

Vigil to commemorate Harshita Brella

Statements from Harshita's family, Bekhal Mahmud, and Nour Norris

Friday, 24th January 2025, 3.30pm, Ilford

Statement from Harshita's family (Sonia and Tarun):

"We gather here tonight not only to honour the life of my sister, Harshita, but also to demand justice for her. Her life was taken from us too soon, and while nothing can bring her back, we cannot allow her story to go unheard. Delayed justice is denied justice, and we stand here to ensure her voice echoes until the justice she deserves is delivered."

Statement from Bekhal Mahmud:

"I send my heartfelt condolences to Harshita's family and friends. Harshita's loss is both tragic and outrageous. How can such murders continue? My sister, Banaz Mahmud, was murdered in 2006 in a so called 'honour killing' by my father, uncle and five male cousins. The alleged killer in Harshita's case is her husband, who has fled the country and stays at large in India. These and other murders of women and girls by abusive men makes me sad and angry.

I want the government, the police, the courts and other agencies to do more to prevent them by taking domestic abuse and honour-based abuse more seriously; to act early by arresting and charging perpetrators, and by convictions and as I am campaigning for under Banaz's Law, higher sentences if they kill in the name of honour. They should also support women to be safe and to recover from abuse by providing more funding for specialist services such as those provided by Southall Black Sisters.

In Banaz's case, two killers were extradited from Iraq to face justice in the UK – the same should happen in Harshita's case. Harshita was also a migrant woman, who had few rights and may have found it difficult to leave abuse because of the government's immigration laws. These laws must change so that no woman is entrapped. I want our communities and the government to condemn and act against violence against women and girls. Such changes will mean that Harshita's death and that of Banaz, and those of many others, would not have been in vain."

Statement from Nour Norris:

"I am heartbroken by the tragic murder of Harshita Brella, a young woman whose life was cruelly taken by someone who should have loved and protected her. Her story echoes the devastating loss of my niece, Raneem Oudeh, and my sister, Khaola Saleem, Raneem's mother. Both were brutally murdered despite their repeated cries for help. May peace be upon them.

Harshita's story highlights the same systemic failings that failed my family. Both women were victims of domestic and honour-based abuse, and both tried to seek safety. Harshita had a Domestic Violence Protection Order, and Raneem made multiple emergency calls in the hours before her murder. Yet, the system failed them at every turn.

Honour-based abuse adds another layer of complexity that the authorities still fail to recognise and address. In both cases, the act of trying to leave their abusive relationships became a deadly trigger. In honour-based abuse, the decision to leave is often seen as bringing shame, not just to the perpetrator but to their entire family. This twisted perception fuels a dangerous need to "restore" honour, often with devastating consequences. Harshita and Raneem were punished for their courage to escape abuse, a punishment that cost them their lives.

As a minoritised woman, Harshita faced even more significant challenges navigating a system that doesn't fully understand the cultural nuances and barriers many of us face. Women like Harshita and Raneem are often left feeling isolated, judged, and unsupported, their voices unheard even when they are crying out for help. This failure to act is a stain on our system, and a betrayal of the trust victims place in it.

I have spent years campaigning for change, and Harshita's story painfully reminds us why Raneem's Law is so urgently needed. This law will strengthen police response times, improve the handling of emergency calls, and ensure victims of domestic and honour-based abuse are identified and protected before it's too late.

We must also commit to properly recognising honour-based abuse as a form of domestic abuse. It is not just an issue of control; it is tied to shame, power, and a misguided sense of restoring "honour." Ignoring this reality puts more lives at risk and allows these crimes to continue unchecked.

To Harshita's family, I know the heartbreak you are enduring. I know the deep pain of losing someone you love in such a brutal and preventable way. My heart is with you. I stand with you. And I promise to continue fighting for change so no more families experience this pain.

We cannot let Harshita, Raneem, or Khaola's lives be lost in vain. Their stories must drive us to act, to fix the broken systems, to provide better training for police and authorities, and to finally recognise and confront honour-based abuse for what it truly is: a deadly form of domestic abuse."