



Contemporary forms of slavery as affecting persons belonging to ethnic, religious, and linguistic minority communities

Submission by the Rights Lab, University of Nottingham on forced marriage affecting minority communities in the UK and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic

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About us

The Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham is the first large-scale research platform for ending slavery, bringing together the largest group of modern slavery scholars in the world to tackle a key challenge of global development and one of the great human rights issues of our time. The Rights Lab works to support the wider antislavery movement with an advanced research agenda. More information about the Rights Lab is available at: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/rights-lab>

Forced marriage in minority communities the UK

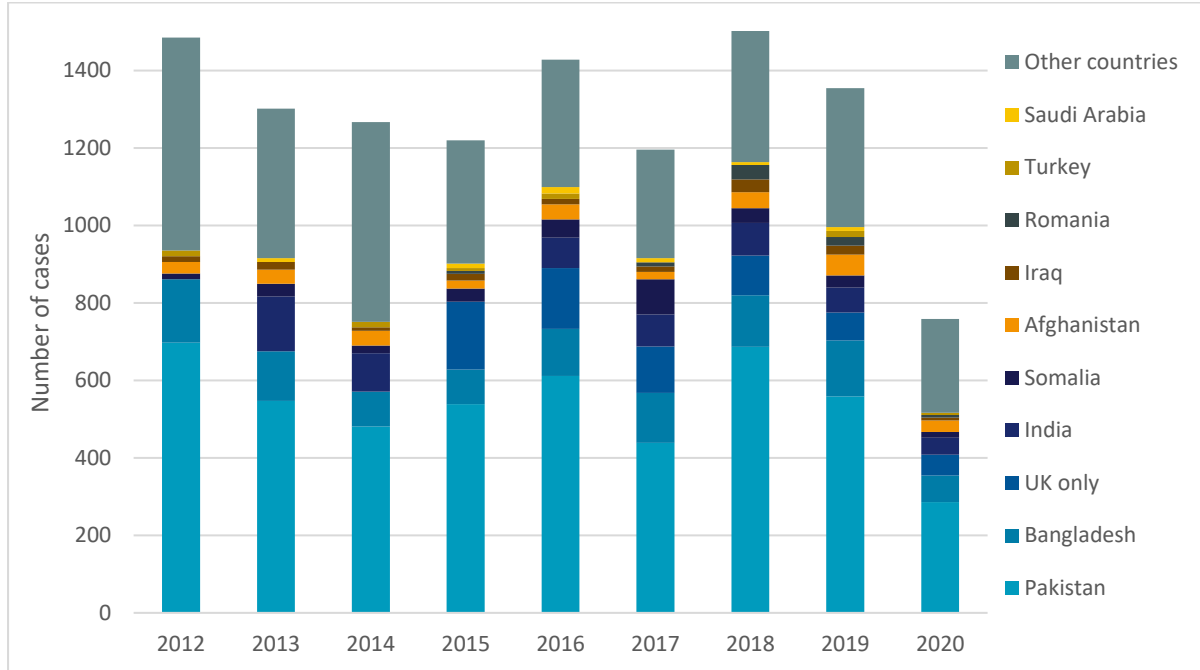
Forced marriage in the UK is often portrayed as a crime which only affects Black or Minority Ethnic (BAME) women, and particularly British South Asians. However, it is worth noting that forced marriage can also affect men and does not only affect BAME communities; it can affect people of all ages, genders, ethnicities, and religions.¹ Despite this, forced marriage in the UK does predominantly affect persons belonging to minority communities, namely BAME women. Recorded cases within the UK demonstrate higher risks and prevalence of forced marriage aligned with particular national and ethnic identities.

The UK government does not publish data identifying the ethnicity or heritage of potential or identified victims of forced marriage. However, the Home Office does record data on the country to which forced marriage risk relates. This may be the country where the forced marriage is expected to take place, the country where it has taken place, and/or the country that the spouse is currently residing in. From 2012-2020, only 5.2% of cases recorded by the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) were reported to have risks related solely to the UK. The majority of cases involved an international dimension, often with a clear relationship between the nationality and ethnicity of the victim or spouse.

Forced marriage risks in a significant proportion of cases recorded by the FMU are reported to relate to Pakistan—representing 37.3% of cases from 2012-2020 and between 31% and 47% of cases in any given year. Cases connected to Pakistan dominate the data, with a significant margin between this and the next most commonly represented country,

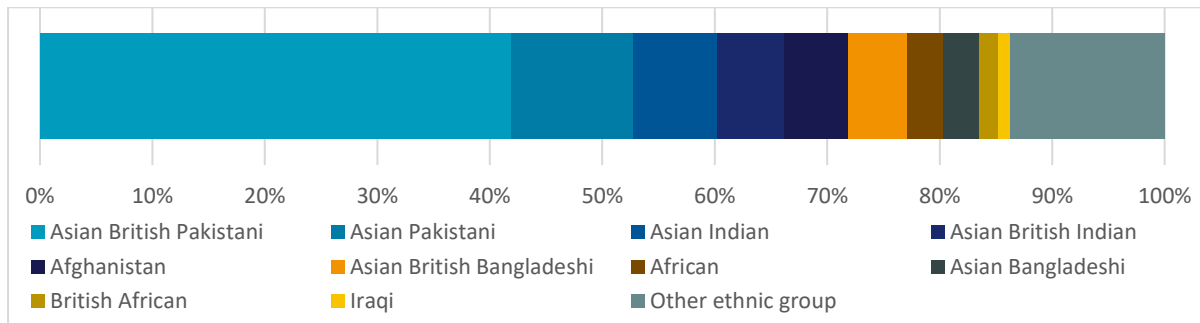
Bangladesh, which represents 8.2% of cases from 2012-2020 overall and between 7% and 11% of cases in any given year. This is followed by India (4.6% overall; 0%-11% annually) and Somalia (2.5% overall; 1%-8% annually). The top ten countries to which risk is related represent 71.2% of all cases recorded from 2012-2020.

Figure 1. Country to which forced marriage risk relates in cases recorded by the FMU 2012-2020



Karma Nirvana (who have run the national helpline since 2008, and act as the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the issue) do collect data on victim ethnicity for cases reported to the national Honour Based Abuse Helpline. In 2021, 452 forced marriage cases were recorded by Karma Nirvana, with ethnicity reported in 284 cases (63%). Of cases for which ethnicity was reported, 41.9% of victims were recorded as being 'Asian British Pakistani', 10.9% 'Asian Pakistani', 7.4% 'Asian Indian', and 6.0% 'Asian British Indian' (see figure 2). Cases were also recorded for Afghanistan, Asian British Bangladeshi, African, Asian Bangladeshi, British African, Iraqi, Somalian, White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish, among others.

Figure 2. Ethnicity of forced marriage victims recorded by Karma Nirvana in 2021



It should be noted that reported and recorded cases are not necessarily representative of all forced marriage cases that exist in the UK. The demographics of reported cases may be influenced by a range of factors, including the focus of official response efforts, the



communities in which awareness raising activities are conducted, and stereotypes and biases amongst those interacting with potential victims and identifying cases.

Tackling forced marriage in the UK

In 2005, the UK government set up the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) to provide support to victims and training and guidance to professionals. It is a joint unit of the Home Office and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

In 2007, the UK government passed the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act.² This was intended to protect individuals against being forced to enter into marriage without their free and full consent, and to protect individuals who had already been forced into marriage without such consent. It introduced Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPOs), which could be awarded by courts and applied for by the person to be protected or a third party. The legislation covers England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Similar legislation was passed in Scotland in 2011.³

Since 2017, 1185 FMPO applications have been lodged, and 1347 made.⁴ Multiple orders may be made against a single application. For example, a case with two victims might involve one application, covering both victims, but two FMPOs would be made (one for each). Between 2009 and 2019, cases continued to increase annually, except in the years 2012, 2014, and 2017.⁵

In 2014, forcing someone to marry, breaching an FMPO, and deceiving someone into leaving the country for the purpose of a forced marriage were made criminal offences.⁶ In the same year, the government published multi-agency statutory guidance for dealing with forced marriage (this has not been updated since publication).⁷ Guidance on how to recognise a forced marriage is available on the FMU's website.⁸ The FMU also ran a "Right to Choose" campaign in 2013, featuring films in English, with an "abridged audio" version in Arabic, Bengali, Punjabi, Somali, and Urdu.⁹

In April 2019, it became mandatory for the Home Office to collect information on honour-based abuse (HBA), including forced marriage, from police forces in England and Wales.¹⁰ The statistics are currently labelled "experimental" as "newly developed or innovative official statistics that are undergoing evaluation", and the Home Office admits it is aware of a number of data quality issues, including that HBA-related identifiers are not correctly applied to an offence.¹¹ Some police forces (for instance, Nottinghamshire) have dedicated units for HBA (including forced marriage), and/or for violence against women and girls (VAWG), but others do not.

UK statutory guidance mandates that Chief Executives, directors, and senior managers of all organisations that provide services to victims and potential victims of forced marriage (such as schools, health-care professionals, and service providers) and all relevant strategic bodies¹² ensure that their organisation has:

- A lead person with overall responsibility for safeguarding children, protecting adults with support needs or victims of domestic abuse, and (where possible) make the same person lead on forced marriage;
- Policies and procedures in place to protect those facing forced marriage, which are updated regularly; and
- A named person whose responsibility it is to ensure that forced marriage cases are handled, monitored, and recorded properly.¹³



It is not clear to what extent this statutory guidance is being followed by all relevant organisations, or whether the government monitors whether it is being followed, or evaluates the policies and practices being enacted.

Lastly, service providers and campaigners have been pushing in recent years to raise the legal age of marriage in the UK to 18. Currently in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, people can marry at age 16 so long as they have their parents' consent. In Scotland, they can marry at 16 without the need for parental consent. There are concerns that the current law allows parents to force their offspring into child marriages, saying that as *they* consent, the marriage should take place. A Private Members' Bill, sponsored by Pauline Latham MP, has recently received government support and a second reading in the House of Commons. It would raise the age of marriage in England and Wales to 18. It is argued that raising the age of marriage would end a "loophole" which both allows child marriage to occur in the UK and makes it easier for some parents to force their children to marry (in line with the definition of childhood as ending at 18 contained in article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child). There are, however, concerns about the implications of different legal ages of marriage (and laws concerning parental consent) in England and Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland.

There are several civil society organisations working to help protect people in the UK from forced marriage. These include Karma Nirvana; Southall Black Sisters; IKWRO Women's Rights Organisation; the Naz and Matt Foundation; Gloucestershire Sisters; Solace Women's Aid; Respond; Savera; Imkaan; Jewish Women's Aid; Refuge; Freedom Charity; Galop; IMECE Women's Centre; Juno Women's Aid; and Freedom Charity. They provide services to victims and survivors, provide training to relevant stakeholders, campaign on the issue, and, in some cases, co-design police initiatives with the government (such as the "spoon" campaign to help identify victims at UK airports¹⁴).

The Impact of Covid-19

It is well-recognised that Covid-19 has had a disproportionate effect on ethnic minorities in the UK. A study published in May 2020 showed that almost all ethnic minority groups had higher risks of dying from Covid-19 compared to the White British majority.¹⁵ In the UK, people from ethnic minorities are almost three times as likely to contract Covid-19 and five times more likely to experience serious outcomes than White British people of comparable age.¹⁶ Evidence suggests this is largely because of social inequalities such as housing, occupational risk, and access to healthcare.¹⁷

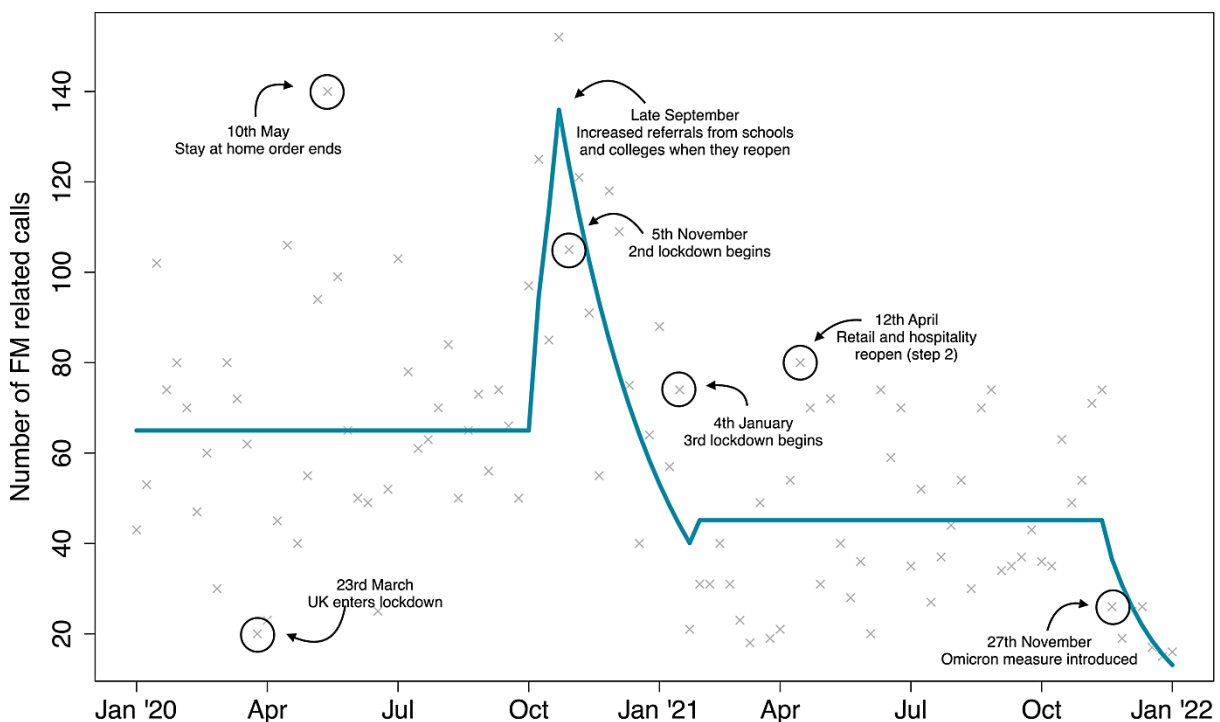
In addition, some ethnic groups were more likely to be made economically vulnerable because of Covid-related restrictions than others (including the White British majority), particularly through working in sectors likely to have been shut-down.¹⁸ Bangladeshis appear to have been particularly at risk of suffering from economic impacts: 29% of young, and 40% of 30-44 year-old Bangladeshis work in sectors that were shut-down in the initial "lockdown" (and many other periods of restrictions between March 2020 and the present day).¹⁹ Moreover, 29% of Bangladeshi working-age men both work in a shut-down sector and have a partner who is not in paid work (compared to only 1% of White British men).²⁰ This situation exacerbated the impacts of disruptions to employment on livelihoods. People from Black African and Bangladeshi communities are also more likely to have experienced mental health issues than their White British counterparts.²¹

Given that we know that people from minority-ethnic communities are also more at risk of forced marriage, we can infer that this disproportionate impact of Covid-19 has also impacted those experiencing or vulnerable to forced marriage within these communities. Similarly, like all citizens of the UK, they will have been impacted by the various restrictions imposed

between March 2020 and the present day. The important question, however, is exactly how they have been impacted, which remains somewhat unclear.

There can be financial motives for forced marriage, and these may have increased in communities that experienced financial insecurity and significant loss of income because of Covid-related restrictions. On the other hand, weddings can be expensive, particularly if they involve overseas travel, and may therefore have been deferred or delayed due to the economic impact of Covid-19. Overall, the Forced Marriage Unit in 2020 received 56% of the number of calls it received in 2019, and 50% of what it had received in 2018. This may indicate that forced marriage decreased in the UK in 2020. However, it may simply mean that Covid-related restrictions made it harder for people at risk to be identified to, or themselves make contact with, the FMU.²²

Figure 3. Change-point analysis of calls to Karma Nirvana 2020-2021



In the week that the first lockdown was announced in the UK, calls to Karma Nirvana about forced marriage dropped dramatically, rising significantly as soon as the “stay at home” order was lifted on 10 May 2020 (see figure 1).²³ This suggests that third parties found it harder to spot signs of risk during lockdown. Given that calls in general rapidly increased in the “lockdown” (about other forms of HBA, VAWG, and domestic abuse), it suggests more that the lockdown, and Covid-19 itself, took forced marriage off the agenda for perpetrators rather than that victims were unable to access help. Restrictions on both domestic and international travel, and household mixing, as well as on official weddings, meant it was harder to force someone to marry, while abiding by Covid-19 restrictions. However, Karma Nirvana’s helpline did record cases of people being subjected to forced marriage via Skype.

There was another peak in calls when schools fully re-opened in September 2020, after having been closed, or only partially open, since mid-March 2020. This suggests both that teachers became more aware of potential cases at this point, and also that victims themselves (and their friends, who are also responsible for referrals to both Karma Nirvana and the FMU) were more able to contact the helpline. This fell rapidly through the rest of the year, mapping onto



restrictions gradually tightening until England was in another lockdown by 5 November 2020 and continuing through the changing restrictions over the Christmas period, and further lockdown from 4 January 2021).

Interestingly, lifting of restrictions did not see calls regarding forced marriage in 2021 rise to the level of 2020. In general, the helpline received fewer calls. This may suggest that on-going Covid-19 restrictions, and the impact of these and of Covid-19 itself, decreased cases of forced marriage in England in 2021. As noted, calls in total decreased in 2021, which might mean that people, in general, found it harder to contact Karma Nirvana's helpline. This said, they did manage to contact the helpline during similar periods of restriction in 2020, and thus we might be able to say that, in general, HBA and forced marriage decreased in 2021 compared to 2020.

As well as restrictions on household mixing, weddings, and the general economic impact of Covid-19, we should also note that there have been strict travel restrictions imposed on the UK by countries to which people are known to travel for forced marriage (particularly in 2020), and strict restrictions on entering the UK from some of these countries (particularly in 2021). These may well also have impacted forced marriage. This said, as noted, there is some evidence people were being subjected to forced marriage through remote technology such as Skype.

Analysis comparing calls to the FMU and the number of flights entering or leaving the UK in 2020 showed that there was almost no correlation. That is, as the number of flights increased or decreased, there was no comparable change in calls to the FMU. However, there were comparable differences when we compared case and death rates. This suggests that travel restrictions may have had some impact, but not in all cases.

We were particularly concerned that the requirement to enter quarantine on return from countries put on the "red list"—which included Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh—would negatively impact on those at risk of forced marriage. It was not clear, for instance, that their quarantine costs would be covered by the UK government as part of repatriation. It was also not clear that the usual safety precautions—such as being met by police off their plane and taken to safe accommodation—would be followed regarding either entering or leaving quarantine.²⁴

There was also a significant decline in FMPOs in 2020: 235 compared to 340 in 2019 and 283 in 2018.²⁵ There were, however, still more than in 2017 (202), and a comparable number to 2016 (231). Interestingly, there was a peak in FMPOs applied for in the second quarter of 2020, which broadly corresponds to the "lockdown".²⁶ This suggests that at least some third parties were able to spot risk, and/or that victims were able to contact their solicitors and barristers to request an FMPO. It also suggests that risk, for some people, increased during the "lockdown", which goes against the evidence we have from Karma Nirvana's call-line.

As regards the UK government response, during the pandemic, Family Courts and Tribunals (where FMPOs are awarded) prioritised "injunctions and orders dealing with issues of care, abduction [and] emergency protection".²⁷ The FMU continued its work and expanded provision of training to stakeholders. The government established a Victim and Witness Silver Command Group for Domestic Abuse in March 2020, which meets fortnightly, and involved representatives from sector organisations and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner.²⁸ Karma Nirvana were included in this Group, and thus could speak for victims of forced marriage. The Foreign Secretary also confirmed in a letter to the Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee that they had worked "with Social Services and our funded partner, Southall Black Sisters Trust, to ensure victims can quarantine in safe accommodation", and had worked with the



police and others to ensure the safety of victims needing to quarantine.²⁹ He said he was unaware of any case in which victims had had to pay their own quarantine costs.

Persisting Obstacles/Challenges

Persisting patriarchal and/or misogynist attitudes (alongside, in some cases, homophobic attitudes) are a key obstacle to ending forced marriage in the UK, in all ethnic groups (including the White British majority). Much more work needs to be done on understanding “honour” and “honour based abuse”, as well as work on understanding prevalence, and monitoring and evaluating various policy initiatives aimed at ending FM. Better reporting of forced marriage-related crimes is needed by all statutory safeguarding bodies, as well as increasing training to give “first responders” better understanding of the problem, and greater confidence to tackle signs of risk in a way which does not put potential victims at further risk of harm.

Currently, the FMU and Karma Nirvana’s forced marriage helpline both exist for reporting instances of forced marriage, which can also be directly reported to the police. Karma Nirvana have received over 80,000 calls about HBA (including forced marriage) since being founded,³⁰ while the FMU have received 12,987 calls³¹. In 2020/2021 the police recorded 125 “forced marriage offences” in England and Wales.³²

All three mechanisms are evidently used by members of ethnic minorities, but there is still a significant problem of under-reporting. Forced marriage victims have access to justice through the use of FMPOs, 2,049 of which have been made since 2009.³³ However, as of early 2019, there had only been three successful cases brought against perpetrators of forced marriage (with four defendants found guilty).³⁴ Police and the Crown Prosecution Service often cite the unwillingness of victims to bring cases, or act as witnesses as the reasons for low prosecution rates. However, civil society organisations challenge whether enough is being done to support victims to access justice and legal remedies (as with many other instances of VAWG). Given the demographic trends in forced marriage cases identified within the UK, this represents a significant access to justice issue for minority communities.

Recommendations

We recommend the following:

- The Victim and Witness Silver Command Group for Domestic Abuse should continue post-pandemic, and continue to be held via remote technology, allowing the participation of NGOs not based in London.
- The Home Office should continue to collect statistics from police forces on forced marriage, publish these in a timely manner (including the break-down by force of different forms of HBA, rather than aggregating all HBA together), and invest in improving the accuracy of data recorded.
- Post-pandemic, the default should remain that people see health-care officials alone, as during the pandemic this seems to have improved people’s opportunity for reporting and identifying forced marriage risk.
- The UK government should work to establish clearer data on forced marriage prevalence in the UK.
- The UK government should work to improve the support offered to victims in order to take more successful prosecutions for forced marriage to court.



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