One minute guide

Forced Marriage

What is a forced marriage?

A forced marriage is where one or both people do not (or in cases of people with learning disabilities or reduced capacity, cannot) consent to the marriage and they are pressured, or abuse is used, to force them. It is recognised in the UK as a form of domestic abuse and a serious abuse of human rights. Most cases of forced marriage involve girls and young women, although victims can be of any age and some victims are male. The legal minimum age for marriage is 18.

Forced marriage is not the same as an 'arranged marriage'. In an arranged marriage, the choice of whether or not to accept the arrangement ultimately is with those due to be married.

What does the law say about forced marriage?

The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022, which came into force in February 2023, raised the minimum age for marriage from 16 (with consent of a parent) to 18. This means that no 16 or 17 year old is legally allowed to marry or enter a civil partnership, even if they have parental consent.

The Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, under Section 121, made it a criminal offence in England, Wales and Scotland to force someone to marry. This includes: taking someone overseas to force them to marry (whether or not the forced marriage takes place); or marrying someone who lacks the mental capacity to consent to the marriage (whether they are pressured to or not). The offence carries a maximum penalty of seven years' imprisonment.

The court can make a Forced Marriage Protection Order (FMPO) under the Family Law Act 1996 (as amended by the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007). An FMPO protects a person from any *attempt* to be forced into marriage, *being* forced into a marriage and those who *have been* forced into a marriage. The order can also demand that perpetrators stop any intimidation, reveal the victim's location and hand over passports, otherwise they could face imprisonment. Breach of a FMPO carries a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment.

What are the key motives associated with forced marriage?

The key motives associated with forced marriage include:

- **Controlling unwanted behaviour** (from those being forced to marry) such as, alcohol and drug use, wearing make-up or behaving in what is perceived to be, a westernised manner; unwanted sexuality - particularly the behaviour and sexuality of women (including perceived promiscuity, or being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender)
- **Preventing 'unsuitable' relationships,** e.g. outside the ethnic, religious or 'caste' group.
- **Protecting perceived cultural ideals.** Protecting perceived religious ideals which are misguided; protecting 'family honour' or 'izzat' (defined as honour, or prestige).
- **Responding to peer group or family pressure**, including attempting to strengthen family links or fulfil long-standing family commitments.
- **Achieving financial gain**, for example ensuring land, property and wealth remain within the family, or assisting claims for UK residence and citizenship.
- **Ensuring care for a child or adult with special educational needs or disabilities**, when parents or existing carers are unable to fulfil that role.

What are potential warning signs or indicators of Forced Marriage

The potential warning signs or indicators of Forced Marriage include:

- **Education**: absence, request for extended leave, home education; failure to return from visit to country of origin; surveillance by family; deterioration in behaviour, achievement or punctuality.
- **Health**: self-harm; attempted suicide; eating disorders; depression; pregnancy, being accompanied to health appointments.
- **Police involvement:** other siblings reported missing; domestic violence; threats or attempts to kill or harm.
- **Family history**: siblings forced to marry or married young; self-harm or suicide of sibling(s); death of a parent; missing and running away from home; unreasonable restrictions (physical and financial).
- **Employment** – poor performance or attendance; inflexible working arrangements; not allowed to work, accompanied to and from work.

What should practitioners do?

Practitioners should become familiar with the potential motives and warning signs/ indicators associated with Forced Marriage. If they identify risks or receive a disclosure associated with forced marriage, practitioners should always take the issue seriously and recognise the potential risk of significant harm to the victim.

Practitioners must not:

- Send the victim away or dismiss the allegation of forced marriage;
- Inform the victim's family, friends or members of the community that they have sought help;
- Attempt to initiate, encourage or facilitate family counselling, mediation or reconciliation.
- Persuade or send the victim back to their family, where the victim has expressly said they cannot return.
- Assume there is someone in the family who will protect the victim, even if the victim has indicated there is such a person;
- Assume that it is a 'cultural issue'.

Where information suggests that a child or young person, under the age of 18 is at risk of being forced to marry, practitioners must contact Duty and Advice Team immediately, who in partnership with the Police may undertake a Section 47 Enquiry (safeguarding).

Key contacts and further information

[Duty and Advice Team](#) tel: 0113 376 0336 - [Out of hours](#) tel: 0113 535 0600. Leeds has produced detailed practice guidance on working with children at risk of forced marriage and associated honour-based abuse, which is available [here](#).

Support and advice is available from specialist charity [Karma Nirvana](#) on tel: 0800 5999 247.

Information is available from the government website on [Forced Marriage](#) and practitioners can contact the [Forced Marriage Unit](#) tel: 020 7008 0151

More information can be found in the [Right to Choose](#) government guidance on forced marriage and ['Multi-agency practice guidelines: Handling cases of Forced Marriage'](#) and in the West Yorkshire Online Procedures—[Forced Marriage](#).

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