



Photography: Tina Orr-Munro

A matter of honour

Nine months after it was set up, John Dean examines how the country's first police helpline for victims of honour crime is working.

It was a simple question from a detective that led to a project which began as a local idea and has since touched lives across the country.

Cleveland Police's helpline for victims of honour-based crime began when Tony Hutchinson, now retired as Detective Superintendent in charge of the Murder Investigation Team (MIT), attended a conference at which the problem within the Asian community was discussed. Returning to force, he suggested that Cleveland assess the situation in its area: the result was the country's first police

She said: "It is important that we do not stigmatise every Asian family with this. Arranged marriages are very different to forced marriage and have worked very well throughout society for many years, because they are entered into freely by the individuals involved. Arranged marriages are part of Asian tradition but there is nothing that says forced marriages are permitted.

"It has been rather like domestic violence was in the sixties. Officers would turn up at a doorstep and be told it was a 'domestic' and accept it. We have come

marriages and honour-based violence. Training was delivered by founder and director Jasvinder Sanghera, who works with police, the Crown Prosecution Service, local authorities, judges and magistrates, to ensure that the issue is better understood within the criminal justice system.

Javinder herself ran away from home at 15 after being shown a photograph of a man she had never met and told he was to be her husband.

Her sister Robina committed suicide at 24 by setting herself on fire, rather than



helpline for victims. Launched in November, it took 210 calls within the first six months, surprising those behind the idea.

According to Inspector Helen Eustace, who runs the helpline: "Supt Hutchinson was shocked at what he heard at the conference. He came back and asked 'do we have a problem in Cleveland?'. We met leaders of the Asian community and asked the same question. They said 'yes'. We didn't know that and set out to do something about it."

The problem relates mainly to women – 85 per cent of callers have been female – who are forced into marrying someone against their will. Often, relatives resort to violence when the demand is rejected. Insp Eustace said there was a distinction between arranged marriages, in which two families agree upon a wedding and no force is used, and those in which relatives resort to coercion.

a long way since the sixties and I believe that we will do the same in the next few years when it comes to honour-based violence."

"They are sensitive cases and to deal with them you have to understand the word Izzat, which means honour. There is a difference between arranged traditional marriages and forced marriages."

The 14 on-call female officers who operate the 24-hour helpline, on 0800 5999 365, underwent specialist training provided by east Midlands charity Karma Nirvana, whose staff and most of its volunteers have experienced forced

leave a violent relationship.

Jasvinder said: "Cleveland, with one per cent of its population from minorities, is a classic example of how this problem can occur. It is an issue for every force.

"I believe honour-based violence is 20 years behind where we are with domestic violence. We have to make the unacceptable unacceptable. It is not enough to say this is about cultural sensitivities. We have to regard these crimes as what they are – rape, kidnapping and child abuse."

Insp Eustace said: "When the helpline was launched, we had no idea whether we would get any calls at all but thought that even if we helped one person it would have been worthwhile. We never expected the influx of calls we have received.

"They have come not just from Cleveland but from around the UK, including the London area, Manchester,



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the Midlands and Scotland.

“Most calls have come from young women, although we have had 15 per cent of the calls from males. We also had a woman in her 50s.”

Police have been able to offer advice themselves or put the callers in touch with those who can help. This includes Karma Nirvana’s own helpline, which assists victims and police officers dealing with cases, and is on 0800 5999 247.

A number of calls led to criminal investigations: Cleveland is investigating 47 cases in its area, with the inquiries often passed onto domestic violence officers because of the similarities between the two types of crime. The response has included working with social workers to remove victims to places of safety. No cases have yet come to court.

Insp Eustace said: “These are difficult cases. You are dealing with people who

are being forced by families they have known and loved all their lives.

“A typical case would be a 15-year-old girl who hears she is going on holiday to Pakistan or India, or wherever. She notices that her mother is packing a lot of material into a suitcase and realises it is for a wedding dress. She also knows that all her sisters have already been married off. She realises she is going to be married but is concerned because she wants to stay in the UK and complete her education. The concern is that she will be forced to marry against her will.”

Helpline officer DC Sonia Moss, a member of Cleveland’s MIT, said: “When the helpline was launched, we were not sure if we would have any calls. The first one came within 15 minutes. “They are sensitive cases and to deal with them you have to understand the word Izzat, which means honour. There

is a difference between arranged traditional marriages and forced marriages. It may be that crimes have been committed, such as assaults or kidnapping. If the girl has sex against her will, rape has occurred.”

Aware that there have been women murdered for refusing to go through with marriages in other parts of the country, DC Moss said: “Our motto is ‘get it right first time’ when the call comes in. These people’s lives are in our hands when they ring.”

The team is working to educate other officers to recognise the danger signs, and is also working with teachers.

Insp Eustace said: “You might have a child who comes to a teacher and says she is going on holiday. We do not want to stigmatise families, it may be genuine – if a white child came and said he or she was emigrating to Australia no one would think anything of it – but we hope teachers will be aware of the signs that it may be a forced marriage.”

Other forces are now considering establishing helplines: the second active one, Cambridgeshire’s on 0800 5 999 818, was launched in June along similar lines to Cleveland, using specially trained female officers. The force receives an average of eight calls a month about honour crimes and says victims are not just women, and points out that they have also come from the Polish, Lithuanian and Turkish communities to name a few.

Detective Inspector Melanie Dales, who is running the initiative, said: “So-called honour-based crimes can be complex to understand and often go unreported because the victim doesn’t feel they can approach police.

“Everyone has the right to make their own life choices without the fear of physical or mental abuse, and we hope that this helpline will encourage those who cannot do this to get in touch with police.”

* A new civil law dealing with forced marriages comes into being in the autumn. The Forced Marriages Civil Protection Act enables a victim or a relevant third party to make an application for a Forced Marriage Protection Order, ensuring that it does not go ahead.