

## **Written evidence submitted by Karma Nirvana (VAW0013)**

Call for evidence: Violence Against Women and Girls

### **Introduction**

1. Karma Nirvana (KN) are the longest established specialist charity supporting victims and survivors of honour based abuse and forced marriage. We have successfully provided support to thousands of women and girls affected by honour based abuse, as well as supporting professionals from bodies such as police, social services and schools to help them better understand the issues.
2. We have campaigned for improved legislation on these issues and their effective criminalisation. KN took a leading role in campaigning for; the criminalisation of forced marriage, civil remedy for forced marriage through the Forced Marriage (civil protection) Act 2007, the first thematic national review into policing “honour” based abuse. We are currently campaigning for a follow up review<sup>1</sup> as police data evidences a decline in reports relating to honour based abuse since the first inspection. We were the first organisation<sup>2</sup> in the UK to become members to the global Girls not Brides partnership. We are currently leading on; the campaign as Co-Chairs of Girls Nots Brides UK to make marrying a child a crime in England and Wales<sup>3</sup>, and on drafting legislation and policy to ban virginity testing<sup>4</sup> and hymenoplasty in the UK.
3. We have trained thousands of frontline practitioners to improve frontline responses provided to victims on the ground. Our training of South Wales Police, the first force to undertake the KN specialist 3-day course, led to the first ever conviction for forced<sup>5</sup> marriage. Since 2013, KN have delivered the 3-day course to over 26 police forces across England and Wales, many police forces receiving the training on multiple occasions<sup>6</sup>.
4. In 2015, we worked with Cosmopolitan Magazine to campaign for the first National Day of Memory<sup>7</sup> for victims of Honour Killings. This is now marked every year on the 14<sup>th</sup> July. In 2019, we became secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Group chaired by Virendra Sharma MP.
5. Our founder Jasvinder Sanghera was awarded Commander of the British Empire in 2013 in recognition of her outstanding contribution to tackling forced marriage and honour based abuse. Her TedX Talk<sup>8</sup> on ‘Fighting Forced Marriage and Honour Based Abuse’ has been watched over 2.1 million times.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/honour-based-abuse-police-forced-marriage-b1775132.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/our-partnership/member-directory/karma-nirvana/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://karmanirvana.org.uk/child-marriage-report-stories/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/virginity-tests-girls-uk-clinics-bill-richard-holden-b1786194.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/06/britains-first-forced-marriage-sentence-lot-more-still-do>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.southyorks.police.uk/find-out/crime-prevention-advice/honour-based-abuse/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://karmanirvana.org.uk/day-of-memory/2015-2/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h\\_Xh5MXA7yY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_Xh5MXA7yY)

## Understanding Honour Based Abuse

7. Despite the heightened profile of Honour Based Abuse (HBA) for over two decades, progress in tackling this form of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) has been insubstantial and long delayed. Previous Home Office VAWG strategies have missed opportunities to respond to all forms of HBA, often dealing only with forced marriage (FM) and Female Genital mutilation (FGM).
8. Honour Based Abuse is frequently misunderstood, misidentified and placed into a 'cultural cul-de-sac', whereby victims affected are conditioned to normalise abuse in the name of 'culture' and professionals responding tread carefully with excessive 'cultural sensitivity'. The framing of HBA in a 'cultural / traditional' context:
  - Limits victim self-identification of abuse, often normalised by their perpetrator's and community/societal narrative
  - Reduces professional confidence when responding to HBA, with professionals citing fears of not wanting to offend or worrying that they may be considered "racist" when tackling issues within minority communities.

## Defining Honour Based Abuse

9. There is currently no statutory definition for HBA. The most widely used and accepted definition is provided by the National Police Chief Council (NPCC). NPCC defines HBA as:

*"an incident or crime involving violence, threats of violence, intimidation coercion or abuse (including psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse) which has or may have been committed to protect or defend the honour of an individual, family and/ or community for alleged or perceived breaches of the family and/or community's code of behaviour"*

10. In the absence of an alternative definition, this definition provides a useful starting point to understand perpetrator motive but does not provide any context to the characteristics of HBA and the unique challenges that victims face. It falsely identifies HBA as an incident or crime (singular), when akin to domestic abuse, HBA is a "*course of conduct*" and would be better described as a pattern of incidents or crimes.

## Honour Based Abuse: Impact of an inadequate definition

11. There are multiple consequences linked to inadequately defining HBA. An obvious implication is that it fails to authentically recognise the lived experience of victims and survivors, including the unique challenges that they face. Professionals relying upon an inadequate definition not only risk misidentifying types of abuse, but also provide inappropriate response to victims and can sometimes over-identify HBA when relying upon 'racial profiling' stereotypes

fueled by media-sensationalised stories such as ‘honour killings’ or assumptions. During police training, KN have been asked by operational police officers whether “*South Asian women experience domestic abuse...or is it always honour based abuse?*”, illustrating the unintended artificial divide that can exist when professionals do not have a broader understanding of the different types of abuse that can exist under the heading of domestic abuse, sitting within a broader framework of VAWG.

12. An inadequate definition also adversely affects data collation, recording and analysis, with wider implications on the development of policy in this area. A 2015 HMICFRS inspection into HBA identified that only three out of forty-three forces were adequately prepared to respond to HBA. Despite HMICFRS recommending that the College of Policing should produce Authorised Professional Practice (APP) guidance to ensure universal and up to date standards on HBA, this has not been implemented. The existing HBA APP overly focuses on forced marriage and when compared with the APP on domestic abuse, it is even more so noticeably lacking in content, context and guidance. The first policing Annual Data Return (ADR) on HBA published by the Home Office in December 2020, reveals concerning levels of regression in policing HBA. It demonstrates that five years from the inspection, police forces are still not adequately prepared to respond to HBA.

### What is the known scope, scale and prevalence of Honour Based Abuse?

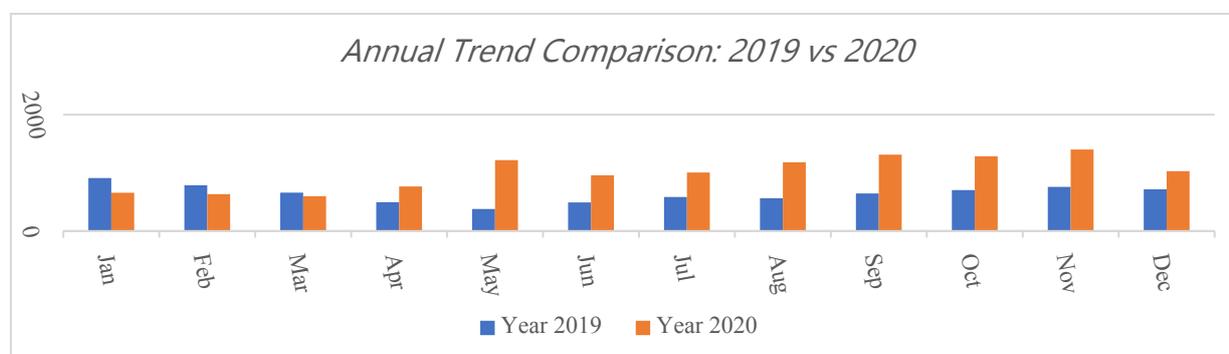
13. Until the recent implementation of HBA on the policing ADR, there has not been a formal return of such data from police. Further, data is not collated or published within any other government department. It is only collated in so far that it relates specifically to FM or FGM, providing an overfocus on these issues to the detriment of HBA cases where there is no presenting FM or FGM concern. HBA is often only recognised where FM and FGM are primary issues. Whilst FM and FGM are forms of HBA, the conflation of these two specific practices with HBA has led to a position where FM and FGM have been much more frequently researched and the focus of emerging law and policy. This is illustrated clearly in 2016-2020 VAWG strategy which contained only 1 action exclusively related to HBA out of a possible 95 actions to tackle VAWG.

### *Karma Nirvana data*

14. Up until the policing ADR publication in December 2020, Karma Nirvana has been the single source of consistent data on HBA. Helpline data for 2020 evidences:

- 81.6% cases related to HBA
- 18% related to FM
- 0.4% related to FGM

15. Contacts to our national helpline have increased by 64% during 2020 (7408 in 2019, to 12,128 in 2020). This is indicative of callers requiring more helpline support since the start of the pandemic and highlights a 12% increase in new callers (2064 in 2019, to 2315 in 2020). KN consistently supports over 2000 victims of HBA annually.



### Types of abuse perpetrated

16. Over the last four years, reports of HBA have significantly increased over each consecutive year. This includes reports relating to criminal offences motivated by 'upholding honour'. Since 2017, we have identified the following increases:

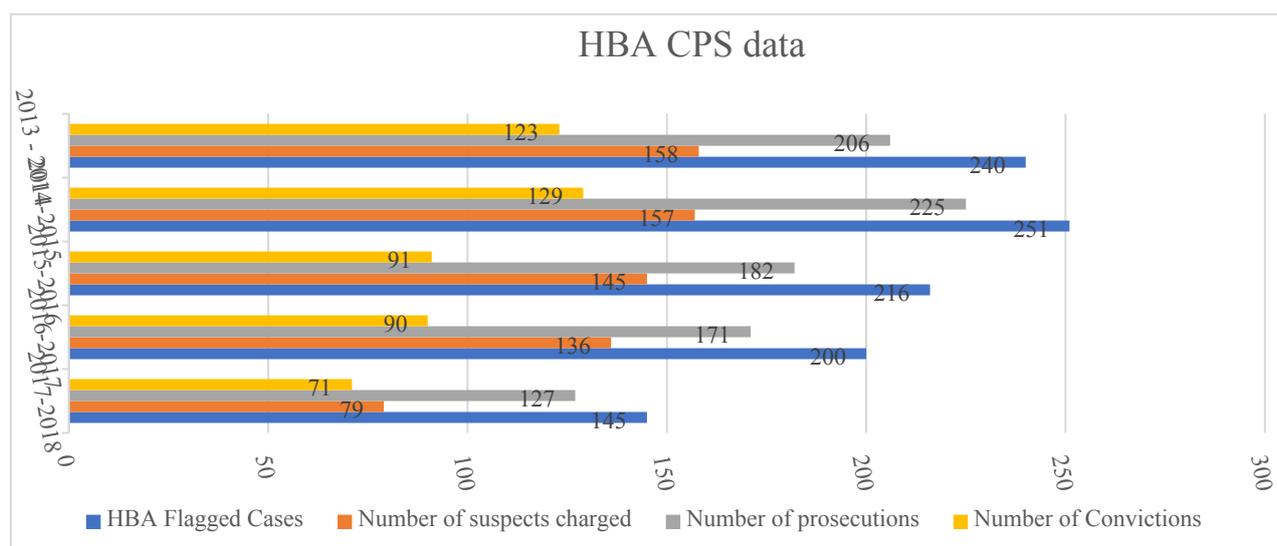
- Coercive control has **increased** by 188%
- Physical abuse has **increased** by 73%
- Sexual abuse has **increased** by 100%
- Economic abuse has **increased** by 116%

17. During 2020, we supported 551 new single victim callers disclosing criminal offences motivated by 'upholding honour' who we know had no police involvement in their case. During the same time, we received 163 new case referrals from police forces across the UK, marking a 32% fall in referrals when compared to 2019. This data when looked at with the recent HBA Home Office ADR, raises significant concerns relating to both victim confidence and policing capability of recognising cases of HBA.

### Honour Based Abuse Data Concerns – Criminal Justice Focus

18. Despite an overall picture of increased reporting of HBA, the criminal justice system represents a different picture all together. The two main criminal justice national data sources on HBA are police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). The CPS first started to flag cases of HBA in 2007, as a consequence of a Scotland Yard re-examination of 109 possible 'honour' killings between 1993 – 2003.

19. CPS data reveals that since 2013 – 2019 (time period for which data is available up to), the number of flagged HBA referrals, suspects charged, prosecutions and convictions has dropped over each consecutive year. KN have raised our concerns directly with the Home Office and CPS, covering an article on this issue with the Independent calling for review and reform. We have called upon, and continue to call upon, HMICFRS, Home Office and HMICPS to review the need for a thematic inspection considering the worrying data trends reflected over the last 8 years.



20. The annual<sup>9</sup> CPS VAWG report for 2019<sup>10</sup> highlights the biggest declines in each area illustrated in the diagram above since the CPS started to monitor data on HBA. The annual report recognises that guidance on gathering this data needs to be urgently reviewed and updated.

### SafeLives Data

21. Evidence from the last HBA insight report highlighted that victims of HBA experience abuse for 2 years longer (5 years' vs 3 years) when compared to those not identified as at risk of HBA. The insight report also highlighted that victims were 7 times more likely to experience abuse from multiple perpetrators and were at greater risk of serious harm or homicide<sup>11</sup>.

### What does all this tell us about how big a problem honour based abuse is?

22. Despite the heightened profile of HBA for over two decades, we are no closer to understanding the true scale, scope and prevalence of it in the UK. Regrettably,

<sup>9</sup> CPS no longer provide this data on annual basis, but now use a quarterly model

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.cps.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/publications/cps-vawg-report-2019.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Spotlight%20on%20HBV%20and%20forced%20marriage-web.pdf>

many of the conclusions and recommendations set out in the Home Affairs Select Committee into HBA in 2008<sup>12</sup> remain unachieved in 2021.

23. HBA remains a thriving but invisible issue. There is limited data available, with only one government department capturing data. The ADR published is limited and provides no detailed analysis to improve insight and understanding or to inform policy decision-making. We are acutely aware that these issues are significantly under-reported, linked to poor victim confidence and normalisation of abuse, particularly within a context of abuse often taking place within a familial / community setting and from a very early age. Statutory agencies do not always respond appropriately, again rooted in poor confidence and understanding of the issues and the unique challenges that HBA poses to those affected. To date, government have only sought to tackle HBA in so far as it relates to FM or FGM, which is only a small part of a bigger picture. Of the contacts made to the national HBA helpline, an overwhelming 81.6% of the new cases presented in 2020 related to HBA, followed by 18% relating to FM and 0.4% relating to FGM. Synonymising HBA as FM or FGM creates a situation which exacerbates the already hidden nature of HBA. This oversight has meant that in previous VAWG strategies, the government has omitted to tackle the root cause to these issues (beliefs, values and attitudes which devalue women and girls), dealing only with the consequences (FM, FGM, coercive control etc). Worryingly, it has excluded thousands of victims of HBA that do not fit 'neatly' into the government's current misconstrued typology of 'honour based abuse'.

### Prevention – Attitudes and Values

24. As a starting point, it is imperative that strategies tackling VAWG commit to taking action to dismantle and eradicate misogynistic attitudes, customs and practices that lower the value of women and girls. Under the 'umbrella' of HBA, these attitudes not only manifest into FM and FGM, but have far reaching alternative affects too. Women and girls that grow up in households and communities where they are devalued and 'honour' and reputation is put first learn to accept and tolerate abusive relationships. They can assume 'gender based roles' normalised through coercive control and face backlash from multiple perpetrators, often supported by a community narrative, if they behave in a way that does not conform to expectations. Our national helpline has heard of countless practices in the name of 'honour' that have penalised families with girls such as dowry, virginity testing and hymenoplasty. We hear of customs of encouragement to accept or tolerate abusive relationships to 'preserve honour' and prevent shame caused through divorce. To meaningfully dismantle and eradicate these archaic and misogynistic attitudes and gender biased customs that devalue women and girls, the government VAWG strategies must acknowledge them. Whilst this includes forced marriage and FGM, it also includes familial coercive control which often leads to marital coercive control and being physically and mentally prevented from accessing support linked to honour-related stigma and perceived shame that this will bring. It includes

<sup>12</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmhaff/263/26302.htm>

pressures to conform to familial, community and societal expectations rooted in 'upholding honour' and 'preventing shame'. It includes child marriage, virginity testing, dowry, concealed 'honour' babies and enforced abortions where the mother is carrying a daughter. Central to prevention is raising the status of women and girls that are silenced by concepts of honour and shame, enabling them to recognise the abuse that they experience is a form of 'domestic abuse' and that safe spaces exist for them too.

### Frontline Practitioner Touchpoints

25. As alluded to, central to long term prevention is empowering women and girls to recognise abuse and speak out. It is vitally important that when women and girls do start speaking out, that they feel able to speak confidently and receive safe and appropriate support when doing so. We are acutely aware that existing victim touchpoints (teachers, police officers, social worker) lack confidence in tackling HBA that is not centered on a forced marriage or on FGM. Professionals confide in our helpline, sharing their concerns of 'not wanting to offend' and feeling limited in knowledge or expertise when presented with cases of HBA. The antidote to this is improved understanding and awareness of what HBA is so that professionals recognise it as a form of domestic abuse and deal with it in the same 'zero tolerance' way. It is important to state that when framing HBA as a form of domestic abuse, it is important to not lose the connected nuances linked to 'honour dynamics' which can increase risk and present victims with more challenges to speaking out. We believe that the only way to enable a basic but universal understanding of HBA is to develop a national training framework for all statutory frontline practitioners. This will increase the number of safe spaces that victims have to come forward confidently and receive appropriate support. It will increase professional confidence and prevent unsafe responses, including professionals that normalise oppressive 'cultural expectations' and 'othering'.

### If the government separates Domestic Abuse and VAWG strategies, where should Honour Based Abuse be positioned?

26. In this situation, there is no doubt that HBA should be positioned within a domestic abuse strategy, situated under a broader VAWG framework. KN data shows that in 2020 99% of the contacts made to the national HBA Helpline fell within the statutory definition of domestic abuse. The domestic abuse definition includes the different forms of abuse carried out and includes family members alongside intimate partners. Framing HBA more clearly within the domestic abuse definition refutes 'cultural normalisation/acceptance' owned by victims, encouraging self-identification of abuse. It also challenges attitudes held by professionals, often rooted in poor understanding and confidence, that HBA is substantially different to domestic abuse.

## 27. VAWG issues that the Ending VAWG strategy should address under the umbrella of Honour Based Abuse

28. On the national helpline, callers share their lived experiences linked to honour and shame. We feel strongly that the Ending VAWG strategy must recognise and acknowledge these experiences to ensure that the strategy is representative of all survivor experiences. We will detail some of the experiences that we hear often on the helpline, including actions to challenge, shape and change these.

### *Child Marriage*

29. Child Marriage is often viewed as a 'developing world issue' and one that takes place exclusively overseas. The reality is that Child Marriage is an invisible but thriving issue in Britain today. It is present in every single area of the UK but is hidden in plain sight. Since 2017, the KN helpline has responded to over 400 cases relating to Child Marriage. The governments Forced Marriage Unit has recorded 1,235 cases relating to Child Marriage during the same time. It is estimated that the actual number of Child Marriage cases that take place or are planned in the UK is significantly higher. Our helpline data shows that 1 in 2 children that marry go on to experience domestic abuse and violence within that marriage.

### *Proposals to end child marriage*

30. Karma Nirvana are members of and UK co-chairs to the Girls Not Brides global partnership to end child marriage. We envision a world where girls are not denied an education or deprived of their fundamental rights as a consequence of child marriage. We would like to see the Ending VAWG strategy acknowledge the problem of child marriage in England and Wales and commit to supporting the removal of all enablers to child marriage. Specifically, this includes the removal of parental consent, which in our experience is synonymous with parental coercion. We believe that the only way to protect children from child marriage is to ensure that the minimum age for marriage is 18, without exceptions. We also seek support to make child marriage a crime so that perpetrators can be brought to justice.

### *Conceal Pregnancy / "Honour" babies*

31. We have supported many young women and girls that have concealed their pregnancies from family and community members to avoid bringing shame and dishonour. Many young women and girls go without any antenatal care or travel outside their town/city to mitigate risks of being seen in the community. This issue is deeply hidden and presents real risks to the young mother both mentally and physically. Over the lockdown, we have worked in partnership with Marie Stopes who have highlighted a significantly rise in young women and girls seeking terminations due to honour based abuse. They have also noticed in these cases that young women and girls tend to seek terminations much later on

in their pregnancy. The procedure of a late termination is more complex and often require a women or girl to stay two nights in clinical care. There are limited clinics to carry out these procedures, presenting real practical access challenges for young women and girls subjected to extreme coercive control.

32. Karma Nirvana have supported the most harrowing inquests where babies have been born at home, with no medical attention and have not survived. We have supported legal proceedings where babies in these circumstances enter the care and adoption system. These proceedings can also increase risk to the mother and baby, particularly as local authorities are encouraged to promote contact with the child's birth family, who may also be perpetrators.

### *Virginity Testing and Hymenoplasty*

33. Karma Nirvana are currently campaigning to ban virginity testing and hymenoplasty in the UK. Whilst it is difficult to get precise figures on the prevalence of virginity tests and hymen repair in the UK, we have supported many women who have been required to prove their virginity by either their parents or prospective in-laws to be. Virginity testing and Hymenoplasty are forms of violence against women and girls, especially HBA, and amount to invasive, de-humanising and degrading treatment and an abuse of human rights.

### **34. Summary of how Honour Based Abuse should be prevented and addressed**

- Introduce a statutory definition for HBA, supported by practice guidelines aimed at frontline statutory professionals;
- Develop a HBA national training framework for all frontline statutory professionals. This will increase the number of safe spaces that exist for victims and survivors of HBA to speak out;
- Strengthen the framing of HBA as a form of domestic abuse, situated under a broader VAWG framework;
- Delivery of strong key messages to victims and survivors of HBA that 'upholding honour' and 'preventing shame' does not legitimise coercive control and abuse perpetrated by family members. This could take the form of a campaign influenced by survivors of HBA;
- Cross governmental accountability in responding to HBA. This includes improving the government understanding of HBA beyond FM and FGM;
- Improved data collation and analysis to provide better insights on the nature and prevalence of HBA. We would like to see this data influence and shape

narrative, policy and broaden cross governmental understanding of HBA as a form of domestic abuse;

- Recommendation of a follow-up inspection looking at progress since the first HMICFRS inspection in 2015;
- Support Karma Nirvana's campaign to end Child Marriage, Virginity Testing and Hymenoplasty;
- Create more 'safe space' for victims of HBA to be heard and supported. This includes the ring fencing of funding for specialist services supporting victims of HBA, ensuring appropriate safe spaces exist for victims to seek specialist help. Equally, more safe spaces should be created through training frontline practitioners to understand the issues connected to HBA to ensure that victims receive appropriate responses the first time and in compliance with the 'once chance rule';
- Continued funding to the national HBA helpline.

May 2021