

UK: More than 1,000 cases of forced marriage in UK last year, report says

Official unit says issue is hidden crime and figures may not reflect full scale of abuse

By Nadia Khomami

The Guardian (10.05.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2rzmye0> – Nearly 1,200 possible forced marriage cases were flagged up to a specialist service last year, figures show.

Of the 1,196 reports handled by the government's Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), more than a quarter involved victims below the age of 18, while one in five related to male victims.

The total number of cases registered in 2017 was down by 19% on the previous year, but officials said the fall did not represent a decrease in prevalence of forced marriage in the UK.

Forcing someone to marry against their will is a criminal offence that carries a maximum sentence of seven years. A forced marriage is defined as one in which one or both spouses do not consent to the union, and violence, threats or any other form of coercion are involved.

Established in 2005, the FMU is jointly run by the Home Office and the Foreign Office. Since 2012, the facility has provided support in 1,200 to 1,400 cases a year.

But a report published by the two departments on Thursday stressed that the statistics only represented cases reported to the unit, adding: "Forced marriage is a hidden crime, and these figures may not reflect the full scale of the abuse."

The figures show 355 cases involved victims below 18 years of age, including 186 relating to victims aged 15 or younger.

While the majority (78%) of reports logged in 2017 related to female victims, 256, or 21%, involved male victims. "This demonstrates that men can also be forced into marriage," the report said.

It emphasised that forced marriage is not a problem specific to one country or culture, noting that the unit has handled cases relating to more than 90 nations across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America.

In 2017, the FMU dealt with cases relating to 65 "focus" countries. This could be the country where the forced marriage is due to take place, or the country that the spouse is currently residing in, or both.

The four countries with the highest number of cases last year were Pakistan (439 cases), Bangladesh (129), Somalia (91) and India (82).

In 120 instances there was no overseas element, with the potential or actual forced marriage taking place entirely within the UK.

A spokesperson for the children's charity NSPCC said the figures echoed reports to Childline, "with children as young as 13 contacting us worried about being forced into marriage yet fearing they will be cut out of their community if they refuse".

The charity said forced marriage was a form of child abuse and the secretive nature of it made it difficult to grasp the true scale of the problem.

"The worry and fears children face in this situation can also lead them to self harm, to run away from home putting them at risk of further abuse, or even to contemplate taking their own lives," the spokesperson said.

Girls as young as 13 have contacted Childline about being forced into marriage, with 205 counselling sessions on the issue in 2016-17, a 12% increase from 2015-16. There were 6,099 visits to the Childline forced marriage page in the same year.

"We would urge anyone worried about a child to speak up before it is too late, so that we can get help and prevent them being bound into something they would never ask for," the spokesperson said.

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