



Research Finding: Afghanistan Case Study

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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.



The number of forced marriages handled by the UK Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) where Afghanistan was the “focus country” decreased significantly in 2020. There were 56% of the number of cases in 2019, and 73% of those in 2018.

The decrease may have been due to Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions. However, it may have been due to other events in Afghanistan in 2020 (e.g. ongoing violence, and disputed elections).

No particular type of forced marriage case seems to have been specifically affected by Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions. That is, no noticeable impacts can be seen on the sex, age or location of victims.

A similar percentage of victims were in the UK when their situation came to the attention of the FMU as in 2019 and 2018: fewer than 5 individuals were already in Afghanistan in 2020 (around 50% of the figure for 2019 and 2018). This may mean fewer people were taken abroad in 2020.

Afghanistan 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 Afghanistan 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’.¹

The FMU provides help to citizens of any country inside the UK, and to British nationals overseas.² This means, in cases where Afghanistan is listed as a “focus country”, the case might involve a British national taken to Afghanistan for a forced marriage; a British national being forced to marry an Afghan national in the UK; and/or an Afghan national being forced to marry someone from any other nationality in the UK.

Since 2017, the FMU have provided more information on cases relating to the most-frequent “focus countries”. The FMU started providing detailed statistics for Afghanistan in 2018.

Number of Cases

	Number of Cases with Afghanistan as the “Focus Country”	Total number of cases handled by the FMU
2018	41	1,507
2019	54	1,355
2020	30	759

Table 1: Number of cases handled by the FMU where Afghanistan was a “focus country”, 2018-2020.

In general, in 2020 the FMU handled 50% of the number of cases they handled in 2018, and 56% of the number in 2019. Cases where Afghanistan was the “focus country” accounted for 4% of the total number of cases handled by the FMU.³ In 2019, this was also 4% of total cases; and in 2018, 3% of the total.⁴ Thus, there was a 44% decrease in cases with Afghanistan as the focus country between 2020 and 2019, but the proportion of all cases remained the same.

The decrease in cases where Afghanistan was the focus country (56%) is the same as the decrease in overall cases handled by the FMU (56%), comparing 2020 to 2019. In general, it seems likely that the decrease in total cases was due to Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions around the world. However, given

on-going conflict in Afghanistan and a worsening political situation there (including disputed elections), the decrease may also have other causes.

Sex of Victims

	% Female	% Male	% Unknown
2018	83	12	5
2019	85	15	0
2020	80	20	0

Table 2: Sex of victims in cases handled by the FMU 2018-2020 in cases with Afghanistan as a “focus country”.

Prior to 2020, 83-85% of cases handled by the FMU with Afghanistan as the focus country related to female victims: in 2020 this was 80%.

Particularly when we consider that the total numbers are (relatively-speaking) small (30 individuals, in 2020), Covid-19 does not seem to have had a significant effect on the sex of those most at risk of forced marriage where Afghanistan is the focus country.

The increase in male victims of forced marriage from 12% of cases in 2018 to 20% of cases in 2020 looks more significant, but actually represents a small increase in real numbers (from 5 to 6).⁵ However, it is worth noting that between 5 and 8 men each year contact the FMU about a forced marriage with Afghanistan as a focus country, hence the stereotypical view that forced marriage is something which only affects women and

girls is not accurate. This is in line with the sex ratio of total cases (21% male, 79% female in 2020, 20.5% male, 79.5% female on average pre-pandemic).

Age of Victims

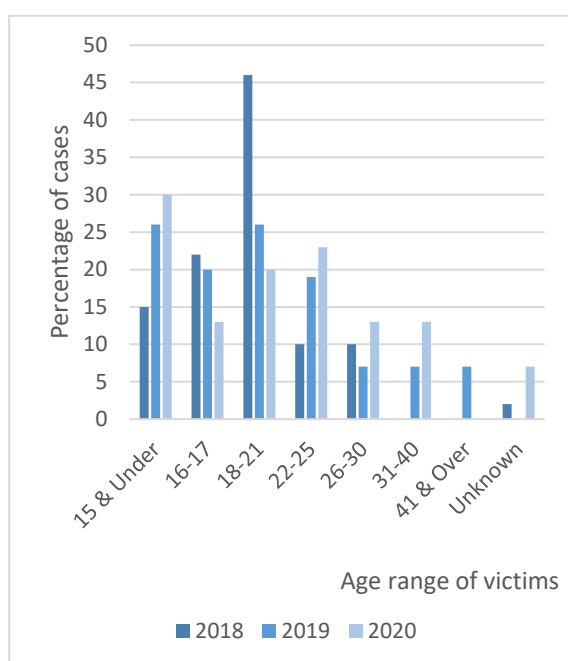


Figure 1: Age Range of Victims in Cases Handled by the FMU 2018-2020 with Afghanistan as a “focus country” (percentage). “<5” real cases treated as 4.

Data shows that people under the age of 25 are more likely to be victims of forced marriage with Afghanistan as a “focus country”. Fewer than five victims each year are aged 26 or above, both before the pandemic and during it.

There is no discernible pattern regarding victims aged 25 and under where Afghanistan is the focus country. The percentage of victims under-15, for instance, was similar in 2019 and 2020, but twice that of 2018. Similarly, the percentage of victims aged 18-21

was similar in 2019 and 2020, but half that of 2018. The most significant difference involves people aged 16-17. In raw numbers, there were 9 cases in 2018, 11 cases in 2019, and <5 cases in 2020.

Overall, data shows a decrease of cases of forced marriages handled by the FMU for people aged under 22 years in 2020. This might represent an actual decrease in forced marriages in 2020 for this age-group, where Afghanistan is the focus country. Alternatively, it may show that people in this age group – already most at risk in cases where Afghanistan is the focus country – were less able to make contact with the FMU because of Covid-19 and related restrictions. (Or, as noted above, because of the political situation in Afghanistan, if they were already there when the forced marriage occurred, or was planned and/or attempted.)

Regions

Pre-pandemic, most calls to the FMU about cases of forced marriage where Afghanistan was the focus country came from London. This was still true in the pandemic – 19 calls, representing 63% of the total, compared to 28 calls (52%) in 2019 and 22 calls (54%) in 2018. Indeed, in 2020, London accounted for a larger proportion of total calls than in other years: calls from London only decreased by 32% compared to 56% for total calls both where

Afghanistan is the focus country, and in general for calls to the FMU.

As only “<5” calls are recorded for other regions (or 0), we cannot say much about changes for specific regions, except to say that <5 is a common figure for regions outside

London, both pre-pandemic and during it. Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions do not seem to have any specific impact on cases outside London.

Rates of Covid-19, and Covid-related restrictions, then, do not seem to have prevented people from contacting the FMU, at least in London: nor did they prevent all forced marriages. What is more, they *may* have increased risk in London, as the decrease in calls from this region was much less than the overall decrease.

This said we are still talking about very small numbers, where the decisions of one family can significantly impact the data.

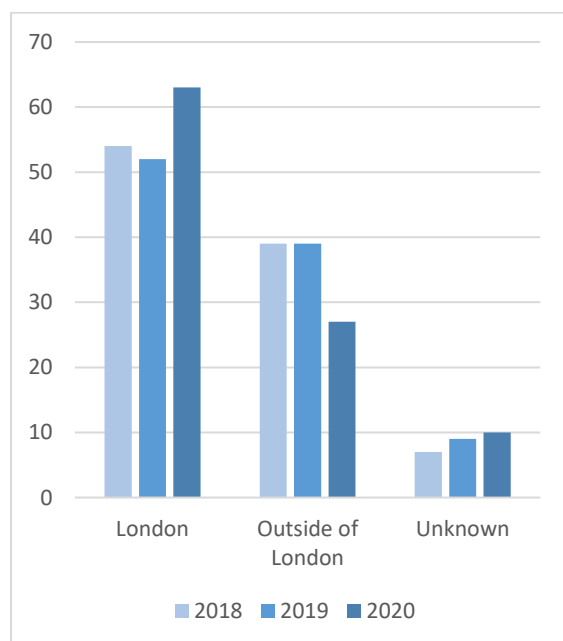


Figure 2: Simplified chart of region of cases handled by the FMU with Afghanistan as the focus country, 2018-2020.

UK Region ⁶	2018	2019	2020
West Midlands	<5 (<12%)	8 (15%)	<5 (<17%)
London	22 (54%)	28 (52%)	19 (63%)
North West	<5 (<12%)	<5 (<9%)	<5 (<17%)
Yorkshire and Humberside	07 (0%)	6 (11%)	0 (0%)
South East	<5 (<12%)	<5 (<9%)	<5 (<17%)
East	<5 (<12%)	<5 (<9%)	<5 (<17%)
Scotland	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
East Midlands	<5 (<12%)	0 (0%)	<5 (<17%)
South West	<5 (<12%)	<5 (<9%)	0 (0%)
Wales	0	<5 (<9%)	0 (0%)
North East	<5 (<12%)	<5 (<9%)	0 (0%)
Unknown	3 (7%)	5 (9%)	3 (10%)

Table 4: Number and percentages of cases per region handled by FMU with Afghanistan as a "focus country" 2018-2020.⁸

Victim Status

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

Victim Status	2018	2019	2020
Overseas	8 (20%)	9 (17%)	<5 (<13%) ⁹
In the UK	33 (80%)	44 (81%)	25 (83%)
Unknown	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	1 (3%)

Table 5: Victim Status in cases where Afghanistan was the “focus country” handled by FMU 2018-2020.

A similar proportion of people were in the UK when they contacted the FMU both pre-pandemic and in 2020. The decrease in the percentage of overseas calls in 2020 is very significant. Unfortunately, we cannot tell quite *how* significant, because we do not know exactly how many people were overseas when they first made contact with the FMU. The most that could be, however, would be 4, which is still less than half the number of people in 2019, and exactly half that of 2018, reflecting a similar decrease to the general decrease in cases (56% from 2019, 50% from 2018 for total cases handled by the FMU). Indeed, it seems likely that the number was 4, given the total number of cases (30), that 25 were in the UK, and 1 was “unknown”.

This suggests that travel restrictions, as well as other Covid-related restrictions, and Covid-19 itself, affected decisions to take people abroad for a forced marriage, but evidently did not completely prevent them.

Given travel restrictions imposed by both British and Afghanistan governments, travel to and from Afghanistan was limited in the 2020. In March 2020, Afghanistan limited the number of airports operating international flights and then suspended all flights, while UK citizens/residents were advised against “inessential” travel in the same month. However, it is plausible that travelling for a wedding may have counted as being “essential”.

After the first “lockdown”, the FCDO advice against international travel remained, and self-isolation rules were brought in for arrivals to the UK.¹⁰ In July, some “travel corridors” were opened. International commercial air traffic to and from Afghanistan was suspended till mid -July.¹¹ Commercial flights into and out of Kabul re-commenced on 15 July, and arrivals were advised to self-quarantine at home for 14 days.¹² However British Airways restarted flights to Afghanistan and Pakistan only on 30 July 2020.¹³

The main window for travel to/from Afghanistan, then, would be January to March 2020 and August to December 2020. Data from the FMU suggests that at least 4 people were taken abroad for forced marriage in these time-periods.

Given that travel to Afghanistan was, at least for the August to end of year (December) period, supposed to be limited for “essential” travel only, we can say that travel for weddings was judged “essential”, or that people were travelling abroad under false pretences. More investigation of the planned weddings which were providing the reason for travel (if such was given as a reason) might have prevented victims being taken abroad for forced marriage in 2020. This suggests

even more might be done by UK Visas and Border Force to spot signs of people being taken out of the country 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 Afghanistan should not have been possible during most of 2020. Moreover, other “essential” purposes (for

instance, attending family funerals) could have been used as an excuse to travel for the purposes of forced marriage.

Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions may also have made it harder for victims to contact the FMU before going abroad, though we should note that the same proportion of people as pre-pandemic did call the FMU from the UK, and that fewer individuals than before the pandemic were taken abroad in 2020.

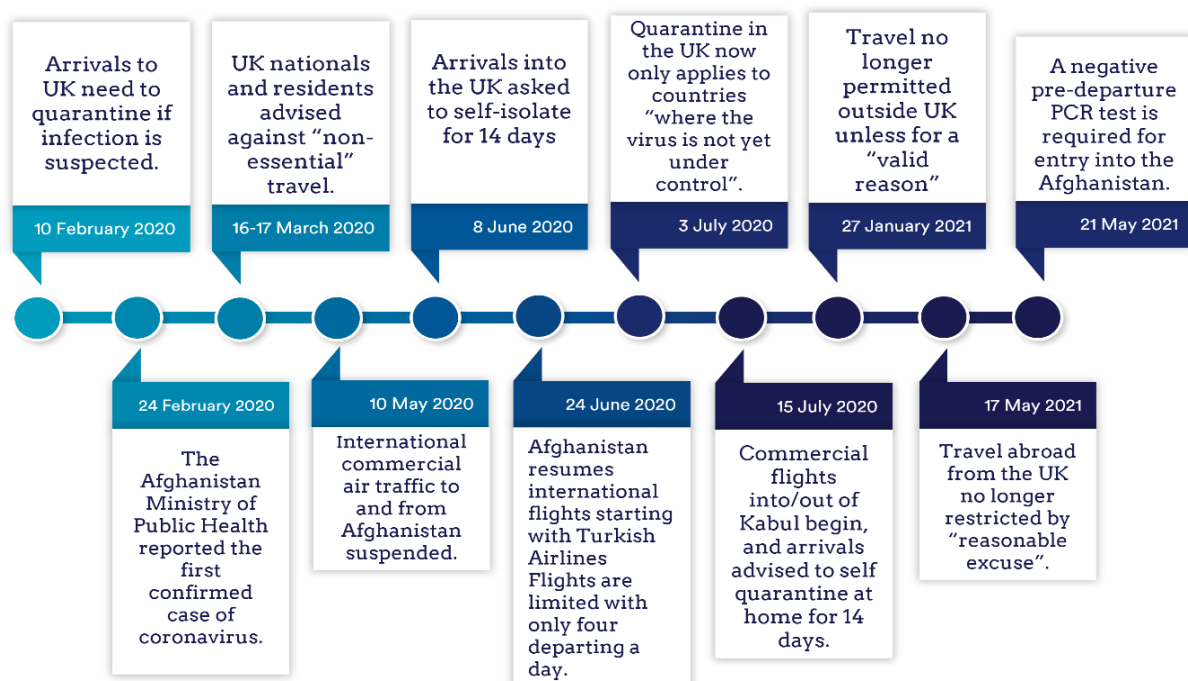


Figure 3: Timeline of relevant Covid-related events in Afghanistan in 2020

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. When the FMU releases the statistics for 2021, we will also be able to see if the same effects were seen in the second year of the pandemic, and Covid-related restrictions.



References

¹ See <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/forced-marriage>.

² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/forced-marriage>.

³ See FMU statistics, available here:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

⁴ See FMU statistics, available here:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

⁵ See FMU statistics, available here:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forced-marriage-unit-statistics>.

⁶ It is notable that Northern Ireland is not included here. This chimes with our more-general finding that there is very little data on this issue in Northern Ireland.

⁷ Where there is a "0" in this table, the FMU did not include that region in their detailed statistics. As they *do* include regions which had "<5" cases, and also account for "Unknown" region, we are assuming that regions which do not feature had no (i.e. 0) cases that year which were handled by the FMU.

⁸ This might be the "home" region of the victim, and/or the region in which the marriage was planned to take place. The percentages (of the regions shown on the table 4) for <5 cases in year on year are approximately only. FMU has not given any specific percentages for <5 cases. We calculated these equally (as approximately) but these may not be accurate. <5 could mean less than 3% or more than 4% or 6% for any one region in any of those years across the board.

⁹ The FMU official statistics say "<5"), but given there were 30 cases in total, 25 overseas and 1 unknown, we can deduce that there were 4 cases in the UK.

¹⁰ <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>.

¹¹ See <https://travelbans.org/asia/afghanistan/>

¹² See <https://travelbans.org/asia/afghanistan/>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/travel-corridors>;
<https://twitter.com/CTurnerFCDO/status/128884891180935169?s=20>;
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-airways-restarts-flights-to-pakistan>.