Victims’ Commissioner for England & Wales, Baroness Newlove is calling for a victim law that delivers legal rights to crime victims, just weeks after the latest stats revealed more than 5 million crimes were reported for the year ending March 2017.

Baroness Newlove said: “For nearly 1000 years our justice system has been all about the crown and offenders, with victims very much standing on the sidelines. A law offering statutory rights to victims will put victims at the heart of justice, which is where they deserve to be.

Her role as VC is to promote the interests of victims and witnesses. “I listen to and represent the views of victims to view the criminal justice system through their eyes. To do this, I travel up and down the country, meeting victims, learning first-hand their experience of the criminal justice system. The stories I hear when I meet victims tell me that there is still so much more we need to do.”

On occasions, it can be brutally insensitive, for example, victims being told not to cry when CCTV footage in court shows their loved one being beaten. On other occasions, it can fail victims, for example, victims not being offered the right to make a VPS, or to seek restorative justice.

A Victims’ Law should reflect a core set of values, based on the premise that all victims deserve procedural justice. These values should guarantee a victim’s right to expect three things: practical support, timely information and empowerment.

She’s also calling for an independent advocacy service, to support and represent vulnerable victims and victims of the worst crimes, throughout the criminal justice process. Too often, victims are forced to navigate a maze of agencies which can be difficult at best, but utterly bewildering when you’re consumed with trauma.

An “independent advocate” would provide a single point of contact throughout the whole process, who’ll take the lead drawing up a support package to meet the victim’s needs. They’ll be able to represent the victim dealing with agencies, as well as support them at every step of the trial.

A Victims’ Law should also introduce a legal requirement that agencies cooperate in providing support for victims; “Too often collaboration depends on personal chemistry – I want to see it put on a statutory footing.” Baroness Newlove said: “It’s time for action. In 2018, my top priority is to see a Victims’ Law that finally puts victims at the heart of the justice system. Victims deserve nothing less.”
Breaking the Taboo

Founder of Karma Nirvana Jasvinder Sanghera on why more needs to be done to save young victims of honour-based abuse and forced marriage

For nearly 25 years Karma Nirvana has stood as a beacon of hope for thousands of victims of ‘honour’ abuse. But the charity’s CEO is adamant that forced marriage is far from on the wane. "There’s absolutely no way we can say forced marriage is decreasing," says Jasvinder Sanghera.

"What we do know is that it’s under-reported and we’re dealing with the tip of the iceberg."

Cry for help

"I was too afraid to talk to a teacher for fear they’d tell my family. As a cry for help, I attempted suicide, but even that didn’t work. Isolation is immense, and my family ganged up, so I became the bad guy."

Jasvinder’s experience and of her sister Robina who committed suicide to escape an abusive marriage, instilled in her a need to help other young victims.

"When I look back at Robina’s death, Karma Nirvana almost became my salvation to articulate the injustice of our experiences. I believed in it passionately and my vision of it spreading like wild flowers never left me."

She launched Karma Nirvana in 1993 in her front room, but in the early days, couldn’t even get anyone to call her hotline for fear of their family finding out.

"It’s taken time to build that relationship of trust but as more and more survivors speak, we’re advocating it’s safe to call us. Because they have faith in us - on behalf of victims’ dead and alive - I think trust has increased people’s confidence."

Capitalising on the high regard in which she’s held, she speaks regularly at conferences and visualises “light bulbs switching on” as she spreads her message.

"Some people are fearful dealing with forced marriage and don’t want to be accused of racism," says Jasvinder. "Police, teachers and doctors have confidence issues, but our presentations empower them to deal with it effectively.”

Latest helpline stats reveal 81 pc of victims report a woman as the perpetrator, which comes as no surprise to Jasvinder.

"Without a shadow of doubt, the perpetrators are mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and wider family,” she says. "But the community’s also complicit because they know it’s happening but don’t report it. There’s almost self-policing that goes on.”

Murdered victims

Determined to change attitudes, Jasvinder hopes her supporters will challenge the taboo that has silenced and even murdered victims in the UK.

Jasvinder says: “Any community operating a system of misogynist attitudes or where women are second-class citizens are affected.” 65pc of the charity’s callers are of South Asian descent but they also get Kurds, Somalis, Afghans, travellers and white British females who married into families that operate honour systems.

The helpline currently gets 850 calls a month, of which 22pc are men. “But the male experience is very different," says Jasvinder, “because often they’re allowed freedom and independence. Families give them a compromise and say, ‘Marry who we say but still see your girlfriend,’ while many callers are gay men forced to marry to hide their sexuality.”

One problem is that few victims can access social media or even own mobile phones. But next year, she’ll launch a survivors’ website to enable victims to have their own safe space to chat, in the knowledge that others will understand.

So how does Karma Nirvana break the taboo? “First and foremost, we’re breaking the silence. We have a thriving survivor ambassador programme that share our message, so I’m no longer in that space where it’s just me. We’re giving women a voice, it’s important to show visibility of survivors that we exist and can survive.”

The helpline funded by the Home Office and MoJ provides a mix of risk assessment, listening, practical and emotional support.

Comforting words

Today, Jasvinder is an advocate for victims in UK courts and schools, and for youngsters under-16, she can make refuge referrals. It must be overwhelming facing family pressures so young. But Jasvinder offers comforting words to any teenager in the same boat.

“You’re not alone. This is happening to many people up and down the country. Compared to me in 1993, there’s a lot of support for you. Pick up the phone and call the helpline who won’t tell your family. You can talk to someone whether you want to stay at home or leave and know there are options open to you.”

Since those early days of indifference, Jasvinder has built overwhelmingly positive support from the police and agencies that queue up to work with her. Her work was key in the creation of a UK Forced Marriage Law in 2014.

Now Karma Nirvana’s latest venture is launching a pledge with Leeds City Council, police and the NHS Trust tackling honour abuse and forced marriage, which she’s keen to roll out across other cities.

The charity also provide training to the police, NHS and social services, dealing with all the challenges linked with honour abuse, including murder and suicide which has high UK rates among young South Asian women and the UK.

“We worked with South Wales Police to develop a risk assessment tool that led to a three-day training programme for officers,” says Jasvinder. "Police are effectively responding and they know what to do if a case is reported. Now officers are using legislation such as Forced Marriage Protection Orders. The pledge is a wonderful example of multi-agency working.”

She hopes the survivors’ networks will inspire other victims to carve their own path and be free to choose who they marry. But neither is she complacent.

"If we’re not getting calls from a certain area, we go and raise awareness. In Dorset, we weren’t getting calls, so we trained their police and local authority and they went from very little reporting to 85 in a year.”

Free to choose

Jasvinder hopes the survivors’ networks will inspire other victims to carve their own path and be free to choose who they marry. She speaks with pride of making a real dent where thousands of people can now report abuse.

“Through this, I have been able to make a difference to someone’s individual life. If one person can get away from the family, that’s a victory,” she says. "I believed in Karma Nirvana passionately and my vision of it spreading like wild flowers never left me”

To learn more about Karma Nirvana and how you can help, visit karma-nirvana.org.uk
**Talkin’ Stalking**

By Rachel Griffin, Chief Executive of Suzy Lamplugh Trust

When stalking became a specific criminal offence in the UK in 2012, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust welcomed the change in law, but warned that training was needed to ensure cases were handled properly. Five years on, we remain deeply concerned over the issue. Despite an estimated 1.1 million people becoming victims of stalking every year in the UK, only 959 cases reached court in 2016. This leaves many victims vulnerable and at risk from obsessive stalking behaviour.

Last year, the government announced plans to introduce Stalking Protection Orders (SPOs). The Orders aim to make stalking victims safer by allowing police to tackle the risks that perpetrators pose while they gather more evidence. Unlike broad measures previously applied to cases, such as Police Information Notices, the Orders are designed to address issues specifically related to stalking.

SPOs will allow police to apply to restrict perpetrators’ actions, for example controlling proximity to their victims or banning social media use. They could even require stalkers to attend mental health or rehabilitation programmes to help prevent reoffending.

Perhaps most importantly, the guilty face a maximum sentence of five years in jail if they breach the orders.

The provision of specific and immediately effective legislation to protect victims is important. We know early intervention in stalking cases is vital when breaking the cycle of obsession and fixation. By recognising stalking behaviour and enforcing prohibitive measures, frontline police officers can protect victims at the earliest stage.

As the Chief Executive of Suzy Lamplugh Trust, which runs the National Stalking Helpline, I am pleased to see steps being taken to protect victims more effectively. Stalking is a vile crime that causes misery. It’s so important victims receive adequate support when they report their worries, and that police take decisive action to protect victims.

The Stalking Protection Bill has its second reading in the House of Commons on 19 January 2018 and I’d urge you to contact your MP to lend support.

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**Victims Fail to Get Their Voices Heard**

Most crime victims are robbed of an opportunity to make a Victim Personal Statement by police, according to new research. The findings emerged in the VC’s review into Victim Personal Statements published 8 November.

Just one in six victims (17pc) said they were invited to make a personal statement for the year ending March 2017. This is despite the fact three quarters of victims who did make one, felt it was taken into account by the justice system.

The victim statements give judges and juries a profound sense of the impact of an offence on the victim.

For more, visit www.victimscommissioner.org.uk

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**Speed Down Save Lives**

In the UK, speeding causes needless crashes, untold suffering and stops people living safe, healthy lives. Driving is unpredictable and if something unexpected happens on the road – such as a child stepping out, it’s a driver’s speed that determines whether they can stop in time and, if they can’t, how hard they’ll be hit.

Brake Road Safety charity is encouraging everyone to Speed Down Save Lives for Road Safety Week 2017 (20-26 November).

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**Karma Nirvana’s Community Champions**

KARMA NIRVANA is seeking volunteers to join their Community Champions programme to help raise awareness of Honour-Based Abuse and Forced Marriage in the UK. For 24 years, the charity has provided emotional and practical support to victims, as well as best practice advice and training courses to professionals (including the Police, Social Services and NHS).

The charity is also recruiting Trustees, a Secretary and a Treasurer. To learn more about these opportunities, and to meet Karma Nirvana’s CEO, management team and board members, an open evening will take place on 7 December in Leeds.

For more, email info@karmanirvana.org.uk.

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**Parole Board Serves 50 Years**

Baroness Newlove marked the 50th anniversary of the Parole Board with a keynote speech to the Butler Trust Conference on 6 November. Praising their professionalism in questioning both offenders and professionals, she told how the evolving treatment of victims played a valuable role in delivering justice.

She singled out the Board’s recognition of the victim’s role in the parole process and opportunity to make a statement as worthy successes. But she warned there was no room for complacency, and called for the Board to explain its decisions to victims to give them greater reassurance. She urged the audience to, “Keep challenging yourself to think better, do better and be better.”