

UK researchers exposing scale and danger of forced marriages

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A study has revealed for the first time that the crime of forced marriage remains rife in England and Wales.

The research on Forced Marriage Protection Orders, a civil injunction designed to prevent forced marriages, uncovers the scale of the problem and proposes new measures urgently needed to better protect victims.

Forced [marriage](#), where one or both people do not or cannot consent to a marriage, is classified as a form of domestic violence and often leads to further crimes, including rape. The study, jointly led by the University of Lincoln and University of Bristol, highlights the pressure forced marriage puts on police forces and local authorities nationwide.

Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPOs) are now being granted by family courts daily in a bid to curb the issue. Over the past decade, around 250—which amounts to approximately five per week—have been approved each year.

Co-lead author Aisha K. Gill, Professor of Criminology at the University of Bristol, said, "This research shows us for the first time how Forced Marriage Protection Orders are a double-edged sword. Although they can prevent forced marriage and protect victims, these orders can also increase the risk of honor-based violence, including abduction, physical assaults, and rape."

Other key findings from the research included:

- The most common age of women and men subject to forced marriages was 16–21, but girls (and boys) as young as 11 were also victims.
- People with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, Trans, queer+ (LGBTQ+) were especially vulnerable to forced marriage.
- While it is commonly believed that forced marriages occur in South Asian or Middle Eastern diaspora communities, they were also found to occur in Irish, Nigerian and Somali communities, among others.
- In extreme cases, efforts to prevent arrange marriage have resulted in perpetrators fleeing the country, kidnapping victims, issuing threats of violence, and committing torture and rape.

Since the minimum age of marriage in England and Wales was raised to 18 earlier this year, any conduct undertaken to cause a child to marry is forced marriage, even if coercion is not used.

Project lead Sundari Anitha, Professor of Gender, Violence, and Work, at the University of Lincoln, said, "This recent change adds to the steps that have been taken to prevent forced marriage but we need to ensure that existing provisions deliver safety for victims. Although the injunctive remedy offered by Forced Marriage Protection Orders has great promise, more work must be done to fully realize the potential."

The research used data from nearly 600 case files from [police forces](#) nationwide. Around 40 FMPO reported judgements were analyzed and the study also comprised more than 50 interviews with practitioners as well as victims/survivors of forced marriage. This provided an in-depth overview of the gaps in protection and possible ways to address them.

The main recommendations were to:

- Gain an understanding of more subtle forms of coercion, such as emotional pressure, and new types, for example institutional imprisonment in another country.
- Implement better and more co-ordinated safeguarding between different agencies which also continues after the FMPO has been obtained.
- Systems to flag up and follow up when FMPOs expire, as this is often when the pressure to marry resumes.

The interviews with victims/survivors and analysis of police case files helped the researchers gain unique insights into various traumatic situations of forced marriage. One case involved a 17-year-old Indian girl, living in the U.K., who was raped. Instead of supporting her through the ordeal, her parents regarded it as a source of family shame and

pressured her to agree to marriage, which was presented as the only way to overcome this. After initial resistance, she eventually gave in and agreed to be engaged but with the marriage looming reached out to the police. Support was provided with the resulting FMPO allowing her to avoid the marriage and leave home to live in secure accommodation.

Another concerned a 20-year-old Saudi woman, brought up in the U.K., who confided to her family she was in relationship with and living with another woman. She was tricked into moving back in with her parents, where she overheard their plans to send her back to Saudi Arabia and marry her off. Her father choked her unconscious repeatedly while performing exorcisms to rid her of "demons" and she was forced to drink and bathe in "holy water." With the help of her girlfriend, she escaped and applied for an FMPO and eventually managed to be housed safely in a secret location. Today she is rebuilding a life with her girlfriend.

There was also a 21-year-old Somali man living in London, who secured his parents' reluctant consent for him to marry his Somali girlfriend. But on discovering that their son had been smoking and disapproving of his wife's clothing and westernized ways, he was escorted back to Somalia under the pretense of his grandmother being ill. There, he was incarcerated in a "cultural rehabilitation center" and put under duress to divorce his wife and remarry a woman of their choice. After trying to escape without success, his wife contacted the police and they sought an FMPO, which stipulated that the man's parents had to bring him back to the U.K. where he was reunited with his wife.

Professor Anitha said, "These orders are different from other injunctions for domestic violence, where the victim has left the abusive relationship and the injunction prevents the perpetrator from contacting the victim. Most people who seek them continue to live in their family home or remain in touch with the perpetrators, their parents.

"These [young people](#) are trying to balance their need to protect themselves from a [forced marriage](#) while avoiding a complete family estrangement. When services continue to work together after an order is granted, they can create a protective shield for continued safety. If orders are treated as an end in themselves, it can expose victims to further serious harm."

Professor Gill added, "Factors such as a lack of knowledge about the complicated coercive pressures on the victims/survivors, fissures between the agencies, missteps in multi-agency working and the gatekeeping of services due to financial constraints often impeded the provision of effective support.

"Where agencies worked together and practitioners understood these lived realities, the risks associated with Forced Marriage Protection Orders were minimized."

The report findings were presented to MPs and representatives from a range of frontline safeguarding services at the House of Commons this week.

Provided by University of Bristol

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