



Research Finding: Somalia Case Study

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There was a greater-than-average decline in cases of forced marriage handled by the UK government's Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) involving Somalia in 2020. This may be due to Covid-related restrictions, particularly on international travel.

There was a spike in cases involving 16–17-year-olds, who made up 47% of 2020 cases compared to 16% in 2019. This may show the impact of school and college closures on the ability of young adults at risk, and those tasked with safeguarding them, to seek help and/or prevent forced marriages.

Despite severe travel restrictions, 9 people contacted the FMU for the first time once they were already in Somalia. Though this is half the number of 2019, it shows that significant travel restrictions, and the impact of Covid-19, did not prevent *all* people being taken overseas for the purpose of forced marriage

Somalia frequently features as a “focus country” in statistics from the FMU. In this Case Study we are interested in whether the 2020 statistics published by the FMU show any significant impacts on cases with Somalia as a “focus country” during the Covid-19 pandemic

Background

According to the FMU, ‘a “focus country” is the country to which the risk of forced marriage relates. This could be the country where the forced marriage is due to take place, the country where it has taken place, and or the country in which the spouse is currently residing’.²

Since 2017, the FMU has provided more detail on cases from the most frequent ‘focus countries’.³ Somalia has been a “focus country” in 241 cases handled by the FMU

since 2015; on average, it was a “focus country” in 3% of cases handled by the FMU year-on-year between 2012 and 2019.

The FMU provides help to citizens of any country inside the UK, and to British nationals overseas.⁴ That is, in cases where Somalia is listed as a “focus country”, the case might involve a British national taken to Somalia for a forced marriage; a British national being forced to marry a Somali national in the UK; and/or a Somali national being forced to marry someone in the UK.



Number of Cases

	Number cases where Somalia is the focus country	Total Number of Cases
2017	91	1196
2018	38	1507
2019	31	1355
2020	15	759

Table 1: Cases handled by the FMU where Somalia was a “focus country”, 2017-2020.⁵

In general, in 2020 the FMU handled 50% of the number of cases they handled in 2018, and 56% of the number in 2019. For cases specifically connected to Somalia, in 2020 they handled 40% of the number of cases in 2018, and 48% of the number of cases in 2019. There was a more substantial decline, then, in cases where Somalia was a focus country than in cases overall.

In 2020, 93% of cases handled by the FMU did not have the UK as their “focus country”. In 2019, that figure was 95%, in 2018 93%, and in 2017 90%. The relative decline in cases involving Somalia, then, is not due to a general decline in cases involving non-UK countries. This said, it is worth noting that there was a significant decrease in cases where Somalia was the focus country between 2017 and 2019, and the decrease in 2020 may have been due to causes other than Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions.

Sex of Victims

	% Female		% Male	% Unknown
2017	71.4		28.6	0
2018	53		34	13
2019	77		23	0
2020	67		33	0

Table 2: Sex of victims in cases handled by the FMU 2017-2020 in cases with Somalia as a “focus country”.⁶

The percentage of female and male victims where Somalia is a focus country has fluctuated in the years for which we have more detailed data. The 67/33% split in 2020 is in line with previous years. It would appear, then, that Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions had no discernible impact on the sex of victims in cases where Somalia is the focus country.

This said, it is worth noting that – in general – 20% of cases handled by the FMU involve male victims, and Somalia has a higher percentage of male victims in every year (29.65%), both before, and during, the Covid-19 pandemic. As forced marriage is generally assumed to mainly – perhaps only – affect females, this is an interesting feature of cases where Somalia is the focus country.

Age of Victims

Age Range	2017	2018	2019	2020
15 & under	23 (25.3%)	<5	<5	<5
16-17	27 (29.7%)	5 (13%)	5 (16%)	7 (47%)
18-21	25 (27.5%)	16 (42%)	11 (35%)	<5
22-25	10 (11.0%)	9 (24%)	<5	
26-30	<5	<5	<5	<5
31-40	-	<5	<5	<5
41 & over	-	-	-	-
Unknown	5 (5.5%)	<5	2 (6%)	

Table 3: Age Range of Victims in Cases Handled by the FMU 2017-2020 with Somalia as a “focus country”.⁷



Data shows that, in general, people under the age of 25 are most at risk of forced marriage when Somalia is the focus country.

In 2017, there was a roughly equal spread of cases in the age ranges 15-and-under through to 22-25; in 2018 and 2019 a noticeable peak in cases affecting 18–21-year-olds. In 2020, almost 50% of cases involved people ages 16-17. This looks like a significant increase on previous years:

however, the numerical increase is only 2 due to the decrease in the overall number of cases.

It is important to note that when dealing with figures this low many factors can impact the number of cases in a given year, even the actions of a singular family. Still, the change in the age of victims in 2020 compared to previous years may have been influenced by Covid-related restrictions such as school closures.

UK Region	2017	2018	2019	2020
London	64 (70.3%)	21 (55%)	20 (65%)	7 (47%)
East Midlands	0 ⁸	<5	0	0
West Midlands	<5	<5	<5	<5
North West	7 (7.7%)	<5	<5	<5
Northern Ireland	0	0	0	<5
South East	<5	0	0	<5
South West	<5	<5	0	0
Wales	0	0	<5	<5
Yorkshire & The Humber	<5	0	<5	0
Unknown	0	10 (26%)	7 (23%)	0

Table 4: UK Regions of cases with Somalia as the focus country, 2017-2020.⁹

The largest number of cases in 2020 were reported in London which accounted for 47% of overall reports relating to Somalia as a focus country. This reflects other years, where London has accounted for the majority of cases.

Of note is the mention of Northern Ireland in 2020, the first year it has featured in FMU statistics where Somalia is a focus-country. This is probably not related to the Covid-19 pandemic, but interesting, nonetheless.

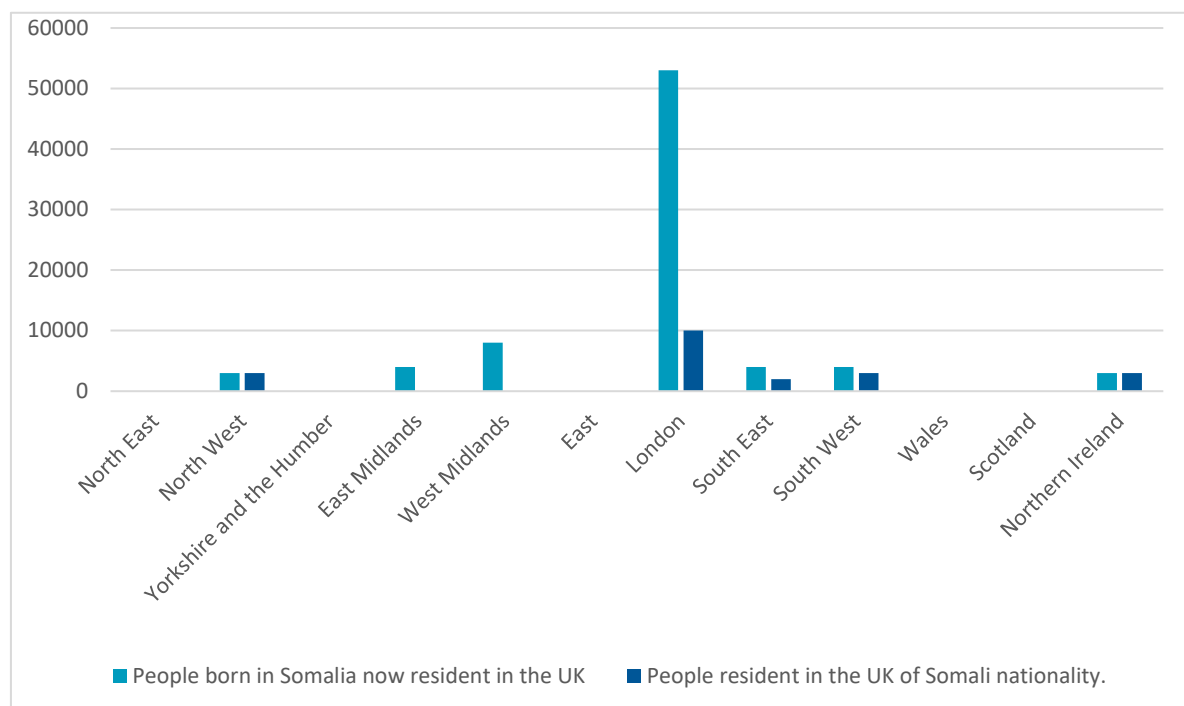


Figure 1: Number of people born in Somalia, and Somali nationals, resident in the UK in 2020.¹⁰

According to the Office for National Statistics¹¹, in 2020, 79,000 people living in the UK were born in Somalia, 76,000 of them in England.

As Figure 1 shows, both when we consider people's country of birth, and their nationality, we can see that London has the highest number, and perhaps it should not therefore be surprising that it also accounts for the highest number of cases handled by the FMU year-on-year with Somalia as the focus-country.

London was mentioned by the Prime Minister on 16 March 2020 as being 'ahead' of the rest of the country regarding Covid-19 infections.¹² After the first national lockdown (starting 23 March 2020), and consequent easing of

restrictions, London was almost immediately put into Tier 2 ("High Alert") in October 2020¹³, and then entered into the second national "lockdown" in November¹⁴. It was put back into Tier 2 on 2 December 2020¹⁵; raised to Tier 3 on 16 December¹⁶; and Tier 4 on 20 December¹⁷.

London therefore experienced tighter restrictions than some other areas of the country, though not for as long a time as places such as Leicester, Greater Manchester, or East Lancashire. These local restrictions may account for the greater decrease in cases relating to forced marriage with Somalia as a focus country handled by the FMU in 2020 compared to the national average. This said, restrictions on international travel may also have played a part

Victim Status

“Victim status” refers to whether the victim was in the UK when they contacted the FMU, or overseas (i.e., in Somalia).

	UK	Overseas	Unknown
2017	74.7%	25.3%	-
2018	47%	53%	-
2019	35%	58%	6%
2020	40%	60%	-

Table 6: Victim Status in cases where Somalia was the “focus country” handled by FMU 2017-2020.¹⁸

Since 2017, an increasing number of victims in cases where Somalia is the focus country have first made contact with the FMU when they were already overseas. Although the actual number of people involved was roughly half that of 2019, 60% of people were already in Somalia when they first made contact with the FMU in 2020. This is a very similar percentage to 2019.

This occurred despite the Covid-related restrictions on international travel introduced from March 2020.

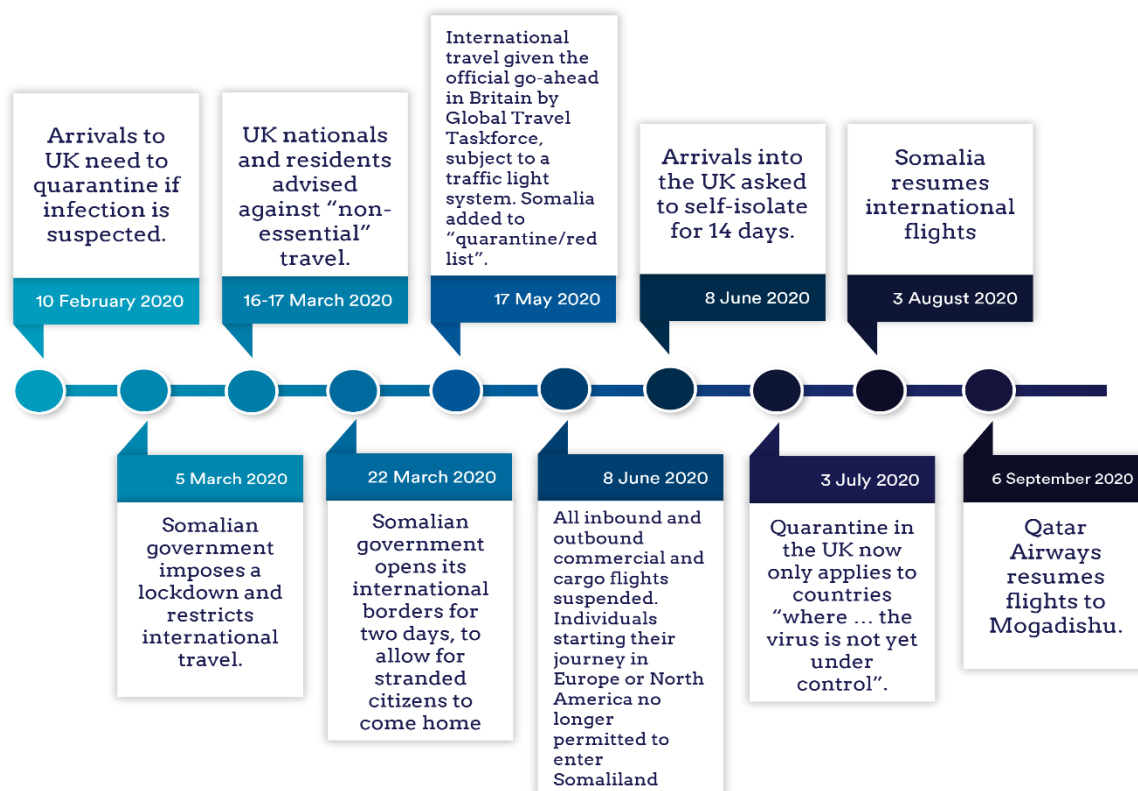


Figure 2: Timeline of relevant travel restriction



Given travel restrictions imposed by both British and Somali governments, travel to and from Somalia was limited in 2020. Travel became more difficult in early March 2020, when Somalia imposed a “shutdown” and suspended all domestic and international flights – the latter of which lasted until August, with some airlines only resuming flights to Mogadishu in mid-September.¹⁹

UK citizens/residents were advised against “inessential” travel (though travelling for a wedding may have counted as being “essential”).²⁰ After the first “lockdown”, the FCDO advice against international travel remained, and self-isolation rules were brought in for arrivals to the UK.²¹

The main window for international travel to/from Somalia, then, would be January to March 2020 and September to December 2020. Data from the FMU suggests that at least 9 people were taken abroad for forced marriage in 2020, presumably within these time-periods. In general, 32% of all cases (243 cases) handled by the FMU in 2020 occurred between January and March. These *could* have included all the cases where Somalia was a focus country, but probably at least some occurred after travel restrictions were first brought in.

Interestingly, given the age of the majority of victims in cases handled by the FMU in 2020 with Somalia as the focus country, the period of time when Somalia allowed international flights does not coincide with school or college holidays. This suggests that some 16–17-year-olds were taken abroad for forced marriage when they ought to have been in full-time education or training. School and college closures and moves to studying at home (for university students) and working from home (for all but key-workers) may, then, have made it harder for relevant safeguarding authorities prevent young adults being taken abroad for forced marriage.

On the other hand, we should note that fewer people, in total, were already abroad when they first made contact with the FMU in 2020 than in

other years (9 in 2020, compared to 18 in 2019). Moreover, we cannot tell from the FMU’s data whether, in other years, young people who should be in full-time education and/or training have been taken abroad for forced marriage outside of school holidays. Still, that 9 people were already abroad when they first contacted the FMU may suggest that Covid-related restrictions made it harder for them to contact the FMU, or for concerned third parties to contact it on their behalf.

Even when Somalia’s airports were open to international flights, travel from the UK was only supposed to be for “essential” purposes, suggesting that travel for weddings could have been judged as “essential”, or that people were travelling abroad under false pretences in order to force people to marry. More investigation of the planned weddings which were providing the reason for travel might have prevented victims being taken abroad for forced marriage in 2020.

Similarly, these findings suggest even more might be done by UK Border Force to spot signs of people being taken out of the UK for forced marriages, and by the UK Home Office to provide help at airports. That said, people do not always know they are being taken out of the country for a forced marriage, though general travel “for holidays” to Somalia should not have been possible during most of 2020. However, other “essential” purposes (for instance, attending family funerals) could have been used as an excuse to travel for the purposes of forced marriage.

Further Work

We continue to monitor the impact of Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions on forced marriage in the UK. This case study is part of a series on all the “focus countries” for which the FMU has provided detailed data in 2020 – Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Somalia. Once we have prepared all these case studies, we will be able to consider broader findings and recommendations.

References

¹ This is an update from the ESRC-funded project (ES/V015270/1) investigating the impact of Covid-19 and Covid-related decision-making on forced marriage in the UK.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2020>

³ See data available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/forced-marriage>.

⁵ See data available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

⁶ See data available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

⁷ See data available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

⁸ Where we have put "0", the FMU did not mention this region in the relevant year's statistics: all regions mentioned in the statistics year-on-year have cases associated with them.

⁹ See data available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

¹⁰ "0" for Wales, and for nationality in the West Midlands represents a lack of data, as this is confidential. See

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationalityunderlyingdatasheets>.

¹¹ See data available here:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationalityunderlyingdatasheets>

¹² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-51910748>.

¹³ <https://www.london.gov.uk/updates/news-feed?fi=2656#news-item--2656>.

¹⁴ <https://www.london.gov.uk/updates/news-feed?fi=2728#news-item--2728>.

¹⁵ <https://www.london.gov.uk/updates/news-feed?fi=2806#news-item--2806>.

¹⁶ <https://www.london.gov.uk/updates/news-feed?fi=2880#news-item--2880>.

¹⁷ <https://www.london.gov.uk/updates/news-feed?fi=2901#news-item--2901>.

¹⁸ See data available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

¹⁹ <https://travelbans.org/africa/somalia/>. Last accessed 4.11.21.

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51917562> Last accessed 25.8.21.;

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-16-march-2020>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/travel-advice-foreign-secretary-statement-17-march-2020>;

²¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-announces-new-public-health-measures-for-all-uk-arrivals>;

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-the-coronavirus-press-conference-3-june-2020>;

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-3-july-2020>.