

SUCKER FOR LOVE



Sophie Lott has a BA (Hons) degree in Politics and a BSc (Hons) in Criminal Justice with a Diploma in Probation. She works as a specialist caseworker, designated safeguarding officer and Consular FGM lead in the Forced Marriage Unit at the Foreign and Commonwealth office. Sophie is the daughter of the Archdeacon of Bromley and Bexley.

Petite, blonde, chipper and with an infectious enthusiasm for her work, it's hard to reconcile this self-confessed incurable romantic with the gritty and distressing work she encounters every day. Sophie Lott is a baptised and committed Christian who works in the Forced Marriage Unit of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office based in London. Her work does require some international travel to countries like Pakistan and Nigeria. Sophie said, "I guess when I first graduated I was interested in justice and equality for all. I was very conscious of the under representation of the black and ethnic minority groups in British politics and was always keen on speaking up for those

whose voices aren't heard. At the same time, the London Probation Service was recruiting. I joined the London Probation team and studied for my degree in Criminal Justice and my Diploma in probation. I worked for two days a week and studied for three. I was also expected to see offenders and write reports. It was a pretty busy time!"

The youngest probation officer in London at the time, Sophie worked flat out for four years before taking a break in Hong Kong. She said, "I had worked in Lewisham, Tower Hamlets and Brixton and got on well with the younger offenders. I think some of the older men saw me and thought 'You can't

be serious! Who is going to be assessing me?' It took a while to build those relationships, but I decided I needed a break so I went to Hong Kong to work in a Church of England kindergarten before coming back to probation in Tower Hamlets. It was during this time that my work with some of the diaspora in the borough meant that I saw for the first time so-called 'honour based' offences and forced marriage is a form of that."

The Western hemisphere consists largely of cultures which are based around an acceptance about right and wrong. To understand the difference between what we describe as 'honour based' offences, there needs to be a shift in understanding cultural norms.

Sophie said, "Some cultures are shaped not around what is right or wrong, but instead around what is honourable or shameful. A forced marriage may be used to restore or to uphold honour or to reduce the shame of something that has happened. It invariably involves sexual abuse, verbal abuse and violence – a consequence of the individual not wanting to consummate the marriage."

Not all victims of forced marriage are female. Sophie said, "About 1 in 5 of our callers are male. Quite often callers, both men and women, will be from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community (LGBT) and they are forced into a marriage because their relatives believe that this will somehow 'cure' them. Generations earlier, the family will have come from a country where homosexuality is illegal."

When people contact the Forced Marriage Unit for help, usually by email or on the phone, they are not asked about ethnicity or religion. That said, the unit can only help British passport holders if the person has already been taken overseas. Sophie said, "Forced marriage plays no part in any religion. Sometimes, relatives will manipulate texts and interpret them in a way that suits their own purposes. We will assist anyone in the UK that has a legal right to be here. Consular assistance abroad can only be given to British passport holders because other people are outside our legal jurisdiction." It's actually the cost of a passport that covers consular assistance.

How much does Sophie's own faith influence the way she does her work? She said, "For me, it's all about people not suffering. I want to help people get justice. I know it's a bit American, but I guess I ask myself, 'What would Jesus do?' I think about if I were in this position, how would I like to be helped? I need to make a difference every day. It's not about the money, it has something to do with what I have seen in my dad as I have been growing up. They are not exclusively Christian values, but even when I was little my dad used to talk to me about my future career choices and even when I was young I knew I wanted a job which captured those values."

Surely, part of the answer lies in education? Sophie explained, "There is a misconception that, with better education, this issue will simply die out. This is not what we have found. The average HBV age is 22. These are male cousins and brothers who grew up in Britain. Their parents may have been born here. Certainly education is important, but cultural integration is essential. Some communities are virtually cut-off from the rest of society; they can be very insular and enclosed. Communities hold on to their cultural identities."

Sophie cites the case of 17 year old Shafiea Ahmed who went missing in 2003 and whose parents were subsequently found guilty of her murder. Mr Justice Roderick Evans said they would both serve a minimum of 25 years. The judge told them: "Your concern about being shamed is greater than the love of your child." The couple suffocated Shafiea with a plastic bag after years of abuse.

Sophie said, "14 July 2015 would have been Shafiea's birthday and with the help of Karma Nirvana, the Government and Cosmopolitan magazine have worked very closely together to promote the first UK 'Day of Memory' to remember those murdered in so-called honour killings. Freedom Charity also does a lot of work in schools to educate those at risk and their siblings, to try and create a new way ahead. There are accredited lesson plans that teach young people that, when they are older, they have a right to choose who they marry. It highlights the fact that a forced marriage is when the person is denied the right to say 'no!'"

There is a mind-set in the UK that this is purely an Asian problem and certainly, victims can be of Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi descent – this is purely linked to the historical ties the UK has with these countries. 23% of calls to the FMU in 2014, however, had no overseas element and highlight the fact it can happen in any community. There are also Christian cases where pregnant 'shotgun' weddings. Different countries see different manifestations

of this. In the USA it is the Catholic Mexican population and in Germany it is likely to be the Turkish community. In the UK, the highest numbers of cases are seen in London (30%) and the South East, closely followed by the Midlands.

Sophie said, "The attitude is that women don't need to be well-educated because they will just be wives and carers. It's important that people are trained to spot warning signs."

This can be teachers or people in the community, or even the potential victims themselves. For example, if parents discover their daughter has a 'secret boyfriend', maybe through social media like Facebook, they will claim that a grandmother is sick 'back home'. The next thing the victim knows, is that they are leaving the UK to visit a sick relative, but when they arrive in the foreign country, they are actually there to attend their own wedding."

Having worked with what she describes as, 'the darker side of human nature' Sophie says nothing surprises her now. "I couldn't do a good job if I got emotionally involved. There are one or two cases that have moved me to tears, but I get through it all by knowing I am making a real difference to someone's life." Most of the contact Sophie will have with someone asking for help will be by phone, text or email. There are no facilities for face-to-face meetings. She said, "Sometimes victims are just grateful to receive a text from someone who cares about them. I have had messages saying people are grateful that I have checked to see if they are okay. I did repatriate four girls from the same family, and they kissed the tarmac when they arrived home in Birmingham, having thought they would never come back to the UK. There are no days when I don't want to come into work. It never feels like a hardship to do this job. I guess I am just a sucker for love. I want people to marry the person they love'."

Sophie's final message is stark. She said, "Forget what you think about forced marriage or what you think it looks like. Look for signs that someone may be in trouble and ask the Forced Marriage Unit for help if you need it. That's what we are here for."

If you need assistance with a forced marriage issue, please contact: Forced Marriage Unit, Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 020 7008 0151 or email fmfu@fco.gov.uk www.gov.uk/forced-marriage

forced marriage is a crime

It's your right to choose who you marry.

Contact the Forced Marriage Unit.
Call: 0207 008 0151 between 9-5 pm
Monday to Friday.
Outside working hours contact the
Global Response Centre: 0207 008 1500
Email: fmfu@fco.gov.uk
Website: www.gov.uk/forced-marriage

HM Government

Sophie has tough decisions to make every day. For example, if she has to intervene without the consent of a person who may be abroad and no contact can be made, she has to weigh-up the possibility that they may be beaten or raped as a consequence of her intervention against the advantages of stopping a forced marriage. She said, "I relish the fact that I am making decisions that can affect someone's long-term wellbeing. I know some people are anxious about it but I really enjoy the challenge and am happy to take the lead. That said, there are victims who don't want their mother or father to be in trouble; even when the parents are aware of the

ordeal their child will have to go through. I have learned to detach from that."

Sophie also attends events, speaks at conferences and runs training courses for Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and in other countries. She said, "Honour based violence (HBV) is very prevalent in some communities. There are a lot of NGOs that are pushing for this to be called 'dishonourable based violence', but for the sake of general understanding, for now it's referred to as HBV. It's a very disturbing issue."

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