

## Shakti Youth: Strong Advocates of Social Change

The team at J R McKenzie Trust was honoured to be invited to attend the recent [Justice Committee](#) sitting at Parliament by Shakti Youth which was making its submission to the “Marriage (Court Consent to Marriage of Minors) Amendment Bill”.



*The Shakti Youth team make the submission*

[Shakti](#) is the largest single provider of specialist domestic/family violence intervention, prevention and awareness services for Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities (ethnic migrants and refugees) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Shakti Youth has a mandate to inform, educate and empower young people from these same communities. Every year, the services support approximately 1,000 women and 700 children.

The Justice Committee looks at business related to constitutional and electoral matters, human rights, justice, courts, crime and criminal law, police, corrections, and Crown legal services.

The Bill was first put into ballot by Dr Jackie Blue, former National MP and now Human Rights Commissioner. Currently, 16 and 17 year olds can marry with parental consent. The Amendment proposes that consent can only be granted by a Family Court Judge after due diligence has occurred. It is currently being supported in Parliament by Jo Hayes.

Mengzhu Fu, Youth Project Coordinator at Shakti, spoke to the submission first. She outlined the organisation’s support for the Amendment to the Marriage Bill, in lieu of the preferred option of New Zealand raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 years without exception. She spoke of the importance of culturally appropriate training and consultation for Family Court judges who will be tasked with granting consent to marry to 16 and 17 year olds from Asian, African and Middle Eastern communities. She outlined many known occurrences of marriage coercion taking place in these communities and introduced a survivor who shared her [experience](#).

Mehwish Mughal and her sisters escaped forced marriage in 2004 with the support of Shakti. Her narrative was brave, articulate, and deeply felt by all in the room. We were very proud of this outstanding woman and all she has gone on to achieve in her life since she initially sought help.

Afterwards, the Committee members asked questions of the Shakti team. Along with Mengzhu, Saini, Shakti’s Legal Counsel, was on hand to answer these with complete skill and confidence. It was clear that the Committee was impressed with Shakti Youth’s knowledge and expertise, and every aspect of Mengzhu’s, Mehwish’s and Manisha’s submission had an impact on the J R McKenzie team.



***Shakti Youth and J R McKenzie team members outside Parliament***

"It has been a long journey to get this far and to be heard by decision-makers, but we are hopeful that there may finally be legislative action. It is through the courage of the survivors of forced and underaged marriages to seek help and to speak up against what has happened to them that we are able to get this far. If this Bill goes through, it will add another layer of detection and deterrence of marriages that involve coercion of 16 and 17 year olds in Aotearoa/New Zealand," says Mengzhu.

Because the team at Shakti believe strongly that stopping and preventing forced marriage is a community responsibility, they have released a *Pledge Against Forced Marriage* campaign in honour of International Women's Day. They want members of the community, civil society organisations, marriage celebrants, educational institutions, government agencies and religious organisations and leaders to pledge a commitment to ending forced and under-age marriage in communities living in Aotearoa. If you would like to show your support and sign the pledge, visit: <https://our.actionstation.org.nz/p/pledgeagainstfm>

***The J R McKenzie Trust is proud to support Shakti Youth's important mahi.***