

MY FUTURE IS MY CHOICE

Laila's Story

My name is Laila and this is my story. It is true. I was born in Iran and I lived there with my mum and dad and my two younger sisters, Homa and Maryam. My parents, especially my dad, spoke about their dreams for us - of university and careers. It didn't matter to them that we were girls. When I was eleven years old, my family left Iran for Cyprus, but soon afterwards my mother became seriously ill, so we moved to the UK where she could receive treatment. When I was twelve years old, my mother passed away. My younger sister Homa was ten, and little Maryam was just four.

Within a year my dad remarried. His wife was from Iran. She had been married before, when she was only 13. Everything changed. Suddenly my sisters and I were not allowed to go out or have friends around, not even the girls from our community. She said they were too 'westernised' and a bad influence. We had to come home immediately after school, our pocket money was stopped, and she even decided what clothes we could wear. She blackmailed us emotionally, saying that if we didn't obey her, our father would have a heart attack. She would shout and scream and even our dad became this horrible person. We were her three little slaves and even Maryam who was only six years old had to cook, clean, and look after our stepmother's own sons and the baby she'd had with my father. She was training us to be good housewives. This was all she believed our futures should be.

During these years, I was totally miserable, and walked around just wanting to cry, with this horrible sick feeling in my stomach. My grades went down. I went from always getting A grades in all subjects, to D's and E's. This got the attention of my teachers, and they wanted to talk to my dad and stepmother, to discuss why I was not doing well. I was terrified. The school didn't realise that in situations of honour-based violence it can be dangerous to talk with the perpetrators. Also, Maryam was always anxious and she had bitten all her nails away. She wore the same ripped jeans and dirty sweater every day, and other students bullied her. It was obvious that she was suffering, but her primary school did nothing.

Then one day, something terrible happened. Homa overheard a conversation between our stepmother and our father. They were making plans for her to marry a 40-year-old man. We knew this man because we had visited his family, but we had no idea that the reason for this visit was to display us as possible brides. Homa was a threat to the 'honour' of our family, so to stop her bringing shame on our family, she was going to be forced to marry.

Both Homa and I had finished our exams, so the school term was over. As soon as we had the opportunity, a few days later when our stepmother and dad were out, we called the police. But when they arrived, they said that because the house was tidy and clean and we didn't have any bruises to show them, there was nothing they could do. When we told them about the plans for Homa's forced marriage, they said, 'That's your culture isn't it?' That really shocked us. The

police were supposed to protect us, but they were just going to leave us to face more abuse. I realised that if we were going to escape, we had to move very fast. Our stepmum and dad were due back any minute and they would find out straight away that we'd called the police. Our stepbrothers, who were in the playground right opposite our house had seen the police car, and so had our neighbours. We had no choice but to run away.

The most important thing was for the three of us to be together. Homa and I each grabbed a small bag, in mine I put a picture of my mum and my diary, and we ran to get Maryam from her primary school. One of our stepbrothers saw us going to Maryam's classroom and told us to come outside, because our dad was there. I told him to go and tell dad that we were coming, but instead we all ran out of the back door, through the woods to the bus stop.

Luckily we were able to make it to a friend's house and she let us stay there for a few weeks. We informed social services that we had Maryam, and they arranged for us to speak with Dad. He told us to come home and to stop bringing shame on the family. The one thing that I am grateful to him for, is that he let Maryam stay with us. Social services left us on our own to look after ourselves after that.

The three of us started our new lives together. We found a flat and Homa and I each got two jobs to pay the bills. Maryam, who had been shy, became a confident girl and Homa studied for her A levels. With everything that had happened, I had not got the grades that I needed to take up my place at university, but I studied hard, and finally got a place studying Biomedical Sciences. I followed my dreams and today I work as a trainee surgeon and have a PhD. In spite of everything, we survived. But it has been very tough. Looking back I know that things could have been very different for us if our schools had taught us about our rights as children and that we do not have to accept child marriage or honour-based violence. I think things are changing, and both the police and schools are learning how to support people in our situation.

This is why as IKWRO's Survivor Ambassador, I am supporting the ***RIGHT TO KNOW*** campaign. I hope you will join us and take action!

To read Laila's original story visit:

<http://ikwro.org.uk/lailas-story/>

<http://antislavery.ac.uk/items/show/1935>

The NO Project acknowledges Laila for this story and for her courage and willingness to confront the crime of honour-based violence, child marriage and forced marriage.