of universities, linoleum-floored hospital wings, and towering city skyscrapers.

On Tuesday two sisters, fifteen-year-old Anh and her thirteen-year-old sister Huong, fail to show up for school. On Wednesday, in addition to Anh and Huong, two sixteen-year-olds and a thirteen-year-old are missing. On Thursday the brightest student, seventeen-year-old Giang, is also absent. And on Friday two fourteen-year-old cousins and the youngest student, twelve-year-old Mai, have disappeared. In one week the class of twenty girls has shrunk to a meager ten; half of the desks stand empty.

This is how many girls will be forced to marry before the age of eighteen in a typical South Asian village: 48 percent, or nearly one out of two.^{vi}

Statistics on the rates of forced marriage vary considerably from region to region – while South Asia’s numbers are staggering, with more than 24 million girls forced into marriage before their eighteenth birthdays,^{vii} it isn’t the most extreme case. In Mozambique, 56 percent of women between the ages of 20 and 24 are married before the age of eighteen; in Chad, the percentage is 68. And in Niger, which has the highest incidence of child marriage in the world, 75 percent of all married women, or three out of every four, is a child bride.^{viii}

According to the United Nations Population Fund, there are 67 million women worldwide who were married before the age of eighteen.^{ix} By the year 2021, 15.1 million girls will be forced to marry every single year – that’s 1,250,000 per month, or one girl every two seconds.

These numbers are deplorable – but in fact they are only a fraction of a much bigger whole, the dimensions of which are still unknown.

The reason why it's so difficult to ascertain how many people are forced into marriage each year – and the reason why the above example takes place in a school – is simple: for most of the world, no data exists on the prevalence of forced marriage in its entirety; the only statistics available pertain to child marriage. As previously mentioned, all child marriages are considered to be forced marriages since individuals under the age of eighteen are not considered to have full power of consent. What this means is that the data we have is merely a snapshot of a much larger picture as it includes only forced marriages that involve underage victims. Forty-eight percent of girls in South Asia are forced into marriage before their eighteenth birthdays – how many more women are forced to marry at nineteen? Twenty? The rest of their lives?

The most comprehensive data on rates of forced marriage as a whole – that includes both child marriage and forced marriage among adults – comes from the UK, where an official Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) has been instituted to combat the practice both in the UK and abroad. As part of its mission the FMU has set up a public helpline that provides information and support to victims of forced marriage and to practitioners working on forced marriage cases. The most recent data shows that, during 2015, the FMU gave advice or support related to a possible forced marriage in 1,220 cases.^x When combined with data collected from other local and national organizations working in the UK, it is estimated that between 5,000 and 8,000 cases of forced marriage are reported each year in England.^{xi} This estimate includes cases that have been made known to authorities; it doesn't take into consideration a “potentially large number of victims” who have not engaged with any of the reporting agencies.

The data on forced marriage in other Western countries is even murkier. In the United States the legal defense organization The Tahirih Justice Center conducted the first national survey on forced marriage in 2011. The study found that in two years 3,000 known and suspected cases of forced marriage had been reported to authorities.^{xii} The authors of the study are quick to point out that, like the data collected in the UK, these statistics are most likely “the tip of the iceberg” in terms of real numbers and that thousands of people living in the US may be subject to forced marriage each year. In Canada no official data on forced marriage exists but activists estimate that hundreds, and possibly thousands, of Canadians have been victims of the practice.^{xiii}

Thinking about the institution of forced marriage in this way, as innumerable faceless, nameless individuals scattered across the globe, can make the issue difficult to comprehend in real, concrete terms. A statistic, be it twenty or twenty thousand, is merely a shadow of what it represents – a collection of individuals, each with her own dreams for the future and scars from the past, who laughs and whispers and sings, who hopes and prays and worries and daydreams.

Who are these women – and in some cases men – who are forced to marry against their will? Who lives behind the faceless numbers?

As mentioned earlier, there is no “average” victim of forced marriage. Mayah is a Kenyan Sikh, who grew up surrounded by housekeepers and security guards in an upscale Nairobi neighborhood. Humayra is a Bangladeshi Muslim who practices medicine in a London hospital.^{xiv} Akech was born in South Sudan and was sold to her husband for the price of 75 cows.^{xv} Sameem was raised in an orphanage and sent to

Pakistan to marry at the age of 14.^{xvi} Mereso, a Maasai from Tanzania, is 29 years old and a mother to five children.^{xvii} All of these women are decimal points on a statistic.

What statistics can provide, though, is a window onto general demographic trends that are important to activists and practitioners working to combat forced marriage. Although the total number of reported cases is extremely small in comparison to the prevalence of forced marriage worldwide, the data collected by the FMU provides the clearest picture of these demographic trends as they pertain to individuals living in the UK. Of the 1,220 cases reported to the FMU in 2015, 27 percent involved victims below eighteen years of age; more than one third of the cases – 35 percent – were individuals between the ages of 18 and 25. Previous FMU studies found that the oldest victim in a given year was 71 and the youngest two years old.^{xviii} If we were to map this ratio onto global statistics of child marriage, it is very possible that the total number of individuals living in forced marriages worldwide could be as high as 191 million, or three percent of all humans on earth.

The FMU statistics illustrate that while the majority of forced marriage cases in the UK involve women, men have also been victims of the practice (80 percent and 20 percent of the total, respectively). One hundred and forty-one of the 1,220 cases involved victims with disabilities, and twenty-nine individuals identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). In 2015 the FMU handled cases of forced marriages involving 67 different countries – the highest percentage being Pakistan (44 percent), followed by India (7 percent), Bangladesh (6 percent), and Somalia (3 percent).^{xix}

What this statistical snapshot reveals are the general attributes of a forced marriage victim profile – or, at the very least, an individual living in the UK who is likely

to report a case of forced marriage to the authorities: she is most likely 25 years old or younger and of South Asian heritage. But the data also acknowledges another reality – that for every “typical” victim, there are many others who don’t fit the characteristic profile. In the past year an elderly woman and a toddler were at risk of forced marriage; nearly one hundred and fifty individuals with varying levels of disability were targeted; a dozen LGBT youth – both men and women – filed reports. What binds these individuals together isn’t cultural heritage or birthplace, religion or age or language: it’s the fact that one of their most basic rights – the right to decide when and whom to marry – has been stolen from them.

Mayah is just one of these nameless, faceless victims. She fits the typical demographic profile in some ways and differs in others. But what is most important about her isn’t whether she grew up wealthy or poor, or worships in a temple or synagogue or mosque. What separates her from the multitude of women forced into marriage each year is just one simple gift: her voice.

This is her story.

ENDNOTES

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