

## Forced marriage: 'I can't forgive or forget what they did to me'

Dr Humayra Abedin talks for the first time to Nina Lakhani about the international storm that began when she visited her parents in Bangladesh



An NHS doctor from east London who was held hostage and forced into marriage has spoken for the first time about her four-month ordeal, during which she feared for her life.

Dr Humayra Abedin, who was freed from her vows on the orders of a Bangladeshi court soon after *The Independent on Sunday* highlighted her plight, described the humiliation and pain she suffered at the hands of her parents, some members of her extended family and nurses and doctors in a private psychiatric hospital in Bangladesh last year.

In an exclusive interview with the IoS, Dr Abedin told of the moment she was abducted: "My face was covered with a piece of cloth by men who told me they were policemen, before they carried me out into an ambulance which was parked outside the house. They held my arms and legs, carried me like a prisoner, while my parents stood in the background."

She was driven, kicking and screaming, to a private hospital, on the request of her family. During the journey, she was held down and gagged by three people as they tried to stop her shouting.

"This was the first time I thought, 'this is it, I am dying'," said Dr Abedin. "I begged them to stop." And so began the nightmare.

For the next three months, every morning and every night, she was forced to swallow dangerously high doses of powerful tranquillisers used to treat people with psychoses. She was kept locked in the hospital, constantly told she was a disgrace by staff and relatives, and denied contact with the outside world. But she could make it stop, so her parents and psychiatrist told her, if she agreed to give up her life in England, marry the man her family had chosen for her and stay in Bangladesh. She refused.

Last December, Dr Abedin was dramatically freed after frantic efforts – highlighted by the IoS – by lawyers in the UK and Dhaka, together with Ask, a human rights NGO, led to her release. The majority of victims are not so lucky; hundreds of missing schoolchildren each year are feared to have been married off abroad by their families.

When you picture a victim of forced marriage, whom do you see? Probably an uneducated, young Asian girl, from a deeply traditional and authoritarian family. But research published last week suggests there could be 8,000 forced marriage cases in England each year, affecting African, European and Middle Eastern communities as well. Victims in 14 per cent of cases are male; 14 per cent are under 16. A worrying proportion involves people with learning disabilities who may not have the capacity to consent.

Sitting in her friend's house in suburban Essex, Dr Abedin looks a million dollars. Her physical appearance has been transformed over the past six months. Gone are the puffy, blotchy skin, brittle hair, stiff joints and tremor she developed as a result of the medication. She complains that she can't lose the last few pounds – anti-psychotics also cause an insatiable appetite – but the physical transformation is truly remarkable. As for her mental state, she denies nightmares or flashbacks, often experienced by victims of abuse and trauma; her anxiety symptoms have gone, but she does admit to dwelling on what happened in the hospital.

"It's my time at the clinic that I think about. These people are meant to be health professionals, but what they did to me was a complete abuse. This I will never forgive or forget," says Dr Abedin, and just for a second she doesn't seem as relaxed or confident as she claims to be.

Born and raised in the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka, Humayra Abedin, 33, is not your typical victim. An only child from a well-off, middle-class Muslim family, she grew up happily surrounded by friends, cousins and extremely supportive parents who encouraged her to study medicine.

After she graduated, her mother, Sophia, 68, a housewife, and her father, Joynal, 77, a retired businessman who at that time owned a clothing factory and several shops, supported her move to England in 2002 to study for a master's degree in public health at Leeds University. She joined several of her Bangladeshi friends in London the following year and embarked on the exams that would enable her to work in the NHS.

"I was totally focused on my career and very happy. I was also learning how to do very ordinary things for the first time, like washing clothes and shopping, which gave me a great sense of satisfaction to be independent instead of having people helping me with everything like at home. I guess I was changing, just becoming more individual and independent."

She spoke to her parents often and there was occasional talk about marriage but she made it clear that studying was her priority.

"Actually, some of my aunties had wanted me to get married before I came to UK, so that I didn't come alone. This would have been quite normal; in fact, most of my friends who went abroad did so after they got married. But I didn't want that and my dad totally agreed every time it came up. I just used the same excuse and kept putting them off."

At the end of 2007, a cousin, also a doctor, came to visit and started commenting on this new-found independence. After his return to Bangladesh, the tension started to mount.

"The family pressure was building. There were more phone calls, more talk about guys they wanted me to meet, but I told them this wasn't what I wanted. It wasn't about religion; it was a cultural thing. In their eyes I was becoming too Westernised, too focused on my career and getting too old to be alone. It was about protecting me."

In July 2008, she flew home to visit her mother, who her dad claimed was suffering from heart problems. "Both my parents have chronic health problems so it was possible that she was sick. I did think they might want me to meet some guys but not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined what would happen next."

As soon as she arrived she was physically restrained, beaten and locked away. She was forced to take sleeping tablets and constantly bombarded with insults. Her parents never touched her; it was a trusted maid, who had worked for the family for 25 years, who took the lead in the abuse. But she still refused to consent to marriage; a week later, the ambulance arrived and took her away.

"After three months of medication, verbal abuse, emotional blackmail, my mind was weakened. I felt like a puppet. I had lost all hope and had no more energy to fight back," she says.

But before she was carted off to this so-called hospital, she had sent texts to friends in the UK. So unbeknown to her, efforts to secure her release were under way.

A female cousin co-operated with Ask and filed a petition to the court, which served her family with an order demanding she be brought in front of the court in Bangladesh, where forced marriage is illegal.

In order to avoid the authorities, her parents discharged her from the hospital and the next couple of weeks were spent in a medication-induced haze, travelling between towns, staying with family friends, until eventually she was forcibly married to a doctor her parents had deemed a suitable match. She won't talk about what happened with him, only that she's waiting for the marriage to be annulled.

Eventually, left with no option, her parents brought her to the court, convinced she would choose her family over her independence. Her father broke down in court after he was told she had chosen to come back to the UK. It was the last time she saw him.

She arrived back in London to face a media storm. "I felt joy, happiness, relief; you've no idea how thankful I was to the media, my lawyers, everyone who had been trying to get me out of that hospital."

There has been no contact with her parents since she was freed; she has moved and changed her phone numbers to avoid them. It is not something she will rule out for ever; she still loves them, but is nowhere near the point of being able to forgive them. She believes her aunts and uncles convinced her parents that she was out of control and needed protection. "I think my dad was made to feel guilty about encouraging me, his only child, to come to the UK, so he felt he had to sort things out. What they did was wrong, but I still think from their point of view they were trying to protect me. But that psychiatric hospital ... the staff told me they knew I was normal, so what they did to me was grossly unethically and criminal." Two other women in similar situations have since been rescued from the same clinic.

A strong, ambitious woman, she is determined not to let this horrific experience become a life-defining one. It is her friends, colleagues and employers she turns to for support; they have become her family and she cannot praise them enough. Work comes first, but she hasn't forgotten how to have fun: listening to Bollywood music while eating home-cooked food with friends is her ideal way to relax. She will finish her GP training with the London Deanery next year and still wants the happy-ever-after ending she always dreamed about.

"The whole incident has made me realise how precious and beautiful life is and it's made me stronger, so maybe it was my destiny. Right now my focus is my career. I love my job, and I also want to do what I can to raise awareness about forced marriage – the protection order was the turning point in my life. In the future, I definitely want to get married to the right person, have children, all those things that I always wanted."