

Written evidence from Barnardo's [HBA0044]

Barnardo's and National FGM Centre response to the Women and Equalities Committee's Inquiry on So-Called 'Honour' Based Abuse

Summary

- There are many forms of violence which are motivated by so-called 'honour'. These include but are not limited to: FGM, breast flattening, abuse linked to faith or belief, early and forced marriage, dowry abuse/violence, sex selective abortion/female infanticide/son preference, virginity testing, scarification, ritual sexual slavery, forced feeding and other food taboos and more. These practices are deeply rooted in stereotyped sex and gender-based roles which seek to control the sexuality of girls and women to preserve male-dominated power structures.
- Although forms of so-called 'honour' related abuse are illegal in the UK, women and girls are still experiencing them, and are often going unreported and unsupported. So-called 'honour' related abuse is hidden, and often taboo with victims and survivors afraid and often forbidden from speaking out.
- Tackling so-called 'honour' based abuse needs to be approached through a gender-sensitive lens. Although culture is often cited as a key factor, there should also be acknowledgement that such issues are driven by patriarchy, the socio-economic status of families and communities, religion, politics, law and power relations between sexes.
- Professionals can struggle to understand that abuse linked to faith or belief can happen, limiting the ability of professionals to identify vulnerability and risk in cases of this kind, which compounds barriers to disclosure.
- Training needs to be provided for all multi-agency professionals, to spot girls at risk of or who are undergoing so-called 'honour' related abuse
- Investment should be made in 'by and for services' for victims and survivors of so-called 'honour' related abuse. Such services provide specialist, trusted support services for specific communities, and can reduce the number of barriers victims/survivors face in accessing support.

About Barnardo's and National FGM Centre

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. Our ambition is to achieve better outcomes for more children by building stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures. In 2021-2022, Barnardo's supported 357,276 children, young people, parents, and carers through 794 services and partnerships throughout the UK.

Barnardo's hosts the National FGM Centre (NFGMC) which works with professionals and in communities to educate and prevent Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), breast flattening, and child abuse linked to faith or belief

(CALFB) as well as other forms of harmful practices. It was established in 2015 to achieve system change in the provision of services for children and their families who are affected by FGM. In 2017, the focus of our work was extended to include Breast Flattening and Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief. The aim is to prevent new cases, protect children and young people, support those affected by FGM and other harmful practices, partner to deliver services and learn. The Centre has worked on over 900 case referrals between Sept 2015 – December 2022 from Local Authorities across the UK. It has supported the application of 48 FGM Protection Orders over this time. The Centre has also worked with five women who are survivor/victims who were subjected to FGM in the UK.

What forms of violence against women and girls are motivated by so-called honour? Are these different forms understood by the Government, police and other agencies?

There are many forms of violence which are motivated by so-called 'honour'. Harmful practices, which are persistent practices, grounded in discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, age or other forms of discrimination that cause physical or psychological harm (UNCRC and UNCEDAW) disproportionately affect girls and women. These include but are not limited to: FGM, breast flattening, abuse linked to faith or belief, early and forced marriage, dowry abuse/violence, sex selective abortion/female infanticide/son preference, virginity testing, scarification, ritual sexual slavery, forced feeding and other food taboos and more. These practices are deeply rooted in stereotyped sex and gender-based roles which seek to control the sexuality of girls and women to preserve male-dominated power structures. Any response to harmful practices therefore requires addressing gender-based norms which seek to preserve inequalities amongst the sexes.

These forms of abuse are often interconnected, and from the NFGMC's experience do not appear in isolation from each other, but also interconnect with other forms of abuse including intimate partner violence (IPV - physical, sexual and emotional) and exploitation.

The current definition of so-called 'honour' related abuse could be expanded to include the definition as set out by the UNCRC and UNCEDAW to encapsulate the spectrum of violence against women and girls. The NFGMC has identified in training delivered nationally to over 20,000 professionals since 2015 that the spectrum and core definition of violence against women and girls is not clearly understood by professionals, creating gaps in protections around so-called 'honour' related abuse.

Case study

A mother was living in a refuge due to risk of so-called 'honour' related abuse to her and her unborn child from her family - she'd received a death threat from her brother whilst she was pregnant because it was the result of a partnership the family disapproved of. The Local Authority undertook a pre-birth assessment and the baby was subject to a child protection plan. During the pregnancy the mother was identified with FGM but didn't know that she had had it - because all ties/communication was severed with her family there was no way of exploring this safely. There was an inconsistent response from

the Local Authority who were insensitive towards the mother in light of her being a survivor of FGM. This compounded the mother's distress in learning that she had FGM. The National FGM Centre, which is hosted by Barnardo's, worked with the mother to ensure that she could access specialist support for FGM via the specialist NHS clinic, undertook educative work and robust safety planning regarding multiple risks located in wider family to her and her baby.

Female Genital Mutilation

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) includes a range of procedures which involve the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia for non-medical reasons.¹ FGM is usually practiced on girls between infancy and 15 years old and is also performed on girls older than this and occasionally adult women and married women.² It is traditionally performed by practitioners with no formal medical training, however there has been a significant rise in the medicalisation of FGM. FGM has a devastating and often deadly impact on women and girls, including immediate health issues and longer-term complications during menstruation and childbirth, as well as psychological health problems. As such, FGM should be treated as both a child protection and public health issue.

It is estimated that around 137,000 women in the UK have undergone FGM, and that 60,000 girls under 15 years old are at risk.³ In just a three-month period (April – June 2022), there were 1,735 women and girls who had an attendance where FGM was identified. Since the collection began, NHS trusts and GP practices have reported information about 31,100 individual women and girls. Between April 2015 and June 2022 there was a total of 77,725 attendances for these individuals where FGM was identified.⁴

All types of FGM have been illegal in England, Wales and Northern Ireland since the Female Circumcision Prohibition Act 1985. The Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 and provisions within the Serious Crime Act have since updated the original Act.⁵

The NFGMC believes there are areas of the FGM Act 2003 and Serious Crime Act 2015 which could be strengthened:

1. Parental liability under the Serious Crime Act 2015 cannot be enforced retroactively which could present a barrier in prosecutions
2. The FGM Act 2003 does not make provision for where FGM is organised but does not take place (conspiracy to commit)

¹ CPS Factsheet: Female Genital Mutilation <https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/cps-factsheet-female-genital-mutilation>

² City University London and Equality Now, 2015. Prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation in England and Wales: National and local estimates https://trustforlondon.fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/FGM-statistics-final-report-21-07-15-released-text_2Rra6iA.pdf

³ Department for Health and Social Care, 2014. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM): migrant health guide <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/female-genital-mutilation-fgm-migrant-health-guide>

⁴ NHS, 2022. Female Genital Mutilation, April 2022 – June 2022 <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/female-genital-mutilation/april-2022---june-2022>

⁵ CPS Factsheet: Female Genital Mutilation <https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/cps-factsheet-female-genital-mutilation>

3. Serious Wounding (cutting through 2 layers of skin) can lead to a life term prison sentence, however the FGM Act 2003 carries a maximum prison sentence of 14 years (flesh cut and removed) - this should be reviewed

Moreover, there is no data on the long-term outcomes of Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery (FGCS) - currently legal according to the CPS – despite the fact FGCS displays great similarities with FGM. We are concerned that women and girls may be undergoing cosmetic interventions as a result of societal pressures to conform to culturally approved aesthetic ideals. Individuals requesting interventions should be provided with accurate information about the normal variations in appearance as well as the provision of alternative interventions, such as psychological therapies. In particular, with regards to FGCS, healthcare practitioners need to be aware of the fact women and girls can be under immense cultural and family pressure to give consent for a procedure that can have long-term negative consequences.

Lastly, data should be collected and published on cases which meet criteria for prosecution but are not proceeded with, or in criminal proceedings which are dismissed to understand both the nature of the prosecution for multi-agency professionals including the police to learn from and strengthen responses. Such published data should take into account anonymity of victim/survivors and make consideration to minimising the stigmatisation of any particular communities.

Breast flattening

Breast flattening is the process of flattening, massaging or pounding down the breast tissue using hot or scorching coals followed by binders to compress and flatten the breasts of pre-pubescent and pubescent girls. Breast flattening is a form of intra-familial violence, often perpetrated by a female member of the family or community to curb the sexuality of girls, reduce instances of promiscuity to preserve virginity and avoid early pregnancy. There are no statistical prevalence estimates for the UK, and globally there are thought to be 3.8 million girls who have been affected by breast flattening.

In a similar way to FGM, breast flattening is seen as a protective practice by those who perform it, as the visual signs of physical maturity can bring its own risks. However, the practice is abusive, it is extremely painful, traumatising and can be life changing and life threatening. The need to raise the profile of breast flattening was raised at a parliamentary level in 2016 as there was increasing concerns that the practice was taking place in the UK. From the work of the NFGMC on the ground, limited numbers of professionals are aware of this hidden harm, which we have sought to address since 2017. Whilst there is no specific law in relation to breast flattening, existing laws prohibit this form of harm which the NFGMC believes to be sufficient to prosecute breast flattening.

Early Forced Marriage

Early forced marriage includes any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child.⁶

Early forced marriage has life-long impacts on girls and women, particularly on their physical and emotional health, and should be treated as both a child protection and public health issue. Children who marry under the age of 18 are more likely to be victims/survivors of other harmful practices, including but not limited to FGM and other forms of so-called 'honour' based abuse.⁷ They are also more likely to be forced to leave education. Early forced marriage is also a driving factor for pregnancies in adolescence, (of which complications arising from such pregnancies and childbirth are among the leading causes of death in girls aged 15-19) and be subjected to all forms of IPV (girls who marry before age 15 are 50% more likely to suffer from intimate partner violence than those who marry later).⁸ Worldwide, 90% of adolescent pregnancies are among married girls under the age of 18.⁹

Early forced marriage is a hidden harm but is happening across the UK. From 2017-2020, the Karma Nirvana helpline, which runs the national 'Honour' Based Abuse helpline, has responded to 375 cases relating to early forced marriage.¹⁰ In the same time period, the Forced Marriage Unit has recorded 1235 cases relating to early forced marriage.¹¹

We are pleased that, as of February 2023, the minimum age for marriage in the UK is increasing to 18. However, non-registered, informal unions – such as through religious or customary marriages – are not formally recorded in the UK, but estimates suggest that they could impact thousands of girls.¹²

Case Study

A 15-year-old Gambian girl was referred to the NFGMC by a local authority due to concerns about FGM and a forthcoming early forced marriage. She was in the care of her aunt who was also an FGM victim/survivor. There were concerns from the girl and her aunt that she could be forcibly taken abroad to undergo FGM for a second time, referred to them as 'second stage FGM' and be forced into marriage thereafter. The NFGMC worked with the girl and aunt to explore experiences, identify any support needs and form a safety plan to prevent the second stage FGM and early forced marriage, which included application of an FGMP and FMPO, ongoingly reviewed to assess risk over time.

Abuse linked to faith or belief

⁶ UNICEF, Child Marriage <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>

⁷ Karma Nirvana, 2020. Child Marriage in England and Wales https://s40641.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/KN_Child_Marriage_UK_2020.pdf

⁸ Girls not Brides, Child Marriage and Health, 2022, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-and-health/>

⁹ Save the Children International, 2020. The Global Girlhood Report 2020: How COVID-19 is putting progress in peril https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/global_girlhood_report_2020_africa_version_2.pdf/

¹⁰ Karma Nirvana, 2020. Child Marriage in England and Wales https://s40641.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/KN_Child_Marriage_UK_2020.pdf https://s40641.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/KN_Child_Marriage_UK_2020.pdf

¹¹ Karma Nirvana, 2020. Child Marriage in England and Wales https://s40641.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/KN_Child_Marriage_UK_2020.pdf

¹² Karma Nirvana, 2020. Child Marriage in England and Wales https://s40641.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/KN_Child_Marriage_UK_2020.pdf

Abuse linked to faith or belief involves a child being abused physically, emotionally, sexually and/or neglected as a result of being labelled either as a witch or as having been possessed by an evil spirit, djinn, dakini or shedim. Significant harm (including murder) can occur due to efforts to 'excise' or 'deliver' evil from the child (or vulnerable adult) in order to 'cure' them and stop the evil from spreading. Abuse linked to faith or belief also includes evil eye, ritual or 'muti' murders, where the body parts of a human are believed to bring supernatural powers and are used for witchcraft, and the use or belief in magic or witchcraft to create fear in children to make them more compliant when they are being trafficked for domestic slavery or sexual exploitation. Exorcism or deliverance of the evil spirit is usually carried out by a religious or community leader, however parents/carers have also tried to excise the spirits themselves. The beliefs which can lead to this abuse are not confined to one faith, nationality, or ethnic group. Globally, beliefs in the spiritual realm and of malevolent forces are common, and not all who believe in witchcraft or spiritual possession harm children.¹³

Victims/survivors of this type of abuse can face physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect.¹⁴ The act of branding or telling a child that they are possessed by an evil spirit or told that they are a witch can be emotionally abusive in itself as it can cause psychological harm.

Case Study

A case involving a 16-year-old Nigerian girl was referred to the NFGMC by a local authority due to concerns around abuse linked to faith or belief – namely that her parent was planning to take her abroad for a 'deliverance'. The allocated local authority children's social work team had not had experience in working a case of abuse linked to faith or belief so struggled with undertaking an assessment. The NFGMC allocated a social worker to the case to conduct an assessment. The mother disclosed that she believed the girl's learning disability was due to malevolent forces which were causing her harm. There were concerns the girl would be taken to Nigeria for a 'deliverance' to drive out the evil force believed, by her mother, to have caused the misfortune. The NFGMC worked with the girl and mother to explore the concerns, their understanding of harm, and identify any support needs and form a safety plan. By the end of the intervention, the mother understood that any accusation of 'evil' could amount to psychological distress and the girl was prevented from undergoing a 'deliverance'.

The abuse of women and girls linked to faith or belief is a 'taboo' subject, that many women and girls accused are too scared to speak out against or are forced not to disclose due to the idea that this could attract further malevolent forces or disrupt the process of removing them. This can particularly be the case when the individual making the accusation is a family member, faith leader, or someone with influence within their community.

¹⁴ The National FGM Centre, Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief <http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/calfb/>

Due to its hidden and taboo nature, it remains difficult to know the true prevalence and scale of this type of abuse, and there is currently no prevalence data in the UK. However, the Department for Education Child in Need Census data, collected since 2016 has shown a significant number of cases where abuse linked to faith or belief was identified as a factor at the end of a social care assessment. There was a total of 9070 assessments undertaken from 2016-2021.¹⁵ See Table 1.

The data provided is not disaggregated, however work by the NFGMC and high-profile cases, including Khyra Ishaq, Victoria Climbé, and Ayesha Ali show that while it affects all genders, particular vulnerabilities place women and girls at greater risk of this form of abuse. The NFGMC has conducted research on the ground in communities, including peer research which has found that communities feel these issues are current, and particularly affect girls and women (participants from across Latin America, Africa, The Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia and Europe).¹⁶ The NFGMC is aware from its work within local authorities that there are some discrepancies in this data collection, and it is likely that the figures do not show the true picture of this type of abuse.

Table 1: Child in Need Assessments where abuse linked to faith or belief was identified as a factor

Year	Child in Need assessments with abuse linked to faith or belief was identified as a factor
2016-17	1460
2017-18	1630
2018-19	1950
2019-20	2080
2020-21	1950
2021-2022	1960

Whilst there is no specific law in relation to abuse linked to faith or belief, existing laws prohibit the physical, sexual and emotional abuse or neglect of children. Civil orders should be put in place to prevent children from being taken abroad for exorcism and other forms of abuse linked to faith or belief. These could be similar to FGM Protection Orders, which were introduced in the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 and based on Forced Marriage Protection orders introduced in 2008.¹⁷

There is currently no prevalence data relating to abuse linked to faith or belief in the UK. The National action plan to tackle child abuse linked to faith or belief which was published by the Department of Education ten years ago in 2012 is

¹⁵ Department for Education, 2022. Characteristics of children in need <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need>

¹⁶ Examples: Community Consultation: Barnet Harmful Practices Strategy, <http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Barnet-Community-Consultation-on-Harmful-Practices-.pdf>; "Between Two Cultures" A Rapid Peer Study Exploring Migrant Communities' Views on Female Genital Mutilation in Essex and Norfolk, UK, <http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Peer-Research-National-FGM-Centre.pdf>

¹⁷ Section 5A(2)(a) and Schedule 2, Part 1 of the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/31/contents>

outdated. The national working group on abuse linked to faith or belief should undertake a review into this action plan, ensuring that it is relevant to problems that we see today, and to improve the national and local response to children at risk.

What are the challenges or barriers faced by victims of so-called 'honour'-based abuse in seeking support or protection?

Although forms of so-called 'honour' based abuse are illegal in the UK, women and girls are still experiencing them, often going unreported and unsupported. So-called 'honour' based abuse is hidden, and often 'taboo' with victims/survivors afraid and often forbidden to speak out, particularly as these forms of abuse can be 'justified' as being part of a cultural norm. This is entrenched when the abuse is being carried out or 'sanctioned' by a faith leader or by someone with power and influence within the community.

It has been highlighted in case reviews and serious case reviews, that professionals struggle to understand that abuse linked to faith or belief can happen. This limits the ability of professionals to identify vulnerability and risk in cases of abuse linked to faith or belief, and compounds barriers to disclosure, as girls and women fear that they will be dismissed, disbelieved, and that adequate support would not be provided.

So-called 'honour' related abuse, including FGM, being a strongly held belief and form of intra-familial violence within families and communities has also meant that victims/survivors do not come forward for fear that they may in turn criminalise their families and loved ones. Whilst 'victim anonymity' for FGM was introduced as an additional provision in the Serious Crime Act 2015, it is not clear whether this is an effective mechanism to support victim/survivors in seeking justice or support. Victims/survivors of intra-familial abuse should be provided with mechanisms which seek to provide them with the support they need which consider whether prosecution is within their best interests.

Case study

An 18-year-old girl was referred to the NFGMC after making a disclosure to a school teacher that she had undergone FGM at age 7 in the UK. The girl's family was not made aware of the disclosure. Upon conducting a risk assessment with the girl in partnership with the police, it was decided not to be in her best interests to seek prosecution owing to potential risk to the girl should the family become aware of professional involvement. The girl was supported over a period of time to ensure she received appropriate support and care, including physical and psychological support, as well as understanding where she could go should she need help in the future.

The government statutory guidance on Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and health education, announced in 2019, makes it compulsory for secondary schools to teach pupils about FGM and other harmful practices, including forced marriage and so-called 'honour'-based abuse. Although the duty to teach about FGM is not mandatory for primary schools, it can optionally be applied. The

NFGMC believes that all schools, primary and secondary, should be teaching core foundational lessons on human rights in an age-appropriate way, including body rights to set the foundations to teach about FGM and so-called 'honour' related abuse. In particular, where the most common ages for FGM are between infancy and 12, a preventative approach should be taken to teach from an earlier stage. Children should understand from the earliest point what support and protections there are for them should they ever be concerned about so-called 'honour' related abuse and be given the language to be able to discuss with professionals what they may be experiencing to increase reporting and normalise conversations around the issue, in turn breaking barriers in reporting. The NFGMC has developed core age-appropriate schools' resources from KS1-KS4 to equip teachers with the tools they need to teach, however specialist training needs to be provided to them to increase their confidence and ensure they can spot indicators and are able to respond to disclosures.¹⁸ The NFGMC is aware from its work that there are teachers who have not been trained in FGM or so-called 'honour' related abuse nationally, as there are secondary schools who are not teaching about the issues. There should be stronger regulation of this nationally. The NFGMC also identifies that often, teachers are unaware of how to ask questions or raise concerns with students/parents when they are concerned about the issues.

Moreover, training also needs to be provided for all multi-agency professionals, including social workers, healthcare professionals, police, community-led and third-sector organisations, to spot girls at risk of or who are undergoing so-called 'honour' related abuse, and increase the confidence of girls and women in reporting their concerns

Critical investment should be made in 'by and for services' for victims/survivors of so-called 'honour' based abuse. 'By and for services' provide specialist, trusted support services for specific communities, and can reduce the number of barriers victims and survivors face in accessing support. Such services should look to reflect the complexity of victim/survivor's experiences, rather than dealing with one form of abuse in silo. A recent report by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales found that by and for services are underfunded and their provision is patchy across the country.¹⁹

Under the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the UK Government has committed to ending all cases of FGM and other harmful practices including early and forced marriage by 2030 to advance the rights of women and girls globally.²⁰ A review of FGM and early and forced marriage should be commissioned with the aim of understanding where we are now, what progress has been made, and what needs to happen to reach this goal.

Data collection around the prevalence of so-called 'honour' related abuse needs to be improved, including research to understand the number of unions in the UK not civilly registered in under 18s, further research into communities to

¹⁸ School lesson plans: <http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/fgm/school-lesson-plans/>

¹⁹ https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/DAC_Mapping-Abuse-Suvivors_Long-Policy-Report_Nov2022_FA.pdf

²⁰ Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>

understand the prevalence of these hidden issues, including girls and women affected by abuse linked to faith or belief. We agree with Karma Nirvana's calls for strengthening published data to include quantifying how many victims, including children, are affected by Honour Based Abuse across England and Wales, or how many perpetrators are currently offending, as well as the criminal justice outcomes for Honour Based Abuse Offences, such as how many offences lead to a successful prosecution and/or conviction. We take this further by suggesting such data should be published on other forms of harmful practices classified under so-called 'honour' related abuse. This should include the development of a crime code to record child abuse linked to faith or belief (outside of CIN census data which only records identified cases at the end of an assessment by social care) to build a picture of the issues in order for professionals and communities to appropriately address them.

Available data needs to be better interrogated to understand the experiences of the victims/survivors, and how support services can contribute to better outcomes.

What are the challenges for services supporting victims of honour-based abuse? How could those challenges be mitigated or overcome?

The diverse and changing society in the UK, and global population growth due to global conflicts, displacement and other crises, leading to the movement of people means that local authorities must recognise that they have to consider how they are going to tackle the actual and potential demand for harmful practices related services now and in the future. As communities' needs change, the system must be able to respond accordingly.

A key challenge is the lack of a coordinated response to tackling so-called 'honour' related abuse in all its forms nationally – creating pools of good and bad practice which provide girls and women with inconsistent responses. Third sector and community led organisations, particularly 'by and for' organisations have unique sights and relationships with communities that statutory agencies often do not/cannot access. However, funding streams into these organisations are often restricted or limited. Increasing the capacity of such 'by and for' organisations should be considered to tackle the issues from the ground up.

Another key challenge is the lack of consistency in thresholds across local authorities. Having worked nationally across various local authorities, the NFGMC has worked in both low and high prevalence areas of so-called 'honour' related abuse and has seen both inadequate and insensitive responses from statutory organisations. Services supporting victims/survivors should show consistency to improve trust and confidence in girls and women to report concerns and crimes, to ensure they know they will be supported, which should be directed from a national level to ensure any girl or woman in any part of the UK will receive an adequate response.

What is known about abuse practised under the pretext of upholding cultural norms? Is there available data and/or research on the prevalence of these practices?

Culture is often cited as a key factor in so-called 'honour' related abuse. The need to conform to, or uphold traditional values, norms and customs is a key motivator in the continuation of harmful practices such as so-called 'honour' related abuse. However, there should also be acknowledgement that such issues are also driven by a number of other intersecting factors, including patriarchy, the socio-economic status of families and communities, religion, politics, law, and power relations between sexes. Viewing so-called 'honour' related abuse solely through the lens of culture can also lead to the viewing of practices as static rather than fluid, dismissing ideas that families and communities can and are abandoning some practices. There is therefore a need nationally to understand the picture of so-called 'honour' related abuse through commissioned research within communities. Current data pertains to specific practices – most notably FGM and early/forced marriage, and to some extent abuse linked to faith or belief. This should be addressed in order to ensure there are adequate responses and support mechanisms in place by organisations and agencies in the statutory and third sectors.

The NFGMC has conducted research with communities in local authorities across the UK, including peer research, to understand the scale of the practices and their driving forces, what communities understand about the issues, legislation and support mechanisms, as well as what steps they feel need to be taken to tackle the practices in their communities. Such research has highlighted that many communities feel these are real and live issues for them which need addressing from within communities, schools and statutory services. The NFGMC believes that change must come from within communities, and thus taking this asset-based approach using co-production is key to tackling harmful practices including so-called 'honour' related abuse.

Akin to this, there is need to look more closely at families who are abandoning practices - there is often a focus on why practices occur and are sustained but less so on what the factors are that enable families to move away from them, to enable professionals to take more appropriate and robust steps towards protecting girls and women – strengthening the status of national policy.

How would you assess the police response to honour-based abuse? How could it be improved?

From our work nationally, we have often seen poor communication and sometimes a lack of partnership working between police and other professionals in child protection investigations concerning the varying forms of so-called 'honour' related abuse. The NFGMC has experienced police undertaking assessments and interventions in silo, or on the other hand not engaging in multi-agency and joint working with social care to address specified child protection concerns around so-called 'honour' related abuse. The NFGMC also recognises that some forces take heavy-handed approaches, including through pursuits of FGMPO's without thorough and joint-assessment initiatives which have resulted in the alienation of families and communities. National guidance should set the standards for joint working on cases of so-called 'honour' related abuse, including by providing clear frameworks for intervention by statutory services to increase the standard of protections for girls and women.

Moreover, there is often no, or very poor attendance from police in multi-agency training, which increase difficulties in addressing poor practice. There should be regular and mandatory training on so-called 'honour'-related abuse. Such training should address what best and poor practice looks like to increase professional development in order to protect girls and women better ideally led by practitioners who have specialist expertise working with women and girls who have experienced so called 'honour'-related abuse.

Lastly, community engagement is at the heart of the change needed if so-called 'honour' related abuse is to be eradicated. Girls and women need the visibility of the police in their communities, outside of when they are called to incidents, to build trust and confidence. From our work on the ground, including in conducting research nationally to look at the scale of these issues within specific local authorities, we know that there is low awareness of the laws on so-called 'honour' related abuse within communities. In order to prevent, protect and support girls and women affected, communities must know and understand the legislation pertaining to specified offences, as well as know and understand support mechanisms which are available to protect them, such as FGMPOs/FMPOs. Such awareness raising programmes should not be limited to professionals.

We know that some communities mistrust agencies including the police, so building cohesion through visibility is key to identifying girls and women at risk or who are undergoing so-called 'honour' related abuse. Working in partnership with 'by and for' services is key for the police to access communities they may struggle to engage and form positive relationships with.

Case study

In 2022, the NFGMC conducted research in a high prevalence authority for so-called 'honour' related abuse with 37 women and 26 men. Findings included:

- Male participants believed FGM did not happen in the UK, and that the prevalence in overseas FGM affected countries was reducing — only occurring in rural areas. They also viewed these issues as for 'women' only. Women generally believed that FGM, forced marriage and child abuse linked to faith or belief are issues affecting their communities. However, some believed virginity testing to be a current issue and others historical.
- Most female participants concurred that harmful practices, such as FGM, so-called 'honour' related abuse and others exist in the LA's communities, whilst male participants largely held an opposite view.
- Most focus group participants of both female and male groups agreed that beliefs in witchcraft, spirit possession, djinns etc. are common in communities – especially against girls.
- Nearly all participants of both female and male groups did not know what an FGM Protection Order or Forced Marriage Protection Order was and details of how it could be used.
- Men noted the research provided the first opportunity to discuss harmful practices. Female participants expressed that they have never had the opportunity to discuss these issues, and wanted safe spaces to continue the conversations.
- 22 participants knew someone affected by harmful practices, including

FGM, early forced marriage, virginity testing or other forms of so-called 'honour' related abuse such as dowry violence

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