

Written evidence submitted by Dr Rowland Seymour, University of Birmingham and Dr Helen McCabe, University of Nottingham

Introduction

Dr Rowland Seymour is an Assistant Professor in Mathematics at the University of Birmingham. Dr Helen McCabe is an Associate Professor in Political Theory at the University of Nottingham and leads the work on forced marriage at the University's Rights Lab. We are submitting evidence as we carry out research into what makes people vulnerable to forced marriage and how the government and support services can best prevent vulnerable people being forced into marriages.

Executive Summary

E.1 Our evidence is about adolescents vulnerable to forced marriage. Our evidence addresses which adolescents are vulnerable to forced marriage and building a coherent approach to supporting adolescents vulnerable to forced marriage.

E.2 Forced marriage is a crime where victims are abused or pressured into a marriage against their will. Last year, the majority of victims the Government's Forced Marriage Unit dealt with were aged under 21, and one in five were aged under 15. Forced marriages lead to complex safeguarding cases, often involving sexual and financial exploitation.

E.3 The data the Government collects is insufficient to identify adolescents vulnerable to forced marriage. Better identification of adolescents vulnerable to forced marriage can reduce the case load of the safeguarding professionals in national and local government, and reduce repatriation costs for the Forced Marriage Unit. We recommend including questions about forced marriage in the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

E.4 Our research has highlighted schools as a key mechanism for safeguarding adolescents vulnerable to forced marriage. Schools provide a network for vulnerable adolescents to access support. It is not clear how the Department for Education will approach the new law protecting children from forced marriage that will come into place in February 2023.

1. Forced Marriage as a means to Exploit Vulnerable Adolescents

1.1 The UK Government defines forced marriage as a marriage where one or both parties do not consent to the marriage and are pressured or abused into the marriage. It is illegal under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, and a new law (Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022) specifically aimed at making child marriage illegal will come into force in February 2023.

1.2 The Government's Forced Marriage Unit was set up to safeguard victims of forced marriage and lead on forced marriage policy and outreach. The Unit recognises that adolescents are most at risk of forced marriage. In 2021, 51% (82) of the cases they dealt

with concerned those aged 21 and under, and 18% (21) concerned victims aged 15 and under. The vast majority (74%) of victims were female (Forced Marriage Unit, 2022).

1.3 The Government recognises forced marriage as a means of exploitation. Victims are frequently subject to domestic violence and other forms of honour-based abuse. Victims may be held overseas against their will, and the Unit repatriates victims. Victims may be subject to sexual violence, including rape. The Unit also highlights financial abuse as a feature of forced marriage, where victims' wages may be taken to support others in the family. Once the process of forcing an adolescent to marry has begun, intensive support from multiple agencies is required to support victims.

2. Insufficient government statistics to identify adolescents at risk of forced marriage

2.1 Producing statistics is vital to identifying those vulnerable to forced marriage and creating a coherent strategy to support those vulnerable to this crime. The Unit does release statistics annually summarising the number of cases it dealt with and broad characteristics of the victims. However, the method the Unit uses to collect and publish statistics has changed in 2019, 2022, and 2021. This means it is not possible to compare statistics over these years and understand what characteristics make individuals vulnerable to forced marriage.

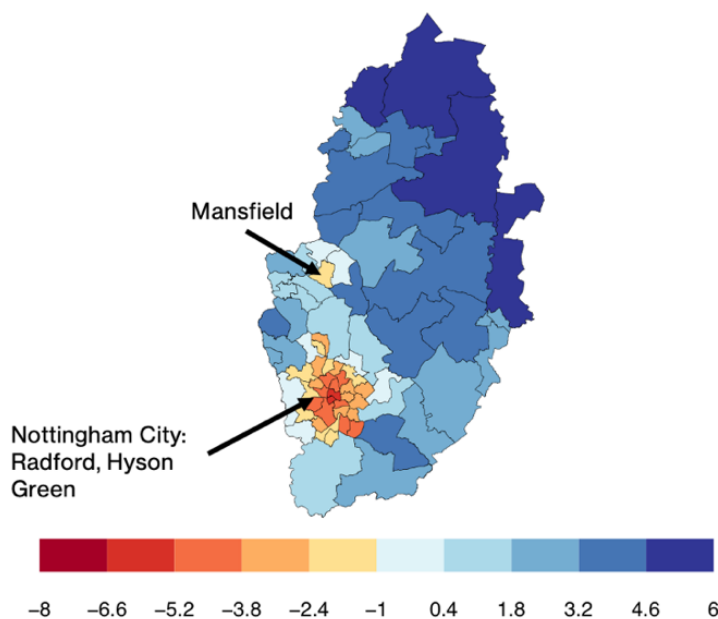


Figure 1: Ward level vulnerability estimates for forced marriage in Nottinghamshire. The red areas are where victims are most vulnerable and the blue the least vulnerable.

2.2 Many of the safeguarding responsibilities and mechanisms lie in the remit of local authorities. Although the Unit does provide regional level information (e.g. forced marriage cases in the East Midlands), the data does not provide sufficient regional level information to empower local authorities to develop coherent support strategies for victims in their own areas. We have produced the first ward level estimates of forced marriage (see Figure 1) and are using these estimates to support local stakeholders in Nottinghamshire to safeguard vulnerable adolescents (Seminerio et. al., 2022).

2.3 Our local level vulnerability estimates can be layered on top of other local level estimates, such as deprivation, income and educational achievement. This can help stakeholders understand the characteristics of those most vulnerable to forced marriage and design local safeguarding strategies. Our research showed that wards where victims were most vulnerable to forced marriage were also those that experienced high levels of income deprivation among the elderly. One reason for this is that parents could be using

forced marriages to attain financial security in older age or exploit victims to provide free labour caring for older relatives (Seminerio et. al., 2022). This may be exacerbated by the current cost-of-living crisis.

2.4 The government's second method for identifying who is vulnerable to forced marriage is severely limited by undercounting. The Home Office release statistics on so called 'honour-based' abuse offence (Home Office, 2021) annually by compiling police records in England and Wales. The Government has long been aware of the issue of unreported crimes. It set up the Crime Survey for England and Wales in 1984 to understand the scale of crime and who is affected by crime, independently of police records. Recently the Survey showed that only four in ten crimes are reported to the police.

2.5 The Survey contains a section on domestic violence and these questions are used to inform the government's strategy on tackling domestic violence and violence against women and girls. Despite the Government recognising forced marriage as a form of domestic violence, the Survey currently does not ask about forced marriage or any other form of honour-based abuse. Instead, the Office for National Statistics reports data from the honour-based abuse charity Karma Nirvana.

2.6 The lack of regular and meaningful statistical releases from the Unit suggests the Government is not using data to develop or validate a coherent strategy on safeguarding vulnerable adolescents from forced marriage. We have supported MPs in Nottingham to table written questions to understand i) the Unit's generation of forced marriage statistics (HC Deb 2 Sep 22 45473; HC Deb 2 Sep 22 45683), ii) the Government's understanding of how deprivation links to vulnerability to forced marriage (HC Deb 2 Sep 22 45681), and iii) how the work of the Unit is monitored and evaluated (HC Deb 2 Sep 22 61025). We believe these three elements are important to developing a coherent safeguarding strategy. The answers to the parliamentary questions showed there is i) currently no public information about improving the quality of the Unit's statistics, ii) a commitment to better understanding vulnerability to forced marriage but no information about how this commitment will be met, and iii) no evaluation for how the Unit's work is carried out. It is not clear what strategy the Unit is taking to support implementation of the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022.

3. Supporting vulnerable adolescents in schools and colleges

3.1 By analysing calls to national helplines for forced marriage, we identified schools as a key place where adolescents vulnerable to forced marriage can be safeguarded. Karma Nirvana run a national helpline for victims of forced marriage. The Helpline received over 20,000 calls in 2020, 3,705 connected to forced marriage, of which 578 referred to new cases. We analysed how call volumes to the helpline changed during the pandemic (McCabe et. al., 2022; Geere et. al., 2022). Calls remained stable during the first lockdown, but then surged immediately after schools and colleges reopened to all students (see Figure 2).

3.2 Despite this increase when schools reopened, very few cases of vulnerable adolescents are referred to Karma Nirvana through schools and colleges. This is surprising as schools have a statutory safeguarding duty. Combing the lack of referrals from schools with the spike in calls when schools reopen suggests that schools are providing a valuable

network for vulnerable adolescents to ask for support (McCabe et al., 2022). As such, any strategy safeguarding adolescents vulnerable to forced marriage should involve schools and services that act within educational establishments.

3.3 The Department for Education’s approach to safeguarding adolescents vulnerable to victims of forced marriage is not currently clear. When asked in parliament about the department’s approach to preparing for the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022, Kelly Tolhurst MP, Minister of State (Education), said the department would make information on forced marriage available for education professionals and signpost to the Unit (HC Deb 11 Oct 2022 61027).

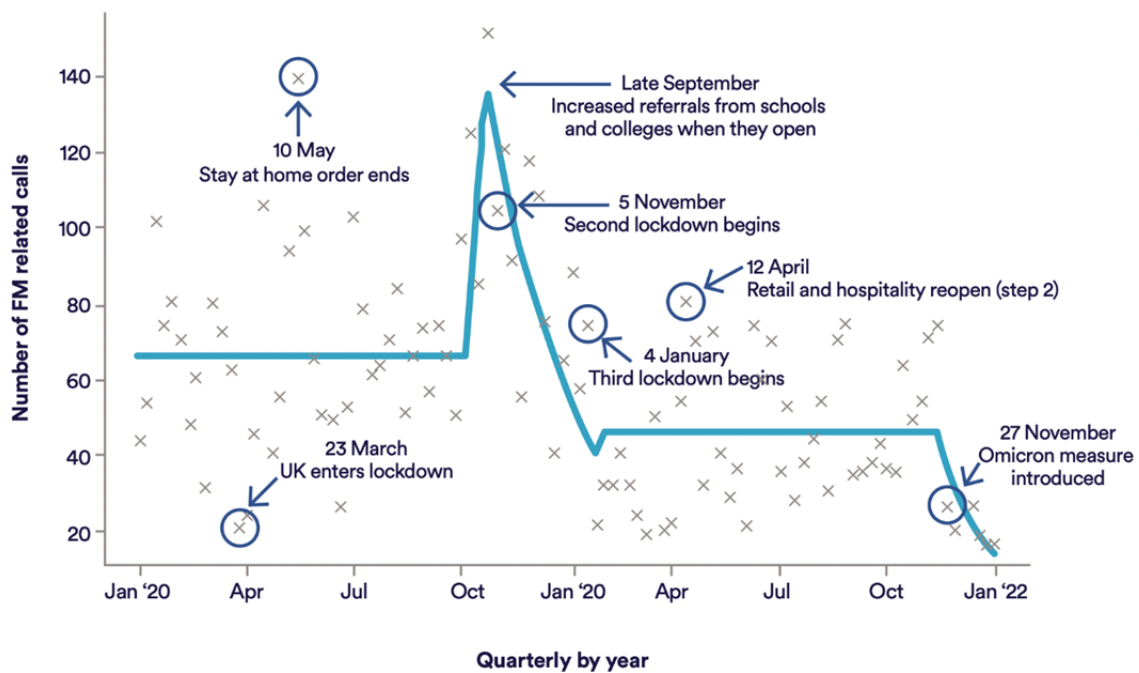


Figure 2: The number of calls received by Karma Nirvana related to forced marriage from January 2020 to January 2022. The blue line shows a change point analysis to identify when the volume in calls changed significantly. Reproduced from McCabe et al. (2022).

4. Summary and recommendations

4.1 Our research into who is vulnerable to forced marriage has shown that current government statistics are neither sufficient to identify who is vulnerable to forced marriage nor to create a coherent strategy to safeguard vulnerable adolescents against this crime. Our research has shown the value of local level data on vulnerability and can empower local stakeholders to develop coherent safeguarding strategies.

4.2 Our research has also identified schools as a key location where vulnerable adolescents can be safeguarded against forced marriage. Any coherent strategy should involve schools, academy chains, and local government education services. This is particularly important in safeguarding children under the new Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022 coming into force in February 2023.

Our recommendations are:

1. Improve reporting of the number of cases the Forced Marriage Unit supports. In particular, to use the same data collection methods and definitions across several years. This will allow the identification of adolescents vulnerable to forced marriage and to build a long-term and coherent strategy.
2. To include questions on forced marriage in the domestic violence part of the Crime Survey for England and Wales. This will provide a better estimate for the number of cases and who is affected by forced marriage. It will avoid the undercounting that is likely occurring in the Home Office's statistics on honour-based abuse.
3. Make local level data on vulnerability to forced marriage available. This will support local stakeholders to develop targeted and coherent strategies to safeguard victims.
4. Improve how the Forced Marriage Unit's work is evaluated. This could be by tracking the outcomes of cases it supports, long term monitoring of safeguarding professionals it trains, and the use of advice it gives to other government departments.
5. Ensure the Department for Education has a coherent strategy to safeguarding adolescents according to the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022. This should involve schools and make the most of schools' abilities to act as networks for those vulnerable to forced marriage.

References

Forced Marriage Unit. 2022. *Forced Marriage Unit Statistics 2021*. GOV.UK. Retrieved November 1, 2022, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2021/forced-marriage-unit-statistics-2021>

Geere, N., Hernandez, F., Severn, K., Seymour, R., McCabe, H. 2022. *Analysing Calls to UK Forced Marriage Helplines*. Retrieved November 1, 2022, from <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2022/august/analysing-calls-to-uk-forced-marriage-helplines.pdf>

Home Office. 2021. Statistics on so called 'honour-based' abuse offences in England and Wales 2020 to 2021. Retrieved November 1, 2022, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-on-so-called-honour-based-abuse-offences-england-and-wales-2020-to-2021/statistics-on-so-called-honour-based-abuse-offences-england-and-wales-2020-to-2021>

McCabe, H., Seymour, R., Bonner, A., Coggins, H., Lott, N., Collins-Taylor., Brown, R. C. 2022. The impact of Covid-19 and Covid-related restrictions on forced marriage: Data report. Retrieved November 1, 2022, from <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2022/may/the-impact-of-covid-19-and-covid-related-restrictions-on-forced-marriage.pdf>

Seminerio, E., Nyarko-Agyei, A., Seymour, R., McCabe, H. 2022. *Mapping Forced Marriage in Nottinghamshire*. Retrieved November 1, 2022, from <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2022/june/mapping-forced-marriage-risk-in-nottinghamshire.pdf>

November 2022