

For release on 7th May. Interviewees available. Contact kate.agha@oxfordagainstcutting.org 07909 510 840

Launch of lockdown poster campaign to support those at risk of female genital mutilation (FGM) or forced marriage

Thames Valley charity, Oxford Against Cutting (OAC), is launching a campaign to protect those who are at increased risk of 'honour'-based abuses, such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced marriage, during lockdown. The charity is working closely with national charity, Karma Nirvana, to raise awareness of the specialist helplines that support victims of honour-based abuses who faced multiple barriers to reaching support.

The campaign, launching on the 7th May 2020, will see a helplines poster disseminated across the Thames Valley, signposting those at risk of 'honour'-based abuses to specialist support services. It follows fears expressed by survivors and women from affected communities during groups run by Oxford Against Cutting and Karma Nirvana after lockdown. The charities also brought together a temporary working group to share thinking around additional barriers faced by victims of honour-based abuses during lockdown.

The helpline poster includes signposting to national support services, including the NSPCC FGM Helpline, Karma Nirvana and The Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), as well as local support services for Oxfordshire, East Berkshire, West Berkshire and Buckinghamshire.

The campaign is a response to increasing concern that people from practicing communities are at an even greater risk of 'honour'-based abuses during the covid-19 lockdown, since they are at home with multiple perpetrators and may have numerous barriers preventing them from reaching out.

Kate Agha, CEO of Oxford Against Cutting comments: "It is important that victims can reach specialist services, as often victims only have one chance to reach out for help. For example, a girl might overhear plans being made for her to be forced into marriage and may have a few minutes to call a helpline number. It is particularly difficult for victims of these kinds of abuses to reach out as there are likely to be multiple perpetrators at home and lockdown makes this even harder".

Jasvinder Sanghera, Chair of Karma Nirvana commented: "Lockdown for these victims means being entombed in homes with threats from mothers, fathers, uncles, brothers and sisters and wider family members. This is a time when the desire of families and communities to further control girls' sexuality and protect their "honour" has been heightened. Lockdown has increased family and community surveillance, reducing even further the opportunity for victims to report, especially as the schools are no longer the 'eyes and ears.'" .

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Jasvinder continues “I recently spoke with survivors during lockdown who describe very real escalated fears due to increased isolation that has led to threats of imminent forced marriages taking place after lockdown and Skype marriages during lockdown”.

Posters will be shared on social media and disseminated as widely as possible across the Thames Valley, including in places such as hospitals, GP surgeries and pharmacies.

‘Honour’-based abuses, such as FGM and forced marriage, affect thousands of people in the UK; an estimated 60,000 girls are at risk of FGM and an estimated 8-10,000 British Nationals are forced into marriage each year.

Perpetrators of these crimes are usually family members, extended family and sometimes even the wider community, meaning that speaking out is always challenging for someone who is experiencing or at risk of ‘honour’-based abuse.

In an ordinary month, many ‘honour’-based crimes will go unreported. Victims may feel that they cannot speak out for fear of bringing ‘shame’ to their family. They may be threatened, coerced or blackmailed into keeping quiet.

Before lockdown, there were more opportunities for victims to seek help including speaking to a teacher at school, or a healthcare professional during a check-up. Professionals, such as teachers, play a vital role in safeguarding children. Seeing children on a daily basis, they are usually well placed to spot signs that something may be wrong.

Living in isolation with perpetrators and the absence of safeguarding puts people at an even higher risk of experiencing ‘honour’-based abuses - many of which may go unreported and some of which may be fatal.

OAC’s poster campaign is important for raising awareness of ‘honour’-based abuses and support services.

It is vital that, where possible, we are signposting those at risk to front line services and letting people know that these services are still running as usual. People concerned for someone’s safety can also use the information on the posters to connect with frontline services, to hopefully prevent ‘honour’-based abuses from taking place.

Our lockdown posters for all areas in A4, printer version and social media size can be accessed on our website here: <https://www.oxfordagainstcutting.org/resources/>

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