



Spotlight #4: Episode 1

Podcast transcript

Coercion & Forced Marriage: why considering gender matters

Dr. Sundari Anitha

Introduction:

Spotlights is a series of online events and publications focusing on a particular group of victim/survivors who are often hidden from services. As part of SafeLives Spotlight on 'honour' – based violence and forced marriage, this week my colleague Deidre went to London to meet Dr Sundari Anitha, a reader in Criminology at the University of Lincoln. Sundari explains why gender, sexual orientation and disability, all must be considered for practitioners to fully understand and respond to the risks associated with forced marriage. We hope you find this podcast as enlightening as we have.

***D: Deidre**

***A: Anitha**

D: Hello

A: Hiya

D: Thanks for meeting with me today. Can you start off by telling me who you are and a bit about yourself.

A: Ok, my name is Sundari Anitha, and I'm a Reader in Criminology at the University of Lincoln. And I've been researching gender based violence, particularly violence against women and girls for about 15 years now. And I've been in the sector for close to 20 years. Where I first started as a volunteer at a refuge and now I'm a trustee for a refuge for South Asian Women. I also spent a brief period working in a refuge, and I also managed a Women's Aid refuge several years back.

D: Great, and I know that you have been doing research around forced marriage and kind of intersectional with forced marriage, kind of looking at gender, ethnicity, disability and things like that. Considering all that you know around that, who is at risk of forced marriage?

A: I would say that the biggest risk factor is gender and it's also clear from evidence that we have that forced marriage is prevalent in particular communities. So those two things come together-gender and particular ethnicities to create the risk of forced marriage. What that does mean, plus there are other factors- for example issues around sexuality, disability, which create additional vulnerabilities for particular groups of people. And so it's about recognising

how all of these come together to create a matrix of disadvantage within which this particular form of violence takes place.

D: So if you're a woman, you're from a particular community, but maybe have a particular sexual orientation, things like that, the risks increase of forced marriage?

A: I would say definitely. So if you're a lesbian woman from a particular community where that sexuality is frowned upon, it's seen as deviant, I would say there are greater risks of forced marriage for you, or greater difficulties in being accepted for your sexuality within your community. And one thing to think about is that coercion in marriage is something that is gendered to some degree for women from various communities, where they experience disadvantage. So if you think of, say for example, in Northern Ireland, or in particular contexts where abortion is very difficult to obtain, pregnancy can create very coercive contexts in which if the person-if boyfriend, the father of the unborn child, is offering to marry you and abortion is not an option-that creates a very coercive context in which saying no to a marriage may not be one of the choices that is in front of you.

We have the same in America. In certain states in America you can get married at 15 with the consent of a judge, if you're pregnant and it's your boyfriend that is proposing to marry you. So the state steps in and says we will allow you to get married if your parents are putting that pressure on you, at 15 what chance do you have of making a choice about marriage? So poverty, pregnancy there are a whole range of contexts in which women find their contexts are coercive and therefore their choices are made in the context of that coercion.

D: So it's about choices or options. Because I think that when people stereotypically think about forced marriage, it's their parents or their family members saying you must marry this individual or the consequences are x, y or z, but in other circumstances it could be, I can't have this abortion, if I have this baby I have to be married, I don't really have another choice but to do this. So, it's less obvious.

A: Yeah, and I think that's the starting point. Coercion is constructed in a particular context and so is consent and we need to problematize that. And I think that we have come a very long way about recognising that about other forms of violence against women. So for example about rape, and for a long time we thought it was straightforward in terms of people recognising what happened to them as sexual coercion or rape. And Liz Kelly's research, a long time back in 88' what she found was that when she'd talk to women they would tell her that what they thought was consensual relationships, it's only when they left the relationships, only when they looked back and could reflect on it that they began to think about whether I ever really had a chance to say no. "I was married to this guy...or he was my boyfriend, there was never space in that relationship for me to say no I don't want to have sex. Does it mean that every time I had sex I was coerced? So if there is no space to say no, that possibility doesn't exist because of the nature of that relationship, then you have to think about at what point were you ever free? But for the person who is experiencing that, the onerous is on them to say it's their word. So they look back and say, actually that was always coercion.

for practitioners, we always rely on the woman's word. So when she says this is coercion, we listen to her. And that's why it's very important for practitioners to listen to a person and to empower them to reflect back on their experience. It's that journey of empowerment that enables them to think back and wonder, was I ever free. What were the forms of coercion that I experienced? And looking at it from that angle today I might see it differently, I might see my experience differently, what seemed to be the reality then.

D: So they could come to you thinking, but I said yes to this marriage, I didn't put up a fight, I didn't outwardly say no, but when they think about their experience and their

circumstances and the pressures on them, they might never have had the option to even say no. And the same can happen when you're in a marriage and in a relationship and someone has sex with you, you might never have been in a position to say no.

A: And we are moving towards the notion of active consent aren't we, in other aspects of violence against women. So in campus cultures it's not about 'no means no' it's about 'yes means yes', we are looking for active consent. And so it's about bringing those connections together and not seeing what's happening in marriages and forced marriages as something that's unique because these debates about consent and coercion have been played out-we've been talking about them in many different contexts of violence against women. It's about making those connections and thinking there are these issues there as well.

D: So we're talking a lot about women, and how women are more at risk of forced marriage than men, and a lot of it has to do with their position in society-that they don't often have other options or choices-they are forced, there is violence. What about men? When are they at risk of forced marriage?

A: In the context of forced marriage, coercion isn't just physical, we know that it can be emotional coercion we know that it can be created by contexts. And we also know from statistics from the foreign and commonwealth office, that of all of the people in 2015, about 80% of the people who came to them for help were women, and around 20%, slightly less, might have been 17% something around that were men. So we know that forced marriage affects men as well, but the majority of victims are women.

In the context of the men that it affects we also know that, from very little research there isn't much about this, that the forms of coercive experiences are more likely to be emotional pressures rather than physical coercion, rather than abduction and you are dragged, which is not to say that coercion in those contexts aren't coercive, because we are recognising that emotional pressure can have a very clear coercive force, but the forms are different.

I think, also from some of my recent research, I have also increasingly come to believe that not only is the prevalence rates different, not only are the forms of coercion different, I think that what is very very significant is the fact that the consequences of forced marriage are very different, particularly for men and women.

So for example, and again this is linked to gender, other issues come in as well, such as issues of sexuality. So I'll give you an example. Where a man might be gay and his family don't except his sexuality, they see it as deviant, they might put on huge amounts of pressure, firstly not to acknowledge his sexuality, or a relationship he might be having with another man, and so that's the context in which he might be facing pressure to get married to an acceptable woman from one's own community. And that is a very big pressure for him. But what happens following that marriage is that he might be able to negotiate a double life. A situation where his family says, once you marry someone of our choice, a woman, perhaps give us a grandchild, other things that they have negotiated in life.

D: So he has to keep up the facade.

A: Yes, whereas for the woman, in terms of her sexuality, or that's not an issue, but once you get married that marriage has to be lived out. So the expectation is you will have sex, you will have children, this will be your family, this will be your primary family and all other options are forever closed to you now. And that creates a continuing context of abuse and violence, not just from the partner, you know sexual violence in terms of forced sex, rape, pregnancy, but from other extended members of the family.

I like to think of this using the concept of coercive control. And if you think about what does domestic violence do to you, what does coercion do to you. And Liz Kelly talks about,

following from Evan Starke's work on coercive control, talks about how it closes up the space for action that you have. So if you are in a relationship where you are experiencing coercion, the space you have to express yourself, your individuality, your identity, the space to express your rights your freedom shrinks. And that's how coercion works. And if you think of it in those terms for a woman who has experienced forced marriage, her space shrinks. And there is all of those options that she might have had in terms of living her life in the way she might have liked to-her identity, expressing her sexuality-all of those spaces close for her. And what I've found in my research is that where it is because of their sexuality, and men have been coerced into the marriage. Following the marriage, which is no doubt coercive, those spaces are opened out for them. So they can carry on this other relationship so long as the community believes that they are married, they have access to dowry, they have access to her domestic labour, they have access to sex with her if they want, none if they don't want to –it's their decision what happens-if he wants children she is expected to get pregnant, if they don't want to have children then she is expected to undergo abortions. So in many ways those spaces that were once closed because of their sexuality seem to have opened out in different ways.

D: So it's like they've both come into that marriage equally coerced and controlled into doing that, with no right to choose another life. Yet for her, she is more entrapped into the situation and there are more abusive outcomes. Whereas for him, it might just give him a nice opportunity to then...

A: Which is not to negate that he can't still not live his life. He still has to live a life of deception. But what it means is that on the basis of his sexuality he is in a position of disadvantage, he is facing a lack of privilege because of his sexuality-but gender trumps, on account of his gender there are privileges that open up for him, but for her where gender and sexuality come together-they are greater constraints on her marriage than there were before. I think it's very important to think about is what position does gender place you in, in a world which is not equal, which is very gendered. Otherwise, you miss a lot of that picture.

What it also means for practitioners I think is where there is a man who is presenting to you because of being coerced into a marriage, you also have to ask the question what's happening to the woman in that marriage. Because, chances are, and I would pretty much be certain, that she is also experiencing domestic violence if she been married someone who has been coerced into that marriage. So for practitioners, while they are supporting him, he might want to leave that marriage, they need to be thinking about how do we support her as well. She has been brought to this country, she agreed to a marriage expecting a marriage she expects to be an equal a genuine marriage, and then she finds out that all she is here for is domestic servitude, to bear children and to show the community that they have conformed, the family has conformed, to the dominant norms. So what's happened to her then? So the solution of annulity (annulment) may be a solution for him, but where does that leave her?

D: So let's say he does leave the relationship, he does become safe from his family, what's the potential of what happens to her when that marriage ends? What kind of risks are there for her?

A: So she might be sent back, but then she might face, we know from research on women with no recourse to public funds that they may not be accepted by their families for not making the marriage work. Often the expectation from the family is that once we get him marriage he might be cured of his deviant sexuality. So the onus is put on her, through her own sexuality, her allure, to bring him back from his gayness, to be a heterosexual man and therefore, she is often blamed for not through her love, transforming him. So she might be blamed for the failure of that marriage and she may not have a place in her own home. There are other associated issues. She may have had a dowry when she got married and now that dowry is likely to be appropriated by his family-which means she might be deprived of her inheritance. I

can talk about it a bit later, in terms of what dowry means. But there are several consequences for her. If there are children, what happens to them as well? So lots of things to think about for practitioners.

D: So loss of finances, homelessness, immigration issues, potentially being sent back to her home country where she might not have a home, and having to care for the needs of her children as well. And, um, that's a lot.

A: A whole range of issue. So in that case, if she is here then with the legislation around no recourse should be able to capture her experiences, so long as practitioners are able to recognise and name what's happening to her as domestic violence. Because it may be that the perpetrators may have family members, and it may in the context of a coercive marriage of her husband, shouldn't bling practitioners to the fact that what is happening to her is violence as well.

D: So looking at coercion and control

A: Looking at the state of that whole relationship and thinking who are the victims here?

D: And there could be numerous, and there could be numerous perpetrators as well.

A: And some people could be both perpetrator and victim.

D: So, in the domestic abuse field there has been a lot of, I think degendering, recognising that men experience domestic abuse as well as women, and to some extent making it more of a gender neutral territory. What's the consequences of doing that, especially when it comes to forced marriage?

A: So, I've given this a lot of thought and while we need to recognise that there are a small minority of those who experience forced marriage that are men, we really need to be thinking about what are the forms of the violence that takes place, what are the manifestations of forced marriage, what is the nature of forced marriage for men-what are the consequences, what is the impact of forced marriage for men and women-and what is the impact that is different in a gendered word. And we don't notice this, when we aren't aware of this as practitioners, we misrecognise what's happening, we don't spot abuse that is going on and we cannot tailor our responses appropriately. And that is the biggest risk I think. And the same issue comes up again when you look at disability.

A: In a context where we see a movement towards degendering of domestic violence-saying that this happens to men and women-and not that it happens equally or happens in the same way-it happens to the same effect. And I would say that as practitioners we need to be extremely cautious about this and I think most practitioners know because they are out there in the field, and what they see is a very gendered problem. But they are getting these messages saying we need to make it degendered.

So one example of thinking about how gender makes a big difference-if you look at forced marriage and issues around disability. So in 2015 the Forced Marriage Unit, at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, gave advice to just over 1,200 people who were at risk of forced marriage-80% were women and 20% were men. Now when we looked at people who had a disability-physical or learning disability-these were 141 cases, in these cases 62% of those presenting to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office were men and only 38% were women. Now this is something that across all forms of domestic violence, all gender based violence, so if you look at sexual violence and at domestic violence, any other form of violence, you will see that the vast majority of victims are women and this seems to be the only statistic I've come across where the majority of victims are men

D: So where disability comes into the mix, men are at an increased risk over women?

A: And you need to think about why this is happening. It's because of the purpose of marriage in cases where the person is disabled and, in I suspect, I haven't done research into this, it seems from my other research that behind that forced marriage is the intention of the family is to secure a carer for someone with a disability. And therefore, I strongly believe that is what explains that is why for the majority of disabled people experiencing forced marriage who have disabilities are men because the families are seeking to get them married to somebody who will then function of their carer So you have to think about what is going on in terms of their lack of consent, if they don't have the capacity to consent, but you also have to think about what is happening to that woman. She might be expecting to be married in an equal relationship, in a full relationship, and she might find that the only reason hat she has been brought here is for domestic servitude.

A: So I recently completed research looking at people who have left a situation of violence through accessing a refuge in the UK. And one of the women that I spoke to came from a very poor family in India and she had a family from the UK came to India and made contact with her and she says that they came to her house, they saw her and within half of an hour they said they want our son to marry your daughter and this was very unusual, firstly because they were very poor and unable to give a dowry and also because a marriage doesn't get fixed in such a short span of time. But also her family were delighted because of their poverty, because they have several daughters, they expect that this would be a great opportunity for their daughter, whose marriage prospects weren't very good because of poverty. So when she came here only met him for a few minutes and they hadn't exchanged any words and she only later said that they didn't let us speak because he couldn't speak and he had such severe physical disabilities and mental health issues, he didn't know what marriage meant and she said that this was never a marriage because he didn't know what marriage meant. She came here and after severe years she was a full time carer for him, she was expected to do all the work in the house, but in the evening she was also expected to go and work in the local petrol station and all the money she earned was taken by the family. For several years before she was able to leave that marriage. They said you're lucky, we got you out of that gutter, you were in such a poor situation, be grateful you're here. And so her account was one of extreme violence, but the man she married was also a victim from his family in many different ways because of his disability.

So it's about thinking through how all of these different issues come together

D: And how their experiences of violence and abuse can be very different and need to be addressed in a different way and if we make everything gender neutral you can't address their specific risks.

A: And therefore I think that gender has to be at the forefront. We have to think of, how does gender fit in here and if there are other issues, if there is disability we think about is it just gender or is it also about disability, is it also about age? Are there any issues of sexuality? So we need to think about different forms of disadvantage they face and when we start asking those questions we see the forms of violent experiences-there are some commonalities but there are specificities depending on those things.

D: And those things need to be thought about and considered when thinking about risk. So, the advice for a professional is have these things in your mind when considering the risks to that individual

A: And who else might be at risk in that context

D: Ok, thank you. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me, its been very interesting

Conclusion

Thank you for listening. If you'd like to find out more about SafeLives Spotlight on 'honour' – based violence and forced marriage, please go to our website SafeLives.org.uk, where we will be uploading new content every week-each exploring a different aspect of 'honour' –based violence and forced marriage. If you'd like to participate in the discussion, you can join in the live Twitter Q&A conversation on June 8 from 10-11am-just go to #YourChoice.