



Metro Toronto
Chinese & Southeast
Asian Legal Clinic



La Maison Shelter

FCJ Refugee Centre

Anita Khanna
Rupaleem Bhuyan

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

On November 5, 2014, the federal government tabled *Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act (Bill S-7)* introducing sweeping changes to Canada's *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA)*, *Civil Marriage Act* and *Criminal Code*. The government's statements in support of these changes are not based on any statistical data or research, nor have they consulted experts in this field. The announcements and the tabled act perpetuate myths about practices of polygamy and forced marriages while misleading Canadians to believe that violence against women is a "cultural" issue which happens only in certain communities. We believe that this racist Act and its implementation will further marginalize the victims and survivors of forced marriage. We believe that the strong language used in this proposed Act is an attempt at fear-mongering and will further marginalize and harm member of communities that this Act purports to serve. We strongly believe that the criminalization of forced marriage and the sweeping changes in Bill S-7 are NOT the right answers for Canada.

In addition, we know and have experience that criminalization has potential to become a tool to further target and over police racialized communities. While we agree that prevention is important in the discussion around forced marriage in Canada, we believe that education is the most effective preventative tool in this debate. We suggest that educating and raising awareness within the Immigration, Law Enforcement, Health and Education sectors is the best practice. Finally, we stand for all victims and survivors of gender based violence, who have told us time and time again that they would not come forward if it meant criminal sanctions or deportation for their own family. We must continue to ensure that victims/survivors - instead of perpetrators - are at the centre of these discussions.

Violence against women happens in all cultures. It is based on abuse of power, results in inequality, and affects all relationships through the generations. Women in every culture in the world have ways of working together to stop violence. Violence is not a manifestation of culture, but a rupture to it. Culture is not a barrier to women's rights, but a context in which those relationships and the possibilities of actions may be shaped. We remain concerned that the proposed legislative changes create barriers for accessing protection and resources by victims and survivors from specifically targeted communities. It will negatively impact survivor's access to justice and safety through provisions that make non-citizens inadmissible to Canada based solely on their real or perceived choice of marriage form, not to mention the preventative detention and monitoring measures, and the criminalization of survivor's families and communities. At worst, it exposes the underlying racist agenda that this Government harbor's towards specifically targeted communities. The lip service paid by this government to the issue of violence against women through Bill S7 demonstrates at best, the Government's complete lack of understanding of the issue of gender based violence.

As such:

We call on the Government of Canada to fulfill its international commitment to protect victims of gender based violence (such as forced marriage and so-called "honour based violence") by extending safety and protection to all these victims not only when they are in Canada but also while abroad.

We call on the Government to withdraw the amendments until such time anti-violence experts, advocates and frontlines workers who support survivors of gender-based violence and those with lived experience can review the proposed amendments and provide concrete substantive feedback as to the efficacy of this provision in achieving their stated goal of making women safer.