



Forced marriage to be outlawed: Parents face jail for coercing daughters to wed against their will, which PM says is 'little more than slavery'

- David Cameron says forced marriage is 'little more than slavery'
- Home Secretary warns up to 8,000 women a year are pushed into wedlock
- **Tomorrow plans for a specific criminal offence will be announced**

Parents who force their children to marry face jail sentences under tough laws to be unveiled tomorrow by Theresa May.

The Home Secretary will promise a sweeping crackdown after warnings that up to 8,000 young women a year are pushed into wedlock without their consent.

David Cameron says forced marriage, which involves families from Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and east Africa, is 'little more than slavery' and 'completely wrong'.



The Home Secretary has warned that up to 8,000 young women are pushed into wedlock without their consent

The new laws will see the Government tackling an issue which has proved highly sensitive in the past. In 2004, Labour considered making forced marriage a criminal offence, but dropped the plans before the 2005 General Election amid fears it would be resented by ethnic voters as an 'intrusion' into minority cultures.

Forced marriage prevention orders were introduced in 2008, but these put the onus on a victim to apply to a civil court for protection, rather than criminalising those who tried to force them into marrying.

For a criminal conviction, the authorities must currently try to prove that those responsible have broken other laws, such as kidnapping, false imprisonment, harassment, or assault.

Breaching a prevention order is also punishable by up to two years in jail, but for contempt of court.

Tomorrow Mrs May will announce that a specific criminal offence of forced marriage will be created, meaning anyone who tries to compel someone to wed against their will could be jailed.

Legislation is expected to be introduced next year. It is part of the Government's attempt to smash Labour's doctrine of multiculturalism, which ministers argue meant unacceptable practices such as forced marriage were not tackled effectively.



David Cameron has said while most weddings involving families from Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and east Africa are happy celebrations, the Government will crack down on forced marriages



Home Secretary Theresa May (left) and David Cameron are spearheading the tough new laws that will be announced tomorrow

Mr Cameron believes a blind eye has been turned to extremism for too long for fear of offending minorities.

Some schools have even refused to put up posters advising pupils about forced marriage for fear of causing offence or being branded racist.

Last year, 1,468 forced marriages were investigated by the authorities but experts believe the true total is as high as 8,000 a year.

Cases often involve a girl or young woman being taken abroad, usually on the pretext of a holiday, then forced to marry a man they have never met in accordance with an arrangement reached by the two families. One young girl from Yorkshire was married off by her parents when she had just turned five, while two teenage sisters were forced to wed strangers on the same day during a trip to Pakistan.

A Government source said: 'Some of those who oppose the criminalisation of forced marriage argue that it could disempower victims, as they might want a non-criminal resolution of their case and reconciliation with their family.'



Baroness Warsi said in the worst cases children were drugged and taken overseas, where they were married off

'However, to avoid deterring victims from coming forward, the civil remedy will continue to exist alongside a new criminal offence. This means that a victim could choose to take the civil route, or to go to the police.'

'Even when criminal proceedings are under way, the victim will have the right to stop those proceedings.'

'The new law will be accompanied by a range of measures to

increase protection and support for victims, as well as maintaining a focus on prevention.'

Mrs May will announce a £500,000 fund to ensure schools and other agencies know how to spot early signs of a forced marriage. Every local authority will have one official in charge of training for police, judiciary, health agencies and social services.

The Government also plans an advertising campaign over the summer to highlight 'the right to choose' who you marry.

And ministers will sign up to the Council of Europe's convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, which requires the criminalisation of various forms of violence against women, including forced marriage.

Conservative chairman Baroness Warsi, who has pushed for a change in the law, said in the worst cases children were drugged and taken overseas, where they were married off.

'It's now time to say no. The tragedy of these stories is long term. People are trapped in loveless marriages for a long, long, long time,' she said.

'There is often no relationship and they live as strangers in the same home. Forced marriage is akin to slavery and it is going on in Britain today. But it is time to draw a line in the sand and say enough. This is not acceptable.'

The new law will seek to draw a clear distinction between arranged and forced marriage. 'A forced marriage is where there is no consent. The time has come to call a halt,' Lady Warsi added.

The cross-party Commons Home Affairs Committee had called for forced marriage to be criminalised, but ministers have spent some months considering how to proceed without discouraging victims from coming forward.

One further measure being considered is for all those marrying abroad to be legally required to declare their intent first with their local registrar in Britain. Religious ceremonies would be void unless they were also entered in the civil register.