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British Muslim lawyers tackle forced marriage 'crisis'



AFP/File Photo: Muslim women in London . British Muslim lawyers said Thursday they had decided to take...

by Robin Millard

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LONDON (AFP) - British Muslim lawyers said Thursday they had decided to take matters into their own hands with a radical plan to combat the forced marriage "crisis" in their community.

Backed by heavyweight sheikhs and mufits, the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal (MAT) proposed setting up their own system to tackle the widespread culture of forced marriages between British Muslims and spouses from South Asia.

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Sheikh Faiz Siddiqi, a barrister and a leading community figure, said the resentment and alienation created by forced marriages drove young British Muslims towards extremism.

Combating extremism has dominated the British political agenda since the 2005 London suicide bombings, perpetrated by British Islamists.

The MAT claims that more than 70 percent of marriages in the Muslim community involving a foreign spouse have some element of coercion or force, while the incidences are minimal between British Muslims.

Marriages without consent, or people refusing them, have led to suicides and honour killings in Britain, shocking a nation generally deemed to have successfully absorbed immigrant communities and practices.

The government has taken steps to tackle the forced marriage culture and has been looking for credible grass-roots partners.

The MAT now wants to start sorting out the problem "in-house."

Going through the British courts to resolve a forced marriage leaves the victim "ostracised by the community" Siddiqi said, launching the proposal in London.

Forced marriages leave young Muslims feeling frustrated by the British system and their communities, he explained, saying it was "little wonder" some went off the rails.

"A lot of people who are steering towards extremism are those who have been rejected by the mainstream Muslim society or the mainstream establishment," Siddiqi told AFP.

"If we can fill those vacuums, we will be moving towards pre-empting those people that steer towards extremism."

Forced marriage led to domestic violence, therefore abusive and out of control, he said. On moving from there into extremism, he added, it was "not unbelievable that that would happen."

Given the incidence of forced marriages, the MAT is consulting the Muslim community on a voluntary system whereby a British Muslim seeking to bring a foreign spouse into the country would provide private testimony before their clerics and professional Muslim judges.

If they are satisfied that the marriage was not forced, the MAT would provide a written statement which the Briton could use to support the foreign spouse's application to settle in Britain.

Lacking such a declaration, immigration officers would be able to draw their own inferences as to the nature of the marriage.

The process would be funded by donations from the Muslim community and a fee of about 150 pounds (290 dollars, 190 euros) from the citizen seeking MAT approval.

No reasons would be given for the MAT verdict, to protect the applicant from a backlash, and the group believes it would be acceptable to Muslims as the process is backed by top Islamic scholars.

With a verdict from eminent British Muslims, the question of izzat -- South Asian codes of family honour and shame -- would then fall on the families pushing people into forced marriage, rather than the youths themselves.

Britain's Forced Marriage Unit receives around 5,000 calls and deals with about 300 cases per year, but fears this is the tip of the iceberg, a view shared by the MAT.

The FMU said 65 percent of its cases involved Pakistani nationals and 25 percent involved Bangladeshi nationals.

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