



## Spotlight #4: Episode 3

### Podcast transcript

Interview with Jasvinder Sanghera CEO and founder of Karma Nirvana

Key:

**I = Interviewer**

JS = Jasvinder Sanghera

s.l. = sounds like

**I: Just to start off, Karma Nirvana is a very well-known and respected organisation but for anybody who isn't sure about what you do on a day-to-day level, can you tell me a bit about what you do?**

JS: So Karma Nirvana is a national charity; we support both men and women who are affected by honour abuse and forced marriages. In terms of the organisation, we are a campaigning organisation, so we have been key in campaigning for specific legislation but also we provide the only national helpline that supports both men and women which *[s.l. preheads 00:00:22]* here at the organisation and it remains a life-line for many people. And as an organisation we are constantly raising awareness amongst professional organisations nationally and ensuring that the issue of honour abuse and forced marriage is dealt with as a safe-guarding issue and part of that means challenging the attitudes that people believe that this is somehow part of one's cultural original tradition and it clearly is not and if we think like that then we're not safe-guarding people affected by this abuse.

**I: Thank you and I know that you founded the organisation over 25 years ago in your front room. What led you to do that?**

JS: The common of honour was founded through my personal experiences of being a potential victim of a forced marriage; I wasn't actually forced into the marriage. I was born in Britain alongside my sisters and I had one brother and I watched the majority of my sisters being taken out of British schools to marry men that they only ever met in photographs and nobody questioned their absences and they would be forced into this marriage and I use the word 'forced' because they were children when it happened to them; there wasn't the ability to consent and also our upbringing meant we were incredibly vulnerable and conditioned to believe that, as women, we were meant to be behave in a certain way and our choices were not our own, even the right to choose who you wanted to marry.

So I was 14 when my mother presented me with a photograph of the man I was promised to from the age of eight and I was the one that no, I'm not marrying this stranger; I was born here, I want to go to school and my mother was very clear that saying no was not an option. So in the end I was taken out of education at the age of 15½ and held as a prisoner in my own home until I agreed to the marriage which I did purely to plan my escape. I left home at the age of 16 and at 16 years old my family gave me the choice – I can come back home and have my family as long as I agree to

conform to the expected level of behaviour of a woman and also marry who they said or, I would have to live a life disowned by my family which means not having any of your family again and as far as they were concerned my mother said you are dead in our eyes. And it is a choice and it was a choice; as a 16 year old you are faced with that choice; many young people are faced with that choice today and I chose the latter and subsequently I've been disowned for 37 years as have my three children and grandchildren now.

So I lived a life in hiding and then I became a campaigner because my sister, Robeena, sadly, who was forced to marriage at the age of 15 and suffered an horrific marriage, domestic abuse; and the people who were meant to protect her that she turned to, be it family or community members, sent her back because it would have been too shameful and dishonourable for her to leave her husband.

So again here's a woman who experiences honour abuse, being told the concept of honour is more important in your decision-making than protecting your life and the life of her son, she had a very young boy as well. Sadly, my sister in the end committed suicide; she set herself on fire and she died in her early twenties and it was that experience and my own that led me to want to set up a charity that gave voice to these experiences back in '93.

**I: Wow and what did setting up the charity look like? How did it begin?**

JS: In 1993 it was for me first time ever I started speaking about my experience and Robeena's. It was in the face of no awareness at all so nobody was talking about this or thinking about that this is happening in Britain at all. So I came across people who looked at me as if I had two heads and people who clearly were saying no, it might be happening in some foreign land but not in Britain, we are a civilised democracy, this cannot be happening in Britain. So the evidence was me; this happened to me, I was born here, I'm a British citizen and my sister.

So it was really difficult because there seemed to be many obstacles, a lot of denial and no support whatsoever from the community where this is happening.

So for the first say four years it was very much about me knocking on any door and then walking through it they listened and if the door closed finding another door and it was police, the women centre, I used to do keep fit classes to try and get women to come and hear what I had to say after the classes. So any opportunity where I could speak, over and above raising my kids and being at uni; just a few things.

**I: So it was about probably even giving them the language around what was happening to you, to even have awareness of what you were experiencing.**

JS: Not at all. There was absolutely no awareness whatsoever in '93, '96; 97 was a time when I first managed to secure some funding from the National Lottery. Then it gave us some resources to do some actual work and then the engagement was very different with regards to the policing section, the voluntary sector but it has taken many years to get people to acknowledge this is an issue for Britain and those early days was very much for me, not just about getting local people to get this in the statutory sector, but also to get Government to listen to it and that was when we had the very first choice by right report in 1999 that led to the forced marriage unit in 2005.

**I: I was going to ask the question of what do you think the tipping point was with regards to recognition in change – was it that? Was it something else?**

JS: I remember setting up the Helpline in 1993 in my front room and in the first four years never having one call to the Helpline and then when I managed to galvanise some

volunteers, they would say well what's the point of having a helpline, nobody's calling it and I would say they will call; the more we go out there and talk about this they will call. And then slowly you had one or two calls to the Helpline a week, if that, but to me that if just me saying they are out there, they don't know we are here.

So as the Helpline started to evolve to a trickle of calls, maybe 10 in a month, the evidence was damning in terms that there are more people like me and so I would just say imagine how many more there are. And then that galvanised the momentum in terms of me using my story, Robeena's story; other stories although I didn't name the individuals, you can use their stories anonymously, it's still powerful, and that led to the choice by a right report that Government did, looking at Britain as a whole, is this an issue for UK citizens and that report clearly highlighted yes, not only is it issue but we've got a problem here in Britain. You saw girls being kidnapped, raped, bounty hunters tracking them down. Everything that I had experienced in terms of my personal experience, professionals were beginning to talk about it and survivors were sharing their stories.

For me I think that was the tipping point because then you had Government attention and also the momentum of more voices, just like mine, who started to share their stories.

**I: That's great. Looking to now, how much do you think we have come? Have we come quite far? Is there still a lot to do? What is good and what still needs to change really?**

JS: From my perspective and we are in our 25<sup>th</sup> year as a charity, this is a journey and albeit in '93 to '97, for me personally it was one on my own I have to say and that's not to negate anybody who was supporting me at that time because their support has been immense in terms of my own sanity, as it were, but the point is where I think we have seen significant changes, there are more people who are taking this on board, like-minded people who are beginning to talk about this, Save Lives is one example. So police forces now who are making this part of their policy and their practice and importantly, the campaign to create a criminal offence in 2014 has made a significant change in terms of a shift in attitudes out there. So people are not only beginning to accept this is happening from a point of, no it isn't, we have shifted to acceptance, we've shifted to seeing a mass increase in reporting, so hundreds to our Helpline, to Government, to police forces, to other organisations and we've shifted to a place where, from my perspective, there are more survivors who are now sharing their stories and their visibility is so important and we encourage that all the time at Karma Nirvana.

Where we are not seeing a shift, I have to say, is in the communities where this is happening. There is a lack of leadership there and also in education and I'm talking about schools across the UK. This is not embedded within a child protection framework; that is going to impact on accountability and impact on children and prevention.

So the Helpline deals with crises. We want to get in there so ideally we don't want to see calls to the Helpline but we are dealing with the tip of the iceberg on the Helpline; we want to prevent this. So where we are not seeing engagement and this is a criticism of Government I have to say, we are not seeing the leadership via the Department of Education, we are not seeing this as part of an Ofsted inspection, we are not seeking Education sit at the table and yet that is where you are going to prevent this.

**I: We are now going to have sex and relationships education at school as mandatory thing, where do you think education awareness about this issue comes in? Do you think it comes under that?**

JS: I think anything to do with healthy relationships is an opportunity to talk about this issue, so healthy relationships is about consent, the right to have a partner and the right to choose who you want to marry is about consent and the whole issue around forced marriage is about consent. So I would urge schools to use any opportunity to put this on the framework. I was at a school this morning and the head teacher is very clear; he said I signed up to teach and to keep kids safe; in fact he is Jonny Mitchell who did Educating Yorkshire Head Teacher and based in Leeds, whose school is going to be used as a beacon to develop this kind of work but it's the common sense leadership of a head teacher who is saying, do you know what, this is a child protection issue, it's a no-brainer. We have to be very clear that it is not part of anybody's culture to abuse anybody and if we are going to give the kid the right to an education, we have got to keep them safe in school and outside of school. What we know about forced marriages is that it prevents our young people from progressing into further education because their lives are mapped out for them, so we have got to get them in school.

So talking about sex in schools, healthy relationships, anything to do with rights, this is an opportunity to talk about honour abuse and forced marriage in terms of the right to choose who you want to marry.

**I: Definitely. As there has been an increase in awareness around forced marriage and honour-based violence, it seems almost inevitable that there will be misconceptions alongside that and misuse of those definitions. Have you seen that happen? Does the good of using those definitions outweigh the bad? I know there is debate around it at the moment.**

JS: I always say to people it is not rocket science; try to make your language as simple as possible; this is a complex issue but at the starting point it is about consent. My three year old grandson knows when I am asking him to do something or if I am forcing him to do something he will feel uncomfortable and he's three. So an arranged marriage is where two individuals or one is saying actually yes I want this, let's have a conversation about this; they have to be 16 or above though. If it is a forced marriage you are being forced, there is some duress and you are feeling uncomfortable, you are questioning it and that duress is the force.

So an arranged marriage is where there is the consent of both parties; a forced marriage is where there is not the consent of one or both parties and that is all people need to get really and not over-complicate it. When people start talking about – but isn't it part of your tradition? Well, it is not part of my culture to be abused or anybody's culture to be abused. I always say cultural acceptance does not mean accepting it is acceptable.

The sad thing is, is whilst we over-complicate it, what is happening is we are not giving the professionals the confidence to deal with it because then they are going to start re-thinking this differently, not as child and public protection and they are going to start thinking oh well is it cultural, do I have to be careful, I do not want offend anybody, I do not want to be called a racist, we have to a bit careful here. So that means in terms of child protection my protection is going to be watered down, not my white counterparts but mine will be watered down and that cannot be right.

**I: I recently did an interview with Dr Gengarli who works for the University of Bristol and she did a report for the HMIC about police responses to survivors of forced marriage and honour-based violence and what she said is what they said, was that the initial response was great but what the police did not understand or**

**do well is a follow up support and they did not know or understand what they needed to do versus what third sector organisations needed to do and what kind of support and advice did they need to provide. I know you've done a lot of training with the police, what has been your experience of them? What is your advice about what the police response needs to be?**

JS: Well Karma Nirvana lobbied and campaigned for a HMIC inspection of all 43 forces and it is interesting because when the Home Secretary, then Theresa May, announced a DV inspection of all 43 forces, I asked her the question whether that inspection would also look at forced marriages and honour-based abuse and she said no. So here is a domestic violence inspection that has not considered this form of abuse, so why are we always the poor relation, the afterthought, the any other business on the agenda item, even if we make that. So we had to lobby for a separate inspection, a specific inspection which is the HMIC inspection.

So we've trained half the forces in Britain now; we have 43 forces and we have trained half and what I know about forces and those that we have trained in the force areas, is they do not know what they do not know. [Unclear 00:16:14] there were schools. As soon as you tell them they go aah I had not thought of that. So it has everything to do with training and awareness.

So everything is there; the statutory guidelines in forced marriage and honour-based abuse has been around 2007; civil law 2007, criminal law 2014; we have a national helpline, we have a Government forced marriage unit. The tool box is vast. Whether our professionals know about it or have been trained is another thing, so when you get that social worker who has your 15 year old kid that does not know about how to respond to this because her organisation has not trained her in the statutory guidelines, she is going to talk to mum and dad. So when that kid is forced into marriage or heaven forbid murdered, is it the social worker's fault who is going to say well actually I did not know what to do in effective responses because I have just dealt with it as any other kid. So whose responsibility is it to ensure that individual is informed and it's the same for police forces. It requires leadership, they need training. I was one of the peer inspectors on the HMIC inspection, I am not going to name the force but I spoke to PCSOs right up to the Chief; about 85 officers in total I engaged with on my inspection and only five knew forced marriage was a criminal offence. That is the state of affairs we are in.

So it has everything to do with awareness and leadership and quite frankly the Government has issued statutory guidelines and have not given any thought to the implementation of them in terms of monitoring them. So it is a toothless exercise in all honesty.

**I: My last question for you is this [s.l. podcast 00:18:04] is for professionals, it is for practitioners, frontline practitioners, what is your one bit of advice for them?**

JS: For practitioners out there I want them to know they are not alone with this. You've got a massive toolbox and Priya will talk about the Helpline. The Helpline not only deals with victim callers, it also deals with professional callers; 42% of the calls to the Helpline are professional callers – police officers, teachers – so it is a resource for them; it is a sounding board to jointly risk assess cases because I know that professionals out there, if it was a subject matter I had not any experience in, I would be floundering with that and need some guidance and advice. The point I'm making is, it is there, you have statutory guidelines, you have civil law, criminal law and you have the support of a national helpline, a Government unit to help those that you think are at risk abroad as well. There is a lot of information out there, so use it and access it; make it part of your business to know where it is, get it on your website, get copies and the thing about it is what is great is all this is free; so it's a no-brainer.

**I: Yes and that is great to know that it is for professionals as well and for them to use it.**

**Thank you very much**