

Age bar to curb forced marriages

by Anthony Browne (The Times, 14 May 2003)

THE Government has raised the age at which a spouse can be brought to Britain from 16 to 18 in an attempt to combat forced marriages in the Asian community.

David Blunkett, the Home Secretary, introduced the measure on April 1 without making an announcement after mounting concern about the number of schoolgirls who are forced into marriages with men from their parents' home country.

The Home Office does not publish how many British 16 and 17-year-olds import spouses from overseas, but it estimates that one in five of them is a victim of forced marriage.

Under the new rules British 16 and 17-year-olds can no longer sponsor a husband or wife to come to Britain from outside the European Union. The minimum age of spouses brought to Britain has also been raised to 18.

The Home Office said: "This provision will stop young girls being pressured into marriage when they are 16 or 17 years old. At 18 they are more able to resist parental pressure and are likely to be much more confident of their own decisions about whether they want to get married to someone living abroad whom they might never have met." There is thought to have been an increase in the number of international arranged marriages after the Government abolished the "primary purpose rule" in 1997, which required people to prove their marriage was not primarily aimed at gaining residence in Britain.

Studies have suggested that up to 70 per cent of marriages in Britain's Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities are arranged with people from their country of origin. Only a small proportion are forced marriages or sham marriages to gain residence.

However, the new rules will affect all 16 and 17-year-olds with a foreign spouse, whether the marriage is forced, arranged, sham or a love-match, and whatever the nationality of the spouse. It does not affect people from the EU, who have an automatic right to live in Britain.

The Home Office increased the age limit after Ann Cryer, the Labour MP who has been helping victims of forced marriage, lobbied the Government to increase the age to 21.